Writing the History of a Local Baptist Church*

IN his book, *The Roots of Experience,* R. C. Walton writes this about the task of the historian:

> "History deals with unrepeatable events; it is the resurrection of that which happened once . . . (but) whether the historian publishes his results in a journal or writes a book, he is faced by the problem of interpretation. Historical writing is never merely the setting down of a number of isolated facts; to a greater or a lesser degree it is an attempt to say what the facts mean. If the events are not interpreted then the author is not writing history but compiling a chronicle." (p. 45).

It is sadly the case that local church histories are all too often the chronicles of ministers who came and went, of Sunday School Superintendents who never went until the Lord called them home, and of those who brewed tea at the Anniversary year after year. The fact that the Sunday School Superintendent was also the local mill-owner who throve on sweated labour, and fought the workers' union at every turn, is tactfully omitted as an irrelevance.

Good local church histories should give a picture of the church members' whole life in their total communities. It should be concerned with the members primarily, and only then with ministers, because the views of the minister were by no means those held by the membership as a whole, enlightened though his views may have been.

The basic requirement for the writing of such history is the adequate development of the "collect and select" technique. The collection of material and where to find it is the most important part of the process. But once it has all been collected, then its arrangement and the selection of the significant material is the point when mere chronicling of material gives way to interpretation and valid history.

1. *The Collection of material.*

To gain some awareness of the significance of the local material you collect you must *first make sure you have a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the historical background of your subject.* To write about Baptists in North-East Lancashire, without having first realised how the industrial revolution took place, in relation to the cotton trade especially, would be disastrous. However, do not become "hypnotised by a sense of your own ignorance" or else you will never start. In understanding the background of the city of Bristol in the 17th century, I read a 500 page year by year chronicle of events compiled by John Latimer. From it I gleaned a tremendous amount of knowledge, and also the historical perspective against which to set

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the *Broadmead Records*. This with a general outline of the religious and political development during the 17th century in England, gave me an adequate initial perspective.

Second, read the primary documents relating to the history of the church, in order. This will mean gathering together minute books of the church, the original trust deeds, minute books of any organisations, and anything else that is to hand in the dusty Sunday School cupboard that you have to search through! Sometimes, if the material is previous to 1830 there will be birth and burial registers, as well as a book in which the members names are written on admission to the Church. Reading this material will give you information concerning the people who have been associated with the Church, and a picture of its inner life. With this working knowledge of the history of the Church undertake three projects.

First, *make a card index of all the persons* whose names are mentioned in these documents. Number the minute books consecutively, and also number the pages if not already done, so that there is an adequate reference system. On to the card note every reference to the person, and also any other information from other sources, primary or secondary, which relates to the person. The *Broadmead Records* required a collection of nearly 1500 cards to cover all the references to people.

Second, *make a card index of all the places* mentioned, and which will give a geographical dimension to the history of the church. It is amazing how far reaching was Broadsmead, Bristol, its members coming from a 25 mile radius, but all linked into the congregation for worship. It gives a fresh dimension to the history when it is worked out on a map.

Third, *get a folder, and into it place all other primary documents, such as letters, or trust deeds, or copies of these, local newspaper cuttings, church magazines, cuttings from religious weeklies, like the Baptist Times, etc., and arrange them in chronological order.* Sometimes a church keeps a "cuttings" book which is invaluable for this kind of thing. Sometimes you have to *make* one by copying extracts from local newspapers!

This arduous preparation is the only adequate foundation upon which to explore the other source material available.

Where will we find other primary material for the history of the local Church? I shall answer this by giving some examples of where I have found some of this evidence, in my writing about Baptists in Rossendale, Lancashire, and in seventeenth century Bristol.

Somebody else may well have been attempting to write a history of the church previously. Do not begin with these but with the actual documents you have. Other histories are very helpful but do not turn to them for help until this point.

