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THE RECORDS OF PROTESTANT NONCONFORMITY

Primary records must be the fuel on which the engine of historical writings runs. Unless records exist no amount of intelligent interrogation or imaginative speculation can reconstruct or interpret what happened in history. Guides to those records are therefore much to be welcomed. Michael Mullett's *Sources for the History of English Nonconformity, 1660-1830*, [116 pp, 1991, £6.75] is No 8 in the British Records Association Guide. The argument for period is that it stretches from the expulsion of the puritans from the established church to the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts.

The approach is confessional with the Baptists appearing first, followed by chapters dealing with Independents, Methodists, Presbyterians/Unitarians, Quakers, and smaller nonconformist groups. Arguably that approach over-emphasizes denominational connexion and continuity for these early years, especially for example in the context of Bunyan's belief that water baptism was not a cause for

separation. An additional chapter would have been desirable to consider inter-denominational initiatives, and those state and state church records which relate to nonconformity as a whole. The Minutes of the Three Denominations are briefly alluded to in the introduction but not the records of the Dissenting Deputies or those pan-evangelical movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which consumed so much nonconformist energy.

The section on the Baptists is divided between General and Particular, proceeding from 'federal bodies' to the records of local congregations. The commentary, focused around the headings of preambles and confessions of faith, discipline, doctrine, membership, ministry, finance, charity, buildings and furnishings, is well-accomplished but it would have been helpful if the archival examples had been fully footnoted. Origins are considered exclusively in relationship to surviving lollardy and the association with continental anabaptism totally omitted. It would therefore be helpful to the general reader to provide a brief list of the principal *secondary* sources for Baptist history.

The colleges and the missionary society, as also Home Missions, as important focuses in the life of the denomination, are significant omissions, as are references to denominational [and general nonconformist-evangelical] magazines, with their obituaries and memoirs, news of churches, as well as other articles, from the early nineteenth century onwards. Such general tools as the British W.T. Whitley's *A Baptist Bibliography, 1526-1776*, 2 vols, 1916, not to mention the international E.C. Starr's twenty-five volume *A Baptist Bibliography*, Rochester NY, 1947-76 ought to be referenced, and readers of this journal will realise that the *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* did not merge with the *Baptist Quarterly* in 1922, rather the *Transactions* changed their name to the *Quarterly*. Smaller Baptist groups are not explored. D.J. Steel's older volume in the *National Index of Parish Registers Series* [vol 2]: *Sources for Nonconformist Genealogy and Family History*, 1980, despite its limited title, is not superseded.

David Shorney's *Protestant Nonconformity and Roman Catholicism: A guide to sources in the Public Record Office*, [PRO Readers' Guide No 13, 126pp, 1996, £9.95] is nicely complementary. In part organised by chronology and otherwise by category of record held, it offers a powerful testimony to the state's concern, whether directly or indirectly, to regulate the religious life of its people, moving forward from persecution to toleration, to what has been termed a kind of 'pluralist establishment' (embracing the mainstream denominations of the nation) as the present 'status quo'. As a consequence, government departments and courts acquired, ordered and preserved a fine body of evidence on nonconformist life.

A useful commentary suggests how the different PRO records can be used: for example to assess the extent and teaching of Anabaptism in England between 1532 and 1560, or its presence in Bristol and Wiltshire a century later. Or again Chancery Rolls [C213/170A] contain 'The humble address and Association of the ministers of Divers Baptist Churches in and about London on the behalf of

themselves and their Respective congregations', which provides a directory to the leading Baptists of the nation's capital. The earliest Baptist register to be found in the PRO is that for Coate in Oxfordshire dating from 1647 [RG 4/140], but because registers were written in books that also contained minutes and other records these too have been preserved in some cases - examples cited include Wisbech [RG 8/3]; Hude, Middleton in Teesdale [RG 4/351], Gosberton, Lincolnshire [RG 4/2829] and Boston in the same county [RG 4/25]. The PRO also holds the baptismal register kept by the Dissenting Deputies from 1742, which attests some 50,000 births together with details of parents and witnesses.

In 1836 and 1852 the Registrar General twice sought to compile cumulative lists of chapel licences, both of which survive in different states of completeness at RG 31 and in PP, HC 433, 1836, XL 267. Defence of property led to the deposit of many nonconformist trust deeds including, for example, five from Sheffield. Here, too, you will find registers for Dissenting Burial Grounds, including that famous final resting place of many dissenting leaders at Bunhill Fields. Within the Registrar's department lay the organization of the Religious Census of 1851, and at Kew will be found the rich resource of all the returns made by individual congregations with their particular enumeration and comments.

The volume concludes with a useful analysis of sources by PRO class indicating the kind of information likely to be found in each, a glossary and a bibliography. When revised, this should indicate that the Baptist Union of Great Britain Library, along with the former Baptist Historical Society collection is now incorporated in the Angus Collection at Regent's Park College, and that the *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* have been succeeded since 1922 by the *Baptist Quarterly*. The list of counties which have published lists of meeting house registrations could also be usefully updated.

This would mean including *Bedford Chapels and Meeting Houses: Official Registration 1672-1901*, edited by Edwin Welch [Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, Volume 75, 231pp, 1996, obtainable from BHRS, 10 Kimbolton, Avenue, Bedford, MK40 3AD, £15 including p & p]. This is published some thirty years after his initial article in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* on 'The Registration of Meeting Houses' in 1966, and adds to counties such as Staffordshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire which already have such listings. Registration was initially a function of the limited toleration offered by the legislation of 1689, but was perpetuated in the nineteenth century when registered chapels could claim exemption from poor rate, and from control by the Charity Commissioners, and when they could be licensed for the celebration of marriages.

