

ECCLESIASTICA, THE BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE OF THE INDEPENDENT CONGREGATIONS OF AXMINSTER AND CHARD, AND THEIR PART IN THE MONMOUTH REBELLION

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Early records of Nonconformist Churches are rare. In c. 1702 Dr. Edmund Calamy¹ recorded the names of about 1,760 incumbents who had been ejected from their vicarages in the years 1660-2, the majority of them university graduates, who could not *ex animo* declare their unfeigned assent and consent to everything contained in the Prayer Book of 1662. Most of these ejected ministers gathered around them a congregation to whom they preached until the Conventicle Act of 1664 drove them underground. The Act lapsed through the prorogation of Parliament in 1668, and for nearly two years the Dissenters again worshipped as they would. Archbishop Sheldon called for a return of the numbers and locations of all conventicles, their size, kind, and 'teachers or preachers'. A Second Conventicle Act in 1670 made it easier for a single magistrate to break up a meeting and fine or imprison the worshippers. Quakers kept records of 'sufferings' but few other Nonconformist bodies committed names to writing at this time, and there are gaps in such 'church books' as have been preserved. The licences for preachers and preaching places issued under Charles II's Declaration of Indulgence in 1672 give us our last overall picture of the English Nonconformists before the Toleration Act of William and Mary's reign.

In the small volume called *Ecclesiastica* we have a unique record of the continuance of a Nonconformist congregation throughout the period of persecution. *The Book of Remembrance* was authorised by the Axminster congregation in October 1687, but, in view of the fact that it contains exact dates, the texts of various sermons and the gist of many more, it is clearly based on earlier written records.²

The Rev. Bartholomew Ashwood, B.A. was vicar of Axminster from 1656 until the Restoration, and foreseeing the shape of things to come, he gathered a dozen likeminded Puritans 'who entered into a Covenant with Christ and each other . . . giving up our selves to him to walk . . . in all his holy Commandments and Ordinances according to the Rule of his word . . . and discharging all those duties that are required of us as a Church of Christ'. They chose Mr. Ashwood as their Pastor, and to this office he was ordained by the Pastors of the Churches at Dorchester and Weymouth.

The 'gathered Church' began to grow, until the Conventicle Act made their worship illegal. The members 'resolved to stand their ground' and 'The Lord gave this people prudence to appoynt such seasons and places for their assembling together to worship the Lord, up and down, sometimes in one obscure place, sometimes in another, in woods and solitary corners, so that the enemies . . . frequently wearied themselves . . . to find the places of their assembling, and all in vain'. The Church appointed two Elders and two Deacons. Several members were fined at the Assizes, apparently for absenting themselves from their parish church, but only one member was arrested, and that when he was worshipping elsewhere. He, Thomas Dean, was imprisoned for three months.

There being 'mixtures in the purest Churches', one sister was charged with the sin of Lying. Perhaps there were other backslidings, for 'We, thy poor people, unworthy to be called thy Children' renewed their covenant, admitting 'provocations against the Lord, whereby we have . . . given him just cause to take his Candlestick from us', an echo from the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3.

The Conventicle Act of 1670 is mentioned as the '£20 Act' from the fine that could be imposed on the householder permitting the meeting, and on the preacher, or, if he could not be found, on two or more members of the congregation. Informers were to be rewarded with one-third of the fines collected. The *Ecclesiastica* describes them as 'certain lewd and

wicked persons of the baser sort'. The book continues 'Now on the Sabbath-day before this Act was to be put in Execution, This Congregation being assembled together, Mr. Ashwood preached from that scripture Heb. x, 34 . . . Then the Church unanimously agreed to keep up their assembling together, as they had done, and resolv'd the next Lord's-day (the Lord permitting) to retire into a solitary wood, only judging it prudent to change the houre of the day: And through the good hand of God towards this people they assembled together every Lord's-day, and very frequently on other daies of the week also, and never met with any Conviction by Informers . . . Sometimes the rage of the Enemy and the fury of the Oppressour have bin so restrained that they have assembled peace-ably together for a considerable space of time in one place, sometimes many Sabbath dayes successively in a wood, sometimes severall Lord's-daies in the Pastor's own hired house, and none to interrupt them. Sometimes again . . . they have bin constrain'd to retire into more solitary places, and to change the place of their assembling up and down, in woods, in fields, in obscure desert places. Sometimes . . . they have bin constrained to take the solitary night watches to assemble together to worship the Lord; but still their Church Communion, and their fellowship in the Gospel have bin continued, and members have bin added to this Church in the worst of times'.

In 1672 'For a small sune of money License and Liberty might be obtained for persons to assemble together to worship the Lord, and penall Laws . . . were suspended: but this not being en-acted Legally by Parliament continued not long . . . Now when this Indulgence was granted . . . Then this Church thought it meet to procure a convenient place for the worship of God, and accordingly hired a house at Wykecroft,³ in the parish of Axminster, which hath ever since bin ordinarily the place for their assembling together to worship the Lord, unlesse when persecution have bin so hot and violent that they have bin constrained to withdraw for a season, and retire into more private and solitary places, as the Lord hath directed them, and upon the Abatement of the storm have returned to that place again. Yea many times the Lord hath signally preserved them in that publick and open place'.

In November 1672 Mr. Ashwood was taken ill in Chard . . . in the house of Robert Batt, one of the Deacons of the Church. Expecting to die, he dictated a long letter to the Church, threatening that unless they repent and obey, the Candle and Candlestick would be taken from them . . . for 'God is preparing for the funerall of his Church in Axminster'. The Covenant was again renewed both at Chard and at Wykecroft. Mr. Ashwood's recovery was followed by a sermon on The unsearchable Riches of Christ; and somewhat later by the excommunication of several members, one for stealing a sheep, another for fraudulent dealing; one for drunkenness; and a lady member for 'her disorderly walking'. Six years later Mr. Ashwood published his book, 'The Heavenly Trade, or the Best Merchandizing', and preached his last sermon from Acts v, 30-31. It was at Chard that he was taken ill and died. The Rev. Robert Bartlett⁴ preached the funeral sermon from 2 Tim. iv, 7-8.

Services were continued with visiting preachers, until in the following spring the Church chose as their pastor Stephen Towgood. The ministers from Bridport, Compton, and Maiden Crawley ordained the young man, and the *Ecclesiastica* quotes their texts and the gist of their sermons and the 'charge' they gave to the new minister.

Persecution eased, and for two years the congregation was able to worship with an open door at 'Wickcroft'; but in 1681 and '82 they had to take to the woods again, and worshipped 'up and down'. In 1683 came news of congregations broken and scattered. 'Only this Congregation, whom the Lord wonderfully preserved and helped them to maintain their constant assembling together every Sabbath, openly in woods and retired places. Yea . . . every Sabbath-day for severall weeks successively, in one certain place with much peace and liberty'. On 5 August they celebrated the Lord's Supper in a solitary wood. Soldiers and informers were 'not far from the place . . . yet the Lord was pleased to hide and protect this Church'. Mr. Towgood chose as his text Psalm xxiii, 5. Two months later they discovered an informer, but he was 'husht out' before the Pastor came. The con-

gregation dispersed, but met again at the close of the day in a solitary place. Twice more the congregation had to disperse and re-assemble elsewhere. No less than three members of the congregation, at the risk of a £20 fine, 'offered the liberty' of their houses 'provided the people come together early in the morning'; and one of them 'contrived a place - in a secret lonesome place - beneath a bank of the earth; and there did this people enjoy many sweet, refreshing and comfortable seasons together . . . every Sabbath in the evening or night season in this secret cave . . . for the space of three moneths or upward'. Twice Mr. Towgood had a very narrow escape, once at Chard, once near Axminster, when the house where he was staying was searched as he slipped out of the back door. On the second occasion the Constable had set some persons as a guard, 'yet did he passe thorough the midst of them, and not one of them did open the mouth or lift a hand'; which suggests that many folk disliked the harrying of their Nonconformist neighbours. One J.P. hearing that the congregation had 'sat down to the Lord's supper' in a wood nearby, refused to convict anyone as the informer could not swear who was there, but some weeks later informers met five members returning home in the rain and swore that they had been at a conventicle. Refusing to pay the fine demanded, they suffered distraint of goods.

The accession of King James II, 'a professed papist', was followed by severer execution of the penal laws 'in many places', and this is reflected in the wording of *Ecclesiastica's* account of the Monmouth Rebellion. 'Now the Lord stirred up James, Duke of Monmouth (reputed son of the former king C.2), who had bin in an Exile state for some time; And on the 11th day of the 4th moneth (June) . . . he safely and peaceably landed at the haven belonging to Lyme-Regis, with a small number of men, about 80 . . . who, immediately upon his landing gave forth his declarations to restore liberty to the people of God for the worship of God, to preserve the rights and priviledges of the nation, &c. Tydings of his landing was spread abroad far and near very speedily, and divers persons from severall quarters hasted to resort to him. Now were the hearts of the people of God glad-ded, and their hopes and expectations raised that this man might be a deliverer for the nation, and the interest of Christ in it, who had bin even harrou's'd out with trouble and persecution . . . A great number of sober and pious men marched forth with the Army.

'The first day of their march they came into the Town of Axminster, where some Companies of Souldiers came towards them on each side of the Town . . . But the Lord eminently appeared, filling this new Army with wonderfull courage and sending an Hornett of fear⁵ amongst those that came to oppose them . . . And as they marched on from Town to Town the Army increased dayly . . . to severall thousands; divers also of the Brethren belonging to this Church marched along with them . . . Whiles they lay in the Town of Taunton, some few persons were . . . sent to view the motions of the Enemy that was behind them, amongst which one of them was a member belonging to this society, a faithfull Brother, named Samuel Rampson.⁶ Those persons riding forth to descry the Enemy, met with a party of them, and engaging with each other had a very smart Battle,⁷ in which . . . this Samuel Rampson was mortally wounded. . . . As the Army marched onwards, and meeting with the Enemy that came against them, there was a more sharp Battle fought,⁸ and great slaughter, in which one Henry Noon, a pious and lively Christian, a usefull member related to this Body, was also slain . . . and this Church began to be diminished. In the meantime their Communion was much interrupted in regard both the Pastor, the Ruling Elder, and several of the Brethren were with the Army.

'About the 6th day of the 5th moneth (July) there was a terrible Battle, in which many . . . was slain . . . and this great Army belonging to the D. of M. was broken and routed . . . Yea, many of the Lord's own professing people were constrain'd to hide themselves in woods and corners . . . for shelter from the fury of the Adversary, divers being taken Captive, some shut up in prison houses, other some hang'd up immediately by the hands of the Enemy. Ah! how did the Lord, by this amazing providence, correct the vain confidence . . . trusting in an arm of flesh . . .

'A little before this dreadfull Battle was fought, some of the Brethren belonging to this Church were inclin'd to leave the Army, and if by any means to return back to their own habitations: and, by the good providence of God . . . Mr. Towgood, Pastor, and Thomas Lane, Elder, returned safely . . . Mr. John Ashwood (son of the former Pastor . . .) and Thomas Smith, a very pious Christian and usefull Member of this Body . . . were apprehended and imprisoned. Such as tarried with the Army were preserved from the power of the sword . . . Another of the Brethren, named John Spiring, being taken by the rude Souldiers after the Battle . . . was stript of his rayment, and barbarously used by their hands, and imprisoned . . . Mr. John Ashwood . . . was sentenced to die as a Traytor, and the place of his Execution⁹ appoynted by the Judge; But . . . the Blessed God in whose hands are the times of all persons, so over-rul'd this sentence, that by endeavours used, a Reprieve was granted him, and afterwards a pardon procured, and his life prolonged; . . . he being afterwards called to the Pastorall Office to a Congregation in Exon. As for Thomas Smith he was sentenc'd also to dye, and the time being come to be led forth of the prison house in order to his Execution, another prisoner standing forth in his name, was carryed out of the prison in his stead, and the said Thomas Smith continuing in the prison a little time longer, having a fitt opportunity, made his escape; but he being a man of a weak constitution of body, (though he had a prosperous soul) . . . he grew very weak. Afterwards, being tost from place to place, he remained but a few weeks ere he dyed . . . Concerning the said John Spiring, he was likewise sentenc'd for banishment, and accordingly was carryed Captive into the Isle of Barbadoes, where he was sold as a slave once and again. Yet the Lord made him very usefull in the land of his captivity and house of bondage; and after some time was past, a door was open for his Redemption by paying a sume of money; which was agreed unto, and the money being collected of Christian friends (who readily communicated to the same), was sent for his ransome. Now being redeem'd from his bondage state, and returning home to his family and to the house of God . . . whilst he was on the seas, both the ship in which he sailed, with the persons and wares in it were cast away and drowned.

'There was also another Brother belonging to this society named William Comb, who suffered imprisonment at the same time, he being steadfastly purposed by the grace of God to keep himselfe pure from the corrupt worship of the nation . . . Some informer . . . carrying him before the Magistrate, who immediately sent him to prison. But no matter of fact could be charged against him of having an hand in the late Rebellion, (as it was termed) so was he afterwards acquitted by the Judge. These were the only persons belonging to this Congregation that suffered Bonds and Imprisonment at this time; The rest of the Brethren that escaped the edge of the sword and the hands of cruel enemies were constrained to lurk in holes and hide themselves in secret corners where the providence of God did open a way for their safety, which was the common lott of many hundreds this day.'

The Congregation revived their constant Communion together every Sabbath in the night season, with the exception of 27 December, when an Assembly was impossible, because of bands of soldiers ranging up and down. The spring of 1686 brought the General Pardon for the remaining untried rebels, though with a long list of those exempted from the Pardon. Mr. Towgood was safely hidden in a Christian friend's house, and managed to preach almost every Sabbath in a friend's house or in the Secret Cave. The Church held a great debate concerning the lawfulness of attending the services in the parish church. Mr. Towgood and the Ruling Elders were against such occasional conformity, holding that 'this present nationall ministry is not a ministry of Christ's Appoyntment . . . The essence of a minister lies in the consent of three wills: of God; of the people, and of the minister. The will of God is declared in the consent of the two latter . . . The present ministry . . . is imposed upon the people without their choice or consent.'

At the end of October 1686 the Church 'adventured into Wickcroft' after five years absence, and in the next year was surprised at King James's Declaration of Indulgence,

finding the King an 'unlikely instrument of the Lord's will' and comparing him with Cyrus.¹⁰ 'Surely the hearts of kings are in the hands of the Lord.'

The last twenty pages of the book contain a few cases of church discipline, the choosing of a new deacon and a ruling elder, and a running commentary on current history. Two members were taken to task for drinking to excess; one was charged with wanton behaviour with soldiers; and another with adultery. He (or she, for the book gives only initials) was excommunicated.

In 1688 'the nation was invaded by foreigners, under the Prince of Orange'. The public worship of God continued very peaceably. 'Come, behold the works of the Lord.' There are references to the Convention and to the 'Abdication' of James II; and then to Liberty of Conscience granted by Act of Parliament. The war was at times alarming, and 'a monthly fast' was requested by 'this new Elected King'. The victory at the Boyne was recorded as 'what the Lord hath done'. The French fleet raided 'Tinmouth', and 'Scripture prophecies were fulfilling apace'. Then 'It pleased the Lord' to grant victory in Ireland. And so the book goes on, mixing the election of another ruling elder and deacon with mid-week assemblies to discuss business and cases of conscience and the renewal of the 'Coyne of the Nation', and at last in 1697 with peace.

In 1698 a new meeting house was built in Axminster, and opened on 14 August. 'Blessed be God', and the book is complete.

REFERENCES

1. The best edition of Calamy's work is that of the Rev. A.G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (O.U.P., 1933).
2. The writer is indebted to Chard United Reformed Church and to Mr. Leonard Hoskins for the loan of a copy of this book. Although printed in 1874, the book is now rare, and it is uncertain whether the manuscript is still in existence.
3. Then in the occupation of Treesham Cop.
4. The minister ejected from Over Compton.
5. Cf. Deuteronomy vii, 20.
6. One of the five recently distrained.
7. At Ashill.
8. At Norton St. Philip.
9. Shepton Mallet.
10. Cf. Ezra, chapter 1.