

The Diaries of Joseph Ash

BAPTIST historians have never had any large number of old diaries to draw upon. Yet the information which diaries provide is of great importance and may save a historian from many a false statement and unfounded generalisation. Some years ago, as recorded in two articles in the *Baptist Quarterly* (XIII, pp. 253 f., pp. 303 f.), there came to light a number of the diaries of John Dyer, the first full-time secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society. The chance sight of the catalogue of a second-hand bookseller in Wells, Somerset, enabled me to secure for the library of the Baptist Union seven little leather-bound volumes containing diary notes made between 1797 and 1823 by Joseph Ash, of Bristol, together with a small note-book in which are the rough drafts of letters he wrote in 1792 and 1793 from Birmingham and in 1794 and 1796 from Bristol. This material also has much that is of interest to the B.M.S. but its range is far wider than that. The circle from which Ash came and in which he moved, as well as a number of the events he mentions, make his pages of considerable historical value.

The seven volumes cover the following dates: (1) 1st Jan.-10th Sept. 1797; (2) 11th Sept. 1797-20th Aug. 1798; (3) 21st Aug. 1798-30th Sept. 1799; (4) 1st Oct. 1799-31st Dec. 1800; (5) 1st Jan. 1801-15th July 1802; (6) 17th March 1803-31st Dec. 1815; (7) 1st Jan. 1816-20th May 1823.

As is usual with most diarists, the entries become briefer and more sporadic as the years pass, though in Ash's case some of the most interesting occur in the later volumes. There are a number of expressions of regret, particularly in the middle years, that he had not made more regular and fuller notes. The central interest and purpose of the diary were the recording of the writer's religious feelings and activities. Joseph Ash was a typical product of the evangelical piety of his day, introspective and frequently depressed. On 1st January, 1797, as he records twelve years later, he made a written covenant with God and it was this that led to the starting of the diary. In 1809 he has to lament "a disturbed lukewarm uncomfortable state of mind . . . doubts and fears, no solid peace" and, besides general references in the years that follow to sinfulness, there are some which are more specific but conceal a particular misdemeanour of which he was ashamed. Many of the entries made when Ash was in middle-age, show a greater serenity and stability, but the last of the volumes shows him disappointed and uneasy.

Joseph Ash was the son of Dr. John Ash, Baptist minister in Pershore from 1748 until his death in 1779.¹ Dr. Ash had studied at the Bristol Baptist Academy under the Rev. Bernard Foskett and is famed for his collaboration with Dr. Caleb Evans in the editing of one of the earliest of Baptist hymnbooks. Ash's eldest daughter, Anne—our Joseph's sister—married Joshua Hopkins (died 1798), of Alcester, and their daughter, Sarah, became in 1791 wife of Samuel Pearce, the young Birmingham pastor, who played so vital a part in the launching of the B.M.S. Joseph Ash came to look upon Pearce, who was only five years his senior, as his spiritual father.

These were Ash's roots. In Bristol he became closely associated with the Broadmead Church. In later life he lived for a time in Horsley and moved into the Nailsworth-Shortwood circle. His eldest daughter, Ann, married Joseph Baynes, who in 1820 began a notable ministry of forty years in Wellington, Somerset. Joseph and Ann Baynes had a remarkable family of three daughters and eight sons. Of the latter, one was T. S. Baynes a Professor of Philosophy; another became an Anglican Canon; a third was Alfred Henry Baynes, for many years regarded as the "father" of the Congo mission. Joseph Ash may thus be regarded as a vital personal link in the history of the Baptist denomination from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

A sister, Sally, was already in Bristol, when Joseph arrived there in 1794 as a young man just under twenty-three years of age. By 1796 he was courting Susanna Day, whose mother had a business in Bridge Street. In February of that year Susanna's sister, Mary, married a Mr. Skone in St. Peter's church. Their home was in Shepton Mallet, as a reference in the diary for November 1803 indicates.² Joseph's wedding took place on 24th August, 1797 and his record of it is as follows:—

"Thursday, Morn'g about $\frac{1}{4}$ past 8 O'clock at St. Peter's Church I was married to Susanna Day by Revd. Mr. Day, her brother—after which we breakfasted at Mrs. Day's with a party of our friends. We dined and drank tea at Mr. Blackbarrow's at Towerhead, Supt at Mrs. Day's and slept in Ellbroad Street. We desire with gratitude to acknowledge the Loving kindness of our God in his dealing with us from the commencement of our acquaintance and in our compleat union this day which we desire to record as the most happy, satisfactory and comfortable we ever spent."

