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Baptist Members of Parliament 1847-1914

RELATIVELY few Baptists have reached the House of Commons. It is hard to give a precise total. Too little evidence survives, especially from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for any catalogue to be definitive, but a rough calculation would put their number over the centuries at about eighty. Of these, some thirty-eight, about half, sat in the parliaments of the period from 1847 to 1914.¹ Before 1847 there had been no Baptist M.P.s at all for over sixty years, but from the parliament of that year they began to be returned in ones and twos. The trend was steadily upwards in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was both because the number of Baptists in the population was increasing and because more Baptists had achieved the social standing that was expected of a parliamentary candidate. The climax of the process came in 1906, when Baptists shared in the electoral triumph that brought some 180 Nonconformists into the Commons. There were therefore far more Baptist M.P.s towards the end of the period than near its beginning. They may be divided into three groups. First there is the handful who entered parliament before the Second Reform Act of 1867; secondly there is the larger number who were first returned between 1868 and 1899; and thirdly there is the sizable body of men elected between 1900 and 1914. Each group had characteristics stamped on them by their period, but each included men of outstanding individuality. This paper attempts to bring out something of what members of the groups had in common and also some of the personal qualities, even eccentricities, that marked them.

The early group of M.P.s returned between 1847 and 1867 included only four or five men. Evangelical Nonconformists as a whole were rare in parliament during the era between the First and Second Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. It is often supposed that middle-class electors returned men similar to themselves directly after parliament was reformed in 1832, and that there was consequently an influx of Nonconformists. In 1832, however, there was elected only a single M.P. from Evangelical Nonconformity, a Congregationalist, together with one Quaker and half a dozen Unitarians.² The electorate, even in the growing industrial towns, still preferred to vote for representatives of the landed interest, men of wide acres and social *éclat*, the class that formed the establishment in church and state. The political system was dominated by the Anglican aristocracy and gentry. Nonconformists began to hold local office in considerable numbers after the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, but entry to parliament was seldom within their grasp. They were out of the centres of power. The few Nonconformists who were returned in these years therefore had something of the spirit of pioneers. They were self-conscious reformers, wishing to modify the existing order in church and state. Yet

they were also moderate men. They wanted change to be neither too drastic nor too rapid. They were used to a deferential society in which landed property automatically occupied the uppermost ranks. Two of the Baptist M.P.s of these years had been born in the hierarchically-minded eighteenth century. Politically, they were not Radicals and some were hardly Liberals. They were Whigs, even if Whigs of a rather advanced kind.

These traits are well illustrated in Richard Harris, M.P. for Leicester from 1848 and a deacon of the Charles Street Baptist Church there. His father, a master stocking-maker, wanted him to learn techniques of fancy weaving and so sent him in the 1790s from Leicester to Nottingham — a change, according to his biographer, that “by no means contributed to his moral well-being”. He was there swayed by infidel literature. On his return to Leicester, however, he was converted through the ministry of the predecessor of Robert Hall at Harvey Lane Baptist Church and became a close friend of the great Robert Hall himself. Harris prospered in the manufacture of fancy hosiery like cravats and braces, and by the 1840s had the extremely large weekly payroll of £1,000. He was returned to Leicester corporation at the first election after the Municipal Corporations Act. Harris was committed to reform. He was a founder of the Leicester branch of the Anti-Corn Law League that aimed to abolish the tariff barrier protecting the agricultural interest, and between 1830 and 1832 he promoted a distinctively Baptist reform. In the absence of public registration of births, marriages and deaths, the only equivalent of a birth certificate was the entry of infant baptism in parish church records. Baptists were left without formal documentation of their birth, often a severe handicap at law. Harris successfully pressed through his M.P. for a bill legalizing family and chapel registers that had been regularly kept. Overall in politics, as his biographer put it, “he boldly and consistently advocated progressive reforms in every department of State”. Yet, according to the same authority, “he was averse to extremes, considering that political privileges gradually obtained are more properly used”. He was deferential by temperament. The highlight of his career was a visit to Belvoir Castle, the seat of the Duke of Rutland, to meet the Queen in his capacity as Mayor of Leicester. He was immensely gratified to be noticed by the Duke of Wellington on a pre-breakfast stroll. In national politics Harris was a quiet backbencher for one parliament only.³ Perhaps his moderation helps explain why he did not transmit his own religious convictions to one of his sons, J. D. Harris, who was subsequently M.P. for Leicester, but who conformed to the Church of England.⁴

A similar man was Sir George Goodman, a wool merchant who sat for Leeds in the 1852 parliament. He was brought up at South Parade Baptist Church in the city, but made no public profession of faith until he joined the Great George Street Church at the age of fifty-eight. Goodman was a bachelor noted for his “sunny smile”, generosity to the poor and hard work. He had no time to read anything, he told his minister, except his Bible and the newspaper. He gave so much attention to his parliamentary work that he suffered from paralysis and neuralgia. Goodman was the first mayor of the reformed Leeds corporation and supported Whig reforms. Like the Leeds wool interest as a whole, however, his politics were far

from extreme. He was credited, for instance, with doing most to tone down the feud between the Reform and Conservative parties on the corporation. And he had a respect for rank. He counted as a friend the Earl of Carlisle, who recommended him for a knighthood in 1851. He was conciliatory and moderate. Sir George Goodman was remembered as a Christian gentleman.⁵

