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The St Mary's Heritage Project

A portrait of the Rev. Richard Oldham, 1875.

SOURCE:

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The Rev. Richard Oldham

The most respectable of the smaller Scotch dissenting sects is certainly the Episcopalian. The body has a history. Indeed, at one time it almost seemed as if Episcopacy and not Presbyterianism were fated to become the national religion of the country. It was the form of creed adopted by the chief persons of the State. Several of its professors, Bishop Leighton of Dunblane was one, were distinguished as well for their learning as for their piety. Presbyterianism was everywhere frowned upon; Prelacy was everywhere coddled.

Then a change took place in the relative positions of the two religions. A king arose who knew not the chiefs of the Episcopal party; the strong democratic spirit on matters of thinking, which has always been characteristic of the Scotch, made the common people class Prelacy and Popery together, and the prelatial church fell, or remained but the church of a handful of our territorial aristocracy.

For a hundred years Episcopacy was nowhere in Scotland. Here and there on the East coast, notably in the neighbourhood of Montrose, she succeeded in holding together a few congregations, but for all active purposes she might as well have been dead.

Then a species of revival took place. The body began to grow stronger. English and occasional Irish settlers in Scotland attended the Communion in which they had been reared in preference to the Presbyterian churches of the country. Members of the upper classes who went south every season gradually adopted the Liturgy as they adopted the other fashions of their southern friends. Scotch Episcopalianism thus recovered some of the ground it lost at the time of the famous Jenny Geddes episode.

Today, it presents the anomaly of a religious sect which is intimately connected with the upper class of the country, and which also possesses not a few devoted adherents among the lower orders - among the orders which furnish recruits to the army, and from which the ranks of our police force are supplied.

Like all other dissenting sects, the Episcopalians are torn with fierce internal dissensions. The body is split up into any number of opposing factions. Unfortunately, too, the strongest of these factions is not always distinguished for loving charity, either for the members of their own Communion, or for those of their brethren in the Christian Church at large.

Of late years the two most eminent members of the denomination have been the late Bishop Ewing of Argyll and the present Bishop Wordsworth of St Andrew's. All the world knows what treatment these distinguished men have received from their co-religionists. To go no further a-field than our own city, it is enough to recall the public scandal created by the inhibition issued by the Bishop of Glasgow against the preaching of Bishop Ewing in the chapel attached to the University at Gilmorehill.

But if Dr Ewing was only subjected to a species of what may be termed negative persecution, the persecution which Dr Wordsworth has recently undergone has been of a distinctly active order. So active, indeed, has it been, that not long since it induced him to resort to the extreme measure of resigning his bishopric, and although he was induced to withdraw his resignation for a time, it is well known that he still looks eagerly forward towards the day of deliverance from his enemies.

The leading Episcopalian clergyman of this city, Richard Samuel Oldham, M.A., Oxon., incumbent of St Mary's, has occupied a leading position among our Glasgow ministers for something like a quarter of a century. His leanings are ritualistic, the service in St Mary's is effective and even rich, and Mr Oldham has a peculiarly aristocratic congregation. Indeed, it is the *right thing*, so to speak, to attend St Mary's. Our neighbouring territorial Episcopalian families *sit under* Mr Oldham, and the folks who would like to be aristocratic *sit under* him likewise.

Ritualistic or no, however, Mr Oldham is a hard working, conscientious clergyman. He has interested himself largely in home mission work; one of the results of his efforts in this direction is the new church of St Luke's in Grafton Square. His infant schools are also well known, and have been the means of largely benefiting, not only members of his own body, but that portion of the public who reside in the districts which come under his more immediate jurisdiction.

Besides his efforts towards the Christianising of the poorer classes, Mr Oldham has shown his singleness of aim by the general tone of his preaching. Ritualist and aristocratic preacher though he be, he invariably lectures his congregation against the deceitfulness of riches. He urges them to charity, to humbleness of heart, and to the exercise of what are usually termed the minor virtues.

Apart from his clerical duties and his clerical position, Mr Oldham, 'The Bailie' may hint, is a wonderful favourite. He is a skilled conversationalist. There is a dash of humour about him, which he can use at the proper time and place with capital effect.

The new church of St Mary's in Great Western Road, the work of Sir Gilbert Scott, which was opened four or five years ago, is perhaps the most perfect specimen of gothic architecture among our recent local edifices. It has still to be crowned with a spire, and this will be added in due time, like that of its neighbour the imposing seminary at Gilmorehill.

St Mary's congregation, as a church, has existed, there is reason to believe, some 300 years. In Mr Oldham's hands Episcopalianism has almost become popular, not only in Glasgow but over the entire West of Scotland. He has artistic sympathies; the narrowness, indeed the bitterness of party feeling which 'The Bailie' has already alluded to, has no place in his nature. Occasionally you even forget that the Episcopalians are nothing more than a sect of dissenters when you meet Mr Oldham. It is impossible, in his company, to preserve with any degree of bitterness the recollections of Airs Moss and Bothwell Brig.