

ART. XVII.—*William Sewell of Radley*. By the Rev.
C. M. L. BOUCH, F.S.A., and C. ROY HUDLESTON,
F.S.A.

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I. WILLIAM SEWELL AND THE FOUNDATION OF RADLEY COLLEGE.

By the Rev. C. M. L. BOUCH, F.S.A.

AS I was at school at Radley, I was much interested to read in a recent issue of the *Penrith Observer* a statement by "Beacon" (Mr C. Roy Hudleston) that William Sewell, the founder¹ of Radley College, came of Cumberland stock; the fact seemed of sufficient interest to be placed on record in our *Transactions*, and I therefore asked Mr Hudleston to contribute an article on the subject. His account is printed below; I agree with him that there can be no possible doubt that William Sewell's grandfather was born at Cumrew. The name of William Sewell probably means little to many people to-day, especially in the North country; it therefore seems worth while to give, as a preface to Mr Hudleston's article on his ancestry, a brief account of the man himself and of his family.

William Sewell, as Mr Hudleston shews, came on his father's side of local stock, presumably farmers. His mother was the daughter of a solicitor of Newport, Isle of Wight, and his grandmother probably of Welsh stock. He was one of a family of twelve children, eleven of whom survived; three of them lived to the age of ninety or more, and five attained sufficient eminence to earn a place in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.²

¹ Or, according to A. K. Boyd, its co-founder (*Radley College, 1847-1947*, Blackwell, 1948, p. 30).

² Cf. Lionel James, *A Forgotten Genius: Sewell of St. Columba's and Radley* (Faber & Faber, 1945), pp. 1-10.

William, the second son, was educated as a commoner at Winchester; he matriculated at Merton College, Oxford, with a postmastership in 1822, obtained a first class in Greats and was elected fellow of Exeter College. He won both the Chancellor's English and Latin essay prizes, and in due course held the chair of Moral Philosophy from 1836 to 1841. He wrote more than twenty books, including a novel which went into three editions, and in the period 1837-1845 he contributed fifteen articles to the *Quarterly Review*. He had been ordained in 1830; three years later Keble preached his famous sermon in St Mary's, and the Oxford Movement had begun. Sewell was in hearty accord with the general principles of the Tractarians, but he was a little distrustful of their methods;³ his biographer writes that

"a comparison of the many references in contemporary letters—from Newman, from Pusey, from Church, and others—leaves the impression that during all these years the strongest force in Oxford outside the definite Tractarian group is Sewell."⁴

Thus, in the days of crisis when, after the publication by Newman of Tract 90, many of its leaders seceded to Rome, Sewell occupied an important place. To quote his biographer again,

"Justice has never been done to Sewell for the part he played at this difficult time. The whole credit for stopping the landslide to Rome has gone to Keble. But the stronger force in Oxford was unquestionably Sewell. The quiet but firm stand which he took so courageously did more than anything else to keep the Oxford Movement to its true bearings."⁵

But none of these achievements is of sufficient interest or importance to justify a claim that William Sewell, as a man of Cumbrian stock, is worthy of special note in this Society's *Transactions*. His true claim to remembrance is as an educationalist of wholly original ideas, and as the founder of two schools.

In 1827 Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) was appointed headmaster of Rugby. From him is generally dated the

³ *Op. cit.*, 39.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, 41.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 46.

beginning of the reform of the public school system; that it was needed can be gathered from the facts that at Eton, in 1809, its headmaster, Keate, was in charge of 170 boys and later more than 200; at Charterhouse there were eight masters for 430 boys; at Uppingham in 1833, nine masters for 570 boys. As has been observed by Mr James, "Keate must have needed his birch".⁶ Arnold's solution of the problem was the prefectorial system, combined with his own moral fervour, working through his sermons in the school chapel; his great object was to make the school a place of really Christian education. Sewell aimed at achieving the same purpose but by different means: for Arnold's moral fervour he substituted the liturgy of the Church (Mattins and Evensong were sung by the whole school every day) and the beauty of the building in which the service took place; for he had great faith in the belief that boys should be fed on the beauties of nature and of art, and that for those days was a great and wholly original conception. Thus he sought for his schools—St Columba's (which he hoped to make the "Eton of Ireland"), begun in 1841, and Radley, founded in 1847—beautiful buildings amid beautiful scenery. Of the site of St Columba's, at Stackallan on the river Boyne, he noted:

"thus we should obtain great advantages for the boys in the way of boating, bathing, and fishing which are admirable ingredients in a place of education . . . the whole reach of the river is perhaps the finest river scenery in Ireland."⁷

For his English school he chose Radley Hall, near Oxford, the 18th century house of the Bowyer family, again a site near beautiful river scenery.