The marriage was a happy one but it lasted less than seventeen years and for a considerable part of it Susanna Ash suffered much ill-health. They had eight children. A daughter, Ann (later Mrs. Joseph Baynes), was born in May, 1798, and her father records that in December of that year Dr. Ryland took tea in the home "and dedicated our first-born by reading Psalm 116 and Colossians 3 cha: beginning at the 12 verse and by prayer". A second daughter, Elizabeth, was born in April 1800. A year later both these children were inoculated for smallpox. In September 1801 Ann had scarlet

fever but fortunately recovered. A third daughter, born in February 1802, developed smallpox when only eighteen months old, while Elizabeth had trouble with her feet for which the doctor recommended sea-bathing at Weston-super-Mare. Yet another daughter, Joanna, was born in 1807 but died in 1815 not long after her mother. A son, John, born in April 1809, died fourteen months later. Another son was born in June 1811, though only at great cost to the mother. This kind of family story was no unusual one at the time, nor throughout the nineteenth century.

When Joseph first arrived in Bristol he went on Sundays to the Tabernacle and only occasionally to Broadmead. Even then, however, he frequently attended three services, though reproaching himself for being often "stupid, drowsy and inattentive". He speaks in 1797 of "that dear man of God, Revd. Samuel Pearce" and records that it was under his ministry "about the year of 1791" that the Holy Spirit put him in possession of "the ONE THING NEEDFUL (which is the highest blessing man can possess)". On 12th August 1798 to his great delight he heard Pearce preach in Broadmead in the morning, at the Pithay chapel in the afternoon and at Broadmead again in the evening and notes that "Mr. & Mrs. Pearce drank tea with us". Ash was again among his hearers when Pearce preached the following evening at Castle Green. Two days later Ash heard of the death of Joshua Hopkins and at once hastened to his sister in Alcester, meeting Pearce once more at the time of his brother-in-law's funeral.

The dread scourge of consumption, from which Pearce died, was already at work. In March 1799 he stayed in Bristol for a few days on his way to Plymouth, hoping for benefit from his native air, and Ash saw him. In July, Pearce, eager to get back home, reached Bristol again "so ill not able to speak," notes Ash in his diary, "he shook hands and smiled in which methinks I saw not only the friend but the Christian." Three months later Pearce died. The news reached Ash on Sunday, October 13th. He had attended the early morning prayer meeting at Broadmead, had heard Dr. Ryland preach at the morning service, had been at the Lord's Supper in the afternoon and had heard Robert Hall in the evening. It was a day, he said, of "mingled mourning and joy".

It was perhaps the renewed contacts with Pearce in 1798 which led Joseph Ash and his wife to apply for membership at Broadmead. In January 1799 he, his wife and his sister-in-law appeared before the Church, as was the custom of the time. Ash thanks God for enabling them "to give such an account of ourselves as to induce thy People to accept of us as candidates for that ordinance which they and we think the most scriptural method of making a Profession of Religion and uniting in Church fellowship." Their baptism and that of eight others took place on Thursday 14th March, 1799, and Ash records the event thus:

"The public service on this occasion was conducted in the following manner. Dr. Ryland read the 3rd Chapter of Matthew and from the 1st to the 19th verse of the 6th Chapter of Romans.

Preached from Acts 10. 47, and 48. While the Dr. and the candidates were preparing for the water Mr. Sharp gave out a hymn and prayed. . . . It was a solemn and pleasant time and I trust the great Head of the Church was with us."

