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Abraham Booth, 1734-1806

ANYONE WHO dips into the history of the Baptists during the last three decades of the 18th century and the first few years of the 19th comes upon mention of Abraham Booth, minister of the church worshipping in Little Prescott Street, Goodman's Fields, and author of several books, of which *The Reign of Grace* was the best known. Always referred to with respect, Booth was clearly an influential figure. But he long seemed to me an elusive, unromantic person compared with younger contemporaries like Fuller and Carey or even Rippon.

When Booth died in 1806 at the age of 72, the Minute Book of his church referred to him as "the truly venerable and revered Mr. Abraham Booth." William Newman, of Bow and later the Stepney Academy, tells how, soon after Booth's death, Andrew Fuller came into a Ministers' Meeting in London and quoted the line from Gray's *Elegy*: "One morn I miss'd him on the hill." When deeply moved Fuller often quoted verse and at times of family bereavement wrote it himself. Gray's *Elegy* he quoted in his last sermon in London in December, 1814. In the 1790s Fuller had clashed somewhat sharply with Booth over their respective expositions of Calvinism. Newman is again the authority for the information that at a meeting of the Baptist Board in 1808, Fuller described Booth as "the first counsellor of our denomination." Four years later Newman recorded in his diary a benefaction from a member of the Prescott Street church, adding the comment: "How great was Mr. Booth's influence!" Joseph Ivimey knew Booth only during the last eighteen months of his life, but the references in the fourth volume of Ivimey's *History* show how quickly and completely he had passed under the venerable man's spell.

Dr. Whitley was persuaded that in the first edition of his *History of British Baptists* he had done less than justice to Abraham Booth. One of the few changes in the second edition was some extra sentences about Booth and his contribution to the early years of the missionary enterprises. Whitley sums him up as "the steady pioneer".

My aim in this paper* is to gather together the facts about the man—assembled over a considerable period and from a variety of sources—and to try to breathe some life into them with a view to learning more about denominational developments in the closing decades of the 18th century.

I ought to disclose a personal interest in the subject. One of Booth's grand-daughters married Edward Steane, Secretary of the Baptist Union from 1835 to 1882. Another grand-daughter married an uncle

* A paper read at the Baptist Historical Society's Summer School in Manchester, 14th July 1974.

of my mother's and I possess several of Booth's letters to his brothers, Robert and William. Through the kindness of a great-grandson, Mr. H. B. Booth, of Ripon (d. 1964), I was able to secure for the Angus Library of Regent's Park College small and somewhat unprepossessing portraits of Abraham and his wife, as well as the great man's walking-stick and Will. The size of the stick suggests that, even if he had, as the *Dictionary of National Biography* suggests, "a strong muscular frame and sound constitution", he was not a tall man. It has to be remembered, however, that someone born into a labouring class home early in the 18th century was a good deal smaller in stature than many are today. Booth was one of six children and had seven or eight of his own. There are still a considerable number of his descendants about. One who can claim a more direct connection than I is the Rev. Stephen Booth Harris, of the United Reformed Church.

Abraham Booth was born at Blackwell, near Alfreton in Derbyshire, on May 20th 1734. George II was King. Sir Robert Walpole was in charge of the nation's affairs. John and Charles Wesley, still under the influence of the Holy Club they had started while undergraduates at Oxford, were considering the mission to Georgia, which was to occupy them from 1735 until early in 1738.

Booth's father was a farmer with a nominal attachment to the Church of England. When Abraham was quite small, the family moved to a small farm in Nottinghamshire, which belonged to the second Duke of Portland. It was at Annesley Woodhouse. There Abraham and his brothers and sisters grew up. Until he was 16, he assisted his father on the farm. He did not have even six months consecutive schooling. In those days the facilities for the poorer part of the population were few. But the father saw that the boy could read by giving him lessons each day after the evening meal, and the boy himself being of a quick and serious turn of mind taught himself to write, count and calculate. He speaks of a concern for his soul, when only eleven years of age. Whether this was the result of early contacts with the Barton preachers from Leicestershire or because of some other influence, it is certain that he was in touch with the Barton group in his late teens. His younger brothers were by then able to help their father—and in fact remained farmers all their lives. Abraham decided to break away and become a stocking-weaver at Kirkby Woodhouse, a few miles from his home.

We know that Francis Smith (1719-95), of Melbourne, conducted services in the house of William Allen, of Kirkby Woodhouse, as early as 1746 or 1747, that is, when Abraham was twelve or thirteen. Already there must have been much talk in the neighbourhood about the new religious stirrings which were being fostered by the Wesleys, Whitefield and their associates. The Barton movement seems to have begun spontaneously, however. After a time it became linked with the General Baptists, still fairly numerous in the Midlands.

