

Rev. Micah Thomas, Abergavenny, 1778-1853.

THE references to Micah Thomas in the *Baptist Quarterly* of October 1950, and January 1951, suggest that some account of his eminently useful life may be timely.

Too little is known of his boyhood and early manhood, but the following facts have been ascertained. He was born in the parish of Whitson, Monmouthshire, on February 19th, 1778, the son of a respected farmer who was a member of New Inn Independent Church on the outskirts of Pontypool. Later on, while he was still young, his parents removed to a farm in the parish of Llangibby and the boy was sent to a school at Tredunnoch. He remained there for several years and it seems that he did so well and evinced such bookish tastes that he was sent on to another school, at Trosnant, Pontypool. The master of his first, and perhaps of his second, school was an Anglican clergyman.

When Micah Thomas was seventeen years of age (1795) he was baptised and received into membership at Penygarn Welsh Baptist Church, Pontypool, and in the following year he began to preach. We cannot but wish that we knew the workings of his mind at this decisive period of his life—just how and why he was led to become a Baptist and then a preacher of the Gospel. He was certainly a debtor to the piety and consideration of his parents. We are also ignorant of what he did for a livelihood after he left school and before he entered Bristol Baptist College. It is possible, even probable, that he helped his father on the farm.

Dr. E. J. Tongue has kindly copied for the present writer the following extract from the Bristol Baptist College minutes for August 5th, 1801: "Mr. Micah Thomas from the Church at Pen-y-garn was admitted into the Academy at Christmas (1800) under the patronage of the London Fund." He was there, under Dr. John Ryland, for less than two years, but the College has good reason to rank him with the more distinguished of its alumni.

On September 29th, 1802, he was ordained to the ministry at Ryeford, near Ross, Herefordshire, where he had often preached during his College course. Bristol and Ryeford proved to be real, but as yet unrealised, preparations for his life work in Abergavenny.

The need of a better educated and trained ministry had long been apparent to some of the more judicious and far-seeing Welsh Baptists. In this matter the Presbyterians and Independents were ahead of us, and it was not until some time between 1732 and 1736 (say, 1734) that action was taken. An Academy was set up at Trosnant, Pontypool, by Miles Harry, minister of Penygarn, and his devout and capable brother-in-law, Mr. John Griffiths, who was the manager of Pontypool Iron Works. John Griffiths was probably the prime mover in the enterprise. This Academy did good service for several years and some of its students became eminent. Many of them proceeded to Bristol for further and fuller instruction under Bernard Foskett and, perhaps Hugh Evans. Just when it was closed is extremely doubtful. The commonly accepted date is 1770, but it was probably much earlier. John Griffiths emigrated to America in 1759, and it is unlikely that it survived for more than a few years after his departure. Joshua Thomas, the Welsh Baptist historian, suggests 1761, and he estimates the number of students as twenty-five in all. Another estimate is forty. Even so, Trosnant is to be remembered with no little gratitude. Among its students were Evan Jenkins, Wrexham (father of Dr. Joseph Jenkins, Walworth), Timothy Thomas, Aberduar, Dr. Thomas Llewelyn London, Morgan Edwards, historian of American Baptists and one of the founders of Brown University, Rhode Island, and Benjamin Francis, Horsley.

Thereafter, until 1807, such Baptists as sought ministerial education mostly went to Bristol. They were drawn thither, presumably, not only by its educational standing, but by its proximity to Wales and by the Welsh sympathies of Hugh and Caleb Evans. But Welshmen at Bristol were apt to settle in England, and it was increasingly felt that Wales required a college of its own. "Undoubtedly the question was discussed by many at divers times and places," wrote the late Dr. E. K. Jones, "but the first mention of doing something practical was at the house of John Harris, Abergavenny. Mrs. Harris was the daughter of Caleb Harris, once minister of Llanwenarth. She and her daughters, while talking the matter over, were joined by Mr. Isaac Wyke, a surgeon . . . Mr Wyke suggested an academy. Another account credits Micah Thomas with making the suggestion to Mrs. Harris. The matter was discussed at length and brought the following day before the Association at Penygarn, and approved of. Mrs. Harris journeyed to Bristol to collect towards this new academy and received, amongst others, a donation of £10 from the widow of Dr. Caleb Evans. Great preparations were being made in 1805 and 1806. A committee was appointed; the Rev. Micah Thomas was elected tutor; the

location was fixed at Abergavenny; and the academy was opened with one student, Jonathan Davies, of Capel Iwan, Carmarthenshire, on January 1st, 1807. Two others entered in February."¹

So, Micah Thomas left Ryeford in order to become tutor of the Abergavenny Academy—conceived and planned but barely established. But he also became minister of a new English Baptist Church now, and long since, known as Frogmore Street. This church, founded in that year, 1807, worshipped in Tudor Street Welsh Baptist Chapel (built in 1769 as an offshoot of Llanwenarth) until its chapel was opened in Frogmore Street in 1816. The present building is a much later structure, but the old chapel, renovated, is in regular use for the Sunday school and weekday activities. The church prospered under his ministry, notwithstanding the regrettable secession (probably on doctrinal grounds) of those who founded Bethany, Abergavenny in 1827 or 1828. With increasing honour and a commanding influence he retained its pastorate until his death on November 28th, 1853, and his body was laid to rest in its burial-ground.

It is not clear whether the idea of an English church was conceived before Micah Thomas actually went to Abergavenny or whether he was one of its founders after he had settled in the town as tutor of the Academy. Perhaps the situation was similar to the one at Pontypool, when the Rev. (later Dr.) Thomas Thomas, London, was invited to become President of the proposed new College in 1836 and also minister of an English Baptist church (now known as Crane Street) which was to be formed after his arrival.

