THE 'RETRACTATION' OF ROBERT BROWNE, FATHER OF CONGREGATIONALISM

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THE 'RETRACTATION'

OF

ROBERT BROWNE

FATHER OF CONGREGATIONALISM

BEING

'A REPROOFE OF CERTEINE SCHISMATICAL PERSONS [i.e. HENRY BARROWE, JOHN GREENWOOD, AND THEIR CONGREGATION] AND THEIR DOCTRINE TOUCHING THE HEARING AND PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD'

WRITTEN PROBABLY EARLY IN THE YEAR 1588
SINCE LOST, AND NOW FIRST PUBLISHED WITH
A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF ITS DISCOVERY

BY

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TO

THE PRESIDENT AND FACULTY

OF NEWTON THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTION

WHO FOR THREE YEARS HAVE GENEROUSLY ENCOURAGED

THE WRITER'S HISTORICAL INVESTIGATIONS

INTRODUCTION

THE following treatise by Robert Browne now first made public is a most surprising writing for him to have produced. It is marked on the whole by a fine, kindly spirit, and any bitterness in his heart only occasionally finds expression. It shows him early in 1588, just about the time when Stephen Bredwell was writing of Browne's brain as being 'sicke', to have been a vigorous thinker, even somewhat of a philosopher, and a man of restless energy in combatting views which experience seemed to him to have proved false or unsatisfactory. This document is indeed probably the most interesting of all Browne's writings, and if it had been published when it was written, might have aroused a discussion among religious people of his day something like that recently produced by the publication of the Rev. R. J. Campbell's 'New Theology'.

Last year in a pamphlet entitled 'The True Story of Robert Browne' I announced the discovery of and briefly described (pp. 49–59) the original manuscript of this treatise, which is now published in full. The character of the contents of this writing, revealing as it does a slightly similar experience to that reflected in 'The last booke of Iohn Smith [the Se-Baptist], | Called the retractation of his errours, | . . . . .', has suggested a similar title, 'The Retractation of Robert Browne'. The above-mentioned pages in 'The True Story', with a few additional words here, will doubtless serve as a sufficient introduction to this most remarkable work, the publication of which is now made possible through the awarding to me for the third successive year of the Research Fellowship of Newton Theological Institution, Newton Center, Massachusetts.

About two years ago, after an examination of the contents of certain libraries in England, when it appeared unlikely that much additional material of special interest concerning Browne would be found, I one day unexpectedly came across the two following items in the Lambeth Palace Catalogue,[1]—'11. T. Cartwright's Reproof of certain schismatical persons and their doctrine concerning the hearing and preaching the word of God. *fol.* 187.

'12. Rob. Brown's Answer to Cartwright's Letter for joining with the Church of England. *fol.* 203.'

My attention was at once arrested. It was evident that the latter of these manuscripts was the original of Browne's 'An ansvvere to Ma-|STER CARTVVRIGHT HIS | *LETTER FOR IOYNING* | with the English Churches: . . . . .', but of the former I had never heard. It seemed worth while, therefore, to examine the manuscripts themselves, and upon seeing them I met with a still further surprise in finding that both were in Browne's familiar handwriting, though neither of them bore his signature. The 'ansvvere to Master Cartvvright', however, had been known for over three centuries to be Browne's work, and, curiously enough, the first manuscript, while catalogued as Cartwright's, was endorsed in Richard Bancroft's handwriting as 'Mr Brownes | Booke | Sent [Lent?] me'. The question naturally at once arose how this had come to be so incorrectly catalogued. The answer was quickly discovered, for, in the index to the volume in which these treatises were found, Archbishop Sancroft (1678–1691), apparently doubting Browne's ability to compose so sane and broad-minded a document, had written 'Rob. Brown's Reproof of certain Schismatical persons, & y^r Doctrin touchḡ ye hearing, & preachḡ of ye Word of God. (I think rather 'tis T. C.'s [i. e. Thomas Cartwright's] & y^t wch follows Brown's)'.

Evidently Mr. Henry J. Todd, who catalogued the Lambeth Palace manuscripts about a century ago, accepted Archbishop Sancroft's opinion without critically examining and comparing the handwriting of the two treatises, thus

[1] MS. 113 (Nos. 11 and 12).

probably failing to see, or at least to appreciate, Richard Bancroft's contemporary endorsement that Browne was the real author of 'A reproofe', and since Mr. Todd's day the existence of these documents has apparently not been noticed, in spite of constant researches in this field during the last half century. This fact, however, does not seem so strange when it is known that for some reason neither of these writings appears to be mentioned in the index of the catalogue. Thus easily was made this 'find' of the two most extended manuscripts of Browne's apparently still in existence.

The present publication of the complete text of 'A reproofe' enables me to realize a hope that I have had in mind since the day of its discovery, for it gives a better idea of the Robert Browne of the early part of 1588, than has been furnished by any historian from that time to this. In the light of recent investigations it is true that Browne must still be held in higher regard as a thinker than as a man, though the most recent and as yet unpublished independent findings of the Rev. F. Ives Cater of Oundle, I believe, also agree with my own, that Browne has hitherto been much too severely criticized by his detractors and that in the latter part of his life he was perfectly sane, even though he did return into the bosom of the Church of England. It should be remembered that Browne was the contemporary of great men and great thinkers, and that in his way he is as notable as some men of much greater fame in other fields of thought. He was a person of great independence, which characteristic gained him no praise in his lifetime, though to-day it adds great interest to his writings and the study of his life.

In summing up the results of recent studies concerning Browne, it may be said that during the last four and a half years the story of his life has been almost completely reconstructed by the discovery of many new facts, and by the elimination in so far as possible of the recurring mistakes of a long line of writers and historians. The gain in our knowledge of his life may perhaps be illustrated