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ANNE STEELE'S HEALTH

A Modern Diagnosis

Few people today, even among Baptists, have heard of Anne Steele; yet in the nineteenth century she was much esteemed and her hymns were widely sung. In the hymnals of the Dissenting Churches only the names of Watts and Doddridge were more often found, and she was, without question, the foremost Baptist hymn writer.(1)

Very little has been written about Anne Steele's life, except for the somewhat sketchy memoirs in their respective editions of her poems by Dr Caleb Evans, John Sheppard, and John Broome. Most commentators in books of hymnody emphasise her sorrowful hymns, her preoccupation with the consolatory effects of faith, and her bad health, and ascribe her melancholy nature to the effects of a tragic drowning accident in which her fiancé died. Thus Joseph Ivimey (1830) writes:

> Dr Evans has not mentioned an incident in the life of the pious 'Theodosia' which must have been most painful to her heart. She had consented to give her hand to a young gentleman, Mr James Elcomb, who resided at Ringwood, and the day of the marriage was fixed. The day preceding it he went to bathe in the river below the town, at a place called South-mead, and was drowned. A tradition, which the writer, who is a native, recollects, was, that his shrieks were heard in the town and the place is still called, on account of this painful circumstance, 'Elcomb's hole'.(2)

Other writers have taken up the theme, from John Sheppard in 1863 to D. M. Sale in 1975 and including A. E. Bailey (1950) who introduced a second accident involving a fall from a horse: 'In her childhood the poet had an accident which made her an invalid through life'.(3)

Examination of the Steele family letters and a 'diary' written by Anne Steele's stepmother (in the possession of H.S-S.), casts doubt on the accuracy of Ivimey's anecdote concerning the drowning and indicates that the horse-riding accident was of no great importance. However, the documents clearly reveal that Anne Steele suffered from several serious diseases and was not simply a melancholy aesthete as some of the Victorian writers would have us believe. It is our contention that her physical and mental state was entirely a consequence of long-standing organic disease and not related to two sensationalised incidents in her early life.

With regard to the drowning, there is a letter extant written by James Manfield to William Steele, Anne's father, which reads:

> I heartily wish the Subsequent part of my letter may not be an Unseasonable surprize to any of your Family and therefore tis with very great concern that I acquaint You that this Evening our dear friend Mr Elcomb was unfortunately drown'd in the River in washing himself where he went in was shallow but

> going a little to Far the Rapidity of the Current driv him out of his depth where he finish'd his Life he had only one person with him who could not Swim & who dar'd not Venture to assist him.
>
> I submitt to your Prudence to Communicate this Unhappy Accident to the rest off your Family in a Suitable manner & not knowing how far he may have prevail'd in the Affections of Miss Steele I send my Man on purpose to prevent any Shock that may attend her hearing It in too sudden a manner I wish I could say he did not deserve her Esteem but am as heartily sorry to say (as his Loss is generally lamented here) that nobody deserv'd the Generall Esteem of mankind more & I heartily Condole him My wife Joyns with me in due Respects to all. JA; MANFIELD

The letter is headed 'Ringwood Wednesday Night', and another hand, it looks like Mrs Steele's, has added, 'May 25 1737'.

James Manfield had married Elizabeth Tezard, a cousin of the Steeles (very likely Anne's mother's niece). He was a lawyer and obviously knew both the Elcombs and the Steeles. It is extremely unlikely that he would be ignorant of such an imminent marriage; nor, surely, would he write in this way if the ceremony was to take place the next day. Ivimey published the anecdote over ninety years after the accident and Alexander Gordon remarks in the *Dictionary of National Biography* that Ivimey's information should 'be used with caution'.(4) No other mention of the incident has survived; that the accident had a deep and lasting effect on Anne is pure speculation.

The horse riding accident is even less likely to have had much physical or mental effect on Anne. She did fall off her horse returning from Salisbury on 6th August 1735: 'Nany [Anne] return'd tho' the hors she rid throw her & hurt her hip'. We have no later references whatsoever to the accident or the injury. Five days later we learn that 'Nany is much indispos'd with her stomack & Molly have the fever', and on 14th August: 'Nany and Molly continue ill tho' not violent'. On 20th August: 'Nany and Molly are better'. We also learn that Anne fell off her horse on 11th July 1752: 'Nany's hors Fright'd and throw'd her yet thro the mercy of God she was not much hurt but extremely surpriz'd [shocked] & was weak and bad after she came home; cause of thankfullness that it was no wors'. Five days later Anne is well enough to accompany her sister to Andover. No doubt she fell off her horse on several unrecorded occasions.

