

The Diaries of John Dyer.

THE REV. JOHN DYER was the first full-time secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society. Andrew Fuller was secretary from the founding of the society in 1792 until his death in 1815. He carried on the work while still minister of the church in Kettering. From 1815 to 1817 Dr. John Ryland and James Hinton were joint secretaries; but the former was President of the Baptist College in Bristol and minister of Broadmead, while the latter was minister at New Road, Oxford, and also kept a school. When Hinton resigned in 1817, John Dyer, then minister at Hosier's Lane, Reading, was appointed in his place. Ryland was sixty-four years old and could obviously give little attention to the growing work of the Society. A London headquarters was needed and someone to give all his time to its affairs. John Dyer, therefore, resigned his pastorate and moved to London.

He was secretary from 1817, when he was thirty-three years of age, until his death in tragic circumstances in July, 1841. The twenty-four years of his secretaryship covered the long drawn-out and deeply to be regretted "Serampore Controversy" and also the exciting and turbulent conflicts in England and Jamaica over slavery. The writer gave a brief sketch of Dyer in *The First Generation* (Carey Press, 1936). The facts there given will not be repeated here. Considerable additional material is now, however, available and, quite recently, four diaries of John Dyer have come to light. They are in the possession of Mrs. Evelyn Murphy, of Headington, a great-granddaughter of Dyer, and it is through her kindness that the extracts given below are made available.

Before turning to the diaries, however, certain new facts about Dyer and his family may be noted. He was the son of James Dyer (1743-97), who was born at Chipping Norton and, after some time as an excise man, became Baptist minister in Whitchurch, Hants., and Devizes. An extended notice of James Dyer is to be found in *Ivimey's History of the Baptists*, Vol. IV., pp. 612f. From this it would appear that it was from his father that John Dyer inherited the streak of melancholy which ultimately caused his death. But other characteristics and endowments were there as well. One of James Dyer's daughters married Joseph Parsons, of Laverton. Alfred Parsons (1843-1920), painter and illustrator, was their grandson. Another daughter of James Dyer, Rebekah, married Frances Franklin, of Coventry. She is described by one of her descendants as "a

woman of wonderful strength and sweetness of character" (Irene Morris, *Three Hundred Years of Baptist Life in Coventry*, p. 44). It was to a school kept by two of her daughters that Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) was sent in 1832, and the Franklin family appear frequently in her journals and novels.

In 1803 John Dyer, while in business in Plymouth, married Agnes Burnell (1783-1826), his partner's daughter. Her sister, Eliza, became in 1814 the wife of Thomas Trowt, an ardent young man sent out by the Baptist Missionary Society to Java at a time when it seemed that the East Indies might become one of the main fields of English missionary activity. Unfortunately his service lasted little more than two years. News of his brother-in-law's death in Samarang in October, 1816, reached John Dyer just about the time he undertook the secretaryship of the Society. (For details of Trowt and his early contacts with Dyer, see the writer's *South-East from Serampore*, Carey Press, 1945, pp. 62ff.)

Agnes and John Dyer had fourteen children. Ten were alive in 1826 when their mother died. The difficulties of caring for his young family undoubtedly contributed to the depression and austerity which marked John Dyer in his closing years and were not dispelled by his remarriage after ten years as a lonely widower. His second wife was Mary Jackson, of Dorking. Several of Dyer's children displayed unusual gifts. His eldest daughter, Eliza (1806-75), spent some time in the house of Mark Wilks in Paris, becoming very proficient in French. On returning to England, she established a large and successful school in Battersea and in 1837 married Joseph Payne (1808-76), headmaster of the Denmark Hill Grammar School. For eight years the two schools were continued. Then, in 1845, the Paynes moved to Leatherhead and founded the Mansion House School for boys. Later Joseph Payne, who had introduced the methods of Jacotot and Froebel into this country, was appointed by the College of Preceptors the first Professor of Education in England. The account of Professor Payne in the *Dictionary of National Biography* pays tribute to the ability of his wife. Mrs. Murphy, who now possesses the diaries of John Dyer, is a grandchild of Eliza and Joseph Payne.

The diaries are contained in four slim black notebooks. They cover the years 1823, 1827, 1836 and 1837 and are all that have been preserved of what was no doubt once a complete series. They were saved as examples of Dyer's remarkably clear but minute hand-writing. The notebooks were carefully ruled by their owner to suit his own purposes. The first few pages of each is given to a list of the names and addresses of Baptist ministers living

in or near London, together with a few miscellaneous addresses. In the two earlier diaries these are followed by a list of the members of the Committee of the Baptist Missionary Society. The later ones have a list of Dyer's preaching engagements and his personal accounts. Then, in all four notebooks, come twelve pages, each covering a month, with a ruled space of about a quarter of an inch for each day. In this minute space Dyer inserted brief notes of what had occupied him and whom he had met. In 1823 and 1827 he set down his time of rising and going to bed—the former varied between six and eight a.m. (on the few occasions he was later there is usually a regretful acknowledgment that he had been guilty of oversleeping), the latter between 10-45 and midnight. The entries reveal a serious, staid, sensitive man and confirm the verdict of F. A. Cox, the B.M.S. historian, that the work of the mission "was his life."

