IRVINGITE PENTECOSTALISM AND THE EARLY BRETHREN

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(Quotations in this article from Dr. John Hill’s diary are reproduced by kind permission of the Bodleian Library)

Irvingism like the Brethren movement was the product of a widespread quest for purity within the Church and for spiritual revival among Christians. There were spiritual revivals in French speaking Switzerland in the first quarter of the 19th century, there was a Roman Catholic revival at Carlshuld, north of Vienna in 1827 and 1828, and there had also been a deeply spiritual movement in Russia under the influence of the Director of St. Peter’s Theological College, in 1820. Irvingism and the Brethren movement were similar to these movements in their origins. Greatly dissatisfied with contemporary Christianity, and awaiting the second coming with expectancy, there were many people with a real spiritual experience of God and his truth in Christ.

One can discern three particular strands in their outlook and each of these is very apparent in the teaching of Irvingites and Brethren alike. First, separation from the world. Second, belief in the imminent return of our Lord. Third, a high doctrine of the authority of the Church under the government and direction of the Holy Spirit rather than human forms.

The world for these people took a variety of forms, but in the final analysis, it was represented by anything that could tempt the believer to esteem the material and visible world more highly than unseen spiritual reality. Hence the comforts derived from luxuries, carpets, insurance societies and entertainment could be worldly. (Lord Congleton had
bare wooden floorboards in his house. Similarly human systems and institutions like missionary societies, an established Church ruled by the state, and man-made doctrinal articles could be worldly. Knowledge and happiness could, unless centred upon Christ, be worldly. Thus Newman recalled that Darby’s attitude had been: ‘What would it avail even to become a second La Place after thirty years’ study, if in five and thirty years the Lord descended from heaven, snatched up all his saints to meet him, and burned to ashes all the works of the earth?’2 Likewise with regard to the enjoyment of the natural beauty of the earth, Groves in his Diary was very critical: ‘The mere physical beauty or barrenness of any country have little interest to my own mind . . . Why spend our thoughts and praises on that which . . . being under the curse is to be burnt up; instead of upon the beauties of Christ and of His world, moral and spiritual, which shall endure for ever?’3 This is an attitude common in the Irvingite writings of men like Wolff and Drummond.4

Stemming from this strong separatism there is the sense of expectancy with regard to the second coming. It is indicated in the attitudes of Darby and Groves quoted above. In many ways it is perhaps the source of the separatism rather than vice-versa. Irvingism traces its rise to the prophetic conferences at Drummond’s home at Albury from 1826-1830.5 Prophetical studies exercised a peculiar fascination over these men and became the main topic of discussion at Powerscourt when Brethren met there in conference. The idea of a secret rapture was taken over by Irving and his followers and by Darby and many of the Brethren. It is uncertain who taught it first, but both accepted it. The imminence of the second coming is the key note of The Morning Watch, (Irving’s prophetic magazine) as also of much Brethren writing.

Seeking to be ready and answerable to Christ alone in a spiritually pure and uncompromised church, naturally led these people to investigate the rôle of the Spirit in the Church. In the face of a worldly church men sought a Church ruled by the Spirit. In this respect the basic attitude of Irvingites and Brethren were similar though differing in a matter of degree. The liberty of the Spirit was found by Brethren in their dispensing with a liturgy and an ordained ministry. One of Darby’s earliest tracts was entitled: ‘The notion of a clergyman dispensationally the sin against the Holy Ghost’.6 Irvingites went further. They believed that Christians should expect the miraculous gifts of the Spirit that had been exercised by the early Church. When the outbreak of tongues was reported from Row to the Albury circle of which Irving had become the leader, the assumption even before the phenomenon was investigated was that such gifts were to be expected and prayed for, and that their absence was a sign of the Church’s unspiritual state.

Having established some distinct resemblances between the Irvingite movement and that of the Brethren, it seems right to enquire whether there were in fact historic links between the movements.

