

DAVID RAILTON AND THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

1. EARLY LIFE

The Railtons were a Scottish family and David Railton's father George Scott Railton was born to Wesleyan Methodist missionary parents in Arbroath. George Scott Railton was a close colleague of General William Booth in the founding of the Salvation Army and Booth sent him to the United States to further the cause there. He was a larger than life character and also was involved in Salvation Army work in Europe, dying suddenly at Cologne in 1910.

David Railton was born in 1884 in Stoke Newington London. The family did not travel abroad with George Scott Railton and in the 1901 Census, the family were living at 44 Gordon Road, Margate. There were two brothers, David and Nathaniel and a sister, Esther. David was educated by private tutors before attending Macclesfield Grammar School (now Kings School, Macclesfield) as a boarder. David and Nathaniel went up to Keble College, Oxford and while at Oxford, both brothers were led to ordination in the Church of England.

Keble College was then a relatively new Oxford College and had been founded in memory of John Keble, a leading figure in the Oxford Movement in the 1840s. The college had a strong High Church tradition and this appears to have led the Railton brothers to a different style of worship from their upbringing in the Salvation Army. David Railton was ordained deacon in 1908 and priest in 1909 by the Bishop of Liverpool. He was appointed curate in the working class parish of St Dunstons's, Edge Hill in that city before moving back to Kent.

David Railton married Ruby Marion Willson in 1910 and returned to Kent. He had two further curacies at St Mary, Ashford and St Mary and St Eanswythe, Folkestone. While in Folkestone, the First World War broke out and he would have seen hundreds of thousands of soldiers leaving the town for the Western Front. Like many other clergy at that time, he volunteered to serve there as an Army chaplain.

2. THE FIRST WORLD WAR

As a padre, David Railton would have buried the dead of his unit and it is also believed that he ministered to several men who were subjected to military executions. He shared the life of the Tommies at the front and was awarded the Military Cross in 1916 for rescuing injured soldiers while under fire.

It was there in the battlefield that he first considered the concept of the Unknown Warrior. Writing many years later he said: "The idea came to me, I know not how, in the early part of 1916 after returning from the line after dusk to a billet at Erkingham near Armentieres. At the back of the billet was a small garden and in than garden, only about six paces from the house, there was a grave. At the head of the grave stood a white cross of wood on which was written in deep black pencilled letters, *An Unknown Soldier of The Black Watch*. How I longed to see his folk! But who was he and who were they?"

David Railton had written a letter to Field Marshall Douglas Haig during the war to express the idea that a representative of the war dead should be returned to England but the letter was not acknowledged by Haig. In August 1920 he wrote another letter but this time to Dean Ryle of Westminster Abbey with the suggestion that an unknown soldier should be buried in the Abbey. It is believed that he could not give up on the idea and with the war over almost two years, his wife suggested that now was the time or the opportunity would be lost for ever.

Dean Ryle was very impressed with the idea and perhaps it was good timing as many in the Church of England were disappointed that the Cenotaph in Whitehall was not a Christian memorial to the war dead. The French were also planning to bury an unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George was enthusiastic and a committee led by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, agreed the proposal quickly. The arrangements were made to bury an unknown soldier in the Abbey.

3. THE BURIAL OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

The task of selecting the body was carried out by Brigadier General L J Wyatt, General Officer Commanding British Troops in France and Belgium. At the stroke of midnight on 7 November 1920, Wyatt entered a hut at St Pol, near Ypres. Four sets of remains (some sources suggest, six) lay before him exhumed from four battle sites, the Aisne, the Somme, Arras and Ypres. The remains were soldiers buried early in the war and had been checked to ensure that there were no identifying items such as regimental buttons.

The remains were each covered in a Union Flag and Wyatt lifted up his lamp in the dark hut and stepped forward to touch one of the flags. He had chosen the Unknown Warrior and the other sets of remains were sent back to be reburied .

The chosen remains were placed in a coffin of English oak, supplied from the grounds of Hampton Court Palace. The coffin had been designed by the British Undertakers Association and two of their members, Mr Nodes and Mr Sowerbutts were in attendance to travel home with the Unknown Warrior.

The coffin together with six barrels of French soil arrived at Boulogne on 10th November and the cortege passed through the streets lined by the town's inhabitants. The coffin was carried onto the destroyer, HMS Verdun and across the English Channel to Dover. In mid channel, HMS Verdun was joined by another six destroyers as escorts. Once the ships came into view, a 19 gun salute was fired in Dover.

