

**RETHINKING THE RISE OF
PROPHECY FICTION:
H.R.K.'S *LIFE IN THE FUTURE* (?1879)**

Crawford Gribben

The genre of prophecy fiction has provided some of the best-selling novels of the last two decades. Its most famous example, the Left Behind novels (1995-2007), written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, has sold over sixty-five million copies and now represents the best-selling fictional series, in any genre, in American literary history. In *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy fiction in evangelical America* (2009), I argued that the genre of prophecy fiction emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, several decades after the consolidation of dispensational theology and just before the beginning of the controversy about fundamentalism. The earliest example of prophecy fiction which I was able to identify was located by a colleague in the Brethren Archivists and Historians Network, Michael Schneider, in a story serialised alongside a series of articles on J.N. Darby in the German Pietist magazine, *Sabbathklänge* (1901).¹ More recently, Andrew Poots, another member of the Network, has drawn my attention to a small pamphlet by 'H.R.K.' entitled *Life in the Future*, which appears to date from the 1870s. This pamphlet, which represents the earliest example of prophecy fiction so far identified, promises to significantly alter our understanding of the literary genre which has produced some of the best-selling novels of the last century.

Life in the Future is a forty-eight-page fictional account of the rapture, the tribulation and the beginnings of the millennial reign of Christ. It is heavily didactic, and the plot clearly takes second place to the author's concern to inculcate dispensational assumptions.

1. Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy fiction in evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.30-31; it is reviewed in the present volume of *BHR*, pp.91-3 below.

Notably, it disallows the idea that those who had rejected the gospel before the rapture would have a second chance of salvation after it – and so sets itself apart from almost all subsequent texts in the genre. But its exposition of dispensational eschatology is firmly within early Brethren norms.

Whatever the familiarity of its theological formation, however, the pamphlet presents a series of significant interpretive difficulties. Firstly, it cannot easily be dated. My own copy, a second edition, is undated, as are the copies of the first and third editions now held in the Christian Brethren Archive (CBA). The back outside cover of the pamphlet provides a clue as to the date of publication of this second edition, in that it lists as ‘just published’ Darby’s notes on 1 and 2 Corinthians (which the CBA catalogue dates as ‘?1879’) and William Kelly’s *Notes on the Book of Job* (1879). The Bodleian Library catalogue gives the date of its copy of the second edition of *Life in the Future* as 1879. The date is in square brackets, a convention used when there is no date printed in a publication, which suggests that this was the date when the Library acquired its copy. It is therefore likely, though perhaps not easily provable, that the first edition appeared towards the end of the 1870s. But if this is the case, it renders problematic the claim in the pamphlet that the crucifixion occurred ‘more than eighteen hundred and seventy years ago.’²

Secondly, it is not easy to identify the author of the text. The CBA does not include in its catalogue any other publications by H.R.K. In fact, the sum total of biographical information provided by the author is constituted in his identifying his location as Ryde, Isle of Wight.³ But if that is the case, the dating of the pamphlet in the late 1870s takes on a new significance. In 1876, Mr Finch, a clergyman of the Church of England serving in a church in Ryde, seceded from the establishment with the bulk of his congregation. The secession appears to have been motivated by his appreciation of Brethren writings, but instead of joining the existing assembly, with whom he and his congregation shared so many ecclesiological preferences, the Finch party met independently. The Finch party’s decision to subsist

2. H.R.K., *Life in the Future*, 2nd edn (London: G. Morrish [1879]), p. 30.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

apart from the existing assembly sent shockwaves through the Darbyite movement, and Cronin's attempt to reconcile the two groups led to his own excommunication from the Kennington assembly and to the "Ramsgate Question" which would precipitate the Kelly division of 1881.⁴ The fact that the pamphlet was published by Morrish suggests that its author was then in fellowship with the original assembly in the town. But the tensions between the competing assemblies provided an important context for his work. It is remarkable, in that respect, that *Life in the Future* offers no consideration of ecclesiological norms.

