

***Gathering to His Name:
The Story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland***
A Review Article

Harold H. Rowdon

Tim Grass, Gathering to His Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) 589 pages (pk); ISBN 1842272209; £29.99

For too long, the Brethren Movement in the UK has lacked a definitive history, despite its colourful story, profound influence on evangelicalism (on both sides of the Atlantic) and far-reaching impact on the worldwide spread of the gospel—not to mention its missiological thinking which played a crucial part in the proliferation of faith missions.

The reasons for this are not far to seek. Among them are its lack of any denominational structure (ironically, apart from the Exclusive Brethren), its emphasis on local churches (most of which lacked any desire to record events, probably because their vision was directed to the future and the world around them with its desperate need for the gospel, rather than to the past), and its commonly negative, if not hostile, attitude towards anything which smacked of intellectualism. The task of the historian of such a movement becomes difficult to the point of apparent impossibility by the proliferation of evangelism, church planting, involvement in para-church activities, together with the diversity of beliefs and practices within a general framework of shared commitments. Generalisations, the stuff of historiography, are always hazardous where Brethren are concerned!

Yet Tim Grass has achieved in this book the near impossible—a comprehensive and crystal clear account which is certain to remain the definitive history of the Brethren for a very long time to come. Everything about it bears the mark of impeccable scholarship, yet it is written in an astonishingly reader-friendly style, with the text of each chapter helpfully divided into bite-sized sections. Close on seventy

illustrations are scattered throughout the book, portraying people (not always the time-honoured portraits, and including women as well as men), places (typical halls and Müller's Orphan Homes, of course, but also the Cardiff Big Tent and a modern Taylor Brethren hall), publications (books, magazines, pamphlets, posters)—even a pro-forma letter of commendation!

The range and depth of research are outstanding. The bibliography runs to close on fifty pages, and must contain well over a thousand items, ranging from primary and secondary works, theses and dissertations (thirty-two of them) to web sites and other electronic resources. Histories of individual assemblies, regional histories, biographies, magazines representing all shades of opinion within the movement, existing histories, critical accounts (a whole chapter is devoted to 'Brethren and their Critics'), as well as background works—all are laid under tribute, and used to great effect.

The appendices are a treasure house in themselves. They list formative early conferences, the main divisions (largely among Exclusive Brethren), the relative strength of different types of Brethren by region and county, 1892-1901, the number of Open Brethren Assemblies, 1887-2005 (which show a peak number of 1,775 in 1933, roughly maintained till 1959, after which they decline to a figure of 1,165 in 2005), clerical seceders in Britain (something of a luxury, this) and even a guide to 'Writing your Assembly's History' (would that this had been available—and heeded—over the years!)

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into six parts, each focusing on the movement in a particular phase of its development. Part 1 covers the period 1825-1849 under the heading 'A United Testimony'. This is familiar ground which is covered succinctly, incorporating the results of recent research, and containing a valuable chapter which examines 'Distinctive Principles of the Early Brethren'. Part 2 looks at 'A Maturing Movement' during the period 1850 to 1914, with chapters on 'Evangelism and Expansion' (I wonder whether this calls for fuller treatment, even though thirty pages are devoted to it), 'The Development of Open Brethren Identity' (a particularly important and interesting chapter), 'Open and Exclusive'

(which looks, all too briefly, at the two sides of what Tim Grass regards as a single coin). ‘Brethren and their Critics’ (already referred to), ‘Brethren and the Wider Religious World’ and ‘Brethren and Society’ (good chapters which examine Brethren relationships with other religious movements and the secular world respectively) and ‘The Brethren Movement as a Missionary Agency’ (a magnificent chapter which—at last—gives proper attention to missionary study classes as well as the better known ‘facilitating bodies’).

Part 3 designates the years 1914-1945 as those when Brethren were ‘Holding the Torch for Evangelicalism’. I like this title, if only because I have thought for a long time that evangelicals have failed to acknowledge their debt to Brethren for doing just that at a time when they were struggling to survive. It is deeply significant that Tim sees during this period the germs of the decline that mark the post-World War II period, as well as apparent growth. There are also good chapters on Brethren involvement in business and even politics and culture, and their reactions to two world wars (including the vexed issue of pacifism).

Part 4 examines the period since 1945 under the question ‘Change—and Decay?’ After a chapter discussing contemporary social change and the Open Brethren reaction to it, further chapters look at ‘Open Brethren and the Religious World’, ‘Re-inventing Open Brethren Identity’ (curiously including a short section devoted to ‘Exclusive Brethren and the Churches of God since 1914’), ‘Internal Change’ (including patterns of leadership and the roles of women), ‘Decline—and Growth?’ (a judicious assessment of the significance of the leakage of members and leaders), and also, appropriately, a chapter titled ‘The Open Brethren: Still a Missionary Movement’.

A brief conclusion brings to an end the main text of a remarkable book. I can recommend it wholeheartedly, with a secret wish that I had been able to write such a book myself!

My one question is about its inclusion of the Exclusive Brethren. I appreciate that, as Tim points out, the two branches were intertwined, with the Open Brethren drawing—to a greater or lesser extent—from Exclusive sources, and being joined by some of those who withdrew from the Exclusives. But I remain dubious about the wisdom of

treating the various brands of Brethren as a whole. Though they had some things in common, the differences between them were, in my view, sufficient to warrant separate treatment. When one group has solemnly and repeatedly excommunicated another, it is difficult to treat them as an entity in a history of a tiny segment of the professing Christian Church. (rather like writing a combined history of Roman Catholic and Protestant churches!). And it leads to anomalies like the strapline to the book—‘The Story of the Open Brethren...’—and the inclusion of a section on ‘Exclusive Brethren’ in a chapter titled ‘Re-inventing Open Brethren Identity’. Also, at the risk of harping on an incidental, if the book is meant to cover both sides adequately, it must be said that the Exclusives have had less than their fair share of the available space!

In conclusion, I gladly acknowledge that, for a self-confessed ‘outsider’, the author has managed to get inside the skin (not ‘under the skin’!) of both ‘Open’ and ‘Exclusive’ Brethren. If anything, he is too kind to them!