The Medical Record

The major source of our knowledge of Anne Steele's health is the 'diary' written by her stepmother. The diary is really a record of Mrs Steele's spiritual state, the state of her soul and her day to day relationship with God. She wrote it up every night, and the secular matters she records are only incidental. These are mainly to do with journeys and illnesses, but even these are by no means systematically or regularly recorded. The comments on Anne Steele's health are not therefore a complete account but they are plentiful and convey a clear

picture of her afflictions. There are several recurring themes, and the catalogue of her illnesses contains frequent mention of the ague, fits, consumption, stomach upsets, and toothache. The contemporary treatments for these diseases are also faithfully recorded in the diary and include such doubtfully therapeutic measures as blood-letting, blistering fomentations, purges and tar-water.

Anne Steele was born in either April or May 1717 in Broughton, Hampshire. Her father was a farmer and timber merchant and also the pastor of Broughton Baptist Church. When Anne was three (and her brother five), their mother died, probably in or because of childbirth as an infant son was buried a month after the mother. It is likely that the father's eldest sister looked after them, as their paternal grandmother had moved away and they stayed in Broughton. When Anne was six her father married again to the writer of the diary, and a year later Mary (Molly), Anne's half sister, was born. The diary which has survived starts in 1730 (Anne aged 13) and continues until April 1736; the next volumes are lost and it resumes in January 1749, continuing to Mrs Steele's death in June 1760. From then until her father's death in September 1769 Anne looked after her father's household. Her sister-in-law died in May 1762 and as well as looking after her father she also looked after her niece, Polly Steele, born in 1753, much of the time. Some letters tell of her health in 1762-3, but little has survived for 1764 to 1770. Anne went to live with her brother in 1769 and he wrote letters to his eldest daughter (he had married again), which usually included news of her aunt's health between 1770 and 1777. A letter which he wrote on 24th December 1777 contained the last comments on her health, but it was almost a year later, on 11th November 1778, when she died aged 61. She was conscious and sensible to the last, but in considerable pain, according to a moving account of her death-bed.

Anne Steele's Illnesses

There is no doubt that she suffered from malaria for most of her life. The first mention of the 'ague' is when Anne is aged fourteen and thereafter she suffers from chronic intermittent fever until her death. There is a clear reference to her sister Molly having the 'ague every third day', i.e. tertian malaria, and it seems inconceivable that Anne was not afflicted by the same variety. Throughout the eighteenth century 'ague' appears to have been endemic in England and Wales.(5,6) Although of widespread distribution throughout the country, it was more prevalent in the South of England and was particularly associated with low-lying and marshy areas; it was colloquially known as 'marsh fever' until quite recent times. Thus the situation of Anne Steele's house near the water meadows of Wallop Brook is especially noteworthy.

We believe the 'fits' to be another manifestation of malaria. 'Fit' was used in a much broader sense than nowadays and probably refers simply to a 'fever-fit'. It is noteworthy that mention of 'fits' only starts when the narrative is taken up by her brother's letters. The word is not used in her step-mother's diary. We take this as a change in usage by the two writers rather than a new disease.

Chronic malaria would have had a progressively debilitating effect on Anne, the major consequences of which would have been anaemia, weakness, lassitude, and susceptibility to other infections. This liability to complicating infections was well known and underlies the frequently expressed fear of consumption. Consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis) was a common disease and probably complicated malaria fairly frequently. The complication must have been greatly feared as it was almost invariably fatal. While Anne was undoubtedly at risk of consumption, we can find no clear indication that she developed this disease. The cardinal features of pulmonary tuberculosis are a productive cough, blood in the sputum, and night sweats, and none of these symptoms are explicitly mentioned.

