

ART. IX.—*Notes on the State of Religion in the Border Country.* By * * * * *

Read at Cockermouth, by Mr. Whitwell, M.P., Oct. 10th, 1867.

THE writer commenced by observing that we could not compare the manners and customs of the south and middle of England with those of the Border country at the beginning of this century without perceiving a remarkable difference between them. The feasts observed in the South, at every period, had a decidedly Christian origin, and in the mode of their observance the nature of their origin was not forgotten. On the other hand, though the origin of some of the feasts in the Border Country might be traced to a Christian source, the mode of their observance strongly partook of a pagan character. If, therefore, we confine our attention to these feasts we should have some reason for saying that in the Border country heathenism had more influence than in other parts of England. In the matter of fairies and brownies the superstitions in the Border country were also more developed and lasted longer than in any other parts of England, and the belief in spells and enchantments was common. These circumstances would lead us to conclude that in the middle ages religion, as it was then taught, did not exercise a great influence on the Border. And this opinion was strengthened by the fact that though monasteries were founded on each side of the Border as some protection against the desolations of war, the English did not scruple to ravage the Scotch monasteries during an invasion, and the Scotch treated with corresponding violence the English foundations. This insensibility to the influence of religion in the Border country during the Middle Ages cropped out very remarkably when the district was regarded from another point of view. In looking at the history of the English Reformation, we found that those countries received the Protestant religion most readily which were the most civilized and had most frequent intercourse with the continent. As we travelled northwards we found the people more ignorant and more wedded to the superstitions in which they had been brought up. The Reformation spread very slowly among them, and in some cases the ancient faith made a successful stand against

L

it,

it, and maintained its position notwithstanding the severest assaults. In Lancashire, to this day, Romanism flourishes; not only do many families amongst the ancient gentry profess it, but it is the religion of a considerable number of yeomanry and farmers. The distance between Lancashire and the Border is not great, and we should naturally expect that whatever cause prevented the spread of the reformed religion in Lancashire would prevail with still greater force on the Border, and retain even a majority of the inhabitants in the profession of the ancient faith. Whatever our expectations might have been, the fact is otherwise, and the ancient faith has entirely disappeared from the Border country. At the time of the Reformation, the Border was most probably the most ignorant and barbarous district in England, but this circumstance did not retain it in the religion of Rome, or prevent it from joining the ranks of the Protestants; and this readiness to become Protestants certainly did not spring from a superabundance of religious zeal. Though the borderers did not regard the ancient church with veneration or affection, they had many superstitious fears and observances, and the penances they had to pay for their misdeeds were a heavy tax upon them. It was, the writer believed, to get rid of this yolk that they embraced the Protestant religion. They listened with approbation to its preachers, while they declaimed on the luxury of the monks and their heavy demands upon the fears of their followers, but their progress in the reformed faith stopped there; and after throwing of the yoke off Rome, they would not subject themselves to the laws which the reformed religion enforced. They remained in a state of indifference, and, though they refused to be guided by the monks or attend to the external observances of the Romish church, they would not lead the life of purity and self-denial which Christianity requires. The inhabitants of the Scottish side of the Border were rescued from this state of heathenism by the strenuous exertions of Cameron and his followers; but on the English side no such preacher appeared, and their indifference remained to a comparatively recent period. The writer concluded by stating that the theory in this paper might be mistaken and erroneous, but it could not be refuted without careful investigation.

The discussion on the paper was commenced by Rev. J. SIMPSON, of Kirkby Stephen, who said they were much indebted to the author of the paper for directing their attention

tention to an interesting subject, but he could not agree to either his facts or his inferences. In contrasting the old customs of the border counties with those in the south, he thought he had been peculiarly unfortunate in his selection; for there was not one of those mentioned peculiar to the border, nor were they more heathenish in their origin than others in the south. He supposed he referred to Halloween more especially, but that was observed equally in the south and the north. Hogmanay, or Hagemna, was certainly commoner throughout the greater part of Scotland, as well as on the continent; and though there were grounds for believing that it derived its origin from the Druids going to cut the mistletoe, he thought there was just as much for thinking it a corruption of three French words, *homme est ne*, run into one,—meaning the man is born. As to Christmas carols and waits there was no doubt a difference in that one was singing, the other generally playing on an instrument; but the waits were not confined to the north or to the borders, they were in Westminster, and though not necessarily confined to the season of Christmas, he thought he had seen Christmas carols and waits used as convertible terms. Mid-lent Sunday was perhaps not observed on that particular day in the way specified, but the change from mid-lent Sunday to Palm Sunday or Easter Sunday was probably owing to the fact that the Holy Communion was then administered in the churches and not on mid-lent Sunday. He need not tell them that the mothering Sunday was so called from the old custom of attending the mother church on that day, and making an offering; and might also owe its name to the occurrence in the service of an allusion to Jerusalem as the mother of us all. The same custom was observed until very lately in these counties on Palm Sunday or Easter Sunday. Wakes were not more Christian in their origin, probably, than other customs. In heathen times it was usual to hold festivals in honour of the gods, and the early teachers of Christianity were not slow to change the festival to the honour of the saint to which the church was dedicated. He did not hold with the derivation of the word he had seen, that it meant to get drunk, though he thought there was a good deal of that at wakes. He thought the word had reference to the watching of vigils during the night preceding the Saturday, upon which the foundation of the church was laid, and it has been suggested that this accounts for the fact that many churches do not stand due east or west, but to that point in the horizon where the
sun

