

The Reverend John Ash, LL.D.

1724 - 1779

“HE was an unobtrusive, good, great man, and deserves to have his name rescued from that oblivion into which it has sunk.” So writes S. A. Swaine of John Ash in *Faithful Men* (1884), a volume of biographical notes of ministers trained at Bristol Baptist College. Swaine gives less information than Ivimey, but the sentiment he expresses is identical with the purpose of the present writer.

1. Early Life

John Ash was born in 1724 in Dorset. One late source¹ names his birthplace as Stockland. His parents were “pious persons” but “of an inferior station in life” and it is clear that he had little schooling for he was soon apprenticed to a blacksmith.² “When very young he was baptized and joined the church at Loughwood, near Lyme, then under the pastoral care of that singular and eminent minister, Mr. Isaac Hann, to whom he was related.”³ (I can find no other reference to Hann or the church although both appear in Wilson’s list for Dorset.) Both the church and its minister recognised the potential abilities of the young blacksmith’s apprentice, since they encouraged him⁴ “to devote himself to the ministry” and sent him to study at Bristol under Bernard Foskett and Hugh Evans in 1740,⁵ when he was only sixteen.

Partly on account of his youth, no doubt, Ash seems to have spent rather longer than usual as a student, proving himself to be an able scholar—“There he continued several years, and made such proficiency in the several branches of learning to which he attended, as did great credit to himself and his worthy tutor.”⁶ Something of the scope of education for the Baptist ministry in those days may be gleaned from the fact that “In his younger years he was particularly attached to the mathematics.”⁷ He appears to have finished his course at Bristol in 1746 or 1747 (see below) but what he did then is far from clear. *The Dictionary of National Biography* entry, which is not entirely accurate in some respects, states that before 1746 Ash was minister at Loughwood; Dr. Tongue also says⁸ that he was at Loughwood, but gives no date or authority; evidence will be given below which links Ash with Pershore at this time; finally, Isaac James, in his potted biography of Ash in the *Hymn Book*,⁹ says that he was at Broadmead, Bristol, presumably as an assistant. There may well be some justification for all three

assertions as students who had completed their course seem quite frequently to have served in churches for some years before being ordained, e.g., Caleb Evans assisted his father at Broadmead, Bristol, for eight years before he was ordained co-pastor,¹⁰ and Benjamin Beddome¹¹ spent three years at Bourton-on-the-Water before he was ordained there. Ash could quite easily have served for a period as an assistant "student-pastor" at his home church of Loughwood, and in the same capacity with Hugh Evans at Broadmead a little later, whilst at the same time beginning his visits to Pershore. It seems an obvious way for an impecunious theological student—who in this respect at least has not changed much in succeeding generations—to support himself. He also put his mathematical interests to good use.

2. Settlement at Pershore

The Baptist church at Pershore, like many of its neighbours in that part of the Midlands, drew many of its ministers from Bristol, to which city the rivers Severn and Avon make useful natural routes. Bernard Foskett himself had assisted John Beddome in a pastorate embracing Alcester, Henley-in-Arden and Bengeworth (Evesham) from 1711 to 1720,¹² so his advice may have influenced his promising student to consider Pershore, but as will shortly appear, there was another reason for young John Ash's interest in Pershore!

As we have seen there exists some confusion about the date of Ash's settlement at Pershore, but Walter Wilson gives an interesting account of it: "His (Ash's) settlement in Pershore was in the following manner. Mr. Ryland and Mr. Haynes both preached as candidates and the members were divided in their choice. But at length the friends of both united and agreed on Dr. Ash. This was in 1746. Mr. Ryland afterwards went to Warwick and Mr. Haynes to Bradford."¹³ It is clear that the Ryland referred to is John Collett Ryland, who was a year older than Ash but a year behind him at Bristol, and who settled at Warwick in 1750.¹⁴ Ash was to have some stern words to say about him a few years later.

The previous minister at Pershore had been Edward Cook (sic), who died in office. He was certainly alive as late as November 18th., 1746, for he signed a receipt on that date,¹⁵ but the next receipt in the collection, dated October 26th, 1747, is signed by "Eliz. Cook" for "forty-five shillings being Due to my late husband Mr. Edwd. Cook, Deceased." This sum represented an endowment yielding 15s. per quarter for the Pershore minister so Mrs. Cook was signing for nine months' allowance in October although the money was due on July 14th. It appears, therefore, that Edward Cook died no earlier than the end of 1746 and no later than the middle of 1747. On the whole it is improbable that the church could

have started looking for a new minister before 1747. The next entry in the receipt book is made by Joseph Young, a member of the church, who explains that the sum of £6 15s. "has been by me applied to & for the benefit of the Occasional Ministry at Pershore Meeting since the Death of Mr. Cook & is in full for the said Interest of the said Money from 14th July, 1747 to 14th October, 1749." The subsequent entries are for 14th October, 1749, to 14th April, 1750, signed by John Ash; April to October, 1750, in the handwriting of John Sitch, another member of the church; and the last two, covering the period October, 1750, to 9th December, 1752, are written and signed by John Ash.

