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'John Nelson Darby and Trinity College, Dublin: a study in eschatological contrasts'

Gary L. Nebeker

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In 1980, David Hempton identified a problem at the heart of scholarly interest in the emergence of dispensational premillennialism and the Brethren movement: 'Without knowing the intellectual history of Trinity College [Dublin] in the first quarter of the [nineteenth] century it is difficult to be certain about the relationship between anti-Catholicism and premillennialism' (David Hempton, 'Evangelicalism and Eschatology', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (1980), p.185). Hempton's remark has often been cited, but in the two decades since its publication, not many historians have been brave enough to address the historical lacuna. In this recent article, Gary Nebeker, who has completed a PhD on 'The hope of heavenly glory in John Nelson Darby' (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1997), has put historians of millennialism, Brethrenism and evangelicalism greatly in his debt.

Nebeker's article offers a rare glimpse into the intellectual world of early nineteenth-century staff and students at TCD. It describes a rich variety of millennial beliefs, each founded upon a basic consensus that the end of the dispensation was at hand. As the Irish rebellion challenged the hegemony of the Protestant establishment, Trinity academics rushed to provide explanations of the contemporary political climate through exegeses of the prophetic passages in Holy Scripture. In describing these explanations, Nebeker's article offers rich context for a new appreciation of the influences at work upon the imagination of the young JND. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Nebeker argues, JND did not base his developing millennialism on an 'anti-Catholic political-religious agenda' (p.102). There are one or two minor difficulties with the text. It is questionable whether postmillennialism began with John Owen, as Nebeker suggests (p.94); neither was this 'puritan postmillennialism' introduced to Ireland in the eighteenth century (p.95). Recent scholarship in this area has suggested instead that leading academics at Trinity College Dublin—notably

Archbishop James Ussher—had engaged with Puritan millennialism from the early seventeenth century, and that puritan exegetes were often as attracted to premillennialism as to the postmillennialism with which they have more often been associated. These details aside, Nebeker's valuable article will open important new ground for many scholars working in this area.

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