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The Autobiography of Robert Spurr

A Social Study of Nineteenth-Century Baptist
Working Class Fortitude

ROBERT SPURR was born into a Yorkshire working class family at Ossett, near Wakefield, in 1801. However, most of his working life was spent at Bramley, Leeds. His life-story reveals a chequered history of more sorrows than joys, more hardships than pleasures, more times of poverty than of plenty. Long hours of work, low wages, periodic unemployment, inadequate housing and the prevalence of disease are evident—typical of working class existence in the nineteenth century. The struggle for survival, the desperate search for work and the lack of security for the working man of those times are exemplified in Spurr's life. The fragility of life itself amongst the working class is illustrated by the death of his first wife within a year of marriage and of four of his nine children in infancy.

Surprisingly, in these circumstances, fortitude and gratitude for his lot in life characterise the author. Certainly he had much to thank his original family unit for—his four brothers helped him during his difficult times in seeking employment, and his sister and mother brought up his baby son for eleven years following the death of his first wife.

In 1867 Robert Spurr wrote his autobiography. It was never published and lay forgotten until later discovered amongst family papers. In the text printed below, punctuation has been supplied by the editor. Words in square brackets have been added to facilitate its reading.

Dear Brethren and Relatives, i take this oppourtunity to write the following lines for your instruction.

When i was a child i spake as a child, i understood as a child, i thought as a child. But when i became a man in 1822 i did not put away childish things; i still continued child like with little things, in stead of improving and strenthing my mind by scholership. I walked from street to street, from field to field, seeking plesure but found very little. My wages was very small. I seldom had any money or very little in my pockett—so i went on from year to year untill 1824. Then i got married to Miss N. Dewhirst. I then found i had been very foolish for i soon began to learn the cares of the world. My wages been so very small, at Spring i went to work with Brother William out of doors. It was a very rainy, wet summer so we made very little money. So i thought i would try some thing else. I began to be a fancy weaver and, been a new work to me, i missed my way and made no thing of it.

Then my Wife was taken very ill, and in 50 weeks after we was married she Died in 1825, leaving me with one son a few weeks old when she Died—that is, our Joshua. My Mother and Sister Betty then took the charge of him. He was a very feeble Boy, but with great care he was brought up with them at a very easy¹ cost untill he was over eleven years of age. So i had to sell part of my goods and go live with Father and Mother. I then began to work for Brother John.

In December 1825 Wakefield Bank broke² and there was a Great fall in the trade, so [i] and Brother David went on [a] tramp. We walked to Liverpool and back but we never got one bit of work. Some time after that i got work at hunslet for a short time. Then i went to work at Leeds but i was very unwell and had to go home again. After that i went with Father and Brother James to work out of doors, but i soon took the typhus fever and for some weeks was very ill. When just recovering from that complaint i was seized with another long and bitter complaint which kept me in prison³ for 12 months. I could not go in search of work all that 12 months. Then my clothing was all worn out, so i sold 2 chares to buy a new hat. This was hard for me. My heart was fit to break—and while i am writing, i feel the smart of it.

I then went off with a very heavy heart to seek work. I worked 3 months at Gildersome, making mens' boots at 2s. per pair. After that, i came to work for Brother John again for some short time. But i wished again to try my weel of fortune else where, so i went to work at Leeds, up at bank,⁴ and lived with Brother David but i slept at another place. I had not been there long before my master removed to meanwood and all the shopmen went with them—⁵ in number. This was a very pleasant place and i enjoyd the working days very well. It is a very healthy country in that land scape. There was parks, woods and groves. It was full of beauty. But when Sunday after noon came i was left alone because my shop mates went to the publick house to enjoy them selves. But i could not do that and support my self and my son.

My Master was very poor and liked his drop of ale, and he had very little money and little work, so when i had been there 18 months i had to leave 50s. of my wages in his hands and go work at Rodley. Rodley is a little place, built near the water side,⁵ where trading vessels is passing up and down. After i had been there a few weeks i went to Meanwood for my 50s., but there was nothing for me. After that, i went to Leeds and got a sommons for my money. When the day of trial came, i only got 20s. And bit by bit, after a long time, i got it all but a few Shillings. In this Rodley shop there was 11 men in number. We had plenty of work and plenty of pastimes, such as sing, dance and drink, and all kinds of folly from morning till night. So time passed away when at our work very well—except that profane swearing that i never did practice, nor did i like to hear it. But when Sunday came i found it was all vanity and vexation of spirit. All my shop mates went to their own homes and i was left alone.

