Stephen J. Plant is Dean and Runcie Fellow at Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge, where he teaches theology and ethics in the Divinity Faculty. He edited the journal Theology for SPCK from 2007 to 2013 and is the author of several books including Taking Stock of Bonhoeffer: Studies in Biblical Interpretation and Ethics (Ashgate Press, 2014).

Toni Burrowes-Cromwell is an International Development Specialist and former International Director of one of the UK’s largest children’s charities. Her background spans student ministry, social policy reform and programme delivery across the Caribbean, in southern Africa and in Canada. Toni is affiliated with several professional associations including the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR).
LETTERS TO LONDON

Bonhoeffer’s previously unpublished correspondence with Ernst Cromwell, 1935–6

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Edited by Stephen J. Plant and Toni Burrowes-Cromwell

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Though Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, most of his fame came posthumously. When Ernst Cromwell met him in late 1934 or early 1935 Bonhoeffer was 29 years old and relatively unknown. Though by this stage Bonhoeffer was already actively resisting state interference in church life (and was one of a small number of Christians arguing that the Church had a responsibility to resist Nazism more widely by standing alongside innocent victims of state aggression and injustice), the young Ernst Cromwell was largely unaware of and uninterested in Bonhoeffer's background. The friendship they formed in the mid 1930s was, therefore, very simply that of pastor and confirmand and was unaffected by the fame (and notoriety) that would attach later to Bonhoeffer as a participant in the treasonous assassination attempt on Hitler of July 1944, or as the brilliantly original theologian who emerged from the publication post mortem of his prison letters. By the time war ended and news of Bonhoeffer's execution at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945 became public, Ernst Cromwell had moved on. His own experience of war intervened between him and Bonhoeffer, and he had his own life to get on with. He was well aware of Bonhoeffer's growing fame, but felt disinclined to contribute to the chatter by drawing attention to Bonhoeffer's role in his own formation. Fully naturalized as an Englishman and after 1941 with an Anglicized first name, Ernest Cromwell, like most others of his generation, valued privacy, both his own and Bonhoeffer's.

In the autumn of 2010, during a house refurbishment, Ernest's son Andrew rediscovered a number of letters written to his father by Bonhoeffer in 1935 and 1936. The letters had been kept carefully and deliberately, interleaved in a number of books. Now approaching his ninetieth birthday, Ernest Cromwell asked Toni Burrowes-Cromwell
(his daughter-in-law) to assume responsibility for them due to the keen interest she had had in Bonhoeffer since her teenage years. In November 2010 Toni invited Stephen Plant to see the cache of letters. It was plain to them both that the letters ought to be in the public domain; the volume you are reading is the outcome of a process to make the letters available in print.

This volume is clearly not an introduction to Bonhoeffer’s life and thought; for that, one may choose from one of several accessible introductions currently in print.\footnote{See, e.g., Keith Clements, \textit{The SPCK Introduction to Bonhoeffer} (London: SPCK, 2010); Joel Lawrence, \textit{Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed} (London: T&T Clark, 2010) and Stephen Plant, \textit{Bonhoeffer} (London: T&T Clark, 2004).} What the letters published in this volume give is a densely pixellated snapshot of Bonhoeffer in sharp focus at a particular moment and in a particular pastoral relationship. Here we can see Bonhoeffer in the period when he prepared to leave congregational ministry in London to take up a post as director of a seminary training ministers for the illegal Confessing Church. These letters and the photographs accompanying them are a significant new find that add colour and texture to our knowledge of what is going on at a comparatively neglected period. In them we see Bonhoeffer pulled between his various callings to pastoral ministry, theological teaching and political resistance. We see him trying on religious community life for size, squeezing out time to travel from a busy schedule, and reflecting on friendships lost and made in the struggle between the German churches and the new Nazi government. Above all we see Bonhoeffer, with rare grace and warmth, finding ways gently to guide a strong-minded adolescent into a flourishing life and faith.

