

2. JOHN NELSON DARBY— THE SCHOLARLY ENIGMA

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One aspect of Darby's work, which has an interest all of its own, but to which very little attention has been paid is his role as a scholar. In his *Collected Works*, two volumes are classified as 'Apologetic' and one volume as 'Critical' but, besides these, there are other of his writings which provide us with the unmistakable evidence of a mind fascinated by intellectual enquiry.

The rigorous Christian who is critical of worldly learning but who has no qualms about using his own learning to good effect is a figure familiar to the historian of the ongoing battle for the faith. In the earliest years of Christianity St Paul could eloquently claim that the foolishness of the cross was spiritually more effective than worldly wisdom (1 Cor. 1: 21-8) but this did not inhibit him from using the legal skills of a Pharisee in the cause of the gospel. A similar incongruity in Tertullian has occasionally led one to smile at his rigorist scorn for Athens and the Academy (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 7) when the effectiveness of his relentless polemics against pagans and heretics was clearly dependent on a sanctified use of his earlier rhetorical training. The learned Peter Lombard adopted a similar stance when he claimed that the real value of his *Sentences* was that by studying them his readers could avoid 'turning the pages of a huge number of books'. By the same token, Pascal's claim that God is known through the heart rather than the reasoning mind (*Pensées*, 16. 3) is rendered rather less convincing by his ruthless demolition of his opponents with remorseless logic.

Darby is manifestly the heir of this tradition. Barely a decade after winning his classical gold medal at Trinity College Dublin, he was seeking to discourage Frank Newman from studying anything other than the Bible. To Newman's suggestion that, as a father, he would like to secure his children a good education, Darby's retort was uncompromising. 'If I had children, I would as soon see them break stones on the road as do anything else, if only I could secure to them the Gospel and the grace of God.' And yet Newman was probably overstating Darby's objections to learning because he also tells us that Darby explained to him that his reading of 2 Timothy 4: 13 'saved me from selling my little library.'¹ Although, at that stage, Darby's collection of

1. F. W. Newman, *Phases of Faith or Passages from the History of My Creed*, 6th edition (1860), pp.18-

books was probably only a fraction of the very considerable library in his possession when he died,² he was certainly not averse to making use of the resources of a good sized library. When, in one of his earliest pieces of scholarly polemic, Darby took issue with the Oxford Regius Professor of Divinity over the original teachings of Anglicanism, he cited lengthy extracts from the sixteenth century commentaries of Bucer, Peter Martyr, and Bishop Jewel. If his later opponent, B. W. Newton is to be believed, these quotations were made possible by his use of the Exeter College Library, though in the case of one of Jewel's letters he confessed that he had been unable to verify his references.³

It is in this dichotomy between his apparent disdain for scholarship and his readiness to make use of it—often with great effect—that Darby may have been a more significant role model than is generally realised. The ceaselessly peripatetic evangelist with limited access to scholarly libraries is a little hard to reconcile with the Darby who, as I have shown elsewhere in this issue, was familiar with the fairly recent works of continental writers like Agier and Lambert.⁴ Of course, controversy frequently arose from the situations in which he found himself and these were often far from home. The text of Darby's first publication in Switzerland refers to the 'peculiar circumstances' of his being 'in a foreign country' which evidently precluded an apparatus of scholarly references,⁵ and many a subsequent pamphlet was produced in similar circumstances.

On the other hand many of Darby's works were evidently composed with his reference books to hand. One impressive example is 'Romanism: or an answer to ... "The Law and the Testimony"'. Although Roman Catholics were 'such as I have lived amongst for years, and loved and served as well as I knew how,' Darby makes few concessions to his 'Romish' opponent, John MacLaughlin. On the second page he scornfully concludes that his antagonist is poorly acquainted with the Fathers because he has confused Bishop Clement of Rome with Clement of Alexandria.⁶ Repeatedly protesting his personal

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2. *Catalogue of the Library of the Late J.N. Darby, Esq.* (1889). I have not seen this volume but it is cited in the bibliography of M.S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ 1992), p. 250.

3. [J.N. Darby], *The Doctrine of the Church of England at the Time of the Reformation...* [Oxford 1831] in *Collected Works* [hereafter *CW*] new edition (1964), 3, p.21. Newton's recollection in Christian Brethren Archive 7062 (John Rylands Manchester University Library), Wyatt MS, 8, p.26.

4. See *intra*, Timothy C. F. Stunt, 'The tribulation of controversy: a review article', pp.103, 107.

5. J. N. Darby, 'The Doctrine of the Wesleyans on Perfection and their employment of Holy Scripture as to this subject' [Lausanne 1840] in *CW*, 3, p.164. The quoted phrases are probably those of Darby's editor. Ironically the lack of references may have contributed to the focus and effectiveness of the pamphlet as the writer had to confine his argument to exposing the weaknesses of the Wesleyan pamphlet which had given rise to the controversy.

