

The Baptist Annual Register, 1790.

ONE hundred and fifty years ago, a London pastor from Devon began a new style of periodical, to combine the memorials of denominational history with news of contemporary progress.

He was not the first Baptist to be an editor, but he was the first to attend chiefly to Baptist affairs. So, at the age of thirty-eight, John Rippon of Carter Lane broke new ground. He paid tribute to predecessors in research, such as Stinton, Crosby, Robert Robinson, Josiah Thompson, Joshua Thomas, Isaac Backus, Morgan Edwards, and others. He outlined his plan, and secured promises of support from America, if he would issue a half-yearly. He succeeded abundantly, and after four years his first volume contained 564 pages, with preface and index. He prefixed a picture of his tutor at Bristol, the late Rev. Caleb Evans, D.D., engraved from a portrait, with a coat of arms. Now, Evans in 1769 had helped John Ash, of Pershore, to do a new thing—gather hymns by many authors, and publish the Bristol Hymn Book, which had raced through seven editions. It had prompted Rippon to make another Selection, which, however, was retrograde, only to supplement Watts; but it threw into prominence hymns by Anne Steele, Benjamin Beddome, the Stennetts, and contemporary Baptists. Such tastes are evident on his title page to the first volume, with the verses :

From East to West, from North to South,
Now be His name ador'd!
EUROPE, with all thy millions, shout
Hosannahs to thy Lord!
ASIA and AFRICA, resound
From shore to shore his Fame;
And thou, AMERICA, in songs
Redeeming Love proclaim.

Not only missionary enterprise was in his heart, but denominational solidarity. Overleaf he dedicated his infant publication "to all the baptized ministers and people in America England Ireland Scotland Wales the United Netherlands France Switzerland Poland Russia Prussia and elsewhere . . . in serious expectation that before many years . . . a deputation from all these climes would meet probably in London to consult the ecclesiastical good of the whole." On 14th October, 1790, a Lutheran minister in the State of Georgia wrote to him that Baptists were far the greater part of

the inhabitants. His anticipations were realised in 1905, when a statue to his successor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was unveiled in that Exeter Hall where he had often preached; and again in 1939, when more than 50,000 saw in Georgia a pageant of Baptist history planned by an English officer of the Baptist Missionary Society, a member of the Historical Society committee.

From a veteran in Gloucestershire who had declined the very post which Rippon was filling in Southwark, he received a poem about the Associations, which had hitherto been the chief links of the churches. Four lines show that Benjamin Francis was a kindred spirit:

Where'er thou meetest to the end of time,
In fair Britannia, or some foreign clime,
Still may'st thou meet, bless'd with abundant grace,
Beneath the smiles of thy Redeemer's face.

Rippon at once found that others had been stirring. A Welsh surgeon, John Thomas, son of a deacon at Fairford, sent a copy of his advertisement in 1783 at Calcutta for helpers to spread the knowledge of Christ in Bengal, with answers. He had been encouraged to preach, and to translate, and he sent a version of a Bengali hymn composed in 1788, whose refrain was:

O who besides can recover us
From the everlasting darkness of sin
Except the Lord Jesus Christ?

News quickly came that Dr. Llewellyn had promoted a mission to North Wales fourteen years earlier; that a negro had founded a church at Savannah within eight years of Whitefield's death; that another negro had established a church in Jamaica during 1784, that a third had gathered one in Nova Scotia next year.

Americans were much interested in Rippon's enterprise. At Commencement in September, 1792, at the Rhode Island College, the honorary degree of M.A. was conferred on Thomas Duncombe of Coate, John Fawcett of Hebden Bridge, and Benjamin Francis; while Rippon and John Ryland junior were made Doctors of Divinity. Rippon had begun advertising publications, among which was a sermon on slavery by Abraham Booth; the concordance by Butterworth still professing to be the most full and concise; a history by his deacon at Coventry, Sutton Staughton, of reformers and martyrs; a collection of materials towards Baptist history in America, by Morgan Edwards; his own new book of above 200 hymn tunes. One other attracted no special interest; it was *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, a booklet of 87 pages published at Leicester, where the author,

after twenty-two months of probation, had been ordained pastor; he was self-educated, till recently a shoe-maker, eleven years younger than Rippon, named William Carey. In the light of after events, chronicled in later volumes of the *Register*, it is amusing to see among the tunes collected by Robert Keen for Rippon, the names of Fountain and Eagle Street, Derby (but not yet Ward), Ryland and Bristol, Broadmead and Westbury (but no Marshman).

