

Out of the shadows

Nine short
inspiring biographies

Faith Cook



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James Lackington

The enigma

AS A BRIGHT MISCHIEVOUS TEN-YEAR-OLD, JAMES LACKINGTON showed an extraordinary talent for salesmanship. Hearing a local baker crying out, 'Apple pies for sale! Half-penny plum puddings for sale!' he was so intrigued that he persuaded his father to allow him to work with the baker. Now a boyish voice could be heard calling out his wares up and down the streets of Wellington, Somerset, where he lived. Customers were charmed and sales quickly multiplied. Such was his success that he stayed with the baker for more than a year, and by the increase in the baker's earnings extricated his master from his heavy debts.

Born in 1746, James was the eldest of eleven children. His start in life was far from promising for his father squandered what little money he earned as a cobbler on drink, and James despised him. But for his mother he had nothing but admiration. 'I shall not look on her like again. Never did I know or hear of a woman who worked as she did to support her eleven children,' he commented

in later life. His education lasted only a few years as he was soon obliged to find work to help support his numerous siblings.

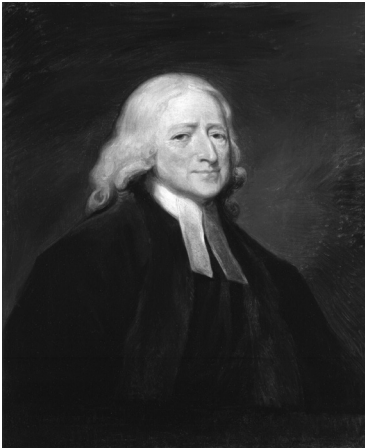
Apprenticed to a master cobbler in Taunton at the age of fourteen, James was glad to be living seven miles away from his alcohol-addicted father. His employer, George Bowden, and George's wife Mary were sober, kindly people with two sons: seventeen-year-old George; and John, who was fourteen like James. The family attended a Baptist church, but it appears that the parents' religion was largely formal, believing that a round of religious duties on the Sabbath was all that God required.

James settled well with the Bowdens and Mary taught the apprentice boy to read, for any early education he had received had been largely forgotten. He found the two boys congenial companions and for a small sum of money even persuaded John to teach him to spell. Although James attended the Baptist church services with the family, he understood little of what was said. Then an event occurred which changed everything.

One of John Wesley's itinerant preachers was touring the area and drawing crowds to hear his preaching. Among them stood George, the Bowdens' elder boy, and he heard a sermon that alarmed and troubled him. For the first time in his life he learnt that an upright moral lifestyle could not save his soul. 'I have even been baptized,' protested George to himself. But he could not escape the preacher's convicting words that apart from the grace and mercy of God through Christ he was 'without hope and God in the world'. George's conversion was swift and sincere. Now he was determined that his family, and James too, should also know the truths that had transformed his own life.

'No man', George assured them all over and over again, 'can earn his way to heaven by good works.' Echoing the preacher's words, he added: 'These are nothing but splendid sins.' Mary Bowden

found her son's comments impertinent and distressing; she spent hours trying to prove from the Bible that George was wrong, with doctrines such as original sin and Christ's imputed righteousness undoubtedly errors. His father said nothing. Then it became clear that their younger son, John, was also becoming increasingly troubled about his own spiritual state. 'I shall be damned for ever,' he kept crying out. At last John too came to a joyful assurance of forgiveness of sin.



John Wesley

Now it was the turn of the apprentice boy, James Lackington, to become alarmed. Perhaps the Bowden brothers and the Methodist preachers were right. Perhaps he too was in 'a damnable condition' as they constantly affirmed. At last James agreed to accompany George and John when they went to hear Thomas Bryant, another local Methodist lay preacher. 'His sermon frightened me most terribly,' James recorded. As in any work of God, not all who profess faith are truly converted, and it would seem that this young man's description of his reactions, written long afterwards with a strong degree of cynicism, casts doubt on his professions. 'At last,' he wrote, 'by singing and repeating enthusiastic, amorous hymns, and ignorantly applying particular texts of scripture, I got my imagination to a proper pitch and thus was I born again in an instant and became a great favourite of heaven.'

However, at the time James Lackington's zeal for his new-found faith knew no bounds. He read the Bible enthusiastically and learnt

many of Charles Wesley's hymns by heart. As an apprentice boy he did not have the freedom granted to the brothers, George and John, to attend Methodist meetings but was determined to do so all the same. As a last expedient to prevent James from attending such meetings and hearing what she deemed to be 'enthusiastical nonsense', his master's wife, Mary Bowden, locked the boy in his room when the other two set off. What was he going to do? Hastily James turned to the Scriptures at random for advice. He read: 'He shall give his angels charge over thee lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.' That decided him. Rushing to the window he opened it and leapt out, falling from a considerable height. As he picked himself up, he did not realize how badly hurt he had been, but after running a couple of hundred yards, he collapsed and had to be carried back to the house. It took a month before James was well enough to walk again.

Now regarded by many as an exemplary convert, James gave himself to earnest study of the Scriptures, often straining his eyes to read in the dark because his master would not allow him the use of candles. With no means of telling the time, he would sometimes get up soon after midnight in order to attend the five o'clock morning service, and was therefore obliged to spend the intervening hours wandering the streets until it was due to begin. His own record of his religious zeal reads:

I was first converted to Methodism when about sixteen years of age; from that time until I was twenty-one I was a sincere enthusiast, and every spare hour I enjoyed I dedicated to the study of the Bible, reading methodistical books, learning hymns, hearing sermons, meeting in societies etc. My memory was very tenacious, so that everything I read I made my own. I could have repeated several volumes of hymns; when I heard a sermon I could have preached it again and nearly in the same words; my Bible had

hundreds of leaves folded down, and thousands of marks against such texts as I thought favoured the doctrines I had imbibed.

But time itself was the ultimate test of James Lackington's sincerity. At the age of twenty-one the young man had completed his apprenticeship and was now free to seek employment as a travelling shoemaker. Mixing with questionable company, James soon began to neglect the Methodist meetings he had once prized so highly, and tried to imitate the dissipated habits of his new associates. Before long he learnt by bitter experience how fickle such so-called friends can be, as he was cheated out of all his hard-earned savings.

Added to this, his conscience troubled him, especially at night. What would happen to him if he died in a backslidden condition? Then a thought occurred to him which soothed his anxieties. All he needed was to await some further work of grace, or 'full sanctification' as the Methodists taught, and then all would be well. However, in the meantime James became more careless still, and began associating with dishonourable women. Before long, he learnt to his dismay that a certain Betty Tucker was claiming to be pregnant by him. This spelt serious trouble for the young man. Great was his relief when the young woman lost the child. Clearly, thought James, he was still 'a favourite of heaven', and God had intervened on his behalf.

Ill-suited to a career as a shoemaker, James was developing an increasing passion for books. Every farthing he could save was devoted to increasing his small collection. Now sharing living accommodation in Bristol with a friend of the same age, John Jones, the two young men scoured second-hand bookshops together, searching for anything they could afford. Previously James' collection had consisted of nothing more than a few religious books but now a motley array of poetry, apologetics and scientific volumes filled his shelves.