

*Brethren Historical Review* 6: 108-110

**John Nelson Darby: Prophetic Pioneer**

Marion Field

Godalming, Surrey: Highland Books, 2008

243pp. (pbk) ISBN 978-1897913-76-5 £8.99

In a recent correspondence Roy Coad noted to the present reviewer of the Belgian beverage, *Bière Darbyste*, which reputedly owes its existence to Darby wishing to provide a low alcohol drink for miners, that such an origin is plausible, for it would show Darby's 'instinctive sympathy and practical thought for the ordinary and least regarded members of society. One's mind goes back to the early curate of Calary! Such a practical thought for the miners of Belgium would have been entirely in character.' However, he added: 'One can be excused for shedding tears over what different groups of extremists have since made of other parts of his legacy.'

Darby's mythology and legacy are still with us. Marion Field's biography is an attempt to deal with both. There is some back-story here, for Field is the author of two books from the end of last century about women leaving the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren: her own autobiography, *Don't Call Me Sister!* (1993), and *Shut Up Sarah* (1996).<sup>1</sup> The biography, then, is more than just an attempt to rescue Darby as the pioneer of dispensational premillennialism from what the author feels is the neglect of the wider Christian world, but is also an act of piety in seeking to rescue him from elements in his own legacy.

Field has produced a readable biography which sets out satisfactorily the main facts of Darby's career. It lays to rest the difficulties over Darby's mother's date of death which earlier biographers have placed too early, making him sorrow over a mother lost in his infancy. Field conclusively shows that Anne Darby lived until she was 90, dying of influenza on the last day of 1847 by which time Darby would be middle-aged. The point is reinforced with a photograph of her tombstone in Warbleton, Sussex. However, the

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1. Both books were reviewed in *BAHNR*, 1.1 (1997), pp.57-9.

state of the relationship between Darby's father and his wife remains a mystery, although Field has a quotation from Prof. Philip McNair's unpublished manuscript biography of Darby (the first snippets to appear in print), which shows that he remained in contact with his mother after he had become Brethren. The biography also does not repeat the failings of previous ones in stopping his life at 1848, but has a chapter, culled from his letters, which shows what a restless itinerant he was for the remainder of his life, travelling on continental Europe, in North America and even the Antipodes. Darby's will has also been traced and is quoted in full, giving fascinating insights into his relationships with other Brethren.

Field, however, absolves Darby from blame for the wilder excesses of 'the other parts of his legacy'. True, it is accepted that with his peers he could be impatient and 'extremely critical and harsh with those who opposed him' (p.158). He is even accused over Bethesda of 'authoritarian behaviour' (p.144) and that he had 'gone too far' (p.148). But generally it is the humble Darby who is portrayed in the book. In Field's account he 'never rejected anyone who held different views from his and was always ready to talk with them' (p.60), and 'was never confrontational when dealing with those who disagreed with him' (p.73), as he 'disliked controversy' (p.133). She accepts his own account of the coming together in Dublin, and so he plays a leading role from the beginning. Newton is apportioned most of the blame for the later split, and neither Newton's later recantation of the elements of heresy in his teaching, which are surprisingly located by Field in his *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* (1844), and Darby's refusal to accept the retraction, are mentioned. Perhaps Field has identified too strongly with her subject, but there is a tendency to take Darby's own assessment of events at face value.

There are three chapters, which discuss Darby's theology, but although his letters are generously quoted as evidence of his beliefs, there is a tendency to flatten out the development of his thought. For example, the twelve letters from which quotations are taken to demonstrate Darby's views on the world and worldliness, range from

1848 until 1881 (pp.58-9), but the reader might not be aware of this, as the dates of writing are not cited in the footnotes throughout the book.

Darby's character is in many ways contradictory, and he created difficulties for any biographer trying to synthesise the different aspects of his personality or his thought. Field's work is therefore less successful as an intellectual or psychological biography of Darby than it is in setting out the main outlines of his career. The book is a great advance on previous ones in filling out a picture of Darby's life, and should be on the shelves of anyone interested in Brethren history. But we still await a properly historically-critical biography which will seek to demythologise the man and establish the full legacy of 'Mr. Darby'.

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