

For King and Country

TO the defence of Newcastle against the Young Pretender had swiftly been rallied about fifteen thousand soldiers,

In Wesley's Day

most of them encamped on Newcastle Moor. Quite naturally, especially in view of the unexpected inactivity, they made merry in Newcastle itself, much to the disgust of the more responsible citizens. On October 26, 1745, John Wesley writes thus to Alderman Ridley:—

"My soul has been pained day by day, even in walking the streets of Newcastle, at the senseless, shameless wickedness, the ignorant profaneness of the poor men to whom our lives are entrusted. The continual cursing and swearing, the wanton blasphemy of the soldiers in general, must needs be a torture to the sober ear, whether of a Christian or an honest infidel."

Wesley then asks, "Is there no man who careth for these souls?" He knows the answer, however—

"Doubtless there are some who ought so to do. But many of these, if I am rightly informed, receive large pay, and do just nothing."

That this was true of many of the Army chaplains of Wesley's day is amply confirmed from several sources. Nearly twenty years later Duncan Wright, a Methodist soldier, could still write—

"Were the chaplains of real piety and courage, much good might be done in the army; but the chaplaincy is generally a kind of sinecure, and the care of souls is left to any worthless wretch that will do it at an easy rate. When we lay in one city the care of four or five regiments was left to an unhappy man who was an object of common ridicule among the soldiers for his perpetual drunkenness."

As the regular chaplains could not, or

would not, tackle the problem, Wesley offers his own services—

"I am ready to do what in me lies to call these poor sinners to repentance once or twice a day (while I remain in these parts), at any hour, or at any place. And I desire no pay at all for doing this, unless what my Lord shall give at His appearing. . . . I should rejoice to serve, as I am able, my King and Country."

He realises that objections may be urged against preaching to soldiers. But to the charge that he might infect them with some kind of "fancy religion" he says—

"Let the officers hear with their own ears: and they may judge whether I do not preach the plain principles of manly, rational religion."

Alderman Ridley did put Wesley's suggestion before the army authorities, however, though the outcome is not quite clear. Whether with permission or without it, shortly afterwards Wesley commenced preaching to troops outside the camp, undeterred by the persistent rainy weather. At first, he admits—

"I could not reach their hearts. The words of a scholar did not affect them like those of a dragoon or a grenadier."

Soon, however, the crowds became larger and more attentive, including people from Newcastle. Wesley even turned his attention to the numbers of German mercenary soldiers, "standing disconsolate at the skirts of the congregation." To these, he says—

"I was constrained (though I had discontinued it so long) to speak a few words in their own language. Immediately they gathered up close together, and drank in every word."

It is good to think of John Wesley, as voluntary chaplain, thus repaying part of the debt which he owed to those Moravian Germans who earlier had led him along the pathway of faith.

F. B.

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