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Leonard Strong: the Motives and Experiences of Early Missionary Work in British Guiana

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Students of Brethren history have long been aware of certain facts concerning Leonard Strong (1797-1874). He served in the Navy during his youth and after a dramatic experience in the West Indies was converted. Having read for ordination, he set sail in 1826 for British Guiana where he had been appointed as Rector of St. Matthew's, Demerara. After his removal to Georgetown, on account of opposition from the slave-owning planters, Strong seceded from the Anglican Church and gave up his living (worth £800 p.a.) and began to meet with other Christians for worship on lines similar to those of the early Brethren in England. By the 1840s his work was known and supported by George Müller and other Brethren among whom Strong ministered after his return to England in the late 1840s. These facts are accurate but, interwoven with this basic framework of his life, more than one myth has developed and it is therefore worth clarifying several aspects of his career with the help of several new sources of material.¹

Strong's conversion seems to have been connected with his narrow escape from drowning when he was serving in the West Indies and his shore-going boat was upset in a squall. However, the account given by Henry Pickering is ambiguous as to the exact sequence of events and we learn that 'being saved [from drowning], he left the Navy, went to Oxford, where he was converted.'² We know from the university records that he matriculated in 1823 as an undergraduate at Magdalen Hall, but the circumstances of his conversion remain a mystery except that it was in 1824.³ Certainly it was while he was at Oxford that he began to think about missionary service and it is from the records of the Church Missionary Society that we can learn fairly exactly of his circumstances at this time.

In March 1824 at the Gloucestershire county meeting of the CMS, Leonard Strong proposed one of the motions.⁴ The Rev. Robert Strong, the vicar of Painswick was also there, but we cannot tell whether this was an uncle or his father, because by March of the following year when

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Leonard Strong was offering himself for service with the CMS, his home is given as Brampton Abbots in Herefordshire where his father was vicar. It may be that the family moved in 1825 or that Robert Strong was not Leonard's father.

The dangers which attend the writer who, by conjecture, seeks to embellish his account with some 'human' interpretation, are well illustrated from subsequent entries in the CMS records. David J. Beattie whose account appears to be a rewriting of Henry Pickering's brief biography, tells us that:

With the desire to become a missionary Mr. Strong entered the Church of England and, after studying at Oxford, was ordained as curate of Ross-on-Wye, but he was unable to settle down in this quiet parish. What Leonard Strong had seen of the West Indies' urgent need of the Bible filled him with an unquenchable longing to carry the Gospel across the seas.⁵

The inaccuracies of this account will become apparent.

At his first interview on 11 April 1825, Strong told the CMS committee that he had been a good deal abroad in the Naval Service and that he did not think 'a warm climate would agree with him.' After two years at Oxford, he could not take his degree till February 1827. His knowledge of the classics was slight and he would prefer to go out as a married missionary. He had read the Life of Henry Martyn and was now reading that of David Brainerd. Doubtless the committee were encouraged to learn that Strong was 'a Churchman on principle', that his mind had 'been seriously impressed for two years,' and that he was 'aware of the total devotion required in a Missionary.' It appears that Strong was not too enthusiastic about his studies in which he had 'read parts of Virgil, Horace, Xenophon and Herodotus' and had 'begun to learn Hebrew.' This must have been rather heavy going for a man of twenty-eight who had joined the navy at 12½. Strong informed the committee that he was 'ready to leave Oxford immediately' and promised to 'regard the Committee's directions as the will of God.' Accordingly the committee informed Dr. Macbride, the principal of Magdalen Hall, that they were impressed with Strong who 'has offered himself to the Society for its New Zealand mission,' and asked his advice concerning Strong's prospects.⁶

