"Ineffable impudence"? Christian Brethren Missionaries in Northern Tasmania, 1860s and 1870s *Elisabeth Wilson*

Abstract: Missionaries associated with the Brethren first came to Tasmania in the 1860s, but were at pains to stress their non-denominational status. However, their insistence on the need for personal conversion and believers' baptism soon aroused criticism and controversy. This paper argues that, nevertheless, their emphasis on the unit of all Christians led to some breaking down of denominational barriers.

The problem with the Brethren was that they were impossible to pin down. With no agreed name, no denominational headquarters, and no clear leadership, evangelists connected with Brethren in one way or another came to Tasmania in the 1860s and 1870s preaching the need for repentance, personal conversion and believers' baptism – a message of spiritual life to many, but one which divided churches and disturbed the respectable as much as the lapsed or unreached masses. As Crawford Gribben writes about Ireland, '...Brethren had no confession of faith, no clerical elite, and little regard for the historic structures of Protestant theology.'¹ Infuriated church leaders found it very difficult to counter such an ostensibly well-meaning group, which yet divided existing congregations and built up fellowships where the traditional denominations had not really taken hold.²

Although the Brethren movement had started in the late 1820s, meeting simply as Christians in the way (they believed) the early church met, the impetus for the pioneer evangelists in Tasmania came more from the 1859 Revival in Ireland and Scotland.³ A handful of men, whose work was coordinated only through friendship and informal networks, established a number of 'assemblies', as Brethren call their church fellowships, across the island, from the Huon to Scottsdale and in particular in the north west.⁴ They would have argued however that they were 'unsectarian', merely gathering together groups of born-again believers, not establishing a new denomination, a concept which was abhorrent to them.

As a consequence, none had the name Brethren. A meeting house might be called a Gospel Hall, as was the rented room in the Quadrant in Launceston,⁵ or believers would meet in a Union Chapel, as in Scottsdale,⁶ the People's Hall, as in Hobart,⁷ or a private house. When the evangelists came to town, they might have been invited by a like-minded person, or they would contact someone through a mutual friend, and organise to hire a hall for meetings. In country areas, they often visited around farms and small towns, and held meetings in barns. This could not have happened without receptive minds and hearts. Dissatisfaction with the "established" church, lack of churches altogether in remote districts, dry preaching, and an awareness of spiritual need were some of the factors which made Tasmanians receptive to the evangelists' message.

The evangelists considered in this paper are Walter Douglas, William Brown, Charles Frederick Perrin, and Edward (sometimes Edwin) Moyse (who is not to be confused with his Church of Christ contemporary C Bickford Moysey). Others involved in Tasmania during the 1870s were Charles Maguire, who worked with Brown in church planting; Henry Rainey, a gifted young Englishman who came to Australia to try to cure his tuberculosis, to which he eventually succumbed in 1881; Harrison Ord and Douglass Russell, who had large meetings in Launceston and Hobart in 1876; and the independent Henry Varley, who held large and sometimes controversial meetings (especially in Launceston) in 1878.⁸

Walter Douglas (1822-1890s) was originally American, but had drifted to England after losing his wife, and had been converted literally from the gutter in the 1860s through a London mission for down-and-outs.⁹ As a result, his preaching was fiery and often uncouth: the *Circular Head Chronicle* criticised his 'excitement of manner and coarse declamatory style of personal abuse... his lamentable want of tact and violence of demeanour...his extreme vanity and sensitiveness to criticism.'¹⁰ He went to New Zealand about a year after his conversion, then arrived in Melbourne in June 1866. From October 1869 to 1872 he was based in Tasmania, taking overflowing meetings which were often noisy, disrupted by objections from the audience to Douglas' outspoken criticism, and sometimes descending into near riots.¹¹

Douglas was actually a freelance evangelist neither formally associated with the Brethren – if such a thing were possible – nor overtly connected with them. Arguably within the public mind there was no real awareness of the existence of such a group. He generally preached in Methodist or Congregational meeting places or secular halls, but after his visits to Hobart and Launceston in particular embryonic fellowships formed which became the nucleus of the assemblies in both cities. (He was in Launceston in April and December 1870, and August to October 1872, and in Circular Head from January to March 1871.)