Two other recurring health problems are references to pains in the stomach or a 'cholick' (colic) disorder, and to toothache and swelling of the face. Colic is literally a spasmodic pain originating in the large intestine (colon). However, the term is more generally used and is applied to various intra-abdominal pains caused by intense contraction of smooth muscle. Thus 'pains in her stomach' might apply to any abdominal pain.

In modern terms the differential diagnosis of Anne's colic would appear to lie between a large bowel cause - 'irritable bowel syndrome', and a gastric cause in which spasmodic pain was occasioned by peptic ulceration and possibly some obstruction to the outflow from the stomach. We know that this problem started at the age of eighteen when Anne was 'indispos'd in her stomach'. On one occasion we are told that she has a 'very bad appetite' - this is more likely to be a feature of a gastric rather than a large-intestinal disorder. At the age of thirty-seven she tries tar-water for the first time and obtains relief. On balance we think that the most likely explanation for Anne's symptoms is peptic ulcer disease.

Toothache must have been very common in the eighteenth century as dental hygiene was uniformly primitive. Buchan's advice(7) on this subject is interesting: 'The best method ... is to wash them daily in salt and water. All brushing and scraping of the teeth is dangerous, and, unless it be performed with great care, does mischief'. It appears that Anne's proneness to infection led to a complication of the toothache - dental abscess. Thus we read that she developed a swollen face at the end of August 1751. She had trouble until 5th September when 'the swelling in her mouth broke', i.e. the abscess spontaneously discharged into her mouth. In November she had a tooth drawn. In most cases this would allow any residuum of infection to drain away through the root socket, but in Anne's case we read that soon afterwards the swelling of her face recurred, and by March 1752 she still has facial swelling and toothache. This appears to have afflicted her for some years after, and in February 1756 she has an 'agonising tooth-ache', although we do not hear of any more dental treatment.

At the age of thirty-nine we have the first mention of 'short breathed' and thereafter this becomes a recurring theme. At age fifty-four we read that 'the pain at her heart' has abated. We cannot take the site of pain as literally her heart. It is just as likely to be a left-sided chest pain. There is no mention of angina - central chest

pain or 'heart pain' coming on with exercise, although she does not seem able to walk very far, probably because of breathlessness. It is difficult, if not impossible, accurately to interpret these complaints. Her chronic anaemia exacerbated by 'therapeutic' bleeding and 'issues' might well have been severe enough to be the cause of breathlessness and 'heart pain'. On the other hand, the complaints could result from repeated respiratory tract infections, chronic bronchitis, and recurrent attacks of pleurisy which would explain the chest pain.

We read elsewhere of 'rheumatics', 'pains in the shoulders', 'headaches', 'a complaint in her eyes', and 'sore throats'. These appear to be non-specific disorders that make up the catalogue of complaints that can afflict anyone in poor health, burdened with considerable responsibilities and perhaps working long hours at her writings.

Conclusion

On the basis of the extant documents concerning Anne Steele, we have formed the picture of a sensitive girl, brought up in a Calvinistic household, who was frequently in bad health through entirely natural causes. In an age when pain-killers were more or less unknown and the so-called treatments were frequently more distressing than the diseases they were designed to cure, it was not unreasonable for Anne to take a rather pessimistic view of this vale of tears, and feel the need to express her gratitude to her Maker for providing her with the consolations of religion, which were, of course, Calvinistic.

When we consider her temperament we should perhaps pay more attention to one who knew her well, than to later writers speculating upon dubious evidence. Dr Caleb Evans wrote soon after her death of her 'native cheerfulness', and of her ability to 'in a variety of ways, as well as by her enlivening conversation, give pleasure to all around her'.(8) Let Anne have the last word:

> Lord of my life! to thee I owe
> A thousand gifts enjoy'd below
> Of providence and grace.
> While nature in her various forms
> My heart enlivens, raises, warms,
> Thy hand, O bid my heart with rapture trace.

NOTES

1 A. E. Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns*, 1950, p.70; E. F. Benson, *The English Hymn*, 1915, p.214.
2 J. Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, IV, 1830, p.312.
3 Bailey, op.cit., p.70. D. M. Sale, *The Hymn Writers of Hampshire*, 1975, pp.48-9.
4 *DNB* X, 1921-2, p.519.
5 L. J. Bruce-Chwatt and J. de Zulueta, *The rise and fall of Malaria in Europe*, 1980, p.131.
6 Sir W. MacArthur, 'A brief story of English malaria', *British Medical Bulletin*, 1951, 8, p.76.
7 W. Buchan, *The Domestic Medicine*, 1783, p.276.

