

A Morningside Brethren Meeting. The Old Schoolhouse*

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Introduction

On the west side of Edinburgh's Morningside Road at number 140, between the public library and Morningside Place, opposite Falcon Avenue, is to be found a distinctive single-storey building, the Old Schoolhouse (hereafter the OSH). As its name implies, it was erected as a school for children of the area in 1823, as the date on the clock face confirms, and was used as such under the name of either 'The Wee School' or the 'Subscription School' until the 1890s, until the new South Morningside Primary replaced it.¹ It then passed in May 1895 from the Edinburgh Educational Trust into the ownership of the Cowieson family who rented it out for a variety of uses. They leased it in the early 1900s to a congregation or 'assembly' of Christian Brethren, who celebrated the centenary, whether it actually was or not, of their time at the hall in 2006. Rented by them for decades, the hall was purchased from the Cowiesons in November 1946 for £1300 by one of the members—Alec Ross—for his son, Ronald, who was then a missionary in the Belgian Congo, and in turn subsequently was bought from Ronald—at the same price—by the assembly in October 1961. While the main hall (which could accommodate at most about 120 people) has remained much as it ever was as a listed building, significant alterations were made in 1980, with the old ante rooms converted into an entrance foyer, and wings added on either side with kitchens, toilets and meeting rooms. The most visible external change for Morningsiders was that the clock, its hands long frozen at twenty to four, was restored to working action.

* This article originally appeared in the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 11 (2015), 53–64, and I am grateful for permission to reproduce it. I have taken the opportunity to make some minor amendments.

¹ Charles Smith, *Historic South Edinburgh*, (Edinburgh 1988), 154–5.

For over a hundred years, therefore, this building was in use by the same group (or ‘assembly’ or ‘meeting’) of Christian Brethren. What follows is an attempt to record some of the story of the OSH



Figure 1: The Old Schoolhouse: reproduced from the OSH Centenary Calendar, 2006, from a postcard, c.1890, entitled ‘The Wee School’.

over the past hundred years, from the early days to the present. In its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s the OSH was a centre of worship and vigorous outreach, with a regular membership of eighty or so, a Sunday school roll of over sixty and Bible class of fifteen or twenty. There was also an extension and thriving Sunday school held at the primary school in Oxfords, then a new housing estate in the south-west of Edinburgh. But numbers have dwindled since, in part drawn-off to other churches, and in November 2013, the building was handed over for the use of a Free Church satellite community. There is a need, therefore to assess the history of this building and its use as

a Brethren assembly while there are still those who have links to that past, all the more important in that there are few written records of its life and work; no kirk session minutes, no lists of members or communion rolls, only a few legal documents, some photographs and letters. This is a problem general to the whole Brethren movement: as Andrew Muirhead has remarked, ‘their lack of records makes any research difficult’.²

Bureaucracy was seen by the Brethren as part of ecclesiastical ‘system’ to which they did not wish to be tied. The prime source of information—*faute de mieux*—has, therefore, had to be the memories and recollections of those who have been connected, a group steadily decreasing in number as the years take their toll.³ Of value is a strong personal and participant link: that from a very early age I was, along with my brother and sister, sent in the 1950s to the OSH Sunday school, held at 3 o’clock in the hall. My father had been in fellowship before the War, but dropped away in the 1950s, although he continued to handle the assembly’s legal affairs and to act for many of the individuals and families. His parents had been members (‘in fellowship’); his father James, who deceased as a result of an accident in 1929 and his mother Margaret née Ross who died in 1942. All of his siblings were OSH people, although marriage, work, and missionary service were to take each away. The Ross connection was and continued to be very important right from the start, as we shall see, and my father’s cousins, Graham and Ian Ross, were leading lights in the Sunday school and young people’s work, with their cousin Maimie running the infants’ class—complete with

² Andrew T.N. Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity. The Story of Scotland’s Churches, 1560–1960* (London 2015), 161.

³ While many people have contributed, I would wish to acknowledge the help and stimulus given in particular by Shona Ross, the late Graham Ross and Joan Mackel. Papers relating to various family settlements have passed to me from my father, and other family papers in my possession include photograph albums, and the war correspondence with my father while on service and then a POW. John Thomson was kind enough to provide copies of the property titles for the OSH and various legal documents.

flannel graph.⁴ It is unfortunate but inevitable that this study is so largely based on the one family and its doings; there were other families and individuals whose perspectives would be of value. But one can work only with what there is in hand.

Edinburgh has long had more than its fair share of big churches, large congregations and important ministries, and there are histories of many of them either from a denominational or congregational perspective.⁵ The OSH, however, is typical of a kind of worship often below the radar, of the small independent church of which there used to be so many, outside the big mainstream denominations. In the section 'Places of worship' in the *Post Office Directory for Edinburgh and Leith* for 1924–1925 are to be found listed sixty-one Church of Scotland congregations, and even more United Free (75). The Episcopal Church has twenty-five, with other denominations such as the Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists and Catholic also represented. But while some quite unusual congregations are listed, as for example the Glasites, the Catholic Apostolic, the Original Secession, and even a New Jerusalem Church, not one Brethren assembly appears. This picture was to alter little over the years as the movement has faded numerically and assemblies have closed, with their passing leaving no mark.

