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CELEBRATING ASSOCIATIONS

From the middle of the seventeenth century, independent Baptist congregations have joined in associations. In the second half of the eighteenth century they took upon themselves a new purposefulness; Dr Nuttall says of the new missionary urgency of those formed after 1765: 'their prime concern is mission to the dark corners of the land or that more distant world on which William Carey looked out through his small cottage window at Moulton' (G. F. Nuttall, 'Assembly and Association in Dissent, 1689-1831' in *Studies in Church History*, vol. VII, ed. C. J. Cuming and D. Baker, 1971, pp. 303-6). Association history, then, ought to be missionary history: this is the criterion by which we should judge three recent histories, to be valued as studies in provincial Baptist life, responding, offering initiatives to, but never dominated by the London leadership.

Our Heritage: The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, 1647-1987 (Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1 South Parade,

Leeds LS6 3LF, 1987, 180pp, f4.50) is edited by Dr Ian Sellers with contributions also from Ernest Clipsham, Keith Jones and John Nicholson. 1647 marks the first-known Baptist presence in York when pious officers in Cromwell's army called together a congregation. Persecution notwithstanding, the cause began to spread, with significant growth in the Rossendale Valley, led by David Crossley, and new causes established elsewhere in Lancashire and across into Yorkshire. The first association of Baptist churches in Lancashire and Yorkshire met at Rawdon in 1719. Its active life was short, dying with its architect, Richard Ashworth, in 1751. From the beginning it was threatened by the High Calvinism of some churches, the source of conflict and schism under John Johnson of Liverpool as later when Gadsby and Kershaw made their protest against Baptists adopting Fullerite theology. This was the child of the Evangelical Revival, as was a new group of orthodox and evangelistic Arminian Baptists who formed the New Connexion of General Baptists in 1770. Thus were Baptists theologically equipped to meet the challenge of the industrial revolution. In the Calder Valley John Fawcett at Hebden Bridge and Dan Taylor at Birchcliffe established a firm friendship betokening a unity institutionalised a century later. In 1787 the association was refounded, and in 1804 the Northern Education Society was established: soon students were joining with gifted laymen to evangelise the valleys. The integration of *training* for ministry with the *practice* of ministry then as today proved a trigger for expansion. So much is of interest: in 1875 one in forty of Bradford's citizens was a Baptist; S. G. Green, the object of theological suspicion as Principal of Rawdon, nevertheless showed an evangelistic commitment as Editorial Secretary of the Religious Tract Society; Joseph Livesey and Jabez Tunnicliffe demonstrate Baptist temperance activism. The separation of the North Western Association of close-communionist churches from 1859-1875 bequeathed Manchester College to the parent body as a centre for ministerial training. By contrast Blenheim, Leeds, an open-membership church, was not allowed into the Yorkshire Association until 1887. By then the relationship between independency and inter-dependency was already being debated. Still one would like more. Whitley in 1913 judged that the Lancashire and Cheshire Association 'has not felt sure enough of its corporate mission to deliver any public utterances' on legislation relating to the interests of labour (W. T. Whitley, *Baptists of N. W. England*, 1913, p.284). What had this to do with the business patronage of our churches in the North West? What of the many auxiliaries for work the young?

The twentieth-century story is a 'warts and all' description. Decline in membership is chronicled alongside the region's economic decline. Many noble attempts at church planting failed to establish viable churches. Worse, in 1931, fourteen ministers in Lancashire had to resign for financial reasons, and 46 churches could no longer afford professional ministry. Financial and theological depression seemed to coincide in the pre-war period. The penultimate chapter is entitled 'Into the Abyss', but the last chapter chronicles those 'Signs of Hope' and deeper commitment which are perceived as giving a new tone to Baptist life in the eighties, with a new concern for mission both in evangelism and church planting and as witness to God's concern for justice and peace. By comparison with earlier histories, (Whitley's on Lancashire and Cheshire and Shipley's on Yorkshire) with their lavish

bindings, ample illustrations, encyclopedic concern for every church, this is a slim and austere volume - a mere 180 pages compared with 700 pages 75 years ago. It is more genuinely an Association history in picking out trends and evaluating progress and decline.