Rather more politically advanced was Sir Morton Peto, a well-known figure to the public at large in high Victorian England. Disraeli once jokingly referred to Nonconformists being "Pedo or Peto Baptists", and Peto was the prototype for more than one successful Dissenting entrepreneur in nineteenth-century fiction. He is the model, for instance, of John Power, the Baptist contractor and M.P. in Thomas Hardy's *A Laodicean*.⁶ Sir Morton was a building and railway contractor. He was responsible for the main line from London to Norwich, Nelson's Column and parts of Parliament. His annual turnover ran into millions of pounds and his personal expenditure in the 1850s was over £15,000. He was capable of princely munificence to Baptist causes: he built Bloomsbury (where he was one of the first deacons) and Regent's Park churches, contributed £5,000 to the Metropolitan Tabernacle, did much for the Baptist Building Fund and was a generous treasurer of the B.M.S. for twenty-one years. His world crashed about him when in 1866, through no fault of his own, his firm went bankrupt with outstanding liabilities of about £1,000,000. In 1847 Peto had been the first Baptist to be elected to parliament in the nineteenth century, beating Harris by one year. He stood as a Whig, defeating a candidate at Norwich put up by the extreme Dissenters, and was sufficiently loyal to the Whig leadership to be invited to second the address to the Crown in 1851. But he used this opportunity for an uncompromising endorsement of free trade, the cause of the commercial interest, and he was not shackled by his party allegiance from criticizing Whig governments. He published a treatise on *Taxation* in 1863 censuring Palmerston for spending too much, especially on fortifications, and urging that taxes should be kept to a minimum. He also took up Dissenting causes. In 1850 he carried what became known as "Sir Morton Peto's Act" simplifying the administration of chapel trusts, and from 1861 to 1863 he unsuccessfully introduced bills to permit Nonconformist burials in parish churchyards. For some years in the 1850s and 1860s he was chairman of the Protestant Dissenting Deputies, the premier Nonconformist pressure groups for protecting civil rights. Sir Morton Peto was perhaps the most distinguished Nonconformist of his day.⁷

Two other M.P.s of this early period must be mentioned. One was John Candlish, a Sunderland ship-owner and glass-bottle manufacturer, who sat from 1866 to 1873. He had been brought up in Scottish Evangelical circles, which may explain why *The Baptist Magazine* described his theology as "somewhat narrow". He had been a Tory in his youth, but, like Peto, he became a staunch free trader.⁸ The other was Henry Winterbotham, a barrister, the grandson of William Winterbotham, minister of Shortwood Baptist Church in Gloucestershire. Henry entered parliament in 1867 and, despite making a maiden speech in favour of Dissenting principles, joined Gladstone's first government as Under-Secretary in the Home Department

in 1871 while he was still in his early thirties. His promising career was cut short by death only two years later. Henry may well not have been a member of a Baptist church, but, like the other M.P.s of this period, he remained "an avowed, though not extreme, Nonconformist".⁹

The second group of M.P.s, those who were first elected between 1868 and 1899, were on the whole more Radical, more confident in their principles, even assertive in some cases. They were Liberals to a man. These were the years when Nonconformists were described, by Gladstone himself, as the backbone of the Liberal Party. Such an estimate was far truer of the electorate than of the parliamentary party, which was still dominated by Anglican gentry, but Nonconformists formed a bloc of progressive M.P.s that numbered at least forty throughout this period. They were chiefly men of commerce and industry, successful entrepreneurs.

Typical of the Baptists among them was Sir John Barran, a central figure in Leeds civic and philanthropic life and a member of South Parade, who represented the city from 1876 and another Yorkshire constituency from 1886. He had moved from London to Leeds as a pawnbroker when he was about twenty, began to specialise in dealing in clothes and at about thirty-five took up the manufacture of ready-made clothing which amassed him a fortune. Barran was the model of a self-made man. Politics was not his forte: Gladstone's son said kindly that Barran was a "practical, though not a good speaker". Parliament was simply the climax of a successful local career.¹⁰ The same was true of Briggs Priestley, a Pudsey worsted manufacturer; Jonathan Samuel, a Stockton-on-Tees grocer; and of Thomas Blake, an estate, news and advertising agent of Ross-on-Wye. Their political principles can be illustrated from an address by Blake to the electors of Leominster in 1875. He declared himself in favour of franchise reform, land law reform, revision of imperial and local taxation, promotion of religious equality, substitution of arbitration for war, reduction of national debt, checking of waste in public departments, abolition of game laws, repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, free and compulsory education, appointment of qualified magistrates, and every other measure that would "benefit and bless the people". He certainly qualified for his own label of being a "thorough Liberal", but politics was only a minor part of a busy life.¹¹ Rather more politically minded were Charles Townsend, a Bristol wholesale druggist and deacon of Tyndale Baptist Church,¹² and John Skirrow Wright, a Birmingham button manufacturer who was elected for Nottingham in 1880 but died on 15 April before taking his seat.¹³ Both were chairmen of their city's Liberal associations. Probably best known in this category of businessmen was J. J. Colman, the Norwich mustard manufacturer whom Gladstone conceived to be the typical Nonconformist M.P. of his day. Colman, however, cannot quite count as a Baptist M.P. He was a deacon of St Mary's, Norwich, but in 1870, the year before his election to parliament, his wife persuaded him to christen their children, and they shortly afterwards transferred to Princes Street Congregational Church. He regarded himself as a Nonconformist *tout court*, without specific denominational allegiance.¹⁴ These were men of impressive will-power whose local eminence was very much their own achievement. They had put the great nineteenth-century virtue of self-help into practice.