Though the other half of this correspondence, Ernst Cromwell’s letters to Bonhoeffer, has been lost, Ernst is nonetheless a full partner in it. Bonhoeffer took to this precocious, intelligent and lively confirmand, still in his teens when the Berlin-educated pastor met him, and welcomed him into his confidence. After distance and time drew them apart, the course of Ernst Cromwell’s life was eventful in its own
right. Distinct from and in addition to any interest these letters foster in Bonhoeffer, they ought also to stimulate interest in the lives of the many families who sought refuge in Britain from Nazi misrule, and whose welcome by some Britons was alloyed with deep suspicion by others, not least by the British government that interned so many of them indiscriminately after the fall of France in 1940.

The first section of what follows is an essay that fills out some of the background to the letters, setting them in context for any whose knowledge of the period is hazy. This ‘introductory’ essay also aims to amplify some of the key themes in the letters, including the development of Bonhoeffer’s theology of life together in Christ, the practice of silence, the impact of the church struggle on friendship, and the central role played by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, both in their author’s thinking and in what Ernest Cromwell remembers of his preparation for confirmation. This is followed by the transcript of an interview with Ernest Cromwell in which some of the biographical background to the letters is spelled out. Then come the letters themselves with extensive footnotes making sense of details in the letters that would not be immediately apparent to most readers, as well as several comments on issues in their translation. Finally, Toni Burrowes-Cromwell uses her background in the area of international development and youth services to connect this historical relationship with some contemporary challenges – not least, linking faith with practice and how the Church engages in mentoring young people.

In spite of its relatively modest length, an unusually large number of people has contributed to the appearance of this short book. At the earliest stage Mike King, then leader of World Church Relationships at Methodist Church House in London, helped put Toni in touch with Stephen. Knut Hammerling and the Revd Burkhard Scheffler of the Bonhoeffer Haus in Berlin also supported the work. By January 2012, a small group of scholars and research students had met at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, to read the letters. The discussions that took place on that occasion have informed this volume and helped to shape many of the footnotes. Initial transcription of the letters was undertaken by Jelena Beljin. Included in the first group to see them were not
Preface and acknowledgements

only Professor Ralf K. Wüstenberg, Professor Clifford Green, Executive Director of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, and Dr Keith Clements, who edited the London volume of Bonhoeffer’s writings (DBWE 13), but also Ernest Cromwell’s granddaughter, Eloise Cromwell, who helped bring the story ‘off the page’ as a living family history.

As an expert on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s handwriting (and on much else about him) Dr Ilse Tödt’s subsequent assistance in accurately transcribing the text has been invaluable. The translation of the letters themselves is by Isabel Best, who, as translator of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: London 1933–1935, Volume 13 of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English, was familiar not only with the conventions of the Bonhoeffer translation project as a whole, but with this period in particular. Our thanks are given to Brother Steven CR, Archivist of the Community of the Resurrection, who kindly sent a copy of the minutes for the House Chapter that mention Bonhoeffer’s visit.

The delegated responsibility for handling copyright issues on Bonhoeffer’s literary legacy lies with Gütersloher Verlagshaus, while copyright on all English translations of Bonhoeffer is held by Augsburg/Fortress. We are grateful for the patient and generous way in which some complex copyright issues have been resolved, as well as, of course, for the permission to publish at all. Philip Law at SPCK immediately saw the potential for this volume, and is responsible for unravelling the rights issues.

editions. We are grateful to all those whose agreement has made these arrangements possible, including Professor Clifford Green, Executive Director and Dr Victoria Barnett, the General Editor of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; Philip Law, our commissioning editor at SPCK; the Gütersloher Verlagshaus and the Fortress Press.

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Our deepest thanks are owed to Ernest Cromwell for his foresight in keeping the letters published here and for his patience in sitting through many hours of personal interviews and conversations, in providing the initial working translation of the letters, and recalling further details from his teenage life. We hope that in our writing we have been guided by his sober admonition not to be such a one as ‘hör das Gras wachsen’.
Abbreviations


KC  Keith Clements, Bonhoeffer and Britain (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006)
That I got to know your father and mother and all of you has become very important to me, especially in these times. I really think of you as good friends, for whom one must forever be grateful.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Ernst Cromwell, 27 March 1936)

NB: On joining the British Army in 1941 Ernst Cromwell changed his name to Ernest Cromwell, which was not only permitted but also encouraged for members of the armed forces serving in combat zones in order to protect them in case of capture. In this chapter we therefore refer to Ernst when discussing him before 1941 and Ernest thereafter.