At the end of the notebooks comes what is their most remarkable feature. The pages are headed "Necrology." Dyer there set down the names of those of his friends and acquaintances, old and young, who died during the year, with a few lines of candid comment on their characters. The present generation will judge Dyer's preoccupation with mortality as morbid, but the notes he made have now historical as well as human interest. A selection will be given in a sequel to the present article. Details of foreign letters, domestic accounts and journeying expenses occupy the rest of the notebooks. The 1827 diary contains an "Order of Reading the Psalms" to cover a month of morning and evening devotions, as well as a more elaborate scheme covering the whole Bible in a year. There are also two prayers, one for the morning and one for the evening, "sent to my dear George, April, 1827," George being presumably his seven-year-old son of that name. The same diary contains a list of his children with their birthdays.

In 1823, Dyer was living at Devonshire House, Battersea, and the offices of the Baptist Missionary Society were at 6, Fen Court, Fenchurch Street. He usually travelled from one to the other by public coach, occasionally by pony-chaise; often, because all the coach seats were taken, he had to walk home. He suffered a good deal from colds and from attacks of gout. His days at the office were taken up with correspondence, with committee meetings and with the preparation each month of the *Herald*. The annual meetings of the Society took place in June and the writing of the Secretary's report was his chief occupation in the preceding weeks and clearly one that caused him considerable anxiety. Dyer was a member of the committee of the Religious Tract Society and rarely missed its weekly meetings.

He was also on the committee of Stepney College and deeply interested in its affairs. From time to time he visited various parts of the country in the interests of the Missionary Society, his trip to Devon and Cornwall in 1823 occupying thirty-seven days and costing £15 13s. 7d. In 1827, Dyer visited Frome, Bath and Bristol in April, at a cost of £5 18s. 6d., Plymouth and Wellington in July at a cost of £7 11s. 5d., Northampton and Olney in October for £3 19s. 6d., and Bristol, Laverton and Trowbridge in November for £5 16s. 7d. This was before the days of railways. The journeys were by coach. There were turnpike charges and the amounts given include the cost of meals. In 1836 Dyer's salary from the B.M.S. was £300. His younger children were still a heavy expense to him and it is clear he had many financial anxieties.

The Serampore Controversy casts its shadow over many of the entries in the earlier diaries. In 1827 there are several pathetic references to his "solitary chambers." When he was free, he regularly attended the services at Battersea of his friend Joseph Hughes, the secretary of the Religious Tract Society, and notes the texts from which he preached, though not always appreciating his sermons. In the later diaries there are many references to Edward Steane, of Camberwell. There are frequent allusions to members of Dyer's family, but even with them he found it difficult to unbend. On Christmas Day, 1827, he records "more levity than was agreeable to me." The following are typical entries for a week from each of the four notebooks:—

1823

FEBRUARY 17

M. 7/15 By Ford inside. Finish^d Herald for Barfield. J. Nicholson call'd in search of a situation! At Prescott St. P.M. in evening. Griffin spoke well from Rom.VIII,28. Slept here. 11/30.

18 T.

7/45 Too late for R.T.S. Stepney Comm^o Meeting. Wrote several Foreign Letters at Coffee House. Drank tea with Salters & thence proceeded to B.H.M.S. at 99 Newgate St. Rode home wth J.N. Wet and boisterous night. 11/.

19 W.

7/15 at home. Wrote many letters. Attended in the evening wth M^r Hughes when the childⁿ of Sunday School were rewarded with cakes etc. 11/.

20 TH.

By Ford outside. Only Burls & Gutteridge here. No business done! Parcel from Bristol. Second L^r from Roberts. Finish^d Norris. 12/.

- 21 F.
Call^d Kingsbury & Co., Burls. Heard pt of a Serm. by Bp. of Exeter at Bow Church. Haircut. Call^d at Stennett's. Salter. Saw M^{rs} Rowe. Home in evening inside. 11/.
- 22 S.
7/15 Magnalia Xth Americana. Rom. XIII.II for Camberwell.
- 23 O
7/30 Set out by Pony Chaise for Camberwell. Preach^d M. Rom. XIII. II. A. I Cor. XIII. 13. Dined at Gutteridges. Drank tea. Spent evening & slept at M^r Bartlett's, agreeably, I w^d hope profitably. 12/.

1827

MARCH 12 M.

