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The Baptist Connections of George Dyer.

A POSTSCRIPT TO E. V. LUCAS'S *LIFE OF*
CHARLES LAMB.

IN E. V. Lucas's *Life of Charles Lamb*, chapter xiv. is devoted to a pen portrait of George Dyer, writer, bookworm and very minor poet, who appears in the pages of both Lamb and Hazlitt, warmly regarded by them both, and in sundry other literary memoirs of the early nineteenth century. It is an attractive picture that E. V. Lucas gives, of an eccentric character, of considerable learning, absent-minded, kindly, taking himself very seriously and with some excellent stories attaching to him. Dyer was the subject of Lamb's amusing essay *Amicus Redivivus*, which tells how his elderly friend walked thoughtlessly into the New River in 1823. Hazlitt, in *On the Look of a Gentleman*, called Dyer one of "God Almighty's gentlemen." In the year of the centenary of his death, he should not be altogether forgotten.

For Baptists, Dyer has special interest. He received help for a time from the Baptist Fund. He was one of the biographers—and the earliest—of Robert Robinson, of Cambridge, and Wordsworth regarded his book as one of the best biographies in the language, though this is a monstrous exaggeration. Dyer was, for a brief and apparently inglorious period "a dissenting minister" in Oxford. Later, he taught in Ryland's famous school at Northampton. These Baptist links have led Dr. Whitley to include Dyer in the *Index of Notable Baptists*, published by the Baptist Historical Society, and to list his works in the *Baptist Bibliography*, Vol. II. This may seem to be stretching the net rather wide, for there is no clear evidence that Dyer was ever baptized; and by the time he came to London in 1792 and began his literary career, he was only loosely connected with Dissent, and, if of any definite denominational allegiance, a Unitarian, owing much to the kindly interest of the Rev. William Frend, of Cambridge. Dyer was, however, clearly for some years, in the early part of his life, well acquainted with a number of Baptists.

It is not easy to disentangle the chronology of his early manhood. There are a number of errors in the account given by E. V. Lucas (which first appeared in 1905), and the article on Dyer prepared subsequently for the *Dictionary of National Biography* by Sir Leslie Stephen neither corrects nor substantially adds to the information there given. The object of this article is to draw attention to one or two mistakes which have been made,

to submit an alternative plan of Dyer's movements, and to put one or two queries.

* * * * *

Dyer was born in 1755, the son of a watchman at Wapping. Through the nomination of some kindly ladies, he entered the Blue Coat School and was there from 1762 to 1774. This was, of course, long before Charles Lamb's days at Christ's Hospital, but it must have provided one of the many links between them. Dyer did well at school, became a "Grecian," which almost always implied preparation for Holy Orders, and in 1774 went up to Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

E. V. Lucas sets out his subsequent movements as follows :

(1) "On taking his degree in 1778, Dyer became an usher in a school at Dedham." (*Life of Charles Lamb*, 5th edition, 1921, Vol. I. p. 175.)

(2) "Leaving Dedham, Dyer entered the family of Robert Robinson of Cambridge. . . . That valiant Dissenter was then living at Chesterton with his numerous children to whom George Dyer was to act as tutor. At that time Dyer was fully intending to take orders, as all Grecians were expected to, but under Robinson's influence he too became a Unitarian and gave up his ecclesiastical projects. Robinson . . . died in 1790, leaving Dyer to edit his *History of Baptism* and his *Ecclesiastical Researches*, and then to write his life in 1796." (*ibid.*, p. 179.)

(3) "Change of faith having brought his intended career to an end, Dyer returned to teaching after Robinson's death, and it was then that he joined Dr. Ryland in a school at Northampton. . . . That was in 1791." (p. 179.)

(4) "In 1792, making up his mind as to his true vocation, Dyer turned his steps to London." (p. 180.)

Certain of these statements are shown to be incorrect by a letter which E. V. Lucas himself quotes. It was written by Dyer to William King in 1820 (the date is of some importance), and appeared with Dyer's memoir in the thirty-eighth volume of the *Mirror of Literature*. Its purpose was to correct the suggestion that the Elia essay, *Oxford in the Vacation*, which contained some allusions to Dyer's experiences as an usher, related to Dr. Grimwood's school at Dedham. In the course of it Dyer has a good deal to say also about Ryland's school, and remarks that he "continued here (i.e. at Northampton) much longer than it was at first intended by him, or than was expected by his past employer." The general tenor of his remarks would not at all fit starting at the school in 1791 and leaving it in 1792, as E. V. Lucas suggests. But, as a matter of fact, the school was not in Northampton at that time. Some years before, Ryland's eccentricity and his liberality (to which Dyer alludes) led him

into "pecuniary embarrassments" (the phrase is Dr. Culross's in *The Three Rylands*, p. 58), and in 1785 he left Northampton and transferred the famous school to Enfield. There, in the neighbourhood of London, both Ryland and his school took on a new lease of life, Ryland continuing active till his death on July 24th, 1792. Dyer is quite specific that he was with Ryland in Northampton, and we must therefore assume that he was at the school prior to 1786.