Young Abraham was soon at the heart of the Barton group, who had bravely met persecution on account of their zeal and by 1751 were

able to erect a simple meeting-house for themselves. In 1753 Booth was present at the marriage of Francis Smith to Elizabeth Toone in Melbourne. It took place, as was possible at the time, in the new meeting-house. The following year this privilege—if it should be so described—was withdrawn from all Dissenters, save Quakers and Jews, and was not restored until 1837. In 1753 Francis Smith and his bride, after giving notice of their intention, stood in the presence of the little congregation and pledged their troth to one another. A document giving the text of their mutual promises was drawn up and signed by twenty-two male witnesses, among them Abraham Booth. The full details may be found in J. R. Godfrey's *Historic Memorials of Barton, Melbourne and other General Baptist Churches* (1891) and in the *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XII. It is of interest that the company described themselves in 1753 as "a congregation of Protestant Dissenters called Independents".

A year after the Melbourne wedding, the twenty year old Booth gave expression to his growing religious zeal in a poem entitled "Absolute Predestination". It was a callow effort, an attack on Calvinism, of which he was later much ashamed, describing its poetry as "despicable" and its theology as "detestable". It was perhaps written in an attempt to impress his friends, who were forming a General Baptist church in Kirkby Woodhouse. There, in 1755, Booth was baptized on profession of faith by Francis Smith.

He had begun to prosper at his stocking-frames and by 1758 was in a position to marry, his bride being Elizabeth Bowman, daughter of a neighbouring farmer. She remained his faithful companion and support for forty-six years, sharing the unexpected changes of fortune that came to him.

In 1760, the year George III succeeded his grandfather as King, the Barton leaders decided to divide the widely scattered work based on Barton and Melbourne into five units, Kegworth and Loughborough being organised beside Kirkby Woodhouse and the main centres. Until then, the Lord's Supper had been observed month by month alternately at Barton and Melbourne. As many as a hundred persons gathered from the wide area covered by the church. A simple mid-day meal was provided, for which each contributed according to his means. Unwittingly they offended against the excise laws, as well as offending the local inn-keepers, and were fined £50 for each place—a heavy penalty, which gave added reason for a division of the work. It was suggested that Abraham Booth superintend the congregation at Kirkby Woodhouse. Formal ordination was proposed, but this he declined.

Already Booth and his wife had one, if not two, children and they had decided to move to Sutton-in-Ashfield, near Chesterfield. There, while continuing his weaving, Booth opened a small school, as Carey was to do in Moulton a few years later. Booth used to say that he had a wife and family before he knew anything of the theory of English grammar, but he must have been busy reading. He had sufficiently

impressed his friends to be asked to preach one of the two sermons at the ordination of Francis Smith and Thomas Perkins in Melbourne. His text was *Acts* xx, 28—Paul's words to the Ephesian Elders.

At the little school in Sutton-in-Ashfield, Elizabeth Booth taught the girls needlework, while Abraham wrestled with reading, writing and arithmetic. He must have had his hands and his mind full, for in the ensuing years he preached not only in the village and in Kirkby Woodhouse, but in Chesterfield, in Nottingham, fifteen miles away, and in other places. All the while he was trying to make up his mind about one of the main divisive theological issues of the day. John Wesley and George Whitefield, the famous contemporary evangelists, differed in their doctrinal allegiance. Wesley was an Arminian, as were the General Baptists, Whitefield was a Calvinist. As Abraham Booth moved about, he became aware of another stream of Baptist witness, that of the Particulars, the Calvinists. Which were right? After a struggle, Booth came down firmly on the side of the Calvinists and began to put forward his views in his sermons. Committed to paper, these became the famous book, *The Reign of Grace from its Rise to its Consummation*.

Somehow or other Booth and his manuscript became known to Henry Venn (1725-97), the Vicar of Huddersfield. Venn had been brought up in a High Church circle, but under the influence of the current revival had become an Evangelical and a Calvinist, though not an extreme one and always a disliker of party names. Venn was a friend of Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon. It was probably the latter, who drew the attention of Venn to Abraham Booth. Selina had a home in his neighbourhood at Donnington Park. Certainly she later became a great distributor of *The Reign of Grace*. Whoever prompted him, Venn visited Sutton-in-Ashfield and talked with Booth as he worked at his stocking-loom. When the Vicar read the sermons, he was so impressed that he took the manuscript home with him, arranged for its printing in Leeds, himself took sufficient copies to pay the printer and left Booth with the rest—one of the most generous benefactions that an Anglican clergyman can ever have bestowed on an unknown Baptist minister-author. *The Reign of Grace* appeared in April, 1768. News of it quickly spread. There were to be nine English editions, one Scottish and three American.

