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978-1-108-05045-6 - Life of John Wilson: For Fifty Years Philanthropist and Scholar in the East

George Smith

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

1804-1828.

HOME—SCHOOL—UNIVERSITY—VOYAGE TO BOMBAY.

Lauder and Lauderdale—The Border and the Men it has sent to India—The Wilsons of Lauder—The Burgh Common and the Big Farms—John Wilson, “The Priest”—Memories of Waterloo—Dr. James Fairbairn on Schoolboy days and the Dawn of Evangelicalism—John Wilson, Schoolmaster and Tutor—Early Indian and Bombay Influences—The Arts Course at Edinburgh University—The Theological Professors—Rebellion of the Divinity Students—Founds the University Missionary Society—Earliest Publications—Ordained—The Bayne Sisters—Marriage—The Latest of the East India Company’s Passports—First view of Cape Comorin and Western India—Arrives at Bombay.

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“ Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe !
Thou Soul, that art the eternity of thought
And giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion, not in vain
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul ;
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man ;
But with high objects, with enduring things,
With life and nature ; purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying by such discipline
Both pain and fear,—until we recognise
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.”

WORDSWORTH in *The Prelude*.

“Audieram enim ego, adhuc puer, de vita eterna nobis promissa per
humilitatem Domini Dei nostri descendentis ad superbiam nostram ; et
signabar jam signo crucis Ejus, et condiebar Ejus sale, jam inde ab utero
matris meæ quae multum speravit in Te.”—S. AUR. AUGUSTINI *Confessio*.

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LIFE OF JOHN WILSON, D.D.



CHAPTER I.

AT a point some twenty-five miles to the south-east of the city of Edinburgh, the three counties of Edinburgh, Berwick, and Roxburgh meet. The spot is the summit of Lauder Hill, which rises between the railway station of Stow and the royal burgh of Lauder, chief of all the district of Lauderdale. As we stand on the ancient road, now grass-grown, we survey perhaps the widest and most quietly beautiful scene that the Scottish Border can present. From the Lammermoor to the Cheviot Hills, with the rounded Eildons sprouting at their base, the breadth of the two border counties, the Merse or march of Berwick and the fells of Roxburgh, are spread out before us. Distant Teviot and near Tweed roll down to the North Sea, watering a land of more historic renown than any other part of the too long disunited Kingdom. Behind we have left Gala Water, with its memories of legend and of song; before us, half hidden by the hill on which we stand, is the Leader which gives its name to Lauderdale. For more than twenty miles the stream flows on from the Lammermoors till it mingles its waters with the Tweed below Melrose Abbey. Even Scotland presents few valleys so broad, so fertile, as this Lauderdale throughout its long extent. Monk and warrior early chose it for their own, from Dryburgh Abbey where Sir Walter Scott lies, and Erceldoune or Earlston where Thomas

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the Rhymer sang his prophecies, to Thirlestane Castle where the Maitlands of Lauderdale still pleasantly perpetuate a house well known in Scottish history. Here it was, along the great highway, from the marshalling-ground of the Boroughmuir of Edinburgh to the fords of the Tweed and the field of Flodden, that the Edwards led their invading armies, and the Stewarts their avenging forces; while noble and yeoman on both sides the marches fought for their own hand. Old Thirlestane, near whose ruins the Leader now flows so gently, was long the tower from which "Maitland, with his auld grey beard," whom Gawan Douglas thought worthy of a place in his allegory of the "Palace of Honour," beat back the English. The ballad of "Auld Maitland," as taken down from the lips of Jane Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd's mother, who had learned it from a blind man of ninety, deserves all the enthusiasm Sir Walter Scott expresses for it. But even finer to the son of the Border is the more modern song of "Leader Haughs and Yarrow," with its quaint poetic catalogue of names and places sweeter to the natives of Lauderdale and Selkirk than those of Homer or of Milton. The old minstrel sighs at the close for the glory that is departed, for he wrote doubtless in the evil days just after the duke built the present castle in 1674—

"Sing Erlington and Cowdenknowes,
Where Humes had ance commanding;
And Drygrange with the milk-white yowes
'Twixt Tweed and Leader standing:
The bird that flees through Redpath trees
And Gladswood banks ilk morrow,
May chaunt and sing sweet Leader Haughs
And bonnie howms of Yarrow.

"But minstrel Burne cannot assuage
His grief, while life endureth,
To see the changes of his age
Which fleeting time procureth;

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1804.]

HIS BIRTH.

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For mony a place stands in hard case,
 Where blythe folk kend nae sorrow,
 With Humes that dwelt on Leader-side
 And Scotts that dwelt on Yarrow."