It may here be pointed out that in Dyer's letter, as printed by E. V. Lucas, there are references to Ryland as "The Rev. Dr. Ryland", "Dr. Ryland", "The Rev. Mr. Ryland" and "Mr. Ryland". If this was so in the original, it is a very early example of a careless method of address which has frequently led to confusion between John Collett Ryland (1723-92) and John Ryland (1753-1825), his son. The former was an A.M., *honoris causa*, of Brown University, Rhode Island, the latter an A.M. and D.D. of the same University. Ryland the elder never had a doctorate. Dyer cannot be alluding to Ryland the younger, who certainly helped his father in school as well as church, since he says, writing in 1820, "the gentlemen with whom George Dyer was connected at school are now deceased." Moreover, his description is patently of John Collett Ryland, and this identification is made trebly sure by the remark of Robert Robinson about Ryland's greatness, which the letter quotes.

A further interesting and romantic point makes it more certain still that Dyer was with Ryland prior to 1786. E. V. Lucas records that one of Dyer's colleagues at the Northampton school was John Clarke, father of another of Lamb's friends, Charles Cowden Clarke, and states that Dyer and Clarke both loved the same lady, "the Rev. Dr. Ryland's step-daughter" (*op. cit.*, p. 180). John Collett Ryland's first wife died in 1779, and in 1782 he married Mrs. Stott, the widow of an army officer. The date of this second marriage, which seems to have escaped Ryland's biographers, is given in *The History of College Street Church, Northampton*, 1897, p. 33. The rivalry of Dyer and Clarke ended in success for the latter and Charles Cowden Clarke was born on December 15th, 1787, at Enfield. John Clarke undertook much of the responsibility for Ryland's school in the Enfield years, and continued it after Ryland's death. It is interesting to note that later on John Keats (born 1795), was one of his pupils. We may take it for granted that, though John Clarke and George Dyer remained friends, they did not continue as colleagues in the school after Dyer's failure to win the hand of Miss Stott, and this is further evidence for the necessity of dating Dyer's time with Ryland prior to 1786.

* * * *

We turn now to the problem of Dyer's movements between 1778 and 1786. In the Bunyan Library there is a volume entitled *Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge*, edited, with memoir, by the Rev. William Robinson, London, 1861. In the preface thereto, these sentences occur in reference to George Dyer and his 1796 *Memoir*. "This gentleman (i.e. Dyer), while a member of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, had frequently worshipped with the Dissenters. Dissatisfied with the Establishment, he left both it and his College; and for about a year was under Mr. Robinson's tuition, receiving pecuniary assistance from the Baptist fund. In 1781 he went to preach to a dissenting congregation at Oxford, and was an example of the incompetency of most seceders from the Establishment for the position and duties of dissenting ministers." (p.v.). This is rather an ill-natured gibe, but the facts recorded are confirmed by Dyer himself. In his *Memoir of the Rev. Robert Robinson*, he says that his acquaintance with Robinson began to strengthen from the latter end of 1777 (p. 124), that is, no doubt, when he was still an undergraduate. "On leaving Emanuel College, Cambridge," he writes, "I was assigned as a kind of pupil to Robinson by the baptist fund in London. . . . I left Robinson at the expiration of the twelvemonth and went to preach to a dissenting congregation at Oxford in 1781." (p. 178n.) "In the year 1779 I left the Cambridge Dissenters after an acquaintance with Robinson for nearly a twelvemonth. My original grounds of disapproving the established church; for connecting myself with the Cambridge dissenters, and, afterwards, for a temporary desertion of them; as well as for my more intimate relation to dissenting assemblies in future life, and, at length, for a final separation from all, as associated religious bodies, it would be improper now to unfold." (p. 178, each phrase here is important). Further on in the book, alluding to Robinson's scheme for a Baptist College in Cambridge, Dyer says: "It was the wish of Robinson, as appears from many of his letters, though to me he never communicated his design, that I should have been employed as a tutor; but, indeed, the wavering state of my mind left small room for any confidential repose in my exertions; and my subsequent rejection of baptism, the badge of this intended college, would have raised an insuperable difficulty in the way of my future success." (p. 189.) William Robinson's ill-natured comment on this singularly candid passage is:—"It is a ludicrous proof of the mistakes into which very sagacious men may fall, that he thought Providence was smiling on the design by raising up a suitable tutor in the person of George Dyer!" Dyer's hesitation about baptism may be studied in a sixteen-page "postscript" to the second edition of his *Inquiry into the Nature of Subscription*

to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. It is headed "Additional Remarks on Baptism." "I have paused again and again on this subject, and impartially weighed the probabilities on both sides." Difficulties relating to "the perpetuity of the rite" seem to have been his chief stumbling block.