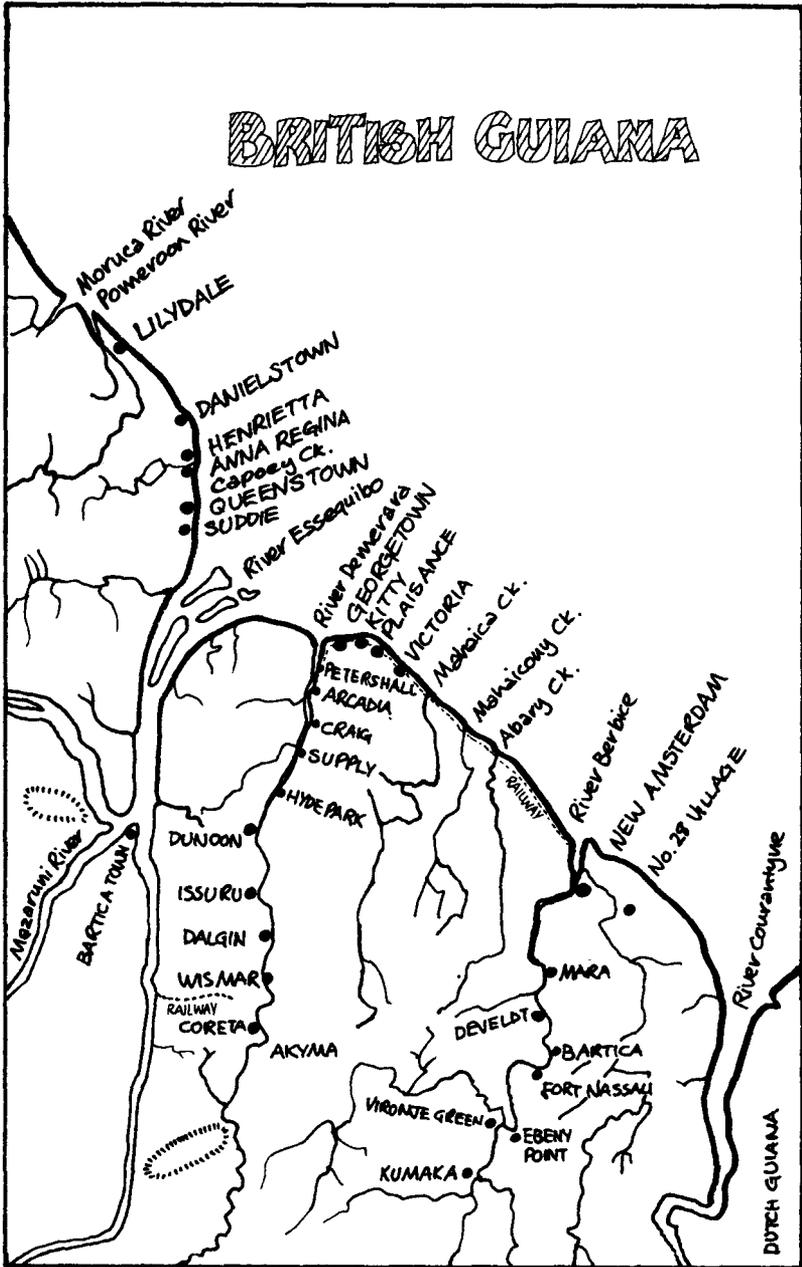
A few days later Dr. Macbride replied recommending Strong to leave Oxford, and on 20 May the Committee accepted him on probation, telling him to go home and pursue his studies 'under the superintendence of his father with a view to his being presented to the Bishop of London as Candidate for Deacon's Orders as soon as he can get three years' testimonials.' They also informed him that they did not object to his marrying 'but he must raise no matrimonial expectations in the mind of

any female without previously obtaining the sanction of the Committee.⁷

In December, 1825, Strong was ordained a deacon but was given leave to live with his father until 21 May 1826 when he was ordained as a priest.⁸ However, the situation was becoming more complicated because a week later the committee learnt that the father of Strong's fiancée, Mr. Reed, was strongly opposed to his going to New Zealand but that 'there is reason to suppose' that he would agree if the destination were changed to Demerara 'where Mr. Reed has considerable property'. A medical report indicated that there was no objection to his going to Demerara and a letter from Strong himself indicated that a certain Mr. Gladstone thought he could get a church built for Mr. Strong in Demerara and that 'Mr. Reed will be disposed to acquiesce in such an arrangement'. In a further interview, Strong said he was ready to co-operate in any plan 'best calculated to promote the glory of God' adding that his fiancée's father 'might possibly consent to his daughter's marriage with him in case he was appointed to a civilised country'. At this point, it was resolved that Strong should go to India or Ceylon and that Mr. Gladstone should be encouraged to persuade Mr. Reed to approve of this.⁹

