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Transmitting Tradition: Engaging with the McLaren 'Triple Tradition' Thesis

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Abstract

The interpretation of Open Brethren origins in North America were given a highly influential formulation by Ross McLaren in his dissertation of 1982 as a 'triple tradition'. This article engages with McLaren to discuss the first of the three traditions that he isolated: 'Revival Brethren' from Scotland and Ireland. It discusses the accuracy of McLaren's portrayal of them by examining the influences on the nascent Scottish assemblies of the early 1870s and how they positioned themselves within the overall Brethren movement in Britian and Ireland. McLaren's thesis has become an established historiography in more popular histories of North American Brethren, and this article examines what use has been made of McLaren by such works. The article concludes that McLaren is accurate in showing that the Revival Brethren brought a rigid form of Brethrenism with them, but less accurate in showing how Brethren theology and ecclesiology had been initially transmitted to them or in asserting their independence of the existing movement.

To date, Ross McLaren's dissertation of 1982, published as *The Triple Tradition: The Origin and Development of the Open Brethren in North America* (by University Microfilms of Ann Arbor) has been the only extended scholarly discussion of North American Brethren origins. He posits that the continent's Open Brethren have three roots: what he calls 'Revival Brethren', the fruit of emigrant Scottish and Irish evangelists from the 1870s onwards; the Grant Brethren, a moderate Exclusive grouping many of whom joined with Open Brethren in the early 1930s; and the 'Bath Brethren', British Brethren whose outlook had developed or diverged from that of the movement's pioneers. This diversity of tradition, and the consequent separate historical strands of

development, is unsurprising to anyone familiar with the Open Brethren and their lack of central organisation, their distinct regional patterns, and the highly individualised autonomy of their assemblies and evangelists. By isolating multiple causations in his account of North American origins, McLaren's perception of separate strands in the history picks up a characteristic mark of their global history. His discussion focuses very largely on the Revival Brethren and the Grant Brethren, and he regards any significant impact of the 'Bath Brethren' as relatively recent and as the result of the reception of English speakers and writers. Whilst McLaren's work was reprinted with some editorial comments in the *Emmaus Journal*,[1] we have searched in vain for scholarly reviews or engagement with it. Yet it has been taken up by more popular writers, and that makes McLaren's argument of particular interest. Although he usefully identifies influences unique to North American Open Brethren, such as the integration there of many Grant Exclusive assemblies, we do not wish to focus on these influences. Instead, by way of beginning to remedy the lack of scholarly discussion, we wish to address two questions relating specifically to the transmission of the first of McLaren's traditions from Britain:

1. How accurate is McLaren's portrayal of the independent origins of the 'Revival Brethren'?
2. How has his thesis been taken up by more recent writers?

The accuracy of McLaren's portrayal of the Scottish origins of 'Revival Brethren'

F. F. Bruce, whose roots lay in North-East Scotland,[2] accepted the argument that local assemblies had begun independently of those

[1] Ross Howlett McLaren, 'The Triple Tradition: The Origin and Development of the Open Brethren in North America', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 169–208; 5 (1996), 57–87, 161–203; 6 (1997), 129–50. References are to this version since it is more widely available than the University Microfilms edition of his MA thesis.

[2] 'North-East Scotland' refers to the North-East Lowlands, comprising the historic counties of Aberdeenshire, Banffshire, and Moray and Nairn. It is east of the Highlands, which are geographically and culturally distinct.

further south. In his autobiographical work *In Retrospect* (1980), Bruce asserted of local Brethrenism that 'While it had come to be associated (from the early 1870s) with the Brethren movement, its origins were quite independent of Dublin, Plymouth, and Bristol; they are to be found rather in the evangelical revival of 1859–60.'[3] According to Bruce, other local assemblies also came into being around that time 'quite spontaneously'.[4] Bruce put his finger on one reason why these Brethren did not regard themselves as heirs of the earlier leaders: 'We had abandoned one religious tradition, and saw no reason why we should take over another … the early brethren were not our standard of reference'. Bruce's claim lends itself to support of McLaren's thesis that the 'Revival Brethren' were independent of the initial Irish and English movement.[5]

However, we wish to offer some modifications to this understanding.

1. Many Brethren ideas were in the contemporary revivalist atmosphere, ready to be breathed in. Mid-Victorian revivalism was itself shaped by the Brethren, and therefore it formed something of a congenial atmosphere for the reception of the movement by a number of its converts.[6] The revival itself was known as 'the layman's revival', because of the involvement of numerous untrained lay preachers,

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[3] F. F. Bruce, *In Retrospect: Remembrance of Things Past* (London & Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, 1980), 2.

[4] Ibid. 6.

[5] Ibid. 7, 8. The Exclusive Brethren in North-East Scotland made a similar claim for an independent origin in the North-East when in the 1870s they emerged from revivalism in the region. Between 1877 and 1880, however, their meetings were being listed in the national list of Exclusive meetings: see Neil Dickson, 'Open and Closed: Brethren and Their Origins in the North East', in James Porter (ed.), *After Columba—After Calvin: Religious Community in North-East Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1999), 152; idem, 'The Exclusive Brethren in Scotland: A Historical Overview, 1838–2018', *Journal of CESNUR*, 5/2 (March–April 2021), 41–2.