But *Life in the Future* also complicates the developing account of the emergence of prophecy fiction in a number of important ways. The pamphlet's most significant challenge to the developing theory of the evolution of prophecy fiction is the evidence it provides that the genre first emerged among Brethren. Brethren have of course been notable producers and consumers of prophecy novels. Many readers of this journal will remember the popularity of Sydney Watson's trilogy, *Scarlet and Purple* (1913), *The Mark of the Beast* (1915), and *In the Twinkling of an Eye* (1916), a series of English texts which displaced in the British Brethren imagination such earlier prophecy fictions as Joseph Birkbeck Burroughs's *Titan, Son of Saturn* (1905), Joshua Hill Foster's *Judgement Day* (1910) and Milton H. Stine's *The Devil's Bride* (1910). And later Brethren produced their own prophecy fictions, most notably F.A. Tatford's *The Clock Strikes* (1970). But no-one who has written about the prophecy fiction phenomenon has suggested that the genre emerged within the Brethren movement itself.

There are certainly difficulties in explaining how it could have done so. It is not easy to explain why Brethren should have been turning to fiction at this point in the development of their thinking, for Brethren throughout this period, if Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907) is to be believed, were resolutely opposed to the consumption of narrative fiction. In fact, this view was widely shared beyond the Brethren movement, and opposition to the reading of

4. Napoleon Noel, *The History of the Brethren*, (ed.) W.F. Knapp (Denver, 1936), vol. 1, p.314.

novels was a standard element of English Victorian evangelical piety.⁵ But *Life in the Future* suggests that certain varieties of narrative fiction could be tolerated within one of Victorian evangelicalism's most world-denying movements. The pamphlet never defends its choice of fictional medium, as Sydney Watson's novels would later do, for example. Nor does it reflect upon its own unique position as a vehicle of dispensational thought: could it be that it was not the earliest Brethren prophecy fiction?

This tolerance of narrative fiction may explain and help date the movement of some Brethren towards sectarian habits of thought. Sociologists have used examples drawn from the lives of modern Exclusive Brethren to account for the fact that those religious groups which are furthest from the cultural mainstream are often less concerned to police lifestyle boundaries than are those closer to it: this explains, they have claimed, why many Open Brethren so often remained so hostile to the consumption of alcohol while many Exclusive Brethren appear so much less concerned about the issue.⁶ *Life in the Future* may signal that by the late 1870s Exclusive Brethren had become so differentiated from 'the world' that they were no longer concerned to politicise their distance from certain aspects of its culture. Whatever these difficulties, *Life in the Future* offers readers a fascinating glimpse into the imagination of early Brethren, and a useful reminder that those contemporary cultural products which seem best to popularise dispensational eschatology may in fact have moved the system some way from its original doctrinal base.

Here are its first two chapters—with original spellings and a misprint preserved.

5. Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, pp. 27-30.

6. See, for example, Bryan R. Wilson. 'The Exclusive Brethren: A case study in the evolution of sectarian ideology', in Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London, 1970), pp. 287-342.

LIFE IN THE FUTURE.

By H.R.K.

CHAPTER I. THE RAPTURE.

“We which are alive and remain shall be caught up.”

1 Thess. iv. 17.

NOTHING unusual had marked the day's proceedings in the beautiful little town of — (which we will take as an example of all other towns), situate on the prettiest coast line in the world. And to this part visitors from every quarter of the globe came for health, pleasure, and to enjoy the thousand and one attractions of the beauties bestowed upon it by nature and art. But, as I said, there was nothing occurred on this particular day of which we speak, to indicate that aught should hinder or oppose the usual flow and current of the day's doings. People were doing exactly what all the world had done before—taking their pleasure, doing their business, and the tradesmen gleefully pocketing their gains; some of them thanking God that they had such a good run of business, as they carefully locked their huge iron safes, containing their treasured store. And their hearts leaped within them as they looked upon the splendid esplanade, and noble pier, literally crowded with wealthy loungers, pleasure-seekers, and time-killers. Some were hurrying to the steam-packets to greet friends, others paraded gaily the promenade, and others listlessly gazed down into the blue depths of the ever varying sea. Every heart has its peculiar object, even the heart of the veriest idler. And the people of this town very closely represented the people of all others. But would they have been thus engaged, had they

known the end of the coming eventful evening? I trow not. In one of the streets of the place I heard the voice of an evangelist, clearly ringing through the still clear air, sounding forth the message of grace, and God's wonderful love to poor sinners.