Further, he sought to enrich his schools with works of art—furniture, carpets, silver. Members who heard Mr W. A. Thorpe, F.S.A., speaking at Brougham Chapel in September 1954, may remember that he compared the

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 137.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 105.

famous triptych there with a similar one bought by Sewell for Radley, which is still the glory of its chapel. The linenfold panelling, which he placed in the great barn that he made the big-school, is believed to have come from the old House of Lords after the fire of 1834.⁸

Though many of the treasures that Sewell acquired were dispersed when the school was passing through its difficult days, enough remains to enable posterity to appreciate his artistic flair for the beautiful; and this, it must be remembered, was happening round about 1851, the time of the Great Exhibition and the worst period of Victorian art. In this respect Sewell must have been a remarkable man, far ahead of his contemporaries in his aesthetic judgement. Thus he sought to achieve through the aesthetic sense what Arnold aimed at reaching by his moral fervour as a preacher.

Sewell also believed that many schools were too large: "they should be of such a size that the needs of the individual could be met as in a large family"; the human soul needs occasional privacy, therefore schoolboys should have their own cubicles. The curriculum should be widened to include subjects, such as music, which fill aesthetic needs; the value of good manners in human conversation should be instilled. Each of the schools was a collegiate foundation with a Warden and Fellows who were to be the elder brothers of the students, sharing their work and their play and supervising their moral welfare at every point.⁹

The new system of education, as envisaged by Sewell, was to start with the gentry, but the profits of the schools for the rich were to finance those for the poor! It is interesting to note that this idea of a series of public schools, based on Church principles, was eventually carried out by Canon Nathaniel Woodard, who in 1848 founded the Society of St Nicholas to carry out this object; as he is recorded to have visited Radley in its early days,

⁸ Boyd, *Radley College*, 50.

⁹ Boyd, 5.

it may perhaps be true that Sewell and not Woodard was the originator of the idea to which we owe Lancing and its kindred foundations.

Why did Sewell fail to carry out his visions and ideals? Why is he to-day comparatively unknown, a "forgotten genius"? The answer seems to be that his make-up did not include ordinary commonsense, that he had no business or administrative ability; above all, no sense of money. Even when Radley was bankrupt, with debts amounting to £40,000, he celebrated the opening of the new gymnasium with "a Balshazzar Feast" to all and sundry, at a cost to somebody of £1,600. It is striking evidence of the hold he had on his contemporaries that there were men, with sufficient faith in his ideals, to come forward and advance the money to ensure, not only the continuance of his foundation, but also the preservation within it of some distinctive and estimable ethos or tradition, which he had implanted.¹⁰

II. THE ANCESTRY OF WILLIAM SEWELL.

By C. ROY HUDLESTON, F.S.A.

In his life of the Rev. William Sewell, the founder of Radley,¹¹ Mr Lionel James refers to Sewell's ancestry, and quotes the following passage from his reminiscences:

"The fountain head of the Sewells has always to my ear been traced up to a bleak and dreary village amidst the Fells of, I think, Westmorland but perhaps it is Cumberland. Its name is Shap. It lay on the great road to Carlisle. In the days of road travelling the associations were those of mails buried in the snow and outside passengers frozen to death. The railway passes through it now, and I remember once making a pilgrimage to this seat of my unknown ancestors. I remember also the startling effect of seeing in the churchyard two new — at least rather modern—tombstones to two Rev. William Sewells. It

¹⁰ Boyd, 134 and 202.

