

John Barber Pewtress, 1756-1827.

WHEN banking depended on the integrity and popularity of private men, there flourished on Gracechurch Street and then on Lombard Street a firm built up by Thomas Pewtress, successively mercer, merchant taylor, goldsmith. He was a member of Stennett's church on Wild Street, of some prominence, for he moved in good circles, and often hunted with the young king George III. At the age of forty-five he retired; seven years later he removed to St. Giles Square, Northampton, where he joined the Church at College Lane, of which John Collett Ryland was pastor. Here he spent another thirty-seven years, and was faithful to the last; in old age he was borne to worship in a sedan chair; and presently stayed in it, placed in the aisle below the pulpit. He was one of the early subscribers to the B.M.S., but only with a conventional guinea. He died on 23 January, 1814, during the pastorate of Thomas Blundell the younger, having seen a new era begin with the foundation of a Sunday School.

His son, John Barber Pewtress, was born on 14 November, 1756, when the father had recently joined forces with Robarts on Lombard Street. The boy had a good education, finished in France; and at the age of eighteen he was apprenticed to a hosier in Aldgate. Apparently he attended Wild Street, where he met the family of another tradesman, Thompson, who had a daughter Millicent, eleven years his senior. In April 1777 she was transferred to College Lane, whither the Pewtresses had gone, young John joining next month and being baptized.

A great deal has to be read between the lines, but apparently he declared there was no impediment to their marriage, and they did contract what might reasonably be called an imprudent match. The father was very angry, though it was singular that with his own record, and his son being a hosier, he should complain that the bride was only the daughter of a tradesman. However, he disinherited his son, who henceforth entered on a happy and adventurous life, destined to endure nearly fifty years longer.

Ryland had stirred the church to evangelism, and was planting the gospel in two dozen villages. His example was followed by others, and the church carefully tested the gifts of its members before it would formally call them to the ministry. Young Pewtress saw no need for such delay, but spoke as

and where the Spirit gave him utterance. He was indeed proposed for trial in 1779, but the church was as cautious as many others, and could not make up its mind. The sister church at Roade had no such doubts, and applied for his dismission that he might become its pastor. Young Ryland had to handle the matter in his father's absence, and after repeated conferences the church dismissed him in 1781 as an ordinary member, in good standing, saying expressly that he had not been called out to the ministry.

He carried with him two fine traditions learned from the elder Ryland, who was as successful a schoolmaster as he was an evangelist. Though he was too young to take any prominent part in Association affairs, a shoemaker's apprentice over at Hackleton tramped over on Sundays "for some preaching which should meet the hunger of his soul"; and presently young William Carey was baptized in the Nene at Northampton.

Pewtress, however, felt the call of his birthplace. London was not yet touched by the zeal of the Rylands. In his lifetime, not a dozen attempts had been made to extend the Baptist cause in the growing districts south of the Thames; while the conservative Board recognised only two new churches, at Woolwich and at Dean Street. Further afield, experiments were being tried at the villages of Clapham, Kingston, Mitcham and Walworth, and these attracted him. He opened a school on East Lane in Walworth, which was the means of his support for some years. A Baptist church was formed in December 1791, with Joseph Swaine from Bristol as pastor, and Pewtress as a deacon. He promptly looked around for new worlds to conquer.

Samuel Stennett was still pastor at Wild Street, where he had baptized a doctor in Newport Street named John Thomas; this convert was starting another unconventional life, preaching in Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, then in Calcutta, and advertising for a colleague as missionary in India. West of Wild Street, except for feeble attempts in Westminster, there was no Baptist church nearer than Colnbrook or Staines. A church in the village of Hammersmith, though backed by Abraham Booth, had been deserted by its first pastor, had been persuaded by another to build a fine meeting-house on the turnpike, but had run heavily into debt and had disbanded, the pastor subsiding into a druggist. Pewtress helped in a reorganization, hiring the former premises, which had been used as an Episcopal chapel-at-ease; by 1793 the work began again, and has endured.

