

Dan Taylor (1738-1816) and Yorkshire Baptist Life.

TWO hundred years ago, on December 21st, 1738, was born Dan Taylor, of Halifax, pioneer in the General Baptist revival in the West Riding and farther afield: to his memory those who inherit the results of his work and genius now unite to pay tribute. The span of his life covers a fascinating and fateful period in English religious history, and in many ways he could not be other than the child of that age. It was an age almost barren of facilities for the education of such a boy; an age of self-help for youths like him; an age offering no prospects of security and comfort to ministers of dissent; yet an age of new stirrings of spirit and energy; an age which began by frowning on "enthusiasm" and ended with deep if narrow convictions: George III.'s age, the age of the Pitts, Priestley's age, perhaps. But Wesley's age also.

The lassitude of eighteenth-century Church life is notorious. In 1738 the spiritual condition of England, which Wesley labelled "drowsy," was immortalised by Hogarth in his "Sleeping Congregation." "An Established Church apathetic, sceptical, lifeless"; writes Halévy,¹ "sects weakened by rationalism, unorganised, their missionary spirit extinct. This was English Protestantism in the eighteenth century. And in 1815 it still presented in several respects the same spectacle, although Methodism had long been at work and its action had changed profoundly the old order. On the Church of England the action of Methodism was late and slow, on Dissent it had been rapid and radical. The Wesleyan preaching had regenerated Nonconformity, creating new sects and transforming both the spirit and the organisation of the 'old denominations'." The Church of England was the "reformed" Church, understanding always, of course, that reform stopped short of finance and administration; if "Latitudinarian in temper," its system of privilege and inequality, pluralism and non-residence marked it out as really "unreformed in constitution."² Nonconformity was

¹ *A History of the English People in 1815*. Book III., chapter 1, "Religion and Culture."

² Rev. N. Sykes on "The Church" in *Johnson's England* (I., 37), edited by Prof. A. S. Turberville, a judicious summary but limited to the Established Church: it is to be regretted that in neither this nor that other handsome "portrait of an age," *Early Victorian England*, have the editors allotted to dissent more than a few lines out of nearly two thousand pages. For a short summary of the low position and influence of the Baptists, see Dr. Whitley, *History of British Baptists* (1923), p. 198.

tolerated, and despised; its disabilities were not merely political, they were spiritual, too.

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN YORKSHIRE.

For the situation in the West Riding about the time of Taylor's birth, the visitation returns³ made to Archbishop Herring of York in 1743 are an invaluable guide. In half the parishes no incumbent was resident; half the clergy were pluralists, not altogether inexcusably; less than half the churches maintained two services a Sunday throughout the year; and if the number of communicants is found to be "remarkably large," it is to be feared that their piety was not equal to their plenitude. Yet although the picture must not be painted too dark, and although there were many priests who performed their duties conscientiously "according to the standards of the day," nevertheless *quieta non movere* was the ideal. The diocese was larger and therefore much more unmanageable than at present, and great roving parishes like Halifax were not uncommon. There was a healthy leaven of dissent in the diocese: Presbyterians, Independents and Quakers abounded, like Roman Catholics; and the Baptist part of it, though small, was by no means negligible or pleasing to the priests. Seventeen "Anabaptist" meeting-houses were reported in sixty-two references to "Anabaptists."⁴ In August of that very year 1743, Salendine Nook was born with much ceremony and due solemnity; the Church could not be called large, but the very full records⁵ in the Church Book at that date do not indicate that vigour or interest in the denominational witness was lacking on the part of some Baptists. That witness was, however, a Particular Baptist witness (as Taylor's action in 1763 will show), and on the whole Baptists were neither a powerful nor a very numerous body of people in Yorkshire.

The year 1738 had its omens, for in May John Wesley had experienced that conversion which was to set all England in

³ Edited by S. L. Ollard and P. C. Walker. Yorks. Arch. Soc., Record series, 5 vols., 1928-31.