It is a surprisingly mature and rounded essay in biblical theology and shows how busy Booth must have been in the years at Sutton-in-Ashfield. Would that we knew exactly who or what gave the new direction to his thought! He is clearly indebted to the one he refers to as "the celebrated John Owen". There are two quotations from "a late excellent writer", namely, Jonathan Edwards. There is one quotation from "that lively elegant and evangelical writer, Hervey", only one from Gill, two from Brine, one each from Watts and Doddridge and two from "my worthy and honoured friend, Henry Venn". Whether all these quotations were in the first edition, I do not know. Two footnotes—one defending gradual as distinct from sudden conversion,

the other criticising "fear of hell"—are of interest and significance.

The very month Booth's book appeared Samuel Burford, pastor of the Baptist church in Little Prescott Street, London, died, at the early age of 42. News of an able young man in the Midlands must already have reached the capital, for within a few weeks three of the Prescott Street deacons—Stephen Williams, William Tomkins and Samuel Etheridge—journeyed to Nottinghamshire, on horse-back or by stage-coach, to hear Abraham Booth preach. According to the Church Book, they reported that they had found "a sound, nervous Gospel minister". Booth was persuaded to give the church three Sundays in June, 1768, and this led to four more Sundays in August. On September 18th he was unanimously invited to the pastorate. He accepted a fortnight later.

It was an excited, tumultuous London to which he came—the London of Dr. Johnson, of Garrick and Hogarth, of Wilkes. "The happiness of London," said Dr. Johnson to the persistent Boswell in 1769, "is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it. I will venture to say, there is more learning and science within the circumference of ten miles from where we now sit, than in all the rest of the kingdom." The move to London must have been an exciting prospect for Booth. Little Prescott Street ran by Goodman's Fields, in the neighbourhood of Aldgate. It was then a wealthy area, the home of merchants and professional men. "London's Oldest Baptist Church", as the late Principal Kevan, once its pastor, liked to call it, had moved there from Wapping in 1730.

Booth was ordained on February 16th, 1769. The Countess of Huntingdon was among the large number who attended the service. The pattern of Baptist ordination services has changed little since the 18th century. William Nash Clarke (1732-95), pastor of the Unicorn Yard church in Southwark, presided, "put the Questions to the church and required the minister's Confession of Faith"—so the memorandum in the Church Book has it. Clarke's father had been a member of Prescott Street, when the polished Samuel Wilson was minister and had led the church to its new meeting-house. Clarke's introductory remarks at the service were reprinted in the *Baptist Quarterly* for October 1938. After an account had been given of the steps taken to secure a new pastor, Clarke asked both the brethren and sisters (the inclusion of the sisters at this date is to be noted) publicly to recognise their invitation by lifting their right hands. Booth gave his Confession of Faith and Clarke, Dr. Samuel Stennett (of Little Wild Street) and Josiah Thompson (formerly of Unicorn Yard) shared in the laying on of hands, the last named offering prayer. A charge to the new pastor was then given by the lame Benjamin Wallin (who was in the midst of a long ministry at the Maze Pond church) and Dr. Stennett addressed the Prescott Street members. Among those who afterwards offered prayer were John Reynolds, M.A. (John Brine's successor at Currier's Hall, Cripplegate) and John Macgowan (of Devonshire Square, Bishopsgate). The participating ministers all came from Particular

Baptist churches, which traced their origin back into the previous century.

Since the pattern of the service is so familiar to us, it is worth recording that twenty-four years later, in 1793, John Rippon, of Carter Lane, was asked to share with Abraham Booth in the ordination of Thomas Hunt at Watford. The day fixed was inconvenient, so Rippon suggested that Booth's sermon be a joint charge to minister and church. Booth's pre-eminence and authority might, Rippon thought, make this a valuable precedent which would be followed. Hunt was a member of the Goodman's Fields church. It was more than a century and a half before the practice of one sermon replaced the traditional two at ordinations and inductions.

Ministering to the Little Prescott Street congregation was a challenging task for a young man from the provinces, whose educational opportunities had been few. Booth took the situation seriously and prepared to fill some of the gaps in his knowledge. He was helped by a Roman Catholic priest, who came to breakfast and then initiated him into the mysteries of the classical languages. Booth attained sufficient mastery of Greek to be able to say towards the end of his life that reading a chapter from the Greek New Testament every morning, he had been through it more than fifty times. He read extensively in the English divines, particularly the works of John Owen, and also familiarised himself with a number of foreign writers. Within a year of his settlement in London, he completed a supplement to *The Reign of Grace*. It was an essay on *Galatians* ii, 19, entitled *The Death of Legal Hope, The Life of Evangelical Obedience* and was dedicated to the church assembling in Little Prescott Street from Fieldgate, Whitechapel Road, where he lived. The following year an enlarged edition of his earlier work appeared, with a new chapter on Election and a specific repudiation of his youthful poem. It was in this revised form that *The Reign of Grace* was reprinted again and again in the next sixty years.