[6] John Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London: Epworth Press, 1978), 116; D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 117; Janice Holmes, *Religious Revivals in Britain and Ireland 1859–1905* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 142–4.

including some women. The central emphasis on personal conversion made the newly converted look askance at the cultural Christians they saw around them in church, and therefore they found appealing the notion of the gathered church consisting of the converted only. This encouraged separatism and made attractive the churches of the Brethren that continued the revivalist zeal for conversion of one's neighbours as the chief business of life. A key transmitter for revivalist enthusiasm were the meetings for prayer which, in their intimate nature, were similar to the ethos of Brethren assemblies. They encouraged informal fellowship outside institutional control and an anticipation of the voice of God speaking through Scripture that prepared participants for the unstructured mode of the Brethren assembly. The seeming spontaneous generation of the Brethren movement, which became a central theme of later Brethren historical narratives,[7] was, in fact, a natural fruit of contemporary revivalism, which already contained seeds implanted by the Brethren and those influenced by the movement.[8] For those such as Donald Ross, the founder of the Northern Evangelistic Society (NES), these emphases were transmitted through journals such as *The Revival*, edited by the one-time Brethren Richard Morgan, or through agencies such as the annual conference of the Scottish revivalist network in Perth, a gathering that had first attracted north the two English evangelists, J. Albert Boswell and Rice T. Hopkins, both of whom were to have significant roles in shaping late nineteenth-century Brethren.

2. Additionally, Brethren ideas were being promulgated by revivalist leaders such as the gentlemen evangelists Boswell and Gordon Forlong, although not initially under the Brethren banner. Some had undoubtedly become familiar with such thinking before separating from the denominations. Forlong was possibly the foremost revivalist

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[7] See Neil Dickson, 'Our Heritage: Plymouth Brethren Historiography', in David Bebbington (ed.), *The Gospel in the Past: Essays on the Historiography of the Evangelical Movement* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).

[8] For an expanded version of this argument, see Neil T. R. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland, 1838–2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 69–73.

in encouraging new converts to read the Bible, but in this, he was certainly not alone.[9] Although Forlong did not explicitly commend the Brethren, his encouragement to meet in houses to study Scripture and to trust it alone, as well as his insistence on the necessity of lay witnessing, meant he left a string of assemblies after his missions, a process that was especially marked in Glasgow.[10] Forlong's appeal solely to the literal truth of Scripture had fertilized the ground for acceptance of the biblical primitivism of the Brethren, outside of the institutional church. There were other evangelists in the period such as Samuel Blow, William Brown, Harrison Ord, and John Hambleton, who were (or became) Brethren, and other non-denominational revivalists whose ecclesiastical identities, like Forlong's are blurred—individuals such as Russell Hurditch, William Scroggie, and William Carter. What is clear is that Brethren spirituality and ideas permeated the contemporary revivalist network through such individuals.

3. Once they separated, the North-East Brethren very soon made contact with what we might call 'accredited' Brethren and immediately aligned their practice with them.[11] As John Ritchie later admitted, at first not everything was done '"after the due order"'.[12] An example was the breaking of bread, which in the new North-East assemblies had initially some diversity of practice, but was soon assimilated to the general Brethren pattern throughout Britain.[13] Bruce records that when Donald Ross eventually found himself compelled to follow the example of some of the NES's converts, who had withdrawn from their previous churches and received believer's

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[9] For Forlong's advocacy of Bible reading, see Gordon Forlong to the editor, *The Revival*, 7 (1862), 296; ibid. 5 (1861), 92; 'Thomas Cochrane', *Believer's Magazine*, 21 (May 1911), iv; for other revivalists: E. McHardie, *James Turner: or how to reach the masses* (3rd ed. London: T. Woolmer, 1889), 150; K. Moody-Stuart, *Brownlow North, B.A., Oxon: Records and Recollections* (London, 1878), 240–1.

[10] Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 61, 63, 73, 79.

[11] Ibid. 97–9.

[12] John Ritchie, 'Revival Times and Work in Aberdeenshire', in C. W. R[oss]. (ed.), *Donald Ross: Pioneer Evangelist* (Kilmarnock; John Ritchie, [1904]), 171: the phrase is from 1 Chron. 15:13.

[13] Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 153.

baptism, he was at first very wary of Brethren. 'But before long he and his friends made the acquaintance of some of these people, and found them to be not quite so bad as their reputation. In fact, there was a handful of them meeting in Aberdeen, and they joined forces with Donald Ross and other Christians associated with him'.[14] Further south, certainly at least by the spring of 1872, a year after the first of the new assemblies had appeared, Ross had made contact with the Brethren in Glasgow and their most prominent leader, John R. Caldwell.[15] Caldwell had been converted to Brethren views through a mission by Forlong, and initially (and later) he held the open communion of Groves' practice.[16] In accordance with this tradition, the NES evangelists were welcomed to the Lord's table and invited to preach among Glasgow assemblies.[17] The distinction between non-denominational revivalism and the Brethren was sometimes blurred, not helped by Brethren reluctance to declare themselves. The affinities between Ross and the Brethren were not immediately clear to outsiders. When one anti-NES polemicist attacked the society in 1871, it was for its mode of revivalism and theology, with its 'new prophets' seen as a revived Montanism.[18] This broadside appeared just as the secessions in the North-East were beginning. The local newspaper in

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[14] Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 5–6. McLaren misidentifies the leader of this Aberdeen assembly. It was led by a John Ritchie, but not the one who was converted under Donald Munro and later became a publisher McLaren, 'The Triple Tradition, 4: 194.