The same afternoon Dr. Ryland took tea with them and Ash heard him "speak over the grave of an aged member of the Church". In the evening Ash attended the monthly lecture at the Pithay Chapel.

Ten years later, his eldest daughter Ann, though she was then only eleven years old, came under conviction of sin. The manner in which the father records this is worth quoting in full:

"Wednesday, 5th July 1809. This day have discovered that Ann my eldest daughter is under considerable impression of mind; late this evening her little heart was so full that she could no longer conceal the effect. On retiring to bed she burst out in terror saying 'I am afraid I shall die tonight and not go to heaven!' After talking with her for some considerable time her mind became more composed and she went to bed but could not settle herself to sleep for a long while. She had attended Tabernacle this evening. Mr. Jones of London preached, the sermon very much affected her. This and several other sermons she had heard from him had considerably impressed her mind. A reflection on these in connection with some other circumstances produced the above effect. O Lord, what an honour conferred on so unworthy a creature as I am that a child of mine should so early be impressed with divine things and a concern for her soul. Oh! that it may be abiding and effectual and prove to be thine own work. Amen.

Thursday. Today my dear Ann was engaged to go with her grandmother and a few friends to spend the day at Towerhead. As I conducted her to her grandmother's early in the morning I asked her a few questions relative to what had taken place last evening. Her mind though calm and considerably impressed, particularly about prayer. She said, 'I am afraid I have never prayed, though I have done more than say my prayers,' that is, she had not only repeated the form of prayers she had learnt, but made some additions of her own. I asked her what induced her to do so and how long she had been in that habit. She answered 'When I was in Worcestershire last Summer I thought I ought to pray for you and my mother'. That was not included in the form she had learnt. I then observed 'It was feeling that you wanted something more than the form you was accustomed to use that induced you to make some addition to it agreeable to your feelings at the time'. She said 'Yes, and this morning I have laid my form aside.' I made a few observations on the nature and use of Prayer, by which time we arrived at the house and found the coach in waiting."

More than four years elapsed before Ann was encouraged to apply for Church Membership. But under Tuesday 21st September, 1813, this entry occurs:

“After the public service the members of the Church having withdrawn into the vestry my daughter, Ann and two other young persons delivered an account of the Lord’s dealings with them. And having given a satisfactory evidence of their faith in Christ were received as Candidates for baptism and membership. That three so young should declare themselves on the Lord’s side is surely a token for good . . . That thou, O my God should’st honor one *so truly unworthy as I am* by marking my child, my eldest child, for thine own, ought and I trust has excited in my heart true gratitude and joy, never to be forgotten.”

Three years later, in April 1816, Elizabeth and five others came before the Church and, on 5th May, there was a baptismal service at which eighteen persons were baptized, including a daughter of Dr. Ryland, as well as Elizabeth.

Susanna Ash had died in January 1814. Three pages of the diary are occupied with an account of her last hours. Her clergyman brother, Mr. Sibree of the Tabernacle and Dr. Ryland all visited her and the children were brought to her bedside to say farewell. She was only 38 years old. Her husband expresses gratitude that she had finally “an easy dismissal from a life of pain and sorrow to a life of blessedness and joy.” On the following Sunday two memorial sermons were preached, one at Broadmead by Dr. Ryland in the morning, one at the Tabernacle by Mr. Sibree. Thereafter, throughout the period covered by these diaries, Joseph Ash was a widower.

He was always keenly interested in the developing work of the B.M.S. and the diary contains a number of references to persons and events connected therewith.

Andrew Fuller visited Bristol at Easter time in 1801. On the Saturday, “the market was this day interrupted,” writes Ash, “by the populace attempting to lower the price of provisions”. Fuller preached in Broadmead on the Sunday both morning and evening and Dr. Ryland in the afternoon. It is to be noted that none of the sermons had any special reference to the Resurrection and that that same year Ash was at business as usual on Christmas Day.³ On the following Sunday he travelled forty miles by stage coach to Taunton but was glad that until it was nearly dark he was alone and so able to read his Bible. On the Monday evening of his 1801 visit to Bristol, Fuller spoke at the prayer meeting and on the Tuesday preached at an evening service. Four months later, early in August, Dr. Ryland was able to read to a meeting in Broadmead letters telling of the first baptisms in India.

