

# AN ORATOR'S LIBRARY

(JOHN BRIGHT AND HIS BOOKS)

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## An Orator's Library

THERE have been two, and only two, Quakers since the foundation of the Society who have as a matter of course been dignified by the adjective "illustrious"—William Penn and John Bright. It has been my exceedingly great privilege to have enjoyed the personal acquaintance of Bright and to have read all that has been written about him with knowledge and judgment by friend or foe. To this has been added a free and open access to his letters and books, and the opportunity of listening to many of his speeches, whether to great or small assemblies.

It is time that the ancient myth which made Bright a man of one book, or perhaps two, should once and for all be dispelled, together with that no less preposterous legend which still prevails among those whose intellectual curiosity does not embrace events or personalities preceding the first Great War, that Bright was a second "single speech Hamilton". For them his fame rests solely upon the fact, or what they regard as such, that during a half-forgotten quarrel known as the Crimean War, he stood up in Parliament and made some reference to the Angel of Death.

Bright was certainly not a "scholar" in the conventional sense of the term. He knew little Latin and less Greek. But true scholarship does not entirely depend upon the ability to read the Classics in the original, and Bright was a man of wide and varied reading within the limits of his own language. Furthermore he knew *how* to read. In July of 1858 he writes to his daughter Helen, "Take care of thyself, darling, in every way. Read what is *good*, and *think*, which is the only way to grow wiser." Bright's attention during his busiest years was largely concentrated on a few great and favourite volumes which he read again and again till they became woven into the tissue of his own mind—guides and companions of his life. In some sense therefore Bright comes into the category of those referred to by the second Lord Esher in his charming letters—"The longer I live, the more sure I am that the best educated man is he who reads the fewest books, always provided they are first-rate ones."

For my immediate purpose I can do no more than select two or three of the more important periods and subjects with

which Bright's multitudinous reading was concerned. With much regret I must omit a great deal of extreme and illuminating interest provided by the immortal literature of Greece and Rome, of which Bright knew much through the medium of translations.

The Middle Ages also—their history, biography and literature were not omitted from his reading. That "little room above his office" in his Rochdale mill was the scene of closest study on Bright's part, with a view to fill up the chasm left by the imperfect, not to say non-existent, teaching of History in the schools at which he had been for a few short years a pupil. Every day he would work, without breakfast, and I think, often without fire—laborious self-denying work, but work which repaid him a thousand fold in development of mind and increase of knowledge. Bright realized early, with Disraeli, that the difference between a person who had read even a brief summary of the story of the past, and another person of equal mental power, but lacking such preliminary knowledge was as the difference between life and death.

History and Biography, as we might expect, formed the staple contents of his shelves. There are not a few translations of the Greek and Latin Classics, for Bright was not, as Lady Beaconsfield who, according to her appreciative husband found it "difficult to distinguish between the Greeks and Romans". There is indisputable proof that he made intimate acquaintance through the medium of translation with some of the best, and, for a politician and orator the most useful, of Greek and Latin writers. Herodotus he knew well. He read him closely in middle life; he returned to him in old age. Here is one among the numerous passages marked by Bright as worthy of special attention. Herodotus is telling of the Scythian worship of Mars—

"Bundles of brushwood", he says, "are heaped up. On the summit an old scimitar of iron is planted by each Scythian government, and this serves as the symbol of Mars. To this scimitar they offer yearly sacrifices of horses and cattle, and present more sacrifices to these symbols than to all the rest of the Gods."

In his great speech on Foreign Policy delivered at Birmingham in 1858, Bright put this passage to practical service—

"The most ancient of profane historians has told us that the Scythians of his time were a very warlike people, and that they elevated an old scimitar upon a platform as a symbol of Mars. To this scimitar they offered sacrifices of horses and cattle, the main wealth of the country, and more costly sacrifices than to all the rest of the Gods.

I often ask myself whether we are at all advanced in one respect beyond these Scythians? What are our contributions to charity, to education (remember Bright was speaking of a time already distant), to morality, to justice, and to civil government, when compared with the wealth we expend in sacrificing to the old scimitars?"

The practical nature of the reader's mind may be gathered from the passages marked on the margin of his books. I select *Cicero's Letters to Atticus*.

"Take it from me, my Atticus, as a general rule, which by long experience I have found to be true, that there never was a poet or orator who thought anyone preferable to himself."

In Cicero's *Offices*, Bright notes the remark—

"What Socrates says is very excellent, that the readiest way, and, as it were the shortest cut, to arrive at glory, is really to be what one desires to be accounted."

Bright was a close student of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, and it is obvious that across the gulf of two thousand years, the minds of the nineteenth century Tribune and the Philosopher of Stagira met in unison—

"It is the opinion of many that ancient laws which are good are preferable to new ones, though better; and that a moderately wise constitution of government ought never to be altered."

"In all matters of practice, possibility is to be considered as well as perfection, and things easily accomplished are preferable to those barely possible."

"Governments are good, and nations happy, in proportion to the preponderance of the middle ranks, and their ability to defy the pride and oppression of the great, as well as to resist the rapacity and malignity of the vulgar."

That is true Whig doctrine indeed!

The perusal of Plato's Dialogues must have been a source of intense enjoyment, a mental and spiritual pabulum, to Bright. I think they guided his conduct; of a surety they barbed his wit, and inspired some of his noblest utterances.

In one Dialogue Socrates quotes an ancient poet who says of a person he would dispraise—"He knew many things, but knew them all amiss."—Compare Bright's own apothegm—"The worst of great thinkers is that they so often think wrong."

