

Extract from Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of the Rev. Samuel Parr, LL.D. By William Field

HENRY HOMER was born in 1751, and was the eldest of seventeen children. His father, the Rev. Henry Homer, was rector of Willoughby, in Warwickshire. He was sent at the age of seven to Rugby School ; and became, at the end of seven years, the head boy of sixty. The celebrity of that school, then under the care of the Rev. Mr. Burrows, was not so great, nor the plan of education pursued in it so elegant and comprehensive, as we have seen them, under the auspices of the very learned Dr. James. Yet Mr. Burrows possessed, as I am told, very sound understanding, and a very respectable share of erudition: the progress which Mr. Homer made under him was such as to do credit to the abilities of the teacher, and the diligence of the scholar. From Rugby, Mr. Homer was removed to Birmingham School, where he remained three years more, under the care of the Rev. Mr. Brailsford, of whose talents, as an instructor, I cannot speak with precision. But of Mr. Price, his successor, I am warranted in saying that he is a man of very refined taste, and of learning more than common. As Mr. Homer had been the head boy of Rugby School, and as he continued three years at Birmingham, we may presume that he was, for that time, employed in reading some of the best classical authors.

" In November 1768, Mr. Homer was admitted of Emanuel College, Cambridge, under Dr. Farmer ; and, in that college, I saw him, at a very early period of his academical life. The pleasantry and good sense diffused through his conversation, and perhaps the singularity of his name, attracted my attention; and produced an acquaintance, which soon grew into friendship. I will hazard the imputation of arrogance for saying that new incitements were given to his industry, and new prospects opened to his curiosity, by my well-meant advice. Mr. Homer proceeded regularly to his Bachelor's degree in 1773, to his Master's in 1776, to his Bachelor's in Divinity in 1783. He had lived in Warwickshire, about three years before he became a fellow; and returned to the university soon after his election. He then resided much at Cambridge; where his mind was neither dissipated by pleasure, nor relaxed by idleness. He frequently visited the public library; and was well acquainted with the history, or contents, of many curious books, which are noticed only by scholars. Of the Greek language, he was by no means ignorant; though he did not profess to be critically skilled in it. He had read many of the Latin classical authors. About orthography he was very exact. He was not a stranger to many niceties, in the structure of the Latin tongue. He had turned his attention to several philological books of great utility and high reputation. He was well versed in the notes, subjoined to some of the best editions of various authors; and of his general erudition, the reader will form no unfavourable opinion, by looking at a catalogue of the works, in which he was engaged." —" Mr. Homer knew how to adapt docility and firmness to different occasions. His friends he never teased, by impotent cavils and futile inquiries. He never attempted to show off his own powers, in that frivolous jargon, or that oracular solemnity, which I have now and then observed in persons, who prated yesterday, as they prate today, and will prate to-morrow, about subjects, which they do not understand. Such is my opinion of Mr. Henry Homer. He, to my knowledge, had fed on the dainties that are bred in a book. He had eaten paper, as it were, and drunk ink. His intellect was replenished.

" As the merits of Mr. Homer stand at this moment in full view before my mind, I will turn my attention towards some points in Mr. Homer's conduct which have ever fixed him in my esteem ; and which, in the judgment of all good men, will do honour to his independence and integrity.

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" Mr. Homer, in consequence of some religious scruples, refused to take priest's orders ; when, by the statutes of the founder he was required to take them, in order to preserve the rank he had attained in college. From a senior fellow he became a junior; and after various negotiations his fellowship was declared vacant, on the 20th June, 1788. The first intelligence I had of this affair, was sent me by a common friend; and, sure I am, no man living could have been more surprised and afflicted than I was, upon receiving it. I wrote to Mr. Homer several letters of sympathy and counsel. I asked about the unknown cause—I deprecated the probable consequence, but to no purpose—for his answers were short and sharp; evidently intended to check inquiry and to avert expostulation. When I afterwards saw him in London, I twice resumed the subject; and spoke with that mixture of delicacy and earnestness, which was adapted to the difficulties of his situation, and the exquisiteness of his feelings. Twice he repelled and silenced me, by declaring that his conduct was the result of long and serious deliberation; that his mind was made up to all possible inconveniences ; and that the interposition of his friends would answer no other purpose, but that of irritation.