Many have shut or morphed into more conventional churches, which some would say is all to the better, as the Plymouth Brethren in general have not had a good press; particularly the Exclusive branch, associated in the public mind with a severe, restricted and isolated lifestyle originally under the leadership in the 1950s of a so-called apostle, James Taylor Jr., and more recently with the Australian Bruce Hales. Theirs is an uncompromisingly separatist faith: their rules include a prohibition on socialising with non-Brethren people, marriage only with other members of the group, no

⁴ The flannel graph was a green baize to which cut out figures were attached. There was also a large roll of biblical scenes.

⁵ Note, for example, I. L. S Balfour, *Revival in Rose Street: Charlotte Baptist Chapel 1808–2008* (Edinburgh 2007); Patricia Meldrum, *Conscience and Compromise: Forgotten Evangelicals of Nineteenth-Century Scotland* (Milton Keynes, 2006), gives histories of Episcopal congregations in Edinburgh.

observance of Christmas which is regarded as pagan, no television or radio, no participation in higher education.⁶ And that sadly is the image that most people understandably have of the Brethren and with which the whole movement is tarred. But the Glanton Brethren, or at least some of them, as we shall, see were much more relaxed.

In its original form, Plymouth Brethrenism, an early nineteenth century movement, was very conservative in its theology and fundamentalist in its approach to the Bible, but quite radical in its organisation. There was no headquarters or hierarchy, no written creed or prescribed liturgy, no training college or formal validation system, and no trained and ordained ministers. Instead it held firmly to the idea of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, that each person could and should contribute to the work of the group, and that it was wrong to confine ministry only to those who had been ordained. Most of the brothers would take an evening gospel service, with the more gifted preaching regularly. Communion (or the ‘breaking of bread’) was to be weekly, a service which was not pre-planned but open to contributions in prayer, reading and hymn from any of the brothers present. Other activities were to include regular bible discussion, prayer meetings, gospel outreach, in prison or hospital and Sunday school work. Baptism, usually by immersion, could be either of believers—after faith was reached in the individual—or household, but not in general of infants, which was seen as meaningless by most, but not all. The OSH had no baptismal pool and borrowed facilities elsewhere as at the Open Brethren Bellevue Chapel in Canonmills. Occasionally baptisms were performed in a private home.

The religious background: Close and Glanton

It can be asked how such a movement retained its identity and coherence, given the autonomy of each assembly, the absence of a written creed, and the lack of hierarchy. It is true that the Brethren movement had a built-in tendency to division, not that the mainstream denominations in Scotland were immune from that. There was constant fracturing. More often than not, personality as

⁶ See the recent series on the Exclusive Brethren in *The Times*, Mar. 17, 2015.

much as principle was the problem; though the Kelly division (named after its leading figure, the writer William Kelly) in 1877 was over the reception by one assembly of a person who had married his deceased wife's sister! There were in the nineteenth century two main wings to the Brethren movement, Open and Close (or 'Exclusive'),⁷ in the second of which J. N. Darby (1800–1882) was the leading figure.⁸ The Close Brethren were also known as the London party, as that was where they were particularly strong, and whence leadership was exercised. This division between the two wings stemmed from a parting of the ways in 1848 over who should be allowed to take weekly communion ('breaking bread'): should it be open to all Christians regardless of denomination, as was the position of the 'Open'; or confined—the 'Close stance'—to those whose faith and godliness could be assured in that they were part of the meeting or another associated meeting: visitors had to be armed with letters of introduction from their assembly. The Close Brethren at London policed this process of scrutiny amongst their meetings throughout Britain.

In Edinburgh there had been a Darbyite meeting since the 1830s, which is very early, with some notable adherents including Caroline Douglas, wife of the 7th Marquis of Queensberry. The Queensberrys were a rum lot. The marchioness's husband committed suicide, and she herself turned to Catholicism (as did so many of her class): one son was killed climbing on the Matterhorn, and another was to be Oscar Wilde's doom. There was some expansion subsequently in which Dr W. T. P. Wolston played a significant part.⁹ A homeopathic

⁷ See Neil R. T. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland 1838–2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Paternoster 2002)) for a superb analysis of the Brethren in Scotland. Other works of relevance include Tim Grass, *Gathering to his Name. The Story of the Open Brethren in Britain & Ireland* (Paternoster, 2006).

⁸ For biographical detail on Darby, see Grass, *Gathering to his Name*, 15–20. Kelly was a close associate of his, which many reckoned was not to his betterment: C. H. Spurgeon described Kelly as a man who, 'born for the universe, has narrowed his mind by Darbyism.'

⁹ For a brief biography see Hy. Pickering, *Chief Men Amongst The Brethren* (1st edn., London, 1918), 141–2.

doctor with a practice in the New Town of Edinburgh, he was to become President of the British Homeopathic Society to whom in 1907 he delivered an address on 'Spas I have known'.¹⁰ But he was also a prolific religious writer¹¹ and active evangelist in and around Edinburgh and further afield in Ireland. By the turn of the century there were several Close or Darbyite meetings in the city, and others in the surrounding area. Though he left Edinburgh in 1909, that there was in 1920s a Wolston Hall in Pilrig which the brethren there used, suggests a real and recognised legacy to his work. Events beyond Edinburgh were to engineer a split in the ranks of the Close Brethren in Edinburgh. In 1908 there was a division in Northumberland within the close meetings there, said to have started at Alnwick, the causes of which are now obscure,¹² with nearby Glanton the rallying point for those who rejected the control being attempted by London. When the dispute spread to Edinburgh, all the close assemblies there, including the group meeting at the OSH, except for one at 12 Merchiston Place, declared themselves for the Glanton party (or 'persuasion') and against London.