**Bonhoeffer, confirmation and ‘mentoring’ the young**

The friendship begins with a request that Bonhoeffer confirm Ernst Cromwell as a baptized member of the Christian Church. The importance for Lutherans of catechetical training for Christians has its origins with Martin Luther himself. In 1529 Luther published his *Large Catechism* intended as a manual for clergy in the practice of Christian initiation. Following a pastoral tour, in 1551 Luther published a second, *Small Catechism* in response to what he took to be widespread ignorance of doctrine among the ‘common people’ – and among the clergy who were supposed to teach them. Though Luther identifies
the want of theological knowledge as the problem, in point of fact the Small Catechism is concerned at least as much with moral formation, recognizing, as does the Lord’s Prayer, that the duty of Christians to God is in balance with their duty to their neighbours.

Given the importance of catechesis to Luther it is perhaps unsurprising that in 1931 Bonhoeffer and his friend Franz Hildebrandt wrote a catechism together titled ‘As You Believe, So You Receive’\(^1\) that tried to express simply ’what the Lutheran faith is saying today’. The catechism is carefully structured. Even here, however, a handwritten addition to his copy hints at the approach Bonhoeffer would take with Ernst: questions and answers challenge ’confirmands to independent reflection. The confirmand today needs someone to expect to make something of him’.\(^2\)

The theological origins of the new catechism lay for Bonhoeffer in the dissertation he had written to qualify as a university lecturer. In the closing section of Act and Being, his demandingly technical study of revelation, Bonhoeffer considers what Christians can learn about their faith from the insight that children have their whole future ahead of them:

Baptism is the call to the human being into childhood, a call that can be understood only eschatologically . . . Faith is able to fix upon baptism as the unbreakable Word of God, the eschatological foundation of its life . . .\(^3\)

That Bonhoeffer had this ‘problem’ in mind as he approached the issue of the training of those who would, as young adults, confirm the promises made on their behalf at their infant baptism is suggested by the jokey inscription he wrote on the front cover of the complimentary copy of Akt und Sein that he gave to Hildebrandt: ‘And will a catechism come now from this!’\(^4\)

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1 See DBWE 11 2/7 pp. 258–67.
2 DBWE 11 2/7 note 4, p. 259.
3 DBWE 2 pp. 159–60.
4 In German: ’Und daraus soll nun ein Katechismus werden!? Ihr Dietrich Bonhoeffer’; see DB-ER p. 186 where Bethge slightly misquotes the dedication. The original copy is now in the Bonhoeffer Archive at Union Seminary, New York.
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There is no evidence of the extent to which Bonhoeffer put his jointly written catechism into practice when he was instructed to lead a confirmation class at Zionskirche in the Mitte district of Berlin from November 1931 to March 1932, but it must surely have contributed to his approach. Bethge reports that the class was out of hand when Bonhoeffer took it over. The boys, 40 of them, threw things at him as he climbed the stairs to meet them and reacted to his name by chanting 'Bon, Bon, Bon!' He dealt with this by quietly telling a story about his time in New York and the class became silent in order to hear him. He rented a room nearby and instructed the landlady to leave it unlocked so the boys could use it. He also rented nine acres of land on the Berlin outskirts with a wooden house to which he could take his class, and took a group of them on a walking tour of the Harz Mountains. Before the confirmation service itself, Bonhoeffer distributed cloth to make new clothes for those being confirmed. Richard Rother, one of those confirmed in this group, reports that Bonhoeffer took care to choose a Bible text to give to each of them for their confirmation. Bonhoeffer's work on a catechism and his experience of preparing a large group for confirmation meant that when he came to prepare Ernst Cromwell for confirmation he had a wealth of theological and practical wisdom to draw on.

