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The Growth of the Brethren Movement: National and International Experiences

Neil T. R. Dickson and Tim Grass (eds)

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The collection of essays under review is likely to be of considerable interest to readers of the *BHR*: it is edited by the authors of two of the most impressive works of Brethren historiography, the names of many, if not all, of the contributors appear regularly on articles and reviews, and the man honoured by this collection has no small claim to be the founding father of modern Brethren history. The volume is a *festschrift* for Dr Harold H. Rowdon; it collects papers presented at a conference held in his honour in 2003.

Harold Rowdon's influence on modern Brethren historiography is immense. His *Origins of the Brethren 1825-1850* was groundbreaking in the degree of serious and critical academic attention that it paid to its subject. To a greater or lesser extent, the contributors to this volume are the self-conscious inheritors of this legacy: Rowdon's work is the '*fons et origo*' (p.1) of these later endeavours.

Following an introduction by the editors, the bulk of the volume is divided into four sections. Part One addresses the writing of Brethren history, offering a biographical sketch of Dr Rowdon by Ian Randall, a survey of Brethren historiography by Tim Grass, and 'A meditation' calculated to encourage historians of the Brethren by Beth Dickson. Part Two examines British Brethren experiences. This section opens with an essay by Gerald West, tracing John Eliot Howard's trajectory 'from Friend to Brother' and a study of George Müller and the Financing of the Scripture Knowledge Institution by Neil Summerton. These are followed by two local studies: Brethren origins in the Orkneys in the 1860s are investigated by Neil Dickson, and the early days of Brethren in Bearwood by Jean Johnson. Two treatments of more recent periods round out the section: Roger Shuff's 'A bulwark of evangelism: Brethren as a lay movement in England in the 1930s,' and Harold Rowdon's own 'Personal sketch' of the Brethren in

Britain, 1945-2000. Section Three examines worldwide Brethren experiences covering Germany, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, Jamaica, Zambia, and Angola. This section also includes a short article by Pauline Summerton comparing and contrasting the African experiences of a Brethren Missionary (Walter Fisher) and a colonial settler (the colourful Stewart Gore-Brown. Section Four—‘The Brethren in International Experience’ contains Timothy Stunt’s ‘Anthony Norris Groves in an international context: a re-assessment of his early development’, David Bebbington’s ‘The place of the Brethren movement in international Evangelicalism’, and a select bibliography of Rowdon’s writings compiled by Tim Grass and Graham Johnson.

Evidently then the collection is pretty representative of recent Brethren history, both in terms of genre (with a predominant focus on local history, and ‘early days’ treatments) and contributors. There are some new names in this collection, but rather disappointingly, if unsurprisingly, the stand-out contributions come from established scholars. Articles by Shuff, Rowdon, Stunt, and Bebbington are, for this reviewer at least, the cream of the collection. A number of other articles merit honourable mention. Randall’s biographical sketch of Rowdon is engaging and affectionate. Grass’s historiographical survey is suggestive, if a little scant in places, and raises some interesting and important questions. Neil Summerton’s economic analysis of the S.K.I. is interesting for its insights, but even more so, perhaps, in its methodology. Pauline Summerton’s article is a trifle short on detail, but usefully nuanced in its approach, and interesting in content. Beth Dickson’s meditation makes a cogent and compelling case for the value of the work carried out by Brethren historians, but simultaneously caused this reviewer some dismay in its appeal to history as sufficient to validate public female ministry, and its rather offhand treatment of Scripture.

The title of this collection promises a broader geographical coverage than has yet been seen in Brethren histories, and as the impact and experiences of the Brethren outside of Europe is largely uncharted but fascinating territory, it was with considerable alacrity that I turned to Section Three of the book. Sadly, this is the weakest

section of this collection. Pioneering historical work—and the essays are genuinely that—is of greatest value when it draws clearly and carefully on primary source material. These essays, however, are only sketchily referenced. Short on analysis of evidence, they rely instead on assertion. They also fail to reflect on basic questions of definition, presenting blandly issues such as central organisation without ever addressing their implications for Brethren identity.

This volume is representative of the present state of Brethren history. It is unsurprising, therefore, that it faithfully embodies two crucial problems that beset this historiographical project. The first is the hegemony of a ‘progressive’ meta-narrative, inherited in great measure from Rowdon, Coad, *et al.* This narrative traces the trajectory of the Brethren movement from ecumenism to separatism to ossification and ultimately to irrelevance and decline, followed, in some cases, by redefinition and renewal. Like all such meta-narratives, it is not without its descriptive power, but like all such narratives, it is not immune to challenge. A case can be made for a conservative teleology that joins a more historically nuanced version of earlier narratives of Spirit-led rediscovery of divine truth, sensitive to the role of human agency, to an unfolding story of faithfulness, blessing, departure, and decline. Such an account would not itself be immune from challenge, but it would gain force from the international prosperity of highly conservative Brethren teaching—in South America, Africa, eastern Europe, and in India. In the light of this, it is a shame that this volume does not include such studies; a greater shame that the editors would have had a difficult time indeed to locate any. The second difficulty with this volume is its restricted version of Britain, which, in effect, means England, with a little Scotland. In light of the conservative nature of many Brethren assemblies in Northern Ireland this has the effect of eliding another challenge to the link made between redefinition and survival by those who have adopted the ‘progressive’ trajectory outlined above.

In summary, then, this is an interesting collection with a core of very valuable essays that will merit a place on the shelves of most readers of the *BHR*. It is a fitting honour for a distinguished Christian and historian. And it is a telling snapshot of the strengths and

weaknesses of Brethren historiography as it exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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