



From the portrait by Arnold Mason, R.A., 1951, in Handsworth College, Birmingham. (Photograph by W. Churcher)

WILBERT FRANCIS HOWARD

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1880-1952

WILBERT FRANCIS HOWARD was born on 30 December 1880 at Gloucester. He was the son of a Wesleyan Methodist minister, the Rev. Joseph Howard, a man of strong, inflexible character who left a deep impress upon each of his five children. His mother, Agnes Wright, could trace her descent from a family of Bristol Methodists in whose home John and Charles Wesley were frequent visitors. The children were brought up in a happy home in spite of its financial stringencies. Self-sacrificing in every way, the parents did everything within their limited resources to advance the education and religious training of their children during the years when, in accordance with the itinerant system of their Church, they lived successively in Gloucester, Gosport, Maidstone, Lewes, Brockley, Bradley in Staffordshire, Kidderminster, Grassington, and other centres of Methodism. Even as a small boy Wilbert Howard had that exceptionally ordered mind that was to stand him in good stead all his life and a tenacity of purpose which enabled him to get through such an incredible amount of work right up to within a week of his death. As a child he reasoned out things for himself and formed definite opinions from which he could not be shaken.

Howard was educated at Haberdashers' Aske's School in Hatcham in London, S.E., and, when the family moved to Bradley and later to Kidderminster, at the famous King Edward VI School in New Street, Birmingham, to which he travelled daily a journey of seventeen miles. He was fortunate in attending the school at a time when A. R. Vardy was Headmaster, a renowned classical scholar of whom it was said that in his opinion to perpetuate a false quantity was only short of committing a mortal sin. There, in the Big School of Charles Barry's Building, Vardy read prayers from the desk whose canopy bore the single word 'Sapientia', and on whose honours' boards stood the names of B. F. Westcott, J. B. Lightfoot, Archbishop Benson, and others which must have stirred ambitious plans in the heart of a young schoolboy now beginning an intensive study of the Classics. In this way foundations were laid for Howard's later work on the Greek Testament. Perhaps it was the independence

of his mind and the bull-dog courage with which he defended his conclusions which prevented him from gaining school prizes, but his astonishing memory for facts and his passionate desire for exact knowledge could not fail to be observed. It was a great disappointment for him to have to leave school for financial reasons when he was seventeen and a half years old, and so was not able to proceed to Cambridge. Owing to the removal of his father to Grassington he lived during the last year of his school career with his mother's cousin, Dr. W. T. Davison, a theological tutor at Handsworth College, Birmingham, strangely enough in the house he himself was to occupy later for many years.

On leaving school he began to prepare himself for entrance into the Wesleyan Ministry and, with a characteristic desire to combine academic with practical interests, he worked as a Lay Pastor for two years, having charge of three small churches at Willington Quay, Percy Main, and Rose Hill. To a friend he wrote, 'I have never ceased to thank God for what He taught me in the homes of those sturdy Tyneside folks'. In 1901 he was accepted as a candidate for the ministry, and, as was normal in those days, he spent a pre-collegiate year in the Liverpool Mission. The following year he entered Didsbury College, Manchester, where he came under the influence of Dr. J. S. Simon, a notable Methodist historian, and of James Hope Moulton, who in that year had given up his fellowship at King's College, Cambridge, and his teaching post at The Leys School in order to become Tutor in New Testament Language and Literature and Classics at Didsbury. Dr. Moulton was already engaged on his study of the Koiné Greek found in the New Testament. In this investigation he gained world-wide renown and in 1906 published the *Prolegomena* to his *Grammar of New Testament Greek*. Howard's interest was at once captured by Moulton's enthusiasm and later, when Moulton died as the result of enemy action through exposure in an open boat, his brilliant student was to continue his work. Leaving Didsbury in 1905 Howard was appointed as a Probationer Minister to Barrhead, near Glasgow, but two years later he returned to the College as Assistant to Dr. Simon during the latter's Presidential year. It was then that he formed a lifelong friendship with A. W. Harrison who at that time was Assistant Tutor.

