

A Student on Collecting Tour in 1885

THROUGHOUT the greater part of its hundred and fifty years of life, the South Wales Baptist College has depended upon collections canvassed from the churches of Wales, by students who systematically toured given areas, preaching each night at a different place, and receiving on behalf of his college the collection from that service, together with individual subscriptions, all of which were carefully noted, not only for inclusion in the Annual Report, but also as a guide for whoever would travel the same district the following year. The Abergavenny Academy was introduced to this system in 1814 by Ellis Evans of Cefn Mawr, who urged that someone should solicit subscriptions in North Wales. In 1885 a student, who was also to be associated with that North Wales village, followed in the footsteps of earlier collectors to see what could be gleaned in the north. He was Evan Jones, later to become famous in Baptist and other circles as Dr. E. K. Jones. Apart from a list of subscriptions he also kept a journal of his travels, now in the possession of his niece, Mrs. B. V. Davies, of Wrexham.

Evan Jones provided for his journey by purchasing a coat for 30/-, a bag for 12/-, leggings for 2/-, and an umbrella for 8/9d. He set out from Ferndale, in the Rhondda Valley, through Talybont and Builth to Machynlleth, his first port of call. However, no service had been arranged for him and, instead he attended special services held that night at the local Methodist chapel, and like every student was in a position to sum up the preachers in a sentence. One was "good," the other "Wesleyanish (Justification through faith, etc.)." The following day, after visiting subscribers and lunching on mutton and ham, with one new potato and a few old ones, followed by rhubarb tart, he set out for Abercegyr. He arrived at the chapel and says :

"Having been informed that shortness was no sin, I took the hint, delivered my sermon and closed my first collecting oration, which was curt and blunt enough. I had about 20 hearers, smiling, kind looking and sympathetic in every respect but one, i.e. subscribing."

At Llanfyllin, again, Evan Jones was compelled to listen to Methodist preaching, and says :

"I was subjected to hearing Rev. Thomas Carno at it for two hours, drawing along: he made some good strokes, but said a lot of nonsense."

Yet he was equally prepared to judge Baptist preachers. At Milwr :

"Thomas Abercarn preached, or at least continued talking for forty minutes, taking for his text fourteen verses from the very heart of the Revelation, and travelling every available ground for the purpose of eliciting the noisy and false approbation of his hearers. *Gomer* after all was the only one that he could successfully tickle, and as for *Gomer*, it would do credit to anyone that could preach so as to keep him quiet. *Pedr Hir* came after him, with a powerful, neatly constructed, explanatory and impressive discourse."

That night he had to share a bed with the massive figure of the famous preacher, best known by his bardic title of *Pedr Hir* (Long Peter).

"This old chap was rather bulky, and being so long was forced to double himself up. Of course, my place was thus minimised. I fell asleep at last, and about 2 o'clock awoke again. By this time I was bare and nearly overboard, the numerous coverings, at first meant to do duty for us both had been possessed by him. He was apparently asleep, and soon the struggle began on my part. I laid hold of the flannels and after much exertion managed to twist and squeeze myself under cover. This only tended to disturb his selfish slumbers and suddenly he gave his mighty carcase a turn over, which was like a vessel heaving. I tried to shift over, and again struggled to retain possession of the clothes, and succeeded too. By this time he was awake and, like a gentleman made many concessions to my little self, such as yielding me a few more square inches to lie on. I had become so cold with long exposure that I could not possibly get warm again and therefore could not sleep; in my endeavours to do so I turned and twisted about, and so did my big bed-fellow. Soon Long Peter turned out, saying that he thought he would go home. And so he did."

This is surely an unusual view of one who was literally a giant of the Welsh pulpit.

When called to preach, Evan Jones rang the changes on four sermons, of which his two favourites were *True Happiness* and *Return*. On one occasion the servant girl at a certain house teased him unmercifully, for she had been present at two of his services, but had heard but one sermon. He describes a service at Moelfre :

"I was ushered into the jampot-shaped pulpit and was told to begin reading at once. I read a Psalm, and asked if we should sing a hymn. I was told 'no' as there was no leader. Well, I prayed, and did not know what to do now. I sat for a moment, took out my five inches of paper, rose to my feet, but, woe, down goes the paper into the pulpit at my feet. At this moment I bent down and was lost sight of by all, but, I was able to pick it up again, owing to the closed pulpit, without anyone seeing it. I got about it very well to please myself, came down from my pedestal, and was ordered to take the plate around and received the sum of 2/6d. and after thanking them, they dispersed."

This was a better collection than he gathered at Dylife, where the

college gained 1/11d., but there they gave the student 1/-. At Pandy'r Capel the chapel was being repaired and he preached in a barn :

"It was a spacious room, built of wood and very old. Cracks and crevices were numerous, but there was no such thing as a window. It was very draughty. The seats had been carried here from the chapel; there was also a table, upon which was laid a Bible, a hymn-book and a price-list of agricultural implements. After preaching I was ordered to take around my own hat and received 3/6½d.; by doing so I felt rather flat, but when I considered the debt of £400 they had incurred, I could not grumble."

At Lixwm, he faced the ordeal of preaching with Principal Gethin Davies of Llangollen College :

"While they were singing I made for the pulpit. Mr. Davies kindly offered to preach first. This I declined with a smile. The idea of the Principal of Llangollen acting as a preface to Evan Jones of Blaenllechau almost made me laugh outright. I went on with my sermon for five or eight minutes when, almost without my knowing it, I become swallowed up with my subject. I somehow managed to talk from my heart. My sermon lasted about twenty-three minutes and I finished, perspiring all over."

