

A WARMED HEART IN WALES

THE STORY OF HOWELL HARRIS

BY REV. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.

Wales has known many great revivals and many great revivalists, but it is doubtful whether any of their native evangelists have surpassed in self-sacrificing zeal and widespread influence the Welsh forerunner of the Methodist Revival, Howell Harris. Yet to most English Methodists he is hardly a name, let alone a living memory. This deficiency was in part remedied by the lecture delivered at the Methodist Conference on July 18th, under the auspices of the Wesley Historical Society, by the Rev. Griffith T. Roberts, M.A., B.D. In printed form the lecture is a book of over eighty pages, published by the Epworth Press at 3/6d. under the title, **Howell Harris**. A full-length comparison between Harris and the Wesleys would be a valuable study, and a few points that would be brought out in such a study are here suggested, though we would focus our attention on the conversion which in each case released the spiritual power for a great life's work.

Harris was a younger man than either John or Charles Wesley, being born at Trevecka, near Talgarth, in Brecknockshire in 1714. Like the Wesley family, there were three surviving Harris sons, each of whom achieved some fame. While the three Wesleys all became clergy (though none of them with a living), the three Harris boys remained laymen, Joseph (1704-1764) becoming an Assay Master of the Royal Mint and a well known scientific author, Thomas (1707-1782) a well-to-do London tailor who retired to become a J.P. and Sheriff of his native county, and Howell (1714-1773), who was by turns schoolmaster, wandering preacher, and Captain of Militia. Howell Harris four times offered himself for ordination, and was four times refused. The reason is to be found in his overpowering enthusiasm to proclaim the gospel of saving grace. Like John Wesley, his warmed heart led him into ways of persecution as well as of spiritual progress.

The turning point of his spiritual career was in 1735. On Palm Sunday of that year, March 30th, the vicar of Talgarth reproved his parishioners for their neglect of Holy Communion, saying, "If you are not fit to come to the Lord's Table, you are not fit to come to Church, you are not fit to live, you are not fit to die." Howell Harris, a young man just turned 21, took the words to heart, using them not only as a constant challenge to himself, but as the means of converting others. He undertook a rigid spiritual discipline, which, like Wesley's, included the keeping of a diary which still remains the most valuable source of our knowledge of him. Again like John Wesley, at this period "faith" was but a word to him, and his efforts to save his own soul took the form of reading, meditation, prayer and fasting, and the denying himself of many creature comforts. Thus prepared he attended Holy Communion on

the Sacrament, simply believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, we should receive forgiveness of all our sins." "And so it was to me," he added. "I was convinced by the Holy Ghost, that Christ died for me, and that all my sins were laid on Him; I was now acquitted at the bar of Justice, and in my conscience; this evidenced itself to be true faith, by the peace, joy, watchfulness, hatred to sin, and fear of offending God, that followed it."

On May 21st (again a Whitsunday) three years later, Charles Wesley entered into a similar experience, expressing it in memorable words—

"My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee."

Three days later still his elder brother John felt his heart "strangely warmed," saying, "I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me that He had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death."

The spiritual process was not complete, of course, no more for Harris than it had been for the Wesleys. It was not until June 18th, 1735, that Harris entered in his diary a passage reminding us vividly of John Wesley's well known words:—"I felt suddenly my heart melting within me like wax before the fire with love to God my Saviour . . . Then was a cry in my inmost soul, which I was totally unacquainted with before, 'Abba Father! Abba Father!' I could not help calling God my Father; I knew that I was His child, and that He loved me, and heard me."

Speedily the Man with the Warmed Heart got to work in Wales. When John Wesley eventually passed through his similar experience three years later Harris had already gathered many converts into a score of societies in Wales, particularly in the south. Soon he was a fellow-worker with the Wesleys—or they with him—respected and loved by them both, even though they understood some of his faults, and tried to guard against the difficult situations sometimes caused by his hasty temper and too-impetuous zeal.

The remaining chapters in the story of Howell Harris cannot be told here: the spreading revival; the reciprocal visits between Harris, George Whitefield, and the Wesleys; the co-operation and then the rivalry of Daniel Rowlands; the disruption of Welsh Methodism; the founding of Harris's "monastery" at Trevecka, the reconciliations and peaceful ministry of his latter years. For those Mr. Robert's book should be read. One thing is almost certain. We shall turn from our reading with a renewed conviction that God has one work, but many instruments, that in John Wesley's own day—and even **before** his actual day—there was a man with a warmed heart in Wales. And if then, and there—

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“A Warmed Heart in Wales: The Story of Howell Harris.” *Joyful News* (Sept. 20, 1951), 7.

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¹*HSP* (1739), 118.