How Bonhoeffer came to London

Bonhoeffer's decision to seek an appointment as a pastor to German-speaking Christians in London was by no means straightforward. In Germany in the twentieth century, and largely still now, individuals

5 Almost all the Bonhoeffer literature indicates that Zionskirche was in the Berlin district of Wedding, but to be precise the church was built in the Rosenthaler Vorstadt which was divided into Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, and Wedding in 1920. Zionskirche sits almost exactly on the spot where Wedding, Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte meet, falling just in Mitte. In a series of boundary changes in 2001 Wedding was subsumed into Mitte.

6 DB-ER p. 226.

who have studied theology must decide whether they want to serve in pastoral ministry or pursue an academic career. Already in 1935 Bonhoeffer felt torn between these two directions. He had qualified as a university lecturer in 1930, receiving his 'habilitation', the certificate needed to teach in the German university system, when he was only 24 years old. Members of his faculty in Berlin spoke of him as the most promising theologian of his generation. Yet Bonhoeffer had also enjoyed a year as an assistant minister in the German-speaking congregation in Barcelona and had made the most of some challenging pastoral work not only at Zionskirche but also, from October 1931 to 1933, as chaplain at the technical college at Berlin-Charlottenberg.

Bonhoeffer’s decision to take up a pastoral appointment in London did not altogether close off the possibility of a future career in the university, but it did put a brake on it and indicate the earnestness of his sense of calling to serve the Church.

The decision also had in it several more ‘human’ elements. Bonhoeffer loved travel: while a student in New York, for example, he took the trouble to travel both to Cuba and to Mexico. London, then as now one of the world’s truly great cities, appealed. It also meant he would have his own house instead of squatting with his parents. Finally, Bonhoeffer and his distant cousin Elizabeth Zinn had, by mutual consent, ended the ‘understanding’ they had had about their relationship; this really was the perfect moment to try something new. For all these reasons a move to London looked like the perfect course to take. What made the decision to leave Germany vexing was what it could be taken to suggest about Bonhoeffer’s participation in the German church struggle.

Following Adolf Hitler’s appointment as Reich Chancellor in January 1933, the Nazi government moved swiftly to neutralize potential church opposition and to conform the churches, along with every other significant previously independent group, to Nazi organization and control. On 20 July 1933, the Nazi government signed a concordat (a treaty) with the Holy See that included provisions to disband the Catholic Centre Party, the only remaining effective political opposition to the Nazis. At the same time they began the process of imposing
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unity upon the Protestant Landeskirchen or regional churches. On paper, this might have looked like a reasonable thing to do: one nation, one Church. But the 32 regional churches in existence in 1933 each had long independent histories. Moreover, though Protestant, they did not all belong to the same confessional tradition: a majority was Lutheran, some were Reformed (i.e. Calvinist), and some were unions of both Lutheran and Reformed traditions. As early as 1931 pressure groups began to form to influence the political direction of the German Protestant churches. The Deutsche Christen (German Christians), a strongly nationalist group with anti-Semitic characteristics, welcomed Hitler and campaigned for one national Church. In opposition, a Pastors’ Emergency League coalesced around Martin Niemöller, pastor of the suburban Dahlem parish church in Berlin. Bonhoeffer was one of the first to join and was one of the league’s most indefatigable campaigners. The Pastors’ Emergency League attracted a sizeable membership but quite quickly gave way to the Bekennende Kirche, the Confessing (or sometimes Confessional) Church.

The issues dividing these two church parties were more complex than might at first appear and two distinct sets of issues were interwoven in their disputes. Certainly politics had something to do with it; yet by no means all Deutsche Christen were Nazis and by no means all members of the Confessing Church were anti-Nazi. Many who were committed nationalists opposed the formation of one Reichskirche on strictly theological grounds. To understand this, we need to recall the foundations of Lutheran political theology: according to Luther religious leaders had their authority from God, but so did secular rulers. These two authorities were not intended by God to compete with, but to complement and even to support, each other. Key to the theological health of this symbiotic relationship was that neither authority interfered in the divinely given authority of the other so long as it was doing its job properly. Luther conceived circumstances in which it was appropriate for the state to intervene in church life, and for the Church to intervene in secular matters if such intervention could be justified by a clear failure of the state to govern wisely in its ‘realm’ or of the Church to govern wisely in its. A Reformed political theology
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was not identical to a Lutheran, but was similar on many essential points. The question facing Protestant Christians in Germany from 1933 was therefore: ‘Has the state exceeded its divine authority in the case of insisting upon a single national Church governed by a single Reichsbischof?’

