"THE RIGHT BOOK AT THE RIGHT TIME"

(A paper read by Dennis Kennedy to the Belfast Literary Society, 7th October, 2019.)

In 1990 the Belfast publisher Blackstaff brought out a book with an odd title by an unpublished author who must have been unknown to most people in his native Northern Ireland. There was, it seems, no public launch and while local newspapers, with some exceptions, gave it a review the book was hardly the talk of the town and Blackstaff were disappointed.

I have managed to trace reviews in *the Newsletter*, the *Sunday News*, the *Down Recorder*, the *Down Spectator*, the *Newtownards Spectator*, and belatedly in May 1991, in *Fortnight.* I have been unable to find any review of it in the *Belfast Telegraph* or in the *Irish News. The Linenhall Review* mentioned it in its Books Received column but did not review it, neither did the *Honest Ulsterman*.

Elsewhere it fared better – in Dublin the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent,* and the *Sunday Press* all carried prominent and generally favourable notices, as did *Scotland on Sunday,* the London-based *Irish Post* and New York's *Irish Echo.*

Better, much better was to come; in May the *London Review of Books* carried a two thousand words ecstatic review by the writer and poet Patricia Beer, and in June the *Times Literary Supplement* a highly complimentary notice by Pat Raine (alias Patricia Craig). A year later *The Irish Review* carried a short but perceptive and laudatory review by Dr.Eamon Hughes, of the English department at Queen's. Patricia Craig found room for a twelve-page excerpt from it in her 1992 book *The Rattle of the North, An Anthology of Ulster Prose,* but there is no mention of it in her subsequent volumes – *The Belfast Anthology* (1999) and *The Ulster Anthology* (2006). In 1992 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland awarded the author a Beck Bursary of £500 in recognition of his book.

The author may have taken this pattern of welcome for his book as confirmation of the Scriptural truth that 'a prophet is not without honour save in his own country'. He would no doubt have been able to add Matthew 13; 57 as the source of the quotation, just as he could have referred those curious about the title of the book to Second Samuel Chapter One.

The author was Max Wright, and the book was *Told in Gath.*

Who was Max Wright ? He was a member of this Society, and a close friend of mine and of others here. He died suddenly in July last year (2018). His body was donated for medical research and at his own instructions there was no funeral, no death notice in the papers, no obituary, and no commemoration event.

Born in County Down in 1932, Max was the only child of parents who were devout members of the Plymouth Brethren. He was reared in Bangor, very much within the world of the local Brethren assembly. The family, and Max's life, were blown apart on the night of 15/16 April 1941, when their home in Bangor was hit by a bomb dropped from a Luftwaffe plane. Max's father was fatally injured, dying a day or two later, his mother was severely injured, losing one leg, and never fully recovering, though she lived for another two decades. Nine-year old Max was blown off his feet, but not seriously injured.

Effectively deprived of both parents, Max was farmed out to relatives, also Brethren, and eventually sent as a boarder to Cabin Hill school in Belfast. From Cabin Hill he moved on to Campbell College, then to Queen's where he enrolled for a degree in English. He abandoned that after a year and moved to London in what was evidently an escape from Belfast and also from his widowed and crippled mother with whom he had been living in an increasingly difficult relationship.

A year or so later he was back in Belfast in need of a job and also of some qualification that might help him find one. He decided to train as a speech therapist in Edinburgh and on completing his training there he returned to Belfast and a post with the County Antrim Education Board.

Then he gave Queen's a second chance, enrolling this time for Psychology and Philosophy, graduating in 1960 and following it up with an MA. Meanwhile he had married a wife, Valerie, who also happened to be a speech therapist. They had met, not in Edinburgh, but on the Glasgow boat taking them both home from Scotland to Northern Ireland.

Soon with three young daughters they were on another boat, this this time taking them to Australia and a post for Max in the National University of Australia in Canberra. While teaching Philosophy there he gained a PhD, armed with which he moved to another teaching post in Edmonton in Canada, before ending back in Belfast, lecturing in Philosophy at Queen's at the end of the 1960s, just as the Troubles were warming up.

He taught in the Philosophy school in Queens until his retirement about 1998. During his long academic career he seems not to have troubled the publishers overmuch. I have found a couple of articles in academic journals but little else. *Told in Gath,* it appears, was both his first and his last book.

In awarding him the Bursary in 1992 the Arts Council said it was 'for his novel *Told in Gath*", describing it as a "powerful and witty account of his early experiences as a Plymouth Brethren". The publishers registered it with the British Library Publication Data, categorising it under 'Biographies'. I am told that Max himself was heard to describe it as a novel. The reviewers generally plumped for the label 'memoir'.

In one respect the book can be seen as fiction. It is presented to us as the work of a man who has recently died in his 50s, leaving behind a collection of papers making up the text of the book. This is explained in an introduction by a contemporary of the author, a sonorously named leading member of the Brethren, Dr Fred Stanley Arnott Stevenson MA, BCh, BAO. He it was who had been left the text of the book and who had overseen its publication, inserting one or two helpful footnotes over his own initials.

