

III.—ON THE AUTHORITIES FOR THE HISTORY OF ST. CUTHBERT.

BY THE REV. J. L. LOW.

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It is a very noticeable fact that, in the present day, there is a great change in the feeling with which the saints of old are regarded. Take, for example, the first and the sixth Bishops of Lindisfarne. They are now everywhere looked upon with respect and veneration. Yet only a very short while ago, St. Aidan's name was hardly known, except to a very few; while the name of St. Cuthbert could scarcely be mentioned without exciting a smile. Whence did this arise, but from ignorance as to St. Cuthbert's true character on the one hand, and on the other from the absurd and sometimes profane legends which in the course of ages had gathered round his name?

Now there are two nearly contemporary lives of St. Cuthbert, from which we learn that he was a man of great holiness, consistency, and simplicity of character, at the same time exhibiting signs of great wisdom and discretion. One of these lives is by an unnamed monk of his own monastery of Lindisfarne, who, of course, must have had the best opportunities of knowing all the facts connected with his history. The other is by the Venerable Bede. Of this there are two versions, one in verse, the other in prose. Some have supposed that Bede was partly indebted to the monk of Lindisfarne, for we are to remember that he himself had no connection with Lindisfarne, any more than he had with York. He lived and died in the diocese of Hexham, and he tells us himself that he was ordained both deacon and priest by Bishop John. The diocese of St. Cuthbert had the river Aln for its southern boundary,* which, as we all know, is at a considerable distance from Jarrow. Bede was probably about fourteen years of age when St. Cuthbert died.

* Prior Richard's *History of the Church of Hexham*, cap. vi.

After these two writers there is a complete blank of four hundred years, till we come to Symeon of Durham. He is supposed to have died about 1135, that is to say, about the same length of time after the death of the Venerable Bede as the interval between the present year and the reign of Richard III; and it is to be borne in mind what manner of time these four centuries were. At their commencement the kingdom of Northumbria was rapidly declining. It was, in fact, becoming a constant scene of rebellion, treachery, and bloodshed. Then, fifty-eight years after the death of Bede, came the first inroad of the Danes into Northumbria, when Lindisfarne suffered most severely. Eighty-two years later came the second invasion, when the Bishop and the monks finally abandoned the Holy Isle. It was, emphatically, the dark age of the Church of England, especially in the North. There was little peace or order in the realm until it fell under the iron hand of the Conqueror, and the clergy had deteriorated most woefully, both in learning and morals. If we consider all this, the question most naturally arises, can we trust any additions which we find in later writers to the narratives of the two almost contemporary biographers? Let us apply this question in one or two instances. In one of his notes to *Marmion*,* Sir Walter Scott says, in reference to his unhistorical establishment of a nunnery at Lindisfarne, "It is altogether fictitious. Indeed, St. Cuthbert was unlikely to permit such an establishment, for . . . he certainly hated the whole female sex, and in revenge of a slippery trick played to him by an Irish princess, he, after his death, inflicted severe penances on such as presumed to approach within a certain distance of his shrine." Now there can be no question that many such stories were told, nor is there any doubt that for many ages women were not permitted to enter the Abbey of Durham. But there is not the least hint of any such feeling on the part of St. Cuthbert, either in the Life by the Venerable Bede, or in that by the monk of Lindisfarne. On the contrary, there are many indications of his consideration and tenderness towards women, especially in distress. We find him visiting the Abbess Ebba at Coldingham; † leaving his retreat in Farne to give Elfedra, the Abbess of Whitby, ‡ a meeting on the Coquet Island; while a part of his directions while dying § was that his body was to be

* Canto ii., st. 19. † Bæd. *Vit. S. Cuthb.*, c. 10. ‡ *Ib.*, c. 24. § *Ib.*, c. 37.

