

HAWKER OF MORWENSTOW

THE centenary of the Oxford Movement brings to mind Robert Stephen Hawker, the High Church clergyman and poet who lived right through the hey-day of the Movement entirely unaffected by it, and was received into the Catholic Church on his death-bed. He is the subject of one of the most entertaining of biographies, *The Vicar of Morwenstow*, by the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, which was published in 1876, the year after Hawker's death. Baring-Gould was a Devonshire High Church parson and squire. He wrote the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers,' three or four good novels, and a number of books on West Country traditions and antiquities. He had a huge appreciation of unusual characters and was the ideal biographer for so altogether striking a character as Mr. Hawker.

Robert Stephen Hawker was born at Plymouth in 1804. In his boyhood and youth he had a reputation as a dangerous practical joker. Baring-Gould relates several of the tricks that he played which are classics of their kind. Along with this exuberance he had a religious and poetical mind. At the age of seventeen he issued his first poems in a little book called '*Tendrils* by Reuben.' He proceeded to the University of Oxford and was destined for the Anglican ministry. When he was twenty the family finances were involved in some misfortune and his career was almost wrecked for lack of means. As soon as he heard what had happened, Robert, who was at home, rushed off and proposed to an old friend of his, a Miss I'Ans, who was forty years old and who had a considerable income. She accepted him. He was able to continue his studies and the marriage was happy and successful.

In 1831 Hawker was ordained by the Bishop of Bath and Wells for the Bishop of Exeter. In 1834 he was given the living of Morwenstow in Cornwall. This benefice he held for the rest of his life and there the great part of the

good which he did among men was done. Morwenstow is one of the most inaccessible places in Cornwall. It is difficult to reach even nowadays by motor-car, being situated on the rugged coast a few miles north of Bude. Baring-Gould says: 'The road to Morwenstow from civilisation passes between narrow hedges, every bush of which is bent from the sea. Not a tree is visible. The glorious blue Atlantic is before one. Suddenly the road dips down a combe: Morwenstow tower, grey-stoned, pinnacled, stands up against the blue ocean with a grove of stunted sycamores to the north of the church. The quaint lyche-gate, the venerable church, the steep slopes of the hills blazing with gorse or red with heather, and the background of sparkling blue sea half-way up the sky, form a picture once seen never to be forgotten.' This description cannot be improved, but there is another side to the picture. In the winter, and especially during rough weather, it is difficult to imagine anything more bleak and desolate.

It was here that Hawker made his soul, performed his ministry, and wrote his poems. He did a marvellous work for the poor, who remember him to this day. His love for God's poor is revealed in his ballad *The Poor Man and his Parish Church*:

The poor have hands and feet and eyes,
 Flesh and a feeling mind:
 They breathe the breath of mortal sighs,
 They are of human kind.
 They weep such tears as others shed,
 And now and then they smile;
 For sweet to them is that poor bread
 They win with honest toil.

They should have roofs to call their own
 When they grow old and bent—
 Meek houses built of dark grey stone,
 Worn labourer's monument.
 There should they dwell beneath the thatch,
 With threshold calm and free:
 No stranger's hand should lift the latch
 To mark their poverty.

BLACKFRIARS

Fast by the church these walls should stand,
Her aisles in youth they trod :
They have no home in all the land
Like that old house of God !
There, there, the sacrament was shed
That gave them heavenly birth,
And lifted up the poor man's head
With princes of the earth.

The condition of the Established Church at this time was disgraceful. A long while before it had fallen into a state of laxity and stagnation, and this was the reason for Wesley's success in Cornwall. Wesley swept all before him, and the results were appalling. As Hawker said, what he did was to make the Cornish change their vices. Lechery replaced drunkenness as the chief popular vice. This year the Oxford Movement is rightly being given credit for a spiritual revival in the Established Church. Hawker also, who knew almost nothing of the Movement, must be credited with an important share in this work.

