

Thomas Thomas, 1805-1881

THOMAS THOMAS,¹ the first Principal of the College in Pontypool, the 150th anniversary of whose birth fell this year, is one of the most significant figures in the history of Nonconformity in South Wales. In the realm of ministerial education he consolidated the achievements of his namesake and former tutor, Micah Thomas of Abergavenny, and was himself a pioneer in the development of the political power and social influence of the Free Churches, which became one of the most telling factors in Wales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

He was born at Cowbridge, the market town of the Vale of Glamorgan, some 12 miles from Cardiff, on January 12th, 1805, but soon afterwards the family moved to Cardiff and farmed some few acres near Leckwith Bridge, which stands between Cardiff and Penarth. He received a remarkably good education for those days, first in a school at Llandaff, conducted by an Anglican clergyman named Lewis, and then at a school in the centre of the town. Yet he gained little instruction in religious matters; neither did his parents offer him any example that he might follow in spiritual affairs. In spite of this he experienced as a boy, what he later described as, "strong convictions and alarms," while he recalls one day, "kneeling in secret prayer under a hayrick, and in the solitude of the adjacent wood mingling the voice of supplication with the sound of the wind that murmured among the branches." In these formative years he came under the influence of two pious labourers, who worked on his father's farm and their conversation led him to frequent the meetings of a Welsh Baptist church, which assembled, at that time, in a room in the "Star and Garter," near Cardiff castle. In spite of parental opposition Thomas Thomas was baptized and received into membership of this church, by the Rev. Griffith Davies, the minister, when still

¹ An outline of the life of Thomas Thomas was given by himself in response to the presentation made to him in 1876. An account of this was reprinted at the time from reports in the local press. Biographies have been written by Dr. Edward Roberts (*Seren Gomer*, 1882, pp. 89ff.), Thomas Morgan, (a prize essay in the Welsh National Eisteddfod, 1924, afterwards abridged and published) and Rev. E. W. Price Evans (*Baptist Quarterly*, 1926, pp. 130ff.), and in his short history of Crane Street, Pontypool, published in 1936).

only 13 years of age. The same room in the "Star and Garter" housed also a day school, conducted by the Rev. William Jones of Bethany, Cardiff, and here he completed his education and soon became Jones' assistant, using this opportunity to master the elements of New Testament Greek, which remained his favourite subject throughout his life. When 16 years of age, he preached for the first time in the "Fellowship Meeting" (*Cyfeillach*) of the church, but one of the older deacons advised him to abandon any idea he might have of entering the Christian ministry as he lacked the necessary gifts. Nevertheless he persisted and shortly afterwards conducted worship at a cottage meeting at Llandough and on April 12th, 1821 preached his first "public sermon" at his own church. At a subsequent Church Meeting he was accounted as fit to exercise a preaching ministry and during the months that followed did this throughout the Vale, in farms, cottages and chapels, for during this period several churches were being formed in the area, while the older churches had set up several preaching stations in the scattered villages.

On September 2nd, 1822 he entered the Academy at Abergavenny, and for two years he studied under the Rev. Micah Thomas before going to Stepney where he continued his studies under the direction of Dr. Murch, Dr. Newman and the Rev. Solomon Young, leaving after four years there to become the pastor of the church at Henrietta Street, London. His eight years here were, undoubtedly, crowned with considerable success, which is indicated in the rapid growth of its membership. There were but 40 members when he received the call, but before he left the number had risen to nearly 200, while the building had to be enlarged to accommodate the congregation that came to hear him. Apart from his work in the church, Thomas Thomas found great satisfaction in preaching in the open air. Each Sunday at 7 a.m. he was to be found at the market, either at Farringdon or Somers Town, preaching among the stalls and trying to obey the command of his Master to take the Gospel to all people. For five of the years he was in London he acted, with Charles Stovell, as Secretary of the London Baptist Building Fund. He claimed that he used the opportunity afforded him here to help the small churches of his native Wales, and an examination of the lists quoted in Appendix A of Mr. Seymour J. Price's *Popular History of the Baptist Building Fund*, justifies him. In the six years before he took office 13 of the 106 churches which received grants from the fund were in Wales or Monmouthshire; during his five years of office the figures are 24 out of 89; in the following six years the proportion is 14 out of 92. Thomas Thomas was, many years later, to look back on his years in a London pastorate as the happiest of his life.

