

WHEN WE WERE (FAIRLY) YOUNG

Early Experience in the Baptist Church

There was always a competition between Biscot and Limbury for the school treat. In fact Biscot's children were coming up to Limbury so that they could put their names in for the Baptist school treat, you see, the same thing was happening down at Biscot, so what we did was put the limit: you've got to be here for three weeks before they issued the tickets. But even then we got a good old crowd there.

We went to Totternhoe once with open lorries, on forms. It would frighten people to death today if it were done like that ... He'd only got to slam his brakes on - if he'd got any brakes - and the forms would tipple over ...

We had three sections of the Sunday School, the infants and the smaller ones, the intermediates, and the seniors, you see, three separate meetings. I know because one time I took the youngsters, the youngest ones ... you'd fill them up with food and turn them loose. They'd run round and round in circles until they came to a stop. Yes, you'd get organised games and so forth. Yes, it was something to do - there was nothing for them to do. When I first started at Limbury, when I was a youngster, there was only two places, the church or the pub. See? And lots of people didn't want to go to the pub so they came to the church. It was somewhere to go...⁹⁸

A familiar sounding recollection, embracing many experiences common to those raised within the orbit of the chapel during the early part of the twentieth century. The scarcity of recreational outlets - especially for those in rural areas, the thrill of travelling just a few miles, the homespun nature of organized leisure, the residue of church-chapel rivalry: all are touched upon in just this short extract and doubtless experienced by thousands of young people. For those raised within the orbit of the church, especially those interested in Baptist history, perhaps it is too familiar. Oral history is one of those things which many mean to get round to but, in busy lives, never quite seem to find the time for. One element of this article could be, therefore, a clarion call from the oral history sub-committee of the Baptist Historical Society (which has been meeting for about four years), extolling the virtues of recording memories, providing encouragement and advice - if it had not been done already. In a 1978 article in the *Baptist Quarterly*, Eileen Simpson promoted the use of the tape recorder as 'a most useful tool in research on local customs, dialect, living and working conditions, community and family life and activities and so on'.⁹⁹ She concluded by urging readers to remember that time is against us and to undertake recording activities with some sense of urgency. It is an article which carried a certain evangelical zeal, recommending oral history as both enjoyable and

illuminating as well as advocating examples of good practice. Eileen Simpson suggested that priority be given to those who remembered Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilee, a proposal which should emphasize to us the fragile nature of this particular source: 1978 may not seem too long ago but we have lost those from 1887, and most with a memory of 1897. There are precious few Victorians left, yet we have not progressed far since her piece was published.

It is vital that those in religious historical associations give thought to the importance of the testimonies of those who grew up within the embrace of the church during this century for another reason: it is an area still relatively neglected by historians. This may be because modern religion is regarded by what one historian described as a ghettoized embarrassment. Another related reason might be the personal prejudice or relative ignorance on the part of individual scholars raised within a secular society. Despite the growing body of work devoted to faith in the period up to 1914, later religion - whether formal practice or private belief - has not been explored to the same extent: perhaps it is not very fashionable. There has recently been encouragement from, for example, Hugh McLeod and Callum Brown, not to mention Spill, Fraser and Hoare's centenary history of the Boys' Brigade (utilizing approximately thirty interviews).¹⁰⁰ Although this is a tentative impression, it is reasonable to claim that, despite the proliferation of increasingly specialist contemporary historical studies during the last thirty years, twentieth-century Christianity is still a relatively neglected area.

A third and fundamental reason lies with the intensely private nature of belief. A faith which is infrequently articulated may defy penetration except by those who combine single-mindedness and sensitivity in their investigations. Sarah Williams expressed this succinctly in a paper presented to the Oral History Society Annual Conference at Bristol in 1995.

What people believe and the context in which these beliefs operated have become a key focus of inquiry.

And yet this 'thing' called belief is highly problematic. As we venture out of the confines of some of the traditional paradigms which have previously shaped the historical study of religion, we are faced with numerous barriers. Complex conceptual issues surround the process of defining the broader category of religion when it ceases to be equated simply with the institutional church. Few are willing to set off into this minefield and religion is still narrowly defined in relation to its institutional manifestations while wider questions concerning the nature of popular belief remain largely unanswered.¹⁰¹

