JAMES LEE OF SHADOXHURST: A STUDY IN EVANGELICAL RELIGION IN THE BLEAK AGE

by ANDREW F. WALLS

MR. WALLS, Lecturer in Theology in Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, Editor of "The Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion", and formerly Warden of Tyndale House, Cambridge, is well known as a church historian, his special field of study being the Hippolytean "Apostolic Tradition". But he has a penchant for exploring the byways and hedges of church history, and it is from his explorations there that he has recovered this quaint record.

I

IT is a commonplace that the fabric of Church history is woven not only with the great deeds of the mighty men of valour whose names are in the book of the wars of the Lord but with the godly living of a host whom no man can number who have no such memorial. In the nature of things, these can rarely be the subjects of biographical studies in a later age, but where the materials for such a study do exist, there may be justification for the attempt to watch more closely the good confession of one of the lesser known of that great cloud of witnesses.

The subject of this paper was, to quote one of Rowland Hill's indecorous allusions, one of Wesley's " ragged legion of preaching tinkers, scavengers, draymen and chimney sweepers."[1] More precisely, he was a farm labourer. He seems never to have strayed far beyond those southern reaches of Kent from which he came; and his passing seems not to have been accorded the humblest notice in his denominational magazine. But in his own neighbourhood James Lee of Shadoxhurst made a profound impression. Soon after his death, a most remarkable local biography of him appeared; and even now, almost a century after, his name is almost a household word in some villages. Yet the outstanding events of

[1] Rowland Hill, *Imposture Detected, some gentle strictures on the false and libellous harangue, lately delivered by Mr. John Wesley, etc.*, 2nd edn., 1777.

his life were few, and no doubt his career and influence could be paralleled many times over throughout the country. So be it. His story nevertheless gives us a glimpse of evangelical piety in the early nineteenth century, and it can, incidentally, offer us some insight into a grim and cheerless era in the social life of England. The greater part of Jimmy Lee's life was spent in what the Hammonds have for ever characterized as The Bleak Age; and for none was it bleaker than for the agricultural labourer. An observer in 1831, when Lee was approaching forty, wrote:

> An English agricultural labourer and an English pauper, these words were synonymous. He pilfers when occasion offers, and teaches his children to lie and steal. His abject and submissive demeanour towards his wealthy neighbours shows that they treat him roughly and with suspicion; hence he fears and hates them, but will never injure them by force. He is depraved through and through, too far gone to possess even the strength of despair.

On this G. M. Trevelyan comments:

> No doubt this was exaggerated as the portrait of a whole class, but it was the exaggeration of a very terrible reality[2].

The French War had brought the steadily rising problem of the poor labourer in the south of England to crisis point. Sharply rising prices made it increasingly difficult for him to maintain his family from his wages. The well-meaning but degrading expedient adopted, of supplementing wages from the rates, wove a net about him from which it was next to impossible to escape. It became a custom in some parts to hire out or even to auction applicants for relief in turn, the parish paying two-thirds and the farmer one-third of the guaranteed wage. It was not unknown for a man with any savings to be refused help, or for one without relief to be refused employment. The effect was "to demoralize completely the conditions of employment, to spread pauperism far and wide, and to turn the agricultural labourer in many parishes into a kind of public serf."[3] The Poor Law of 1834 and the Commission set up by it, while it cauterized this running sore, caused untold suffering in the process. This is the background of Jimmy Lee's life. When we first hear of him, it is in the workhouse, and in his old age he is barely maintained "outside the union door." Grinding poverty dogs him and his like. We see the labourer quite at the mercy of his employer, whose malice may threaten the young Christian with dismissal and ruin for his faith, or whose negligence may leave him without his week's wages. We see the labourer's wife, worn out

[2] G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century and after*, 2nd edn., 1937, p. 249.

[3] J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Bleak Age*, 2nd edn., 1947, p. 98.

with the cares of home and family, going out in season to pick hops or fruit to hold the home together, and being prematurely cut off through sheer exhaustion. We begin to understand why Lee's biographer goes out of his way to defend the labourer's right to change his job if thereby he can gain an honest shilling or two.

II

Lee's biography[4] is an extraordinary document. Its author, Edward Pearson, was, like his hero, a farm labourer and a former workhouse boy. He came from Bethersden, close to Lee's village, Shadoxhurst. The work is undated, but was clearly written within a year of Lee's death in 1865. It consists of 170 pages measuring 4 inches by $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and is entirely in doggerel quatrains. It would not be difficult to quote a number of excruciating stanzas, such as:

> But some perhaps who cannot read,
> May either say or think,
> The ravens might Elijah feed,
> But how about the drink.