Most of the sources give 1751 as the date of Ash's settlement but this is the date of his *ordination* which, says Ivimey, took place in June, 1751.¹⁶ As the receipt book¹⁷ shows, Ash was receiving the Pershore minister's endowment by the end of 1749, and if we take into account Wilson's evidence,¹⁸ the existing links between the Bristol Academy and the church (Edward Cook had also been trained under Foskett¹⁹), the relatively easy communications between Bristol and Pershore, and the fact that Ash would have been a student for seven years in 1747, there is some justification for suggesting that he, together with other Bristol students like Ryland, was acquainted with Pershore as a visiting preacher soon after Edward Cook's death, and that for two years before his ordination he was resident there. There is some support for this in the inscription on his tombstone of 1779 that he was "pastor for more than twenty-eight years." which makes 1751 the official starting-point but implies an association of earlier date.

3. Marriage

An important feature of Ash's settlement at Pershore was his marriage, which introduces us to a key source for the story of John Ash and the history of the Baptist church at Pershore—the Rickards family papers. For our immediate purpose it is sufficient to note that at the end of the 17th century Samuel Rickards, Snr. had settled in Pershore as a mercer and joined the Baptist church. He was a shrewd businessman and soon became a leading and respected figure in the church and town, helping to secure the present Broad Street site for the church in 1700.²⁰ He died in 1729, leaving a small legacy for the benefit of the Pershore minister, and his property and mercer's business to his son, Samuel Rickards, Jnr.²¹ Like his father, Samuel Rickards, Jnr. was a prominent citizen and Baptist, prospering greatly both as a mercer and land-owner. He administered his father's estate and his own affairs with great competence, keeping his records carefully in a "Money Book," in which are found the receipt signatures mentioned above. He died in 1752.

One of his sisters, Hannah, had married Mark Goddard, a merchant of Bristol, who went bankrupt and died shortly after in 1736, followed by his wife a year later, leaving three young children, two girls and a boy. Samuel Rickards, Snr., their grandfather, had settled £600 in trust for the Goddard children, with Samuel Rickards, Jr. as chief trustee. The latter took his responsibilities very seriously and brought his two orphan nieces to Pershore: Elizabeth (always called Betsy by her uncle) as soon as her father died, when she was about eight years old, and her sister, Patty, the following year. Samuel lodged Betsy first with his mother, next-door to his own house in the High Street, and on old Mrs. Rickards' death in 1741, Betsy went to live with Samuel's sister, Mary, and her husband, Robert Sitch, near-by. Samuel Rickards remained the actual guardian of his nieces, however, and sent them both to Mrs. Linton's Boarding School in Worcester for five years where they appear to have received a better education than was usual for girls in those days.

On 24th June, 1749, when Elizabeth Goddard presumably came of age, her uncle Samuel paid her the balance of the trust money.²³ Meanwhile John Ash had been introduced to Pershore and must soon have noticed the Misses Goddard as attentive members of his congregation. No doubt his quick intelligence impressed Samuel Rickards, too, but certainly Elizabeth attracted more than strictly pastoral attention from the "student pastor." Courtship could easily have started before 1749 if Ash had been a frequent visitor, but in any case, like many a Baptist student since, as soon as he achieved full ministerial status, he married.

The Marriage Settlement,²⁴ dated 26th August, 1751, is a formidable parchment document, measuring 23½ inches long by 28½ inches wide and still in beautiful condition. It explains Ash's circumstances with great candour: ". . . the said John Ash not being provided with any Reall Estate in Possession Sufficient for the Jointure of the said Elizabeth Goddard." By the terms of the settlement £400, "part of the marriage portion of her the said Elizabeth Goddard," was to be invested in trust for the benefit of Elizabeth and her children, the trustees being her uncle, Samuel Rickards, and her cousin, John Sitch. Against the red wax seals at the bottom of the parchment appear the signatures of the parties to the settlement: John Ash, in a lean, vigorous hand; Elizabeth Goddard, in a careful, elegant "copper-plate" style which speaks well for Mrs. Linton's school; Samuel Rickards, rounded and with flourishes; John Sitch, plain and firm—all appearing as fresh today as when they were first penned; four interesting Baptist signatures over 200 years old. The marriage followed soon after for on 2nd January, 1752, John and Elizabeth signed an "Instrument"²⁵ proving that the trustees of the Marriage Settlement had invested

the £400 at 4%: Elizabeth signed in her married name—the slightly blurred “Eliz.” can still be seen immediately under her husband’s signature, showing that she began to write too high up, smudged it out and signed again lower down by the second seal.

John Ash was 27, his bride 23, when they began what was clearly a happy marriage. From various clues we may glean something of their personalities. In the first place the marriage could hardly have been possible unless Samuel Rickards had approved of John Ash both as the husband of his niece and as the minister of his church. This in itself is no small commendation. For his part, as we have seen, Ash had nothing to offer except his brains and the rather uncertain prospects of the Baptist ministry, although he had sufficient confidence to ask for Elizabeth’s hand before he was ordained, and to marry immediately afterwards. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was a comparatively wealthy young woman with good connections and could probably have married into a higher and more secure station, yet she was willing to accept a young, unknown Baptist minister of humble origin and settle down in the Pershore manse among the very people who had known her most of her life. It says much for their determination and mutual affection. Ash’s regard for his wife’s good sense is seen in the provisions of his will by which he entrusted her with considerable responsibility.

Their first home, we may assume, was the house built by Samuel Rickards, Jr. in 1742²⁶ for use as the Baptist manse. Ivimey describes it as “a very comfortable family house, adjoining the meeting-house.” It was replaced by the present manse in 1868. Whatever its “comfort” may have been, we know that Ash bought a house of his own in the town about 25 years later.²⁷

Elizabeth bore her husband six children²⁸ who are all named in his will of 1779, presumably in order of seniority: Eliza, Samuel (an inevitable choice!), Joseph, Martha, Sarah and Luezar (sic). Nothing more has come to light so far about these children except for Joseph; of him Ivimey writes,²⁹ “Mr. Joseph Ash was for many years a respectable deacon of the church at Broadmead, Bristol, and is now living in the vicinity of Horsley, Gloucestershire.” A diary kept by Joseph Ash has recently come to light through the vigilance of Dr. E. A. Payne.

