

THE CHRISTIAN BRETHREN ARCHIVE

OUTLINE

In what follows, I would like to introduce you to the Christian Brethren Archive.

This is how I intend to proceed:

- ❑ An introduction to the Brethren
 - ❑ An outline of the kind of things we collect
 - ❑ Issues and problems related to the Archive
 - ❑ I would like to finish with a few brief comments on the future of the Archive
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INTRODUCTION TO THE BRETHREN

Who are the Christian Brethren?

I would describe them as fundamentalist evangelical Christians, using the word fundamentalist in its original 1920s sense of returning to the fundamentals of belief.

They are better known as the Plymouth Brethren, but the important point is that the titles are titles given by outsiders. By and large – and there are exceptions (especially, I think in America) – Brethren do not like titles, and many individuals within the Brethren tradition if asked, would deny that they were members of the Christian Brethren or the Plymouth Brethren. The view is that such titles suggest a denomination, and this is something they would deny. They see themselves returning to an earlier New Testament tradition before denominations developed.

The Brethren began life in Dublin in the 1820s. A group of individuals, most of them Anglican clergymen met at one of their houses to discuss biblical themes and pray together. Over time, they came to see these little gatherings as more meaningful than the formal acts of worship they attended on Sundays. The turning point was when they broke bread together on a Sunday, adopting their own version of the Eucharist outside of the formal boundaries of the Anglican Church.

Over time these individuals left Dublin and began to spread their ideas in England, setting up their own congregations, particularly in the south west where they caught on, and particularly around Plymouth – hence Plymouth Brethren.

The Brethren split in 1848. I don't have time to go into details of the split here. Although there were many similarities between the two groups, the major difference over time was

that the Open Brethren maintained independent autonomous congregations, where as the Exclusives established themselves as interconnected communities. Within the Exclusives, particular individuals were adopted as leaders and guides. Modern historians tend to call them ‘connectional brethren’ for this reason – they maintained formal connections between congregations. The Exclusives were initially dominated by an important individual – John Nelson Darby. Over time the Exclusives split further, and there are a variety of subdivisions still in existence. Most Brethren in the world today come from the open tradition.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THE BRETHREN?

I will focus on the Open Brethren here, though much of what I say about ecclesiology and doctrine could apply to both

ECCLESIOLOGY

Brethren worship is very informal. They believe strongly in the priesthood of all believers, so there is no formal leader, and on the surface anyone can lead the service (note that for much of the Brethren’s history this meant any male). The exception to this informality is what they refer to as the Breaking of Bread, which is at the heart of the Sunday meeting. For administrative duties, such as maintaining buildings and paying bills, Elders are chosen by the congregation.

DOCTRINE

The Brethren are usually associated with what is often referred to as premillennial dispensationalism. Despite the split with Darby, the ideas he developed and popularised were adopted by most Brethren. They adopted a dispensational interpretation of the Bible, by which the Bible is divided into a series of dispensations or epochs, divided by pivotal events. In each dispensation the relationship between God and mankind is transformed.

There is also a focus on eschatology, with the expected imminent return of Christ, which would be accompanied by the pre-milenial rapture of Christians.

DIVERSITY

This is where I disown everything I have said so far! The Brethren movement is diverse and autonomous, and as such any attempt at generalisation can be knocked down the moment it is attempted. Because there is no formal organisation and no formal leadership, outside of the Exclusives, there is no one to lay down the law as to what goes and what doesn’t, no one to say what is acceptable and what isn’t, and no one to excommunicate dissenters. Also change occurs over time. Many within the Brethren tradition in this country do not accept a dispensational approach to the Bible for instance. Also, many assemblies, responding to declining numbers in the eighties acknowledged the need for full timers to provide leadership and coherence. Often assemblies with roots in the Brethren tradition are indistinguishable from other local evangelical churches.

THE COLLECTION

I would now like to introduce you to the collection. It is made up of:

- Printed Books
- Periodicals
- Pamphlets/Tracts etc.
- Archival materials

I would like to say something briefly about each of these.

PRINTED BOOKS

The first history the Brethren was entitled *Chief Men Among the Brethren*. I think the title is apposite, and it represents the first focus of the collection: the collected works of prominent Brethren leaders (most of whom it is true were men). We collect histories of the Brethren such as Roy Coad's *History of the Brethren Movement* and the recently published *Gathering to his Name* by Tim Grass. We collect biographies of prominent Brethren, representative examples of which would be R.S. Latimer on Dr. Baedeker, and Roy Coad's life of Sir John Laing the founder of the Laing construction company and the benefactor of many Brethren related projects.

A good example of the distinctiveness of the collection is Maurice Millard's *The Time of Their Life*. This is a beautifully written family history written by someone brought up in a Brethren family. It was self-published, and the author sent a copy to the Archive. It is not something you would find in a typical library, and the British Library does not have a copy. Other less formal biographies and autobiographies, produced on word processors and spiral bound, make their way into the collection. Similarly, home made chapel centenaries produced for chapel members, find their way into the collection.

