

"ELDER MOULTON" AND THE NOVA SCOTIA BAPTISTS

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IN the early histories of several Nova Scotian towns there occurs the name of Elder Moulton, a Baptist preacher before there were any Baptist churches in the Province. The story of this shadowy pioneer throws valuable light upon the social origins and the religious background of many of the Preloyalist settlers in Nova Scotia.

Ebenezer Moulton was born at Windham, Connecticut, on Christmas Day, 1709, and before his twentieth birthday had settled in that part of the town of Brimfield, Massachusetts, which is known as Wales.¹ At this time there were very few Baptist churches in New England. In the eyes of the majority of persons, Baptists were religious radicals of the most dangerous type, a menace to the "standing order" in both Church and State. It is somewhat unusual therefore to discover that on November 22, 1736, eleven persons signed a petition to be exempted from parish rates on the grounds that they were "of that persuasion commonly called Anabaptists."² The leader of this little group was Ebenezer Moulton. On November 4, 1741, he was ordained an elder, by Rev. John Callender of Newport, R.I.

The years 1740 and 1741 are notable in New England history for the great religious awakening which took place under the preaching of Rev. George Whitefield, Rev. Jonathan Edwards and others. The heart of this movement was the new emphasis placed upon personal religious experience, and the public relation of such experience to others. In formerly sleepy congregations there was a wild outburst of religious emotion, sometimes accompanied by crying, fainting and convulsive motions. Ordinary restraints and inhibitions were broken down, and a vast movement of lay preaching and exhortation sprang into existence.

Within the Wales Baptist church, the "New Light" caused a division. Mr. Moulton and some of the brethren were convinced that those who did not "feel" their religion were still unregenerate sinners. These latter, who disliked religious emotionalism, regarded their pastor and his friends as deluded guides. After seven years of controversy Mr. Moulton and

1. Absalom Gardner, *An Address Delivered in Wales, October 5, 1862*, (Springfield, Mass., 1864), 12.

2. Charles M. Hyde, "Historical Address," *Historical Celebration of the Town of Brimfield, Hampden County, Mass . . .* (Springfield, 1879), 134.

fifteen others related their experiences "to each other's satisfaction", and signed a new covenant which definitely closed the door of the church against their unconverted brethren.³

Similar separations occurred in many other towns among the Congregationalists, and, in the confusion which ensued, Elder Moulton was active in preaching to the dissatisfied New Lights. According to Massachusetts ecclesiastical law, though not always recognized in local practice, certified members of Baptist churches were exempted from paying rates for the support of the regular Congregational minister of the town in which they lived. Congregational Separatists enjoyed no such immunity. Therefore, as civil and ecclesiastical pressure was brought to bear more and more severely upon them, many Congregationalists found it profitable to be "dipped to wash away their taxes."

In June, 1749, Elder Moulton baptized thirteen members of the Separate church at Sturbridge, Mass. The persecutions had been particularly bitter in that town. A contemporary writes:

They stripped the pewter from the shelves of such as had it, and they took away skillets, kettles, pots and warming pans from those who had it not. Others they deprived of the means by which they got their bread . . . They drove away geese and swine from the doors of others. From some that had cows, they took one or more of them; from some that had but one, they took that away . . . and they thrust some into prison, where they suffered a long and tedious imprisonment.⁴

In this struggle with the tax-collector Elder Moulton did not escape. He was seized by the constables of Sturbridge, "dragged out of town and thrust into prison as a stroller and a vagabond." How long he remained in jail is not clear, but three months later he was preaching and baptizing at Raynham and Bridgewater, Mass., more than eighty miles from South Brimfield.

In their reaction against an unconverted and tax-supported ministry, both New Lights and Baptists became strongly prejudiced against all forms of ministerial support. Mr. Moulton, therefore, found it necessary to support his family by other means. There were very few stores in western Massachusetts

3. Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, 2nd ed. with notes by David Weston, (Newton, Mass., 1871), II, 467.

4. John C. Meyer, *Church and State in Massachusetts*, (Cleveland, O., 1930), 38

5. "Testimony" of Henry Fisk, Backus, *op. cit.*, II, 94.

