

Introductory Essay

In the centre of the town of Kidderminster there stands a Sicilian marble statue of Richard Baxter, the work of Sir Thomas Brock, R.A. It bears the following inscription:

RICHARD BAXTER
Between the years 1641 and 1660
This Town
was the scene of the labours
of
RICHARD BAXTER
renowned equally for
his Christian learning
and his pastoral fidelity.
In a stormy and divided age
he advocated unity and comprehension
pointing the way to
'The Everlasting Rest'
Churchmen and Nonconformists
united to raise this memorial
A.D. 1875

This statue is a symbol of the supreme purpose of Baxter's ministry. His mind was constantly filled with the thoughts of man's pilgrimage, the significance of which could only be understood in the light of its eternal destiny. Whether he is dealing death-blows at error and sin, or splitting hairs in casuistry, or preparing plans for church-union, or rebuking spiritual wickedness in high places, Baxter always stands as one who 'dwelt long on the side of eternity, and always ready to be absorbed in its bosom'. All his explanations and pleadings, all his repetitions, line upon line and precept upon precept, originate in this realization of eternity.

But this symbolism has further significance. It indicates the instinctive association between Baxter and his first – and possibly his greatest – book.¹ Just as the name of Bunyan immediately

1. Baxter's first published book was *Aphorisms of Justification* (1649), but the *Saints' Everlasting Rest* had been begun earlier (R.B., I.107). 'The second book which I wrote (and the first which X began) was that called *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*' (R.B., I.108).

suggests to men's minds *The Pilgrim's Progress*, so the name of Baxter calls up to the mind *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, even if it be allowed at once that the recognition of the former has been more widespread than that of the latter. Although a multitude of writings came from his prolific pen, it is by this book that, at least for most people, Baxter is remembered.

I

The first edition of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* came out in the early weeks of 1650, which means that it was issued in Baxter's thirty-fifth year. Indeed the greater part of it was written some four or five years earlier. It was therefore the work of a young man – a fact which is not generally realized. Not only is it the work of one young in years, but of one who was weary of life, and for this there was more than one reason. His own words describe the origin of the book:

Whilst I was in health I had not the least thought of writing books; or of serving God in any more public way than preaching; but when I was weakened with great bleeding, and left solitary in my chamber at Sir John Cook's, in Derbyshire, without any acquaintance but my servant about me, and was sentenced to death by the physicians, I began to contemplate more seriously on the Everlasting Rest which I apprehended myself to be just on the borders of. And that my thoughts might not too much scatter in my meditation, I began to write something on that subject, intending but the quantity of a sermon or two . . . but being continued in weakness, where I had no books nor better employment, I followed it on till it was enlarged to the bulk in which it is published.²

This account, written about 1644, some fifteen years after the time when he thought his end was near, agrees with that expressed in the general Dedication of the work, dated 15th January 1649.³

Being in my quarters far from home, cast into extreme languishing (by the sudden loss of about a gallon of blood, after many years of foregoing weakness), and having no acquaintance about me, nor any book but my Bible, and living in continual expectation of death, I bent my thoughts on my everlasting rest. And because my memory, through extreme weakness, was imperfect, I took my pen, and began to draw up my own funeral sermon; or some helps for my own meditation of Heaven, to sweeten both the rest of my life and my death.

Baxter's condition was accentuated by application of 'divers remedies', after the fashion of the time, as indicated in a further note, in which he states that he came to Sir John Cook's house

2. *R.B.*, I.108.

3. *Infra*, pp. 23–4.

in a cold and snowy season; and the cold, together with other things coincident, set my nose on bleeding. When I had bled about a quart or two, I opened four veins, but it did no good. I used divers other remedies for several days to little purpose; at last I gave myself a purge, which stopt it. This so much weakened me and altered my complexion that my acquaintances who came to visit me scarce knew me.⁴

It is little wonder that he regarded himself as near to death. It was in such physical weakness that he began *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*.

But there were other reasons for his weariness of life. The general background of the time was that of the Civil War during its most critical years. In 1641, 'brought by the gracious Providence of God' to begin his ministry at Kidderminster, Baxter had found that it 'yielded the greatest fruits of comfort' by its success,⁵ but the outbreak of war had interrupted his labours. Owing to 'the fury of the rabble' in the town, and on the advice of his friends, he withdrew and went to Gloucester, but returned after a month's absence. Shortly afterwards, threatened by still further violence he withdrew a second time, and did not return for six years. These years brought to him many harsh experiences, of which we must take some brief note.