F. M. W. Harrison's *It All Began Here: The Story of the East Midlands Baptist Association* (E.M.B.A. 1986, 4 Southampton Row, WC1B 4AB, 192 pp. £4 hb, £3 pb) provides a well organized history of Baptists in the East Midlands, easy to follow because he highlights running themes - such as Organisation, Forward Work, Public Affairs, Relations with Other Christians. The title reflects Thomas Helwys' association with Broxtowe and John Smyth's with Gainsborough, and the subsequent development of General Baptist congregations. But there were also Particular churches in the area, so the story proper starts with the foundation of the Association in 1892 as a recognition of the unity between Particular and New Connexion Baptists secured nationally in 1891. As the northern volume is enriched by Dr Sellers' researches in Liverpool, so is this from Mr Harrison's thesis on Nottinghamshire Baptists, reflected in the attitudes of Baptist entrepreneurs, in Absalom Barnett who wrote on Poor Law administration, and Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, and a long list of distinguished pulpiteers. Here too the problems of village churches, once strong centres of Baptist witness, repeatedly occupied the association officers' attention as they patiently commended grouping plans to secure comprehensive ministerial oversight. The growth of the institutional church is clearly illustrated, as is the history of theological education. The suspicions of Anglo-Catholicism and the stridency of Liberation Society campaigns gradually gave way to more positive relations with other Christians, though hardly helped by the Balfour Education Act with the Passive Resistance Movement witnessing more Baptists in gaol than for many a year. Association resolutions are carefully chronicled and membership statistics provided numerically and graphically. It is interesting that in all three association histories the Revd Violet Hedger features as a pioneer of women's ministries.

Brynmor Jones, in *Sowing Beside All Waters* (Gwent Baptist Association, 1985, 356 pp, £5) has the luxury of describing a more restricted area over many more pages. Here is a careful documentation of the preachings, praying and doings of the people and churches of Gwent rather than simply the story of the Association. The planting of churches, whether by the strategy of key mother churches, by rural missions, or by schisms and divisions - linguistic, theological and temperamental - is carefully set forth and enlivened by anecdotal illustration. Baptist architecture, Sunday Schools and Youth Work, the activities of Baptist women, those once widely influential organizations, the Band of Hope and Christian Endeavour Societies and Gwent Baptists contribution to overseas missions are all embraced. The confessions and covenants on which the church's life is founded are well illustrated and carefully analysed, whilst the ministry both of ordained clergy and of deacons and other church officers is gently scrutinized, revealing in a down-to-earth way the development of Baptist polity and practice. Revival breaks in time and again with great open-air baptismal services, as at Newbridge in September 1892 when 104 candidates were baptised in the presence of 5000 witnesses. On such occasions, pastors often invited those convicted of sin to be

baptised on the spot which 'could later have caused serious dilution of the church'. A particularly Welsh chapter is entitled 'Baptist Contributions to Culture and Community', much of it associated with the rise of the Welsh language and so vulnerable to the encroachment of an alternative culture speaking English. The question is raised whether such cultural activities usefully replenished the churches' wider community in which nurture towards fuller commitment could take place, or did they secularize the chapels? As in northern England and the East Midlands, temperance, education and the impositions and privileges of an alien State Church attracted Baptist interest. The identification of righteousness with the Liberal Party was all but total: few of us this June, even in Wales, will have encountered banners at the polling station reminding us 'Be loyal to the Saviour', 'Remember your accountability to the Lord by voting for the Liberal candidates'. The running of Baptist life in tune with an ascendant popular culture of moral antipathy to the English establishment in all its forms was not to last: association membership touching 15,000 in 1910 has shrunk to around 5,000 today - in part a function of population migration, but the chapels seemed to suffer as much from material improvement after the Second World War as from economic deprivation in the years preceding it. A final chapter considers the service given by the association itself. Mr Jones concludes around the end of the Second World War: the Gwent Association ought not to wait long before telling the story of the last half century. How has Gwent been affected by liturgical and ecumenical movement, by church growth and charismatic renewal? Can it claim any Signs of Hope? Will the missionary vision that Dr Nuttall noted in the 1790s also characterise association life in the 1990s?

BAPTIST HISTORY AND IDENTITY FROM THE YORKSHIRE BAPTIST ASSOCIATION



- * **OUR HERITAGE** - The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire & Cheshire 1647-1987. Editor Ian Sellers.
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