Broadmead has two previous historians. In 1847 E. B. Underhill published the original records for the Hanserd Knollys Society, in

which he set out the text as written by Terrill, and interspersed it with all the letters and other documents which were then in the Broadmead archives. The whole thing took 520 pages. In 1865, Nathaniel Haycroft produced an edition for the Bunyan Library, which reproduced the text "with scrupulous exactness", giving a complete orthographic transcript of the MS with no intrusions into the text, and the whole thing only needed 281 pages.

A comparison of the texts shows many additions by Underhill, taken from lists of church members and the burial register, which are not in Haycroft. A comparison of Haycroft with the original shows that his text is the accurate and trustworthy one.

Both these editions have footnotes which provide further information about the more eminent members, especially the ministers, of Broadmead, and other local dissenters. But it is important to realise that these sometimes follow what others have said, without checking it. This is very dangerous.

Underhill produces a copy of the licence given to Thomas Hardcastle to preach at Bitton, in Gloucestershire, which describes Hardcastle as "of the persuasion commonly called baptized". However a note on p. 218 tells us that the original is lost, and this copy was made by Isaac James. Haycroft repeats this footnote on pp. 290-1. However John Stanley, writing about dissenters in 1912, quotes the licence as authorising Hardcastle as a "Presbyterian", but explains it as a case of "official slipshod", knowing Hardcastle's attachment to Broadmead. Consulting the extracts made by G. L. Turner from the original records we discover that when he was ejected from Braham in Yorkshire, Hardcastle was reckoned a Presbyterian; and when the licence was issued he was classed as a Presbyterian and not as a Baptist. There is good internal evidence for thinking Arlington's clerk was correct, and this was not official slipshod. Beware of following, without checking, the statements of other workers in your field before you.

Both Underhill and Haycroft acknowledge continually the help they have received from one Isaac James. James was a bookseller in Wine Street, Bristol, a former pupil of Bristol College, and a lecturer in the College for several years in the classics. His grandfather was Philip James, a doctor and Baptist pastor in Swansea, Warwick, Coventry and Hemel Hempstead. His father was Samuel James, who married Mary Needham, the daughter of the ageing pastor of Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, Hitchin, and succeeded his father-in-law as minister there. Isaac was the youngest of Samuel's eleven children, born in 1759. He married Jane Hall of Arnesby, the sister of Robert Hall, Junior. His sister Mary married George Burder, founder of the British and Foreign Bible Society; and another sister, Anna, married William Button, publisher and pastor of Dean Street Baptist Church, Southwark. I hope this short family history illustrates the worth of putting members in their context if at all possible.

Isaac James was a chronicler rather than an historian. He never got

to the stage of publishing. But among his works are two folio volumes in Bristol College library, which contain a history of Dissent in every county in England, much of it gleaned from the Evans and Thomson MSS in Dr. Williams's Library in London. He also wrote an abridgment of the *Broadmead Records*, and added to it extensively from other local sources much that is relevant to a history of the Broadmead Church and to the history of dissent in Bristol. For example he extracted items from the original minute book of the Pithay Baptist Church, giving details of the 17th century membership and life of the church. These no longer exist and the details can only be found now in James's transcript. He collected information regarding Robert Bodenham from a now non-existent MS history of Broadmead made by Dr. Evans, at the close of the 18th century. Other histories have much to offer if used carefully.

The city Archive Office in Bristol was very helpful when I started work on the *Broadmead Records*. They advised me to read John Latimer's *Annals of Bristol in 17th century*, and made me aware of the other materials available of which the following have been of significance.

(i) *Quarter Sessions records*. For the 17th century, the Quarter Sessions records are complete, and fortunately written in English, which means that here I discovered a wealth of local material about the persecutions of the dissenters, and could check Terrill's accuracy against the Court proceedings.

In October 1670 we find Thomas Ellis, with four others fined for attending a conventicle. This matter is mentioned under the same date on pp. 253-4 (Underhill) of the *Records*. But here we learn something else: of the fine imposed, 30s. was delivered to the Sheriff for the King, 30s. was delivered to Sir Robert Yeomans for the informer, and 25s. was given to the poor of the St. James' parish, in which the conventicle took place. This was why under the Second Conventicle Act informing was so profitable, both for individual informers and for parish relief.

