ADAM CLARKE, THE MAN

by Maldwyn L. Edwards

The one unforgettable thing about Adam Clarke was his amazing industry. He was not only the master of many languages and the writer of many books, but at the same time he was ever a most diligent Methodist preacher and pastor. As a young man in his little Irish village, he had listened to the Methodist preachers with a growing sense of need and one morning, in spiritual torment, he went to work in the fields. But his burden was too great, and he groaned aloud in his distress and could not even find the words to pray. Then he heard the Divine Voice: "Come to the Holiest through the Blood of Jesus." He looked up and his sense of guilt and condemnation was banished. He was indescribably happy and "bounded like a roe." ¹ The next week he went to a love feast at Coleraine and the work of grace was completed in his heart. He knew he was a child of God and affirmed ever afterwards that he could no more doubt it than he could doubt the reality of his own existence. This was the great secret of his devoted ministry. He had met the King and he knew that the King's business required haste. Eternity was too short to utter all His praise.

It was this unwillingness to slacken rein even for an instant that precipitated his death. For when he came home after his tour in Northern Ireland and his family noticed how pale and weary he seemed, his wife begged him not to think of going to the Conference of Preachers. But although it meant leaving his family almost at once, and although he knew that there was a severe outbreak of cholera in Liverpool, he went because he considered it his duty to report on his Irish schools and obtain fresh preachers for the Shetland Isles. At the earnest insistence of his brethren, he preached before the Conference, but confessed in a letter to his wife that although his mind was never more vigorous, his body was never so near sinking. Immediately after Conference he set off to Frome to fulfil a promise he had made to preach for his son. Throughout these days he was continually battling against pain and weariness but four days after arriving home he set out once more to preach. This time the imperious demands of the spirit could not override the exhaustion of the body. His illness was diagnosed as cholera and almost at once that night came for him "wherein no man can work." ² No Methodist preacher had ever employed more fully the working hours of the day. It was his custom always to rise at four

o’clock in the morning. He disliked tea as strongly as he disliked tobacco and claimed to have saved many valuable hours by never taking tea himself nor making any “tea visits.” 3 He possessed one of the finest private collections of books and manuscripts in the Kingdom and eagerly studied all the catalogues of booksellers. One day he saw advertised a copy of the first edition of the Greek Testament of Erasmus and early the next morning he went to the bookseller and purchased it. He was met later by a Dr. Gossett, who asked him how he obtained it, “for,” said he, “I was at Baynes’ directly after breakfast.” “Ah,” said Clarke, “I was there before breakfast and so I forestalled you.” 4

With his industry there were allied the kindred virtues of punctuality and tidiness. Once when he had arrived, as usual, in time for a committee, he found the other members had not arrived, so he wrote on a piece of paper: “I have been here—no one came—so I am gone forth. Adam Clarke.” He laid the paper on the table before the place of Lord Teignmouth, the chairman of the committee.

It might be thought that a man so industrious in his habits, so neat and tidy always in appearance, and so unfailingly punctual in his engagements was one to respect but not to love. Yet Clarke was actually the most lovable of men. He was no dry-as-dust scholar, but interested in all he saw. He could translate an obscure Coptic inscription in the rooms of the Royal Society of Antiquaries which had baffled other eminent scholars and, at the same time, he could unhesitatingly pronounce the stone on which the inscription was engraved to be basalt. He could take a watch to pieces, clean it, reassemble the watch and write as the pleasant sequel that it went well ever after. He mended a pair of bellows and other household utensils once when he was in Norwich. On one occasion he remarked to a friend, “We ought to learn something every day; Methodist preachers should know everything and be capable of assisting themselves in every way because of the peculiar situations in which they are placed. For my own part I can build a haystack or a chimney piece; mend my own shoes; put sleeves into my own coat, repair a frying pan, put bars to a cild-iron and turn a lathe.” 5

If he was wide in his interests, he was equally wide in his sympathies. It was his concern for the helpless and needy that made him originate such schemes as the Stranger’s Friend Societies, the schools for poor children in Ulster, and the sending of missionaries to the Shetland Isles. He had a great love for children and in one of his delightful letters to a little grandson (1825), he told him in

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4 Ibid., p. 199.
the simplest language about birds and their ways. Although he claimed that he was shy and lacking in the manners of polite society, no one enjoyed more the company of friends and no one had a better fund of conversation. He must have been an agreeable companion, because so many instances of his abounding good humor and wit have come down to us.

