

DR. HENRY BURTON
METHODISM'S GREAT HYMN WRITER

BORN AT SWANNINGTON

(By ALFRED BOSWORTH)

There are few people living to-day who are more widely known throughout the Christian world than the Rev. Dr. Henry Burton. In his beautiful hymns there are the outpourings of a great heart full of love, sympathy and music. His writings bear the mark of a cultured mind, and of a soul that lives in a world of vision and beauty. He always strikes the note of hope, and sets the world ringing with music and song. He looks upon men and the world with a mighty conquering faith, and lovingly calls for a victorious heroism.

It was at the colliery village of Swannington that Dr. Burton was born nearly 88 years ago. He came into the world amid quite ordinary surroundings, an old farmhouse which had been in the family for nearly 200 years, being the place of his birth.

Dr. Burton, however, started life at a great advantage so far as his religious life was concerned. The home in which he was born was dominated by Christian influences, and the family was revered and held in the highest esteem by everybody in the district. His grandfather, a very godly man, exercised considerable influence both in the village and district.

BARN SERVICES

When but a boy there were evident signs that Dr. Burton was endowed with unusual gifts, and the great desire of his parents was that he might become a preacher. His conversion came about in rather an unusual manner. The services were so well attended that it was found necessary to enlarge the chapel, and for some time worship was conducted in one of his father's barns, and it was during one of the services that Dr. Burton was converted at the age of 15 years. He immediately offered himself as a teacher in the Sunday School, and was appointed to have charge of the infant class. For seven years he was a scholar at the Wesleyan day school at Griffydam.

Eventually a great change came to the family, which gave a smashing blow to the Wesleyan Methodist Society, and which meant a big cleavage from the village and people with whom they were so popular. In the year 1858 father, mother and ten children bade farewell to the old home and friends, and set sail on a clipper to America.

Upon arriving in America they settled about 90 miles from Chicago, where Dr. Burton attended the Academy of Beloit College for two years. He matriculated, and entered upon his four years' course, graduating with honours in 1862.

The family availed themselves of the first opportunity of taking up active Christian work, and became associated with the Methodist Episcopal

Church in Beloit, where Dr. Burton became a teacher in the Sunday School, a class leader and a fully accredited local preacher. It was during his college course that he felt moved towards the ministry, and his mother gave it all the encouragement she could. On one occasion she offered him a shilling a volume if he would read the six volumes of "Jackson's Lives of the early Methodist Preachers," an offer which was accepted.

SUPPLY WORK

Three days after graduating, Dr. Burton, by the appointment of the presiding elder of the district, was on his way to Egerton Circuit in the Wisconsin Conference to take up supply work. After the expiration of three months he was sent to take charge of the Church at Monroe, Wisconsin, where he witnessed a wonderful revival. Under the strain and excitement of the work his health broke down, and as his parents and the family had gone back to England he deemed it advisable to follow them and went back to England.

Immediately upon his return Dr. Burton commenced to preach, and for several quarters held a position on the Brunswick Circuit Plan as a local preacher, and afterwards was placed on the Ashby-de-la-Zouch Circuit Plan. He then resided at Melbourne, working on his uncle's farm at Breedon-on-the-Hill. At that time the Wesleyan Methodist Society at Melbourne was greatly in need of assistance, and it was decided to engage Dr. Burton. The venture was a decided success, and after a short period he was unanimously recommended by the Castle Donington Circuit as a candidate for the Wesleyan Ministry, and for 41 years was an itinerating minister in Methodism, a career which was considerably shortened owing to a very serious illness.

"PASS IT ON"

Dr. Burton, however, was specially drawn to hymn-writing. The hymn, "Pass it On," has a most interesting history. The hymn has been translated into Chinese, and the first verse was chosen out of 5,000 efforts as the motto of the International Sunshine Society of America. A society of railroad men in London, and a "Pass it on" Society, in Scotland, both use it as their motto. In 1887 Dr. Burton was one of three asked to write an ode for the jubilee of Queen Victoria and he wrote "O King of Kings," which is included in the hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America, and it was set to music by Sir John Stainer, and sung by a choir of a thousand voices accompanied by an orchestra of seventy instruments at a special festival of the National Children's Home and Orphanage in the Royal Albert Hall, London.

Sir John Stainer afterwards wrote Dr. Burton asking if he could put it in another form which would do for any occasion, and he would adapt the music for it. Dr. Burton agreed to the suggestion, and the hymn was evolved which has been described as the finest National Anthem of modern times. The first verse of that beautiful hymn "Break Day of God" came to him on Christmas Eve when he was standing on the railway bridge at Blundell Sands, and the hymn was completed the same evening. A number of Dr. Burton's hymns have first been published in America, two of them being in Moody and Sankey's collection of sacred songs and solos. The hymn, "Come for the feast is spread," is often used in the German Lutheran Church as one of their sacramental hymns.

Dr. Burton married the sister of the Rev. Mark Pearce, and has five

children. Three are actively engaged in the work of the ministry, one the wife of the Rev. G.M. Bamford, another the wife of the Rev. J.A. Alexander, and the Rev. Howard Worley Burton, who recently concluded his Ministry in Leicester. The other two children are engaged in the work of the Church.

GLORIOUS RECORD

The Castle Donington circuit, which nominated Dr. Burton for the ministry, is proud of his glorious record, and he cherishes tender memories of his association with his old friends, and finds peculiar delight in visiting the scenes of his early labours. Dr. Burton has never sought popularity among the great pulpits of Methodism. He has always found great joy in delivering his heart-felt message to the small congregation in the little wayside chapel, as he did in preaching to thousand in the mighty churches of the denomination to which he belongs. He has always been a lover of the countryside. The little village with its cottages dotted here and there has always been to him a place of great endearment.

Dr. Burton is spending the eventide of his life at West Kirby, which is part of the coastline which first greets the voyager who has sailed the Atlantic from New York to Liverpool. The house in which he lives is situated on a hill from where there is a glorious sea view, with a long stretch of the Welsh hills. From his study windows there is afforded a wonderful sweep of sea and sky. Here he spends many hours watching the

wonderful sunsets and the calm of evening gently failing. With Dr. Henry Burton the day is far spent, but the evening is touched with a beauty and peace and hope like the setting summer sun. Of Dr. Henry Burton it can be truly said:

"The golden evening brightens in the west."