Or, perhaps the best of all:

> And Pharaoh followed on their heels,
> But he could not succeed,
> For God took off his chariot wheels
> Which did retard the speed.

Few can maintain impeccable prosody for 1200 stanzas, and it is therefore not surprising to find in the Bethersden rhymer many false lines and words patently thrown in to help the metre more than the sense. His rhyming is nothing if not ingenious, as may be seen from his collocation of " Erasmus " and " usefulness." But he confesses himself beaten by the text for Lee's funeral sermon:

> Just here I canot quite afford
> To find sufficient time,
> To write the passage word for word,
> In what we call a rhyme.

Add to this the author's downright solecisms, and it will be apparent that it is not by accident that no excerpt from the book appears in *The Golden Treasury*. Pearson, however, modestly admits his defects:

> But every such like circumstance,
> Is owing to my ignorance.

Occasionally he tries an incongrous flourish:

> It may be in the smiling morn,
> When Phoebus does arise ;

[4] Edward Pearson, *A narrative giving a brief outline of the life and labours of James Lee, of Shadoxhurst, Kent, who died at Warehorn the 15th February*, 1865, *aged seventy-two years*, printed by R. Lindly, 9 Old Bailey.

but normally he keeps to homely, straightforward English; and sometimes he produces a fine and striking phrase:

> He had no pot-lid godliness
> Which taketh off and on;

or, describing a drunk,

> This live cask of alcohol,
> A-tumbling in the road;

or even, describing conviction of sin,

> For Moses with his ten thong whip
> Is apt to wake us up.

He is at his best when describing the work of grace and the delights of heaven: where, indeed, he compares favourably with some of his contemporaries, notably with the soupy mumblings of Father Faber. His utter sincerity wins a hundred times where his verse fails him. He tells us that the idea of writing his book was "fastened home on him" on the day of Lee's burial: and his design is

> To stimulate the youthful mind
> To practise Jimmy's ways.

To this end he introduces long digressions which often take the form of a forced parallel between some Scripture narrative and some incident in Jimmy Lee's life. He is not to be satisfied until he has recovered the allegorical significance of every straw in the lame man's mattress.

As a biographer, he is frankly eulogistic; it is not his business, he says, to talk about Jimmy's faults, which were few and small. There was a "something in his character" to be imitated. But he expresses the hope that he does not over-exalt his hero.

III

From the author, let us turn to the subject. James Lee was born in 1792 or 1793. No record of his baptism is to be found in the parish registers of Brookland, where we first hear of him, but he seems to have come from somewhere in Romney Marsh, that "fifth quarter of the globe" as R. H. Barham, himself a Marsh Rector, described it. At all events we do know that his father died when he was young, and Pearson tells us that little James was flung on the parish and admitted to Brookland workhouse.[5] In Brookland he seems to have remained until about 1812 when he became a waggoner's mate in the Marsh village of Ivychurch. Two years later, he moved to Bromley Green, on the Ashford-New Romney

[5] There seems to have been no workhouse in Brookland until 1806. The minute book held in the parish church shows that in that year the Churchwardens were to inspect other workhouses in the district to gain information as to their administration. By this time Jimmy Lee would have been in his early 'teens.

road, and a new chapter in his life opened.

Soon after his arrival, he heard a Wesleyan travelling preacher, the Rev. Joseph Walker, preach in a house in the neighbouring village of Kingsnorth. This gives us a more or less fixed point in the chronology, since the Minutes of the Methodist Conference show that Walker was stationed "in the Ashford Mission" in 1814 and reappointed for 1815. Jimmy was soundly converted and joined the Methodist Society.

His new faith was soon put to the test. He was working for a farmer named Lester, whose wife ordered him to renounce his religion or give up his job: but by patience and a good witness Jimmy maintained both. Moreover, while working for Lester, the ministry of personal evangelism which was to be so long and so fruitful began. Lester, who had been abroad, had a negro slave (so Pearson), whom Jimmy led to Christ;

> And though he was a captive slave,
> He died a happy man.

At some time during this period Jimmy married Harriet Rummery (or Rumery). Five children were born to them: William, the only boy, died of "brain fever" in 1829, at eight years old: the first of a sad series of bereavements for Jimmy. He had now left Lester, and had undertaken the keeping of the turnpike gate at Bromley Green. As the pay for this was four shillings per week *and* rent, and as the nature of the work enabled his wife to look after the gate at times while he worked elsewhere, this was decidedly an improvement of situation. He left it, however, a year later. Perhaps the constant interruption of the post proved intolerable with increasing family commitments: perhaps, too, the move coincides with William's death.

