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The Irish Saint and Scholar: A Biography of William Kelly,

E. N. Cross

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Although it is some 100 years since William Kelly's death, his lengthy, academically rigorous and varied publications still exert an enduring influence over and interest to both believers from within the Brethren movement and students of biblical studies and nineteenth-century evangelicalism from without. Edwin Cross in this book seeks to present for the first time a biography of Kelly that will demonstrate to the reader both the piety and sanctity of Kelly's personal life along with his well respected and his weighty, scholarly intellectualism.

Kelly, 1821-1906, was, like Darby, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, where he excelled in Classics. He first met Darby in 1845, only a short while before the damaging schisms of the 1846 Exclusive/Open break and the 1848 Bethesda division, and thus remained untainted by the painful events of earlier years. His skill as a church leader was immense; Coad notes that within the Exclusive movement he was known as a prominent leader and the most erudite of Darby's followers. His theological and doctrinal influence was vast, as a man of great learning he played a crucial role in disseminating and popularising Darby's theology. He edited *The Prospect* (1849-1850), *The Bible Treasury* (1856-1906), and was a contributor to *The Christian Annotator*; he also collated and edited *The Collected Writings of Darby*. In addition to many pamphlets and tracts he produced some 300 commentaries dealing with the text of every book of the Bible, for many of which he had effectively produced a new translation.

Overall I found this book enjoyable and easy to read. The author at times catches something of the excitement and newness of those embryonic years when for example he describes Kelly's first experience of the breaking of bread service and his first meeting with Darby. There is also an interesting parallel running through the book between the development of the early Brethren movement and that of

the Oxford movement. One wonders however if Kelly and his brethren would have spoken quite so highly of Keble, Pusey and the Tractarians. Spurgeon comes out worse than Pusey and Keble!

Cross sets out his agenda at the start, stating that he will not be writing a 'warts and all' biography, or 'detail the faults and failings,' and therefore I wonder if this can be a truly objective and honest biography. An awareness of a person's weaknesses and indeed an awareness of the limitations of the human condition in general is no bad thing and does not necessitate negative judgment of character. Yet I found the inclusion of a quote from the nineteenth century writer 'Spectator' which humorously describes Brethren hymn singing at Blackheath enjoyable and a few other instances, particularly in chapter 4, where the 'real' Kelly came across and where the author helped to personalise his subject.

The problem with any publication referring to Kelly is that he always comes across as the number two, the second fiddle to Darby. Cross however, makes some attempt to address the imbalance, and at times we get the rare picture of Kelly as a man, scholar and believer in his own right, brought out from under the shadow of Darby. It was a refreshing surprise to find that Kelly and E.B. Elliot were friends, as the primary instances in which we come across references to Elliot in Kelly's work are often dismissive (see, e.g. W. Kelly, 'Answers To Questions', *The Bible Treasury*, vol.2, (March 1898), p. 47, *Bible Treasury*, vol.1 (August 1897), p. 319). The link between the American dispensationalist Gaebelein and Kelly explored in chapter 4 is also interesting in so far as it provides an early projection of Brethren eschatology over the Atlantic to North America.

Cross is, as one might presume, thorough and exhaustive in his use of sources, yet it is his use of such sources as the *Guardian*, *Baptist Times*, *Biblioteca Sacra*, and the Exeter papers the *Express* and *Echo* and the *Western Morning News*, that delights most and makes an excellent addition to the more obvious sources, such as *The Prospect*, *Bible Treasury*, etc.

I was pleased to find, in this book, that the author seemed to avoid the long, tired and unnecessary history of schism and division which overall only serves to weaken the positive work of the movement. In

chapter 4 the old themes start to creep back in but generally this book avoids those pitfalls.

The lasting question that this book has left me with is one of the rightness of the actual nature of such a genre. Can a biography of such a man be written without verging on an almost medieval hagiographical genre? This biography presents a picture of a man in language that will inevitably lead to an almost legendary mythical status being perpetuated, language surely at odds with true saintliness. I have to ask myself would a humble, pious, self-effacing man such as Kelly want to have a biography written that does not show us the man, 'warts and all' or 'detail the faults and failings'. That said, I am sure that in the present day much can be learnt by both the scholar and the man of faith from Kelly's life.

James Harding