

**The Elusive Quest of the Spiritual Malcontent: Some Early
Nineteenth-Century Ecclesiastical Mavericks**

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The eighteen chapters of this collection of Timothy Stunt's essays, garnered from over half a century of producing them, are nearly all about Brethren. Only nine are assembled under the heading 'Brethren', but the two in the section on Quakers and the four in that on Freelance Independents are about groups with Brethren links or parallels. The two on Quakers make the point that when the Evangelical Revival hit the Society of Friends very late, in the 1830s, only some of those affected, under the leadership of J. J. Gurney, managed to reconcile their inherited Quaker ways with the novelties of Evangelical belief and action. Others burst out of their past allegiance, sometimes, as in Kendal and Tottenham, establishing Brethren assemblies, but they did not wholly abandon their earlier ways. Their doctrine of the inner light, Stunt suggests, contributed to the understanding of ministry and church government as guided by impulse that played a large part in subsequent Brethren practice. The four chapters on Freelance Independents consider R. M. Beverley, A. A. Rees and G. H. Stoddart, each of whom passed through a phase of more or less alignment with Brethren before moving on to fresh ecclesiastical positions, and the Soltau family, which produced missionaries of various loyalties beyond the Open Brethren identity of the patriarch, H. W. Soltau of Exeter. Even the two articles on events surrounding the appearance of the luminary Edward Irving on the Evangelical horizon in the years around 1830 are related to Brethren in that they document the extraordinary phenomena of the juncture when the new movement emerged. One examines responses to the outbreak of speaking in tongues in Irving's circle, concluding that assessments made at the time confirmed pre-existing opinions. The other chronicles an extraordinary episode of 1831 in which the seven-year-old twin children of a Gloucestershire clergyman, Edmund Probyn, prophesied that he should take various drastic actions. The millenarian atmosphere was so intense that the father

obeyed them, dismantling his house, giving away his books and planning to set off for Jerusalem. Just before the family's departure, the children's grandfather, an archdeacon, intervened to stop the foolhardy enterprise and Irving sent a message pointing out that the spirit of the children had not been tried. The father was subsequently confined to an institution for the insane. Only in the context of rising expectations of the imminence of the second advent could such events take place; and that helps explain the potent preoccupation of most Brethren with eschatology.

The chapters on Brethren themselves bring out other main facets of the movement. Their commitment to secession from existing denominations is illustrated in a chapter on an Irish Churchman, John Synge, who was closely associated with early Brethren but who could not see his way to repudiating the Anglican establishment. Synge replied along those lines to a pamphlet by W. G. Lambert, who in 1831 set out the earliest statement of what would become Brethren principles:

it is the mind of the Spirit that in the assemblies of the Saints... one should have a psalm, one a doctrine, one a tongue, one a revelation, and one an interpretation, and so all edify each other; if... we are hedged in a system that precludes all this . . . let us by all means pray that we may with due dispatch be tumbled out of it. (p.158)

Secession was *de rigueur*. Again, what Stunt characterises as the uncompromising temperament of early Brethren is illustrated from his account of Evangelical developments in Hereford. Under the sternly Calvinist clergyman Henry Gipps, a strong Evangelical congregation gathered within the Church of England, but when his successor, John Venn, turned out to be a milder man, a group of inflexible radicals left in 1837 to form a Brethren assembly. A further characteristic of the movement, its missionary passion, is brought out in a chapter on the pioneer of overseas work A. N. Groves, who found much greater affinity with Swiss and German pietists than with the sober personnel of the Church Missionary Society [CMS]. And the rapid spread of Brethren beliefs around the world is demonstrated in a study of Leonard Strong, a CMS missionary in the interior of

British Guiana who in 1838 founded an assembly there. Brethren emerge as people of deep conviction, very radical figures indeed.

Perhaps the most important chapters are those on John Henry Newman and John Nelson Darby, by any reckoning eminent figures in nineteenth-century church history. The chapter on Newman reveals the Evangelical situation in Oxford on the eve of the emergence of the Oxford Movement in a way that no other piece of writing has done. Newman, Stunt demonstrates, broke not with Evangelicals in general but with a group of radicals when, in 1830, he resigned as secretary of the local auxiliary of the CMS. Newman's experience helps explain the high degree of animus he showed against Evangelicalism in his sermons over the following decade. Again, Stunt goes with more care into the subject of the evolution of Darby's early views than any other author. He scrutinises the intellectual balance at Trinity College, Dublin, where Darby studied from 1815 to 1819, pointing out that younger fellows, such as Darby's tutor J. H. Singer, were touched by the rising Romantic spirit of the age that also affected the student. Stunt further establishes that Darby embraced some of his most characteristic views, anti-erastianism and premillennialism, before he reached the point of assurance of faith and so emerged publicly as an Evangelical. These conclusions about the genesis of Darbyism are unlikely to be overturned. So it is evident that the chapters about Brethren do not merely convey a mass of biographical information but engage with the ideas of their subjects and present definite lines of argument. The one exception is chapter 10, on the Soltau family of Plymouth, which is inconclusive, and the reason is plain: it was originally the first half of a larger piece including what is now chapter 18. Apart from that chapter, the material is organised so as to build up a definite case about early Brethren.