6. J. N. Darby, 'Romanism: or an answer to the Pamphlet of a Romish Priest [John MacLaughlin], entitled "The Law and the Testimony"' [c. 1855], *CW*, 18, p.31. Cf. The fun that Darby has at his opponent's expense showing that he has quoted Augustine out of context and with a meaningless reference. ('...but you must forgive me for increased hesitation as to your having looked at the original.' p. 87).

distaste for the ‘mass of barbarous folio volumes’ which he is ‘forced to read’ (p. 83) Darby freely quotes (often with chapter and verse) from the works of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Eusebius, Jerome, Augustine,⁷ and others. With scrupulous honesty he qualifies his reference to Cassian’s opinion with the words ‘as others state (I have not his works).’⁸ To the candid observer there is something faintly amusing in the relish with which Darby takes up the writings of the Fathers, citing them in detail to rebut his opponent’s assertions, all the while affirming his own disdain for their authority as being appallingly unbiblical.⁹ With all the skill of the barrister building up his case, Darby brilliantly forestalls the charge that his opinion as a Protestant is unreliable, by citing Roman Catholic commentators such as Antoine Pagi (1624-99) and Denys Pétau or ‘Petavius’ (1583-1652), to support his own reading of the Fathers.¹⁰ Similarly impressive, when he quotes a letter in which Chrysostom rejects the doctrine of transubstantiation, is Darby’s familiarity with the circumstances of the letter’s discovery by Peter Martyr and its later publication in spite of Roman Catholic attempts to prevent it.¹¹

A similar access to patristic sources is apparent about ten years later in his analysis of John Henry Newman’s *Apologia* (1864). Again Darby begins by making clear how distasteful he finds the task.

I had no thought of even reading Dr. Newman’s *Apologia pro Vita sua*... But the book has been put into my hands by others and so far pressed upon me; and I have read it: I cannot say it has won my respect.¹²

In fact the essay is an important source for Darby’s earlier religious opinions as he tells us that, like Newman, he had similarly been governed by a morbid imagination, ‘thought much of Rome... looked out for something more like reverend antiquity. I was really much in Dr Newman’s state of mind.’¹³

7. Sometimes Darby uses the older English form of Augustine’s name referring to ‘St. Austin’ (pp.137-143). This fooled the compiler of the Full Indexes to the *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* who listed them separately. While on the subject of antique usage, perhaps I may raise a query. What did Darby mean when he referred to orphans in nineteenth-century Rome being ‘brought up by avellin institutions’ (p.142)? The word ‘avellin’ is lost on me and is apparently unknown to the large OED.

8. *CW*, 18, p.72. Cf. the reference to Pagi’s revision of the *Annales Ecclesiastici* where Darby adds: ‘I use another’s quotation in this instance also.’ (p. 74).

9. Equally disparaging but somewhat more charitable is his assessment of the Fathers in his ‘Remarks on Puseyism’ (*CW*, 15, pp. 291-4) where he singles out Irenaeus for special commendation.

10. Particularly effective were Darby’s citations from *L’Histoire de la Destruction du Paganisme en Occident* of Count Auguste-Arthur Beugnot (1797-1865) to demonstrate the continuity between the worship of the pagan Cybele and the Virgin Mary, *ibid.*, pp.124-6. Darby refers to the author as ‘M. de Beugnot, a very learned Romanist, whose work was crowned by the Institute of France’ but fails to mention that the book was written during the liberal phase of the author’s career when it was put on the Index by the Roman Catholic authorities.

11. *Ibid.*, pp.106-7. Darby’s account appears to be based on Burnet’s *History of the Reformation* (1679-1714). I am indebted to Professor Philip McNair for this reference. He has excellently summarised the episode in his *Peter Martyr in Italy* (Oxford 1967), pp.289-90.

12. J. N. Darby, ‘Analysis of Dr. Newman’s ‘*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*’: with a glance at the History of Popes, Councils, and the Church’ [1866], in *CW*, 18. This disclaimer may be compared with his insistence that contesting Puseyism ‘may not be wholly useless, though an inferior part of Christian service’, *CW*, 15, p.254.

13. *Ibid.*, p.146.