Let us ignore the centuries, and pass at once from the famous philosopher of Classic Greece to the no less famous poet of mediæval Italy—from Plato to Dante.

In his public speeches Bright more than once harks back to Dante. The peroration of the speech on Foreign Policy which he addressed to a Birmingham audience on the occasion

of his first visit to his constituents in that town, contained these words—

“ If nations reject and deride the moral law, there is a penalty which will inevitably follow ; it may not come at once, it may not come in our lifetime ; but rely upon it, the great Italian is not a poet only, but a prophet, when he says—‘ The sword of Heaven is not in haste to smite, nor yet doth linger ’.”

You might expect that the man who in October of 1835 outstripped his companions, and, with something of the zeal of another Tancred or Baldwin de Bourg, rode up to the walls of Jerusalem to obtain a first sight of the Holy City, would make himself acquainted with the story of the Crusades, the Saracens and the Turks. He could on occasion illustrate an argument from the Koran. During a speech in the House, in June of 1845, on the question of the Corn Laws, he said—

“ There was a passage in the Mohammedan Bible, the Koran, in which the man whom the world regards as an imposter, laid it down as a maxim that one hour of justice is worth seventy days of prayer.”

As we approach the period of the Renaissance, we find that history, biography, poetry, are each and all multiplied, on Bright’s shelves. There are numerous biographies—*Lorenzo de Medici*, *Poggio Bracciolini*, *Luther*, and *Luther’s Table Talk*—(would that we possessed Bright’s own!) Northcote’s *Titian*, and a legion more, besides the prose, the poems, and dramatic works of many of the great Elizabethans.

Of Spenser, Bright may be called a devotee. Bright read and re-read *The Faery Queen*. Chatham and Bright alone among English statesmen are known to have read the great poem from end to end. Bright took the chair at a breakfast given to the great American anti-slavery leader, William Lloyd Garrison, in St. James’s Hall, on June 29th, 1867. His address, delivered on that occasion, has been described by Augustine Birrell as “ the most beautiful ever delivered in the English tongue”. It closed with a line taken from the second canto of Book IV of the *Faery Queen*, where the poet speaks of—

“ Dan Chaucer, well of English undefiled,  
On fame’s eternal bead-roll worthy to be filed.”

It was adapted by Bright, and made his own—

“ We venture to speak a verdict which I believe will be sanctioned by all mankind—not only by those who live now, but by those who shall come after, to whom their perseverance and their success shall be a lesson and a help in the future struggles which remain for men to make. One of our oldest and greatest poets has furnished me with a line that well expresses that verdict. ‘ Are not William Lloyd Garrison and his

fellow labourers in that world's work—are they not “on fame's eternal bead-roll worthy to be filed”.’’

In the course of a speech on Indian affairs on June 24th, 1858, addressed to the House of Commons, Bright stated his opinion on Shakespeare in definite and unqualified terms—“The greatest genius who has shed lustre on the literature of this country”. Bright's knowledge of Shakespeare was such and so considerable that he could readily call it into requisition upon a wide variety of topics.

In the harbour of Catania, the behaviour of a consequential official reminds him of *Measure for Measure* (II. 2.1.113).

In 1840 during the course of the Local Church Rate controversy at Rochdale, he quotes *Romeo and Juliet*—

“He jests at scars who never felt a wound”:

and *Cymbeline* (III. 4.1.38)—

“Kings, queens and states,  
Maids, matrons, nay, the secrets of the grave  
This viperous slander enters.”

A man of essentially conservative mind, Bright, fortunately for his country, was apt in one particular to disregard apolistic injunction—however ardently he looked forward to those things that were before, he never ceased to remember the things that were behind. No statesman made more frequent or more effective appeal than did this Tribune of the people to the judgments of the giants of former generations. Like Mazzini, he based his actions, not merely upon the dictates of his own conscience, but, wherever possible, he preferred also to interrogate the tradition of humanity.

Bright's reading of pre-Stuart literature, or of the story of ancient and mediæval times was, as we have seen, not negligible. He possessed the most intimate acquaintance with the history of Europe during the eighteenth century, and particularly of this country, with the history and historians of the United States, with the story of British India, and, of course, with the politics of his own day “quorum pars magna fuit”. He was constantly fighting his battles over again, in public or in private. There have, no doubt, been many young and eager listeners who, like myself, have been by turns informed, thrilled, exalted, by the old man eloquent, as scene by scene he recounted the epic of his life—“'Tis greatly wise to talk of our past hours’,” if I may repeat the lines of Young which Bright was so fond of quoting. They embody his own philosophy, as well as that of the author of *Night Thoughts*. But he was

especially attracted, both on religious and on political grounds, by the story and by the personalities of the seventeenth century in England. I suppose few men of his own day, save a Gardiner or a Masson, knew more of that heroic and burning time—the time of Strafford and of Oliver, of Laud and of George Fox, of Montrose and of Milton; of that age of astounding contrasts, when those who delight “to praise famous men and our fathers that begat us”, can bring forward an imposing array on either side of the unending dispute. In that epoch of alternate revolt and reaction, when new ideals of freedom and citizenship were slowly evolved, with passionate striving of mind, body and soul, Bright sought and found the storehouse of his mental and spiritual provision. There, on the stage of our own island, he saw many of his most cherished theories expressed in action, or in debate, by worthy political and spiritual forerunners. “John Bright”, it has been sagely remarked by Viscount Morley, “would have been a true comrade of John Hampden, John Selden, John Pym; he had their brave and honest heart, their sound and sedate judgment, their manly hatred of oppression, of bad laws, and of government outside laws.” In balance of mind, in the true spirit of statesmanship, Bright and Pym were one:—

“Time”, said Pym, “must needs bring about some alterations . . . therefore have those Commonwealths been ever the most durable and perpetual which have often reformed and re-composed themselves according to their first institutions and ordinance.”