[15] Ross's journal, *Northern Evangelistic Intelligencer* [hereafter: *NEI*], in April 1872 carried an article entitled 'Conscience' by J. R. Caldwell: no.4 (Apr. 1872), 25–7. The first of the Aberdeenshire assemblies, Old Rayne, had been formed in April 1871: Ritchie, 'Revival Times', 174. In 1876 Caldwell was appointed the editor of the *NEI* under its new title of *The Northern Witness* (later *The Witness*).

[16] Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 172–3. Caldwell went through a phase from the later 1870s when he limited reception to the Lord's table to those already in an assembly fellowship but in 1906 published a retraction in which he had returned to his earlier views: ibid.

[17] H. A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1942), 72–3.

[18] Hugh McIntosh, 'The New Prophets', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 7, 14, and 21 Apr., and 12 May 1871; later issued as *The New Prophets: Being an Account of the Operations of the Northern Evangelists* (Aberdeen: A. & R. Milne, 1871).

Huntly in 1873 denominated the town's two sects as 'Darbyites', then the most common name for the Exclusive Brethren,[19] and the neologism of 'Rossites'.[20] Earlier that same year, however, the better-informed religious controversialist, the Aberdeenshire laird, Alexander Burnett, a Baptist lay preacher, who had witnessed the secessions in his region, had no difficulty in his polemic in claiming in his title that the new assemblies showed *Plymouth Brethren is Antichrist*.[21] In Huntly, too, by 1878, its newspaper could ask what was the difference between the 'Open Brethren' and 'Close Brethren', and which those who 'broke bread' in the New Hall in the town were.[22] The origins of the North-East assemblies might be blurred due to the overlaps between the Brethren and contemporary revivalism, but once formed their shape was clearly discerned by outsiders as being Brethren, not least by their anti-clericalism. The leaders too had no difficulty in the immediate postpartum period in recognizing that they carried the genes of the Open Brethren movement and quickly associated with others who bore the family resemblance. Admittedly, the continuing use of women preachers by the assembly in the remote village of Rhynie is an interesting outlier, one that perhaps modern advocates of a spontaneous and independent origin, governed only by the light received from the Scriptures, might not wish to accept as evidence for their understanding of Brethren history.[23]

Donald Ross's shift from independency as an evangelist to Open Brethren demonstrates how elements adopted in the former identity influenced the adoption of the latter. The meetings formed through the NES were evidently regarded as Brethren by the Exclusives. H. A. Ironside, the pastor of Moody Memorial Church, Chicago, from 1930

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[19] Neil Dickson, '"Exclusive" and "Open": A Footnote', *Brethren Historical Review*, 19 (2023), 88.

[20] 'The Sectaries of Huntly', *Huntly Express*, 4 Oct. 1873.

[21] Alexander G. Burnett, *Plymouth Brethren is Antichrist* (Aberdeen: James Murray, 1873).

[22] 'Jottings By the Way', *Huntly Express*, 3 Aug. 1878.

[23] Note also Ross's inclusion of a teaching article by 'the Late Mrs. Code' on 'The Mystery of Christ; or, the Special Unity of the Head and the Body': *NEI*, 2 (1873), 83–9.

until 1948, had family roots in North-East Aberdeenshire, and he drew on family recollections to assert that soon after the NES gatherings began to meet, Exclusive Brethren from further south heard of the work and came to investigate, with a view to them uniting. However, their demand that its leaders 'judge the question' as to the soundness in doctrine of Bethesda Chapel in Bristol was categorically rejected. It was Ross himself, according to Ironside, who was behind this rejection. When Ross had founded the NES in 1870, it was as a faith mission, in which the worker was not salaried but was dependent on God for all material needs. This was a concept that in the nineteenth century originated with the Brethren, principally through Groves and his brother-in-law, George Müller, the Brethren pastor of Bethesda Chapel.[24] Müller was the most famous exemplar of the practice in Britain, widely known throughout British evangelicalism and beyond through his annual reports and his serially issued *Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller*.[25] When Ross discovered he would have to judge Müller 'a defiled man' he categorically rejected the Exclusives' approach, ensuring that both his future trajectory and that of the newly formed North-East meetings would lie among Open assemblies.[26] It was Ross's theological descent from Bristol on this particular practice, despite McLaren's denial of historical or theological influence from there,[27] that in part ensured this trajectory. Ross's positioning of himself within the Brethren is clear in a statement printed in *The Witness* in 1939 but dated to 'about 1870':

> We are simply 'Christians', 'believers', 'saints', 'brethren'. In order to save misconception, however, let me say we are not what the world calls 'Exclusives', 'Darbys', or 'Plymouth Brethren'. They have no connection with us, nor we with them. The world calls us Open Brethren, or 'Bethesda Brethren', on account, I suppose, of Mr.

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[24] Timothy Larsen, '"Living by faith": A Short History of Brethren Practice', *Brethren Archivists and Historians Network Review*, 1 (1997–8), 67–102.

[25] See Neil Summerton, *'I thanked the Lord, and asked for more': George Müller's Life and Work* (Glasgow: BAHN, 2022), 7, 105–40.

[26] Ironside, *A Historical Sketch*, 72.

[27] McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 193–4.

