

*Nathaniel Evans*  
*Some Notes on His Ministry*

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NATHANIEL EVANS, who was born in Philadelphia, June 8, 1742, and died at Haddonfield, New Jersey, on October 29, 1767, was a poet of a high degree of mechanical skill and of some promise. Grounded in the tradition of Pope and Dryden, he was an excellent versifier although lacking in imagination and subtlety. At the same time he deserves a high rank among the men of letters of colonial America; and no history of the literature of this country is complete without some recognition of his efforts. He was highly regarded as a poet beyond the circle in which he moved; and Oliver Goldsmith was one of those who subscribed to a volume of his poems.

Evans was a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the great organization of the Anglican communion which supported a large majority of the Church of England clergymen who ministered to the American colonies during the eighteenth century. After his ordination in England, he was sent to Haddonfield; and there—and in the surrounding communities—he toiled till his death, a little over a year and a half after his arrival. Evans had enjoyed the affection of Dr. William Smith, Provost of the College of Philadelphia, ever since his student days; and he was well known to Dr. Richard Peters, the rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, and one of the most influential clergymen in the colonies. His early departure was deeply deplored. His body was brought to his native city, and interred in Christ Church; Dr. Peters preached the burial sermon. The *Philadelphia Gazette* and the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* paid tributes to the young man's memory; and several letters were

written to the Society in London—the S. P. G.—expressing the loss and sorrow which had been sustained.<sup>1</sup>

As the Reverend Jonathan Odell, S. P. G. missionary at Burlington, New Jersey, intimated to the Society, in a letter written January 6, 1768, the good start which was made by Mr. Evans in his particular field soon came to an end. When the Reverend David Griffith appeared as a successor, he found the congregations diminished and scattered.

A few of the letters written regarding Mr. Evans and his work, and concerning his bereaved father, may be found in the archives of the S. P. G. They have never been published; still their bearing on one of the significant figures of early America justifies making them available.

On November 9, 1787, Dr. Richard Peters wrote the secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, expressing the grief sustained from the death of the Reverend Robert McKean, missionary to Perth Amboy, who had died on October 17, 1767, and the death of Mr. Evans. Regarding the latter, he said:

At the Instance of the dejected Parents I went to the House where he lived & met the principal People of both his Congregations. It appeared from Mr. Evans's own Books & from the Churchwardens Books that they had paid him one hundred and Eight pounds the full Amount of their first years Subscription. Indeed they were dilatory at first & it made Mr. Evans uneasy for he was not in a Capacity to live without the Subscription Money—but lately & towards the Spring they have & will collect & pay all or the most of the money stipulated. They are a large numerous well disposed people & worthy of the Societys Care. Mr. Evans was almost adored amongst them & did a great deal of Good—he was uneasy for some time and expressed to me a desire to leave them as persons incapable of giving him a support. They mended & I believe had it pleased God to continue him he woud have been content with his Mission for some time.<sup>2</sup>

The father of Nathaniel Evans was left in a pathetic position by his son's death. Not merely grief-stricken, he was reduced to

<sup>1</sup> For the life of Evans, see the author's brochure, *Nathaniel Evans, a Poet of Colonial America* (Ocala, Florida, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 130 (bis), copied from transcript in the Library of Congress.

financial embarrassment. He appealed to Dr. William Smith to use his good offices in securing some help from the Society; and on May 6, 1768, Dr. Smith wrote a letter to the S. P. G., enclosing one from Mr. Edward Evans, the father, and stating that, while the late missionary's congregation had responded reasonably well, a gift from the Society "would be kind."

I enclose a Letter from old Mr. Evans. I find his Son had £70 from Gloster Church, and about £72 from his other Church; so that they do not deserve to be complained off. The old Gentleman however expects Something from the Society, & if any Thing can be done it would be kind.<sup>1</sup>

The following is the letter written by Edward Evans to the Secretary of the Society, and dated May 7, 1768:

In looking over my Son's (the Revd Nathaniel Evans's) Papers, the last letter I can find he receiv'd from you bears date the 20th of April 1767; wherein you desire him to send an Account of what Moneys he had received from each of his Congregations. An exact Account of each Subscription, of each Congregation, as he received it, he set down in a little Book he made for that purpose; which Book has been examined by the principal Members of each Church, which they acknowledge to be satisfied is true & right, and which you would have long since received, had it been God's good Pleasure, to have spared his life. I have now put them into the Hands of the Reverend Dr Smith, in order that he may send you such Extracts from it, as he may think necessary. —