On the first Sunday following his departure, whilst preaching at Alcester, he heard the cannon from the battle of Edgehill (23rd October 1642), and the next morning 'being willing to see the field where they had fought', he went to Edgehill and saw between the armies 'about a thousand dead bodies in the field', many others having already been buried, and the two spent armies still facing each other. Baxter became uncertain as to his own plans.

I knew not what course to take. To live at home I was uneasy; but especially now, when Soldiers on one side or other would be frequently among us, and we must still be at the Mercy of every furious Beast that would make a prey of us. I had neither Money nor Friends: I knew not who would receive me in any place of Safety; nor had I any thing to satisfie them for my Diet and Entertainment.⁶

Under persuasion he moved to Coventry, expecting that before long the war would end. For a month he stayed with Mr Simon King, the Puritan minister. The war still continuing, he removed to 'lodge in the Governor's house, and preach to the soldiers'. Only rumours of war reached the city, but the news was harrowing.

While I lived here in Peace and Liberty, as Men in a dry House do hear of Storms abroad, so did we daily hear of News of one Fight or other, or one Garrison or other won or lost; the two *Newbury* Fights, *Gloster Siege*, the

4. *R.B.*, I.58.5. *Ibid.* p. 20.6. *Ibid.* p. 43.

marvellous Sieges of *Plimouth, Lime* and *Taunton*, Sir William Waller's Successes and Losses; the Loss at *Newark*, the Slaughter at *Bolton*, the greatest Fight of all at *York*, with abundance more. So that hearing such sad News on one side or other was our daily Work; insomuch that as dully I awakened in the Morning I expected to hear one come and tell me, *such a Garrison is won or lost*, or *such a Defeat received or given*: And *do you hear the News* was commonly the first Word I heard. So miserable were those bloody Days, in which he was the most honourable that could kill most of his Enemies.⁷

In addition there was a personal anxiety. In Shropshire his father – 'though so far from meddling on either side' – had been imprisoned at Lilleshall, following plundering by the King's soldiers.⁸

The news of Naseby (15th June 1645) brought a great change for Baxter. Following a visit to Naseby field, he made a visit to the Parliamentary headquarters at Leicester, in part to discover news about certain old friends in the Army, but also with a deeper interest. He was greatly concerned about the religious condition of the Army, for there were disturbing reports that the soldiers of Cromwell's Army were under the stress of notions that were dangerous. It was not a matter of vices of conduct – for such could have little or no place in Cromwell's Army: the faults were regarding matters of opinion together with undue freedom of expression.

I found that many honest Men of weak judgements and little acquaintance with such Matters had been seduced into a disputing vein, and made it too much of their Religion to talk for this Opinion and for that; sometimes for State Democracy, and sometimes for Church Democracy; sometimes against Forms of Prayer, and sometimes against Infant Baptism. ... But their most frequent and vehement Disputes were for Liberty of Conscience, as they called it; that is, that the Civil Magistrate had nothing to do to determine of any thing in Matters of Religion, by constraint or restraint, but every Man might not only *hold*, but *preach* and *do* in Matters of Religion what he pleased.⁹

In this Baxter thought that he discerned a serious and threatening danger to law and order, alike in Church and State, and therefore, if the more extreme in the Army should gain control, there might be the opening of the door to revolutionary action.

This situation led Baxter to a new and serious commitment. The post of chaplain to the regiment of his friend, Colonel Whalley, was offered to him, and he accepted it, believing that ministers of the gospel had failed in their responsibility to the spiritual needs of the soldiers, and that he himself, through ignorance of the situation, had also failed in this duty. Perhaps even at so late a time he could do

7. *R.B.*, I.46.

8. *Ibid.* p. 44.

9. *Ibid.* p. 53.

something; but he was soon to meet disillusionment and frustration – and most surprisingly of all, at the beginning.

As soon as I came to the Army, *Oliver Cromwell* coldly bid me welcome, and never spake one word to me more while I was there; nor once all that time vouchsafed me an Opportunity to come to the Head Quarters where the Councils and Meetings of the Officers were, so that most of my design was thereby frustrated. And his Secretary gave out that there was a Reformer come to the Army to undeceive them, and to save Church and State.¹⁰

Thus he discovered some antagonism against himself, though he was welcomed by Colonel Whalley, 'who was the worse thought on for it by the rest'.

During the next two years Baxter saw much fighting,¹¹ and grew sad in mind and weak in body. His final breakdown in health brought the end of his labours in the Army, and in this conclusion he believed that he saw the Divine will that he should not proceed farther.