4. The Baptist Church at Pershore

The church of which Ash became minister in 1751 was by that time already nearly a century old, the traditional date of its formation being 1658. It had enjoyed considerable support under the remarkable ministry of Timothy Thomas from 1696-1716.³⁰ On his death he was succeeded by his son, who died after only three years as a minister. Mrs. Thomas survived her husband and son and in 1723 she wrote to Philip Doddridge,³¹ then at Kibworth, to persuade

him to accept the pastorate at Pershore, where, she urged, he would be able to preach "to above 800 people every Lord's Day." Elsewhere we hear of the "700 hearers"³² of Timothy Thomas, Snr. in 1715. At that period the church was of mixed Baptist and Independent character³³ which may account in part for this large following, but it is extremely doubtful whether these figures were ever meant to describe the *membership*, but rather the "hearers." Nor would all the congregation have lived in Pershore but would have been drawn from the surrounding villages—a traditional source of the church's strength throughout the 18th and 19th centuries—"the meeting house was thronged with attentive admiring hearers, who came from all the villages ten miles round to attend his (Timothy Thomas, Snr.) ministry."³⁴ This picture is given further colour by the Anglican Churchwardens' Presentments³⁵ for the parishes of the neighbourhood in the late 17th century. These frequently recorded the names of Dissenters, labelling them as "Anabaptists" quite often, but nothing approaching 800 is suggested by this source. We may best assume, therefore, a firm nucleus of actual members, with a large following of sympathisers who must have retained their Communion with their parish churches.

In 1726 a membership of 70 is recorded,³⁶ but some ten years later, Ash's predecessor, Edward Cook, excluded all pædo-baptists³⁷ from membership and "ye additions in his time fell short of the deaths."³⁸ These two factors must largely account for the size of the church when Ash began his ministry, there being only 48 members,³⁹ and a year after his ordination he lost the valuable support of Samuel Rickards, who died in August, 1752.⁴⁰

The population of Pershore in the 18th century remained at about two-and-a-half thousand.

5. Income and Business Interests

The stipend John and Elizabeth Ash could rely on was not large although it is difficult to translate it accurately into modern values, especially when allowance is made for the gifts of fruit and vegetables which are still a happy feature of Baptist life in Pershore. Wilson,⁴¹ in a note claiming to be based on the church's state in 1774, says that part of the stipend was derived from legacies, representing invested capital of £300 to £400 (both Samuel Rickards, Snr. and his son left money for this purpose).⁴² The interest from these legacies together with the weekly offerings yielded an income of approximately £80 per annum. "But this sum," says Wilson, "is more than they have ever raised for any of their ministers, though in presents of a different kind they have been found generous beyond what might have been expected. To which might be added, that by their peaceable friendly and affectionate behaviour they have contributed much more to the comfort and hap-

piness of their ministers than much larger pecuniary advantages would have done without them."

Opportunities for "larger pecuniary advantages" were not entirely lacking for a man of Ash's talent and he took full advantage of them, proving himself to be as shrewd in business as in everything else. He was fortunate in that through the Rickards family he had excellent contacts with the world of commerce and investment. From the will of Mary Sitch, dated June, 1771,⁴³ something of Ash's extra-ministerial interests can be seen. Mary Sitch was the sister of Samuel Rickards, Jnr., and Elizabeth Ash had lived with her as a girl. The will suggests that there was a considerable estate part of which was left to her grandson and described as follows.

"All that my Barn and parcel of Land with the Appurtenances thereunto . . . in Catshill, in the parish of Bromsgrove . . . containing by estimation two acres . . . which I lately purchased of John Ash and James Rickards." (The Rickards mentioned here was one of the Birmingham branch of the family.)

Mrs. Sitch also states that her grandson had already bought her other Bromsgrove property, "which I also purchased of the said John Ash and James Rickards," and apparently on account of this he was to pay £500 to her estate. Finally, £43 7s. 0½d.—a nice calculation—was to be paid to John Ash in respect of a debt which her son, John Sitch, had incurred. It is interesting to see that the Sitches continued to figure in Ash's transactions.

From his own will of 1779⁴⁴ we learn that John Ash kept a shop but tantalisingly he does not say what it was. He directs that "the said Trade of Business be carried on in the Firm of Mrs. Ash and Company and as near as consistent in the manner that it now is." It is evident that Ash had a high regard for his wife's ability and she may have been helping to look after the shop for some time before his death.

The will also reveals that Ash owned and occupied his own house, since he bequeathed to his "beloved wife" and "dear daughter," Eliza, "all those two Messuages and Tennaments in Pershore afores'd which I lately purchased of Mr. John Sitch the Elder and Mr. John Sitch the Younger." Later on he refers to his property as that "which I do now occupy." The centre of Pershore still consists mainly of Georgian houses with long, mellow-walled gardens behind, and in many cases the original double-fronted house is now divided in two. Judging by the complicated patterns of roofs, chimneys, walls and doors still to be seen in the town many of these divisions could easily date from the 18th century, and it is possible that Ash's "two messuages," which by implication were adjacent, had been divided by the Sitches and re-united to house the Ash

family. The property is almost certainly still standing and the secret is doubtless hidden in one of the bundles of old deeds which Pershore house-owners sometimes show their visitors today. The sale of this Sitch property is, perhaps, reflected in an entry in "Calendar of Letters, 1742-1831, collected by Isaac Mann,"⁴⁵ which has the following note: "1176. October 16. A legal document by which John Ash, LL.D. (of Pershore, Worcs.) leaves to John Sitch ("the elder of Kingswood in the County of Wilts"—who, a later note says, died in 1789) the sum of £100. Witnesses: Thos. Hillier and Benj. Bedford."