FIRST PRESIDENT

In 1836, to his great astonishment, he received an invitation from the officers and committee of the Abergavenny Academy to become the successor of Micah Thomas and the first President of the College which it was now proposed to establish at Pontypool. He must have realised the difficulties he was called upon to face. Micah Thomas had discovered how hard the path of the pioneer could be, for throughout his years at the Academy he had faced considerable opposition from many of the leading Baptist ministers of South Wales, chief of whom was Dr. John Jenkins of Hengoed, whose writings and publications were considered as a standard of hyper-Calvinist orthodoxy, at that time. He, in 1827 had written a letter to the Welsh Baptist periodical, *Cyfrinach y Bedyddwyr*, in which he accused Micah Thomas of charging the students exorbitant fees, and of failing to supply them with the reasonable luxuries of life, particularly tea, of which Jenkins seems to have been extremely fond, sugar, candles and soap. This attack, which hid a theological antagonism, created much feeling in South Wales and though the committee vindicated its President, it is clear that the charges were not forgotten for in 1837, after retiring, Micah Thomas finds it necessary to write to *The Baptist Magazine* a letter in which he sets out his income during his last years as tutor and contrasts this with what the committee promised to pay his successor. In 1834 the uneasy relationship between the Academy and the leading ministers became obvious over a dispute occasioned by a letter sent by five students, W. Gravel, E. Price, J. Davies, T. Jones and J. Williams to the *Great*, in which they accused their tutor of partiality, tyranny and heterodoxy. This letter is dated November 11th. These students withdrew from the Academy and on December 10th a special meeting of the committee passed a resolution regretting that so much money had been already spent on training men so unworthy of the Christian ministry. The matter, however, was not at an end, and on January 1st, 1835 a number of Baptist ministers, led by Jenkins, Hengoed and Hiley, Llanwenarth, met and agreed upon a statement which deplored the action of the College committee in attacking the moral character of these students and seeking help so that they could complete their education under the supervision of William Jones, Bethany, Cardiff. The whole affair caused an uproar in Baptist circles in South Wales and letter after letter appeared in the *Great* during subsequent months. The controversy came to an end only with the resignation of Micah Thomas. Undoubtedly, some of this antipathy towards the founder of the Academy was due to the deep-rooted suspicion felt by many in regard to ministerial education itself. John Jenkins' sons, in their life of their father, felt it necessary to insist that, though without college training himself,

Jenkins was never opposed to the Academy at Abergavenny, but only to the inefficiency of its administration.² Yet their dislike of the College was, in the main, due to their opposition to the more liberal Calvinism which Micah Thomas professed. The charge of the five students which received greatest prominence in the controversy that followed was that of heterodoxy, for they claimed that their tutor always advised them to read Wesley's *Notes* rather than Gill's *Commentary*. The seriousness of the controversy is seen in that the Glamorgan Association, meeting at Ystrad-dafodwg in June decided to discontinue their support of the Abergavenny institution and to make collections in aid of the "new academy" in Cardiff. These troubles were the background to the resignation of Micah Thomas and it is remarkable that his successor was able to command such wide support for the College from the very beginning of his Presidency. It was to secure this support that Thomas Thomas left London in May, 1836 and spent the Summer visiting the Welsh Association meetings. The impression he created was extremely favourable. He was never made the subject of attack for his heterodoxy in regard to Calvinistic dogma. Micah Thomas had, in fact, won his battle, and the difficulties he overcame made the contribution of his successor possible.