It was at Lauder, too, in the days of the Third James, that Archibald Douglas "belled the cat," hanging before his sovereign's eyes five of the low favourites who misled the royal youth. Nor should it be overlooked that the minister of Lauder, inducted in 1638, was James Guthrie, the Covenanter whom Lauderdale martyred along with the Marquis of Argyll, the Earl of Tweeddale alone pleading for the milder sentence of banishment. But modern times have brought more peaceful associations. Except, perhaps, the Highland Inverness-shire, no part of Scotland has been so fruitful a nursery of heroes for the civilisation, if not the conquest of our Indian Empire. Tweedside and its many dales have, in the last century, sent forth Kers and Elliots, Douglasses and Riddells, Scotts and Walkers, Malcolms and Grays, Napiers and Murrays to the noblest work any country has ever done for humanity. To a governor-general like Lord Minto, a statesman like Sir John Malcolm, a scholar and poet like Dr. Leyden, and an economist like James Wilson, we have now to add the Christian missionary John Wilson. He was as great a scholar and as benevolent a philanthropist as the best of them, or as all of them together; and he was a more potent force than they, because he gave himself to the people of India for a life of continuous service, covering nearly half a century, and because that service was inspired and fed every hour by the highest of all motives, the purest of all forms of self-sacrifice.

John Wilson was born in the Berwickshire burgh of Lauder on the 11th day of December 1804. He was the eldest of seven children, four brothers and three sisters, most of whom still survive. He came of a long-lived stock of small proprietors and farmers who for two hundred years inhabited

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the thatched, but now enlarged, house in the "Row" of the town in which he first saw the light. His great-grandfather reached the age of ninety-eight, his grandfather lived to be eighty-eight, his father and mother each died at eighty-two. Physically, he thus inherited a constitution of singular elasticity and power of endurance, under the frequent hardship of toilsome journeys and malarious disease in the jungles of Western India, before British railways, or even roads, had opened them up. His father, Andrew Wilson, was for more than forty years a councillor of the burgh, and was an elder in the parish kirk. His mother, Janet Hunter, the eldest of a family of thirteen most of whom lived to a good old age, was a woman of great force of character. This, added to the kindly unselfishness which marked her eldest son also, caused her to be in constant request by her neighbours in times of sickness and trouble. Father and mother combined in their rearing the economic conditions of the surrounding district. Lauderdale, to the east of the Leader, is a district of large farms, yielding an average rental of a thousand a year and upwards, even in those days, and worked in the very best style of the *grande culture*. Of James Hunter, the leaseholder of one of the most extensive of these, John Wilson's mother was the eldest daughter. To the west of the stream lie the town and its unusually wide commonage, covering at the present time 1700 acres, but doubtless larger a century ago. The land is owned by the burgesses, and a very considerable share of it had always been possessed by the Wilsons of the "Row." The old conditions are only now beginning to give place to the same influences which have made the high farming of the Lothians and the Merse famous in the history of agriculture. At last some of the "portioners" have combined to work the common land by the steam plough on a large scale. Yet, till this present year, the greater part of the burgh lands has been little more than fine pasture slopes,

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1804.]

HIS CHILDHOOD.

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to which the cattle have been led daily, under a common herdsman. Of such a stock, and out of the very heart of farmer-life, sprang the thoughtful scholar, the unwearied preacher, the distinguished philanthropist of Bombay.

No love had he, though the eldest of four sons, for the doubly ancestral and honourable calling. From the womb he had a higher vocation. Had he become the apostle of a superstitious mysticism, like Gooroo Nanuk, the founder of the Sikh dissent from Hindooism, the same stories might have been told of the great Christian Gooroo. For Nanuk, too, was the son of the chief "portioner" of the common of a village near Lahore, and he failed to keep his father's buffaloes from the cultivated fields. Nanuk never played like other children, so that the Hindoos said, "Some god is in him." On the second of Andrew Wilson's sons fell the duty of helping in the farm, and of driving the cattle to the nearest fair of St. Boswell's. From infancy John revealed himself as meant for a very different lot. When a baby he almost alarmed his mother by speaking before he could walk, and with an intelligence unprecedented in the experience of the neighbours. So the Mussulman villagers had said of Nanuk, "A holy man of God has been born!" As he grew up John Wilson was to his schoolfellows "the priest," by which name he was always known among them. His early developed tendencies brought him into trouble. On one occasion the boy was found preaching from a hollow tree behind Thirlestane Castle to the people who were sauntering home on the Sacrament Sunday evening, and was chastised for what seemed to his parents an offence. The secret of his life was not one which mere heredity may explain, though that too will find data in it. It is thus stated by himself in a "diary of religious experience" which he began to write on his twentieth birthday, but did not continue beyond his departure for India :—"When about the age of three years, I

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was put to sleep in the same bed with my aged grandfather by my father's side. He was the first person, if I remember rightly, who communicated to me any knowledge about God and my soul. I remember well the effect his instructions, by the blessing of God, produced upon my mind: the impressions which were then conveyed to me have never been wholly removed from me. I can never forget the fervour with which he engaged in his evening private devotions, and the feeling with which at such times he repeated the twenty-third Psalm, especially the concluding verse—

‘ Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me,
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.