What, then, is the perspective that emerges from the book? The overall contentions emerge most clearly from a chapter on 'Elitist Leadership and Congregational Participation among Early Plymouth Brethren', first published in *Studies in Church History* in 2006. Here Stunt argues that the leaders of worship in the 1830s and 1840s, often seceding clergy yearning for freedom of expression, paradoxically

dominated proceedings to a remarkable degree, sometimes silencing ministry of which they disapproved. This behaviour came naturally to men drawn from the higher social ranks. In 1842 J. H. Philpot, a fellow seceder who found his way into Strict Baptist circles, wrote that Brethren were marked by

an aristocratic atmosphere, a kind of Madeira climate which suits the tender lungs of gentility. Gentlemen and ladies dissatisfied with the carnal forms of the establishment can join the Plymouth Brethren without being jostled by “vulgar Dissenters”. (p.197)

The landed families who figure in most of the chapters of this book, though often (as Philpot admits) self-denying and generous, naturally brought their assumptions of social hierarchy into the new movement. Only gradually did the popular element triumph in worship, allowing widespread participation without fear of rebuke. That change was associated with the rise to leadership in the movement of more individuals drawn from the professional and managerial classes, a phenomenon Stunt notices in chapter 18. The early Brethren, however, because of their social position, were usually well educated and even somewhat sophisticated. Chapter 3 makes this point most explicitly. J. J. Penstone was an antiquarian, contributing to *Notes and Queries*, a poet, composing tasteful spiritual verse, an engraver, with his handiwork now on the walls of the National Portrait Gallery, and an artist who is normally classed as a Pre-Raphaelite. Penstone was no Philistine sectarian. It is one of the virtues of Stunt's book that it would be hard to leave its reading with that idea, often advanced in the past, still in mind.

There are few flaws in this volume. One is the occasional allusion that will be lost on some readers: thus the ability to send a son to Monkton Combe (p.292) will convey little unless one knows that Monkton Combe is not just a village but also a public school. The word ‘Episcopal’ is standardly but mistakenly given an initial capital when it refers to a bishop rather than a denomination; and conversely ‘congregational’ is given a lower-case initial when it refers to the denomination not a worshipping community. That these blemishes arise from the publisher's unfortunate decisions is confirmed by a few words from English or Irish sources that are presented with

American spellings (e.g. 'somber' at p.208). The only matter of substance to question is part of chapter 14 on 'Plymouth Brethren and the Armed Services'. After a section showing the tendency of individual early Brethren to veer towards pacifism, there is material on later developments. William Dobbie, the governor during the siege of Malta in the Second World War, is rightly depicted as a symbol of Brethren willingness to enter the profession of arms, but the extent of continuing aversion to participation in war is underestimated. The article in the *Witness* at the opening of the First World War contending that enlistment was a matter for individual conscience is treated as too representative. There were many members of assemblies who regarded war as abhorrent and so became conscientious objectors after the introduction of conscription. That decision often rested on their Brethren worldview: they were citizens of heaven, not of the earthly government that called them to arms. Elisabeth Wilson's article in volume 3 of this review gives a more balanced evaluation of Brethren and the First World War.

The merits of this volume, however, are not exhausted by its content. Its style, vigorous and lucid, is a pleasure to read. The research on which the essays are founded is extraordinarily thorough. Thus John Synge's move of house in 1831 has been tracked down in an issue of the *Exeter Flying Post* (p.151 n.41). The author has not spared himself in identifying and exploiting obscure sources. Unique manuscripts and rare pamphlets are frequently the foundation for powerful arguments. And there is the attractive habit of quoting Scripture (e.g. at p.12 n.19) not because it was mentioned by the people of the nineteenth century but because it seemed apposite to the point being made. That is a Brethren practice, and the author has the huge advantage in writing about his subject of being from the heart of the movement. He mentions in a footnote (p.285 n.10) that his great-grandfather, Francis Stunt, married in 1865 but sold some wedding presents to finance a Brethren missionary venture to Penang. By publishing this book the author has done service to the movement of which his ancestors would have been proud.

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