

## The Deputies of the Dissenters.

TWO hundred years ago, Protestant Dissenters in and near London appointed Deputies from their congregations to take care of their civil affairs. The tradition of the State had long been to enforce uniformity of worship. This was abandoned after the civil war provoked by Charles I, but it was re-inforced by a series of laws under his son, often known as the Clarendon Code. After the revolution of 1688, Protestant Dissent was at length recognized as inevitable, and much ecclesiastical liberty was permitted, at the price of much civil disability. After a generation's experience, during which attempts to impose further disabilities had nearly succeeded, it was decided to make application to repeal two acts, and restore to Dissenters the rights of holding office under the crown and of being elected to corporations.

A modern Scots historian thinks that the great majority of Nonconformists had no conscientious objection to passing the very futile tests imposed by the law; we doubt this extremely, and as far as Baptists are concerned, contradict it flatly; only two cases are known, and in each case the church disciplined the erring member. But Walpole knew that Dissenters would not rebel, while experience showed that a mob could always be roused to riot by the cry, "The Church in danger." Therefore he preferred to let sleeping dogs lie, and discouraged all attempts to remedy the injustice.

The Deputies were therefore re-elected annually, to watch for suitable opportunities, and to prevent further encroachments. Leave was refused even to bring in a bill for repeal, both in 1736 and in 1739; and when Dissenters actively supported the dynasty against the Stuart rebellion of 1745, all that they secured was indemnity for taking commissions from the king illegally—an insult made worse by coupling them with the rebels. The Act of Indemnity however did serve as a precedent, and henceforth it was usual to forgive Dissenters for accepting office, every year.

The Deputies were more successful in compelling local magistrates to obey and administer the law, securing apologies and damages from rioters, and in composing difficulties. For example, several rioters, having insulted and maltreated Baptists at Stratton in 1741, were prosecuted. The mayor of Dartmouth in 1772 was compelled to issue warrants against disturbers. Clergy who claimed fees when dissenting ministers buried Dis-

senters in their own ground, were shown that they had no legal claim. A chairman of Quarter Sessions who had ostentatiously refused to register a certificate that a certain house was to be used for Baptist worship, was put to open shame at the next sessions when a London barrister appeared with a mandamus from King's Bench ordering him to do it forthwith.

The Deputies were equally keen in protecting Dissenters in the colonies. When Connecticut passed a new law in 1743 against revivalists (such as Whitefield!), and there were other hardships as to taxation and education, the Deputies remonstrated, and after some discussion with the governor, secured amelioration. And twice they prevented the institution of bishops with jurisdiction in those colonies.

It is well known how one of their number, Allen Evans of Wild Street and Kingsgate, was so active that to punish him he was nominated to be sheriff of London, though it was known he could not conscientiously take the sacrament in his parish church, and that therefore he could not serve; it was thought that under a city bye-law he could then be fined £600. He and others in the same plight resisted, and after thirteen years' litigation, the practice was stopped. Yet it took another generation before the repeated efforts of the Deputies for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts were successful. And only after a private member in the Lords, at the height of the Napoleonic wars, had tried yet again to abridge liberty, was the reaction strong enough to sweep off another instalment of the persecuting laws.

When this much was achieved, the Deputies had the opportunity to show how disinterested they were; for Roman Catholics suffered even more severe disabilities, which George III. had been unwilling to lessen. They supported the movement for Catholic Emancipation, which was successful in 1829, and thus they ended gloriously their first hundred years.

Since then, their efforts have been less spectacular, for less remained to be done; yet we all know how hard are the last steps, when no very glaring injustice remains. Little differences as to the treatment of buildings and their exemption from rates and taxes, of ministers and their privileges or disabilities, of the conduct of marriages and funerals, rarely give trouble to-day. The Deputies have done good work not only to remove inequalities, but to educate Dissenters in the minute details of the law, and insist on their complying with it before they would help. To-day each great denomination has skilled legal advisers, and the tendency is for churches to use these channels rather than resort to the ancient body. How the Deputies intend to adjust themselves to the new conditions and prove still to benefit

the Three Denominations, they did not disclose at their recent Bicentenary celebrations. Since they are in touch with the General Body of London ministers which dates from 1727, and equally has official recognition and the right of access to the throne, they would form a natural forum for the discussion of plans as to a closer union between the Three Denominations, which is being so earnestly considered by our younger men. Baptists in 1891 found that the driving force for uniting was not from theologically-minded ministers, but from practical laymen.

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EDWARD WIGHTMAN was the last man burned for heresy in England; at Lichfield in 1612. The account of his trials is in manuscript at the Bodleian, being perhaps an office copy; it shows that young William Laud had fruitlessly sought to persuade him he was mistaken. Crosby could hardly believe he really held the opinions attributed to him, but the record is clear. No one was anxious to claim kinship with him for many years. But the persistence of a descendant has at length ferreted out some of the facts.

The registers at Burton-on-Trent show that Edward Wightman married Francis Darbye there on 2 September 1593; that their son John was christened 8 December 1594, Priscilla on 25 December 1596, a second John on 7 January 1598-9, Maria on 27 February 1603/4, and buried 5 January 1605/6, Anna on 18 September 1608, Samuell on 18 August 1611.

Edward evidently came to Burton from outside, as there is no record of him in the registers before his marriage. The family belonged to Hinckley and Burbage. He may be son of John, christened at Burbage 20 December 1566, with a brother Valentin two years older. Or he may be son of Mr. Valentine, christened at Burbage 9 April 1576; in this case he profited under his father's will proved in 1606. The various Visitations have no occasion to mention him.

The first John, his son, is supposed to have died in 1595, so that in 1599 the name was used again. The second John is supposed to have had two sons. George, born in 1632, was in Rhode Island 1637, became a tailor, died in Rhode Island 1722. Valentine, traced in Rhode Island 1648, died there 1701; his family gave Elders to the North Kingstown Baptist church. Another Valentine was founder of the Groton church in Connecticut, whence a branch was opened in New York.