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The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

THE JOURNAL OF THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXIX

OCTOBER 1982

No. 8

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EDITORIAL

This issue includes a report on the Baptist Historical Society Summer School held at Malvern in July this year, on the main theme "Baptists in the Twentieth Century". As by now expected at these events, those who attended found much to enjoy in the blend of academic business and pleasure. If the attendance was slightly down on previous schools, this was probably due largely to circumstantial factors. But during informal conversation the question was raised more than once as to whether twentieth century history, in ecclesiastical as in other fields, has the same inherent appeal as that of earlier periods. In time, as in space, distance lends enchantment to the view. History is equated with age: the more ivy covering the crumbling stone, the more "historic" the building is. Antiquity evokes a reverence deemed unseemly for the recent past, especially that within living memory.

But history is history, however recent. It is worth reflecting that a comparable group of Baptists meeting just 80 years

ago to study *their* past 80 years would have had to include over a decade in which Carey was still alive, and Spurgeon as yet unborn, such is the vast range covered by the strides of but three generations. Ah, but it will be said, *our* modern story contains neither a Carey nor a Spurgeon, and is a rather sorry story of decline, having none of the romance of the seventeenth century, the adventure of the eighteenth, or the achievement to compare with the nineteenth. That, of course, is one of the compelling reasons why recent history *should* be studied, and here serious study of history parts company with sentimental and escapist time-travelling. If we study the past, as we say so often, to find out who we are and where we have come from, there are likely to be some fatal blind-spots in our self-understanding if we ignore the more recent twists and turns of the way.

Nor can it be allowed that the more distant past will inevitably be more alluring to the researcher who welcomes the challenge of delving into the mists of obscurity, and tracking down the primary documents and other sources. In fact, the student of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is in some ways better provided for than the modern historian. There are well-known, and quite well-used, collections from the earlier periods. The modern historian has a very great deal of basic hunting to do for himself, and even the most elementary sources are not as accessible as might be imagined. For instance, in all the Baptist libraries in this country, there are only two complete files of the *Baptist Times*. Professor John Kent, in his review of Dr David Bebbington's *Nonconformist Conscience*, remarked on the apparently near total loss of the personal papers of so many of the leading nonconformist figures around the turn of the century. At the summer school, it was repeatedly stated that there is much, much more that we need to know about the work and attitudes of such figures as J. H. Shakespeare, J. H. Rushbrooke and M. E. Aubrey, than is commonly realised. *Terra incognita* is a realm on both sides of the bounds of living memory, and expressions of surprise were the order of the day throughout the Malvern weekend. At the very least, we in turn should be ensuring that adequate watch is kept on our own recent and contemporary records, as well as the ancient minute-books whose safe-keeping we so frequently urge.

A sense of the passage of time was naturally induced at Malvern, by the fact that this was the first summer school at which we felt the absence among us of Dr Ernest Payne and Mr Charles Jewson who contributed so much to these occasions in the past, and to the work of the Society as a whole. With Dr Payne in particular, of course, we entered into a new kind of relationship as he repeatedly emerged in the story of modern Baptist life. Before very long, too, his biography will be in our hands, as a further invaluable tool and stimulus for understanding our recent history. And, as mentioned in the report, it is hoped to publish next year, in a single volume, the papers given at the summer school. One hopes that Baptists will be led to realise that there is as much to interest and concern them in the twentieth century story as in any earlier period, and that, as always with historical awareness, a greater realism and objectivity will be brought to bear on the problems and opportunities of the present. Of course future generations will revise and re-interpret this story, just as we do with the histories written by our predecessors. The historian's work is never done, but that does not mean it should never be started.