At a designation of missionaries in Broadmead on 1st December, 1803, Sutcliff, Fuller and Winterbotham shared the service with Dr. Ryland. “Three of the missionaries and two of their wives slept with me” says Ash. “The morning service was the most solemn and interesting I ever witnessed.” Fuller he heard again in Bristol in 1812, while in August 1813 he refers to Dr. Ryland reading letters from Carey at the close of a morning service. In May 1815 the first secretary of the B.M.S. died and the following Sunday, Ash was

present at Broadmead to hear Dr. Ryland's tribute to his friend. Two months later Robert Hall preached particularly eloquent sermons on behalf of the B.M.S. and the collection amounted to £120. In November of the same year Lee Compere was valedicted from Broadmead for service in Jamaica. The following day Joseph Ash sailed down the river with the missionary party which included Mr. Thurston, a Sunday School Superintendent, who had been a valued family servant in the Ash household. Finally, in a specially notable year so far as missionary matters were concerned, Ash recorded the sending out of T. Griffiths and his wife to Ceylon. In July 1819 he was able to hear William Ward on furlough from Serampore, but makes no special comment on the service. In February 1820, however, Ward was back in Bristol and preached an impressive sermon on three recently deceased missionaries—Kitching, Randall, and Wheelock—all of whom had been in Jamaica. Two years later, under date of January 1821, Ash records: "Tuesday, Mrs. Marshman from India with two daughters and a son took tea with us in Norfolk Street after which we attended conference."

There are also references to meetings of the Western Association in 1802 and 1814. On the first occasion William Steadman (later the first principal of the Horton Academy) and John Saffery of Salisbury, were the special preachers. There were 110 ministers and messengers present at dinner and over 80 at supper. In 1814 Saffery was again a preacher, together with Isaiah Birt of Plymouth.

Joseph Ash was in the linen trade. This involved him in frequent lengthy journeys in the West Country. From 1801 to 1820 he was in partnership with two brothers named Heineman. Those who think our weather has deteriorated may note that on 10th May 1797 (his birthday), Ash "rode in quite tremendous weather (from Honiton) to Wellington before breakfast, the wind blowing very strong, with hard rain, sleet and snow". After the dissolution of his partnership, Ash moved out to Horsley and there opened a shop of some kind. By then entries in the diary are few and far between.

There are a number of scattered references to public events. In October 1798, for example, there were special illuminations in Bristol to celebrate Nelson's victory over the French fleet in Aboukir Bay. In October 1801 there were illuminations to mark the conclusion of peace with France, though this proved only temporary. Under Tuesday 21st June 1814, Ash writes:—

"Yesterday the proclamation of Peace with France was made in the usual form in London, and this day I witnessed the largest concourse of people I almost ever saw assembled together to welcome the arrival of the Mail from London as bringing an account of the transactions of yesterday in regard to the blessing of Peace. The Mail met with such detention by the public expression of congratulation in the different towns it passed through that it did not arrive at the Bush Inn till $\frac{1}{2}$ past 3^O clock. Four hours and a half after its regular time."

The end of the Hundred Days leading up to the Battle of Waterloo

is more laconically recorded; "This day arrived the news of Bonaparte's surrender to the English. Is his work done? He has been a stubborn foe". The victor of Waterloo was in Bristol a year later. "July 27th 1816 Saturday, Lord Wellington having accepted the invitation of the Corporation of this city to dinner this day made his entry about half past 3'O clock through a grand Arch erected for the purpose near the top of Park Street."

