

Two Dutch Translations by Carey.

AN ANGUS LIBRARY FIND.

I

THE linguistic achievements of Carey have always caused great astonishment, and sometimes a little incredulity. That a young man, with the slenderest resources and much else to occupy him, should have taught himself Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and also a working knowledge of Dutch, French and Italian, has seemed almost beyond the bounds of possibility. Just as later there was questioning of the reliability and accuracy of certain of the translations of the Bible which came from Serampore—questioning which has resulted in the complete vindication of Carey's name—so, even in Carey's lifetime, there were some who refused to believe that a village shoemaker-pastor could have gained such mastery over ancient and modern tongues.

In the main, for the earlier period of Carey's life, we have to rely on the testimony of his contemporaries, and in particular that of his closest friends. To substantiate their claims, however, there is still preserved, happily, in the vestry of the College Street Church, Northampton, a translation of a Dutch pamphlet made by Carey for John Ryland in 1789, and there has just come to light in the Angus Library of Regent's Park College, Oxford, some further evidence of his knowledge of the Dutch language. The papers are important as confirmation of Carey's ability, and they have also considerable interest on account of their contents.

What we know of Carey's acquaintance with Dutch comes almost entirely from John Ryland. In his life of Fuller, published in 1816 (that is, while Carey was in the midst of his work in India) this passage occurs :

"I never formally examined the proficiency he had then made in learning Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Dutch, Italian, etc., but one anecdote will illustrate what, indeed, his subsequent attainments render unnecessary to be proved. I one day had occasion thus to address him : 'Well, Mr. Carey, you remember I laughed at you when I heard of your learning Dutch, for I thought you would never have any use for that language; but now I have the first opportunity of profiting by it. I have received a parcel from Dr. Erskine, of Edinburgh, who has long been used to send me any interesting publications which he receives from America, or which have been printed in Scotland; and this parcel contains several of those sorts: but he says I shall wonder that he has inclosed a Dutch book. This, he informs me, is a volume of Sermons written by a Divine now living in Holland; at the end of which is a Dissertation on the

Call of the Gospel, which, if any friend of mine or Mr. Fuller's understands the language sufficiently to translate it for us, we should be glad to see. 'Now (said I to Mr. Carey) if you will translate this Dissertation for me, I will give you the whole book.' He soon brought me a good Dissertation on the subject, and afterwards an extraordinary sermon, on Hosea, chapter iii, which I doubt not were translated from this book. I once also, in an accidental way, made a trial of his skill in French; and hence, at that early period, I inferred that, as his motives to learn Latin, Greek and Hebrew must have been stronger than those that excited him to acquire French and Dutch, his proficiency in them could not be less. His present eminence in Oriental literature every one acknowledges. But it is pleasant to trace the rise of the oak from an acorn."¹

This passage was substantially reproduced by Cox in his *History of the Baptist Mission*,² and has also found its way in various forms into the biographies of Carey. Only one small addition can be made to it from another source. When, in 1834, Christopher Anderson printed his memorial sermon, preached in Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, after the news of Carey's death reached this country, he added a footnote to his quotation of the passage from Ryland given above :

"And I am now able to give additional interest to this anecdote, from the best authority, owing to my residence with Mr. Sutcliff, whose conversation used so delightfully to beguile every evening. Dr. Carey actually acquired the knowledge of this tongue without the intervention of one elementary book, through some Dutch quarto, obtained, I think, from an old woman either in the village or its neighbourhood."³

Anderson spent some months in Olney in 1805, and remained in close touch with Sutcliff and Fuller for the rest of their lives. On a number of points besides this one, his testimony is of great value.

Pearce Carey has examined the College Street translation, which runs to forty-five pages of neat, small writing. He calls it a "credible rendering."⁴ It was made apparently in 1789.⁵

The Angus Library find is in a small parcel of faded papers which belonged once to John Rippon, well-known for his selection of hymns and as editor of the *Baptist Register*. The parcel contains, among other things :

- (1) A translation of a letter to Rippon from Daniel Hovens, of Rotterdam, dated 26th November, 1791. It runs to seven closely written sheets, and at the end there is this note :

1. *Life and Death of Andrew Fuller*, 1816, p. 239n.
2. *Op. cit.*, 1842, I, p. 9.
3. *A Discourse occasioned by the death, etc.*, 1834, p. 31n.
4. *William Carey*, 8th ed., p. 52.
5. Smith, *Life*, Everyman ed., p. 17.