He was earnest indeed, and pleaded with sinners so simply, so sweetly, that some weary hearts cast their all, there and then, just as they were, upon Him who once said, "I will in no wise cast out." O what a timely decision was theirs! But some there were who scoffed at the preacher, and became the more hardened in their sins because the effect of the word of God, upon any hearer thereof, is either of life unto life or of death unto death. Many closed their doors, and closed their hearts, and sat down to their cups, and their games to drown conscience, and to become giddy with pleasure, even as they stood on the brink of destruction.

It would have surprised you had you seen how many there were, whom people thought good Christians in the day time, entering into the jollities, convivialities, revellings, and such like, of the night season.

Now there was a deal of religiousness in this town, and indeed it would have appeared very disrespectable and altogether unbecoming, of any holding anything like a position in the town, not to have attended some place of worship (as they persistently called their splendid buildings), on the Sunday, or "the Sabbath" as some with show of reverence called the "first day of the week." However, their testaments told them it was "the Lord's day." But this by the way. It did not a bit matter how large a subscription appeared on the list of donations towards the building of a church or a chapel, or how handsome a gift to some society for the spread of the gospel, I say, in God's sight, it was an abomination. God looks at the man, not his manner, *that* may be assumed. He looks at the heart, not at the handsome gift. These respectable, religious men were despising the poor evangelist at the very moment God was saving souls by the foolishness of his preaching. What a decisive moment was this! There was still a numerous throng drinking in the words of the preacher, though it was getting late in the evening. The silvery moon had risen, and was pouring her soft mellowed light upon the place.

The course of nature, was the same. Nothing was altered, nothing indicated any stupendous act of God, but all things continued as they were from the beginning. Many still said, "Where is the promise of his coming?" But, lo! in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, a mighty change had taken place! The preacher vanished before the eyes of his audience. Many of the listeners also as suddenly disappeared. Not a sound, not an echo did they make in their departure. Some there were who said they heard what sounded to them more like thunder than aught else. Some professed to have seen wondrous signs in the heavens, but none of their assertions could be relied on. You know when Jesus was on earth, when His Father spake to Him, saying, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." Some who stood by, said that it was the voice of an angel, and some said that it thundered. None knew the meaning thereof. Nor was it wonderful that these poor people understood not who were present at the time we speak.

All that night how many vainly searched for their friends! Distracted mothers looking for their children, children looking for their parents, husbands for their wives, and wives for their husbands. It was a terrible night indeed. And when the morning came, and the town woke up, wholly and alive to the astounding fact, what consternation, what surprise ensued! It is perfectly indescribable. Many shops remained closed, and it was soon found that the proprietors had gone. Many offices were vacated. Servants had left their places without a moment's warning, but had taken nothing with them. In some instances servants were left in the entire possession of their employers' property. How anxiously was the arrival of the post looked for! And all the daily papers got a ready sale. Their leaders dilated on the wonderful exodus of many thousands of people, but failed to explain satisfactorily. Telegraph clerks were extremely busy, as soon it was known that all over the world, and at same moment, people had been snatched away from their homes, from business, and from their meetings. Now what did it all mean? People madly crowded to their churches and chapels, but many of their ministers, too, had left. It was a solemn, heart-rending time. Many died from terror, not knowing what next would take place. Some to quiet the

populace, boldly asserted that the millennium would now dawn upon the world, and so endeavoured to preach Peace, Peace.

Alas! for the poor world. The salt of the earth is taken away, and corruption must have its sway. The light of the world is gone, and darkness and confusion must ensue. The saints are gone, and sinners remain. He who had hindered the full power of sin, the Holy Ghost, is taken away with the church. This is the solution of the mystery. The Lord Jesus had fulfilled His promise. He had called His own to Himself. He came with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God, and bade His people meet Him in the air. But the world heard Him not. Yes! that was the meeting place, "the air." Whether it was in the immeasurable space of the stellar universe, or the atmosphere of the earth, is perfectly immaterial. The rapture of the saints had taken place, and they had met their Lord in the air. Upon the minds of those who had heard the gospel preached and knew the truth, though not savingly, the whole affair was as clear as noonday. Never did the scriptures appear so powerfully, and now painfully clear to their hearts. It was self-evident, that if they belonged to Christendom, they did not belong to Christ. Most terribly was this applied to the hearts of those who had had converted parents. It was peculiarly distressing, the vain searches made by some young people, who slept in the comfortable homes of their godly parents. They awoke in the morning to find practically true, what they had heard as if only it were theory. O there is nothing so real as reality! And now the awful feeling of lost, lost, lost, flooded their souls in a deluge of despair. How bitterly they lamented their lost opportunity, blaming themselves for not taking salvation, which but yesterday was within, their reach. There were their fondest friends, gazing in glory on the face of Him who had loved them, and they were left—left to be swept away by the besom of destruction.

