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Benjamin Keach, 1640.

THERE was a man sent from God whose name was Benjamin Keach. He was born at Stoke Hammond, near Bletchley, North Buckinghamshire. In Great Britain, America, and where-ever lovers of freedom know the work and worth of Keach, his debtors will give God thanks on every remembrance of His servant.

"February has twenty-eight days clear and twenty-nine each leap year." Three hundred years ago, on 29th February, 1640, unto John Keach and his wife was born a son, who, though his story belongs to the short and simple annals of the poor, was to prove to be such a great Valiant for the Truth that, centuries later, in the words of Bunyan, his contemporary and fellow-Baptist, we can say to men concerning this man:

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

Were you to visit Stoke Hammond to-day, you would find it difficult to discover three or four people among its three or four hundred inhabitants who could tell you anything about the lad who was born there in the seventeenth century. There are two shops, and the one on the village green or square stands on the site of the former General Baptist Chapel which Benjamin attended when a child. This chapel was sold to Mr. Charles Scott, of Stoke Hammond, for £76 on 31st July, 1876. quote from the title deed, dated 10th day of October, 1876: "And whereas the public worship of God in the said Chapel or Meeting House has been entirely discontinued for more than six months preceding the day of the date hereof." Mr. Scott, who married on 16th May, 1878, converted the chapel into his home and added the general store shop which is there now. slab that serves as a door-step of this shop is the original one used for the chapel. The door, large, broad, thick, is the chapel door. Mr. Scott's daughter, who holds the title deed, tells me that the chapel was not demolished but altered by her father, who often pointed out to his children where the pulpit and pews were in the old days. Stand facing this shop, turn left, and one minute's walk from it you will see an old gate leading into an enclosed field, at the farther end of which there are some stately trees. Near these trees stood two humble houses, and the one on the left was the home dear to Benjamin Keach as a youngster and youth. Was that his birthplace? I know not. None could tell me. These old buildings were removed some forty years ago, and though no brick or mortar remains to mark the place, you may see where John Keach's son learned to play and pray.

Benjamin Keach inserted the record of his own birth in his own Baptist book. In the official record in the Parish Church at Stoke Hammond there is an entry under Baptisms which is dated March 6th, 1640. The script is not at all clear, but I believe it is a record of the christening of Keach. The word Benjamin is perfectly clear, and the word which follows it is almost certainly Keach, so three of us thought who examined it with great care. Then we have—filia Johannis et Fodora—then a word which may be Keach, but which is too indistinct to enable one to be certain that it is. At the end of the line is the date—March 6th.

So it seems fairly certain that the child born on February 29th was christened on March 6th.

That his parents called him Benjamin, that he honoured his Creator in the days of his youth, and that a certain Mr. Joseph Keach, a bricklayer and preacher, was probably his brother, would seem to be indicative of the spiritual stock from which he sprung. Another brother, Mr. Henry Keach, was a miller, occupying Stableford Mill at Soulbury. Like most men who have lived for truth and righteousness and God, Benjamin Keach owed much to humble and holy parentage. Bunyan was a tinker and Keach was a tailor: both lived to the glory of God.

Like Timothy, Benjamin was familiar with the Scriptures from childhood, and at fifteen years of age he asked for Believers' Baptism. Mr. John Russell, probably of Berkhamstead, baptized the young disciple into the Name of the Trinity. Three years later the pupil became known as a preacher and teacher of the Word of God to men. For nearly fifty years this happy warrior lived a life of adventure and achievement as a fearless ambassador of Christ the King. His name and fame were soon noised abroad.

Three good women helped this man of God in his life's work: his mother and the ladies whom he married. At twenty years of age he married Jane Grove, of Winslow, who was a woman of "great piety and prudence." Jane, married to him in 1660, died in 1670, aged thirty-one years. They had had five children, but two had died. In 1672 he married a widow,

a Mrs. Susanna Patridge of Rickmansworth, Herts., widow of Samuel Patridge, originally she was a Skidmore. They had five daughters. Keach and his second wife lived together for thirty-two years. She survived him for twenty-three years, and died in February, 1727. He owed much to the women God gave him.

The scene changes, and we must leave the village of Stoke Hammond where Keach was born and go to the town of Winslow, some ten miles from Aylesbury. There, in 1660, when he was about twenty-one years of age, he became minister to the General Baptists. Thither I went on Monday, February 12th, 1940, and that day stood in the pulpit of this worthy son of Bucks.