> Muller [*sic*] of the Bristol Orphan House and of Bethesda Chapel, being one, or perhaps chief, of our number; and our readiness to acknowledge all believers as brethren and sisters in the Lord, believing that the true ground of church fellowship is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and love to all the brethren, we disclaim the name given us by the world.[28]

It is unthinkable that the magazine's editor, Henry Pickering, would have attributed this statement to Ross unless he was sure in his own mind it was written by him, although the date of about 1870 is undoubtedly a few years too early.[29] Pickering offered it as clear evidence both of Ross's early identification with the movement and of his view of the grounds for reception to fellowship before his emigration.

John Ritchie and F. F. Bruce are perfectly right as a matter of chronology that the origins of the Brethren in North-East Scotland post-dated their appearance in Ireland and England by some thirty years and that they emerged from contemporary revivalism. As both men observe, it gave them a degree of distance from the tradition that had emerged in the Dublin-Plymouth-Bristol axis. Nevertheless, the family resemblance was unmistakable. Ideas are not always transmitted contemporaneously or through direct contact with their progenitors, but also over time and place through such means as networks and print culture. One anonymous NES convert in an Aberdeenshire country assembly offers an example of the latter. In the formative period for the North-East assemblies of 1871-2, he was reading papers on prophetic subjects and imbibing the

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[28] 'A Clear Statement', *The Witness*, 69 (1939), 6. We are grateful to Prof. Mark Stevenson for supplying this reference and quotation.

[29] 1870 was the year in which Ross founded the independent Northern Evangelistic Society, when he was not yet Brethren. He founded his magazine *The Northern Assemblies* with its titular Brethren term in 1873, which is the year after the earliest recorded use of 'Open Brethren' appeared: see Dickson, '"Exclusive" and "Open"', 85-6. If 'about 1870' is accurate, then it was possibly written nearer to 1873 or just after.

dispensationalist scheme.[30] He was also aware that the new movement he had entered was known as 'Plymouth Brethren' in England (although he was unclear over the name's origin).[31] Transmission into different social and religious contexts, however, leaves its mark. The revivalism of the mid-century remade the Open Brethren, although any remodelling took place along existing lines of development, such as an increased enthusiasm for evangelism and the flowering of a missionary movement.[32] Change can also be seen in the rise of more negative attitudes to mainstream churches which Ross and the NES shared, and which, as McLaren points out, are different from those shown by A. N. Groves in the classic statement of Open Brethrenism in his letter of 1836,[33] or that historians such as Thomas Veitch, Roy Coad, and Harold Rowdon would find in the Brethren past, and which McLaren himself found attractive.[34] Some of these writers undoubtedly idealized the 'openness' of Open Brethren in England. Probably the more cautious questioning by John Eliot Howard at Tottenham, a decade later than Groves's letter, of those presenting themselves for reception to the Lord's table and his criticism of a 'latitudinarian' acceptance, which one writer responding to Howard associated with Groves, was more typical.[35] As we shall see, however, in the following point, the increased negativity towards denominational churches would make many influenced by the North-East and Irish evangelists in North America open to more restrictive thinking. The anonymous

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[30] [Anon.], 'Reminiscences of Former Days. VIII', *Green Pastures*, 1 (1907), 99. We are grateful to Dr Samuel McBride for drawing this source to our attention.

[31] Ibid. 66.

[32] Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britian and* Ireland (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 115–46.

[33] Anthony Norris Groves to [John N.] D[arby]., 10 March 1836, in [Harriet Groves], *Memoir of Anthony Norris Groves . . . by his Widow* (1856; 3rd ed., London: James Nisbet, 1869), 538–43.

[34] See Dickson, 'Our Heritage'; for McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 170.

[35] Neil Dickson, 'The Howards: Global, Cultural, and Religious Influence', in Gerald T. West, *From Friends to Brethren: The Howards of Tottenham—Quakers, Brethren, and Evangelicals* (Troon: BAHN, 2016), 14–15.

writer just quoted, for example, eventually sided with those seceders who had the restricted communion advocated in *Needed Truth*.[36] But as we shall also see below, that was not something unique to Open Brethren from North-East Scotland and Ireland, but, as more recent research has shown, was more widespread during this period in the British movement and in Australia than McLaren seems to suggest.[37]

McLaren asserts that in the journals published by Ross in North America, a more overt '"Plymouth Brethren"' direction only took place in the early twentieth century under the editorship of his son, Charles Ross, when he began carrying articles by British Brethren, particularly ones by J. R. Caldwell.[38] Given the significance of publications for Brethren in establishing a sense of identity, it is worth examining two volumes of Ross's earlier *Northern Evangelistic Intelligencer*.[39] This monthly, initially issued from Aberdeen, which first appeared in 1872 and later changed its title to the *Northern Witness* and then *The Witness*, offers abundant indications that Ross quickly had begun to relate to the established assembly constituency while still in Scotland. Each month it advertised works by Open and Exclusive Brethren writers, available from Ross's book depot. Among its authors were Caldwell, William Lincoln, and Henry Groves. An article introduced three movements evidently seen as fellow travellers, the 'Radicals' of Northern Scotland (evangelical Presbyterian lay seceders), the early Brethren associated with A. N. Groves, and the 'Pen Folk' of Paisley (independents who met in the type of passageway

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[36] The journal in which his reminiscences were published, *Green Pastures*, was that of the Vernalite section of the Churches of God, which in turn had seceded from its section commonly known as 'Needed Truth', itself a secession from the Open Brethren.

[37] Grass, *Gathering to His Name*, 186–94.

[38] McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 200–6.

