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**A History of the Plymouth Brethren (1901; republished)**

**William Blair Neatby**

**Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker, 2001**

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Archbishop Alexander of Armagh characterised the present threat to the Irish establishment: 'The hill up which our little host must march is steep, and the hail beats in our faces. We hear the steady tramp of the serried ranks of Rome around us; the shout of the marauders of Plymouth rises, as they, ever and anon, cut off a few stragglers. We draw close, and grip our muskets harder.'

This remarkable assessment of the gravest threats to Anglicanism is ably explained in Blair Neatby's *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*. One century after its first publication, the Brethren movement has progressed far beyond the historical paradigms the work explored. Nevertheless, Neatby's history remains indispensable for any understanding of the movement's first seventy years.

Neatby concentrates largely on the history of the Exclusives after the failure to resolve the Bethesda question. He represents Darbyism as a species of anti-ritualistic High Churchmanship which gained early popularity among an aristocratic circle associated with 'the academic parent of Plymouth Brethrenism', Trinity College, Dublin. He sketches the movement's missionary impact throughout Europe and far beyond. He notes that Darby's strength was as a mystic rather than a systematic theologian, and indicates the significance of the fact that the movement, which had begun in a burst of song, produced few great hymns after 1845. His comments on the movement's theology are insightful – particularly his claim that Darby's root error was a failure to distinguish between the visible and invisible church – and his characterisations are never dry. Commenting on the magnetic appeal of Darby's personality, which seemed to cow all dissent, Neatby recounts one incident in which Darby (a peadobaptist) was questioned as to what Wigram (a baptist) held regarding baptism. Wigram, Darby replied, held his tongue.

Tentmaker are to be congratulated for the fine appearance of this edition. The text has been re-set and each book has been individually hand-bound. For little more than paperback price, this edition of Neatby's history represents excellent value for money.

Crawford Gribben