William K. Kay

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William K. Kay’s career has seen him hold positions ranging from Pentecostal seminary to chairs of theology at universities in both England and Wales and for more than two decades he has published extensively in areas that relate to the doctorates he possesses in both theology and education. In short, Kay boasts an academic resume few Pentecostals in the British Isles can match. For this endeavour he has collaborated with CPT Press, an arm of the Centre for Pentecostal Theology residential library based in Cleveland, Tennessee, whose stated aim is to facilitate “the conception, birth and maturation of constructive Pentecostal Theology across the theological disciplines” (http://www.pentecostaltheology.org/Home.html). All of this augurs well for the first full-length account of the life and ministry of George Jeffreys (1889–1962), a native of Wales and revivalist of some repute during the early decades of the 20th century. To date he has been the subject of memoirs and chronicles of modest proportions, but as the denomination he was instrumental in founding has recently marked a centenary of activity, it seems both timely and apposite that Kay would undertake to present the fullest account yet of the singular role played by this pioneer of British Pentecostalism. Indeed, those already attuned to such things may have found themselves salivating at the prospect and wondering if this might even prove to be the *magnum opus* of Kay’s notable career.

Yet it is not without reason that the life and ministry of Jeffreys have remained insufficiently documented. It is no small undertaking to provide an historical biography of this fascinating but complex man and to do so in a manner which would ideally engage both a general readership, as well as inform a more academic constituency, represents a challenge to which few have attempted to rise. Kay’s answer is to present us with something of a behemoth which stretches close to 450 pages of text and, on that basis alone, is not for the faint-hearted. Building on previous accounts, magazines of the movement, correspondence between key players and officials, minutes of meetings and conference reports, he has constructed an edifice which takes the reader on a journey from the non-conformist world of 1890s Wales, to the social and spiritual challenges of post-war Britain via evangelistic campaigning, clashes of religious charisma and bureaucracy, miraculous occurrence, strange doctrine, and frequently indecipherable motives and machinations.

It may be helpful to conceive of the volume as covering three phases, the first of which relates to Jeffreys’s background and early years. Here the picture
emerges of a promising young lad, who although having received only limited educational opportunities, appeared to those around him to be eager, earnest, and liable to make a success of whatever life might put in his path. Where gaps exist in knowledge, and they are considerable, Kay offers informed supposition which is generally plausible and convincing. The context of the religious life of Wales, the early years of the Pentecostal movement in Britain and Jeffreys’s fledgling evangelism in Ireland are set out in a clear, lucid fashion helpfully supported by selective available scholarship and primary sources. Kay wears his academic credentials lightly and seemingly effortlessly; the narrative moves forward into the 1920s and, as momentum grows for Jeffreys’ campaigning, readers will find themselves captivated by a heady optimism that seems to drift from the pages.

What could be conceived as the second phase of the book approximates to the “golden years” where, to borrow from David Bowie, the nights were warm and the days were young for Jeffreys and the burgeoning Elim movement. Travelling with his trusted Revival Party, he took his distinctive brand of Gospel presentation across mainland Britain to considerable effect. Elim’s magazine, the Evangel, reported souls saved and medical conditions healed in the capital as well as across “major provincial cities” (133). Stirring scenes are recounted such as the occasion in 1927 when several hundred Elim supporters travelled by train from Carlisle near the Scottish border to support a campaign in Glasgow. Jeffreys, according to a contemporary participant, was “skillfully piloted” in his Chrysler car as he lead a procession through the streets while “the saints of God” marched solemnly toward the venue attracting attention from passers-by as they chanted “songs of Zion” (156–157). The Elim Foursquare Gospel Demonstration held at the London’s Royal Albert Hall in the same year represented something of a pinnacle of attainment. Reports featured a much vaunted telegram exchange with the King, services which saw hundreds encounter the waters of baptism, afternoons devoted to the teaching and practice of healing, evenings where communion was observed on a vast scale. Having witnessed his methods first hand, Donald Gee was apt to conclude that Jeffreys’s platform personality “was at times magnetic,” while he possessed “a voice like music with sufficient Welsh intonation to add an inimitable charm” (130). For revivalist and loyal following alike, these intoxicating days seem to have echoed the sentiment: Bliss it was in that down to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.

Yet a more appraising inspection will encounter questions relating to methodology as well as historiography. Kay relies extensively on the accounts published in the Evangel magazine as well as a 1928 account George Jeffreys: A Ministry of the Miraculous (London: Elim Publishing Office, 1928). Penned by insider and collaborator with the Revival Party, E.C.W. Boulton, this chroni-