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adequately and imaginatively to the fresh challenges that were beginning to emerge.¹

Those allegations against Davidson's generation remain, for the most part, unanswered by Ralston's biography. The positive aspects of the book are, however, in the clear majority.

Ralston has preserved Davidson's legacy within living memory and re-established his rightful place as a significant influence on the Kirk and the city of Glasgow in the mid-twentieth century. He has also provided a further crucial reminder of the scale and confidence of the Kirk in that time, and of its innovative, creative and dynamic approaches to mission, as well as its dedication to ecumenism. In doing so, despite the passage of time and the vastly altered social circumstances, as in the work of Allan and MacLeod, there are key lessons to be learned for the church today in those areas. Andrew Ralston's book has, therefore, much to be commended, not only for Scottish social and church historians, but for all those keen to identify how the legacy of our immediately preceding generations can be honoured and applied in today's world.

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Margaret Newbiggin Beetham, *Home Is Where: The Journeys of a Missionary Child* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019), pp. 240, ISBN 978-0232534085. £12.99

Home Is Where is a memoir seen through the lens and language of Margaret Newbiggin Beetham's childhood, combined with journal entries and occasional pieces written after the death of her sister. The title is left suspended, incomplete as a sentence and unframed as a question, which suggests that the story involves loss and longing.

¹ Harry Reid, *Outside Verdict: An Old Kirk in a New Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2002), 55.



‘When my parents spoke of “Home” it was always somewhere else’, she writes (p. 27 f.). It was a word ‘which pointed always to distant times and places’ (p. 27). The book describes the many places where the Newbigins stayed, from a mission bungalow in Kanchipuram to a holiday house in Kodaikanal, from a furlough house in Edinburgh to a boarding school in Kent, from the homes of her aunts near Liverpool or Newcastle to the house where she now lives in Manchester.

She returns repeatedly throughout the book to focus on the responsibility that was thrust on her of looking after her sister Alison, in particular when the two of them, aged 12 and 10, were sent away to an old-fashioned boarding school for the daughters of missionaries.

How to make sense of her memories of childhood, in particular her relationship with her father? The story is told in the third person, changing the names of immediate family members and friends. Margaret reckons this released her to be more truthful about confronting her own forgetting. Jeanette Winterson puts it thus in her memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, ‘When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of silence that can be spoken.’¹

Home Is Where is not an autobiography. Margaret hasn’t a story to tell as such: ‘just fragments, snatches of song, a dot-to-dot puzzle. A handful of dust’ (p. 56). Her world was full of the hymns, songs and spirituals her father used to play which keep surfacing throughout the book. ‘Play the bones song, please, please, Daddy [...] Dem bones, dem bones, dem – uh – dry bones, hear the word of the Lord’ (p. 17).

Margaret’s parents, Lesslie and Helen Newbiggin, were appointed by the Church of Scotland as missionaries to India in 1936. Lesslie’s story is told in his autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*. He was one of the twentieth century’s most admired and respected missionaries and ecumenists, involved in the creation of the Church of South India, overseeing the integration of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches in 1961, and becoming Associate General Secretary of the WCC, before returning to India for a final missionary stint as Bishop of Madras.

The story of a missionary’s family is not usually told. But it is here.

¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Vintage, 2012), 8.



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The book has a loose structure of ten parts, each composed of two or three chapters. “Packing” describes Helen’s obsession with how to pack a trunk or suitcase properly for the annual migration to the hills, or returning to Scotland on furlough: ‘Always the sense of the other place, the other home. Here we have no abiding city’ (p. 58).

She spends one chapter sorting through the contents of her Mum’s box of photos, albums from the early years of her marriage, and fat envelopes full of photos of special occasions. The biggest pile was one called ‘Dad; Official’. “Mango Season” is a chapter in which she talks wistfully about holidays in Kodaikanal, the hill station where south Indian missionary families went every year to escape the heat of the plains. Margaret was nervous of the placid water buffaloes in the shallows at the edge of the lake, but she loved punting with her Dad.

Several chapters are given over to describing different aspects of life at boarding school, and what it eventually meant to her when years later she attended a school reunion. Reading had been her guide at school, her invisible thread throughout life. Quoting a verse of poetry, she says it was ‘part of the flotsam which washed around in her brain, along with all the biblical passages and hymns and the poems she had learned by heart’ (p. 86).

Most school holidays were spent in Huyton, a suburb of Liverpool, with Auntie May, the eldest sister of Helen’s large Irish family. She was their guardian. But sometimes they went to Rothbury, near Newcastle, where Lesslie came from; he had two sisters there. ‘That was the thing with our aunts’, writes Margaret, ‘They were just there. Like the weather’ (p. 179).

Auntie May’s husband had died years earlier. Of her three boys, Margaret’s cousins, two had died in the war, aged 19 and 23. Margaret found the official telegrams informing May of their deaths. The third son, John, had learning difficulties. His mother left him with friends so she could accompany Helen and the children back to India following the birth of their brother – the first time he had been left without her. The trip was to have been her big Indian holiday. But meeting them off the ship in Bombay, Lesslie had a telegram telling May that John had killed himself.