One of the most instructive of this generation of M.P.s was Robert Everett, exceptional among them in being a farmer. Everett, who sat for the Woodbridge division of Suffolk in the parliaments of 1885, 1892 and 1906, was deeply rooted in East Anglian Dissenting traditions. He was a deacon of Stoke Green Baptist Church, Ipswich, and his father had spent a year at Stepney College with the intention of entering the Baptist ministry.¹⁵ Everett's religious convictions carried over into his politics. In 1895 he proposed in the House of Commons that since nearly every ruler of England was commemorated by a statue in or about Westminster, Oliver Cromwell, the great Lord Protector, should take his place among the kings and queens. There was intense opposition from Irish Nationalists to whom Cromwell was a detested folk memory, but Everett's wish was fulfilled through the private generosity of Lord Rosebery.¹⁶ Everett earned extra income by writing weekly parliamentary reports for *The Christian World* from the standpoint of Nonconformity. He was also responsible in 1907 for proposing a Commons motion that the Church of England should be separated from the state.¹⁷ Everett was very much a militant Dissenter. There were two other dimensions to his politics. One was his defence of the agricultural interest. He first became well known in 1865 as the author of a prize essay urging the removal of the tax on malt that bore hard on barley growers, he stood for parliament in 1880 as a farmers' candidate and he sat on the Royal Commission on the Agricultural Depression of 1894-96.¹⁸ The other theme was his commitment to freedom. He was a temperance worker who had taken the pledge of total abstinence at a meeting addressed by General Booth. Yet his 1906 election poster proudly demanded, "Who worked to get the cottager . . . his cheap home-brewed beer?" Everett himself had persuaded the Chancellor of the Exchequer to abolish the licence on home brewing in 1886. The paradox of an opponent of drink encouraging drinking is resolved by recognizing how important freedom was in Everett's eyes. He believed in persuading others not to drink, but he refused to coerce them into abstinence. "He would not," he declared on the drink question in 1880, "interfere with any man's liberty." Similarly he had all eight of his children vaccinated, but protested against compulsory vaccination. In the Boer War he was one of the Nonconformists most convinced that Britain should not try to deprive the Dutch settlers in south Africa of their liberty. And he believed in the extension of the franchise as widely as possible — as early as 1907 he was in favour of women's suffrage. Everett pressed the liberty that was the kernel of Liberalism to a larger number of logical conclusions than most of his contemporaries.¹⁹

Another exception to the general rule that Baptist M.P.s were businessmen was William Willis, a barrister who rose to be a county court judge in Norfolk and then in London. Like Everett, Willis delighted in the Puritan tradition, and he assembled a magnificent collection of books on Cromwell, Milton, Bunyan, Cowper and Newton. He was something of an eccentric. In parliament he would put down motions worded in imitation of seventeenth-century precedents. He would become extremely heated in any ecclesiastical controversy left over from earlier centuries, and he specially disliked episcopacy. More than once he was seen to shake his fist

at Lambeth Palace while passing it in the train. To meet him at a Baptist Union assembly could be alarming. After one session he seized the lapel of a nearby delegate and berated him for losing the American colonies. Hardly surprisingly, Willis was not a serious politician. His election to represent Colchester in 1880 was a surprise, the result of a much greater Liberal swing than expected, and then was by only one vote. Willis, as contemporaries put it, was an "original".²⁰

There were, however, serious issues in which Baptist M.P.s played prominent parts. The single Baptist M.P. to come from Nottingham, Thomas Bayley, was one such. A member of Woodborough Road Church, he was a colliery owner who rose to be Sheriff of Nottingham before sitting in parliament for Chesterfield from 1892 to 1905. He took a keen interest in the welfare of black peoples around Britain's growing empire. His special concern was Rhodesia. Bayley objected to the system whereby the territory was governed by Cecil Rhodes' chartered company. It claimed to own all the land and many of the cattle, and imposed labour services on the black population amounting to little less than slavery. Bayley protested against these conditions, but his representations went largely unheeded.²¹ Bayley also became involved in what amounted to a Baptist political issue in 1903. Concern was growing in Britain over inhuman treatment by the authorities serving the Belgian King Leopold of the inhabitants of Zaire, then as now a B.M.S. field. The King, in a calculated attempt to turn British public opinion in favour of his rule, remitted one-third of the taxes imposed on the society. In Britain the King's chief agent was Sir Hugh Gilzean Reid, a newspaper proprietor based on Middlesbrough and himself a Baptist who had briefly, in 1885-86, been an M.P. Gilzean Reid, who had been decorated by the King of the Belgians, believed that he was capable of keeping his own territories in good order. He saw the chance for some good publicity for the King. He therefore took the B.M.S. secretary to Belgium to present an address of thanks for the tax remittance. The address was said to be a tribute to the King's "enlightened rule". The society, embarrassed at appearing to sanction cruel misgovernment, repudiated having used the phrase and the issue was given a public airing. Thomas Bayley was one of the leading Baptists who as a result were convinced that atrocities had been committed in Zaire and became a leading supporter of the Congo Reform movement. It was a strange incident in which leading protagonists on both sides were Baptists, but it helped give momentum to a campaign that over the next ten years exerted effective international pressure for reforms in Zaire.²²

