

William Steadman's Hampshire Years

ON 20th August, 1788, William Steadman set out on foot from Leominster to walk to Bristol where he had obtained an entrance to the Baptist Academy. Born of poor parents and largely self-educated, Steadman was converted during a Baptismal service he attended and was himself baptised in April, 1784. Though he taught for eight years in Monkland and Eardisland his predilection was for the ministry and he entered the Bristol Academy with great anticipation.

A chance meeting with a member of the Steele family brought him a preaching engagement at Broughton and led to his acceptance of that pastorate in 1789. Henry Steele had filled the pastorate for forty years, and was succeeded by his nephew, William Steele, who served for thirty years, dying in 1769. Anne Steele, the hymn-writer, was his daughter. Her Bible, the gift of Mrs. Ann Dutton, another Baptist hymn-writer, is still a treasured possession of the church.

Until settling at Broughton, Steadman's reading had been chiefly classical but a chance reading of Edward's *Life of David Brainerd* opened a new field of influence and experience. Chiding himself for what he felt to be wasted years of vanity and pride; mourning time spent in criticism of others and neglect of his own ministry; "My time at Bristol might have been better improved," he lamented, "though I think in conscience I was as diligent and as serious as most there; yet I might have done more; and the barrenness of my soul in divine things now fills me with shame. . . . I am ready to think Brainerd exercised more grace, manifested more diligence, and did more work, in one week of his life, than I have in the whole time since I entered the ministry."

Seven years later, when he was at Plymouth Dock, he speaks of Brainerd as bringing revival into his ministry and, later still, when commending the life of Whitefield, he recalls: "Have met with nothing since the reading of Brainerd's Life, twelve years ago, that has affected me so much."

Days of prayer and self-examination led Steadman to seek for more dynamic results in his ministry: "Shall I always labour,

study, pray, preach in vain?" he wrote in his journal. "Yet, surely, my work is with the Lord, and my reward with my God. But, O Lord, if I may be allowed to make one request, let me see some good effects attending my labours; let me see the members of this church active, zealous, affectionate christians: let me see some sinners converted by my ministry before I die." Brainerd's life led him to seek out in Scripture passages that "speak of the spread of the Gospel" and led him also to seek out in the district such villages where the need for Gospel preaching was indicated: "I endeavoured to enlarge my sphere of labour; went more frequently to Winterslow and Wallop and sought an introduction into several other villages. . . . In some of these places my efforts to introduce the Gospel succeeded, in others they proved abortive; but even there I felt a satisfaction in having made the attempt. My strain of preaching at home was somewhat altered, becoming more earnest and pointed, more evangelical and spiritual."

The spirit of revival which affected the young pastor was not appreciated by the members of his flock who spoke "in frigid strains" saying: "It is no purpose to trouble oneself about souls . . . leave it to Him," and he adds his answering challenge to his own soul: "Thus the devil teaches men to pervert the truths of the Gospel, and endeavours to press into his service truths he cannot erase!"

Among his ministerial neighbours was one who shared his concerns and understood him perfectly; Rev. J. Saffery of Salisbury who had been sent into the ministry from Meeting House Alley, Portsmouth, a church rich in sanctified endeavour. Steadman and Saffery concluded that if God were laying upon their hearts a new concern for souls they must reach out beyond their immediate district, and in the winter of 1792 they visited the churches of the Portsmouth area, preaching daily in the churches and conducting simple Gospel services in the homes of the people. This evangelistic enterprise confirmed their opinions of the "ill effects of high Calvinism," though Steadman still wondered whether they were right in sounding this "new note" and wrote in his journal: "Whether I shall take such another journey without a more express call of Providence, I cannot say." That "express call of Providence" was nearer than he knew and came through the founding of the B.M.S.

On the last day of 1792 Steadman read the "Account of the Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen." William Carey, it will be remembered, had preached his "deathless sermon" in May and the Society had been inaugurated October 2nd, 1792. Steadman's reaction was one of thrilling acceptance and he wrote in his journal: "It revived me, and did my heart good to think that God had put it into the heart of any

to attempt that good work; and I cannot but look upon this as one of the many favourable indications of the approach of the universal spread of the Gospel and of the latter day glory." In the week following, Steadman wrote to William Carey enclosing a half-guinea subscription for the Society, meanwhile hoping he did it "prudently and with proper views."

In acknowledging the gift, which Carey passed on, Andrew Fuller informed Steadman of the plans which Carey and Dr. Thomas had made for their journey to India. He enclosed a Gospel hymn translated from the Bengalee of Ram Ram Boshoo, a Hindu christian. "It did my heart good to read it," recorded Steadman, adding, "Jesus Christ is blessed by heathens! O when shall all the heathens call Him blessed?" At once, Steadman challenged his own flock in the little church at Broughton with the story of the Society and, much to his surprise, they responded with a gift of almost seven pounds. Steadman next approached Salisbury, where his friend Saffery was pastor, and later toured the village churches of the Salisbury Plain, reading Fuller's letters and seeking help for the pioneer work—that "pious design" as Fuller had called it.