Elizabeth Ash was authorised under her husband's will to mortgage their property up to £600 if such a sum should be needed to maintain the shop. Any "Issues or Proffits" from the property were to be used first to pay John Sitch, Snr. an annuity of £8 per annum for which "he have got my Bond." Property or effects worth £600 would be a useful amount in the 18th century. The shrewdness Ash brought to his business affairs and the success he achieved is seen from a comparison of the Marriage Settlement and his will 28 years later. A further source of income was his pen and it is his books that we must now consider.

6. Author and Educationalist

To his contemporaries Ash was best known as a scholar whose particular interest was in philology and education, which perhaps owed something to his own struggle to overcome a poor start. Whilst still a student at Bristol he contributed to various journals on mathematical questions and, according to Caleb Evans, "made a distinguishing figure in the periodical publications of that day."⁴⁶ It was not until 1763, however, that his first book appeared.⁴⁷ This was his *Grammatical Institutes, or an easy Introduction to Dr. Lowth's English Grammar*, which seems to have been an instant success for it ran to thirteen editions.⁴⁸ There followed in 1775 Ash's magnum opus, *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* in two volumes and including a "comprehensive Grammar." A second edition was published in 1795. The Dictionary was quickly followed by another two-volume work in 1777, *Sentiments on Education*. This is a collection of various authors' views about a wide range of subjects, including, appropriately enough, public speaking. In its obituary to Ash in 1779, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, praised this last work as one "in which the outlines of a good education are traced with a masterly hand."

Ash must have won his reputation fairly early since he was awarded a Doctorate of Laws by a Scottish University in 1774,⁴⁹ the year before his Dictionary was published.

The Lexicographer. The place which John Ash claims in current works of reference is always under the title of Lexicographer. *The*

Dictionary of National Biography, referring to his Dictionary, remarks a little unkindly that it "incorporates most of Bailey's collection of canting words, and many provincial terms with no nice discrimination; best known for the blunder under 'curmudgeon', which Johnson derived from *coeur méchant* on the authority of an 'unknown correspondent'; Ash gives it as 'from the French *coeur*—unknown, *méchant*—correspondent'." One may charitably assume that French was not among the subjects taught at Bristol Academy!

Allibone's *The Critical Dictionary of English Literature* (Philadelphia, 1899) quotes Chalmers on Ash's Dictionary as follows: "The plan was extensive beyond anything of the kind ever attempted, and perhaps embraced much more than was necessary or useful. It is valuable, however, as containing a very large proportion of obsolete words, and such provincial or cant words as have crept into general use."

A further evaluation of Ash's contribution to lexicography is found in M. M. Mathews' *A Survey of English Dictionaries* (Oxford, 1923) which relates that, "In the latter part of the 18th century lexicographers adopted the device of placing stress marks in such a way as to terminate syllables and thereby aid in the pronunciation of words. The Rev. John Ash in his *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* of 1775, took credit upon himself for having used stress marks in this manner. Entries in his dictionary like Ab'bacy, Art'ful, Ar'tery, show the helpfulness of his arrangement. In his introduction Ash said he had included in his tionalary 'all the words he could find or remember.' In his efforts to find words he examined closely earlier dictionaries." The mistake over "curmudgeon" is then noted.

The 18th century was an age that witnessed a growing enthusiasm for lexicography, the crowning achievement being that of the renowned Dr. Johnson, who published his dictionary in 1775 after eight years hard work. This made a great impression, not least, apparently, upon the Baptist minister at Pershore, who must nevertheless have felt that there was room for improvement. His debt to Bailey and Johnson (who also relied a good deal on Bailey) is obvious but his use of stress marks to aid pronunciation does seem to have been something of an advance (Mathews, *op cit.*, p. 30). There was sufficient appreciation of his work to merit a second edition sixteen years after his death. Ivimey remarks, with no little pride in a fellow-Baptist's achievement, "His Philological works, his elaborate Grammar and Dictionary, are universally known and highly prized. His *Sentiments upon Education* have been admired for correct thought and solid judgment."⁵⁰

There is a strong tradition that Ash, like a number of other ministers, kept a private school or academy for pupils of which he

first produced his educational books. With his known interest in education it would be more surprising if he had not kept a school, but no description of it seems to exist.

7. The Baptist Preacher

In his churchmanship John Ash was a Particular Baptist and his ministerial activities seem to have been confined to that body. He quickly made his mark in the Midland Association: "Dr. Ash was frequently employed in preaching the annual sermon at the Associations: this he did in 1751, 1755, 1760, 1764, 1767, 1775 and 1778."⁵¹ In addition he is known to be the author of at least two of the Association's Circular Letters—those for 1757 and 1759—as well as being Moderator for some of the Annual Meetings, three of which were held at his church during his ministry. Thus, during his thirty years in the Midland Association Ash was asked to contribute to at least a dozen Annual Meetings, which indicates something of the esteem in which he was held.

