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The Munster Anabaptists

THE account of the Anabaptist episode in Münster, Westfalen, in 1533, does not make a very choice page of Church history and I, certainly, have no desire to revive the grim story. Since, however, I have lived in Münster for over two years as United Board Chaplain to the Control Commission for Germany, I have had an opportunity of making one or two discoveries.

Readers will be familiar with the tragic episode known as "The Siege of Münster" in which, the three leaders, Jan Van Leiden (whose real name was Jan Bockelsson); Knipperdolling, a "Tuchmacher" or weaver; and Krechting, established, what they called, "The Kingdom of God" within the walls of the city. Jan Van Leiden was the self-styled "King of Sion"; Knipperdolling became Bürgermeister, and Krechting was created Chancellor. They appointed twelve others as aldermen and gave them the names of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. All resistance against them was suppressed and their actions brought Anabaptists into disrepute everywhere for a long time to come. The city, after a long siege, was captured by the Bishop's forces and the three leaders were put to death by "Tongues of Fire"; their bodies afterwards being placed in three iron cages beneath the spire of the Lambertikirche in the principal thoroughfare of Münster.

A full account of the Münster episode has been given in T. M. Lindsay's *History of the Reformation* and there is a concise record of these sombre events written by the German historian Bruno Gebhardt in his *Handbuch der Deutschen Geschichte*, Vol. 2, p. 61. More recently we are indebted to Rev. Ernest A. Payne for his enlightening little book, *The Anabaptists of the 16th Century*.

I have no historical knowledge to add to this episode, but living in Münster, a little antiquarian curiosity led me to find out a few things that may be of some interest. Although the Lambertikirche was almost entirely destroyed during the war, the spire, save for being chipped in several places, remained intact. It tapers towards the sky upon an open ornamental tower, on one side of which is a large clock. As I passed by one day a ray of sunshine shone through the tower and there, clearly illuminated, I saw the three large iron cages, two together and one on top, that

had been used to display the bodies of the three dead Anabaptist leaders. It is said that the bodies remained in the cages for about a month in order that they might be an example to all and then they were taken down and burned, their ashes being strewn.

Not very far from the Lambertikirche where the cages are, there is a famous church known as the Überwasserkirche. It stood within the old city walls when the Siege of Münster was on. It is recorded that the Anabaptist forces removed the spire from the tower so that they might use the roof to train their guns on the headquarters of the Bishop's army. The tower still stands without its spire, and this event in Münster's history, is pointed out as one of the interesting features of the city. A number of the old statues and images that were destroyed by the Anabaptists were, until recently, to be seen in Landesmuseum in Münster. They are said to have been unearthed about the early part of the present century by a Professor Geisebeg.

It would appear that before they were finally brought to trial, the three leaders were kept in prison for about six months. The imprisonment took place in a small castle at Iburg, situated just off the main road between Münster and Osnabrück. The castle itself is now used to shelter German refugees and part of it has also been turned into a school. I made my way to the castle and asked to see the cells in which the Anabaptists were imprisoned. This part of the Castle is not open to the public, but I obtained permission to get in. I followed the guide up a dark wooden staircase until we reached the first floor, about fifty feet from the ground, and found that I was in an octagonal tower. It was extremely dark, and apart from the candle carried by my guide, the only light came from very narrow slits high up in the wall of the tower. By the candle light I saw the cells were arranged round the wall and were divided into three. Each cell was about four feet in depth and about six feet in width. At one time there were, doubtless, rails in front of each. A slanting stone slab came out from the wall in each cell to about two feet at its base, and attached to the base of each stone slab were two iron rings about eighteen inches apart, to which each prisoner was chained by his two ankles. It was a most gruesome place.

The trial of the three leaders took place in the Münster "Rathaus" or Town Hall which, before the war, was considered to be one of the finest specimens of the Early Gothic Period in Germany, being built in 1335. Unfortunately, the beautiful artistic front of the building was completely destroyed when the town was bombed and the famous Council Chamber in the rear, built in 1250, was also badly damaged. The latter, however, has now been restored and amid great

celebrations it was reopened in October, 1949, the British Community sharing in the rejoicings. During the period of the war the exquisitely carved panelling at the back of the rostrum, together with the carved seats round the hall, cushions, famous chandelier, and paintings of celebrities which adorned the walls, were all removed to a safe place, but are now back in their proper setting. In this hall the Anabaptist leaders were tried and condemned. In this hall, too, the Peace Treaty, concluding the Thirty Years War was signed in 1648, and the hall afterwards became known as "The Friedensaad" or the Hall of Peace. To those who have not seen this hall, and who are interested in its Anabaptist associations, it may be worth noting that the Westfalen artist Terborch painted a picture showing the signing of the Peace Treaty, and the original picture is said to be in the British Museum, although some Germans say the National Gallery, but I have seen the replica in the Landesmuseum in Münster and it perfectly portrays the setting of the hall. As mentioned before, the Anabaptists were condemned to die by "Tongues of Fire" and this meant that, red hot embers were pulled out of a fire with long iron tongues and then applied to their bodies. There are three sets of these original tongues to be seen hanging on the wall in the Friedensaal today. Each set is about two feet long.

The Anabaptist episode is by no means forgotten by certain sections of the people of Münster and Westfalia. It may be that the people are not allowed to forget. The town of Münster is ninety-five per cent Roman Catholic and there are no German Baptists within the town. There are a few Brethren who practise baptism, but I had great difficulty in finding them. I once met officially a certain important Catholic dignity of Münster, but when he knew that I was a Baptist, the conversation ceased almost abruptly and he moved on to speak with someone else. Strange as it may seem the Anabaptist episode is kept alive by virtue of a Carnival. Germany revels in carnivals, and, in Münster, there are three Carnival Clubs, one of which is known as "Die Wiedertäufe" or "The Anabaptists' Club." The Carnival takes place on what is called "Rosenmontag," the Monday before the beginning of Lent. This year it took place on the 5th February. The members of the club on these carnival occasions adopt the attire of the Anabaptists, some impersonating the various leaders, and in the procession they carry three large wooden cages painted to look like iron, each cage having a little door. It is said that the object of the club is to cast a skit on the administration of the town if it is not liked or to place within the cages effigies of people disliked, and even to pull out of the crowd some person not very popular and keep him in the cage for five minutes, jeering

at him all the time and pinching him with imitation tongs which many carry. Sometimes, I am told, they "catch" a pretty girl and put her into the cage, a bit of fun which she enters into with great frivolity! So the great carnival goes lumbering along, in part, a playful reminder that the Anabaptist episode is not forgotten in Münster.

W. J. T. BROWN.

Behold, Thy King Cometh. Ed. Brother Edward. (Canterbury Press, 5s.)

Eight writers have contributed to this symposium on the Second Coming. Though most of them are Anglo-Catholic, the biographical notes supplied by the editor show that they make a varied team, a fact indicating the widespread quickening of interest in this doctrine. There is throughout the papers a unity of treatment, the aim being, not to present "theological theses before the judgment of critics and reviewers" but to recall Christian attention to an article of the Faith which has suffered hitherto through neglect and mishandling. The quality of the papers varies, as is usually the case in a symposium, but on the whole they keep a high level. So far as this theme is concerned there has been a lack of respectable books in the devotional category. It is on that bookshelf that the present work will find its place, for, while it is only occasionally instructive, it is generally moving and challenging in tone and content.

G. W. RUSLING.