

Dr. Thomas Thomas, of Pontypool.

DR. THOMAS THOMAS, Pontypool, is one of the many good, even great, men whose memory is fading because no adequate memorial has been erected to them. There are at once too many and too few biographies. There ought to have been a good one of Dr. Thomas. He deserved it for his own sake, and we needed it as a denomination in order to understand better certain important phases of the development of Baptist life and work in Wales during the early and middle periods of the nineteenth century. Dr. Thomas had a great deal to do with that development.

A biography has been published, however, within the last few months which will do something to fill this recognized gap, *The Life and Work of the Rev. T. Thomas, D.D., First President of the Baptist College, Pontypool*, by the Rev. Thomas Morgan, Skewen. This work is an abridgment of a prize essay contributed to the Welsh National Eisteddfod, Pontypool, 1924. I have a special interest in the book because I was responsible for inducing the Eisteddfod Committee to include the subject as an item in the Eisteddfod programme, and because Crane Street Church provided the prize, and returned the MSS. to the author for publication.

Mr. Morgan will be the first to acknowledge the limitations of his essay, and to wish with us, I am sure, that something more adequate could have been done. The book is small because it was felt that a fair circulation could be secured only if the price was as low as possible. The result is, however, such severe compression that we have more of a skeleton than a flesh-and-blood portrait. Mr. Morgan has rather crowded his facts and has not sufficiently subordinated them to the unifying purpose of portraiture. Sympathetic and imaginative readers can possibly do that for themselves. The style is straightforward and unpretentious, but English idiom is not seldom violated, and it is clear that the author is more at home in Welsh than in English. This is not to be wondered at, however, when we realize that Mr. Morgan ministers to a Welsh congregation and probably does his thinking in Welsh. But his English is as good as that of most Englishmen, and we should be grateful to him for what he has given to us. There is plenty of evidence in his book of diligent, careful work, and students of Dr. Thomas's times will

consult him with advantage. The book is published by W. M. Evans and Son, Carmarthen, and the price is 2s. 6d.

Dr. Thomas was born at Cowbridge, Glamorgan, on January 12, 1805. His father, Thomas Thomas, a small farmer, was a man of no special quality in intelligence or character, but his mother, Mary Thomas, was a good woman, keenly anxious to do all she could for her son. The family soon removed to Leckwith Bridge, near Cardiff, and here, on a small farm, the child grew to boyhood and youth. He was an obedient, intelligent, and attractive boy, fond of solitude, and inclined to hold aloof from other boys.

The poor had few educational advantages in those days, but his parents contrived to give young Thomas a good elementary schooling, first at a school in Llandaff, kept by a Welsh clergyman named Lewis, and later at Cardiff, where he studied for a while under the guidance of the Rev. W. Jones, who had recently settled as minister of Bethany Baptist Church. The boy was thoughtful beyond his years, fond of reading, and gifted with an unusually tenacious memory.

He received early and deep religious impressions. His father, a nominal adherent of the Established Church, gave little or no help. His mother was far more sympathetic, but her influence seems to have been more general than decisive. He seems to have owed most to two poor labourers who worked on his father's farm, and who were earnest members of the newly formed Welsh Baptist Church—the Tabernacle, Cardiff. These good men exercised a deep influence over the boy and induced him to attend the services at their church. At the age of thirteen he applied for baptism at the hands of the minister, the Rev. Griffith Davies, but when the appointed day came his father intervened and forcibly carried him away. Ere long, however, the goodwill of the mother prevailed, and he was baptized on November 22, 1818, in the river Taff.

Developing gifts for service, he was invited to preach. He preached his first sermon on April 12, 1821, in the newly-built Tabernacle chapel. His text was 1 John iv. 10: "Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another"—a text which was prophetic of much that characterised his subsequent ministry. He soon became known in the district as "the boy preacher," but he was not precocious; nor was he spoilt.

The Tabernacle church, convinced that God was calling him to the holy ministry, furthered his application to Abergavenny Academy. His application was accepted, and he entered that institution on September 2, 1822. He spent two strenuous and fruitful years there, and then, on August 23, 1824, he entered Stepney College, where he studied for four years, under the

guidance of Drs. Murch and Newman and the Rev. Solomon Young. We know little of his student days beyond the fact that he worked very hard (sometimes seventeen hours a day), and that he became intimate with Charles Stovel.

He was ordained to the charge of Henrietta Street Baptist Church, Brunswick Square, on July 18, 1828. The years at this church were happy, strenuous, and unquestionably blessed of God. The membership was quadrupled and the life of the church was proportionately enriched. Prominent members and loyal helpers were Mr. Justice Lush and Jonathan Dawson, the schoolmaster father of the famous George Dawson of Birmingham.

Early in his London ministry—February 22, 1830—Thomas married a Miss David, of Cardiff, and Christmas Evans, one of the grandest men in the history of the Welsh, or any other, pulpit, was one of the guests at the wedding-breakfast. He owed a great deal to this lady, and God gave them over fifty years of happy, blessed, wedded life. Mrs. Thomas died on March 18, 1881.

