

James Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins: Early Pentecostalism in Ireland in the Context of the British Isles*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

James Robinson's *Pentecostal Origins: Early Pentecostalism in Ireland in the Context of the British Isles* builds on earlier work on specific individuals and denominations to offer the first general account of its subject. Robinson writes with an acute awareness of the importance of his project. After reviewing the remarkable growth of the Pentecostal movement through the last century, he notes, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is advancing so rapidly that it is threatening to outpace its resources within scholarship, not least in its historians who in number are not commensurate with its march and are left puffing rather badly behind" (p. xxiv). Robinson's account offers a lively and accessible overview of the theological contexts for the emergence of Irish Pentecostalism and a detailed and engaging narrative of the Elim church, from a sympathetic scholarly approach, which takes the claims of its leading actors at face value.

Robinson's *Pentecostal Origins* begins with the necessary backgrounds. The Pentecostal message was first popularized in England by A. A. Boddy, the vicar of All Saints, Sunderland. The Whitsun Conventions that Boddy organized became the principal vehicle for the circulation of Pentecostal ideas in England between 1908 and 1914. In its earliest days, the movement gained from the respectability associated with Boddy's position in the Church of England. But his po-

sition within an established denomination meant that Boddy could not offer the pastoral care required by those groups of Pentecostals who had formed themselves into discrete congregations outside the control of any overseeing body. In many ways, while having a “core interest in discovering the theological streams that fed the nascent Pentecostal movement” (p. xxv), Robinson’s *Pentecostal Origins* is an explanation of the consequences of that vacuum in leadership.

It was from Sunderland that Pentecostal ideas reached Ireland. During the winter of 1907, Robert J. Kerr and Joseph H. Gray visited the English town and received their Spirit-baptism. Returning home to Belfast, they established “cottage meetings” and began to promulgate the new message. Of course, they had local advantages to draw upon. The evangelical revival of 1859, which had produced tens of thousands of new converts, had precipitated the establishment of numerous mission halls through the landscape of the north-east of Ireland. These lay-led independent congregations were fertile ground for the growth of informal and sometimes eccentric theologies, including those of the Catholic Christian Apostolic Church in Zion, which promoted utopian communalism alongside strictly Levitical codes of purity. Even American-style camp meetings had their own tradition in Ireland. As early as 1862, such meetings were being convened in county Fermanagh, basking in the afterglow of the evangelical revival. Kerr and Gray were working in an environment, which was already predisposed to the informal lay-led character of the new faith.

Until 1913, the Pentecostal message did not make much impact outside a small number of assem-

blies established through the work of Kerr, Gray and their associates. It was with the arrival of the Welsh evangelist, George Jeffreys, in 1915, that the movement began its decisive period of expansion. Jeffreys was invited to lodge in Pine Street, Belfast (p. 88) – just a few doors down from the house in which my grandfather had recently been born – in which city he established a base from which to move into a series of successful missions in its rural hinterlands. He advanced the cause through the Elim Evangelistic Band, which he established, and which led missions throughout the northern half of the island. In 1918 the movement was brought under the authority of the Elim Pentecostal Alliance Council, and its drift towards denominational status accelerated.

It is with the detailed study of George Jeffreys in chapter 5 that Robinson's account comes into its own. *Pentecostal Origins*, for all its sympathy with the movement whose origins it describes, does refer to the less flattering aspects of Jeffreys' personality, including vanity, as expressed in his complaint that his name was not sufficiently prominent on the movement's new letterhead. This self-regard developed alongside his adoption of British-Israel theories, his early introduction of female pastors, sometimes with an aggressive pulpit style, and the "privation, bordering on destitution" which became "endemic" within the Evangelistic Band for which he was responsible (p. 136). But it was Jeffreys' overpowering personality that led to his departure from the movement he had established. In 1940, the Irish Elim churches grappled with Jeffreys' changing views of the autonomy of the local

church, realizing the consequences of the system of personal control which Jeffreys had established – for “in the system of checks and balances, the only person who was not answerable to another was Jeffreys himself” (p. 182). Jeffreys was pushing for a centralization of power that would allow local churches to be centrally governed.

But Robinson’s account contextualizes the history of Elim with the other influences on Irish Pentecostal origins. The book also describes the origin of the Apostolic Church, founded in Wales, which became the first serious challenger to the hegemony of the Elim Pentecostal churches in Ireland, and which advocated a much less restrained public worship, as well as allowing for extremely directive “prophesying,” with all of the dangerous pastoral abuses that might involve. Irish believers were also perplexed by the universalism that was being advocated within the movement by the former Baptist pastor, A.E. Saxby. Robinson documents a number of other extraordinary claims made by early Pentecostal believers, including that of a prospective missionary, who claimed to be able to write in unknown tongues. But even the admitted sympathy of Robinson’s approach cannot move beyond his sense that some of the claims of Aimee Semple were, at best, “implausible” (p. 83).

*Pentecostal Origins* is an admirable exploration of a forgotten component of Irish ecclesiastical history, which offers its rich resources to scholars and general readers alike.

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