“I was very early under conviction of sin, and I trust that the Lord at an early period of my life took a saving dealing with my soul. When about the age of four years I was sent to a school in Lauder taught by Mr. George Murray, where I continued about the space of one year. I then went to the parish school taught by Mr. Alexander Paterson, where, under Mr. Paterson's instructions, I made remarkable progress.” It was an early and it became a fruitful consecration; even as that of the prophet of Naioth and the statesman of Ramah.

John Wilson proved to be as fortunate in his teacher and in his companions as in his early home life. A new spirit in truth was abroad over the land, which had long lain under the spell of what is called “moderatism” in Scotland. It was the beginning, too, of that fifty years' period of peace and reform, in State as well as Church, which the crowning victory of Waterloo seemed to introduce. Dr. Wilson used to tell how, when he was little more than ten years old, the Edinburgh coach came to Lauder adorned with boughs, and one who had gone to the place where it stopped, to hear the news, rushed down the Row shouting “We've just annihilated

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MEMORIES OF HIS SCHOOLBOY DAYS.

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them." In both Lauder and Stow there happened to be evangelical preachers in the parish churches, Mr. Cosens and Dr. Cormack, while the "Burgher" or seceding congregations were everywhere ministered to by earnest men, to whom many of the surrounding families were driven by the old "moderates." The coming of Mr. Paterson to the parish school at this time was an event of importance. It affected at once the spiritual condition of the whole district, and speedily brought within the reach of evangelical teaching all the hopeful youth of the surrounding country. The survivor of that band, the venerable Dr. Fairbairn of Newhaven, has thus written out the memories of these days :—

"John Wilson was one of a group of boys who received their early education at the parish school of Lauder, and most of whom proceeded together to the University of Edinburgh. I have them all in my mind's eye, in the flower of their boyhood, as fresh as yesterday—John and Peter Purves, George Paterson, George Douglas, James and David Runciman, John Paterson, John Wilson, William Romanes, Patrick Fairbairn, Alexander Murray, James Haswell, Alexander Jamieson, Robert Lees, Thomas Simpson, William Broomfield, William Dove, and others. Most of them ran a successful career in life, and some of them attained great eminence. Here they are—distinct, but oh ! how distant—for with one exception they have all passed within the veil, and I alone am left to tell their story.

"I have the most distinct recollection of the characters of all my school-fellows, and not least of John Wilson. He was a modest, devout, affectionate, and gentle boy, always ready to take part with the weakest, and never in a quarrel or a scrape. He was, I think, the most diligent and persevering student in the school, and I can readily understand how he attained to such acquirements and success. He was also eminently truthful and sincere. There was one of our number (James Runciman) whom our teacher always charac-

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terised as the ‘boy who never told a lie,’ and he used to associate John Wilson with him in this honourable distinction. I remember in one of the intervals of our school day, a band of us started ‘up the burn’ for fishing and other diversions. Seduced by the summer sunlight (oh how bright it was in those days!) we heeded not the lapse of time, till the school hour had passed. Then came a conference to determine what we would say for ourselves, and various proposals, savouring, I fear, of diplomacy, were made. But the discussion was cut short by John Wilson saying, in a tone unusually energetic for him, ‘I tell you what—we will tell the truth,’ and the truth he told—aye, and continued to tell it till his dying day.

“I well remember also a very bright and calm summer Sabbath day. As the people went along the road to church, there was a question in every mouth—‘Will they be *fechtin’* on sic a day as this?’ After sermon there was a fellowship-meeting in the session-house of the Burgher meeting-house, into which my friend John and I contrived to get admission. Again the question went round, ‘Will they be *fechtin’*?’ and the inquiry tinged all the services with unusual solemnity. A venerable white-headed elder, Saunders Downie, the tailor—who has passed long since into the fellowship of the four-and-twenty Elders that sit around the Throne—delivered himself to this effect: ‘Surely,’ he said in his godly simplicity, ‘surely they’ll let the blessed Sabbath ower afore they fecht.’ Whether they were ‘fechtin’ or whether they let the blessed Sabbath over before doing so, you will judge when I say that that Sabbath day was the 18th of June 1815. Then came a week of anxiety; groups of people stood all the day at the head of the town, in the expectation of hearing the booming of the guns of the distant castle of Edinburgh announcing a victory. At last came the full accounts of the great battle, which filled every mouth and heart for many a long day. I recollect we were both much impressed with all this, and had