It was only in a letter of 15 June (from Bowden Hall, probably in Ross-on-Wye although there is no official record of a curacy held here by Strong) that the missionary candidate explained the situation. His fiancée's brother was actually living in Demerara and wanted a minister to instruct his slaves. This was where Mr. Gladstone was ready to build a church, and if Strong wanted to marry Mr. Reed's daughter, this was the only place to which he could go as a missionary. The CMS bowed to the vested interests involved and resolved that if the Bishop of Barbados would license Strong, and if Gladstone would undertake to build the church, then that was where Leonard Strong would go.¹⁰

One cannot help feeling that circumstances had dictated Strong's final destination in an extraordinarily pragmatic way, especially as he had originally thought that a warm climate would not suit him and bearing in mind that Guiana has an equatorial climate with an average temperature of 79°F in cooler months. There can be little doubt that the Mr. Gladstone who promised to build Strong's church was W. E. Gladstone's father on one of whose properties in Britian Guiana a rebellion had been suppressed with ruthless cruelty in 1823. A scandal had arisen from the episode because a missionary with the London Missionary Society, John Smith, had died in prison while awaiting trial after his arrest for alleged complicity. John Gladstone vigorously supported the planters in the House of Commons claiming that the missionaries were troublemakers who had encouraged the rising. William Huskisson at



the Board of Trade took a similar line, saying that Smith had established an 'organised system of influence' and that it was necessary to replace the missionaries whose misguided enthusiasm had caused so much trouble, with clergy of the Church of England who would be 'more or less under the direct control of Government, kept so by the advantages which they hold, or expect to derive from it.'¹¹

It would be inconceivable that Strong did not know all this, and it would appear that at this stage his motives were very mixed. Clearly he wanted to be engaged in missionary work, but his interest in Miss Reed seems to have taken over his judgment. This was not the only aspect in which he was deceiving himself. In a later account which is probably rather exaggerated but in which there must be some basis of truth, Strong describes his doubts at the time of his ordination:

My Christian friends were all in the Establishment. We all perceived the falseness of the Catechism and the Baptismal Service, etc., yet I thought there was no other way to get a door for preaching the gospel than by ordination in the Establishment ... I was shocked as the so-called bishop pretended to convey to me the Holy Ghost, and give ME power to remit and retain sins ...; I knew all that was wrong. nay, was a lie, but thought there was no other way of getting liberty before men to preach the blessed gospel.¹²

In August and September it was decided that Mr. Norton, a missionary who had been on furlough, should return to his station at Alleppic and that 'Rev. Leonard Strong do accompany Mr. Norton on his return and that the secretaries be authorized to provide their outfit and to take their passage'.¹³ It is evident that whatever doubts the plantation owners may have had about evangelism among the slaves, these were envisaged as the objects of Strong's mission. He tells us that he and his wife went out 'burning with zeal to teach Jesus to the slaves', and when the CMS learnt that the governor of Demerara had presented him with a living in the colony, they expressed their satisfaction at the opportunity Strong now had 'for promoting the spiritual profit of the slave population'.¹⁴

In a further exchange before his departure, Strong asked the CMS committee that a Mr. Charles Carter (of Shepscombe, Gloucs.) should accompany him 'to take charge of a negro school', but their decision was to wait until they knew Carter better, and for this purpose he was enrolled as a student in the CMS college at Islington.¹⁵

It was, therefore, late in 1826 that Leonard Strong set sail for the West Indies and his first letter from abroad is dated 27 February 1827 and was sent from Nabaclis informing the committee that he had been licensed by the bishop to officiate in St. Mary's parish and that his brother-in-law was building him 'a temporary place of worship'. In a further letter of 12 March he reiterates his need for Carter's services as a schoolmaster, but