¹¹ *A Forgotten Genius: Sewell of St. Columba's and Radley* (Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 4.

gave me a shock, next to being buried myself; and I then recalled faint hints and questionings and mysterious hopes which had dropped from my father and mother when I was a boy, the full particulars of which never reached me. Only a time came when they suddenly ceased. And I gathered that a sum of about £20,000 was looking for a rightful heir of the name of Sewell—that my father and Sir John Sewell were entering the lists for its possession, that my father triumphantly traced up his claim to a Rev. Sewell buried in Shap Churchyard, and considered that the prize was his own; when unhappily another Rev. Sewell was found buried in the same churchyard, and my father was descended from the wrong one.”

These reminiscences were published in 1866-74, and the account quoted above contains one or two statements which do not appear to be supported by facts. Wherever Mr Sewell may have looked at the graves of two Rev. William Sewells, it was certainly not in Shap churchyard. He may have seen there the grave of the Rev. Thomas Sewell, curate of Swindale, who died in 1870, but he certainly could not claim him as an ancestor. Mr James speaks of the Rev. William Sewell's grandfather as the Rev. *Thomas* Sewell, fellow of Queen's College, Oxford, and rector of Headley in Hampshire; in actual fact he was *William* Sewell, and Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses*¹² gives his parentage and his career: he was son of Thomas Sewell of "Coomb Rew, Cumberland, pleb.", and he matriculated on 31 January 1737-8 at the age of sixteen. "Coomb Rew" can only be Cumrew, and the registers of that parish quickly yield the baptism of the future fellow of Queen's: on 15 June 1721 there was baptized William, son of Thomas Sewell of Bownwood in that parish. This fact was duly discovered by Mr Mountagne C. Owen, a great-nephew of our Rev. William Sewell, who in 1905 produced an excellent history of the family, *The Sewells of the Isle of Wight* (privately printed). For some reason, Mr James observes that there is "no proof" that Sewell's grandfather was son of Thomas Sewell of Cumrew, yet even a cursory glance at Mr Owen's book

¹² 2nd ser., iv 1275.

is enough to convince the reader of the admirable way in which all the facts are carefully documented in it. Only in one respect has Mr Owen gone astray, placing Bownwood in the parish of Gosforth. There is indeed a Boonwood in that parish, but Thomas Sewell lived at a place of the same name in Cumrew, a place which still exists.¹³

Mr Owen shows that Thomas Sewell, father of the fellow of Queen's, was buried at Cumrew on 10 August 1782, at the age of 87. It is therefore likely that he was the Thomas, son of Thomas Sewell of Blackwell, who was christened at St Cuthbert's, Carlisle, on 6 October 1695. Thomas Sewell's will was proved at Carlisle on 14 September 1782, and Mr Owen prints it *in extenso* at p. 146 f. of his book; he also prints, at pp. 142-145, a calendar of all the Sewell wills and admns in Carlisle Probate Registry from 1567 to 1797, 145 and 12 respectively. The will leaves one shilling only "to my son the Revd. Wm. Sewell". Another son, Jacob, baptized at Cumrew in 1723, predeceased his father. In 1905, Thomas Sewell's descendants were numerous, and Mr Owen shows, at p. 79, that his eldest son (who lived latterly at Haslemere in Surrey) owned property at Shap, which was inherited by one of his sons. Incidentally, the earliest Sewell reference in the registers of Shap is of 6 February 1744-5, when Thomas "son to William Sewel of Swindale" was baptized.

As to Sir John Sewell, Mr Owen says, p. 112:

"He was the son of Joseph Sewell of Limehouse, Middlesex, but I believe his family originally came from Cumberland. He was born in 1766 and died in 1833."

This is borne out by the obituary notice of Sir John which appeared in the *Carlisle Journal* of 26 January 1833:

"On 15th inst. at his house in Cumberland Street, Portman Square, London, Sir John Sewell, Knight, D.C.L., F.R.S., &c. and sometime Judge of the Vice Admiralty Court at Malta. Sir John Sewell was an Alderman of this city and in 1820 proposed

¹³ It is strange that Boonwood in Cumrew is not noticed in *The Place Names of Cumberland*, ed. A. M. Armstrong and others, under Cumrew.

the late Sir P. Musgrave as one of the candidates for the representation of Carlisle."

Further proof of Sir John's Cumbrian ancestry lies in his recommendation of Thomas Sewell (1801-1836) when the latter petitioned for a commission in the East India Company's military service; he was the son of Thomas Sewell of Newlands in the parish of St Cuthbert's, Carlisle, where the family had been established for many years.