Sarah Williams' observation will doubtless strike a chord within the experience of many. It is fair to say that personal belief and Christian experience remain (in a phrase borrowed from another area of specialist study) hidden from history. The second half of the twentieth century is a period distinguished by what Grace Davie

described, as a subtitle to her sociology of post-war religion, as 'believing without belonging'.¹⁰² Considerable numbers of people, especially men, are unwilling to talk about their belief, and only the most skilfully framed questions can elicit a response. Peter Clarke's new general history of this country since 1900, *Hope and Glory*, although excellent in many respects, addresses twentieth-century religion in familiar and largely uninspiring terms. He notes the decline of church attendance and the diminishing of the influence of the nonconformist conscience. He considers the religiosity of political leaders, with Baldwin or Attlee serving as relics of the Victorian era, while David Lloyd George was blatantly insincere. The church, in particular the Church of England, is seen as a vehicle for rites of passage, the 'hatches, matches and despatches' which form the core of what Arthur Marwick referred to as 'secular Anglicanism'.¹⁰³

Is that it? Does the Baptist Historical Society exist to study a phenomenon which once had profound relevance but is now merely a shadow? One should not blame Peter Clarke, compiling the collected output of recent research and revision, if the significance of religious belief is neglected by other historians - *including* those engaged in gathering oral testimonies. A good example of such work is *Industrial Town*, a compilation of recollections of seventy inhabitants of St Helens in a study concentrated upon the 1920s.¹⁰⁴ The author, Charles Forman, devoted much of the study to the development of the Labour and Trade Union movements. This was reasonable, but the marginal Communist Party received as much attention as did Methodism, for which details were provided by just one interviewee, a lay preacher. Forman acknowledged that he chose his focus at the expense of other areas: the immigrant Irish, women, employers, working-class Tories (far more numerous than Communists), the black economy. In the list of omissions he did not include religion, even though the Methodist stressed the centrality of the chapel in the development of Labour politics in St Helens, even though a Communist acknowledged the crucial importance of the Catholic Church in gathering support for Labour candidates (about one-third of the local population were Roman Catholics, and even though Forman himself acknowledged that religion was one of the primary divisions within the working classes in St Helens. Presumably, therefore, it was a considerable factor in establishing a sense of collective identity.

The significance of contact with, for example, the Sunday School movement, the brigades, 'squashes' and Christian Endeavour in shaping young lives has been ignored, not only by Forman. Still under-researched are the roles played by churches on new post-war estates, providing facilities, such as Mums and Tots clubs, which helped foster a sense of community. This is why work like that of Julie Collings, a former History undergraduate at the University of Luton, featured in a recent Society newsletter, is so important.¹⁰⁵ Julie conducted several interviews with those connected with the establishment of a church at Ramridge, a speculative post-war estate in Luton. At the time of the developing welfare state, in the town which sociologists later dubbed the home of the 'Affluent Worker', this small church

made an important social as well as spiritual contribution. What also became apparent from Julie's interviews, was that youth work - the Sunday School and, to a lesser extent, the Brigades - was central to the strategy of church growth. Similarly, in 1996-97 Luton Museum embarked on a community project, recording the testimonies of the generations of immigrants who came there for work and for housing. Their memories formed the basis of an exhibition at the museum. Reading the recollections of the Irish, for example (there are an estimated 30,000 Irish in Luton), it was striking to note how, as they set down their roots in the town, living in bed-sits a long way from home, they were able to declare in the midst of their loneliness that 'my faith sustained me'. Again, belief was not always articulated in terms of formal religious affiliation, but in a more private expression.¹⁰⁶

Even for those who are working within the structure of defined denominational allegiance, the challenge of identifying belief and its evolution still presents Sarah Williams' minefield when conducting interviews with people who have spent their lives within a Baptist church. There are numerous obstacles, peculiar to the task of Baptists gathering recollections from fellow Baptists, to be avoided or overcome. One drawback in drawing upon testimonies from within the Baptist denomination - or any other - is that they tend to be uncritical, analysis being diminished by lack of detachment and subsequent contentment with something through which they obtained friendship, security, a sense of identity and, eventually, a happy marriage. For those who have spent their life within the chapel, perhaps just one chapel, even if the memories are powerful, it is very difficult to perceive childhood through subsequent layers of belief and perception. Kath Floyd had this recollection of standing, at the age of three or four, upon a chair on a raised platform at an evening Sunday School presentation, before assembled classmates, teachers and parents:

*I had to learn this piece off by heart ... 'A' stands for alcohol, which ruins mankind and often destroys soul, body and mind ...'. Now for a little child of that age ... how could they understand that ... but I've never forgotten it ... see that' riveted in my head and I've always remembered it. I can see myself standing there now ...*¹⁰⁷