By the inter war years there were four Glanton assemblies in Edinburgh: George Street (later moved to the New Gallery), Southside (Lauriston Place), Leith and Morningside (the OSH). The Glanton movement's main strength lay, as the name suggests, in Northumberland where it had a strong following amongst the farming community, but it also had also had a firm presence amongst the

¹⁰ In Dr Wolston's *Spas I have Seen* (London, 1907) he explained that his annual practice was to take an autumn holiday each year at a spa either in Britain or on the Continent. Wolston qualified MB Edinburgh in 1865 and MRCS England in the same year, and his first medical appointment was as house surgeon to the Old Royal Infirmary. He lived at 10 Castle Street. Amongst his medical publications was a paper to the BMA at Brighton in 1886 on 'Nasal Polpi: Their Radical Extirpation and Cure by Electro-cautery', in which he tabulated some 40 cases that he had seen between 1883 and 1886.

¹¹ E.g. W .T. P. Wolston, *Backsliding and Restoration. A Book for Backsliders* (Edinburgh: *Gospel Messenger* Office, 1899).

¹² W. R Dronsfield, *The Brethren since 1870* (n.pl., 1970), seems to point to the root cause as being factionalism within the Alnwick assembly, with the minority being thrown out and seeking support from other assemblies as at Glanton.

fishing communities of East Lothian, Fife, and the Moray Coast, and down to East Anglia, notably at Lowestoft, taken there by the migrant herring workers. Other assemblies were in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Newcastle, Manchester, Stockport, and London. They were as a rule numerically small, with most (other than in the bigger cities) not having a membership of more than a few dozen. Whether they are to be regarded as a loose or tight grouping is a matter of perspective, but they were certainly not monochromatic. As one might expect, the individual meetings tended to vary greatly in tone, depending on culture and leadership. There were some differences in interpretation, practice and in attitudes. Some were much stricter than others (e.g. that in the East Lothian fishing village of Cockenzie), but what they held in common was doctrinal, firmly scriptural, a commitment to the Bible, and also to prophecy ('dispensationalism') and the end times, an interest dropping from sight in the mainstream churches. They were partly defined by what they were, partially also by whom they were not: from what and whom they had split away. There was no defined written creed, but an understood and articulated set of positions; strict adherence to the Little Flock hymnbook,¹³ the King James ('Authorised') Version of the Bible, and to 'Mr. Darby' and his 'new translation' which dated back to 1867. They were firm on Sunday Observance, a position strongly tested for those who were farmers if the harvest was late and the sun shone on the Sunday, and mostly teetotal; smoking, on the other hand, was tolerated. The different assemblies were brought together by quarterly and annual meetings which were hosted in various localities; and approved brothers could be and were booked to speak for every Sunday at one meeting or another. Where, and how often one was invited to speak was a mark of acceptance, and indeed a subtle form of inducing conformity. The movement was democratic

¹³ The first Exclusive Brethren hymnbook, called *Hymns for the Poor of the Flock* was compiled by George Wigram in 1838, and there were many subsequent editions. Every split led to the new group producing their own revision; the Glanton party's edition dated from 1908. See Roger N. Holden, 'Hymns and Songs for the Little Flock: A Sectarian Hymn Book', in Neil T.R. Dickson and T.J. Marinello (eds.), *Culture, Spirituality and the Brethren* (Troon, 2014), 209–26.

in that there was no hierarchy, but it was recognized that there were 'weighty brothers' whose teaching and guidance were respected. There was an annual conference with prearranged speakers; it was customary to pair an established name with someone whose ministry was beginning to develop.

The provenance, therefore, of the brethren meeting at the OSH is that they were part of the 'Close' movement, with due respect paid to John Nelson Darby's writings. But the Glanton meetings lay on the wing of the Close Brethren that was less controlled, more interested in contact and outreach, and the drift over time was that they became more like an Open meeting, particularly after the Second World War. There never had been great numbers of Glanton meetings: some fifty or so in 1948, but the OSH was in many ways the most open of them all, more open than some so-called Open meetings. By contrast the Exclusives were becoming more and more inward looking and indeed secretive, although remaining numerically larger. A guess-estimate (and it is no more than that) made by John Hight in 1960 was that there were in Scotland some 3–5000 Exclusives as against only 1,000 or so Glantonites.¹⁴ It is hard to be sure of numbers; there was (and remains, celebrating its centenary in 2009) a magazine for the Glanton movement, *Scripture Truth*, but it carried mainly devotional articles rather than news. A newsletter, the *Dronsfield Circular*, was sent round to assemblies with news of meetings and speakers, but I have not been able to locate any surviving run of this. Since the 1970s the Glanton movement has fallen away and now there remain but a handful of live meetings.¹⁵ Those at Aberdeen and Glasgow have closed, as has Hawick and many others, and at Glanton, not only has the assembly disappeared but even the tin hall in which their meetings were held.

The OSH: the early years 1908–1939

¹⁴ Cited in Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 3.

¹⁵ In 1948 an overture was made to the Kelly-Lowe brethren to seek reconciliation. The letter of approach was signed by the leading figures of some thirty Glanton assemblies from Surrey to Findochty; there is no way now of knowing how many assemblies were not associated with this (unsuccessful) initiative.