6. George H. Haynes, *Historical Sketch of the First Congregational Church, Sturbridge, Mass.* (Worcester, 1910), 14.

at the time, which doubtless led him to take up "merchandizing".⁷ In time he became quite prosperous and, in 1757, was able to build a large new meeting house for his congregation. Provincial currency was very uncertain, however, and after the capture of Quebec many new merchants were able to set themselves up in Hampden County. Suddenly the merchant-preacher found that he was hopelessly in debt. His creditors "were ready to devour him," when like many other debtors in the year 1761 he slipped away to Nova Scotia where debtors enjoyed unusual privileges.⁸

On September 25, 1761, the name of Ebenezer Moulton appears among those appointed by the Governor and Council of Nova Scotia to act as a committee "for dividing the forfeited lands in the Township of Yarmouth, and for admitting settlers into the said Township under the regulations established by the Council."⁹ He himself received three lots of land, totalling seven hundred and fifty-five acres, and took up his residence at Cape Forchue at a spot still known as Elder Head. In the first *Return* of the township in 1763-64 he is listed as having two members in his family (his son?), and as being the owner of two "cattle". He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1761, and his name appears in the town records until 1771.

Whether or not the Elder, when embarking for Nova Scotia, planned to itinerate among the settlements on the new frontier as he had done in Massachusetts, is unknown. The New England settlers for the most part shared their countrymen's prejudice against "ranting Baptists". At Yarmouth, Mr. Moulton frequently preached in private houses, and even for a time, during the divisions in the Chebogue church over the ordination of Squire John Frost in 1796, ministered to the dissident Congregational society. In 1763, travelling by schooner along the coast, he was the first Dissenting minister to preach in Barrington, Cornwallis and Horton. At the latter places, which had been settled by families from Eastern Connecticut, the centre of Separatism, considerable religious enthusiasm was manifested. A number of persons were baptized, and a church was organized. Very little is known concerning this early Baptist body. It is

7. Backus, *op. cit.*, 467.

8. Cf., *Canadian Archives Report*, 1894, (Ottawa, 1895), 250. E. M. Saunders, *History of the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces*, (Halifax, 1902), 63, suggests that Mr. Moulton emigrated because of religious persecution, but I have been unable to discover any evidence of this at Brimfield, while the financial motive is clearly indicated by Backus.

9. John R. Campbell, *A History of the County of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia*, (Saint John, N. B., 1876), 39.

10. *Ibid.*, 50.

said to have practised mixed-communion, and to have built a meeting house near the old burying-ground in Horton (Wolfville).¹¹ Despite the fact that the Congregationalists of Cornwallis and Horton were unable to secure a minister of their own or organize a church until 1766, the opposition to the Baptists was so bitter that Elder Moulton returned to Yarmouth. "The Lord sent Mr. Moulton to Horton," remarked an old woman long afterwards, "but the devil drove him out."¹² With his departure the little church was dissolved, but some of its members clung to their Baptist doctrines and fifteen years later became the nucleus of the Baptist revival which spread throughout the Maritime Provinces.

Such experiences, together with the great distances which separated the western towns, must have convinced Elder Moulton that there was little hope of winning the frontier for "lively religion". Moreover, the economic depression which had set in after the Peace of Paris was causing widespread restlessness and discontent among the settlements. Discouraged farmers were selling their lands and returning to New England. When he received word that his creditors in Massachusetts would no longer press their claims, the pioneer preacher sold his farm at Yarmouth for seventy nine "Spanish mill dollars,"¹³ and returned to his old home in Brimfield. There in 1779 his heart was gladdened by a religious revival of unusual intensity, which more than doubled the membership of his old congregation. He died at Brimfield in 1783.

The significance of Elder Moulton lies not so much in the Baptist seeds he scattered here and there among the new settlements, but rather in the fact that in him the attitudes and the travails of the Preloyalists are most clearly distinguishable. He is representative of several thousand pioneers who have left no such definite memory of themselves. In the throes of the Great Awakening, the bitter struggle with the assessors, the religious strife and persecution, and the collapse of paper money, can be read the story of many who sailed for the new "French lands" in 1760-62.

11. A. W. H. Eaton, "The First Church Founded by New England People in King's County, Nova Scotia," *Some Fugitive Writings*, (1892), 222.

12. Quoted in Saunders, *op. cit.*, 63.

13. George S. Brown, *Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, A Sequel to Campbell's History*, (Boston, 1888), 324. There is a tradition that Elder Moulton served for a time as chaplain aboard one of the king's ships, but this is rather unlikely for a Baptist.