

# The Baptist Connections of George Dyer.

## A FURTHER NOTE

THREE years ago in an article in this Journal (Vol. x, No. 5, January, 1941) I drew attention to certain inaccuracies in the account of the early life of George Dyer given by E. V. Lucas in his *Life of Charles Lamb* and by Sir Leslie Stephen in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. They suggest that after taking his degree at Cambridge in 1778, Dyer was usher in a school at Dedham; that after a short time there he entered the family of the Rev. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge; that, on the latter's death in 1790, Dyer joined Ryland's school in Northampton: and that in 1792 he went to London. The fact that Ryland moved his school from Northampton to Enfield, in 1785, makes this scheme impossible, and investigation of Dyer's movements soon revealed other incidents that had to be fitted into the story, e.g. a period of preaching in Oxford, to which one of Robinson's biographers bears testimony, and Dyer's unsuccessful suit for the hand of Ryland's step-daughter, to which E. V. Lucas himself alludes.

The reconstruction of Dyer's movements which I tentatively submitted was as follows: that, after being in Dedham for a twelvemonth from 1777-8, he was befriended by Robert Robinson and lived in or near Cambridge; that in 1781 he went to preach to a congregation in Oxford with no very happy results; that in 1782 or 1783 he went to Northampton, leaving there three or four years later when he failed in his suit for the hand of Miss Stott and when Ryland moved to Enfield; that Dyer then returned to the Cambridge neighbourhood until his settlement in Clifford's Inn in 1792.

This suggested account of Dyer's movements I can now definitely confirm in certain important points. The Angus Library of Regent's Park College contains a number of autograph letters of the Rev. Daniel Turner. He was the much respected minister of the Abingdon Baptist Church from 1748 till his death in 1798. The monument in the chapel at Abingdon finely describes him as "The Scholar, The Poet, The Christian". "Good Mr. Turner", as he was called locally, exercised a wide influence in the neighbourhood, and it was he who presided over the reconstitution of the Baptist church in Oxford in 1780. Most of Turner's letters in the Angus Library are addressed to members of the Munn family, of Watford. There is one, however, which begins, "My Dear Sir", with no indication of the identity of the recipient. The relevant passages are set out

below, and it will be seen that they give a new, vivid and valuable picture of Dyer as a young man, and confirm the view that he preached in Oxford, that he was introduced there by Robert Robinson, and that in 1782 he went on from there to Northampton.

“ Abingdon, June 14th. '82.

My dear Sir,

I have answered your queries. Dyer is an excellent man. He has one foible, that is, he is apt to be a little eccentric and to be carried away by sudden starts of fancy sometimes into a behaviour not so manly as I could wish, but it is always with the most benevolent intention, the overflowing of the heart. He would not hurt a worm. In his preaching without notes he is sometimes excellent, especially when he is not overawed. But sometimes he pauses rather too long. He came quite raw to Oxford in the preaching way, not having had time to form his mind, and Robinson is too much of an original to be a pattern for young men who are pleased with his manner and naturally attempt to imitate it; which there is not one in a thousand can do. For the temper of the man and the good stuff in him you will not easily find one to excell, and time and encouragement would make him a good preacher. In short, he is a man I have a very high esteem of, and would do anything in my power to render him happy. He is a very good classical scholar. But he is upon going to Northampton as I hinted in the paper of queries. Though the matter is not absolutely fixed. I expect every post a letter from Mr. Ryland to determine it. If Mr. Ryland chooses to engage him he has the prior claim. There he will have time to study divinity more attentively and fully, and will seldom preach, which is my reason for recommending him thither. But should Ryland not choose to engage him, then query whether I may send him to Watford? Let me know this as soon as you can.”

All that need be added is that Robert Robinson made a preaching tour through Berkshire and Oxfordshire in 1780 (*Select Works*, Bunyan Library, p. liv.). It was no doubt after seeing the situation in Oxford on the spot, or after personal contact with Daniel Turner with whom he had been in correspondence since 1774, that Robinson sent his clever young friend, Dyer, over from Cambridge. It will be seen that Turner's shrewd and kindly judgment is in line with the later and more famous picture of Dyer drawn by Charles Lamb.

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