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Was John Skinner ejected in 1662 ?

THE answer to this interesting problem reveals to us the immense value to the grubber in archæological dust, of old lists and old letters, circular letters, official letters, private letters, whose intrinsic value is often gone, that may not be more than ghostly voices of the past—lists and letters that seem to the superficial to have "Had their day, and passed away"—the tidy housekeeper can see no other use for them than to light the fires, and fill the spill-vase.

Such are two letters that alone connect John Skinner with the Parish from which Calamy says he was ejected in 1662, but can give no particulars.

Save for these letters, John Skinner would be, so far as Weston-under-Penyard is concerned, *non est*, by them, *redivivus*. How little did Skinner think, as he signed them in the quaint hand of the times, that 260 years later men would be poring over those signatures with loving interest.

These letters are (1) a circular (or rather a joint) letter sent by a group of Herefordshire Baptist Churches to a young church at Hexham, and (2) a letter sent by the "Gathered Church" (as distinct from a Parochial community) in Weston, to Oliver Cromwell in 1653. The former is incorporated in the precious Records of the Hexham Church, now bound up with the old Church Records of Fenstanton and Warboys published by the Hanserd Knollys Society; the second is to be found in a collection of "Original Letters, sent to Oliver Cromwell," published by Nicholls, and now very scarce.

The letter to Hexham was sent by a group of Baptist Churches in Herefordshire, holding "Particular" views, and probably the "Six Principles" (Heb. vi. 1, 2) and with a leaning to open communion, in which Hexham shared.

The letter is signed by Skinner, and three brethren, on behalf of Weston; by William Pritchard, and two brethren, on behalf of Abergavenny; by William Skinne (? Skinner) for "the church baptized in the Forest of Dean"; by famous John Tombes, B.D. two elders for Lintile (? Linton) in Hereford; for Bewdley; Thos.

Bolstonne and two others; for Netherton, in Gloucestershire, Richard Harrison, and Paul Frewen, both popular ministers, and William Drew; the city of Hereford by R. London, and two others; and the church at Wormbridge by John Bell.

The second letter forms one of a number of letters sent by the pastors of "Gathered Churches" to Cromwell in the same year, 1653. The Gloucester and Hereford group include two letters from Leominster, one signed by John Tombes, the Rector, who was also Pastor of the "Gathered Church," and the other by 16 persons who had seceded from Tombes' "Gathered Church." Tombes, by the way, had just been appointed one of the "Triers."

Five elders sign for Hereford, and six for Oxenden. Richard Harrison, Paul Frewen, William Drew, and four others sign for Dymock. Evidently the "Church at Netherton" and the "Church at Dymock" are identical. Giles Watkins, still pastor in 1692, signs for Cirencester, John Bell for Wormbridge, and John Skinner, for Weston-under-Penyard.

Was Skinner the Rector of Weston, as well as Pastor of the "Gathered" Baptist Church, as Tombes was at Leominster?

Calamy asserts that he was, and on his authority the Editor of the B.H.T. passed him as an "ejected" Baptist minister in his list B.H.T., No. i., Vol. i. In addition, a marble tablet, somewhat recently placed on the walls of Ryeford chapel, repeats the assertion. The editor has, however, allotted to me, living on the spot, the pleasant task of a further investigation as to whether Skinner was ever the Incumbent of the parish.

Prebendary Hawkshaw, the present Rector, says "No," and in support his gifted daughter, Mrs. Blake, gives the results of a diligent search. (1) Weston was not a separate parish until 1684. In 1662 it was merely a Chapel of Ease to Ross—so Skinner could not have been the Rector. (2) No mention is made of Skinner in the Weston Church Records, which have been carefully kept since 1568, and are in excellent preservation.