Pencil cannot picture—nor imagination conjure, the consternation amongst the professors of the different sects of the church of Christ, erroneously so-called. There was one ray of hope, they were alive upon the earth, they were not in hell, and they could search the word and see what the Lord would say concerning them. So they buoyed themselves up in a hope which proved as false as Satan could desire

it, soon settling down to what we read of *the left ones* in 2 Thessalonians ii. 11. "The Lord shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie."

How it fared with these doomed people we shall hereafter see.

CHAPTER II. THE RESURRECTION.

The dead in Christ shall rise first."—1 Thess. iv. 16.

THE first evening after the wonderful event—the translation of the saints—drew on: and as yet a vague apprehension duly had been received by the minds of many. But upon one particular portion of the community it exerted a most wonderful influence. It was upon the Jews. A strong delusion was already fast spreading amongst the masses, but the Jew was energized by a power that impelled him to the performance of an enterprise which his heart had long yearned for. What it was we shall speedily see. Meanwhile, we shall introduce the reader to some of the different Jewish families. In the Library of the British Museum sat some thoughtful descendants of a worthy line. They had retired thither for seclusion for a short time from the great discussion of the day. They were highly educated and knew far more of natural philosophy than of scriptural knowledge. As members of society they were refined, and as scholars classical. They had read deeply nearly every book, except the English New Testament, and works on Christianity. Still they were imbued with a great amount of awe and reverence for religion. A glance at the "Codex Cottonianus," one of the most ancient MSS., containing only a few fragments of the four gospels, written on purple vellum with silver letters, was sufficient to demand their attention. It is referred to the end of the 4th century, so it had a claim upon them for its ancient style and great age. It was not their first desire to look into the truth of Christianity. But this their education overruled. They had heard of some of their people—only a few indeed—who had really become like the Gentile infidels, and believers in the fact that Messiah had already appeared. But their terrible excommunication was a sufficient

deterrent for entertaining a thought respecting the truth. Now their convictions were too late. Was the Christian's bible indeed true? So, absorbed in thought, they sat, they noted not the flight of time. The great question of the day aroused their dormant convictions. They would carefully search the prophets, for that purpose they had retired from domestic scenes. A crisis had come respecting their beloved nation, and they were determined to make sure work of their decision.

Very anxiously, indeed, was their arrival looked for by each family circle. The times were so strange. Nothing seemed too great or too impossible to occur.

The younger branches of the families kept up constant watch for their return; their attention being often distracted by the vast crowds of people moving about, as if by impulse, in an indeterminate sort of way. The older more thoughtful ones made many inquiries, yet feared to intrude remarks, which might have little relevancy to the subjects earnestly being discussed by the heads of the families.

The long-looked-for at length appeared. The delight of the family, and the secret pride of the mother, were again in the embraces of their families. But their noble faces wore stern lines, and a decisive manner of speaking betokened their earnestness. The purport of the message each gave was as follows:—Undoubtedly God has not forgotten His ancient people. We belong to His own peculiar nation whom He chose out from among all the nations, and this assuredly is the time for action and not for repose. A wonderful work has been done among the Gentiles, an undeniable proof that God is amongst us still. None can dispute the fact that thousands are gone—many with whom we have done business, too, are gone, leaving only their goods and chattels, but not a shadow of their mortality. And what is equally remarkable, there are unmistakable evidences of a resurrection having taken place of some from the dead. Would that we had been taught the English New Testament. Already we have made many discoveries, which simply prove its teachings to have been true. One passage declares that “The dead in Christ shall rise first,” and goes on to say that in the twinkling of an eye, the living believers in Jesus of Nazareth would be changed and caught up in the air, with those