In 1908 Howard was ordained and appointed to serve at Bowes Park, North London. A year later he married Winifred Worsley Bedale, the only daughter of T. A. Bedale of Worsley, Lancashire, and sister of the Rev. Charles L. Bedale who, until

the time of his early death, was Old Testament Tutor at Didsbury. During the period that he was at Bowes Park and again at Radnor Street, Manchester, Howard combined highly successful pastoral work with diligent and unceasing theological study. He was awarded the B.D. degree and First Class B.D. Honours in the London University and the M.A. degree at Manchester. Later, during the First World War of 1914-18, while minister at Somerset Road, Handsworth, he added to his many duties service in the Special Constabulary and drove a lorry during his mornings for a firm of Birmingham shopfitters. After the war he was appointed to Wallasey, Cheshire, and gaining leave of absence was Visiting Professor at Drew Theological College, New Jersey, U.S.A. At this university he was offered a chair in New Testament Studies, but declined this tempting offer partly because he felt that his life must be dedicated to the Methodist Church in England and also, as he confessed to his friends, because he did not wish his children to lose their British birthright. On his return he was designated to the Chair of New Testament, Literature, and Classics at Handsworth College, Birmingham, where among his colleagues were J. G. Tasker, F. Platt, and W. F. Lofthouse, and there he remained for thirty-two years.

Reference is made later to his publications and his work as a teacher at Handsworth, but meantime the account of his public ministry must be completed. Howard served on many committees in his beloved Church and was a forceful speaker and debater in its annual Conferences. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1944 he was elected President of the Methodist Conference. When his friend and successor, Dr. A. W. Harrison, died in the spring of 1946, Howard again became President until the following Conference. It must not be supposed that his sympathies and services were limited to his own Church. He played a distinguished part in the formation of the Theological Faculty at Birmingham University, became Lecturer there in Hellenistic Greek, and was Examiner in New Testament Studies in the Universities of Cambridge, Manchester, and Wales. In 1947 he was appointed Select Preacher at Cambridge. He was one of the original founders of the international society known as *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* and became a member of the New Testament and Apocrypha translation panels appointed by the *New Translation Joint Committee*. From 1932 to 1951 he was a Governor of King Edward VI School, Birmingham, and Bailiff (Chairman) in the session 1937-8. Honours came to him from many

quarters. He was awarded the degree of D.D. at the London University in 1929, the D.D. *honoris causa* by St. Andrews in 1937 and by Manchester University in 1947, received the Burkitt Bronze Medal for Biblical Studies in the same year, and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1949.

Among his publications Howard's part in the completion of Vol. II of Moulton's *Grammar* is first in importance. When Dr. Moulton sailed for India in October 1915 he had finished the manuscript of Parts I and II, and had written the chapter on Word-Composition in Part III and part of an introductory chapter on New Testament Greek. Howard's work in issuing the first two parts was that of an editor. He completed the Introduction, marking with characteristic accuracy by an asterisk the middle of the sentence where the original manuscript ended, writing the section of Word-Formation by Suffixes, and contributing an invaluable appendix of seventy-five closely printed pages on 'Semitisms in the New Testament', together with detailed indexes to the whole. This appendix was universally acclaimed a masterly setting of its theme and has remained a standard work on the subject in modern times. In the *Prolegomena* Dr. Moulton himself had already added an important Note which showed how much he had been influenced by the works of three great Semitic scholars who had challenged the accepted theory regarding the original language in which the Acts, the Apocalypse, and the Fourth Gospel were written, and had intended to write an appendix to Vol. II in conjunction with his colleague, the Rev. C. L. Bedale. Unhappily Mr. Bedale, whom Howard justly describes as 'a Semitic scholar of real distinction and great promise', died in a military hospital at Cambridge in March 1919. Howard took up the task and devoted much time and care to the preparation of the appendix on Semitisms. He shared, and perhaps exceeded, Dr. Moulton's hesitations on this question. He was ready to admit the Aramaic background of the Synoptic tradition, but preferred to trace many of the Semitisms in New Testament Greek to the influence of the Septuagint and the presence of allied constructions in the Papyri. As regards St. Mark's Gospel he remained of the opinion so well expressed by Père Lagrange, 'His Greek is always Greek, yet translation Greek; not that he translates an Aramaic writing, but because he reproduces an Aramaic *κατήχησις*'. Of the linguistic phenomena of Luke i and ii he concluded, 'The Hebraic phraseology is beyond question, but there is nothing that lies beyond the range of composition by one who was steeped in the