Douglas came into the Tasmanian religious scene much like a meteor – blazing a fiery trail and leaving some debris behind him – but he pioneered the idea of nondenominational revival meetings in the colony. This foundation was built on by others who followed him, and indeed they might well have become aware of the island's spiritual needs through him. The Scotsman **William Brown** (1835-1911), converted during the Revival, came to Australia in 1867,¹² first to Adelaide,¹³ and arriving in Tasmania in 1872. He traversed the island for the next few years, with breaks in Victoria. He saw fellowships established at Sheffield (70 breaking bread), Sherwood, Northdown (50), Sassafras (40),¹⁴ and writing from Sheffield in 1875, said that 'Brother M (Maguire) and T had the joy of beholding, as far as we know, 140 souls brought to Jesus.'¹⁵ He was also involved in strengthening or starting meetings in the Esperance area, Scottsdale, and Circular Head. Eventually he went on to Canada, then back to Scotland. Not long before he died he wrote to Reuben Austin of Kentish, showing his continuing close interest in the progress of those who had professed conversion under his ministry.¹⁶ He died in 1911.¹⁷

Brown worked closely with **Charles Frederick Perrin** (1842-1875), who first had travelled to Australia between 1859 and 1861 during a restless late adolescence. On his return to Ireland he experienced an evangelical conversion, partly the result of hearing of the sudden death of Prince Albert the Prince Consort. In 1866 he and his bride sailed for Australia,¹⁸ working mostly in Collingwood and Geelong then, after a time back in the UK in 1870-71¹⁹, they worked in Melbourne and Bendigo. However, an invitation to join in the first believers' conference in Wynyard in January 1873 brought Perrin to Tasmania, after which he had very successful meetings with Brown in the Circular Head area. This pattern was repeated in 1874 and 1875, extending the areas of influence to Scottsdale, and to the Huon where Brown had pioneered previously. However, in 1875 Perrin died at Forth of rheumatic fever, brought on by an horrendous journey in appalling weather, just as he was planning to establish himself and his family in Tasmania.²⁰

The third member of this trio was the Englishman **Edward Moyse**, of whose background almost nothing is known. He arrived in Hobart from Melbourne in 1871, and although an effective evangelist, his gifts were also evident in church planting and consolidation. He greatly strengthened the Hobart fellowship, travelling through the Huon and Esperance area for the next eighteen months bringing about a number of conversions and the formation of a gathering at Dover. Later, in 1874-75 he was very active in the Kentish and Scottsdale areas, helping Brown establish the new groups in

their faith. Evidently he moved to Victoria in early 1876, and after visiting Tasmania again in1880-81 he went to New Zealand where he established a number of Brethren fellowships, in particular around Nelson and on the west coast of the North Island in the Taranaki region.²¹ Apart from a visit to Tasmania in late 1881-early 1882 for conference meetings and consultations, he seems to have ended his evangelistic career in New Zealand. To the shock and heartbreak of his Tasmanian colleagues and converts, in 1883 he was found to have had a homosexual relationship with another evangelist, and correspondence across the Tasman ensured that never again would he be welcomed here.²²



Three early Evangelists. Edward Moyse, England (standing), William Brown, Scotland (seated left), and Charles Perrin, Ireland (seated right).

One might wonder how these evangelists were motivated to keep going as they did, often in lonely and even dangerous circumstances – they were often threatened and Brown was once in direct danger of his life. A comment in a letter to an English paper gives a glimpse into his thoughts:

"...whatever comes I go at once to the Lord, and all is made straight. The passage has been with me this long time, "He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." When I go to work I keep saying it over, and sure enough I am wrapt in and over with the love of God. Then I say, "Blessed Jesus, Thou hast brought me here." Then I feel for the unconverted, and know that they will soon be in hell if not rescued, and I yearn over them, and I cannot rest till I go and warn them. Then I come away as happy as if I had saved them.'²³

There were several ways in which these Brethren missionaries made an impact on the Tasmanian community in the 1870s. The first was their emphasis on conversions, which was not appreciated by everyone in the conventional religious community. A *Tasmanian Mail* columnist who wrote 'Trifles by the Way' was critical of Varley and Mrs Baeyertz for talking of

