

BHR 4: 156-7

Protestant Millennialism, Evangelicalism and Irish Society, 1790-2005

Crawford Gribben and Andrew Holmes (eds)

Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006
244 pp. ISBN 0230003494 £50/\$105

This book begins with J.N. Darby. However, it is the intention of the authors to demonstrate that Protestant millennialism in Ireland consists of so much more than him. There is an impressive introductory essay by Crawford Gribben on the history of Irish millennialism in the period under discussion, comprehensive essays on Protestant mission in the Dublin slums and biblical prophecy in Irish Presbyterianism from 1850 until 1930, a delightfully sympathetic portrait of an ecumenical premillennial missionary, William Graham, and an important study of unionism and eschatology in the later twentieth century.

But for the essayists in the book Darby is the inescapable Irish clergyman—he is the individual with the most references in the index. Three papers at the heart of the book place him. Irene Whelan, whose work will be impossible to ignore by future historians of the Brethren movement, gives his context among ‘the Bible gentry’. She contends that the Irish social and political elite embraced the so-called ‘Second Reformation’—the evangelical mission to convert Catholic Ireland—as a way of defending the existing social order against the threats contained in the 1798 rebellion and the rising demand for Catholic political equality. Ironically it backfired and forced Catholic Ireland to define itself against it. These were trends that would cast a long shadow in Irish affairs, but they also had considerable influence in shaping Darby and his eschatology, as Whelan points out. Timothy Stunt directs attention to the man himself, teasing out the nuances of the complex perceptions of him: ‘Irish, English, European, and transatlantic’. Within different religious constituencies he is revered at present, but often these groups are unaware of the homage paid to him by others, something this far from insular Irishman would have noticed. The third paper which touches on Darby directly is the one

on Edward Nangle, like Darby a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin. Curiously, this university turned out a number of futurist premillennial thinkers, such as Darby, but equally curiously Nangle was not among them. He was a historicist premillennialist, a position that was in part inspired by his anti-Catholicism. This tended to make him one of those who venture forth, in the words of Isaac Taylor (quoted in the book), 'the Bible in one hand, the newspaper in the other'. This approach demonstrates in part why futurist premillennialism has been more enduring.

The assertion of W.G McCormick that the Brethren movement 'can be accounted as the product of Irish religious life to a degree which no other denomination can rival' is quoted twice in the book. Other papers refer to the Brethren: the anti-Brethren polemics of the Presbyterians, inspired in part by their postmillennialism; their growth through revivalism; their influence on William Graham; Graham's serene relations with, among other Brethren, George Müller, who preached for him in Germany. Yet Crawford Gribben in an endnote states that 'Despite its importance, there exists no formal scholarly study of the origins and development of the Brethren movement in Ireland.' In the Conclusion Andrew Holmes notes that this is partly a problem of sources and suggests as a possible approach the techniques of oral history. This book makes an invaluable contribution to the study of Irish millennialism. It is necessary reading for Brethren historians. But it also makes plain what a yawning gap the history of Irish Brethrenism is.

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