

A Page from an Old Newspaper : 1687.

CONTRIBUTED BY SIDNEY W. BOWSER.

A. A Brief Historical Note.

“The London Gazette” for May 19-23, 1687, printed by Tho. Newcomb in the Poultry, consists of a small single sheet of two full columns on each side. There are items of foreign news from Cadiz, Dantzicke, Vienna, Hamburg, Hague; a few items of home news, mostly of deserters from the Army, and of ‘lost stolen or strays’; an intimation that “Their Majesties went yesterday (Whitehal, May 20) with the whole Court to Windsor”; a full advertisement in Latin of the “Gradus ad Parnassum”; &c. These items, however curious, are of little more than ephemeral interest: and very properly they occupy the back page and a little more. The front page is nearly all taken up with three Addresses to the King from Nonconformists and people “commonly called Anabaptists.” These Addresses are exactly reprinted below; and they all deal with the grave moral question—important then and not less important now—of the Liberty of the Conscience. On the 4th April, 1687, James II issued his first Declaration of Indulgence, extending toleration to Nonconformists and Catholics alike, suspending the penal laws against their meetings for public worship, and abolishing religious tests for office in Church or State. Many Nonconformists, including some of the leaders, were justifiably suspicious of a policy dictated rather by love for the Catholics than by love for themselves. The late Mr. Skeats was inclined to give James the credit of being genuinely in favour of reli-

gious liberty and equality, and quotes the king's word to a Quaker Deputation. "Some of you know—I am sure you do, Mr Penn—that it was always my principle that conscience ought not to be forced, and that all men ought to have liberty of their consciences, and what I have promised in my declaration I will continue to perform 'as long as I live; and I hope, before I die, to settle it so that after ages shall have no reason to alter it." Certain it is that the Nonconformists and people "commonly called Anabaptists" who presented these Addresses were sincerely grateful for the relief afforded after years of persecution and trial. In language somewhat unnecessarily obsequious they express their fervent loyalty to the Throne; and they earnestly protest their unquenchable passion for religious liberty, and equality. Some at least of them did not fully estimate the unconstitutional character of the "dispensing power" that lay behind the declaration. On 22nd April 1688 a second Declaration of Indulgence was issued by the king. Seven Bishops declined to order their clergy to read it in the Churches. Their petition was regarded 'as a seditious libel—"a standard of rebellion," James called it. Their trial and their acquittal are well known matters of history. Nonconformist sympathy was largely with the Bishops. Toleration and Liberty of Conscience must be universal; based, not on the edict of a king, but on the nation's will expressed in constitutional law.

B. The Document itself.

The London Gazette. Numb. 2244.

Published by Authority.

From Thursday May 19. to Monday May 23. 1687.

WHITEHAL, MAY 21.

The following Addresses have been Presented to His Majesty, which his Majesty received very Graciously.

To the King's most excellent Majesty.

The Humble Address of some of Your Majesties Non-conforming and Loyal Subjects of Your Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, on the behalf of our Selves and others.

May it please Your Majesty,
Your Royal Grace and Favour manifested in Your Free Pardon, Publish'd in the Second year of Your Majesties Reign, was of such advantage and benefit to us, that some of us imprisoned by Writs of Capias for Nonconformity were discharged, and others of us delivered from eminent ruine, being then under severe prosecution upon the same account: The sence of this Favour, (which we with all Thankfulness acknowledge) was not gone out of our Minds, when it pleased Your Majesty, by Your late most Gracious Declaration, to espouse that Principle, that Conscience ought not to be constrained, nor People Forc'd in matters of meer Religion; a Principle so universally True and Just, that those whose Interest it was to deny, That the Matters in controversie betwixt them and us, ought to be concerned in it; or that we were to be believed in our Professions of Conscientious dissatisfaction, would nevertheless think it a rational Plea, if the case should be their own. Your Majesties Gracious Inclination, Your Sence and Opinion herein thus Declared, filleth us with unspeakable Satisfaction and Joy: And as we cannot but be sensible of the present advantage we have by it, being from thence Indulg'd in a freedom to Serve God in our way and manner, so are we confident that when others shall consider that this Truth hath now gained Cæsar's Image and Superscription, it will henceforth pass for currant good Coin, and conduce much to allay the heats and animosities which must unavoidably make the Government uneasy to a peaceably dispos'd Prince.