When sitting by the water side one sabbath day in a very solitary or retire place, under a green tree where no human eye could see me nor a voice could i hear, i thought of old Ossett, my parents and Brethren—how happy they all was, and i had been for some years a miserable man. Then i thought i would end it all by putting my self into the water and there have a watery grave. But i moved off for time to think of it.

Soon after that, the bailiff came with a writ for my master. Then his Lanlord came and sold his cattle and all his farming stock; and his Brother-in-law took a house at Leeds new road end,⁶ and i went with them. This house and shop was very small and every thing was very unpleasant to me. Then i thought i would leave them and try to get work in some other place. Providence guided me to Bramley in august 1831. I then began to work for Mr. R. Pickard.⁷ He was a member of the Wesleyan Methodist [Church] but as i did not like that creed i never went with them. The shop men here was 6 in number. I soon found they where sober, hard working men. This was a great change for me. In the 2 last mentioned shops we had dreadful oaths and bitter cursing day by day. Here we all did sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. I had more comfort then i ever had at any previous shop for some years, and every Saturday morning i got my wage, from the first week to the last—this was what i never had in all my life [before]! This put joy and happiness in to my heart more then all the vanity and folly i ever had.

Then one of my shop mates and my self began to go to the Baptist Chapel.⁸ I thought it very strange when i saw men and women go down into the water, and the Minister in the water Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and holy Ghost. But i heard them preach the word of truth—and reading for my self in the book, i found it to be true—so i went along with them, hoping to be in heaven with them. I believe that creed to be according to the new testament and generally agreed with their doctrines such as original sin, regeneration by grace, Baptizam and the Lord Suppor, free justification and adoption, the final perseverance of real believers, the eternal happiness of the righteous and so on.

But i did not very well like my lodgin house because he was a very drunken man, so i went to live with Wm Dearden.⁹ He was a shoemaker and a follower of Christ. His Wife was not very well. She got worse and worse, so a Woman did often come in to help her. It was Miss M. Marshall. I soon found she was, like my self, living in lodgens, with out Father and Mother, Sister or Brother, and so was i in Bramley. So we thought one house would do for us both and, as soon has we got ready, we went to Leeds parish Church in 1833.¹⁰ Then she came to live with me and in 5 weeks after, Dearden Wife died, leving him one little Boy. So we had to stop there and do all the work of the house, rent free. My Wife had the care of his Boy and the house work and to bind his shoes, so she had work enough. But in due time she gave birth to a little Girl—this is our Nancy—in 1834.

Then she had another little Girl in 1835—her name was Eliza. While living here we where very comfortable and got some goods for house keeping and saved 9 or 10 pounds in a money club.¹¹

Has our family was on the increase, we wished to try our fortune in some other way. So after working for Mr. R. Pickard 5 years, i left him to commence business in 1836. So we then took a new house and removed into it. Then i went to Ossett to fetch my son, Joshua. When he got to Bramley he was full of trouble because he had no one to play with. But that soon left him because he got some play mates and after that he learned to be a shoemaker.

On the 26 of June George was born. We have now 3 small children. The first born was 2 years and 24 weeks old, besides our son Joshua. And business was all to learn and the trade all to get. I tried to open a small shoe shop and we soon began to get work and for a fue months we got on has well as could be expected. But we soon had a death also in this year—Oct 22 1836. It was Eliza.

In 1837 there was a general down fall in trade. The cloth trade was all most at a stand. And the people having so little work, we got very little money. My Wife took in some washing [but] when my work was ready the people got a good bit of it with out money which kept us very poor. Our shop was broken down ¹² and we lost all we had. Then we got into debt and had to strugle hard to get on. We had also a birth in this year—Sep 16. His name was John, but he died in 3 weeks after. And all the money we could rise was 18d., so we had to get the grave made and a coffin on strap.¹³ Soon after they both came for some boots for that money, so we got them paid of.

When Christmas was coming on, i spent all the money we could get to make up boots for the people, expecting to have a good return. But on December the 24 all the money that came into our house was 1s. for all our labour. So my Wife went to make her market¹⁴ and spent it all, so on Christmas day we was as clear from money as a toad is from feathers. Our table was very scanty; we had plenty of poverty, because the people was feasting on our money. And so we was from year to year, working and trying to get our bread day by day.