None of the M.P.s so far discussed was anything like a politician of national standing. They did, however, exist in Baptist ranks. One was Alfred Illingworth, a Bradford worsted spinner, who was considered for a government post in 1882 as a representative of the "extreme left" of Liberalism, those who believed in a minimal role for the state in social and economic affairs.²³ According to Sidney Webb in 1892, Illingworth was the type of a sturdy, old-fashioned individualist.²⁴ Two years later he gained notoriety for trying to decree that his mill-girls should do one-third more work for the same pay.²⁵ He believed in hard work, and

once publicly condemned the royal family for doing none.²⁶ He was noted for a certain Yorkshire bluntness unmitigated by Yorkshire warmth. His eminence came chiefly from his position in the Liberation Society, the powerful Nonconformist pressure group aiming at separating church and state. He was its treasurer from 1872 to 1898 and declared on his retirement from parliament in 1895 that disestablishment was "the passion of his life".²⁷ Illingworth was insistent that the Church of England should receive no preference in any field, especially education. He campaigned energetically against state grants for church schools. His rather acerbic personality was a force to be reckoned with by late nineteenth-century governments.

Another leader of a sectional interest within Liberalism was W. S. Caine, a disciple and (remarkably) son-in-law and then brother-in-law of Hugh Stowell Brown, the Liverpool Baptist minister. Caine was a metal merchant, but retired in 1878 to devote himself to public life. Two years later he entered parliament, and — a sure sign of high political aspirations — he was to sit for four constituencies in different parts of the country. Caine was rewarded at an early stage by receiving a government post in 1884 as a Civil Lord of the Admiralty. His potential was never realized because in 1886 he followed Chamberlain in his Liberal Unionist revolt against Gladstone's Home Rule policy. Caine returned to Liberalism in 1890, but his disloyalty ensured that he was given no office in the 1892 Liberal administration. His chief political significance was therefore as a pressure group leader. Under Stowell Brown's influence he had early become a temperance worker in Liverpool, from 1880 he was president of the Baptist Total Abstinence Society and in parliament he was a leading spokesman for the temperance lobby and especially for its chief political organization, the United Kingdom Alliance. Unlike Everett, Caine believed in legislation to restrict drinking and ultimately in prohibition. He broke with the Liberal Unionists because he held that the Conservative government they were supporting was being too generous with liquor licensing measures. The temperance zealots are often thought of as gloomy busybodies trying to suppress the people's pleasures, and so it is worthwhile noting that Caine was nothing like that. He was popular with working men, ran a mission on Sundays for them on the South Lambeth Road and was described sympathetically by the Socialist press of his day as "a bluff, jolly man".²⁸

The remaining two M.P.s of this group were both Welshmen of some eminence. Sir Alfred Thomas, Lord Pontypridd from 1912, was a Cardiff public works contractor and director of the Taff Vale Railway. He was a lifelong member of Tabernacle Welsh Baptist Church, Cardiff, and chairman of the Baptist Union of Wales in 1885-86. Thomas was chiefly a spokesman on Welsh issues, acting as leader of the Welsh parliamentary group from 1898.²⁹ The other is so well known that there is no need to discuss his career here. David Lloyd George, the later Prime Minister, entered parliament for Caernarfon Boroughs in 1890. But it must be noted that he was normally seen as a Baptist. His religious convictions seem gradually to have faded, but he did not lose his fascination for good preaching, Welsh hymns and hymn tunes. He never gave up membership of Penymaes

Chapel, Criccieth, where his uncle was the guiding spirit and where he was baptized in 1875. The chapel was technically affiliated to the Churches of Christ, until in 1939, when Lloyd George was still an M.P., it joined the Baptist Union of Wales. And Lloyd George was honoured by the denomination: in 1905 he was a vice-president of the first Baptist World Congress, and in 1910 chairman of the Welsh Baptist Union. Where his heart lay it is perhaps impossible for the historian to say.³⁰

The third group of M.P.s consists of those who entered parliament from 1900 onwards. The greatest influx, in this period or in any other, took place in 1906 when, as part of a Liberal landslide, twelve new Baptist M.P.s took their seats. Altogether eighteen were members of the parliament of 1906-09. It was an exciting time when, at first, Nonconformity thought that something like the rule of the saints on earth was to begin. The M.P.s of this period were more varied than their predecessors, and included non-Liberals for the first time (setting aside Caine's temporary Unionist phase). They may be divided into four sub-groups.

