

A Note on the Rev. George Beaumont of Norwich.

LIKE Mr. Hewett (above, p. 106), I, too, have long wished to know more about Rev. George Beaumont of Norwich. The facts given by Mr. Hewett suffice to identify the man, show him as theological disputant, and hint at his interest in social conditions, but too little is known about his career, especially that aspect of it which takes him out of local and denominational history into the wider field of the national struggle for political reform in the days before 1832. The slight information available suggests that the portrait of a most interesting personality might emerge from further research; may we hope that some student of Norwich history will be encouraged to find out more about Beaumont from the files of local newspapers and other contemporary records?

In the meantime, as a slight contribution to his biography, the following incident in his career may help to rescue him from oblivion; it is a mere episode, but a most enlightening one, and it is derived from the Tory *Leeds Intelligencer* and the Whig *Leeds Mercury* for the dates June 3rd and June 5th, 1830, respectively. On May 31st a great Reform meeting was held on Hunslet Moor, Leeds, whereat the old glories of the days of Peterloo were revived. It was a time of great distress and the meeting was held at the instigation of the Radicals, who were by that time almost all working men, a fact of some importance when it is learned that the Rev. George Beaumont was one of the speakers. The middle and upper class Reformers who stood for "moderate" reform were almost entirely of the Whig faction and most of their leaders were Unitarian; among the Tories, who stood by church, king and constitution (that is, the *status quo*) were to be found supporters of the Church of England and the Wesleyans. Local Baptists seem to have played small part. So that the question of Beaumont's denominational status, though still unsolved, is of some importance. The *Intelligencer* styled him a Wesleyan, but newspaper reporters cannot be credited with infallibility. If it can be proved that he was a Baptist, that fact would be of value to the historian of the denomination, for not enough is known about the part our forefathers played in social and political reform. Historians of other denominations have examined this aspect of their history (often with more zeal than

discretion) but Baptists appear to have concentrated more on doctrine, missions and local personalities than on this more general, if more controversial aspect of human affairs. We know enough, and more than enough perhaps, about the freethinkers of the period of the Industrial Revolution; it was a minor tragedy that so much agitation was carried on (in Leeds at any rate) by men of vague, if any, religious views. There was a small body of "Christian Reformers"—was Beaumont one of these at Norwich?—but little is known of their brief existence.

Beaumont was given a hearty welcome at Leeds. According to both newspapers his speech was "long and eccentric," but one cannot avoid the suspicion that his outspoken views were a little unpalatable to the middle class subscribers. He asserted plainly that "there must be either a Radical Reform or despotism." He quoted examples of distress in Norwich, adding that many people were leaving that place for America and many more ("thousands") would follow if they had the means. He thought it strange that ministers of the gospel should have so little to say on the subject of distress, when it was one of the greatest causes of demoralisation. The *Mercury* reported his speech in brief and the *Intelligencer* not at all, but their reports clearly show that Beaumont was a full-blooded Radical. He concluded his rambling speech by reading extracts from his pamphlet *The Griper*, which attacked the British Constitution. A vote of thanks was proposed to "that venerable, able, and worthy advocate of liberty, Mr. George Beaumont of Norwich" by James Mann, the leader of the Leeds Radical party, and carried with cheers.

Beaumont's earlier book, mentioned by Mr. Hewett, was published at Sheffield in 1808 and is an anthology on the theme of the evils of war. He therein styles himself "minister of the gospel of peace." His other pamphlets may throw further light on his political opinions. The question remains, what was he doing in Leeds at that time? Was he that object of abhorrence to the government, an itinerant missionary of what the authorities called sedition?

It is curious, too, and apt to cause confusion, that there was at this very time another George Beaumont similarly active and holding like views; he was the secretary of a working men's political union at Almondbury, near Huddersfield, who made an attack in this very month, first on the evils of a long and extravagant war against the liberties of France and America, and then on mismanagement at home, calling for "real radical reform" of Parliament.

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