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Tom Barclay.

Memoirs and Medleys: the Autobiography of a Bottle-washer. By the late Tom Barclay (Leicester: Edgar Bachus; 5s.)

It must be very nearly twenty years since my old friend—and present colleague—Teddie Preston, then fresh from Leicester, told me about Tom Barclay, the Philosopher, with the soul of a Socrates, and the occupation of a bottle-washer.

Memoirs and Medleys is, for more than one reason, an important piece of autobiography; it is comparable to those forgotten autobiographies of self-made men and working-men, James Lackington, Thomas Cooper, Joseph Barker, George Jacob Holyoake, C. M. Smith, William Lovett, for instance, that give infinitely more of the real stuff of human nature than any of the memoirs of the Alleged Good and Reputed Great that I have seen.

Here is a memorable autobiography by a man who had no interest in "getting on in the world," as the old Victorians used to call it, or "making money"; Tom Barclay was too absorbed in life itself to be interested in what the foul old Philistines used to call "the value of money," which, if I may here be slightly autobiographical myself for a moment, is one of the numerous phrases that darkened my own childhood.

All his life Tom Barclay remained a working-man; he would have scorned to be anything else. Herein lies the key to his superb and unique manhood. In several ways he recalls the forgotten—but very bright—Eighteenth Century Freethinker, Thomas Chubb, who, in his very brief, but sufficing, autobiography, writes:—

> The Author lived a *single life*, he judging it greatly improper to introduce a family into the world, without a *prospect* of maintaining them, which was *his* case; such adventures being usually attended with great poverty, the parent of much misery; and that was a state of life that he did not choose to *rush* into. And

though, according to the proverb, God does not send *mouths* without sending *meat* to fill them; yet our Author saw, by daily experience, that meat to some was not to be obtained but with great difficulty. And as to trusting to providence, in such cases, the Author thought it was rather *groundlessly presuming* upon providence, than a proper trust in it; nor did he find that providence *interposed* to extricate its pretended *dependents* out of their difficulties.

Here is Chubb's history repeated in Tom Barclay; James R. Kelly, the Editor of this book, says exactly the same thing of his hero:—

> Then, later, as his understanding developed, and his observation of the facts of life around him made it clear that he was likely to remain poor always, he determined never to marry and beget children to be subject to such horrible privations as those through which he had passed.

There are passages in this delightful and fresh record that move me as much as anything in history; they seem to me of the very stuff of life itself; the real sweet essence of life that keeps humanity going. This, for in stance:—

> Here let me tell a story I heard of him many years ago. One night a man who knew him met him on St. Saviour's Road, and was surprised to see that he was crying like a child. He went to him and said, "What ever is the matter, Mr. Barclay?" "Bradlaugh's dead!" replied Tom. The same deep feeling of affection for one highly prized impelled him, the unbeliever, to pay for Masses for his dead sister, and to shed tears of bitter grief on the death of one who was the champion of the right and the duty of every man to think freely on all questions, and to hold to the conclusions which seemed to him to be true, against all comers.

Here is another passage that I must quote; it should reach as many minds as possible:—

> I chose Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, for my patron saint on account of his reputed great Learn-

ing, but I've done with him. What do you think he says: you'll find it in Part Three of the *Summa*: he says, "*Beati in Regno Coelesli videbunt pœnas damnatorum ut beatudo illis magis complaceat*." That means that the happiness of the Blessed in Heaven will be increased by watching the torments of the damned. You'd think the most hardened murderer—the most insidious poisoner—would hardly announce such a thought, if he were hellish enough to think it. Contrast the sentiment with that expressed by the pessimistic poet James Thomson,

> If any human soul at all
> Must die the second death, and fall
> Into that gulf of quenchless flame,
>
> Then I give God my scorn and hate,
> And turning back from Heaven's Gate
> (Suppose me got there) bid "Adieu,
> Almighty Devil; damn me too."