In 1771 a young man from Sutton-in-Ashfield, named Isaac Stavelly, came to London. Bristol College possesses a diary of his, in which he records that Abraham Booth lent him a copy of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. This poem was first published in 1742 and was much read in the next few decades. Dr. Johnson was of the opinion that it contained "a very wide display of original poetry, variegated with deep reflection and striking allusions: a wilderness of thought, in which the fertility of fancy scatters flowers of every hue and of every colour." Professor Sainsbury thought Pope much more superficial than Young. Lord David Cecil includes nearly one hundred lines from *Night Thoughts* in his *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*. To another young man, John Thomas, aged about 24, uncertain as to his church attachment but concerned about baptism, Booth gave a copy of *The Doctrine which is according to Godliness*, a substantial volume by Isaac Chauncey, the minister of the church in Mark Lane, of which John Owen had been pastor.

About the time of his contact with Stavely, Booth was made a member of the Baptist Board, the little group of London ministers, who functioned as the Baptist section of the General Body of Protestant Dissenting Ministers (Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists), who since the time of Queen Anne had established a right of access to the throne on certain occasions—a right still exercised, though in a somewhat different manner. The Baptist Board held monthly meetings at the Jamaica Coffee House and acted as a useful denominational clearing-house, as well as a ministers' fraternal. The brethren preached to one another and discussed both theological and public issues. Those who arrived late at the meetings were fined, the exact time being agreed by the watches of those present. John Gill, who had long been a dominating figure, died in 1771, the year Booth joined the Board. Three years later, Gill's successor, John Rippon, another arrival from the provinces and still only twenty-three years of age, was elected to membership.

The year 1774 was a tumultuous one in London, with John Wilkes as Lord Mayor. He was already notorious as an M.P. and the publisher of *The North Briton*, which attacked the King as well as the latter's favourite, Lord Bute. Wilke's morals were similar to those of Boswell, but he had gained a considerable following by opposing "General Warrants" for arrest and could legitimately claim some right to the title "A Friend of Liberty", which he asked should be put on his tomb. Benjamin Franklin declared that if John Wilkes had had a good character and George III a bad one, the demagogue would have toppled the King. In 1776 Dr. Johnson met Wilkes at the home of Edward Dilly, the bookseller, where some years later John Rippon met Richard Price. Dilly's shop was one of the places where Abraham Booth's books could be had, but there is a more intriguing link. One of Wilke's closest collaborators was Alderman Frederick Bull, Lord Mayor in 1773, and M.P. for the City of London. Bull was for many years a member of the Little Prescott Street church and a generous benefactor of Bristol College. He is not very favourably presented in C. C. Trench's biography of Wilkes, but he was clearly a personal link between Baptists and radical London.

The Boston Tea Party took place in 1774. Wilkes and Bull helped to swing London opinion to the side of the Americans, whom they regarded not as rebels, but as outraged fellow-subjects. Nonconformist opinion as a whole supported the colonists in their struggle. One would like to know more of the attitude of the Prescott Street church and its minister. It is intriguing to recall that for a few months in 1766, not long before Booth arrived in Goodman's Fields, Tom Paine taught in an Academy in the neighbourhood kept by Daniel Noble (1729-83), a Seventh Day Baptist. In 1792 Carey's *Enquiry* was sold by Joseph Johnson (like Edward Dilly, a Dissenter) at his shop in St. Paul's Churchyard, side by side with Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* and the works of Joseph Priestley, William Blake and Mary Wollstonecraft. Carey's pamphlet was also to be had from Dilly's in the Poultry,

where it had Boswell's *Life of Johnson* as a more ambitious and famous companion.

We know virtually nothing about Booth's politics, at any rate in the 1770s and 1780s. Writing later about Booth's opinions and his books, William Newman said: "He cut his own way." In 1777 he published a new edition of a work on the deity of Christ, translated from the French by James Abbadie, Dean of Killaloe. A year later he had ready one of his own most influential works: *An Apology for the Baptists, in which they are vindicated from the imputation of laying an unwarrantable stress on the ordinance of baptism*. Booth was here touching one of the most sensitive nerves in the denomination and one that still aches and quivers.

The church meeting in College Lane, Northampton, one of the most important in the Midlands and Calvinist in its theological emphasis, had long practised "open communion" in accordance with the Bunyan tradition that "differences of judgment about water baptism (should be) no bar to communion". John Collett Ryland (1723-92), ten years Booth's senior, had been minister in Northampton since 1759. He was a strong advocate of open or free communion. Robert Hall (1764-1831) says that the relatively few churches, which practised free communion, "were very equivocally acknowledged to belong to the general body" and that Booth seemed to regard Bunyan, Jessey and their successors "much in the light of rebels and insurgents; or to use the mildest terms, as contumacious despisers of legitimate authority." Booth's attitude was: "It is not everyone that is received of Jesus Christ, who is entitled to communion at his table; but such, and only such, as revere his authority, submit to his ordinances, and obey the laws of his house." In a letter he wrote in 1785 to Orlando Buckley, Booth said he would not think it unlawful for a baptized person occasionally to commune with a paedobaptist church, but the presiding minister should be informed that neither he nor his people regarded it as implying recognition of infant sprinkling as Christian baptism. Booth recommended travelling even twenty miles a few times a year to hold communion with "the truly baptized". With his letter he sent Buckley a certificate that he was in "full communion" with the Little Prescott Street church.