There is no knowing how numerically strong was the group at the OSH which had declared for the Glanton persuasion in 1908, other than that they must have been able to muster the financial resources to pay for the rent of the hall. Or how long indeed there had been a 'Close' meeting there and whether they lost or gained numbers by the split. It is however likely that some families who were to play a continuing part in the life of the OSH were already in place. There were the Dussels, an extended family of German origin, some of whom subsequently anglicised their name in 1915 to Gunn-Russell. Carl Dussel was a tailor who had emigrated from Hamburg in the 1880s, and who married a widow whose maiden name was Gunn. His son, Charles had a jeweller's business, and his wife Isa was a daughter of Thomas Bell, a grocer in Newcastle who had made his reputation and wealth through Be-Ro flour.¹⁶ Another, and a large clan, was the Ross family. Alexander Ross 1854–1930 (or 'Alec') was a baker, later master baker,¹⁷ who came to manage and own the most successful business of its kind in Edinburgh, MacVitties Guest, a company incorporated in 1898 whose main premises were just off Princes Street.¹⁸ When Robert M'Vittie had died in 1910, his shares were bought by Alec Ross and control passed to him. The firm expanded and in 1924 while their main premises and restaurants remained at the corner of Princes and South Charlotte Streets, there were outlying shops in Morningside, Queensferry Street, and Comiston Road; the main bakery was at Orwell Terrace.¹⁹ It was a

¹⁶ Thomas Bell had developed a self-raising flour, marketed originally as Bells Royal but shortened after the death of Edward VII to 'Be-Ro'. It proved a hugely successful marketing ploy. There were Be-Ro recipe and baking books, the first of which appeared in 1923.

¹⁷ In the 1901 census, Alexander Ross and his family were living at 94 Polwarth Gardens: his occupation is given as 'master baker'.

¹⁸ MacVitties Guest & Company was incorporated as a limited company on 20 Dec. 1898. Quite why the name of the company was 'MacVittie' when the family name was M'Vitie is not clear. M'Vittie is described as a biscuit manufacturer; Guest as the baker and confectioner.

¹⁹ According to the Post Office directory for 1924–5, the firm had received Royal Warrants of appointment as Baker to King George V in 1912, then as baker and confectioner in 1922, and finally in 1926 as baker confectioner and purveyor. The

very profitable business, both during the First World War and thereafter, paying a dividend of ten per cent in 1930.²⁰ On Alexander Ross's death in October 1930 he left £33,000,²¹ having already given much of his wealth away to his offspring. The firm of undertakers which took care of the funeral arrangements was that of William Purves, another Glanton Brethren family, some of whom were later to attend the OSH themselves. The Rosses did not waste money. They spent some on motor cars and holidays, but put the bulk into safe investments, into good and solid houses on the south side of Edinburgh, to which territory they remained committed generation after generation. Alexander Ross himself lived in a substantial property at 56 Polwarth Terrace, which by his will was bequeathed to his then unmarried children, David, Jeannie, and John, with his son Alec moving to 10 Braid Road, a very large house, in the Hermitage in the 1930s. When James Durie died relatively young in 1929, leaving his widow—Alexander Ross' second daughter—with a family of five to support, it was her father who enabled them to move from Ashley Terrace to a good terraced house at 19 Lockharton Gardens. Margaret, as with all her siblings, inherited shares in MacVitties from her father, which generated a substantial and continuing income.²²

firm for many years supplied bakery goods to Holyrood Palace during the annual visit of the Royal family.

²⁰ Even during World War 2 the dividend level was maintained at 5%.

²¹ Family papers: Inventory of Alexander Ross's estate; 8 Jan. 1931. It shows £2344 held in government stock, a loan of £2500 to MacVitties, and a motor car valued at £350. The largest single remaining asset was his holding of shares in MacVitties: 425 £5 preference shares and 670 ordinary shares, valued in total at £12,000.

²² Her estate of £7985 was divided equally between her five children. My father's share was the house at 19 Lockharton Gardens, valued then at £1350 with the balance made up by shares in MacVitties.



Figure 2. Three generations: The Ross family *c.*1919. Alexander Ross is at the centre, flanked by his wife and his son John. In the back row, from the left, are his son Alec and Annie Ross, Great-Aunt Margaret, Jean, David, Joanne, and James and Margaret Durie (*née* Ross). My father, with his school tie, is on the left at the front; his older brother Andrew to the right.

We do not know when Alec Ross had joined the Plymouth Brethren, but when he married Jessie Izzett in November 1877, it was at the Free Church, 7 Mansion House Road. When, however, his daughter Margaret married James Durie on 29 September 1903 it was not a church ceremony, but by declaration—a Brethren form of marriage—in the presence of witnesses and by warrant of the sheriff substitute at 117 George Street, a hall being used by the Brethren.²³ So they were Brethren by then. There is nothing more to be gleaned

²³ Later David Ross, and after him, his nephew Ian Ross was to hold the licence for the marrying of couples.

of these early days of the OSH. But what is clear is that while the Brethren may have wished to grow their numbers through conversion, they certainly helped matters through reproduction. Alec and Jessie had eight children between 1878 and 1894, one of whom died in infancy. His second son—also Alec—was born in 1889 and was to take over his father's role as managing director of MacVitties. He married in 1913 and also had eight children between 1915 and 1931 which explains his utterance 'I'm known for my large family'. Their big house in the Hermitage was fully occupied. His sister Margaret herself had five children, which meant that the meeting room's capacity was being stretched with family members of the Ross clan alone.