wrapped in a linen cloth which had been given to him by the Abbess Vereá. Perhaps these things may not be altogether inconsistent with the alleged exclusion of women from his churches; but they certainly look the other way. The first intimation of anything of the kind occurs in Symeon of Durham, who flourished four hundred and fifty years after St. Cuthbert's death. It is not to be doubted that, when Symeon wrote, there was such a restriction in force, and the blue cross beyond which women were not allowed to pass, is still to be seen in Durham Cathedral. Even this was a relaxation, for it appears from Symeon that in his day they were not allowed in the churchyard, or in any part of the monastery. He gives several instances of judgments which befel intruders, and his contemporary, Reginald of Durham, supplies us with more. But four hundred and fifty years is a very long time. The Cathedral had been in the meanwhile removed from Lindisfarne to Chester-le-Street, and from Chester-le-street to Durham, and the original church at Durham had been replaced by the grand church which now exists. There was abundance of time for the Prior and Cōnvent to institute the rule, and then to impute its origin to St. Cuthbert. Symeon, too, undertakes to tell us* the particular fact which led St. Cuthbert to impose the restriction, and it is not the slippery trick of the Irish princess, a legend which is quite unworthy of notice, but the disorders which, after the death of St. Cuthbert's friend, St. Ebba, prevailed in her Abbey of Coldingham; which would have been a good reason for the Bishop to forbid double monasteries, but by no means a reason for forbidding women to resort to church. Surely, considering the silence of the old biographers, not to say that their testimony in other ways tends rather in the contrary direction, we may fairly discard Symeon's account of the origin of the usage.

There is nothing on which Bede dwells with greater pleasure, or insists on more earnestly, than the entire unselfishness and unworldliness of the early Bishops. He tells of St. Aidan, that whatever money he received from kings, or from rich men, was immediately given to the poor, or used for the redemption of captives; † especially he notes that St. Aidan had no possessions of his own, savé his church and some small fields adjoining to it. The Scottish teachers in general, he tells us, were so free from all taint of avarice, that none of them would

* Sym. *Dunelm. Eccles.*; c. xxii. † Bæd. *Hist. Eccles.*, iii., c. 7.

accept lands or possessions for the building of monasteries unless they were forced to do so by the powerful of the world.* St. Cuthbert was a Saxon, not a Scot (*i.e.* Irish), but he was the pupil of St. Eata and St. Boisil, Aidan's immediate disciples, and we should expect him to be like his teachers. Accordingly, we have not the least hint from Bede or the monk of Lindisfarne that he ever, before or after his consecration to the episcopate, acquired any landed property, unless we are so to construe the highly figurative language in which Bede describes his taking possession of the islet of Farne :†—"When having routed the host of the tyrants (the fiends who infested the island) he became the monarch of the land, he built therein a city fit for his empire, and houses therein equally suited to the city." We are, therefore, somewhat surprised to learn from Symeon that, at his consecration as Bishop, King Egfrid gave to St. Cuthbert, in the presence of Theodore the Archbishop, a large part of the city of York :‡—"All the land from the wall of the church of St. Peter to the great gate westwards, and from the wall of the church itself to the wall of the city southward ; also the vill of Crayke, and three miles around it, that when going to York, or returning, he might have a dwelling in which to rest. There he set up a monastery; and, because this land was not sufficient, he received, in augmentation, Carlisle with fifteen miles around it, where also he established a monastery (in which the Queen afterwards put on the religious habit), and also instituted schools for the advancement of the service of God." Now it is notorious that Crayke was, till very recent times, a possession of the Bishops of Durham, and according to Symeon, who may well be trusted for a fact so near his own time, St. Cuthbert's body rested there just before its final arrival at Durham.§ Moreover, Bede tells us of at least two occasions|| on which St. Cuthbert visited Carlisle, where he exercised his episcopal functions. But he has not one word of any landed possessions being given to St. Cuthbert, there or anywhere else. The example of St. Aidan, and his own antecedents, would lead us to the belief that if any such had been offered, they would

* Bæd. *Hist. Eccles.*, iii., 26.

† Bæd. *Vit. S. C.*, xvii.

‡ Sym. *Dunelm, Eccl.*, c. ix.

§ In mentioning this, Symeon speaks of the monastery in a vill which was once his own, "sua quondam villa."—Sym. *Dunelm, Eccl.*, c., xxvii.

|| *Vit. St. Cuth.*, cc. xxvii., xxviii.

have been refused, for it is to be noted that Egfrid's donation is quite of a different character from the gift of small parcels of ground for the erection of monasteries. On the other hand, it is quite certain that by the time Symeon wrote, the Bishops and the Convent of Durham had become very eager to acquire landed property, many particulars of which are given by Symeon, and the Bishops and the Convent could not agree about their respective shares; nay, there is too much reason to fear that sometimes the monks did not hesitate to fabricate documents. Indeed, there is no doubt that this very case supplies an instance of fabrication, for we actually have a copy of the deed by which King Egfrid conveyed Crayke and Carlisle to St. Cuthbert. It is surely most strange that all this seems to have been unknown to Bede or the monk of Lindisfarne, though it is not by any means necessary to charge Symeon with the invention. The belief may have grown up in the dark times which preceded his day. But it certainly seems as if we might use our own discretion as to whether we accept it as history or not.