Weston is about two miles from the central Church at Ross. An extract from Fosbrook's "Ariconensis," kindly supplied by Archdeacon Winnington Ingram, gives the following pretty vignette of the Commonwealth minister at Ross, who held the living for twelve years:

"One, Jonathan Smith, was a "Thrum" Vicar of Ross from before 1658 till 1661. He was born in Rochester in 1609, was educated in Ireland, was apprenticed to a tailor in Canterbury, and was afterwards a bankrupt hosier at Sandwich; he officiated at Ross for 12 years, was expelled from Ross at the return of

Charles II., and died in 1670, aged 72 [the curious arithmetic is Fosbrook's, not mine. J.S.]. He incurred the displeasure of the loyal town of Ross by celebrating the defeat of the King at Worcester, by a feast of cakes and ale, and was otherwise distasteful to his parishioners." Apparently also to the historian, whose choice of a nickname is meant to imply that he could not perform parish duties well, but only thrum like a poor player on the lute.

Skinner was Pastor of the Baptist Gathered Church at Weston, about the time that Smith held the vicarage of Ross, as our two letters have shown. What were the relations between the men? Was Skinner just an ordinary curate, paid out of Smith's stipend of some £250? More probably there were no official relations at all. Smith and his son (the vicar of Hempsted) declared themselves in 1672 as Congregationalists, and would not believe in one minister controlling another. But Smith might be glad to let Skinner have the use of the Chapel of Ease, legally under the vicar's control, for the worship of his Gathered Church.

Moreover, we may look again at the letters of 1653, and notice that John Tombes is at the centre of this group. Now, after he became a Baptist, he was chosen minister of Bewdley by the people, and there he gathered also a separate Church. To the living of Bewdley he added also the living of Ross; but when he was restored to the living of Leominster he apparently resigned Ross, and Smith followed. Without discussing the conduct of Tombes, may we not infer that all the Baptist movement in this district was due to him? His precedent would suggest that Skinner, in charge of a Gathered Church, would readily be allowed the use of the Chapel of Ease. Any such arrangement, being quite unknown to the law, would speedily end at the Restoration, long before any Act of Uniformity, in such a "loyal town of Ross." Skinner evidently withdrew, and when we remember that there was a William Skinne[r] connected with the Forest of Dean church, we see he would have a haven of refuge not far away.

In 1672 we tread again with sure foot. On 26 May, application was made for five licences, by Owen Davies, perhaps the dissenting minister at Mitcheldean, hard by. They were desired by John Skinner for his house at Clearwell, John Chapman for Ruardean, Richard Perkins for Weston-under-Penyard, Jonathan Smith for Ross, and Francis Harris for Painswick. Here is substantially the same group of churches as twenty years earlier, not crushed by persecution; it would take us too far afield to follow up the absentees. Four years later, 110 Dissenters were found at Ross.

according to the Compton MS.; but as in 1672 there was a Presbyterian licensed there, it is impossible to say how many of these belonged to the congregation of Skinner and Perkins.

Possibly we get a last glimpse of our friend at the General Assembly in London, September 7, 1689. In company with the aged Hanserd Knollys was a John Skinner. Both are missing from the Assembly three years later. Knollys has entered upon his well-earned rest, in his 93rd year. Not unlikely that John Skinner of Weston shortly preceded or followed his old friend to the House of Rest. The Weston Baptists were represented in London in 1689, and 1692 by Richard Perkins, whom we saw there in 1672.

In 1724 ground was bought of the Earl of Kent at Ryeford, a small hamlet of Weston; and about a mile from the church to-day there still stand the quaint little Meeting House with its one Gallery, and the Manse built thereon; and still to be seen is the old dignified Carolean chair, probably once occupied by the first minister.

A certain aureola surrounds the brow of the "Ejected Minister," and I give place to none in my homage to the memory of the "brave 2,000," but may I not suggest that at the least surely no less worthy were the men who never availed themselves of the emoluments and prestige of the Establishment wrested from the Bishops by the Presbytery, who often suffered bitter persecution at the hands of the New National Church, so that as Anabaptist John Milton cried, "new Presbytery is old Priest writ large," whose request to form Congregational Churches was burnt by the hand of the common hangman. And such was John Skinner, who never notched his conscience by occupying a position in the Establishment, which his very standing as Baptist Congregationalist condemned. And Ryeford has the distinction of being one of the oldest Baptist Churches in the country with an authentic and contemporary record.

JOHN STANLEY.