His new home was Hamstreet, near the edge of the Marsh, some six miles from Ashford, in, local tradition has it, a curious building at the cross-roads which was later a forge and recently demolished after a series of road accidents. He still worked, however, at Bromley Green and hence, as Pearson proudly calculates, walked 1,560 miles a year, apart from the long walks to his preaching appointments. The youngest girl, Sarah, was born here; and while she was still a baby, the second tragedy occured. Harriet had been hop-picking all day. On her return she set about the work of the house, and did not go to bed until the bread was baked for the next day. During the night Jimmy was awakened by the baby crying—and found it seeking for its mother's breast. Harriet Lee was dead.

> And Jimmy's grief in one short night
> Came sudden like the storm.

He was now left alone with four little daughters, one a baby in arms. He found a home with his widowed mother-in-law, who lived in humble circumstances at the now extinct Button House, in Warehorne which adjoins Hamstreet.

At this point Pearson has a long digression describing Elijah and the ravens: but the parallelism with Jimmy's case reaches its height when he draws attention to the fact that Elijah met a widow near the city gate of Zarephath, and that Jimmy Lee met a widow of suitable age near the Church at Shadoxhurst. And so in 1832, fifteen months after the death of his first wife, Jimmy married again, and in Sarah Ann Woodcock found a beloved companion and an excellent mother for his four young children.

This marks the beginning of the most fruitful period of Jimmy's life. He moved to Shadoxhurst, to which parish Bromley Green belonged, and rented, at £6 per annum, a little weather-boarded house on the Green. He was to live there for the next thirty-two years, and to exercise an increasing influence in the whole district. That is easily said, but how to define it is another matter. Pearson felt the same difficulty. Jimmy kept no diary, he says, and he therefore found it hard to put events into sequence. But, in any case, Jimmy Lee's ministry was of a nature that could not be easily chronicled: he was a farm labourer, and a good one; a local preacher, and a powerful one; and a saint of God, who was known as a man of prayer and of a holy life.

There was a Methodist Society at Shadoxhurst. The early preachers were roughly handled, but, to secure the Society from outrage, one Henry Highful had his house licensed for preaching. From this began the Shadoxhurst Wesleyan Chapel, where Jimmy Lee was senior class leader and faithful guide of souls for many years.

'Twas Henry Highful planted it,
Moreover you must know
James Lee took pains to water it,
And God has made it grow.

In 1838 a shy young man named Charles Rolfe was appointed to the living of Shadoxhurst, a benefice which he held till his death in 1877. There is a memoir of Rolfe written by his neighbour, Edward Wilkinson, Rector of Snargate[6] (a successor to Barham in that cure). It is tedious, shapeless, repetitious and

[6] Edward Wilkinson, *Memorials of the Rev. Charles Rolfe, B.A., Rector of Shadoxhurst and Orlestone, Kent; with incidental reflections*: London (Nisbet) and Ashford, Kent (Miller), 1879. Most of the book, it may be said, is taken up with " incidental reflections ".

digressive, but a little about Rolfe emerges from its pages. He was a scholar; a man of deep devotion and unquestionable godliness; a zealous pastor, he loved and encouraged public and private prayer (in his small village he had the room full for a regular prayer meeting); and he was an uncompromising high Calvinist.[7] If he heard a sermon which did not set forth the classical doctrines of grace, he would say "Dark, very dark — the poor man has no light at all"; and he withdrew from a clerical club, despite entreaties, because its membership was too Arminian. If there was one thing he hated more than Arminianism and Tractarianism it was *Hymns Ancient and Modern.* For him it was an axiom that if *Ancient and Modern* were to be seen on a drawing-room table, it might be safely concluded that there was no knowledge of the truth in that house.

And yet Rolfe and Lee were close friends. The biographers of each testify that they had frequent prayer together and nourished each other's souls. Rolfe paid a tribute at Lee's burial to the man whom he could not remember meeting without conversation on spiritual things and mutual benefit. One senses that Wilkinson is not very comfortable about this, generous as he is in his estimate of Jimmy Lee. Pearson contents himself with the observation that they did not see eye to eye on everything. This is a very mild statement. Church-Chapel feeling in the area was always strong, and sometimes bitter. Beyond this, the older man was a Wesleyan Methodist, the younger a fearless and outspoken high predestinarian. Add to these theological factors the social, cultural and educational differences in an age when these things loomed far larger than they do now, and we see how privileged Shadoxhurst was in having two such men of God, and something of what it must have seen of the communion of saints.