At the Conference of 1792 held at Manchester there was great poverty and distress and the people in their misery looked with indignation at the powdered wigs of the senior preachers. Clarke took advantage of this feeling to scare Peard Dickinson, who was remarkable for the quantity of powder he used. He sent him a letter in the following terms: "Sir—The people want food; they consider you by wearing powder to be an unnecessary consumer, and call you and your party, cannibals and vow vengeance. We take the liberty to caution you as you are narrowly watched and sign ourselves—Provident and Little Faith." Clarke had the impish satisfaction of seeing Dickinson make a most hasty departure from the city. When some one asked him in 1793 where it was in Liverpool that he lived, he replied, "Neither in hell nor in purgatory but in a place of torment. You must go down Dale Street then along East Street, and when you are up to the middle in clay and mud, call out lustily for Adam Clarke." Once, when an unctuous old man had said piously, "The love of money is the root of all evil," Adam Clarke said, "If you think so, hand me over a few of your money bags and I will soon show you that I can do some good with them."

He desired people to kneel to pray and he said in an article in the Arminian Magazine that the best thing he could wish those who sat at prayer was a porcupine's skin for a cushion. He once complained of the barges on the Duke of Bridgewater's canals that over twenty of his boxes were broken, though they came by his Grace's flats. "I think that the flats and his Grace's flatteries should be trusted with nothing but millstones, Pompey's Pillar or Cleopatra's Needle. For their prosperity in their present destructive and predatory work they shall never have my prayers. I can only say, reformation to all rogues. Amen. Selah." Once, when a careless servant girl upset the contents of a dish onto a lady's lap, Dr. Clarke instantly turned to her and quoted appositely some words of John Wesley: "How fortunate it happened here, Madam, and to you, Madam, for I know none more able to bear it."

Adam Clarke was greatly loved by his brethren and the Methodist people because he had great qualities of character. He was essentially modest and only with the greatest difficulty could he be persuaded to accept the Presidency. The honor came to him three times, but he never felt himself worthy of it. Another char-

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6 Ibid., p. 41.
characteristic was his generosity. This was shown not only in his numerous gifts both to individuals and organizations, but in his refusal to accept fee or reward for his services. Like his revered leader, John Wesley, he was remarkably tolerant and free from bigotry in his views. In reference to his decided views on the eternal sonship of Christ, he said, “On this point it is necessary every man smuld be clear in his own mind. Any opinion of mine, my readers are at perfect liberty to accept or reject. I never claimed infallibility. I can say with Augustine, “Errare possum’.”

But the humanity and attractiveness of Clarke is best seen in his family relationships. He was most happily married to a sweet and gifted lady, from whom he was fated so often to be parted. Always when he was away he assured his “dear Mary” of his desire to be again at home. When at home he always called the children round him and played with them before their bedtime. When his Commentary on the Bible was finished, he was presented by his family with a large silver vase. For some moments Adam Clarke was unable to speak, and then he rose and assured them of his love and blessed them individually. When Joseph added an appendix to the life of Adam Clarke, he finished his tribute with the words: “My God, I bless Thee that I had such a father.” In a letter to his wife, Adam Clarke revealed how much his family meant to him: “You know, my dear Mary, that yourself and the children are all I have on this side of the God of Heaven.”

Throughout his long and distinguished career it was ever the proudest boast of Adam Clarke that he was a Methodist preacher. It is doubtful whether he spent much time in the preparation of particular sermons. Indeed, in some recorded instances he took a suggested text and almost straightway preached upon it. His method was to expound his text, drawing out its several implications, and using always his unrivalled knowledge of the Bible. Then logic would give place to declamation. The strong, clear voice which had seemed a trifle monotonous would vibrate with emotion. The people were spellbound by his passionate pleading and brought into the very presence of a God who delighted in mercy and who wanted to pardon and redeem His children. In one recorded climax to a sermon he pictured God about to create new worlds and hearing a poor sinner cry, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me,” and at once leaving all else, God came to that poor sinner’s aid. James Dixon, himself a distinguished Methodist leader and preacher, said that when Dr. Clarke had finished his argument he used to come down

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upon the congregation with tremendous force. "He concentrated
the truth he had been uttering into one focus. His declamation in
the latter part of his sermon was overwhelming. I have seen a con­
gregation transported by his power and force. Some were weeping,
some smiling, some shouting for joy—all commotion." 9

He believed wholeheartedly in the institutions of Methodism and
he accepted gladly, and preached convincingly, those doctrines
which Methodism had specially stressed. A month before his death
he wrote that Christianity as existing among Wesleyan Methodists
is the purest and safest, and that which is most to the glory of God
and the benefit of man. He affirmed that among Methodists was the
best form and body of divinity that had existed since Christianity
first began. "If any should say, 'Dr. Clarke, are you not a bigot?'
I would answer, 'No, I am not; for by the grace of God I am a Meth­
odist.'" His singular goodness of life was apparent to all who met
him. No one was more occupied in the study of the Bible, but he
read it not only with the understanding of the scholar but the devo­
tion of a true believer.

