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The Time of Their Life: A Family History

Maurice Millard

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Anyone who has done some research into his or her family or has been gripped by the BBC series 'Who do you think you are?' will be captivated by this book. Written in an extremely readable style and handsomely produced, its appeal, however, will extend well beyond those who are merely fascinated by family history. It is also an absorbing picture of British social life, mainly in Bristol and its adjacent counties and in south Wales, during the 100 years from the mid-nineteenth century. It portrays the class of people whose day-to-day life often eludes the historian: mole-catchers, agricultural labourers, washer women, miners, railwaymen. Their quotidian struggles with poverty, ill-health, war, illegitimacy, mortality and other hardships are lovingly excavated and detailed. But there's more. The author's family became evangelical Christians towards the end of the nineteenth century, Methodists on his paternal side and Baptists on his maternal. Their faith guards them against the worst excesses of working-class rough culture and inculcates those solid virtues which make for a stable family life and economic prosperity. Both sides of the family are then drawn into the Brethren through invitations from friends. His mother's family, the Proberts, join Adamsdown Gospel Hall in Cardiff in the Edwardian period, and his father, Ernest Millard, joins Chelsea Gospel Hall in Bristol in 1930 and then the nearby Abingdon Gospel Hall. The author's portrait of his father, who had no public speaking-skills but a genius for practical maintenance, is remarkable as a sympathetic portrayal of an ordinary Brethren member which is at the same time shrewd in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the movement. Especially good is the analysis of why the Brethren attracted his father: their simple lifestyle, unworldliness, egalitarianism and informal intimacy. Equally notable is the depiction of the writer's uncle, Albert Probert, a 'keen

Christian' whose 'piety sat easily on him'. These counter-balance the Brethren of popular stereotype. There is even a positive description of a Brethren Christmas to put beside the one in *Father and Son*. Rarely have the latent values of the movement received as warm an endorsement. Written for the This book deserves a wider readership than the author's immediate family.

Neil Dickson