

OBITUARY
F. ROY COAD
1925–2011

Frederick Roy Coad was an outstanding example of someone able to excel not only in his chosen profession but in other disciplines. Born of missionary parents in Kalene, in what is now Zambia, he was educated at Peter Symonds School, was articled to accountants in Winchester and qualified as a chartered accountant in 1948. He joined a well-known Brethren firm, Griffin Stone, Moscrop and Co. of Manchester Square (later Welbeck Street) in London, becoming a partner in 1949 and senior partner from 1985 until his retirement in 1990. He was made a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants and served on the ‘main committee’ of the London Society of Chartered Accountants from 1985.

Alongside all this, he made huge contributions both to historical research and to the discussion and dissemination of theological and ecclesiastical issues. He found time, much of it in the early hours of the morning before leaving home for the office, to engage in pioneer historical research out of which came a substantial volume, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (1968). The background to the book was in a study group that some young men in fellowship with Open Brethren had formed during the late 1950s, which began to investigate, among other things, the origins and fundamental principles of the Brethren movement. Roy was one of this group, and he became deeply involved in the subsequent Young Men’s Bible Teaching Conferences, held annually at Oxford (1956–69), then at Winchester, with the likes of James Houston, F. F. Bruce, and G. C. D. Howley. At a conference in 1960 he delivered a paper entitled ‘Notes on the Brethren Movement’. This surveyed the movement’s history and raised a whole raft of questions concerning the contemporary application of the teachings of early Brethren. The

result was that he was asked to produce a book on the subject, which duly appeared eight years later.³

He was the chief architect of one other additional very significant by-product of the Oxford Conferences—the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship (CBRF) which commenced in 1963 and morphed into Partnership in 1987. The original purpose of CBRF was threefold: as its name implies, to encourage research into Brethren history; to provide a point of reference for people enquiring into the nature of the Brethren movement; and, most importantly, to provide a forum in which younger people in particular could freely exchange their opinions. A journal and a range of booklets were published (including one by Roy on eschatology⁴), some good historical research was produced and a decennial survey of Brethren churches was regularly undertaken. Conferences were held, some of which were well attended—notably one addressed by Malcolm Muggeridge and another on the role of women in church at which F. F. Bruce gave a powerful paper. CBRF provided a forum for the discussion of fundamental issues being raised within Brethren churches and which were already giving rise to a slow but steady loss of people, particularly younger people.

A key text in this reevaluation of the significance of the Brethren movement was Roy's *History*, although it does not claim to be a complete history. His focus was primarily on the nineteenth century, during which the movement's fundamental principles were established and clarified. Described by Timothy Stunt as a 'tract for the times,' which sought to recall Brethren to the freedom enjoyed and encouraged by the pioneers,⁵ it supplanted Neatby's *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (1901) as the standard general history of the Open wing of the movement. The author's wish was to provide a

3. F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter, 1968; 2nd edn 1976).

⁴ F. Roy Coad, *Prophetic Developments with Particular Reference to the Early Brethren* (Pinner, Middlesex, 1966), online text <http://brethrenhistory.org/qwicsitePro/php/docsview.php?docid=418>.

5. T. C. F. Stunt, 'A History of the Brethren Movement', *The Witness*, 98 (1968), p.228.

corrective to previous histories, which had demonstrated a preoccupation with the controversies that had racked Exclusivism.⁶ This, and the attention given to answering critics of the movement, betoken something of an apologetic motif in his work.