Nine years after Booth's death, in 1815, Robert Hall wrote his notable and searching attack on "strict communion". It was intended as a reply to "the late venerable Booth, his treatise being generally considered by our opponents the ablest defence of their hypothesis." "He writes on the subject under discussion," says Hall, "with all his constitutional ardour and confidence; which, supported by the spotless integrity and elevated sanctity of the man, have contributed more perhaps than any other cause to fortify baptists in their prevailing practice." But Hall described Booth's treatment of Bunyan as "unsparing ridicule and banter". His own book on *Terms of Communion* was one of the earliest, most important and most eloquent ecumenical treatises by a Baptist. It involved Hall in a two year pamphlet con-

trovcrsy with Joseph Kinghorn, of Norwich, his pupil while a student in Bristol, but Hall made clear throughout that he regarded Booth as "that excellent person" in contrast to Kinghorn.

Gradually Baptists decided in favour of open communion and with it in due course open membership. Booth's *Apology* was issued in America in 1788 and was reprinted in England in 1812, but it cannot be compared in importance or success with *The Reign of Grace*. Another polemical work appeared in 1784, *Paedobaptism Examined*. In form this was a reply to a posthumous work by Matthew Henry. A second edition was called for in 1787 and five years later Booth replied to criticisms by Dr. Edward Williams in *A Defence of Paedobaptism Examined*. *An Essay on the Kingdom of God* appeared in 1788. But Booth was not at his best with the pen, nor do these books explain the influence he exerted over his church, the Baptist Board and yet wider circles.

We are nearer the secret when we recall some of the men he influenced and what they started with his encouragement. Samuel Etheridge (d. 1805) and William Taylor (1728-1811) were among the deacons at Little Prescott Street, when Booth settled there. The latter was a prosperous hosier. The year *The Apology* was published Booth baptized Joseph Gutteridge (1752-1844) and his wife. In 1786 Gutteridge and William Fox (1736-1826), a Cheapside draper, were solemnly "ordained" as deacons. Taylor, Gutteridge and Fox became Booth's close and generous collaborators in a series of new enterprises, which occupied the last dozen or fifteen years of his life.

Fox had joined in 1785 with Joseph Hanway, Samuel Hoare and Henry Thornton—evangelical Anglican philanthropists—in the formation, at a meeting in the King's Head Tavern in the Poultry, of a Sunday School Society. Towards the close of the century the Little Prescott Street church embarked in a substantial way on a school of its own, first on Sundays from 2.0 to 4.0 p.m., then with a full-time master on weekdays and with evening classes. The records tell of the purchase of spelling-books, slates, pens and inkstands, candles, and copies of Isaac Watt's *Songs* and *Catechisms*. This was an attempt to provide a smattering of general education for those who would otherwise have had little chance of it. The promoters probably accepted the principle enunciated by Robert Hall that "reading being essential to any considerable acquaintance with the oracles of God" might be taught on Sundays, but that writing should be kept for a weekday. Clothing was provided for the poorer children, who were increasing in numbers in the neighbourhood. For the work among girls Samuel Etheridge left a special legacy of £50.

Those were exciting years. After the successful revolt of the American colonies, another tumult struck London—the Gordon Riots of 1780, a "No-Popery" outburst of dangerous character and proportions. In dealing with it Wilkes is said to have behaved more responsibly than some of his fellow magistrates. Nonconformists began to hope that the restrictions imposed on them by the Test and

Corporation Acts would at last be removed. They welcomed the French Revolution a few years later as sweeping away a tyrannous régime and heralding the downfall of the Papacy. Before long, however, there were critical reactions to the excesses in France. Many Nonconformists felt perplexed and in a quandary. The rioting in Birmingham in 1791, from which Joseph Priestley was the chief sufferer, was a danger signal. It is significant, therefore, that in 1792, as well as promoting a petition against the slave trade, Booth preached a courageous and outspoken sermon, subsequently published under the title *Commerce in the Human Species and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons*. It was based on *Exodus* xxi, 16 and was regarded by Thomas Clarkson as one of the most important early reinforcements to his campaign.