This contrasts with examples of more critical, even jaundiced views of chapel childhoods which, I believe, remain in wider circulation. *Destiny Obscure*, edited by John Burnett, is a representative of this style: although laden with vivid testimony, it seems to assume the insidious and ill-informed misunderstanding that church youth organizations, especially the Sunday School movement, were vehicles for social control.¹⁰⁸ The tenor of the reflections of those who remained in the church from youth through to adulthood also contrasts with the perception of those who were raised within the orbit of the church but did not experience the defining moment of conversion until later in adult life. This is the recollection of Norman Pepper, born in Mansfield in 1929, and raised within a Primitive Methodist chapel where his grandfather, a miner and a lay preacher, was a member.

NP: I was sent to Sunday School, I was taken to church in the evening, mainly because I couldn't do anything else, I had to go and that was it. I was taken. I don't ever remember particularly willingly going to Sunday School. That's sounding negative, possibly not quite true but I don't ever particularly looked forward to it. Anyhow, the first opportunity I was given to leave the Sunday School, I left.

SB: How old were you?

NP: Sixteen. I left school and that was it. I was given the chance. The last year then, I was only going to Sunday School - and this was even worse - I was only going because I could play the piano. I was co-opted in playing for the primary department. At fifteen, playing for kids, I ask you! I used to go and suffer that and as soon as I got the chance - my parents said you've left school now - do you want to go to Sunday School, or not? And I didn't. And that was it.

To make matters excruciatingly worse, Norman's grandfather was also his Sunday School teacher and the young lad was expected, therefore, to set a good example to the others. Asked what were his recollections of Sunday School anniversaries, he wearily groaned and said:

Oh, gosh, yes ... Because my parents were involved with the church, I was expected to be. I would have to stand up and recite some poem or something like that, or take part in drama. We used to do a play sometimes - big deal ... I remember learning these lines for this play and standing up and saying these poems - I hated it - but I was expected to do it because my parents were involved. I hated it.¹⁰⁹

The difficulty of extracting analysis of childhood perceptions when overlaid by subsequent adult contentment, or acceptance, should not be underestimated. Kath Floyd spoke of the Sunday School teaching which she received during the 1920s, as little more than a series of uninspiring memory tests drawn from the Bible and delivered by an elderly spinster, dressed in black, who made little secret that she was not overly fond of children. When asked whether she ever questioned the method or content of her lessons, Kath's straightforward answer encapsulated what may have been the view of many children, 'No, because you see it was part of - I thought - it was part of life, I suppose ... I didn't know that you could do anything different ...'.

Subsequently a dedicated and excellent Sunday School teacher herself, Kath swiftly appreciated the deficiencies of her own instruction. But because her subsequent experience within the church was, overall, a very happy one, she drew the positive elements from her childhood experience: the familiarity with scripture, the ability to remember and quote passages (far less apparent with children taught at the end of the twentieth century) that has stayed with her for more than seventy

years. Two sisters, Frances Day and Pat Swindell, had a similar response to the question of whether they actually enjoyed Sunday School:

Frances: Well, it was just something you did every Sunday ...

*Pat: ... it was just like going to school ... you had to go ... none of us really kicked up about going ...*¹¹⁰

Doug Bedford, born in 1916, was raised at Limbury Baptist Church, eventually serving as Church Secretary and as the organist for more than fifty years. When asked about the people who had made the greatest impression on his formative years, Doug repeated a tribute which he had already paid to one Sunday School teacher and then simply declared: '... well, I suppose you can't really say, there are so many people that ... well ... the fact that you listen, you perhaps didn't take it in but you was sort of growing ... you can't really say ...'.¹¹¹

That was it: the shaping of what was to become a lifetime of dedicated commitment encapsulated thus. Doug later added that one minister, George Whitehead, was also instrumental in his eventual decision to become a baptized member at the age of nineteen. In the pursuit of oral history, if provided with such a brief and not especially detailed answer, it is tempting to try and tease out more, to provide a leading question. This temptation must be resisted as it is important to let people speak for themselves. To do otherwise is discourteous and, frankly, condescending.

