

# Papers of John Nelson Darby

**Reference code:** JND

**Title:** Papers of John Nelson Darby

**Dates of creation:** 1800–1882

**Held at:** The University of Manchester, The John Rylands University Library

**Extent:** 1.5 linear metres

**Extent:** 14 boxes

**Extent:** 617 items.

**Physical condition:** Many items in this collection are in poor physical condition.

**Name of creator:** John Nelson Darby

**Level of Description:** fonds

**Language:** English

**Published by:** John Rylands University Library

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## Biographical history

John Nelson Darby was one of the founder members of what later became known as the Plymouth Brethren. When the latter split in 1848, he went on to become the first leader of the 'Exclusive Brethren'. He was a noted biblical scholar whose doctrinal system was adopted well beyond the confines of the Brethren, and is a seminal influence on present day Christian fundamentalism, particularly that in America.

John Nelson Darby was born on 18th November 1800. His father John Darby was a wealthy merchant, who inherited the family home of Leap Castle in King's County, Ireland in 1824.

Darby was educated at Westminster School, and Trinity College Dublin, where he studied classics, and was awarded a coveted gold medal on graduation in 1819. From here he pursued a career at law, being first admitted to the King's Inn, Dublin and later to Lincoln's Inn, London. However, the law did not suit his temperament, and his spiritual leanings inclined him towards the Anglican Church. Despite his father's disapproval, he was ordained as a deacon of the Church of Ireland in 1825 and as a priest in 1826. He became the curate of an isolated rural parish in County Wicklow.

Darby was not to remain long in the Anglican Church; a mixture of pragmatic disillusion and spiritual differences together forced him out. In Ireland the activities of Archbishop Magee in the mid-1820s generated a controversy with the Catholic Church, culminating in his demand that each convert from Catholicism swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. This was anathema to Darby: it was contrary to the heavenly focus required of the church, and analogous to the worst features of Roman

Catholicism; he published a polemical pamphlet critical of Magee and his supporters. At around the same time, Darby was involved in a riding accident and retired to his sister's homes in Delgaty and Dublin to convalesce. During his convalescence he underwent a spiritual experience, which was to alter his attitude to the church and to the ministry, and have important long term consequences. It was here that his High Church phase ended; he arrived at the conclusion that spiritual authority rested ultimately with scripture rather than the church, embraced a literal biblical hermeneutic, and came to a new awareness of his relationship to Christ. He developed a particular interest in the history of the early church, which led him to question the notion of an Established Church, and moved towards recognition of the 'priesthood of all believers'. His study of scripture also led him to reflect anew on Biblical prophecy and to conclude that God's promises to the Christian church were different to those made to the nation of Israel.

Whilst in Dublin, Darby was present at the meetings of a group of individuals, including Francis Hutchinson, Edward Cronin, Anthony Norris Groves, and J.G. Bellett, whose gatherings are generally regarded as marking the beginning of what would later be known to the world as the Plymouth Brethren.

Darby visited Switzerland in the late 1830s, where his fascination with the continental *réveil* enabled him to develop his ideas further, in particular his notion of the 'church in ruins'. His influence led to a call for secession, and the establishment of groups of *Darbistes* in France and Switzerland. He returned to England in 1845 following a revolution in Switzerland. Here he came into conflict with Benjamin Wills Newton, who had come to dominate the Plymouth assembly of Brethren. Differences over eschatology, accusations of Newton's Christological heresy, disagreement over the authority of teachers and the nature of open worship, mixed with a general atmosphere of personal mistrust, led to the historic schism which created the Open and Exclusive branches of the Brethren movement. Darby's insistence on the need to separate and ostracise all who had been in contact with the 'evil' represented by Newton and his followers, cemented the division. Darby was to become the dominant figure among the Exclusive Brethren, who were to continue to subdivide over the years.

Darby travelled and preached widely, and was influential in the development of the Brethren movement in Germany, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. However his influence and importance are much more widespread than the Brethren movement, which was to remain a relatively small offshoot of Protestantism. Darby was a biblical scholar, he was proficient in a variety of languages including ancient Greek and Latin, and translated the Bible into English, French and German. He produced popular synopses of the Bible and voluminous polemical writings on biblical subjects. As well as his distinctive eschatological views in which he popularised the idea of the 'rapture' of true believers at the point of Christ's return, he developed a dispensational interpretation of the Bible. This analysed the relationship between God and mankind in terms of distinct dispensations or epochs, with marked changes and transformations occurring following pivotal events. This interpretation proved to be a useful way of overcoming contradictions and discrepancies within the Bible. It was adopted and developed further in the early twentieth century by C.S. Scofield who produced a highly popular and influential series of reference and study Bibles. Through this medium, Darby became one of the most influential forces

shaping the character and form of modern day American fundamentalist Christianity. Most of those describing themselves as 'premillennial dispensationalists' can trace the modern roots of their ideas to Darby.