He was also in some demand as a preacher outside the Association. His funeral sermon for Caleb Evans' wife in 1771 was printed⁵² and in 1778 he was honoured by his old college at Bristol with an invitation to preach there. The structure of a funeral sermon was decreed by custom, which Ash strictly observed in his oration to Mrs. Evans. Even so, it still reads well and implies a lively style, for it contains several passages which must clearly have been uttered with passion and vigour. Of the sermon preached for the Bristol Education Society, as the Baptist College was then called, Dr. E. J. Tongue writes, "It is from Eph. 4 : 11 and 12, 'The perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry.' . . . It is interesting to see how long ago, long before some moderns made such a song about it, that he discusses and approves leaving out the comma after the word 'saints'."⁵³ Another sermon, "Preached at ye Pithay Meeting on a Thursday even" survives in manuscript,⁵⁴ as taken down, apparently, by a member of the congregation. The text is Acts 10 : 33 and is applied to attendance at public worship. The introduction and exposition are balanced and could be used today with little alteration. From this scholarly beginning Ash advances to some very frank remarks about punctuality: "I am sorry to say my Friends that many of you seem not to pay a proper regard to it in so much that many a time half the congregation has been absent at the beginning of the worship." The preacher must have known his congregation well to speak so freely!

The surviving examples of Ash's preaching style add colour to Caleb Evans' judgment: "In his sentiments he was sound, rational, liberal, and strictly scriptural; and in his preaching, plain, practical, powerful, and thoroughly evangelical. His ideas of the great plan of providence and grace were uniform, grand, extensive, and

truly noble; and those ideas he earnestly desired to impress upon the minds of his hearers.⁵⁵

One written work of Ash's should be considered with his preaching rather than with his other writing, which, as we have seen, was of a more academic nature. The book in question is called *Dialogue of Eumenes* and appears to have been a moral tale addressed to young people. It made a singular impression on Caleb Evans who reveals something of its character thus: "Some of the sheets of it I never have read and I believe never shall read, without a moistened cheek and a heaving heart."⁵⁶

8. The Hymn Collection

As we receive the new *Baptist Hymn Book* in 1962 it is fitting to recall that one of John Ash's greatest contributions to Baptist life was the production of the *Collection of Hymns* in collaboration with Caleb Evans. The preface is dated Bristol, September 27, 1769. Both Ash and Evans were interested in poetry and belonged to the same private group of verse-writing friends which included Anne Steele, who adopted the *nom de plume* "Theodosia" whilst Ash favoured the disguise of "Eusebius."⁵⁷

The two hymn collectors did not claim to be innovators but their preface does show them to be among the foremost advocates of reform. Isaac Watts and the Wesleys were revolutionising hymn singing, but inevitably many congregations lacked the necessary books and the desire to change old habits. Often a hymn would be composed by a minister for his congregation on one of his sermon themes, each line being read out by him before it was sung. Watts had long urged the abandonment of this method so that the verses could be sung without interruption and Ash and Evans enthusiastically endorsed his judgment. It is significant that as late as 1801, when Isaac James of Bristol published the 8th edition of the *Collection*, he rejected Watts' view in favour of the old line-by-line method, Ash and Evans notwithstanding! The object of the two friends was to provide in a single volume the hymns of several authors in the most useful order. They also explain that several of their personal friends had contributed hymns, notably "Theodosia" (Anne Steele), Benjamin Beddome, the formidable minister of Bourton-on-the-Water, and Benjamin Seward of Bengeworth, Evesham, (the "Seward Lectures" are still given annually in Evesham Baptist Church). There are 412 hymns in the *Collection*, the greater number by Watts, followed by Doddridge and "Theodosia." Of this number twenty-two survive in the *Revised Baptist Church Hymnal* including "Christ, the Lord, is risen today" (with the "Hallelujah!") and "Hark! the Herald Angels sing." It was a highly successful enterprise and was still in popular use in the early 19th century.

9. Dr. Ash — the Man and the Minister

Unfortunately it has not so far been possible to trace any portrait of John Ash, but there is considerable evidence of the kind of person he was and the impression he made on others. He was of strong physique which was probably one reason for his early apprenticeship to a blacksmith, and in later life he was noted as being "Blest with a remarkable share of health and spirits, he continued, with scarcely any interruption, in the assiduous, faithful, affectionate and successful discharge of the various important duties of his station, character and office, to his dying day."⁵⁸ To this robustness of body was added not only a keen mind but an attractive personality for the record of his friendships suggests that they were happily maintained over many years. We may trace them from the time when the Dorsetshire country lad so impressed Isaac Hann and his congregation at Loughwood; to the striking impression his lively intellect made upon his Bristol tutors, Foscett and Hugh Evans; to his call to Pershore, his only pastorate; to his ready acceptance by the wealthy Rickards family and to his command of the affections of the young and mature Elizabeth Goddard. Above all except his marriage, however, must be set Ash's close and lifelong friendship with his tutor's son, Caleb Evans (1737-1791),⁵⁹ who was thirteen years junior to him. He had offered one of the prayers at Caleb's ordination at Bristol in 1767⁶⁰ and two years later they produced their *Collection of Hymns*.