Carter only arrived in February of the following year, accompanied by John Armstrong of Manchester who was destined to work in Esse-
quibo.¹⁶

In spite of the connection with Gladstone (who regarded slavery as a providential institution to be exploited in hotter climates), Strong was evidently of a sufficiently independent frame of mind to risk the wrath of hostile planters. In January of 1828 he noted that 'there is strong prejudice against instruction of negroes on weekdays' even though there were openings for work among them.¹⁷

It is not the purpose of this paper to give an account of Strong's work in Guiana. His reports to the CMS were not very numerous because, technically, he was not serving in a missionary capacity. There were some accounts given by him particularly with reference to the work of Carter and Armstrong, and these were published in the *Missionary Register* from time to time.¹⁸ Before his secession from the established church there was one incident of evident importance, to which reference must be made. Strong's original appointment was as rector of St. Mary's parish, but early in 1830 he seems to have so incensed some of the plantation owners that he was forced to change his location and become rector of St. Matthew's.^{18a} In some published recollections he wrote: 'After nearly three years, the crafty policy of men succeeded in removing us from the district' and it was after 1830 that the Craig chapel was erected as well as several other church buildings.¹⁹

The ambiguity of his position in the Church of England was still a source of unease for Strong. Again, if his account written nearly thirty years later is reliable, his doubts were renewed when he was inducted as rector. Apparently he even then hoped that he need not express his unconditional assent but was told that if he could not he would have to go home, and that might open the door for 'an unconverted man' to take his place:

Then did my senior in the Christian faith bring before me my own father, a Christian clergyman, and a whole army of godly persons, ... as my examples, who all gave their assent and consent in words, though not in heart ... So ... I yielded, but with a bad conscience. I was installed, and I returned to my Christian wife, saying, "I am rector of this parish; I have now a field for labour in the gospel, but I am a *liar*". I could never shake this off from my conscience. We gave ourselves to the work. I never *taught the Catechism* or allowed it in the parish. I did not baptize the children of unconverted persons. I often left out parts of the Baptismal Service. I never read the whole of the burial service over the unconverted dead. Indeed, I never used the Prayer Book when I could help it.²⁰

It is by no means clear what brought the matter to a head, but finally in 1837 Strong handed in his resignation. Previously, he seems to have had

good relations with dissenting missionaries in the area and there is a friendly reference to him made by a congregationalist missionary, John Ketley, who met him at Fort Island in October 1831, though the *Evangelical Magazine* in its inimitable way managed to misread the report and describe him as 'the Rev. Mr. Sting'.²¹ Almost two years after Strong seceded, an account of his decision and the reasons for it was given in a pamphlet published in Exeter in 1839. From the fact that it was being sold at No. 1 Warwick Square, we gather that Strong's decision was soon known to Brethren in England, and although no copy of the tract is known to the writer, an abbreviation of it was printed in a Brethren periodical the *Inquirer*.²² From the tract it would appear that his secession took place on amiable terms with everyone from the bishop and the governors of the colony to the local clergy, though he had to give up the Craig chapel which had been paid for partly out of his own pocket. It also emerges that in the years previous to his secession Strong had suffered severe illness and had lost at least one of his children 'by the country fever'. It is not clear why there was such a long delay between the resignation and the publication of the tract in England. It might have been surmised that it was only in this period that Strong became acquainted with Brethren attitudes with which his tract is full, except that the *Inquirer* is explicit that the pamphlet was published 'on the day of his resignation'.

Strong's objections to the establishment will all be familiar to anyone who has read Brethren literature of the 1830s. A national church cannot be the Church of Christ, printed prayers are unscriptural, the Prayer Book and the Catechism teach baptismal regeneration, the priesthood is not warranted by the New Testament, and there is no scope for communion with each other in the Lord's Supper as administered by the Church of England. Such complaints could indicate that Strong had merely become a nonconformist, but he moves on to more characteristically 'Brethren' ground when he claims that in resigning his position 'I leave *nothing* of her [ie the Church of England] *but* that which is *the world*'. He makes no suggestion that he will be associated with any other denomination, and the editor of the *Inquirer* stresses that 'Mr. Strong's purpose is to hold himself quite aloof from the various sects of dissenters'. In Strong's own words, which are very familiar in Brethren literature, 'Open communion [is] with *all who love Jesus* ... O that God's children may come out everywhere, though only two or three, and meet in Christ's name!'