"Some few words in the Letter were obscurely written but the sense is given. I shall translate the Pamphlet in the course of the week if nothing very unexpectedly prevents. All except the Names must be translated. But Oh! how fall'n is Religion in Holland. I am, etc.
W. Carey."

This is addressed on the outside to Mr. Thos. Rippon, Drawing Office, Bank of England, for the Revd. J. Rippon, and the postmark is Leicester, January, 1792.

- (2) A Dutch MS. of twenty-four pages, consisting of a copy by D. Hovens of an account of the Baptist congregations in Haarlem, written in April, 1740, by his grandfather, Enoch Hovens.
- (3) A translation of the above, quite clearly in Carey's writing.

The deciphering of the Dutch script can have been no small feat, and though there are evidences that Carey was occasionally somewhat baffled as to the sense, there is no doubt at all from the translation both of the letter and the so-called pamphlet that he had a very competent knowledge of the language. These are not laborious schoolboy exercises. Pearce Carey's word "creditable" is, on the whole, an understatement.

II

Both the letter and the other document are of interest in themselves. Rippon, says Dr. Whitley, "was an indefatigable antiquary, and gathered much material; unfortunately he did not publish much that he gathered, nor did he return it to its owners, and many early records have been lost ever since, though some manuscripts have found their way to safe keeping."⁶ In the parcel in the Angus Library there are other documents that will repay careful examination. The letter from Hovens, of Rotterdam, throws light on Rippon's methods, and also indicates that there were not a few contacts between English and Dutch Baptists in the late eighteenth century.

Hovens is replying to a communication he had had from Rippon seven months earlier, inviting his collaboration in the *Baptist Register*. He has only recently learned that he need not attempt to send an answer in English. A colleague in Leyden has assured him that "though you neither understand High or Low Dutch, yet you can get it interpreted without much trouble." Hovens then tells an interesting story. In 1783 he had had a letter from the Rev. Job David, of Frome, who had seen a contribution of his to Teyler's *Divine Fellowship*. David invited his help with the plan for a "History of the Baptists in Europe and America," which was occupying the attention of Robert Robinson, of Cambridge. In particular,

6. *History of British Baptists*, p. 272.

Robinson was wanting a copy of T. J. Van Braght's *Looking-Glass of Martyrs*.⁷ Hovens reports that in May, 1784, he sent a copy, care of a Holborn bookseller, for forwarding to David, and also information about the historical papers of a Mr. Cuperus, a deceased Baptist minister of Utrecht, who had had in mind an undertaking similar to Robinson's. David had replied asking for the papers, but after considerable correspondence and delay, the executors of Cuperus had refused, though they were willing that Hovens send to England some extracts from them. This he reported to David in 1787, receiving in reply full details of Robinson's scheme, and a further request for help. But Hovens's wife died shortly afterwards, and for some time he was too overwhelmed to undertake any additional work.

In May, 1791, however, having married again, he felt able to pursue the matter further, and he sent over to the Holborn bookseller:

- (1) H. Costenbaan, *Epistola de Mennonitis Amstelodami*.
- (2) An account of the Baptists of Haarlem written by his grandfather, Enoch Hovens.
- (3) Two catalogues of Baptist churches and their ministers, which he had made up some years earlier from the papers of Cuperus.

When he wrote to Rippon in November of the same year, these had not been acknowledged. He gathered from references in the copies of the *Baptist Register* sent him, that Robinson was dead, and he thought that perhaps David also was deceased. Accordingly he appeals to Rippon to try to discover the papers. "What concerns the state of the Baptists here you will in some sense perceive from the two catalogues which I have sent to Mr. David, if you can obtain them. The greatest part of the churches, however, are since that time become very much reduced, and a few remain much as they were with little increase."