“It is a great thing in statesmanship”, said Bright, “when you are about to make a change which is inevitable . . . it is a great thing, I say, if you can make the past slide into the future without any great jar, and without any great shock to the feelings of the people.”

Bright, in short, applied the maxims, the spirit, and the intention of John Pym to the Reform movement of the Sixties, and if his political standpoint coincided with that of Pym, in breadth of religious outlook he closely resembled Selden. In his *Table Talk*, Selden observes, “’Tis vain to talk of a heretic, for a man in his heart can think no otherwise than he does think.” Compare, among many similar utterances, Bright’s remark, near the close of his famous speech of May, 1851 on the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill—

“But reflecting on the deep mysteries of religion, on my own doubts and frailties, on the shortness of the present time, and on the awful and unknown future—I ask what am I, that I should judge another in religious things, and condemn him to exclusion and persecution?”



“ If there was one thing more certain than another ”, said Bright in the Friends Yearly Meeting of 1875, “ it was that the New Testament did not teach us to condemn the systems of others. He for one would not join in any condemnation of the practices of any other body. We must not say that other schemes are wrong if they do not agree with our own. They need not be wrong, though they may not be as good as our own.”

Bright entertained an admiration, little short of worship, for the chief literary exponent of Puritanism—its theological dogma, and its civic ideals—the immortal Milton. He was well acquainted, as a matter of course with Masson’s encyclopædic volumes on the *Life and Times of Milton*, still absolutely essential for every serious student of the Puritan era.

He was a meticulous reader of Hallam. This consideration is of great importance when we explore the sources of Bright’s convictions and public policy. Hallam’s great book was nothing less, though it was a great deal more, than Whig manifesto. Throughout it advocated the middle way. Hallam hated tyranny, but he profoundly distrusted democracy. I suggest that he imparted a distinct colour to Bright’s politics, in his early and formative period. To Hallam, in short, it is due in no small measure that moderation, always a real, if latent factor, in Bright’s genius, came to the front and there remained for two score working years, to the infinite good of this country, a perpetual lesson to every honest political reformer.

If, however, we are asked to name one book more than another on which Bright relied for the religious and political history of the whole period from the accession of Elizabeth to the abdication of James II, I should be disposed to name Neal’s *History of the Puritans*. Inscribed on its pages are some 280 marginal lines—proof in themselves of its absorbing interest for the reader, of all others most fitted to appreciate and understand. One of these passages may have a special interest for members of Bright’s own religious body. There was a certain controversy, or discussion, some years ago concerning the origin of the felicitous motto prefixed to a well-known Quaker journal—“ In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” Perhaps this quotation from Neal’s History may shed light upon the problem—

“ Mr. Baxter speaks of the leaders of the Independents as “ prudent men, who were for union in things necessary, for liberty in things unnecessary, and for charity in all.” ”

Bright, of course, by no means confined his biographical

reading to the lives of those who championed the Parliamentary or Puritan side. Our statesman, in short, might very well have written on the frontispiece of each of his books, John Selden's motto—"Above all, liberty."

This too was the age which witnessed the rise of the religious society to which, throughout the changes of fortune, Bright remained a devoted member. With the story and the literature of seventeenth century Quakerism—the inspired Journal of the Founder, the life and mystical writings of Isaac Penington, the classic *Apologia of Quakerism*, by Robert Barclay of Ury, the wit of John Roberts, the valiant life of that ancient servant of Christ, John Gratton of Derbyshire, Bright's own ancestor, *The Memoir*, and even the verse, of Ellwood, very many, if perhaps not all, of the voluminous writings of the great William Penn—with these, and with scores of other records and sayings of the "First Publishers" and their immediate successors, Bright was familiar from early manhood—

"I knew", he wrote, "something of the history of Friends, and of the persecutions they had endured, and of their principles of equality and justice. I knew that I came of the stock of the martyrs."

It is, of course, to Penn that Bright chiefly resorts for counsel and for inspiration. In his speeches, Bright makes frequent quotations from Penn. Here is one of them—

"Any government is free to the people under it, whatever be the frame, where the laws rule, and the people are a party to the laws; and more than this is tyranny, oligarchy, or confusion."

I venture to quote a second. In the Commons debate of March 14th, 1868, on the State of Ireland, Bright said—

"I imagine that there will come a time in the history of the world when men will be astonished that Catholics and Protestants have had so much animosity against, and suspicion of each other. I accept the belief in a grand passage which I once met with in the writings of the illustrious founder of the colony of Pennsylvania. He says that, 'The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion, and when death has taken off the mask, they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers.'"

I omit the many quotations—pointed, witty, amusing, which Bright borrowed from the historians or satirists of the later seventeenth century.

