

ART. III.—*The passage of the Border by Aeneas Sylvius in the winter of 1435-6.* By the REV. CANON JAMES WILSON, Litt.D.

Read at Carlisle, April 6th, 1922.

OWING to certain ecclesiastical troubles in Scotland, the cardinal of St. Cross (Albergati) despatched from the congress of Arras in 1435 his secretary, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, a young Italian of noble birth, to the court of King James I. with the view of promoting conciliation in that kingdom. The envoy was even at that time a remarkable personage, afterwards a cardinal, and eventually raised to the pontificate as Pope Pius II. The narrative of his mission, which he incorporated in his autobiography, would scarcely be suitable to lay before members of this Society, had it not been for the fact that in one portion of it he described his passage from Scotland into England on his return journey homewards, when his business in the northern kingdom had been concluded. About his exploits on the Border there is little or nothing to be gleaned from outside sources, only from what has fallen from his own pen, so that we are kept solely to a right interpretation of his narrative to determine at what place the passage was made. The topographical setting of his description of the place has some difficulties, the obscurity being perhaps caused by his ignorance of local geography as well as by the language of the natives or the blundering of his guide. One may well expect vagueness from a passing foreigner in identifying places, for the outline of his map is only rough, without clear indications of exact locality. For this reason divergent views have been taken of the direction

of his itinerary by scholars of repute. From a general view, however, of his description of the local scenery, it may be inferred, I think, that Aeneas Sylvius crossed the Border at one of the fords over the Solway, and if so, the account of his experiences of the people on the English side and their mode of life supplies an interesting page in the social history of Cumberland.

On his journey to Scotland, it was the envoy's intention to travel through England and for that purpose he had reached London, but for political reasons the necessary passport was refused. After visiting the chief places in the metropolis, he returned to Flanders and embarked for Scotland from Sluys, an important port on the Flemish coast. The voyage, which took twelve days, was stormy and vows were made by the passengers that if they reached Scotland in safety their undertakings would be performed. At last, after many vicissitudes, the ship cast anchor on the Lothian coast in the Firth of Forth. Aeneas was not unmindful of his promises when in peril and after visiting some shrines in that neighbourhood he made his way to Edinburgh, interviewed King James, and brought his mission to a happy close. On his departure the King presented him with a pair of palfreys for his journey homewards with some money and a jewel for his mother.

Remembering the sufferings and perils of his outward voyage, Aeneas determined to hazard his return journey by land by going through England rather than attempt another passage by sea. It is at this point that his narrative becomes to us of the greatest interest and we must reproduce it in paraphrase as well as in his actual words, that the reader may form his own conclusions on their application. Though written by a stranger, unacquainted with local customs, the narrative gives a glimpse of Border life for which we may look in vain elsewhere, and if it can be maintained that it refers to

the social habits of our district in the middle of the fifteenth century, the description must be regarded as piquant and of considerable value.

As the envoy is silent on the particular road he took on leaving Edinburgh, we must for the present suspend judgment till we hear his story. Then Aeneas, the narrative proceeds, understanding that he had been preserved by Divine Providence on his journey by sea, passed through Scotland into England disguised as a merchant. A river, to which he had come, was widened out from a high mountain, and seemed as a boundary of the two kingdoms. This river he crossed by means of a ferry and turned aside to a large village about sunset. Having found lodging in a peasant's house, he had supper there with the priest of the place and his host. There was brought to the table plenty of broth, chickens and geese, but no wine or bread of any kind. Then all the women and men of the village hastened to the house as if to find some novelty, just as Italians are wont to look in wonder at Ethiopians or Indians. They stared at Aeneas in astonishment and inquired from the priest, what countryman he was: what he was doing there: and whether he was a Christian or not. But Aeneas, in anticipation of the probable needs of his journey, had provided himself at a certain monastery with some bread and a measure of red wine, and when he showed them to the barbarians, they were greatly delighted as they had never seen wine or white bread before. Married women and their husbands sidled up to the table, handling the bread and smelling the wine, and begged a portion, so that he felt obliged to give them the whole. When the supper was protracted to the second hour of the night, the priest and his host with the children and all the men hurriedly took leave of Aeneas, saying that they must flee to a tower a long way off for fear of the Scots, who were wont to pass over the river at the ebbing

