

John Ogilvie, Presbyterian Poet

By FRANK BAKER

ONE summer evening in 1763, at the Mitre Tavern, Mr. Samuel Johnson (soon to become Dr. Johnson) was enjoying his favourite sport of Boswell-baiting, applauded by Oliver Goldsmith. 'Bozzy' had ushered into the great man's presence young John Ogilvie, a parson-poet from Aberdeen, partly, he confessed, with the idea of 'shewing one of my countrymen upon what easy terms Johnson permitted me to live with him'. Ogilvie, however, started off with the wrong foot. He 'was unlucky enough to choose for the topic of his conversation the praises of his native country', observing 'that Scotland had a great many noble wild prospects'. Whereupon Johnson ponderously delivered himself of the following pronouncement:

I believe, Sir, you have a great many Norway, too, has noble wild prospects; and Lapland is remarkable for prodigious noble wild prospects. But, Sir, let me tell you, the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that leads him to England.

So pleased was he with this crushing climax that ten years later he was still trotting it out.

Poor Ogilvie! He was really a very deserving young man. His father, as a Presbyterian minister at Aberdeen, had welcomed Methodism there, and was friendly with both Wesley and Whitefield. The son also had entered the Presbyterian

ministry, being appointed in 1759 to the lonely parish of Midmar, where he was to remain until his death in 1813, aged seventy. His seclusion enabled him eagerly to follow up his zest for miscellaneous learning. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and a D.D. of Aberdeen. His varied publications included not only *Sermons* and *The Triumphs of Christianity over Deism*, but *Philosophical and Critical Observations on Composition. An Inquiry into the Causes of Infidelity and Scepticism*, and *The Theology of Plato compared with the Principles of Grecian and Oriental Philosophers*.

He was probably best-known to the general religious public, however, as a poet. His poetical career had started auspiciously at sixteen with a paraphrase of Psalm 148, commencing:

Begin, my soul, th' exalted lay,
Let each enraptured thought obey,
And praise th' Almighty's name;
Lo! heav'n, and earth, and seas, and
skies
In one melodious concert rise
To swell th' inspiring theme!

This so impressed John Wesley that he apparently transcribed all its thirteen stanzas for the *Arminian Magazine*, though it was not to appear therein until 1795, when it was followed closely by an imitation from the pen of a Methodist versifier, Miles Martindale.

In 1753, the year in which

he would have had nothing but praise for the frail green worlds of *Volvox globator* dredged from the nearest pond, each a bare fiftieth of an inch in diameter and all rolling and bowling merrily along. It is even stranger that he who welcomed the wild north-easter and knew what the rocks and the streams and the laughing greenwoods say, did not recognize a kindred spirit in Susan Warner, lover of the great out-doors. From first to last her little Ellen is happiest in the open air, whether she trundles slowly, very slowly in the ox-cart, or skims across the snow to the tune of jingling sleigh-bells, or rides the Brownie 'over the roads, through the lanes, up and down the hills', or climbs the mountain to visit the hardy old Swiss woman who lives there because she stifles in the plains, or seeks for yellow bells and Solomon's seal in the rocky woodland beyond the wheatfield.

What else may be found in this so-called narrow world? The book itself is as snug and cosy as a Dutch interior. Susan Warner had an eye keen as Herrick's or Rupert Brooke's for trifles and for catalogues. We know exactly how each corner of Ellen's desk was filled, how many pairs of white stockings were dyed grey by the ruthless Aunt Fortune, what lay behind the three doors in her room, and what was in her Christmas stocking.

As for the people of the narrow world, they are 'all sorts', like the apples in Aunt Fortune's basket. Here

and there is 'a real Orson pippin—a very fine kind', and some of them are 'Swars, that ain't as good as most of the others'. The Scottish characters are undoubted Swars. Of Miss Warner's valiant but regrettable attempt to describe Scotch high life, the less said the better. Happily the Swars steal only a few chapters from the story of the real Orson pippins, whose acquaintance is well worth making. Aunt Fortune and Farmer Van Brunt and their circle are the best of the pippins; but those who expect to find the child heroine, 'like Niobe, all tears,' will be agreeably disappointed by the spirit and sparkle of the demure young mouse. The hero, John Humphreys, is the first of Miss Warner's numerous studies of the ideal lover, who is always an adroit mixture of brother and guardian angel, a difficult role much more deftly played by her charming and most human West Point cadet, Christian Thorold of the *Melbourne House* trilogy, than by John Humphreys.