This is fiction insofar as Max Wright was not dead, and Dr Fred had never existed. The nine-page introduction is Max's obituary written by Max roughly thirty years before his actual death, and sets the both the tone and the agenda for the book which is very much more than an account of his early experiences as a Plymouth Brethren, as the Arts Council put it.

Before we look more closely at the book, a few comments on the Brethren. Most people would regard it as just one of the numerous evangelical Protestant denominations found here and across the United Kingdom and elsewhere, with predominantly working-class congregations meeting in back street Gospel Halls, preaching hell-fire and damnation and practising a stern, disciplined and isolated form of Christianity. They differ from other denominations in that they would deny being a denomination, having no overall church organisation – no bishops, no synods no general assemblies and no clergy.

That puts it mildly. *Told in Gath* uses the terminology of the archery target to convey the Brethren conviction that they were right and everyone else was to varying degrees wrong.

"The Brethren in their un-pastored, unornamented assemblies were the only group to score a bull's eye with respect to God's purposes for mankind….the Baptists scored an inner (because they appreciated the scriptural truth of baptism by immersion), the Methodists a magpie for John Wesley's sake, Presbyterians and evangelical Episcopalians an outer. Satanically inspired deviants like Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints were not on the board at all….Roman Catholics *en masse* were excluded."

The Brethren do not call themselves Plymouth Brethren; that is a name applied to them by others. They are just Brethren, or as they put it, Brethren in Christ. When they first emerged as a distinct movement in the early 19th century they were called the Wicklow Brethren because they were concentrated among the Protestants of county Wicklow and South Dublin,

among the Church of Ireland parishes of that region. But they had far from working class origins – the driving forces at that time were the titled gentry, such as the Powerscourts, wealthy families including the Guinnesses and Latouches, and numbers of Church of Ireland curates and rectors, often themselves sons of the aristocracy or of the very rich.

The events that established the movement as a coherent grouping were a series of week-long annual residential meetings held in one of the grandest mansions in Ireland, Powerscourt House near Enniskerry in north Wicklow, at the invitation of the dowager Lady Powerscourt. Between 1831 and 1836 there were six such gatherings, the first three in Powerscourt, two in the Powerscourt Dublin residence in Ely Place and the final one in a hotel in Sandymount.

The attendance at the first week we know included 35 clergymen, 15 laymen and 20 women, all accommodated in the house. Locals, presumably C of I parishioners, were invited to attend on a daily basis. A programme of topics to be discussed each day was set out.

One man who emerged as a leading figure at these meetings was the Rev John Nelson Darby, then a Church of Ireland clergyman active in Wicklow. He was to become a powerful even dominant force in the Brethren not just in Wicklow, but in the movement worldwide, soon dubbed the Plymouth Brethren after the Devon city which became its strongest base in England. Darby travelled widely in England and in Continental Europe and In North America.

If you want to know more about all this I recommend Professor Don Akenson's three volume trilogy on the world-wide influence of the Brethren on evangelical Protestantism, particularly in America, right down to the age of Billy Graham and Donald Trump.

Told in Gath begins, before Dr Fred Stevenson's introduction, with the Old Testament verse which inspired the title – *Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice.* The first line of the verse is probably more familiar to most people. It is *How are the mighty fallen a*nd is the beginning of King Solomon's lament for the deaths of Saul and Jonathon.

I don't think we need to speculate on who the mighty might be in the context of the book. The title makes it clear that the author has no intention of being bound by scriptural injunctions; instead he is going to spill the beans. Publish and be dammed.

Next, still before Dr Fred gets going, Max calls on the young 17th century poet clergyman, George Herbert, to give us further indication of what we are to expect.

Lord with what care hast thou begirt us round!
Parents first season us; then schoolmasters
Deliver us to laws; they send us bound,
To rules of reason, holy messengers,
Pulpits and sundayes, sorrow dogging sinne,
Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in.
Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,
Blessings beforehand, tyes of gratefulnesse,
The sound of glory ringing in our eares;
Without, our shame; within our consciences;
Angels and grace, eternal hopes and fears
Yet all these fences and their whole array
One cunning bosom-sinne blows quite away.

The title to the poem, not given here, is simply "Sin", and it neatly tells us that that all the teaching and preaching, the laws and afflictions, the promise of glory, even our consciences are all blithely blown away by one delightful sin.

Dr Fred then gives an accurate account of Max's early days, the bomb, Cabin Hill and Campbell College. It will be clear to the reader, he sorrowfully writes, that the author had begun

to stray from 'the old paths' (Jeremiah 6:16). (Throughout Max uses this simple device of adding the Bible reference for each quotation to draw our attention to the Brethren's literal reading of the Bible – King James version of course - and their belief in it as the unquestioned authority on all things in life and thereafter.)