- 7/30 Talk^d wth M^{rs} M. By Coach i'e. Sub-Comm^o here to meet C. Evans. Call^d on Blight. Tea at Beddome's. Began Accounts Journal. 11/30.
- 13 T.
6/15 Breakfasted wth R.T.S. Kinghorn and I went down to Camberwell & spent the day at Gutteridge's. E. Carey coming down afterwards. Wearied and spent. Return^d. D^r Conquest. Acc^{ts} till 11/45.
- 14 W.
6/45 At 11 P.M. Kinghorn, Hinton, Waters, Page, Ivimey & D^r Marshman engag^d. Continued in conversation, Reading Minutes, &c all day. Warmington's at night to supper. 11/.
- 15 TH.
6/30 Again Comm^o. Kinghorn question^d M. ab^{ot} College, &c. I proposed Resolutions, seconded by Gutteridge—at length passed nem.con. Din^d at Ship. Warmington's again. Early to bed.
- 16 F.
6/. Prepar^d letter for press—took it to Haddon's, where found Carey. Marshman declines the proposals. Spoke at some length. Coles. Wilkinson suggested modification of 2nd Resolution. 11/.
- 17 S.
6/45 Sub Comm^o at 11. Accounts. Proportion of Expenses at last D^r M. *conscientiously* declines Proposals! So that the qu. is decided. May God command his blessing on us & them. 11/30.
- 18 O
7/ Heard Hinton at D.Sq. Heb.IV.15. Mann Maze Pond. Luke ii.37. Anderson D.Sq. Matt. XXIV 37-44. Din^d &

tea at Millard's with Edmonds, Lomax, Foster. A day, I hope, not wholly lost. 11/.

1836

MARCH 14 M.

Remitt^{co} from Bristol. Home & conversed wth dear chldⁿ. Conducted P.M. Letter from Saunders.

15. T.

R.T.S. Wrote some Jamaica letters. Ministers Ann^l Meet^s long & controversial. Home with Stearne & Bartlett.

16 W.

Fosters (B). Wrote to Nassau. Variety of Calls. Spent an hour at 4 Swans wth F. & Son. Patriot. Mannering. Slept here.

17 TH.

Bedford Row till 12. Endeavoured to dispatch business afterw^{ds}. Prepar^d part of Herald. Home to Meeting. Steane Luke V. 29-31 .

18 F.

Letter from Coventry. Bible Society 12 to 3, unprofitably & wearisome. Afterwards to Rawlings's. Talked on Rom. XV.1.

19 S.

Wrote on Jer.vi.14. Bracebridge Hall! Kitsons here. Walk'd to Vauxhall to tea, thence to Hyde Park, & so by Omnibus to B. Overcome by heat.

20 O

Preach^d M. Jer.vi.14. E.1 Pet. 11.7. Made unhappy by conduct Young People. Alas! religion seems fast declining in that family.

1837

DECEMBER 25 M.

Very fine day. Busy copying Minutes. We all dined Park Place. My dear Mary obliged to leave early thro weakness.

26 T.

Variety cash business. Carey repaid £60. Staid in town to Meeting Bapt. Mag. Puzzled about B^m Acc^{nt}. Home much wearied.

27 W.

Ordination Angus at New Park St. but I was detained here by business.

28 TH.

Marriage of my dear Eliza with M^r Payne—at church, thro necessity, all very orderly & pleasant. They left at 3. Mrs. Horsey drank tea with us.

29 F.

Meeting of Finance Comm^e—more agreeable than I had anticipated. Copying Minutes.

30 S.

Finish^d Minutes. Wrote on Jer. XXX.21. Tea at Gurney's with Pearce & Carey.

31 O.

My dear wife went to Battersea wth me. M. Jer. XXX.21. E. 1 Peter IV.7. Agreeable day on the whole.

Most of these entries in spite of their abbreviations are self-explanatory. Burls and Gutteridge, whose names occur in the 1823 extracts, were lay members of the B.M.S. Committee. Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, which Dyer read on February 22nd, first appeared in 1702. It has been described as "the *omnium gatherum* of seventeenth century New England." The 1827 entries deal with the discussions about the relationship of the Serampore missionaries to the B.M.S. Committee. Dr. Joshua Marshman had come on a visit to Europe. His rejection of the proposals made on March 17 led to a breach which lasted ten years. Joseph Kinghorn, of Norwich, J. H. Hinton, of Reading, Joseph Ivimey, Eustace Carey and Christopher Anderson all played leading parts in the protracted and unhappy discussions. Details of the points at issue may be found in the pages of F. A. Cox and J. C. Marshman. By 1836 the chief interest in B.M.S. affairs had shifted to the West Indies and much of Dyer's time was taken up in discussions with the Colonial Office about compensation for Baptist chapels and schools, wrecked by angry planters at the time of the 1832-33 disturbances. The 1837 entries are interesting as showing how little the Christmas holiday meant a century ago. The ordination service on December 27th was that of Joseph Angus, who in 1841 became assistant secretary of the B.M.S., then Dyer's successor and in 1849 Principal of Stepney College. These representative extracts are sufficient to indicate that much of historical interest has been lost by the destruction of the rest of Dyer's notebooks. In a second article quotations will be given from the necrologies.

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