

ANNE STEELE'S HEALTH

A Modern Diagnosis

Few people today, even among Baptists, have heard of Anne Steele; yet in the nineteenth century she was much esteemed and her hymns were widely sung. In the hymnals of the Dissenting Churches only the names of Watts and Dodderidge were more often found, and she was, without question, the foremost Baptist hymn writer. (1)

Very little has been written about Anne Steele's life, except for the somewhat sketchy memoirs in their respective editions of her poems by Dr Caleb Evans, John Sheppard, and John Broome. Most commentators in books of hymnody emphasise her sorrowful hymns, her preoccupation with the consolatory effects of faith, and her bad health, and ascribe her melancholy nature to the effects of a tragic drowning accident in which her fiancé died. Thus Joseph Ivimey (1830) writes:

Dr Evans has not mentioned an incident in the life of the pious 'Theodosia' which must have been most painful to her heart. She had consented to give her hand to a young gentleman, Mr James Elcomb, who resided at Ringwood, and the day of the marriage was fixed. The day preceding it he went to bathe in the river below the town, at a place called South-mead, and was drowned. A tradition, which the writer, who is a native, recollects, was, that his shrieks were heard in the town and the place is still called, on account of this painful circumstance, 'Elcomb's hole'. (2)

Other writers have taken up the theme, from John Sheppard in 1863 to D. M. Sale in 1975 and including A. E. Bailey (1950) who introduced a second accident involving a fall from a horse: 'In her childhood the poet had an accident which made her an invalid through life'. (3)

Examination of the Steele family letters and a 'diary' written by Anne Steele's stepmother (in the possession of H.S-S.), casts doubt on the accuracy of Ivimey's anecdote concerning the drowning and indicates that the horse-riding accident was of no great importance. However, the documents clearly reveal that Anne Steele suffered from several serious diseases and was not simply a melancholy aesthete as some of the Victorian writers would have us believe. It is our contention that her physical and mental state was entirely a consequence of long-standing organic disease and not related to two sensationalised incidents in her early life.

With regard to the drowning, there is a letter extant written by James Manfield to William Steele, Anne's father, which reads:

I heartily wish the Subsequent part of my letter may not be an Unseasonable surprize to any of your Family and therefore tis with very great concern that I acquaint You that this Evening our dear friend Mr Elcomb was unfortunately drown'd in the River in washing himself where he went in was shallow but