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Behind Closed Doors: A Startling Story of Exclusive Brethren Life

Ngairé Thomas

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This is a useful addition to the genre of ex-‘Exclusive Brethren’ memoirs—personal accounts of life within, and escape from, the most radically separatist strand of the Brethren movement—not only for its measured tone and objective analysis, but because the New Zealand context contributes to the understanding of worldwide developments among this group during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Ngairé Thomas was born in 1943 to a father raised within the Taylor group of connexional Brethren (which has become universally dubbed ‘Exclusive Brethren’), and a mother who was an Evangelical Anglican but had joined the Brethren to facilitate her marriage to Ngairé’s father. A highly perceptive child, Ngairé was very early aware of differences between her family life and that of many of her peers; nonetheless, she recognises that it was not incomparable to that of other strictly conservative evangelicals. During her teenage years, however, a growing raft of restrictive changes to behaviour began to be adopted under the emerging universal leadership of James Taylor junior. While these impacted Ngairé’s formative years, her husband, Denis, whom she married in 1962 was four years older, and had been able to do things, such as leaving home to find work elsewhere, that were no longer options for Ngairé.

The highs and lows of bringing up a family during this period of rapid change among ‘Exclusive Brethren’ are lucidly recorded—a significant high being the strength of Brethren social life—and are punctuated with insightful observation. The author’s objectivity arises in no small part from the fact that she at no time, while with the Brethren, made any kind of spiritual commitment, although acutely aware of the wish, not least by her husband, that she should do so. The absence of an emotional loyalty to the group gave the author a

contemporaneous clarity of perception and analysis that comes to many ex-Brethren only with hindsight. It also gave her the courage to lead a bold double life by engaging in clandestine activities with outsiders, such as running knitting classes, which would have been forbidden if discovered. This served as some small degree of preparation for later life outside the group.

The traumatic process by which the family eventually left the group in 1974 and began to adjust to life outside, including involvement with mainstream evangelical churches, is powerfully representative of the struggles of many who have made this journey. In discussing her husband's reluctance to turn his back on the Brethren the author also highlights perceptively the depth of genuine allegiance that compels many who are expelled to persist for many years in seeking re-admittance—contrary to apparent reason.

While it covers events among 'Exclusive Brethren' that are now reasonably well-documented, Ngaire Thomas' account has a good deal to offer those seeking understanding of this aspect of Brethren history—including the professional careers of ex-members who suffer the ongoing psychological and emotional effects of the kind of experiences recounted. The book is particularly helpful in drawing attention to the differing impact of 'Exclusive Brethrenism' on individuals depending on when they were born. Those born before the mid-1950s grew up with an awareness of the world outside, Christian and secular, that was denied to those whose formative years began after Taylor junior came to power. The comments of Ngaire's eldest son (Appendix 3) highlight the huge challenge that normal socialisation presents for any now leaving the group in early middle age or younger.

In terms of Brethren historiography, Ngaire's recollections of events add weight to the view that the radicalisation process that sharply accentuated the separatism of this group of connexional Brethren was more advanced in the 1950s in Australia and New Zealand than elsewhere in the world. This was a cause of recurring contention in that area, and Taylor junior's correspondence, seen by this reviewer, indicates that both he and his father, James Taylor senior, initially opposed the radical or 'legal' element. It was Taylor

junior's unannounced u-turn in this respect that lay behind the infamous altercation with his rival, G.R. Cowell, at the London Central Hall conference in 1959, leading ultimately to the large loss of members from this group between 1960 and 1970.

Roger Shuff