First there were those who sat in parliament primarily as Nonconformists and whose chief concern was with the education issue. In 1902 the Unionist government had carried an Education Act which compelled local authorities to give rate aid to denominational schools, Anglican and Roman Catholic. Nonconformists were incensed that they should be expected to pay for instruction in forms of the Christian faith which, they believed, would imperil the children's salvation. John Clifford denounced it as "Rome on the rates". So strongly did Nonconformists feel that many refused to pay part of their rates and permitted the distraint of their goods instead. This formed the Passive Resistance movement. The Free Church Council, then very much a campaigning body, raised an election fund and did much to rouse Nonconformist enthusiasm for the electoral battle of 1906. It even approached Free Churchmen with a view to standing in forlorn-hope constituencies that lacked Liberal candidates.³¹ In the event the Liberal vote was so great that several, including a few Baptists, were unexpectedly returned. One was F. J. Marnham, a retired member of the Stock Exchange. Marnham was the treasurer of Highbury Hill Baptist Church and on many denominational committees, but was probably best known as the brother of Herbert Marnham, treasurer of the Baptist Union.³² Another was J. E. Sears, an architect active on the London County Council, the son of a Baptist minister, and a deacon of Hendon Baptist Church.³³ A third was Charles Goddard Clarke, a wholesale druggist and a member of the Metropolitan Tabernacle.³⁴ A fourth was George Hay Morgan, a barrister who had previously been minister of Woodberry Down Baptist Church, London. His preaching experience enabled him to gain most of the publicity he needed in his Cornish constituency through taking an active part in the Wesleyan preachers' plan.³⁵ All these men were passive resisters. Hay Morgan had actually been a victim of educational discrimination against Nonconformists. He had been a pupil teacher in an Anglican school, but had left when he was told that he must join the Church of England if he was to become a qualified teacher. In parliament he held the post of secretary to the Nonconformist M.P.s' committee that met to co-ordinate education policy

for negotiations with the government.³⁶ The education controversy brought into the Commons several M.P.s whose chief *raison d'être* was to press the claims of Nonconformity.

The most distinguished Baptist M.P. in the education controversy was Sir George White, a shoe manufacturer who represented Norwich from 1900 to 1912. White was a thorough-going Baptist. His father had been a deacon of Bourne Union Church in Lincolnshire and he himself became a deacon of St Mary's Baptist Church, Norwich. He took a men's Bible class each Sunday morning and was Sunday School superintendent every afternoon, even when he was in the Commons.³⁷ In 1903 he was the third lay president of the Baptist Union. White on a first meeting seemed "abrupt and unapproachable", but these qualities were really the marks of a certain shyness and an iron self-discipline. He regularly began his business day with two hours' intellectual work, and every morning he would write the tasks of the day on a slip of paper so that they could be ticked off one by one.³⁸ White was a shrewd businessman, but was scrupulous about maintaining good personal relations with his workers. During a shoe workers' strike in 1897 he gave evidence in favour of three strikers accused of intimidation, and even went so far as to give financial help to those who were in dire straits through striking against his own firm.³⁹ White was active in a host of good causes. He was a leader of the temperance movement, succeeding Caine as president of the Baptist Total Abstinence Society and devising the scheme of securing a million new teetotal pledges to greet the twentieth century.⁴⁰ He was a member of a church delegation to Germany that tried to improve Anglo-German relations in 1909 and he was chairman of the Congo Reform Association that drew attention to conditions in Zaire.⁴¹ Perhaps his chief work, however, was in the education struggle. It was White who in 1902 first suggested that if the Education Bill put denominational instruction on the rates, then Nonconformists should resort to passive resistance.⁴² From 1908 Sir George was chairman of the Nonconformist committee in the Commons. He capably steered it towards accepting compromise proposals for a solution to the education problem put forward by Walter Runciman, the government minister in charge, but had the bitter disappointment of seeing the proposals rejected by extremists on the Church of England side.⁴³ As Lloyd George once put it, Sir George White stood for what was best in Nonconformity: he was staunch yet tolerant.⁴⁴

A second sub-group of early twentieth-century M.P.s came from the so-called Celtic fringe. The first Scottish Baptist M.P.s were elected in 1906 — if we exclude Robinson Souttar, a Presbyterian who was returned for Dumfriesshire in 1895 while a member of New Road, Oxford, which practised open membership.⁴⁵ The two returned in 1906 were members of the same church, Coats Memorial, Paisley, a magnificently built Baptist cathedral. One was its builder, Sir Thomas Glen-Coats, of the thread spinning firm, the other Sir John McCallum, a soap manufacturer.⁴⁶ In the following year they were joined by Sir Robert Pullar, of the Perth dyeing firm,⁴⁷ and in 1910 Stirlingshire returned a New Zealand surgeon, Dr William Chapple.⁴⁸ In 1906 Ireland sent the only native Baptist representative it has ever returned to parliament: Robert Glendinning, a

linen manufacturer, a deacon of the Great Victoria Street Church, Belfast, and an open-handed giver to Irish Baptists. It was said that every Baptist cause in Ireland had benefited from his generosity.⁴⁹ There were also two more Welsh M.P.s in this period. Both represented Welsh constituencies but business had brought them to London. One was originally called Thomas Howell Williams, but he added the extra surname "Idris" to celebrate the success of the Idris Mineral Water Company that he founded. He also wrote chemical papers and maintained his links with his native country by encouraging societies for London Welshmen.⁵⁰ The other was John Hinds, a draper who was a deacon of Castle Street Welsh Baptist Church, Oxford Circus. He went on to be twice president of the Baptist Union of Wales (in 1919-20 and 1920-21), the only man so honoured, and chairman of the Welsh Parliamentary Liberal Party in 1922-23.⁵¹ It is no accident that Baptists were being sent to Westminster from Scotland, Ireland and Wales. In each of them at the turn of the century a few Baptists were reaching the forefront of national life, and parliament reflected the changing state of society.

