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The Significance of J. G. Deck 1807–1884

by Peter J. Lineham

It is now a good ten years since I completed the text of *There we found Brethren*, a history of the Brethren assemblies of New Zealand. When I began I wondered whether I would find enough original sources, especially for the earliest period. That story belonged to the Exclusive Brethren rather than the Open Brethren, and consequently access to information seemed likely to be restricted. I quickly found that my fears were misplaced. In the first place a group as isolated in New Zealand society as the Exclusive Brethren had a remarkably long collective memory of events more than a century old, but they have recently excommunicated more than a few people with family links to those early days. I also found that there were printed materials available, which had been recorded to justify one side or the other in the traumatic history of the Brethren. Reading between the lines I was able to reconstruct long forgotten events. No other aspect of the story engrossed me more than the unhappy tale of the man who founded and tried to hold together the Brethren in New Zealand. James G. Deck was doubly fascinating, because he was one of the few New Zealanders who had close links with the first generation of English Brethren. Yet in his story I was conscious of many gaps; of tracts referred to but lost; of hints of disputes which could not be easily understood.

Over the past ten years I have continued the search. Little by little new details emerged. Now the discoveries have become so extensive that the story be told with more confidence and more detail. Of the several discoveries the most exciting was the correspondence of Deck with the great leader of the Exclusive Brethren, J. N. Darby. Copies of these and many other letters have been deposited in the Christian Brethren Archives at the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester, and I must acknowledge the help of the curator, Dr David Brady, in locating and copying these for me. I had already deduced from Darby's published correspondence which were the letters probably written to Deck. It is now possible to see the relationship from both sides. Information from the Deck family, and other books, newspapers and church records fill out the story I originally told, and make it an account of a peculiarly interesting life.

James George Deck was one of the first Brethren in New Zealand, and has good claims to be regarded as the founder of both the open and exclusive assemblies in this country. The orientation of the Brethren in New Zealand seemed for a while to be in his hands. Deck was a man haunted by his past, a past that included the deep division which had riven the Brethren movement in England. This biographical study of Deck also shows how the divisions of the English Brethren were extended to New Zealand impinging deeply on the founder's life and reflected in the rifts within his own family. It is hard for outsiders to understand how someone of the character of Deck could have made the choice to be part of the Exclusive Brethren. The aim of this study is to elucidate his choice.

James George Deck was born on 1 November 1807, in Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk.¹ His family had a Huguenot ancestry, and had left France at some stage before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They had settled in the south of England and, like many Huguenots, merged easily into respectable society. One branch of the family farmed in Norfolk, but Deck's father John, who was born in 1781, was postmaster in Bury. He must have been a wealthy man, and had been Mayor of the town, reflecting his Tory politics, which were very popular in that part of the country. Indeed his son aspired at one point to go higher than his father and become Member of Parliament for Bury.²

Naturally the family were dutiful members of the Church of England, and seem to have had some contact with evangelicals. While neither of the two Bury parish churches had a known evangelical incumbent, Charles Simeon's influence at Cambridge had spread interest in "serious Christianity", Bible reading and missionary work. Deck later recalled that his mother was devout, and all her children eventually made professions of faith. James' younger sister, Mary Jane, later gained recognition as a hymn writer, and her compositions included "Jesus, I will trust Thee". She married the Rev. Dr Walker, a clergyman and hymn book editor from the evangelical heartland of Cheltenham who later helped to make Deck's hymns known to a wider audience.³

James was the eldest child and his father, ambitious that his son enter the professional world, sent him to Paris to train as a military cadet, possibly at the *Ecole Militaire*. When he graduated at the age of seventeen, his father purchased a commission for him as lieutenant in the 14th Madras Native Infantry of the East India Company, which at this time controlled India under conditions set by Act of Parliament at Westminster. He served in India for two terms, from 1824 to 1826 and from 1830 to 1835.⁴ Deck was from the beginning an exemplary young officer. The Indian Army had some pious commanders, and Deck is known to have written out good resolutions and signed them with his own blood. In 1826 a severe attack of cholera brought his first term in India to an end and he returned to England. His sister Clara took the opportunity to take him to hear a sermon by an evangelical clergyman. As a result he was converted and decided to seek ordination in the Anglican ministry. He therefore took a place at the private college based in the vicarage of the Rev. Samuel Feild at Hatherleigh in the Dartmoor region of Devon. In this period it was usual for ordination to follow completion of a degree at Oxford or Cambridge, but this was expensive, and few evangelicals found the universities a congenial environment. It is possible that Deck's father refused to support him at university, or that Deck was attracted to a more evangelical training. Samuel Feild was a prominent second generation evangelical Anglican. Two sons followed him into the ministry, two of his daughters married clergymen, and his brother was to become Bishop of Newfoundland.

I am grateful to all who have assisted in the research and writing of this study, among them the late Doug Trewavas, Robin Sides, Mrs W. D. Dron, Winsome Harding, Warwick Tyler, David Brady and Ron Deck. The copies of letters and pamphlets used in this study and not available in New Zealand will be deposited in the Assembly Archives in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

- 1 S. J. Deck in *Chief Men among the Brethren*, 2 edn., London, 1931, p 36.
- 2 *Ibid*, p 37; MS typescript from Ron Deck: "Some Details of the life of Dr. John Feild Deck", p 1; J. Julian (ed.), *Dictionary of Hymnology*, London, 1908, p 1231; A. E. Salisbury, *After Many More Days*, Paekakeriki, 1971, p 12.
- 3 *Chief Men among the Brethren*, p 36; Julian, p 1231; J. G. Deck, "To my Mother", *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 2 edn., London, 1889, pp 198–200.
- 4 *Chief Men among the Brethren*, p 37.

Feild was appointed Headmaster of Westbury College, near Bristol, in 1830, and here his pupils included the founder of the Mildmay Conference, the Rev. William Pennefather.⁵ Yet Deck did not receive ordination. Possibly he was a victim of the vindictiveness of Henry Philpotts, who after his consecration as Bishop of Exeter in 1830, made the lives of evangelicals and low churchmen in the diocese extremely uncomfortable. Nevertheless Deck's residence in the Feild home had a happy outcome, for on 22 April 1829 he married Feild's daughter Alicia, who was a year younger than him.

Shortly after their marriage the couple returned to India. Deck joined the 15th Native Infantry at Bangalore, and he and his wife lived nearby. There Deck determined to make a clear stand as a Christian. He encouraged his brother George who had also joined the army and was stationed at Ahmednugger, in the same stand. George too married a clergyman's daughter.⁶ It was a time of spiritual awakening among the English in India. Henry [= Anthony Norris] Groves, the pioneer missionary and great advocate of apostolic simplicity, moved from Baghdad to Bombay in 1833, and remained there until 1835. While there is no direct evidence that he met Groves, Deck was friendly with Henry Young, a judge in the Bombay Residency who had been in India since 1822, and was the third son of Sir Samuel Young. The subsequent behaviour of Young and Deck and Young's later links with Open Brethren suggest that they had been inspired by Groves' call in his little book *Christian Devotedness* for Christians to abandon worldly security and thus experience the grace of God in its fullness. In 1834 Young resigned from his position and refused to accept the pension to which he was entitled. Others took the same stand. J. G. Deck was troubled in his conscience about whether a Christian could be a soldier, and so he resigned from the position his father had purchased for him.⁷

Consequently James Deck returned to England in 1835 with his wife and the two children born to them in India, Samuel John, born in 1832, and Mary Alicia, born in 1833. They went back to Hatherleigh to his father-in-law's vicarage where their third child, John Feild Deck, was born on 5 July 1835. Deck had decided to seek ordination once again, but his intentions were again thwarted, this time by qualms of conscience. Samuel Feild was troubled by Baptists in the parish, and he pre-emptorily dismissed the Baptist scriptural arguments. His son-in-law now took nothing for granted, and as he studied the Baptist literature he did not know how to refute it. To his wife he confessed: "I have left the army to become a clergyman, but now see that the church of England is contrary to the Word of God; what shall we do?" Alicia was very clear about the answer. "Whatever you believe to be the will of God, do it at any cost", she told him.

There proved to be a very high cost. Forty-five years later Deck recalled: "If ever with singleness of eye and heart I sought to know and do the will of God, it was when at the cost of every thing I learnt *baptism*".⁸ Both the Deck and Feild families were loyal to the establishment in church and state. When James and Alicia were re-baptised as believers and sought fellowship with Christians motivated by similar desires, they were forsaking

5 *Dictionary of National Biography*, London, 1882–1903, vol xviii, p 286; *Life and Letters of the Rev. William Pennefather*, 4 edn., n. d., pp 4–11; J. Feild Deck, p 1.