The discovery that Strong seceded in 1837 may be a disappointment to those who cherish the myth of his having received enlightenment 'before the first public meeting of early Brethren at Dublin', or of his secession being 'contemporary with the beginnings of the movement in

Britain'.²³ It seems that this error originated in a slip of the late Professor Rendle Short who wrote 1827 for 1837. The consequences of this slip have been repeated for nearly seventy years, though the writer's uncle shortly before his death discovered the correct date independently. This explains the divided voice of the editors of *Echoes of Service* who in their magnificent volume *Turning the World Upside Down*, give the right date at one stage and revert to the myth of simultaneous revelation two hundred pages later.²⁴

The mystery as to how Strong came across Brethren principles remains, though there is a clue in the life of J. Meyer (to whom we shall refer shortly), when his biographer mentions a plantation, Tamoth Manor, on the banks of the Essequibo, owned by a Mr. Barlow 'an Englishman and an adherent of the religious principles of the Plymouth Brethren'. John Barlow was an agent for the Bristol merchants, Davies and Co., and it is not inconceivable that Strong met him when moving up the Essequibo in May 1835. This, coupled with dissension between some of his fellow-workers, culminating in the resignation of his catechist, John Armstrong, in 1836, may have finally pushed Strong into secession.²⁵

Shortly after his decision, it became apparent that any fears he had entertained about a possible diminution in his usefulness, were unfounded. The negroes particularly appreciated his ministry and with the final emancipation of the slaves in British territory, which took place on 1 August 1838, Strong probably found his own freedom of action increased. Meanwhile, Strong's contact with the Brethren in England had provided him with some reinforcements.

A practice that had become common in the 1820s and '30s was for Swiss missionary-students from the Basel Mission house to come to London to learn English and to study other subjects in the missionary institute of the CMS in Islington. Johannes Meyer (born in 1814) was sent to Islington after some years spent in the Basel Mission house, and arrived in September 1838.²⁶ The ecclesiastical climate at Islington was very different from what he was accustomed to, and as time went on he found the attitudes of his superiors in the institute overbearing and narrow-minded, while the liturgy of the Prayer Book was hardly to his liking.²⁷ Early in 1839 he broke off his connection with the institute but did not immediately go back to Switzerland. By chance, he came across a Brethren assembly in London and soon heard of an opportunity to fulfill his missionary vocation without submitting to Anglican regulations. A letter from Strong was read out one evening giving information of the work in British Guiana, and Meyer decided to take up the challenge. After a quick visit to his home town of Zofingen in the course of which he married a friend from his childhood days, Susanne Senn, he set sail

for South America and landed at Georgetown on 1 January 1840 after a journey of 53 days.

Such was the background of the 'rugged, independent type' whose evangelism first on the banks of the Demerara and later among the Indians inland at Kumaka, is briefly described by Dr. Rowdon in his history of the early Brethren, and more fully told in *Turning the World Upside Down* by the editors of *Echoes of Service*.²⁸ To complete the picture of the earliest work associated with Leonard Strong mention should be made of two others who were active in this field. One was a Mr. Aveline who arrived soon after Meyer. He appears to have been a businessman who brought gifts, sometimes, from George Müller in Bristol. Curiously there is no information available concerning the Mr. and Mrs. Barrington of Bristol who sailed with Strong back to Demerara after his furlough in 1843. Likewise we are ignorant of 'brother Mordal' except for the fact that he was a faithful worker in Müller's assembly and that he resolved to go to Demerara on the day that the Barrington's left, set out eleven months later in July 1844 and died in January 1845.²⁹