"saving souls", as the result of their labours, as being as certain of success as a fisherman... of obtaining a haul of fish of some kind... The conceit of some of those self-called upon people, female and male, who fancy themselves possessed of a special mission and power to subjugate sin...would be worth no more than a contemptuous sneer, but for the ineffable impudence of the whole thing.²⁴

His criticism might well have been the result of several years' observation of evangelistic work: the object of Brown, Perrin and Moyse's preaching was indeed to "save souls". For example, Brown wrote in 1873, 'I joined brother Maguire at Table Cape...and we had glorious meetings in the Church of England; people travelled six miles every night, and six back, and several were converted.²⁵ He also wrote that at Duck River (Smithton), there had been a baptism of 14; in six weeks between Table Cape and Montagu, nearly 60 souls were brought to Christ.²⁶ Perrin wrote that it was 'impossible for us to overtake [oversee] the work, though there are four of us now'. He considered that a dozen would not be enough - there were 20 places asking for them to come.²⁷ Nearly 200 professed conversion in Kentish,²⁸ and 68 in all were baptised at Scottsdale.²⁹ One estimate is that in the years 1872-75, over 500 people professed conversion in response to these evangelists, mainly in the Huon, Scottsdale, Kentish, and Circular Head areas.³⁰ As a result, by the end of the decade there were Brethrentype meetings at Port Esperance, Hobart, Launceston, Scottsdale, Sheffield, and several places on the north-west coast including Burnie, Boat Harbour, Montagu and Circular Head. There also had been promising groups on the Tasman Peninsula which had followed the Tasmanian evangelist Stephen Cheek into the Church of Christ.³¹

The second issue was that sometimes the "conversions" were more an awakening to spiritual life and deeper connectedness by people who were already active church members, but seeking something more. In many rural places, the main denominations were struggling to establish themselves; their clergy were stretched to provide services in out of the way places. Brown wrote that, 'The farthest I have been is...Montague [sic]; [where] they do not hear a word sometimes for three months.'³² Thus in many instances, the evangelists were finding a ready response with people who already felt an unmet spiritual need. Nevertheless, there was deep resentment at what was regarded as sheep stealing, especially in places where churches had been established. A critic wrote, '...in many places in Tasmania, Church members have become disaffected, and some have given up Church fellowship through the teaching and efforts of these travelling Evangelists.'³³The evangelists were aware of this criticism: Brown's comment was, 'The devil is raging against us, ministers are saying that we are breaking up their churches, stealing their best sheep. We just tell them there must be something the matter with their fences, or they would never get out.'³⁴

This resentment was fuelled by the fact that, when they first arrived, the evangelists were welcomed as genuinely independent and non-denominational (and although it sounds disingenuous, they sincerely believed that this is what they were). This was probably more true for Walter Douglas than for the others, and he wrote home, 'As soon as it was known that I had arrived in Hobart Town, I was waited upon, and was invited, in the name of the Evangelizing Association, to preach in the People's Hall.'³⁵ The secretary of the Association was R A Mather, an evangelical Quaker and leading businessman. Douglas wrote that 'a dear brother in Christ...a member of the Society of Friends' had seen an account of his remarkable conversion from the gutter in the paper *The Revival* and had prayed for him to come, which had happened 'without any communication whatever between the parties'.³⁶ *The Mercury* reported that apart from the People's Hall, Douglas had preached in all types of the Methodist Church – Wesleyan, Primitive, and United³⁷ – and as his meetings grew they moved to the Town Hall, where there were major altercations with some listeners.³⁸

In fact, in many areas, the evangelists were invited to have meetings in Wesleyan chapels or Anglican halls – until the incumbent ministers realised that the converts were likely to be forming a new fellowship. In Stanley, Douglas preached in a Presbyterian chapel. In 1872, William Brown wrote home that

The Wesleyans have got letters from their President, not to let me preach in their chapels, whilst the Primitives, Presbyterians, Church of England, and Baptists, offer me, yea, press on me to preach in theirs...³⁹