6 Eastbourne: Ron Deck: MS Letter, G. Deck to J. G. Deck, 27 June 1830.

7 *Chief Men among the Brethren*, p 37; F. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, London & Edinburgh, n. d., pp 12–13; *In Memoriam: Emily Baring Deck*, South Seas Evangelical Mission, 1915, pp 3–4; H. H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren*, London & Glasgow, 1967, pp 195–7.

8 Manchester: John Rylands Library, Christian Brethren Archives (hereinafter CBA) 5540 (380), J. G. Deck to J. N. Darby, 15 May 1881; *Chief Men among the Brethren*, p 37.

the expectations of life and position which they could reasonably aspire to, and consequently they were bound to strain their family bonds. For them the compensation was the new fellowship which they now experienced, for across the West Country since about 1832 significant numbers of people had been turning in the same direction. They were influenced by a movement for radical reformation of the church which had surfaced in Dublin in the late 1820s, and was known as the Brethren, because it rejected any organisation or structure not found in the New Testament. The leaders of the Brethren were mostly Calvinist evangelical Anglicans who disliked the growing caution and denominationalism of the second generation of Evangelical Anglican clergy, and advocated a more absolute discipleship. If Deck had met Henry [= Anthony Norris] Groves in India this might have influenced his decision, for in 1835 Groves also returned to England. Another possibility is that Deck had met some of the lay preachers who earned the name “Plymouth Brethren” when they itinerated from Plymouth. The assembly in Raleigh Street, Plymouth, had commenced through the preaching of a former ordinand, G. V. Wigram, two former clergy, J. L. Harris and Henry Borlase, and Captain Hall, who had resigned his commission in the army. Under the leadership of Benjamin Wills Newton, it was the key assembly in England, and the first Brethren magazine, the *Christian Witness*, was published here in 1834. Plymouth was only thirty-five miles from Hatherleigh, and thus Deck was drawn into the movement at its heart: “Plymouth in its highest days”, as he later recalled.⁹

He was no doubt attracted by the passionate conviction of these men and women from Plymouth, who were prepared to overturn almost every traditional institution of the church: the clergy, the establishment and the liturgy. He was not the only one to be attracted. The weekly unstructured services of Communion (very unlike the traditional celebrations three times a year in parish churches) were attended by several Anglican clergy in their gowns on their way to conduct services in their own parish churches. Deck was a man of deeply felt piety, and the calling to be New Testament priests, approaching Christ at his table, unaided by human rituals, awakened in him a poetic muse. He wrote some of the first hymns of the movement, which give a sense of the tone at the Raleigh Street (later Ebrington Street) assembly:

“Abba, Father!” we approach Thee
 In our Saviour’s precious name;
 We, Thy children, here assembling,
 Now the promised blessing claim.
 From our sins His blood hath washed us,
 ’T is through Him our souls draw nigh;
 And Thy Spirit too has taught us,
 “Abba, Father!” thus to cry.

At the same time he wrote other hymns now familiar to Brethren including “Lamb of God! our Souls adore Thee”, with its moving vision of Christ’s humbling path to the cross; and “Lord Jesus, are we one with Thee?”, with its exalted vision of believers’ unity with their Lord. These hymns were published in *Hymns for the Poor of the Flock*, published in 1838 and republished with an appendix in 1841. He himself edited *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs In Two Parts* in 1842, and included in it his hymn “The veil is rent. Lo!

⁹ Rowdon, pp 74–78; CBA 5540 (369): J. G. Deck to J. N. Darby, 25 September [1872], p 10.

Jesus stands". There was something mystical about the Brethren concept of worship, and Deck's own devotional spirit found this deeply attractive.¹⁰

Through his association with the Brethren, Deck was led into a new life's work. Having abandoned hopes of ordination he decided to engage in lay evangelism in villages around the coast of Devon from Plymouth including Kingston where he disturbed the loyalty to the high church parish of many farm labourers. Then he moved house to Sidmouth, and made a significant impact at the nearby villages of Colyton Raleigh and Otterton. Another mission was conducted at East Coker, near Yeovil in Somerset, and he moved house to Wellington, near Taunton, in the same county. Finally, at some point before 1850 he removed to Wyke Regis, near Weymouth. At Wellington he established a school in order to provide financial support for his ministry. Living costs must have been considerable, for his family now included eight children. In quick succession his wife gave birth in 1837 to James George (afterwards known to Exclusive Brethren as George), in 1839 to Clara Agnes, in 1840 to Sarah Rachel, in 1843 to Margaret Jane (known as Daisy), in 1845 to Fanny Harriet, in 1848 to Henry Augustus (although he lived for only five days) and in 1852 to Alice Anne Catherine. About 1846 another member of the Brethren, Henry Dyer, joined him at the school. Dyer and his brother were to remain in the area long-term, and the Yeovil Conferences organised by them were important in the evolution of the Open Brethren.¹¹

The early Brethren were committed to a radical return to the New Testament. They were far less agreed about what the Bible taught than their spiritual heirs imagine them to have been. They took several differing views about infant baptism. Expectation of the return of Christ was very important in the movement, but there was more than one interpretation of the eschatology of the Bible. Irving's views on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit interested some among them, and the appointment of elders was advocated by some and opposed by others. Yet this undoctrinaire biblicism was short-lived. When Henry [= Anthony Norris] Groves had returned from India in 1835 he noticed the growing demand for a "Brethren view" of various issues, which members were expected to adhere to. Before he departed for the East in 1836 he wrote to the man who was coming to exemplify "Brethren orthodoxy", the former Irish curate and brilliant linguist, John Nelson Darby:

I feel you have departed from those principles by which you once hoped to have effected [your purposes], and are in principle returning to the city from whence you departed ... I feel it needs but a step or two more to advance and you will see all the evils of the systems from which you profess to be separated, to spring up among yourselves. ... The transition your little bodies have undergone, in no longer standing forth the witnesses for the glorious and simple *truth*, so much as standing forth witnesses against all that they judge error, have lowered them in my apprehension from heaven to earth in their position as witnesses. ... It is into this position, dear D[arby], I feel some little flocks are fast tending, if they have not already attained it. Making *light* not *life* the measure of communion.¹²

10 Deck, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, p 3; Julian, 285–6, 898.

11 *Chief Men among the Brethren*, pp 38, 64–5; Family tree prepared by Mr Ron Deck of Eastbourne.

12 Groves to Darby, 10 March 1836, in *Memoir of Anthony Norris Groves containing extracts from his Letters and Journals*, 2 edn., London, 1857, pp 539, 540.

Groves' perspective was rare. The drift towards sectarianism was a natural progression, and Deck was not the only one who wanted final answers on biblical interpretation, and who accepted the absolutist Darbyite principle that a church could be holy only by separating from any religious movement tainted with evil. Perhaps inevitably the little assemblies of Brethren across the West Country became more and more isolated from other Christians. In consequence they became more precise about their own principles. A major difference of opinion over eschatology erupted at Plymouth, for the leading elder there, B. W. Newton, was an a-millennialist, and disagreed deeply with the pre-millennialism and belief in the pre-tribulational rapture of the church which had become the hallmark of Darby's preaching. Patterns of church life became another issue. At Darby's suggestion B. W. Newton acted as a chairman of the open services of worship at Plymouth, stemming any unprofitable ministry. In 1845 Darby returned to Plymouth from Switzerland, and now attacked Newton's role as threatening the freedom of the Spirit and his own role. His criticisms led to a split of that assembly, and by 1847 these tensions were spreading to other parts of the West Country.

It was a tragic moment for a movement committed to recognising the unity of the church. They had commenced to take sides over scriptural interpretation, and in the absence of any formal authority these schismatic tendencies quickly became endemic. In 1847 a more serious issue erupted when Darby fiercely attacked Newton's teaching that the sufferings of Christ had a non-atoning human aspect because Christ possessed Israelite racial descent. Speculations about the nature of Christ have been the cause of more convulsions in the history of the church than any other issue, and the Brethren statements tendency to fanciful exegesis of biblical phrases made them particularly vulnerable. Newton in self-defence drew attention to one of the hymns written by J. G. Deck and sung in all Brethren assemblies. In the hymn "Lord Jesus, are we one with Thee?", Deck had penned the lines:

Such was Thy grace, that for our sake,
Thou didst from heaven come down;
Our *mortal* flesh and blood partake,
In all our misery one.