The Unknown Warrior was taken from the ship to Dover Marine Station and placed in a special luggage van which had previously been used to convey the coffin of Nurse Edith Cavell, who had been executed in the war by the Germans for assisting the escape of prisoners of war. The van is still in existence today and has its home at Tenterden on the Kent and East Sussex Railway. As the train passed through stations on the line to Victoria, crowds gathered on the platforms to witness the solemn event.

The Unknown Warrior was accorded a hero's burial in the Abbey on 11th November 1920 and the grave in the nave was filled with the French soil and later sealed with a slab of Belgian marble. Over the following three days, thousands of people came to the Abbey to walk past the grave. David Railton's great idea had been endorsed by the nation's leaders and was universally popular with ordinary folk. The Union Flag that had been draped over the coffin was hung above the grave. The flag was the one provided by David Railton and had been used by him in the war for the burial of soldiers. This flag is still there today as a link with the man who inspired the idea of burying an Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey.

4. VICAR OF ST JOHN'S

David Railton's ministry in Margate was appointed to St John's by Archbishop Randall Davidson and was inducted on 25th September 1920. It is clear from the Parochial Church Council minutes and Parish Magazines of the time, that he was full of energy and enthusiasm from his arrival. In many respects he was decades ahead of his time in his ideas.

He arranged for a series of well-known speakers to visit the town to give public lectures. These included the actor Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson, Rev Studdert Kennedy (better known as the padre, "Woodbine Willie"), the poet Patrick McGill and the wife of the politician, Philip Snowden

In an age when denominational boundaries were very evident, he declared that he wanted to co-operate with other churches and with "all who call themselves Christians". He appointed a secretary to allow the clergy of the parish more time for spiritual matters. The secretary was eventually replaced with a lay worker with an ever wider remit. A link was established with the local papers to gain maximum publicity for activities at St John's. Some members of congregation were very worried about the cost of all these initiatives and their effect on the Church finances. David Railton's response to criticism was to launch a series of gift days and when he left, the parish had a healthy surplus.

There is little doubt that the trauma of the First World War had a great impact on David Railton. It was said that, unable to sleep, he would walk around Margate late at night before calling at the Police Station for a cocoa with the duty sergeant! There is also a newspaper account of how he travelled to the North of England for a few days and assumed the disguise of an unemployed ex- serviceman to see how he would be treated. He had great concern for these unemployed men and in January 1922, he wrote "May it be a brighter year for the present unemployed. Our statesmen and businessmen see more and more the need to solve this problem. But we must push them on and do all we can to save numerous men from going mad".

The town's war memorial in Trinity Square was dedicated in 1922 and there was no parish war memorial at St John's. David Railton initiated a plan in 1924 to restore the St George's Chapel in memory of the war dead. The area of the church was used for weekday services but the project was not completed until the 1930s when the carved screens to separate the chapel from the nave and chancel were erected.

The parish boundaries in the 1920s were somewhat different from those of the present parish. It then consisted of part of the town centre around the church and Upper High Street; the terraced streets

around Milton and Byron Avenues with a mission church of St Barnabas; the area around Tivoli and Salmestone with a daughter church of St Augustine and the rest of the parish was semi- rural, extending as far as Foreness and Westwood with a mission in Dane Valley and St Mary's at Northdown Park (now incorporated within present day Holy Trinity Church).

The demands placed upon the vicar were immense and there were also civic duties associated with St John's also being Margate Parish Church. After almost five years as vicar, David Railton resigned in 1925. He told parishioners, "I feel sure that the time has come when a leader of a rather different type should be appointed to consolidate and make good a position that has been attacked and bombarded with at least as much energy as I have been given strength to put into it."

5. LATER LIFE

After a short time as curate in a friend's parish at Christ Church, Westminster, he served as Vicar of St James, Bolton in Bradford, a growing suburban parish. He then was appointed to be the Vicar of Shalford, near Guildford. His final parish appointment was as Vicar of Liverpool Parish Church from 1935 to 1942.

It was there that he saw the outbreak of another World War and his church was gutted in the blitz on the city in 1940. Much of the parish was destroyed and David Railton chose to return to the life of a padre. This time he was to serve with the RAF before finally retiring to the Scottish Highlands. He sadly died in a railway accident at Fort William in 1955.

