



## GILBERT DOBLE AND HIS PAMPHLET "ST PETROC, ABBOT AND CONFESSOR"

Gilbert Doble did not have a clear mind. He was fully capable of deep erudition, combined with a child-like inability to imagine what others might think about it.

He held office in Cornwall as an Anglican parish clergyman in the first half of the twentieth century, and was vicar of Wendron for almost twenty years until his death in 1945. His knowledge of Cornish history, folksong and hagiography was enough to gain him membership of the Cornish college of bards, the Gorseth.

In his time Cornwall was almost entirely Methodist. Dislike of "the church" was widespread. Even in 1979 my own grandmother shared this feeling, and had no time for its *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. There was good reason for this dislike. The Anglican church was not the church of the people of Cornwall, who preferred "the chapel". Worse, within living memory, there were cases of evangelical clergymen being harassed out of their parishes. Similarly arrogant behaviour in Wales led to the disestablishment of the church in Wales in 1906, and feeling in Cornwall was not less.

In such a world, in 1927 Rev Gilbert Doble solemnly proposed the "recatholicisation of Cornwall". He was foolish enough to do this at a time when he was promised the incumbency of a Cornish parish; which offer was promptly withdrawn, presumably on the basis that the man was clearly an idiot. And so he was. Down the centuries Oxford has produced many a learned fool. Indeed I recognise something of myself in this combination.

Evidence of this failure is to be found in his pamphlet, "Saint Petroc, Abbot and Confessor", which I have been browsing in the last couple of days.

The paper seems to have been first published as a standalone item in 1928, with a second edition in 1930, and a third in 1939, I think. The final version was reprinted in the combined *The Saints of Cornwall*, part 4, (ed. D. Attwater, 1960-70), and in the Llanerch Press edition (1998) it appears on pp.132-163.

On the first page he states without footnote that:

The present writer in 1928 printed a translation of the *Vita Petroci* formerly kept at the Breton abbey of Saint-Méen.

Note how little information this conveys to the reader. There is no indication of the title of the publication, or where it might have appeared. Nor does he tell us any useful information about the manuscript. Cunningly he tells us only that it was at one time at Saint-Méen, a statement utterly useless for locating it. If you want to follow this up, you are stumped.

He then wanders off into discussion of an epitome by John of Tynmouth, then into a Paris manuscript (BNF lat. 9989, fol. 142) containing a text from which John seems to have made his epitome. After more verbiage he says that he will give a translation of this below.

Then he starts to talk about another *Life* of St Petroc, in a Gotha manuscript, and in passing

says that he will now refer to the Saint-Méen *Life* as “the First Life”. Then off he goes into another unrelated subject, the medieval theft of the relics of St Petroc. After almost five pages of rambling, he starts to talk about the defects of “the manuscript in the National Library in Paris” – no shelfmark – and finally presents a translation of it.

As a parting gift to the baffled reader, he indicates the folio number at which the text starts in his translation – in Roman numerals! Not all of us will realise without a moment of concentration that “cxlii” = “142”. But this means that this is a translation of Paris BNF lat. 9989.

I suspect that some of those reading this will find this confusing, even in summary.

The text simply rambles. Worse yet Doble seems to avoid using the same description twice for the same item.

The facts are actually simple. He could have said this (Imagine some references where I put [\*\*\*]):

This paper contains an English translation of the medieval Latin *Life* of St Petroc, preserved in Paris BNF lat. 9989, folios 142-*nnn*, once the property of the Breton abbey of Saint-Méen. This translation was first printed by me in 1928 and in a revised form in 1930.[\*\*\*] In 1937 a manuscript containing a different version of the *Life* was discovered at Gotha[\*\*\*] which clarified certain points in the damaged Paris manuscript. What follows is a revised translation to take account of this, together with a translation of certain passages from the Gotha manuscript.

That’s short, simple, and to the point. It should appear at the start of the first page. Once you know that, you can cope with his diffuse digressions.

Was it worth writing about all this? I feel that it was.

It is a reminder to us all. When we write, we write to be heard. We write to convey information. This paper fails to do so. It alludes. It hints. It requires several readings to get the key points. It is a burden to the reader.

If the reader has to strain to work out what we mean, then we have failed. We all have much to read. We do not need to spend time sifting and rereading, just to work out what the author has to say.

Sadly a failure of this kind is very common in writers of textbooks. I still shudder at the memory of some of the chemistry textbooks – all long since sold – with which I suffered at university.

Poor Gilbert Doble. So much learning, vitiated by a failure to sit back and think what a reader new to the subject will make of his words.

Maybe he should have been a blogger!

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