diction of the Greek version of the Psalter'. He was not convinced that C. C. Torrey's claim that Acts i-xv are Luke's literal translation of an Aramaic document, and was not disposed to allow more than the opinion that C. F. Burney had proved convincingly the Semitic cast of the evangelist's mind. These opinions were expressed after a careful study of all that had been said regarding the general style and structure of sentences in the New Testament, the several parts of speech, and alleged examples of 'mistranslation' of Semitic words or phrases. Since the appendix was written several fine scholars have been able to go farther, but all have had to take seriously into account what Howard wrote.

A second important work is the Fernley Lecture of 1931, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation*. In this work he faced the critical questions left over by the Cambridge school of the nineteenth century. He described fully the contributions made to the study of the Gospel in Britain, America, Germany, and France. Although he cast his net widely, he was able to say in his preface that he had entered in his bibliography, which consisted of ten closely printed pages, no book or essay which he had not himself read. Besides estimating the importance of these contributions Howard addressed himself to the critical issues of Symbolism and Allegory, Mysticism and Sacramentalism, the Johannine idiom, and the Message and Abiding Value of the Fourth Evangelist, adding seven considerable Appendixes on special questions. The standpoint was both conservative and liberal. Discussing the narratives of the turning of water into wine and the raising of Lazarus he courageously exposed himself to attack by saying explicitly, 'When a moral principle collides with a miracle we feel, by every Christian instinct, that it is the miracle that must go to the wall'. On the other hand, he did full justice to the strong sacramental element in the evangelist's thought, and broke new ground by describing the Johannine sayings as an 'inspired Targum'. 'The Targum', he wrote, 'is sometimes an almost literal translation of the actual words that were spoken; sometimes a free paraphrase; sometimes an interpretative exposition.'

The influence of this book on New Testament scholars has been very great and many writers and commentators have leaned heavily upon it. It ran into three editions and has recently been brought up to date by Dr. C. Kingsley Barrett.

Three smaller books followed, an essay on the critical study of

the Acts in the *Study Bible*, an account of the contribution of A. S. Peake to Biblical Studies in *Recollections and Appreciations of A. S. Peake*, and an anthology of essays of Dr. W. T. Davison in *Mystics and Poets*. The next important book, out of all proportion to its size, was *Christianity according to St. John*, which he published in 1943. This book embodied the substance of eight lectures which he delivered as Dale Lecturer of Mansfield College, Oxford. It was written in the full course of teaching at Handsworth and crystallized an estimate of the Johannine theology formed over a long period of years, with the result that it can be read and appreciated by the expert and the general reader alike. Every Monday morning, Howard tells us, during the Hilary Term of 1940, in one of the severest winters within memory, when travelling was exceptionally difficult because of the war, he made the double journey between Birmingham and Oxford so that he might lose as little time as possible in fulfilling his obligations to his own students. He wrote out each week the lecture for the following Monday, intending to rewrite the Series later. Happily he decided in the end to retain the original form of the lectures, but added footnotes and short appendixes before publication, with the result that the book has a freshness and a religious depth which make it outstanding among his writings. A single illustration must suffice. He had maintained in Lecture V that a writer who is by temperament and experience a mystic may yet have an eschatological background of thought and that in some of his moods his overwhelming sense of impending crisis may find expression even in apocalyptic imagery. Significantly enough, he found an example of this combination in the hymns of Charles Wesley. In 1742 Wesley wrote a hymn which is the prayer of a Christian mystic, in which the lines appear,

From the world of sin and noise
And hurry I withdraw;
For the small and inward voice
I wait with humble awe;
Silent am I now and still,
Dare not in Thy presence move;
To my waiting soul reveal
The secret of Thy love.