What is interesting is that Alec's oldest son, David, who was five years senior to Alec, who was to succeed his father in the business, was not lined up to take over leadership of the family firm. It may have been clear from an early age that his skills were scholarly rather than commercial, and the census of 1901 lists him as a student (training college). That of itself is significant—neither the Ross clan nor the Glanton party shared the Exclusive Brethren's prejudice against higher education. Or indeed good schools; the boys went to Watsons or Heriots or the Edinburgh Academy; the girls to one of the Merchant Company schools. Or to sport which was an enthusiasm of many: rugby and golf in particular. Other sports were not seen as respectable: billiards or football. There were in the ranks of the Glanton party, as well as people who worked as drivers or salesmen, quite a number of doctors, lawyers, teachers, dentists, pharmacists, a university lecturer in anatomy and other graduates, including some women, in arts and languages. The OSH also tended to attract students from Glanton assemblies who were studying in Edinburgh, as for example Dr. Alan Binnie.²⁴ David Ross was to become a teacher of History at Edinburgh Corporation's flagship school at Boroughmuir and was one of the Glanton party's most effective speakers. He had a large library, of theology in which Campbell Morgan and Alexander Whyte featured prominently, but also of

²⁴ A GP in Norham, he was a noted naturalist and local historian. See, for example, his *Churches and Graveyards of Berwick* (Berwick, 1996).

general classics: Scott and Stevenson, and H. V. Morton. There were also many volumes in the Old High German script; when and why that interest developed is not known, but he was to spend some time in Germany during the 1930s, accompanied by his daughter, ministering to the Brethren there. Many of the Glanton Brethren read deeply, and read surprisingly widely, outside their own ilk. James Durie's signature is to be found in several commentaries which came from non-Brethren stables such as Bishop Lightfoot's text and notes on Galatians. Reading mattered and there were many autodidacts. David Ross was not the only high-profile speaker on which the OSH could call; there was also for example Roddy McCallum, a mathematics teacher, and headmaster of Bathgate Academy. What is unusual is that some of David Ross' talks in the 1930s have been preserved in typescript and a notebook of skeleton sermons of his from 1949 has survived. What is clear is how he favoured alliteration—he used the headings of 'Enemies, Endowed, Exploits, Enticed, Entangled, Enslavement' for a study in the life of Samson. But the notes show also that he had an eye for a good illustration, even if some now cannot be reconstructed, as is the case from his brief tag 'refer to wireless address in Berlin on the fall of Jerusalem'. A sermon of his from November 1938, given in Edinburgh, on '*the vein of love in the letter of Ephesians*', was reproduced in edited form in the Centenary edition in 2009 of *Scripture Truth*. He was described by the editor as a well-loved Bible teacher both in this country and in Germany.²⁵

Was the assembly a religious ghetto? Marriage tended to be within the meetings, something true perhaps of all small religious groups, though David Ross married a Baptist girl, and John Ross, late in life and to some surprise, Bessie who was a 'four square gospeller' (a form of Pentecostalism). Not all were happy; divorce did occur. But there was a strong and continuing pattern of care, in which family and faith reinforced each other: David Ross's daughter Maimie, whose mother spent much of her life in a mental institution, was simply incorporated into the activities of the wider family. One

²⁵ *Scripture Truth*, Centenary edition, 1909–2009 (July to Sept. 2009), 9–14.

wealthy member paid quietly and privately for the upkeep of two ladies in a care home. While there was no formal cooperation with the established churches, and the Brethren (along with the Presbyterians) were hostile on scriptural grounds to Roman Catholicism, they took no part in such virulently anti-Catholic organisations as John Cormack's Protestant Action, and were appalled at the riot in June 1935 at the end of the road opposite the OSH, when Protestant protestors stoned the buses of Catholics attending a mass at St Andrews Priory during an Eucharistic Conference.²⁶

The OSH clearly cooperated with the other Glanton assemblies in Edinburgh. There were Saturday night meetings for young people, Sunday morning services in the Royal Infirmary, outreach Sunday schools, one of which was off the High Street in the Old town, and another which opened in the 1930s in the new housing estate of Craigmillar. Open-air meetings were held at the Mound in the city centre, and tract distribution was undertaken. The Glanton people had their own missionary cause—the North Kasai mission in the then Belgian Congo, and there was a missionary house in Edinburgh kept for those on furlough. It is not possible to say if there was any growth in the numbers at the OSH during the interwar years. There was held every Sunday an evening gospel (or outreach) meeting; a photograph of the OSH from 1927 shows a large notice board announcing an 'Evangelistic Meeting' at 6.30 p.m., to which in bold letters is added 'All are welcome.'²⁷ The speaker's name was only chalked up, necessary as each week the speaker would change. Any visitor coming in, however, would not have known from the board that it was a Brethren meeting to which they were coming: the board was simply headed 140 Morningside Road.²⁸

²⁶ See Tom Gallagher, *Edinburgh Divided: John Cormack and No Popery in the 1930s* (Edinburgh, 1987), 45–54.

²⁷ Exclusive meetings had at best a notice board with only the time of the evening meeting, with some rubric such as 'The Lord's Word will be preached here at 6.30 p.m'.