of the tide in the night for purpose of plunder. In no circumstances would they bring Aeneas with them, though he implored them to do so: nor would they have any of the women, though several of the girls and matrons were attractive. The people believed that the enemy would do them no harm, inasmuch as they did not reckon that defilement was much harm at all.

Aeneas accordingly remained behind with two servants and the guide among one hundred females, who sat in a ring with a fire in the midst of them, and passed the night without sleep, carding hemp and gossiping with the guide. But when the night was far spent, a great commotion was made by the barking of dogs and the gabbling of geese. Then all the females slipped away in different directions: the guide also fled: and there was a great uproar as if the enemy had come. It seemed to Aeneas, however, the safer course to remain in his chamber, though it was a stable, and await events, for if he sallied forth ignorant which way to take, he would become a prey to the first person he met. In a short time the women returned with the guide and announced that nothing was really the matter: it was friends, not enemies, that had come. When it was daylight, Aeneas set out on his journey and arrived at Newcastle, said to be the work of Caesar. There he seemed to have returned to civilization, for Scotland and the part of England bordering on the Scots had none of the features of Italian life and manners, the country being rugged, waste and in winter sunless. Thence he went to Durham, where the tomb of the Venerable Bede, a priest and holy man, was then to be seen, and the inhabitants of that district revered it with great devotion.

Without further reference to the narrative of Aeneas about his journey south, we may now inquire about the locality to which the foregoing picture applies. It is a story strange and lurid enough to excite curiosity. But

if it happens that the evidence is strong enough to warrant the belief that his experiences were gained in Cumberland, and not elsewhere, we have a description of the manners of the natives, very easily imagined from the political conditions and geographical situation of the county, but never described by an eyewitness before. My own view is that it was over the Solway that he passed into England, and that view was largely formed by a study of the episode made by different writers of repute in past generations. The language of Aeneas is sufficiently vague, but there are features of it which can only be explained as indicative of the western and not the eastern Border, the Solway and not the Tweed.

Let us glance at some of the older interpretations of this unique narrative. Camden only so far committed himself by recording the visit of Aeneas under Northumberland, offering the opinion that "the borderers who dwelt there round about had nothing degenerated" in his time.* Perhaps it was to free them from this aspersion that Bishop Gibson, one of his editors, pleaded a century later that if the description was true of the Northumberland borderers in the fifteenth century, it was not their due when he wrote. He identifies the river over which Aeneas had crossed as the Tweed, and seems to take it as obvious that his journey was direct from Edinburgh to Newcastle.† It shows how little attention Sir Walter Scott had given to a determination of the *locus in quo* that he translated the pertinent portion of the narrative of Aeneas without comment, only assuming that the route was over the Tweed. It seems clear, however, that he was quoting Camden, for he reproduced the year 1448 as the date of the mission. For Sir Walter's purpose the place was immaterial, as

* Camden, *Britannia*, translated by Philemon Holland, p. 818.

† *Ibid.*, ed. Gibson, ii, 1101, 1102.

he only wanted to illustrate the conditions of the Border in former centuries.* A valuable and picturesque account of the whole journey, with some suggestive notes and reflections, has been given to us by Dean Milman.† It is worthy of perusal, but scarcely concerns us here, except that he adopted the traditional view that Aeneas had travelled to Newcastle by the direct route over the Tweed.