But seventeen years later, says Howard, he wrote in 'the dialect of undiluted apocalyptic',

Come, Thou Conqueror of the nations,
Now on Thy white horse appear;

Earthquakes, dearths, and desolations
Signify Thy kingdom near;
True and Faithful!
'Stablish Thy dominion here.

The change in Wesley's lines was due to the historical background of the times, earth-tremors in London, the Lisbon earthquake, and the victory at Quiberon Bay. It is not easy, with this illustration in mind, to consent to the elimination of eschatological passages in the Fourth Gospel as later interpolations and the fulminations about Antichrist in 1 John, with the declaration, 'Little children, it is the last hour' (1 John ii. 18).

Two small commentaries, one on *First and Second Corinthians* in the *Abingdon Bible Commentary* (1929) and the other on *St. John* in the *Interpreter's Bible* (1952), reveal Howard's gifts as a commentator, and it is a great loss to Biblical scholarship that he was unable to find time to accomplish more in this field. Models of compression, they fix upon the salient points in these writings and are of value, not only to preachers for whom they were primarily intended, but also for students able to read between the lines. Another book in which his gift for lucid writing found popular expression is *The Romance of New Testament Scholarship* (1949), which contains full and exact information about the great figures in the history of New Testament research.

In addition to these works Howard wrote many scholarly articles in well-known journals, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, *The Hibbert Journal*, *The Expository Times*, and *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*. Many of these articles are books in miniature, especially his Commemoration Addresses at Handsworth College and the detailed summaries which from time to time he gave of recent continental studies. Outstanding among these essays are his article on 'The Common Authorship of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles', in reply to C. H. Dodd, in the *Journal of Theological Studies* (vol. xlviii, 1947), and a series of articles in the *London Quarterly*: 'The Person of Jesus in Recent Criticism' (Jan. 1925), 'The Fourth Gospel and Mandaeen Gnosticism' (Jan. 1927), 'The First Interpreter of Jesus' (Jan. 1939), and 'Some Thoughts on a New Translation of the Bible' (Apr. 1950). In these and other essays accuracy of statement is linked with clarity of style, and it is to be hoped that someone will do for them what Howard himself did when he edited a series of reviews and tributes in his already mentioned *Recollections and Appreciations of A. S. Peake*.

A word must be added about his exceptional gifts as a reviewer

of theological and Biblical books. These were read and reviewed with meticulous care in the leading theological journals, and what is remarkable, with as much thoroughness in the pages of the popular religious weekly, the *Methodist Recorder*. Usually he prefaced his reviews with a luminous statement placing them in their historical context and describing works which had preceded them. The result was that his reviews were highly valued and preserved. Not a few students pasted them in commonplace books, thus gaining an instructive survey of New Testament studies over a period of years. Frequently he corresponded with authors mentioning points which he had forborne to make in print and giving encouragement which was often much appreciated.