The church at Little Prescott Street consisted of some 260 members in those years and there were many in the congregation who had not "given themselves up to the Lord" as the current phrase had it and in the way Booth required. He claimed that he was never away for more than two Sundays at a time. He was in frequent demand, however, for weekday ordinations and funeral addresses. His charge to young Thomas Hopkins (1758-87) at Eagle Street in 1785 was published twenty years later as *Pastoral Cautions* and frequently reprinted. It had often been spoken of for its wisdom and because the promising young man added a hundred members to his church before his death in his thirtieth year.

In the 1790s the Baptist Missionary Society became the special new interest of the denomination. Beginning in a small way in the Northampton Association, it was quickly aided by an Auxiliary in Birmingham. But the enterprise would never have got off the ground but for help from London, though Andrew Fuller was always suspicious of the metropolis and ill-at-ease there. In the starting of the work in India Abraham Booth played an important, indeed essential, part. Early in 1792, before the Society was formed, John Thomas, that strange erratic doctor, who had already been to India, urged his plans for a mission there on Dr. Samuel Stennett, of Little Wild Street, and on Booth. It was Booth who put Thomas in touch with the Northamptonshire group and the third meeting of the little committee was held in November 1792, at the Little Prescott Street chapel. The deacons are said to have been sceptical about the enterprise, but in the summer of 1793 Booth joined with Timothy Thomas, of Devonshire Square, and John Rippon, of Carter Lane, in finding the money that enabled the Carey family and Thomas to set out for India in the Danish ship.

Thereafter Fuller turned again and again to Booth for advice. He proved a wise and staunch counsellor. He was sure it would be unwise for Samuel Pearce to go overseas and was not afraid to say so. His letter about this, written in 1794, is in the Isaac Mann collection in the National Library of Wales. One of the most memorable occasions in Booth's ministry and in the history of the Prescott Street chapel must have been the valedictory service for the first main party of

missionary recruits. It took place on May 10th 1799. William Ward, Daniel Brunson, William Grant and Joshua Marshman were farewelled, the last three of them married men. Abraham Booth addressed them on "the interesting, honourable and arduous nature of their undertaking." Carey, Thomas and other of the early missionaries corresponded with Booth and clearly drew strength from the fact that he was one of those "holding the ropes".

Booth and Fuller had first met in 1781, the former already well-established in London, the latter a young man of twenty-seven, uncertain whether he should leave the pastorate of his native Soham for the more challenging sphere of Kettering. The Northampton Association already stretched from Nottingham to St. Albans and included Booth's old church at Sutton-in-Ashfield. The annual meetings covered three days in Whitweek. The gathering in June 1781, was a specially memorable one. Robert Hall, of Arnsby, who was getting his little book *Help to Zion's Travellers* through the press, had prepared the Association's Circular Letter on "The Nature of Faith". John Sutcliff, of Olney, addressed the company on "The Nature and Design of the Association". The preachers were John Collett Ryland, of Northampton, old Robert Hall and Abraham Booth. Rippon was also present and led in prayer. There was criticism of the fact that Wesley had too drastically abridged Jonathan Edwards's life of David Brainerd. After the public services, Fuller consulted nine of the ministers present as to whether he should accept the call to Kettering. Ryland in his life of Fuller gives the list: Booth, Evans, of Foxton, Gill, of St. Albans (nephew of the more famous John Gill), Guy, of Shepshed, Robert Hall, Hopper, of Nottingham, J. C. Ryland and his son, John (who was almost exactly the same age as Fuller) and Sutcliff. They all advised Fuller to move, but he remained uncertain and did not accept the Kettering invitation for another fifteen months. Probably at the Association gathering, Booth put his name down for a copy of Hall's *Help to Zion's Travellers*. In the list of subscribers the name of Samuel Etheridge also appears, while Joseph Gutteridge is down for six copies.

Fuller's *Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* came out in 1784 and probably deepened Booth's confidence in him. Soon after their contact over the B.M.S. launching, Booth encouraged Fuller to expand his correspondence with William Vidler (1758-1816), the General Baptist minister of Battle, who was being expelled from the Kent and Sussex Association for Socinianism. Soon afterwards, however, in the closing years of the decade, Booth became uncertain whether Fuller was entirely sound about faith and regeneration. The difference of opinion was a cause of distress to both of them. The issue was carefully examined by Ernest Clipsham in the articles on Fuller's theology, which he contributed to the *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XX, in 1963-64. His conclusion was that Booth misunderstood Fuller, but that this was not surprising as Fuller changed his way of expressing things between 1787 and 1802. Booth's pamphlet *Glad Tidings to Perishing Sinners*,

published in 1796, with a second edition in 1800, was intended as a critical comment on Fuller's views. Fuller replied in the pages of the *Evangelical Magazine* for 1800. Ryland says that the two men met in London that March and quotes Fuller as saying that Booth seemed "friendly, but reserved". In January 1803, however, Fuller wrote no fewer than six letters to Ryland setting out his difficulties with Booth and a seventh in March of that year. That Spring Fuller again visited Booth, by then an ageing man, and got his support for protests over the restrictions on missionary work in Jamaica, but the two men were never to be again completely at ease with one another. Ryland's comment on this rather sad, but warning episode is that Booth, whom he describes as "this venerable and excellent man" was "betrayed into an excess of suspicion, etc." He emphasises Fuller's continuing respect for the older man.