Before he commenced to write his famous Commentary, he had
translated the New Testament in 1794-5, using the printed text
collated with available manuscripts. Then he translated the Old
Testament from the Hebrew and Chaldee texts in 1797. He had
previously made a close study of the Septuagint and noted down
the most important differences between that and the Hebrew text.
He began to write his Commentary on May 1, 1798, and it was
issued in parts and continued in the intervals of other exacting
work until at length he was able to declare that he was fully in
sight of land. He completed it on March 28, 1825 at eight o'clock in
the evening, writing the last notes on the last verse of the last
chapter of Malachi upon his knees. Then he came into the parlor
and, without speaking, beckoned his youngest son into the study.
All the books had been replaced on the shelves and on the study
table there was only left the Bible. "Joseph," said Adam Clarke,
"this is the happiest period I have known for years. I have put the
last hand to my Commentary and put away the chains that would
remind me of my bondage, and there," pointing to the steps of the
library ladder, "have I returned the deep thanks of a grateful soul
to God who has shown me such great and continued kindness;
I shall now go into the parlor, tell my good news to the rest and
enjoy myself for the day." Few commentaries have had a greater
sale. Butterworth, the publisher, had to strike off eleven thousand
eight hundred copies before the first demand could be supplied
and successive editions were printed both in England and America.
There were other Methodist commentators, such as Coke and Ben­

son and Sutcliffe, but Clarke was easily the greatest because he combined profound learning with a gift for simple convincing exposition.

The Commentary was written before the true beginnings either of the textual or historical criticism of the Bible and consequently it has small value for modern scholars. Nevertheless, it can still be read with profit by the general reader, for Clarke was not merely content to translate carefully any difficult word or phrase and to illustrate from a bewildering number of ancient writings, but to make his own clear and helpful comments upon the meaning of the sacred text.

He said if the Bible was false we could not be sure of anything, but we know it to be God’s word by the effect it produces on the heart and mind. On January 1, 1830, he bound himself to read the Bible through once more by reading the New Testament in Greek and the Old Testament in English, collating it occasionally with the Hebrew. This course he commended to others, suggesting that they take a chapter in each Testament every day. He was a mighty man of prayer and when he led the daily worship in his family, they felt it to be the strong pleading of the “friend of God.” As he lived, so he died. When he was scarcely conscious, some one bent over him and whispered, “My dear Doctor, you must put your soul into the hands of God and your trust in the merits of your Savior.” And Adam Clarke faintly murmured, “I do, I do.” 10 Henry Moore, who knew him before he became a preacher and lived long enough to preach the funeral sermon, paid him a remarkable and even daring tribute. He said: “Our Connexion, I believe, never knew a more blameless life than that of Dr. Clarke. He had his opponents, but they never dared to fix a stain either upon his moral or religious character. He was, as Mr. Wesley used to say that a preacher of the Gospel should be, without stain, or, as a greater than he said, ‘Which of you convinceth me of sin’.”

Adam Clarkë was the greatest name in British Methodism in the generation which succeeded Wesley. He had not the tireless missionary zeal of Coke, nor the statesmanship of Jabez Bunting. He had not the sparkling eloquence of Samuel Bradburn nor the theological acumen of Richard Watson, but in combination of gifts he surpassed them all. He was not only the greatest scholar in Methodism, but amongst the greatest of his age. The eminent Robert Hall pronounced him an “ocean of learning” and William Jones, a famous Baptist minister and scholar, said, “He was unquestionably the most universal scholar of his age.” After his death the Conference of 1833 declared that the range of his learning was “far beyond the standard even of those who have attained considerable rank among

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10 Etheridge, op. cit., p. 411.
men of learning and research.” It asserted further that “he was highly distinguished for his extraordinary attainments in Oriental literature and that his writings have added largely to the valuable literary and Biblical stores of the country.”

In 1806 the University of Aberdeen conferred upon him the degree of Master of Arts, and in the following year unanimously voted to him the highest distinction they could confer—the degree of Doctor of Civil and Canon Law. Before he died he was made a member of several learned societies in England, Ireland and America. He numbered among his friends the finest scholars of the day and moved easily in their company. To the end of his days he was always a learner. Writing to a young friend, he said, “Study yourself half to death and pray yourself wholly to life. Do something you can look at, something that will be worth having when you are not worth a rush. You have tenfold greater advantages than I ever had from reading. Were I you—I would dig, water, lopp off, tie up and lead along till the garden blossom as the rose, and the whole ground be like Carmel!” It was advice which he took himself before he proferred it to others. But if to all men he was known as a scholar, to his own people he was a father in God and a brother beloved. It was due to him as much as to any man that Methodism passed safely through the troubled years after Wesley’s death and became in the nineteenth century a great church, known and respected by Christians of all communions. That was all Adam Clarke would wish. A short time before his death he said to some fellow ministers: “My heart is with you, and when my spirit has passed away, if God permit, it shall return and be a stirring spirit among you again.”

11 Ibid., pp. 352-384.