The only mention of Irving in Neatby’s History of the Plymouth Brethren occurs in his discussion of the Powerscourt conferences.7 One
of those who attended the Albury discussions was Lady Powerscourt who soon started similar meetings in her own home in Ireland. Irving who was frequently at Albury, visited Powerscourt in autumn 1830,\(^7\) and as late as 1838 according to J. Butler Stoney there were Irvingites at the conferences there.\(^8\) The Rev. Peter Roe noted in his diary for Sept. 29th, 1832, after visiting Powerscourt House for one of the conferences, that he found the meeting rather unprofitable. ‘The duty of seeking for miraculous gifts was strongly insisted upon’.\(^8a\) The great emphasis on the imminence of the second coming and the rôle of the Holy Spirit is very apparent in the writings of Lady Powerscourt herself. For example her expectancy of suffering and trial as the prelude to the end: ‘Does it not seem that the world is breaking up? ... How we should be bespeaking strength for the day of trial. I cannot help thinking, we also shall have trial though not to partake in the despair and desolation of the last end’.\(^9\) Or her lament at the state of the professing church: ‘The transcript of the Spirit though executed with exquisite nicety, is scarcely perceptible through the thick veil of flesh that covers it. ... Whether we look at the want of his power in his church or of the fruit of his Spirit in his members, still are we inclined to ask, Has the Spirit of the Lord fainted? Is he exhausted? Where is he?’\(^10\) It is hardly surprising that Professor G. T. Stokes commented that Lady Powerscourt’s letters ‘show how much of the spirit of the ancient Montanists was in the whole [brethren] movement. Her letters read in many places like the writings of Tertullian after he had joined that sect’.\(^11\) Montanist is indeed the adjective truly applicable to both of the movements that we are considering. Montanism was strongly millennial in its expectation, uncompromisingly separatist, and believed in the rule of the Holy Spirit rather than the worldly institutions of men.

Are there, however, further links, apart from the Albury-Powerscourt connection? There are a number of pieces of evidence coming from a wide field. Though sometimes fragmentary, they do point to an obvious conclusion when taken as a whole. The first example that we shall consider, is in fact, much later than the others.

We referred earlier to the revival in French speaking Switzerland. This largely centred upon Geneva and the Canton de Vaud. The revival was separatist and broke away from the Established Church though it remained ecclesiastically very Presbyterian in outlook. Darby came to Switzerland in 1838 and to Geneva in 1839.\(^12\) He was well received by the pastors of one of the separatist churches, l’ Eglise de la Pélisserie and his ministerial abilities soon proved to be of great assistance to them.

In 1835, however, before Darby’s arrival, missionaries of Irvingism had begun to be active in Geneva. Drummond had taken part in the earlier revival and another Irvingite, Méjanel, began to exercise great influence. There was no large Irvingite community but their ideas were naturally well received in a separatist church striving after the apostolic ideal. In the Pélisserie Church, this influence was noticeably felt.

Contrary to the wishes of the pastors who were strongly presbyterian, the Church voted in 1837 to have a more democratic system of church
government. They arranged meetings for discussion without their pastors, and though Emile Guers their oldest pastor, protested strongly against such ‘réunions acéphales’, the congregational principle of government was established.

For his first year or two Darby seems to have accepted the church as it was. Then in 1840-1 he began to preach about the ruin of the Church and the impossibility of Church order as found in the New Testament. In March 1842, while Darby was away in Lausanne, one of his supporters, named O'Donnell, led sixty of the most ‘radical’ members of the church to secede without warning and to set up another assembly. The principles of exclusivism were being enunciated five years before the question of Bethesda had been heard of. The depleted Pelisserie Church went back to a presbyterian system and when Darby returned to Geneva he joined the new assembly. His rôle in the episode is not quite clear, but evidently Darbyism in Switzerland absorbed a large part of evangelicalism that was already prepared by Irvingites.

Such was the link in Geneva. This was, however, much later than the other instances that we shall note. In Ireland we have a clear instance much earlier than 1838. The Rev. Edward Hardman was an assistant curate at Westport and later at Ballincholla in Ireland. Around 1831 he came into contact with Darby and a number of strongly ascetical and other-worldly Christians who wanted him to separate from the Established Church. Hardman felt this would be schismatic and refused though strongly critical of his own communion. At the same time he was favourably disposed to Irvingite opinions about Spirit outpouring, gifts, Anti-Christ etc., as, according to the biographer of the Archbishop of Tuam, ‘some of these verbally coincided with the common language of the separating school above referred to’. (i.e. the Brethren.) Darby in a letter of August, 1833 wrote: ‘Hardman, a dear brother in the Lord, a clergyman, was here lately and he was speaking at large on the Seven Churches. I was not here, but this ground I hear he took ... It is an important consideration in the present state of things. It commends itself morally to one’s mind’. Soon after Hardman published a sermon on I Cor. 12-14 in which he took an Irvingite interpretation and also attacked the nature of the Establishment of his own church. He was suspended in 1834. Evidently the influence of Darby and Irvingites combined to make him take the course he did. Ultimately he came to London and joined with the (Irvingite) Catholic Apostolic Church, but clearly Darby and Bellett, and other Brethren like John Code and Charles Hargrove who also had left the Established Church, affected his opinions considerably.