Permit me now, Reverend Sir, to acquaint you with some part of my Son's Circumstances; when it pleased God to incline his Heart to enter into holy Orders he had but little Money, which he could call to Service; therefore he was obliged to borrow of a Friend between £30 and £40 Sterling upon Interest, for which I became bound, and this Money is still unpaid. The Salary my Son received from the venerable Society was paid to a Gentleman in England of whom he bought Books, and his Salary here coming so slowly, and that in drabs, that he could not while he lived pay the Debt, and his Books will sell at one half or more less, Therefore Reverend Sir, I pray you to let me know what the Venerable Society will permit me to draw for. The Reason, Sir, I did not myself the Honour of writing to you sooner was, I had no Spirit or Strength to do any Business, I was so overwhelmed with Grief for the loss of my dear Son, my only Child, my obedient Son, O! how could it be otherwise! I had lost my Crown of Glory, as it were—pardon, Revd Sir, my Weakness. Had it been the Will of God to have lengthened his days, he would have been, I believe, an useful & able Minister in Christ's Church.

<sup>1</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 259 (Library of Congress transcript).

Daily his Office became more weighty to him, and his People more dear;—but it was the Will of God he should make a short Work of it, finish his Course in Righteousness, & go home to Rest. The Time he was employed he made a good progress in his holy Calling; he was faithful, & vigilant, & tender in the discharge of his duty, according to the light & knowledge God had given him; was greatly desirous of doing Good both to the souls & Bodies of Men. Blessed be God, he has left a sweet smelling Saviour behind him; even a Saviour of Life unto Life unto many I believe and I believe some will ever bless God that he sent him but likewise others, Dissenters, Presbyterians & Quakers express it by many Tears at his Funeral, which was the 31st of October, 1767.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Peters felt very sympathetic towards poor Mr. Evans; and he recommended to the Society that some provision for the old man would be generous, in case the same were possible. (It should be stated here that the funds of the S. P. G. were never excessive; that the expansion of the Society's missionary activities was an increasing drain on the income; and that towards the end of the colonial period there was a falling off in receipts and donations, which caused many worth-while appeals to be refused).

The declining state of Mr. Evans's missions, still without a shepherd, was also the subject of Dr. Peters' appeal. He wrote the Secretary, May 19, 1768.

The Two Congregations of Coles Church & Gloucester late under the pastoral Care of Missionary Evans deceased are suffering much & will soon go back to their sad deplorable state of Ignorance & a loose profane abuse of the Sabbath day unless the Goodness of the Society will continue the Provisions allowed to Mr. Evans. They have depended much upon Dr. Smith & me to represent their Case & tho it be in Jersey & out of our District yet as Members of the Society & concernd for every thing relative to their sacred [trust?] we shall take the freedom to write to the Society on this Subject. Some Arrears were due to the late Mr. Evans his Father is now labouring under a Debt contracted by [for?] his Son at the time he went over for Orders. He writes I believe on this Subject. Please to signifie to Mr. Smith or me or both of us what is usually done on such occasions & what the Society will be pleased to do in the Case of Mr. Evans.<sup>2</sup>

The Society, moved by the appeal, sent a gift to Mr. Evans; and the same was acknowledged with gratitude by the elderly

<sup>1</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 60 (Library of Congress transcript).

<sup>2</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 132, p. 3 (Library of Congress transcript).

father, on October 11, 1768. He had received the same by the hands of Dr. Smith, on the 7th of that month; and "the honourable Donation of the venerable Society" was accompanied by a letter—

for which I shall allways account my Self their and your Debtor which is all your Poor Servant has to offer to you. But to my God I shall not Seace to pray for them and for you that they and you may be abundantly Blessed for your Labour of Love and Greatly Rewarded for In-courageing Carring on so Pious and Charitable an Institution that may thereby Lay up Treasures unto Eternal life.

This letter to the Secretary of the S. P. G. was signed, "Your Poor Humble Servant / Edward Evans."<sup>1</sup>

The Reverend John Lyon, S. P. G. missionary in Sussex County, Delaware, visited the congregations formerly ministered to by Nathaniel Evans, in 1769. He reported to the Society, October 25, 1769, that he had gone to see the people of Gloucester and Waterford, New Jersey; and had preached among them.

Though I found many among them well disposd yet since the Revd Mr. Evans Death, the Gloucester Part of the Mission, are become so broken & dispersd that they think themselves not able to comply with the Society's Proposal to them.