Good fortune attended me and I soon had a worthy guide in Miss Clear, whose grandfather, in the year, 1894, wrote A Thousand Years of Winslow Life. One does need a guide to discover Benjamin Keach's Meeting House. Nonconformists do often build chapels in out-of-the-way corners. Heaven knows why! In the days of the House of Stuart they had good cause to do so. It was safer to be hidden away, "you in your small corner and I in mine." Even then they were often ferreted out by the king's men who were sent to apprehend them. The chapel is near the Market Square, but to save time and patience ask someone to be good enough to direct you to Benjamin Keach's Meeting Place, as it is known by that name, and is to be found "situate in a most secluded spot at the bottom of a narrow alley." Bye-and-bye, after sundry twists and divers turns, you will arrive at a very humble little Baptist Chapel that stands on ground which, for Baptists, should be, for ever, holy ground.

This is one of the oldest Nonconformist places of worship in Buckinghamshire or in Britain. Sheahan, in his History of Bucks., 1862, gives the date of its erection as 1625. Mr. Robert Gibbs, in his History of Aylesbury, says that it is one of the few remaining ancient Puritan places of worship in an original state. Those worthy pioneers of that far-off day were sincere men who loved simplicity. This is manifest in the scheme and structure of this House of God. "The building is a very homely brick and tiled structure with its original small lattice windows remaining on the north side, and having a very quaint little porch... bearing the date 1695, when the porch was added to the original building." Through this porch on the right-hand side of the chapel you enter a small burial ground, where lie at rest the remains of former worshippers. Be it ever so humble, it was a holy place to those who were happy therein, and the visitor will be agreeably surprised at the state of good repair the small but sacred Bethel is in, after standing for more than three centuries. "From the chapel accounts we learn that in October, 1821, the building underwent a thorough repair. The roof was stript, new lathed and retiled, the large oak beam which went across the Meeting House was taken out and converted into several purposes, such as the posts which are on the sides of the meeting, the window linings, the pulpit stairs, back to table pew, and a box to put the books in."

When you enter the building you observe Keach's pulpit right opposite. Above it are two windows which were installed in October, 1824. Before the pulpit is a table, and thereon several volumes lie. Three are by Keach. When no parson or preacher was available one of the brethren would read to the congregation one of Keach's sermons. "Some of these sermons have dates written against them in a shaky hand by pencil writing, denoting, no doubt, the deacon had read them when no supplies were available." Long ago, the silver cord was loosed and the golden bowl broken, but Benjamin Keach, being dead, yet speaketh, yea, even in the place where he began to preach the glorious Gospel of the happy God. There is a communion service consisting of old pewter cup, plate and box. At the back is a very small gallery, with narrow steps thereto. "An increase in the congregation rendered it necessary for us to build a temporary gallery . . . August, 1827." The church is partly paved with memorial stones which keep ever green the names of several stalwarts who are gone but not forgotten: some are buried in vaults under the floor. On either side are ancient seats which are "wood white with age." Brave men and women long ago worshipped the Ancient of Days in this place set apart, and we may stand where they stood and sit where they sat. To the imaginative it is not difficult to believe that the spirit of Benjamin Keach still haunts the sanctuary where he served God and man with distinction.

With varying degrees of encouragement Divine Service was held in this old place until the end of last century. Attempts have been made of late to revive the cause, but without success. I was told that it was open for three months in the summer of 1936, but the numbers attending did not justify the good people to continue the effort. Since 1930, each year the chapel has been open on the last Thursday in June for Anniversary Services. In the afternoon there is Divine Worship: afterwards, the friends adjourn to the Congregational Church Hall, where tea is served: and in the evening they return to Benjamin Keach's Meeting Place for another Service. Some thirty or forty gather from divers parts for these meetings in mid-summer. A board of nine trustees manages all the affairs of this historical House of God. The desire and prayer of many must be that God will raise up in this our day and generation a modern Benjamin who

will continue the good work begun so long ago by one we now

delight to honour.

