

**Book Review** – Ian Randall

# The Service of Giving: Sir John Laing and his Trusts, 1922-2022

By Alex McIlhinney

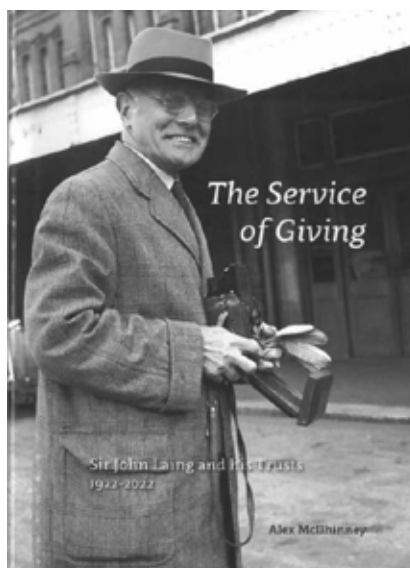
OPAL Trust, 2022, 305 pp, hardback, £15.00 (plus p. and p.) ISBN A 100

This book is a welcome extension of the biography of Sir John W. Laing by Roy Coad, which was published in 1979, a year after Laing's death: *The Biography of Sir John W Laing, CBE (1879-1978)*. For those who might not have much knowledge of Laing's life, this biography by Coad remains valuable. Both Coad and McIlhinney outline the way in which John Laing, from small beginnings in Carlisle, turned what was a family firm into a building and civil engineering concern of international proportions. He became a world-renowned builder. From a business point of view, Laing was a pioneer in many developments which were of direct benefit to his employees and at the same time contributed to his business flourishing. For example he was among the first major employers to give holidays with pay, a company pension, bonus payments, and payments by results. He encouraged shareholding by employees.

Sir John Laing's outlook in business and the whole of his life was shaped by his deep evangelical Christian commitment. It was this which led him to set up trusts through which he channelled enormous amounts of money in charitable giving. For him it was important to substitute generous help to others for what could have been the making of a personal fortune. The title of McIlhinney's book, 'The Service of Giving', comes from something Laing wrote in 1922: 'Business has a tendency to make a man mercenary, which the service of giving counteracts.' It was in 1922 that Laing set up the first of his Trusts.

Alex McIlhinney is well qualified to write on Laing and his Trusts. He studied history at the University of Glasgow and University College,


London, and followed this with a career in public service and business. For twenty years he was on the J.W. Laing Trust Committee, for the last seven as chairman. Someone who writes as an insider has the benefit of ready access to and understanding of a mass of material. At the same time – as sometimes happens here – there can be a tendency to include so much detail that the reader finds it hard to see the bigger picture.



The chapters follow to a large extent a chronological arrangement, after an initial chapter covering Laing as a business man, a family man, and a generous Christian. Chapter 2 tells the stories of the formation of what were three significant Trusts: the J.W. Laing Trust in 1922; the J.W. Laing Biblical Scholarship Trust in 1947; and a Trust formed in the name of Sir John's wife Beatrice in 1952. The subsequent chapters examine the way the Trusts supported missionary work abroad and evangelical ministry in the UK and Ireland. The distribution of what were enormous sums of money is forensically outlined. By 2022 the two J.W. Laing

Trusts had distributed £373,918,389 at 2021 value. There are explanations throughout of what the amounts given would be at 2021 value.

It is significant that the years 1984-2002 (chapter 5 in the book) are described as 'Years of Plenty'. The work of the Trust continued unabated in the years after Sir John's death. The two decades 2002-2022 are covered under the heading 'Years of Adjustment'. A very effective part of the book is found as an Appendix, in which testimonies are given by leaders of seven organisations that gained great benefit from Laing support. Two of these – Echoes International and Counties – represent Laing's passionate concern, as a member of the Open Brethren, for the advancement of Brethren missionary work overseas and evangelism at home. Although Laing's own early background did not include theological institutions or University experience, it is notable that four of these seven bodies which received crucial support worked in those fields: the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, Tyndale House in Cambridge, the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, and the London School of Theology (formerly London Bible College). The seventh testimony is from Christianity Explored Ministries.

This volume is remarkably cheap at £15.00. The publishers have a website, [www.opaltrust.org](http://www.opaltrust.org). The back cover of the book states: 'In recounting the story of Sir John and the charitable trusts he established, this book seeks to honour his vision and generosity, and celebrate God's faithfulness over the past century'. For those whose appetites are whetted by that, and perhaps by this review, OPAL Trust would no doubt be happy to be approached about buying the book. 



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