

Trosnant Academy.

HAD Oliver Cromwell lived a little longer there is every likelihood that a University would have been established in Wales nearly two hundred years earlier than it was. John Lewis of Glasgrug, Cardiganshire, wrote a pamphlet in which he discussed the need of educational facilities in Wales. It is a lengthy treatment of the position, and on May 25th, 1656, he forwarded a copy to Richard Baxter, and suggested that he should use his influence with Cromwell for the founding of a University. In a lengthy reply, Baxter evinced interest in the project, even to suggesting a site for the college buildings. The relevant passage is as follows: "I am most desirous to treat with you about a Colledge with academical priviledges for Wales, and I am glad that you and Dr. Ulin favor it. I did ten years ago expound it to Colonel Mackworth, but succeeded not." Then follows a statement of the efforts that Baxter had made in other directions: to get a fund started for the purpose of providing those educational facilities, and the assurance that if Lewis and those who supported him in his request could find someone to make a substantial gift to start the fund, there would be no difficulty in getting official sanction and support. "I make no doubt to procure authority from ye Protector and Parliament," and so certain is he that all would be well that he suggests the site for the college. "I conceive Shrewsbury ye only fit place in many respects."

With the death of Cromwell all hope for higher educational provisions was lost, and even those privileges which the Dissenters had enjoyed during Cromwell's rule were soon removed, leaving Nonconformist Wales in much the same position on its educational side as it had been when Nonconformity was first established.

This accounts in no small measure for the number of private academies that sprang up all over the land during the first and second decades of the eighteenth century. One other contributory factor was that at that time a large number of Welsh clergymen were ejected from the Anglican community, a great number of whom made use of their superior learning by training young men for the Nonconformist ministry.

In this way there flowed into the churches of Wales a steady stream of educated men, and it soon became apparent that denominational academies were necessary to encourage and control the training of these men.

To say, as it has been said,¹ that the Baptists of Wales were guilty of "culpably neglecting the education of their ministers for one hundred and fifty years" is unfair and misleading. As early as 1720, at the Association Meetings held at Trosgoed (now Maesyberllan), Breconshire, a Committee was set up to enter into the whole question of ministerial training, and especially to consider the desirability of forming a denominational academy.

This movement was supported by the leading men of the denomination, including John Miles, of Ilston; David Davies, of Hengoed; Lewis Thomas; John Jenkins, Rhydwlwym; the famous Enoch Francis, Aberduar; and Morgan Griffiths, the third minister of Hengoed. It is true that nothing definite seems to have emerged from the findings of this Committee, but the fact that a son of one of its members opened a Baptist Academy about twelve years later cannot be without significance.

It was left to a layman to make the first venture in ministerial education among the Baptists of Wales. John Griffiths, son of Morgan Griffiths, the minister of Hengoed, who was at that time manager of the Iron and Japanning Works at Pontypool, rented a house at Trosnant and commenced an Academy there about the year 1732. The Academy's syllabus testifies to the purpose Griffiths had in mind, for it included among its subjects, first, the teaching of Welsh and English, secondly, an introduction to the root languages of the Holy Scripture, and thirdly, an introduction into the various branches of learning which are profitable for the work of the ministry.

This was the first school of its kind to receive the official blessing of the denomination, and it served the churches as a ministerial training centre for upwards of forty years. It is well to remember, however, that concern for ministerial education had been shown before this date. In 1718 the Particular Baptist Fund, known in Wales as the London Treasury Fund, began to help ministers in Wales, some to buy books, and others to obtain instruction at one or other of the private Academies. Even earlier than this, during the first ten years of the eighteenth century, churches assisted young men to study at the school of Robert Morgan, Pontyrdulais, who afterwards became teacher at Horsley Down School, London.

But these were all personal transactions in comparison with that which later took place at Trosnant. Here the denomination not only contributed to the maintenance of the Academy, but also had an important voice in its control and administration. There were times when its influence and importance were less than at

¹ By Dr. Rees in his *History of Protestant Nonconformity*, 1st edition, p.496.

others, but never during its history was the Academy completely severed from the Association.

As far as can be discovered there were six tutors at Trosnant,² not all at the same time, nor in succession, and it is difficult to determine, with any accuracy, how long and in what capacity some of these tutors laboured there. But one thing seems now to have been established, namely, that Miles Harry was associated in one way or another with the Academy from first to last. He and John Griffiths married two sisters, and they became firm friends, and if John Griffiths is to be credited with the founding of the Academy, much of its later success is attributable to the unwearied efforts of his brother-in-law.