The Baptist Fund existed to help ministers of the Calvinistic persuasion, and it was generally felt that none but orthodox preachers should receive help from it. Robinson wanted its benefits made available to all, and this was one of the issues between him and his fellow Baptists in his later years. Dyer records that he was never himself asked to sign any articles of faith before receiving help from the fund, and that had he been, he "would certainly have reckoned it the greatest insult they could have offered me." He continues: "But I rather suspect that Robinson used, if not a *pious*, at least a *benevolent* fraud on this occasion. To speak the truth, I never knew the actual relation in which I stood to this generous man, till a few days from writing this paragraph. All I knew was, (for I was extremely inattentive to many things that occurred at the period now alluded to) that Robinson discovered for me the greatest friendship; that I was much indebted to himself and many of his friends; that I resided with him a twelvemonth; that I used to preach for him occasionally, and that during my continuance at his house, he requested of me, *as a particular favour*, to draw up a Latin treatise on the Scripture-doctrine of justification, with an English translation, which he wished to show some of my London friends; this was accordingly performed." (pp. 299-300n.)

On Dyer's stay in Oxford, which appears to have been brief and ill-fated, I am unable to throw any more light than is provided by the casual references of Dyer himself and of William Robinson, which have already been quoted. Hinton's *Historical Sketch of Eighteen Baptist Churches included in the Oxfordshire Association*, a pamphlet published at Oxford in 1821, has in it no mention of Dyer. The dissenting interest in Oxford sank to a very low ebb in the middle of the eighteenth century. Then there was some revival, not unconnected with the work of Wesley and Whitefield. It was in 1780 that the present New Road Baptist Church was formed, though there was regular preaching far earlier. The original group of members numbered fourteen, of whom the majority were Baptists. The new start then made was initiated by the Rev. Daniel Turner, of Abingdon, and the first pastor is said to have been the Rev. Edward Prowitt, who when he adopted heterodox views in 1787, was succeeded by James Hinton. Now it is perhaps significant for our present purpose that Daniel Turner, of Abingdon, was a friend and

correspondent of Robert Robinson, of Cambridge. Was George Dyer introduced by the latter to the former as a likely first minister of the new cause? What happened at Oxford is probably now undiscoverable. E. V. Lucas quotes from the *Memoirs of Augustus De Morgan* by Mrs. De Morgan, a daughter of William Frend, a rather naughty story, which, considering Dyer's notorious absent-mindedness, may perhaps be founded on an actual incident, though clearly it is not to be dated, as is suggested, before 1774. "At one period of his life," writes Mrs. De Morgan, "I fancy before he went as a sizar to Emmanuel College—Dyer was a Baptist minister. I have seen his consternation and alarm when thus reminded of his ministrations by my father.

Wm. Frend: 'You know, Dyer, that was before you drowned the woman.'

G. Dyer: 'I never drowned any woman!'

Wm. Frend: 'You have forgotten.' To the company generally: 'Dyer had taken the woman's hand and made her dip in the water; he then pronounced the benediction and left her there.'

G. Dyer (troubled): 'No, no; you are joking. It could not be!''

Admittedly, it is not easy to fit his Dedham experiences into Dyer's own references to Cambridge and Oxford, but in the letter of 1820, already quoted, Dyer says that he stayed in Dedham "only a twelvemonth", and continues: "It was at this school that George Dyer (to borrow Elia's expression) 'commenced life'; afterwards he became the inmate of the Rev. Dr. Ryland." Did Dyer go to Dedham immediately after leaving Emanuel College, or after he had been with Robert Robinson? On the whole, the former alternative seems more likely. In the 1820 letter, Dyer says that "it was a point of honour that led to his determination to leave Dedham", and this may have had relation to the question of subscription to the thirty-nine articles. An ambitious volume on this subject was Dyer's earliest publication (1789; second enlarged edition, 1792), and that he felt very strongly on the matter at an earlier period is proved by the way he refers to it in the sentences quoted above in connection with the Baptist Fund.

