

William Thomas Whitley.

IT was with profound regret that we heard of the death of our President, William Thomas Whitley, M.A., LL.M., LL.D., F.T.S., F.R.Hist.S., in his eighty-seventh year, on Thursday, December 18th, 1947. By common consent he was the outstanding British Baptist historian. No one had done more to preserve and interpret the records of our past. We owe a great debt to the research pioneers, Crosby, Ivimey, Rippon, Underhill and others, but all would agree that the debt owed to Dr. Whitley is immeasurably greater. Baptist history and traditions were his close study for sixty years. To this study he brought a trained and disciplined mind, with the result that obscure and disputed points were settled, inaccuracies corrected, and conclusions reached which have stood the test of time. His knowledge of dates, persons and churches was encyclopaedic, and this knowledge he cheerfully placed at the service of others. He was known among Baptists of the five continents as a statesman of international repute, and his correspondence was world-wide.

He was the founder and driving force of our Society, and his service during the past forty years can hardly be measured. Prior to the Society's formation he enlisted, and obtained, warm-hearted support from Dr. J. H. Shakespeare, Principal G. P. Gould, Judge William Willis, and others who were high in the counsels of the denomination. He convinced them, and through them, the Baptist Union Council, of the urgency and usefulness of such a Society; and he it was who, on the instruction of the Council, moved the resolution at the fourth session of the Assembly at Bloomsbury on Thursday, April 30th, 1908, "That the members of the Assembly of the Baptist Union cordially approve of the proposal to form a Baptist Historical Society, and trust that this important denominational work will receive practical and general support." Naturally Dr. Whitley was elected the first secretary and, with unselfish devotion to the work of the Society, he retained this office for twenty-seven years. On his retirement in 1935 he was elected Vice-President, and in 1947 succeeded Dr. Wheeler Robinson as President. He edited the seven volumes of the *Transactions* from 1908 to 1921, and for a further fourteen years was either editor or joint-editor of seven volumes of *The Baptist Quarterly*. Articles by him, both signed and unsigned, enriched all the fourteen volumes, and Dr. Wheeler Robinson's tribute on his retirement may well be recalled: "Dr. Whitley's resignation of the office of Secretary was announced in our issue of last July, and he has now felt obliged to give up his editorial work, performed so generously and faithfully through the last twenty-eight years. The fourteen volumes of the

combined work, are a great and enduring monument of this devotion—both through his own signed contributions, and also through the large amount of valuable material which he has constantly added to the work of others, or as detached notes. We renew the expression of the Society's gratitude to him, its founder and its outstanding worker during so long a period. We hope that we shall still have both contributions and counsel from him for a long time to come." That hope was abundantly fulfilled, for his contributions and counsel continued to the end.

Dr. Whitley was born in Mildmay Terrace, Islington, on May 16th, 1861, but the family soon moved to Epping Forest where, he tells us in his typewritten *Reminiscences*, "the joy was to go blackberrying, armed against adders with a club to dash out their brains when we had pinned them down with a forked stick; but we never saw even one." Those who knew Dr. Whitley at meetings of the Ministerial Recognition Committee will recall that occasionally he asked a candidate "at what hour do you start your studies." Perhaps the genesis of this question is to be found in an early experience at school at Chigwell. "There," he relates, "on the scholarship side, Latin was the staple; the *Public School Latin Primer* introduced to a new world where I got into trouble by thinking that the 'poetry' of exceptions was the main thing, rather than the mere prose of dull rules. Once this was cleared up I shot ahead so that soon I was promoted too fast; and, though I won a football as a prize, found that I could not keep up with the fourth form. The headmaster came to the rescue, and let me use his study from eight in the morning for my 'home-work'." The headmaster's study at eight in the morning, after breakfast at home and a fairly long walk over fields! No wonder that ministerial recognition candidates who considered ten o'clock, or thereabouts, a reasonable hour to commence their studies earned his displeasure.

The return of the family to Highbury introduced young Whitley to the newly opened Highbury Hill Baptist Church, and it was there that his conversion and baptism took place. This church had been fostered by the London Baptist Association during the presidency of W.G. Lewis, of Westbourne Grove, and the saintly James Culross, later Principal of Bristol Baptist College, had been called from Stirling to be its first minister. Dr. Whitley ever remembered this church, its minister and officers, with affection. Its senior deacon, John Sands, was well known in the wider life of the denomination. He had served on the London Baptist Association Council from its inception in 1865, was treasurer of the Baptist Union for approximately ten years from 1869, and was a generous subscriber to various denominational funds. He was more than the wealthy and experienced business

man, however, for he was a personal evangelist ever ready to speak the challenging word for his Lord. And, Dr. Whitley records, "it was to the stately deacon that I owed the direct appeal. 'Was I going to give myself to serve the Lord?' He had taken me for a walk, and I can remember exactly where he came to this point. The church was much perturbed when three brothers applied for Church membership, aged ten, twelve, fourteen. We knew no theology, only our Bible. But mother had drilled us on her own lines, as a notebook still testifies, and the leading deacon followed up: so with two cousins we were all baptised." It was at Highbury Hill that Dr. Whitley developed the taste for music that remained throughout life. There was no organ, but his uncle, Arthur Rooke, led the singing and an unofficial choir of "good singers clustered in the front pews." He specially delighted in oratorios and the Victorian practice of hymn singing and music in the home.

After a year at University College School, in which one or two prizes fell to his lot, he was transferred to a private school in Hastings. Here, he developed qualifications for the future editorship of our *Transactions* and *The Baptist Quarterly*. He relates: "The school was well conducted, and the boarders were encouraged to develop hobbies. I chose printing. . . . In after days I found it quite useful to understand these technicalities, to choose type, estimate the space required for an article, fill a stick, transfer to a galley, make a page, insert to a forme, wedge up the whole, and pull off the sheets required." Securing first prize for mathematics and first for all subjects, Whitley passed on to Cambridge where he gained exhibitions and his M.A. in 1883 and LL.M. in 1889. In his *Reminiscences*, he gives an interesting glimpse of St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church: "So next to Cavendish College on the Hills Road. The head chanced to be a Baptist, and introduced me at St. Andrew's Street Chapel, which was both historic and flourishing. Though many pews were let twice over, yet one large square pew was set apart for college men; quite an advance from the days when a blank wall faced the street, and lofty stout railings protected the chapel from rowdy undergraduates. Robert Hall's pulpit of very remarkable shape, still graced the place, and, in front of it, another large pew held the singers who led assisted by a harmonium. . . . My singing tenor helped, and before long I had the choice of the Varsity pew, or the harmonium stool." T. Graham Tarn was the minister at this time.

It was Dr. Whitley's intention on leaving the University to enter the teaching profession, and Cambridge dons gave him good testimonials. But then he encountered unexpected obstacles. A don, about to take a headship, told him "all my masters must belong to the Church of England." Another took the same view.

However, says Dr. Whitley, "a college in Delhi seemed to open a door where no Church was established, and a prospect which was decidedly attractive . . . But to my great astonishment, when interviewing the authorities, my plain statement that I should be a member of the Baptist Church there proved fatal." No wonder that Dr. Whitley remained an uncompromising Free Churchman. Happily things are vastly different today; nevertheless, in many scholastic appointments and in all national celebrations, the Anglican remains the privileged and the Free Churchman the handicapped.