In our own time, as soon as the attention of northern scholars was directed to the itinerary of Aeneas, there was no hesitation in discarding the traditional opinion and fixing the place of crossing on the Solway. Dr. Robertson,‡ a distinguished Scottish divine, who had many strictures to make on the description Aeneas had given of the climate, products, manners and people of Scotland, said that "the strange night scene," which Aeneas reported, "was more likely to have been witnessed on the West March than on the East, which was comparatively quiet and civilized." The same view was taken by the late Mr. Cadwallader J. Bates, the eminent Northumberland antiquary, who also repudiated the ascription to the Tweed. The high mountain from which the river was spread out, he states, was no doubt the Criffel: "there is no mountain that occupies such a position in regard to the Tweed. The account of the Scots making a foray at low water is wholly inapplicable to a river, on which there were no less than seven or eight ordinary fords between Berwick and Norham: while there was no large town with a priest between these two castles, and if there had been, its male population would have taken refuge in one of them and not in a distant tower. There seems every probability that the future Pope passed this eventful night at Bowness

* *Border Antiquities* (1814), pp. lxi, lxx.

† *Latin Christianity*, viij, 415-421, fourth ed.

‡ *Statuta Ecclesie Scotice*, pref., p. xcvi.

itself.”* From this opinion as coming from Mr. Bates, who was so thoroughly acquainted with the conditions and surroundings of the lower reaches of the Tweed, there seems to me to be no appeal.

If the narrative of Aeneas is read as a whole, there will be no difficulty, I think, of forming a similar conclusion. Its vagueness on some points may be ascribed to the writer's ignorance of local geography and his dependence on the local knowledge of his guide. We cannot explain his reason for the adoption of the longer route, when the journey could have been naturally undertaken by way of the Tweed. Political reasons to escape observation have been suggested: but in view of the curiosity which his presence aroused at Bowness, there was as much likelihood of detection at Carlisle as at Berwick. It is not known whether his guide was a Scotchman, specially selected for the occasion, but if so, the direction of the route may have been made by him. Aeneas alludes to him indifferently as guide or interpreter. In whatever capacity he acted, he seems to have been acquainted with the fords of the Solway as the recognised highway between England and Scotland on the western Border. The cavalcade consisted of two servants in charge of the palfreys given by the King of Scotland, with the guide and Aeneas himself. The guide was not specially attached to his master's person, for as soon as the commotion began at Bowness, he fled with the women. The mention of the monastery, where the white bread and red wine were purchased, is ambiguous enough to confuse identification. Several monasteries were available if he chose to travel down Lauderdale: the party could have called at Melrose or Jedburgh or even at Canonby. In any case Annan was reached.

* *The Border Holds of Northumberland* (Archaeologia Aeliana, vol. xiv), pp. 61-4.

It seems certain that further progress from this place would be over the Solway. The district towards Longtown was well nigh impassable by reason of the bogs and mosses, and there was little commercial intercourse between the two kingdoms by that route. The evidence supplied by the details of the battle of Solway Moss in 1542, when so many Scots were drowned in recrossing the Esk,* does not encourage the belief that there was a bridge or a thoroughfare at that place. The most frequented passages into England on the western border were the fords of the estuary, as we find again and again in the records. When Archbishop Winchelsey, for instance, was charged by the Pope in 1300 to deliver a message in person to King Edward, then sojourning in the neighbourhood of Caerlaverock, and was afterwards relating his experiences † in the North, he said : " I kept myself concealed in certain secret places near the sea which separates England and Galloway, and took advantage of an opportunity at ebb tide. Guided by some who were bound not to be ignorant of the direction of the crossing, I passed with my horses and harness through four streams of water in the sea, not more dangerous because of the depth of the water than because of the ins and outs of the shore and quicksands." Such a passage must have been somewhat similar to that of Aeneas nearly a century and a half later.

The lowlands of Cumberland south of the confluence of Eden and Esk were so well supplied with fortified places that the identification of the tower, in which the inhabitants, as described by Aeneas, were proposing to take refuge, seems to be quite hopeless. It is said that the tower was a long way off : that may mean a consider-

* *Hamilton Papers* (Scot. Rec. Pub.), i, pp. lxxxiv-vj.