Young Max's pilgrim's regress is clearly charted by Dr.Fred. It consists of 'godless companions' at school, addiction to the cinema and, particularly, to 'old books' such as those by Dickens and Shakespeare, and much worse, by the likes of T.S.Eliot, D.H.Lawrence and James Joyce. He later adds Christopher Isherwood and W.H.Auden as having an insidious influence on the author. He tells us that Max had left him a selection of books with the hope that he, Fred, might with profit read them. Among them were Sir Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* and Mark Rutherford's *Autobiography.*

Dr Fred had found tucked away in the pages of the Rutherford book some verses evidently written by Max. He quotes one poem for our benefit. It is entitled *Anthanatology*, and according to Fred 'makes sad reading'. Thanatology is the scientific or academic study of death. This is presumably an anthology of death; here it is:

Anthanatology

Nothing will come of nothing. Think again
On Fleming's trek or Isherwood's ascent,
Where shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And our delight is had without content.

From morn to dew, a summer's day,
Indifferent to a beautiful physique,
I see with hollow and wrinkled brow,
Unresting death a whole day nearer now,
The sick man's passport in his hollow beak.
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

As killing as the canker to the rose,
An air that kills from yon far country blown,
And I have that within which passeth show
By storied urn or animated bust.
My words fly up, my thoughts remain below,
Where of I cannot speak, thereof I must.

The curfew tolls: westward the hot sun lowers,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Which by and by black night will take away.
Then comes still evening on and twilight grey,
Shades of the prison house begin to close.
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds.
The winds that will be howling at all hours.

To lie in cold obstruction and to rot
In absence, darkness, death, things which are not.

So do my minutes hasten to their end,
While millions of strange shadows on me tend,
Whereby the horn of plenty is undone.
I saw eternity the other night,
A chamber deaf to noise and blind to light,
And thought of London, spread out in the sun.

Dr Fred is well enough read to identify the line *'Unresting death a whole day nearer now*' as being from Philip Larkin's *Aubade,* and has no trouble attributing '*The curfew tolls*' to Thomas Gray. In fact the 32 line poem is made up of quotations from at least 18 writers, from Shakespeare and Milton to Wittgenstein, Yeats and Larkin. I can identify them all, thanks I must confess, to a key I found by accident tucked into a copy of *Told in Gath* I had plucked from Max's bookshelves to browse through a couple of years ago.

A last word from Fred. He concludes by quoting from the introduction written to Mark Rutherford's *Autobiography* by Rutherford's friend Reuben Shapcott. It warns of the danger and folly of cultivating thoughts and reading books to which you are not equal. The joke is that Reuben Shapcott is no more real than Dr Fred A.S.Stevenson, even less so as Mark Rutherford never existed either, being the invention of Hale White, who wrote several successful novels under the name Mark Rutherford, and who also produced the *Autobiography of Mark Rutherford,* by, of course, Mark Rutherford, alias Hale White.

Thus the careful reader is made aware that this is no straightforward memoir by a deserter primarily concerned with berating the Brethren, but an extended essay by someone fascinated by language, the use and abuse of words and above all by the great storehouse of knowledge available to us in literature; in books of course, but Max extends literature to include its modern development in cinema, and in this book into that sub species of poetry called hymnology.

He gives many indications in *Told in Gath* of early ambitions to write, to be a writer, back as far as his Campbell College days. But it seems he did not begin working on *Told in Gath* until the middle or late 1980s. By June 1989 he had completed it and was seeking advice on a publisher.

He wrote to Patricia Beer, a successful poet, former academic at Goldsmith's College, and most importantly from Max's viewpoint, the author of *Mrs Beer's House*, a widely praised memoir of her own background in a strict Brethren family in Devon, published in 1968. He sent her two extracts from his manuscript, and received a reply saying she greatly enjoyed them and urging him to try some of the major publishers such as Macmillan, which had brought out *Mrs Beer's House*.

Max replied that he would try Blackstaff first to see what they would say. In May Mrs Beer was congratulating Max on the news that Blackstaff said yes, and offering to help in any way, and agreeing that if Blackstaff sent a script to her she could comment on the whole work. That comment appears on the back of the book and its first paragraph reads as follows:

> "The story of Max Wright's early experiences with the Plymouth Brethren has now been told, and not exclusively in Gath, and published not necessarily in the streets of Askelon. If the daughters of the Philistines don't rejoice, they ought to."
>
> And she concludes:
>
> "Told in Gath is an important book. The Brethren were always testifying to something or other: I testify to this."

Max must have been overjoyed, not just with the praise, but with the style which cleverly matches that of his book. He had had quite a struggle with the editors at Blackstaff – they thought the title would not help sales, and they wanted to drop the fake intro and most of the first chapter. Max dug his heels in and won. But then he had been working on titles since Campbell College, and though this was his first book, he knew exactly what he wanted to say and how to say it.

The first sentence of the book proper tells us a lot about Max and his book:-

"There are not many joys to compare with finding the right book at the right time"

For Max the right book was Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* and the right time was when he was seventeen years old. Later in that first chapter he explains what he meant by right book and right time. What he felt he lacked in the Brethren was any educated or

intellectual assessment; someone with a Brethren background who had actually been through it, survived and then written it down.

"The James Joyce of the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or even better the Joyce of *Stephen Hero* was all very well in his way, but the Roman Catholic way was something very far removed from our way." Turning to Gosse's Fathe*r and Son,* he continues "I had no idea that such a writer and such a book existed, an acknowledged masterpiece to boot, praised by Kipling as more interesting that David Copperfield, until that chance opening of *Father and Son*. It was a Cortezian moment."