When he resigned from the Presidency of the Academy Micah Thomas did not relinquish the pastorate of the church he had been instrumental in founding. The committee, therefore, were forced to consider changing the location of the College, for its funds were insufficient to meet the salary of a full-time tutor. It was for this reason that Pontypool was chosen as the future home of the institution for it had been felt, for some time, that an English church should be set up here. On August 2nd, 1836, in a building which had been a Meeting House of the Friends, a church was formed and Thomas Thomas set apart as its Pastor. The church grew quickly and in 1847 a new chapel was built in Crane Street, at a cost of £2,200. Here, in addition to all his other work he exercised his gift of preaching and took care of the flock of Christ. The church flourished in the succeeding years.

For five years Thomas Thomas was the only tutor in the College but the work became too much for him and the committee appointed as Classical Tutor, the Rev. George Thomas, and for nearly thirty years they worked harmoniously together. In August, 1836 the foundation stone of the new college building was laid, and soon seven students were in residence. During the Principalship of Thomas Thomas 260 men were prepared for the Baptist ministry here. The training given at Abergavenny had

² *Hanes Buchedd . . . John Jenkins*, by John and Llewellyn Jenkins, Cardiff, 1859, pp. 89ff.

presupposed that ministers, if given acquaintance with the English language, would then study theology themselves, and so, apart from linguistic studies the students were taught Geography, History, Minerology, Geology, Magnetism, Electricity, Galvanism, Pneumatics, Meteorology, Pharmaceutical operations and Chemical affinities (a list of subjects taken from one of the annual reports). Thomas Thomas changed the nature of the course and stressed the study of Theology. In their first year the students studied the Mosaic account of creation and the original state of man. In the second year they examined the various schemes for harmonising the four Gospels and for relating a consecutive account of the events in the Apostolic Age. This course included an examination of the Biblical doctrine of the Church which showed that "the voluntary principle" is "the only true means of the Church's support and extension, the compulsory being unscriptural and mischievous." To this was added some Church History from the beginning to the present day and also the history of the future, depicted in prophecy. In the final year lectures were given on the main doctrines of the Faith, including the being and attributes of God, the divine unity, the Trinity, the providence and moral government of God, the pre-existence and deity of Christ and the main views concerning His person. This course ended by examining the final judgment, the eternal happiness of the righteous and punishment of the wicked. This outline remains the basis of the teaching given at Pontypool though, from time to time, Thomas Thomas lectured on other subjects, of special interest at that time, such as the character of war, national education, the reasons for Dissent, the Millennium, Popery, Puseyism and Mormonism, and, significantly, the Uncorrupted Preservation of the Holy Scriptures. His favourite textbook was Payne's *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, and to this was later added Wayland's *Elements of Moral Science* and Haven's *Mental Philosophy*. In this way the theological freedom won for the college by Micah Thomas was used.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

In the work of the denomination Thomas Thomas was ever active and was instrumental in founding a new Association of Baptist Churches. In 1831, at Aberavon, the churches of Monmouthshire left the older South Eastern Association and formed a separate body. The language of these churches was Welsh, but the development of collieries, iron works and allied industries led to the influx of many Englishmen and soon, not only were English churches established but the need was felt for incorporating these in an Association. The first proposition was that an English wing of the existing Association should be formed, but Dr. Thomas and