Familiarity is a problem for the interviewer also, the reverse of the obstacle which the detached and possibly non-religious questioner will face. Roger Laidlaw observed that respondents are conscious of the gaze of the outsider and can be coy about professing belief and identifying themselves with particular sets of moral precepts.¹¹² The opposite applies for those from within religious historical associations. A respondent may be far more forthcoming in the company of someone whom they understand to be sympathetic towards what is, in late twentieth-century Britain, a minority belief, at least in the context of formal affiliation to the Christian faith. For the interviewer there is an inclination to seek out personal acquaintances, people who have possibly been a guidance and a help in the past, perhaps a pastor, a Bible Class leader or Brigade officer. It is not merely that the interviewer can be suddenly disarmed or confounded when a former Sunday School teacher reminds them - and, on the recording, posterity - of an incident from the interviewer's childhood. Analysis can also be blunted by feelings of continued love and respect, a residue of deference, or dark memories of barking officers, disapproving teachers and the stern countenance of deacons, all amounting to guilt or even little short of sheer terror.

Drawing upon the limited number of recorded conversations to date, what are the recurring themes which illuminate the testimonies of those who grew within the Baptist churches? First, there are the recurring details which impressed themselves upon the childish mind. The Sunday School outing, already referred to at the

beginning of this article, provided a rare, perhaps unique, opportunity to escape the restrictive confines of home and the familiarity of the local environment. For children from the inner urban areas, this was also an opportunity to breathe fresh air, for many others an equally rare chance to paddle in the sea. In a century of overall rising affluence, the churches were perhaps better placed than most to appreciate that the redefinition of poverty often left a widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots. In this context, detailed recollections of picnics, charabancs, train journeys and rough-and-ready games, possess a resonance cherished by the interviewee but not so easily valued by those raised during the post-war era.

Mild acts of subversion are often recalled, sometimes these examples of high spirits are almost immediately coupled with the supposed shortcomings in behaviour of contemporary children and young people. Anomalies such as this can all too easily diminish the value of the account in the mind of the interviewer, but anecdotal information often provides an alternative perspective which challenges simple historical assumptions. The image of the orderly Edwardian Sunday School for example, brimming with Sunday best, staring back at the camera *en masse*, or at least posed in devout classroom setting, is imprinted on many minds, even though it is something which few now can recall. John Dony, born in Luton during the 1890s, once spoke (in one of those informal discussions in which, regrettably, no tape recorder was to hand) of his experience in the Sunday School of Ceylon Baptist Church, Wellington Street. This was the chapel from which sprang that embodiment of Baptist decorum, the Luton Girls Choir. In contrast with received images of order and discipline, Dr Dony likened the atmosphere in the school on Sunday to that of the Oak Road on a Saturday afternoon - the Oak Road being one of the (once) terraced ends at Luton Town Football Club. A rather startling observation, until one places it alongside the frequent references to the shortcomings of individual teachers, and recollections of others that the atmosphere in Sunday School was more informal than at day school. Those who view the Sunday School movement as a relentless instrument of middle-class hegemony might do well to bear this in mind.

Also gleefully recalled are instances of imperfection or backsliding on the part of the great and good. For most of his life George Horsler was, in his own words, 'as dry as a bone'. In discussion over the lingering influence of teetotalism and the Band of Hope, George remembered this: '... it was funny one Christmas, the choir went round singing carols and they sang outside the *Black Swan*. After they'd sung the carol, they opened the door and there sitting at the bar was one of the deacons ...'.¹¹³ Here we have a demonstration of how oral history can shed a small insight, albeit in this instance through a pub doorway, at some of the internal tensions which existed within the church between the public stance of the congregation and the private conscience of its individual members.

In addition to the details recalled, time and time again those who were raised and who subsequently stayed within the church remarked upon one fundamental aspect

of Baptist life: the disintegration of the centrality of the chapel in the social calendar of the young. This is a feature which is not of primary concern to historians within the secular world but ought to be for those of a religious inclination, carrying as it does an ominous, if not altogether surprising, note. The Sunday School outings, the anniversaries (a useful time for overburdened teachers, according to one Sunday School veteran, as rehearsals meant you did not have to teach for six weeks beforehand) and the accompanying prize giving, the brigades and camps, and the distinctive nature of Sunday, all fit within this context.

