

NARCISSUS MARSH

(Sermon preached in the Chapel of Trinity College, Dublin, by the Rev. N. J. D. White, D.D., on Trinity Monday, 1920)

If it were necessary to prefix a text to a memorial discourse, this sermon on Narcissus Marsh might very suitably begin with the closing words of the Book of Nehemiah, *Remember me, O my God, for good*. This constant refrain in Nehemiah's memoir, and prayers similarly expressed, recur again and again in Marsh's Diary. It is tempting to recall here that Jewish tradition (2 Macc. ii. 13) spoke of Nehemiah "founding a library"; but apart from this trifling parallel, there was in fact a close affinity in character between the restorer of the Jewish state and this Irish prelate of the early eighteenth century. They differed only in the circumstances in which they found themselves. Nehemiah and Marsh were both specimens of the best type of ordinary man, the men by whose consistent honesty of purpose and conscientious work "the fabric of the world is maintained. Neither Nehemiah nor Marsh was a spiritual genius; while both were men of sincere practical piety. They both had a single eye to the general good, and were inspired by that particular form of public spirit which loves to express itself in something visible and tangible, bricks and mortar for choice. Both exhibit a naïve appreciation of their own good deeds, which just escapes condemnation as smug self-complacency because the men whose foible it was were in truth most worthy of respect and admiration. There is, for example, a rue Nehemiah ring in these words penned by Marsh on his 52nd birthday: "I thank my God that my conscience doth not reproach me for any negligence either in my study or calling; but I do find a great deal of comfort in what I have done."

Marsh was not an alumnus of this College; yet it is fitting that we commemorate him at one of our Trinity feasts; for although he was imported here from Oxford, an utter stranger, he made this country his home. He never regarded Dublin or Ireland as a source of income or a means to private aggrandisement but as the place assigned to him by God for useful work. He gave his thoughts, his culture and his money to the furtherance of Irish interests and the enrichment of social life in Ireland; and whether as Provost or Bishop or Archbishop he left the place he had occupied the better for his having been there.

Narcissus Marsh was born 20th December, 1638, at Hanington, near Highworth, in North Wiltshire. He was the youngest of five children - three sons and two daughters. He belonged to the class of yeomen - small landed proprietors who farmed their own ancestral estates - a class, unhappily, now almost extinct in England. His father, "designing to breed him up to learning," sent him to a succession of schools in the neighbourhood of his home; "in all which schools," he tells us, "I never was so much as once whipt or beaten." He must have been an exceptionally satisfactory boy from the schoolmaster's point of view; for in those days the use of the rod as a stimulus to the intellect was "frequent and free."

And here let me say at once that Marsh's devotion to book-learning was excessive. The only bodily exercise he took as a young man was that involved in "the practice of musick, especially of the Bass Viol" [or lute.] After 1666, "I constantly kept a weekly consort (of instrumental musick and sometimes vocal) in my chamber on Wednesday in the afternoon, and then on Thursday, as long as I lived in Oxford." After recording this, Marsh adds, "Yet, O Lord, I beseech thee to forgive me this loss of time and vain conversation." As might be expected, he became an expert in the theory of music. He wrote an essay on the Sympathy of Viol or Lute strings, which was printed in 1677, by Robert Plot in his *Natural History of Oxfordshire*. And some at least of Marsh's lute music remains among the MSS in his Library.

Otherwise, until he left Oxford for Dublin, although he discharged his College duties with efficiency, he lived for little else than what he calls more than once, "my dearly-beloved studies." To these studies everything was subordinated. Writing of his life after he had obtained fellowship, he says, "I was still sedulous in my study, being more desirous to know truth than to engage in wordly business, and especially in the vanity of conversation." The positive element in this sentiment - the desire for truth - is indeed worthy of all praise; and it is in accord with the Greek motto which Marsh inscribed on the fly-leaf of every book he possessed, "Truth everywhere."

To return to our narrative - In 1654, at the age of sixteen, he entered Magdalen Hall (now Hertford College), Oxford; and there he "betook himself seriously to the study of Old Philosophy, Mathematics and Oriental languages." These subjects absorbed his attention to the end of his life.