One aspect of Roy's approach, which deserves notice is his contention that the ecumenical movement needs the kind of radical perspective represented by the Brethren and other such movements. In his view, Brethren were 'one of the purest examples extant today of a strain in Christianity which has not only been recurrent from the beginning, but will continue to recur as long as the Church exists'⁷—the Bible-based, nonconforming, independent congregation, which presented a necessary corrective to the monolithic institutional bodies; such gatherings faced the challenge of maintaining their freedom while recognising that they existed for the benefit of the whole church and not for themselves alone. Roy thus followed E. H. Broadbent's *The Pilgrim Church* (1931) in locating Brethren within a tradition of radical dissent, but diverges from him in a more positive conception of the relationship of such movements to the institutional church: 'such movements are the very stuff of the Church's continual self-renewal'.⁸ A major reason for this divergence may lie in the absence in Roy's work of the dispensationalist philosophy of history, with its gloomy prognostications concerning the future of organised Christianity, which had marked Broadbent's work.

The *History* was followed in 1979 by *Laing*, the biography of Sir John Laing, the Brethren builder and benefactor. Roy had found a congenial subject in Laing, not only because of their shared business and ecclesiastical interests, but also as someone who had penetrated 'beyond the diminishing effect of the sectarian mentality to the enlarging effect of a true relationship with, and experience of, God.'⁹

6. Coad, *History*, pp.7, 231. He gives minimal attention to these.

7. *Ibid.*, p.283.

8. *Ibid.*, p.207.

9. Roy Coad, *Laing: The Biography of Sir John W. Laing, C.B.E (1879–1978)* (London, 1979), p.10.

Roy made several contributions to the one-volume *New Testament Commentary* (1969)—later expanded to the *Bible Commentary for Today* (1979)—including a suggestive study of ‘The Apostolic Church’. For a decade (1973-83) he edited the magazine *The Harvester*, in which he tried to broaden his readers’ horizons and to challenge them to fresh thought, and brought a new emphasis on Christian lifestyle and on Christian thinking about the issues of the day.

For Roy, the most attractive feature of the early Brethren was ‘the strength of their personal devotion to Christ.’¹⁰ His own Christian commitment was unswerving, though his faith was a questioning one. With his wife, Joy, he was a member, first of West Street Chapel in Carshalton, then of Chiltern Church in Sutton, in both of which he served as an elder. He gave several stimulating addresses at the Swanwick Conferences of Brethren, including two at the seminal 1978 one on the future of Brethren. He also gave the keynote addresses at the conference on Brethren history and heritage held at Regent College, Vancouver, in 1990. As a result of this conference, BAHN was founded two years later. Roy was one of the small group of historians who met in London to establish the new body dedicated to studying Brethren history and supporting the work of relevant archives.

After retiring to Shropshire, where he worshipped in an Anglican church, yet another of his gifts came to light in 2000 with the publication of a slim volume of poems, entitled *Verses from an Incomer: Poems from Shropshire and Elsewhere*. Although those who had considered his prose would have detected a vein of poetry in his temperament, no one could accuse Roy of wearing his heart on his sleeve! But Colin Holmes who was fellow-elder and pastor of Chiltern Church reveals that this is not the whole story. Colin says:

He spoke little but his words were weighted with wisdom and were not wasted. His laugh was infectious and I suspect not many people heard him laugh, but it was such a warm side to his nature. He was both a compassionate and generous godly man in words and action.

10. Coad, *History*, p.263.

Roy was a man of his generation but was in touch with the struggles and problems of younger people. For me he will be remembered as a Barnabas, a good man, very sincere, had the human touch, knowledgeable and an example of Christlikeness.

Dr Timothy Stunt says of him: 'He was a sort of *ersatz* father to me after my own father died and I was the beneficiary of a rich correspondence with him.' Prof. Ward Gasque has acknowledged the 'profound impact' that Roy and Joy Coad had upon his life when he was a research student at Manchester under Prof. F. F. Bruce in the late 1960s.

Roy leaves behind a widow who is unwell, two sons and a daughter, and a host of people whose lives have been enriched by his writings, his personal influence and friendship, and memories of his incisive conference addresses. In the final sentence of *Laing* he wrote: 'But he would quietly remind us that, beyond the sleep, he looked forward to a glad awakening.'¹¹ In this faith Roy, too, fell on sleep.

Harold Rowdon and Tim Grass

11. Coad, *Laing*, p.218.