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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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#### OF OBITUARIES: GENERAL AND PARTICULAR

Obituaries obviously provide a valuable source of Baptist history but as a genre they suffer from certain limitations. For example, they are of such a length that they never substitute for biography. In the nineteenth century they often disappoint in that their interest focused so much on the hours of dying, sometimes almost to the exclusion of informing on the years of living. Not unnaturally they will veer towards stressing the strengths rather than the weaknesses of the person described, and will not always avoid the hagiographic. Almost inevitably elitist, they give more attention to those exercising leadership in church and society than those whose faithfulness was revealed in accepting and following that leadership. They also tell the story of the survivors - that is, they spell out the biographies of saints triumphant rather than sinners still reprobate.

This is where the hallelujahs and 'nunc dimittises' of the obituaries need to be

balanced by the disciplinary action recorded in church books, or the messy deletions that occasion ugly erasures in church lists, the consequences, conspicuously, of undisciplined drinking, of sexual infidelity and other hedonistic pursuits, but sometimes more mundanely of failure to manage this world's goods in avoiding bankruptcy. This is where we read the accounts of the failing and the not-so-good. And yet that frailty is as much the stuff of religious history as the achievements of faith's great heroes.

A mere obituary is surely too brief to record all the achievements of the Reverend Dr Gwynne Henton Davies - pastor, scholar, educator, international Baptist leader, 1906-98. Born in Aberdare, he graduated with a first class honours degree in Hebrew from Cardiff, to which he added that university's MA with distinction in Old Testament. To these he added an Oxford MA and MLitt, and a Baptist Union Scholarship which he used to spend in a year of study at Marburg. In later life he was honoured with DDs from Stetson and Glasgow. He only had one pastorate: three years at Hammersmith before the outbreak of the Second World War, though into his nineties he was still serving the chapel at Penuel, Manorbier in Pembrokeshire.

For thirteen years he served on the staff of Bristol Baptist College before accepting appointment to be the first holder of the chair in Old Testament at Durham. This he held for seven years, before returning to Oxford as Principal of Regent's Park College. In a seminal principalship, he helped to consolidate the work of the college, increasing its staff, its range of buildings, and its influence in the university. President of the Old Testament Society in 1966, he occupied the Presidency of the Baptist Union for 1971-2. He published various commentaries, such as those on *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*, which many found helpful and illuminating in their understanding of the Old Testament text. However, in so doing, with his commentary on *Genesis*, he confronted the more negative aspects of North American fundamentalism, the heresy seekers who failed to perceive the evangelicalism of this most lucid of teachers and most committed of Christian scholars, who was widely loved in the USA, which was to provide the place of his death on a not untypical preaching tour.

His life and scholarship provoke one to ask why it has been that Regent's has been so biased in favour of the Old Testament in the scholars it has produced: one thinks in this century alone of Wheeler and Theodore Robinson, of Henton Davies and David Russell, and more recently of Harry Mowvley and Rex Mason.

Henton Davies never forgot his Welsh roots and it is for this reason that this periodical, nor normally given to writing obituaries, honours his memory. For it was he who endowed the Benjamin Henton Lecture in Baptist history in commemoration of his grandfather; most of these lectures have been published in this journal.