To an extent Martin Niemöller embodied some of this complexity. A former U-boat commander, Niemöller was a committed German nationalist and, though not anti-Semitic, was instinctively sympathetic to many Nazi policies. Yet theologically he held strong views that the Nazi state should keep out of the affairs of the Church unless the Church had failed in the exercise of its duty. By contrast Bonhoeffer was both politically opposed to Nazism andtheologically convinced that this particular intervention by the Nazi state was improper. To Bonhoeffer, Niemöller was certainly an ally, but he was also a ‘starry-eyed idealist’ because he thought he could outdo the National Socialists in nationalist fervour.¹

In August 1933 Bonhoeffer, together with another Lutheran theologian, Hermann Sasse, was commissioned to draft a theological basis for the nascent Confessing Church; it was named the Bethel Confession after the place where they undertook the work. They drafted two versions that make bold theological statements concerning the Christian Church.¹² Though Bonhoeffer and Sasse’s statements on Church/state relations were in keeping with Lutheran orthodoxy, in the context of the church struggle they proved explosive. After stating the Lutheran view that worldly government is ordained by God, they continued that ‘[t]he church can never be absorbed by worldly government, that is, it can never be “built into” the structure of a state. The content of its proclamation always places it over against all worldly authority’.¹³ This ran directly counter to the policy of Gleichschaltung.

¹ The phrasing is Bonhoeffer’s: see DBWE 13 1/193 p. 135.
¹² The Bethel Confession went through several drafts; the two published in DBWE 12 2/15 pp. 374–424 are the versions that Bonhoeffer worked on – and which therefore had his full support. After August 1933 he withdrew from the drafting process and he disapproved later revisions.
¹³ DBWE 12 2/15 p. 414.
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the bringing into line or conformation of all aspects of German society to the Nazi Party.

Also included in the drafts submitted by Bonhoeffer and Sasse was a clause on ‘The Church and the Jews’. From the perspective of Christian theology after the Holocaust/Shoah this section of the draft Bethel Confession contains disturbing elements; for example, it maintains the historic Christian claim that ‘The place of the Old Testament people of the covenant has been taken not by another nation but rather by the Christian church, called out of, and within, all nations’.\(^{11}\) Though intended to militate against Nazi claims that Germans were now God’s chosen people, the assertion that the Church has superseded Israel as God’s chosen people with hindsight theologically underwrote the anti-Jewish thinking it was intended to oppose. Yet the two theologians resisted firmly a racist approach to what was commonly called ‘the Jewish problem’:

> [t]he fellowship of those belonging to the church is determined not by blood, therefore, by race, but by the Holy Spirit and baptism . . . We object to the attempt to make the German Protestant church into a Reich church for Christians of the Aryan race.\(^{12}\)

What even their draft failed to do was to advocate – as Bonhoeffer did later – that the Church must stand not only with baptized Jews, but also with non-baptized victims of Nazi injustice. When Confessing Church leaders got hold of the draft confessions they emasculated them by removing clauses likely to create controversy. Bonhoeffer’s dismay at the evisceration of the Bethel Confession by church leaders keen to keep out of trouble is a major reason why he left Germany for London.