In many areas, this built on a spirit of non-denominationalism which had been evident for years because of isolation. "E W B" reported from Scottsdale in 1874 that Brown and Perrin's visits had been the continuation of work by lay preachers and a number of visiting clergymen, although by the early 1870s there was no resident pastor of the Union Church. They went there by invitation, and the writer attributed the remarkable results to prayer, and 'a growing concern in reference to their spiritual interests' on the part of many in the district. He also noted that respondents were 'adherents of many Christian denominations'.⁴⁰ In 1872, the Rev. Richard Smith (Anglican)⁴¹ reported from Wynyard that 'lovers and promoters of Christian unity will be glad to hear' that the Wesleyan minister there had encouraged Brown's work at Circular Head, and let him use their place of worship, as he recognised 'that the work was of God...If all would reason and act in that way, we should soon have no disunion amongst those who really belong to Christ.'⁴²

This was a society in which sectarianism was rife, as evinced for instance by the intensity of feeling over state aid to church schools.⁴³ Even though such sectarian feeling was often deplored, this insistence on only bearing the name Christian was a novelty. At much the same time (1873-75), Moody and Sankey were in the UK taking the enormous non-denominational meetings that made their names, but their influence was not yet as great as it became, although reports were starting to make their way into both secular and religious newspapers here. So the concept was relatively radical.

Although the evangelists were linked through the Brethren network, they were adamant that they were not part of a denomination, but encouraging Christians to meet as simply as did the early church. Brown reported that on his voyage to Australia, there were two other 'fine Christians' who 'cannot see through why I will not go under the name of any particular sect.'⁴⁴ While in the end, this ideal was not possible to maintain in practice, it was one which had an influence nonetheless.

Another point of contention was the issue of baptism. With Baptists as yet a small and struggling group in Tasmania, believers' baptism by immersion was another novelty. Not only was it a somewhat diverting and ridiculous public spectacle – indeed, it was not quite decent to see women emerging from a river with their soaked clothes clinging to them – it was also theologically abhorrent to those who considered it 're-baptism' for

those (probably the majority of the population) who had been christened as children. Perrin was aware of these views also, writing that

I have always distinctly set baptism before the converts, and asked them to search their Bibles, and decide for themselves. Of course, when we are working with those who think differently, we keep to the Gospel. But when we are alone, we have always put forth the whole truth as we have found it in God's Word.⁴⁵

The result was, as we have seen above, relatively large numbers of baptisms, especially in the Scottsdale and Kentish areas.

The whole issue was hotly debated in various quarters, including over three months in the evangelical monthly *Christian Witness;* as Perrin wrote, 'it has raised a storm, [and] Brown and I were abused well, and a number of untruths said about us.' ⁴⁶ These included accusations that the evangelists did not preach the doctrine of repentance, that they unsettled people's minds about such issues as baptism, and were 'living on the hospitality of kind friends (in some instances too long).'⁴⁷ Perrin's comment was that 'the Launceston papers have been publishing absurd letters about the work, but I really think it does good instead of harm.'⁴⁸

The final way in which their ministry made an impact was through 'believers' conferences'. The first conference of this type in the Australian colonies, and indeed contemporaneous with the beginnings of such conferences in England, was held at Wynyard on 1 and 2 January 1873. Perrin wrote that it was

...promoted by a Mr Richard Smith, a Church of England clergyman, a dear godly man. It was in a very out of the way part of the North-West Coast of that very thinly populated island...I do not think I ever was at a similar meeting at home, or elsewhere, at which I more felt the power and presence of God.⁴⁹

Some idea of the sheer workload on the visiting evangelists might be gained from Perrin's note to his wife that he was hoarse from so much speaking, as well as singing '39 hymns between 9am yesterday and 2am this morning'.⁵⁰

Similar conferences were held in ensuing years, and indeed as they evolved into Brethren conferences, were held for over a century in the Wynyard area, Circular Head, and Sheffield, and for many years in Launceston and Hobart. Reports of these early ones show that the speakers came from a variety of backgrounds – there were Anglican clergymen as well a number of laymen who had been influenced by the evangelists. The first conference held in Launceston was at Easter time in 1875, and William Ayton's preface to the printed proceedings indicates something of the environment in which it was held:

...it is to be regretted that several misrepresentations concerning their object in this movement have been circulated, some having charged the promoters with seeking to destroy every mode of Church government, as well as the disorganisation of the various religious sects, both in Launceston and elsewhere; when, in reality, they sought the co-operation...of all who loved and served the Lord Jesus, irrespective of denomination, both clergy and laity...that they might plead...for a gracious outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to the quickening of believers and the salvation of the perishing around them.⁵¹

Notwithstanding the opposition, people had come from all over the state (including a lady and her daughter who walked the 42 miles from Scottsdale!), with numbers going from 200 to 500 by the second day, and speakers able to be identified coming from the Brethren, Congregationalists, Primitive Methodists, Wesleyans, Baptists, and Anglicans. In many ways this was a high water mark for the "honeymoon" stage of the movement in Tasmania. No conference quite like this was held again. No doubt the difficulties of transport from places as geographically diverse as Circular Head, Lymington in the south, and beyond Scottsdale, contributed to this, as did the death of Perrin two months later, and the gradual introversion of the new fellowships which

became increasingly identifiable as Brethren. Henry Varley did convene a believers' conference in 1878 which had some of the same characteristics but not such a broadly-based clientele.⁵²

However, the work of the Brethren missionaries and the upsurge in spiritual life that resulted had an impact beyond the establishment of a number of Brethren fellowships – albeit one of the highest concentrations of Brethren in the world! Their contribution was one which challenged denominational barriers and encouraged the latent stirrings of Christian unity. This was arguably a factor in the cooperation which underpinned Dr Somerville's meetings in 1878 and in the interest in Henry Varley's meetings the same year, and later Mrs Hampson's very large meetings in 1884. The Rev. Richard Smith wrote of the first Wynyard conference that there were 'such greetings – such joyous faces – such Christian love'.⁵³ The experience of such conferences and indeed the Brethren missionaries' teaching in general stayed with many participants for the rest of their lives.

⁷ Walch's Almanac, 1880s.

¹ Crawford Gribben, ' "The worst sect that a Christian man can meet": opposition to the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and Scotland, 1859-1900', *Scottish Studies Review,* vol. 3, no. 2, Autumn 2002, p. 34.

² This resentment is discussed in some detail in Peter Lineham's history of New Zealand Brethren, *There we found Brethren,* Palmerston North, 1977, pp. 45-48.

³ See Ian McDowell, A Brief History of the 'Brethren', Victory Books, Sydney, 1968, p. 31; F R Coad, A History of the Brethren Movement, Exeter, 1968, pp. 167-174; Tim Glass, Gathering to His Name: The Story of the Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland, Milton Keynes, 2006, pp. 117-120.

⁴ About a dozen by the early 1880s.

⁵ Cyclopedia of Tasmania, Vol. 2, Maitland & Krone, Hobart, 1900, p. 39.

⁶ See, eg, *Christian Witness*, 19 September 1874, p. 94.

⁸ Varley was often seen to be associated with the Brethren, although he was at least as close to Baptists, and maintained a fierce independence. See my ' "An emissary of the Plymouth Brotherhood" ? Henry Varley's interactions with Australian society in the late nineteenth century', submitted for publication to the *Brethren History Review*.

⁹ See [no author, possibly W J Lewis], *Lifted Up: the life of Walter Douglas*, London, [1873?], chapters I, II and IV.

¹⁰ Circular Head Chronicle, 20 March 1871, p. 383.

¹¹ Stones were thrown into the Presbyterian chapel at Stanley: *Circular Head Chronicle*, 20 March 1871, p. 383. There was a major disturbance at the Town Hall in Hobart (*The Mercury*, 13 December 1869 ff), and an arrest for disturbance of the peace at a meeting at the People's Hall in Bathurst Street (*The Mercury*, 3 February 1870).

¹² James Anderson, A brief record concerning the early days of the assembly in Lesmahagow (photocopy of handwritten memoir, 1960, in Christian Brethren Archive, John Rylands University Library, Manchester), p. 75. This contains copies of letters from William Brown.

¹³ James Anderson, A brief record, p. 79.