† Neilson, *Annals of the Solway*, pp. 66-7, with references : see also Wilkins, *Concilia*, ii, 261-3, from the Registers of Archbishop Winchelsey, MS, f. 138b.

able distance. Drumburgh,* if it had a tower, which I doubt, is comparatively near: Wolsty is certainly too far away. Then there were the "towered" churches of Burgh by Sands, Newton Arlosh and Wigton, half houses of God but really bulwarks against the Scots: the situation of either of these fortified churches, but especially that of Burgh or Arlosh, would suit the description. But there is another disturbing obscurity in the narrative. What had become of the tower in the village of Bowness, the fortified parsonage of the priest there, who figures so prominently in the story? In the survey of castles and fortresses on the Border needing repair in 1580, "Bownes towre" has a fitting place† among the rest.‡ Over a century before it was in a similar dilapidated state. In 1464, some thirty years after Aeneas and his party had passed through Cumberland, the rector of Bowness had licence from the Bishop of Carlisle to collect subscriptions in the diocese for the repair of a house of defence there (*pro reparatione unius domus defensionis ibidem* §). The said house of defence must have been in a better condition in 1435: yet apparently it was not regarded as safe enough for the shelter of the flock. The existence of the fortification at Bowness raises many misgivings: at least it presents some formidable difficulties which I am unable to disentangle or explain.

* Leave was given to Robert le Brun in 1307 to crenellate his dwelling-house of Drombogh in the Marches of Scotland (*Cal. of Pat. Rolls*, 1307-1313, p. 11), but licence to fortify a dwelling did not carry with it liberty to erect a tower.

† Bain, *Border Papers*, i, 32.

‡ See the references to Bowness Tower in the sixteenth century, collected by Mr. J. F. Curwen in *The Castles and Towers of Cumb. and Westmor.*, p. 255, specially to Sir Christopher Dacre's survey of 1580. A water-colour drawing in my possession, made in 1856, shows a group of the church and parsonage of Bowness, with a portion of the massive wall of the old tower *in situ* close to the modern rectory.

§ Ministers' Accounts of the Bishopric of Carlisle, a MS. in the Diocesan Registry.

As there was no large village on the coast of the Solway with the claims of Bowness to answer the description, the whole episode seems to suggest that the Italian envoy had been grossly imposed upon by the inhabitants. His arrival was at sunset in mid-winter, and his departure, though he had no rest in the night, was at daybreak next morning. The people regarded the stranger with awe or curiosity: they had no better lodgings for him than a stable. It may well be imagined that the scare of a raid was manufactured to get rid of him. All the men and children of the place were supposed to fly to some distant refuge: the women only were left behind with the visitor and his party. Even after they had eaten his white bread and drunken his red wine, in no circumstances would he be permitted to accompany them. No prayers of his could change their resolve. Towards morning the women slipped out, but soon afterwards returned and reported that the raid was a false alarm: it was not enemies, they said, but friends, their own men and children surely, who had come. These women, no doubt, were aware of the true state of affairs: they chatted merrily with their visitors round the fire in spite of the impending danger. That the children also should have been taken away is very suspicious. From the strange action of leaving only the women as a prey to the marauding Scots, the credulous Italian, whose personal character is well known, drew characteristic conclusions about the ideas of chastity prevalent in Cumberland among men and women. There is little doubt that the whole affair of the raid was an elaborate hoax to hasten the departure of the strange visitors.

Except the purchase of food at a monastery between Edinburgh and the Solway, the stay at Bowness is the only incident mentioned of the journey to Newcastle. This is somewhat surprising. Aeneas must have passed through Carlisle in order to reach the great road to

Newcastle and must have afterwards touched Hexham on the way. Not a word, however, is said in the narrative about Carlisle or Hexham, at that time famous shrines which were attracting pilgrims from far and near. It is possible that he was unacquainted with their religious celebrity, for at Durham he made no allusion to St. Cuthbert, but showed his ignorance by mistaking * him for the Venerable Bede, whose tomb had been pointed out. The cause of the detour which he made in travelling from Edinburgh to Newcastle by way of the Solway must remain a mystery, unless it be assumed that he was the victim of another imposition practised on him by his guide to protract the journey and increase the fee. But in view of the conditions of the East March, as already mentioned, and his own description of what took place at his crossing of the Border, there can be no reasonable doubt that he had entered England near Bowness on Solway, and not over any ford of the Tweed.