It is not perhaps necessary, on this occasion, to enter on the question of St. Cuthbert's miracles, but one or two remarks may be permitted. And first, it may be noticed that they have sometimes been spoken of in a most exaggerated strain. For example, one to whom we all feel that we are under great obligations, whose memory we all cherish with respect, the late Dr. Raine, in his *North Durham*, speaking of St. Cuthbert's retirement in Farne, says:—"Here he continued for nine years to practice every austerity which misguided zeal could impose, and, as the *dulce levamen* of his leisure hours, to exert his supernatural powers upon the most trifling occasions. I pass by a whole myriad of miracles, from his cure of Aelfled to the story of the crows and their hog's lard." Again, after his consecration, "He now performed his miracles with greater facility and greater frequency." There is an unpleasant tone about these words, but what is most to be noticed is, "a whole myriad of miracles." A myriad is supposed to represent ten thousand, though it is frequently used to signify a very large number. Now the whole number of *marvels* in *Bede's Prose Life* is about forty, a large portion of which might more properly be called remarkable incidents than miracles. Of these forty, nine belong to the retirement in Farne, that is, on an

average, one for every year. Twelve belong to his episcopate, five are posthumous, and two do not belong to him at all but to his master, St. Boisil. One of the posthumous ones is the state in which his body was found, eleven years after his death, which Dr. Raine is good enough to think not at all improbable.

In considering this subject, we are bound to remember that the faith of our forefathers was then in its first fervour, for the death of St. Cuthbert took place just about fifty years after the first preaching of the gospel by St. Aidan. Men had just become acquainted with all the marvellous works which God had wrought in old times by the instrumentality of his servants. Their minds were, therefore, just in a condition to expect the recurrence of like wonders. And when people get into a way of looking for such things they are very apt to believe that they have met with them. Besides this, many of the things recorded by Bede might be paralleled by well authenticated instances in or near our own time—such as the dream in which, on the night of St. Aidan's death, St. Cuthbert saw the soul of a righteous man carried up to heaven, and his presentiment at Carlisle as to the defeat and death of King Egfrid. It may be remarked that many of the marvellous stories are full of beauty, such as the dealings of the solitary with the lower animals.

As to the healing of the sick, modes of speech still linger amongst us which, while the word *miracle* is avoided, still recognise the interposition of God's merciful hand. No one would be disposed to sneer if he heard a pious and affectionate mother say of the unexpected return of a dear child from the gates of death, "God granted him to our prayers." Especially are such wonders to be heard of when the minds of men are much excited by passing events, or in times of unusual religious fervour. A book recording the acts and sufferings of the Scottish Covenanters in the seventeenth century—the *Scots Worthies*, which was common enough in Scotland in my younger days—and, for aught I know, may be met with in Northumbrian cottages even now—contains many most marvellous incidents. John Wesley in his *Journal*, while he seems carefully to avoid the word *miracle* gives many narratives which are little short of those which Bede gives of St. Cuthbert. I may notice one which took place in this city, perhaps not far from where we are now met. It was on his second visit to

Newcastle, and the weather was very severe, for it was the depth of winter. A friend of his, who was with him, became so ill that he was given up by the physicians. His extremities were cold, and it seemed as if he could not live over the night. He was insensible, but they prayed *over* him. He opened his eyes, and called for Mr Wesley, and from that time he continued to recover, till he was restored to perfect health. "I wait to hear," says Mr. Wesley, "who will either disprove this fact, or philosophically account for it." There is little difference between Mr. Wesley and the Venerable Bede, except that the former does not use the word *miracle*, and Bede throws out no challenge to unbelievers.

