

# JOHN WILSON OF WOOLWICH

## AN INTIMATE TRIBUTE BY J. C. CARLILE

Yes, I shall write this *in memoriam* sketch myself. It will be punctuated with sorrow but not with the sorrow that is devoid of hope and of honest pride in great achievement.

On Sunday it was my privilege to listen to Rev. H. H. Sutton; the service in the evening was particularly helpful and uplifting. Mr. Sutton is a man with a message and possesses the spirit in which the glad tidings should be told. We returned home after the service. The night was threatening; the sea a little noisy as though giving warning of trouble ahead. We listened to the news over the Radio. To our surprise and sorrow the announcer said "they recorded with profound regret the death of Dr. John Wilson of Woolwich, one of the great Nonconformists." I did not listen to what followed; I felt the touch of a vanished hand and heard the merry sound of a voice that is stilled, so far as this life is concerned.

It seemed only a few days ago my beloved friend said in his own humorous way, "What do you think about retiring? How does it feel?" I replied, "It's rather more work and much less pay." Laughingly he retorted, "I shall never retire, I have the thought of it." And then in more serious mood he added, "Carlile, if you go first, I shall preach the sermon; and if I go first, you will write my *in memoriam*." That is why the printers are waiting in London and I am dictating in Folkestone with a mist in my eyes and a lump in my throat, yet feeling some satisfaction that my tribute of words would not be unacceptable to the colleague and friend with whom I have worked for half a hundred years.

Wilson of Woolwich, as one of the public officials said, "put the religious life of the borough on the map." He did more: he put the religion of Jesus Christ wherever he went. What a man he was! Strong and sturdy in his build, a real product of Scotch porridge, he hardly knew what it was even to be tired. From the days in the little Forfarshire village of Craichie until quite recently, he stood the strain and the stress of a hard life, not only enduring hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, but loving hardness.

When Dr. Wilson received

### the freedom of Woolwich,

a distinguished and signal honour, it fell to my lot to make the presentation address. I ventured to say that he would be the first to attribute the greater part of his success to the loving care of his home, to the lady who is still "the Queen of hearts" in Woolwich and far beyond. He was very happy in his family. Dr. John Greenwood Wilson is the well-known Medical Officer of Health at Cardiff. His eldest brother was in charge of the American Express Company's establishment at Naples. There are three daughters doing good work in the service of the Kingdom.

The story of John Wilson of Woolwich is well told in a recent volume by my colleague, Marguerite Williams. It is a book of inspiration which should not be missed by preachers, for whom it has special value.

My earliest association with Wilson of Woolwich was

### during the Dock Strike.

Woolwich was greatly affected. The authorities feared that the workers in the Arsenal would come out in sympathy with the men at the docks. There was great distress. John Wilson—our Mr. Great-Heart—was kept very busy. Soon after I went at the top of the poll as Independent Labour candidate to the London School Board, to find there a little group of Nonconformists, Wilson among the number. We worked together

and scarcely disagreed upon any subject that came up in Committee.

Upon a memorable occasion the Hon. L. Stanley, the leader of the Progressive Party, was very angry with our action in response to a request from Frederick Harrison for the use of a school for a social evening and dancing. We turned the request down. Stanley was very angry and said across the table, "You miserable Nonconformists, to hell with you!" John Wilson answered with a chuckle, "You are our leader, Mr. Stanley, but we're not following you there."

### The Baptist denomination

owes a great debt to John Wilson. For more than sixty years he has been minister of one of the two or three largest congregations in London. Until recently men and women queued up in the early evening to get into the Tabernacle. Charles Booth, in "The Life and Labour of the People of London," refers with sympathy and appre-



DR. JOHN WILSON

ciation to the work at the Tabernacle. It was the second largest congregation—Spurgeon's came first and Woolwich followed.

### Spurgeon's College

is rightly proud of John Wilson. He belonged to the group that included Dr. McCaig and Tom Greenwood. What a trinity of diverse personalities and stalwart warriors for the truth! They were always together until the unhappy Down Grade Controversy and then Wilson and Greenwood stayed in the Union and McCaig went to the Home Counties, but their friendship, though strained, was not broken. I saw much of John Wilson at the end of the controversy, and I knew what a grief it was to him to differ in opinion, though not in affection, from the Gov'nor.

Churches all over the country turned to John Wilson for special missions and anniversary sermons. His great pulpit gifts of natural oratory and a keen sense of humour made him very attractive. He was always an evangelist, on the look-out for those who had gone astray.

I have ventured to describe him in the phrase applied to Mary Pickford: he was

### Everybody's Sweetheart.

I have known no man with a greater love for his fellows. During a long period of years I have been with him in elections of one sort and another, in controversy, in committee, and on the platform, and I cannot recall a single instance in which he said an unkind word or made an unfair criticism. In the old days we were often provoked to

anger, but John Wilson kept his sweetness of temper, the supreme hall-mark of a saint.

More than forty years ago I became minister of the Folkestone Baptist Church; he came to the recognition service, and for many years was an annual visitor. When the branch church at Cheriton was opened he was one of the earliest preachers, always acceptable. As the years passed he mel- lowed, and deeper notes of tenderness crept into his speech as he talked of the Home- land and of those loved "long since and lost awhile."

Will Crooks, M.P. for Woolwich, laughingly told me that John Wilson was the Member for Woolwich and he represented Wilson. A few days before his death I spent some time with Will Crooks; we were great friends. I shall never forget how the tears ran down John Wilson's cheeks as I told him of my last interview with the Labour leader, and how we prayed for him, and dear old Woolwich.

We shall never know to how many ministers John Wilson was father confessor. He did not seek a confidence; it was given to him as a natural right rather than a privilege. Many a lame dog has been helped over the stile by the sympathy and the pressure of the hand on the shoulder which was like a benediction. Quite a number of boys from Woolwich Tabernacle have gone into the ministry and to the mission field to preach the old Evangel which is always new.

The holy passion for social righteousness was part of his Gospel. He had no use for the sob-stuff sentimentality that ended in heart-breaking appeals. Wilson was a worker, he lived his religion; his life was his best sermon. He had

### a genius for making friends.

Lloyd George spoke of him as "my old friend." In Woolwich and far beyond men of all Churches and no Church turned to Wilson. He was with me in some of the darkest hours of my life, and in joyous sunshine, straight as a razor-blade and just as keen, but reliable, with a strength of character not often met with. Lord Baldwin has said: "Our Empire demands three great qualities: loyalty, sympathy, and understanding." These three qualities are supremely necessary in the ministry of Jesus Christ, and the one whom we remember possessed them all.

Others will tell of his services; I write as a friend. I do not pretend to be unbiassed; I loved the man. Whatever weaknesses he had, they did not show on my horizon. I saw his work and could judge somewhat of its value. I knew how strenuously he worked in his study and the ministry; how ready he was to speak well of those who were not succeeding, and to lend a helping hand.

Life is the richer for friendship. Charles Kingsley attributed whatever success had come to him to the fact that he had a friend, and John Wilson would have been the first to bring his laurels to the feet of his Lord. How wonderfully he talked about the Master! He realised the presence of Jesus in a way that was sometimes startling. Matthew Arnold once protested against the people who spoke of God as they would speak of the neighbour in the next garden. John Wilson's Lord was not so far away as the next garden, and now he is nearer.

We shall miss him at the Church House. The Council Chamber, though thronged with good men and true, will be a little empty. Shakespeare, Clifford, Blomfield and Wilson and a host of others will come like Ibsen's ghosts. May their spirit ever abide in our denomination to enrich the universal Church to which all great souls belong!