The third sub-group is a portent of developments later in the twentieth century. This category consists of the earliest Baptist M.P.s to represent Labour. This sub-group overlaps with the last one, for a majority were from outside England. The first of them, however, was English, and represents the transitional phase of Labour representation when a man could stand as a candidate of Labour, that is the working people, and yet remain loyal to Liberalism. The one Baptist "Lib-Lab" M.P. was Samuel Woods, who is best treated here although in fact he sat in the Commons during the 1890s. Woods was a St Helens miner who rose to become first president of the Lancashire Miners' Federation in 1884 and secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. in 1894.⁵² His ten-year tenure of the post came at a difficult time, for he had to steer a policy that would contain and yet satisfy those who wanted independent Labour representation. He had some success, for while he was in parliament as a Liberal the Independent Labour Party newspaper admitted that he was "less slavishly Liberal" than some other T.U.C. leaders.⁵³ Although in his later years in office, from 1900 to 1904, ill health made him less efficient in the performance of his duties, Woods deserves some credit for guiding the trade union movement through a period of sharp tensions. In 1906 two Welsh miners' leaders who were Baptists entered the Commons as Labour men, although until 1909 they retained tenuous links with Liberalism. One was John Williams of Swansea, who had served in his early days as a Baptist minister, had learned Greek and had contributed Welsh poetry at *eistedfodau*.⁵⁴ The other was William Brace of Abertillery, who became vice-president of the Labour Party in 1911 and entered the wartime coalition government as Under-Secretary in the Home Department.⁵⁵ Brace was an eloquent lay preacher up to his death in 1946 and, although a Labour representative, was a man of patrician tastes. Lord Rhondda, a colleague in the wartime coalition and prosperous mineowner, used to tell Brace: "The difference between us is that I have the income of a duke and the tastes of a peasant, whilst you have the income of a peasant and the tastes of a duke."⁵⁶ In 1910 a very similar Baptist Labour M.P. joined them

from Scotland. William Adamson, a miner and the son and grandson of miners, became one of their leaders in the Fife coalfield while he was secretary of the West Baptist Church, Dunfermline.⁵⁷ He was to achieve cabinet office as Secretary of State for Scotland in the first two Labour governments. These four men, all miners, were the first working-class Baptist M.P.s.

The final sub-group consists of those who were ordinary recruits to the parliamentary Liberal party in the years before the First World War. Thomas Wiles, a corn merchant, was the son of a deacon of Dagnall Street, St Albans, and married a minister's daughter.⁵⁸ He went on to be Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. G. R. Thorne, a Wolverhampton solicitor, became a Liberal whip from 1910 to 1923.⁵⁹ Sir Alfred Yeo, in the music trade and at one time secretary of Berger Baptist Church, Bromley, entered parliament at the very end of the period, in 1914.⁶⁰ But the man in this category who contributed most to political and to Baptist life was Percy Illingworth, a nephew of Alfred. Illingworth had charm, diligence and loyalty, some of his uncle's directness when it was needed but the vitality of a Cambridge and England rugby half-back at all times. These qualities were put to good use when, in 1912, he became Liberal chief whip. He served at a time of bitter inter-party feeling, yet surmounted the problems of his office with an impressively polished efficiency. At the same time he was co-operating with J. H. Shakespeare as secretary of the Baptist Union in raising a central fund for the support of the Baptist ministry — the first equivalent of the Home Mission Fund. When war broke out Illingworth successfully pressed for the appointment of the first Baptist and Congregational chaplains to the forces. He seemed marked out for higher political office, but at the start of 1915 he died, apparently in part as a result of overwork.⁶¹ Illingworth is rightly commemorated on a plaque in Baptist Church House.

The three groups of M.P.s that have been surveyed were widely varied men. Not all enjoyed such attractive personalities as Percy Illingworth, and few were men of major political significance. Yet their Christian allegiance and their loyalty to the churches of their faith and order are impressive. Richard Harris, for instance, used to journey back from Westminster to Leicester in the late 1840s although travelling was not easy for a man in his seventies, to be in his place to serve at the monthly communion.⁶² That so many laymen could gain a certain eminence and yet put spiritual concerns first is something to admire. They consecrated their fame. George White chose to deliver his presidential address to the Baptist Union assembly in 1903 on "The Nonconformist Conscience". He urged that Christians have a responsibility to take part in politics.⁶³ That may be over-stating the case, but surely it is true that some Christians have a responsibility to take part in politics. The "Nonconformist Conscience" that White and some of his predecessors and contemporaries embodied so well is a tradition that should live on in the late twentieth century.