(ii) *Deposition Books*. These were sworn statements made by people to be used as evidence. There are several of these for Bristol in the 17th century, some of them published by the Bristol Record Society. Among them we find one dated July 22nd 1654 in which "William Browning, mariner, Master of the Golden Lion, Bristol" made a deposition concerning "dues paid on a cargo of corn to be sold in Lisbon for salt and oil on behalf of Major Samuell Clarke and his brother Joseph", both of whom were closely connected with Broadmead.

(iii) *The Record Society*. In the local office were the publications of the Bristol Record Society, with many documents relative to the 17th century, a valuable introduction, notes about the people mentioned, and a good index. Looking through the index, one could pick out the names of people connected with Broadmead who are also mentioned in these other Records. In the Merchant Venturer's Society of Bristol, I discovered that John Ewins, the son of a former pastor of

Broadmead, was admitted as a member of the M.V.S. in 1677. He is one of several from Broadmead who appear in the records of that Society.

(iv) Adopting the same technique of consulting first the index, I discovered also many interesting leads among the publications of the *Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society.* I discovered one article which listed all those who possessed arms the year following the Rye House Plot of 1683. The paper had been discovered among the papers of the Earl of Shaftesbury, and in 1684 the King commanded the authorities to search the houses of these men to see what arms they possessed. Until I read this article I had been quite convinced that the only ones actively associated in the support of the Duke of Monmouth had been the Baptists at the Pithay, under the leadership of the Giffords. But here were listed prominent men in the Broadmead church, some of them noted as having a considerable supply of arms, and as being supporters of Monmouth previously.

(v) *The Local Library.* The central reference library in Bristol, in common with many other older libraries, is the repository of many documents relating to the local history of the city, and in particular to many of the members of Broadmead congregation in the 17th century. Its most useful aspect is a well-documented card index system. When dealing with the later history of Broadmead, its collection of local newspapers should prove invaluable in building up the background of the church within the life of the City.

(vi) *The Local Museum.* Bristol has among its treasures a map by James Millerd of the city of Bristol in 1673. Not only that, they reproduced a modern print of it for only 2/6d. This, together with the local Saxby maps of the counties of Somerset and Gloucestershire, gives the geographical clues to many place names.

(vii) *Parish Records* are another source of information which prove useful. There is also in Bristol a Cathedral Church, which dates back to the 17th century, and there are diocesan records of ecclesiastical courts, and also lists of visitations made by the Bishop at various times. These are largely in ecclesiastical Latin, and take time to decipher, but this is by no means impossible.

These then are some of the local records available which ought to be consulted. Provided you know what you are looking for, and make an appointment in advance to see those in charge, Archivists and Librarians are most helpful and encouraging on these issues. Sometimes local records find a resting place far from home. The Records of Broadmead, for example, are also to be found in London, and in two particular places.

The Public Record Office. Broadmead had its own burial ground which it shared with the Pithay Church, from 1679, when Henry Hynam, the minister of the Pithay was interred at Red-Cross Lane, Bristol. The complete six volumes of the interments from that date were deposited at the Public Record Office in the thirties of the last century, along with many other burial and birth registers of non-

conformist chapels. There is much information here which cannot be found elsewhere. For example, that Robert Bodenham was a "saylemaker", that Edward Bright was an "apothecary", and Thomas Hall a "smith". It is not just the details of decease, but these other factors which are mentioned which make it so worth while.

The British Museum Catalogue revealed a list of published works by Robert Purnel. Listed in the Records as an elder, one would never suspect that he was also a considerable author. Within these books too, one gets an insight into the early thought of an elder at Broadmead, and realises just how un-Baptist Broadmead was in these early days. It was in fact an open communion and membership church, which, to use the phrases of Walter Cradock and John Bunyan, treated "saints as saints", and stated that "water baptism was no bar to communion". This presents quite a different light on the situation to that presented by Terrill writing about 1670, some fifteen years after the publication of Purnel's works.