By the term *Old Philosophy* Marsh seems to mean *Logic*. His labours in this field finally resulted in a little manual for the use of the students of Dublin University, published in 1681. (*Institutiones Logicae in usum juventutis Academiae Dubliniensis*). This was a second edition of an earlier work, published at Oxford in 1678, based on Philip du Trieu's *Manuductio ad Logicam*. I do not know for how long Marsh's text book remained in the course of study here. The book which was known in the early 19th century as *The Provost's Logic* was published in 1759, by Richard Murray, who was Provost, 1795-1799. There is no copy of Murray's *Logic*, in the original Latin, in our College Library; a copy that was in Marsh's Library disappeared many years ago.

Marsh's diary has many entries exemplifying the fascination that mathematical studies had for him. More than once, after recording his discovery of the solution of a problem in trigonometry, he adds words such as these: - "O Lord, thy holy name be for ever praised for thus enlightening my understanding, and discovering to me hidden truths."

But the main intellectual interest in Marsh's life unquestionably lay in the acquisition of knowledge of Oriental languages. Among the printed books which he

left to the library which bears his name, besides Hebrew, Syraic and Arabic, the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian, Slavonic, Persian and Turkish languages are represented. It would be hazardous to affirm that Marsh knew all these languages; but at least the list is evidence of a wide linguistic interest. In addition to the printed books, he acquired a very valuable collection of Oriental MSS., which he bequeathed to the Bodleian Library. The Marsh collection there now includes no fewer than 714 items.

Besides this general account of his studies, Marsh gives us one detail of his life as an undergraduate which is too remarkable to be passed over: - "All this while I constantly kept an entire fast every week from Thursday, six o'clock at night, until Saturday, eleven at noon." This uncompromising observance of the Friday fast, and that too under the Puritan regime, indicates that Marsh was at least in sympathy with the principles of the great Caroline divines of the Church of England. To one of these divines, indeed, he rendered yeoman's service; for he spent an entire year (1670-1671) in correcting and supervising W. Beveridge's monumental work on the Canons of the Greek Councils (Oxon. 1672); "in which," he says, "I had nothing but the honour and satisfaction of serving the publick. Lord, remember me for this."

It is significant that many years afterwards, in his charge to the clergy of Dublin, 1694, he bade them "to give notice on every Sunday of what fast-days and holy-days are to be in the next week, according as the Rubric doth require, and the observe them themselves together with their parishioners." The other practical exhortations in this charge are in the same tone of consistent Churchmanship.

To resume - At his examination for the degree of B.A. Marsh acquitted himself so well that he was elected to a Wiltshire fellowship in Exeter College, June 30th, 1658. But he professes to have owed this preferment to the good offices of a certain Mr. John Jenner. Marsh was a man of a grateful spirit; his diary is full of prayers for those who at any time shewed him kindness; and when Mr. Jenner subsequently got into difficulties, Marsh paid his debts to the amount of £200, a considerable sum in those days.

Marsh's career was now assured. But the first attempt made by his friends to promote his worldly interests was foiled by his devotion to the life of a learned recluse. In March 1662, the living of Swindon became vacant. At the same time the Bishop of Exeter, Seth Ward, wanted to provide a certain lady with a husband; and thought that Marsh would oblige him in the matter for a consideration. So Marsh was offered the living; and was then ordained deacon and priest on the same day (by being then a little over 23 years old), by Skinner, Bishop of Oxford; and the bishop of Exeter made him his chaplain. It was not until "after he had peaceable possession" of the living that he was apprised of the nature of the return that was expected of him. The sequel is best told in his own words: - "Being averse to the entangling myself in the cares of the world (but indeed and chiefly my father being

