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The Fisherman's Gospel Manual

Compiled by Graham Mair

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This book is aptly named. It is sub-titled 'a collection of true stories from the sea' and is in the style of the gospel manuals of yesteryear. It is a compilation of 85 self-contained contributions; each is, therefore, short. They are by a variety of authors who are usually named and most of the anecdotes relate to Exclusive and Open Brethren fishermen since the 1859 Revival. It is nicely produced with attractive black and white drawings of fishing boats.

Each item becomes the occasion of a little homily. The emphasis is not so much on the historical and factual details as on the lesson to be drawn from the incident, which is supported by appropriate Biblical reference and an earnest gospel appeal. Here are some of the titles: 'Setting the Course', 'Safe into Harbour', 'Whither Bound', 'Heaven's Life-boat', 'The Gospel Compass'. There is an appropriate rendering of Psalm 23—Thou anointest the waves with oil.

The book is an inventory of place names associated with fishing—Hopeman, St Monance, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Findochty, Gardenstown, Stornoway, Orkney and Shetland, to name a few. North-east Scotland is the main locus of events. Is there anywhere in the world where we would find a greater concentration of Evangelicals who are fishermen than there is in seemingly distant areas such as North-East Scotland or the Faroe Islands? Christian Brethren are strongly represented in these communities. Peterhead may be thought of as a small town: it is indeed such, with a population of about 18000. But it is a big fishing town. Last century it was a whaling port. Today it is the largest fishing port in the EC and the largest white-fish port in Europe. Some 400 boats fish from it. It has a large Open Brethren church with about 200 in membership, that can have an audience more nearly twice that if it is a special occasion. What could be more fitting than that those who follow the same calling as the first disciples should respond to the same call and follow the risen Lord? I could not imagine Peter, Andrew, James and John being more at home anywhere else in today's world than among today's believing fishermen.

Alex McLean of the "Pathway" has been a fisherman all his working life, is the correspondent of the Peterhead Open assembly and has made several contributions to the book. He tells how John Noble Stephen (named after a famous forebear) led him to trust in Christ (p.22), and later (p.49) how he was lost at sea. In the story 'All is Well' we have an incident referring to a bygone relative of Mrs Georgina Jack who possesses a more fulsome account. She too is a member of the assembly and has a son a fisherman on a sister ship to the "Pathway".

The book before us is a reminder that the fishing fraternity of today, like that of Bible days, sets us an example to follow. The spirit of that is caught in a verse of J.G. Whittier's Hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'. The word 'Syrian' is neatly interchangeable with 'Northern'. An appeal to the reader is surely a fitting way to end:

In simple trust like their's who heard,
Beside the Syrian Sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word
Rise up and follow Thee.

Alex McIntosh