[39] The early copies of the journal were not available to researchers until they were discovered by John Dempster in a bound volume in the possession of the late David Graham of Kilmarnock. Dempster was researching Scottish Brethren publishers and his work was published as 'Aspects of Brethren Publishing Enterprise in Late Nineteenth-Century Scotland', *Publishing History*, 20 (1986), 61–101. The volume was then gifted to Neil Dickson, who deposited it in the Christian Brethren Archive in 2005 after which it became more widely available.

known in Scotland as a 'pend').[40] An extract from the report on the 1851 Census of Religious Worship in England and Wales appeared under the title 'Who are the Brethren? And what are their Doctrines?'[41] The magazine carried news from Brethren assemblies such as Penrith and Greenock,[42] and advertised the regional Believers' Meetings at Belfast and Glasgow.[43] A report of the first Aberdeen Conference for believers in 1873 names a number of Brethren as speakers, including R. T. Hopkins, J. A. Boswell, and J. R. Caldwell, as well as George Adam, who had recently passed into assemblies as part of the movement in the North-East.[44] Such meetings were gathering points for many in assemblies and provided platforms for the promulgation of teaching which helped to give the movement theological coherence. It is true, that as well as Brethren authors, Ross included articles and advertised books by others involved in the revival network such as W. P. Mackay, the Scots-born English Presbyterian minister. Separation from denominations did not entail rejection of all that was written by men (and women) who were still in them. If Ross began independently of Brethren, he evidently recognized them as meeting on the same scriptural lines as he did. The Brethren preoccupations that McLaren analyses among the Scottish and Irish evangelists in North America had been learned before emigration.[45]

4. Distancing themselves from Brethren came later, as part of the *Needed Truth* rejection of open communion from the late 1870s. It was the end result of this process which has generally been seen to forfeit the adjective in 'Open Brethren'.[46] In 1900, J. A. Boswell, while

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[40] *NEI*, 2 (1873), 107–11. The article was marked 'To be continued', but it never was.

[41] Ibid. 156–7.

[42] Ibid. 95; *NEI*, 3 (1874), 191.

[43] *NEI*, 3 (1874), 63.

[44] *NEI*, 2 (1873), 113.

[45] McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 205.

[46] Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church: Brethren and Evangelicals in Twentieth-Century England* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 3–4; Elisabeth Wilson, '"Gathering and Receiving": A Reassessment of the Role of Rice Thomas Hopkins in

asserting the independent origin of the North-East assemblies, noted that even J. N. Darby had admitted that they could not be regarded as associated with the evils of Bethesda in the same way as assemblies further south. Sadly, Boswell opined, that independence had not been maintained, and Open teachers from elsewhere had gradually gained entrance and influence among these gatherings.[47] A few years later, John Ritchie, who had been converted in 1871 and associated with the meetings formed as a result of the preaching of the NES , affirmed that these assemblies were first formed in ignorance of others existing elsewhere, and of the designation 'Brethren'. This, he considered, refuted 'the theory that all in every place are responsible for and identified with certain doctrines and doings, which are said to have existed thirty years before there was an assembly of believers gathered in the Lord's name in the north of Scotland'.[48] Ritchie is here propounding a curious notion of responsibility. If one identifies with a particular community, one is also identifying with its history, beliefs, and traditions, although there may be regrets over some aspects of its past. Many are familiar with this ambivalence in belonging to a nation. As has been seen, the leaders of the NES did identify with the Open Brethren in Glasgow and had preaching exchanges, while deliberately rejecting the alternative of the Exclusive Brethren because of the demand for disfellowshipping Müller, who was, it has recently been convincingly argued, the *de facto* founder of Open Brethrenism.[49] In a formative period for the North-East assemblies in 1871–2, undoubtedly, they identified with Open Brethren. It was only in the later 1870s that some distance became evident.

The first public indication of a more restrictive ecclesiology being developed was at a conference in Sheffield in Yorkshire in 1873,

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Australia', in Neil Dickson and T. J. Marinello (eds.), *Brethren and the Church* (Glasgow: BAHN, 2021), 76–7.

47 *Needed Truth*, 12 (1900), 74–5.

48 Ritchie, 'Revival Times', 169; Ritchie had earlier made this claim in a review pamphlet: *John Ritchie, 'The Way, Which They Call Heresy': Remarks on Mr. W. Blair Neatby's Book, 'A History of the Plymouth Brethren'* (Kilmarnock: John Ritchie, [1901]).

49 Summerton, *'I thanked the Lord'*, 32-3.

followed by some questions and answers in 1876 from J. A. Boswell in the *Northern Witness*, by now edited by Caldwell.[50] The chain of transmission of the restrictive ecclesiology was described in a letter of *c*.1926 from Alexander Marshall, who had evangelized in both Britain and (from 1879) in North America, to his fellow evangelist in North-East Scotland Peter Bruce. Marshall wrote: 'The distinction made first by "R. T. H[opkins]." then by "A. J. H[oliday]." then by "J. R. C[aldwell].", & then taught by "J[ohn]. R[itchie]." &c. &c. that believers in ——— may be in the body of Christ & not in the local assembly is a mistake. Col. Beers learned the theory from Donald Munro & thus the theory spread!'[51] Marshall's sentence requires some explication. Key to Marshall's chain of transmission is Alfred James Holiday from Bradford in Yorkshire. He was a founding editor of *Needed Truth*, which spread more restrictive ecclesiological views, although at the Churches of God secession, which was also known by the magazine's title, he remained with the Open Brethren,[52] as did John Ritchie, although he too had been expected to be a leader in the secession.[53] After a flirtation with the new views on church fellowship, both Marshall and Caldwell, who were initially in Glasgow assemblies, had returned to their earlier views on an open reception to the Lord's table in individual assemblies. These views held that no distinction can be made between a believer who is in the body of Christ and those to be received to the Lord's table. Common life in Christ is the entitlement to the Lord's supper.[54] The more restrictive view, whose origin Marshall attributes to Rice Thomas Hopkins from

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[50] Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 161-2.