averse to it...) I at once resolutely broke the chains and quitted the living..., and adhered to my fellowship.... O my God, I bless thy holy Name for delivering me out of the snare that they had laid for me... And, O Lord, pardon them, I beseech thee, for what they designed and what they acted... against the intent and purpose of my heart to render thee and thy holy Church such service as in a marry'd state I could not be able to do, which is the only reason I have hitherto kept myself a single man." The portraits of Marsh that are extant suggest that he had been a well-favoured, desirable young man; and he tells us of four subsequent occasions when ladies with fortunes, "beautiful, lovely persons," were proposed in vain to him in marriage. In the same spirit of devotion to what he conceived to be his life-work, he refused in 1667 to become domestic chaplain to Lord Keeper Bridgman, "resolving not to live chaplain in any man's house, lest it might rob me of too much time from my dearly beloved studies, which I would not part with for any preferment; and therefore I desired and cared for none." It is to Marsh's credit that he rejected all short and easy ways to material prosperity; and when wealth at last came to him, he gave of it freely, during his own life-time; his generosity was not of the easy *post mortem* kind.

In 1673, the Duke of Ormonde, who was chancellor of the University of Oxford, made Marsh Principal of St. Alban's Hall, where he remained for nearly six years. Under his care the Hall prospered greatly; and this evidence of administrative ability no doubt encouraged the Duke, who was also Chancellor of the University in Dublin, to offer him, through Fell, Bishop of Oxford, in March 1678, the Provostship of Trinity College, Dublin. He left Oxford 23rd December, 1678, just after his 40th birthday, arrived in Dublin 19th January, 1679, and was sworn in on the 24th of the same month.

It is well that for our knowledge of what Marsh did for this place we are not dependent on his diary alone. This is his retrospect seven years after he had resigned the Provostship: - "But finding this place very troublesome, partly by reason of the multitude of business and impertinent visits the Provost is obliged to, and partly by reason of the ill education that the young scholars have before they come to the College, whereby they are both rude and ignorant, I was quickly weary of 340 young men and boys in this lewd debauched town; and the more so because I had no time to follow my allways dearly beloved studies."

These words, written in 1690, give a wholly false impression of the Provostship of Narcissus Marsh; and fortunately we are enabled to supplement them by what he wrote sixteen years later, in 1706. In that year Marsh was completing his arrangements for the establishment of the Library in St. Patrick's Close which bears his name. He had, in 1704, bought for this purpose "that very valuable collection of choice and excellent books [9,512 in number] which was made by the learned doctor, Edward Stillingfleet, late Lord Bishop of Worcester." These books cost Marsh £2,500. They have been described as "the mine whence Richard Bentley

drew the main stores of his learning”; and their removal from England caused at the time much regret and resentment.

One of Marsh’s correspondents, Dr. Thomas Smith, a non-juror, sometime Fellow of Magdalen, Oxford, quoted from a letter of a friend of his (Thos. Hearne) in reference to Stillingfleet’s books: “He hopes greater care will be taken of them than of [the library of] Trinity College, Dublin, which, as I am informed, is quite neglected and in no order, and upon that account is become perfectly useless, the Provost and Fellows of that College having no regard for books or learning.” The serious charge against the authorities of Trinity College, as well as an error made by Smith himself in his life of Provost Huntington, as regards the printing of the Old Testament in Irish, elicited from Marsh a lengthy report (published in *The Christian Examiner*, for 1833, by Dr. J. H. Toss) from which we gather some interesting facts as to his doings here.

There was, it appears, some ground for the statement that the College library was not in a satisfactory state; but the cause of this was not any culpable neglect. The original chapel and Hall of Elizabeth’s College had become too small for the increasing number of students; and the building of larger ones was an urgent necessity. Marsh “thought it most proper to begin first with the house of God,” and he laid the foundations of a new chapel - where the Campanile now stands - which was completed in Provost Huntington’s time. When the new chapel was finished, the old Hall had to be taken down for the building of a larger one on the same site; “and while this was doing, the Scholars having no place to eat in, they were forced to make use of the Library for that purpose; and because the books were not chained, ‘twas necessary that they should remove them into some other place, and” ... so “they were constrained to lay them in heaps in some void rooms.”