He had written the hymn ten years before, to emphasise the love of Christ illustrated in his incarnation. He now cringed with embarrassment at the implication that he believed Christ was as mortal as any human, and on 14 December 1850 he published a *Confession of a Verbal Error in a Hymn*. In the collected edition of his poems the last two lines are changed to: "With us of flesh and blood partake, / And make our woes Thine own." The poetry was sacrificed for the sake of an orthodox reputation.¹³

Deck's behaviour bears witness to the growing tensions in the Brethren. It was not entirely over doctrine, for B. W. Newton soon returned to a more traditional Christology. His deviation had raised the issue of how to keep the movement free from error. Darby's doctrine of separation from evil now seemed to offer an answer. So when the assembly at Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, welcomed a visitor from the suspect Plymouth assembly who was willing to reject the heresy their reputation in Darby's eyes was destroyed. Darby considered that anyone who continued to be a member of a church with any questionable doctrines could not be received by assemblies if they wanted to remain pure. Thus

13 See W. B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, London, 1902, pp 145–6; Deck, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, p 35.

Bethesda chapel itself and other assemblies which received visitors from it were placed on a blacklist, and a divide emerged between “open” and “exclusive” Brethren, which proved to be permanent. To Open Brethren, in the words of George Chapman of Barnstaple, the exclusives were “Brethren dearly loved and longed for, whose conscience leads them to refuse my fellowship and to deprive me of theirs”.¹⁴ The Open party were at first a minority of Brethren, for the absolutism of the Brethren tended to make exclusivism appealing, and even among the Open Brethren patterns of sectarian fellowship and exclusive traditions soon emerged.

In the midst of this turmoil Deck, as a minor leader in the assemblies, was called upon to choose between separation and association. In January 1850 he issued a *Letter on Receiving or Rejecting Brethren from the Lord’s Table*. The tract evinces Deck’s deep indebtedness to the teaching of Darby and loyalty to him, but also shows his unease about Darby’s behaviour. Darby had refused to go near Bethesda chapel. Deck, who had written to Muller in 1848 and received assurances that he rejected Newton’s “fearful error”, was unhappy about Darby’s determination to force a breach: “Is this the way the Lord would have his sheep cared for by those whom he had called to watch over and feed them? ... Where ought our dear brother to have gone, but where he believed Christ’s flock were in danger, to help and deliver them?”¹⁵ Deck recalled the discussions in the early days of the movement, some fifteen years earlier, about the grounds for separating from the church of England. Darby had taught that the Church of England could not be regarded as a real church, because it was part of the establishment. But at that time Darby had admitted that there was less justification for separation from fellow-believers just because their doctrinal emphases were different. Deck accepted that caution was advisable in admitting Christians to communion, and used an interesting argument based on the treatment of sin in the seven churches in the Book of Revelation to justify his position:

Ought we not, while seeking to separate from evil, and to put away that which the Lord hates, to tremble, lest we cast out one whom he has not cast out; or to make one sad whom he has not made sad? ...

Where do we find in Scripture either the reception or rejection of whole bodies? Is not reception into fellowship an individual thing? ...

For myself I confess that I dare not act when I have no Scripture, no word of my Lord to sanction me in rejecting from his table whole companies of saints, and faithful, devoted, honoured servants of Christ, without discrimination, without solemn and patient investigation, and if there has been evil, space given for repentance. I have no heart for such work as this. I dare have no fellowship with it.

Deck was caught between his respect for Darby and his fellowship with Dyer. In his preface he lamented the bitter attacks Brethren were launching against the spirituality of one another:

a little while ago tract after tract issued from our pens, pointing out the sin of schisms and divisions among the saints of God, and the simple ground of Christian fellowship:

14 T. S. Veitch, *The Story of the Brethren Movement*, London & Glasgow, n. d., p 68.

15 Deck, *Op. cit.*, London, 1850, p iii; *Copy of a Letter from J. G. Deck of New Zealand on Vital Questions in Connection with the Glory of Christ and our Fellowship with One Another*, Bristol, 1873, p 7.

but now there is scarcely a place where table is not set up *against* table, while tract upon tract proclaims aloud our divisions, our folly, our shame.¹⁶

Deck's plea was intended to persuade Brethren on all sides to be more open with each other. In 1851 he went with Robert Chapman and William Hake to Bethesda to try to resolve the issue. On the open side Muller and Craik and Lord Congleton listened sympathetically to his peace-making efforts, but Deck could not accept their "open" emphasis on the independence of each assembly, for he gloried in the Darbyite vision of the glorious united body of Christ. But his own brethren saw the letter as an admission that he accepted the open view of reception. Painful letters were sent to Deck accusing him of treachery. At least one tract was issued in answer to him, entitled *Unity, a Dialogue*, and Darby wrote to him in criticism in August 1851, saying that the tract had driven at least one person back to the Church of England. "I agree entirely that we (when needed) deal with individuals", wrote Darby, "but then I should see whether they had the principle of inter-communion with evil. If so, they are in heart of the principle of the gathering which you avowedly reject. ... I could not receive them."¹⁷ So during 1851 Deck had to face up to the consequences of being regarded as a renegade. When he found that nothing came of his negotiations, he rethought his position.

On 16 February 1852 Deck issued a *Second Letter on Receiving and Rejecting Brethren*, in which he effectively retracted his previous assertions. He now expressed a new conviction that an assembly could "so depart from [Christ] in spirit, in principles, or in practice, that *on its refusal to judge itself and repent*, He may disown it – remove its candlestick – and even spue it out of His mouth." Old Testament analogies seemed to him to demonstrate the possibility of corporate rejection of a church because it had gone so awry "that separation from it becomes a positive duty to Christ, and the only way of escape from participation in the evil and the Lord's judgements because of it." He now adopted the crucial exclusive argument that "fellowship and association with others" were one criterion for reception to communion. In other words Deck followed the exclusive Brethren drift towards denominationalism, regarding the Lord's table as a place where people from a certain circle only should keep fellowship. His outlook had become denominational:

In commending the bearer [of a letter of commendation] to us, these assemblies, of course *accredited* the body gathered here, as an assembly of Christ, worthy of their confidence and fellowship as before the Lord; and by receiving the bearer, on their letter of commendation, we, as far as our testimony goes, *accredit* these assemblies.

It was a much more insular position than the stand he had previously taken. Yet Deck retained a deep concern about the spirit in which the controversy had been conducted. He wrote:

Has not much of our sin and misery sprung from the very feeble apprehensions among us, of what the Church of the living God really is; what its unity and responsibilities [are] ... Has it not, with some of us at least, been a light thing to say, that we meet in the name of Jesus? Consequently, has there not been among us party spirit, glorying

16 Deck, *Letter on Receiving or Rejecting Brethren*, pp 11, 14–15, iii.

17 *Letters of J. N. D.*, 2 edn., London, n. d., vol 1, pp 234–40; *Copy of a Letter*, p 13; CBA 5540 (391): Deck to Darby, 13 March 1873, p 1.

in men, over estimation of knowledge compared with grace, and “puffing-up” where deep humility of soul specially became us?¹⁸

Deck’s complaint against his brethren was now only their unwillingness to admit this. For him confession was a mark of true spirituality. In his sensitive hymn written in 1838 “O Lord, when we the path retrace / Which Thou on earth hast trod” he had observed:

O Lord, with sorrow, and with shame,
We meekly would confess,
How little we, who bear Thy name,
Thy mind and ways express.

