

**A REVIEW ARTICLE:
REFLECTIONS ON
FROM AWAKENING TO SECESSION
BY TIMOTHY C.F. STUNT**

Harold H. Rowdon

Sufficient time has elapsed since the publication of Timothy Stunt's ground-breaking *From Awakening to Secession: radical evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-35* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) in 2000 for some evaluation of its importance for our understanding of the evangelical movement as a whole and the Brethren Movement in particular. And what a book it is!

From whichever angle one looks at it, it is breathtaking. Its sheer size is impressive. The text extends to 317 large pages which must contain at least 150,00 words. The select bibliography covers 28 pages and must contain c600 titles. Items from forty-four collections of unpublished or rare sources, located in Switzerland, England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland and USA, fill eight pages. Concealed within the forty-one pages of the index lies one of the most valuable features of the book—a large number of summarised biographies.

From Awakening to Secession is the product of research that was both intensive and extensive, carried out over a period of several decades. The author possesses the ability to ferret out information from every kind of source, including booklets, books, magazines, newspapers (both national and local) in libraries, archives, private collections, in each of the countries and areas he is researching. And he is able to piece together huge quantities of relevant information into a coherent whole, presented in language that is both concise and crystal clear.

Documentation is impeccable, even extending in many instances to the current location of material moved since it was consulted.

This wide-ranging book reads like a verbal mosaic comprising many thousands of tiny pieces drawn from a multitude of locations, each tirelessly refined and carefully polished, and then composed into a fascinating and sometimes dazzling picture.

What the picture portrays is the process by which 'spiritual awakening' led to 'secession' in various areas within Western Europe in the early nineteenth century. The opening chapter serves to introduce the scene by means of a judicious study of its eighteenth-century background. This is no run-of-the-mill introductory chapter, replete with bland generalisations and wearisome summaries. Instead, the reader is treated to a series of probing analyses of the matrix out of which arose the early nineteenth-century movements that will form the main theme of the book. Our attention is drawn first to eighteenth-century pietism and rationalism, and then to the revolutions and wars associated with France, out of which emerged the events later to be described and brought into relationship with each other. Even in this introductory chapter, little-known facts are unearthed in order to prove a point. For instance, how many readers will know that when the 15-year-old Edward Gibbon expressed the desire to leave the Church of England and be received into the Roman Catholic Church, his father removed him from Oxford and sent him 'to finish his studies in the sober household of a Swiss pastor, Daniel Pavillard, who would henceforth be his tutor'.

The picture begins to take shape as the next three chapters portray the Swiss *réveil* as it developed in the cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Berne. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first full account of these events in English. It constitutes a kind of foundation for the rest of the book. The third chapter,

'The Impact of the Swiss *Réveil* in Britain' explores the emergence of a radical element within British evangelicalism, focusing on Lewis Way and his millennial hopes, and, especially, on the radical aspirations of Henry Drummond, Joseph Wolff (who describes himself as being, hopefully, 'an enthusiast drunk with the love of `God) and Edward Irving. Stunt then elaborates on the link between such men with the Swiss *réveil* and its influence upon them. Among British evangelicals who visited Switzerland were men like Henry Drummond and Robert Haldane whose connections with Switzerland are well known, but others such as Gerard Noel, Thomas Erskine and John Adam (described by Stunt as 'a key figure in the student awakening at St. Andrews under Thomas Chalmers') evidently hit the Swiss trail. Some remain little more than names, despite the beavering activity of the author! The traffic was not one-way. Numerous Swiss students and pastors visited Britain, the most notable of whom was César Malan, a Genevan pastor who was warmly received in both England and Scotland. Reports of events in Switzerland, especially Geneva, were reported in the British evangelical press.

In chapter 6, in which Stunt explores the area of 'Radical Missionary Perspectives', Brethren figures appear on the scene, in the persons of A.N.Groves and Henry Craik, together with John Kitto. The Swiss connection appears again in the person of Samuel Gobat who, like Kitto, studied in Islington and worked for a time with him in Malta before going on to his extraordinary missionary career. Naturally, Edward Irving figures largely in this chapter, with his radical criticisms of current missionary ideas and practice. A little is said about Groves's relationship with and attitude towards Irving and the radical element in general in British and Swiss evangelicalism. Oh that we knew more!