The London ministry came to an end in 1836, when he answered an urgent call to return to Wales. It was a call to what proved to be his great life work.

I wish there were a competent history of our Baptist Theological Colleges. It would be fascinating and most instructive reading. He who writes such a book will render a great service. Not the least rewarding of its chapters will be that, or those, dealing with Wales.

Monmouthshire has the honour of being the home of our earliest Welsh Baptist Colleges, and the facts are briefly as follows: About 1732 a Mr. John Griffiths, superintendent of the Iron and Japan Works, Pontypool, and an earnest member of Penygarn Baptist Church, rented a house at Trosnant (Pontypool) for the purposes of (1) occasional preaching services and (2) training young men for the Baptist ministry. The Trosnant Academy, as it was called, did good service for nearly forty years, and gave an education to some distinguished men. There was no Baptist college in Wales from 1770 to 1807, and young Welshmen mostly went to Bristol College for their training. In 1807 an academy was opened at Abergavenny, supported by private benefaction (the widow of Dr. Caleb Evans, Bristol, gave £10), and the resolution of an Association conference, held at Penygarn, Pontypool. The Rev. Micah Thomas, minister of Frogmore Street Church, was elected tutor, and remained in sole charge throughout the twenty-nine years' history of the institution. Micah Thomas was a man of undoubted distinction, and he rendered unforgettable service. One hundred and six students passed through his hands. He died on November 28, 1853, full of years and full of honour.

When Micah Thomas resigned his charge in 1836, a special committee was convened to consider the whole situation. The result was that it was decided to transfer the institution from Abergavenny to Pontypool, and to invite the Rev. T. Thomas, London, to undertake its oversight. The funds did not allow of a whole-time president, so that office was held jointly with the pastorate of an English Baptist church, which was needed, and was to be founded, in the town. Crane Street Church was formally established, with sixteen members, on August 2, 1836, and Mr. Thomas was recognised as minister. Henrietta Street Church, recognising the hand of God in these movements, though loath to lose a beloved minister, sent a letter of cordial greeting. The young church grew rapidly, and in 1847 an attractive chapel was built and opened. The church has never been large, but its influence has always been wide and deep, out of all proportion to its numerical strength. It has stood for, and illustrated, a generous interpretation of the Christian faith in the town of Pontypool and in the county of Monmouth. Dr. Thomas is now little more than a fine tradition. Very few survive who remember him, but his name is revered, and the church knows that, under God, it owes an incalculable debt to him, its first minister. Origins and early tendencies are of first-class importance in a church's developing life.

Dr. Thomas was at Pontypool for forty-one years, retiring from the college and from Crane Street Church in 1876. I wish it were possible to appraise the work of those years, but it is impossible. Some 500—600 students passed through his hands, and most of them carried the fine marks of his stamp as they separated for their life work in Wales, England, and abroad.

Personally, Dr. Thomas was one of the handsomest men of his time, tall, stately, gracious, impressive. The Rev. J. Meredith, Hereford, one of his last students, writes of "his handsome presence, his dignified bearing, his old-world courtesy," as "among the outward signs of a manhood at once strong and gracious, commanding and yet winsome." His portrait hangs on one of the walls of Regent's Park College. Gracious as he was, he was also a man of strong will, knowing what he wanted and getting it done. He could be stern on occasion, and he was a strict disciplinarian. He was never afraid of speaking what he thought was the truth, and he early became a leader in the district as well as in the counsels of his denomination. An instance of his courage (one of many) was his sermon (at Trosnant, Pontypool) on "The civil duties of Christians" (based on Matthew xxii. 21), preached when the county was disturbed by Chartist riots in Newport. He was not a first-rate scholar, in the technical sense,

but he was a man of broad culture, fairly versed in the ancient classics, and well-read in the fields of theology and philosophy. He seems to have had a great love for English literature, and had absorbed much of the spirit of its greater writers. He had "culture" as well as "knowledge." He was a preacher, too. Popular and fiery in his early years, he mellowed with time and it was a great gain to have in our Welsh college a man who could show how, for deep, real, permanent influence, preaching must have body, substance, scholarship, and that these features were wholly compatible with an impressive eloquence.

The years brought growing influence, and many honours were conferred upon him. He was elected President of the Baptist Union in 1872, and did distinguished service, I gather. His first Presidential address was on "The Kingdom of Christ in relation to the Aspects of the Present Times," and his second, delivered at the autumnal session, in Manchester, was on "The Baptists and Christian Union." Both subjects suggest the spirit of one who was both prophet and church-statesman.

When Dr. Thomas came to Pontypool in 1836 a house was hired for him and his first seven students—five of whom came on from his old Abergavenny Academy. One of the two new men was Evan Edwards, widely known for his subsequent ministry at Upton Vale, Torquay. A splendid site was secured, near to the old historic Penygarn chapel, overlooking Pontypool, and the foundation-stone of the new college was laid on August 3, 1836. The building was completed within a year, at a cost of nearly £2,000. At least two extensions of the building were made in subsequent years. By 1841, the number of students had so increased that the authorities felt it right to appoint a second tutor. The Rev. George Thomas, M.A., Newtown, proved to be a most loyal and efficient colleague for twenty-eight years. We are told that "the students simply idolized him." 1857 was the college jubilee, and a special fund, exceeding £2,000, was collected. The college was further enlarged; the course of study was extended from three to four and, in cases of special merit, five years; and the number of students was increased from twenty to twenty-five. These students all "lived-in"—to their permanent gain.