Give us Thy meek, Thy lowly mind;
We fain would like Thee be;
And all our rest and pleasure find
In learning, Lord, of Thee.¹⁹

Exclusive Brethren found it hard to make this admission and yet maintain that they were on the true ground of gathering. Yet something in Deck’s appeal seems to have touched Darby at least. In the early summer of 1852 Darby wrote somewhat cautiously to Deck and met him in London. Darby offered to call a meeting of humiliation for Brethren (including some representatives of the Open group) in Taunton, and Deck attended this meeting and talked privately to Darby there. But this meeting did not go well, and other exclusive Brethren leaders (especially G. V. Wigram) made it clear to Darby that he must not take humiliation too far. Darby at his interview with Deck insisted that it was unwise to make any admission to Open Brethren that Exclusives had made some mistakes. “What bad policy it was when his forces were all scattered”, Darby commented.²⁰ Darbyite policy, executed by G. V. Wigram (whom Deck did not find particularly attractive), was to rebuild the Exclusive Brethren on the basis of opposition to the Bethesda party. Admissions of weakness could only weaken their moral stance. It is interesting that G. V. Wigram deleted the former of the verses of Deck’s hymn cited above when he was editing *Hymns for the Poor of the Flock*.²¹

Deck was saddened by the whole affair. His mother was evidently on the point of death and the emotional strains of the previous two years had left their mark on her son. “My heart had been nearly broken, and my [?humours], ere excitable, almost off balance”, he later recalled.²² Spiritually exhausted he evidently suffered a stroke and partial paralysis. He could endure no more. He had decided to be loyal to his exclusive friends, but he did not like the intolerant spirit which was the essence of exclusivism. Some sort of cautious retreat seemed advisable. And so evidently New Zealand came to mind, partly for its climate, and partly for its distance from England. It was subsequently rumoured that Deck “fled to the colony to escape the issue, and to develop assemblies on neutral

18 Deck, *Op. cit.*, London, 1852, pp 3, 28–9, 30, 36, 15–16.

19 Deck, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, pp 43–4.

20 CBA 5540 (381): Deck to Darby, 1 July 1852; CBA 5540 (367): Deck to Darby, 19 August 1852. For the Taunton meeting see CBA 5540 (369): Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], pp 1–3; *Letters of J. N. D.*, pp 259–77; see F. R. Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, Exeter, 1968, pp 164–6.

21 *Hymns for the Poor of the Flock*, London, 1856, no. 230; the story is told slightly inaccurately in Neatby, pp 233–4.

22 Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], p 1.

territory". That is not really accurate. Darby wrote to him a farewell letter from Montpellier: "I should have desired much to have kept you in England, if the Lord had so pleased". Since Darby took a very low view of worldly circumstances, ("I have no home", he told Deck), he lamented that Deck could not rise above such issues. But the Exclusive leader accepted the necessity of Deck's emigration for the sake of his health and his family.²³ Deck's views had not changed. He was prepared in principle to be an exclusive brother, but he could not endure the pain of abandoning fellowship with so many other friends. He wanted to be an exclusive brother, but paradoxically he also wanted to have communion with all who loved the Lord. In New Zealand he was to write a hymn never included in Exclusive Brethren books: "Lord, we would ne'er forget Thy love", one verse of which reads:

We would remember we are one
With every saint that loves Thy name;
United to Thee on the throne –
Our *life*, our *hope*, our *Lord*, the *same*.²⁴

That was his aspiration. Because he could not express it to both his open and his exclusive brothers and sisters in Christ at the same time, he decided to avoid being put into a dilemma. The family took a passage on the ship *Cornwall* to New Zealand, arriving in Wellington late in 1852.²⁵

The journey to New Zealand was a pleasant therapy after all the tension. On the ship the family befriended the Vyvyan family, and the two families purchased land in the Waiwero district some eight miles from Motueka in the Nelson province. It was an isolated area and the land was not particularly good. The first years of settlement must have been very onerous for one who had previously worked as army officer, preacher and teacher. Deck's wife did not survive long in the new climate. On 8 December 1853 an abscess in her ear led to her death. Mary Alicia, his twenty-year-old daughter, took charge of the younger children for the next three years, but on 17 July 1855 Deck married Lewenna Atkinson, the daughter of another Motueka settler, who had evidently known the family in England. He and his new wife soon added yet more children to the already large family. Eve was born in 1857, Edward in 1858, Henry O'Brien in 1859 or 1860, and Charles James (Jim) in 1862. In May 1865 Lewenna gave birth again, but she and the baby, named Martin Luther, both died within a few days, due to an attack of the measles. So the care of these thirteen children fell solely upon their father again, although by then Samuel, the eldest, was 33 years old.²⁶ The pain of the death of his second wife must have been acute. Perhaps it was at this time that Deck penned his poem "Resignation under Bereavement":

O Lord, at times I feel all desolate;
The cup too bitter seems for me to drink,
The loss too heavy, – burden all too great:

23 *Chief Men among the Brethren*, p 39; Neatby, p 185. This is the view still held by the Exclusive Brethren according to the late D. Trewavas of Nelson, with whom I talked in 1975.

24 Deck, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, pp 12–13. The version best known in Open Brethren assemblies begins "Oft we alas forget the love".

25 Hall-Jones, *Invercargill Pioneers*, Invercargill, 1946, p 91.

26 A. E. Salisbury, pp 66–7; Genealogy supplied by Mr Ron Deck.

From the keen knife I oft-times weeping shrink,
That prunes the branches; though Thy love ordains,
And fruit shall grow from all these needed pains.²⁷

It was not great poetry, but it was heartfelt. Some of what he wrote at this time was much better. What is perhaps his finest hymn, “Around Thy, grave Lord Jesus”, written for the baptism of one of his family, has a second verse, “Lord Jesus, we remember / The travail of Thy soul”, with a deep insight into the sufferings of Christ which doubtless reflects his personal experience.

For Deck, however, Motueka had mostly pleasant memories. He quickly found himself surrounded by new and convivial Christian friends. Beside the Vyvyans and the Atkinsons there were also the friends who had met the Vyvyans in Wellington, John Park Salisbury and his family. Then Henry Young, Deck’s friend in India and member of the Brethren in Devon, and his family came to Motueka. The Youngs soon moved to a sheep run in Canterbury, returning to England in 1859, but they came back and farmed in Southland from 1861. Their place was taken by the Paton family, who arrived in Hope near the town of Nelson from India about 1860. Major Robert Paton had much in common with J. G. Deck, though he was rather younger than him, and the two families used often to exchange visits, and even attended J. G. Deck’s birthday party. Obviously Deck was never without sympathetic Christian company. It may be that initially Deck did not want to begin a New Zealand branch of the Brethren, although he certainly had an instant congregation in his own family. By 1860 he was becoming more active again. Exclusive Brethren accounts suggest that a regular Breaking of Bread was being held in Mr Nice’s house in King Street, Motueka, by then.²⁸ Deck was seeking to develop an active Christian community in the area, and on the first day of January 1863, traditionally a picnic day for the settlers, he and “a few Christian brethren in this locality” including the Patons from Hope gathered for a day of prayer and humiliation. It was suggested in a circular letter that Christians unable to be present because of distance should observe the same day themselves. It was a happy day, and Margaret Deck wrote a simple poem to celebrate the event:

It was the day of prayer –
And bright and fresh arose the dewy morn,
Fair was creation on the New Year’s morn; ...
Beneath the shade of trees His hands had made,
His children gathered – and ’twas there they prayed ...
Their “mouths were opened wide”, and filled by Him
Who hears and answers prayer, whose praise they sing:
They blessed his holy Name with one accord,
To heaven on high their joyful anthems soared:
With earnest hearts again the knee they bow –
Oh what a privilege by Jesus given!
It is indeed the foretaste here of heaven,
That we can hold communion with our Lord,
Can meet *with Him*, according to His Word.

27 Deck, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, p 195.

28 Beacon Hill, Nelson: Paton Diaries for 2 April 1866 and 1 November 1872 and *passim*. See P. J. Lineham, *There we found Brethren*, Palmerston North, 1977, p 15 and associated footnotes.

There was an emphasis on prayer and humiliation in the gathering which was a hall-mark of Deck's leadership as was the suggestion of supplication for personal consecration and for revival in the church. The day of prayer was held again on 1 January 1864, on which occasion the theme was set as "the operation of the Holy Spirit" in the life of believers.²⁹

Deck's Christian concerns were not restricted to Motueka. With the help of others he persuaded Christians all over the Nelson area to begin to hold simple meetings for fellowship and the Lord's Supper, and thus assemblies were formed in Nelson, Richmond, Wakefield, and preaching services were held at these places and at a number of school houses including Waimea West and Ranzau. The Nelson area was the most congenial community for church planting in New Zealand; an evangelical bishop and a strong Non-conformist tradition intensified a mood of religious enquiry. In 1859 Deck first took part in fierce debates with the Disciples of Christ who, like the Brethren, saw themselves as a "restoration movement" returning to New Testament Christianity. Both groups were to find their strongest initial support in the province. In 1862 he rebaptised an Anglican in the Moutere, to the intense annoyance of Bishop Hobhouse.³⁰ The first Baptist church in New Zealand was formed in Nelson in 1851. Deck's combination of ecumenism and sectarianism appealed to several members of that congregation including the pastor appointed in 1860, William Biss, who may well have known Deck in India, for his family had served as missionaries in Calcutta. By 1864 Biss and other sympathetic members were holding their own communion service in the Brethren style, until this led to a split in the congregation. The Paton family tried to persuade the Richmond Baptist church to become a Brethren congregation.³¹ Deck's ability to draw such groups within his fellowship suggests that he was not taking an exclusive Brethren view of "association" with other churches.