One leading figure in the Confessing Church movement who shared Bonhoeffer’s anxiety about the Confessing Church’s lack of courage was the theologian Karl Barth. From the time as a student

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11 DBWE 12 2/15 p. 417.
he had read Barth’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans, Bonhoeffer had respected Barth as a powerful and authentic new theological voice. Their first face-to-face meeting in 1931 did nothing to diminish Bonhoeffer’s sense of Barth’s importance. Though Bonhoeffer had engaged critically with Barth’s theology, the younger theologian looked to the older as something of a mentor. Because of this Bonhoeffer did not write to tell Barth of his decision to go to London until after he had arrived, after which he waited anxiously for Barth’s reply. When it finally came, Barth’s response was friendly but uncompromising. Barth recognized that Bonhoeffer’s move to London could be understood as a ‘personally necessary interlude’, but continued, ‘I truly cannot do otherwise than call to you, “Get back to your post in Berlin straightaway!”’ Summarizing Bonhoeffer’s letter, Barth added, ‘What is this about “going into the wilderness,” “keeping quiet in the parish ministry,” and so forth at a moment when you are needed in Germany?’ In this sharp criticism Barth was partly wrong and partly right. On the one hand Bonhoeffer continued to play a modest but useful role in the church struggle from London by mobilizing German-speaking Christians in Britain in support of the church opposition and by working behind the scenes to influence the views of leading English churchmen (alas, the gender-exclusive noun is accurate). And yet Barth did have a point: by absenting himself from the heart of the battle in what would prove to be the decisive years of the struggle, Bonhoeffer could be said to have been ‘playing Elijah under the Juniper tree or Jonah under the gourd’.

How Ernst Cromwell came to London
Ernst Cromwell was born on 30 March 1921 in Nuremberg. His father, Philipp Cromwell, was a secularized German Jew who had served as a volunteer soldier in the First World War, first in Romania.
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and later on the western front where he was taken prisoner, spending time as a prisoner of war on the border between England and Scotland. Ernst's mother, Lotte Cromwell (née Rasch), had graduated in German from university. A convinced Lutheran Christian, like Bonhoeffer’s own family and like many middle-class Germans she did not regularly attend a church, but she did have Ernst baptized as an infant. After the war Philipp practised as a lawyer and Ernst lived what he describes, in a memoir, as a ‘very happy if undistinguished childhood’.15

Ernst went, a year early after some private tuition, to the Realgymnasium where relations between pupils and staff were cool but efficient and where the fact that his father was Jewish was not generally known. In 1930 Ernst ‘acquired a little sister’ (and later a brother) and by 1933, when Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor, Philipp Cromwell’s legal practice was thriving. Increasingly, however, the atmosphere ‘became very unsettling and insecure’. The family domestic help was going out with a Nazi storm trooper who tried to persuade her to leave the family’s employment. Rumours began to be repeated in hushed tones about friends who had been taken from their beds at dawn, maltreated and beaten. Judging that Germany was not a country where his family could have a secure future, Philipp attempted first to relocate to France, before moving to London to work as a clerk at a very modest salary in a firm making greeting cards. A short while later Philipp’s family followed. Ernest recalls that his mother was impressed by the consideration of the immigration official who, seeing her with young children, called her to the front of the queue.

Upon his first sight of Britain, travelling from Dover to London Victoria, Ernst felt reborn. Not only was there the sensation of security after much uncertainty, but also, after the relatively joyless atmosphere of his German Gymnasium, he entered the ‘fresh air’ of the Beltane School. There, as he mentions in the interview published in

15 This section draws heavily on an unpublished autobiographical memoir written by Ernest Cromwell in March 1994; unattributed quotations are from the memoir.
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Ernst Cromwell and his parents in Nuremberg, Germany, c. 1925
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Ernst (bottom row, third from left) at Realgymnasium School, Nuremberg, Germany, 1931

this book, an atheist deputy headmaster had an influence on his own
developing thoughts about religious belief and practice. Nonetheless,
the Cromwells were keen that Ernst be confirmed.

Bonhoeffer, the Cromwells and the Sydenham church

It is unclear precisely when or how Bonhoeffer and the Cromwells
met. During his stay in London Bonhoeffer was active – with some
success – in finding financial support and support of other practical
kinds for a number of individuals and families who had left Germany
to evade Nazi oppression. Ernest Cromwell’s memoir reports that, as
soon as could be managed after his emigration to London in 1934,
Philipp Cromwell qualified to practise law in England, specializing
in advising refugees on legal matters. It is quite likely that the two
men met in connection with one particular refugee or with a refu-
gee family whose affairs Philipp Cromwell was involved with, perhaps