It is somewhat curious that nowhere, have I found any reference to the *Pilgrim's Progress*, though it was beyond question a book read and highly prized by Bright. Mrs. Curry,

however, in her Anthology, includes three extracts which her father especially loved. Two of these are significant and characteristic—no-one knew better than did the great orator the relative value of word and deed—Christian says to Faithful, “The soul of religion is the practick part—pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this—to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

Few people have possessed the grace of spiritual humility in a higher degree than Bright, and I doubt not that he compared himself rather to the Feeble-Minds than to the Greathearts of the Christian pilgrimage—

“Then they asked Mr. Feeble-Mind how he fell into his hands (Giant Slaygood’s). Then said the poor man . . . I am a man of no strength at all of body, nor yet of mind ; but would, if I could, though I can but crawl, spend my life in the Pilgrims’ Way. Robbed I look to be, and robbed to be sure I am ; but I am, as you see escaped with life, for the which I thank my King as author, and you as the means. . . . As to the main, I thank Him that loved me, I am fixed ; my way is before me, my mind is beyond the river that has no bridge. . . . though I am, as you see, but of a Feeble mind.”

We have ample proof that Bright’s admiration for Milton was rather enhanced than diminished by the passing of the years. After his death, his nephew, the First Lord Aberconway, placed Milton at the head of the list of Bright’s favourite authors. With respect to particular poems, he is, I think, impartial, with perhaps an undercurrent of preference for *Paradise Regained*. In writing to Miss Leatham he speaks of *Paradise Regained*—“After tea, it was proposed that we should have some reading and I was employed to read *Paradise Regained*, which I read through in about two hours. It is a noble and most devout poem, and I think we all felt that the time had been well spent.”

I have enjoyed the privilege of copying all the marks which Bright attached to his travelling Milton. They are hundreds in number.

In Bright’s speeches the quotations from *Paradise Regained* are few, but among the most felicitous of all.

At the close of his speech at Glasgow in 1866, on Parliamentary Reform—one of the immortalities of British oratory—Bright borrows, and makes his own, Milton’s words ; he even enhances their beauty, and at the same time adapts them to his own purpose with such exquisite perfection of phrase that the borrowing is not even suspected by the average reader.

Near the beginning of Book I of *Paradise Regained*, the poet speaks of

“ . . . the tempter foiled  
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,  
And Eden raised in the waste wilderness.”

This is how these words, or some of them, are embodied in Bright's peroration—

“ I am convinced that just laws, and an enlightened administration of them, would change the face of the country. I believe that ignorance and suffering might be lessened to an incalculable extent, and that many an Eden, beauteous in flowers and rich in fruits, might be raised up in the waste wilderness which spreads before us.”

Many of us are aware that Professor Rufus Jones, in the illuminating sixteenth chapter of *The Later Periods of Quakerism* speaks positively on the question of Bright's incomparable style with the sanction of the orator's own express statement that the dual influence of the Bible and of Milton was predominant in the formation of his style. No higher authority is possible, but some further explanation is perhaps needed. How precisely did Milton influence the literary form of Bright's speeches? It is a most interesting question, but it cannot here be discussed. I will only add that it is difficult to bring forward concrete examples by way of proof. Proof, if any, must be sought in the region of the spirit. While on the one hand that vein of humour seldom entirely absent from Bright's argument or declamation, never appears above the surface in Milton's poetry and prose, yet the manifest honesty of Bright's word and aim, the rhythmic flow of his mellow periods, the crystal clearness of his thought—its ordered and logical arrangement—the sublimity of the famous perorations—the dignity in simplicity which pervades the most conversational passages of many, and indeed of all, his speeches, reveal perhaps the mystic agency of that divine poet, between whose mind and that of Bright there existed a lifelong and holy union.

I must again beg leave to follow the example of Mr. Eden, who, in a speech on Foreign Policy, made what he called many a “ hop ” from one subject to another. I must hop, or rather jump, from Milton to Pope.

Bright's knowledge of Pope is not a matter for conjecture. He knew the eight volumes of Roscoe's edition from cover to cover. It is perhaps true to say that his attention was attracted rather by the religious and ethical elements of Pope's verse than

by political satire, however polished and mordant, or by social persiflage, however sparkling and humourous.

Four times at least—on public platforms, or in the House of Commons—Bright quoted *The Messiah*.

That noble and stately address of March 19th, 1869,<sup>1</sup> during the debate on the second reading of the Irish Church Bill has long been regarded, and certainly not without reason, as illustrating beyond all others a combination of certain outstanding qualities of Bright's oratory—the wit, the pathos, the lucid simplicity, the mastery of rhythmic prose, the skilful transition from grave to gay, from familiar to sublime, adorned and enforced by a peroration which for sustained beauty of thought and diction is yet unsurpassed in our oratorical anthology. To this culminating splendour Pope contributed his share.

“ And as to the uses to which these endowments are put, if I were particular on the point as to the sacred nature of the endowments, I should even then be satisfied with the propositions in this Bill—for, after all, I hope it is not far from Christianity to charity ; and we know that the Divine Founder of our faith has left much more of the doings of a compassionate and loving heart than He has of dogma. . . . We can do little, it is true. We cannot re-illumine the extinguished lamp of reason, we cannot make the deaf to hear. We cannot make the dumb to speak. It is not given to us

‘ From the thick film to purge the visual ray,  
And on the sightless eyeballs pour the day ; ’

but at least we can lessen the load of affliction, and we can make life more tolerable to vast numbers who suffer.”

Mr. F. W. Hirst once remarked that the world had only seen three great statesmen philosophers who were at the same time great orators—Demosthenes, Burke and Bright.

In March of 1883 Bright began his Rectorial Address to the students of Glasgow University with these words—

“ It is, I think, exactly one hundred years since this chair was occupied by Edmund Burke.”

Few modern politicians would have dared to challenge the comparison. But the comparison may well be drawn, and can readily be defended. The two British representatives, despite their diversity of gifts, stand upon a pinnacle by themselves. Was it not a *Times* reviewer who happily described them as “ the greatest man who ever addressed a political meeting, and the greatest man who ever addressed the House of Commons ” ?