During this period it was, of course, impossible to use the books. But even in normal times the library was practically useless to all except the Provost and Fellows. “By the College Statutes,” Marsh writes, “no man beside the Provost and Fellows is permitted to study there, unless carry’d up thither by one of them, who is bound to be present all the time the other stays in the library. And ‘twas this, and this consideration alone, that at first moved me to think of building a Library in some other place (than in the College), for public use, where all might have free access.” This then was the origin of Marsh’s Library, which was incorporated in 1707, and remained the only public library in Dublin for about 150 years; and which, though now naturally fallen out of popular use, still serves a purpose in the modern world as a picturesque and faithful custodian of many literary treasures of the past.

As regards the College Library, Marsh claims to have done his best for its preservation while he was Provost. The office of Librarian was then an annual one, held by one of the junior Fellows. This was a most unsatisfactory arrangement; and, to minimize its evil consequences, Marsh had a shelf catalogue of each *classis*

hung on the several book cases. This he himself verified every year with the old and the new Librarian; “and what books were wanting I made the old Library Keeper restore or pay for to buy others of the same kind in their stead.” This annual verification of the catalogue “was not above two hours’ work”; which proves that the collection then cannot have been a very extensive one.

But the greater part of Marsh’s letter to Dr. Smith is concerned with the share he took in the printing of the Old Testament in the Irish language, and in the encouragement of the study of Irish in Trinity College. Shortly after Marsh’s arrival in Ireland, he got into communication with a certain Dr. Andrew Sall, an eminent ex-Jesuit, who had left the Church of Rome, and was no beneficed in the Diocese of Cashel. From this man Marsh learnt that the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr. Thomas Price, “had for some time employed one Mr. Tiernan, an Irish convert priest to preach in the cathedral Sundaies afternoon in Irish, to which there was a great concourse of people of all sorts that understood Irish.”

This fired the imagination of the new Provost; and he at once determined to adopt and develop this common-sense method of commending the reformed faith to the natives of Ireland. “By the statutes of our College,” he writes, “of seventy Scholars of the House... we were bound to choose 30 of them *natives of Ireland*. And tho’ by *natives of Ireland* had been understood *such as were born in Ireland*, tho’ of English parents, as well as of Irish,... yet my opinion then was, and still is, that the Statutes required those 30 should be of Irish extraction, intending thereby the better to propagate the Protestant religion among the Irish. I then sent for those Natives... to try how many of them understood Irish; and tho’ most if not all of them could speak it,... yet not one of them could read or write it. I then took up a resolution to provide a man at mine own charges who should teach them to read and write the Irish tongue, and that none thereafter during my time should be chosen into a Native’s place that could not do both; which I observed as long as I was Provost.

The man whom Marsh employed for this purpose was a converted R.C. priest, Paul Higgins, who was given rooms and board in the College and a salary of £16 per annum; in return for which he taught Irish and “preached an Irish sermon once a month in the College chapel at 3 of the clock on Sundays in the afternoon” to an audience which was never fewer than 300 persons, while as many as 80 students came to his lectures. The Provost himself attended both the classes and the sermons; but does not seem to have acquired much knowledge of the language. “At first,” he says, “I was much censured by some great men (and amongst them by the late Lord Primate [Michael Boyle] then Lord Chancellor also)... for undertaking what I have above related; for saying that there is an Act of Parliament for abolishing the Irish language, and I endeavoured to propagate it, for which I might be questioned in Parliament... But that discourse soon went off; and I went on with what I had begun.”