[51] Alexander Marshall to P. F. Bruce, 12 October [1926/7], Christian Brethren Archive, University of Manchester Library, CBA 2409, There is a holograph note on the letter by Bruce's son, F. F. Bruce, 'From Alexander Marshall to P F Bruce — 1926 or 27 I reckon (FFB)'.

[52] 'Alfred James Holiday', in J. J. Park, *The Churches of God: Their Origin and Development in the 20th Century* (Sheffield: Hayes Press, [1966]), 88.

[53] HyP[ickering]., 'Death of a Contemporary [John Ritchie]', *The Witness*, 60 (1930), 92.

[54] See Alexander Marshall, *"Holding Fast the Faithful Word": Or Whither Are We Drifting?* (Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, [1908]).

Birkenhead in Cheshire, insisted that these were different modes and times of reception.[55] Crucial, according to Marshall, for the spread of the more restrictive views to North America was the acceptance of them by Donald Munro, who had evangelized in northern Scotland alongside Hopkins and was among the first of the evangelists from North-East Scotland to emigrate. Munro, according to Marshall, had in turn influenced the Irishman William Beers, a retired British army infantry colonel, who had combined farming with evangelism for a while in Arkansas before, about the turn of the nineteenth century, becoming an evangelist for some twenty years in Toronto.[56] As Marshall had himself been closely involved in the spread both of the Brethren and of more restricted views in the same area of Canada, his claim that the theory which justified ecclesial isolation in North America had originated earlier in England must be taken seriously. The new theory became so widely accepted in North America that, as McLaren points out, when Charles Ross asserted in 1910 'that believers in the denominations were part of God's true church as much as those in the assemblies', he was accused of introducing novel doctrines. On the contrary, Ross, jr., maintained, he had not departed from his father's doctrine.[57]

As Marshall's genealogy makes clear, however, the 'rigidity' that McLaren identifies in early North American Open Brethren, which he felt made them closer to Exclusivism, first appeared throughout British Open Brethren, although it did not affect all. It emerged from the mid-1870s onwards, just at the point when the evangelists began emigrating to North America, and it gained considerable popularity, especially in Scotland, the north of England, and Ulster.[58] McLaren concludes that the evidence he had accumulated shows that North American Brethren 'were different from, and not historically related to, those called Open

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[55] For Hopkins, see Wilson, '"Gathering and Receiving"', 63–78.

[56] For Beers, see J. G. Hutchinson (comp.), *Whose Praise is in the Gospel: A Record of One Hundred and Nine Irish Evangelists* (Glasgow: Gospel Tract Publications, 2002), 32–5. Beers is omitted from McLaren's discussion of Irish Brethren evangelists.

[57] McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 205.

[58] For this strain of Brethren in Britain, see Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 142–83.

Brethren in England'.[59] But *pace* McLaren, this 'rigidity' was present from the later 1870s in a strain of indigenous British Open Brethren throughout the United Kingdom, England included, and, as we have argued, made the North American assemblies, via the 'Revival evangelists', historically related to them.[60] As Eric Hobsbawm has noted, new traditions are invented in response to novel situations and appeal to their own past.[61] The Open Brethren had found themselves facing a new situation from the 1860s onwards due to the greatly increased growth of their movement and the consequent need to integrate into their assemblies new converts and Christians from other churches. Some Brethren revivalists, who felt many existing churches were largely populated by the unconverted, looked for increased safeguards against admitting new members in too lax a manner and abhorred 'looser' practices that were often divergent from the earlier Calvinist evangelicalism and that were associated with the campaigns of D. L. Moody. There was a corresponding shift from the earlier symbolic significance of the Lord's table to it being regarded, in McLaren's phrase, as 'a symbol of purity and not of unity'.[62] An increased separatism was undoubtedly reinforced, too, by anti-Brethren polemics issuing from existing churches and their ministers in Ireland and Scotland.[63]

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[59] McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 207. McLaren clearly means to specify the part of Britain that was historically and geographically England as his use of 'Scotland and Ireland' in the next sentence makes clear. His distinction is between English 'Open Brethren' and Scottish and Irish 'Revival Brethren'.

[60] For how the varieties of Open Brethren related to each other in Britain through a worked example, see Neil T. R. Dickson, 'Revival and the Limits of Cooperation: Brethren Origins in Orkney in the 1860s', in idem and Tim Grass (eds.), *The Growth of the Brethren Movement: National and International experiences. Essays in Honour of Harold Rowdon* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 80–91.

[61] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in idem and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

[62] McLaren, 'Triple Tradition', *Emmaus Journal*, 4 (1995), 205.

[63] Crawford Gribben, '"The worst sect a Christian man can meet": Opposition to the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and Scotland, 1859–1900', *Scottish Studies Review*, 3 (2002), 34–53.

