

REVIEWS

**Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*,
Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005, ISBN 0-903166-35-6
(600pp)**

This is a long-awaited history to bring the century-by-century Baptist Historical Society series up to the near present. This sort of book is difficult to write; so full credit to the author for his work.

Randall has chosen to order his work in chronological decade-by-decade fashion. Contrast this with Brigg's companion volume of the nineteenth century English Baptists, which takes a thematic approach. Randall's approach has the advantage of being more comprehensive, of 'telling the full story'. The weakness is that there is therefore far less analysis, far less exploring particular trends and issues in depth. For my part as a lecturer in Baptist history I would have opted for Brigg's approach over Randall's. Randall will touch on issues and point to wider resources for exploration; but commonly there is not the detailed analysis or the answer to the question that his material evokes in a reader like me.

Of course, Randall's work does not and cannot tell the full story. It must necessarily be selective. What one best gets through this book is what happened at the co-ordinating centre of Baptist life, rather than the perspectives of grassroots Baptists. The book is excellent in exploring the ecumenical vision of John Howard Shakespeare, key general secretary of the Baptist Union, 1898-1924. From a much later perspective, Shakespeare's willingness to give away much Baptist identity in favour of a proposed United Free Church and even to accept episcopacy if that was the price of union with the Anglican Church is remarkable. Those of us who know something of Baptist ethos and ecclesiology will not be surprised that Shakespeare's vision ultimately bore little fruit within his denomination.

Why did Shakespeare put so much effort into that vision? Randall notes that Shakespeare professed himself in private, 'at heart an Episcopalian' (p.126). I wish that Randall had provided a footnote reference to the source of that key statement. Randall's narrative of the ecumenism not only of Shakespeare but also of other Baptist leaders throughout much of the twentieth century underlines, however, the much stronger influence of ecumenism in English Baptist life than in the 'down-under' life of her antipodean offspring. Why is there that difference? Randall does not answer that question, but it may have something to do with the ongoing gravitational pull of the Anglican Church for bodies and individuals that had left her but were constantly reminded of her dominating presence as the national church.

Another strand of Baptist life well narrated by Randall is the controversy generated by Michael Taylor's address to the 1971 Assembly on the topic, 'How much of a man was Jesus Christ?' Randall ably explores the controversy that broke over Taylor's inadequate Christology (it only doubtfully supported the full divinity of Jesus) and its causing 52 churches to leave the Baptist Union. Should Henton Davies, the then Union President, have taken some of the blame for this? After all, he should have known something of Taylor's theology (Taylor then being the principal of Northern Baptist College) and it was Davies who named the topic on which Taylor was to speak. Randall simply unfolds the story and leaves readers to work out for themselves the issue of blame.

A weakness of Randall's approach is that in order to unfold his story chronologically, he opts to do this decade by decade. Randall himself acknowledges that such a schema is somewhat arbitrary: 'Baptist life does not shift gear every ten years' (p.3). Thus World War Two, for example, does not neatly fit within one of Randall's decades and his material on this topic is found in two separate parts in succeeding chapters.

What is more disconcerting is that Randall's chapters have all been given headings that are 'sound bites' from a larger quotation of that time, even though the heading may then give a misleading impression of the contents of the chapter. This misleading impression is very marked with the chapter on the first decade which is headed, 'The future rests with the Free Churches'. The subsequent material shows that the future did not in fact rest with those churches.

Overall, I would have liked greater historical depth from Randall and less plotting of screeds of events. I was intrigued with Randall's noting how English Baptists counted Lloyd George (Prime Minister of Britain, 1916-1922) as one of their own, notwithstanding his philandering, particularly his affair over thirty years with his private secretary, Frances Stevenson. Given the propensity of Baptists to view sexual sin as particularly serious, I would have liked some comment as to why English Baptists seemed to turn a blind eye to the situation. Maybe they were keener for their denomination to have a place of reflected glory in the centre of English life than to apply consistently the values that they otherwise held.

One crucial theme that keeps re-appearing in the book is the ongoing numerical decline of the English Baptist Churches in the twentieth century, notwithstanding repeated denominational attempts to arrest and reverse the decline through evangelistic and other strategies. The book does, however, note that the downward trend may have been reversed in the 1990s, research indicating that notwithstanding total British church attendance dropping by 14% in that decade, Baptist attendance increased by 13%. It is a pity that Randall does not explore more factors both in the decline and in the apparent turn-around.

Clearly I would have liked a different approach from the one Randall has chosen to deliver. At the same time I recognise the richness of resource he has provided us with in this voluminous work. In the end, where I was expecting a destination, Randall has provided me with a signpost, a pointer to lots of material, to lots of issues and to the interpretation of other scholars that I need to follow up. It remains a 'must-get' book for serious students of English Baptist history.

Laurie Guy

P.E. Thompson and A.R. Cross (eds) *Recycling the Past or Researching History: Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths, Studies in Baptist History and Thought* 11, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005, ISBN 1-84227-122-9 (331 pp)

This valuable series continues to present new material to the Baptist historian and theologian. This collection of essays, timed to coincide with the centenary meetings of the BWA, 'seeks to recover a sense of communal power through an interrogation of certain portions of the