Darby died in Bournemouth on 29 April 1882.

## **Scope and content**

The collection contains much valuable information relating to the life and activities of Darby between his birth in 1800 and his death in 1882. There is a scrapbook of personal documents and ephemera containing certificates, letters, and personal memorabilia concerning important events and activities in his life. There are numerous notebooks containing detailed notes by Darby on Biblical subjects, some of which have been published. There are notes on lectures and sermons by various Brethren activists, including C. McAdam, J.B. Stoney, C.E. Stuart, and C. Stanley. There are also notebooks containing copies of Darby's letters to a variety of correspondents, including Dr. Neatby and C.H. Mackintosh.

There is a four volume set of Darby's personal New Testament in Greek. This has been rebound into a larger volume with blank pages in which Darby has written detailed commentary on many passages. There are extensive notes throughout, including invaluable personal testament (as at II Timothy 3 where Darby relates his conversion experience). There is a copy of Darby's personal Bible in English, which contains lined pages, some of which contain Darby's commentary. There is an extensive set of unbound notes on lectures and readings by prominent Brethren individuals including J.N. Darby, J. Willans, J.G. Bellett, W. Trotter, G.V. Wigram, C.H. Macintosh and W.H. Dorman. Finally, the collection contains over 300 letters. These mainly consist of correspondence sent to Darby, including letters from, among others, John Adams, E. Bennett, E.L. Bevir, Edward Cronin, George James Deck, F.W. Grant, J. Hennessey, Harrison J. Jull, William Kelly, C.H. Macintosh, Thomas Neatby, Benjamin Wills Newton, and Edward Wooton. It also contains draft copies of Darby's own letters.

In sum the collection is an invaluable resource for anyone studying Darby's life and thought. It contains much material on the early history of the Brethren movement, and is particularly useful for anyone wishing to understand the divisions among nineteenth century Brethren. Most correspondence from Darby has been published, but not the correspondence to him contained in this collection. It is an important resource for anyone studying the ideas of the Exclusive Brethren, or wanting to understand the roots of modern fundamentalist Christianity.

## **Arrangement**

Organised into five series, representing the physical form of the collection and the order in which the items were received. The principles of provenance and original order have been followed as far as possible. There is no way of knowing if the order represents the initial arrangement of the materials. The letters were arranged in rough alphabetical order by correspondent, with the exception of a number of separated items at the beginning and end of the collection. This order has been maintained. The

latter items possibly formed the basis of a separate collection; photocopies of these letters formed part of a larger collection of photocopied letters relating to Darby (apparently of the same provenance as the letters included here), in the John Rylands University Library, and organised in a separate alphabetical sequence.

## Organization

The collection has been arranged into the following series:

- JND/1 Scrapbooks
- JND/2 Notebooks and notes
- JND/3 Annotated Bibles
- JND/4 Unbound papers containing bundles of notes from lectures and readings
- JND/5 Correspondence

## Archival history

The J.N. Darby collection was formerly in the possession of Henry Sibthorpe of Redruth, Cornwall and for some years in the Stichting Archief voor de Kerkgeschiedenis in De Bilt (later Vaassen), Netherlands, before transfer to the present Archive in June 2002. The papers were originally bequeathed by Darby in his will to Farnham Chidley Close among the residue of Darby's 'other property and effects', after bequest of his 'books and papers' to C. McAdam, J.B. Stoney, and A.H. Burton. Close gave them to Major Humphrey of St. Ives, Cornwall, who gave them to the maternal grandfather of Henry Sibthorpe, who in due course received them in bequest from his mother.

Photocopies of Darby's correspondence were held in the Christian Brethren Archive prior to the donation of the originals to the Archive. These were arranged in a card index, and numbered CBA 5540 (1) - CBA 5540 (534). The cards were also sorted thematically, and each group photocopied onto A4 paper. These photocopies were placed into a bound handlist (CBA H2), which was widely used by Brethren scholars. In this finding aid (produced in 1983 by Susan N. Noble) the correspondence was rearranged into the following categories:

- J.N. Darby's advice on scriptural passages
- J.N. Darby's views on Brethren doctrine; J.N. Darby's writings
- Assemblies in Great Britain - news of Brethren meetings and controversies:
  - London and South East England - mainly relating to the Ramsgate-Ryde division
  - South West England
  - East Anglia
  - Northern England
  - Scotland
  - Ireland
- Brethren activity abroad:
  - France and Italy - mainly relating to the work of E.L. Bevir
  - Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands

- USA and Canada - mainly relating to the work of F.W. Grant and R.T. Grant
- Australia and New Zealand - mainly relating to the work of J.G. Deck
- Miscellaneous subjects and items

The photocopy collection contains copies of letters not included in this collection. The whereabouts of the photocopied items not included here is not known

## **Immediate source of acquisition**

Stichting Archief voor de Kerkgeschiedenis in De Bilt (later Vaassen), Netherlands

## **Restrictions on access**

The collection is open to any accredited reader.

## **Restrictions on use**

The collection is open to any accredited reader

## **Existence and location of copies**

Photocopies are filed at the following location: CBA 5440. See Archival History for details. Present Truth Publishers, 274 East Veterans Highway, Jackson, NJ 08527, USA, also have photocopy reproductions of the letters.

## **Other finding aids**

There is a card index relating to photocopies of the correspondence collection. The card index has also been rearranged thematically, photocopied and reproduced as a handlist: *The Christian Brethren Archive, Papers Relating to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882)*(Manchester, 1983). The contents of this handlist have been outlined under Archival History.

## **Bibliography**

James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977)

Jonathan D. Burnham, *A story of conflict: the controversial relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004)

Tim Grass, *Gathering to his name: the story of the open brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006)

Ernest R. Sandeen, *The roots of fundamentalism: British and American millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970)

Timothy C.F. Stunt, 'John Nelson Darby (1800–1882)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Timothy C.F. Stunt, 'John Nelson Darby: contexts and perceptions', in Crawford Gribben and Andrew R. Holmes (eds.), *Protestant millennialism, evangelicalism, and Irish society, 1790-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

M.S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: a biography* (NJ: Neptune, 1992)

## Preferred Citation

Papers of John Nelson Darby (JND/1 etc.), John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester.

## Archivist's Note

An extensive boxlist of the collection (excluding correspondence) was produced by David Brady in 2002.

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## Index terms

### Personal Name

Bellett John Gifford 1795–1864 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Bevir Edward Lawrence 1847–1922 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Cronin Edward 1801–1882 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Darby John Nelson 1800–1882 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Deck James George 1807–1884 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Dorman William Henry 1802–1878 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Hall Percy Francis 1804–1884 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Jeckell George fl. 1846–1872 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Jull Harrison J fl. 1879–1881 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Kelly William 1821–1906 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Macintosh Charles Henry 1820–1906 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Magee William 1766–1831 Archbishop of Dublin  
McAdam Christopher fl. 1858–1881 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Neatby Thomas 1835–1911 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Newton Benjamin Wills 1807–1899 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Pennefather Edward 1773–1847 Chief Justice of the Queen's Bench and Privy Councillor  
Powerscourt Theodosia Wingfield 1800–1836 née Howard, 2nd wife of 5th Viscount Powerscourt  
Stoney James Butler 1814–1897 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Trotter William 1818–1865 Associated with Christian Brethren  
Wigram George Vicesimus 1805–1879 Writer and lexicographer Associated with Christian Brethren  
Willans John fl. 1844–1868 Associated with Christian Brethren

### Place Name

Bournemouth (Hampshire)  
Bristol (Gloucestershire)  
Broadstairs (Kent)  
Calary (County Wicklow, Ireland)  
Croydon (Surrey)  
Dublin (Ireland)  
Kennington (Kent)  
Leap Castle (Kings County, Ireland)  
Ryde (Isle of Wight)  
Ramsgate (Kent)  
Toronto (Canada)

**Subject**

Christianity  
Christian Theology  
Plymouth Brethren  
Religion  
Religious History  
Religious Groups  
Schism

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**Reference code:** JND/1

**Scrapbooks**

**Dates of creation:** 1800-1882

**Extent:** Single volume

**Physical Condition:** Very poor, foxing, paper crumbling around edges and pages loose.

**Language:** English, German, French and Greek. English unless otherwise stated.

**Scope and Content**

Contains letters, certificates, newspaper cuttings, tickets and other ephemera relating to the life of Darby. Most items have been pasted into the scrapbook. There is also a copy of Darby's will, which has become separated from the scrapbook.

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**Reference code:** JND/1/1

**Scrapbook of personal documents relating to the life of J.N.  
Darby**

**Extent:** 50 items.

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**Reference code:** JND/1/1/1

**Letter**





































































































































































































































































































































































































































