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Militant Baptists 1660-1672.

THE persecutions endured by Baptists after 1660 have often excited our sympathy, and we have wondered at the callousness of Charles in so lightly breaking his word as to indulgence. But the publication of many state papers of the time show what ample justification there was for much of the severe legislation and administration. We can tell the story with special emphasis on three or four military Baptists. Those who are proud of a Havelock, a Lush, a Lloyd George, will see the necessity of studying the movements of others than the meek preachers who too often fill the pages of our histories.

The New Model Army which crushed the Royalists swarmed with Baptists and other "sectaries." The Clarke Papers which deal with its movements give abundant details as to Overton, Robert Lilburne, Disbrowe, Packer, Gladman, and other Baptists; while Chillenden, Deane, Denne, Everard and Harrison have already attracted the attention of some historical students. Most of the Baptists were pronounced republicans, or Levellers; when Cromwell coquetted with the idea of kingship, and did accept the power as Protector, he found it necessary to cashier the colonel of his own Guards, John Wigan, and to send the late commander-in-chief in England, Thomas Harrison, into private life, along with numerous others of less note. For the rest of his life he was warned of plots against him, in which such Baptists as Harrison, Lawson, Danvers and Fipps were concerned. It might well be expected that when his hand was removed, this party would be none the less active. Monk had some trouble in keeping them still, both in Scotland and in Ireland, and there are amusing glimpses at his intrigues whereby garrisons deposed their officers quite in the Young Turk style. Still he succeeded in preserving peace, and staving off open trouble till the arrival of Charles, when most of the army was paid off, and the officers had to choose between giving security for good behaviour, emigrating, or being imprisoned.

The first outbreak did not concern Baptists, being of Fifth-

Monarchy men under Venner; but when London was for four days in the power of armed men openly resisting the new order of things, there was ample reason for forbidding all unlawful and seditious meetings held under the pretence of religious worship, as the band had prepared and started from such a meeting, in a street where there was also a Baptist meeting, with others hard by. One result was to encourage the new government to keep troops afoot, quite an innovation for a king, to employ spies, and to furbish up Elizabeth's Conventicle Act and other forgotten laws. A licenser was appointed for literature, the post office was overhauled and the sectaries installed there were ejected, both in town and country. Newbury, Bristol, and Caxton are instances where these nerve-ganglia were in Baptist control, while from Carlisle, the West, Norwich and Kent came in reports that Baptists were most dangerous.

There was indeed one error of the authorities; finding that Baptists and Quakers would not take oaths to be quiet, they inferred that revolution was in view, whereas it was the oath itself which was the stumbling block with many, not the object of the oath. But while this worked great injustice to the peaceable Quakers, it is true that three or four Baptists were ring-leaders in plots for a few years.

As early as June 1660 it had been found wise to put under restraint Thomas Tillam. Familiar to us as Messenger of the Coleman Street church, founder of Hexham and probably of Warrington, he was familiar to the Government as active at the military centres of Newcastle, Dalkeith, and Colchester. By next March, Lancaster jail was crowded with more than 250 Quakers, with 500 in various London jails, and thousands more all over the country; till Charles realised that their objection was only to swearing, and that they were not dangerous, whereupon he freed them all.

Parliament had, however, been elected during the fear excited by Venner, and the constant embodying of the militia to keep down the revolutionaries; and soon there were definite facts enough, without verifying the rumours of plots near Worcester, for the extremists realised what was to be expected from this Parliament.

From Berwick in April came a story of a Baptist schoolmaster threatening the powder magazine, with hints of a widespread plot. At the end of June Colonels Okey and Danvers (the minister who pleaded later for Laying on of hands) were at Newington preparing an insurrection. And by the middle of August the authorities had their hands on Paul Hobson.

This man was originally a tailor; after being member of a Separatist church in Crutched Friars about 1639, he became Baptist and signed the Confession of 1644, preaching in various parts of London and at Bristol. Taking a commission as Captain, he was arrested at Newport Pagnel for lay preaching, but was freed in London. At Yarmouth and in the Midlands, at Hull and at Newcastle he was active, and at the last garrison had found time for a vigorous quarrel with Tillam. He had by these varied pursuits qualified to become Fellow of Eton College, whence he was ejected at the Restoration. Now he was acting under a commission from a German Prince to export manufactures, but the authorities evidently questioned whether this were the whole truth.

