

THOMAS, JOSHUA (1719-1797), Baptist minister and historian

Name: Joshua Thomas
Date of birth: 1719
Date of death: 1797
Child: Timothy Thomas
Parent: Jane Thomas (née Hughes)
Parent: Thomas Morgan Thomas
Gender: Male
Occupation: Baptist minister and historian
Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Religion

Born at Tŷ Hen, parish of Cao, 22 February 1719, though the family moved within three years to Esgair Ithri in Cwm Pedol. There is very little information about his early years, till in 1738 he went to Hereford to be apprenticed as a mercer to his uncle **Simon Thomas**, the author of *Hanes y Byd a'r Amseroedd*. There were no Baptists in that city, so Joshua had to walk as far as Leominster, where he was baptized in May 1740. He returned to Wales in 1743, commenced to preach, and went to the Association meetings at Cilfowyr, the very first for him to attend. In 1746 he married a lady from Lampeter who was closely related to **David Davis**, Castell Hywel, and the same year he settled as minister at the Hay, was ordained at Maes-y-berllan, preaching and keeping school; at times he preached at Olchon, Capel-y-ffin and Llanigon, in districts alive with romance for a Baptist; the old people were closely cross-examined by him, and his ears were all alert for any traditions that had come down from the old pioneers. In 1753 he had a 'call' from the Baptists of Leominster; he started work there in 1754, remained their minister for forty-three years, and one of the most influential figures in the Midland Association; he was a frequent visitor to the Welsh Association meetings, and a great power behind the Baptist crusade in North Wales from 1776 onwards. He had already, before settling at Leominster, ventured to come out as an author by translating into Welsh various English works defending the tenets of the Baptists; two of these appeared in 1751, to be followed by another in 1767; and he showed himself a true Calvinist by publishing still another translation, *Tystiolaeth y Credadyrn*, in 1757, and bringing out, 1775, the notes of a Calvinistic Baptist upon a sermon by **Abel Francis**, a Baptist of Arminian leanings, delivered in 1732 (*Llyfryddiaeth y Cymry*, 568).

It was not his work as translator that made Joshua Thomas famous, but his volume on *Hanes y Bedyddwyr* that appeared in 1778. He had started gathering material for it in 1745, before going to the Hay; commenced seriously on the work in 1752; in 1776 he made a special journey to South Wales to complete his researches. On its appearance the volume proved that a historian of a new type had arrived: courteous, impartial, dogmatic enough upon the fundamentals of belief, slow and hesitant over details; he pondered the evidence in very delicate scales, and used many noncommittal adjectives; very open to criticism because of his frequent repetitions and many cross-references (an index to the work has still to be made). Though he cherished some beliefs about the Baptists of the Border that were obviously insecure, and gave many quotations from old manuscripts, that cannot be checked today because these have been lost, his standards were eminently judicial and scientific; he laboured assiduously to get evidence from America to substantiate theories about the beginnings of the Baptist cause in Wales; he strove to follow the divergence between Calvinist and Arminian in the early churches, and to explain why some practised 'strict' communion, others 'free.' In 1780 he published some corrigenda of the *Hanes*, with several additional remarks, 18 pp. in all; in 1795 he published a *History of the Welsh Association, 1650-1790*. Gradually his work as Baptist historian became known over the Border: in 1803 Samuel Palmer quotes from the *Hanes* in the third volume of the *Nonconformist's Memorial*, in 1811 Joseph Ivimey refers to the work with great respect in the first volume on the *History of English Baptists*. He still went on writing; in 1791 he published a new translation of the *Confession of Faith*, issued by the London Assembly of 1689; in 1794 he translated a book by Robert Hall on the doctrine of the Trinity; before 1795 he published sharply-worded *Remarks* on the work of an author who had belittled the cause and mission of the Baptists. And he left behind at Leominster, in manuscript, two volumes on the story of that church and the early days of the Olchon Baptists, not to mention other important manuscripts, that eventually found a home at the Bristol Baptist College. But his outstanding contribution as a historian was the *Hanes* of 1778 [today usually cited in the Welsh version (1885) by **Benjamin Davies** (1826 - 1905) of a manuscript enlargement in English, now preserved at Bristol Baptist College]. Thomas died 25 August 1797.

TIMOTHY THOMAS (1753 - 1827), minister

Son of Joshua Thomas, was for forty-five years minister of the Devonshire Square church in London, and important enough (with two others) among the Baptists of the country to allocate the moneys that came to them from the 'Regium Donum.' He had been a student at Bristol Academy, his first wife was a sister to **Caleb Evans**, one of the principals. It was the father who delivered the sermon of charge to the son when he became a settled minister (September 1781), his text being 1 Tim., vi, 20.

In 1796 Timothy Thomas began to keep school to teach the elements. He was not, like his father, fond of writing books, for Dr. Whitley (*Bapt. Bibliog.*, ii, 23) could only come across one effort of his, and that of little importance.

Sources

Hanes y Bedyddwyr ymhlith y Cymry: o amser yr Apostolion, hyd y flwyddyn hon: yn ddwy ran (Caerfyrddin 1778) (1778 ed.), passim, (1885 ed.), passim

Shankland Manuscripts at the University College of North Wales, Bangor (U.C.N.W.), 131 (52-4), 148 (1-11), 159-60

Thomas Lewis, *Joshua Thomas a Llanllieni, Seren Gomer*, 1883, 94-104

Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru, 1935, 1-24

W. T. Whitley, *A Baptist Bibliography* (1917â€"22), but probably the author of the two works referred to in ii., 214 was the Joshua Thomas who died c.1759)
Notable Welshmen (1700â€"1900) (1908)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: Joshua Thomas

Works

Matthew Henry, Joshua Thomas (translator), *Golwg ar Destament Newydd ein Harglwydd a'n Iachawdwr Iesu Grist: sef crynhoad o swm a sylwedd y pethau hynny a gynnwysir ym mhob llyfr, ac ym mhob pennod wedi ei gasglu allan o esboniadau helaeth y diweddar a'r Parchedig Mr. Mathew Henry, gweinidog yr efengyl. At yr hwn y chwanegwyd tabl a'r fesur cerdd yn ol yr egwyddor A.B.C. i helpu'r c  f ac i wneuthur i fynu goncordans bychan i'r Testament newydd* (Caerfyrddin 1728)

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