²⁸ Photograph by John Smith 1927. Edinburgh City Libraries, Capital Collections. One other feature in the photograph is that the clock hands were stopped at twenty to



Figure 3. The Old Schoolhouse in 1927. Photograph reproduced by permission of Edinburgh City Libraries

How effective such services were in attracting new people is uncertain; there were some, but most new blood came through the Sunday school. Any gains were to some extent counterbalanced by problems within the Glanton movement: the Willie Reid parting or schism (so named after the leading figure in the split) of the later 1930s, which started at the Wolston halls in Leith, took some fifty adherents from the Glanton assemblies in Edinburgh away to their

four, adding support to the belief that the original mechanism had been taken away during the First World War.

own rooms at York Place.²⁹ But it was not all loss for the OSH in that the Sunday school superintendent at the troubled Wolston halls, Ernest Lyon, moved to the OSH with his family.

The Second World War and after

The outbreak of the Second World War was to be a challenge. The Exclusive movement in principle supported conscientious objection, as it had done during WW1,³⁰ but there were no such doubts amongst the young men of the OSH or indeed the other Glanton meetings; those who were called for service went, variously to the Army, Air Force or Navy. What may have shaped their position was an awareness of what Nazism was, fostered by what David Ross found on his visits during the 1930s to the Brethren in Germany who were under heavy pressure from the Nazi regime.³¹ One such visit, for which a photograph album survives, came in April 1936 when he was accompanied by his daughter Maimie and her cousin Helen Durie; their itinerary included Berlin, the Hartz mountains, Marburg, and Frankfurt. Helen later recalled how the children of the German families whom they visited were instructed not to let slip that they had had English visitors.³² It left its mark: in a sermon of David Ross, for which a transcript survives, he refers ‘to the devilry going on in

²⁹ Information supplied by Dr Theo Balderston, himself an attender at the OSH in the 1970s.

³⁰ See Karyn Burnham, *The Courage of Cowards. The Untold Stories of First World War Conscientious Objectors* (Barnsley, 2014).

³¹ See Andreas Liese, ‘The Brethren Movement in Germany during the National Socialist Era’, Tim Grass (ed.), *Witness in Many Lands: Leadership and Outreach Amongst the Brethren* (Troon, 2013), 273–87.

³² According to Helen’s daughter, her mother talked of the trip to Germany, particularly of visiting a family called Wolter, where the father, a brave man, refused to display the Nazi flag. She also remembered women sewing cushions celebrating Hitler. The daughter Ella Wolter stayed in touch with David’s daughter Maimie for years and came over to the UK at one point post-war.

Germany'.³³ He returned to Germany again in the following year, again with Maimie, but with his niece Joey rather than Helen.



Figure 4. David Ross with his daughter Maimie and niece Joey, and a German brother: Dusseldorf, 1937.

the development of ship to ship communications. Women also contributed; at least one worked at Bletchley. There were to be losses; direct in the form of deaths: Lex Ross (oldest son of Alec) was killed in a training accident at Maryhill Barracks in Glasgow and one of Ernest Lyon's sons, a RAF pilot, was killed in action.³⁴ Others had difficult times. In February 1943 Eric Ross was interned at the Curragh after his plane, damaged in a bombing mission over St

³³ Address given by David Ross at the New Gallery, Edinburgh, on 10 Nov. 1938. David Ross may have served in the First World in the Non Combatant Corps; there is some family memory of a work camp at Kirkliston, W. Lothian.

³⁴ Russell Lyon, born in 1922, went to George Watson's School, and joined the RAF in 1941 at the age of 18. Trained in Canada, he saw action over Western Europe and was killed in July 1944 when his Spitfire was hit by flak. The crash site was found in 2001, and a burial location recognised in 2014; his name is on the war memorial in Colinton, Edinburgh.

Nazaire, had crash landed in Southern Ireland. He was to escape from Dublin to Belfast in a coffin, or so the story ran. The reality appears to have been more prosaic in that having broken his ankle playing rugby for Drogheda, he was released on compassionate grounds in April 1944.³⁵ Ross Durie, a lieutenant in the 4th Royal Tanks Regiment, was badly wounded and captured in the Western desert on 15 June 1941 during the disastrous Battleaxe operation. But extraordinarily he was returned from Italy as part of an exchange in May 1943 of severely wounded prisoners. Sadly his mother had died in September 1942 while on a visit to relatives in Northumberland.³⁶

With so many of the younger generation away, it is surprising that the assembly seems to have kept functioning so well. Mrs Durie had reported to her son in February 1941 that there had been 225 at the Sunday school 'treat', a mixture of games and singing, with a bag of goodies provided by MacVitties: 'It was a glorious day: hence the crowd, I think'.³⁷ But the absence of so many younger people had weakened the assembly; one young woman complained that the Sunday school picnic in June 1941, traditionally a lively affair, was 'a pretty feeble S.S. picnic owing no doubt to the absence of the 'old crowd'.³⁸ Things kept going, but it was a struggle; there was a smaller pool of speakers and they were worked harder, perhaps too hard.³⁹ There was in the longer term an indirect cost; some of those who went away never really came back into the fold.⁴⁰ Marriage outside the meeting during or just after the war haemorrhaged some

³⁵ T. Ryle Dwyer, *Guests of the State* (Dingle, Co. Kerry, 1994), 176–7. Sgt Eric Ross was given special parole to attend classes two days a week at Rathmines Technical College in Dublin.