The last of the early Brethren to come to Demerara was Thomas Tweedy who had seceded from the Church of Ireland in the early 1830s soon after his graduation from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1833. As a roving evangelist in Ireland he had decided that missionary work was his vocation, but partly on account of ill health and perhaps also because of discouragement from his family he remained in Ireland for some years. It was only in 1842 that he set out for Demerara where he arrived after 'a fine passage' of only 33 days. How effective was Tweedy's work as a missionary is hard to say, as his health was, at the best of times, fragile and the only account we have of his life is written by one who was not particularly interested in the spiritual side of his work. He married a local coloured lady, Elizabeth Thomas by whom he had two children. Henry died when still young, while Elizabeth became the caretaker of the chapel in Georgetown.³⁰

It is thus apparent that Strong's identification with the Brethren in Britain was the means whereby a fair number of other missionaries were directed to British Guiana. Although there was no publication equivalent to the *Missionary Reporter*, or the *Missionary Echo* (precursors of *Echoes of Service*) there were evidently means whereby information of this sort did circulate among Brethren, otherwise the arrival of Meyer, Aveline, Tweedy, the Barringtons and Mordal in Demerara, all in the space of less than five years, would be an extraordinary coincidence. Any further information about John Barlow or Mr. Aveline who seem to have been important links in a Bristol-Georgetown axis, would be most valuable. It is particularly curious, and a point worthy of reflec-

tion, that the whole story of Brethren missionary work in British Guiana would probably have been very different if Leonard Strong had been more punctilious about his ordination vows, and if his father-in-law had been less particular about where his daughter would live when married.

NOTES

1. The basic account is summarized in H. H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren 1825-1850* (1967), 185-186.
2. H. Pickering, *Chief Men among the Brethren* (1931²) 22. It is possible that a connexion between his escape from drowning and his conversion was assumed from the use Strong made in evangelism of a similar incident in 1852 when the H.M.S. Amazon was destroyed. See Leonard Strong, *The Burning Amazon and the Life-Boat*, London [1852]. A copy is preserved in the Guicciardini Collection, Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, No. 14-11-18. xxvi.
3. L. Strong, *A Personal Testimony to the Truthfulness of C. H. Spurgeon's witness concerning the evangelical clergy and the errors of the Prayer Book* (1864) 5.
4. CMS Minutes Book vii. 21. The books are in the CMS Archives, Waterloo Road, London SE1.
5. D. J. Beattie, *Brethren: the Story of a great Recovery*, (1940), 66. A similar account (signed J.M.B.) which probably appeared originally in the *Witness*, was published in Henry W. Case, *On Sea and Land, being an account of experiences in the visitation of assemblies of Christians in the W. Indies and British Guiana ...* (1910) 52-55.
6. CMS Minutes vii. 471-472.
7. *Ibid.* vii. 517-18. But he was visiting Oxford again in December, a week before his ordination as a Deacon. The Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall describes him in his Diary (14 Dec. 1825) as 'Mr Strong who is to be ordained next Sunday to proceed to New Zealand.' 'Diary of John Hill' St. Edmund Hall MSS 67/5 p.90 in the Bodleian Library Oxford.
8. *Ibid.* viii. 172, 349.
9. *Ibid.* viii. 331.
10. *Ibid.* viii. 361-362.
11. S. G. Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography 1764-1851* (1971) 189.
12. L. Strong, *Personal Testimony* 5.
13. CMS Minutes viii. 428, 450.
14. L. Strong, *Personal Testimony* 6; CMS Minutes viii. 483.
15. CMS Minutes viii. 497-498, 507; [D. T. Barry (ed.)] *Church Missionary Society: Register of Missionaries and Native Clergy* [1895, 1904] 25.
16. CMS Minutes ix. 133; *Missionary Register* (Feb. 1828) 140; *Church Missionary Society Register* 25.
17. CMS Minutes ix. 500.
18. *Missionary Register* (July 1831) 334-335; (Sept. 1836) 433-436.
- 18a. St. Mary's Parish appears to have been near to Victoria on the coast, east of Georgetown. St. Matthew's parish was a few miles inland at Peters Hall on the east bank of the River Demerara. See Case, *op. cit.* 53. There is a good, detailed map opposite p.38.
19. L. Strong, *Gospel Reminiscences in the West Indies: The Triumph of Grace* (n.d.) 13.
20. L. Strong, *Personal Testimony* 6-7.
21. *Evangelical Magazine*, NS. x (1832) 122.