In January 1820 Ash visited London, the visit being thus recorded:
 "Wednesday, Morn'g. 6'O clock set off for London by the Regulation Coach, arrived at Brother Smith's a little after 10 the same evening. A kind providence has granted me safety and comfort by the way. The Country covered with snow and severe frost.
 Thursday. Accompanied by my daughter Jane went to Battersea. After dinner return to London leaving Jane there.
 Friday. Went to Battersea confer'd with Mr. and Mrs. Dyer about my daughter Susan and made an arrangement with them. After dinner called on Hannah Pearce and Jane and myself returned to London.
 Saturday. Called on Mr. Wilkes and dined and took tea in Margaret Street. Went to Battersea to sleep.
 Sunday. Heard Mr. Hughes preach on the subject of Christian's Warfare. Dined at Mr. Dyer's. Returned to Margaret Street to tea. Went to Tottenham Court Chapel and heard Mr. Cook of Maidenhead preach. . . .
 Monday. Afternoon $\frac{1}{2}$ pt. 4'O clock left London by the Regent Coach."

Dyer was the recently appointed Secretary of the B.M.S. Mr. Hughes, in addition to his pastorate in Battersea, was Secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Hannah Pearce was probably Samuel's daughter, Anna, then twenty-five years old. She went in 1822 to India and there married Carey's youngest son, Jonathan.

A few days after his return to Bristol, Joseph Ash notes the death of the Duke of Kent, the King's fourth son and the father of the future Queen Victoria. Five days later George III himself passed away, "The extraordinary and truly solemn circumstance of Prince and King, Father and Son, lying dead at the same time was pathetically noticed" at the afternoon service in Broadmead. A few days later this entry occurs:

"Thursday. Witnessed the Ceremony of Proclaiming King George IV. From the State of his majesty's health and constitution could not even amidst the shew and noise of the occasion suppress the suggestion that this might and most likely would be a short reign and that it might be necessary very soon to perform this ceremony again.

This is a memorable day not only on this account but to me especially by an occurrence in the evening, viz. I fell into a particular sin. But I hope I feel thankful that it was followed by remorse and dismay of soul which I pray may under a divine influence be effectual to prevent a recurrence of it and while I

wage *War* with this besetting *sin* and every other may I have grace given me to maintain the fight and conquer through Christ the captain of Salvation. Amen."

This may well bring these extracts to a close. Joseph Ash was about to dissolve his business partnership and move to Horsley. His daughter, Ann, was already married to Joseph Baynes and lived at Tickmore End. A grand-daughter was born to him in February 1820 and the following autumn the Baynes family moved to Wellington. Joseph Ash had already made the acquaintance of the Overburys of Nailsworth, and had been a frequent visitor in their home, before himself moving to Horsley with his daughter Elizabeth. He was warmly welcomed into the Nailsworth-Shortwood circle and quickly showed his appreciation of it. While stock-taking in January 1822 he broke his shin and because, as he says, "a prisoner of providence", but was soon about again and able to sow beans, peas, parsnips and potatoes in his garden. In April of that year he was contemplating removal from Horsley and appears to have returned to Bristol with his daughter. The final entries in the last of the seven volumes are in a strain very similar to the last one quoted. He remained constant in his church attendance and even had, in May 1823, "private conversation" with Dr. Ryland, but he remained dissatisfied with himself and talked about a besetting sin, on the nature of which it would be idle as well as wrong to speculate. At least he deserves credit for the frank mention of weaknesses.

Whatever Joseph Ash's failings may have been we have every reason for gratitude to him for the help he left us for the difficult task of picturing what life was really like in Baptist circles a century and a half ago.

NOTES

¹ See G. F. Nuttall, "John Ash and the Pershore Church: Additional Notes" in *Baptist Quarterly*, XXII, No. 5 (January 1968), pp. 271 ff.

² Skone died in January, 1815.

³ J. G. Fuller, *The Rise and Progress of Dissent in Bristol*, 1840, p. 15, records of Mrs. Dorothy Kelly (later the wife of the Rev. Mr. Hazard) that "She kept a shop in High Street; where, on the day on which high mass was offered to Christ in the Church of Rome—the day which even Protestants observed as *Christ's mass* (Christmas) day—she would sit, sewing, with her shop door open, as a witness for God, in the midst of the city, and in the sight of all the passengers; and this, in those days of thick darkness and superstition, when all descriptions of people, high and low, rich and poor, venerated that day above all others."

ERNEST A. PAYNE.