other leaders of these churches would have none of this. In 1859 at a meeting of the messengers of the churches at the College, under the presidency of Dr. Thomas, the Monmouthshire English Baptist Association was called into being. Soon the work of Thomas Thomas was to receive national recognition, when, on April 27th, 1871, he was elected President of the Baptist Union, the first Welsh-speaking Welshman to be so honoured. During his year of office he gave two addresses, which are important indications of his view of Church and State. The first was delivered at London in April, 1872 on *Evangelical Theocracy*. This stresses the spirituality of Christ's Kingdom and then considers the relationship of this view to "the character of the Christian Church, the state of society in our country, the welfare of our Denomination, the aspect of current events and the complication of national affairs." At Manchester, the following October, his theme was *Baptists and Christian Union*. He emphasises the value of the existing Union "in softening down the asperity of party and bringing different sections into comparative harmony and united action," and "in developing and combining the resources of the denomination in general." He sees no insuperable obstacle why this principle should not be extended to effect a complete union between General and Particular Baptists, and then asks, "May not the baptized believers of Great Britain and Ireland stand forth before the world as one body in Christ, their only Lord and Saviour, and extend the hand of fellowship to the myriads of brethren of the same faith and order beyond the Atlantic, on the continent of Europe and throughout the whole earth?" While he rejects, utterly, any scheme for ecclesiastical union, which would mean "a formal coalition of those vast systems which have little of Christianity besides the name"—yet he does hold that Baptists should fraternise with the wise and the good of all sects to work harmoniously with them in whatsoever tended to benefit the nation, and even to unite with pious members of the established Church, in spite of their adherence to a system which had grievously wronged the Baptists in past centuries, if such union would be of advantage to the people of the country and to the Kingdom of Christ.

Thomas Thomas believed fervently that each Christian should exercise fully his political rights, so long as he is careful to act the citizen "as it becometh the Gospel of Christ," yet he is passionate in condemning any relationship between the State and the Church. "I have yet to learn," he writes in one of his pamphlets, "what good reasons can be alleged why the ministers of Christ, abstaining from party and factious proceedings, should not interfere with politics, so far as they are the science of national morals—of those just social principles on which public institutions ought to be based;

as why, while the enemies of liberty, and the opponents of the interests of the poor, are *politically* religious, the friends of freedom and popular rights should not be *religiously* political?" Two great movements of the period gave him the opportunity of defining his political views. The Chartist riot in Newport occasioned his tract, *The Civil Duties of Christians* (1834), and the agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws caused him to publish *A Proper Consideration of the Cause of the Poor* (1841). In the former he answers the charge that it was the principles of civil and religious liberty held by the Nonconformists of the Monmouthshire valleys that inspired the Chartist attack. He claims that but a small minority of the rioters were Dissenters who, with their love of liberty, joined a firm allegiance to the throne, together with an ardent, though enlightened, attachment to the civil constitution of the country. The New Testament, he believes, commands a general obedience to all civil laws, under every form of government, though this obedience was always subject to two limitations; the first being the political constitution and civil laws of the land, for each man has the right to disobey the illegal commands of his governor, magistrates being created by law, which defines their every function. The second limitation is that the magistrate has no right to command anything morally wrong. "It cannot be a man's duty to do what he believes, in his conscience, to be a sin against God, whose authority is paramount to every other; nor to sanction by his active obedience, the impious assumption on the part of the magistrates, of the prerogatives of the eternal King." Yet Christians must never use physical violence if unjustly treated by the secular powers, and must use legitimate methods of obtaining their ends, petitioning the legislature, enlisting the sympathy of the public and, in the last resort, by "passive obedience," by which he means "submission to the penalty of law, when all means of redress have been used in vain." Dr. Thomas demonstrated the efficacy of this last method in 1845 when, together with Edwards, Trosnant, Price, Abersychan and others, he refused to pay the Church Rate, and certain of their effects (from Thomas Thomas a table) were seized and sold by an auctioneer who, according to Dr. Edward Roberts of Pontypridd, was brought from Usk, as no one in Pontypool would conduct the sale. The controversy provoked, especially in the local press, proved the death blow to this demand in the town. In common with the radicals of the time, Thomas Thomas had great faith in what could be achieved by the extension of the franchise. The pamphlet on the Corn Laws in 1841 gives a vivid description of the distressing condition of the poor during those hungry years and admits, being one of the pioneers of the Total Abstinence Movement among the Baptists of Wales, that this is often due to the idleness, intemperance and