The question however, is not simply one of establishing links of influence. We should also ask ourselves whether Brethren themselves were favourably disposed to the idea of exercising Pentecostal gifts. The answer differs from person to person. B. W. Newton seems never to have seriously sought such experiences though at one time he had an open mind about them as we shall see. Darby’s notion of guidance and control by the Holy Spirit does not seem to have been the impulsive one characteristic of Irvingism. According to Newton, however, one of the leading Plymouth
figures among the early Brethren did earnestly desire the gifts of tongues and healing. Captain Percy Hall whom Darby found preaching in the villages when he arrived in Plymouth, was evidently influenced by Irvingite views. He was one of the first to teach the immediate Advent with no intermediate events, which was Irving's position, and Newton recalled as an old man: 'I have heard Hall pray that the same gifts that were working in London might be given to them'. Hall was probably not alone in his wish. Another naval man, Captain W. G. Rhind, was evidently favourably disposed to Irvingism. In the later part of 1831, he and Rev. Nicholas Armstrong, one of the leading Irvingites, made a preaching tour of Guildford, Gloucester, Bristol, Carrington and Taunton, representing the Reformation Society of which Rhind was the Secretary. Trouble arose because Armstrong taught that the Church should expect miraculous gifts of the spirit, and he and Rhind defended themselves before the society's committee. First Armstrong and then Rhind severed their connection with the society and went their different ways. Rhind moved to Ireland where he joined with Christians at Powerscourt and soon adopted 'Brethren' principles. Evidently the Pentecostal aspects of Irvingism were not questioned by many Brethren, even though Irving's doctrinal views sometimes were.

In many ways Oxford was as important a seed-bed for the ideas of the early Brethren as Southern Ireland and Plymouth. Separatism became a great issue in the Evangelical party at Oxford in the early 1830s, and among those who separated from the Established Church were F. W. Newman, B. W. Newton, Henry Bulteel, and G. V. Wigram, all of whom were associated with the Brethren for a time. There was also great interest in prophetic matters. The influence of Lewis Way, Henry Drummond, William Marsh, Hugh McNeile and others of the Albury group was considerable and the Jews Conversion Society had an active auxiliary at Oxford with B. W. Newton as Secretary. In 1829 a former member of Exeter College, who supported Catholic emancipation, came up to Oxford to vote for Peel at the by-election. His name was Harris. He met Newton who was also at Exeter and was persuaded to attend a 'reading meeting' at the house of the Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall, Dr. John Hill. Here he heard William Marsh expounding Isaiah XI and according to Newton it was the occasion of his conversion. Harris was already a clergyman, with a perpetual curacy at Plymstock, but in 1832 he seceded and joined the Brethren and became the second editor of the Christian Witness when Henry Borlase died. It will thus be seen that more than one of the group that was soon to be associated with the Brethren was under the influence of the Albury group that gave rise to Irvingism.

In 1830 came the news that there had been an outbreak of unknown tongues at Row in the West of Scotland. The validity of these and other manifestations became a burning question. Some among the Albury group, like Drummond, Irving and Armstrong accepted them as genuine while others like Marsh and Sibthorp remained uncommitted. At Oxford there was great interest. Newton recalled many years later, that F. W. Newman received a letter about the occurrences and 'came triumphantly
to my study and gave me the letter to read—"There Newton, what can you say to that?" Newton apparently suggested that Darby who had come to Oxford and been introduced to Newton only three weeks before (towards the end of May) should go and investigate the phenomena. His account of Darby's report is interesting. 'He stayed a fortnight or three weeks and returned saying he had carefully watched everything, and one thing he noticed decidedly—that was that they denied the application of prophetic Scriptures and promises to Israel. In a moment that decided me. It convinced me unhesitatingly that the work was not of God, furnishing me with a clear proof'. In retrospect it seemed very clearcut to Newton, but at the time he had been quite open-minded.