When John Griffiths' active interest in the institution he had founded terminated is not known, but we are told that as the result of a difference between him and some of the "gentlemen of the district" he left Pontypool about 1750. After a period of residence at Abercarn, where he was among the founders of the Baptist Church there, he left for America in April 1759. For a time he lived at Philadelphia, but later removed to New York, where his intellectual attainments were recognised and he was made a judge of the New York State.

That Caleb Evans was at the Academy early in its history is now beyond dispute, although Joshua Thomas, Rufus and Nefydd, seem to have overlooked him. From *Dissenting Deputies* we learn that he was brought before the Bishop of Llandaff, Mathew Mawson, for keeping a school without a licence. This was in 1739, which indicates that at that time Evans was the principal of the Academy.

The bishop held that a licence for teaching could only be granted, according to the Schism Act, to one who could produce evidence of having communed at least once at the parish church during the previous twelve months. This Caleb Evans could not do, but he went one better, for this was one of the occasions when the prisoner was better versed in the law than his judge. Not only did he point out to the bishop that the Schism Act had never been enforced, but that it had been totally repealed in 1719. After that incident Evans resigned as principal of the Academy, and removed in 1764 to Bristol, where he died in 1790. Some time during its early years the Academy seems to have been under the supervision of one Thomas Phillips, a native of Rhydwylym, but nothing is known of him. It has been suggested that he was the son of Philip John, the minister of the church at Rhydwylym, but there is little or no evidence to support this.

The brightest and most successful period in the history of

² John Griffiths, Caleb Evans, Thomas Phillips, John Mathews, Rees Evans and Miles Harry.

Trosnant was enjoyed under the principalship of John Mathews, of Swansea. He is reported as having excelled in certain branches of learning, and was a tutor at Trosnant for many years, commencing his work there in 1740; apparently from the time that Caleb Evans severed his connection with the Academy.

We may rest assured, however, that much of the success during this period was due to a great extent to the publicity that the Academy received as the result of Caleb Evans' trial. The courage and resource of Evans were much talked of in those days, and the institution of which he was the head received a much-needed fillip from the accounts of the proceedings. Many brilliant young men enrolled as members of Trosnant during this period, who later earned fame for themselves not only in England and Wales, but also in Ireland and America. Among them were Morgan Jones of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Francis of Horsley Church, Gloucester, and Thomas Llewellyn of London. The death of John Mathews coincides with the closing of the Academy.

There is one other tutor whose name cannot be left out of the list of those who served Trosnant during these forty years, he was Rees Evans of Pentrefnewydd, Montgomeryshire. He was never the principal, but seems always to have worked as the assistant to the Head Teacher. He had already some knowledge of teaching before coming to Trosnant. After his baptism in 1740 he moved to Bedwellty, Monmouthshire, where he opened a private school. It was from Bedwellty that he was invited to Trosnant, where he was asked to preach.

His associations with Trosnant were partly as student and partly as tutor. He left Trosnant before 1749, for in that year he was enrolled as a student at Bristol, where, like so many of the other students of the Academy, he had gone for a further course of studies. From Bristol he received a call to Leominster, where he remained for three years. Afterwards he was at Shrewsbury, Chester and Tewkesbury, dying in the last-named place in 1768.

As has already been said, the exact relation of Miles Harry with the Academy is difficult to determine. He was a native of Blaenau Gwent, where he was baptised on April 1st, 1724, and was ordained as a local preacher on October 29th, 1729. He preached very often at Penygarn, which was at that time a branch church of Blaenau Gwent. When the first invitation came to him to take charge of Penygarn Church, the members at Blaenau Gwent were not altogether agreeable to his going, desiring, so it has been suggested, to retain his services themselves. At last, however, they consented, and having received his letter of transfer on May 1st, 1732, he became the chosen pastor of Penygarn on the 24th of the same month.

So we have a new minister at the only Baptist Church in Pontypool just about the time that the Trosnant Academy was coming into being, and the history of Trosnant and Penygarn are so interwoven that it is nearly impossible to tell where one begins and where the other finishes. For example, the Penygarn records tell of much missionary work in those days. Young men were sent out to all the surrounding villages to commence new causes. Thus we have Baptist Churches being formed in districts as far apart as Rogerstone and Blaenavon, Risca and Goytre, and hardly a village in the eastern and western valleys of Monmouthshire was not visited.