Later came the call to the ministry, and Whitley entered Rawdon College, of which his uncle, T. G. Rooke, was Principal. His love for his Alma Mater never waned, and when in the mood, he could tell many stories of those far off College days and of the overwhelming hospitality of Yorkshire hosts. During his first short pastorate at Bridlington (1888-1891) he took some of his uncle's classes at Rawdon, and it was hinted to him that he was likely to be invited to join the staff. Before this eventuated, however, Dr. Maclaren of Manchester conveyed to him an invitation from Australia, and in 1891 he left this country to become the first Principal of the newly-founded Baptist College of Victoria. This position he held for eleven years. He also became member of the Senate of Melbourne University, whose LL.D. he gained in 1897, and for five years a lecturer at Queen's College, Melbourne. He also did considerable preaching and lecturing in other parts, and relates that at Adelaide he was bombarded with miscellaneous questions. One question and answer are worthy of record:

- Q. "Do you think that secular instruction should be intermingled with theological?"
- A. "I should recommend one thing at a time, concentrating attention on each; first, a good general education to hold your own in society; next, the special preparation for the ministry; then seeking and securing a partner for life."

The last recommendation drew attention to a student in a rear seat, who could not disentangle himself from his sweetheart! It may be added that some students still find that disentanglement a difficulty.

Returning to the home country in 1902, he held pastorates at Fishergate, Preston, 1902-1917, and Droitwich, 1917-1928. In both places he was the faithful pastor, caring individually for his people. One who at a later date was minister at Fishergate has testified: "I soon discovered how worthily he had carried out the many privileges of the pastoral office and how firmly

he was established in the hearts of the people . . . But above all he had been assiduous in visitation; much did I hear of his care and kindness, of his praying with his people, instructing them personally and in classes, taking gifts, comforts and food to the sick and needy. In the First World War he made a point of visiting every home just before a man was due to leave for service, whether for the first time or from leave." He also represented his people and denomination on public bodies. It is recorded that the Roman Catholics of Preston gave a course of lectures in the Jesuit College, addressed expressly to Protestants. Dr. Whitley adopted their syllabus and arranged for experts to take part in a similar course addressed expressly to Catholics. The Roman Catholics never repeated the experiment. Another incident of the Preston days may be related. An attempt was made to introduce a fully licensed bar at a new picture palace. On licensing day the bench was packed and the licence granted. Then Dr. Whitley took action. He verified from the Chief Constable that the law required the manager to be on the premises the whole time the place was open. As an interim measure, the architect had been named as manager. Naturally he was not prepared to spend his afternoons and evenings at the cinema, so the licence was never used. No doubt Dr. Whitley chuckled very heartily.

Dr. Whitley's greatest service was rendered in the national and international life of the denomination. He had come home at an opportune moment. Dr. J. H. Shakespeare was transforming the Baptist Union. The Twentieth Century Fund was in process of completion and the Baptist Church House was rising near Kingsway. Shakespeare was determined that Baptists, in today's phraseology, "should be put on the map." Our great men, past and present, were not sufficiently appreciated; our history and world position were hardly realised; John Rippon's century-old vision of a world gathering of Baptists in London had remained a vision. All this was to be altered and Shakespeare needed someone with the historical mind and international outlook to co-operate with him in the organisation of the first Baptist World Congress which was to be held in London in July, 1905. His choice fell on his brother-in-law, Dr. Whitley, and the Preston Church, when approached, freely and graciously liberated him for an average of three days a week during the early months of 1905 and completely for the last month before the Congress. Never was man more blessed than Shakespeare in the unremitting toil and attention to detail which Dr. Whitley gave to the organisation of that first Baptist World Congress. From the opening meeting in Exeter Hall to the closing demonstration in the Albert Hall there were no loose ends, and Dr. Whitley richly deserved Dr. Shakespeare's tribute that "his patience, courtesy, untiring

industry, and business-like methods were beyond all praise." It was typical of Dr. Whitley that, as a diversion from the strenuous organisation of the Congress, he won the Jay Gould prize of £200 for the best work on the Douay Version of the Bible.

