

CHRISTMAS EVANS 1766-1838

BY WILLIAM CATHCART, D.D. LL.D

Evans, Christmas. — The Welsh pulpit found in Christmas Evans its brightest ornament. He was born on the 25th of December, 1766. In his early life there do not appear to have been any gleamings of power or genius.

It only needed, however, the proper influences to sweep over the as yet chaotic wastes of that young man's soul to call forth order and harmony. Like his native hills enveloped in the mists and snows of winter, he only needed the sunshine to liberate his imprisoned powers. Nor had he to wait long. What spring is to the ice-bound earth a religious awakening was to Christmas Evans. It subdued his nature, changed his life, and called into activity all the dormant faculties of his hitherto sluggish soul.

He learned to read his Welsh Bible in the course of a month, exulting not a little at the time in his achievement. His intense thirst for knowledge led him to borrow and read every book that the scant

libraries of the neighborhood afforded. It is noteworthy, in view of the imaginative brilliance which became the distinguishing characteristic of his mental processes, that one of the first books which he voraciously devoured was the "Pilgrim's Progress."

He soon cherished the fixed intention of entering the ministry. The first formal attempt which he made at preaching was in the cottage of a tailor in the neighborhood, who it would appear was a man of more than ordinary intelligence, and who took a lively interest in aspiring merit. This effort was in every respect successful.

Christmas Evans was a Baptist from conviction. He was for some years a member of a Pedobaptist community, and it was not until he began to study the New Testament carefully, with a view of exposing the Anabaptist heresy, as he was pleased to call it, that he discovered the utter untenableness of his position. He went into the royal armory to equip himself with weapons with which to slay an opponent, when to his dismay he found the edge of every blade turned against himself. "Having read the New Testament through," says he, "I found not a

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single verse in favor of infant sprinkling, while about forty passages seemed to me to testify clearly for baptism on a profession of faith." After a

struggle, which, however, was not protracted, he was baptized in the year 1788 in the river Duar by the Rev. Timothy Thomas.

Some of the most exquisitely proportioned creatures are exceedingly ungainly when young and undeveloped. It was even so with Christmas Evans. For some time it was difficult to determine whether he was a genius or a fool. With a temperament intensely fervid and a mind vividly imaginative, his sermons at this early day were as disjointed and grotesque as his personal appearance. That great preponderating faculty of his mind which in after years, under the mastery of a keen and well-balanced judgment and strong common sense, gave him unrivaled popularity, now but infused a capricious wildness into his utterances which astonished rather than impressed, and exposed to ridicule rather than to admiration. He soon, however, acquired that mental elasticity which made him the Samson of the Baptist hosts.

The field upon which he expended well-nigh the whole of his fruitful life was Anglesea. Here he was for many years a quasi-bishop. But it would be impossible to form a correct idea of his labors without taking into account the frequent lengthened preaching excursions which he made into the most remote parts of the principality. It is said that he visited South Wales forty times in the course of his ministry, and preached one hundred and sixty-three Association sermons, each journey involving an absence from home of at least six or seven weeks, and occupied with incessant evangelistic work.

The influence which he exerted upon the churches, and upon the land, by these transient ministries, it is impossible to conjecture. Large congregations greeted him everywhere and at all seasons. The

coming of Christmas Evans presaged a general holiday even in the midst of harvest. Whole neighborhoods flocked to hear him, and the effect of his preaching was such that the people, held by the spell long after the enchanter had left the scene, would continue sometimes weeping and rejoicing until the morning light reminded them that they were still in a world where ordinary duties demanded attention. Nor were the impressions thus made ephemeral. In some instances strong churches grew up and flourished as the result of a single sermon.

Forty years or more have passed since that voice which thrilled so many human hearts was hushed, but its rich melody remains as a grateful reminiscence. Old men revert to their hearing Christmas Evans as one of the most notable events in a lifetime. He could no more pass out of memory than could the everlasting hills amid which they were born. And no wonder. The genius of the Welsh character found in him its most perfect ideal, he embodied in his rugged honesty and fervent zeal, his clear penetration and poetic vision, the spirit and pathos of the Welsh mind.

He died in Swansea, at the home of the Rev. Daniel Davies, D.D., on the 20th of July, 1838.