A Cortezian moment? Had I heard the phrase before? I thought not and could not find it in any reference book. I presumed it had something to do with "Stout Cortez" and consulted John Keats's sonnet on Chapman' Homer, and there was the perfect description of 17 year old Max's reaction to reading Gosse:

Then I felt like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken:
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific – and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Max constantly sets the reader such tests throughout the book. Sometimes, as with the Anthanatology in the Introduction, he gives the reader a clue when Dr Fred obligingly identifies two of the authors quoted in it, prompting the reader to track down the rest.

When Max and I began a decade or more ago to have a monthly coffee mornings to talk about books or anything, but mostly books, and to exchange books we thought the other might enjoy or at least ought to read, the first he passed on to me were Gosse's *Father and Son, Mrs. Beer's House* and *the Autobiography of Mark Rutherford.*

Gosse I knew about, but had not read. I had never heard of Mrs Beer or Mark Rutherford. These three authors feature large in *Told in Gath,* alongside a host of others, known and unknown, for this is a book of books.

Max's choice of subject when he first started his university career was English, he then became a speech therapist, and also married one, and when he ended up academically with philosophy he specialised in language philosophers – John Wisdom for his MA and J.L.Austin for his PhD.

One of Austin's best known books was entitled "How to do things with words". Doing things with words, his own and other people's, was something Max did, and did very well. He may have written only one book, but he had read a great number. I was impressed by the books housed in shelves around several rooms in his home, both by their number and also by the fact that they were almost entirely neatly arranged in alphabetical order. All the Amises, father and son, followed by Barnes, Bellow and Boyd down to Roth, Updike and Waugh, including full shelves of John McGahern, Edna O'Bien, William Trevor, and almost every other Irish author. Not just one or two but what seemed an entire canon of each author, American, British, Irish, Indian…..

All the Iris Murdoch's were there, perhaps not entirely on merit: Iris was family, a second cousin, the grand niece of Max's grandmother. After *Told in Gath* was published Iris was sent a copy, and in April 1991 Max is writing to Mrs Beer (Dear Patricia by then) telling her that he had had an enthusiastic letter back from cousin Iris. Iris was not the only writer in the family: in 1893 a Dr William Wright, missionary and medical man and a cousin of Max's grandfather had published *The Brontes in Ireland. Facts stranger than Fiction.* Max Wright gave a detailed account of the author and of the book in a paper to this society in March 1998.

The book had its admirers, though Max was not among them. It was, he said, a ridiculous book.

The *Anthanatology* in the introduction is one example of 'doing things with words' – other peoples' words in this case.. Another he gives from his schooldays at Campbell when in the Upper Sixth he first conceived the desire to be a writer. He tells us Mr Felix Jones would rap out, modern bestsellers whose titles had been culled from the works of Shakespeare, for example Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ales* borrowed from *Twelfth Night,* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* from *The Tempest.*

Max and his particular pals at Campbell - Terence McCaughey, later a Presbyterian Minister and Lecturer in Irish at TCD, and Jimmy Simmons later poet and creator of *The Honest Ulsterman* - adapted this device for their own amusement by seeking likely phrases from any books or other sources to hand for titles for their own books still to be written. Their efforts help fill a chapter of *Told in Gath,* but even in that the serious main thread of the book – the Brethren and the author's flight from them – is not forgotten. One of the titles young Max had suggested to his friends he had culled from a gospel hymn he had learned at the Brethren "I am travelling on the Hallejulah Line/ On the good Old Gospel train." So what about The Hallejulah Line?"

"My fellow authors looked at me as if reason had quit its throne and I never again proposed anything so foolish. I did however, recollecting my father's adversion to obscure passages of Scripture, which were, he alleged, Gospel-free, recommend to them Job 39 and 25: "He saith among the trumpets , Ha Ha, and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains and the shouting."

"Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets", Max suggested.

"This was much admired, we did not realise that it had already been appropriated by Alun Lewis, himself already dead."

At that point, you, like me, might have paused to wonder who Alun Lewis was, or had been. The name was familiar but I confess I had to look him up to find out. The reader of *Told in Gath* might find it useful to keep a copy of the Bible, King James version, by his side along with a dictionary of quotations and perhaps some device for accessing Wikipedia.

The title of his own book could theoretically qualify for entry into the titles game. One of his favourite authors, well represented on his shelves, was Cyril Connolly, once great man of letters and critic. In 1960 Connolly published a collection of short parodies, including one on Aldous Huxley with the title *Told in Gath*. Perhaps Max was to borrow it 40 years on.

His love of books was tested by the requirement of young Brethren to read the Bible in its entirety. Max admits that his appetite for the Word of God began to wane somewhere around the first Book of Chronicles with its endless genealogies. He is reminded of an old preacher's explanation that such boring lists of names made the reader thirst for better fare and be all the more appreciative of small oases of inspirational prose. "As with the gardener of Peacock's *Headlong Hall*, unexpectedness is what we were aiming for."