A later issue prints the resolutions at Kettering on 2nd October, 1792, when a few local men founded the Particular Baptist Society for propagating the Gospel among the Heathen, promising 12½ guineas. The minutes do not say that one half-guinea was pledged by Sutton Staughton's son, a student at Bristol; nor that Carey had already received a whole guinea from an American in England, Elhanan Winchester; had Rippon known, he would have rejoiced in the promise of youth and the prospects across the Atlantic. The next issue published a letter signed by Fuller, Pearce, W. Staughton and others, commending to their fellow-Christians in India "our much esteemed brethren Thomas and Carey."

Meanwhile, another man had been kindled by the spread of aspirations after liberty from America to France. Morgan John Rhees had gone to Hengoed, where he was baptised young; he had started teaching in chapels and barns, both on week-nights and on Sunday. For the two kinds of school that resulted he wrote Welsh text-books, and thus gained a place in the growth of education. Feeling his own lack, he went to Bristol Academy, being one of the last who profited under Caleb Evans; then in 1788 he succeeded David Jones at pastor at Penygarn, near Pontypool, just in time for Joshua Thomas to meet him and note it in the history he wrote, which Rippon printed as an extra to his *Register*.

When, however, France had again a States-General, and liberty was in the air, Rhees, at the age of twenty-nine, went to Paris. A few months gave him a life-long impulse to republicanism; while the new freedom to the Huguenots quickened his evangelistic zeal. He struck out on a completely new line.

David Jones, his predecessor, had been issuing a Welsh Bible in parts, with short notes. A Naval and Military Bible Society had for five or six years been supplying cheap English Bibles to the Forces. Rhees put the two ideas together, so that the flint and steel struck a spark. He decided to found a Bible Society, not for the British Forces, not for the Principality, but for foreigners, to promote evangelical religion.

In the *Register* he could read a letter of 1789 from Boston recognising the revolution in France as an astonishing event of

Providence. But while the American said emphatically, *Stand still and see the salvation of God*, Rhees could remember how Moses had been rebuked for this, and had been bidden change his utterance to *Go forward*. Rippon printed part of the 1790 Bill of Rights of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and compared it with part of the new constitution of France; the latter opened a career to all citizens, the former to all who acknowledged God and His moral rule. Rhees drew the conclusion that Frenchmen needed steadying in the Christian faith. Now, Rippon had published a very full and detailed list of all the Mennonite churches on the Continent, finding them most akin to the Baptists. They abounded in the Netherlands and the Palatinate; in France they were but a few in Alsace. Rhees did not see them as a good medium, and chose another place, another agency. There had been frequent revision of the French Bible, the last by Pierre Roques, of Basle, in 1736. The Naval and Military Bible Society took this up, and had a large edition marked, "Ce livre ne doit point être vendu, étant le don de la Société de Bibles, à Londres établi l'an 1780." But whereas it was expressly confined to the British Forces—why did they need a French version?—Rhees projected a new Bible Society which should supply it to Frenchmen; and he fixed on Boulogne as its base of operations. But when France, early in 1793, declared war on England, this enterprise was stopped. It began again only just after Rippon stopped his *Register*, at the call of Joseph Hughes.

Rhees had already opened out in another direction, taking a leaf from Rippon. At Trefecca he published the first number of a quarterly, *Y cylchgrawn cymmraeg*. This proved to be too republican for the authorities, and after the fifth number appeared at Carmarthen, he found it wise to go to America, where he had a fine career.

More cautious were others of this circle. Joshua Thomas confined himself to writing the histories of each Welsh church, but Rippon never published them. Toulmin revised Neal's *History of the Puritans*. Elhanan Winchester, however, began expounding prophecies yet to be fulfilled, then dilated on the woe-trumpets; so although he and Rhees both published hymn-books in 1794, he, too, found it wise to return to America.

Rippon avoided political snares, and held on his course with the *Register*, while his hymn-book steadily enriched him. Yet the magazine was allowed to die in 1803, without any explanation. The Massachusetts B.M.S. instantly supplied the gap by a new magazine, while the English B.M.S. was issuing its *Periodical Accounts*; and John Foster became the mainstay of the *Eclectic Review* in 1805. But the printing of Baptist

history had to wait six years longer, till Joseph Ivimey digested much of Rippon's researches with those of Stinton, and gradually produced four valuable volumes. Two years earlier, the west country began another *Baptist Magazine*, which had nearly a century before it. But the combination of history and literature was dissolved, until in 1922 the present *Baptist Quarterly* took shape.

Looking back these 150 years, one outstanding fact is the value of the Bristol Academy; and this was due to three Welshmen with a pupil of a Welshman. Rippon was one of the many who profited, and acknowledged the debt in his history of it. Just as he ended his *Register*, another Bristol man, Steadman, the earliest supporter of Carey, before 1792, with half a guinea, transplanted its traditions to a Northern Academy, and when the *Baptist Magazine* appeared in 1809, while it was edited by Thomas Smith, who, like Rippon, hailed from Tiverton, it numbered among its contributors Steadman from Bristol.

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