

slaves to create spheres of dignity. And, as the historian points out, the bell that once called slaves to bend their backs in relentless labor to provide sugar for European tables today calls men, women, and children to kneel in prayer and song. The Moravian brothers and sisters in the Caribbean today are the spiritual children of Rebecca.

— Craig D. Atwood

Geoffrey and Margaret Stead, *The Exotic Plant: A History of the Moravian Church in Great Britain 1742-2000* (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2004), 383 pages plus notes, bibliography and index. 25£

Geoffrey and Margaret Stead took on the ambitious project of writing a comprehensive and professional history of the Moravian Church in England down to the present. As the Steads point out in the opening chapter of their book, the history of the Moravians in England has not been well served by historians over the past century. Earlier histories were more interested in the Moravian Church as a whole than in the history of the British Moravians themselves. In many cases, those earlier histories were too apologetic in their approach, which meant that the actual history was somewhat distorted. The Steads, in contrast, are non-Moravians who have written a sympathetic yet rigorous account of the long history of the British Province. Their research confirms rather than contradicts the recent studies of J.C.S. Mason *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England*, which was reviewed last year in *The Hinge* by David Schattschneider, and Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England 1728-1760*, but *The Exotic Plant* has a broader historical lens.

The central thesis of this book is that the Moravian Church was indeed a foreign implant in England that has only partially been anglicized through the years. Initially the church was primarily a religious fellowship for German Pietists living in England that also provided a safe haven for Moravians en route to or from the New World. Except for a few evangelists, like John Cennick, who loom large in the lore of the British Province, Moravians had difficulty adapting to the social and religious culture of England and attracting members. Even though the church did indeed adapt gradually to the British setting, its close ties with Germany always marked it as distinct and even “exotic.”

The Steads show that British Moravians gradually moved away from the German Moravian pattern and became a dissenter denomination in England with free-standing congregations served by an ordained pastor. But this in turn made it increasingly difficult for the church to survive and thrive in the 20th century. The authors note that the contemporary British Province is being forced by circumstances to adopt informal structures and creative forms of ministry that are quite similar to the original Zinzendorffian plan. The irony of this history is not always recognized.

An irony that the authors identify is that it was not until 1908 that the church officially adopted the name “Moravian Church” rather than the original “Church of United Brethren of the Augsburg Confession.” This was just six years before the outbreak of World War I when the name “Moravian” became suspect because of its association with the Hapsburg Empire (p. 127). The Steads shed light on the complex issue of using the name Moravian in several places in the book, and I hope that they will publish an article devoted to this topic in the future.

This is a well-researched and critical history rather than a triumphal one, and it can be a bit depressing to read the litany of woes after the “Golden Age” of Zinzendorf: too many small congregations, dire financial circumstances, stagnating or declining membership, petty squabbles, and repetitious calls for renewal. The province never had more than 4000 members, and the Steads show that a lack of finances and human resources had a continuous crippling effect on the province from 1753 to the present. There were always too many congregations with too few members to support full-time pastors, and there was always a tendency on the part of those pastors to blame their congregations for lack of energy and initiative.

Despite the fact that the world mission of the Moravians was the one thing that did attract admiration from the British public prior to World War II, relatively few Moravians from the British Isles actually became foreign missionaries. Likewise, for several decades Moravian schools achieved a measure of respect in England, but even the famed boarding schools were often under-funded and under-attended. The writers are to be commended for addressing such issues objectively. They do not flinch, for instance, from the fact that many British Moravians shared their countrymen’s hatred of Germans during the two world wars and that it took courageous leadership to reconcile British and German Moravians after each encounter.

The book is helpfully designed to allow readers to focus on topics of particular interest, such as Moravian education and hymnody. Some of these sections are of high quality and can stand on their own right as pieces of historical research and writing. Particularly noteworthy is the section on “Moravianism,” which charts continuity and change in Moravian beliefs and practices, particularly in their worship. Also noteworthy is the discussion on the Moravians’ small but important contribution to British ecumenism through the years.

Perhaps the most helpful aspect of the book is that it provides the details of the process by which the Moravians in England slowly turned away from many features of the Zinzendorf era while striving to maintain some of the mission of that period in a new era. Readers may be surprised to learn, for instance, that in the 1750s ordained women helped distribute the Communion elements to women (p. 201) but that women would not be ordained again until the 1970s. Or that in the 1850s it was declared that if the Brethren in 1741 thought the idea of Christ as Chief Elder meant that Christ held ecclesiastical office, then they were “mistaken” (p. 87).

In many ways, this book provides a model for the writing of the histories of each province in the Moravian Unity. It is comprehensive but does not get bogged down in the details of each congregation’s

history. It places the history of the British Moravians in their changing historical circumstances in a way that illuminates changes in the Province. Statistical information is well-researched and presented in a way that illustrates rather than bores the reader. Most important, it offers a helpful insight into the character and ministry of the church today. Many sections would have benefited by more comparative analysis with developments in the wider Moravian world, particularly the American provinces; however, such comparative study can be left to other scholars who will no doubt value the solid research and lucid writing of the Steads.

— *Craig D. Atwood*

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