Somewhere, remembering how she missed her family at school, Margaret confesses, ‘I realise now how desolate we often were’ (p. 136). And there were occasions when the desolation was overwhelming: ‘Auntie May [...] she was Lot’s wife, frozen in grief and looking back for her



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husband, for her dead boys, the cousins I never knew, killed in the war' (p. 196). Eventually Auntie May went into a home ('Another misnomer!'), where she shared a room with two other women. As soon as Margaret arrived to visit her for the first time she asked, 'Are we going home now?' And then a few minutes later, 'Are we going home now?' (p. 207).

Margaret's father, she tells us, 'was the most important person in her world', and yet,

He had been an absent presence through so much of her life. [...] If he was there, sometimes after lunch he would go to the big black piano, lift the lid and say 'Only for a moment' as he sat down to play. [...] Someone had sent him the music for the songs from the Disney film of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, so [...] they knew all the songs by heart. [...] Play, "I like to dance and tap my feet", they would say and then they'd sing as loudly as they could, dancing round and stamping their feet, being dwarves. [...] 'That's all now. Bye bye, my dears', Daddy would put down the piano lid, give them a quick kiss. Then he would disappear 'to the villages' for several days [...]. His coming and going had been the rhythm of her early childhood. (pp. 185 f.)

This passage illustrates the nature of the void at the heart of what was otherwise a very loving relationship between Margaret and her parents. When she and Alison started boarding school, she remembers 'the general confusion of that first year of being "back home", where every landmark of her life had disappeared' (p. 134). At school in England, they were deprived of their parents' presence for five years at a time, with only a weekly letter from Helen to fill the gap. The void is central to *Home Is Where* though the girls disguised it at the time: 'We wanted to make everything okay for Mum and Dad, of course, as children do. We knew they loved us and so we had to protect them from the truth of the hurt they did us' (p. 141) I wonder whether writing her story in the third person – 'that little girl who is me and not me' (p. 24) – wasn't a way to evade the pain of remembering her father's absence in her life.

Her Daddy constantly leaving them to disappear 'to the villages' left Margaret bereft in India. Later he would visit the girls during school holidays at their aunts' for a couple of days in between international engagements which brought him to England. Then he would be off again.



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For his part, in *Unfinished Agenda* (1985) he describes his ‘feelings of relief and happiness when I could escape to the work in the villages’ – which was his first mission field in Kanchipuram – and his commitment to spreading the Gospel amongst the Dalits, the untouchables, in the villages. That was what he had come to India for: *The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation*, as John R. Mott put it (1900). It was the vocation the Student Christian Movement had instilled in him in the 1930s. It was urgent. How to make time for the needs of a young family alongside that? Margaret remembers a school debate in which she proposed the motion that ‘missionaries should not have children’ (p. 139). In fact, when he preached on the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination, he apologised from the pulpit to his family who, he said, had borne the burden of his ministry.

Margaret had all Lesslie’s sheet music, bound in cheap cardboard in the bazaar, and would get it out and play it sometimes. ‘His sayings and songs rose to her lips with her grandchildren as they had with her children. “Oopsie diddley dandy dee”’ (p. 194). Sometimes she slips into passages of beautiful prose – a memory of walking in the hills above Rothbury with her Dad:

she had inherited from him her love of the hills, her delight in wild places [...] The heather was just over, but the hills were still dark purple and smelled honey-sweet. There were bronze glints in the bracken. The valley below them was green in the late afternoon sun which caught the meanders of the river. (p. 194)

– or of the day they scattered Alison’s ashes on the Thames: ‘It was a blue May morning, a lover’s morning, hey ding-a-ding-a-ding. The water glinted and dazzled’ (p. 229).

‘He was, of course, a patriarch. Was that why she had become a feminist?’ (p. 190). Alison had raged at his absences, at being abandoned, the sense that she, they, were not as important as those others, known and unknown, who claimed his time, his attention, and his love. But for Margaret, her Dad was the most important person in her world. She describes how she struggled with tears of rage and sorrow after a churchman she didn’t know (and who her father didn’t seem to know either) had come into the hospital ward where Lesslie lay dying and taken



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her place by his bedside. So she wasn't there when he died later that night and her last words to him remained unspoken.

Towards the end of the book Margaret says how some lines of poetry from the last verse of a poem by Blake kept coming back to her: *Broken Love*.

*And throughout all Eternity
I forgive you, you forgive me.* (p. 197)

Do they complete the sentence and frame the question of her memoir? – *Home Is Where*. Do they resolve her sense of loss and longing? Remembering the couplet, she sits for a moment in silence, her father 'vivid to her as on that last walk in his beloved hills' (p. 197).

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Steve Bruce, *British Gods: Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), pp. xvi + 282, ISBN 978-0198854111. £25.00

Steve Bruce, a sociologist based at the University of Aberdeen, has written extensively on religion and spirituality. His primary purpose in writing *British Gods* is to defend the hypothesis that the British people are becoming increasingly secular. He has collected and compiled a large amount of data and evidence covering many years and demonstrates his point well. This work will likely be of value to those interested in the trend towards secularisation of society. However, in this review I intend to examine the book with respect to the value it holds for committed Christians. From this perspective, the book will interest those looking for an outsider's view of religion in Britain.

It is helpful to allow Bruce's own words speak for how his book is structured:

This book has two overlapping structures: a series of places and a series of themes. Most chapters start by documenting the changes