In 1838 Sarah ann was born—Nov 21. And in 1841 the house we live in now was to be let. We wanted to have it, but how can we pay our rent of and take another house? I had to enter into a £6 money club and i had to go and buy the first share to enable me to pay my rent. It was sold by auction—i gave for it 27s. So i just got all the rent and left the house. We then entered our new house with all our debt. We have all the £6 club and intrest to pay, besides all other debts. This was a great burden. And when Lydia was about one year old she fell sick and my poor Wife had to carry her in her arms to Leeds infirmary and back. And then she died—May 22 1842, aged 18 months. But Hannah maria was born—Aug 31 1842—which made up the number again.

Hoping to see that day when we should owe no man any thing, we tried to open a small shoe shop 2 or 3 times, but we had to break

down¹² because we had the club to pay and other debts. Docter bills been very heavy for us to pay, they fetched it from us in boots. Or we paid it in cash. This kept us very poor. We had to work hard and live on a low dite for many years. But we went on, untill March 25 1845—then Cyrus was born. He was a very fine boy but in a short time his health gave way. He was like a tender plant for 18 months and then he got into good health again.

In 1847 the price of flour was very high—up to 4s. per stone. This made our trade very poor. But before the close of the year the price was reduced to about 2s. 6d. per stone. And on the 25 of Dec our Joshua got married and left us and followed shoemaking for many years. We are left with 5 Children and no one to work but my self and my Wife. We laboured to get them food and raiment has well has we could, looking for that day when our Children would be able to help us. Cyrus was a strong boy, a Child of hope. We was looking to him to ade us in old age. But he fell sick and in March 12 1851 he died of a few days' sickness. This great Change filled all our harts with sorrow more then all the poverty we ever had. But i am very thankfull and can say, "Bless the Lord, o my soul, and all that is with in me."¹⁵ It would have been worse if my Children had been fatherless and my Wife a widow. But God knoweth our frame. He remembreth that we are but dust.¹⁶ Now our Children is working and helping us, and the trade is better. Now we can get food and rament has well as any other working man. And the time is come that we have paid all our debts and owest no man any thing. I have seen men live in poverty and die in debt. Some has goon into the poor house to live and die there. Some have goon from door to door beggin their bread. Some has goon out to work and was brought home dead—and many such things. So i have reason to thank God and take courage, for none of these things has yet come upon me.

After our debts was all paid, we then went on from time to time, trying to make a pair of boots now and then to get another shop, untill we had got 40 pairs of boots and shoes. We got a friend for the loan of £5 and paid it back at 10d. per month. Then we began to rise¹⁷ our shop, and our Joshua began to work for us. Our trade began to increas. Our minds was more at rest. Our famley was 6 in number. We was all pooling one way, getting along very well. Our health was good; our days was happy—sundays and week days; our home was plesant; our gains was slowly on the increase—up to 1861.

This winter there was a very strong storm of frost and snow, so my Wife was confined in bed untill spring. Then she got into better health and was able to do her work again. But in Aug 9 1862 she was taken ill with the Cholera and a very deal of cramp which had her more then 20 hours. This affliction was so strong she never got the right strength of her body any more, and with all the means we could use she still continued unwell all winter. In Nov our Nancy got married and left us, and in Feb 1863 our Sarah ann got married and left us. So then we had to manage our business and our affliction has well as

we could. But we where just able to get our living and bear the ex-pence with out geting into debt. In this way we went on from time to time untill Oct 29 1864. Then she took [to] her bed and was never up one whole day and was only drest 2 or 3 times for 17 months. When she had sufferd much, night and day, more or less for 5 years, on the 24 of March 1866 she departed this life, aged 66. She boor her afflictions with patience and was willing to depart.

Our son George got married 4 weeks before the death of his Mother, so now you will see i am left with only one Daughter, that is Hannah maria. She works at the Sowing Machine and follows the work of the house. So we are has well as any one can expect. But i find my mind has been very much at wander for some time. I think my best way will be to take the advice of Soloman. He says there is nothing better for a man then he should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour. It is the gift of God, for that his is portion while in this life. For we brought nothing into this world and it is certan we shall take nothing out. But has we are sent into this world to work for our daily bread in the sweat of our face untill we return to the ground,¹⁸ we must be content to do has well as we can while we are able to.