Co-operation extended beyond personal fellowship. Strong local tradition says that the parish church and the chapel came to an arrangement[8] to avoid clashing. Rolfe was simultaneously Rector of Orlestone, bordering on Hamstreet; and Wilkinson says that his ministry there was not so well attended as at Shadoxhurst. He puts this down to the baleful influence of Hamstreet Wesleyan Chapel. He quite overlooks the presence of the vigorous Wesleyan Chapel at Shadoxhurst.

[7] He had great difficulty in obtaining his letters testimonial for ordination, on the ground of his Calvinism. He was eventually accepted by Henry Ryder of Lichfield, the first Evangelical bishop.

[8] I have not been able to get any clear definition, documentation or otherwise, of what form this took.

Jimmy's domestic griefs continued. His youngest girl, Sally, died in 1844, at fourteen years old. A still greater grief came when his second daughter, Eliza, who was away in service, came home expecting a baby: a too frequent outcome of the contemporary conditions of domestic service. The event is one which embarrasses Pearson greatly: and to this day Jimmy's detractors urge it against him that he refused to allow his daughter to have her baby at home. Pearson is at pains to defend him, and declares that people would have been just as displeased had he accepted her back; and adds, what we may well believe, that it hurt Jimmy more to take the action he did than if he had taken her in. He feels so strongly on this that rhyme and metre desert him for a whole stanza. To all this there was, however, a happy sequel. Eliza was taken in by a neighbour: she and her father were quickly reconciled, and she herself was converted.

Eliza married a Warehorne man named Bourne, but both she and her sister, Mary Ann Washford, died relatively young. In 1864[9] the last blow came in the death of Jimmy's wife. He was now over seventy-one, and only one of his five children was still living. A tired man, crippled with rheumatics, he moved back to Warehorne, to a little house which had long associations with evangelical religion,[10] where he was attended by his surviving daughter, Harriet, and her husband, James Knight.

The end was not long in coming: and Jimmy Lee knew how to die. James Knight asked him if he had any message for his friends. Pearson, with a clear reminiscence of Wesley, versifies his reply:

I have not much to say to them,
But tell them this from me,
That I the chief of sinners am,
But Jesus died for me.

And so he fell asleep on the 15th February, 1865. Rolfe preached by the graveside. Pearson could only say that Elijah had gone, and there was no Elisha to take his mantle.

IV

Jimmy Lee was only five feet two inches tall, and was slight and delicate in appearance. He was, nevertheless, an excellent workman, who did the work of men of much greater apparent strength.

9 Pearson says 1863: but her tombstone at Shadoxhurst gives the date of her death as 21st January, 1864.

10 It had been the home of Jeremiah Washford, a well-known "character" and renowned preacher, whose tombstone in Warehorne churchyard bears a curious inscription which makes one wonder whether it represents more activity on the part of Pearson's muse. Only the foundations of the cottage now remain.

He never left the land. At one time, the sudden death of the travelling preacher at Sandhurst[11] led to a call for him to take the place: he refused point blank, as " he was not big enough for such a place as that ". Probably the cry of *Nolo Episcopari* has never been made with greater sincerity.

All the sources bespeak an affection for the little man: and he was regularly known as " Little Jimmy Lee." His gentleness and humility were a proverb: but they were linked with a fearlessness in speaking of Christ that made him deeply respected. Pearson tells of a drunk who, rolling home on a dark night, found Jimmy ahead of him. Frightened lest he should receive some gentle reproach, he staggered a long detour round a wood. Jimmy had not seen him: but later, the man, feeling ashamed, owned to him what he had done. Jimmy, who never cast pearls before swine, nor offended by unseasonable rebuke, was now able to open the gospel to an eager auditor, and had the joy of seeing his response.

Once, at the Bromley Green crossing, a thief stole the — for the Lees—large sum of twelve shillings from the till. Jimmy, though he knew who had done this, took no action, but spent many weary hours mowing a field to pay back what had gone.

He was, as has already been seen, a man of prayer. He had put God to the test many a time in his penurious early days: there was a time when his employer did not give him his wages, and the cupboard at home was literally bare. Jimmy's prayers were answered in a strange way: for, buried in the dust of the road as he returned home in disappointment, he found a gold sovereign. His home was noted for its family altar and its daily sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. We hear of the testimony of a carpenter who lodged with Jimmy while working on Rolfe's new Rectory and for whom his host's offering of prayer opened a new world.