This gives the precise difference in quality between Supernaturalism and Humanism. The statement is complete and final; there is nothing more relevantly to be said, and there never w ill be. Mr. Arnold Lunn and the rest of the Neo-Catholics who have recently rediscovered "the Angelic Doctor" might think-over this quotation from the life of a heretic and ex-Catholic who, "waking-up to life," found that he had no further use for the alleged "Consolations" of the sweetly-reasonable Catholic creed.

Humanity, as this self-initiated philosopher discovered for himself, does not really need the "Angelicalism" that preaches permanent hell-fire to "sinners." What humanity needs is the humanism that insists on human love as the panacea for human ills. That was Tom Barclay's gospel; and, unless it be adopted by Europe, there is an end to European civilization. Here is a Freethinking Bottle-washer who puts to shame an "angelic doctor," who is also a Catholic Saint. I will leave the discerning reader to discover the moral for himself.

Barclay was born in 1852. Here is a picture "from the life" of Christian and Capitalist England in the days before Trades Unions and Freethought had made things a little more tolerable for those whom Christian charity called "the common people," and "the lower orders":—

> What sort of an existence was it where a mother giving suck had to be hours away from home trying to earn something? When the kids of the yard were not molesting us, I as eldest was nurse, and often have I put my tongue into baby's mouth to be sucked in lieu of "titty" to stop her cries. The cries used to cease for a minute, and then were resumed as the tongue gave no satisfaction. Poor cooped-up vermin-infected brats! But I am suffering much more now probably in simply remembering our stale than I actually suffered then: we did not feel the dimness and squalour and foul smells—the horror of the bugs and lice and black-beetles—as I now, many years after, feel them: we had no other life, no other sensations or feelings. This was life, and we knew no other to contrast it with. Does the worm wish to be a butterfly, or the mole a lark?

This paragraph is taken from the first chapter of the bottle-washer's autobiography; this chapter is a master piece of descriptive writing; true, poignant, simple, unforgettable.

"Poor as we were," continues the Philosopher, "we were not the poorest in the court; the very poorest were too proud to let the others know how poor they were: they felt shame of what they couldn't possibly help, as when they broke the only saucepan in the house, and had to borrow one."

Here is a picture of a poor man's home in England in the mid-nineteenth century—say three-quarters of a century ago; it will be allowed, I think, that "God" and the Bourgeoisie who then ruled England—according to the Bourgeoisie—did their work well and characteristically:—

> I'm sure we never had a complete bath in all our childhood's years, unless such a thing is indispensable to the newly-born. Mother did all that was possible, but she had neither time nor means to boil our rags of shirts and sheets when washing. We had no wash-tub nor dolly-pegs, not to speak of wringing and mangling-machines: there could have been no room for such in a room only nine feet by nine, even had we possessed them, eh, Mother? So we went unwashed, and pediculus thrived greatly in his two principal species, *capitis* and *vestimenti*, and God's beautiful image was preyed upon daily and nightly. No fault of Mother's.

When he was eight years old Tom went to work for eighteen pence a week; “Unwashed, ill-clothed, ill-fed, untaught, worried by vermin, I worked in all weathers, and not without scolding and threats of violence, seventy hours a week for—how much? One shilling and sixpence.” Work began at six a.m., and ended late at night.

There is a chapter in this book wherein any Irishman will rejoice. It concerns the Gaelic League, and the at tempts—partially successful—to revive Erse as a living tongue. By descent Tom Barclay was pure, or almost pure, Irish; and he learnt to read fluently his ancestral speech.

All the Celtic Revival names occur in this miniature history—for that is what it is—of the Irish National Revival that began in the ’nineties of last century with Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, Dr. Douglas Hyde, George Russell (A.E.), and others as “sponsorial artists,” if I may coin a phrase.

Barclay was in London, earning half-a-crown a day as a circular-distributor, whilst the Gaelic League was hold ing its Irish classes. “During the eighteen months I lived in London, I think I never missed a single lesson.”