The Determination of God against it was most observable. ... I afterward found that this great Affliction was a Mercy to myself; for they were so strong and active, that I had been likely to have had small Success in the Attempt, but to have lost my Life among them in their Fury. And thus I was finally separated from the Army.¹²

It was under this sense of the failure of his labours that, weary and spent, Baxter came to the home of Sir John Cook at Melbourne in Derbyshire. Such were the conditions under which he wrote *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. To realize this is important because it is the key to much that is in its pages. 'Melancholy, born of a sick body and mind tinctures it more or less throughout, and particularly some of its most characteristic passages.'¹³

The following excerpt shows how profoundly the war had distressed Baxter.

O the sad and heart-piercing spectacles that mine eyes have seen in four years space! In this fight, a dear friend fall down by me; for another, a precious Christian brought home wounded or dead; scarce a' moneth, scarce a week without the sight or noise of blood. Surely, there is none of

10. Ibid. p. 52.

11. Baxter was present at the battle of Langport (10th July 1645); at the siege of Bridgwater (taken by storm, 23rd July); at the final assault of Bristol (nth September)—during which time he 'fell sick of a Fever,' which left him 'so emaciated and weak that it was long ere I recovered that little strength I had before'; at the siege of Exeter (surrendered 13th April 1646); at that of Oxford (surrendered 24th July 1646); at that of Banbury, for two months before its fall on 9th May 1646); and at that of Worcester for the greater part of the eleven weeks before its capture on 22nd June 1646.

12. *R.B.*, I.59.

13. Powicke, p. 8.

this in Heaven. Our eyes shall then be filled no more, nor our hearts pierced with such sights as at Worcester, Edg-hil, Newbury, Nantwich, Montgomery, Horn-Castle, York, Naseby, Langport &c. . . . Mine eyes shall never more behold the Earth covered with the carcases of the slain. . . . Look on England's four years blood, a flourishing Land almost made ruined; hear but the common voice in most Cities, Towns, and Countreys through the Land, and judge whether here be no cause of sorrow. Especially, look but to the sad effects; and men's spirits grown more out of order, when a most wonderful Reformation, by such wonderful means might have been well expected. And is this not cause of astonishing sorrows? . . . And the fears for the future that possessed our hearts, were worse than all that we saw or suffered. . . . To think of the Gospel departing, the Glory taken from Israel, our Sun setting at Noon-day, poor souls left willingly dark and destitute, and with great pains and hazard blowing out the Light that should guide them to salvation: What sad thoughts must these be?¹⁴

A further ground of Baxter's sadness was 'our sad Divisions and unchristianlike quarrels with one another'. Having in mind particularly the breach between England and Scotland, he had yearned for a union by which both should enjoy the blessings of the gospel in a united Church. To Baxter the invasion of Scotland was a tragedy; Cromwell's call to the nation to observe days of prayer and fasting for the success of his campaigns, and of thanksgiving for the success of victories like Dunbar, Baxter regarded as deplorable. So we find the following passage:

O what sweet Idolizing thoughts of our future state, had we in the time of Wars! What full content did I promise my soul! when I should enjoy Peace, and see the Gospel set up in power and plenty, and all the ordinances in purity, and true Discipline exercised in the Churches, and ignorance cured, and all persecution ceased, and the mouths of railers stopped, who kept men from Christ by filling the world with prejudice against him! And now where is the Rest that I promised my soul? even that is my greatest grief from which I expected most Content. Instead of Peace we have more blood-shed: and such as is confessed to be the blood of Saints: The two Nations that were bound in an Oath of Union, and where so great a part of the Interest of Christ on earth is contained (in regard of Purity of Doctrine and Worship) are dashing each other in pieces, and the souls of multitudes let out of their bodies, by those that look to rejoice with them for ever in Heaven.¹⁵

It is the same *crie du cœur* that we find in another passage:

14. S.E.R. (and edn), Pt I, ch. 7, § xv.

15. Ibid. II.9. In the seventh edition ('revised by the author') Baxter adds this marginal note: 'This was written upon the war in Scotland . . . and an Ordinance for the sequestering of all Ministers who would not go to God on their Errand, in Fasting and Prayer, or in Thanksgiving for their successes. And an order made to put out all ministers for all the Cities, Market Towns and Garrisons that subscribed not their Engagement.'