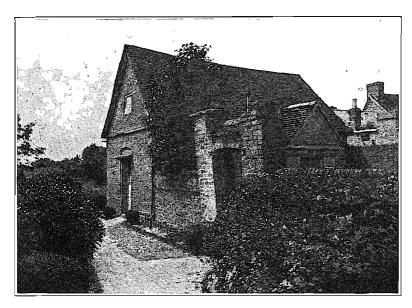
Principal H. Wheeler Robinson, in his chapter in Baptists in Britain, writes: "The relation of Baptists to the State during this century (prior to 1689) passed through three general phases. (1) In the first (1612-1640) they were naturally the objects of persecution, since they were offenders against both civil and ecclesiastical law by their 'conventicles.' . . . (2) In the second phase (1640-1660) Baptists profited by the removal of Stuart tyranny, themselves contributing largely to Cromwell's army and its officers. . . . (3) The third phase (1660-1686) brought a return of persecution, though from the Episcopalian Parliament rather than from the Crown."

Keach was born precisely at the beginning of the second phase, and grew up therein. He went to Winslow to begin his ministry precisely at the beginning of the third phase, the second epoch of persecution under the Stuart kings. Christ's young servant went forward with the spirit of this prayer in his heart: "God grant my only cowardice may be, afraid to be afraid." Very soon this fearless preacher was a marked man and was in trouble. "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake." This blessedness was vouchsafed to Benjamin Keach in large measure. The storm broke when he was twenty-four years of age.

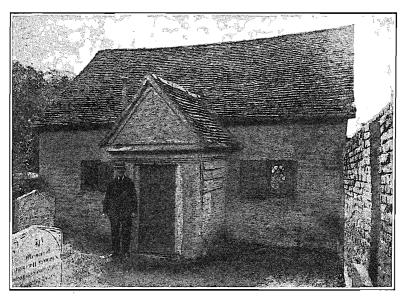
Some good people think that Baptists neglect the training of the young because they practise Believers' Baptism only. The case of Keach illustrates how erroneous such a belief is. He would not compromise on the question of Believers' Baptism, but it was his emphasis on the importance of spiritual instruction for children which first got him into serious difficulties. In 1664, Keach wrote and published a little book called The Child's Instructor, or a New and Easy Primer. Hear John C. Foster on this most important subject: "No more useful book for a child can be conceived of. It is educational; containing the alphabet, instructions in spelling and composition, lists of numerals and exercises in arithmetic, religious injunctions, verses and hymns; with an eulogistic preface by 'Hansard Knowles.' Altogether, a book calculated to make a studious child's heart leap for joy." In this famous volume he forthwith and without apology rejected the official Church teaching on Baptism as taught in the Catechism. "It was the Rector of Stoke Hammond, Thomas Disney, who was the first to give information against Keach for printing his Child's Primer, and caused his arrest: (Disney had been presented to that living under the Common-wealth, and had conformed at the Restoration)." Immediately,

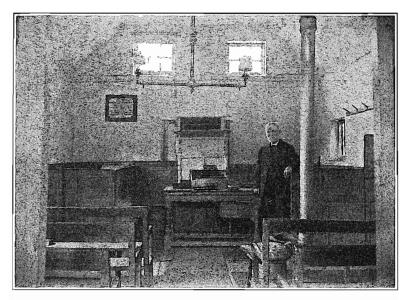
Mr. Strafford, J.P., taking Constable Neal of Winslow with him, went and arrested Keach and seized all his books. He was tried at the Aylesbury Assizes, October 8th, 1664, before Chief Justice Hyde. Unfortunately for Keach, the Chief Justice had not learned to obey the prophet's injunction to walk humbly, love mercy and do justly. After an unfair trial, the Judge proceeded to pass sentence on Keach as follows: "Benjamin Keach, you are here convicted of writing and publishing a seditious and scandalous book, for which the court's judgment is this, and the court doth award that you shall go to gaol for a fortnight without bail or mainprise, and the next Saturday to stand upon the pillory at Aylesbury for the space of two hours, from eleven of the clock to one, with a paper upon your head with this inscription, For writing, printing, and publishing a schismatical book entitled: The Child's Instructor, or a New and Easy Primer,' and the next Thursday to stand in the same manner and for the same time in the market of Winslow, and there your book shall be openly burnt before your face by the common hangman, in disgrace of you and your doctrine." The sentence was carried out in the letter and in the spirit. Did it achieve its purpose and silence the preacher? He preached from the pillory and was not ashamed to be there for Christ's sake. Did it cause him to lay down his pen? He rewrote the Primer and many editions were published. In Boston, New England, it was published in 1685, and it became the foundation of the famous New England Primer which ran to scores of editions. The trial made him a marked man by foes and friends. His enemies gave him little respite. Four years later, when he was twenty-eight years of age he went to London.

"Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us" about John Bunyan, I regret that no Baptist historian has been constrained to write: "It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding, or even imperfect understanding of all things from 1640 to 1704, to write unto thee in order, dear reader, concerning most excellent Benjamin Keach." One day, perhaps, someone will do him justice and put us in debt. His trial and testing proved that he could not be hid. "Londoners," says Dr. Whitley, "had their eye on Bucks. because of the death-sentence passed there on conventiclers. He soon was encouraged to migrate to town, and took charge of an off-shoot from the ancient church founded by Elias Tookey in Southwark. But coming into contact with Kiffin and Knollys, he considered the points of difference, and declared himself a Calvinist. This led, of course, to his founding a new church, which in his later career erected a meeting-house on Goat Street.



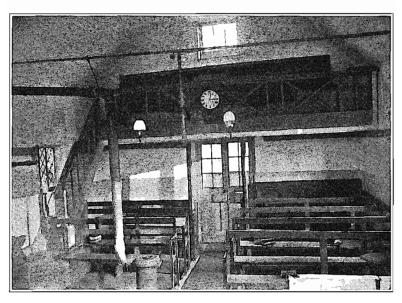
Exterior Views of Benjamin Keach's Meeting-House. Photographed by Mr. J. H. Turnham, of Winslow.





Interior Views of Benjamin Keach's Meeting-House.

Photographed by Mr. J. H. Turnham, of Winslow.



Horsleydown." Keach went to London in 1668. His first wife died in 1670, and in 1672 he married again. This second wedding proved to be a pivotal point. The new Mrs. Keach was apparently a Particular Baptist, but details are lacking. It is certain that at this time Keach quitted the church which had ordained him, and, taking a few attached converts, he founded another in Goat Yard. His deserted church is now housed on Borough Road, his new church died in 1853, but a split in the time of his son-in-law, Thomas Crosby, now flourishes at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. (See Dr. Whitley's Baptists of London, pages 110, 112.)

Arriving in London from Winslow, young Keach would have understood the mind and mood of Keats when he sang:

—Then felt I like some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken;

He and his good wife must have

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise-

but, unlike stout Cortez, Keach did not remain silent. As in the beginning, in his native Bucks, so, during the three dozen years he lived in London, he was a man of great and good courage. He could truly testify:

> The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?

This brave man was ever a very busy man. Ever about his Father's business, he never grew weary in well-doing. As preacher, writer, rhymester, apologist, controversialist, he was indefatigable. He wrote volumes of sermons like The Victorious Christian . . . Prison Meditations; A golden mine opened (40 sermons); The Display of Glorious Grace . . . in 14 sermons lately preached. He was a strong defender of Baptist faith and principles. He wrote: A Broadsheet criticising Baxter's arguments for Infant Baptism; Gold Refin'd, or Baptism in its Primitive Purity; Paedo-baptism disproved, Being an answer to the Athenian Society; The Rector rectified (about infant-baptism); Light broke forth in Wales expelling darkness. He was asked by Welshmen to reply to an attack on Baptists: this is the result, which they translated into Welsh. His attitude to Roman Catholicism was crystal clear: he wrote: Antichrist stormed, or the church of Rome proved to be mystery Babylon. He was a preacher AND teacher: his Child's Instructor was and is famous: and his Instructions for Youth saw its thirtieth edition by 1763.

His Expositions of the Parables made a most massive volume. "He ran neck and neck with Bunyan as a religious novelist, though he has not had the staying power there." Dr. Whitley writes: "He broke new ground in 1673 with a couple of dialogues, whereof the former was allegorical, War with the Devil; The Young Man's Conflict with the Powers of Darkness. Keach has seldom been recognised as the father of this species of literature, which he cultivated assiduously, though he was not quite original, for another Baptist, T.S., identified by some as Thomas Sherman, had already found a demand for three editions of his Youth's Tragedy, which he followed up with Youth's Comedy, besides the Song of Solomon in metre and a more directly religious work, Divine Breathings. This first dialogue of Keach ran to twenty-two editions within a century." I have a copy before me which was printed in Leeds in 1795 by John Binns. On page 144 Keach puts these words into the mouth of the "Professor," and I quote them since they give us an insight into the sovereign passion of his own soul:

If father, mother, and dear brother too,
Forsake me quite; yet still I well do know
My precious Saviour will my soul embrace,
And I shall see sweet smiles from his dear face.
Myself, and my relations all, though dear,
I do deny, such is the love I bear
To my dear Lord, whose servant now am I,
And do resolve to be, until I die.
Come life, come death, for Canaan I'll endeavour,
It is my home and resting-place for ever.

