

National Day of Prayer

"FEAR drives the wretched to prayer."
So wrote that "ancient heathen,"

In Wesley's Day

whom John Wesley occasionally quoted, Seneca. The truth of his saying was evident on Wednesday, December 18, 1745. Three weeks earlier the

Government had announced "a general fast, throughout Great Britain, on the 18th of December next." Such was the national fear both of the actual invasion of the Young Pretender from Scotland and of possible invasion from France, that "alarm posts" were arranged in London, and everyone was schooled in the siren system of two hundred years ago—"7 cannon, one fir'd every half minute from the Tower, to be answer'd from St. James Park." On hearing this signal, "every officer and soldier in the six regiments of militia, without waiting for beat of drum, or any other notice," must immediately "repair with their arms, and the usual quantity of powder and ball, to their respective rendezvouses" (1)

Panic was in the air. The setting was right to drive people to their knees—having first of all denied their stomachs, for this was to be a National Fast, as well as a National Day of Prayer. On the 18th "the house of peers went in a grand procession to the collegiate church of St. Peter's, Westminster," while the Commons attended a service in St. Margaret's. Both preachers took as their text—apparently without collaboration—"Remember whence thou art fallen, and repent." Contemporary reports say that "there was the greatest attendance of lords and commons ever known on the like occasion."

Stirred to action by Methodist tract-distributing, the city authorities printed

An Earnest Exhortation to Serious Repentance, which on the day of the Fast—

"was given at every church-door, in or near London, to every person who came out, and one left at the house of every householder who was absent from church."

This tract reminded the citizens, with lavish italics, that—

"we have yet long been a most rebellious and ungrateful people, rendering to God evil for good, and that continually."

It warned them, too, of what might ensue were this Fast Day not solemnly observed—

"All that is valuable in this world to free Britons and true protestants, is likely to be lost for ever, and our very nation become a province of France, and the bondmen of Rome, under the viceroyship of an abjured pretender, guided by the councils of priests and Jesuits."

A note at the end suggested that penitent citizens would find prayers appropriate for the occasion both in the Book of Common Prayer and in that religious best-seller of the day, the *Whole Duty of Man*.

The Methodists were not behindhand in making arrangements for an effective observance of the National Fast. Their early morning service was put forward an hour to 4 a.m., and Wesley preached on "Turn ye . . . with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments." At 9 a.m. there was a Methodist service in the West Street Chapel, and 5 p.m. saw solemn Methodists—and more solemn non-Methodists—assembled once more at the Foundery. Wesley's comment on the day is this—

"Abundance of people were at West Street chapel and at the Foundery, both morning and evening: as also (we understood) at every place of public worship throughout London and Westminster. And such a solemnity and seriousness everywhere appeared as had not been lately seen in England."

F. B.

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“National Day of Prayer.” *Methodist Recorder* (December 27, 1945): 1

In Wesley’s Day.

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