

Australian Baptists' Sesqui-Centenary

THIS month Australian Baptists celebrate their sesqui-centenary. On 24 April 1831 the first publicly recorded Baptist service was conducted by a controversial Scottish emigrant, Rev. John McKaeg, who had gathered a congregation around him at the *Rose and Crown Inn*, King Street, Sydney. McKaeg's attempts to establish a permanent cause foundered, however, and it was not until 15 December 1836, following a request to the Baptist Missionary Society that the Bathurst Street church was formally constituted under the leadership of the Rev. John Saunders.

It is unfortunate in 1981 there is only one Baptist historical society in Australia — the Baptist Historical Society of New South Wales (1974) — even though the formation of an Australasian Baptist Historical Society was resolved as early as the First Australasian Baptist Congress in 1908. Nothing on a national level has permanently eventuated although a national society had a brief existence in the mid-fifties. The difficulties encountered indicate not only a fitful interest in history by many Baptists but also stress the tyranny of distance, both interstate and intrastate, which has prevented likeminded people meeting together on a regular basis.

Official histories of varying degrees of merit have been written for most states: only Tasmania and Western Australia have still to produce their own. The themes common to all and the differences in polity and theological outlook which have developed infer that a national history should be attempted. Only one non-Baptist has written on Australian Baptists. In his *Australian Baptists — A Religious Minority*, Dr J. D. Bollen limited himself to New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia in attempting to explain their fortunes and the differences which developed in the nineteenth-century.

In its quarterly meetings the Baptist Historical Society of New South Wales is gradually gaining greater prominence. Last September it successfully launched its first publication: a biography of an evangelist Rev. John G. Ridley, M.C. by Harold E. Evans.

Coincident with the sesqui-centenary the Society has launched its second publication. *Australia's First Baptists* by Ken Manley and Michael Petras re-examines early Australian Baptist history. The latter author recently completed an M.A. degree on the growth and expansion of Baptists in New South Wales, 1900 to 1939. Further publications are anticipated in the coming year.

We are deeply conscious of our links with British Baptists. There are still many areas to be explored in Australian Baptist history whose origins lie in our British heritage. It is to be hoped the fruits of this research which exemplify our links will be preserved through the medium of *The Baptist Quarterly*.

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