And now (Great Sir,) as we render our Humble Thanks to God (under whose Conduct and Guidance the Hearts of Kings are) for this our Liberty, so we desire to express all possible Gratitude to Your Majesty for Your Royal Favour and Compassion to us, promising in all Humility, to continue in cheerful and dutiful Obedience under Your Government; And are firmly resolved, steadily to move in all the paths of Loyalty and Allegiance, to serve your Majesty to our utmost hazard.

To the King's most Excellent Majesty.

The Humble Address of divers of Your Majesties Subjects in part of Stafford, Derby, and Nottinghamshires, commonly called Anabaptists.

Great Monarch,

We Your Majesties most Humble and Loyal Subjects, having for several years past been deep sufferers by the severe execution of Penal Laws about matters of Religion, having received the great benefit of your Majesties late most Gracious Declaration for Liberty of Conscience; by which we are at once deliver'd from all the Distresses we lay under, and have also the invaluable Blessing of Liberty to Serve Almighty God according to the best Light of our own Consciences.

Having made our Thankful Acknowledgments to the God of Heaven, as owning Him to be the Original of this and all our Blessings in the next place.

Dread Sovereign, the force of this your great Clemency, brings us at this time to your Majesties Feet, to present you our most Humble and unfeigned Thanks, for that Liberty and Quiet that we, and all other Dissenters now enjoy, and rest confident of during your Majesties whole Reign; and to assure your Majesty of our Duty and Loyalty to the utmost, and that it shall ever be our Care to promote what in us

lies, the Glory and Happiness of your Majesties Person and Government, and the Peace and Quiet of all our Fellow Subject.

And that from this illustrious Instance, so Great, so Good, and so Just, founded upon such unalterable Principles, such an universal Blessing from Almighty God may descend upon your Majesty, your Royal Posterity, and all the People under your Government, that you may be Great throughout all the World.

And that from these good Effects following upon this Princely Action, your Majesty may ever be confirmed in the Wisdom and Goodness of this choice.

We shall ever pray.

Subscribed for our Selves, and in this behalf of many others of the same Persuasion with us.

To the King's most Excellent Majesty,

The Humble Address of many of Your Majesties Subjects in and about Namptwich in Cheshire, Salop in Shropshire, and Audly in Staffordshire, commonly called Anabaptists.

Most Serene Prince,

When we call to mind the Distresses we lately groaned under, and the inevitable Ruine that threatened us, and our Families, by reason of the severe execution of the Penal Laws about matters of Religion; and now finding our selves delivered at once from all our Sufferings, and Fears, by your Gracious Declaration for Liberty of Conscience, we can do no less than prostrate our Selves at your Majesties Feet, with the offer of our most humble Thanks, flowing from the deepest sense of your Princely Compassion towards us.

And though we want words to express our Gratitude, for so great a Blessing as the free Exercise of our Religion, which is now by your Majesty Granted unto us, and all others in so full a manner, as could

'be expected from none, but such a Prince as Heaven designed for the highest Pattern of Royal Goodness, and true Policy; yet the Sense of it hath made so lasting an impression upon us, that (we trust) it shall not be possible for any of your Subjects to serve your Majesty with more ready Obedience, and steadfast Loyalty, than we shall do in our station, to the utmost of our capacity.

Dread Sovereign! That Almighty God who hath established You upon the Throne, to correct the Mistakes of past Ages, and make the present happy in the enjoyment of an intire Liberty of Conscience (which in matters of Religion cannot be forc'd,) will Crown your Majesty and your Royal Posterity with all Temporal and Eternal Blessings, making Your Reign over us Glorious and Happy, to the utmost wish of your most Loyal and Obliged Subjects, and the terror of your Enemies.

We shall ever pray.

Subscribed for our Selves, and in the behalf of many others of the same Persuasion with us.

C. Note by the Editor.

The Newcastle Address is from Nonconforming subjects; this title was never used by Baptists. The group in Stafford, Derby and Nottingham was probably General Baptists, for we know that such did exist there, as shown in the Minutes of Assembly, II, xi; whereas no Particular Baptists appeared thence at Assembly in 1689. The group round Nantwich-Shrewsbury-Audley was probably inspired by Samuel Acton the General Baptist. It is a pity that the Gazette does not give the signatures; probably they were so utterly obscure that the names would have made the addresses ridiculous. In London an address of thanks was presented by Nehemiah Cox, William Collins, Benjamin Dennis, Thomas Plant and others. William Kiffin and Joseph Stennett advised Baptists generally to ignore the king and his indulgence, and to re-open the meeting-houses, which had been illegally closed.