At the end of August spies reported a meeting of Fifth-Monarchy men in Norton Folgate, rejoicing over the landing of Ludlow, Whalley and Tillam in Essex. In a few days it came out that Hobson, Tillam and Pooley, a Baptist preacher in Norfolk, were concerned in a scheme whereby a hundred families had gone to the Palatinate, and were in communication with the leading regicides. Clearly there was serious risk of an invasion from abroad, and when John James preached open sedition at Bull-stake Alley, it is little wonder if an example was made of him, and he was executed for treason.

Another plot being disclosed, the Parliament in a panic passed the Corporation Act, whereby it would be impossible for Baptist butchers like Thomas Hobson to be chosen to municipal office. The militia was reorganised, for only a few years before, General Harrison had enlisted chiefly Baptists and Independents. The fortresses in the land were either dismantled, or occupied in force. To this the response was another plot, this time to murder Charles, and stories rolled in of Baptist gatherings by night at Cranbrook, of church collections for a rising next spring, of plans at Plymouth for a Baptist insurrection. By the end of the year, Newgate was packed with 289 Baptists and their friends, only 66 ordinary prisoners being there besides. Among them were many prominent ministers such as Samuel Fisher, Thomas Parrott, Richard Pilgrim, John Griffith, Jonathan Jennings. Warning was given that Belcher, preaching at Coleman Street in Limehouse, was likely to prove another Venner.

By this time another set of malcontents had been created, the Act of Uniformity causing some 1,800 Presbyterian ministers to resign from the Established Church. So serious was the situation that Charles in December issued a Declaration of Indulgence, on the lines of his promise from Breda, but against the

advice of his Council. With the Presbyterians kept quiet, it might be possible to hold down the Baptists. For in November it became known that Gower and Hobson had been arranging with John Joplin, ex-jailer at Durham, for a rising in the North; Muggleswick and Stokesley, two Baptist centres, were centres of the plot. Hobson was captured but released on bail before the full plot was known, while the Durham militia was called out to arrest the northern leaders.

Yet another Baptist colonel was busy on the same errand, over in Dublin; Thomas Blood. The Cromwellian soldiers were being displaced from the Irish farms they had settled, and he had no difficulty in finding ready listeners. Small wonder if Parliament decided to make no distinctions between Dissenters, obliged Charles to withdraw his Declaration, and drafted an Act to close all Conventicles, which were demonstrably centres of sedition in many cases: the Lords, however, checked this last move.

By August 20 in 1663, Hobson was secure in the Tower, and was discovered to be corresponding with Joplin and John Atkinson the Stockinger. By October he had turned King's evidence, and the Government was looking out for Captain Jones at Muggleswick, and Oates, while Ludlow and Hutchinson were under suspicion. Meantime evidence poured in from Newcastle and Westmorland of the extensive preparations, and of the governor of Chester Castle being in suspicious touch with a Baptist agitator; while in the Isle of Wight and in Somerset the Baptists met defiantly. With one man cross-examined under trial, and Atkinson also turning King's evidence, an alarming state of affairs came to light. The southern malcontents were being managed by Ludlow and Goffe, but the northern almost entirely by Baptists. Two thousand horse were enlisted, and many trained bands were ready to mutiny; Hull, Durham, Appleby, Carlisle were to be attacked. The chief travelling agent was Jeremy Marsden, ex-chaplain to Overton—both Baptists. At Gildersome it had been announced on October 6 that the twelfth was set for a general insurrection.

Parliament naturally took severe measures. It was not the time for a general election, so they repealed the Triennial Act. And for the next three years they passed a Conventicle Act, which forbade all manner of meetings of above four people under the guise of religion. Ex-soldiers were ordered to leave London and not to carry arms. This resulted in meetings at girls' boarding-schools, in plotting being transferred to the country, till word came up that many thousands were implicated, and were expecting help from Holland. When a scheme to seize the Tower

and Whitehall came to light, forces were embodied anew, York and Devon being specially garrisoned. In Lancashire the Baptists met as usual, refused to pay the fines, and went to prison. Five thousand people were reported here and from Cheshire as thus passively resisting, while Colonel John Wigan, founder of the Baptist church at Manchester, was not likely to stop short of active resistance. In Furness beyond the sands, where Colonel Sawrey had retired and founded Tottlebank church, the churches met openly. Major Gladman was to command 400 cavalry in Staffordshire. From Norwich came news that Pooley and Tillam were away on the Continent, a dubious errand.

Matters became even more serious with 1665, for in February war was declared with the Dutch. Ludlow was overseas, and was being told that if the Dutch could attack in force, 30,000 men would rise, of whom many belonged to the old army, while part of the fleet would mutiny, and cash was not wanting. This was based on solid fact, for in the June before, out of 25 new naval captains, many were Baptist and Presbyterian. The Morecocks of Chatham were still in great force at the navy yard, while at Deal the late governor Taverner was still there, a Baptist minister now, and the post office was in the hands of another Baptist. Blood and Jones were concerned in another plot to capture the Tower and Whitehall, while the prisons were so badly managed that fifty Baptists were actually storing arms in the White Lion.

The defeat of the Dutch fleet in June checked the greater scheme, so Tillam, Jones and Blood crossed to Ireland to mature another plan. About this time the miserable Hobson, who had been transferred down to Chepstow, and had been petitioning for thirteen months to be transported to Jamaica, appears to have received the reward of his infamy and to have been set free. He appears once more during 1665, but not in the State Papers, as causing two women at Devonshire Square to be disciplined for wanton conduct with him.

The lenient conduct of Parliament is astonishing. There was now ample evidence that conventicles were in some cases the mere cloaks for plotters, and that dissenting preachers such as Marsden, Gower, Hobson, Tillam, Wigan, Jones, Price were active conspirators. They therefore framed an oath to be tendered to all such; an oath to accept the existing state of things and be loyal. If this was refused, the only penalty was to move five miles from every corporate town and any place where the preacher had exercised his ministry. The Five-Mile Act deserves praise for its ingenuity and mercy.

Yet in 1666 the danger to the Government was still great.

A four days' battle in the Dunes prevented a Dutch landing and a rising, but public credit was so low that neither the city nor the North would lend money, while Deal, the great Baptist centre, was reported so disaffected that it was not safe to quarter troops there, and it came out next year that Taverner was plotting, while the Dutch were regularly informed by Baptists there. A naval victory off Sheerness ended the foreign danger for the year, and the Irish plot culminated in an insurrection there, and in another rising of Dumfries suppressed at Pentland; Blood was in both these, as appeared next April.

Tillam and Pooley were busy promoting a great emigration scheme to the Palatinate, which to the spy seemed inoffensive; but Blood, Danvers and Jones were wanted for trial. As it was, the Earl of Bridgewater only got hold of such innocent Baptists as John Griffith, Jonathan Jennings and Benjamin Keach, whom he committed to Aylesbury jail and told the king he would be responsible for the cause.

In 1667 it was found that the Baptists at Bell Alley were apparently intermediaries of plotters, who certainly used to send seditious letters there. In June and July the Dutch fleet destroyed Sheerness and Chatham and raided the coasts; and it was not reassuring to find that the agent for all the packets at Dover was Jemmett, well known as a Baptist. In many quarters the Conventicle Act was a dead letter, and people met openly, the Baptists of Minehead and Durham being specially defiant, while Colonel Blood signalised himself on July 25 by rescuing a prisoner from an armed escort.

By this time Clarendon was falling, and the new minister was Buckingham, who undoubtedly sympathised with dissent. The expiration of the Conventicle Act and the peace with Holland gave a great check to the militant dissenters, and Tillam's emigration schemes prospered. But with February 1669 the Act was renewed and made permanent. A serious resistance was organised; constables would not enforce, and when the soldiery was called out, three or four thousand people turned out to defend the chief meeting houses in London. The king secretly approved, but by July had to own he could no longer protect Alderman and Major Kiffin. The consequence was that when he wanted to borrow £60,000 in September, the city refused to lend. Arrests of preachers and hearers were made, and fines of £20 were imposed on the ministers, and all through 1670 reports came in. The State Papers yield many names of Baptist preachers fined or in jail during this year, and the spies begin to report that it is no good sacking the meeting houses, they are repaired and used

again, while a troop of horse would be needed to keep down the dissenters in Wilts. Convinced of this, and doubtless really sympathising, the Government let the Act drop into much disuse by the end of 1670.

But in May, 1671, a last outrage was committed by Baptists. Colonel Blood and his nephew, with Robert Perrot, a silk dyer, evidently related to the great Thomas Perrot, nearly stole the regalia out of the Tower. To save their lives, they turned King's evidence, and a number of people were arrested, including John Belcher from Oxfordshire, a Sabbatarian preacher. But Blood was received by Charles in a personal interview, when the king evidently was convinced that the policy of repression was suicidal, and steps were taken to reverse it. Plans were matured by the ministers and Charles, working through Blood during the winter, and on 15 March, 1672, Charles issued a second Declaration of Indulgence, offering licences for buildings and preachers. Almost at once we find Colonel Rede of Porton applying—to be refused, however, at first; with Taverner of Dover, the Baptists at Cranbrook where these had been drilling, and the White's Alley group, also refused because they were the Bell Alley people. All the people recently figuring as defendants, now appear in high favour; and in many cases the notorious Blood is the intermediary.

With the Dissenters placated, Charles felt strong enough to declare war again on the Dutch without fear of an insurrection. The weak point in his policy was finance, and he only secured money by stopping payments out of the Exchequer. When the cash in hand ran out, he had to convoke Parliament again, and the Houses obliged him to withdraw the Declaration. They did not, however, insist on any more repressive measures, and as a matter of fact persecution almost stopped till James reversed his brother's policy for a year.

Now it is surprising at first to find Baptist ministers involved in schemes of this kind; but it is as well to recognise that there were Baptists of this stamp. Their proceedings were the cause of the Conventicle Acts, and it is hard to see what less the Government could have done when confronted with meetings where preaching and plotting were blended. An honest attempt was made to divide the sheep from the goats by the Five-Mile Act, when every peaceable minister could swear that it was unlawful on any pretence to take arms against the King, and that he would acquiesce in the existing government of Church and State. Who would know, from the frequent diatribes against the Act, that it had no bearing except on people who refused this most reasonable promise?

The fact remains, that men like Blood, Gower, Hobson, Sawrey and Wigan were not content to be put down summarily. If their superior officers like Harrison were executed or banished, they remained the officers of highest rank in the disbanded army, and while its traditions were yet strong, they would make another stroke for freedom. They saw no more harm in planning an insurrection than the Royalists had seen under Cromwell; they saw no more harm in an understanding with Holland than Charles in an understanding with France or than the bishops or lords twenty years later when they plotted with William of Orange.

If this were all, we could sympathise largely with the officers. But when we find that at least four of this group, Blood, Gower, Hobson and Perrott, betrayed their friends to save their lives, we can no longer respect them, though we can understand the temptation. And until we know what Blood and Perrott meant to do with the regalia, we cannot tell whether they were mere bold robbers or whether some political motive may palliate their conduct.

Clarendon and Sheldon have often been blamed for the series of Acts that repressed dissent; but these proceedings will show the Acts were mere measures of self-defence. On the whole, the Presbyterians fared far worse than they deserved, for the provocation was given by a party whose brains and arms were Baptist. Their sins were visited on many innocent people, but Charles frequently did his best to restrain the panic and revenge of the Cavalier Parliament, and did at last permit a practical toleration.

There is a remarkable epilogue to this story of twelve years. The Baptists had suffered so much from mob violence when there were rumours of plots, that one or two astute politicians saw how to turn this to account against another party, the Roman Catholics. When Shaftesbury took refuge in the city with a Baptist minister, it was presently a renegade Baptist, Titus Oates, who infuriated the populace against the new victims.

It is well sometimes to remember that not all Baptists were ministers, and that not all Baptist ministers had an unblemished record. This study is avowedly one-sided, and it needs to be remarked that for one of the plotters mentioned here, there were hundreds who repeatedly and emphatically disavowed them, finding their interest in religion and not in politics.