The family continued to live together in Motueka, although in July 1859 the second son, John Feild Deck, returned to England to train for the medical profession. Here he had some contact with Darby and the Exclusive Brethren, although he evidently much preferred the Open Brethren he met. The eldest son, Samuel, also spent some time in England, training as a dentist, and he too met Darby, whom both Samuel and John remembered meeting in their teenage years.³² In 1865 the family was more profoundly affected when, in the aftermath of his second wife's death, J. G. Deck sold the farm at Waiwero. While his third son George (and possibly Samuel) stayed in the vicinity, their father moved with the younger members of the family to Wellington.³³ Deck was 58 years old but was not yet contemplating retirement. Some months before his wife's death he had visited Christchurch and preached in the town hall in association with a new Brethren assembly which had been founded by people converted in England by the Open Brethren, Hicks and Soltau.³⁴ The vision had begun to form in his mind that the Brethren might be planted right across New Zealand in a way that avoided the split among the English

29 Printed circular, dated 16 December 1862. The circular for the 1864 meeting is in the 1864 diary of the Paton family now held by the Dron family of Paton Hill, Nelson, as is Margaret Deck's poem.

30 See Lineham, pp 18–19, and T. P. Clarke, "Bishop Hobhouse The Nelson Episcopate ...", Victoria University of Wellington M. A. Thesis, 1977, p 57.

31 Lineham, pp 19–20, and P. Tonson, *A Handful of Grain*, vol 1, Wellington, 1982, pp 18, 51–52.

32 CBA 5540 (372): Deck to Darby, n. d.; personal communication from Miss Joan Deck of Australia.

33 Paton letters cited in Lineham, p 29; *Treasury*, vol 24 (1922), p 143.

34 *Lyttleton Times*, 7 February 1865, p 4; Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], p 5.

Brethren. It seems that he saw Wellington as a convenient base for the resumption of his ministry as an evangelist. He was soon preaching in the newly-recognised capital of the colony, and creating a considerable sensation there. By March the Primitive Methodists were alarmed at the growth of Deck's congregations and the decline of their own recently formed mission, and by the end of 1866 his "great congregations" led even Maria Richmond, a member of the noted Unitarian family, to note that "The Brethren' seem in the ascendent".³⁵ Deck was happy to accept opportunities to preach in churches of any denomination, but he did not moderate his message in such contexts. The Rev. W. M. Fell, the rather feeble pastor of the Woodward Street Congregational Church, later complained that "Mr Deck got into my church under profession of good-will, and expressed a sincere desire only to preach the gospel and save sinners. He clandestinely introduced Plymouth Brethren doctrines and led away some of my members".³⁶ Deck also held his own services. On 3 December 1866 the Quarterly Meeting of the Primitive Methodist Circuit in Wellington indicated that it was these public services in the city which were causing them most concern:

Our decrease of members is owing to the influence of a new party – Plymouth Brethren – Mr Deck, their minister is very popular – holds services regularly in the large Hall and other parts of the city and country. They have no collections, seat-rent or class money. He preaches much against all other sects, and affirms that nothing makes so many hypocrites as class meetings. The wife of one of the judges, a Wesleyan local preacher, and a manager of one of the banks, six church workers from the English church and members from other churches including our own [have joined him]. Wealth, and position, give this party a powerful influence – which is employed in getting members from other churches.³⁷

Deck did not confine his preaching to the city of Wellington. He had a regular circuit of the immediate neighbourhood which included Tawa Flat and the Hutt. He also ranged further afield in the lower North Island, including Wanganui, which he visited in December 1866, and Masterton. In 1870 he spent six months in Invercargill, where his second son was practising as a dentist, and here too his preaching attracted interest and opposition.³⁸ In the early 1870s, feeling his age, and suffering from angina pectoris, he returned to Motueka and lived in the family home, "the Gables", in Thorpe Street.

The character of the movement he established was not unlike the (Open) Brethrenism which after the 1859 awakening was the object of a great deal of attention and criticism in Britain. In Invercargill Deck was accused by a visiting Wesleyan minister, the Rev. J. S. Rishworth, of being no evangelist but rather a charlatan and proselytizer of members of other evangelical congregations. The published proceedings of the enquiry held to investigate the charges suggest that the allegations against his morals were far-fetched.³⁹ But there seems little doubt that Deck often denounced of the failings of the Nonconformist

35 M. Richmond to E. E. Richmond, 3 December 1866, cited in *The Richmond-Atkinson Papers*, Wellington, 1960, vol 2, p 221.

36 *Minutes of a Meeting held 30 August, 1870 ... to investigate certain Statements reported to have been made by the Rev. Mr. Rishworth having reference to Mr. James G. Deck*, [Invercargill, 1870], p 3.

37 Wellington: Alexander Turnbull Library, MS Papers 1185; box 160: Wesley Methodist Church, Taranaki Street: Primitive Methodist Circuit Minute Book, December 1866.

38 *ibid*, 5 March 1866; *Wanganui Chronicle*, 5 December 1866; *Minutes of a Meeting*, p 3.

39 *Minutes of a Meeting*, pp 2, 8–12.

churches, their low spiritual life, their unconverted and uncommitted lay leaders and members, and their ministers who lacked an evangelistic vision. Yet compared to English Brethren, Deck was remarkably tolerant, willing to work with other denominations as far as possible, given that he was founding a new movement. Deck himself commented about the Brethren assemblies scattered through New Zealand:

They, the little companies out here, are all babes in Christ – they have not had the education, doctrinal or practical, which for so many years have exercised the minds and consciences of saints in England. They have many of them hardly [?arrived] to the wilderness side of the Red Sea; much less to the order, discipline and [?witness] of the Church of God in the wilderness. Old tradition [?and] teachings occupy the will and they are hard to [?remove] – We are widely separated; communications are slow and limited.⁴⁰

As Brethren from Britain began to visit the antipodes, knowing little of the New Zealand Brethren, they thought them very unsatisfactory. An exclusive Brethren doctor who was in New Zealand in April and May 1869 described them as:

unshepherded sheep – roaming about for the most part at their own will, eating much unwholesome pasture, provocative of intestine trouble, distress and distraction; among them I could find but little sense of real union, that is, of divine, in the power of the Holy Ghost. ... You understand I refer to meetings of Christians who professedly take ground separate from the systems of men; many such are found at Invercargill, Dunedin, Christchurch, Timaru, Omaru [sic] – along the coast-line of the middle island, – Wellington, and other places in the North Island. Again, on the west coast, Nelson, Hokatika [sic], and, I believe, a few in Greymouth and inland at the goldfields. Practically, I may say, most of these are on independent ground, refusing, as they do, to recognize our common responsibility as members one of another ... the almost universal answer [to the Bethesda question] was “We have nothing to do with the differences of Christians in England, and can take no note of what happened so long ago” – with many kindred objections. ... Many had newly come out of the systems, and sought to cease from evil, without having clearly seen the path of the faithful in an evil day. ... Practically they present the aspect of an amiable Evangelical Society, and without much gift, except in two or three individuals who had been in the ministry of the systems. There seemed among many an earnest desire after souls, and many conversions were spoken of.⁴¹

Exclusives were bound to blame Deck for these attitudes. When Deck admitted in a letter to Edward Cronin how he had slipped into sharing communion with Open Brethren in Christchurch in 1865, Cronin had then written to Mrs Brett in Christchurch, complaining that “Mr Deck was out of fellowship with the Church of God, and calling upon the saints at Christchurch to reject [him]”. In their eyes Deck was now an Open Brother. It would be more accurate to say that the New Zealand Brethren were neither open nor exclusive, or a kind of reformed and liberated group of Exclusive Brethren. Most assembly members had been converted in New Zealand. Only a few assemblies had members with experience of the Brethren in England. Thus few people had been obliged to decide whether they sided with or against Bethesda. Because Mackern believed that all true Exclusive

40 Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], p 13.

41 Letter of October 1869 in *Letters by Dr. Mackern*, London, n. d., pp 97–100.

Brethren could do this, he was willing to break bread in only five assemblies; probably including those at Christchurch, Timaru and Geraldine.

