

## REVIEWS

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### **Christian Brethren in Manchester and District: a history**

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London: Heritage Publications, PO Box 8603, London SE18 2XE

259pp. £25 ISBN 1 85307 1420

One of the major lacunae in Brethren historiography is the almost total lack of local histories. Plenty of assemblies have published booklets on the occasion of a centenary, half-century, or whatever, but little has been done by way of recording the history of Brethren in an area. (One notable exception is the account penned by the Linton brothers of Brethren in Bristol.) It is altogether fitting that one of the authors of the account of Brethren in Manchester which is the subject of this review is librarian of the Brethren Archive in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, which has become the major repository of primary and secondary material relating to the Brethren movement. The area covered by this survey is very sensibly the same as that covered by the *A-Z Atlas* of Manchester, stretching from Bolton, Bury, Rochdale and Oldham in the north to Altrincham, Bramhall and Southport in the south. The survey includes all types of 'Brethren', not only the Open variety but also the various Exclusive groupings. And here, this reviewer confesses a personal quirk. I find it odd to regard as a single unit churches, some of which do not accept members of some others to table fellowship, and indeed have effectively 'unchurched' them for a century and a half. To me, it's like regarding Roman Catholic and Protestant churches as part of the same movement! But then, I suppose that each part of the fragmented movement that calls itself 'Brethren' has the same roots and, despite some profound differences, shares many family characteristics.

A word about the format. The A4 size takes some getting used to, but it makes sense, particularly when you come to the twenty-page appendix which tabulates significant details about the groups described in the body of the work. The type is clear, and the twenty-five illustrations helpfully break up the text.

The main body of the work is divided into two chapters of unequal length (38 and 134 pages respectively). The first chapter, headed 'The Nineteenth Century', is largely concerned with origins and is a most interesting discussion. It delves into the influence of the Beaconite controversy within the Society of Friends, the witness of the ex-Methodists, Joseph Barker and John Bowes, and the parallel movement known as Churches of Christ. All this makes it crystal clear that the Brethren were not alone in seeking a form of church life that escapes from traditional formality and returns to the simplicity of the New Testament. Something is also said about the enormous influence upon the Open Brethren, in particular, of the mid-century revival and the sequence of revivalist preachers that followed. This goes a long way towards justifying the view that, but for this, it is highly unlikely that they would have survived and almost certain that they would not have become the force they did.

The second chapter contains a meticulous account of the numerous gatherings that arose, flourished or failed, in the Manchester area. Inevitably, a great deal of the source material is anecdotal, but it is handled with scholarly care, written up with skill, and is of slightly more than antiquarian interest.

Appendices comprise a list of 'Beaconite Seceders from the Religious Society of Friends'; 'Extended Notes on Selected Individuals' (including John Rylands who although never associated with Brethren was evidently a kindred spirit); 'The Northern Counties Eventide Home'; and a 'Table of Meeting Places of Brethren and Similar Groups in Greater Manchester' (already mentioned). An impressive list of sources and an extensive general index complete a valuable work which will be of interest not only to those who have connections with the north of England but also researchers into Brethren history.

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