When Keach found that a "Bedfordshire brazier (Bunyan) was ploughing with his heifer, he put forth The Travels of True Godliness, which was revised and reprinted for a hundred and fifty years." I will give one prose and one verse extract from this work. On page 46 we read: "At this answer the dispute ended; and Riches perceiving his chaplain was worsted, envied True Godliness much more, and raised all the rabble of the town upon him; amongst which were these following: Pride-Ignorance - Wilful - Hard-heart - Belly-god - Giddy-head-Pick-thank — Rob-faint —, and much more of such like rustical and ill-bred fellows: And moreover, he swore if he would not be gone the sooner, he would send for the two constables, Oppression and Cruelty, to lay him fast enough; at which poor Godliness was fain to get away, and hide himself, or else for certain he would have been knocked on the head, or basely put to death; but he being out of their reach, by the providence of God, escaped without any hurt to himself, but many of his poor friends were sadly abused, who stood up to speak on his behalf, being reproached as the vilest of men."

On page 127 Godliness bewails Apostate's condition:

Farewell, farewell, thou monster of mankind, Look east and west, see, see if you can find A man who may with this sad soul compare: Will he return? or if he does, is there A ground to hope repentance he may meet, Who treads the truth, nay Jesus, under feet? Can any man on earth here come to be A full complete and just epitome Of sin and wroth? O then, sirs, this is he Who turns his back on Christ, to Babel flies, He unto falsehood cleaves, the truth denies.

Keach then wrote *The Progress of Sin*, or the *Travels of Ungodliness*, which had an equal vogue. In this "The Pedigree, Rise, and Antiquity of Sin is fully discovered; in an apt and pleasant Allegory; Together with the great Victories he hath obtained, and the abominable Evil he has done to Mankind, by the help of the Devil, in all his Travels, from the beginning of the World to this very Day. Also, The Manner of his Apprehension, Arraignment, Trial, Condemnation, and Execution."

On page 162 Sin is on trial; "For hark; the trumpet

sounds already, and the Judge is just gone to the bench.

"The Jury summoned were these following: New-man, Sound-Judgment, Divine-Reason, Enlightened-Understanding, Godly-Fear, Holy-Revenge, Vehement-Desire, Fiery-Zeal of the town of Knowledge, Right-Faith, True-Love, Impartiality, Spiritual-Indignation. A long list of witnesses give evidence against Sin and anon the Jury found him guilty."

As a religious novelist, probably Keach was excelled by one

alone, the mighty master, Bunyan of Bedford.

Some of this London Baptist minister's writings were published in America. The articles of the faith of the congregation at Horseleydown had a great influence on American usage, being used in a confession of 1742, and it is still a standard work in the Southern States.

Before taking cognizance of one more unique attainment by Keach, let us note that this preacher and publisher was also a printer. "Authorship and printing were closely associated, and it is possible that Keach's income was derived not only from the sale of his numerous books, but from a printing-shop which presently appears in the name of his son Elias." The same authority, Dr. Whitley, tells me that Keach was a book-seller and that he had no rival except Kiffin.

Benjamin Keach wrote hundreds of hymns, and was a pioneer in advocating the singing of hymns in congregational worship. As Baptists must be given an honourable place in

the study of the history of the fight for freedom of conscience to worship God, in the study of evangelism, foreign missionary work, and Sunday School work, so, because of Keach, they must be given an honourable place in the study of the writing and singing of hymns. He wrote a new hymn each week to drive home the points of his sermon; he persuaded his congregation to sing them at a time when the rest of England had settled down to the Psalter only. In 1691 he published a book of nearly 300 hymns. It was called Spiritual Melody. As early as 1664, when he was but twenty-four, he had published hymns for children to learn. In 1675, in War with the Devil, Keach had essayed a small collection of "hymns and spiritual songs," containing, amongst others, "A Mystical Hymn of Thanksgiving." It has the verse:

My soul mounts up with Eagle's wings, And unto Thee, dear God, she sings; Since Thou art on my side, My enemies are forc'd to fly As soon as they do Thee espy, Thy Name be glorifi'd.