That he was known as a man of prayer doubtless explains why he was so often called on in distress. Of this, there are many examples on record.

George Highful, son of the founder of Shadoxhurst Chapel, was still a lad when stricken with a fatal illness. He had little of his

11 Near the border of Sussex: not the Royal Military Academy. The incident makes one wonder, though without firm evidence for doing so, whether there might possibly be some connexion with the removal of a young minister from Sandhurst in 1848. " When he was in our circuit," said a resident many years later, when this minister became President of the Wesleyan Conference, " there was not a local preacher on the plan who could not preach better." The minister was W. B. Pope, who became the most eminent of Methodist theologians (R. W. Moss, *William B. Pope, Theologian and Saint*, London, n.d., pp. 55 f.).

father's piety; a voracious reader, he had been corrupted by the nineteenth-century evangelical vice of novel-reading. As a result, as Pearson quaintly puts it:

His head was full of literature
Without a work of grace.

But he sent for Jimmy: and ere he died he shouted as he saw his sins taken away, and did his utmost to recall his erstwhile companions from their thoughtlessness.

There was the farmer, too, "a quiet, moral man" who called for Jimmy on his deathbed, and "saw his title clear some hours before he died." But it was not only to the dying that Jimmy ministered. In the course of his daily work in the field, we find him leading to Christ a fellow-labourer, who felt he was too bad to come to the Society meeting; and we hear of his help to a woman secretly burdened with domestic cares and under conviction of sin that she could not sleep. She later became a pillar of the work in Shadoxhurst.

Throughout his life, from the time when the zealous new convert began to speak to the negro on his master's farm, Jimmy was meeting people in great spiritual need; and, dwelling deeply as he did in his Lord's presence, he was constantly able to give a word in season.

V

A little remains to be said on Jimmy Lee as a preacher. The announcement of his death[12] described him as a local preacher for nearly fifty years: so that he must have commenced soon after his conversion. Pearson mentions that in the early days, like other Methodist preachers, he was stoned for his pains. The period of his activity coincides with the growth of the Bible Christian Mission in Romney Marsh,[13] and to the new societies as to the old Jimmy was a valued preacher. Indeed, his last sermon was to the expanding Bible Christian Society at Warehorne in 1864.

Pearson says that his sermons "for a general thing was very short and sweet", and he has left a notable summary of their evangelistic content.

Our sinful nature can't produce
A single act of grace;
But Jesus Christ our righteousness
Just fills the empty place.

[12] *Ashford News*, 22nd February, 1865.

[13] Cf. F. W. Bourne, *The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History*, 1905, pp. 82-89, and passim. Bourne, one of the connexion's most illustrious figures, was himself from this area, being born at Woodchurch and converted through the little Bible Christian chapel there. See W. B. Luke, *Memorials of Frederick William Bourne*, 1906.

If we sometimes can hardly bear
To see our sinful state,
How vile and black must we appear
To Him who did create.

But when the Saviour stands between
In garments dyed in blood,
'Tis He instead of us is seen
When we approach to God.

It is the finished work of Christ
That cheers our dying hours,
Our breaches of the law are His
And His obedience ours.

There is a vivid account on record of Jimmy's preaching at Charing, a distant appointment, where he was not known. The Superintendent was due to preach, but was somehow prevented, and Jimmy arrived a little late to find a large congregation. He seemed, though at that time nearing forty, to be a mere boy, and the congregation giggled and whispered, "I wonder who comes next?" Pearson describes the gradual melting as hymn and prayer followed: the electric effect of the simply constructed sermon on the work of Christ and the reliability of God's promises as

The stripling held the Saviour up,
The only way for all;

and the abiding ties which Jimmy formed that day.

VI

The graves of Charles Rolfe and Jimmy Lee are close to each other in Shadoxhurst churchyard. There is an inscription over each. Rolfe's, set up by Wilkinson, has an account of the doctrines of grace which he preached. Lee's says:

> This stone is erected by voluntary contributions in affectionate remembrance of James Lee who departed this life in the full assurance of faith February 15th, 1865, in the 73rd year of his age.
> "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."

But the last words in this study of evangelical religion in the Bleak Age we may again give to Edward Pearson:

May we on Canaan's happy plains
From every trouble free;
Meet all our relatives and friends
And also Jimmy Lee.

Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone.