

BHR 5:80-2 (2008)

**A Good Boy Tomorrow: Memoirs of a Fundamentalist
Upbringing**

Charles Gidley Wheeler

Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse, 2007

119pp (pb) ISBN 978-0-595-43685-9 US\$13.95/UK£7.00

126pp (Adobe eBook) ISBN: 0-595-88018-5 US\$6.00

Charles Gidley Wheeler is of interest to Brethren historians as the author of *The Believer* (1986), his historical novel which treats the movement's splits of the 1840s which he published under the name of Charles Gidley. *A Good Boy Tomorrow* is his autobiography.

His family were members of Cholmeley Hall in Highgate, London. His paternal grandfather was a publisher in Paternoster Row, who died young. His widow, needing her older son, James, to come back from India at the end of World War I, where he was an officer in the First Royal Dragoon Guards, stopped his allowance, thus forcing him to resign his commission as he could no longer afford the expense of the officers' mess. In England, James nursed ambitions of being a playwright, but it was not long before he took his place in Cholmeley Hall where he met his future wife, Joyce Marks. She was not initially enamoured with his advances and took herself off to Northern Rhodesia where her sister was the missionary wife of Dr ffolliott Fisher, a scion of a famous missionary dynasty. James tracked her down and they married. Clearly this was a family of some spirit.

Gidley was the son that was born to James and Joyce Wheeler. James had been happiest in the army, and the coming of war in 1939 gave his talents focus and he rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Post-war he struggled, before again finding financial security in the army personnel department. His wife and children had spent the war years in an idyllic, church-free, life in the Lake District. The youthful Wheeler found the abrupt transition to London difficult where the family initially joined Oakleigh Hall, Whetstone, Barnet. He repeatedly describes the Brethren as 'exclusivist', but the evidence he provides for this is their disdain for members of the Church of

England and that his family regarded themselves 'as better read and more intelligent, witty, artistic, and creative than most people'. This is 'exclusivist' in the sense it might be used of the Bloomsbury group, but not of how the word is ordinarily used of religious sects. James Wheeler was a devotee of Ruskin and had Kant, Gibbon and the English Romantic poets on his bookshelves. He smoked self-rolled cigarettes and was not a teetotaler. Joyce Wheeler painted. The children went to the best of schools—Wheeler to University College School, a leading London independent institution. He joined the Sea Scouts. This seems a remarkably liberal upbringing, and not just for the Brethren.

Perhaps the 'exclusivism' for Wheeler resided in the strict division of humanity into the 'saved' and the 'unsaved' which began to chafe, especially when his older sisters were received into fellowship. His father was a reserved middle-class English officer whom Wheeler perceived as finding difficulty in showing affection or affirmation to him. Sexual abuse from an older Sea Scout disturbed Wheeler deeply and he ineffectually contemplated suicide. Eventually he escaped the Brethren by joining the Royal Navy, his father's original ambition. Much to his family's disgust, he married a Roman Catholic. In later life he lost his Christian faith and after taking a degree in philosophy, he adopted Spinozean monism, his current belief.

Wheeler served in the navy for twenty-five years before fulfilling his desire to become a writer, having written seven novels to date and a number of scripts for television. This book (probably his last—he has developed motor neurone disease) displays several marks of the Brethren autobiographical genre—not least the tribute to the genre's originator, *Father and Son*. They contain small errors which rather undermine the writer's claim to be an expert on all things Brethren (Wheeler states his father possessed the writings of Charles Müller!). They are reverse conversion narratives: salvation is an escape into the world; spiritual maturity is a development of a worldview which is the opposite of what the Brethren are perceived to stand for. There are dark hints of the evils that lurk within the system (here, that religious indoctrination makes children susceptible to sexual abuse). There are the accusations of hypocrisy—Wheeler accuses his family of

mauvaise foi. There is the continued grappling with serious and cerebral issues throughout life. And above all, that whatever horrors may have befallen the individual, the Brethren are to blame. Of his father's perceived inability to break down the emotional barrier which lay between him and his son Wheeler writes: 'It was not his fault, and I do not blame him. It was the fundamentalist religion in which he had been brought up, and which he and my mother handed on to us three children that blighted our lives.' Fortunately, books of this genre also provide the materials for their own deconstruction.

Neil Dickson