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Friend and Helpmate of William Carey

ANNIVERSARY OF JOHN FOUNTAIN

SEPTEMBER marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival in Bengal of John Fountain, a former member of Eagle-street Baptist Chapel, London. Fountain, with William Carey and John Thomas, played a large part in the foundation of Baptist missionary work in India.

Carey and Thomas had settled in Bengal in November, 1793, and, by the time of Fountain's arrival, Carey, who was earning a living by superintending two indigo factories, had founded a church at Mudnabatty, whilst his friend Thomas was struggling to do the same at Moypauldiggy, about seventeen miles to the north.

Sent out by the Baptist Missionary Society as a general assistant, Fountain, in letters to England, throws an interesting sidelight on Carey's work. "The day after my arrival," he said, "one of the idolatrous feasts of the Hindus was celebrated. They had been drumming and dancing before the idol three days and nights, but this evening it was to be thrown into the river. Brother Carey went among them and spoke for some time respecting the folly and sinfulness of their practices; but not being able to procure their attention, he addressed himself to the officiating Brahmin and some of the wildest devotees, who were much ashamed before him. . . . Just as he had left them, a letter was brought from brother Thomas, stating that he hoped a good work was begun at Moypauldiggy, and requesting brother Carey to come over and speak to the people. We accordingly went on the Saturday, and on the Sabbath, at sunrise, worship began, when nearly a hundred people were assembled."

Visiting the Bhutan country, in 1797, the missionaries were welcomed by high officials, who arranged for a band of Bengali musicians to precede them. Carey, Fountain and his companions undertook preaching in the villages around. Carey took a district of twenty square miles, travelling by river with two small boats, one serving as a lodging and the other as a cookhouse. Even his furniture accompanied him.

Requested by five Hindus and by a Portuguese gentleman, Fernandez by name, to open a mission at Dinagepore, thirty miles from Mudnabatty, Fountain visited the town and was the means of the conversion of Fernandez, who opened a meeting house shortly afterwards, at his own expense.

Marrying a fellow-missionary, a Miss Tidd, at Calcutta, in 1799, Fountain also welcomed a new band of missionaries sent out by the Society in the same year, and successfully initiated them into the practical problems of the work. He also helped Carey, when the leader found himself forced for economic reasons to remove his headquarters to Serampore in 1800. Here Fountain was appointed librarian, and he used his practical knowledge in helping Carey to produce and print his Bengalee Bible, for he was one of the only three missionaries who could preach to the natives in their own tongue.

His services, however, were soon lost to the mission. Responding to the request of a friend to help him to make indigo at Moypauldiggy, he developed dysentery and, although moved to Dinagepore, where he had the services of the East India Company's surgeons, he died on August 20, 1800, shortly before the birth of his child. This was a grievous disaster to the little band of pioneer missionaries, for Fountain was a fine preacher and a good singer. His composure on his death-bed was so inspiring that it rallied many waverers at Dinagepore to faith in Christ when they saw how he welcomed rather than feared death. Fountain was one of those many forgotten Englishmen, buried far from their homes, the real fruit of whose work only ripened years after their deaths.

R. D. WOODALL.