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IN METHODIST BYWAYS

The Ballad-Monger

By the Rev. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.

IT is well known that the eighteenth century saw the gradual decay of that popular figure, the ballad-monger. Often coarsely-worded as well as coarsely-printed, the familiar broadsheets of the preceding century had sometimes been outspoken to the point of indecency, and would have provided indisputable grounds for slander actions in modern courts. A few ballad-mongers still bawled their wares, however, in spite of Methodism. Not unnaturally, they joined in the chorus of protest against the new spiritual zeal which threatened their very livelihood. The trend of social life was also against them, however. The broadsheet was gradually giving way before the advance of the pamphlet and the newspaper. In the Rev. Richard Green's list of six hundred *Anti-Methodist Publications issued during the Eighteenth Century* bitter lampoons jostle with lengthy and learned arguments, but of them all only three are described as broadsheets. There must have been many more, of course. But the broadsheet is a particularly ephemeral type of literature.

The present writer is the more pleased to have secured what is probably a typical anti-Methodist ballad-sheet, apparently unknown either to Green, the *Methodist Book*

Room, or the British Museum. It measures ten-and-a-half by seventeen inches, and contains nineteen verses, in two columns, under the title:

THE
METHODISTS WELCOME TO PEWSEY.
A NEW BALLAD.

to the Tune of, *The Cordelier and Thief*; or, *Abbot of Canterbury*.

As so often with such productions, this ballad is not completely original, being based (without acknowledgement) on some verses in a volume of poems published by Samuel Bowden, M.D., in 1754. Bowden had entitled his effusion: 'The Mechanic Inspired: or, the Methodist's Welcome to Frome.' In this he had vented his rage against Methodist lay preachers thus:

'Say, brother fanatics, what led you to Frome,
Where weavers expound as they sit at the loom;
Where mechanics inspired, the Gospel explain,
And weave at a text as well as a chain? . . .
Here tinkers and tailors deep doctrine can handle,
By the light of the Spirit—
or light of the candle.'

Ten years later one of the Calvinist protégés of the Countess of Huntingdon, the Rev. Joseph Townsend, became Rec-

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tor of Pewsey. It was probably at his invitation that in October of that year John Wesley paid his only recorded visit to the place, after breakfasting at Devizes with 'a black swan, an honest lawyer'! Wesley's *Journal* reveals the determined efforts that were made at Pewsey to drown his appeal:

'I found a neighbouring gentleman had been there, moving every stone to prevent my preaching. I was informed his first design was to raise a mob; then he would have had the churchwardens interpose. Whether they intended it or no I cannot tell, but they neither did not say anything. The congregation filled a great part of the church, and were all deeply attentive.'

It seems at least possible that this same anonymous 'neighbouring gentleman' decided to try a new weapon in his warfare against the Methodists—a ballad. At any rate, either he or someone else certainly got hold of Bowden's poem and adapted it to the locality of Pewsey by the alteration or omission of a few passages. The unknown editor also divided it up into verses, added a chorus, smoothed out the metre, and sharpened its sting in many places, so that 'To rely all on faith, and to deal with the devil' became in the new version 'To be saved by our Faith, tho' we act like the Devil'. One can imagine the enthusiastic Methodist - baiter

getting hold of some down-at-heel ballad-monger to sing his production up and down the streets of Pewsey, distributing the ballad-sheets freely to all and sundry. One can also imagine the Methodists throwing all the copies they could lay hands on into the fire! The historian must be pardoned his satisfaction that at least one copy escaped.

This 'welcome' to Methodist preachers commences:

'Ye vagabond Levites, who
ramble about
To gull with your Priest-
Craft an ignorant Rout;
A While your Nonsensical
Canting suspend,
And in Silence my honest
new Ballad attend.'

The opening verse, like the other eighteen, is followed by the conventional 'Derry down, down, high derry down'. The ballad continues:

'These pretended Reformers
recruiting are come,
For *volunteer* Saints, with
canonical Drum,
With impudent Jargon, and
spiritual Pother,
They damn Half Mankind,
and Plunder the Other.
By Jesuits deluded with pious
Commission
To kindle the schismatic
Coals of Sedition;
The Dupes of sly Romish
itinerant Liars,
The Spawn of *French*
Prophets and Mendicant
Friars.'

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The unfounded charge of Methodists being in the pay of Rome is followed by others equally wide of the mark. It is obvious that the verses are based partly on hearsay, partly on some acquaintance with the scum which Methodism had dragged along in its trail, those so-called 'Gospel - Preachers' whom Wesley abhorred. Wesley, indeed, would have agreed with the sarcasm of verse 15, though he would certainly have repudiated its application to Methodism in general:

'How *modest* these innocent
Methodist-Elves,
Who *damn* all *Mankind*, but
are *Righteous* Themselves.
Those who Plunder the Poor
are surely accurst,
And of all Rogues the sanctified
Rogue is the worst.'

The closing verses reveal the author as a typical humanist of the day, with no place at all in his philosophy for any kind of religious experience:

'Begone, ye false Prophets, go
whine out *Damnation*,
Experiences, *Impulses*, *Re-*
generation:
We want no such *Tutors* our
Duty to shew,

If we copy in *Practice* but
half what we know.'

A final word must be spoken in vindication of at least one ballad-monger of the same time and district, a poor rag-collecting pedlar who listened one day at Bristol to a new kind of ballad-singing. It was a Methodist service. So charmed was he that he learnt one of their hymns:

'Happy the man that finds the
grace,
The blessings of God's chosen
race;
The wisdom coming from
above,
The faith that sweetly works
by love.'

Selling his wares in Frome one day he spoke to his customers of this Charles Wesley hymn, and at their request sang it. So delighted were they that he was sent back to Bristol to plead for a Methodist preacher. Thus Methodism had come to Frome. And whilst the old anti-Methodist broadsheet originating there is now but a quaint museum-piece, Methodists both in Frome and elsewhere still sing that other ballad of Charles Wesley's as heartily as ever.