But who on earth was Peacock or his Headlong Hall? "**Headlong Hall** is a novella by Thomas Love **Peacock**, his first long work of fiction, written in 1815 and published in 1816", Wikipedia tells me. Perhaps you already know that.

Having skirted the Chronicles, Max goes on to the minor prophets. "Not all of these are tedious of course, for while *Zephaniah* is surely not a jolly book*, Jonah* was great fun and is still worth a yearly reading, along with *The Great Gatsby, A Handful of Dust, 'The Dead', The Unquiet Grave, The Diary of a Nobody, Heaven's my Destination, Murder in the Cathedral* and the rest of the old favourites."

He then proceeds to give a very racy account of the story of Jonah, adding into the episode of Jonah being swallowed by the whale a favourite Brethren tale of the modernist preacher – not a Brethren of course – who teases old Minnie telling her she could not possibly believe, cannot possibly 'swallow' a story like that. To which Minnie replies that indeed she can (Sir) and furthermore (Sir) that if God had told her in his own inspired Word that Jonah had swallowed the whale she would believe that too.

Max concludes this section by adding “End of story, end of book. As Joyce’s Mr Crofton might have said, It’s a very fine piece of writing.” This is another little test for the reader. Who was Mr Crofton, and where did he say that? We have been given a bit of a clue. In his list of books worth a yearly reading, Max has included Joyce’s story The Dead, which is in *Dubliners.* In that book is also the story ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’. Mr Crofton is asked for his opinion on a lengthy poem on the death of Parnell which has just been read. The final line of the story is “Mr Crofton said that it was a very fine piece of writing.”

In this book about books there is frequent reference to and quotation from the Bible, particularly with regard to its many inconsistences, and the contortions employed by the Brethren to prove that in every word it is faultless. His own relationship with the Bible is perhaps best encapsulated by his comment on a passage from the Epistle to the Romans. It begins with ‘What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?’ and concludes:

‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers. Nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

Max’s comment is: “What it all means is something of a question, but that it is all beautiful and something of a comfort is without question.” He counts himself lucky that “having departed from the Scriptures, they have not departed from me.”

What Max calls his long affair with the cinema – often involving three films in three separate cinemas in one day, was, he writes, furtive on at least two levels.

> “First, my exits from and entrances to those places were devious, with cap pulled down and handkerchief up, affecting an incipient sneeze for fear of being spotted by passing saints. Secondly, I fairly shortly soon became if not actually ashamed of, at least embarrassed by an addiction to a form of entertainment I thought unworthy of an intellectual. Would T.S.Eliot patronise three cinemas within the space of eight hours?”

It all began with a sixth-form geography class visit to a local cinema to see a film about Australian grazers. Earlier, such opportunities had been spurned by young Wright’s Brethren-inculcated views on the evils of the cinema, explaining to his headmaster that ‘ as a Christian I did not go to the cinema’…As Max tells it, ‘the younger masters sneered openly, recognising lower middle class, mission-hall Protestantism when they saw it.’

The lure of the cinema rather than an interest in Australian grazers triumphed over whatever scruples he had left, and over real fears that he might be spotted going into such a place.

> “And so at last I passed through those ornate portals, past a painted Jezebel at the receipt of custom, up the carpeted stairs under the eyes of Alan Ladd, Lana Turner, Joan Crawford, Nigel Patrick, Anna Neagle, Richard Attenborough, Vivienne Leigh, Jean Kent, Alastair Sim, David Niven, Cornel Wilde, Bette Davis, Dirk Bogarde and the rest, names and faces now, but not for much longer, unfamiliar to me, into the dark, redolent of tobacco smoke and cheap scent, as different and as awful as a Roman Catholic church (not that I had ever been there either).”

That chapter ends with a more than 40 line paragraph made up entirely of a list of film star names, beginning with Dane Clark and ending more than 150 names later with Chips Rafferty, followed by the question ‘where are you now?’ Surely a parody of the who begat whom genealogies of the Chronicles? Then comes a final line that seems both wonderfully apt and original.

"Just reeling off your names is ever so comfy."

Or it does so until you come a few pages later to one of Dr Fred's helpful footnotes where he tells us he is reliably informed that the line is the last line of the poem *Lakes* "by the homo-sexual poet W.H.Auden". (In another footnote Dr. Fred refers to E.M..Forster as 'the homo-sexual author'). I had to look at Auden's *Lakes,* and there I found this:

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It is unlikely I shall ever keep a swan
Or build a tower on any small tombolo,
But that's not going to stop me wondering which class
Of lake I would decide on if I should.
Moraine, pot, oxbow, glint, sink, crater, piedmont, dimple…
Just reeling off the names is ever so comfy.

I think it sounds far better when Max borrows it. Incidentally that footnote begins with Dr Fred informing us a friend of his who has some knowledge of these matters tells him that there is a lot of quotation and literary allusion scattered through this text. As the footnote appears on page 123 of a 177 page-book, this may be a belated concession from Max to slow-learners.