At the invitation of Dr. Ryland and Andrew Fuller, Steadman visited Northampton in order to gain first-hand knowledge of the movement and was surprised to find that Fuller and others looked upon him as the natural successor to Ryland, who was leaving the Midlands for the presidency of Bristol College. Samuel Pearce had other plans for Steadman and sought by every means in his power to persuade him to join the missionary band in India, supporting his plea with the claim: "That in all our connexion there was no man known to us as you, provided you were disposed for it." Steadman was "disposed for it" but there were many obstacles in the way and, reluctantly, Steadman turned down the suggestion of service abroad, determined to evangelise at home with a zeal no whit behind that of his colleagues serving in India. Out of a meagre salary of £40 per year he managed, in spite of family responsibilities, to rent rooms in the villages around the Hampshire-Wiltshire borders in which to preach the Gospel and, when his own money proved insufficient to meet the need, he travelled far afield pleading the cause of "the destitute towns and villages." His pastoral zeal was infectious and his work "gave an impulse to all the country so that all the younger ministers, both Baptists and Independents, and a number of members of their churches as occasional preachers, started in every direction." His journal reveals moments of rapturous enthusiasm and periods of acute depression as the following extracts reveal: "Went to W . . . and conversed with several poor afflicted people and felt some satisfaction in attempting somewhat for God"; "was greatly dejected. . . . I find I am still alone in attempting to

promote the interests of Christ." As early as 1796 Steadman was following the example set by Robert Raikes of gathering children together for religious instruction on Sunday afternoon and during the week, though his church questioned the wisdom of spending two shillings per week on the new enterprise and he confessed sadly: "I thought I should have no difficulty in obtaining it, but find myself mistaken and am apprehensive I must drop it on account thereof! Whatever attempts I make for good are either openly opposed, or else neglected; so that I give up all hope of success in any of them."

Such a light as his zeal had kindled could not be hid under the bushel of mistrust and, if his own people were blind to their pastor's qualities, an ever-widening circle of influence was being confirmed. From Exeter, Bristol and Plymouth, from the Midlands, and from his beloved Herefordshire came requests for his services, and always his ministry brought help and blessing. These invitations were but the prelude to a Macedonian call he was to accept in company with his friend Saffery. By 1796 the band of missionaries serving the Society in India "found themselves competent to their own support and, in consequence, most generously declined further aid from the funds of the Society at home." The General Committee therefore decided that it would be "a legitimate application of the funds, to attempt the evangelisation of some of the less enlightened parts of our own country and Cornwall was the first field selected for the experiment."

In June the two ministers began their itineration of the West Country and the experiment succeeded all their expectation. In chapels and halls, in private homes and in the open air they preached the Gospel; in almost every case being received with great acceptance during the three months' mission.

On his return to Broughton, Steadman set out his views on the enterprise in a report to Dr. Rippon, afterwards published in Vol. ii of the *Baptist Register*, and his pungent comments reveal an insight into evangelistic method which was far in advance of the majority of his ministerial colleagues.

"Whilst it is readily allowed," he wrote, "that the millions of heathens abroad call loudly for our help: do not the hundreds and thousands of little better than heathens at home call loudly for our pity too?" If only "pious and charitable gentlemen" could finance such schemes, and churches were willing to release their ministers for several weeks each year, he averred, great blocks of territory much neglected could be reached with the Gospel. "The obligations of real Christians to labour to the utmost to bring others to an acquaintance with the Gospel, appear to me to be so numerous, so powerful and so obvious that I feel surprised that the godly amongst the Baptists, and other denominations, have made so few

efforts to accomplish it. Nor can I conceive of any more effectual means of doing it, than that of itinerant preaching, carried on either by stated ministers, who may pretty frequently make excursions in the villages around them, or at other times take a more extensive circle, and leave their own immediate charge for a season, which in many cases, may be done without any real injury to it."

Many years later, when he had assumed the Presidency of the Northern Education Society (now Rawdon College), Steadman wrote: "The experience I gained . . . contributed not a little to fit me for the stations I was designed to fill." The evangelist-pastor had seen very clearly the challenge of the multitudes, and his whole life was afterwards devoted either to evangelism or to the training of evangelists. To the last the fire burned with a zeal neither sorrow nor disappointment could quench, as these words from Rev. J. O. Barrett's recently published history of Rawdon College indicate: "He (Dr. Steadman) had done a notable work for Baptist Ministerial education in the North, contending in the early years with a strong prejudice against an educated ministry . . . for thirty-one years he had lived for the Academy, sparing no effort to equip his men for their work. . . . To these labours he added the care of a large church, and evangelistic work in Allerton, Brierley, Birkenshaw, Bowling, Cutler Heights, Heaton, Low Moor and other places. He was also chiefly responsible for the formation of the Itinerant Society of Yorkshire Baptists formed for evangelism, and its first Treasurer." Such was the man, and such the motive which pulsed through his ministry; setting a seal upon village work which was to become a pattern for the new evangelism.

WALTER FANCUTT

Some Modern Religions, by J. Oswald Sanders and J. Stafford Wright. (Tyndale Press, 2s.).

This little book, in the Foundations for Faith series, concisely outlines the origins and main tenets of certain modern deviations from the historic Faith and compares their doctrines with New Testament teaching. Christian Science, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Spiritualism, Christiadelphianism and Theosophy are dealt with, and there are short notes on nine others. The whole is well done and the book will be found useful for those who want to know something about these cults and where they deviate from orthodoxy.