³⁶ The records of the undertakers, William Purves, record the arrangements made to bring the body to Edinburgh for interment in Morningside Cemetery: van to Alnmouth Station, train to Waverley, motor hearse and 5 cars etc; total bill £50 14/-.

³⁷ Author's Collection: Mrs Durie to Ross, 28 Feb. 1941.

³⁸ Author's Collection: Joey Durie to her brother Ross, 17 June 1941.

³⁹ The *Edinburgh Evening News* of Saturday 20 Nov. 1943 carried some 91 notices of church services in Edinburgh on the Sunday, including one for the Old Schoolhouse: speaker Mr David Ross M.A.

⁴⁰ Alastair J. Durie, 'A Glanton Assembly and the Second World War', *BHR*, 5 (2009), 119–137.

of the meeting's young men. Yet there was no war memorial or roll of honour in the hall, nor was Remembrance Sunday given any place or recognition.

Post-war

Despite the dislocation of the war years, the post-war picture for some time was surprisingly buoyant. What has just come to light is a notebook of Charles Gunn-Russell,⁴¹ undated but probably *c.*1955, listing attendees at the OSH, some eighty-three adults and several children, to which has been added by his wife, a supplementary list of another eleven names, perhaps of people who were regular visitors. A typical schedule for the OSH in the 1950s was the breaking of bread (or communion) at 10.30; the Sunday school (with at its peak over a hundred children)⁴² and Bible class at 3 p.m.; evening gospel service at 6.30; youth fellowship thereafter. Sunday may have been a day of rest, but not for the saints. Monday saw the Bible reading;⁴³ Wednesday the prayer meeting. There were other activities—women's group, missionary briefings, and the like. Boys' and girls' camps were held each summer. There was a sense of momentum, and the success of the outreach Sunday school at Oxfangs led by Graham Ross—a Scottish rugby internationalist—and held in the local primary school, prompted serious thought as to whether to establish a satellite hall there. An application was made for ground in the 1960s, but the Open Brethren got there first. Numbers held up well but there were signs of growing stress over things such as religious language,

⁴¹ This has been made available to me by Joan Mackel, to whom I am grateful.

⁴² The Sunday School programme was standard—a time of choruses, some of which were chosen by the children; 'The wise man built his house upon the rock' was a particular favourite as it finished with a great shout—'the house on the sand fell down'—and then separation with a teacher into boys' and girls' classes. You went up into the mixed Bible class from the Sunday school, which was held in a hut adjoining the main OSH building, at the age of about 14. The Sunday school went into recess in June for the summer, with the year being signed-off with the Sunday school picnic, a big affair to which parents and friends came. There were races, and to finish, a sweet scatter.

⁴³ This was a discussion of a Bible passage to which all could contribute.

versions of the Bible, music, dress, and the charismatic movement. Which translation of the Bible to use was divisive. The older generation preferred the King James translation (and indeed prayed in the language of the past—‘thees’ and thous’), the younger wanted something in present-day language. But the New English Bible was suspect, the Good News Bible too loose, the Revised Standard Version the answer. To most of the young the old evening hymn book was seen as completely outdated with too much Victoriana (Moody and Sankey⁴⁴), the morning meeting’s hymnbook called *The Little Flock*, lost in a time warp, when new collections such as *Mission Praise* were available. And unaccompanied signing, which was a key feature of the breaking of bread, was seen as very old-fashioned, not what was needed. It could be wonderful, but that depended on the presenter—if the pitch were wrong or the wrong tune chosen for the metre, the outcome was far from acceptable. Some starters of tunes were expert and reliable, others less so. It was, incidentally, a hazard that a visitor might launch into a tune which no one else knew, or with a variation or two which were local to his assembly. A musicologist would find much to study. There was the issue of hats—head coverings for females were held by the traditionalists to be essential, but not by the new.

And there was the place of women. It was held as bedrock by the older saints that women should not take open part in either assembly worship or preaching, but that was faced by some questioning, by muttering rather than revolt. There were able women in the meeting: Meg Mather was the matron of Chalmers Hospital in Lauriston Place and women were far from powerless behind the scene. Why not in the open, some argued? That women did not speak did not mean that they were powerless; it was Jessie Ross who in the 1930s had vetoed as ‘mere vanity’ her husband’s idea to add the name ‘Ross’ to the firm’s name of MacVitties Guest. There were therefore real tensions to which the leadership had to respond. A further complication was

⁴⁴ Sankey’s most famous tune was to the hymn ‘There were ninety and nine safely laid in the shelter of the fold’, which he composed on the spot at an evangelistic meeting in Edinburgh in 1874 at which Moody had been speaking on the ‘lost sheep’.

that the other Glanton meetings in Edinburgh were closing, as at Laurieston, and the Willie Reid group likewise. The OSH instead of being one Glanton meeting amongst several of that persuasion, which allowed for different emphases, became the only Glanton meeting in Edinburgh—and it was difficult for one size to fit all. Moreover the troubles amongst the Taylorite meetings resulted in several formerly Exclusive families coming to the OSH.