Quotations and allusions abound. The last paragraph in the book is a comment on the modern Brethren of Belfast. It reads:

> "Outside the Crescent Church, from time to time, I see wedding parties being photographed in the porch, a red carpet running from the steps to the cars . Not only is there a steeple, but the steeple contains a bell. This is really a mistake, for on the principle of 'waste not want not' the brethren cannot resist the temptation to use it on these occasions. Alas, it is a knell evocative of the yew trees and yellow November twilights of Hammer productions long ago. As it bongs away, every stroke deader than the final stroke of nine at St Mary's Woolnoth, the bridegroom looks as if he at least he knows for whom it tolls. If I happen to be on foot, I stop, a boat in FitzGerald's beautiful prose, against the current, drawn ceaselessly back into the past. Sometimes I see a familiar face, more often not."

But what and where is St.Mary's Woolnoth? T.S.Eliot's tells us in *The Waste Land* it is in London. A crowd..'Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,/ to where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours/With a dead sound on the stroke of nine."

The paragraph has another bell tolling, but this time it's not Gray's but John Donne's. That final line of the book 'Sometimes I see a familiar a familiar face, more often not' ought to be in any book of quotations, but none that I can find.

This use of quotations is part of the charm of *Told in Gath* but is not what the book is all about.

In another paper to this society in December 2008 on *Philip Henry and Edmund Gosse*; *Father and Son,* Max said a reason for writing *Told in Gath* was to challenge an assertion made by Edmund Gosse, the author of *Father and Son,* that that book was a "record of educational and religious conditions which, having passed away, will never return…the diagnosis of a dying Puritanism".

His quarrel is not with Gosse's account of Brethren life, but with his assertion that the 'educational and religious conditions' associated with the Brethren had passed away and would never return. *Father and Son* was published in 1907.

He quotes, from *Father and Son,* the younger Gosse's ringing condemnation of 'evangelical religion'.

> "Let me speak plainly, after my long experience, after my patience and forbearance, I have surely the right to protest against the untruth (would that I could apply to it any other word) that evangelical religion or any other religion in a violent form is a wholesome or desirable adjunct to human life. It divides heart from heart. It sets up a vain chimerical ideal, in violent pursuit of which all the tender indulgent affections, all the genial play of life, all the pleasures and soft resignations of the body , all that enlarges and calms the soul, are exchanged for what is harsh and void and negative. It encourages a stern and ignorant spirit of condemnation; it throws altogether out of gear the healthy movement of the conscience; it invents virtues which are sterile and cruel; it invents sins which are no sins at all, but which darken the heaven of innocent joy with futile clouds of remorse."

After that, and more, while admitting that the tone is sometimes extravagant, Max declares that at the age of 19, 'Gosse, c'etait moi' , and he longed to protest his agnosticism, to castigate evangelical religion , above all to sigh world wearily……."Let me speak plainly, after my long experience, after my patience and forbearance ….But I held my peace."

Around the same age that he encountered Gosse through his book, Max discovered Cyril Connolly through his very different writings portraying among much else the pleasures of a dissolute life on the shores of the Med. His new young reader was greatly impressed by one of his aphorisms:

> "Salvation lay, Connolly had convinced me, not in Jesus Christ, but only in the production of a masterpiece. According to Connolly 'The more books we read, the sooner we perceive that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence.'"

Max held his peace for more than forty years as regards both his ambitions as a 19 year old – to speak plainly against evangelical religion, and to write a masterpiece. In the end he sought to fulfil both in the shape of *Told in Gath.* Why did he take so long? Why does it take many of us so long to fulfil youthful dreams, if we ever do? Gosse junior, after all, was 58 when he published *Father and Son,* already a public figure in London society, a published poet and author. Max was 56 when he published *Told in Gath.*

Leavened as it is by literary and linquistic gymnastics, *Told in Gath* is a deadly serious book, with an ever-present shadow of the tragic events of 1941 when the nine-year old was cruelly confronted with death, seeing with his own eyes his father being mortally injured and his mother maimed for life.

Max's frank account of the year following the bombing, which he spent with two sets of relatives, indicates just how much the tragedy was impacting upon him. First he deliberately damages a watch his father had given him on his 9th birthday just one month before the bomb. Then he begins, again deliberately, to foul himself, shitting in his pants while at table, or even in the Brethren meeting.

Fifty years on, he writes, he finds it hard to think about; "The action was voluntary and yet in the very performance I was appalled and frightened at what I was doing. I was disgusted, indeed horrified at the way I was behaving. Yet I did it again and again."

The result was he was taken back by his mother, who was still in hospital, and installed in a boarding house in Bangor. His mother, her infirmity and the ever-worsening relationship between mother and son, cast a shadow even longer than did the bombing itself.

Some years later, after he had been sent to Campbell College as a boarder, he recounts another episode which has echoes of the fouling.

His mother cross-examined him one day on whether the boys in the dormitory told dirty stories. He said they did, and he was pressed to give examples. He gave some that hardly qualified as dirty and was pressed for more. So, half ashamed and half excited, he

repeated to her three filthy stories the Campbell boys had gleaned from the American GIs currently billeted in Belfast.

Psychiatrists might tell us that both episodes showed his deep resentment over the way the world had treated him and he was hitting back as powerfully as he could, at the nearest representative of that world.

An account of a cricket match at Cabin Hill gives an idea of relations between son and mother.