A possible reconstruction of Dyer's movements would, therefore, be as follows:—(1) In 1777 or 1778 he went to Dedham for a twelvemonth. (2) In 1779, having finally surrendered any idea of entering the Church of England, he was befriended by Robert Robinson, who secured for him help from the Baptist Fund. (3) In 1781 he went to preach to the Oxford congregation with no very happy results. (4) In 1782 or 1783 he arrived in

Northampton, his special position as "a sort of supernumerary" (see the 1820 letter) being due to the fact that there was still hope that with more experience and training, he might make a Baptist minister. (5) About 1785 or 1786, when Ryland left Northampton, Dyer ceased to teach in the school.

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What then happened to him? Sir Leslie Stephen in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, after telling how Robert Robinson's influence had led him into Unitarianism, says that Priestley, Gilbert Wakefield and Mrs. Barbauld took notice of him and that he "lived in retirement at Swavesey, near Cambridge." Later, in 1787, Robinson's daughter, Julia, died, aged seventeen, and one of Dyer's elegies was written in her memory. Robert Robinson's diary for October 8th, 1788, runs: "Lord's Day. After service, Friend, Barham, Paulus, Dyer, another and myself, drank tea with the venerable Mr. Tyrwhitt." (Dyer's *Memoir*, p. 317. Bunyan Library Memoir, p. lxxxii.) Dyer's chapters on the controversies with Cambridge University in which Robinson and William Friend were involved, are clearly written out of intimate knowledge. Did Dyer, then, return to the neighbourhood of Cambridge, after being in Northampton, identify himself with the Unitarian circle, and lay the foundation of his later very varied erudition? Robinson died in Birmingham, in June, 1790, while on a visit to Priestley. The news moved Dyer to one of his poetical effusions. It will be found in his *Poetical Works*, Vol. I. (1802) with a note that he heard of his old friend's death when he was "relaxing after severer studies at Fenstanton, in Hunts." (p. 110.) Fenstanton was where William Friend frequently preached after he had become a Unitarian. In the *Memoir of Robinson* (pp. 399-400), Dyer says that "having been engaged in literary pursuits that had somewhat impaired his health," he was "unbending his mind at a friend's seat in Huntingdonshire, by attempting an ode," when "he was interrupted by receiving intelligence of the death of Mr. Robinson." Probably the work which had so taxed him was the preparation of the first edition of his *Inquiry into the Nature of Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles*.

The fact that Dyer was clearly in the Cambridge neighbourhood from, say, 1786 to 1792, when it is known he settled in Clifford's Inn, would help to explain E. V. Lucas's mistaken suggestion that he was in Robinson's household from 1779 to 1791, with its corollary, which we have seen to be impossible, that he was in Northampton from 1791 to 1792.

The reconstruction of events is admittedly not without difficulties, but it does account for most of the data. J. C. Ryland was an orthodox Calvinist and a believer in "the true and eternal

divinity of Christ." He would have had little sympathy with Unitarian views. Were Dyer's Oxford experiences and his years at Northampton an attempt to repay his debt to the Baptist Fund? And was it not until Miss Stott rejected his suit that he returned to Cambridge and embraced wholeheartedly the views of his old friend Robert Robinson? Are there any who can answer these questions or supply further information on this period in the life of George Dyer?

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

Letters to Dr. Rippon from New York.

IN vol. I. of the *Transactions* of the Baptist Historical Society (pp. 69-76), three lengthy letters from John Bowen of New York to his pastor, John Rippon of Carter Lane, were printed, with the following explanatory paragraph by Dr. Whitley :

After Benjamin Stinton, Thomas Crosby, and James Richardson, John Rippon continued this Southwark tradition of collecting materials for Baptist history. These three letters from one of his church members at Carter Lane, emigrated to New York, show his desire to get first-hand information. The glimpses at the American book trade and the state of the currency are interesting on other accounts. The letters belong to the Rev. Newton H. Marshall, Ph.D., who has lent them for printing.

Mr. Edward C. Starr, Curator of the Samuel Colgate Baptist Historical Collection, Hamilton, N.Y., writes that while studying vol. I. of the *Transactions* he realised that additional Bowen-Rippon letters were in his Collection, and he has forwarded copies in which "care has been taken to follow the original capitalization and spelling." We are much indebted to Mr. Starr for his kindness.

The letters printed below, particularly when read with those published in 1909, throw considerable light on the times, and supply interesting data on the distribution of books at the opening of the nineteenth century. The nature of the correspondence is such that all readers will wish we had the letters from John Rippon to complete the story. Possibly that is too much to expect.

In connection with the Spurgeon Centenary in 1934, I examined the Carter Lane Minute Books, and made a note