⁴ *Ibid.* It may be well to add that in this admirable work of scholarship the treatment of the Baptists, alone among the dissenters, is lamentable; if it is strange to find one editor (I., xxiii) propagating the legend of Crosley's friendship with Bunyan (see *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, p. 77) in the one reference he makes, it is still more strange to read the confession of the other (IV., 234) "I have found little material for illustrating the references in the Returns to the Baptists." It should be noted that the index and epitome of Baptists in vol. IV. is not complete; for a corrective to the omission of the entries relating to "Anabaptists" and their decayed meeting house in the parish of Birstall, for example, see H. C. Cradock: *A History of the Ancient Parish of Birstall* (1933), pp. 79-81.

⁵ Captain Percy Stock, *Foundations*, 1933, p. 66ff.

ferment. In twenty-two of the 1743 returns "Methodists" were noted; but the work of the revival had hardly had time to make itself felt as yet. Nevertheless, it was proceeding actively. Eight years later, William Darney, a local Methodist preacher, could write:

"In Halifax and Skircoat-Green
Some precious souls there be,
Which are now sav'd by faith alone,
And bring forth fruit to thee."⁶

By this early date Methodism had come to stay in the West Riding. Besides the powerful influence exerted no less by Whitefield than by the Wesleys themselves, the revivalist labours of local men like John Nelson, the stonemason of Birstall, William Grimshaw, incumbent of Haworth and Henry Venn, vicar of Huddersfield, together with the example of the Moravians, made a rapid and lasting impression round about.⁷ Methodism had discovered in the growing industrial areas virgin and neglected fields ripe unto harvest.

That the Yorkshire Baptist Churches, Particular as well as General, which originated in the eighteenth century, shared in the great debt to this Methodist movement cannot be denied, and especially is this debt to be seen in the case of Dan Taylor and the little group of Churches he founded. By 1760, then, when the young and impressionable Taylor had been caught up in it at Halifax,⁸ Methodism had overcome the initial opposition and was attracting not merely huge and excited audiences of rough Yorkshire folk, but was drafting into its service numbers of zealous and intelligent laymen. But by 1760 also it was itself vexed with the problem of "dissent." It is time to turn to Taylor.

DAN TAYLOR.

He had been born of workaday parents at Sourmilk Hall,

⁶ *Collection of Hymns*, 1751, quoted by W. W. Stamp, *Historical Notes of Wesleyan Methodism in Bradford and its Vicinity* [1840?], p. 34.

⁷ Almost any life of Wesley will be found to mention these influences in Yorkshire. Dan would often walk ten and twenty miles with his brother to hear the Wesleys and Grimshaw; the latter was especially friendly to the Baptists of Haworth and its pastor, James Hartley (see *Trans. Wesley Hist. Soc.*, X., 165). Cf. also Fawcett's *Life* (&c.), p. 17ff., and Dr. Whitley in *B.Q.*, N.S., V., p. 30ff.

⁸ J. U. Walker, *A History of Wesleyan Methodism in Halifax and its Vicinity*, 1836, shows how its introduction was due to Nelson, and how much of its development and influence were due to Grimshaw. It is worth noting that the earliest composition of Dan Taylor's to be printed (Whitley, 22-763) is "An elegy on the Rev. W. Grimshaw." The secession of 1762 is also described. The Vicar of Halifax, Dr. Legh, Wesley found to be a friend to himself, a "low churchman, and popular with the dissenters."