<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate that this oration finds no place in the published volumes of Bright's speeches, and can only be read *in extenso* in the pages of Hansard.

and both of them, be it noted were alumni of Quaker schools—schools of that religious Society one of whose distinguishing characteristics is silence!

Do not suppose that Bright, with all his deep and genuine spiritual humility, was unaware of the merit of his own speeches. A well-known hostess and political speaker, told how in her young days she met Bright, and sought his advice upon the art of public speaking, and particularly with regard to style and arrangement. She received a kindly reply, and, among other suggestions, he counselled her to make a careful study of Edmund Burke's speeches or his own.

In Burke's writings and speeches there are numerous passages marked by Bright. All of them are worthy of consideration, but I can only call your attention to one or two. In the volumes of the Burke correspondence, Burke discourses to Captain Mercer upon the distribution of ownership, and he condenses into a few words the whole philosophy of Conservatism—

“ My dear Captain Mercer, it is not my calling the use you make of your plate in your house, either of dwelling or of prayer ‘ pageantry and hypocrisy ’ that can justify me in taking from you your property, and your liberty to use your own property according to your own ideas of ornament . . . it is not calling the landed estates, possessed by old prescriptive rights, ‘ the accumulations of ignorance and superstition that can support me in shaking that grand title which supercedes every other title. . . . I mean the ascertaining and securing of prescription. ‘ But these are donations made in ages of ignorance and superstition ’—Be it so. It proves that they were made long ago. And this is prescription, and this gives the right and title . . . this may be superstition in me, and ignorance, but I had rather remain in ignorance and superstition than be enlightened and purified out of the first principles of law and natural justice.”

Burke's own maxim is still worthy of consideration—  
“ If I cannot reform with justice, I will not reform at all.”

Whatever I omit, it is necessary to say a word about Lord Byron, who comes perhaps second only to Milton among Bright's literary favourites—a curious contrast—Milton and Byron! But apart from the presence of that genius which leaps lightly over every obstacle, it is easy to name certain emotions and certain gifts which Bright and Byron possessed in common—a passionate love of freedom, and of the heroes of freedom, an indomitable courage, which enables each of them, however diverse the motive or the method, to bid defiance to public opinion, a love for and mastery of oratorical form—many of Byron's poems are no other than metrical orations—

speeches with the clarity and directness of the orator rather than the subtlety of the philosopher, or the imaginative gifts of his contemporaries Shelley, Keats and Coleridge. Moreover, and this point, I think, has been overlooked by every commentator, Bright with his always ardent local patriotism, would naturally be attracted to the writings of Baron Byron of Rochdale, and perhaps the poet's dying message from Missolonghi, "Send Rochdale to Greece", proved no small incentive to the Hellenic travel of Rochdale's greatest son.

Seldom has a poet been put to more felicitous use than was Byron by Bright on October 27th, 1858, at Birmingham. Here are the last words of that marvellous peroration—

"As for me, my voice is feeble. I feel now, sensibly, painfully, that I am not what I was. I speak with diminished fire. I act with lessened force; but, as I am, my countrymen and constituents, I will if you will let me, be found in your ranks in the impending struggle."

This, as Sir Alfred Dale says, "is Byron in solution".

The phrases will be found in the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold*.

"When my father" writes Sir Alfred Dale, "asked Bright in after years, whether he had been reading Byron at the time when the speech was delivered, and explained why he asked the question, Mr. Bright at once recalled the fact, and recited the whole of the stanzas from which the words were taken."

Unfortunately I can only spare a word for Whittier, one of the four poets named by Charles McLaren as the especial favourites of his uncle. But I regret this fact the less inasmuch as I have myself in a recent book attempted a comparison between the English statesman and the American poet, in respect not merely of their outward activities and mutual relationship, but of their intellectual and spiritual life, their views and their aims. Bright knew his *Snowbound* by heart, and said that there were lines in that poem which had nothing superior to them in beauty and pathos in our language.

Some of the verses in *Hampton Beach* were especially treasured by a man so deeply interested in every devout forecast, and every thoughtful explanation of the unknown future.

And the more familiar lines, published in 1882, reflected the humility so profoundly characteristic not only of the writer himself but of the illustrious reader, who loved them.

" Suffice it if—my good and ill unreckoned,  
And both forgiven through Thy abounding grace—  
I find myself by hands familiar beckoned  
Unto my fitting place.

Some humble door among Thy many mansions,  
 Some sheltering shade where sin and striving cease,  
 And flows for ever, through Heaven's green expansions  
 The river of Thy peace."

It is, I find, not generally remembered that the *Reformers of England*, written in 1843, was addressed by Whittier, "To those who like Richard Cobden and John Bright, were seeking the reform of political evils in Great Britain by Christian and peaceful means."

" Press on ! the triumph shall be won  
 Of common rights and equal laws,  
 The glorious dream of Harrington,  
 And Sidney's good old cause.

" Blessing the Cottar and the Crown,  
 Sweetening worn labour's bitter cup ;  
 And plucking, not the highest down,  
 Lifting the lowest up."