All St. Cuthbert's marvellous acts, as given by Bede, are acts of love and mercy, resembling in character, if we may say so reverently, the miracles of the New Testament. But when we part company with the Venerable Bede, and come to later writers, such as Symeon and Reginald, the case is very different. Works of mercy are not wanting, but there are many of a vindictive character—dire punishments inflicted on invaders of the property of the Saint, that is, of the convent; or on women who presumed to intrude into his church or churchyard.* The earth opens at Norham and swallows up many thousands of Scots who had invaded the territory of the Saint in North Durham.† A rustic going to a fair at Durham, with a horse for sale, allows the animal to attack some sheaves of corn in a field belonging to the convent. The bailiff expostulates. They both become abusive, and the horse falls down dead.‡ It is satisfactory to find that the man becomes a penitent. A lady at Durham is returning from an evening party, with her husband; the street is miry, and they go into the churchyard; the husband escapes, being a man; his wife falls down senseless, and is carried home to die.§ David, King of Scots, married Maud, Countess of Huntingdon. In passing northward,|| the Queen stops at Durham; she wishes to see the church, but is content to forego her wish when she is told that it cannot be permitted. Not so one of her ladies, whose curiosity is not to be baulked. She puts on

* Sym. *Dunelm, Eccl.*, c. xxvi.

† *Hist. Transl. St. Cuth.*, iv. p. 167 (Surtees Soc.)

‡ *Hist. Transl. S. C.*, viii., 173, Reginald, c. lxxiii. p. 149.

§ Sym., *Dunelm, Eccl.*, c. xxiii.

|| Reginald, cap. lxxiv.

a monk's dress, and gets as far as the door of the church. The Saint becoming aware of her presence, in great wrath calls the sacrist, and, in terms which cannot be called anything but bad language, commands him to expel the intruder. In great anger, the sacrist institutes a search, finds at last the poor trembling girl, assails her with a torrent of abuse, which shows that he had learned one lesson, at least, from St. Cuthbert, and expels her from the sacred precincts. In terror and compunction she takes the veil at Elstow, near Bedford. Certainly, St. Cuthbert owes little gratitude to his later historians. The St. Cuthbert of Symeon and Reginald is a totally different being from the St. Cuthbert of the Venerable Bede and the monk of Lindisfarne. There can be no question which is the more attractive picture, and it is quite needless to say which appears most in accordance with truth. In fact, if we are to believe Bede, and the monk of Lindisfarne, and also Symeon and Reginald, it is plain that St. Cuthbert's character must have changed very much for the worse after his death. Yet Symeon, in other respects, is a most valuable link in the historical chain; and, notwithstanding all his absurdities and his intricate and inflated style, Reginald presents many most valuable historical details, and many most interesting pictures of mediæval life and manners.

These remarks on the miracles of St. Cuthbert, as narrated by later writers, such as Symeon and Reginald, may possibly serve to guide us in some degree as to the credit which is to be attached to their testimony with respect to incidents in the life of St. Cuthbert, or connected with it, which are not recorded by the Venerable Bede or the monk of Lindisfarne.

My thesis has been that we may fairly use our own discretion with respect to such matters as what Sir Walter Scott calls his hatred of the whole female sex, and also with regard to the enormous donation said to have been conferred on St. Cuthbert when he was consecrated to the episcopate. It is quite certain that Crayke came into the possession of the Bishops at some time or other, but I am not aware of any corroboration anywhere of the gift of the City of Carlisle and fifteen miles round it, that is, something between a hundred and ten and a hundred and twenty thousand acres, not of much value perhaps in those days, but still a possession of very great extent. One cannot help thinking of Constantine and Pope Sylvester. Is Egfrid's gift to

St. Cuthbert to be sought for where Ariosto places Constantine's donation to the Pope—in the moon? I will not say I have proved my point. Indeed my object has rather been to raise a question than to prove anything, and I hope I may flatter myself that what I have brought forward is not altogether unworthy of notice. As to the miracles, most persons will, of course, withhold their belief as to those acts which really appear to be of that character; but there is a wide difference between respectfully thinking that such a man as the Venerable Bede may have been somewhat credulous, and on the other hand adopting an exaggerated tone as to the number of such occurrences, so as to give an excuse for treating the story with ridicule. Neither the Venerable Bede nor St Cuthbert can, with justice, be called a weak or a vain man, and neither of them is a fit subject for ridicule or drollery.