NOTES

- 1 I am most grateful for help with the present paper to a number of people who are acknowledged in the notes to an earlier article in *The Baptist Quarterly* cataloguing nineteenth-century Baptist M.Ps and an article to be published later cataloguing those of the twentieth century. Both articles contain additional biographical details, especially about the church affiliations of the M.Ps
- 2 The Congregationalist was John Wilks, M.P. for Boston 1830-37 and secretary of the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty. The Quaker was Joseph Pease, M.P. for Durham, South, 1832-41.
- 3 Thomas Lomas, *A Memoir of the late R. Harris, Esq., formerly M.P. for Leicester*, London, 1855, *passim*.
- 4 *Victoria History of the County of Leicestershire*, 4, London, 1958, p. 220.
- 5 R. K. Brewer, *Man, at Death: a funeral sermon preached in Great George Street Chapel, Leeds, October 30th, 1859*, Leeds, 1859, pp. 20ff. R. V. Taylor, *The Biographia Leodiensis . . .*, London, 1865, pp. 477-80. [Spence's] *Memoirs of Eminent Men of Leeds*, London, 1868, pp. 59ff.
- 6 B. Disraeli to Lord Campden, 10 Apr. 1863, G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, 4, London, 1916, p. 367. Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian novel*, Oxford, 1975, p. 201.
- 7 H[enry] P[eto], *Sir Morton Peto: a memorial sketch*, London, 1893, *passim*. *Baptist Magazine*, Apr. 1863, p. 241f.
- 8 *Baptist Magazine*, May 1874, pp. 274-80.
- 9 J. R. Macdonald, "Henry Selfe Page Winterbotham", *The Dictionary of National Biography*, London, 1922 edn, p. 693. *Baptist Magazine*, Jan. 1874, p. 32.
- 10 Leeds Bibliography 384, Leeds Public Library. Autobiographical Sketch of Herbert Gladstone, British Library, Viscount Gladstone Papers, MS 46228, f.8.
- 11 *A History of the Chief Events and Occurrences connected with the Life of the late Thomas Blake*, Ross-on-Wye, 1904, p. 8.
- 12 *Freeman*, 1 Jul. 1892, p. 458.
- 13 Cf. A. S. Langley, *Birmingham Baptists: Past and present*, London, 1939, pp. 108ff.
- 14 J. L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation*, London, 1938, pp. 633f. H. C. Colman, *Jeremiah James Colman: a memoir*, London, 1905, pp. 135f., 144.
- 15 A. J. Klaiber, *The Story of the Suffolk Baptists*, London, 1931, pp. 179ff. MS on Everett compiled by his daughter, Mrs Ida Keeble, in possession of Miss M. E. King, to whom I am grateful for giving me access.
- 16 *Christian World*, 20 Jun. 1895, p. 489.
- 17 W. G. Addison, *Religious Equality in Modern England*, London, 1944, p. 171.
- 18 On the Royal Commission and elsewhere Everett was an advocate of bimetalism, the principle that the value of money should be tied to a silver standard as well as a gold standard. He explained the late nineteenth-century agricultural depression as a consequence of the British adherence to a gold standard alone. This policy, he held, led to a contraction of the money supply and so to a lack of demand for agricultural products. Bimetalism was an alternative remedy for agricultural ills to protection, which was unpalatable to a man with Everett's devotion to free trade.
- 19 MS on Everett.
- 20 *Christian World*, 24 Aug. 1911, p. 12.
- 21 *Labour Leader*, 12 Jun. 1897, p. 197.
- 22 W. R. Louis and Jean Stenger, ed., *E. D. Morel's History of the Congo Reform Movement*, Oxford, 1968, pp. 111-27.
- 23 Entry for 10 Dec. 1882, *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton*, ed. D. W. R. Bahlman, Oxford, 1972, 1, p. 372.
- 24 Sidney Webb, "The Moral of the Elections", *Contemporary Review*, Aug. 1892, p. 273.