There were more intimate ties which like so much of this story are linked with Samuel Rickards, the younger. Another of his sisters, Sarah,⁶¹ had married Joseph Jeffries, of Taunton, who was probably a Baptist minister, although Ivimey is silent about him. From Samuel's "Money Book" we know that their daughter, "Sally," was also brought to Pershore by her good uncle Samuel, boarded with "Bro. Sitch" and educated at Mrs. Linton's school in Worcester, just as Elizabeth and Patty Goddard had been ten years earlier. The rest of her short biography is told by John Ash in his funeral sermon for Mrs. Sarah Evans. He states that: "Mrs. Evans . . . was the only daughter of the Rev. Mr. Joseph Jeffries of Taunton in Somersetshire. She was left an orphan when a child, but her education was, nevertheless, truly pious . . . she became truly religious in early youth. She was baptized and admitted to Christian fellowship in the church of Christ at Pershore in Worcester-shire, about the middle of the year 1760. . . . In the spring of the year of 1762, she became the amiable and pious consort of your present minister." (Caleb Evans was minister of Broadmead, Bristol.) Sarah Evans died in 1771, aged 33. Mrs. Ash and Mrs. Evans were, therefore, first cousins and it is highly probable that Caleb Evans met his bride at Pershore through the good offices of his friends the Rev. and Mrs. John Ash. The wedding may also

have taken place there. A friendship can hardly produce a happier result and it is small wonder that Ivimey remarks, "Dr. Caleb Evans . . . had a very great regard for him (Ash); they had been remarkably intimate for many years."⁶²

If the Worcestershire records so far examined are typical, then it is evident that the 18th century Baptist community, which, like all the Dissenting minorities of the day, suffered many civil disabilities, maintained its identity to a considerable extent by inter-marriage within its own ranks, often crossing several counties to do so. Thus it has already been established that the Baptist families of Rickards-Sitch-Jeffries-Ash-Evans were all related by marriage. Property and income of considerable value were frequently involved in these relationships and it is a tribute to Ash's high standing among Worcestershire Baptists that one of them, Thomas Harris, a rich landowner of Hackett's Broughton (now Broughton Hackett, a small village about five miles from Pershore) asked him to be guardian to his daughter, Eleanor, and trustee of her property.⁶³ This was a common way of preventing a daughter's wealth from passing automatically to her husband on marriage.

On January 28th, 1765, Eleanor Harris, then aged 23, married Richard Hudson (1744-1804) of Pershore. As the bridegroom was an Anglican the ceremony took place in the tiny parish church at Broughton Hackett, where the entry in the marriage register may still be seen, as fresh as when it was first written. John Ash was in attendance and signed as one of the witnesses. Thomas Harris had died before this date and under his will (it is hoped to trace this at Somerset House as it is not at Worcester) the bride was heiress to a comfortable fortune in the form of a number of farms amounting to more than 500 acres.⁶⁴ Her husband was ambitious but of only moderate means which he could not immediately increase from his wife's lands without the approval of Ash. Relations must have been harmonious for a year or two later, presumably at Eleanor Hudson's request, her guardian signed an indenture with Richard Hudson making over the Harris property to him.⁶⁵ The Hudsons then bought Wyke Manor in the village of Wick, which is separated from Pershore by the river and two meadows. The fine Georgian country mansion stands empty now.

Richard Hudson retained his Anglican allegiance for some years, having his children christened in the parish church of St. Andrew, Pershore (the town had two parish churches opposite each other at this period) and some of them buried there. He became a figure of some prominence in the county as a Justice of the Peace and chairman of Quarter Sessions and probably found it an advantage to remain at least an "occasional conformist." This did not prevent him from establishing a family vault in the Baptist burial ground adjoining the church. This was long after the death of John Ash

but his influence cannot be forgotten when the Hudson story is told. One interesting clue remains: in the Ash-Evans *Collection of Hymns* there is one hymn by a "Mr. Hudson, a private Gentleman"—could this be Richard Hudson of Wick?

Another friend, Joshua Thomas,⁶⁶ leaves this brief comment: "I had the happiness to be acquainted with Dr. Ash from the year 1755. He was remarkable for his affable temper and disposition, and was endowed with many excellent talents."

The friends of John Ash could hardly fail to discern, however, that his "affable temper and disposition" were built upon a characteristic firmness and integrity which received forthright expression when necessary. This quality is implied by his sermons but the following letter is a striking example, particularly as it concerns a former friend and fellow-student, who had been considered for the Pershore pastorate before Ash. The letter is undated but speaks for itself. It is copied into a MS. book⁶⁷ belonging to John Collett Ryland and is headed, "The Picture of Ingratitude of John Ash of Pershore, Worcestershire In a Copy of a Letter from him to Mr. Ed. Dilly."

"Sir,

My Friend Mr. Ryland, not to say Mr. Dilly, has used me exceedingly ill. The Edition of the Grammars published by you, was, as he confess'd in the Preface, entirely without my Knowledge. Since that time I have heard not so much as one single Word from him by Way of Excuse or otherwise. But as he then made no Alteration and I knew the Man I gave myself no further concern about it. When I was last in London I thought (sic) indeed to have call (sic)⁶⁸ on you for some Satisfaction but other Engagement prevented me.

I now find by your Letter that a second pirated Edition is in the press with some Alterations, not to say Improvs by Mr. Ryland, which I look upon as a further abuse of that Friendship that once subsisted between us, and such an one as, I do assure you, I will not put up with. If he has given you to understand that I ever gave him any Liberty to alter, publish or do anything with it, he has greatly abused you. I look upon the Copy to be entirely my own Property at my own Disposal. And if the present Edition is printed off without my first seeing the proposed Alterations I will actually redress myself to the utmost of my Power. Mr. Ryland may have made some Improvts but I must be convinced of this and approve of what he has done. And I hope both of you will give me leave and Opportunity to make what Alterations I may think proper in my own Work for my own is shall still be. When that is done, as to Terms, they shall not be unreasonable on the part of

Yr hub Sert.