Darby was not the only one to go and investigate. We have a letter written by Newton to G. V. Wigram, dated 31 July 1830. In it Newton was offering some advice to Wigram with reference to his investigations in Scotland. 'If it can be clearly proved that a language is really spoken by a person who never learned it—that a disease confirmed and known, has been cured without means—then I am bound to believe that the power is of God . . . My own mind remains just as when I left Oxford—undecided . . .' Evidently the possibility was by no means ruled out but rather it was to be expected that such gifts were genuine. It was only the rejection of prophetic truth as he understood it that turned Newton against the possibility.

Meanwhile the separatist movement at Oxford was growing and late in 1830 Bulteel, the curate of St. Ebbe's, told Newton of his intention to secede. He waited however until February 6th when he delivered a most dramatic sermon criticising the Established Church from the pulpit of the University Church. He then went on a tour of the West Country preaching in a number of nonconformist chapels for which his Bishop suspended him and withdrew his licence in August. Within two months Bulteel underwent a striking change in his views. The entry in John Hill's Diary for Oct. 18, 1831 will indicate its extent. 'Heard today that Miss Charvier who has been so long and hopelessly ill has been suddenly restored so as to be able to walk &c. without any sensation of pain or weakness. This result connected with the fact that Bulteel prayed earnestly with her on Saturday and she for herself on Sunday for such restoration. Bulteel has been spending a week with some of Mr. Irving's friends and is come back satisfied of the genuineness of the miracles of healing and tongues:—and convinced moreover of their doctrine of general redemption. For myself this does not appear to be the testimony of Scripture:—as to the facts I dare not form a judgment . . .' We do not know what Newton's judgment was at the time but later he attested that the cure was genuine as he had known the lady in question.

In March 1832 Bulteel performed a further cure and Hill thought it was again quite genuine. Other people thought the patient was imposing upon Bulteel. In the same month Newton left Oxford for good. He recalled later that he was deeply troubled by the whole atmosphere of Irvingism. 'I was myself at one of the meetings and I felt a supernatural power over me. I went home and couldn't read my Bible and I resolved
never to be again within that circle'.

It was evidently a time of extravagances. Newton said that Tiptaft told him of a group of Christians who at dinner toasted the Holy Spirit. He also recalled that a group in Bulteel's congregation once rushed out in the middle of the night to baptise each other in the river Isis. Little wonder that Newton who was a particularly orderly person, fled from Oxford. 'I left it entirely, I couldn't bear to view the state of affairs'.

Bulteel had come to set an inordinately high premium upon spontaneity. He 'used to minister without knowing what he would say till he was saying it'. No wonder Hill in his Diary was constrained to pray: 'Oh mercifully regulate the mind and heart of my dear friend Bulteel who is I fear the victim of some sad delusion'. Bulteel's Irvingite period lasted for about a year and a half. With great relief Hill recorded on May 18, 1833 that Bulteel had called and 'gave me an account of his gracious deliverance from the awful delusions concerning supernatural gifts... He spake too with horror of two of Irving's errors—concerning the human nature of Christ—and perfectability on earth'. According to Newton, Bulteel later said that his deliverance came when he discovered that though he could speak about the second coming, or holiness and other subjects, he found difficulty in speaking of the Cross.

After 1833 he was associated with the Brethren at Oxford (until 1848 when he sided with Newton and became a Presbyterian) and in 'The Inquirer' (a Brethren journal) we find a report of his baptizing R. M. Beverley (also with the Brethren) in 1838 at Oxford.

Is the episode relevant, it may be asked. Surely the answer is: Yes. In the midst of a strongly Separatist and Millenarian movement not only are people sympathetic to the idea of supernatural gifts but they begin to exercise them. In due course the gift becomes an obsession and there is a revulsion from the extravagances that the obsession led to, with the result that a person like Newton says that the gifts came to Bulteel as a punishment from God. (Newton did not indicate what the punishment was for.) The case is significant. Bulteel may be the only actual case among the Brethren of complete adoption of Irvingism in its most extreme form but his case is sufficient to underline the kindred attitudes of Brethren and Irvingites.

There are of course other connections. For instance it is noticeable that in turn, Irving, Newton and finally Darby were accused of belittling the sinlessness of Christ, in their attempts to expound the mysteries of incarnation and atonement.