To some extent Deck only drifted into this open position. In New Zealand he had tried to forget that the 1848 division had occurred. Preachers from Australia like Walter Douglas, James Dunleavy and Mr Backland could be welcomed without too many enquiries, since everyone wanted to see active lay evangelism. Yet this attempt at independence was an unrealistic outlook, because the assemblies still saw themselves as part of the wider Brethren movement. Consequently Deck could not isolate New Zealand Brethren from inspection by English Brethren endowed with a “mother country” mentality. During the 1860s and 1870s contact with the English assemblies became more common as shipping services improved. English Brethren such as Mackern felt obliged to classify the New Zealand assemblies. The New Zealanders were somewhat hostile to this, but they were very vulnerable to it. Brethren tracts, including various booklets on the Bethesda issue, began to circulate more extensively. Deck was concerned when he found that someone who had just arrived from England in 1869 (a “Mr G.” of Wellington, possibly W. J. Gandy) had distributed copies of the books of B. W. Newton to the assemblies. Since he had rejected these heresies in the 1840s, J. G. Deck was horrified to see them appearing in New Zealand.⁴² This led him to reconsider the Open-Exclusive division, for it was horror at Newton’s heresy which had originally driven him into the exclusive camp.

A further factor was family pressure. The Decks were an affectionate family, but in such a large family there were inevitable tensions, and some of these tensions were theological. When John Feild Deck had been in England he had enjoyed very broad associations with other evangelical Christians, and became engaged to Emily Young, a daughter of Henry Young, who was then back in England. This family sided with Bethesda. After John had gained his degree from St. Andrews he returned to New Zealand in 1863, and following a brief visit to Motueka he moved to Southland. He began a practice in Invercargill, not far from his fiancée’s family farm at Erme Dale. He married Emily Young on 24 August 1865. Shortly after John arrived in Invercargill he and a few other Christians formed an assembly which reflected the open inclinations of John and maintained friendly relations with other churches. Not long after this his elder brother Samuel moved to Invercargill as a dentist, although in 1872 John and Emily Deck moved to Dunedin, where a flourishing and very open assembly was led by a renegade Congregational minister, Alfred Brunton.⁴³ In contrast the third son in the family, George, inclined firmly towards a more exclusive position, and the assembly at Moutere, where he was a teacher, was much more separatist in outlook. Their father nevertheless kept good relations with all his sons, and preached freely in all the assemblies of which they were members. In a letter to his sons written in 1867 he urged them to be devoted to Christ, and to “come, learn, serve, watch and pray”.⁴⁴

Unfortunately the ageing J. G. Deck found his peace increasingly disrupted in the 1870s. Samuel, who was probably distressed by the differing inclinations of his younger brothers John and George, must have felt the need for a Deck to give a lead to the New

42 Mackern, p 100; *Copy of a Letter from J. G. Deck, of New Zealand*, Bristol, 1873, pp 12–13; Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], pp 5–8; G. V. Wigram, *To the Christians of New Zealand*, Christchurch, 26 May 1874, pp 5–6.

43 *Reminiscences of John Feild Deck*, pp 1–5; *In Memoriam Emily Baring Deck*, p 5; Paton Diary, 14 August 1863.

44 Eastbourne: Ron Deck: J. G. Deck to his sons, 27 July 1867.

Zealand assemblies. In September 1871, after he had re-read his own tracts on the Bethesda question, J. G. Deck decided (perhaps at the suggestion of Samuel) to write to his old English Open Brethren friends Robert C. Chapman and William Hake, to suggest that if Bethesda would repent of receiving those polluted with Newton's errors, then he was willing to urge the New Zealand Brethren to restore fellowship with them. Thus might the New Zealand Brethren pioneer a healing of the 1848 breach.⁴⁵ In reply he was cautioned that in the twenty years since the separation the two groups of Brethren in England had drifted far apart. Deck might have left it at that, but his inactivity and possibly discussions in Invercargill provoked his son into taking independent action. At the end of 1871 Samuel wrote a tract in which he argued that the exclusive party had been very unjust in their treatment of Bethesda. Brethren were great tract writers, and in the absence of formal church forums they resorted to pamphlets to air issues. All Decks must have been familiar with Brethren issues under debate, and Samuel wrote to tell his father that "he had light from the Lord on the subject of Discipline, and thought he ought to make it known".⁴⁶ Accepting the orthodox exclusive Brethren criticism of the independency of the open assemblies, which seemed to him a denial of the unity of the church, he nevertheless queried the accusations against Bethesda, because they regarded those who welcomed members of churches where erroneous doctrines were held: "as though they stood in the same place with the holders of evil doctrine itself".⁴⁷

J. G. Deck, who was ill at the time he received his son's manuscript, and felt even more unwell after he had read it, was most unwilling for Samuel to publish. He no doubt remembered the problems his own first pamphlet on the subject had provoked. He pleaded with Samuel to submit it to Darby for comment first. Samuel was not prepared to delay this long. The pamphlet was published, probably late in 1871, and Samuel then forwarded a copy to Darby. Meanwhile his father, while "agreeing with much that you say & disagreeing with much that some of our Exclusive brethren have said & done", expostulated with Samuel, and persuaded him to change his mind on at least one point – that any church which failed to excommunicate someone guilty of a specific sin was guilty of that sin, at least. In June 1872 Samuel decided to withdraw his tract for reconsideration, although he remained adamant that the Exclusive Brethren were morally wrong to refuse communion to people like the great philanthropist and leader of Open Brethren, George Muller.⁴⁸ Grateful for this belated show of filial obedience, his father realised that the stance of the New Zealand assemblies was now a public issue, both in New Zealand and England. Inaction was out of the question now. So he set out to re-read the whole literature, and then reissued his 1852 tract in which he had more or less declared himself for the exclusive position. Surely he had studied the question so carefully then that he had got it right? All his life he had wanted his conscience to be clear. Why then was he so troubled? At the end of his life he wanted to restore links with Darby which were so frail that they were at breaking point. So finally, in a step which seems inconsistent with all

45 *Copy of a Letter from Deck*, p 13; Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], pp 4–6.

46 Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], p 8.

47 No copy of Samuel Deck's tract (which was probably entitled *Church Discipline*) has been found, but these quotations are taken from the excerpts in *Two Letters from New Zealand for the consideration of Saints ...*, Belleville, Ontario, [1879], pp 13–14; and CBA 5540 (370): Samuel J. Deck to J. N. Darby, 3 June 1872, p 3.

48 S. J. Deck to Darby, 3 June 1872, pp 3, 5; J. G. Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], p 9; Letter 390: S. J. Deck to J. G. Deck, 18 October 1872.

that he had learned over the previous twenty-five years, on 25 September 1872 he sent John Nelson Darby a painful thirteen-page confession of his wrong attitudes. "The Lord led me in His most blessed grace to retrace all the past in His marvellous light – my secret sins in the light of His countenance", he told Darby. "I had indeed 'left my first love' ... I had lost much of the little knowledge I had acquired of the precious truths the Lord had instructed them [the Brethren] in since I came to New Zealand. It was my own fault."⁴⁹

The problem was how to persuade the New Zealand Brethren to take the same attitude. For plainly they were drifting towards more open principles, finding the separatism of the exclusive element incompatible with the colonial mood, which tended towards informal co-operation in evangelism. This was the spirit they had learnt from Deck. In November 1872 Deck wrote a circular letter to the New Zealand assemblies asking that they should meet to discuss the issue. There was no enthusiasm. "There are many dear precious Brethren among them", he reported to Darby in March 1873, "but they are ignorant of what the Church of God is, and ignorant and prejudiced against those called 'Exclusive Brethren'".⁵⁰ In the September of that year he took a drastic step. He wrote and published a circular: "to beloved brethren, among whom I have gone preaching in days past the Gospel of Christ", in which he insisted that he wanted: "to take my place, unworthy as I feel of their confidence, among those whose faithfulness to the Lord could not suffer unfaithfulness in their fellow-servant". He also noted with curious hesitation that: "I recognise that in the main their discipline is right". This letter he then dispatched to England, along with a formal "Letter of Humiliation" addressed to Darby, G. V. Wigram, E. Cronin and the English Brethren, in which he conscientiously and painfully confessed what he now saw as his faults:

Had I been walking in the light, when this controversy first began[,] in nearness to the heart of God, I should have been spared not the anguish of heart because of the terrible nature of the sin, but the bitter sorrow that followed the discovery of my own kindness and unfaithfulness. Nor should I have sought to shun by flying to New Zealand fellowship with the afflictions of the Brethren who had faithfully opposed the evil. ... After much chastening and rebuke the Lord has, I believe graciously restored my soul; and I feel it according to the Lord's holy discipline of His house, the Church of the living God, to confess my faults to my beloved Brethren, and ask their forgiveness and restoration to their confidence and fellowship. ... My path is of course a very humbling and very trying one to the flesh.⁵¹

Indeed it was. Deck did not feel able alone to turn the tide in the New Zealand assemblies. The issue was certainly considered in various places, but Deck felt the need of outside assistance. He was not happy at the proposed return of Dr Mackern; after his visit in 1869 Mackern was regarded as a mere lackey of the exclusive cause. An Exclusive Brethren evangelist, F. Carruagh, also visited New Zealand in 1873–5, but he had little to say

49 J. G. Deck to Darby, 25 September [1872], p 3. For the reissue of the tract see *ibid*, p 9 and *Copy of a Letter*, pp 9, 11. No copy of this has been found.