Northowram, Halifax, on December 21st, 1738. At the mature age of five his long days were consumed in helping his father in the Shibden Hall coal pits;⁹ but this was a boy of spirit, and in default of proper schooling his scanty leisure and still more scanty savings were spent upon books. At fifteen he came under the influence of the revival just mentioned, and was confirmed; he joined the Methodists in 1759, one of a number of youths of promise, and at Hipperholme in September 1761 first preached for them. It was not long, however, before he registered his protest against certain points of order and doctrine by withdrawing from their number. He was not alone, for that same midsummer of 1762, half of the body of thirty members withdrew also, led by a fellow-workman in the same pit, another "collier turned preacher,"¹⁰ T. Knight, later to become an Independent minister and father of three mighty sons; Edwards of Leeds also withdrew. That autumn, Taylor threw up his job as miner and began to serve a small body of seceders (to the number of four) at Wadsworth; his first preaching was in the open air at The Nook, a mile from Halifax, but as winter drew on a preaching station was fitted up in Wadsworth Lanes in a hired room, which Taylor also used as a school during the week. It was not in his nature to fear the wild country, rough inhabitants or the prospect of penury.

He and his brother John had often heard Particular Baptist preachers at Halifax;¹¹ John, a mere boy, was a decided Calvinist, Dan would have none of it. Now, a study of his New Testament and of Wall's *History of Infant Baptism* convinced him of the validity of believers' baptism by immersion; and others inclining to agree with him, he sought baptism at the hands of local Calvinistic Baptists, but in vain. Taylor was not made of stuff so easily to be put off; having heard of a like-minded society of Baptists at Boston in Lincolnshire, under the care of William Thompson, he set off on foot to visit them, with John Slater for companion. After prayer, they spent the first night under the stars, in the shelter of a hayrick: it was mid-February. Next evening, just over half-way there, great was their amazement to find that they had already passed by a General Baptist Church and that if they were to retrace their steps some eight miles they

⁹ *Trans. Halifax Antiq. Soc.*, 1930, p. 128.

¹⁰ Rev. J. Watson, M.A., F.S.A., *History and Antiquities of Halifax* (1775), p. 483. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 74ff. *Trans. Halifax Ant. Soc.*, 1936, p. 39.

¹¹ Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 452, noted in the parish in 1758 "Anabaptists (as they are called)—Rodhill End in Stansfield—Slack in Heptonstall—Wainsgate in Wadsworth."

would discover what they sought at Gamston.¹² And there Taylor, but not Slater, was baptised in the river Idle by Joseph Jeffries on February 16th, 1763. On his return to Wadsworth, Taylor baptised Slater and began to propagate Baptist views, not without opposition.

Three months later, Taylor, with his Church, became a member of the Lincolnshire Association of General Baptists. Thompson of Boston, a new friend, came with him to Wadsworth and made several baptisms, also instituting a regular Church with fourteen members. On July 30th, 1763, Taylor was ordained pastor at Wadsworth. Events now moved rapidly.¹³ In 1764 a meeting-house was put up on the rocky slope of Birchcliffe, Taylor working at it with his own hands and transferring the pulpit from old premises to new on his own back. Membership increased. Again he attended the Lincolnshire Association; and touring the Midlands, not for the first time, collecting money for his Church, he discovered the Leicestershire Association of General Baptists, a body of sturdy independents.

In 1765 and 1767 he represented the Lincolnshire Association at the General Assembly in London; the thorough-going Taylor discovered other things now, and after experiencing unifying disputes on doctrine with the Lincolnshire brethren, and an abortive attempt to unite them with the Midland Churches, he became a leading spirit in a move for separation.

In the autumn of 1769 the historic meeting at which a New Connexion¹⁴ was resolved upon was held at Lincoln, with Dan

¹² Gamston was then in the diocese of York; the following report of the incumbent in 1743 to Archbishop Herring (*op. cit.*, IV., 63) is worthy of note:—"The more ignorant our Dissenters are, the more are they zealous to make Proselytes, when they can prevail with any person, they make them generally so obstinate that they will give no ear to any advice or argument." Yet handsome is as handsome does, and he adds: "What I am going to say is, I doubt, odious, if not offensive and scandalous to some among us: but as the Apostles themselves used to go to Heathen Temples: I cannot but Think it might be of use, if we were allowed to be more conversant with Dissenters, both in publick and private: we might have a better opportunity, to convince them, that we do not look upon Forms and Ceremonies as Essentials, but only as helps and assistances to true Religion; which, where they have nothing in them either Idolatrous or Superstitious, nor against Scripture, ought to be complied with for Decency's & order's sake."