These changes in attitude and practices were a revolt against the openness of communion and association with fellow evangelicals of Groves and Müller in England and those influenced by them, such as the Glasgow Brethren Alexander Stewart, J. R. Caldwell, and Alexander Marshall,[64] or the early Irish figures J. G. M'Vicker and David Rea.[65] As Charles Ross was to discover, the new symbolic understanding of reception to the Lord's table had become invariable. The past that was relevant for those such as Ritchie and Boswell was that of North-East Scotland, not the earlier one associated with the geographically remote Dublin-Plymouth-Bristol. Nevertheless, it was related to that earlier past through several doctrinal strands, and, as we have seen, through the initial relations in Scotland between the North-East and Glasgow. The new teaching that Marshall had traced in his letter to Peter Bruce had been inserted into the existing historiography of the movement but had also supplanted it by postulating a new past with an origin in the forces contained within revivalism .[66]

The use of McLaren's thesis by more recent writers

On the one hand is William W. Conard's *Family Matters* (1992), a popular presentation of Open Brethren history, emanating from Interest Ministries. This began as two series of historical articles in *Interest* during the late 1980s and acknowledges a significant debt to McLaren's thesis and earlier presentations by him. Nevertheless, Conard's extensive coverage of the movement's pre-1870 British history (nine out of fourteen chapters, plus briefer comments elsewhere) indicates that he sees this as part of the contemporary North American movement's story. And whilst he recounts Donald Ross's emergence as a Brethren evangelist and writer, and mentions the independent origins of the meetings associated with Ross in North-

64 John Hawthorn, *Alexander Marshall: Evangelist, Author, Pioneer* (Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, [1929]), 126–32, 137–41.

65 [Editors of *Echoes of Service*], *Selected Letters with Brief Memoir of J. G. M'Vicker* (London: "Echoes of Service", [1902]), 194-5; Tom Rea (comp.), *The Life and Labours of David Rea, Evangelist Largely Written from His Own MSS* (Belfast: John Adams, 1917), 210.

66 Cf. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', 2.

East Scotland, Conard indicates that they were quickly accepted by other Open Brethren elsewhere.[67] More significantly, his diagnosis of the ills of the contemporary movement and prescription for its cure appeals to examples from the early days of Chapman, Groves, Craik, and Müller.[68] Clearly Conard regards the modern movement as part of the same family as these men. Where he draws more deeply on McLaren's thinking is in his discussion of events associated with the adoption of an Open position by many Grant Brethren.[69]

A similar breadth of approach is evident in Robert H. Baylis, *My People: The History of those Christians sometimes called Plymouth Brethren* (1995, 2nd ed. 1997). Three times the length of Conard's sketch, Baylis also gives considerable space to the movement's early British history. When it comes to the Revival evangelists, he also accepts McLaren's argument that the assemblies associated with them emerged independently of those elsewhere, though his main sources are the standard biographies of Ross by his son and of Donald Munro by John Ritchie.[70] Like Conard, however, his standpoint is that of a relatively 'open' brother.

On the other hand, writers from the conservative 'Gospel Hall' wing of the North American movement have used McLaren's argument to justify their standing apart from assemblies of a more open outlook, often dubbed the 'Bible Chapels'. McLaren's assertion that the Revival Brethren evangelists developed in Britain independently of what had happened earlier in Dublin, Plymouth, and Bristol is congenial to Gospel Hall writers who wish to regard the movement as unique, *sui generis*. As an example, we cite the work of the Canadian Norman W. Crawford, editor of the 'Gospel Hall' magazine *Truth and Tidings*, which circulates among conservative assemblies in North America and Northern Ireland, and author of (among other titles) the

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[67] William W. Conard, *Family Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Interest Ministries, 1992), 102.

[68] Ibid. 125–36.

[69] Ibid. 104–13.

[70] Robert H. Baylis, *My People: The History of those Christians sometimes called Plymouth Brethren* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1995, 2nd ed. 1997; repr. Port Colborne, ON: Gospel Folio Press, 2006), chap. 7.

widely read *Gathering unto His Name* (1985) and *Assembly Truth* (a distillation of the earlier book with some additional historical material, which appeared in 1994).[71] Crawford does not cite his sources in the latter work, but the echoes of McLaren's main thesis are very clear. His outline of Brethren history begins with the various groups which appeared in the 1820s, stressing that 'One of the most powerful evidences that this was a work of God is that these believers were unaware of each other. [*sic*]'[72] Beginning with this preconceived theory of providence, he goes in search of evidence to support it. He was at pains to cut the link between those early groups and the assemblies among whom he moved: 'our heritage as assemblies in North America cannot be traced back to Dublin, or Plymouth, nor to the great men whose names are linked with John Nelson Darby. Our story has a different origin'.[73] Improbably, he finds examples of spontaneous growth in 'the south of England, Ireland, Orkney Islands, Br. Guiana, New York City, USA[,] and Rangoon India [*sic*]'.[74] This list re-writes the transmission of Brethren and ignores the previous decades of careful scholarship. Outlining the development of the movement associated with Donald Ross, he again stresses their ignorance of similar gatherings and teachings elsewhere,[75] a separation which we may be meant to see as paralleling the separation from denominations practised by the Scottish converts. Following McLaren's thesis closely, Crawford asserts that the assemblies resulting from the labours of the Scottish and Irish evangelists 'have no historical link to either the open or exclusive brethren [*sic*]

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71 See Jackson, MI, oversight, 'Tributes: Norman Crawford—A Mighty Prince Among Us', *Truth and Tidings*, 68/11 (November 2017), https://truthandtidings.com/2017/11/tributes-norman-crawford-a-mighty-prince-among-us/.