Respondents - particularly those reared within rural, or semi-rural environments revealed a sharp distinction between the extent to which church dominated the social life of individuals who were raised before World War Two, compared with those who have grown up in the late twentieth century. Creaking organizations, such as the temperance movement, ceased as an effective force at local level after the war. This distinction between the world before 1939 and the situation after 1945 was fully appreciated by those interviewed, stressing both the array of activities centred upon the church throughout the week and the scarcity of alternatives which lay beyond it. As Les Rumble observed in conversation with Julie Collings:

In the old days church life was your local church, if you could get there, you kept going, even so sometimes you didn't feel like going. It was the pivot more or less of your spiritual life, it was the growth area where different things would be happening. Then again when the Sunday School dropped out in the afternoon to go in the morning, now a lot of kids don't go. They would have gone in the afternoon because their parents would have sent them for a quiet afternoon, I always think anyway. I think the car has got a lot to answer for and television for the lack of people going to church or being interested in church.¹¹⁴

Historians would doubtless point to the earlier evidence of change and many threads influencing young life within the Baptist churches run through the periods of both wars, but the World Wars have clearly been a pivotal point in many people's lives and many seize upon the war as a time of significant change.¹¹⁵ The blackout restricted meetings, especially for the young; leaders - significantly youth leaders - were lost to various forms of national service, with a detrimental effect upon rolls; people moved away and, severed from their roots, did not return; transport was restricted. Norman Pepper's church was three miles away and his father was exhausted after working long shifts. None of these factors were conducive to regular church attendance, even if the emergency of the time focused the mind upon the possible imminence of the next world, or the need to improve this one.

Details of the quiet, restrictive Sunday (certainly no games in the street), the eager anticipation of the highlights of the Sunday School calendar, the structured focus of Christian Endeavour, the excitement of Girls Brigade camp, early romance:

these are subjects which burst far beyond the limited parameters of this article. The recounting of them, however, serves to throw in to the sharpest relief the extent of the profound challenges which Baptist churches face as they enter the new millennium. This is the ominous note, although not necessarily one of irrevocable pessimism. In the face of commercialized leisure and conflicting demands on time, church alternatives have appeared steadily less appealing. The church has struggled to adapt to new demands and utilize new techniques. It was striking to hear accounts of magic lantern slide shows being given during the 1920s and 1930s as elsewhere cinemas opened, rivalling each other in comfort as silent movies gave way to talkies and the glamour of Hollywood. The aroma of the lanterns carbide lamp appears to have left a more profound impact upon the memory than the lectures themselves. When old techniques were no longer attractive, some of the testimonies suggest that churches old and new groped for a worthwhile alternative. John Rowlands, interviewed by Julie Collings, described the re-establishment of the Boys Brigade at Stopsley in the early 1970s:

JR: But I became a youth leader in Stopsley Baptist. There was not youth things going ...

JC: What year was that?

JR: 71. They used to have at the summer time, summer holidays - holiday special programme, just to amuse the children in the school holidays. And wed often get some of those left over in years past and they'd say can you do something with these boys, we've got seven boys here. I said, yes, Ill try to do a boys club, if you like. After six months of doing a boys club, of which my son was one of them, he was good on recruiting and got one or two other boys in, so it got to nine or ten. But I was running out of ideas. I'm more used to a disciplined approach having been in the navy so long, so subconsciously I must have missed that. And so I started looking at different organisations which we could start. And scouts wanted me to do a six months training course and this and that and the other, and be vetted and turned inside out. It didn't seem a very viable thing to start, if we wanted to get it off the ground straight away, which is what I was anxious to do. when I enquired about the Boys Brigade, the Battalion Secretary was up like a flash, and was in here chatting to me, welcoming me with open arms once he knew my background, and that we were associated with the church. Quite emphatically. Once it became clear that Boys Brigade appeared to be the best avenue. And then when some old couple came tottering out with the 15th Luton Boys Brigade colours, which they said had been put in mothballs for about twenty years: there had been a company in the church and they had been desperate to get it restarted. So I said, all right, we've got

*the colours, lets restart it, OK. I didn't know anything about Boys Brigade. I kept the fact quiet that I had been a boy scout and got on with it.*¹¹⁶

In fact the Boys Brigade were highly successful at Stopsley - but the note of initial uncertainty in John Rowland's account is unmistakable. Also plain is the sense of relief with which he grasped at the hand of help offered by the representative of a national organization possessing clear localized structures.