Following a lucid explanation of the changing legislation under which registration took place, Dr Welch organises his material by 119 locations, noting that missing records and incomplete registration by quarter sessions mean that very few pre-1740 licences survive, though he includes the evidence provided by the 1672 and 1687 Declarations of Indulgence. Alongside the registrations are set a series of

Appendices, the first of which contains the two variants of the Evans' 1715 list for Bedfordshire in which the Baptist predominance in the county is most marked, and Appendix 2 the Thompson list for 1772. Appendix 3 provides a list of chapels in the county taken from Samuel Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary of England* of 1842, which is followed by the first official list of chapels published nationally in 1908. The final appendix lists Nonconformist Trust Deeds enrolled in Chancery.

Together all these lists provide a rich data base for historians of Bedfordshire Dissent. My only regret is that Dr Welch did not allow himself a little more space in the introduction to spell out the particularities of the Bunyan legacy within the county in the continued existence of independent churches practising both believers and infant baptism, and the role of the splendidly titled Bedfordshire Union of Christians as an instrument of mission and unity within the county.

Derbyshire offers us a complete transcript and commentary on the county's returns for the religious census of 1851 in ed. M. Tranter, *The Derbyshire Returns to the 1851 Religious Census*, [Derbyshire Record Society, 9 Caernarvon Close, Chesterfield, S40 3DY, lxxvi + 238pp, 1995, £30 + £2pp] The more such transcriptions are made for the different counties, the greater our knowledge of patterns of worship across the country and the richer the analysis that can be undertaken without handling the original documents in the PRO. Thus this volume needs to be put into the context of a sequence of publications which includes such volumes as ed. R.W. Ambler, *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship*, 1851, Lincolnshire Record Society, 1979, ed. J.A. Vickers, *The Religious Census of Sussex*, Sussex Record Society, 1989 and most relevantly, Michael Watts, *Religion in Victorian Nottinghamshire: the 1851 Census for Nottinghamshire*, 1988. The Derbyshire volume is based upon the Administrative County, not the Registration County, thus for the Parish of Appleby near Atherstone, the parish church and Baptist chapels were in Leicestershire but the Wesleyan Chapel in Derbyshire until in 1897 all were transferred to Leicestershire.

Strengthened by the development of the New Connexion, Baptists were relatively strong in Derby, Belper and Shardlow, but weak in the upland parishes of the northwest of the county, (where the dissenting presence was left to the Wesleyans and the Primitive Methodists), a distribution helpfully laid out in Map 11. A number of the Baptist figures are of interest in that they relate to churches only founded in the late forties but which had already developed some strength in this part of the New Connexion's heartlands.

Measham General Baptist claimed an evening congregation of 380 which compared well with the 250 at the parish church, which like the Baptists was the best attended service of the day. At Melbourne, similarly, the General Baptist church with an evening congregation of 350 adults far outstripped the parish church, though the Baptists explained that this was a low attendance because of special circumstances and that they would normally expect 480. Loscoe Particular Baptist, although without a regular minister, had an afternoon congregation of 200 and an

evening congregation of 250. The New Connexion Chapel at Langley Mill had nearly all its 150 seats taken for the afternoon service, and being out of debt, indicated that it was contemplating adding galleries.

The returns provide ample evidence of the General Baptists grouping churches for pastoral oversight, whilst John Brooks, a tailor and deacon, making the return for Ticknall General Baptist, which had an evening congregation of 250, tells us that once a fortnight the chapel was let to the Wesleyan Reformers, ecumenical hospitality which was also displayed by the General Baptists of Cromford who had only afternoon and evening services and let their premises be used by the Wesleyan Reformers in the morning.

Baptists in the county town itself exhibited considerable strength. Duffield Road, a new cause, designated neither General nor Particular, and housed in a chapel purchased or rented from another denomination, could nevertheless boast 150 adult and 50 scholars at its evening service. Brook Street General Baptist secured an evening congregation of 190; Agard Street Particular Baptist, 192 against a claimed average of 300; Sacheverell Street General Baptist 240; but the flagship was St Mary's Gate [General] Baptist where J.G. Pike attracted an evening congregation of 711 to his 1200 seat chapel.

An honest handling of bureaucratic demands is suggested by the New Connexion return for Ripley where the evening congregation was 300 adults and 150 scholars but with the note that the attendance was exceptional as this was the Sunday School Anniversary. This is confirmed by the return for Swanwick Particular Baptist where the minister notes that anniversary sermons in Ripley lessened their own attendance but then does not proceed to give a figure, though claiming the remarkable evening average of 300 general congregation and 220 scholars in a chapel calculated to hold 500. The doctrine of election clearly was not to be allowed to divide on anniversary day.

Alfreton Particular Baptist also had a buoyant evening congregation of 360 general congregation and 40 scholars in a chapel with only 340 seats. The return is interesting in also giving a church membership of 122, which for this congregation suggests that the attendance at the best attended service was three times the membership figure.

Not all was success: St Mary's Chapel, Ashbourne, which was licensed by the established church for the accommodation of 200 of the poor in 1845 is noted as 'purchased from the Baptists' for £300; Ashford Lane, Bakewell, is reported as built c.1770 but closed for about four years 'standing void and no services performed therein' by George Birley, of Ashford 'one of the persuasion'. In neither town were sufficient numbers 'persuaded' for viable Baptist churches to emerge.