Scarcely second to Whittier in Bright's estimation, among American poets, was Lowell. His Biglow papers frequently lent themselves to an apt quotation from the English orator. They enlivened and illustrated many a serious speech. But Lowell was by no means solely a wit—he was a man not only of genius, but of deep thought, and varied experience. I venture to quote a very brief, but eloquent and exquisite lyric, surcharged with emotion, which describes the varied and arduous fates and fortunes which attend the earnest seeker after truth. For one reader at least, with mind and heart enlightened by well nigh incomparable experience, these noble lines would assuredly contain a message as from the very source and fount of sympathy and wisdom—

" Many loved Truth, and lavished life's best oil  
 Amid the dust of books to find her,  
 Content at last, for guerdon of their toil,  
 With the cast mantle she hath left behind her ;  
 Many in sad faith sought for her ;  
 Many with crossed hands sighed for her,  
 But there have been who fought for her,  
 At life's dear peril wrought for her,  
 So loved her that they died for her,  
 Tasting the raptured fleetness  
 Of her divine completeness ;  
 Their higher instinct knew,  
 Those love her best who to themselves are true,  
 And what they dare to dream of, dare to do."

Can we marvel at the profound respect—perhaps " reverence " is a truer term—with which, on one occasion, the orator



salutes the poet's name—" Mr. Russell Lowell, Minister from the United States to our court, and no less, I think I may say, Minister to our people."

Many of the great English poets, and the equally great English writers of fiction whom the nineteenth century produced I am compelled to pass by without a word. There are many reasons why the name of Ebenezer Elliott, whose seventy years of life linked him with the late eighteenth century, and the mid nineteenth century schools of literature, should not be omitted. But do not let us produce the impression that our statesman was unacquainted with the immortalities of Wordsworth and Coleridge and Shelley and others scarcely second in genius and fame.

Elliott was a true lover and poet of nature. His simple but vivid and touching songs of all things animate and inanimate—the birds, the trees, the flowers, his beloved companions amidst the hills of Derbyshire and the wooded glens of the Rivelin and the Don,

" Or where deep azure brightens into gold  
O'er Sheaf that mourns in Eden."

—even now, a hundred years after they were penned, have lost little of their haunting beauty for every man of intellect and heart. To these gifts and merits Bright was not blind. But Elliott was something more and greater than a worshipper of beauty. He was a man of infinite sympathy for the victims of oppression and injustice, or what he conceived to be oppression and injustice, wherever they might be found, and it was precisely this aspect of Elliott's genius that made an irresistible appeal to the Tribune of the People.

Elliott well earned his honourable title of "The Corn Law Rhymer", but perhaps the bond which united the mind and heart of poet and statesman is to be sought rather in the sphere of religion than of politics. To this day Bright stands first, or second only to Milton, among English champions of religious toleration. For him toleration was not a matter of policy only, but of conscience and conviction.

In a valedictory address delivered in his native town to a great audience met to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of his birthday, Bright made reference to the eminent Church reformer Edward Miall, once Member for Rochdale. He declared Miall to be

" a man who pursued a great and noble cause with a great and noble earnestness and magnanimity. . . . He did not fight against

the religion of the Church of England. He fought only that the Church might be freed from the chains which had been forged by despotic monarchs and subtle statesmen and priests some three centuries ago."

The orator went on pointedly, and proudly, to associate himself with the feelings and the words of Elliott.

"He might have adopted the lines which have often struck me as being forcible and very good, that were written by the Corn Law Rhymers, now a long time ago, when he was justifying himself, or rather those whom he was representing. . . . He says—

' We hate not the religion of bare walls :  
We scorn not the cathedral's pomp of prayer ;  
For sweet are all our Father's festivals,  
If contrite hearts the Heavenly banquet share,  
In field or temple, God is everywhere.' "

But after all Elliott is best remembered by the part which he took in the crusade against the Corn Law. "Here is a John Bright uttering himself in fiery and melodious verse"—so Alexander Smith described Ebenezer Elliott. He was beyond rivalry the "Tyrtæus of the League".

Of humble origin—for years an iron worker of Sheffield—he was well acquainted by personal contact with the poor of the West Riding and with the causes of their distress. Yet neither Chartism, nor Socialism, and still less Communism, could claim Elliott's allegiance. Far more outspoken than Bright became as the fires of youth died down, Elliott, like Burke or Bright himself, had at no time turned a deaf ear to the "tradition of humanity". In his Corn Law Rhymes he shows himself an out and out supporter of individualism. "Capital", he declares, "has a right to rule the world, and competition is the great social law of God."

To his spirit stirring song "God save the People" he appends, as was his custom, a comment in prose. He asks the pertinent question, "Who are the People?" and he then proceeds to answer his own query—

"They are those persons who by honestly maintaining themselves and perhaps earning a surplus, or by honestly living on the precious earnings and savings of others, prove their right to govern the country through their representatives."

A definition tempting to critics doubtless, from both wings of political thought, but even yet, representing the sincere opinion of many honest, just, broad-minded supporters of every stable system of government.

Despite his enthusiastic advocacy of Corn Law Repeal, which he regarded as the only and infallible remedy for the

widespread poverty of the manufacturing districts, Elliott was essentially conservative by nature.

"I recollect", said Bright at Edinburgh, in October of 1853—

"Ebenezer Elliott, a poet of no mean order—and no good poet is found who has not something of the prophet in his spirit—Ebenezer Elliott, in a poem in which he portrays the terrific consequences to this country if that gigantic evil, the Corn Laws, be not repealed, after addressing the different sections of the community, concludes his poem by turning his eyes to the throne itself. He says—

'Throne established by the good,  
Not unstained with patriot blood,  
Not unwatched by patriot fears,  
Not unwept by patriot tears,  
What shall bread tax do for thee,  
Venerable monarchy?  
Dreams of evil spare my sight,  
Let that horror rest in night.'"