In 1961 a significant step had been taken when the meeting at the OSH purchased their hall. Most Brethren assemblies, though high in commitment, were relatively low-cost affairs, neither owning their building (with a few exceptions⁴⁵) nor having a minister's stipend to pay. There were things such as heating and insurance, and the occasional larger bill: the replacement of the old benches and foot cushions by comfortable chairs was much welcomed by those who had had to hump the seats around. But in 1961 the meeting did commit itself to buying the OSH. It had been bought by Alec Ross in 1946 and given to his son Ronald, then a medical missionary, and to whom the meeting paid rent. But by 1961, back in the UK, he was working in Birmingham, and offered the OSH to the meeting at exactly the same price as his father had paid fifteen years previously. It was a bargain at £1300, there was no problem in raising the money, and title was taken by five of the senior brethren as trustees. Three of these were long standing adherents of the OSH: Alfred Allan (an architect and married to a Gunn-Russell), Graham Ross (MD of MacVitties) and Donald McCallum (MD in Scotland of Ferranti). Two were post-war incomers: Walter Binnie from Northumberland and Alan Scott (an engineer with Bruce Peebles). What was remarkable is that the legal document for the registers of Scotland actually sets out the doctrinal basis of the meeting, including the infallibility of Scripture, the Trinity, the work of Christ, the need for faith, the eternal life of the spirit, and the resurrection. It would be interesting to know who thrashed out this statement. Unusually,

⁴⁵ There is the exception of Bellevue in Edinburgh, an Open meeting, which took over a grander ex-German church building in 1919. It is said that they rolled their seats down from their previous hall in Picardy Place in a hand-cart.

while the ranks of the trustees could be amended by a meeting of brothers only, winding up or disposal would require brothers and sisters (which may have been shaped by the reality that meetings had found sisters to live longer.)

From the 1960s

This was of course a time when church attendance and every other indicator of religious life—baptism, new communicants, membership throughout Scotland—was falling. In Callum Brown's words 'most indices enter free fall'.⁴⁶ And it was of course hardest on smaller churches when the downturn came: Sunday schools or youth groups needed a certain minimum mass to function. In the early 1960s, the *Edinburgh Evening News* carried in its Saturday edition notices of over 150 places where one could worship in Edinburgh on the Sunday, from big churches to small missions.⁴⁷ Fifty years later, probably the figure can be halved. There are some churches which still thrive, and even a few mega-churches, but the number of church buildings no longer in religious use tells the tale. And, one would guess, the smaller denominations and movements like the Brethren have been even harder hit than the mainstream.

But during the 1960s the OSH continued to function and indeed may well have punched above its weight, thanks in part to a generous tradition of hospitality, and at one stage there were numbers of students attending, including postgraduates. There was considerable participation in non-denominational groups like the Gideons, or pan Christian causes, such as the Evangelistic Crusades held in Edinburgh, or Scripture Union Summer missions; that at Elie in Fife was a particular favourite of OSH folk. It is worth noting that OSH people played a considerable role in wider Scottish life, not in politics, but in business and public service. After the takeover of

⁴⁶ See Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation* (London, 2001), 188.

⁴⁷ The issue of 16 Nov. 1963 contains 148 notices for Christian services, including one for the OSH where Mr Arthur Leitch was speaking. At the 6.30 service at Laurieston, another Glanton meeting, was Mr Alfred Allan of the OSH. Eleven Spiritualist meetings also appeared.

MacVitties by Rank, Hovis and Macdougall in 1962, and his subsequent resignation from what was no longer a family business, Graham Ross was the founding executive director of Scottish Business in the Community, Chairman of the Edinburgh Old Town Renewal Trust and also of Napier College (later University)'s Advisory Council: his services were recognised with the award of LVO in 1983 and an OBE in 1990. Donald McCallum became managing director of the electronic giant Ferranti (Scotland) and after his retirement in 1987 president of the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and chair of the UFC for Scotland. He was knighted in 1988.⁴⁸

But the turnover of young people meant that too many passed through the OSH, some to other churches such as the independent Edinburgh Baptist church, Charlotte Chapel, and too few stayed. It was not that there was a loss of faith; it was that the old order, however modified, no longer had the same appeal. The more the OSH modernised, the less Brethren it became. The adoption of the name 'Old Schoolhouse Christian Fellowship' confirmed that it was now more a place for Christian worship than Brethren practice. Though the breaking of bread was retained, there was now an all-age morning service which was no different from that which many churches were offering. While there was still an emphasis on everyone participating, another break with the past and with tradition, was the appointment of a paid pastor. It was an additional irony that the Brethren system which so fostered the development of ability—to speak, to organise, to present—led to some being drawn to a bigger stage in other denominations than the contracting Brethren assembly could provide. Employment away from Edinburgh also took younger graduates away and there was a loss through death of some of the stalwarts; including Ian Ross, a vet in Colinton, notable speaker and Bible-class leader.

Yet the centenary held in 2006 was a vibrant affair. But within a few months, there had been a serious loss of significant members to Morningside Baptist Church, for reasons which remain uncertain. It

⁴⁸ Obituary in *The Scotsman*, 24 Mar. 2011.

made the longer-term situation serious. At one level, the core appeared to function as before and the morning meeting continued with the addition of all-age services, using Scripture Union material. But the committed remnant was now just that, thirty or forty in number, with it harder and harder to sustain activities. And there was no denominational structure to insist on continuing through what might be seen as merely a low point in the life-cycle of this religious group. There was no loss of commitment by those who remained, but the process of shrinkage could not be reversed. And so after a century of usage by the Brethren, the Old Schoolhouse in Morningside is to be used by a different Christian community. The building continues, and it will still be a centre of worship, but in a new form.

Editor's note: Sadly, Alastair Durie died while this version of his paper was in preparation. See the obituary on pp.180–1 below.