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The Indulgence of 1687 in Wales

TRAFODION CYMDEITHAS HANES BEDYDDWYR

CYMRU: 1924. "Declarasiwn 1687: Tipyu o'i Hanes a Barn Cymru aur dano," gan T. Richards, M.A., D.Litt., Maesteg, tt. 52.

FOR the ignorant, the above may be interpreted as "Transactions of the Historical Society of the Baptists of Wales, 1924." A booklet of 52 pp., it consists entirely of an address delivered to the Society on September 23, 1924, by Dr. Richards, which he modestly calls, "Some Notes on the History of the Declaration of Indulgence, 1687, and on the attitude of Wales towards it."

To students of the history of religion in Wales, the author is already well known as one of the very few who are devoting themselves to the work of research in that field with scientific thoroughness and great success. He has already proved his extraordinary capacity for such a task. Older historians, like Joshua Thomas and Thomas Rees, with one or two others, may have scratched the surface here and there, while more recent and better equipped students like Mr. Shankland and Principal J. H. Davies, have delved a little deeper in patches; yet Dr. Richards must have found the seventeenth century to be almost virgin soil for work such as his. Moreover, he seems bent upon carrying on his operations systematically over the whole ground, and he has already brought to light many treasures which call for still more minute investigation. His volume of over three hundred pages on the *History of the Puritan Movement in Wales*, covered the period from 1639 to 1653, that is, from the institution of the first Separatist Church in Wales at Llanvaches, Monmouthshire, up to the time when the Propagation Act for Wales expired. It was published in 1920. His still fuller volume on *Religious Developments in Wales from 1654 to 1662*, saw the light in 1923. These were both written in English. Several other contributions in English and Welsh deal with single episodes and personalities in the religious history of Wales, both inside and outside this period. They are all crammed full (almost too full for any general consumption) of all kinds of interesting facts about men

and movements which were very little or not known at all before. Each of them in turn put the future historian of religion in Wales more and more heavily in debt to Dr. Richards. They are all so interesting that one is relieved to realise, after taking thought, that in none of them has Dr. Richards quite succeeded in writing history in any literary sense. He still may do so, but so far one's main regret is that he has given us something betwixt and between. He has not been satisfied with a clear record of patient research, and yet he has not quite succeeded in transforming it into an interesting historical narrative in style and arrangement. It is something less than the one and something more than the other—and the something more is not always to the good. There is danger in such a *via media*. His style has always been rather too rich and allusive for a clear record of individual discoveries and (one is tempted to say) sometimes too blunt and acid in its personal references and inferences for the sober historical critic. The reason for this is, of course, that Dr. Richards is too much alive to be satisfied with a bare record of facts, and too much interested in their meaning to allow any facts to pass without anticipating the contribution they are likely to make to the finished history that must one day come. I, for one, am not anxious to deny his dangerous right to the double rôle of the writer of history and of the successful researcher, but it is evident that the task is a very difficult one, and it is not many who have succeeded in overcoming its difficulty.

In any case, as an ordinary teacher of general church history in a Welsh Theological College, I have to devote all my energies, unfortunately, to the successful and thankless task of keeping abreast with the rapid strides of such specialists like Dr. Richards in all parts of the field. One can, therefore, only look from afar with envy upon their fruitful work of research, and share only by proxy in their joy of discovery in fields like the early history of Nonconformity in Wales, while accepting humbly and thankfully at second-hand the treasures they bring home rejoicing. We can only dream of the time when it will be possible in Wales for those who teach a theological subject to share also, to some extent, in the thorough and scientific research of men like Dr. Richards. At present, he stands almost alone so far as any comprehensive work of research into the origin and early history of Nonconformity in Wales is concerned. He certainly receives no help from the theological colleges, which ought to be, under proper conditions, the inspiration and the home of all work of this kind.

In the contribution before us, Dr. Richards deals with an episode which takes him far on towards the end of the seventeenth century. The attitude of the later Stuart kings towards

the Nonconformists, of which these Declarations of Indulgence are one expression, is a curious instance of the tortuous ways in which their mind naturally worked. They are signal instances of how the cunning mind can blind and gull itself by its own superficial cleverness, and therefore concludes that other minds can be as easily blinded and gulled by its tricks.

Much more even than in the case of the Indulgence of 1672, that of 1687 was a fatuous instance of laying the snare in the sight of the bird. This special investigation by Dr. Richards into its reception by the Welsh people shows that it was no more successful in Wales than elsewhere.

Dr. Richards is naturally compelled to devote some space to a general description of the historical situation as a whole, to the character of James II., and to the contents and form of the Declaration itself, as well to the attitude of English Nonconformity generally to it. But even in these preliminary discussions he is not satisfied with a second-hand description, but keeps close to the original documents and sources of information.

On page 14 he comes to the question of the reception given to the Declaration of 1687 in Wales. So far as the Nonconformists are concerned, there are three aspects to the problem.

1. The first is how far they actually made use of the freedom provided by the Indulgence without even asking for the legal recognition it provided.

2. The second is to what extent they went even so far as to register formally under its provisions.

3. The third asks how many of them definitely expressed their approval of it, and their gratitude for it.

These three represent quite different attitudes, and probably to some extent quite different types among the Nonconformists. Of the last, it is quite easy to dispose. Out of the sixty addresses of thanks to the king for his gracious clemency, published in the *London Gazette*, three only came from Wales—one from some Independents in Monmouthshire, one from a group of Independents in North Wales, but emanating especially from Shrewsbury, and one from some Presbyterians, Baptists, and Independents in south-west Wales (including especially the district around Swansea). There is evidently some mystery surrounding all three. As usual, no names are attached to them in the Gazette, and there is no strong reason for thinking that any of them are genuine and spontaneous expressions of the mind of any convinced Nonconformists. They were all probably engineered in some way or other by the king's agents, working on the fears or greed of a few nominal Puritans, who were ready, at a price, to become the king's tools.

Dr. Richards describes particularly the attitude of six more