Conclude.

Now you will see i have been more then 40 years in the Wilder-ness. During this time there has been many a heavy storm in life. After i left Ossett i went from town to town, from shop to shop, working for different men and living and lodgin with other men for near ten years. Some times it was very unpleasent to me. Then i got married to a poor hard working woman. She was faithfull to her trust. We where united to gather near 34 years before she Died. During our pass through life we have had births and deaths, times of sickness and of health; we have been in poverty and in plenty; we have had poor trade and good trade. But i do not remember at any time putting a price upon my goods to extortion from a customer that which was not right. I have often had two little for my labour that i might have a good conscience, believing it would be better for us at the end. We have had 8 Children [as well as Joshua] but lost 4 of them by Death. So now, as a working man, i think after all my poverty, if any one has reason to be thankfull, it is me. For there his a deal of people in poverty and in debt, but all my debts is paid and all my Children is sober hard working Children (and i hope they are all resting on the faith of the Gospel of Christ).¹⁹

And now i find my health his giving way and the time his fast coming that this place which knows me now will soon know me no more for ever. So when i have run the race and finished my course,²⁰ you may all come then and see the end.

R. Spurr

Bramley Leeds June 27 1867

Two years after he wrote this account of his life, Robert Spurr died, aged 68. We must remain indebted to him for producing, and

his family for preserving, this valuable insight into the harsh life of a nineteenth-century Baptist working man.

NOTES

¹ Obsolete use of the word, meaning "slight".

² The bank which went bankrupt was that of Wentworth, Chaloner, Rishworth and Company. It was a London banking-house which had banks at York and Bradford, as well as at Wakefield. The fact that from the beginning of December wages could not be paid with that banking-house's notes had immediate local repercussions. The *Leeds Mercury* of 17th December 1825, reported: "The distress caused in many trading and manufacturing concerns was peculiarly severe."

³ Obsolete use of the word, meaning "confined to home".

⁴ The district known as Bank was the area approximately where Saxton Gardens estate in Leeds is today.

⁵ Both the Leeds and Liverpool Canal and the River Aire flow through Rodley.

⁶ A minor turnpike near Rodley.

⁷ Ralph Pickard is mentioned in several *Leeds Directories* as a boot and shoe maker.

⁸ This was Bramley Zion Baptist Church, where Spurr was baptized and received into membership in 1832. The church's minister who baptized him—to whom he refers in the text—was William Colcroft, who left Bramley in 1837 and was pastor of the Baptist churches at Golcar, Stanningley and Wakefield successively before returning to Bramley Zion in 1854 as an ordinary member. For further information, see the present writer's "The Baptists in the Borough of Leeds During the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Local Church History", chapter 8, a copy of which is in the library of the University of Leeds.

⁹ William Dearden was a fellow-member at Bramley Zion and his name appears on "The Roll", the oldest surviving membership register of that church.

¹⁰ Until 1836 all marriage ceremonies in the Borough (with the exception of those of the Jews and the Society of Friends) had by law to take place in Leeds Parish Church.

¹¹ Money clubs were more popular than banks for the majority of the working class. They tended to be run by local people, were often more accessible than banks and were easier to get credit from. In the money club mentioned later, shareholders could have credit up to £6.

¹² The verb "to break down" was used to signify a failure in business.

¹³ Slang dialect word, meaning "credit".

¹⁴ The expression "to make one's market" usually refers to selling goods at cut-price, hence it could mean that Spurr's wife was disposing of boots at bargain prices in order to get some ready cash. However, in this context it seems preferable to adopt the alternative meaning of the expression, viz. to haggle and seek to buy at bargain prices. Spurr's wife used the shilling to purchase as much as she could on the best terms possible.

¹⁵ Psalm 103:1.

¹⁶ Psalm 103:14.

¹⁷ Obsolete use of the word, meaning "start" or "set up".

¹⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:12-13; 1 Timothy 6:7; Genesis 3:19.

¹⁹ The children not unnaturally were brought up as Baptists. Joshua, for example, was baptized by immersion and accepted into membership at Bramley Zion in 1842. He remained in membership with that church for the rest of his life. One of Robert Spurr's great-grandsons is a member of Bramley Zion today.

²⁰ The imagery is taken from Hebrews 12:1 and 2 Timothy 4:7.