Theses on Brethren related topics are begged, borrowed or bought for the Archive. As an archivist, I make a point of befriending research students and suggesting that they donate copies of their work to the Archive on completion. In fact we collect any kind of printed matter from scholarly works and novels, to sermons and newspaper stories if they are on themes related to the Brethren or to life in the Brethren community.

PERIODICALS

We collect periodicals from all of the various branches and divisions within the Brethren movement. The main focus is on English language materials, but we have magazines and journals from all over the world. Our oldest journal is *The Christian Witness* from the 1830s, we have unique runs of many journals. We also collect current periodicals such as *Partnership Perspectives* and *Precious Seed*, and missionary magazines such as *Christian Service Bulletin* and *Echoes of Service*. Although less well represented than open brethren material, we have journals related to the connectional or 'exclusive' brethren, including *Mutual Comfort* and *Scripture Truth*. We also take the *Brethren Archivist's and Historians Network Review*, which is the main repository of articles and reviews on the history of the Brethren movement.

PAMPHLETS/TRACTS ETC.

We collect all manner of pamphlets and tracts relating to the brethren movement, including sermons, biblical commentary and literature relating to disputes and divisions among Brethren.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Finally, we collect archival materials relating to the Brethren. This includes the records of individual assemblies, and material related to the lives of prominent Brethren individuals. Two of the most used collections are the so-called 'Fry Manuscript' related to the life of Benjamin wills Newton, and the 'Sibthorpe Collection' which has recently been renamed 'The Papers of John Nelson Darby'. The dispute between these two individuals was important in the formative years of the movement. Darby's work had repercussions well beyond the confines of the Brethren, and he was an important influence on the shaping of modern day American fundamentalist Christianity.

USAGE

I would not describe the Archive as busy, but we do have a number of regular users. Tim Grass recently published a thorough history of the Brethren, *Gathering to his Name*, based on material in the collection. Crawford Gribben and Timothy Stunt recently produced an edited volume of essays based on the work of researchers. Roger Shuff has published a study of twentieth century Brethren, and in the past year two PhD students successfully completed theses on Brethren related themes, and another has commenced work on a thesis connected with the collection.

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

FUNDING

The major problem for the archive is that of funding. The archivist's salary is provided by a Brethren related charitable trust, with the accommodation and resources for day-to-day running provided by the John Rylands University Library. The initial funding was provided for three years, and this has been renewed for a further three year period. However the long term future of the funding is far from certain. A number of other charitable trusts have been approached, so far without success, but we continue to search for funding.

THE NATURE OF THE BRETHERN

The nature of the Brethren themselves poses problems for the Archive. Open Brethren assemblies are autonomous and independent. There is limited contact between assemblies and no centralisation or organisation at national or regional level. Most contact is personal and informal. This creates enormous difficulties for the collection of archival materials. Material from individual congregations is under-represented at the Archive. When I first became the archivist responsible for the collection, I discovered a list of addresses of individual assemblies and attempted a mail-shot to multiple congregations. Within a week, the envelopes were returned, most of them marked as unavailable by the Post Office. Most chapels did not have post boxes or did not exist as formal postal addresses. I discovered that the only way to contact most assemblies was through personal contact with elders or leaders, and of course this was only possible if one knew their names and addresses. Even more difficult is contact with most 'Exclusive' assemblies, who by definition tend to keep themselves separate from 'the world', and are even more difficult to build up contacts with.

WORKLOAD/CATALOGUE BACKLOG

A major problem confronting the Archive is the fact that it is that it is manned on a part-time basis by one individual. The day-to-day running of the Archive, the correspondence and dealing with reader enquires takes up a disproportionate amount of time, leaving limited time for cataloguing the ever expanding collection. The cataloguing of the most well used collections has been prioritized, and the papers of John Nelson Darby are now available online, but progress is necessarily slow.

MANAGING CHANGE

The coming years are a time of important changes at the John Rylands Universtiy Library where the collection is based. In recent years the CBA has had access to a fully staffed reading room set up in the Library to deal with the variety of manuscript and archive collections held by the Rylands. In the near future this is to be relocated to another site, but the CBA is to remain in its present home. New methods and procedures will need to be implemented in order to allow readers to access the collection, but it is unlikely that additional staff will be provided to help, leaving the Archivist with addition duties to perform. Having said this, a new Archive and Record Centre is to be opened in the near future at the Library's main site, and this could provide a means of resolving these problems.

THE FUTURE

At present, the long term future of the Christian Brethren Archive is unclear. The Archive continues to collect and accumulate Brethren related materials, and makes them available to readers. The mammoth job of sorting and cataloguing the materials continues, albeit slowly. The opening of the new Archives and Records Centre at the university library in the near future holds out promise, but much will depend on whether support staff will be available to help with the day-to-day activities of supervising readers and dealing with enquiries. The major issue is funding: in the short-term, this is guaranteed, but much depends on the continuation of funding by outside bodies.