¹³ *Minutes of the Gen. Bapt. Assoc.*, II., 127ff.

¹⁴ It is usual to begin the story of the evolution of the New Connexion with the founding of the society at Barton in Leicestershire, and the labours of Taylor's namesake David, who, it may be observed, could claim no relationship in the flesh, although he itinerated in the West Riding from 1741. (Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley*, I., 10, should therefore be corrected: see *Trans. Wesley Hist. Soc.*, VIII., 109). Only Dan Taylor and Yorkshire concern us here.

Taylor and William Thompson from the Old Connexion and Francis Smith, John Grimley and others from the Midland Churches. It adjourned until May 1770, when it decided to hold the first meeting of a New Connexion in London the following month.

The meeting was duly held on June 6th, 1770, at John Brittain's church, Church Lane, Whitechapel. Taylor was the solitary representative from Yorkshire, but it was he who preached the morning sermon on June 7th, and who took the chair in the same afternoon.¹⁵ The "Association of Free-Grace General Baptists" thereupon proclaimed its six articles of distinctive belief. Next year the New Connexion subdivided into northern and southern Associations, but subsequent developments shortly left the former as really the basis of the Connexion. Of later developments the story may be read in Wood's *Condensed History*. The breach with the old General Baptist Assembly was not made final and formal till 1803. Their work endured for one hundred and twenty years and beyond, and who shall measure their contribution to the deepening of our Baptist witness?

To return to Yorkshire. Taylor laboured no less assiduously at his personal improvement in scholarship than at the oversight and extension both of his own flock at Birchcliffe (where murmurings soon began to be heard at the constant absences of their pastor) and of new causes in the district. His labours were incessant; he even opened a bookshop to augment his income, but he lacked what is now called the technique of salesmanship; he took a farm ("Hirst"); literary work kept him busy; his family grew and grew; he began a long career of assisting at ordinations and of writing "circular letters"; he was constantly away, preaching and collecting. For example, at Halifax, ten years of patient work yielded a building in 1777 and a separate church in 1782; thither Taylor himself removed as pastor in October 1783, after just ten years' oversight at Birchcliffe. It was a wrench; only after others had debated this way and that did Taylor, repressing any personal desires, determine to do what was best, not for Birchcliffe, but for his Master.¹⁶ His farewell to Wadsworth was *The Consistent Christian*, a book of wise and gentle counsel, which deserves a better fate than to sleep undusted and unread among the obscure theological lumber of

¹⁵ I follow Wood and Taylor. Dr. Whitley, *Mins. General Assembly*, II., 141, says "John Brittain is regarded as head of the seceders . . . Young Stanger and young Taylor had not impressed themselves on the Assembly" (i.e. of the Old Connexion).

¹⁶ See his own grand confession prefixed to *The consistent Christian* (1784) and reprinted in Adam Taylor's *Memoirs*, pp. 117-20.

our libraries. Two years later, however, it was the turn of Halifax.

At this time the ancient cause at Church Lane, London, had rapidly declined, and its pastor, John Brittain, grown enfeebled; after a full year's consideration by the Association and much debate as before, Taylor, again putting himself last, "acceded to the invitation of the Church and the advice of the Association" and migrated there in June 1785, nominally as colleague to Brittain. He became sole pastor in September 1794. He was now at his prime. Two important developments of his later days cannot be overlooked in however short a survey of his life and work. He had long desired an Academy for the training of ministers, and when at last the Association resolved to make the attempt, it requested Taylor to become Tutor; at first declined, the offer was later accepted, circumstances overcoming personal wishes once more. The Academy was opened at Mile End in January 1798, and Taylor remained there till its removal some years later.¹⁷ Horton was thus anticipated by six years; his nephew James was the first student. At the same time the Connexion resolved that a denominational periodical should be established: "when the question of superintendence was proposed, all, as usual, looked to Mr. T.," and in January 1798 the first number of the short-lived *General Baptist Magazine* duly appeared.

