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**John Nelson Darby: a Biography**

Max S. Weremchuk

Loizeaux Brothers: Neptune, New Jersey, USA, 1992

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Until now, the few published biographies of John Nelson Darby have been better described as hagiography. It is true that perceptive accounts of him can be found in the excellent works on the early Brethren by Rowdon and Coad, but it is nonetheless extraordinary that more than a century has elapsed between Darby's death and the recent appearance of Max Weremchuk's thorough examination of the primary sources relating to Darby's early life. (The book's cover title is misleading because its biographical, as opposed to interpretative elements, only cover the first thirty-five years of Darby's life.) The author has done some valuable spade-work in a wide range of primary sources to establish details of Darby's family background and early career. He has grappled with such diverse materials as genealogical and local residential records in Sussex, London and Ireland; the Large Fry MS Book (Manchester University Library, CBA 7049); Darby's letters and memorabilia (from the former Sibthorpe collection but now in what is here described as the 'Darby Collection, Foundation of Archives of Church History' in the care of Dr. W.J. Ouweneel, but which we now understand to be in the hands of the Medema Publishing House in Vaassen, Netherlands); and the numerous autobiographical snippets scattered through the voluminous corpus of Darby's own published work. His book also contains some unfamiliar early Brethren portraits from the collection of Ulrich Bister of Herborn/Horbach, in Germany.

Darby, of course, was a competent German speaker but it is nevertheless a little ironic that this book appeared originally in German (1988) and then in Dutch (1990) and that the author who has tracked down so much information is neither English nor Irish but, if we are not mistaken, of Ukrainian/ Austrian/Canadian origins. On the other hand this may account for a few errors of nomenclature (eg. Lord Powerscourt's first wife was not 'Francis Theodosia Bligh' (p.115) but 'Frances Theodosia Jocelyn'. Bligh was the maiden name of her mother and also of the mother of her cousin the 2nd Lady Powerscourt). Likewise there are some stylistic infelicities which are reminiscent of the 'Ladybird' books. For example while the statement that Darby's uncle 'later received the title of "Sir"' (p.21) sounds childish, the explanation that 'a curate was a clergyman in charge of a parish' (p.233 n.40) is inaccurate as well.

Weremchuk's imprecision in the acknowledgement of his sources is more than occasionally problematic. Even though the Large Fry MS Book is a MS transcript of an earlier transcript of Newton's letters and reminiscences, it is here referred to in the bibliography as if it were a printed volume ('B.W Newton, *Letters and Account of Early Years of the Brethren in the so-called Fry Manuscripts*) and there is no hint that it is housed in Manchester. Documents, like some recently discovered letters of Darby's father from 1813-27 (p.28), are discussed but with no details of where they can be found. Likewise Weremchuk quotes at length (Appendix C) from J.N. Darby's MS notes (written in a 'four volume Greek New Testament') about his early spiritual progress but he gives no indication of the book's location except for an erroneous reference (p.233 n.31) to the 'Fry Manuscripts' which actually contain no such item. There are similar references to unlocated letters and notes of William Kelly which we have reason to think are in the possession of Ulrich Bister in Germany.

Another difficulty arises when Weremchuk states categorically that 'The money that [Darby] had before his ordination, he spent in building schools and giving alms' (p.42).

Naturally the reader would like to know more about this discovery but the footnote only refers us to an essay by Thomas Scott (1747-1821). Even though Scott's writings were highly esteemed by Darby at the time, they are hardly a reliable basis for saying what Darby was doing in the late 1820s. A rather more disturbing example of this lack of precision occurs on pp.32-3 where Weremchuk quotes from Darby's account of his reaction when reading a work of Cicero before his conversion. Weremchuk says it was written in 1853 and in the footnotes refers us first to Darby's *Letters*, (I, 20) and then to a passage in his *Irrationalism of Infidelity* (1853) (*Collected Writings*, VI, 27-8). The letter in question dates from 1833 and therefore would be a much better source for Darby's reaction but it is significantly different from the passage quoted by Weremchuk who, in fact, has inaccurately conflated a part of the letter and a part of Darby's work of 1853.

In addition to this cavalier approach to sources, there are other reasons for having doubts about Mr. Weremchuk's historical method. For example the biographer has usefully established the date of the death of Darby's mother, when her youngest son was 47 years old, but in that connection one is dismayed to find Weremchuk repeating a misunderstanding of W.G. Turner's when he treats as a fact what was really a fictitious analogy drawn by Darby to illustrate a point in controversy. Darby's review of F.W. Newman's *Phases of Faith* contained an analogy where he chose to 'suppose' or imagine himself as a man looking at a portrait of his mother of whom he 'was early bereft'. Taking this as a statement of truth rather than as a suppositional analogy, Weremchuk has invented a non-existent tragedy whereby Darby, early in his life, was separated from his mother though she was yet living. Another misinterpretation of evidence has led the biographer to find J.C. Philpot tutoring Darby's nephews at Rathsallagh instead of Temple Carig, Delgany.