50 CBA 5540 (391): J. G. Deck to Darby, 13 March 1873, p 2.

51 *Copy of a Letter*, pp 3, 11; CBA 5540 (371): Deck to Darby, Wigram, Cronin et al, 19 September 1873. This letter was forwarded with an accompanying note to Darby, 5540 (389): Deck to Darby, 19 September 1873.

on doctrinal issues.⁵² If only Darby would come out to put the case. Darby was sympathetic to the invitation, but he deferred to another representative of the exclusive cause. This was the disciplinarian of the Exclusive Brethren, G. V. Wigram, who arrived on 14 January 1874 and remained until 20 January 1875, apart from a brief visit to Melbourne in March 1874. While in the West Indies in 1871 Wigram had expressed interest in visiting New Zealand if no-one else could go there.⁵³ After a long sea journey he called briefly at each assembly but he put down some roots in Christchurch, where the assembly was recognised as the one with most loyalty to the exclusive side. From Christchurch on 14 March he published an open letter to J. G. Deck, writing as one “aged pilgrim” to another, who “on reviewing your course from England, through India, England, and hither” should have learnt what was wrong with the Brethren in New Zealand. Wigram’s chief complaint was that while there were many companies of believers in New Zealand, they lacked “the liberty and life-giving power” of assemblies anointed by God, and their independent outlook was in contravention of the character of the church of God.⁵⁴ Deck seems to have replied to Wigram, explaining to him how he felt a “yearning over everyone that has life”, and therefore did not want to break with assemblies he was not wholly happy with.⁵⁵ Wigram obviously cited Deck’s act of penitence as he visited assemblies throughout the country, but it was at his instigation, not Deck’s that the separation of open and exclusive groups occurred in each assembly. He produced two other pamphlets to assist in his campaign. One rejected: “setting one merely human name against another merely human name” (the initials he mentioned were M, D and W; perhaps Muller, Deck or was it Darby, and Wigram). In his view the vindication of the exclusive assemblies did not necessitate any defence of the behaviour of their leaders. In another pamphlet he complained of the lack of spirituality in New Zealand. This he attributed to the colonial preoccupation with things material at the expense of things spiritual.⁵⁶ Wigram travelled extensively in New Zealand, and was finally happy that there were acceptable exclusive assemblies in Auckland, Thames, Wellington, Nelson, Motueka, Christchurch, Timaru and Geraldine. Between August and October he was in the Nelson area largely in the company of Deck, whose health was on the mend. They travelled together to Wellington where Deck wanted to farewell his son John and his wife, who were off to England for a visit.⁵⁷ Wigram and Deck now found a surprising unity of purpose.

Yet Wigram’s work did not solve all the problems of the New Zealand assemblies. The Invercargill assembly did not welcome Wigram, and nor did that at Dunedin, of whose leader, Brunton, J. G. Deck commented: “his principles [were] looser even than G. Muller’s”. Family links certainly inhibited Deck from permitting any attack on these centres of Open Brethren. Moreover the exclusive assemblies were not in very good shape. In Christchurch there were new tensions caused by the Suckling family, on questions quite

52 For Mackern see Deck to Darby, 13 March 1873, p 2. For Darby’s thoughts of visiting see *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol 2, pp 251, 278 (dated Concord, 1873, and July 1873). For Carruagh see CBA 5540 (388): Deck to Darby, 15 January 1874, and CBA 5540 (382): Deck to Darby, 16 January 1875, pp 2, 4; and CBA 5540 (384): Deck to Darby, 22 September 1875, p 3.

53 *Memorials of the Ministry of G. V. Wigram*, London, 1880; vol 1, p 444; vol 3, p 98.

54 Wigram, *A Letter to Mr. J. G. Deck, of Motueka, Nelson*, Christchurch, 1874, pp 3, 5 and passim.

55 Wigram, *Memorials*, vol 3, p 100, which would appear to be Wigram’s answer to Deck’s letter.

56 W., *A Word on the Fellowship of Saints*, Nelson, 24 September 1874, p 3; G. V. W., *To the Christians of New Zealand*, Christchurch, 26 May 1874.

57 Wigram, *Memorials*, vol 3, pp 103–4, 109, 112–5; CBA 5540 (382): Deck to Darby, 16 January 1875.

separate from the Bethesda debate, and other doctrinal debates also threatened.⁵⁸ Above all Deck did not find the visit of Wigram personally satisfying, since they had never been close while he was in England. It was Darby whom he now longed to see.

Deck longed to see Darby. He appealed to him: “Will the Lord give us the joy of welcoming you to New Zealand? Many are asking to see you here”.⁵⁹ Darby himself was not sure. “Were I young, I should think pretty surely of going there, but I shall be half way between seventy and eighty before I start for that country, and a year then is a long while, specially if I have anything to finish before I depart home to be no more seen”, he wrote to a friend.⁶⁰ But Deck was the more urgent because angina made it impossible for him to travel, and because the exclusive cause desperately needed exactly such a fillip. Darby was an indefatigable traveller who made repeated journeys across America. He finally decided that he would take advantage of his current visit to North America, so he caught a ship from San Francisco and arrived on 15 September 1875, accompanied by R. Grant. Deck wrote ahead to Auckland apologising to Darby that health did not allow him to meet him in Auckland. But, after telegraphing Deck, and making a brief and unannounced visit to the Cobden Street hall of the Exclusive Brethren, he caught the steamer to Nelson, where Deck met him. No description of that meeting survives, although the excitement of Deck, and his desire that Darby might have a favourable impression of New Zealand is obvious in his letters to Darby. One may perhaps imagine the encounter between the balding and snowy-white-bearded Deck and the clean-shaven Darby with his still sharply-contoured face. Yet Deck was only sixty-eight years old and Darby seventy-five. They must have spent time reminiscing, and walking in the quiet garden of “the Gables”. Darby was certainly impressed by Deck’s new homeland: “It is a really charming country ... mountains and bush – the bush though always fine, not as our trees, always brown, which gives it a sombre hue”. In another letter he commented: “Were I health-hunting, I might stay in this beautiful country with pleasure. The climate is admirable here, and the locality charming. Of course I have been, through mercy, working as elsewhere.”⁶¹

Naturally Darby was working. Deck may have wanted the visit to focus on the past, but Darby had come to check up on people. In the Nelson area, he reported “all are clear unless perhaps one, who is still not against, but really getting his soul exercised, feeling others have gone on without him – the Word is enjoyed so that I trust there may be blessing for all outside as well as inside – At Motueka the farmers come out as they [were] here dour, having been a good deal asleep & prejudiced, but they come in a remarkable manner”.⁶² Darby travelled on to Wellington and then to Christchurch, Timaru and Geraldine, and seems to have spurred Deck himself to more activity; he made a visit to Christchurch where he shared a pulpit with Darby, and to the east and west coasts of the Wellington

58 CBA 5540 (388): Deck to Darby, 15 January 1874 (uncompleted) enclosed in Deck to [?], 15 January 1874.

59 CBA 5540 (382): Deck to Darby, 16 January 1875.

60 *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol 2, p 327.

61 CBA 5540 (383): Deck to Darby, 6 September 1875; CBA 5540 (384): Deck to Darby, 22 September 1875; *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol 2, pp 427, 430 (letters of October 1875 and 25 October 1875). An MS copy of the latter letter is at CBA 5540 (417): Darby to Mr Alexander, 25 October 1875.

