

Prodigal Turns Preacher

WHEN John Wesley set out for Newcastle on February 14, 1746, he

In Wesley's Day

had a companion for the road. His name was Richard Moss, who had become Wesley's right-hand man and then a trusted preacher. Born in 1718 at Hurleston, a tiny though straggling Cheshire village, the death of baby Richard's mother led to his being brought up by his grandfather, a tailor, to whom he was apprenticed in 1729. Much of his wild youth is reminiscent of the Prodigal Son—

"I fell again into drinking, diversions, and the company of loose women. . . . After this, having spent all the money I had saved, and beginning to be bare of clothes, I began to consider what an unhappy condition I was in."

Coming to London as a lad of nineteen, an evil companion soon helped him to break the good resolutions which he had made. Two years later he was persuaded by the master-tailor and foreman where he worked to go to the Foundery, where under John Wesley's preaching a vivid experience of conversion was his—

"In the middle of the sermon, I found myself overshadowed by a divine power. I was lost in God. . . . I was more in heaven than on earth. I felt nothing of the body. I saw nothing but heaven and God. When I came to myself, toward the latter end of the sermon, I was upon my knees."

This was in February, 1744. The following February saw him setting off as John Wesley's body-servant on the evangelist's "northern journey." The illness of a preacher at Newcastle—John Downes—coincided with Moss's inner urge to express himself in a sermon, to such good effect that Wesley left the fledgling preacher behind when he himself returned south. The following

months were months to be remembered. It would have been excitement enough—and danger enough—merely to try out his preaching-wings on rough eighteenth century crowds. Added to that, however, was the thrill of a narrow escape from a press-gang, followed quickly by arrest—and then by an unexpected rescue. By slow and hazardous preaching-stages Moss reached London once more in July.

Before winter was out he was again accompanying Wesley to the North, spending the Lent of 1746 in Newcastle, where "the Rebels were then daily expected"—and the people more serious-minded as a result. Back in London by July again, the winter found him collapsed in fever. He had proved his worth, however, and at the next Conference Wesley named him one of his "Assistants," and appointed him one of the first masters for Kingswood School, opened the following Midsummer Day. "Grave and weighty in his behaviour," says Wesley, Moss got on well at Kingswood until Walter Sellon's livelier methods caused dissension. During the autumn of 1748 he was once more Wesley's companion on a preaching-tour—to the West Country this time. In 1755 his name appeared among the Itinerant Preachers, as the "Assistant" for his native Cheshire, although in the following January Wesley apparently sent him into the Birstal Circuit.

Richard Moss then disappears from the scene until 1767, when Wesley, writing to George Whitefield about the shortage of preachers, says—

"But some of the local preachers are equal both in grace and gifts to most of the itinerants. Such is Richard Moss in particular."

Wesley's next phrase is significant: "And I heartily rejoice when these are removed into a larger field of action." Such was the lot of Richard Moss. Ordained by the Bishop of London, he ended his days as a missionary in the West Indies.

F. B.

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