During the years when his relations with Fuller were somewhat strained, Abraham Booth had another matter causing him considerable anxiety. Most Nonconformists had cordially welcomed the French Revolution. The excesses that followed damped the enthusiasm of most of them, but not all easily surrendered their hopes of greater freedom for themselves and for others in this country. Many were troubled when the authorities became suspicious of persons with democratic sympathies. The contacts between Baptists and the more radical elements in the 1790s have still to be fully explored. How many were connected with the London Corresponding Society and the London Constitutional Society and their offshoots? The arrest and imprisonment for political preaching in 1793 of William Winterbotham (1763-1829), of Plymouth, and the outspoken sermons of Mark Wilks (d. 1819), of Norwich, on behalf of Thomas Hardy, the London shoemaker charged with high treason, are signs of things awaiting further investigation. So are the difficulties the B.M.S experienced over the impatient radicalism of Jacob Grigg, John Fountain and Lee Compere, to which Basil Amey has drawn attention. There are clues that should be followed up in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

The case in which Booth became involved occurred in 1798, the year after the naval mutinies at Spithead and the attempted French invasion on the Pembroke coast. It was reported to the Baptist Board that in a sermon-lecture in Broad Street chapel on January 10th John Martin (1741-1820), of Keppel Street, had said that if there was a successful French landing, most Dissenters would rally to the invaders. This was clearly a treasonable utterance, likely to embarrass many besides the preacher. Booth, as the senior member of the Board, and a widely respected figure, was asked to investigate and handle the matter. When in 1774 Martin had come to London from Shepshed, Booth had shared in his ordination.

Martin was a strange mixture. In an interesting autobiographical pamphlet published in 1797, he says that as a youth in Spalding he found Young's *Night Thoughts* "strangely rhapsodical". The son of a

publican and grazier, Martin was, like Booth, largely self-educated. After trying his hand at various occupations, he was baptized in a garden at Blunham in 1763. He was then 22 and joined the church at Gamlingay. He had hesitated to identify himself with those he describes as "the poorest, and most obscure of the three denominations of Protestant dissenters in this country", because of what he had heard about the Anabaptists of Münster. So far as numbers were concerned Baptists were a community of only some 20-25,000. But Martin was in touch with John Browne, of Kettering, and when in 1765 he became minister in Shephard, he was linked with the recently formed and stimulating Northampton Association. He soon made a mark in London, but became known as a supporter of the continuance of the Test and Corporation Acts. For many years he distributed to Non-conformists the "Regium Donum", a gift from the royal purse, first granted by George I. He published a number of sermons and pamphlets and in 1789-91 had a brush with Andrew Fuller, whose views savoured, in his opinion, of Arminianism.

Booth called for the text of Martin's sermon about the French. What he had said was regarded generally as false and unpatriotic. Martin refused to withdraw his statements, however, and was eventually dismissed from the Baptist Board. The record of what took place and of an unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation in 1803 will be found in the *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vols. V-VI, 1916-19. Martin continued his ministry at Keppel Street until 1814, died in 1820 and was buried in Bunhill Fields.

The Napoleonic Wars added greatly to the strain on public figures. By 1799 Booth's health was beginning to fail. He had been minister at Little Prescott Street for thirty years. Early in the new century Thomas Coles acted as his assistant for a few months before starting his long ministry at Bourton-on-the-Water. Then in 1801 William Gray came after training in Bristol and Edinburgh and remained with Booth until the latter's death in 1806.

The last years of Booth's life were by no means the least fruitful. In 1797 he had drafted the constitution of the Baptist Society in London for the encouragement and support of Itinerant Preaching, which later became the Baptist Home Missionary Society and later still an essential component of the Baptist Union. William Fox, the Prescott Street deacon, was the Society's first treasurer. Then, on August 10th 1804, with the encouragement of Booth who drafted the first appeal, Deacons William Taylor and Joseph Gutteridge, assisted by William Newman, revived an earlier London Baptist Education Society with a view to the better training of candidates for the ministry. Booth was encouraging wealthy members of his church to leave legacies to the Particular Baptist Fund. The gifts of Eliezer Wilkinson, William Taylor, Joseph Gutteridge and Miss Tomkins, of Finsbury, made it possible in 1810, four years after Booth's death, to found Stepney Academy.

In 1804 Elizabeth Booth died, leaving her husband sorely bereft.