Hovens tells Rippon that he has been in touch with Dr. Stennett, translating into Dutch one of his pamphlets on baptism. He asks for a copy of Rippon's hymnbook, and says he is sending him:

- (1) Printed catalogue of Baptist writers and writings, 1639-1725 (perhaps).
- (2) Last printed catalogue of Baptist churches and teachers with notes.
- (3) List of Bachelors of Divinity who have come out of the seminary in Amsterdam since its foundation.

7. See Whitley, *Baptist Bibliography*, I, p. 119, etc. An Anabaptist martyrology, which appeared in its final form in 1685, but incorporated documents from as early as 1524.

- (4) Some details of the peculiarities of one or two special congregations.
- (5) Copy of a 1672 discussion between a Baptist minister and a doctor of the Sorbonne.
- (6) Copy of an abstract of the latest Church Acts relating to the Mennonites.

A few points may be added to this summary of Hovens's letter. Robert Robinson had died in 1790, with only a part of his plan completed. After his death, his friend George Dyer⁸ edited his *History of Baptism* and the unfinished *Ecclesiastical Researches*. Job David did not die till 1813; but he shared Robinson's unorthodox views and became minister of a Unitarian church in Taunton, which probably accounts for Hovens's failure to hear again from him. The list of Dutch churches which Hovens sent to Rippon must be that printed in the *Baptist Register*, Vol. I, pp. 303-320. I cannot find that Rippon ever used the other material, but it is significant that he had heard of Carey's knowledge of Dutch and that he turned to him for help.

III

Finally, as to the document translated by Carey, the Dutch original of which we possess. It seems without doubt to be that sent by Hovens in May, 1791, to the Holborn bookseller, which means that Rippon acted at once on Hovens's suggestion that he should try to get hold of it.

It is a copy by Daniel Hovens of an account of the Baptist churches in Haarlem, prepared in 1740 by Enoch Hovens for a friend in Utrecht, with a few notes which show that it was written out in 1787. It makes clear that by "Baptists" the Mennonites were really meant, though the divisions and varieties among them were so many that certain groups might perhaps be better described as Baptists. The interest and importance of the document come from several considerations. Enoch Hovens was eighty years old when he wrote it; he was himself a Mennonite "teacher," that is, a preacher called out by the church, but receiving no stipend or salary; he was related to, or could recollect, not a few of the seventeenth century Mennonite leaders, including his great-grandfather, Herman Zeger, of Utrecht, born about 1577, that is, only sixteen years after the death of Menno Simons, and whom he heard preach when over ninety years of age.

Professor Kühler, of Amsterdam, a distinguished Mennonite scholar, says of the Mennonites:

"In the 18th century their number declined for many reasons. The lay-preachers elected from among the brethren

8. See *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. X, No. 5 (Jan., 1941).

no longer satisfied the congregations; consequently, a great number of families passed into the State Church. The foundation of a theological seminary in Amsterdam (1735) did not produce any lasting improvement. At many places, fortunately, the piety of the forefathers continued, and the spiritual well-being of the people and the spreading of a higher civilization were objects of great care."⁹

All these points might be illustrated from Enoch Hovens's account of affairs, which is full of names of persons, parties and meeting-places. Not the least interesting passage is an allusion to the Moravians—"a troop from Germany called Herrnhutters, full of inward imaginations, and assertions of an indolent waiting for divine illuminations, which draw to themselves some of light faith and desirous of new things." The aged Enoch Hovens, who remembers the great days of the past, thinks they will come to nothing, but he has to confess: "For the hundred years that are past in Haarlem very little less than 5,000 members have been in the Baptist churches, which now can by no means make up the third part." As one reads the whole account through one does not wonder at Carey's comment: "But Oh! how fall'n is Religion in Holland."

One day, perhaps, when the present grim European ordeal is over, and happier days come for Rotterdam and Haarlem, the Historical Society might reprint in full this 1740 account of conditions in Holland, and might renew English contacts with the Mennonites—contacts that were clearly prized on both sides of the North Sea at the end of the eighteenth century, and that gave occasion for this welcome evidence of the early linguistic skill of young William Carey.

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9. *E.R.E.*, VIII, pp. 553-4.