

Brethren Historical Review 15 (2019)

Exporting the Rapture: John Nelson Darby and the Victorian Conquest of North-American Evangelicalism

Donald Harman Akenson

Oxford: University Press 2018

xiv + 505 pp.+12 illus. (hdbk) ISBN 09780190882709 £39.95

Hard on the heels of his ground breaking analysis of J.N. Darby's early life, *Discovering the End of Time* (2016), Professor Donald Akenson has now given us a fascinating sequel pursuing the scope of Darby's activities and thought at a later stage replete with unexpected details of the man—sometimes up-lifting, sometimes disappointingly arrogant but always rivetingly human.

As was the case with its predecessor, this book's title is a trifle misleading and it is only in his fifteen pages of conclusion (425–38) that the author truly focuses on the North American dimension of Darby's career, but in the body of the book he establishes at much greater length the process by which Darby established and maintained control over much of the social fabric of Brethrenism, during which time he began his work in Canada and the United States. On the American front, Professor Akenson acknowledges the pioneer work of the late Ernest Sandeen and one suspects that he will devote a third volume to this aspect of Darby's career.

In other ways too, Akenson's new analysis is a trifle confusing. The title suggests that he is primarily dealing with Darby's dispensationalist eschatology, as this was the one aspect of his teaching that really caught on in North America, but he is equally preoccupied with Brethren ecclesiology. This takes him to Baghdad and India with Anthony Norris Groves (and later to the faith mission of Hudson Taylor), whose connections with Darby were only tangential. It also leads him to investigate the early careers of George Müller and Henry Craik, whose rejection of Darby's eschatology has been discreetly ignored by many admirers of Darby who want to treat dispensationalism as a significant part of the essence of Brethrenism. As is the case with all his writing, Akenson's account of these other

leading Brethren is thought provoking and instructive but it threatens to be something of a digression.¹

To this criticism the author may well reply that he is analyzing the tactical machinery of control exercised by Darby in the Brethren movement, and the almost pathological bent for controversy displayed by this extraordinary man can only be understood if we are familiar with the position of those who disagreed with him. Certainly those of us who find the later (post-1845) polemics of the Brethren depressingly uncharitable, can only be grateful to Professor Akenson for his detached and unflinching analysis of these sordid squabbles with what he calls their 'occasional spots of civility, but mostly hillocks of nastiness' (278 n.56). Thankfully we can now be spared from further soiling our hands in these murky waters. Only those wishing to perpetuate these uncharitable squabbles will need to traverse these paths again. This reader found the final description of the appalling treatment received in 1879 by the aged and saintly Dr Cronin, intensely depressing and very near to heart-breaking (404–14).

Akenson writes with panache and his lively style rarely flags. His mastery of the considerable *dramatis personae* is impressive. In a couple of pages and sometimes in merely an extended footnote, he can bring to life aspects of the career and character of Darby's correspondents (like William Trotter and John Willans), some of whom have hitherto been little more than names. His brilliant sketch of the gifted and charming Edward Lawrence Bevir, even includes the younger man's 'obsession with clocks'. As a reader who likes to be challenged, this reviewer appreciates an author who is not afraid to use words like 'autochthonous', 'threnody', 'fungible', 'atrabilious', 'metonymical', 'vilipended' and even. . . 'larrikinism', but it is amusing to find Akenson taking Thomas Ryan to task for using words like 'introition' and 'catadysian' which, he suggests, 'fell off the top shelf of the antique dictionary library' (350).

¹ Some readers will similarly dismiss as a superfluous irrelevance the Appendix (439–76) devoted to the published (and accessible on Google), but unproven charge of sexual misbehaviour levelled at Darby in the 1850s.

In a book that covers such a huge canvas there are bound to be slips but usually, one must add, they are of little gravity. In a footnote Groves is referred to as Müller's *father-in-law* (109 n.41) and one of Müller's less remembered successors, becomes still more elusive as 'F. Fred Bergen. (105 n.28).² The letters in the Christian Brethren Archive between Newton and Tregelles were written *by* Tregelles (not *to* him) and it was Newton's wife who was a cousin of Tregelles as opposed to Newton being a cousin of Tregelles's wife (115 n.47). More seriously, it is this reader's understanding that the *ancien* dissidence in French speaking Switzerland (often misleadingly translated as 'old dissent') does not refer to an eighteenth-century secession, as suggested by Akenson (128–9), but to the early Genevan *réveil* of 1817-22 associated with the Bourg-de-four assembly (with 'ancien' perhaps better translated as 'earlier'). This distinguishes it from the later *dissidence* of some of the Genevan haute-bourgeoisie in the 1830s, characterized by the ministry of d'Aubigné and Gausson at the Oratoire. While clarifying the nomenclature, I hasten to add that it makes little difference to Darby's tactic of ignoring labels and finding in the maelstrom of French speaking Swiss evangelicalism, a good boat from which to fish.

Professor Akenson has provided us with another literary tour de force—astonishingly wide and detailed in its compass, shrewdly perceptive but generous in its judgments, and tautly compelling in its narrative. It is unlikely that his readers will always agree with him, but they will ignore him at their peril!

Timothy C. F. Stunt

² George Frederick Bergin is hard to track down as he was included in the first edition of Henry Pickering's *Chief Men among the Brethren* (1918) but expunged, for no very obvious reason, from the second edition (1931).