

BAHNR 4: 84-6

Assemblies of Christians in the Wirral

Fred Bresnen

**Privately printed, 2002: 5, Maranatha Bungalows, Pensby Road,
Heswall, Wirral, CH60 7RG. Phone: 0151-342-6220
223 pp. £1 (to cover p+p)**

This work is a first-rate local history of the Open Brethren in the Wirral, the long peninsula which runs northward between Liverpool and north Wales. Until the early nineteenth century the Wirral was an isolated, thinly-populated agricultural area. But during the century it became a residence for the Liverpool middle-classes and was also heavily industrialised. In 1801 the Wirral's total population was 5,865 but by 1901 it was 184,197, a 3,041 percentage increase. Many names synonymous with British industry were located there: Stork Margarine, the Lever Brothers and Cammell Laird.

The Brethren arrived in 1879 when the evangelist Rice Thomas Hopkins, who had been living in Birkenhead since about 1875, united with some Christians from the Claughton Mission in Atherton Hall, Birkenhead. As Hopkins was to become a leader in the *Needed Truth* party within the Open Brethren, the seeds of its centralising strictures were planted early in the area, and Atherton Hall ultimately seceded with the Churches of God in 1893. But the Open Brethren continued to grow, founding a further twenty-two assemblies. Part of this growth was from the immigrants who flooded the area, Brethren among them: Ulstermen, Scots, Welsh, and Liverpoolians and those from elsewhere in England added to the melange. But vigorous evangelism also contributed. The movement probably reached its peak in the inter-war years of the last century, some eight new assemblies being formed in this period. It drew its membership largely from the skilled working-classes, but there were also a few professional people and small businessmen present who were prominent in taking new initiatives or in leadership, usually without excluding members of other social groups. Although the population of the Wirral has continued to grow, reaching 312,289 in 2001, the Brethren have declined, their assemblies falling to twelve by 2006 (a

decrease of forty-five per cent from the 1960s). There are exceptions to the general trend, such as Oaklea Chapel, Irby, and Bethany Chapel, Prenton, but the drop in the number of assemblies masks a much sharper decline within them as many are perilously small and must soon be discontinued. Why? The secularising trends that have affected all churches in Britain is clearly a factor, and so too is out-migration by Brethren members. But it is clear that most assemblies have found nothing to replace the large-scale gospel campaigns of earlier days or the other forms of aggressive evangelism which have declined in popularity and success.

Fred Bresnen, the author of this remarkable study, is a nonagenarian and a descendant of Catholic immigrants who fled the Irish potato famine to the Wirral. His parents were converted through the witness of a workmate in 1911, and he has lived through much of the history he describes. He is a staunch advocate of 'assembly principles as we have them so clearly marked out for us in the New Testament' (p.73), and is not frightened to take to task those assemblies he sees departing from them or (happily taking his model from biblical history) to describe the disputes which have troubled Brethren in the Wirral. A surprising number of these have had to do with women's roles. There was a split over the issue in 1904 and again in 1927. The mission hall background of some possibly had an influence, and about 1912 one leading elder had to turn back some of his flock going to hear a woman preacher. The issue clearly has returned at present. One assembly now supports a woman as a community outreach worker. We are introduced to a rich galaxy of characters. Among others: A.H. Boulton, a significant Christian builder; Samuel Johnson, a text carrier; William Anwyl, a Welsh Phineas; and Gus Allen, an Orange Lodge iconoclast. Some noteworthy initiatives have come out of the area, such as the splendidly-named Inasmuch Relief Fund (to aid post-war German Christians), the British Emmaus Bible School, and Brass Tacks. The history is written in an easy, almost conversational style. The histories of individual assemblies are detailed, and usefully, the book has an index. There is a chapter on encounters with the demonic in the Wirral and one on R.T. Hopkins which brings together valuable

biographical material. Would that all areas of the British Isles had local histories as complete as this.

Neil Dickson