

**THE THREE RYLANDS: A
HUNDRED
YEARS OF VARIOUS
CHRISTIAN SERVICE**

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The Three Rylands: A Hundred Years of Various Christian Service by James Culross

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Special thanks are due to Miss Cornelia Bagster for her kindness in allowing the free use of her father's unpublished Autobiography, and to Martin Wilkin, Esq., for his courteous permission to print an autograph letter of Rev. John Ryland, A. M.

THE THREE RYLANDS :

**& Hundred Years of various
Christian Service.**

BY

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WITH INTRODUCTION

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1897.

INTRODUCTION.

THIS monograph—to which I am allowed by my friend Dr. Culross to prefix a few pages of introductory comment—is concerned with the lives of three men who successively exercised much influence over the thoughts and modes of training of Protestant dissenters, especially those belonging to the Baptist denomination. Differing much in temperament and gifts, the three Rylands—father, son, and grandson—worked on almost exactly similar lines in their religious and educational activities, and were alike characterized by undeviating evangelical orthodoxy, combined with zeal for acquiring and diffusing learning. Much the ablest and strongest character of the three, as it seems to his descendant who writes these lines, was the first of these, John Collett Ryland; and the bent of the family influence, and the tradition to which they were all loyal, were determined by the condition of thought and religion in England when he commenced his career as a Baptist

minister in 1748. His cast of opinion and his religious temperament were those of the seventeenth-century Puritans, while the general current of thought in the country was then altogether different from that of the previous age. England at that time, and during most of Ryland's life, was, like Western Europe generally, in the full tide of reaction. From the times of Elizabeth to those of Anne, Englishmen had been striving and fighting continually for the realization of ideas in religion and politics. To so long a period of stress and high tension there was bound to come a profound reaction towards prosaic temper and materialism. With the accession of the House of Brunswick, these set in and continued largely till the French Revolution. For the first part of this period there was little in public affairs to stir the minds and hearts of men. In place of uncertainty as to national and dynastic existence, came the settled government and peace policy of Walpole. Instead of a nation harassed by war-taxes and shaken by factions, came fat years of plenty. Rents throughout England had increased by one half during the thirty years ending in 1746. In rural districts the labouring classes were more comfortable and better off than they have ever been, before or since. Trade was expanding, and commerce increasing, and the national energies were diverted into channels of material prosperity. Similar character-

istics marked the intellectual world. The finest minds of the time were no longer concerned with constructive theories in religion and politics: to a creative had succeeded a critical age. This was no doubt well, but to fervent spirits wedded to the formulæ of the last generation, criticism seemed perilously like desecration and destruction. The changed conditions showed themselves in the world of morals. Hypocrisy and malignity, which always disfigure ages of enthusiasm, are less prominent, but sloth and coarse enjoyment loom larger in the denunciations of preachers. The England of George II. was no worse, but rather better, than the England of Charles I., but it was much less highly wrought for good or evil, and was marked by all the signs which accompany a time of repose, when great forces have burnt themselves out, and when even the highest faculties of a nation have to lie fallow to recover their fertility.

Perhaps the weaknesses of the new age were felt more than its benefits by the dissenting bodies among whom John Ryland was brought up. In common with all religionists, they breathed a different air from their fathers, and a new temper, strong in robust sanity, but weak for want of fervour and spiritual elevation, shows itself in them as in the episcopal churches at once by the growth of rationalistic opinion, and yet more by the spread of what in Scotland was called 'Moderatism'—that

spirit which exalted common-sense and balance of faculty above emotional and introspective religion. But, unlike the Churches of Rome and England, they gained little of the best life of their time in critical scholarship and intellectual eminence. They had lost the supreme stimulus of persecution. They had not gained the full encouragement of perfect freedom. The Toleration Act allowed them to exist. The Statute Book prevented their sharing the educational endowment of the nation. Treated with contemptuous indifference, and removed by disabilities and want of wealth and status from the main stream of the national life, they were in the very position where it was easiest to sink into apathy, most difficult to retain their vigour, and impossible to develop their ideas.

Among such people came John Ryland, young, ardent, with marked individuality, and with all that vehement temperament preferring eccentricity to platitude, which would have been congenial to the two previous centuries or to ours, but which was in sharp collision with the prevalent tendency of his own. To a man so situated there is always one deadly temptation. He finds himself hostile to the mode of his day; he is satisfied with the religious habits of thought of an earlier time, and devoted to the ways and phraseology of an age half gone, and he is very likely to intensify his antagonism to his contemporaries, and hugging his cloak of antique