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Abraham Booth and some of his Descendants

ABRAMHAM BOOTH, minister for thirty-seven years of the Baptist church in Little Prescott Street, Goodman's Fields, died on 27th January, 1806. He was, as pastor, writer and counsellor, one of the outstanding Baptists of his day. When Booth passed away, the Minute Book of the church he had served so long and faithfully, referred to him as "the truly venerable and revered Mr. Abraham Booth." There is plenty of contemporary evidence that that was how he was generally regarded. "Such a degree of majesty attended him, plain as he was in exterior, that if he sat down with you but a few minutes, you could not help feeling that you had a prince or a great man in the house." This was the tribute of William Newman, afterwards first President of Stepney College.

Born at Blackwell in Derbyshire in 1734, and brought up at Annesley Woodhouse in Nottinghamshire, Booth became in his teens a stocking-weaver and had a wife and family before he knew anything of the theory of English grammar. He owed his conversion to the Barton preachers and, soon after, began to preach among the General Baptists. When about thirty years of age, however, he was mastered by the Calvinist doctrines of God's sovereignty and electing grace and transferred his loyalty to the Particular Baptists. His book, *The Reign of Grace*, published in 1768, was a remarkable *tour de force*. Its contents were given first as sermons at Sutton Ashfield, then in Nottingham and Chesterfield, where he regularly conducted services. He was encouraged to venture into print by Henry Venn, the evangelical vicar of Huddersfield. The book quickly gained him fame and was largely responsible for his call to London. Once there, Booth gave himself to intense study, making himself one of the most learned Baptists of his day.

Details about Booth, his personality and his work, may be found most conveniently in E. F. Kevan's valuable history of *London's Oldest Baptist Church* (Kingsgate Press, 1933). The *Baptist Quarterly* published, in January, 1931, an interesting letter written by Booth to his brother, Robert, in 1800, and in October, 1938, reprinted the introductory discourse given by W. N. Clark at Booth's ordination at Goodman's Fields in 1769. There are several

Booth letters in the Isaac Mann Collection, now in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth, including an important and characteristic one written to Andrew Fuller in 1795. These two strong, self-taught men did not always find it easy to agree. Booth gave outstanding service to the Particular Baptist Fund, to the London Baptist Education Society (out of which came Stepney College), to the cause of Sunday Schools, to the Baptist Missionary Society, and to the early campaign against the slave-trade. As a Baptist apologist and a champion of strict communion, he exercised widespread influence for a generation or more, though one can understand how young William (later General) Booth, considering entry to the Congregational ministry in the middle of the nineteenth century and given the *Reign of Grace* to study, flung it across the room after reading thirty or forty pages.

The terjubilee of Abraham Booth's death may serve as the occasion for the printing of his Will and for a few notes on his family. Booth's wife, née Elizabeth Bowmar, died two or three years before her husband. They had seven children: Abraham, Alice, Isaac, Robert, Ann, Sarah and Rebecca. All of them were remembered in his Will, made eleven months before his death and now in the keeping of Regent's Park College. The text of the Will is as follows:

I ABRAHAM BOOTH protestant dissenting minister in the parish St. Mary Whitechapel London reflecting on the uncertainty of Life do make this my last will and testament in manner and form following Being firmly persuaded that those doctrines which have constituted the grand subject of my public Ministry for a long course of years are divine Truths being deeply sensible that all I have and all I am are the Lords and entirely at his disposal and being completely satisfied that his dominion is perfectly wise and righteous I in the anticipation of my departing moment cheerfully commend my immortal Spirit into his hands in expectation of everlasting Life as the Gift of Sovereign Grace thro' the mediation of Jesus Christ and my Body I resign to the care of providence in the silent Grave with a pleasing hope of its being raised again at the last day in a state of perpetual vigour beauty and Glory. In regard to the measure of temporal property with which the bounty of providence has indulged me my will is that as soon as convenient after my decease all my debts and funeral Expenses be punctually discharged I order that my four Stocking frames my own publications then on sale together with the Copyright if not already alienated and my Library be all sold as to distribution of my property I order it to be as follows that is to say to my son Abraham Booth and to my daughter Alice Stevenson I give twenty pounds apiece for Mourning To my Son Isaac Booth I give one hundred pounds To my Son Robert Booth I give all my wearing apparel my plate my pocket Watch and three hundred pounds 5 p. cent Navy Annuities. I give to my daughter Ann Booth spinster one half of my household furniture of my Linen and of my China together with four hundred pounds 5 p. cent Navy Annuities I give to each of my daughters Sarah Grainger and Rebecca Robinson two hundred and fifty pounds sterling To my granddaughter Elizabeth Parkin I give one hundred and fifty pounds 5 p. cent Navy Annuities To my Grand-