JOHN ASH.

My Friend Mr. Hurt will be in Town next week and I will desire him to call on you for the Copy of the proposed Alterations."

Ryland was an awesome presence to many of his fellow Baptists and on one famous occasion rebuked William Carey, but to an outraged John Ash he was a literary pirate who had abused a friendship. The letter indicates plainly enough the strong character of its author who was certainly not one to be trifled with when he considered principle to be at stake.

10. Last Days

In the 18th century death often came early even to the strongest. Ash was certainly one of these, but he died when only 55, at the height of his powers. His end seems to have come suddenly but he faced it with the calm and patient consideration that must belong to any man who is capable of producing a dictionary single-handed. On the last Sunday but one before his death he preached as usual,⁶⁹ apparently unaware of his condition, for it was noted later as a signal portent that his last two sermon texts were Amos 4: 12, "Prepare to meet thy God" and Psalm 40: 13, "Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me, O Lord, make haste to help me." When told that he had "the Diabetes" and that it was incurable, he replied simply, "O Lord, Thy Will be done!" and in his methodical way turned to settle his earthly affairs.⁷⁰

His will⁷¹ is dated 8th April, 1779, only two days before his death, which is a further indication of its suddenness. The handwriting of the will is almost certainly that of Ash himself as it is in the same long sloping style as his familiar and distinctive signature. It betrays no hint of infirmity and as the will was proved without difficulty the following September it is evident that Ash knew the necessary legal procedure in a field that is full of snares for the amateur. His witnesses were John Haydon, the elderly minister of Westmancote (about six miles from Pershore—it is a small village) who was to be Ash's successor at Pershore, Benjamin Bedford, a notable member of the church at Pershore, and Samuel Gibbons, of whom nothing further is known.

The main provisions of the will have already been described, but some interesting details remain. Ash took the unusual step of making his wife and eldest daughter, Eliza, the executrices of his will, which was an eloquent compliment to their ability and good sense in what was very much a man's world. His son, Samuel, presumably the eldest boy, was perhaps married or otherwise independent, for he was to receive nothing immediately, but on his mother's decease the houses were to be his. The shop was to be kept in business for Joseph who was under age. For the rest, "the whole of my Effects not before disposed of my Stock in Trade Book Debts

Household Furniture Chyna Plate Linnen and whatsoever I am possessed of" were to be equally divided between his wife, four daughters and son, Joseph. Elizabeth Ash survived her husband by several years for it is known that she lived once again in one of the Rickards houses in the High Street from 1785 to 1788.⁷²

The church at Pershore where Ash spent his whole ministerial life was left at the end of his ministry not large, but reasonably secure. He had found it with a membership of 48 and received in 90 new members during his ministry so that by 1778 the church could claim a membership of 79. The following year, however, seventeen of these were dismissed to form a church in a neighbouring village so that at the time of Ash's death the membership was reduced to 58.⁷³ It is interesting to notice that the village in question was Westmancote, on the side of Bredon Hill. Its association with Pershore Baptist Church was then already over a century old for the Rickards family came from there originally and the Church Wardens' Presentments⁷⁴ of the last quarter of the 17th century indicate that there was a lively Baptist community in the village. Ivimey gives an account of the church as from 1769.⁷⁵

After so long a ministry the congregation at Pershore enjoyed many ties of affection with their minister and were proud of his many achievements, for his name was known and honoured far beyond the bounds of the town and of the Baptist denomination: they "thought themselves equally honoured and happy in their connection with him as their friend and pastor."

So said Caleb Evans in the funeral sermon preached for his old friend on the text of Acts 20: 37 and 38—Paul's farewell to the Elders of Ephesus. The burial was in the church itself for the tombstone may still be seen in the floor of the left-hand aisle. The stone is polished and of a far more durable quality than any of the others to be seen in the church or burial ground and hence is well preserved. The wording expresses the feelings of the congregation for their late minister and goes beyond the merely conventional.

In Memory of
THE REVEREND JOHN ASH LLD.

He lived highly esteemed and honoured by the World
For his great Abilities and learned Publications
Justly beloved by all that knew him for his
Integrity Piety Benevolence
And many other Virtues
Peculiarly endeared to the Christian society of this Place
In the Character of a faithful and affectionate Pastor
For more than twenty eight Years.

He died in the Meridian of his Fame
 And usefulness both as an Author and a Minister
 On the 10th Day of April 1779

Aged 55

Deeply Lamented.

To perpetuate the Remembrance of the many Excellencies
 Of so great and good a Man
 His much afflicted Congregation
 Have here placed this humble Monument
 Sorrowing . . . that in this World
 They shall see him no more.

The last two lines are an echo of Evans' funeral text and we may conjecture that he advised on the wording of the whole memorial.

11. Conclusion

If today John Ash has been largely forgotten by the denomination he served so well, it should at least be remembered that in his own generation, especially in literary circles, his was a respected name, and he was familiar both with London, where his publishers were, and with Bristol, where many Baptist friends welcomed him. Several of his works, notably the Dictionary, the English Grammar and the Hymn Collection were still being reprinted years after his death. As late as 1801, in the 8th edition of the Hymn Collection, Isaac James could say of Ash, "his 'Grammatical Institutes' are well known throughout the Nation." *The Gentleman's Magazine* obituary spoke of his "celebrated English Grammar" and ranked its author as "an eminent Dissenting Minister."