22. *The Inquirer* ii (1839) 282-287. The original pamphlet was entitled 'A Letter to all the Brethren in Christ'. Any information as to the whereabouts of a copy would be appreciated.
23. D. J. Beattie, *op. cit.*, 65; F. R. Coad, *History of the Brethren Movement* (1968) 197.
24. W. T. Stunt *et al.* *Turning the World Upside Down: a Century of Missionary Endeavour* (1972) 25, 242. The myth has been further perpetuated in F. A. Tatford, *Dawn Over Latin America* (1983) 269ff. Rendle Short's account in *Principles of Open Brethren* (1913) 96 is imprecise but not inaccurate, whereas his *A Modern Experiment in Apostolic Missions* (1919) develops the myth of simultaneous revelation (43).
25. *Evangelisches Missions-magazin* (1859) 348; W. T. Stunt, 'History of Assembly Work in British Guiana' *Echoes Quarterly Review* viii (1956) 16; J. H. Bernau, *Missionary Labours in British Guiana* (1847) 81. Elsewhere Barlow was described as 'manager and planting attorney' of Messrs. Thomas Daniel, of Berkeley Square, Bristol, who had large interests in the West Indies, and he is said to have been living 'at Queenstown, Danielstown — on the next sugar estate to Queens-town (Phil Taymouth Manor)'. No date is given for his arrival. Case, *op. cit.* 94.
26. The details of Meyer's career can be followed by students of German only.* Originally the story was told by A. Ostertag 'Johannes Meyer' in *Evangelisches Missions-magazin* (1858) 429-459, 521-552; (1859) 345-377, 425-450, 546-576. There is a portrait of Meyer, on page 520. Subsequent reworkings of this account are in P. Geyser, *Mit Eisernem Willen* (1905, 1923, 1927) and Hans Scheurer, *Mit Eisernem Willen*, (1940). See also Case, 110-18, where we learn that Meyer thought that a compass or watch was 'Babylonish' and refused to use them when travelling ... with dire consequences.
27. A similar episode had occurred a year or two earlier when Gottlob Schreiner, another Basel missionary student, had found the Islington rules 'unworthy of the Christian liberty and of the English character,' R. First, A. Scott, *Olive Schreiner, A Biography* (1980), 31.
28. H. H. Rowdon, *op. cit.* 186; *Turning the World Upside Down*, 243-244. Fulllest details can be found in Ostertag's account and in L. Strong, *A Brief and Simple Record of the Lord's Gracious Work among the Indians of British Guiana, by his servant John Meyer during four Years and a half* (n.d.). This work is cited by Rowdon but I have not seen it. Inexplicably there is no mention of Meyer in E. A. Chapman, *A History of the Brethren in British Guiana* (n.d.).
29. *A Narrative of some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller written by Himself*, First Part (1881⁸) 517. Further information (but not much) on these figures is available in Case, *op. cit.* 94-96.
30. Owen Tweedy, *The Dublin Tweedys: the story of an Irish Family 1650-1882* (1956) 9-11. A pamphlet of Tweedy's is preserved in the Guicciardini Collection in Florence. On the *Dealings of God with the Leprous Man, Leviticus xiii-xiv*. Signed T. T. [weedy] Demerara, n.d. Only known copy in Guicciardini Collection, No. 14-7-8 ter. xiv. Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence.

*I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. Paul Jenkins, Archivist of the Basel Mission, for the great assistance he has given me in this and many other inquiries, and for the clues he gave me on Meyer. My knowledge of German is insufficient for me to have made use of the letters of Meyer which are in the Basel Archives; one of them is dated 31 March 1840 and addressed to Abraham Meyer. It is written in German but signed 'John Meyer with Missionary Strong at Petershall in Demerara, South America—by the care of Mr. Wigram, 23, Myddelton Square, Islington London'. Presumably the letter was sent with one of Strong's letters to Wigram who was to forward it to Switzerland.