The geographical focus then switches first to Ireland, where the incipient Brethren movement is clearly identified as arising within the ferment of the so-called 'Irish Reformation'; then to Oxford where an equally volatile atmosphere was giving birth to several movements that involved secession from the established church; and then to Scotland where, once again, ferment within evangelical circles is delineated with a sure touch (and the parallels to and contrasts with the situation in Switzerland are indicated).

Chapter 10 squarely faces the disruption that took place within evangelical circles in England and Ireland, resulting in the Irvingite and Brethren secessions. This is yet another chapter that probes deeply and documents its findings meticulously, though it is a little surprising to find no apparent reference to Ian Rennie's researches on the tensions within evangelicalism.

The story is rounded off by an analysis of 'New Beginnings and a Swiss Response' (chapter 11). These new beginnings were, of course, those of the Catholic Apostolic Church and the Brethren Movement. The links with the Swiss *réveil* are developed in the section appropriately titled 'Switzerland: the movement comes full circle'.

The boldness of the conception that lies behind this daring book is quite breathtaking. It links together apparently disparate though obviously kindred movements of thought and action in a variety of West European locations. Most of these movements have received considerable study but, although a few links between them have been remarked upon, they have hitherto been viewed as largely separate and in many respects independent. Has Stunt succeeded in his attempt to show that they are far more intimately linked? The jury is still out, but the present writer inclines to the view that, in essence, the case has been proved. If the volume of evidence and the eloquence of the

presentation of the case are anything to go by, the answer is surely clear.

What influence is this book likely to have on future studies of Brethren history?

For a start, it has placed the movement more securely into its historical setting. It makes it crystal clear that, despite the loud protestation of so many of its founding fathers that it arose in the context of spiritual decline, religious apathy and indifference to biblical truth, in fact, it emerged out of an atmosphere of evangelical fervour and spiritual excitement. Its leaders were ardent young men, mostly students, who were reaching out for even more devotion, even more united action, even more evangelistic zeal, even more obedience to scripture. They were part of the radical wing of the wider evangelical movement and—at first—had far more in common with men like Edward Irving than its emerging leaders were later prepared to admit.

Arising out of this is the sobering fact that the Brethren movement was much less of a spontaneous movement emerging in a variety of places without any human agency than has often been imagined. The links which earlier researchers had perceived somewhat dimly were at once more numerous and more far flung—reaching beyond the boundaries of the British Isles—than had previously appeared to be the case. This is not to deny the activity of the Holy Spirit or to minimise the significance of the movement that resulted. God the Holy Spirit not infrequently uses down-to-earth methods to achieve his purposes and, incidentally, his activities are often disturbed and even frustrated by the human failings of those whom he uses to further those purposes.

In one instance after another, Stunt's work enlarges and deepens our knowledge and understanding of events and situations in early Brethren history. If a somewhat hackneyed phrase is permissible, it would be no exaggeration to say that he

adorns everything he touches. To give but a couple of examples, our understanding of the emergence of Brethren in the West of England, particularly at Bath and Salcombe is now clearer than previously, as is the relationship of Groves to fellow missionaries in the Near East.

Perhaps even more important than this, and the book's major contribution to evangelical as well as Brethren historiography is the penetrating light thrown on the Swiss *réveil*, and the links between it and the evangelical enthusiasts in general and the Brethren in particular. Of course, we all knew about Darby's visits to Switzerland, and the interaction between them and the development of the Brethren movement in the UK, but many of us were feeling our way, and are immensely grateful for the clear light which has now been thrown upon it.

This impinges on a larger issue—the myth that the British Isles were the *fons et origo* of the Brethren movement which fanned out from this point of origin to spread across the globe to well over half its nation states (and most of its larger ones). There is, of course, an element of truth in this interpretation, but it is far from being the whole truth (as the case of Italy shows most clearly). *From Awakening to Secession* shows that, even in its years of gestation, developments on the British scene were influenced by things that were happening elsewhere.