" Knowing that enlightened and amiable men are sometimes hurried into rigorous proceedings by their political zeal; *I* for a long—yes—a very long time—had painful doubts, whether Mr. Homer had been perfectly well used. But after strict and repeated inquiry, I was convinced, thoroughly convinced, that my friend had met with fair, and, from some quarters, most indulgent treatment; and that, in a case so very notorious, the statutes left no power of mitigation whatever, in the hands either of the fellows or the master. Mr. Homer persisted in obeying the dictates of his conscience ; and the members of the college were compelled to act under the direction of their statutes, and by the force of their oaths.

" Though I collected from the general conversation of Mr. Homer that he was not adverse to a partial and temperate reform of the Church of England ; yet, in no one moment of the most private and confidential intercourse, did he open to me his doubts, upon any particular subject of doctrine. When I was talking to him about the events, which had recently passed in college, he, for the first time, told me, that, many years before, he stood aloof from some preferment, which, in all probability, was within his reach ; and that he had taken an unalterable resolution of not accepting any living, either from private patrons, or from any academical society. The reasons, upon which that resolution was founded, he did not reveal to me : nor did I think myself authorised to investigate them. But I ever have honoured, and ever shall honour, so much moderation, mixed with so much firmness. He never indulged himself in pouring forth vague and trite declamation, against the real or supposed errors of churchmen. He never let loose contemptuous and bitter reproaches against those, who might differ from him, upon speculative. and controversial topics of theology. He remained a quiet, and, I doubt not, a sincere conformist within the pale of the establishment, after renouncing all share of its profits, and all chance of its honours. On this rare and happy union of integrity and delicacy, panegyric were useless. They who read of his conduct will approve of it; and, among those who approve, some wise and virtuous men may be found, whom his example may encourage to imitate. In praising Mr. Homer, I mean not to censure some enlightened and worthy contemporaries, who, from motives equally pure, may not have pursued the same measures. The propriety of continuing in the church, as he continued, will depend upon personal circumstances, which will be different, with different men, and upon

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general principles, about which the best scholars and the best Christians of this age are not wholly agreed.

" From the quickness of Mr. Homer's temper, and perhaps of my own, we now and then wrangled, in our conversation, and in our letters. But the effects of these little altercations were temporary: and I feel the very highest and purest satisfaction in being able to affirm that, from the commencement of my acquaintance with him, to the very latest hour of his life, we never had one serious dispute—one difference which sent us, with throbbing bosoms, to a restless pillow, for one night; or darkened our countenances with one frown, upon the succeeding day. Many and great were his exertions, in compliance with my requests, and for the management of my concerns. Many, too, are the thanks, which I returned to him; and many the services, which I endeavoured to render him.

" Mr. Homer, in his last illness, which took place early in 1791, had been for three or four weeks with his father in Warwickshire, before I knew that he was ill. But the very day after the evening, in which the intelligence reached me, I sent a special messenger, with a letter full of anxious and affectionate inquiry; and I received an answer, which I clasped to my bosom; and which I, at this moment, keep deposited among the most precious records of friendship. In a day or two, I hastened in person to his father's house. With anguish of soul, I found my friend pale, emaciated, and sunk beyond the power of recovery. I talked to him with all the tenderness, which the sight of such a friend, in such a situation, could have excited in the most virtuous breast. I came away with a drooping head, and with spirits quite darkened by the gloom of despair. Again I hastened to see him, if the lamp of life should not be wholly gone out; and again I did see him, on the evening before his eyes were closed in death. With tears, not easily stifled, and with an aching heart, I accompanied his sad remains to the grave; and, in many a pensive mood, have I since reflected on the melancholy scene. Many a look of fondness have I cast upon his countenance, which meets me, in an excellent engraving, as I enter my study, each revolving day. Many an earnest wish have I formed, that my own last end may be like his—a season of calm resignation, of humble hope, and of devotion ; at once rational, fervent, and sincere."

Mr. Homer died of a rapid decline, May 4, 1791, in the fortieth year of his age.¹

¹ Answer to Combe's Statement.