He was troubled with asthma and was often incapacitated on a Sunday. He thought that the winter of 1802 or that of 1803 might be his last and visited Nottinghamshire to see his surviving brothers and their families. In 1805, however, he was able to preach for the Education Society and prepared essays on "The Love of God to His Chosen People" and "The Conduct and Character formed under the Influence of Evangelical Truth", which were published after his death. Writing to his brother, William, in Annesley Woodhouse, on January 19th 1806, to acknowledge the gift of a brace of hares, Booth speaks of sitting in the Prescott Street vestry by the fire, when unable to preach. But even this would soon be too much for him. He was present at a meeting at the chapel four days later. Four days after that, on January 27th, the end came. Henry Granger, husband of his daughter, Sarah, and William Gray were with him. He was buried in the burial-ground attached to the Maze Pond chapel in Southwark. John Rippon gave the address at the funeral. James Dore spoke at a Memorial Service at Little Prescott Street. A notable Baptist figure had passed away.

In February 1799, Nathan Smith, of Barnoldswick, paid a visit to London. He was a weaver, a malt merchant, a schoolmaster and at the same time pastor of one of the oldest Baptist churches in the north of England. In a letter home he wrote: "Last Sabbath I heard Mr. Booth. He appears to greater advantage in writing than in the pulpit. He is rather in danger of a decline. So plain was his appearance that I mistook him before he ascended the rostrum for a poor layman." No doubt it was unfortunate that this visit took place in 1799, when Booth was in his mid-sixties and unwell. One would like a description of him ten or fifteen years earlier. But it is clear that he was always a simple and unpretentious person. A Baptist College in America was anxious to honour him after the custom of the time, but Booth set no store by literary titles and would have scorned to appear other than he was—a person who, without educational advantages, had reached a position of some theological eminence by his own steady application. He was not sure he really liked the title "Reverend", which was only then coming into use among Dissenters. An American visitor to Little Prescott Street declared that "when he returned home, he would have the pleasure of assuring the President and students of the College that while in England he had heard several ministers preach, but that he had heard one minister pray."

Contemporaries spoke of Booth's "unsullied purity and kindliness". A lady member of his church left him a substantial legacy, but when he learned that some of her relatives were in poor circumstances, he took the money to the Bank of England (where his son, Isaac, was a cashier) and insisted that it be transferred to them. He had continued to own four stocking-frames back in Nottinghamshire. In 1800 he sent his brother Robert a coat for their mother's brother, Uncle Elias Bradley, and inquired: "How is it with the labouring poor: what are the prices of provisions; and what your Parish Rates are to the Poor?"

It was these sympathetic qualities that contributed to the hold Booth had over his own congregation and over many other ministers and laymen.

Booth's Will may be read in the *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XVI (1956). It was made early in 1805. His stocking-frames, the copyright of his publications, his library, his clothes, his pocket-watch, his furniture, linen and china, his Navy Annuities—all are carefully and cautiously distributed among his children and grandchildren.

How are we to characterise and estimate the man? He was clearly a key figure in the life of the denomination, playing a considerable part in holding together the Particular Baptist churches in the period of theological controversy and change between the hyper- or ultra-Calvinism of Gill and the moderate or evangelical Calvinism of Fuller and in a period of political controversy and change between the relative stability of the mid-18th century and the final stages of the wars against Napoleon, a period that saw the successful revolt of the American colonies, the French Revolution and the beginnings of what is comprehensively known as the Industrial Revolution. The farmer's son, without even a dame school education, self-taught, as so many bright and determined boys had to be in those days, became for more than thirty years the respected pastor of one of London's most influential churches and the trusted counsellor of a far wider circle. He lived to see the Baptist denomination increase in numbers fourfold. Although basically conservative and cautious, probably always rather stiff in manner and occasionally sharp and somewhat obtuse in his judgments, on critical new issues like the slave-trade, overseas missions, Sunday Schools, and better ministerial education, Booth opted unhesitatingly for the side with the future in its hands. The elaborate mural memorial tablet erected by his friends at Little Prescott Street was taken to Walthamstow, after its stay in Commercial Road. One of the most moving tributes and one of the briefest and simplest occurs in the Church Book: "He sought not ours, but us."

Some lines from Edward Young also seem apposite: —

"Thou who canst still the raging of the flood,
 Restrain the various tumults of my blood;
 Teach me, with equal firmness, to sustain
 Alluring pleasure, and assailing pain.
 O may I pant for Thee in each desire!
 And with strong faith foment the holy fire!
 Stretch out my soul in hope, and grasp the prize,
 Which in eternity's deep bosom lies!
 At the great day of recompense behold,
 Devoid of fear, the fatal book unfold!
 Then wafted upward to the blissful seat,
 From age to age my grateful song repeat;
 My light, my life, my God, my Saviour see,
 And rival angels in the praise of Thee."

ERNEST A. PAYNE.