



Martin Tupper

by Margaret Prentice

Many people will have read about Martin Tupper being the inspiration behind the celebrations in Wantage in 1849 to commemorate the millennium of Alfred's birth. But who was this 'Victorian do-gooder' as Miss Gibbons calls him in her book 'Wantage Past and Present'?

Martin Tupper was born in 1810 the son of a doctor with a prosperous practice in the West End of London. He was educated at Christ Church, Oxford, and it was there he began his life-long friendship with the future PM, W E Gladstone. Their correspondence and the twenty-five scrapbooks which Tupper compiled formed the basis of Derek Hudson's book 'MARTIN TUPPER His Rise and Fall', published in 1949, to which I am indebted.

At Oxford Tupper was already an ardent Evangelical and hoped to make a career in the Church. But he suffered from a stammer which remained with him until he was about 35 when he cured it, according to his own notes, by constant prayer. Dr Tupper hoped his son would make a career in law, but after several years spent in chambers this idea was also abandoned. Already married and with the first of a large family to provide for, Tupper lived in a small house in London largely dependent on the generosity of his father.

It was then that he turned to writing to make his living. Tupper had for years been versifying and setting down his pious thoughts on paper. He now collected together his essays including those on love and matrimony which he had written for his wife and published them in 1838 in a well-printed volume entitled 'Proverbial Philosophy. A Book of Thoughts & Arguments, originally treated, by Martin Farquhar Tupper Esq. M.A.' The book was, on the whole, well received as Tupper seemed to epitomise the moral and evangelical spirit of the mid-nineteenth century. This gave him the confidence to continue writing. Now he began to inundate the newspapers and periodicals with his verse and prose contributions on topics of national interest particularly his admiration for the young Queen Victoria, whose coronation he had attended.

Martin Tupper quickly produced a second series of essays on ethics, conduct and emotion - from ridicule to flattery. When the two series were bound together into one volume, Tupper's book became a best seller. 'Proverbial Philosophy' sold over 5,000 copies during each of the next 25 years in England and became the "stock" present for weddings or birthdays. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were both great admirers of 'Proverbial Philosophy' and their children were familiar with it.

Translations of Tupper's book were made into many languages and in the USA the book was even more of a sensational success. In 1851 Tupper made his first visit to America and was feted wherever went. The highlight of his tour was dinner with the President, Millard Fillmore.

Tupper also wrote a thriller ‘The Crock of Gold’, an historical novel ‘Stephen Langton’, a few plays and many long poems, some of which were set to music. ‘Never Give Up’ is said to have cheered many a soldier in the Crimea –

“Never give up! it is wiser and better
Always to hope than once to despair.”

One of his hymns was published two days before the Chartist demonstrations of 1848 and was entitled ‘God Preserve the Queen’ –

“How glorious is the calling
My happy Fatherland,
While all the thrones are falling
In righteousness to stand!”

The English public was now learning to expect a contribution from Tupper on patriotic occasions. They were not disappointed in 1849 when he turned his attention to a new literary magazine, the ‘Anglo-Saxon’, and to the millennium of King Alfred’s birth. Throughout the summer of 1849, Tupper campaigned for a national celebration. Circulars appealing for general and financial support were received by the English nobility and leading politicians. But few replied! Despite this, a small committee was formed in the Wantage area. Its most enthusiastic member was Dr J A Giles of Bampton, who had just completed a life of Alfred, and through his perseverance Charles Eyston of Hendred House, Philip Pusey the local MP and other local gentry became involved.

The day chosen was Thursday October 25th. The streets of Wantage were decorated with flowers, flags and banners as Tupper had urged in a printed leaflet which had been distributed among the townsfolk. Local bands played and the people sang Tupper’s jubilee song as they walked in procession:

“Today is the day of a thousand years!
Bless it, O brothers, with heart-thrilling cheers!
Alfred for ever! - to-day was he born,
Day-star of England to herald her morn ”

At eleven o’clock, divine service was conducted in the parish church by the Rev. William Butler. Afterwards, at the Town Hall, there were speeches extolling the virtues of Alfred and Ellis Roberts played several airs on his ‘Ancient Welsh Harp’. A procession then set off for the legendary King Alfred’s Well where similar lengthy speeches were delivered.

The townsfolk of Wantage then enjoyed all the fun of the fair and free food from the ox-roast, while a hundred honoured guests dined at the Alfred’s Head Inn. Martin Tupper recited a poem and proposed a toast to “the Anglo-Saxon Race all over the World”. This was a special achievement for Tupper because it was the first time he had spoken in public and it marked the end of his stammer.

But this celebration in Wantage was also a disappointment for Tupper who had hoped for a national celebration attended by the Queen. His aspirations suffered a further setback in 1850 when, on the death of William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson and not Martin Tupper was appointed Poet Laureate.

Undeterred, Tupper continued his literary outpourings. It is thought that in the 1840s he had an annual income from his writings of £1,500 to £2,000, sufficient to allow him and

his large family to live in some comfort in Albury House, near Brighton. His income was less than his published works might suggest, because the copyright laws were not as they are today. Poems were published in journals or in leaflet form and circulated through newspapers. They were then copied by anyone without any payment to the poet.

Tupper had many other interests ranging from amateur archaeology, coin collecting, inventions and the Volunteer Movement. In 1838 he was one of the people given grains of “mummy wheat” which had been found in a newly discovered Egyptian tomb. One of these twelve seeds germinated and as the years passed a considerable crop was produced and the seeds were marketed throughout Britain. Of course, the results of this experiment were published in ‘The Times’, a report was read by Michael Faraday to the Royal Institution and Prince Albert was sent samples.

From the mid 1850s Tupper’s fortunes, both literary and financial, began to decline. As Victorian attitudes changed, his poetic works were much criticised both in literary circles and in the Press. In 1868, Tupper approached Gladstone about the possibility of a pension. But it was not until 1873 that he was granted an annual Civil List pension of £120. This provided the Press with another cause for public criticism. But by then Tupper was in considerable financial difficulties. Albury House was leased and later mortgaged, while the Tupper family lived in a series of smaller, rented houses.

To the end of his life, he continued his prolific outpourings of patriotic verse. Two poems appeared for the 1887 Jubilee. His last appearance at Court had taken place two years previously when he must have attracted considerable attention. Tupper was a short man and had by then a mass of white hair and a long white beard. He appeared wearing the Court suit of Queen Anne, with flowered waistcoat and buckled shoes.

Tupper died in November 1889. Few of his verses are remembered today and perhaps only those on Victorian tombstones are ever read! Of the thousands of special jubilee medals, which he had minted and distributed during the 1849 celebrations in Wantage, none have survived as far as we know!

Martin Tupper is indeed a forgotten man!

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