

Sir Frederick Wedmore concerning Robert Charlton

Sir Frederick Wedmore, in the closing chapter of his *Memories*,¹ gives the following interesting account of Robert Charlton²:

“In a Sketch of some of the great English speaking preachers I have had the privilege to listen to, it would have been a folly indeed, much more—it would have seemed to me not loyal—to have left out the name of Robert Charlton.

“In that profound and reverent gravity—and in much besides—David Wright [Incumbent of St. Mary Magdalene, Stoke Bishop] was at one, absolutely, with an occasional, a frequent preacher, whom I think he did not know: an elderly Friend, Robert Charlton, whom I—I am glad to say—had great chances of hearing when I accompanied my Father, driving into Bristol, to the Friends’ Meeting House, in Rosemary Street, on Sunday mornings before 1870, and, sometimes, after it. . . . I forget what Robert Charlton was, exactly—I think a manufacturer or merchant, on a scale not large. I am certain that in his secular work Robert Charlton added to the unblemished honour that is exacted of Friends—generally—that which is also of course encouraged, but cannot in the nature of things be exacted, a treatment rather specially kind and generous, of every servant or subordinate with whom he had to do. Between Robert Charlton’s daily life in business and his life of the spirit, there was, I am sure, no discord; so that, without difficulty—but fortified no doubt, by thought and reading, and the practice of a charity which began, it may be, but never ended with alms-giving—he came from the affairs of the week into the atmosphere of a Sunday which, with Friends, has at no time been puritanical, into the silence of the Meeting: a silence which is not the barren silence of the superficial but a silence that Maeterlinck has fathomed, and set forth the fruitful depths of, in the first essay in *Le Trésor des Humbles*. Many there are, as Maeterlinck remarks, ‘qui n’ont pas le Silence.’

“For a while one would see Robert Charlton—in the Ministers’ slightly raised gallery—sitting in reverent quietude. Deeply, more deeply, was he immersed in thought. That was revealed to one, as time passed on, in the workings of his face. His soul was in travail. What was to be the upshot? It might be, he said nothing. Much likelier, however, after some further wrestling, he would remove his hat suddenly; then rise; grasp the firm gallery balustrade, in front of him; and with a countenance altogether inspired, with a voice extraordinarily melodious, pour out the burden of his meditations—of his solitude—of his encouragement—in a spirit that was pure poetry and in a form that was the very best of English prose.”

¹ Methuen & Co. [1912].

² Robert Charlton (1809-1872), pin manufacturer in Bristol.