Dr. Whitley was now launched on the full tide of his historical and archaeological researches. Wherever he resided he joined the County Historical and Archaeological Societies, and served on their committees. Not only was his pen active, but his spade also came into use, and, near Droitwich, he unearthed the remains of a Roman villa. Service was given on County Education and University Committees; but the main interests of his life centred around the Baptists. Their history absorbed more and more of his time. Papers and booklets dealing with local churches, associations, doctrine and Church government poured forth. They laid foundations on which others have built. As Mr. Payne has made a Bibliography of Dr. Whitley's writings (printed immediately after this article), there is no need to refer to them in detail. It should be said, however, that by his editorship of the *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptists (1654-1811)* in two volumes, published in 1909 and 1910; the *Works of John Smyth*, also in two volumes, published in 1915; and the *Church Books of Ford and Amersham*, published in one volume in 1912, he made available original material of the first importance. His most valuable works, however, were the *History of British Baptists*, published in 1923 and the *Baptist Bibliography*, published in two handsome volumes in 1916 and 1922. The *History* supplied a need that had long been felt for a modern authoritative history, and all Baptists are indebted to the Regents Park College officers who invited Dr. Whitley to deliver the Angus Lectures in 1922, which led to the preparation and publication of the *History*. Dr. Whitley brought his trained mind and enthusiastic spirit to bear upon the records, and produced a copious work whose conclusions have stood the test and criticism of twenty-five years. Although it will long and deservedly remain a standard work, truth compels the admission that many have found the reading and study of the volume a severe trial. Dr. Whitley was concerned to set forth the facts. Possibly they were dry in themselves but he could make them drier, for he was not gifted with a popular style. The *Bibliography* is the bigger work, and is indispensable to all researchers into Baptist history. The two volumes which cover the period from 1526 to 1837 contain approximately 10,000 entries of the chief materials for Baptist history whether in manuscript or print. It is difficult to appreciate adequately the years of research, the repeated visits to colleges, libraries and museums, the laborious copying and checking of multitudinous entries which this compilation entailed.

Dr. Whitley was elected a personal member of the Baptist Union in 1888, and a member of the Council in 1905. For many years he was chairman of the National Education Committee and an influential member of the Ministerial Recognition and other Committees. Indeed, as the years passed he was looked upon as an indispensable member of any special committee or sub-committee, and no trouble was too great for him that he might give faithful and effective service. At the Annual Assembly at Glasgow in 1933, the rare privilege of honorary membership of the Council was unanimously conferred on him, an honour that he richly deserved.

Reference has already been made to his early love of music. He never lost that love for music was in his heart. In later years he found an outlet for it in the Psalms and Hymns Trust, of which he became a co-optative trustee in 1926. The work of the Trust proved an unfailing inspiration, for the opportunity to enrich the psalmody of God's House, and the privilege of ministering to the widow in her time of need, awoke in him responsive chords which vibrated with the love that inspired them. He was appointed to both the Hymns Committee and the Tunes Committee for the Revised Edition of the *Baptist Church Hymnal*, and for over ten years was chairman of the Trust's Business Committee. His fellow Trustees testified in their memorial resolution that "no service that he could render, however laborious and cumbered with detail, was too small or too onerous."

Very much more could be written of Dr. Whitley's various interests for he was a man of amazing versatility. We have space but to mention his interest in the different versions of the Scriptures; his keenness for the preservation of footpaths and rights of way; his work for the Joseph Davis Charity and similar institutions; his love of travel and visits to India, Canada, the United States, Australia, etc. His eighty-six years coincided with striking changes in the thought and outlook of his fellow countrymen, but he was never surprised by these changes, or by modern discoveries, for he kept himself abreast of them.

We shall often recall him, his kindness, his humility, his generosity, his humour, his hearty chuckle. His end was singularly beautiful. He had been laid aside physically for several months, but mentally was bright and alert. On the morning of the Thursday before Christmas he was at work in his home studying and thinking of his friends, to one of whom he wrote: "Look up St. Paul at Malta. I think I am suffering as his friend was, and feel rather out of things." In the afternoon his outstanding gifts were engaged in the greater things of the Father's home for God's finger had touched him.

SEYMOUR J. PRICE.