Marsh's interest in the Irish language thus begun led him to take an active part in the printing of the Old Testament in Irish. The prime mover in this matter was the Hon. Robert Boyle, the great experimental scientist, who employed as his instrument a good Irish scholar named Reily. Boyle had already, in 1681, reprinted the Irish New Testament of 1602, published by William O'Donnell or Daniel, then a Fellow of this College, and afterwards Archbishop of Tuam. For the Old Testament Boyle desired to use a translation in MS. made for Bishop Bedell, before 1641, by Murtaugh King and James Nangle. This MS. was now in the possession of the Bishop of Meath, Henry Jones; and he consented to let it be copied for the press, provided the book was produced in scholarly style. Bishop Jones then consulted Dr. Sall and Marsh; and in the event Sall procured a transcriber, one Denine; Marsh provided him a room in the College to work in; and Boyle defrayed almost the whole of the cost of the copying and publication. The Old Testament as printed is not merely a copy of Bedell's MS.; it is the result of a revision superintended by Marsh himself. The process may be given in his own words: - "When a quantity of sheets were transcribed, I got Dr. Sall,...Mr. Higgins, Mr. Mullan and... some other gentlemen well skilled in Irish to compare the transcript with the original copy... then to render the Irish into English, whilst I had the Polyglott Bible before me, to observe whether it came up to the original [Hebrew]; and where any doubt did arise... after a debate... and their agreement upon a more proper expression, 'twas written in the margin, and left to Mr. Boyle to advise with Mr. Reily thereupon. But I think very few alterations were made in the impression."

This Old Testament was printed in 1685. But the Canonical Books were ready for the press before Marsh finally left Trinity College, about Easter 1684; and so he was able to take away with him the portion of the MS., containing *Genesis - Canticles*, which is still one of the treasures of Marsh's Library. He left the volume of the Prophets and the Apocrypha in the care of Provost Huntington, his successor. The Apocrypha was also transcribed by Denine, "but never compared and examined"; and it was never printed, although Boyle paid for the transcription. This volume had an unfortunate fate. In the confusion that ensued during the war in Ireland between James II. and William III., Huntington lost both the original and the copy. After Huntington's death, the copy of the Apocrypha was found among his papers and restored to Marsh, in 1709. But Bedell's original of the Prophets and Apocrypha disappeared until it was discovered in 1857 by Henry Bradshaw in the Cambridge University Library, in a very decayed condition. (Prothero's *Memoir of Henry Bradshaw*, p. 20). It would seem that Huntington had it with him when he fled to England in 1689; though it could not be found when he died. In any case it came into the hands of John Moore, Bishop of Ely (1707-1714), and on his death went with the rest of his books to Cambridge.

On the 6th May, 1683, Marsh was consecrated Bishop of Leighlin and Ferns in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin. But he did not resign the Provostship until the arrival of his successor, Robert Huntington, in September; and he did not cease to reside in

College until Easter 1684. Before he left Dublin to reside in his diocese, Marsh took a prominent part in the foundation of a Society of the same nature as the Royal Society in London. "The Philosophical Meeting," as Marsh calls it, began, he says, in the winter of 1683-4. The founder of this *Conventio Philosophica* was William Molyneux, and the company which met weekly in "the Provost's lodgings" included St. George Ashe, afterwards Provost, Dr. John Madden, Sir William Petty, the director of the famous Down survey of Ireland, and William Kind, afterwards Archbishop of Dublin. "At the first meeting of it," Marsh tells us, "as a prelude to what we were to do, I, in 3 or 4 days time, composed an Introductory Discourse to the Doctrine of Sounds." This essay was printed in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, 1684; and is interesting from the fact that in it Marsh suggests the term *microphone*. This first Dublin Society was broken up by the troublous times that began in 1688. But it was renewed in April 1693, as Marsh notes in his diary.

The life of Narcissus Marsh as a bishop and archbishop of the Church of Ireland is full of interest of many kinds; but pressure of time precludes me from any detailed account of it. He was translated to the archiepiscopal See of Cashel in February 1690, became Archbishop of Dublin in May 1694, and Archbishop of Armagh in January 1703. He died November 2nd, 1713, in the 75th year of his age.

He began the building of Marsh's Library when Archbishop of Dublin, and completed the work as Primate. Apart from that achievement his doings, after he left Trinity College, do not attach themselves to anything that touches us to-day. The wordy epitaph on his monument in St. Patrick's Cathedral leaves cold those who have patience to read it. He was a good man; and "served his own generation by the counsel of God," and "served the counsel of God in his own generation." If Marsh had an ambition, it would have been that this could be said of him; and it can be said with truth and without qualification.