S. P. Tregelles, who was with the Brethren until 1848-9, and then became a trenchant critic of the movement, said that the teaching of the secret rapture was taken by the Brethren from an Irvingite utterance, and wondered if they had not received from Irvingites the idea that the standing of the Church was far superior to that of Israel and that their identities were for ever separate and unrelated. This latter teaching was recognised by Tregelles to be the basis of Darby's dispensationalism, and, being very critical of it, he was not surprised to learn that Irvingites taught it also. It
is interesting that in one of his letters to Newton, Tregelles maintained that similar ideas were to be found in the Montanist writings of Tertullian.  

A final point may be made. Shortly before Bulteel's death in 1866, Tregelles used to visit him in his final illness. Describing one of these visits to Newton in a letter he made the following remark about Bulteel: 'The first step, he tells me, in the course which connected him with Irvingism was getting some mystical notion into his mind about Christ risen being the only main truth to be contemplated, instead of seeing our abiding relation to the cross'. It may be remembered that great emphasis was laid by Darby in particular and by many of the early brethren upon the fact that Christ is risen and that we are risen with him and seated with him in the heavenly places and hence our separateness from the world. Bulteel became an Irvingite after five years of Calvinist evangelism that had been abundantly blessed of God. Newton recalled that in one year, seventy-five gownsmen were converted by the means of Bulteel's ministry. Could it be, that the evidently arresting and very impressive character of J. N. Darby who came to Oxford in 1830 made a great impact upon Bulteel and that his emphasis upon Christ's resurrection led Bulteel in the direction that brought him first to secession and finally to Irvingism? It is a possibility. Certainly the relationship between the two movements and their similar emphases seems beyond question. Even today, after more than a hundred and thirty years, many brethren believe that spontaneity is a trustworthy indication of spirituality.

2. F. W. Newman: *Phases of Faith.* London, 1850, p. 35. Compare this with the following in the same work. 'the highest Christian must necessarily decline the pursuit of science, knowledge, art, history,—except so far as any of these things might be made useful tools for immediate spiritual results'. p. 37.
4. See for example the Irvingite journal *The Morning Watch,* London 1829-1833. passim.
7a. Oliphant: *op. cit.,* pp. 148-153 (Vol. II.)
10. Ibid. p. 129. Both extracts are dated 1831.
16. In the next paragraphs there occur a number of quotations from the recorded reminiscences of B. W. Newton in his old age. They are in a series of MS Books in the Isle of Wight together with copies of a number of letters he wrote in the course of his early years with the Brethren. They are the property of Mr. C. E. Fry of Newport I.O.W.
18. For religious life at Oxford at this time see J. S. Reynolds: The Evangelicals at Oxford 1735-1871. Oxford, 1953. pp. 82-108. This book however is not always accurate and in the particular aspect we are dealing with leaves large gaps.
21. It should perhaps be observed that Newton himself was converted at Oxford and underwent a deep spiritual revival through his being introduced to the study of prophecy by F. W. Newman, who had just returned from Ireland where he had been under the influence of J. N. Darby.
23. Ibid.
26. The Diary of the Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall is an invaluable aid to the account of this episode as he was at the heart of Evangelical Society at Oxford. Every good Evangelical went regularly to ‘drink tea’ with Dr. Hill. This quotation is dated Oct. 18, 1831 and is in vol. 8, p. 65.
31. Fry MS Book 1, p. 331.
32. Fry MS Book 1, p. 331.
34. Hill Diary vol. 9, p. 65. 18 May, ’32.
37. Fry MS Book 11, p. 150.
38. The hope of Christ’s second Coming. London (2nd ed.) 1886, p. 35 (footnote).
39. Letter from Tregelles to Newton. Nov. 20, 1865. (In Fry collection, Isle of Wight.)
40. Letter from Tregelles to Newton. April 25, 1866. (Fry Collection.)
41. Letter from Tregelles to Newton. Jan. 21, 1864. (Fry Collection.)
42. Fry MS Book 2, p. 2.

Biographical Notes and Queries

We are grateful to those members who have helped with answers to the queries listed in this column in CBRFJ ix, p. 46.

2. G. F. Vallance. His full names were George Frederick, and he lived from 1899 to 1951. The address from which some of his publications appeared in the 1930s was Dedham (not Dereham), Essex.

3. Ernest Feasey. No definite information has been received, but he is believed to have lived in Palmers Green, N. London.