

**Children of Dissent**, by Pauline Ashbridge; 284pp. London, Kershaw Publishing, 2008 (ISBN 978-0-9546632-1-6). £8.99.

*Children of Dissent* is a very detailed account of the non-conformist ancestors of three brothers, John, James and Tom Somerton, who emigrated to the South African Cape in the 1870s. Their families came largely from the area around Banbury and included Quakers, Baptists and Methodists, about whom there is a great deal of detail.

The book is arranged chronologically from the seventeenth century but with an introduction about the Cape Emigration Agent and his influential powers over the choice of emigrants in the 1870s. It then reverts to the ancestral histories of rural Baptists in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds to the Quakers in Oxfordshire who regularly defied the authorities and to the Methodists who followed them. Much of the detail relates to Hook Norton and the surrounding agricultural area, outlining the interaction between different non-conformist groups and the influence of each as it grew and then waned. Poverty and constant struggle for survival are themes throughout the book, culminating in emigration as the final hope for a better life. Others from Hook Norton had already started to emigrate to America by the mid-nineteenth century and opportunism led the Somerton families first to London and then to the wider world. The author concludes that the final fortunes of the emigrants, as contrasted with those who remained in Britain, were probably not substantial but that those who went had gained greater freedom to own land. Agricultural poverty in Britain had reduced many to a landless existence in the nineteenth century from which there were few means of escape other than emigration.

This is a useful addition to the history of those who ultimately emigrated to South Africa and a great deal of work has gone into discovering historical detail. It is a pity therefore that the structure of the book makes the overall theme rather difficult to follow. Appendix I illustrates the parallel chronology of events, as detailed by chapter, but the mere fact that it was necessary to put it in suggests that it was not easy to write this way. For the reader it is also difficult to follow the story when almost every sentence is a paragraph in its own right; greater consolidation of the text would help to keep similar ideas together and enhance the overall picture.

Finally, with such a wealth of information, an index would immediately make the volume many times more valuable, both for local historians and genealogists, as well as those interested in the antecedents of emigrants to the Cape. But at least sources are very conscientiously footnoted, including references to our own journal and other local records publications!

**Helen Forde**