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The Exclusive Brethren and an Australian rural community
Matthew Tonts

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Apart from the interest of the topic to the readership of this journal, a review of this article is justified by the difficulty of getting hold of a copy—being in a geographical journal, it is not easily available to historians via internet databases. The article abstract states at the outset that the paper ‘examines the history, theology and geography of the Christian sect known as the Exclusive Brethren’. Needless to say, this is not achieved in fourteen pages. More successfully, the author looks at how the ‘historical and theological characteristics of the Exclusive Brethren have shaped the sect’s social and economic geographies’—in particular, what impact they have had on the Western Australian country town of Dalwallinu.

The paper, an offshoot of Tonts’s doctoral thesis on rural communities, has four main sections as well as an introduction and conclusion: conceptualising the religious sect; Brethren history, theology and geography; the demographic and economic turnaround in Dalwallinu; and local social relations with the Brethren.

The first section draws on the work of Troelstch, Wilson and Niebuhr, among others, to examine the characteristics of introversionist sects: total commitment to the sect, strict conventions, exclusion of those who fail in allegiance, and separation from the outside world—both ideologically and spatially. The paper then goes on to review the history of the Exclusive Brethren, showing how they fit into the definition of an introversionist sect. This historical section is probably the weakest, despite the fact that the author apparently draws on Coad and Rowdon. A basic overview of the early history includes some misunderstandings, such as the statement that Cronin and his friends began to meet ‘outside the confines of the Church of England’, whereas Cronin had been associated with dissenting bodies, and that the group emerged as a result of doubts about the ‘validity of Anglican orders’—a simplistic and even misleading summary. Other anomalies are the claim that the

Exclusives excluded all other Christians from fellowship (when in the first decades after the division only the Open Brethren were excluded), and that the original split of 1848 was over the question of the 'closed table'. Perhaps this is a case of 'as others see us', as Tonts has clearly tried to give basic foundational information for readers who know nothing about the Brethren, but it is rather unsatisfactory in an academic paper.

From the Australian point of view, it is not 'generally held that Darby's charismatic public preaching and missionary work led to the establishment of fellowships in Melbourne and Sydney' in the 1830s and '40s (p. 313). Also, although elsewhere Tonts distinguishes between the Open and Exclusive wings of the movement, this paragraph on Australia reads as though only the Exclusives have meetings here.

The author is more accurate in outlining the situation from 1959, and indeed the strongest part of the paper is based on his research into the small country town of Dalwallinu (pop. 697 in 1996). There had been a small assembly there since the 1930s, but in the 1980s and 1990s this grew to around 200 as a result of John Hales's directives to move from metropolitan areas to the country. Tonts analyses census and other data to show that this influx turned around a local population decline, created labour opportunities (especially indirect employment), and helped consolidate basic public services such as education and health provision. It has even contributed, through rates and taxes, to an improvement in local government infrastructure and community services—many of which the Exclusives rarely use.

Tonts then concludes the paper with a discussion of the social relationships of the Exclusives, which as one might predict are mixed. In a number of interviews with local residents and former Brethren, the usual ambivalence and regrets were voiced. Residents appreciated the economic upturn which resulted from the Brethren presence, but struggled to understand the separation they maintained. As always, this negative attitude was particularly the case with those who had been withdrawn from. Both ex-members and locals looking

on were distressed—in such a small town the ramifications for ex-members were painfully obvious to all.

Tonts's study is over ten years old and towards the end of it the Exclusives were considering starting their own school. This proposal was of great concern to locals who thought it might threaten the existence of the state school. Also, follow-up interviews indicated that locals were increasingly 'taking sides': "The trouble is, people who drive through town see all this economic development. They don't see what's below the surface" (p. 320).

Despite some shortcomings in background information, this study looks at the Exclusive Brethren in Australia in microcosm and from both personal interviews and objective data analyses their effect on a local community. As such it is unusual and an interesting contribution to scholarship on this branch of the movement.

Note: an internet search shows that the Exclusives built a high school in the 1990s. The Dalwallinu shire web site lists an 'Exclusive Bretheren' [*sic*] fellowship as one of the churches, with no details as to place or times.

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