Dennis Hollister, the one time member of Broadmead, and M.P. for Bristol in 1653, who became the leader of the Quakers in Bristol, was excluded from Broadmead, and he published an attack on the church in 1656 called *The Skirts of the Whore Discovered*, to which the Church replied in *The Church of Bristol Recovering her Vail*. The latter contains much first hand information about Broadmead, which Terrill either did not use, or did not know about. In it there is a letter from Thomas Ewins in reply to Hollister, which gives us a considerable amount of information about himself which we would not otherwise have.

A further source of information about Broadmead is to be found in the collections which are housed in *various important libraries*. The University Libraries of Cambridge and Oxford contain details about some of the pastors of the church. Hardcastle was a Cambridge man, as was George Fownes, and Dr. Ingello. The National Library of Wales also has information regarding the origins of early Baptist churches in Wales with which Broadmead was closely linked. The Lambeth Library has reports concerning conventicles and those who led them, which were sent by various bishops to the Archbishop of the day. With these libraries, one must also link the Angus Library in Oxford, the Bristol College Library, the Historical Society's own library at Baptist Church House in London, and the great collection at Dr. Williams's Library in Gordon Square, London.

2. *The Collection of Secondary Material.*

It is quite impossible to give a bibliography of other works to be read in relation to a particular local church history, but I do recommend some specific sources which ought to be read before writing.

First, check the list of your members and ministers against the articles written in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. You will be amazed at those who appear in such volumes, and while these articles

are by no means infallible, they will repay attention, not least in following out the notes and references at the end of the articles.

Second, check your list against the names listed in Whitley's *Baptist Bibliography*. Despised by some, it is very useful because Dr. Whitely had a very perceptive understanding of a wide range of Baptist History, even if he can be proved wrong in some particulars.

Third, check your list against the *Cumulative Index* of the *Transactions*, and the individual indices of the *Quarterly*. I might add, that if you discover contacts with the American scene or are concerned with contemporary Baptists then the Bibliography edited by Edward C. Starr is the first place to turn.

Fourth, get hold of a general local history of your area. When preparing material for a study of *Baptists in the Cotton Towns of North-East Lancashire*, Tupling's *Economic History of the Forest of Rossendale* was an essential tool in understanding the development of the area. In the local history section of the Rawtenstall Library I also discovered the report of William Lee, one of the first Government Public Health Visitors appointed. Written in 1849, it gave what can only be described as a vivid account of the local situation in Bacup.

Lee describes the lodging houses as overcrowded, "men, women, and frequently dogs, forming a promiscuous herd, all sleeping in the same close, confined room, from which everywhere the breath of air is excluded, while their unwashed bodies, filthy stinking clothes, and frequently foul straw beds, produce an atmosphere that is horrible on first entering the room. Most of the lodgers sleep in a state of absolute nudity, and decency with a greater proportion of them has long ceased to be thought of. . . ." Commenting on this report, the Revd. Thomas Dawson, Minister of Irwell Terrace Baptist Church, Bacup, uttered what must surely be the Baptist understatement for 1849, when he said: "As to the lodging houses I can state that they are in a very undesirable condition as to cleanliness, decency and morality."

If there is a predominant local industry, turn up a history of it, if you can find one, so that you can get some of the background to your community area. When the Rossendale Valley switched from cotton to slippers, after the turn of the century, it was a Baptist deacon, Henry Trickett, who developed the idea of the "slipper", and produced it as a saleable form of footwear. He was a deacon at Bethel, Waterfoot, and received a knighthood just before the first world war, having made a million out of slippers. To this day, Tricketts Mill and Bethel Baptist Church, Waterfoot, stand side by side, a perpetual reminder of the dependence of the one upon the other.

Fifth, do not forget to consult, where available, the *Victoria County History*, it is indispensable as a guide to what is available, and what has already been done.

W. G. Hoskin's *Local History in England* is a book which encourages the beginner and emphasises the need to get out into the locality: "Some of the best documented local histories betray not the slightest sign that the author has looked over the hedges of his chosen

place, or walked its boundaries, or explored its streets, or noticed its buildings and what they mean in terms of this history he is trying to write."