This is not to argue that the host of organizations and events offered by Baptists and others failed to have effect upon those who participated or that they were not enjoyed by them. The testimonies of those who have been members of the Baptist church and its youth organizations since their younger days are often the testimonies of those who subsequently became youth leaders. The vividness and detail which these people can offer indicate that there has been far more to the role of the church in the twentieth century, especially in its contact with the young, than the gloomy catalogue of dwindling congregations might suggest. Work carried out over the last fifteen years has demonstrated that the extent of belief has transcended formal affiliation, that during the twentieth century religion carried influence, amongst the working class, for example, that went far beyond mere attendance at a place of worship on a Sunday. There is no need to overstate the case, to claim that the church does not face profound challenges, and certainly no scope to indulge in mindless, head-in-the-sand optimism. On the other hand, atheism has made little headway in what, we are so often reminded, is a materialistic, self-obsessed culture. New historical research, including oral history, is indicating that belief has proved to be durable, perhaps more durable than denominational structures. Maybe British urban Christianity is not yet at its final frontier (as Callum Brown neatly put it).¹¹⁷

Just as the true nature of personal faith is of growing interest to historians, so too it would be interesting to discover what influence churches still possessed upon shaping belief and practice during the twentieth century, especially through the various guises of its youth movements. For this reason, even if for no other, the message from those who grew up within the orbit of the chapel, many of whom remain (fairly) young at heart, is worthy of closer attention.

NOTES

- 1 Interview with George Horsler, 23 June 1998. *University of Luton Sound Archive*. George was raised at Limbury Baptist Church, located in a hamlet north of Luton (now a suburb). Biscot was the parish church at the bottom of the hill.
- 2 Eileen Simpson, 'Oral history: Some thoughts and experiences', *BQ* XXVII, 8, 1978. Thanks to Ruth Gouldbourne for discovering this article.
- 3 J. Springhill, B. Fraser, M. Hoare, *Sure and Steadfast: A history of the Boys' Brigade 1883-1983*, 1983.
- 4 Sarah C. Williams, 'The Problem of Belief: The place of oral history in the study of popular religion', *Oral History*, Autumn 1996, 24, no.2.
- 5 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*, Oxford 1994.
- 6 Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990*, 1996.
- 7 Charles Forman, *Industrial Town: Self portrait of St Helens in the 1920s*, 1979.

- 8 Julie Collings, 'Don't be a working lad!', unpublished dissertation, University of Luton, Also interviews conducted with Les and Jess Rumble, P.K. Tongeman, Dorothy Baker John Rowlands, Sandra Connolly, and Cath Claridge. See also *Newsletter*, Baptist Historical Society, autumn 1996.
- 9 'East West Home's Best' exhibition, Luton Museum, 1998.
- 10 Interview with Kath Floyd (born 1918), 24 June 1998, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 11 John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of childhood, education and family from the 1820s to the 1920s*, 1982.
- 12 Interview with Norman Pepper, 8 July 1998, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 13 Interview with Pat Swindell and Frances Day, 26 February 1999, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 14 Interview with Doug Bedford, 29 June 1998, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 15 Roger Laidlaw, 'Jack Mary Ann and the Myth of the Sinning Deacon: Images of Nonconformist asceticism in fictive folklore', *Oral History*, autumn 1996, 24, no.2.
- 16 Interview with George and Lily Horsler, *op.cit.*
- 17 Interview between Julie Collings and Les Rumble, 17 January 1996, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 18 For example, Gladys Wagstaff lived next door to Ampthill Baptist Church but was apprenticed to a hairdresser in Luton. By the time she had returned home in the evening there was little time left after her meal until bed. What little spare time she had was spent at the church. Interview with Gladys Wagstaff, 5 February 1997, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 19 Interview between Julie Collings and John Rowlands, 21 April 1995, *University of Luton Sound Archive*.
- 20 Callum G. Brown, 'The Mechanism of Religious Growth in Urban Societies: British cities since the eighteenth century' in Hugh McLeod, *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830-1930*, 1995.

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Prescot Stephens, *The Waldensian Story*, Book Guild Ltd, Lewes, Sussex, 1998, 375 pages, £16-95. ISBN 1 85776 280 0.

Prescot Stephens's book provides in thirty well-balanced chapters an up-to-date narration of the 800-year history of the Waldenses. The task is enormous, not only for the wealth of information that the author has brilliantly mastered, but also because the result is rightly the history of the Waldenses as well as a history of the Waldensian church. Deep into the Waldensian soul lies the awareness of being not only a church, but also a people (*popolo chiesa* in Italian). From this point of view, this 'Story' recommends itself as an elegant and well-constructed narration of one of the most intriguing experiences by Christians to preserve and to propose their faith as unique in European history. Contemporary Waldenses are proud of their past, but they are also strenuously committed to witness in the Italian context, which has hardly any parallels in Europe.

In this light, the contents of this book contradicts, in my opinion, its subtitle: 'A study in faith, intolerance and *survival*' (the italics are mine). It would be, in fact, a gross understatement to see the history of the Waldenses and their understanding of their faith as mere commitment to survival. The Waldensian Church looks to its