- 25 *Labour Leader*, 30 Jun. 1894, p. 5.
- 26 James Cropper, *Notes and Memories*, Kendal, 1900, p. 189. Cropper refers to an M.P. named A — I —, who can only be Illingworth.
- 27 W. H. Mackintosh, *Disestablishment and Liberation: the movement for the separation of the Anglican church from state control*, London, 1972, p. 227. *Christian World*, 14 Feb. 1895, p. 115.
- 28 John Newton, *W. S. Caine, M.P.: a biography*, London, 1907, *passim*. *Labour Leader*, 28 Apr. 1894, p. 4.
- 29 *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography down to 1940*, London, 1959, pp. 937f. *Baptist Times*, 7 Jul. 1905, p. 488.
- 30 William George, *My Brother and I*, London, 1958, pp. 74, 79, 271f. *Christian World*, 13 Jul. 1905, p. 21. *Baptist Times*, 11 Feb. 1910, p. 88.
- 31 Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, London, 1975, pp. 38-75.
- 32 *Baptist Times*, 5 Jan. 1906, p. II.
- 33 *Christian World*, 4 Jan. 1906, p. iii.
- 34 *British Weekly*, 12 May 1908, p. 613.
- 35 *Christian World*, 4 Jan. 1904, p. i; 1 Sep. 1910, p. 3.
- 36 *Christian World*, 12 Jun. 1902, p. 3; 29 Aug. 1907, p. 4.
- 37 *British Weekly*, 14 Nov. 1907, p. 138. *Christian World*, 1 Sep. 1910, p. 3.
- 38 *British Weekly*, 16 May 1912, p. 159.
- 39 *Labour Leader*, 22 May 1897, p. 172. C. B. Jewson, *The Baptists in Norfolk*, London, 1957, p. 124.
- 40 *British Weekly*, 25 Apr. 1901, p. 30.
- 41 K. W. Clements, "Baptists and the Outbreak of the First World War", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 26/2, Apr. 1975, p. 80. *Christian World*, 9 Nov. 1911, p. 12.
- 42 *British Weekly*, 10 Apr. 1902, p. 655.
- 43 *Christian World*, 20 Feb. 1908, p. 3. *British Weekly*, 26 Nov. 1908, p. 213.
- 44 *British Weekly*, 16 May 1912, p. 159.
- 45 *Freeman*, 1 Jul. 1892, p. 458. *Christian World*, 24 Sep. 1903, p. 3.
- 46 *Baptist Times*, 12 Jan. 1906, p. 22.
- 47 George Yuille, ed., *History of the Baptists in Scotland*, Glasgow, 1926, p. 166.
- 48 *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament*, 3, 1919-1945, ed. Michael Stenton and Stephen Lees, Hassocks, Sussex, 1979, pp. 62f.
- 49 *Irish Baptist Magazine*, Sep. 1929, p. 107.
- 50 *Baptist Times*, 12 Jan. 1906, p. 22.
- 51 I am grateful for details on Hinds to the Rev. M. J. Williams, sometime secretary of the Baptist Union of Wales.
- 52 Joyce Bellamy, "Samuel Woods", *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, 1, ed. J. M. Bellamy and John Saville, London, 1972, pp. 351ff.
- 53 *Labour Leader*, 30 Jan. 1897, p. 37.
- 54 Joyce Bellamy, "John Williams", *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, 1, pp. 347f.
- 55 R. P. Arnot, Joyce Bellamy and John Saville, "William Brace", *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, 1, pp. 51ff.
- 56 D. J. Thomas, *A Short History of the Monmouthshire English Baptist Association*, Newport, Mon., 1957, p. 16. Anecdote told by Brace to the Rev. M. J. Williams.
- 57 *Baptist Times*, 30 Dec. 1910, p. 855.
- 58 *Christian World*, 28 May 1908, p. 3. *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*, 1909, p. 366.
- 59 *Baptist Times*, 29 Oct. 1931, p. 761.
- 60 *Debrett's Illustrated House of Commons*, 1920, p. 167.
- 61 *British Weekly*, 7 Jan. 1915, p. 297. *Christian World*, 7 Jan. 1915, p. 2.

62 Lomas, *Harris*, p. 161.

63 George White, "The Nonconformist Conscience", *Baptist Hand Book*, 1904, p. 113.

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The Benhams of Bloomsbury

THIS paper is about the contribution made to a Victorian church and to the denomination by a lay family and particularly by one member of that family, James Benham, the first treasurer of Bloomsbury. The family is by no means unique: many churches have known the equal even of James Benham. Bloomsbury itself has had many other loyal and enthusiastic laymen. But in looking at the service of this man who stands out in the archives of Bloomsbury Chapel I hope to illustrate the wide-ranging contribution made by the laity in our churches.

Bloomsbury Chapel was built in 1848 by a wealthy layman, the railway contractor Morton Peto. The Chapel sat between the smart squares of Bloomsbury to the north and the grim slums of St Giles to the south. Peto persuaded his friend William Brock to come from Norwich to minister to the new cause. With him came George Wilson M'Cree as missionary to direct the Domestic Mission in the adjacent slums, for which Bloomsbury Chapel would provide the resources. The Chapel opened in December 1848 and by July 1849 fifty-two people worshipping there were ready to form a church. Of these initial members seven were Benhams. In subsequent years thirteen more Benhams were to join Bloomsbury, and a further three subscribed to its activities.

Who were these Benhams, the largest single family participating in the founding of Bloomsbury? They were young, the eldest, James, being only twenty-nine. The seven founder members were already members of the Christian Church, transferring from Paddington Chapel (Congregational), except for Eliza, James' wife, who came from Prescott Street. Their home was in Wigmore Street, Cavendish Square, the base of the business founded by their father in 1817, *John Lee Benham & Sons, Ironmongers, bath makers, stove, grate and kitchen range manufacturers, and hot water engineers*. The firm prospered under John Lee and James. It still exists today, but the family connection ceased in 1961, and it is now part of Thorn Electrical Industries.

We do not know how the Benham brothers and sisters came to desert Paddington Chapel for Bloomsbury, but another of the family, Edward, had worshipped at St Mary's, Norwich while Brock was minister there. William Brock's ministry always had a particularly strong appeal to young men: he was unconventional, unaffected and warm-hearted, and he was always concerned to relate religion to everyday life. After a few months at Bloomsbury the young Benhams were eager to throw themselves into