He was entirely responsible for the revival of rural deaneries and the institution of that popular Anglican function, the Harvest Festival. He seems to have worked out a theological system of his own, a curious synthesis of Catholic and Orthodox with a touch of the Calvinist. Always, though, his outlook was predominantly Catholic. He knew little of the movements in the Establishment and disapproved of what he regarded as the excesses of the Tractarians. For many years Hawker officiated at Matins and the Communion in alb and cope. In later years he gave up the cope as a protest against the Ritualists. A visitor to Morwenstow Church wrote: 'We are very much taken with the old church, to say nothing of the vicar thereof, who reminds me immensely of Cardinal Wiseman. He is a sight to see, as well as a preacher to hear, as he stands in his quaint garb and quaint pulpit.'

Tidiness was not one of the vicar's qualities, and the beauty of his church was somewhat marred by the number of old match-ends, leaves from old floral decorations and

pages from prayer-books, that lay about. A new curate once filled a whole barrow with such stuff, wheeled it down to the parsonage, and told Mr. Hawker that this was the rubbish he had found in his church. 'Not all,' was the reply. 'Complete the pile by seating yourself on the top, and I will see to the whole being shot speedily.'

Hawker's literary work is of great interest. His volume of essays, *Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall*, is uncommonly good reading. His poetic output was not large; the same poems were issued over and over again with slight emendations, and a new poem appeared from time to time. His book of *Cornish Ballads and Other Poems* contains any amount of Christian poetry of a high order. His greatest achievement was *The Quest of the Sangraal*, a glorious fragment in blank verse. It is a great pity that this Arthurian poem was never finished. Had it been completed it might well have become as famous as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, with which it compares more than favourably. Into this poem Hawker put all his music and thought, and it is his 'topmost note of mystic song.'

In his last years the vicar was greatly distressed by the state of disrepair into which his church was falling. He went to London to preach for alms, but met with small success. His health was not equal to the task. On the 29th of June, 1875, he went to Plymouth to see a doctor. With him went his second wife, a Polish lady whom he had married in 1864. On Sunday, the 1st of August, the vicar went with Mrs. Hawker to Benediction at the Catholic Cathedral. He was delighted with the service, which he had never seen before, and said that he would be glad to stay in the church all night. During the week his illness became more acute. By Saturday it was evident that the grand old man was on his death-bed, and Mrs. Hawker sent for the Very Reverend Canon Mansfield, who received him into the Catholic Church and administered Extreme Unction. On Sunday, the Feast of the Assumption, he

died. He was buried on the following Wednesday, after a Mass of Requiem had been sung at the Cathedral.

His reception into the Catholic Church was a great shock to Hawker's friends and occasioned some bitter controversy. The matter is not treated at all satisfactorily by Baring-Gould. He states that Mrs. Hawker was not received into the Church till after her husband's death. Presumably he means that she was not *reconciled* to the Faith till then. Her Polish origin and open Catholic tendencies make it extremely unlikely that she was not brought up a Catholic. Baring-Gould lays great emphasis on Hawker's long period of unconsciousness when dying, and the difficulty his friends had in crediting his change of allegiance. Baring-Gould has two main pieces of evidence to support his view of the 'painful incident.'

The first is Hawker's almost life-long habit of referring to Catholics as 'Romish dissenters' and his habit of making a distinction between 'Romanism' and Catholicism. The second is that a few days before his death Hawker caused himself to be photographed in surplice, stole, and biretta. The biretta (a definitely sacerdotal article) Hawker had never previously worn, and one was procured specially for him. Was this, asks his biographer, the act of one who doubted his Church or his Orders? To anyone with any knowledge of psychology, however, this looks very much like the last dramatic gesture of a man at bay.

With regard to the first objection, Baring-Gould does not mention that in his later years Hawker was very deeply disturbed about the Church of England. Such events as the Cowper-Temple educational proposals and the Gorham judgment filled him with horror and dismay. So we learn from another life of Hawker, long out of print, by the amazing Dr. Frederick George Lee, also an Anglican clergyman who was converted on his death-bed. In this book is reproduced as frontispiece the photograph of Hawker in canonicals and biretta. A very sturdy, saintly old gentleman he looks, and such he was. It is now known that

HAWKER OF MORWENSTOW

Hawker had been in touch with Catholics for some time before his death. His whole life was given to God and he should be remembered not only as a poet but as a man of singular holiness and zeal for religion. There was a touch of Blake about him, and his sense of the reality of the supernatural was remarkable.

MICHAEL SEWELL.