He came to Yorkshire several times in after years, for example in 1792 and 1798, when the Association met at Halifax, and in 1806 when it met at Queenshead. After his seventieth year, mental and bodily vigour grew weaker and weaker, until in November 1816 he collapsed one day¹⁸ and expired without a struggle or a sigh. His story had not had a happy ending.

In person he was little of stature, but he possessed great strength (which came in handy once or twice), and not of body only, for his mind and character were alike as strong and bold and solid as his own northern hills. In theology and linguistics his attainments were considerable by contemporary standards: as author, plain and reasonable and not so prolix as some: as tutor, loved or perhaps respected: as Christian, one who practised the virtues he preached: an "autodidacte," as the French say, of the very first rank; an indefatigable servant of his Master and of the cause he judged to be right: one who stood firm by the Scriptures;¹⁹ an inspiration to his contem-

¹⁷ "The late Midland College," three articles by W. J. Avery. *B.Q.*, N.S., I.

¹⁸ 26th: *Leeds Mercury* (14-XII.-1816) gives 27th.

¹⁹ This is particularly noticeable in his writings: indeed his first theological venture in print is significant of the man, "*The Absolute Necessity of Searching the Scriptures*," 1764.

poraries and a challenge to his far-distant legatees. "Persevere," was his admonition to his pupils, "persevere till you have conquered; without this you may be a gaudy butterfly, but never, like the bee, will your hive bear examining."

The ten Yorkshire Baptist Churches originating in the eighteenth century from the Evangelical Revival centre round the names and the spheres of action of Fawcett and Taylor.²⁰ Taylor's move to Halifax has already been noted: but it was not his first conquest. From 1771 onwards his preaching at Queenshead,²¹ eleven miles away, bore rapid fruit, so that by 1773 a meeting-house had been erected, seventeen members dismissed from Birchcliffe, and Taylor's brother John installed on a lifelong pastorate; that, too, was a fruitful and widely esteemed ministry. At the same time Shore, seven miles away, was evangelised, a meeting-house built in 1777, and John Stansfield of Birchcliffe made minister: it became a separate Church in 1795 when John Spencer was called to the pastorate. A hazardous venture at Burnley took root.

Birchcliffe might have been expected to suffer from the frequent calls on its pastor's time and energies (and there was some real Yorkshire grumbling), but even after the severest blow of all in 1783 it bore up well: John Sutcliffe proved an admirable disciple and successor. Halifax in its turn received a like blow in 1785. Again, Taylor's withdrawal might have been expected to weaken his Churches, and indeed this more distant removal did prove unfortunate. In spite of the subsequent establishment in 1789 of an ill-fated cause at Longwood (a flash in the pan, whose tragic and short-lived history receives short shrift in Dr. Blomfield's survey²²), the position of the West Riding General Baptist Churches was outwardly hardly so good in 1800 as it had been in 1786.

Nineteenth-century developments can be mentioned only briefly: the full story is readily available elsewhere. Queenshead, for example, was the mother of many children—Sandy Lane (1824), Clayton (1828), Tetley Street (1832) and others, in the Bradford area, and Birchcliffe led to Heptonstall Slack in 1807. In 1846, when Wood made his survey, Heptonstall had taken the lead, with Birchcliffe second: but Leicester was twice as prosperous. Until in the slow process of time, in 1891, Baptists General and Particular consummated the evolutionary process in a Union.