It makes me seriously, both to say, and to think, O sweet, O happy day of the Rest of the Saints in Glory! When, as there is one God, one Christ, one Spirit, so we shall have one judgement, one Heart, one Church, one Employment for ever! When there shall be no more Circumcision and Uncircumcision, Jew and Gentile, Anabaptist or Paedobaptist, Brownist, Separatist, Independent, Presbyterian, Episcopal; but Christ is All, and in All. We shall not there scruple our Communion, nor any of the Ordinances of Divine Worship.... Alas, that *Turks* and *Pagans* can agree in wickedness, better than Christians in the Truth! . . . But this rejoiceth me, That my old Friends who now look strangely at me, will joyfully triumph with me in our common Rest.¹⁶

Yet another source of Baxter's weariness – perhaps in some sense the deepest – was his own personal suffering from which he yearned for release.

Grief creeps in at our eyes, at our ears, and almost everywhere! . . . what part doth escape it? Fears do devour us, and darken our Delights, as the Frosts do nip the tender Buds: Cares do consume us, and feed upon our Spirits, as the scorching Sun doth wither the delicate Flowers. . . . Whatever it is to the sound and healthful, methinks to such as myself, this Rest should be acceptable, who in ten or twelve years time have scarce had a whole day free from some dolor. O the weary nights and days! O the unserviceable languishing weakness! O the restless working vapours! O the tedious nauseating medicines! besides the daily expectations of worse! and will it not be desirable to Rest from all these? . . . O what would we not give now for a little ease, much more for a perfect cure? how then should we value that perfect freedom? ... If we have some short and smiling intermissions, it is scarce time enough to breathe us in, and to prepare our tacklings for the next storm. If one wave pass by, another succeeds: And if the night be over, and the day come, yet will it soon be night again. . . . O the blessed tranquillity of that Region, where there is nothing but sweet continued Peace!¹⁷

Such passages as these are frequent in the pages of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, but these are sufficient to indicate the melancholy state of Baxter's mind, which was coloured by inward stress and tumult. If his mind had known serenity, although undoubtedly the main structure of the work would have been the same, its prevailing tone would have been different.

This mood of Baxter's spirit is important as explaining another feature of his work. Somewhat surprisingly the reading of the book does not afford that spirit of tranquillity which one might reasonably expect. This is not to say that there are no 'quiet reaches of restfulness'; but, under constant pressure of argument and appeal, the reader is carried on at a tremendous pace. One reason for this is the

16. Ibid. I.7.XW.

17. Ibid. xvi.

nature of Baxter's theological position, for 'he was neither a thoroughgoing Calvinist nor an avowed Arminian; he was however more of the latter than he knew.... His Calvinism was a theory which the logical part of him did not permit him to deny in so many words, but his conscience asserted the contrary with irresistible vehemence'.¹⁸ In a widespread antinomianism Baxter saw the danger of that conception of Divine grace which caused many to leave everything to God and thereby they were encouraged to sheer spiritual laziness. So he came to stress the human element in the process of salvation. Although this constituted a challenge to one of the fundamental assumptions of Puritan spirituality, namely that the spiritual life depends entirely upon the grace of God, yet Baxter was satisfied that diligent exercise in meditation was definitely a part of the spiritual preparation of the soul for eternity.¹⁹ Not for a moment denying the Divine grace, he so emphasizes the need for strenuous effort and constant toil that it seems to assume primary importance. The reader appears to gain the impression that salvation is finally a matter of spiritual discipline by human endeavour. More this impression is intensified by that constant reiteration which is a feature of most of Baxter's writings, and in this work in particular, arising as it did from a burning passion for the souls of men. 'He was intent on standing well with his own conscience for ever. In the same spirit he dealt with the dilemmas and scruples and fears of the conscientious: he was afraid of leaving anything unsaid which might affect their eternal welfare and perish their souls. Accordingly he pleads and explains and repeats until he feels himself clear of their blood and prepared to meet them at the last tribunal'.²⁰

There is one further point arising out of Baxter's theological conviction. He believed that Hell lies just beyond the borderland of death; and that every sinner, dying impenitently, is doomed to its fires everlastingly. This was emphasized by his Calvinism, but it sprang from what he believed was the unmistakable teaching of scripture – and he believed it utterly, though there is evidence that

18. Powicke, pp. 13, 17.

19. There is full discussion of this particular insight of Baxter in L. L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954) pp. 153–63. Note also Baxter's viewpoint in the following passage from 'The Introduction' to Part IV of the *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*: 'As the Papists have wronged the Merits of Christ, by their ascribing too much to our own Works; so it is almost incredible, how much they on the other extream [i.e. Protestants] have wronged the safety and consolation of mens Souls, by telling them, that their own endeavours are onely for Obedience and Gratitude, but are not so much as Conditions of their Salvation, or Means of their increased Sanctification or Consolation.'

20. Baxter's Practical Works (4 vols, London, 1847), p. xxiv.