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Brethren in Scotland 1838-2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement

[Studies in Evangelical History and Thought]

Neil T.R. Dickson

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Writing in 393 AD, St Jerome claimed that as a boy he had visited Gaul and had seen members of a Scots tribe, who practiced cannibalism (*Contra Iovinianum* ii.7.). When Edward Gibbon treated St Jerome's claim as credible, he went on to suggest that if such a race could later produce the civilization of Glasgow, then New Zealand might one day produce a scholar like David Hume (*Decline and Fall* iv.25). More than a century later it was a Scots Brethren missionary, Dan Crawford, who reminded his readers of Jerome's story as an introduction to the last chapter of his book of autobiographical experiences in Africa. (*Thinking Black* (1912) p.432.) With a subtle brevity unknown to the eighteenth century historian, Crawford left his readers to draw their own conclusions. A mischievous and self-deprecating sense of humour has long been a recurring component in the outlook of his fellow Scots and the Editor of this journal whose *magnum opus* is the subject of our review is no exception.

A movement whose history has been written by people with names like Blair Neatby, David Beattie and Thomas Stewart Veitch, whose publishers have names like Inglis and Ritchie, and some of whose most well-known teachers have been named Mackintosh, Scott, Caldwell and Bruce could be assumed to have a significant Scots element in its composition. The truth exceeds such expectations as the Scots have had an indelible and unmistakable effect on the Brethren.

This however was not apparent in the earliest days. Although Benjamin Newton, one of the movement's founder figures, recalled with grudging respect the severity of 'the Scotch Sabbatarians', he gave expression to some alarmingly Caledonophobic sentiments

when he observed that Scotland had been ‘a great evil to England’ because ‘it gave us the Stuarts and the Edinbro [*sic*] Review’ and because ‘Lord Palmerston was educated in Scotland’. [CBA, ‘Wyatt notebooks’ vi.37 verso; ii.9 recto]. We shouldn’t therefore be surprised to find that Neil Dickson’s book begins a little later with the founding of a Brethren group in Edinburgh in 1838. He charitably ignores Newton’s prejudices though he briefly alludes to Newton’s belief that the Scots despised England and that the Scottish Church was out of sympathy with his ideas.

With mutual distrust of that sort lurking at the border in the early days of the Brethren, it is, indeed, entirely appropriate that in post-devolutionary Britain, a Scottish historian has taken up the challenge of writing an account of the Brethren in his country. This magisterial book, however, is very much more than that, as it provides a powerfully creative reinterpretation of one hundred and sixty years of Brethren thinking. Dickson is well aware of the fissiparous tendencies of the movement and the great variety of elements that have combined, separated, coalesced once more and often still managed to co-habit uneasily in the extraordinary ecclesiastical *mélange* (I nearly said hotchpotch) that we call the Brethren or the Brethren movement (but never the Brethren Church!)

From the various evangelistic, ecumenical and yet separatist yearnings of the first twenty years, the author takes us through the invigorating effects of the 1859 awakening and subsequent revivalism to the considerable development of the movement prior to 1914 both in outreach and, at the same time, in self-constriction. In his foreword, David Bebbington observes that although some Brethren shunned ‘spurious separation’ others had ‘a doughty capacity for rejection’. Dickson does full justice to both these potentially incompatible elements in the evolution of the movement in Scotland. In his treatment of Brethren development from the Great War to the 1960s he recognizes the simultaneous ebb and flow of the movement in varying localities. The principled particularism of the Open Brethren must have made this a daunting task, but he has mastered an impressive range of printed material, reports in periodicals, assembly records and other manuscript material. Dickson has corresponded

with and interviewed Brethren from every corner of Scotland, ransacking their archives and their memories for a mass of detail that he has then successfully incorporated into a brilliantly coherent story. In two remarkable chapters he successfully captures some of the movement's more intangible characteristics with a lively discussion of Brethren spirituality and their ambivalent social identity. Dickson shuns superficial generalisations for the very good reason that the wealth of his evidence precludes such oversimplification and his fascinating tables of social and educational classification effectively serve to warn the reader against simplistic stereotyping. On the other hand there is no danger of the author slipping into 'cliometrical' aridity as he relishes a telling phrase and has an unerring eye for anecdotal detail. Whether it is Robert Miller's conversion, 'pruning knife in hand' when trimming his gooseberry bush, John Ritchie's severe dismissal of 'lady soloists' and other such 'crutches' as signs of 'fake revival', or merely the seventy motor cars noticed in *The Witness's* account of John Gray's funeral in 1936, Dickson's account is grounded in the lives and experience of his subjects. A final chapter, true as ever to the ambiguities of the movement, considers signs of disintegration as well as continuing vitality.

There is an ongoing debate among readers about the reference apparatus of scholarship. If Lemuel Gulliver were to visit us, instead of Lilliput, the egg-breaking rivalry of the 'Big-Enders' and 'Little-Enders' might be replaced by the current division between the increasingly prevalent 'End-noters' and the dwindling numbers of 'Foot-noters'. At the risk of upsetting the former, this reviewer is delighted to report that Paternoster have served Dickson well, and his meticulously copious references are at the foot of each page supplemented by a variety of relevant (and not so relevant!) adiphora. (The ceiling plaster that nearly landed on 'Billy-Pin-Leg' during the morning meeting in Orkney has to compete with J.R. Caldwell's distaste for 'white umbrellas with green lining'!) In addition to the footnotes we should mention the fourteen regional maps of Scotland (though this Sassenach would have benefited from one further map of Scotland in which to locate the parts of the whole), the list of Scottish Open Assemblies (with dates), as well as

the all-embracing bibliography of more than fifty pages. We shall be in debt to Neil Dickson for this colossal achievement for many years to come.

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