The most difficult part of the tour lay in persuading subscribers to part with their money. Sometimes Evan Jones failed in this. He would walk several miles to obtain a single shilling but it could happen, as at a farm called Bwlch-y-douge, where he was offered tea by Mrs. Jones :

"I asked for the subscription, but, to my surprise was told that Mr. Jones was away from home and that he had taken the purse with him. Fancy my feelings after I had walked about 4¼ miles purposely for this 1/-, spending about 1½ hours of my precious time, and with a journey of six miles before me."

At Ruthin he called to see a businessman of the town :

"I asked the clerk for him and after a while he appeared, looking like a hunted Indian, flushed and excited. I told him who and what I was, upon which he sent forth a cataract of words upon me, denouncing denominational colleges, stating he thought it unreasonable to keep six men to teach fifty students, and that he would subscribe no more to institutions that had no object in view but to keep tutors in good livings. Without waiting for a reply he turned on his heel. Thus was I treated by the chairman of the Denbigh Flint and Merionethshire Association for 1885. So he stands alone as the only person who seemed angered at my request. He not only ignored my claim upon him as a brother and a baptist, but he acted in such a base and dirty manner as to prove that he was a coward and a black-guard."

Rhyl he also found a difficult place for his purpose :

"I travelled all over Rhyl calling at one place and then at another, being requested by one to call again, and then after calling a second time on an opulent family was bowed out empty-handed in the most profuse and Christianly manner. Others said they had given in the

collection, another left all such things to her husband, who was out, of course; thus was I humbugged about till I was actually sick of the place and longed for the country again."

Yet he could make mistakes in his collecting. At Llansilin he says :

" I unintentionally played a trick on an old lady. She placed a six-penny bit in the box and desired 4d. back, but I had no coppers and I promised to let her have it later. After this I forgot all about it, and thanked the congregation for their gifts; we sang a hymn and they dispersed. We counted up the money and it was some time before I remembered my words to the old lady. I related the story to the secretary and gave him the 4d. for the dear lady."

All students who have been on collecting tours know that their greatest joy lies in the generous hospitality one receives, and their greatest worry is the fear that there will be no preparations made for one's lodging at the end of one's journey. Evan Jones arrived at St. Asaph and was told that no meeting had been arranged for him. He goes on :

" I went in search of the Anti-honourable, red-headed, self-wise, crusty Sir John Jones, Gasman of Gasworks and found him seated near his door reading *Y Faner*. The following dialogue took place, with myself with a heavy bag in one hand, and my umbrella in the other :

Student: Are you Mr. Jones?

Gasman: Yes (Snottish).

Student: Am I expected to preach tonight at the chapel?

Gasman: No.

Student: Where shall I spend the night?

Gasman: I don't know.

Soon, however, the student found kinder Baptists, who offered their accustomed hospitality. He had a similar experience at Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd :

" When I asked where I could find a bed and cover, I was directed to Tycoch, but on the way I overtook an old shoemaker, who spoke as if he were a member. He asked me where I was to be on the following night. I answered, Denbigh. He advised me to go straight on there that night, but I told him I should be in the same fix there, as all were strangers to me at both places. We soon parted and I sought out Tycoch. How kindly they received me! What sunshine after rain! What a silver lining to a black cloud! "

The houses where he stayed differed greatly, and yet shared certain of what were regarded as the respectable necessities of that day. He describes his bedroom at Abercegyr :

" My bed is snow white, so both the table and the washstand are covered in white. On the wall are two pictures, a mourning card framed, and Christmas Evans. There is also a large pier glass with another large glass on the dressing table."

At Carrog :

" I was shown to a fine room containing two beds, well curtained.

The one is a complete tent minus the sides, the other with only curtains covering the head."

At Llanrhaidr-ym-mochnant he stayed with a Mr. Evans :

"He is apparently a man of brain, for on the walls were busts of Gladstone, Beaconsfield, Milton and Dickens. I also saw signs of his delight in things naturalistic. I saw cases of stuffed birds and strange quadrupeds and also a fine collection of butterflies preserved in a glass case."

Yet some of the rooms held traps for the student in the morning :

"I heard the venerable Hugh Parry downstairs, and did my toilet in a short time. O my, what a clather! I splashed the wall with water and in trying to dry it again, the soft colour on the paper came off on to the toilet cloth. I lost some water on the planks and in trying to dry it I messed the cloth until it was covered with dark, dirty patches. Now I knew not what to do, but fearing something worse would happen, I soon betook myself downstairs."

The journal is dotted with political comments. On leaving Corwen he bought the *Liverpool Mercury*:

"I was at once involved in politics. The paper gives an account of Salisbury's march to Balmoral. Poor fellow, he is well aware that Victoria would be pleased to entrust the management of affairs to him, but the bitter pill for him is the fact that the country will not have anything to do with him."

The general political temper of the area is found in an incident at Dolywern :

"I was at dinner with Mr. Roberts. During the meal he told me he had been to the funeral of Sir W. W. Wynne, and Mr. Jones his neighbour riled him for paying such respect to a Tory, to which he answered that nothing would please him better than to have the chance soon to attend the funerals of all the Tories in the world."

North Wales was a strange land to a lad from the Rhondda Valley. The food was at times strange. At Treddol he tasted for the first time a strange meat dish called "mince." It was natural therefore that it was with great joy he met some men from the area he called home :

"I met with several Southmen, who were glad to see me and I to see them. With these I had the pleasure of attending a very large cattle fair. I was up at Maes-y-dre where the Southmen chiefly reside, and had a jolly time of it."

It is on this happy note that E. K. Jones ends his journal. Collecting tours have meant great difficulties for the students, but have always brought their compensations in experience and fun. Without these student journeys, it is difficult to believe that ministerial education among the Welsh Baptists would have survived these hundred and fifty years.

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