But how many of these young evangelists were members of the church at Penygarn, and how many were members both of Penygarn and of Trosnant Academy, it is not possible to ascertain. It is for that reason that the full list of students at Trosnant can never be discovered. There can be little or no doubt that young men leaving their homes for Trosnant would seek membership at Penygarn, and equally as certain that they would have been known later as members of Penygarn rather than as students of the Academy. It is this more than anything else that accounts for the statement so often made that all except five of the students at Trosnant settled in America, England or elsewhere. If we take into account all those who settled in Wales from Penygarn the figure would be nearer fifty than five, and many of these must have received instruction at Trosnant.

Opinions differ greatly concerning the number of ministers which Trosnant produced, some placing the figure no higher than forty over the whole period, or an average of one a year during its existence. But Dr. Richards, in his *Nonconformist Memorial*, claims that there were between thirty and forty during Mathews' period alone, and this seems much nearer the mark when we remember the number of men that entered the Welsh ministry from Penygarn during Miles Harry's ministry.

For many of the students Trosnant was but the stepping-stone to Bristol, and a great deal more is known of the achievements of these than of the men whose training ended with their period at the Academy. They left their mark upon Theology, Philosophy, History and Literature. One of their number, Thomas Llewellyn, made valuable contributions to New Testament studies, principally as a result of his work on the root languages of the Scriptures, and they all, without exception, gained much prominence as preachers and denominational leaders.

Some are deserving of more than this generalised reference; especially those who were at Trosnant during its most successful years under John Mathews. Of these, the greatest was Thomas

Llewellyn, for whom it has been claimed by one authority that "he was the most noted man that Wales ever reared." Born near Hengoed in 1720, Llewellyn began to preach immediately following his baptism in 1739. Before reaching his twentieth birthday he became a student at Trosnant, later studying under Foskett and Evans at Bristol. At the latter place he showed such exceptional brilliance that he was advised to continue his studies in London, where he came under the influence of John Huttard, Dr. Walker, Dr. Margath, Dr. Jennings and Dr. Savage.

Realising how greatly he himself had benefited by the opportunities for learning granted him, Llewellyn's first service on concluding his own studies was the provision of free educational facilities for all young men preparing for the Baptist ministry. His example soon attracted others who were interested in ministerial education, and soon afterwards a Society was formed "for advising and helping young men to learn original languages of Scripture, and other subjects desirable for the preaching of the Word." The Society chose Thomas Llewellyn teacher and advisor to these young men.

He was among the founders of the London Cymrodorion Society, and Cymdeithas Gwyneddigion. For many years he gave valuable assistance as a member of the missionary movement for the evangelisation of Môn and Arfon. The University of Aberdeen honoured Llewellyn, first by conferring upon him the M.A. degree, and later the LL.D. He died in August 1793, and was buried in Bunhill Fields, according to tradition, in the same grave as Isaac Watts.

Another Trosnant student who gained a world-wide reputation was Morgan Edwards. He was a member at Penygarn under Miles Harry, and began preaching when only sixteen years of age. For twenty years he did the work of an evangelist, journeying through the towns and villages of England and Ireland preaching the Gospel. It was not until 1757 that he was ordained to the ministry; nineteen years after he had commenced preaching. In 1761 he sailed to America, where he soon sprang into prominence as a popular preacher and historian.

To Morgan Edwards we are indebted for so much of our information concerning the Baptist movement in America up to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. He wrote twelve books on Baptist History in the Twelve States. These first appeared in 1770, and are evidence of great scholarship.

In this very brief summary of the life of but two of Trosnant's students we have an indication of how the Academy influenced Baptist witness in England, Ireland and America, and as could be expected, its influence in Wales was even greater, but, as someone has suggested, to tell the story of Trosnant,

even in the fragmentary form in which we have it, would demand the space of an average-size book.

During its forty years of existence the Academy did much to remove the prejudices that then existed against a trained ministry, and paved the way for future efforts along similar lines. There was never a year in its history when its supporters were free from anxiety, and scarcely an Association meeting passed without some threat to its existence. The last great fight to preserve the Academy was made in 1761, but the support was lacking, and the movement declined until it was finally abandoned in 1770.

There were good and sufficient reasons why the Academy should be closed. When, in 1741, the question of its continuance was discussed, it was revealed that there were only sixteen churches throughout the whole of Wales who were members of the Union, and it was explained that the expense of the Academy was too great to be borne by so few.

There was also the difficulty of securing the services of competent tutors, and perhaps most important of all, the fact that so many of the students left Trosnant to complete their studies at Bristol, and became lost to Wales by settling in England or America.

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