Mr. Lyon had been appointed by the Society as Mr. Evans' successor; but he had found the Sussex County mission so important that he had gone there instead, with the consent of Dr. Smith and the other Philadelphia clergy.<sup>2</sup>

The Reverend David Griffith was appointed to the field by the Society. He found that the congregations had diminished; and that the members who remained were so intermarried and connected with the Quakers, who constituted the most numerous and wealthy people, that their affection for the Church had greatly cooled. At Gloucester, there were not more than three families who continued steadfast to the Church of England. The rest refused to contribute at all towards its support. In his letter to the Society, February 8, 1771, he blamed some of the dissatisfaction

<sup>1</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 61 (Library of Congress transcript).

<sup>2</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 170 (Library of Congress transcript).

on the visits of Mr. Evans, whose pious zeal had led him into the ranks of the itinerant Methodist preachers who were then going about the country. "This revolt seems to have been occasioned by the frequent Visits of the Late Mr. Evans's Father & other Methodist Preachers among them."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Richard Peters, in his letter to the Society, October 31, 1771, confirmed what Mr. Griffith had said. He recommended Mr. Robert Blackwell as one who might rescue the remnants of Nathaniel Evans' congregations and revive their interest in the Church of England.

I am under a necessity of informing you that the misfortunes attending the Cleshill & Gloucester Mission will turn out much to the advantage of it. Mr. Evans the Father of my late dear Friend the late Missionary there is dead, & as he had collected a Congregation at some miles distance from Gloucester, on the Methodist irregular Plan, and out of Love to him they had built a New Church of Meeting; Pains had been taken to lay before these people their Errors, and to prevail with them to return to the Church & they have engaged to join with the Members of Coleshill & Gloucester & to encrease the Sallary of any future Missionary. They are induced to this Step the readier, as there has been with them a good Young man, who has been bred with a design to take Orders in the Church of England, one Mr. Wm Blackwell, whose Father lives near New York, & who brought with him good Testimonials & Recommendations to Dr Smith & Me from Dr Auchmuty and the Clergy of New York. Mr. Blackwell has been with the people of all these Congregations, & they are much taken with him, & desire to have him for their Missionary; and Dr Smith and myself have agreed to recommend him to the Society & to press him to go over to London immediately.<sup>2</sup>

The Reverend Robert Blackwell was ordained, and commissioned to Gloucester. On November 20, 1773, he wrote the S. P. G. that he had been attended the congregations of Gloucester, Waterford, and Berkeley (within the town of Greenwich). There were about forty families in each church—"very ignorant, particularly in respect to the Sacraments as living in the midst of Quakers and destitute of the means of instruction."<sup>3</sup> On April 25, 1774, he wrote:

<sup>1</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 24, no. 131 (Library of Congress transcript).

<sup>2</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 21, no. 134 (Library of Congress transcript). Peters erroneously refers to Robert Blackwell as "William."

<sup>3</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 24, no. 15 (Library of Congress transcript); Archives of General Convention, vol. 2, pp. 153-154.

My people, in general, are not so zealous in promoting the true interest of the Church as I could wish them; at Waterford they are too much tinctured with Methodism. I use my best endeavours to give them an attachment to the Church; but what will be the fruit of my labours, God only knows, & we must leave it to time to inform us.

At Greenwich, his people were "well meaning . . . the somewhat enthusiastic, which in this place is the very spirit of methodism. They may in time see their error, & be more firmly attached to the Church."

I exercise much gentleness towards them, endeavouring to reclaim them rather by conviction than reproof.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Blackwell sided with the Americans during the Revolutionary War. During the struggle, it was no longer possible for the Society to maintain missions in the colonies.

Summing up, we find that during the short ministry of Nathaniel Evans, the young clergyman succeeded in winning the affections of his people. His illness and early death caused deep regret; and the members showed their grief not only by their expressions of sympathy but by making up their share of the stipend. The father of the late missionary gained the sympathy of prominent clergymen, who pressed his case before the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and secured for him a donation. Of a pious turn and strongly affected by his loss, Mr. Evans attached himself to the Methodist movement—not yet crystallized into a separate religious body; and visited the scene of his son's labours, preaching and exhorting. Thus he built up a congregation from the disorganized group, where his son's memory was held sacred. A house of worship was even built. The old man died shortly afterwards; but the following which he had collected formed a nucleus to which a resident Anglican minister might still minister.

<sup>1</sup> S. P. G. B-Series, vol. 24, no. 15 (Library of Congress transcript).

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