62 Darby to Alexander, 25 October 1875, p 2. (This part of the letter was not published.)

district, where there were more than a few problems from the extremist sectarianism of one of the more unusual of the early Brethren, Alfred Feist.⁶³

Darby was well-satisfied with his visit to New Zealand. To a friend he reported: “Brother Deck, long known and loved, had, through various circumstances, fallen under the influence of Bethesda. ... [now] He is himself very happy, and there are thorough-going assemblies everywhere, and new ones have arisen, some rather numerous.”⁶⁴ As Deck farewelled him, Darby’s voice echoed towards the vanishing Sandridge pier at Motueka, exhorting him that there was still “plenty to do”.⁶⁵ Deck took the advice seriously. Indeed for a few years he was very active among the assemblies. Hardly had Darby left than he accepted an invitation to Victoria, Australia. There were also any number of problems to deal with in New Zealand. In Motueka J. Code (evidently related to the man of the same name involved in founding the English Brethren) became involved in a quietist sect. In Wellington the wife of W. M. Biss had to be excommunicated for repeated drunkenness. In Christchurch the Sucklings threatened to form their own break-away group. All this Deck tried to sort out and more beside. Wigram returned to New Zealand early in 1877 partly to resolve the problems in Christchurch and Deck helped him in this. Deck also arranged for the popular evangelistic tracts by Charles Stanley to be translated into Maori (probably by Abraham Honoré, whom he knew and respected).⁶⁶

All of this work was important, although increasingly other people took the lead in it, especially the Cappers of Wellington. Deck, though, always had a place of special honour among the Exclusive Brethren, not in his own right as the founder, but as the man who knew Darby. He took the same view of his own significance. Just before Darby left Auckland he had written to him affectionately: “If I do not meet you again in the flesh, I have to bless God for having permitted me to know you, and for making you his channel of living water and refreshment to my soul – and I do thank him for permitting me to see your face again in person and here in this distant land, and for yr kind forgiving love to me.”⁶⁷ Yet his own values did not change. On his return from Australia he visited Samuel in Invercargill. He reported to Darby:

We stayed a few days at Invercargill. I preached there twice and lectured once, in the theatre. Samuel [does sorry] things connected with this subject of “their walking”, but I could wish that some of the assemblies with us manifested the same grace that in other things characterised the dear brethren there.⁶⁸

He did not break bread any more at Open Brethren assemblies, but he continued to enjoy fellowship with them. Initially they survived as essentially independent churches; Brunton’s fellowship in Dunedin and the Samuel Costall’s Bethel in Wellington are the most interesting examples. Only gradually did they develop any sense that they were part of a single communion.

63 CBA 5540 (385): Deck to Darby, 2 February 1876; (387): Deck to Darby, 2 March 1876; (386): 10 March 1876; the letters are written from Carterton, Porirua, and on board the steamer to Nelson.

64 *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol 2, p 448.

65 CBA 5540 (374): Deck to Darby, 13 December 1876, p 2.

66 CBA 5540 (375): Deck to Darby, 12 March 1877; (373): Deck to Darby, n. d. [ca April 1877]; (376): Deck to Darby [5 May 1877]; (377): Deck to Darby, 29 June 1877; (378): Deck to Darby, 22 August 1877; (380): Deck to Darby, 15 May 1880.

67 Deck to Darby, 10 March 1876, p 5.

68 Deck to Darby, 13 December 1876, p 3.

To the end of his life Deck continued to waver in his desire for broader fellowship with other Christians. From 1874 services at the Anglican Church at Ngatimoti for a while alternated with those of the Brethren, and combined church picnics also enabled the community links to continue. Some Exclusive Brethren allege that Deck welcomed non-Brethren to break bread at Motueka, although his great friends, the Paton family from Nelson, who had chosen the Open Brethren side, now avoided Sunday visits to the old man. His family was now divided religiously and yet there were still close personal ties between them. John and Emily went to Australia in 1877, where they were involved in the foundation of the South Seas Evangelical Mission. Samuel retired to Stewart Island. George became the key leader of the Exclusive Brethren. The health of their father slowly declined. The handwriting in his last letter to Darby in 1881 had deteriorated sharply. There is a fleeting glimpse of him in a letter to England by one of the Paton family in 1881:

Mrs N. has been over to see Mr Deck. She knew his sister Mrs Walker very well, was very fond of her she says. Mr Deck when he spoke reminded her so strongly of his sister that she felt inclined to embrace him! Mr Deck has failed very much recently.⁶⁹

Deck died in Motueka on 14 August 1884. He was buried on the foreshore, in a grave between those of his first and second wives. He was aged seventy-five; no mean age in view of his unstable health. Darby had died in 1882. After his death the Exclusive Brethren suffered serious splits in New Zealand as well as overseas, and the main group became, like its equivalents overseas, increasingly sectarian. At the same time the Open Brethren in New Zealand recovered dramatically as Gordon Forlong's work led to rural revival, and assemblies were planted in the hinterland of Otago, Nelson and the Manawatu. In the long run the Brethren had to learn to adapt to their environment in New Zealand. When Wigram observed the assemblies in 1874 he felt that the immigrant community had its own rather dubious ethos. He was once asked whether he found New Zealanders very self-righteous. In reply he noted the lack of "spiritual perception and power of *the presence of God*" in the colony. He also complained of the lack of: "Certain gravity and sobriety and collectedness of manner, and the more aged of the place and not the younger bearing any responsibility which may arise".⁷⁰ The heartiness and rough and ready nature of the society was reflected strongly in the assemblies. Perhaps it is unfair to take the story a hundred years forward, but the Open Brethren grew much more quickly than the Exclusives, probably because they were less burdened by English interference. Deck did much to lay the basis for one of the strongest branches of Brethren in the world, but his work soon lost the distinctive character he had tried to give to it.

The story of his life will be interpreted in different ways by different people. He was a great hymn writer, who may justly be praised for the fine rhythm, simple language, and high sentiments of his hymns.⁷¹ Curiously they are little known beyond the Brethren, except in some American hymnbooks. They are written specifically for the Brethren observance of the Lord's Supper, and are ever-popular there, but they deserve to be more widely known. Deck's hymns give some indication of his spiritual depths. His life story gives his hymns even more meaning. Like all the early Brethren he had a great longing for the restoration of the church to what the New Testament intends it to be. Every new and

69 Beacon Hill, Nelson: Paton Diaries for 22 April 1877 and 4 January 1880. [C. B. Brereton], *Jubilee of St. James' Church, Ngatimoti*, pp 7, 8.

70 Wigram, *To the Christians of New Zealand*, pp 11, 15.

71 Julian, p 285.

extremist group tends to become unpopular, and the Brethren drifted inevitably towards sectarianism. Deck was acutely embarrassed by this, because the most distinctive aspect of his life was the high value he put on loving and forgiving human relationships. His conscience inclined him to a breadth of fellowship and love. His mind was convinced on the contrary that loyalty to Christ meant willingness to stand firm for the purity of the church, whatever the effect of this on personal relationships. One will only understand the dilemma when one appreciates the high and mystical view of the church which inspired the early Brethren. Deck's hymns are perhaps the finest evidence of their exalted vision. But disputes over that vision engendered terrible bitterness, and sadly most Brethren were blinded to the tragic damage their sectarianism caused. This accusation can never be levelled against Deck. He accepted the doctrines, but he tried to find a way to love people as well. His emotional need for security and his intellectual need for a tidy systemisation of scripture kept him within the Darbyite world. His was an extraordinary life. One thing motivated it: his love for the Lord and his desire to be true to whatever he saw was right, at whatever cost to himself. He may have mistaken falsity for truth on more than one occasion. Once a theological system forms in one's mind, it tends to override other aspects of the conscience. But this is not necessarily a fault. As I put down the last photocopy of his scrawled and virtually illegible letters I find myself full of sadness but admiration. Sadness at the sight of a great person snared in a system which was not what he thought it to be. But I also feel a deep admiration for him. There was something beautiful about his perception of life and his priorities. One hymn expresses it all:

O Lamb of God, still keep me
Close to Thy pierced side;
'T is only there is safety
And peace I can abide.
What foes and snares surround me!
What lusts and fears within!
The grace that sought and found me
Alone can keep me clean.⁷²

Maybe if he had been a little less susceptible to pressure his life would have ebbed and flowed less. But in the end it was not his confidence but his conviction which mattered.

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72 Deck, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, p 34.