

John Prichard, 1796-1875

A note from the the present Principal of the North Wales Baptist College, written to commemorate the centenary of a distinguished predecessor.

SUCCESSION IN a noble vocation sobers a man. It was a hundred years to the autumn of 1975 that Rev. John Prichard, the first Principal of the North Wales Baptist College, died—or, to give the full details, “at twenty minutes to one in the morning of Tuesday, September 7th 1875”. Four days previously he had declared: “I have given myself to the Lord, so I can die at a second’s notice”. That is the minute recorded in the valuable biography by the Rev. Owen Davies, published in 1880, and written at the request of the Half-Yearly Meeting of the Denbigh, Flint and Merioneth Association, held at Llandyrnog, 9th December 1875. It is a sizeable volume of 424 pages, and it is an inspiration to read it, especially the chapters on “The Theological Controversies of the Baptists of Wales” and “The Periodical Literature of the Baptists of Wales”.

John Prichard was born on 25th March 1796, in Llancilian in Anglesey. He was the son of John Prichard, a drunkard saved when he was 62, and his wife Jane. The family moved from Anglesey to Llandudno, and John Prichard, the son, was baptized there, in the sea. He began to preach, and went to the College in Abergavenny. He was ordained in Llangollen in 1823 and began a ministry there which lasted 52 years. Two who ministered with him were Rev. John Jones (Mathetes) and Rev. Hugh Jones (who came from The Tabernacle, Llandudno, where he had been ordained, and followed him as Principal, after being a tutor at Llangollen College).

It was in 1862 that the North Wales Baptist College was founded, Llangollen having been chosen for its home by the chairman’s casting vote, against Bangor, where it ultimately found a more permanent home in 1892. Six students were admitted, and two were rejected. John Prichard, then aged 66, was called to preside over the college, and he remained Principal until 1865. He received only £65 for his four years’ labour.

The first name of the institution was “St Bartholomew’s College”, and it was formally opened on 25th August 1862, the day following St. Bartholomew’s Day. The name was soon abandoned for the less romantic “The Baptist College in North Wales”. At its inception, the College had six students, two tutors, a library of over 350 volumes, and £200 in “ready money”, with the promise of a similar sum. The tutors, the secretary, the treasurer, and the six students were all from North Wales.

In the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* one of Prichard’s successors, the Rev. T. Ellis Jones, writes of him:

“He was a preacher, a teacher, a writer, and a speaker. He gave

rare service to philanthropic movements, and he addressed scores of meetings on behalf of peace, temperance, the emancipation of slaves, free education, and the repeal of the Corn Laws. He was responsible for 'Yr Athro' (The Teacher) for 48 years. He was respected as a leader, an able preacher, a shrewd theologian and a good teacher."

Among his publications were: *A first catechism for the children of the Sunday School* (1827)—in forty years 42,000 copies were sold; *Praise from the lips of children* (1833), containing 318 hymns, many by himself, and possibly the first hymn-book for children in Welsh; *The Second Birth in the New Testament* (sermon, 1861); *Advice to the churches to teach the disciples of Christ* (Association Letter, 1862); *The biography of Rev. Hugh Jones, Rhuthyn*; *The biography of Rev. Hugh Williams, Amlwch*; *The characteristic notes of the Baptists concerning the church of Jesus Christ, and their duties arising from them* (Address from the Chair of the Baptist Union of Wales, 1869); *The two covenants* (1869); *The history of the church of Jesus Christ in Llangollen* (1870). With three others, he co-edited *The Children's Book*, which sold for a half-penny!

In 1846 he founded a printing press in Llangollen, to further Baptist witness and principles. When he finished as principal of the college, eighteen candidates for the ministry were interviewed.

Prichard was an indefatigable champion of the Baptist Missionary Society. He spoke about its work in the Monday Prayer Meeting (held on the first Monday in each month), and he addressed hundreds of meetings. Owen Davies, his biographer, relates how, when he was 73, he walked over the mountain to Glyn Ceiriog on a cold winter evening.

His basic beliefs about the ministry are summarised in a lecture he delivered when the College opened:

1. Let us foster the love towards Jesus Christ which is ours already.
2. Let us foster love, from an experience of Christ, towards sinners.
3. Let us consider the importance of our status, as sentinels on the walls of Zion, not to be dumb, night or day . . .
4. Let us make an effort to understand the mind of God in his word.
5. Let us beware of levity.
6. Let us beware of pride. Colleges are accused of fostering selfishness and pride . . . Let us make an effort to know ourselves . . . Let us make an effort to achieve real greatness by following our Lord's example to be a servant to all. Let us convince the whole land
 "[A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring];
 There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
 And drinking largely sobers us again."

7. Let us place everything under constraint to enrich us in sanctity,—the conforming of the heart and life to God's word.
8. Do not neglect reading and personal prayer . . . Let us look at the glory of Jesus in the looking-glass, and may we be moulded on his likeness.

His preaching is said to have been "always clear, scriptural and evangelical". His pastoral care matched his pulpit gifts. He loved his people. His successor, Rev. Hugh Jones, states that, by and large, in spite of his human faults, John Prichard was "one of the best, most genuine, wisest and godliest of men."

If he were to come back to his old college (in Bangor since 1892) he would see many changes. But the present Principal could give no better beginning to the 1975-6 session than to read his advice to the students of 1862. The most reprehensible failing of the godly and learned man was that of his age, namely his tendency to regard anglicisation as a major virtue. He built a chapel for "our English friends", and it was named "The John Prichard Memorial Chapel" after his death. It has closed. His college, now one hundred per cent Welsh, is still alive. That is how it is in history.

It is a privilege, however, to commemorate one of the most dedicated of workers among Welsh Baptists.

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Reviews

Dirk Philips, 1504-1568. A Catalogue of his Printed Works in the University of Amsterdam. Compiled by Marja Keyser. Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1975. Pp. 168. Hfl. 70.-

In 1968 the Mennonite Library, which used to be housed in the church property beside the Singel, was transferred on permanent loan to the library of Amsterdam University. A beginning has now been made with the scholarly examination and cataloguing of the works belonging to both collections. This is a difficult but desirable task, for copies of early Mennonite and Anabaptist books are rare and most were printed secretly and without the printer's name. A catalogue of the works of Menno Simons awaits publication. There is now available one in English with fifty-six illustrations and all the needed technical detail covering the writings of Dirk Philips, Menno's staunchest supporter and successor, and a man of some learning.

Dirk started as a Franciscan friar. He and his elder brother, Obbe, saw the execution of the first Anabaptist martyr in Leeuwarden in 1531. They were already under the influence of Lutheran tracts and were soon eager followers of Melchior Hofmann. Obbe withdrew from or was forced out of the new movement in 1539/40. His sympathies were with Hans Denck and the Spiritualists. Dirk became a leader of