72 Norman Crawford, *Assembly Truth* (Glasgow: Gospel Tract Publications, 1994), 29.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid. Rangoon was part of India in the period the writer is evidently referring to.

75 Ibid. 32.

assemblies', although many believers from assemblies in Britain and Europe have been received into assemblies in North America.[76]

But Crawford's line of argument is not uniformly held among conservative Brethren. David Boyd, in *A History of Some Christian Assemblies in Ireland*, which he completed from material left by Wynnfield Hooke, saw a line of continuity between the earliest gatherings and those about which he and Hooke had written. Justifying the alphabetical rather than chronological arrangement of assemblies adopted in the book, he commented that 'really the history should start with "D" for Dublin and "K" for Kells and other locations of marked importance'.[77] The section on Dublin offers extensive coverage of the early decades of the Brethren movement, and the section on the assembly at Kells outlines the events of 1859 and also suggests that a gathering known to have existed locally in 1807 was along similar lines, a gathering which has also been described by D. H. Akenson as 'pre-Brethren'.[78] To say nothing more, Boyd's approach at least places a question-mark against Crawford's argument.

What are we to make of the differing approaches of Conard and Crawford? Whatever the historical links between the North-East Scots of the 1870s and earlier English and Irish Brethren, and they do not materially affect the thesis that the origins of Ross's gatherings were

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[76] Ibid. 33.

[77] Wynnfield Hooke and David Boyd, *A History of some Christian Assemblies in Northern Ireland: New Testament Truths Practised* (Glasgow: Gospel Tract Publications, 2014), 8-9. Kells was where the 1859 revival began in Northern Ireland.

[78] Ibid. 165–74, 210; Donald Harman Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time: Irish Evangelicals in the Age of Daniel O'Connell* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 291–5. Hooke and Boyd knew of the 1807 church from the writings of James Buchanan (1772–1851). His church at Camowen Green is one of those included in *Letters concerning their Principles and Order*, a work reprinted by Pickering & Inglis in 1889 and seen by some as evidence of proto-Brethren assemblies in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and North America. For James Buchanan and his relation to churches contemporary with him, see the passage cited from Akenson. For a discussion of the congregations included in the *Letters*, see Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 9 n.43; Grass, *Gathering to His Name*, 20-1; James I. Fazio, 'The Elements and Ordinances of Proto-Brethren Assemblies, 1818–20', in Neil Dickson and T. J. Marinello (eds.), *Brethren and the Church* (Glasgow: BAHN, 2020), 105–15.

independent of direct contact with Brethren work elsewhere, it is clear that certain magazines such as *The* (*Northern*) *Witness* and hymnals such as *The Believer's Hymnbook* quickly bridged the divide, between those adhering to Groves's view of reception to the Lord's table and those favouring that of Hopkins, by circulating on both sides in Britain, as well as influencing assemblies in North America. *Echoes of Service* carried reports of the work of the Scottish and Irish evangelists, and listed believers commended from North American assemblies. Key leaders moved between the two countries, such as Alexander Marshall. Whilst North American assemblies may not have looked to the leaders at Dublin, Plymouth, Bristol, or Bath as their spiritual parents, their Scottish forebears clearly came to regard themselves as part of the extended family that is Open Brethren, and to do so before their evangelists became influential in North America. Conard appears more willing to acknowledge this than Crawford.

The problem arises when it is asserted that 'early Brethren are nothing to do with us and we are not bound to consider their opinions', because, as the analysis above demonstrates, the earlier and later movements *are* related, even if indirectly. To be persuasive, any history of the Open Brethren must account for the transmission both of variations created by historical exigencies and of crucial features inherited from the original pioneers in the Dublin-Plymouth-Bristol axis. As some central features had to be preserved for it to be recognisably the same movement, the question of their transmission is key. From a practical standpoint, more recent research has shown there are problems with McLaren's argument. McLaren is correct that the 'Revival evangelists' introduced a more restrictive position on reception to the Lord's table. He is on less certain ground when considering the transmission of ecclesiology and theology among those acknowledged as Open Brethren. F. F. Bruce in his brief summary of Brethren origins in North-East Scotland is more accurate when he wrote of the local movement's historical development that 'it had come to be associated (from the early 1870s) with the Brethren movement'.[79] Bruce was writing from his own family's experience.

[79] Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 2.

He had married a granddaughter of John Davidson, the Aberdeenshire farmer who had been an associate of the Revival Evangelists from the 1860s onwards and had baptised Donald Ross. When Bruce's future father-in-law had been born in 1882 (only some ten years after the formation of the Aberdeenshire assemblies), he had been named Anthony Bellett Davidson, to commemorate Anthony Norris Groves and John Gifford Bellett, which, wrote Bruce, 'bore witness to his parents' appreciation of Brethren history'.[80]

There are greater difficulties, however, with the uses to which McLaren's thesis can be put—using his thesis in the service of an ecclesial position which McLaren himself would not accept. But to comment extensively on this would take us beyond our remit as historians. Our concern here is with the accuracy or otherwise of what has become a tradition of historical interpretation.

[80] Ibid., 43. We are grateful to Prof. Mark Stevenson for drawing our attention to Bruce's point.