8 'Theodosia', *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional*, III, 1780, p.ix.
James Manfield's letter and Mrs Steele's 'Diary' are in manuscript.

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REVIEWS

Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 1986, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh. £14.95, pp.309.

In this book Professor Oberman, so long at Tubingen and now at the University of Arizona, has brought together a number of articles which he has published over the last twenty-five years concerned with the theology of the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Each of these papers has an interest for students of the two periods but three may especially interest readers of the *Baptist Quarterly*. The first is 'The Gospel of Social Unrest' (1976). Here he argues convincingly that the so-called 'Peasants' War' was both a more urban and a less secular affair than it is currently popular to recognise. The second is a brisk and challenging piece published first in 1976, 'Calvin's critique of Calvinism' which puts some important questions both to historians of 'Calvinism' and to those who identify themselves today with the Calvinist tradition. One of the most interesting points made is to question the nature of Calvin's 'subito conversio' - a question taken further in W. J. Bousma's *John Calvin: a Sixteenth Century Portrait* (1988). The last article in this collection, 'Quo Vadis Petre?' (1963), a study of tradition in the Western Church, is, though almost the oldest, still one of the most significant both for Reformation studies and the ecumenical movement. Speaking both of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation he says, in words which have been echoed in countless tutorials over the years but which have not yet penetrated our pulpits, much less the minds of Baptist congregations: 'We are here not confronted with the alternatives of Scripture and tradition but with the clash of two radically different concepts of tradition'. However, the point is supported by a review of the subject from the Fathers to the present in a carefully detailed discussion. This is a book to have on one's shelves just because it illuminates so many different themes.

B. R. WHITE

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This story reflects the contribution of Baptist laymen to mission of the church overseas and at home. Although short, it is written well, and tells the story of Baptist men whose vision was missionary, ecumenical and caring - for the hungry overseas and the elderly at home. Told with integrity, it reflects the frustrations as well as the real achievements of BMM. The vitality, inventiveness and imagination of the few at the centre has not always been easily communicated to men at the perimeter of church life.

The BMM still has work to do, as the male-female ratio in any Baptist congregation establishes clearly. The story thus far shows that much can be achieved through Gospel-inspired caring, but the first objective of BMM has still to be achieved in the present generation: 'To lead men to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to see their whole life as obedience to Him .

J. H. Y. Briggs, ed., *Faith, Heritage and Witness: A supplement to the Baptist Quarterly, published in honour of Dr W. M. S. West,* Baptist Historical Society, 1987, 64pp. £4.00.

Dr West, we hear, was as delighted by the gesture of a Festschrift in his honour as by the contents. An account of his career, as student, minister and college principal, by his colleague of many years, Harry Mowvley, is complemented without overlapping or repetition by Neville Clark's study of his role as servant of the Baptist Union, both in its internal affairs and in its relations with other Churches. John Briggs explores trends within the Baptist constituency during the past four decades. Morris West's contribution to the Faith and Order Commission is reflected in Mary Tanner's survey of the W.C.C.'s recent history, with special reference to the Lima statement. His work on the Bench is recognised by a sermon preached by Professor Bottoms in Manchester Cathedral before H.M.Justices (not many generations ago Baptists would have been as astonished at one of their pastors being a magistrate as they would at such a book having a Foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury!). Two essays recall Dr West's contribution to Church History: one from Barrie White on Baptist leaders of the mid-seventeenth century, the other from the late Gordon Rupp. This last article from that great and gentle Methodist scholar is entitled 'The Old Man Luther', and is a wry and occasionally hilarious appreciation by one veteran, who obviously enjoyed his old age, of the later years of the great Reformer, just too busy, too overwhelmed by crowds of visitors and friends, by epistolary demands and special commissions, to know whether he had in fact retired or not. Now it is Morris West's turn to savour Brother Martin's experience and to reflect that for ecclesiastical statesmen it is ever thus.

IAN SELLERS