Some of the men he trained and encouraged and influenced

²⁰ On these see *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, and Wood, *op. cit.*

²¹ Alias Queensbury; its story in *General Baptist Repository*, v. II.

²² *Baptists of Yorkshire*, p. 109.

have already been mentioned in connection with the various Churches: other names of disciples²³ are J. Deacon of Leicester, Richard Folds, Jeremy Ingham of Malby, Jonathan Scott of Gamston, and Joseph Ellis. His first assistant at his school (August 1765 to March 1768), George Birley, became minister at St. Ives.

His friendships were not only with men of his own persuasion: among Particular Baptists, A. Booth,²⁴ Austin and Stennett, and among Independents, Kello and Collyer were his friends. He went to hear James Hartley of Haworth:²⁵ he often preached for Fawcett. With Fawcett, indeed, he kept up an intimate and lifelong friendship in Yorkshire from 1764:²⁶ Fawcett's son paints an idyllic picture of the two youthful Baptist ministers, General and Particular, joining in study at Wainsgate with the Anglican Henry Foster, home on vacation from Queen's College. It was Fawcett who baptised Taylor's friend and assistant, John Sutcliffe, whom he afterwards helped in his studies.

But the rival Churches kept their distance: Thomas Stutterd, prominent layman at Salendine Nook, made a grudging acknowledgment of the work of the General Baptists at Longwood (where he lived) in a letter of May 23rd, 1789, which is apparently the sole indication of any Particular interest in them discoverable among a mass of papers at Salendine.²⁷ In 1788 the Colne brethren reported to the Association its severe censure of a youth preaching Arminianism.²⁸

Prejudice against dissent died hard in the district: in 1794 the first toast of a company of volunteers at Halifax was "damnation to all dissenters and Methodists."²⁹ Thomas Stutterd surveyed the local Baptist Churches, Particular of course, in November 1798: he was not too full of optimism, desired a forward movement, and found Lancashire better off than Yorkshire.³⁰ About 1805, Dr. Steadman summarised the position of the West Riding Churches and his report is very gloomy:³¹ only Rochdale and Leeds, for example, had baptisteries.

But patient sowing had been done: the Churches had held

²³ Biographies of many of these in Wood, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Adam Taylor's *Memoirs*, p. 301, etc.

²⁵ At Wainsgate, Dec. 12, 1765, *ibid.* p. 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-2; 221. Fawcett's *Life* (&c.), p. 139.

²⁷ Captain Percy Stock, *Foundations* (1933), p. 210. See also Adam Taylor, *Memoirs*, p. 32.

²⁸ Stock, p. 214.

²⁹ Stock, p. 490.

³⁰ Stock, p. 383-4.

³¹ Thos. Steadman, *Memoir* (1838), p. 227 and 235.

fast: a rich harvest was shortly to follow. Yet, while the Particular Churches had done little more than mark time, Dan Taylor had marched boldly forward: "*si momentum requiris*," he could have said of his labours as early as 1785, "*circumspice*."

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

The article on Taylor in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (vol. lv., 1898), by Alexander Gordon, gives a list of main authorities, such as Adam Taylor and Underwood. Some useful material in work published during the past forty years may perhaps be mentioned; for example, Dr. Whitley's *Baptist bibliography*, with which should be compared C. Crossland, *Contributions to Halifax bibliography and authors* (*Trans. Halifax Ant. Soc.*, 1915, pp. 30-33, "Dan Taylor"), and J. H. Turner, *Halifax books and authors*, 1906, p. 211. Both the *Baptists of Yorkshire* and *Baptists of the North-West* (or the joint volume, of course) survey his work. Goadby's *By-paths*, an older book (1871), has a romantic pen portrait of Taylor. There are also various histories of churches, such as the *Centenary souvenir of Heptonstall Slack Baptist Church, 1807-1907*, by E. G. Thomas; and articles in the Society's *Transactions* (e.g. V., 35 ff.) provide useful references.

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