The question may be asked why Howard did not write more books comparable to his works on the Fourth Gospel. The answer is not far to seek and it is significant that it is bound up with his disposition and character. In the years 1940-5, when Handsworth College was closed, he was in charge of a small church which presented many difficulties. His oversight of the college property and the reopening of Handsworth entailed many responsibilities which he discharged with marked business acumen. During his two presidential years he was necessarily engaged in Church affairs which involved much travelling and attendance at committees. Sometimes burdens fell upon him which were distasteful, but out of loyalty he shouldered them, not without groans and protests. Outspoken by disposition, he was particularly severe on ecclesiastical leaders whose reading was limited and who did not appear to appreciate fully the importance of ministerial training. To a friend he described himself as 'a man with an almost morbid conscience'. 'I am continually haunted by the thought of unfulfilled purposes and unwritten books', he wrote, 'and have at least three books on the stocks which may never be published.' These included *John Wesley and His Letters* and *The Growth of the New Testament*, a much-needed work on the New Testament Canon, and as opportunity offered he made notes for Vol. III of Moulton's *Grammar*. Again, he gave much time to correspondence, not only with scholars, but also with former students and friends, especially students serving in lonely stations overseas. Further, he believed that time was on his hands and looked forward to the opportunities of retirement when he would be able to write at greater leisure. When he retired in 1951 he frequently declared that he had planned work for ten years, but alas! eleven months later after

a week's illness he died in his seventy-third year in Addenbrooke's Hospital on 10 July 1952.

Among the books which he did not live to complete were Vol. III of the *Grammar* mentioned above and a revised edition of Moulton's smaller *Grammar*. The latter was completed by his friend Dr. H. G. Meecham. Dr. Meecham was also entrusted with the writing of Vol. III, but with the fatality which has accompanied this work from the beginning he himself died in 1955. Happily the task is being undertaken by younger hands. Perhaps the greatest loss of all is that death prevented Howard from writing a massive commentary on St. John's Gospel for the well-known Macmillan Series, a work which might have been his *magnum opus*.

Something of a more personal kind remains to be said. As a teacher Howard brought to the classroom the same characteristics of learning and lucidity which appear in his writings. He lectured about eleven hour-periods a week in addition to tutorial work, and in accordance with Handsworth custom took 'private hours' with groups of students on Monday evenings. In these groups students either selected a subject of their own or discussed wider questions as, for example, the religious opinions of George Bernard Shaw in *Androcles and the Lion*. At first some of his students on their own confession were somewhat afraid of Howard's apparently austere personality, but they soon came to realize his keen interest in them and in their work. The careless and the dilatory he could wither with scorn, but for those who put their heart into their work he gave sacrificially of his best. Hundreds of students passed through his hands, and incredible as it may seem, Dr. Lofthouse has declared that he could have written a short biography of most of them. He never forgot them and was always ready to help them after they had left college.

His home life was singularly happy and well ordered, and this he owed in no small degree to his gifted and self-effacing wife who made so much of his work possible. He had four children, two boys and two girls, each of whom by the careful planning of their parents proceeded to Cambridge.

Howard was an intensely human personality, although a first meeting with him suggested a somewhat grim disposition. He had a great sense of humour and a remarkable gift of mimicry which his friends often tempted him, not unsuccessfully, to exercise. He was a man of great physical strength and in earlier life somewhat of an athlete. Even in his fifties he could cut and drive

well-pitched balls in a game of cricket with his students. Often his study light shone well into the night and sometimes into the early morning, but he rarely seemed tired or weary. He was a natural leader of men, but I think he found opposition somewhat hard to bear. Yet he was able to yield graciously when good reasons were put forward. The late Dr. T. W. Manson has said of his attitude on the translation panels of the New Translation of the Bible, 'In discussion his colleagues could always depend on him to defend his own interpretations with a reasoned tenacity, which he never allowed to become unreasoning obstinacy. When his views prevailed he was pleased, but not unduly elated; when they did not he yielded graciously. We came to rely greatly on his learning, his sound judgement, and his firm grasp of the essentials of the faith that is embodied in the New Testament.' Howard had a strong sense of duty, allied with sympathy and understanding for others, and a courtesy which never failed. He wrote on the romance of New Testament scholarship, and it is not too much to say that among the great personalities he described his own has a silent and abiding place.

V. TAYLOR