Keach was born in 1640 and Isaac Watts in 1674. Keach wrote hymns earlier than 1664: Watts wrote no hymns till 1694. Keach published hymns in 1664, 1675 and 1691: Watts published no hymns till 1707, three years after the death of Keach. The honour of first introducing hymns into the regular worship of an English congregation, established or dissenting, belongs to Benjamin Keach. Just as he was excelled by Bunyan as a writer of religious novels, so he was excelled by Watts as a writer of sacred songs: but it still remains true that he was in the field before either, respectively; he was the pioneer, and as such we honour him. "World-wide has been his influence in promoting hymns." In Keach's time, religious verse was a powerful and popular medium of teaching and propaganda: few used it to better effect than he did over a period of many years. The quantity he produced was generous: what shall we say of the quality? Benjamin's most generous friends cannot claim that he was a bard, nor can his least generous foes truly gainsay the influence for good which his manifold rhymes had in a very large constituency of readers and admirers in his own and later generations. Mr. Spurgeon's estimate of Keach's poetry is decidedly frank and not flattering: "As for the poetry of Keach's works, the less said the better. It is a rigmarole almost equal to John Bunyan's rhyming, but hardly up to the mark of honest John." We may put it in Blake's classic couplet:

> The languid strings do scarcely move, The sound is forced, the notes are few.

Let me give you samples of his rather better and of his rather worse efforts as found in *Spiritual Melody*. First, the better:

O Virgins know, both Fools and Wise, The Bridegroom is at hand: He comes, He comes, let it suffice, But who with Him shall stand?

Cast off your drowze, let's all awake,
'Tis not a time to slumber:
But speedily our Lamps let's take
And haste to the Wedding-Chamber:

The mid-night cry will soon be heard—
Will quickly come away;
For certainly our dearest Lord
His chariots will not stay.

Here are three specimens which justify the critics. They are chosen by Dr. Robinson.

Our wounds do stink and are corrupt, Hard swellings we do see; We want a little ointment, Lord, Let us more humble be. (p. 173.)

Repentance like a bucket is
To pump the water out;
For leaky is our ship, alas,
Which makes us look about. (p. 254.)

Here meets them now that worm that gnaws, And plucks their bowels out; The pit, too, on them shuts her jaws, This dreadful is, no doubt. (p. 312.)

Shall we agree and leave it at that?

Few, if any, of his hymns are sung to-day, but in his day, and long afterwards, they were a blessing to many; they did much to spread and defend Baptist principles, "they enshrine and perpetuate records of persecution bravely borne in the cause of religion. Many of them might well have been called 'Baptist Prison Poems'." When we sing the songs of Zion in God's House, let us remember what we owe to the Baptist pioneer, Benjamin Keach, and give God thanks for him.

Let us sum up. Keach was born in a humble home in a little village in the country. There did he live and move and have his being during the first two decades of his life. He was not born great, nor did he have greatness thrust upon him, he achieved real greatness through character and capacity and courage. Early in life he could say: "Life means Christ to me," and soon, in Believers' Baptism, he said to all whom it may have concerned: "Stand thou on that side—if you will, for on this,

am I." As a child, Nature was his gentle nurse, and in his 'teens the Grace of Christ inspired his heart with a holy ambition to serve God and man. These were the schoolmasters which prepared Keach for his life of adventure and accomplishment. Dangers and difficulties, and there were many, did not daunt him, his strength the more was, because he waited upon God. This was true of him and of his ilk,

Whether beneath was flinty rock Or yielding grassy sod.

He refused to obey man rather than God, and suffered for Christ's sake. Gladly did he bear the cross, and thus found the burden light. He was stern, but human enough to rejoice in the love of wife and laughter of little children. It is clear that he accepted the Master's words in the letter and in the spirit: "Of such is the kingdom of heaven." He wrote and wrought for them. Freedom to work and worship as the Spirit led him—he bought at a great price. Preaching, teaching, writing prose or verse, printing, publishing, all these were means by which this self-taught man and messenger of God proclaimed the Good News to men in the last four decades of the turbulent seventeenth century. Keach had the limitations of his own forceful nature and fiery times, but we do well to honour him, and we ought never to suffer his name to be forgotten.

In July, 1704, in the sixty-fourth year of his course, the Lord, in His great mercy, granted Benjamin Keach "Safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord." God's servant was buried at the Baptist Burying-Ground, in the Park, Southwark. "His soul goes marching on."

ADAM A. REID.