Under Micah Thomas's capable rule the Academy grew in strength, usefulness and influence. It was never a large institution and its curriculum was necessarily modest, but it fully justified its existence. More than that, it marked an important stage in the development of Baptist ministerial education in Wales. The over-all number of its students was 103 (perhaps 106)—in twenty-nine years—but many of them were men of outstanding ability and future leaders of the denomination. Three of them subsequently became Principals (or Presidents as they were then called) of the three new colleges of Pontypool, Haverfordwest and Llangollen: Dr. Thomas Thomas, David Davies and Dr. John Pritchard. Some Abergavenny students pursued further studies at an English college, e.g. Dr. Thomas proceeded to Stepney.

The students lived in rented rooms in the town and went to Micah Thomas's home, Aenon House, for lectures etc. Pontypool was a residential college and one is glad that its

¹ *The Baptists of Wales and Ministerial Education*, pp. 14, 15.

successor in Cardiff has decided "*longo intervallo*" to follow its good example.

Inevitably Micah Thomas had his recurring difficulties, some of them trivial and others more serious. There were criticisms of his administration and discipline, but most serious were the charges against his doctrinal teaching. It was declared, quite wrongly, that he was an "Arminian," than which few "heresies" were so obnoxious to contemporary Welsh Baptists—not least in some Monmouthshire churches. Matters came to a head in the early thirties, when several students left and were put under the care of William Jones, minister of Bethany, Cardiff. But Micah Thomas was not the man to be deterred by difficulties or to be diverted from his cherished ideals of truth and duty, and he continued his work. When he resigned, early in 1836, it was chiefly because of ill-health. In 1828 he had undergone an operation in London, and at last the exacting demands of his two offices of tutor and minister proved too much for his strength.

On March 9th, 1836, a committee, convened for consideration of the future of the Academy, decided to transfer to Pontypool and to house it in a worthy building. This was done, and on a scale and with a success which probably exceeded the best hopes of its original promoters. Nevertheless the subsequent achievements of Pontypool owed much to the hard pioneer work at Abergavenny.

Micah Thomas's portrait hangs in Cardiff Baptist College. It gives a clear indication of size and quality. Physically tall (six feet) and upright of carriage, carefully but not fastidiously dressed, his features (high forehead and firm mouth) reveal a man of alert intelligence and of resolute, even masterful, will. Obviously he had that "decision of character" which John Foster, whom he must have known, commended so eloquently in his once-celebrated essay.

What of his scholarship and of his ability as tutor and preacher? The evidence is too meagre for confident judgment. He had a competent working knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew and we are told that he was a man of "wide reading." His contemporaries adjudged him "an able theologian, a cultured and independent thinker, and an erudite and accurate scholar." Theologically he was a qualified Calvinist, more or less of the school of Andrew Fuller. As a tutor, "he knew how to rule without taking on him to be severe." As a preacher, he was scriptural and expository, working out his theme with logical precision and thoroughness, but in language rather above the understanding of the rank and file of his congregation. His preaching is described as "excellent" and varied. As a pastor, he was kind and sympathetic, and generous to the poor and needy.

Also, he could be forthright and straight, as occasion required. He was a convinced Baptist, ever ready to affirm and defend our distinctive principles, but he was no sectarian. One of his close friends was William Powell, Vicar of St. Mary's, Abergavenny, who attended his funeral. Above all, he was a devout and earnest Christian, who sought the spread of the Gospel at home and overseas. He was a staunch promoter of the missionary interest.

Micah Thomas's political and social sympathies have been made evident in a letter which he wrote to the Marquis of Normanby after the Chartist riots. This letter is to be found among the Chartist papers in Newport Public Library, but it was published (for the first time) by Professor David Williams, Aberystwyth, in the *Transactions of the Welsh Baptist Historical Society* for 1950. The rioting at Newport on November 4th, 1839 had resulted in a sentence of death being passed at Monmouth Assizes upon John Frost and two other Chartist leaders. Micah Thomas pleaded strongly for mercy. His plea was partly, but not wholly, successful and Lord Normanby was at pains to inform him that the government had decided to commute the sentence to one of transportation for life. This episode, whilst revealing his sensitiveness to social issues, serves also to suggest his standing and influence in the public life of Monmouthshire.

Micah Thomas was married twice:—to Sarah Wall, of Ross, and then to Rachel Harries, daughter of John Harries of Govilon, son of Morgan Harries, minister of Blaenau Gwent.

So far as the present writer is aware, Micah Thomas published nothing except three sermons, copies of which are in Newport Public Library: (1) *The Error and the Delusion and Destructive Tendency of Infant Sprinkling practised as Christian Baptism* (1841); (2) *Infant Christening falsely called Baptism Explained in its Nature and Basis, chiefly in its Evil Workings* (1842); (3) *The Important Claims of Ministerial and Pastoral Conduct*—addressed to the students at the annual meeting of Pontypool Baptist Theological Institution, July 26th, 1843. Bristol Baptist College library possesses five of his MS. sermons, presented by S. R. Young, minister of Bethany, Abergavenny, in 1893. He preached to the students of his old college at a service held in Old King Street Chapel on June 24th, 1846. His text was *2 Cor. v. 18-20*. Micah Thomas, it seems to the present writer, would wish for no other office, and no other remembrance, than that of an ambassador for Christ, seeking to exercise an entrusted ministry of reconciliation.

E. W. PRICE EVANS.