> "On a hot day just after the end of the Second World War she came to school for the annual Fathers' Day cricket match to watch me play. Cars and petrol were still in short supply but all the parents at Cabin Hill seemed to be able to lay hands on at least a taxi.. My mother would have said she could not afford one, and so taking two trams she toiled across Belfast, finally limping up the half mile of the school drive with her heavy bag and her artificial leg, shod in ugly black boots. She watched the game uncomprehending and at tea-time was fussed over by a non-playing prefect more understanding than me…..The match over, I had to give her my arm and walk her back to the main road while cars and taxis, Austin Twelves and Standard Tens, Humbers and Rileys, an Alvis, an Armstrong Siddley rolled down the hill past us. As she limped off and hoisted herself onto the tram I recognized that it would be wicked in anyone, and beyond belief in me, a sinner saved by grace, to wish that she had stayed at home. But I did fervently. For a father dropping catches and coming in at the ninth wicket, for two parents with four legs evenly distributed in a Sunbeam Talbot I would have dealt with Mephistopheles."
>
> "So, four years later, how was I to say to her that the beliefs of the brethren were unmitigated nonsense? That at death the dome of many coloured glass is trampled to fragments, the million-petaled flower of being here disintegrates, the insubstantial pageant fades, leaving not a rack behind. No heaven, no hell, no salvation, no damnation, no lake with burning fire and brimstone, no glad reunion with my father, no great advantage to be gained from keeping out of picture houses. When, further years on, I did eventually stammer some of these things in a half-hearted way, her reaction was what I had suspected all along it would be; not alarm at my eternal damnation but dismay at what relatives and fellow saints in the assembly would say and think. Her exact words were what I had felt they always would be; 'How can you do this thing to me when I have already suffered so much?' What she dreaded was the false pity, the *Schadenfreude* of the closed community. ('Of course she should never have sent him to that school.') the clammy prayers of visiting elders for the backslider.')"

(The *dome of many coloured glass* is borrowed from Shelley, *the million petaled flowers from Larkin,* and *the insubstantial pageant fading and leaving not a rack behind* from Shakespeare's T*he Tempest.)*

Max continues:

> 'Therefore, I procrastinated. Owl-solemn under the street-lights on lonely city walks, I could identify strongly with Stephen Daedalus's young friend Cranly:"
> "They paced along three sides of the Green in silence…while Cranly began to explain to Stephen how he too had felt a desire for life – a life of freedom and happiness – when he had been younger and how at that time he too had been about to leave the church in search of happiness, but that many considerations had restrained him." (*Stephen Hero*, Joyce.)

In his later-fifties Max cast aside the many considerations and told all. Did he achieve what he set out to do?

Certainly Mrs Beer thought so. In her review in the *London Review of Books* she aligned herself with the daughters of the Philistines in rejoicing. She declares it a necessary book; necessary, not just because it painted the Brethren in their true light, but because she had long been convinced that their kind of Christian fundamentalism should be opposed by 'some fairly firm writing on the wall' and this book could be it. She quotes Gosse's denunciation of evangelical religion, adding that he was wrong in assuring his readers in I907 that the evils he had endured had passed and would never return. Nothing had changed, she wrote, and if conditions had changed it could be for the worse "to judge from the last chapter of *Told in Gath* which gives a devastating picture of thoroughly modern Brethren" in the Crescent in Belfast.

As we have seen, challenging Gosse's assertion that what he had experienced was a thing of the past, the end of a dying Puritanism, was Max Wright's declared intention in writing *Told in Gath*. Mrs Beer had many other compliments to pay the book. From her own background she said that she could testify to its complete authenticity, adding that it was often anecdotal and very funny in a deadpan way.

Patrick Skene Catling, an English author and regular reviewer for *the Irish Times* called it 'an admirably candid and sardonically witty autobiography'. He notes the book's quotation from Cyril Connolly '…that the true function of a writer is to write a masterpiece and that no other is of any consequence' and concludes: '*Told in Gath* is Max Wright's brave response to that insidious exhortation.'

Tom Adair, in *Scotland on Sunday,* mentions the frequent references to Edmund Gosse and his book, and to Mrs. Beer's 'marvellous memoir', immediately adding that 'he (Max) writes in no man's shadow and concluding '*Told in Gath'*, told without rancour, is delightfully matter-of-fact, honest and lyrical, a minor classic in the making.'

Pat Raine, alias Patrcia Caig, wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* that *Told in Gath* could be read as a comedy of recantation, with the absurder elements of born-again Christianity coming in for a well-deserved swipe. Like most reviewers she saw through the 'spoof preface' calling it a 'splendid idea'.

One reviewer who, it seems, took the bait and swallowed Dr.Fred, was Ciaran McKeown in the *Newsletter*. Approaching the book with curiosity mixed with apprehension that the author might be a polemical turncoat to his own people, he found it proved to be a little masterpiece, both in its narrative and the objectivity of tone it achieves – witty, rarely scornful and at times disturbing.