Twenty-four years later, Bright again remembers Elliott, and, in my own hearing, once more recites the last four lines of the passage just quoted, together with pointed and eloquent comments of his own.

Between the epoch of Romanticism and the closing years of life, Bright read many English poets. But of few can it be said that they roused his enthusiasm or captured his heart. Janet Hamilton of Langloan and Lewis Morris of Penrhyn are perhaps the only conspicuous exceptions to this rule.

Janet Hamilton is unique. If we are tempted to declare her the feminine counterpart, in her country and time, of Robert Burns, it may be pleaded that the points of similarity are many, and impossible to overlook. The ineffable pathos of the story of "Effie", the vivid pictures of Scottish character and landscape seen through the eye of genius and sympathy assuredly support Bright's dictum that it would be impossible without previous knowledge to distinguish some of her poems from those of Burns himself. Even so, a fruitful comparison becomes well nigh impossible in the face of such infinite divergencies in aim, in disposition, in character, in deeds and in life.

But we must allow Bright to tell her story in his own inimitable way. In that memorable speech at Birmingham on June 1st, 1882, he spoke of David Dundas, Michael Bruce, of Milton; and then he continued:—

"I am not a critic, but still I have an opinion of books that I have read, and I read one lately . . . to which I should like to refer. It

is a book containing the memoirs and poems, and other compositions of—to my mind—the most remarkable old lady that I have ever heard of . . . Now, I should like to tell you what can be done by a person to whom God has given a great love of books. Janet Hamilton was the daughter of a shoemaker who employed one journeyman, and, as might be reasonably supposed, she became afterwards the wife of the journeyman—and at a very early age too—(fourteen, according to her latest biographer) earlier than I should recommend in similar cases. However, during her life she had a family of ten children, most of whom, I believe, grew up to manhood and womanhood. But she never went to school, and her mother, taught her to read. But she did not learn to write until she was fifty, and she became blind at sixty ; and she lived, I think, to about seventy-five or seventy-six.<sup>1</sup>

“ So far for the points of her life. Now, she never saw a mountain, she never saw any river but the river Clyde, and she never was twenty miles away from her humble dwelling. She read in her childhood, when about five or six or seven years of age, Bible stories, little stories that her mother procured for her, and at eight years of age she found by accident, on the beam of a weaver’s loom in her neighbourhood, two volumes. One was *Paradise Lost*, and the other was Allan Ramsay’s poems. Now, she read with an extraordinary eagerness, and did not forget what she read—as many of us are much too apt to do. She read through all the village library—the history, the biography, the travels. When she got to Shakespeare, Shakespeare was like a revelation to her—and she had no words with which to express her admiration for his writings ; and she said that in those days it was not considered a very good thing for serious people to read Shakespeare, and there was a hole in the wall of her house, near the chair on which she nursed her children, and where she worked at some kind of tambour-frame work, and when people came in she put Shakespeare into this hole in the wall, so that it might not be seen, and her conduct might not be criticized. Well, she said that in her childhood her mother had led her every morning, after she could read, to read a chapter in her Bible, which was done without intermission, until she left her home, and had a home of her own. She said that her love of books was her ruling passion, and not withstanding that, so far as she knew, nothing was neglected. But she suffered ultimately from sitting up to read till two o’clock in the morning ; that, she believed, had had the effect of very much injuring, and at last depriving her of her eye-sight. She was asked how she came to write so grammatically, having never been to school, and she said, ‘ You might as well ask why the laverock ’—that is the lark—‘ can sing ? ’ . . . Now this old lady has written poems, some of which . . . if they were placed amongst the poems of Burns, no-one would for a moment doubt they were the production of that, the greatest of all Scotch poets. That, I think, is an amazing story. I doubt if we have on record the particulars of a more remarkable person than my old friend Janet Hamilton.”

There existed links between Bright and the Scottish poetess in the memories of a common suffering endured by their Puritan

<sup>1</sup> Seventy-eight, or thereabouts, was Janet Hamilton’s age at the time of her decease.

ancestry amid the strife and turmoil of the seventeenth century. They did not always see eye to eye—with all his admiration for Janet Hamilton, Bright would by no means have subscribed to her enthusiastic estimate of Palmerston's character and statesmanship, but on the broad question of political reform they were entirely at one in their policy and in their aims ; as the following verses in *Rhymes for the Times*, remains to prove.

“ When famishin' Tories owre benches and stools  
Cam loupin' and yellin', the Whigamore fools  
Left a' in their 'han's, an' took aff to the hill,  
*In the Cave of Adullam* was buried the bill.”

Bright speaks of Janet Hamilton's long life as “ spent at Coatbridge in Lanarkshire ”. More recent biographers substitute Langloan. The two statements are reconciled by her son James, in a letter whose subject remains of interest for widely different reasons, both personal and national.

James Hamilton thus inscribes a copy of his edition of his mother's works :

“ To the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P.  
As a small mark of gratitude for the very kindly feelings of respect and esteem expressed by him for the authoress and her writings, and also in remembrance of his long, arduous and untiring labours for the advancement of the best interests of the working classes.

With sincere wishes that he may have much success in his works of faith and labours of love—  
From the authoress's son,

James Hamilton.

Langloan, Coatbridge.

June 3. 82.”