Certainly this may explain his ready familiarity with a range of Roman Catholic books like the *Annales Ecclesiastici* by the Vatican Librarian, Cesare Baronius (1538-1607); the 20 volumes of the *Histoire Écclésiastique* of Claude Fleury (1640-1723); the 16 volumes of the *Mémoires* of the Jansenist sympathiser, Louis Tillemont (1637-98); the *Conciliarum Collectio* of Jean Hardouin (1646-1729) and the Jesuit, Louis Maimbourg's *Histoire du lutheranisme*¹⁴—all of which were mobilized for Darby's answer to Newman and his account of Papal and Conciliar history.¹⁵

But there are other fields in which one is astonished at the lines of enquiry for which Darby, the indefatigable evangelist, teacher and correspondent could find the time to pursue. In his lengthy *Examination of Newton's Thoughts on the Apocalypse* ([1848]) he draws on an extraordinary range of knowledge though, again, his remarks are often prefaced with disclaimers. 'I am not a good Hebraist—far from it—but, as far as I have been able to examine the books and statements of those who are...'; 'This I leave to the learned. There is no need of reference to the Hebrew word...'; 'Do not let the reader complain of my plunging him into criticism. I engage him to keep out of it.'¹⁶ Nevertheless, his protests are a little hard to take too seriously. More than once he acknowledges the scholarship of Samuel Tregelles (whose life from 1844 was to be totally devoted to the textual criticism of the New Testament) but repeatedly Darby shows his own readiness to think independently on such specialist matters as the validity of textual readings, the unreliability of Griesbach's Leipzig edition or the various hiatuses in the Codex Ephraemi.¹⁷

Newton's views on the restoration of the Roman Empire elicited a response from Darby, which makes particularly apparent his fascination with the politico-religious tensions of the day in France and the Near East.¹⁸ Here again however Darby is almost apologetic for his familiarity with the subject, so that when he disagrees with Newton's reading of the French political scene, he adds somewhat disingenuously 'I don't blame the ignorance at all here, but the pretension to interpret events in this manner.' He finds himself in a similar situation when he corrects Newton's use of the name Velasquez instead of Vasco da Gama, but feels compelled to add 'I am not aware of any other

14. Darby's citation of Maimbourg is curiously detailed ('3rd edition, 12mo, Paris')—an edition unknown to the British Library or the Bodleian.

15. This 'potted' account of the Popes and Councils was ill conceived in that any attempt to treat of such a vast topic in so small a space would trivialise and over-simplify a hugely complex subject. Nevertheless the range of quotations could not have been drummed up overnight. It may be compared with his copious citations from Bernardino of Siena, Cardinal Bellarmine, Alphonsus Liguori (not to mention the Decrees of the Council of Trent) in the slightly less acerbic 'Familiar Conversations on Romanism', in *CW*, 18, pp.276ff *et passim*.

16. J. N. Darby, *An Examination of the Statements made in the 'Thoughts on the Apocalypse' by B.W. Newton and an Enquiry how far they accord with Scripture* (London, Plymouth [1848]), pp. 7-8n, 66n, p.96. The tract is reproduced in *CW*, 8.

17. *Ibid.*, pp.95, 362n; pp.110n, 84n. For his independent (though somewhat eclectic) approach to textual criticism in later years [1881] see *Letters of J. N. D.* (Stowe Hill, n.d.), 3, p.129 and his comments on Tischendorf and the Codex Sinaiticus, *CW*, 13, p.204.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 209 n2, 278-81, 300.

Velasquez than a Spanish painter: but I am not well read on these subjects.¹⁹

Numerous further examples could be cited to illustrate Darby's wonderfully inquiring mind and the fact that he continued to keep abreast of a huge amount of contemporary learning and writing. What, perhaps, has not been recognized is the consequent 'two-edged legacy' to the Brethren. In principle, education was for years dismissed or at least held in low-esteem among them and yet, in practice, readers of Darby's highly regarded writings, were liable to develop a taste for intellectual enquiry. It can perhaps therefore be argued that Darby significantly contributed to the tradition of amateur scholarship among the Brethren. In some cases (as with the writings of William Kelly) it was of great value but, quite as often, Brethren ministry was left in the hands of retired officers from the armed forces whose articulate eloquence was scarcely matched by their pseudo-learning. It is only really since the Education Acts of 1944 and 1945 that Brethren ministry in Britain has been able to get beyond this tradition of amateur scholarship. How impressively different was the professional learning of F. F. Bruce from the earlier tradition, brilliantly described by Professor David Clines some ten years ago, in which 'every Bible student was perforce self-taught, self-mistaught, self-starting, self-sustaining and self-caricaturing'.²⁰ For a century or so, the amateur scholarship of the Brethren could rarely match the insatiable curiosity and robust learning which characterized the formidable intellect of John Nelson Darby.

19. *Ibid.*, p.113n; p.278n.

20. D. J. A. Clines, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce, 1910-1990, In Memoriam', *Journal of Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* (August 1991), p. 53.