dissipation of the people themselves, but attributes this distress also to the *truck system*, with its effect on the purchasing power of wages and particularly to the defective representation of the people. He believed that it was the want of fair and impartial representation that created "class legislation," and thereby the interest of the many was sacrificed for the benefit of the few. Of this kind of legislation, he regarded the Corn Laws as the most typical and grievous example. "General Suffrage," he writes, "would, I have no doubt, have prevented the existence of most of the unjust laws, which now press with fearful effect on the energies and comfort of the poor." He later added his support to the movement for the extension of the vote to women and when, in 1872, the National Society for Women's Suffrage held meetings in Pontypool, he was asked to preside at them. To obtain liberty and to guarantee its preservation, he believed in the use of political power by Dissenters and saw the movement for the disestablishment of the church, not only as the expression of a religious ideal, but also as a political necessity. In a tract entitled *The Importance of Developing the Power of Welsh Nonconformity for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control* (1862), he writes, "Christianity inspires the love of liberty, and teaches all men how to use and enjoy it. It sets up the golden rule, 'as ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them,' which strikes at the root of all monopoly and wrong in Church and State, and all its precepts are favourable to the largest extension of popular freedom." Nonconformist power was, for him, the prerequisite of civil liberty.

At the close of 1873 Thomas Thomas retired from the pastorate of Crane Street, when the church presented him with a purse of 100 guineas and an inscribed copy of the *Hexapla*, while his wife received a clock; in September, 1876 he resigned the Principalship of the College. To mark his many years of service to the Denomination a national testimonial was raised and, at Tabernacle, Cardiff, on September 20th, 1876, a meeting, presided over by his great friend Sir Robert Lush, paid tribute to all his many achievements and he was presented with an illuminated address, which is now at the Cardiff Baptist College, and a purse containing 2,000 guineas. He now left Pontypool and came to Cardiff, where on February 22nd, 1880 he celebrated his golden wedding. During his years of retirement his special interest was that of his early years, the study of the New Testament. His last published articles appeared in the *Seren Gomer* for July and October, 1881 and January, 1882 and bore the title, "Notes on Difficult Texts" (*Nodiadau ar Destynau Anhawdd*). During this same period he preached almost every Sunday, often in the churches where he had first exercised his gifts. Dr. Edward Roberts relates that when inviting Dr. Thomas to officiate at Pontypridd, he had apologised

that the Sunday would not be one of special services, to which the Doctor replied, "Friends need not scruple to ask me to supply for them. I have become a very ordinary village preacher, as I was in early life." A few weeks after his death a memorial pamphlet was published, which gives, in addition to the texts of the addresses at his funeral, an account of his last days. On Sunday, November 20th, he had taken part with his successor, William Edwards, in the re-opening services of the chapel at Pontrhydyrun, when he said that this would probably be his last visit to a church, in which he had first preached some 57 years earlier. On the following Sunday he preached at Llantwit Major, in his own beloved Vale of Glamorgan, and on Tuesday, November 29th, attended the committee of the College. On Sunday, December 4th, he preached at Pontypridd in Welsh. The following Tuesday, the Rev. Nathaniel Thomas, minister of Tabernacle, Cardiff, called upon him and found him engaged in comparing the Revised version of the Scriptures with the Authorised and the Greek text, when he expressed himself to be in general agreement with the revision, though he felt that insufficient notice had been taken of the work of certain American translators. That night before retiring to bed he wrote a note on the translation of the word, *Didaskalos*. That night he died in his sleep.

When Thomas Thomas retired from the College at Pontypool, that institution was one of the largest centres of ministerial training among Baptists; it was also a centre of social and spiritual influence that helped to make the Baptists of Monmouthshire not only strong, numerically, but influential in every aspect of the life of the Principality. Dr. William Edwards exploited to the full the work of his predecessor, and these two men, more perhaps than any others, have moulded the denominational life that the Baptists of South Wales enjoy today.

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