



Reviews

T *John and Donald Baillie: Transatlantic Theology*, George Newlands, Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang Publishers, 2002, pp.451, £39.00, ISBN 3-906768-41-4

With the publication of this significant book George Newlands performs an important service in relation to Scottish theology. For he reminds us of the virtues and the strengths of what has been termed the 'evangelical-liberal' approach to theology that characterised the Baillies' work. In this sense Newlands continues to mine the seam so successfully pursued in David Fergusson's earlier edited collection of essays concerning the Baillies entitled *Christ, Church and Society*. But whereas that volume represented a series of 'takes' on the Baillies by former friends, colleagues and some younger theologians, this book is the work of one mind engaging with the whole range of the Baillie's *oeuvre*. Moreover, George Newlands has had privileged access to the Baillie archive material and as such he has been able to draw on the personal and private thoughts of the Baillies as revealed to friends and colleagues in letters and diaries, as well as the published works. This gives the book an intensely personal flavour and a real insight into the spirit of the age, even if one occasionally hopes that there is no-one still living who might be discomfited by some of the more personal revelations. The book concludes with an extensive listing of entries from John Baillie's diaries and letters that functions as a sort of invitation to further and more detailed study.

John and Donald Baillie were of course massive figures in the pre- and immediately post-war theological scene in Scotland. John, in particular, could rightly claim to be a figure of international standing given his influence in America and his contacts with many of the leading thinkers of the day – Niebuhr, Brunner, Barth, McKay, Van Dusen and Bultmann. Newlands succeeds in showing just how influential and well-regarded John Baillie was at this time. And he traces well the development in John's thought through the crisis of the thirties and forties and in particular the ways in which he tried to wrestle



– not always successfully - with the impact of Barth on the theological scene.

The extracts from letters and diaries and the detailed account of conferences and meetings serve to show also the ecclesial and institutional influence that both brothers had at that time. Both within the Church of Scotland and throughout the wider world the Baillies were significant figures on the ecumenical scene (John, indeed an early President of the WCC).

Donald's enduring reputation rests of course almost wholly on *God Was in Christ* and it is salutary to consider how this book continues to excite interest among scholars when much of John's work is almost completely neglected by contemporary theologians. Newlands, however, everywhere shows the close connection between the thought of the two brothers and, in particular, the similarities of *God Was in Christ* with John's earlier foray into christology.

One of the undoubted highlights of this book is that its use of letters and diaries, in tandem with the published works, introduces you to the spirit of an age now long forgotten. It leaves one wistfully lamenting a time when Scottish culture, (and in particular the often much maligned specifically presbyterian culture of Scotland), effortlessly produced thinkers, ministers and writers of grace, clarity and deep humanity. Newlands' opening chapter' – describing the formative years of the Baillies – follows an earlier essay by Alec Cheyne in brilliantly evoking the unique amalgam that was Scottish culture in that period. The description of the integrity and seriousness of the Highland Free Church tradition, tempered with the liberal and humanistic inclination of the Scottish educational process, exemplified at its best by Inverness Royal Academy and the University of Edinburgh, leaves one lamenting the present state of Scottish education and culture - both secular and religious.

Nevertheless, despite the fine points of this book (and there are many), one wanted Newlands to engage more directly with the relevance of the Baillies for today. He clearly thinks that their outlook was and is

important, for he tells us so on many occasions. Yet, we wait for him to engage at a level that goes beyond simply describing the importance of the Baillies work to the actual demonstration of its relevance and applicability today. Chapter Eight of the book is where he surely attempts to do this, but it is perhaps too brief and tantalising to tell us much. On page 316f. Newlands tells us the direction that an evangelical liberal theology would have to take, but states that, 'this is not the place to rehearse the outline of such an approach', and refers us onward to his latest book *Generosity and the Christian Future*. However, this reader for one would have liked to see Newlands engage directly point by point with the central themes of John and Donald Baillie's work. At times he comes close to doing this and useful and engaging insights are thus produced. More of this type of assessment would have been welcome. Such a sympathetic close engagement by someone who is a significant contemporary theologian in his own right would have usefully teased out the enduring qualities of the Baillies' approach to theology and situated it *vis à vis* the sometimes more obviously radicalised accounts of orthodoxy that are prevalent today. It would also, I venture, have teased out some of the systematic and connected strands of Newland's own approach to theology which are otherwise understated and scattered throughout his various books.

Newlands clearly believes that the 'evangelical-liberal' school of theology still has something to offer to the theological community today, but he would have to admit that that view runs counter to the tenor and tone of much that passes for contemporary theology. A Newlands' retrieval and reworking of the Baillie heritage is something that would have been worth pursuing – and it would have made this very good account of the Baillies in their own time an original an important contribution to this one.

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