Nor should you overlook the work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, dealing with the history of *English Local Government* from 1689 onwards. Many of the volumes will have much relevant detail concerning the development of local history.

Finally, may I allude to some publications which help with the interpretation of material, and enable you to judge its significance. The *Amateur Historian,* available in most public libraries has many articles of real importance to any one writing local history. The magazine *History,* publishes a four-page article in each issue, on a *Short Guide to Records.* This is useful for interpreting what is before you and its relevance. G. Kitson Clark's *Guide for Research Students Working on Historical Subjects* (C.U.P. 5s. 6d.) is most helpful to anyone who is taking seriously the writing of historical material. And finally, I would recommend you to get hold of the Historical Association's latest edition of *The English Local History Handlist,* edited by F. W. Kuhlicke and F. G. Emmison. (8s. 6d.).

3. *The selection of material.*

Ultimately, the selection of the material is your own responsibility. It is impossible to say what you should put in and what you should leave out because each locality and church has its own ethos and environment, and what is important in one may be of no concern in another. But I would plead for certain emphases in the writing of local church histories.

(a) *An emphasis upon the history in its context.* We have far too many histories which are really chronicles of who did what and when in the local church. This is narrow and restricting. The community which gathers on church premises is part of a larger community which exists in that area. People marry and have children, and are buried in that locality. They are educated in the local schools. They work there, on the farm, in the factory, as government employees, and in a thousand other ways. They are involved in local issues like the provision of drains and adequate housing, and the local political situations. The local congregation has flesh and bones and lives in a community seven days a week, not just one. It had views which were contrary to its ministers, and to other local people. The task is not to pretend these things were not there, or did not happen, but to explore their significance in that local situation. It will mean a lot of hard work on personal biographies, sometimes not possible but wherever it is, it must not be shirked.

(b) *A willingness to let the facts speak for themselves.* It is all too easy to impose a preconceived idea upon a local situation. When writing about the situation in Rossendale many people assumed that the local churches were there largely because of petty disputes in the

congregations or because of a close link between mill-owners and churches. In fact, population growth and a definite and planned evangelistic outreach into growing areas were the main reasons for expansion. Only two churches out of nine were founded on the basis of a doctrinal dispute, and only one was directly founded by a mill-owner as part of his factory development, and even then it was not for his own glorification but out of a concern for his workers' well-being.

Beware of imposing an all too easy pattern on what are usually complex situations. The generalisations of people like Underwood and Whitley must often be challenged in the light of particular situations.

(c) *Remember that the interpretation of history begins with those who write it down.* This is very important to realise, and if possible to recognise. In regard to Edward Terrill's account of the history of Broadmead, it is vital to recognise his own bias in favour of a baptised membership, which affects his narrative, especially in his treatment of the early period. Terrill did not deliberately misrepresent facts. He wrote what he believed to be the truth concerning the origins of the Broadmead congregation, but he wrote at a time when Baptists were becoming dominant in the church, and out of a deep personal conviction which is everywhere evident in these early chapters of Broadmead history.

Make sure that you understand the point of view of the man who writes the minutes: ask yourself why he expressed himself in this way and not another: and always check his facts if possible.

Conclusion.

In lecturing about the Old Testament prophets, J. N. Schofield used to compare them to the man who rows in the single sculls at a regatta. He has his back to the way he is going, and by looking at what is past, he decides how to guide his boat forward. Such a backward look is vital for understanding the present and the future.

Dr. Gordon Rupp, in an address to this Society remarked that he was a supporter of the "oak-tree" view of history. This is a view which "sees the Church as a 'church of pardoned sinners', always rooted in earthly and often very earthy history, often nearly submerged by secular pressures, here on earth always wearing the Cinderella-like, ambiguous garments, the form of a servant."

Local church history is vital to a correct understanding of the total denominational picture. It is important that it should be written in a total context of the life of the Church in the world. It is the Church which has learned to remember which will possess the future. Our task is to record the past mercies of God clearly, so that the sure ground of a future hope may be clearly discerned, and the Church go forward.

ROGER HAYDEN.