I well recall one evening in February, 1888, about a year before his death, when Bright was chatting pleasantly by his fireside about these writers, he turned to myself, who had the privilege of being a member of the little company, and remarked with a twinkle in his eye, “ I set Lewis up in his poetry. I was unveiling the statue of my friend Cobden at Bradford some years ago, and I said that in my view Morris's poem, *The Epic of Hades* was ‘ another gem added to the wealth of the poetry of our language ’, and I quoted a line or two from it.” He hesitated, “ What were they ? ” I was fortunately able at once to supply the lines—

“ For knowledge is a steep which few may climb,  
But duty is a path which all may tread.”

I shall never forget his look of pleasure and surprise.

In the last years of life Bright wrote some lines from Lewis Morris in a friend's album. They need, I think, no comment—

“ There is a sweetness in autumnal days,  
Which many a lip doth praise ;  
When the earth, tired a little and grown mute  
Of song, and having borne its fruit,  
Rests for a little space ere winter come.  
It is not sad to turn the face towards home,  
Even though it shows the journey nearly done ;  
It is not sad to mark the westering sun,  
Even though we know the night doth come.”

It will not be supposed that a man so appreciative and so gifted with wit and humour as John Bright, was blind to the amusing originalities of thought and expression with which so many of the early American writers were gifted. A man who delighted in the matchless satire of Hudibras, and in the comic exaggerations of Peter Pindar, was not likely to overlook the lighter side of the genius of Lowell. The *Biglow Papers* were for him an untiring source of delight. Moreover the ruder and less polished wit of statesmen, as in the case of Jefferson, possessed strong attractions.

Thomas Jefferson is, of course, identified rather with America than with Britain. Jefferson is, as everyone knows, a great popular idol of America, and of democratic enthusiasts the world over. He was by origin a country gentleman of Virginia. His hand drafted the Declaration of Independence, he became Minister at the Court of France. He occupied the Presidential chair from 1797 to 1801. He was to the last degree eccentric—“ made up ”, as his enemies said, and with much reason, “ for the part of a sterling democrat.” But he seems really to have believed the voice of the people to be the voice of God, and he was successful in persuading others into the same belief.

His political philosophy and almost anarchic—the less of government the better—good up to a point. But this did not satisfy Jefferson—“ a little rebellion ”, he said, “ is a good thing—God forbid that we should be twenty years without a rebellion ”. Was Bright thinking of that doctrine, when he gave this serio-comic description of our colonies before the advent of Lord Durham ?

“ We had then discontent, and now and then a little wholesome insurrection, especially in Canada.”

Jefferson hated everything, person, or class, invested by tradition with reverence or respect. His passion, his obsession,

was individual freedom. To this, despite all his extremes of action and utterance, we can attribute the attraction which he possessed for Bright.

Of course there were occasions when Jefferson displayed to the full the bias and the bigotry of the political fanatic. Among his pet aversions were the people and the policy of Great Britain, and the institution of monarchy in general—he writes :—

“ I was much an enemy to monarchies before I came to Europe. I am ten thousand times more so since I have seen what they are. There is scarcely an evil known in these countries which may not be traced to their King as its source, nor a good which is not derived from the small fibres of Republicanism existing among them.

“ While in Europe I often amused myself with contemplating the characters of the then reigning sovereigns of Europe. Louis the XVI was a fool, of my own knowledge, and in despite of the answers made for him at his trial. The King of Spain was a fool, and of Naples the same. They passed their lives in hunting, and despatched two couriers a week, one thousand miles, to let each other know what game they had killed the preceding days. The King of Sardinia was a fool. All these were Bourbons. The Queen of Portugal—a Braganza—was an idiot by nature. And so was the King of Denmark. . . . The King of Prussia—successor to the Great Frederick—was a mere hog, in body as well as in mind. Gustavus of Sweden, and Joseph of Austria were really crazy, and George of England, you know, was in a strait waistcoat. There remained then none but old Catherine, who had been too lately picked up to have lost her common sense. In this state Bonaparte found Europe ; and it was this state of its rulers which lost it, with scarce a struggle . . . and so endeth the Book of Kings, from all of whom the Lord deliver us, and have you, my friend, and all such good men and true, in His Holy keeping ! ”

We may perhaps excuse the gross unfairness of some of Jefferson's tirades, on the ground of their humour. Jefferson lived to recognize, although with equal malice and equal unfairness, that certain leaders of Republican America were no less open to criticism.

It may be asked, why leave the Bible—source and inspiration of a great part of what was best in Bright—to an inconspicuous position at the very close of this address ? The answer is simple, and, I trust, all sufficient—everyone who is acquainted with the name of Bright is well aware that the career of this great Christian statesman and orator was one long—we may say, unbroken—endeavour to follow in the footsteps of the Divine Founder of our faith ; that the Biblical story, and the teachings of the New Testament were the very warp and weft of the texture of his life. As it was of all books the one

which exercised the greatest influence upon his style, so the English Bible was the volume from which Bright most frequently quoted. Its language and the incidents recorded on its pages rose spontaneously to his lips. It served as an inexhaustible treasure for the highest purpose of the orator.

Bright, in short, was the most distinguished example of a numerous class of men, thus described in the columns of *The Times*—

“ It is enough to know that throughout all the noble history of the Friends has run a stream of culture, of which the best members have been delighted to drink.”

Bright was as great a lover of books as his own Milton—

“ As good almost kill a man as kill a good book. . . . Many a man lives a burden on the earth ; but a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.”

The love of books remained with Bright, to delight and to console, from the dawn of consciousness to its decline. Martha Bright said of her little boy, “ John is very fond of books.” When, in the last months of life, he was strongly urged to seek the milder climate of the South, he replied :—  
“ Home is the best place—the best place for old people—and my books, how I should miss my books ! ”