Eamonn Hughes, in the *Irish Review*, gets into the spirit of the book right away by saying that 'from the marvellous introduction onwards … we find we have entered a Shandy Hall." (I don't think I spotted a Laurence Sterne borrowing in the book, so maybe Mr Hughes is filling a gap.) Max, he writes, has produced an autobiography of compelling interest, far wittier than one might expect.

In *Books Ireland* Jeremy Addis begins by describing *Told in Gath* as 'a disorganised and compulsively written account of an upbringing and falling away from the Plymouth Brethren, rapidly adding that 'compulsive writing equates in this case with compulsive reading'. But he is critical; 'the book is a self-indulgent (almost obsessive) dip into his bible-thumping youth" , though this view is modified by the writer's honest and good humour, his gentle irony and wit.

This reviewer smells a rat about Dr Fred. He writes that the most extraordinary thing about the book – which kept him up late to finish in one reading – is the preface, and the footnotes, to which he devotes a lengthy paragraph. He ends his review on a positive if slightly questioning note.

"I would be sad indeed if I thought Max Wright was dead. He should have written more."

Below the review a note from Addis says that after writing it he wrote to the publishers to ask if Mr Wright was alive or dead. It concludes:

"The answer speaks well for the future of Irish letters and ill of your reviewer's ability to see through a glass darkly, while also saying something about human credulity. The review stands unchanged, to add point to a wicked but forgivable literary ruse."

Not everybody liked the book: In the New York-based *Irish Echo* under the heading "Fundamentally Flawed", Patrick Campbell, an Irish-America author and regular reviewer, wrote that *Told in Gath* was a flatly written, depressing book about Wright's alienation from the world of the Brethren.

"He emerges with his prejudices intact. Indeed Wright, who teaches philosophy at Queen's University Belfast comes across as a person with limited intellectual ability."

Not quite so abrupt was the reviewer in the *Irish Independent,* though he starts off in similar vein by describing the book as a theological tract, or an anti-theological tract, a tract against the Plymouth Brethren, portraying them as vain, hypocritical and narrow minded. As most of its readers probably knew that anyway, he says, the book is calculated to enforce existing religious, or anti-religious prejudice. So it is very odd therefore that it has had an Arts Council subsidy.

Max Wright, he says, sees very few redeeming features in the Brethren, but at least one shines through the book which 'is soaked in the magnificent language of the Bible and cheered by the constant intervention of hymns and little Brethren ditties which are like so many windows into a brighter world'.

Max's problem, he says, is that he was put under immense pressure to say he was saved at a time when he was not sure he really was and when he was beginning to discover the delights of the fleshpots of Egypt.

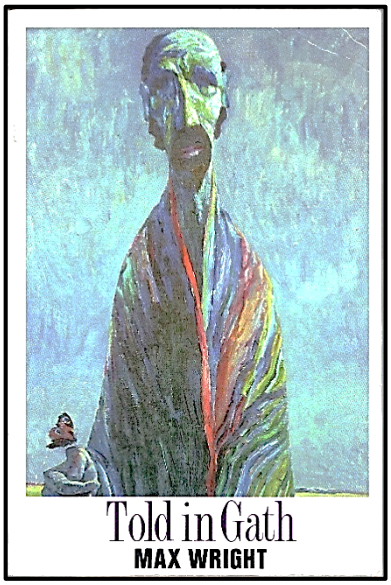
He ends by saying the Brethren should read the book and take into account the witty and sharp observations. They should then write a reply, and if it is sufficiently witty and well-written, they should ask the Arts Council for money to have it published.

The writer of this review may sound like a latter day Dr Fred Stevenson giving Max a taste of his own medicine. But he is not – he is Belfast-born Peter Brooke, educated at Cambridge, with a Cambridge doctorate, convert to the Orthodox Church, author of several books on theology, church history and allied topics. Latterly more given to poetry and painting. To date the Brethren, it seems, have not taken his advice.

When *Father and Son* was published it was something of a sensation, and remains today a frequently mentioned classic. A full frontal attack on evangelical Christianity, even if it was directed mainly at one small sector of it, was shocking to British society in 1907, especially when it was known that the at first anonymous author was Edmund Gosse, a published poet, distinguished man of letters, friend of the great and a figure of repute in London society. When Patricia Beer's *Mrs.Beer's House* was published in 1968 she too was already known, a published poet, regarded by many as the best woman poet Britain had produced in the 20th century. (It was not yet taboo to refer to women poets as a sub-species of poets *tout court.*)

Two decades later. In the progressively God-less world of 1990, an attack on religion by an academic in Belfast was unlikely to set the literary world, let alone *le grand publique,* on its ears, no matter how good.

The term masterpiece originated in the practice of a craftsman, say a woodcarver, to produce a sample of his work to demonstrate to a potential patron that he was a master of his craft. *Told in Gath* is Max Wright's masterpiece.



The cover, designed by Wendy Dunbar, is Colin Middleton's 'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel', based on Genisis ch 32.

It is generally assumed that the Biblical story is a methaphor for man's struggle with God. The episode has been depicted by many painters including Rembrandt. In Middleton's account the angel would seem to be represented by a butterfly alighting on the thumb of a very puzzled Jacob. The theme is appropriate to the book, though neither the designer nor the author's family can remember whether it was Max's own choice.