APPENDIX.

Description of a journey from Edinburgh to Newcastle on Tyne in the winter of 1435-6, as related by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, afterwards Pope Pius II.

(*Commentarii Pii Pape ii*, lib. i. ff. 6-8, Rome, 1584.)

Tunc se diuino nutu beneficioque seruatum Aeneas intelligens, dissimulato habitu sub specie mercatoris per Scotiam transiuit in Angliam. Fluius est qui ex alto monte diffusus vtramque terram disternat; hunc cum nauigio transmeasset, atque in villam magnam circa solis occasum declinasset, in domum rusticānam descendit, atque ibi coenam cum sacerdote loci et hospite fecit. Multa ibi pulmentaria et galline et anseres afferebantur in esum, sed neque vini neque panis quicquam aderat, et omnes tum femine virique ville, quasi ad rem nouam accurrerant: atque vt nostri vel Aethiopes vel Indos mirari solent, sic Aeneam stupentes intuebantur, quaerentes ex sacerdote cuias esset, quidnam facturus venisset, Christianum ne fidem saperet. Edoc-tus autem Aeneas itineris defectum, apud monasterium quoddam

* Perhaps both tombs were pointed out, but only the less important, so far as Durham veneration was concerned, remained in his memory.

panes aliquot et vini rubei metratam receperat, quibus expositis maior admiratio barbaros tenuit qui neque vinum neque panem album viderant. Appropinquabant autem mensae praegnantēs feminae earumque viri, attrectantes panem, et vinum odorantes, portionem petebant, inter quos totum erogare necessum fuit. Cumque in secundam noctis horam coena protraheretur, sacerdos et hospes cum liberis virisque omnibus Aenea dimisso abire festinantes, dixerunt se ad turrim quandam longo spatio remotam metu Scotorum fugere, qui fluvio maris refluxu decrescente noctu transire, praedarique soleant, neque secum Aeneam multis orantem precibus quoquo pacto adducere voluerunt, neque feminarum quampiam, quamvis adolescentulae et matronae formosae complures essent: nihil enim his mali facturos hostes credunt, qui stuprum inter mala non ducunt. Mansit ergo illic solus Aeneas cum duobus famulis et uno itineris duce inter centum feminas, quae corona facta medium claudentes ignem, cannabumque mundantes, noctem insomnem ducebant, plurimaeque cum interprete fabulabantur. Postquam autem multum noctis transierat, latrantibus canibus, et anseribus strepentibus i[n]gens clamor factus est: tumque omnes feminae in diuersum prolapsae, dux quoque itineris diffugit, et quasi hostes adessent, omnia tumultu completa. At Aeneae potior sententia visa est in cubiculo, id enim stabulum fuit, rei eventum expectare, ne si foras curreret ignarus itineris, cui primum obviasset, ei se praedam daret: nec mora, reversae mulieres cum interprete nihil mali esse nuntiant, atque amicos, non hostes, uenisse. Qui ubi dies illuxit, itineri se commisit, atque ad Novum castellum pervenit, quod Caesaris opus dicunt: ibi primum figuram orbis et habitabilem terrae faciem visus est revisere: nam terra Scociae et Angliae pars vicina Scotis, nihil simile nostrae habitationis habet, horrida, inculta, atque hiemali sole inaccessa. Exinde ad Dunelmiam uenit, ubi sepulchrum uenerabilis Bedae, presbyteri sancti viri hodie visitur, quod accolae regionis devota religione colunt.