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'Evangelical Cross-Currents in the Church of Ireland 1820-33'

T.C.F. Stunt

in W.J. Shields and Diana Wood (eds), *The Churches, Ireland and the Irish: Studies in Church History*

Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1989

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Anything from the pen of Timothy Stunt is worthwhile, and although this short paper is only peripheral to Brethren history it is no exception. It embodies (as does all his work) the fruits of wide research in both original and secondary sources—many of them not readily accessible. Stunt is concerned with the currents of opinion in the Church of Ireland following the Act of Union of 1800 and at the time of Catholic Emancipation in 1828, and thus with one of the chief formative influences on the beginnings of what he describes in his final paragraph as 'the misnamed Plymouth Brethren'.

Stunt draws a picture of a church disturbed by numerous unsettling currents that were breaking up the 'worldly enlightenment of eighteenth-century Dublin'. The Anglo-Irish community—from which several of the most influential Brethren leaders were to emerge—was feeling increasingly isolated in the country. Religiously, the advent of Evangelicalism led on the one hand to interdenominational societies such as the Bible Society and the Scripture Readers' Society, and on the other to a fashion for 'drawing room meetings' for prayer and Bible study. There were differences between those who pursued active involvement and those who sought a quieter—and often quietist—spirituality. The Church of Ireland developed other tensions between 'exact churchmen' who were suspicious of interdenominational involvement and concerned for the Establishment, and two other elements, themselves mutually antagonistic: aggressive evangelisation of Catholics on one side and political activities on the other. From this ferment of loyalties and opinions it was perhaps inevitable that a new form of dissent should emerge—and, tragically, take destructive seeds of conflict with it into the new movement that was to develop on the far side of the Irish Sea. It was not for nothing that B.W. Newton in later life was to confide to a companion that there were two things that spoiled the Brethren—'Irving and the Irish'.

Roy Coad