Next year he pioneered again in Surrey, at Reigate, where the denomination had been represented only at an outpost of

an ancient General Baptist church, whose fidelity to evangelical principles was not intense. Pewtress held services in the open air, and despite the opposition of a rich farmer, who provided an orchestra of tin kettles, he persevered till a meeting-house began to arise. As the opposition tried to pull it down, and then added to the congregation some pigeons, pigs, dogs, and a donkey, they were prosecuted at the assizes and convicted; he contented himself with exacting from the ringleaders a public apology in the meeting-house, and so secured peace. Years afterwards, one of these men when dying sent for him, and Pewtress had the joy of finding that the lenient treatment he had received had impressed him, so that now he wished to be led to Christ. The cause, however, did not prosper; it never attracted the attention of Rippon, although by 1802 he was a member of Rippon's church at Carter Lane.

The French wars opened new needs, both for the sailors at the ports, and for the prisoners of war. The new Religious Tract Society soon tried to seize the opportunity, and Pewtress was sent to Liverpool in 1800. He reported that the French Protestants asked him to make them Christians, agreeing that the tracts were good but that they could not understand them. Here was a fresh opening, and he prepared a French catechism for which Liverpool people paid. He also distributed to them some of Saurin's works, and gave a farewell sermon, presently printed as "Le Chemin vers le vrai Honneur." Then he went to another great camp at Norman's Cross near Stilton in Huntingdon. On this mission he was described as the Rev. John Pewtress of Southwark; but the Baptist Board in London never acknowledged him as a minister.

Indeed, he seems to have continued his school in Walworth as his sheet-anchor. It evidently flourished, for in 1807 the "Rev. John Pewtress" made a donation of £20 to the B.M.S., where his friend Carey had joined Thomas, his successor at Roade being an eager supporter. His father at Northampton had been content with his guinea, but was roused by this to contribute £5, while the mother added £2; whereupon "Mr. J. B. Pewtress" countered with £15.

Pewtress was like Carey, ready to cobble if there was no call for new work. At the end of 1810, trouble arose in the church at Shore Place, Hackney, under William Bradley, resulting in the departure of a deacon, T. P. Burford, to a pedo-baptist church. Pewtress transferred his membership thither, and aided in the removal under F. A. Cox to Mare Street in 1812. He continued his interest in the B.M.S., whose report next year acknowledged five guineas from "J. B. Pewtress, Esq."

Once again the singular developments in the south caught

his attention. The ambiguous General Baptists had had a meeting-house in Lewes on Eastport Lane for seventy years; to this in 1811 went as Elder John William Morris, printer for and biographer of Andrew Fuller. The followers of the Countess of Huntingdon had founded Jireh, where William Huntingdon was buried grandly in 1813. Another church had been planted by Joseph Middleton, and had joined the Kent and Sussex Association of Particular Baptists in 1785. An energetic pastor, Moses Fisher, after eight years good work on old-fashioned lines, went to do even better at Liverpool. This church attracted Pewtress in 1815, and profited speedily, several additions leading to a general revival. On 18 May, 1818, he was at last ordained, with the approval of Cox, by John Edwards of Wild Street, James Packer of Brighton, J. H. Foster of Uckfield, Thomas Dicker of Hailsham, and Kirby. Eight months later the church moved to a new home on Eastgate. In 1821 he was asked to write the circular letter for the Association, and he gave a Fourfold view of the Church of God. It was his last public service, for ill health obliged him to retire next year, and he went to live at Brighton.

Yet Walworth and extension exercised their fascination still, so that he and his wife returned. A branch had been opened a mile and a half south, at Coldharbour Lane, but had collapsed after twenty years. Young Edward Steane began again, and the Pewtresses backed him. Soon a new building was opened, on Denmark Place, and burial registers were begun. Pewtress was a pioneer to the last; in March, 1827, he was buried there, and within seven months his widow was laid in the same grave.

This exceptional career illustrates afresh the caution of churches in calling men to the ministry, the custom of Baptist pastors to keep schools, the revival spirit that spread from Northampton; but it has also romantic elements. For love's sake he forfeited worldly position; the advantages given by his father were devoted to the spread of the gospel; the narrow conventions of churches and pastors did not trammel his enterprise; town and country alike profited by his zeal; overseas pioneers received most liberal support: while his fidelity to conviction and his versatility were transmitted to future generations.

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