daughter Mary Lee Wightman I give one hundred and fifty pounds of the same Annuities to bear Interest from the second quarter day after my decease but neither the principal nor the interest to be payable until she arrive at the age of twenty-four years complete I give to the deacons for the time being of the Church of Christ over which I have so long had the pastoral oversight and from which I have received numerous tokens of the most affectionate regard five pounds sterling to be distributed at their discretion among the poor Members of the said Church which trifling bequest I order to be paid by my Executors hereafter named within the space of three months of my decease I nominate and appoint my Sons Abraham and Isaac Booth the EXECUTORS of this my last Will and Testament to whom jointly considered I give eight hundred pounds 3 p. cent Stock of the year 1726 together with the remaining and unappropriated Moiety of my Household furniture of my Linen and of my China finally I order and appoint my Son Robert Booth and my daughter Ann Booth Spinster to be jointly and equally my Residuary Legatees.

Abrm Booth Signed sealed published and declared by the Testator as his last Will and Testament Feb 27 1805 in the presence of
Eady Booth Jacob Booth

Booth's generosity is mentioned by several of his friends. It is apparent that he had prospered during his long ministry, as did many of his congregation, to judge by their munificent gifts to Baptist causes. His books must have brought him a considerable income for they had a large circulation during his lifetime. He had apparently kept his stocking-frames, renting them to his brother, Robert, who remained in Kirkby Woodhouse, for some of Booth's letters acknowledge the receipt of small annual payments. The Will shows that Booth had acquired £1,000 in 5% Navy Annuities, £800 in 3% Stock (1726) and that he expected his estate to yield at least another £700 apart from his furniture and plate.

Of Booth's eldest son, named after him, the writer knows nothing, though he appears in some of the early list of subscribers to the B.M.S. and was in business at one time in Newgate Street. The eldest daughter, Alice, was "adopted" by the wealthy daughter of Mr. Leader Cox, at one time a deacon at Little Prescott Street. In due course she married a Mr. Stevenson and had several children, one of whom, Mary, married Dr. Edward Steane, secretary of the Baptist Union from 1835 to 1882.

Isaac Booth (1761-1840) was well known in his day in Baptist circles. Apprenticed in 1775 to an ironmonger, he later became a cashier in the Bank of England. He was in membership with the church in Mare Street, Hackney, in the formation of which his father had taken the lead in 1798. Isaac Booth married one of his cousins, Eady, who as a small child worked an elaborate sampler map, now in the writer's possession. Isaac and Eady Booth had eight children. One son, another Isaac, emigrated to Australia. Another, Jacob, left two sons, one of whom went to America, the other remaining in this country with issue. A daughter, Eady

(1805-48) married George Futvoye and emigrated to Canada. In the *Baptist Quarterly* for 1941 there was printed an interesting letter she sent to her mother from Quebec. Another of Isaac Booth's daughters, Elizabeth (1812-89), married Thomas Horatio Harris and had twelve children, one of whom, Booth Harris (1839-1912), of Woodford, left many descendants, one of his grandsons being the Rev. Stephen Booth Harris, now Congregational minister at Bury St. Edmunds. Yet another of Isaac's daughters, Rebekah (1819-68) married William Overbury Purchase, of Romsey, who was associated first with the Baptist church in Bell Street and then with the Abbey Congregational Church. They had three children, all of whom died without issue.

Abraham Booth's spinster daughter, Ann, died in 1847. She was buried in the grave-yard behind Mare Street Chapel. So also were her brother, Isaac, and his wife, and Isaac's daughters, Martha (1814-47), a spinster, and Sarah, wife of Henry Martin. The original Mare Street Chapel was burned down soon after the death of its famous minister, Francis Augustus Cox. The fine building which replaced it was destroyed by bombs during the last war. The site has now been acquired by the local authorities and a new church has been built recently on a fresh site a little distance away down Well Street. All evidences of these associations with the Booth family will now disappear.

The old burial-ground of the Maze Pond church, where Abraham Booth's body was interred, has also now disappeared. The tablet erected to his memory in Little Prescott Street was, however, taken to Commercial Street, when the church moved there in 1854 and thence, in 1914, to Church Hill, Walthamstow, where "London's oldest Baptist church" still worships. The tablet is to be found on the north wall of the chapel. After eulogizing Booth's virtues "as a man and as a Christian" and speaking of his work as a minister, the inscription concludes :

"nor will his name, or his writings be forgotten, while Evangelical Truth shall be revered, genius admired or integrity respected."

Though this claims a little too much, Abraham Booth is certain always of a place in Baptist history.

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