Ash does not appear to have been an original scholar—few men are, but the Georgian age saw the rise of the ordering and cataloguing of knowledge in dictionaries and similar works of reference which were an essential foundation to the development of our own contemporary critical-analytical approach, and to this work John Ash bent his talents as a cultured man of his time. It is hoped, however, that the evidence offered in this account presents far more than a remote academic figure. We shall best honour him as an honest, educated, well-loved Baptist minister who fully merited the tribute of his friend, Caleb Evans, "A man of a clearer head, a sounder heart, or of more amiable, steady, happy temper the world hath seldom seen."

NOTES

¹ J. Ash and C. Evans, *A Collection of Hymns adapted to Public Worship*, 8th ed., edited by Isaac James, Bristol, 1801. See the Advertisement which follows the Preface (pages not numbered). In this Advertisement James gives a brief biography of Ash and Evans.

² Walter Wilson MSS., *An Account of Various Congregations in England Among the Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists*. Vol. iv. Pershore is No. 10 of the fifty-one included here. The Walter Wilson MSS. are to be found in Dr. Williams's Library, London.

³ Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, Vol. 4, London, 1830, p. 561.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ So Dr. E. J. Tongue, former librarian of Bristol Baptist College, in a personal letter of 8th Sept., 1958, apparently quoting a college list of former students.

⁶ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 561.

⁷ From a funeral sermon for John Ash by Caleb Evans, April, 1779, on the text *Acts* 20: 37-38. Ivimey (*op. cit.*, p. 562) quotes part and the full sermon is in a MS. volume of sermons in the library at Baptist Church House.

⁸ In a personal letter of 18th Aug., 1960.

⁹ See n.1 above.

¹⁰ See introduction of *A Charge and Sermon delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Mr. Caleb Evans, August 18, 1767, in Broad Mead, Bristol* (published at Bristol by S. Farley), in a volume of sermons in Bristol College library, preached by and on behalf of Caleb Evans. See also Ivimey, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-5.

¹¹ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 461.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 267.

¹³ Walter Wilson MS., *Biographical Collections*, Vol. I, p. 37. See n.2 above.

¹⁴ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 609.

¹⁵ See *The Money Book* of Samuel Rickards the Younger, an item in the Rickards Family Papers to which I have had access by courtesy of Capt. E. Rickards, whose help and kindness I gratefully acknowledge.

¹⁶ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 561.

¹⁷ See n.15 above.

¹⁸ See n.13 above.

¹⁹ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 560.

²⁰ The deeds of Pershore Baptist Church.

²¹ The will is among the Rickards Family Papers.

²² See n.15 above.

²³ Rickards Family Papers.

²⁴ MS. in the writer's possession, a gift from Capt. E. Rickards.

²⁵ MS. in the writer's possession.

²⁶ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 555.

²⁷ The will of John Ash in the Worcs. Archive Office, the assistance of whose staff is greatly acknowledged.

²⁸ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 562.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 556ff.

³¹ From a thesis on Doddridge by the late Rev. F. W. P. Harris, to which I have had access by courtesy of Mr. F. Marshall of Birmingham.

³² Walter Wilson MSS. See n.2 above.

³³ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, pp. 560-1.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 557.

³⁵ In the Worcs. Archive Office.

³⁶ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 559.

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 560-1.

³⁸ Walter Wilson MSS. See n.2 above.

³⁹ See n.37.

⁴⁰ Rickards Family Papers.

⁴¹ Wilson, see n.2.

- 42 Rickards Family Papers.
 43 Worcs. Archive Office.
 44 *ibid.*
 45 *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. vi. (1932-3), p. 85.
 46 See n.7 above.
 47 Ed. F. W. Bateson, *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1940), p. 932.
 48 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1947), p. 140.
 49 Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 562.
 50 *ibid.*
 51 *ibid.*
 52 *A Sermon occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Sarah Evans, wife of The Rev. Caleb Evans of Bristol, Who died November 7, 1771. . . with the Oration delivered at her Interment.* Printed and published at Bristol by W. Pine. It is bound in the same volume as that referred to in n.10 above.
 53 In Bristol College library, bound in a volume with sermons by other ministers.
 54 MS. in Bristol College library.
 55 See n.7 above.
 56 *ibid.*
 57 *ibid.* and Ivimey, *op. cit.*, pp. 310ff.
 58 See n.7 above.
 59 Ivimey, *op. cit.*, pp. 274ff.
 60 See the Advertisement of *A Charge and Sermon* referred to in n.10 above.
 61 Rickards Family Papers.
 62 *op. cit.*, p. 561.
 63 C. E. M. Hudson, *The Manors of Wike Burnell and Wyke Waryn in the County of Worcester*, Oxford, 1901. The book might better be described as the Hudson family history.
 64 *ibid.*
 65 *ibid.*
 66 Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 561.
 67 In Bristol College library in a MS. book of J. C. Ryland. Again, this is a reference which I owe to the kindness of Dr. Tongue.
 68 Are this and the previous (*sic*) Ryland's comment?
 69 Walter Wilson MSS. See n.2 above.
 70 By Caleb Evans, see n.7 above.
 71 Worcs. Archive Office.
 72 Rickards Family Papers.
 73 Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 561.
 74 Worcs. Archive Office
 75 *op. cit.*, p. 549.
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