raised ones to meet their Jehovah-Jesus in the air. Now it is equally plain that this has actually taken place. It is confirmed on all sides that at the *same instant* it was consummated. Rumour brings strange statements of the resurrection. Instances are not wanting which prove in many cases those who lay in their coffins ready for interment, had in the same instant left their coffin and grave clothes, obeying, doubtless, the mandate of the Almighty. Funerals were stopped—finding the burden had gone—the bearers became alarmed. Surely the passage was divinely inspired which states “This corruptible must put on incorruption.” Doubtless that referred to those sleeping in death, and the quotation finishes, “this mortal must put on immortality,” that referred to the living. And so a resurrection and a transformation has taken place, and we have been in determined ignorance. It is a solemn time indeed. Yet something tells us of hope about to shine on Israel. And our conviction and decision is, that announcements be made for immediate preparation to start *en masse* for the beloved city of God and of our forefathers, Jerusalem. The night of our dispersion is at an end, the dawn of a glorious future is about to gleam for us. What says Isaiah, son of Amoz? “Jehovah shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people which shall be left from the isles of the sea.” This is plain language for us. Lose no time, let us hasten from a land which most assuredly is devoted to destruction, to our own land of promise, where we are sure God will again delight over His Zion. Surely our Rabbis are in error, why should they say concerning the coming of Messiah, “Cursed be he that shall calculate the time ?” yet at the same time declare to us that “He is to deliver them from their afflictions and give them in reversion, joy, temporal dominion, and prosperity, and the triumphant possession of their own land.” Why should we further pray as on the day of atonement, “Woe unto us for we have no Mediator”? There is a passage in the “Targum of Onkelos” which tells us, “There shall not pass away one exercising dominion from the house of Judah until Messiah shall come.”* To our minds this is a proof positive that Messiah *has* come, for who is

*See Genesis xlix. 10.

there that is or has been exercising dominion over Judah? But our teachers speak of Messiah as a sufferer and as a conqueror, and so they tell us of Ben Joseph the sufferer, and Ben David the conqueror. This we confess we do not quite understand. The same prophet we quote from says of Him, "His visage was marred more than any man, and his form more than the Sons of men." And to meet this our teachers have surely adopted this teaching of a twofold Messiah, which is at variance with other scriptures according to our knowledge thereof. Alas! that we gave such little attention thereto! But this we fully coincide with and readily and gladly go forth, expecting to meet Him as David the Conqueror. For all His words are truth and verity.

Still one difficulty presents itself to our minds. In our confessions we say, "My death must be an atonement for my sins." This to us is directly opposed to our law given by Moses. Still we do not see how our long-expected Messiah will be the sufferer. But of this we are confident, He will come as a conqueror. So, beloved ones, let us be up and doing. Our journey admits no delay. Our presence is required at the Holy city: there to await His coming.

Now while our Jewish friends are getting ready to start on their journey to Jerusalem, we will take a general survey. What are the people doing that had received such a fright and such a shock to their nerves? Very much the same as in the days before the flood, while the ark of God was preparing. Very much the same were they doing as they had previously to the rapture of the true believers in Jesus of Nazareth. Many were glad enough not to have their consciences disturbed. Besides, they enriched themselves with forsaken spoil. Their ministers and public lecturers declared "peace and safety," and God suffered a strong delusion to take hold of their minds, and they believed the lie that Satan foamed out in insinuations. He was a liar from the beginning, and he is a liar at the ending. It has been said that people love to be deceived. Indeed they do not like to be undeceived. But this settling down of the populace was like a lull before the storm. Their peace was that of an unwary traveller being drawn into the maelstrom, and their safety, like a dweller near the crater of Vesuvius. A corpse cannot remain long intact. So this seething mass

of corruption cannot remain long. It must work, and burst all barriers of propriety, education, and restraint, because the Holy Ghost had hitherto hindered the full working of evil; but being taken away with the translated ones, there is no hindrance to sin reaching a climax hitherto unapproached. Shortly, as we shall see, an awful element of evil developing itself, rapidly paving the way for that tremendous period in the world's history, designated in scripture, "The great tribulation." Now is the time when Satan brings forth, on the platform of professing Christendom, his master-piece of imitation and deception.