Writing these Memoirs in his old age, the author records—in Leicester, anyway—the decline and fall of Erse interest. “But one Irish speaker is left to-day in Leicester—M aggie Brown.” Whimsically he compares Maggie Brown to Dolly (or, as he calls her, Dorothea) Pentreath, the famous eighteenth-century centenarian who was the last speaker of Cornish as a living tongue; “and I, a would-be Irishman, and Dick Hancock, an Englishman with a Jewish strain in him are the only two who can read an Irish book or newspaper.”

Barclay visited Ireland three times; his chief adoration is for Irish music; for he himself was a bit of a musician, and he had the old airs in his blood.

The hero of this book became something of a poet, something of a linguist, something of an artist; and a good deal of a thinker. That he was a Socialist and a Freethinker need scarcely be told. Barclay’s ideal was a very human one—an ideal, happily, still amongst us—George Bernard Shaw, of whom I shall write presently. He also knew Ruskin, Morris, and the delightful Edward Carpenter. Amongst his intimates were J.W. Barrs, “B.V.’s” intimate, and Sydney A. Gimson, both of Leicester, his native town; the latter of these writes a Foreword to this book. It is clearly his job; for he was a friend of Barclay’s for nearly half a century.

The names of those admired and heard by Tom Barclay are those of the men and women to whom we owe all the improvements in English life that have happened in the last eighty years; George Jacob Holyoake, Thomas Cooper, Morris, Hyndman, Kropotkin, Foote, Bradlaugh, Tom Mann, Hubert Bland, Sydney Webb, Cunninghame Graham, Auberon Herbert, Dr. Aveling, Annie Besant, George Cores (whom I am proud to hail as a present colleague of my own), J.M. Robertson, Enid Stacey, J.J. Nichol, amongst them. There are many others; but this list suffices to give a sample of the company to which the fortunate reader of this book is introduced. It is a glorious company, the very flower of England's noblest hope and thought and work. What are the good of hope and thought and work if they be not used in the service of the people? Such was Tom Barclay's view; and it is the only one worth holding. All the rest is personal ambition and social self-seeking, and worth neither having nor recording.

Barclay "discovered" Shaw, as he says, years before the crowd of bookmakers and journalists who now find that worthy reformer and dramatist good and remunerative "copy." In Shaw he found centred all the idealisms whereto his life was devoted; that unique and picturesque Irishman "stood" for the future in a way that "got" Tom Barclay absolutely. He was probably the first, as he was assuredly the noblest of the Shavians.

This book contains six illustration s; the two that seem to me really to get there are an admirable portrait of Shaw that is new to me; and an exquisite photograph of the author "taken in August, 1932, on the Western Park." In that picture the whole history of this humanist hero may be "read at a blink." It is the last photograph of Tom Barclay ever taken.

I lie book is edited by James R. Kelley, whose epilogue is worthy of its subject.

Here is an unique and human work, fresh, clean, and honest. The only work like it that I have seen is a for gotten history of the early nineteenth century called The Memoirs of Robert Blincoe, and in both depth and range the palm goes to Thomas Patrick Barclay, who has, I think, despite his modesty and gentleness of soul, achieved a posthumous immortality. All honour be to these self-effacing and self-cultured humans who are the salt of our race.

There is not much doubt that future editions of this book w ill appear; on half-a-dozen counts it is notable; this first edition, if I know ought about such matters, will become valuable. When the next edition appears I hope that the rather frequent

misprints, especially in foreign words, will receive the attention of a competent proof-reader. The most irritating error is the repeated misprint of Evelyn Douglas's name as *Evylin* Douglas: a hideous, if original, version. It should also be mentioned, by the way, that "Evelyn Douglas" is the pen-name of the poet John Barlas.

I will not close this notice of an exquisite piece of life without giving the Editor's concluding sentence. "It is the crowning glory of such a man as Tom Barclay that intimacy with him created, confirmed and increased faith in the essential goodness of human nature."

All honour to the Pioneers; of such is the Kingdom of Man; and the Kingdom of Man is the utmost that our Planet can hope to achieve.

Victor B. Neuburg