

Sons Beyond the Door  
By H Bickerstaffe Kendall, B.A.

### III. - John Nelson: W. Crocker, D.D.

THE brothers Thomas and John Nelson, who sprang from a village near Whitby, both rendered good service to Methodism in the early days. Our main concern here is with John who entered the ministry a few months after his elder brother, December, 1820. John Nelson became one of the leading ministers of the powerful Hull Circuit, and in Hull itself he was well known and highly respected for his character and intellectual abilities. Of his Hull ministry we have a rather bulky souvenir in his "Sermons and Lectures," notable also as one of the earliest and most considerable attempts at authorship by a Primitive Methodist preacher. Nelson was very successful in the North of England; nor is this surprising when we know that, in addition to the personal qualities already mentioned, he had other qualities which are sure to gain attention and leave an impression. He was a man of fine physique—tall, of commanding presence, fluent of utterance, unsparing of his strength.

The memory of John Nelson lingered long on the lower reaches of the Tyne and Wear. To the Primitives of the two Shields and Sunderland he soon became to memory a heroic figure round which legends began to gather. Some few years ago we unexpectedly came across a proof of this. A document was put into our hands written by an old gentleman whose memory went back to the missioning of Sunderland and the building of Flag Lane Chapel. I cannot give the writer's name for I made no note of it, and the document is no longer available. I recall, however, the outlines of a story connected with John Nelson and the opening of Flag Lane that the document contained. I am afraid that the document has not much historic value, as it does not in some particulars square with the known facts. But even though the story be partly legendary it has a value of its own, as showing how John Nelson had taken hold of the imagination of the Primitives of Wearwater and retained a warm place in their affections. So much was this the case that it was felt to be incongruous, inconceivable that any other man than John Nelson could have opened Flag Lane. To come to the story or legend itself, it was told with every circumstance. The name of the vessel that was to bring Nelson was given, as well as the name of its skipper; and we may well believe that the name in each case was real and not fictitious. First of all we see the skipper of the schooner on the wharf, deep in talk with one or two of the leading men of Sunderland Primitive Methodism. The collier-schooner is just about to sail for London port and is due back again by the time Flag Lane is to be ready for opening. The skipper is receiving instructions to seek out John Nelson in London and to see to it that he brings him back in time for the opening. In the second scene we have the skipper and his mate, in their Sunday best, on the London streets seeking John Nelson. They are making Westminster way when their attention is drawn to certain females in neat attire and with Quaker bonnets all going in one direction. The skipper and his mate are "knowing" ones; they pick up the scent and following it they find John Nelson! The third scene shows the schooner with John Nelson on board gallantly making northward. All goes well for a time. Then the wind drops and the sea is becalmed. There is anxiety in the

skipper's breast, for time is running on fast, but John Nelson is calm and confident; he gives himself to prayer: a favourable breeze springs up, and the schooner puts into Sunderland river just in time for the opening service, which the books tell us was Friday, September 3rd, 1824, though they do not tell us who preached the sermon.

It was Sunderland Circuit which sent John Nelson to start a mission in Dorsetshire whereby he became lost to the Connexion. In March, 1834, the Circuit was found to be so prosperous both spiritually and financially as to suggest the obligation of carrying the evangel to some spot where it was sorely needed. Dorset *needed* the gospel badly enough, it is true, but it certainly did not *want* it, and said so emphatically by its treatment of Nelson and Cosens (a man of colour) who was his colleague on the mission. At Weymouth, indeed, they were well received, but at Dorchester and the villages around they were subjected to much petty persecution and sometimes found it hard to get a night's lodging. In spite of this opposition the mission made some progress, and might have made more had not the missionaries quarrelled and the societies taken sides in the quarrel. We do not know what the quarrel was about, as we do know in the case of Barnabas and Paul. The result, however, was the same in both cases - "they departed asunder the one from the other, "Cosens becoming a Baptist minister, while John Nelson, discouraged by the attitude of Hugh Bourne and others in regard to the affair, retired from our Church and became a New Connexion minister. Such he continued to be till his death in 1869. I have been unable to glean much information of this part of his career. On the authority of my father, the late Charles Kendall, I learn "he was stationed as a New Connexion minister to this borough (Hull), but his presence had no perceptible influence upon our societies. An old friend, now and then, dropped in to hear him, but his altered position seems to have divested his ministrations of some of the charm they possessed in his prime. "We should like to know in what years John Nelson was located in Hull, for we bring up one occasion when he breakfasted at our house in 1853 - or 4, when my father travelled the Scotter Circuit. C. Kendall's note finishes on a minor key. "He ended his days in Ireland some three or four years ago (i e., 1869), and we are sorry to have to record that some clouds and bitter sorrows marked his declining years." John Nelson ought not to have been allowed to leave the Connexion he loved and served with such rare devotion. Nor can we stifle the thought that he would not have left it had some of "the heads of houses" but shown a little more forbearance. We are not told that either Jerusalem or Antioch frowned on, or threatened Paul when the "paroxysm" broke out between him and Barnabas. Bemersley and Sunderland—Bemersley specially—might have shown similar wisdom and charity. To speak frankly, there was too much of the severe countenance and the heavy hand at times in the official side of our Church's history in the earlier days. In this respect, as in many other respects, times have greatly changed for the better.

In an old common-place book now lying before me there is a note in my own youthful hand to the effect that Editor W. Antliff has written, in a magazine of 1863: "The New Connexion Conference, as well as our own, was held this year at Leeds An old friend of our own and an ex-travelling preacher with us, the Rev. W. Cocker, is their President."

"When found, make a note of" is a sound maxim: and so, fifty-one years after it was made, the note comes in for elucidation. A careful examination of the

Conference Minutes discloses that W. Cocker was pledged by Blackburn Circuit in 1834. He is down "first six months" for Preston, "last six months" for Blackburn with John Verity - that man of strong individuality - as his superintendent. Then his name disappears from the "Minutes." Behind these prosaic facts there is an interesting story which Dr. Cocker some years ago confided to an interviewer for Young People.

Dr. Cocker was born at Calver, a village in Derbyshire, on January 18, 1816. Calver was in the Bradwell Circuit, and Primitive Methodist services were then held "in a little room over a stable on the left-hand side as you pass over Derwent Bridge." In this humble room W. Cocker was converted. When Verity came to Bradwell in 1831, the youth of sixteen "struck up" a close acquaintance with his superintendent, which on his part evidently ripened into affection: for on Verity's leaving in 1833 for Blackburn, he asked Cocker's parents to let their son go with him for the purpose of study and training. There was some hesitancy, but at last the father consented, being "influenced by a dream." So young Cocker had a two years' college course under John Verity. The young man had no quarrel with Primitive Methodism - no sense of grievance; but though he fully approved of its doctrines, he preferred the polity of the New Connexion, and says, "Acting on Mr. Verity's advice I determined to apply for entrance into the ministry of that denomination."

Dr. Cocker had a long and distinguished career in the Church of his second choice. As we have seen, he was elected President of the Conference of 1863. On the death of Dr. James Stacey (1818-92) the first Principal of Ranmoor College, Sheffield, Dr. Cocker was appointed his successor and occupied the responsible position for ten years. He was "an Apollo in dignified bearing, and an Apollos in platform and pulpit oratory."

Reference

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