By 1869 the work of the college had so grown that a third tutor was required. The committee appointed Mr. James Sully, M.A., London, whose later work in Psychology made him known wherever that science is studied. He did signal service for two years, and was succeeded in 1871 by the Rev. W. Mortimer Lewis, M.A. Mr. Lewis, a man of great charm and ability, was a graduate of Glasgow, and an old Regent's Park student. In 1877 he was appointed to succeed Dr. Thomas as President, but,

unhappily, he held that office for three years only. He died suddenly in Switzerland, aged forty.

Dr. Thomas resigned in September, 1876, pleading "the pressure of advancing years and the deep consciousness of inability to do justice to the institution with its increasing demands." The resignation was reluctantly accepted, and took effect at the end of that year.

It was widely felt that a national testimonial should be made to him in recognition of his long and eminent services. The idea was eagerly and successfully taken up, and a largely attended meeting was held at the Tabernacle, Cardiff, on September 20, 1876, for that purpose. The Right Hon. Sir Robert Lush presided, and he, with such others as Drs. Todd and Green, of London, Revs. Jenkyn Brown of Birmingham, Nathaniel Thomas and Alfred Tilly of Cardiff, spoke gratefully of those services. C. H. Spurgeon sent a letter, in the course of which he said that he had "always considered Dr. Thomas a pillar of our temple, and a noble one." A purse of two thousand guineas was presented to him, and an illuminated address. The following extracts from the address will show the character of enlightened contemporary judgment, and will fittingly conclude this notice :

Rev. and Dear Sir,—Forty years since, at the earnest solicitation of the committee of that institution, which must ever owe you more than can be adequately acknowledged, you quitted a pastorate of eminent promise in the metropolis, and entered upon the responsibilities of that office which you have so long and honourably filled as President and Professor of Theology. . . . The college has, under your wise and able management, risen from a condition of utter disorganisation to one of recognised efficiency and great prosperity. By your native endowments and various attainments and Christian culture, as well as by your unswerving faithfulness to duty and unobtrusive devotion unto God, alike in spirit and in life, you have inspired and moulded the characters of hundreds who have accounted it their joy to sit at your feet, elevated the tone and character of the Baptist ministers in Wales, and places the churches of our denomination in wider regions under lasting indebtedness for the pastors you have educated and matured. . . . You have ever been found amongst the foremost and ablest advocates of Temperance, political and ecclesiastical equality, peace on earth, and all that is adapted to elevated, ennoble, and edify the family of mankind. In the name of the thousands whom we are here to represent, we devoutly and lovingly thank the Great Father of all who has given you and spared you so long to us as a section of the Saviour's one church, and on their behalf we tender that imperfect tribute of unfeigned admiration and fond affection which is

presented to you to-day. It has been contributed by those in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Africa, and India, who have longest known you, as well as by hundreds who have never seen your face or listened to your eloquent utterances, but have heard your name and love you for your work's sake. . . ."

Shortly afterwards, Dr. Thomas retired to Cardiff, and spent the evening of his life in quiet service to the churches as opportunity and strength permitted. He died peacefully and rather unexpectedly, on Wednesday morning, December 7, 1881, and was buried at Penygarn, Pontypool, on Monday, December 12. The saintly Rev. Nathaniel Thomas, Cardiff, testified that he was the most perfect man he had ever known, and that he never saw a man who lived nearer God. He was a great gift of God to the Baptist denomination and to Wales, and his memory is blessed.

E. W. PRICE EVANS.

Pontypool.

EXETER church was founded by Colonel Abraham Holmes, and worshipped in the Deanery bought by Carew. At the Restoration the people scattered to Topsham, Thorverton, Honiton's Clift, where Thomas Delaune wrote his Plea for the Nonconformists. He was one of several who came from Ireland, Kitterell becoming deacon. In 1672 the house of Adam Pearce was licensed in the city. The church book begins ten years later, and shows William Phips chosen pastor in 1685, till his death in 1690. A brother of Abraham Holmes helped till his death in 1709, nearly a hundred years old. But Richard Sampson, trained at Bristol, came as pastor in 1692, and they fitted up an old chapel in Katharine's Gate, then built on Gandy's Lane in 1712. After Lucas, Ingram, Caleb Jope, had supplied, Joseph Stennett settled, and was presently helped by Brooks and German, till he left in 1737. They built a new home in 1724/5, on South Street. Edmund Jones came from the Bristol Academy in 1741, induced them to sing in 1760, and died five years later. Thomas Lewis followed at once, assisted by Thomas Twining, but died in 1776, and was succeeded by Enoch Francis. When he resigned in 1789, William Clark, M.A., came from Unicorn Yard. This was the church to which Josiah Thompson had ministered, the man who gathered this information; it is the more welcome as the Exeter church book was deliberately destroyed in 1766.