sun would first appear on the morning of the Saint's day to whom the church was dedicated. Be this as it may, and whatever their origin, wakes under other names, such as rush-bearing, revellings, hoppings, were held in these counties as well as in the south. As to the writer's argument about the people readily recovering the Protestant religion, and easily abandoning the old faith, he (Mr. SIMPSON) doubted the fact. Some old writer, Fuller, he thought, did say that the people of this county, were muzzled with ignorance and superstition, and gave this as one reason why there were no martyrs in Cumberland. A Cumberland woman, a native of Greystoke, was burnt at Sneekfield, Ann Askew, he thought her name was, but they heard of no prosecution for conscience sake in Cumberland. This, however, was owing much more to another reason that Bishop Oglethorpe, who was mild and courteous, took care not to see any departure from the prescribed forms and doctrines, even if at that time there was much inclination amongst the people to forsake the old faith. Then there is another fact leading in this direction. When Oglethorpe died the bishopric was offered to Bernard Gilpin, and though other reasons are given for his refusal of the See, he thought the best was the annoyance and trouble he was likely to experience from those still attached to the Romish faith, and he thought, though he would not venture to assert it from memory, that there were many families who continued to hold the old faith in Cumberland as well as Lancashire—the Dacres, the Salkelds, the Howards, and others, and there was the Pilgrimage of Grace, and other instances of faith. With respect to the source of information, he thought part would be got from parish registers, but there were the wills, the manor books, and other sources, from which such information might be had. That religion was at a low ebb after the Reformation there was no doubt, but other causes might be adduced.

The CHAIRMAN (The HON. PERCY WYNDHAM, M.P.) was of opinion that the premises would lead them to larger conclusions than the facts would warrant. No doubt it was very difficult to get at the superstitions of the country people, but he believed that as much faith existed in the old superstition of witchcraft in the south as in the north.

The Rev. J. SIMPSON said the paper opened out a very wide view of an important subject, and one which he hoped would not be allowed to drop. They really had very little information as to the religion of the people, and he thought they should extend their enquiries further in that direction.

The

The CHAIRMAN said that the monastic influence was just as strong in the south as in the north of England. He agreed with the writer as to the amount of old heathenish customs to be found in the north, but he did not think that they abounded more here than they did in the south of England. If you question people on such a subject they think perhaps you are laughing at them, and they won't tell you anything. But that they exist here more than they do in the south is another question. He thought the writer had failed to prove that.

The Rev. J. SIMPSON said it was quite impossible to go into the whole question, but there could be no doubt that Christianity had more influence here during the old Saxon period than it had in other parts of the country. He might mention that when the monasteries were suppressed there was a very strong feeling on the subject in certain parts of England, but it extended most to Cumberland and Westmorland. In fact so strong was it that Henry VIII. issued a proclamation, in which he requested the men of Cumberland and Westmorland not to rise. He thought that all things considered—so far as he had an opportunity of studying the history of the time—that the monasteries of this county seemed to have had a very beneficial influence upon the people, more so than in other parts, simply because they were kept poorer, and consequently they were more in sympathy with the people. He could not accept the doctrine that Cumberland people turned from one religion to another simply because they were too barbarous to know anything about it. He thought, tracing the history of the whole thing, it was clear that after the Reformation, Cumberland was very much desolated, its people became poor, and the clergy almost ceased from the land. Those who were left did not wear black cloth, but went about armed with sword and buckler. There were none left to instruct the people, and thus it went on till the union of the two countries. Of course religion had got to a low ebb, and then came teachers to inculcate the new faith.

Note by the Editor. Mr. Buckle, in his great work, notes the fact that there are few Roman Catholics in Cumberland and Westmorland, while the adjacent counties of Lancashire and Northumberland long continued Jacobite and Catholic. In Burn and Nicolson, Vol. I., pp. 165 to 170, we learn that of the Deputy Lieutenants for Cumberland and Westmorland in 1687, only Francis Howard, Thomas Braithwaite, William Fletcher, and John Skelton were "Papists;" that Thomas Warwick, Henry Dacre, John Aglionby, — Orfeur and Thomas Dalston were "*esteemed* Protestants," and that Christopher Phillipson, Edward Wilson, Thos. Fletcher, John Lamplugh, Richard Lamplugh, and Richard Patrickson sided politically more or less with them. In 1687, the Howards were quite new comers into Cumberland, and of the rest, the

ART.