Before us lies no *Brave New World*, but a country not unlike Bunyan's pleasant river banks 'curiously beautified with lilles', where clean winds blow across meadow and brook and mountainside, where the songs of Sion echo from every grove, and where, in snow and sunshine, pious souls, straitly disciplined, blossom as the rose and bring forth the fruits of love, joy, peace. If you are wise, you cannot fail often to visit it. Pray step again into *The Wide, Wide World!*

this poem first appeared in the pages of *Scots Magazine*, Ogilvie also published *The Day of Judgement, A Poem, In Two Books*. It was this rather heavy work in decasyllabic couplets which had caught Boswell's eye and resulted in the embarrassing introduction to Samuel Johnson. Nor did it escape John Wesley's attention, for from its thousand or so lines he extracted a passage of about sixty lines for inclusion in the *Arminian Magazine* of 1786, a colourful description in Miltonic vein of the descent of the Angel of Judgement. The strange standards of literary honesty in Wesley's day are reflected by the fact that he gives not the slightest indication of the source from which he quotes, and by the added fact that a few years later the *Theological Magazine* in its turn lifted Wesley's selection—again without any acknowledgement.

Gradually Ogilvie's reputation as a poet grew, so that when in 1775 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland appointed a committee to revise and enlarge their *Translations and Paraphrases, in Verse, of several Passages of Sacred Scripture*, he was an obvious choice, one of the twenty-seven additional poems included being from his pen. This was 'Lo, in the last of days behold', a poetical version of 2 Peter iii, 3-14, once popular, but now forgotten. To speak truth, Ogilvie was often found a little tiring in his own day. The succession of decorated moralizings which trod on the heels of *The Day of*

Judgement led to Charles Churchill's jibe—

Under dark Allegory's filmy veil
Let them with Ogilvie spin out a tale
Of rueful length.

Ogilvie's *Poems* were collected in two volumes in 1769, and John Wesley appears to have glanced over them. *Providence an Allegorical Poem*—of over three thousand lines!—would probably cause him to wax a little impatient, though he could not but note approvingly that its view of the providential gradations in nature agreed with his own as set forth in his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*. He must have read with interest this foreshadowing of the theory of evolution:

See in the tribe
Of living forms, the gradual scale
ascend
From sensitive to animal; from
brute,
To human. The fine plant, that from
thy touch
Shrinks sensible, connects the filmy
line
To the small shell but just impregn'd
with life,
Where sput from harm as in a
circling mound,

ARE YOU DEAF?

You may be relieved at very little cost by using

WILSON'S COMMONSENSE EARDRUMS

This Scientific Invention is entirely different in construction from other devices, and assists where other methods have failed to give relief. The DRUMS are soft, comfortable, INVISIBLE, have no wire or string attachments, and require NO electric batteries.

Write for FREE pamphlet to
WILSON EAR DRUM CO.
(Dept. 24) 4 TILNEY STREET,
LONDON, W.1

Lives the lone 'Habitant. Thence
 rising slow
 Thro' Instinct's wide-revolving
 rounds, ascends
 The just progression; till the watch-
 ful dog,
 Sagacious, friendly, penetrating, joins
 His twilight circle to his Master's
 sphere,
 Where full-form'd Instinct drops, and
 Reason dawns.

Another of Ogilvie's Methodist admirers was that fellow-townsmen of Dr. Thomas Coke, that 'honest attorney' and would-be poet, Walter Churchey, the self-appointed liaison officer between John Wesley and William Cowper. In the massive volume of poems which Wesley tried so hard to dissuade him from publishing. Churchey included an extract from what Ogilvie regarded as his best poetical effort—*Solitude, or the Elysium of the Poets*. This extract Churchey unsuccessfully used as a bait to catch Ogilvie's energetic support for his own poems. Ogilvie gently disillusioned him, his reply almost hinting that the volume's greatest attraction was the patronage of 'Mr. Wesley, a warm and respectable advocate',

to whom he desired to be remembered, as 'an old correspondent, in whose esteem he has ever held a very distinguished place'.

Wesley himself probably approved warmly of at least the Ogilvie section of Churchey's *Poems and Imitations for Solitude* echoed his own veneration for the poems of Ossian, whom Ogilvie ranked with Shakespeare:

No film o'ershadowing dimm'd his
 piercing sight,
 Nor felt his vigorous form the
 waste of Time;
 But tall and ardent as the sons of
 light,
 O'er the rude beech he look'd, he
 trod sublime.

Even Wesley's shrewd literary judgement was occasionally at fault, however. As later generations have repudiated his beloved Ossian, so they have neglected that Presbyterian poet of whom he remarked on receiving the good wishes obediently conveyed by Churchey: 'I know Dr. (Ogilvie) well: he is a lovely man, and an excellent poet.'

Historical Process and Christian Progress

By FRANK KERBY

'PROGRESS' and 'Process' are words which not only sound much alike but are often used as if they meant the same thing. There is, however, a very real difference between

them: when we say that we believe in the historical process we are stating a fact; to say that we believe in the historical progress is to state not a fact but a theory. We cannot use