The book is also strewn with references to oral tradition (beginning with phrases like 'the story is told', 'it is said' or 'if the local tradition is correct') and these must be winnowed carefully. For example Mr. Weremchuk tells us that 'Darby is still referred to as Dr. Darby in the Wicklow area of Ireland' (p.39), but we are not told *by whom* he is given this title. When working there for some weeks, this reviewer never once heard him thus described. It is similarly worth noting that although the testimony of William Kelly is often cited, the writer forgets that Kelly's first meeting with Darby was only in 1845—a fact which makes him very much a *secondary* source in his subsequent statements about the 1820s and 30s. These considerations are particularly important in the context of Weremchuk's conjectures about Darby's possible engagement to Lady Powerscourt. He is adamant that 'we do know that they *did* meet each other, and they fell in love and became engaged' (p.133). In fact it emerges on the following page that, apart from an unreferenced 'saying' of Darby and an unlocated letter of Kelly (dated 1897), Weremchuk is *totally* dependent on oral tradition and conjecture for this episode. His suggestion is not necessarily wrong, but his source-evaluation is inadequate. These questions however are only symptomatic of a wider historiographical issue.

It is, of course, a commonplace to observe that historians sometimes tell us as much about themselves as about their subject, but they seldom wear their hearts on their sleeves with the confessional enthusiasm of Mr. Weremchuk. In his introduction he tells us that he began as 'an ardent follower' of his subject but that while writing his book he became more critical and objective. It is true that there are significant differences between this book and its German predecessor but the claim (to critical objectivity) is not immediately apparent as Weremchuk can scarcely hide his enthusiastic approval of Darby. He quotes several assessments of Darby which are critical, but his own writing is a work of faithful piety *par excellence*. When he ventures to refer to a weakness of Darby, he usually finds an extenuating circumstance or a positive 'flip-side' by way of compensation.

So great is the degree of his identification with his subject that the characters and society who provide the back-drop to Darby's career never really come into focus. William Kelly's

claim that A.N. Groves (whom he probably never met) ‘retained, to the last, a link with the ordinary ways of Christendom’ is quoted with approval and J.G. Bellett is portrayed as a very hesitant seceder. In contrast Darby is presented as the authentic moving-spirit of the early Brethren, making a decisive break with the Church of Ireland in 1828. Weremchuk concedes that Edward Cronin anticipated Darby in an informal ‘breaking of bread’ but Darby is depicted as the real pioneer who ‘shaped’ an accidental development into ‘a new and stabler form, with more concrete directions and consequences’ (p.73). This is really very misleading because, of all the early Brethren—and they were nearly all hesitant and cautious at the outset—Darby was one of the last to sever his links with the Establishment and as late as 1833 he was able to write that he was ‘no enemy to episcopacy abstractedly, if it be real and done from the Lord’ (*Letters* I. 17).

If he plays down the importance of other early Brethren, Weremchuk is even more negative about the Irish clergy in general, his dismal account of whom is very unfair. The only non-seceding clergyman about whom Weremchuk seems to be informed is Robert Daly of Powerscourt who, he admits, was a keen Evangelical. He ignores the numerous other Evangelical clergy like Bishop James O’Brien, B.W. Mathias, William Cleaver, Henry Irwin, Thomas Pope and, not least, Bishop Joseph Singer (one of Darby’s teachers at Trinity College, here referred to as ‘a Mr. Singer’ (p.31). In a caricature which is unworthy of the writer, Mr. Weremchuk dismisses the clergy wholesale, as ‘careless in giving out the bread of life...’ and preaching ‘at best... a carnal and soul-benumbing morality’. He claims that they ‘trafficked with the souls of men by receiving money for discharging the pastoral office in parishes where they did not so much as look on the faces of the people more than once a year’ (p.40). It is sad that Mr. Weremchuk is unable or reluctant to put Darby into a more meaningful context than this travesty of the truth as it throws in doubt the validity of the careful research which appears elsewhere in his book. Darby, as he repeatedly reminds us, was a large-hearted man. It was only when Brethren challenged him over such matters as the Bethesda question—an episode which Weremchuk has completely side-stepped—that Darby denigrated people unjustly. Although at this remove they are hardly threatening, Darby’s admiring biographer has misrepresented a wide range of Christians who, one hundred and seventy years later, are surely entitled to a portion of the objective fairness which Mr. Weremchuk seeks for John Nelson Darby. It seems that we have still not quite escaped from the bane of hagiography.

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