¹⁴ Northern Witness, February 1876, p. 25-6.

¹⁵ Northern Witness, February 1876, p. 25.

¹⁶ Letter copied by Alan Dyer, Sheffield, from original in Cyril Austin's possession, Launceston.

¹⁷ Died 16 December 1911: *Believers' Magazine,* no. 22 June 1912, p. iv.

¹⁸ He had just married his cousin, Sarah Deacon. They arrived in Melbourne on the *Staffordshire* in June 1866. Public Record Office of Victoria, Index to Unassisted Inward Passenger Lists to Victoria 1852-1923. For Perrin's life, see [Sarah Perrin], "*One thing I do", or, Memorials of Charles F. Perrin [compiled] by his widow,* Bible & Tract Repository, Melbourne, 1878.

¹⁹ They returned on the *George Thompson* in August 1871, with their 3 year old son Charles. Public Record Office of Victoria, Index to Unassisted Inward Passenger Lists to Victoria 1852-1923.

²⁰ [Sarah Perrin], "One thing I do", pp. 147ff; Alan Dyer, God was their rock, Pioneer Publishers, Sheffield, 1974, pp. 13-14.

²¹ Peter Lineham, There we found Brethren, Palmerston North, 1972, pp. 61, 67-9. Lineham spells the name Moves.

²² Information in letters and diary of Henry Lewis Garrett, correspondent of the Hobart assembly, 1875-1893, courtesy of Mrs Jennifer Atkinson, Garrett's great-granddaughter.

²³ The Latter Rain, 1 February 1873, p. 26-7.

²⁴ Tasmanian Mail. 30 March 1878, p. 13, c. 1.

²⁵ The Latter Rain, 1 February 1873, p. 27.

²⁶ The Latter Rain, 1 August 1873, p. 117.

²⁷ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 143.

²⁸ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 143.

²⁹ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 108; "E W B" wrote that at least 119 people had professed salvation - 'three-fifths of those persons in the district who are of sufficient age to understand what it is to be saved.' Christian Witness, 5 September 1874, p. 83.

³⁰ Alan Dyer, draft history of the Brethren in Tasmania, in writer's possession.

³¹ See Richard Ely, 'Communities of generation, communities of choice: Stephen Cheek at

Bream Creek,' Lucas no. 12, Dec. 1991, pp. 6-41; and also the article by Ely on Cheek in Alison Alexander (ed.), The Companion to Tasmanian History, Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, Hobart, 2005, p.71

³² *The Latter Rain,* 1 February 1873, p. 27.

³³ Christian Witness, 19 September 1874, p. 95.

- ³⁴ Northern Witness, February 1876, p. 26.
- ³⁵ Christian, 10 February 1870, p. 25.
- ³⁶ Christian, 10 February 1870, p. 25.
- ³⁷ The Mercury, 4 December 1869.
- ³⁸ The Mercury, 13 December 1869.
- ³⁹ The Latter Rain, 1 February 1873, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Christian Witness, 5 September 1874, p. 82. From a later letter (17 October 1874) it appears E W B was E W Bonner.

⁴¹ Richard Smith left the Anglican ministry in the 1870s and became a leading elder in the Launceston Brethren assembly.

⁴² Christian Witness, 21 September 1872, p. 114.

⁴³ Examples of other issues canvassed in religious papers were disestablishment, the deceased wife's sister's marriage bill, the ongoing debate about ritualism and Sunday trading.

⁴⁴ James Anderson, A brief record, p. 77.

- ⁴⁵ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 138.
 ⁴⁶ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 137.
- ⁴⁷ Christian Witness, 19 September 1874, p. 95.
- ⁴⁸ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 138.
- ⁴⁹ The Latter Rain, 1 August 1873, p. 117.
- ⁵⁰ [Sarah Perrin], "One Thing I Do", p. 75.

⁵¹ First Believers' Conference held in Launceston. Tasmania, at Mechanics' Institute, on Easter Sunday and Monday, March 28 and 29, 1875, Launceston, [1875], p. 2.

⁵² For reports, see *The Launceston Examiner*, 1 May 1878, p. 2, and 3 May 1878, p. 2.

⁵³ The Christian, 8 May 1873, p. 245.