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From Jesuit Aberration to Mystical Apparition: A Consideration of the Intellectual Influences on J. N. Darby's Rapture Doctrine Priesthood

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Introduction

This research paper will consider the historical and theological development of John Nelson Darby's doctrine of the pre-tribulational rapture and will assess several longstanding narratives concerning the influences on his eschatological thought. In popular and scholarly discussions, Darby's articulation of the pre-tribulational rapture has been attributed both to aberrant Jesuit interpreters such as Francisco Ribera and Manuel de Lacunza or to the ecstatic prophetic apparitions of Margaret MacDonald during the charismatic revival associated with the self-appointed chief apostle of the Catholic Apostolic Church, Edward Irving. This paper proposes that these claims fail to account adequately for Darby's own statements concerning the individuals and theological traditions that shaped his ecclesiology and eschatology. While Darby often resisted explicitly acknowledging his intellectual influences, he nevertheless did name individuals, movements, and interpretive traditions that contributed to the development of his understanding of the church and its eschatological destiny.

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The central argument advanced in this paper is that Darby did not derive his understanding of the pre-tribulational rapture primarily from Jesuit aberrations or from charismatic apparitions. Rather, Darby's theology emerged from a convergence of Anglican ecclesiastical dissatisfaction, prophetic conference culture, biblical literalism, and through his interactions with evangelical and restorationist thinkers, many of whom came to be associated with the early Plymouth Brethren movement. In addition to these various factors, all of which have been previously acknowledged by others, I suggest there remains another influence that bears significance on Darby's thought that has gone underrealized. Darby's robust engagement with the Early Church Fathers informed his ecclesiology as well as it did his eschatology. While he doesn't explicitly credit them for shaping his thought, his frequent appeal to their writings evidences the extent the ideas he settled upon were informed by his reading of the Patristics.

This study will employ historical-theological methodology through close textual analysis of Darby's published writings, correspondence, and recorded reflections and will critically evaluate the claims advanced by writers such as Dave MacPherson, who argued for Margaret MacDonald's decisive influence on Darby's doctrine. These claims will be weighed against chronological and textual evidence that elucidate Darby's own theological development during the late 1820s and early 1830s. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to move beyond simplistic dependency theories and toward a more nuanced account of historical-theological development. Rather than portraying Darby as either an isolated innovator or an uncritical imitator, the argument advanced in this paper is that his doctrine developed within a dynamic intellectual and ecclesiastical environment in which he sometimes referenced conversations, controversies, and interpretive influences that shaped his thinking. By recovering these named influences, the paper seeks to contribute to a more historically responsible

understanding of the development of dispensational eschatology and modern evangelical prophetic thought.

Darby's Developing Premillennial Eschatology

Today's Evangelicals, when not reading their Bibles, can often be found binge-watching episodes of the latest dystopian sci-fi series, interspersed with segments of Fox News. Two-hundred years ago, Evangelicals could not avail themselves of these pastimes. Instead, they hosted social gatherings known as "Prophetic House Parties"[2] or "drawing room meetings," where like-minded members of the Anglo-Irish gentry class gathered for tea and to tickle the itch of apocalyptic speculation. One historian remarked that "throughout the 1820s, these so called 'drawing room meetings' enjoyed widespread popularity among many 'serious minded' folk in and around Dublin."[3] Darby's association with Rev. Robert Daly and Lady Powerscourt thrust him into the center of prophetic discourse not long after his evangelical conversion, in 1820. However, eschatological interests did not immediately occupy his interests to the same extent they would, after he became more settled in his ecclesiology.

One historian has opined that Darby's gravitation toward premillennialism "probably goes back to the growing confrontation between Catholics and Protestants that gave rise to Archbishop Magee's Charge of 1826 and the Petition to the House of Commons for Protection in February 1827."[4] However, it is admittedly difficult to pin-point when Darby fully embraced the millenniarian persuasion, as the postmillennial framework that was common to the Irish

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[2] Donald Harman Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time: Irish Evangelicals in the Age of Daniel O'Connell* (Montréal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 348–349.

[3] Greyson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media, c. 1800–1850* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 197.

[4] Stunt, "Influences", 55–56.

Evangelicals, at that time, was not always easy to distinguish from premillennialism. What is certain is that in 1829 Darby published his first tract from Dublin that addressed the subject of biblical prophecy, titled *Reflections Upon the Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in It*.[5] In that publication, Darby critiqued several competing eschatological views that were being advanced by his contemporaries, including the position maintained by the dissenting Scottish minister Edward Irving (1792–1834). It should be noted that at this early date, Darby's premillennial eschatology was not yet fully settled, particularly as it concerned the rapture of the church and the tribulation period. In 1829 Darby advocated for a historicist form of eschatology that anticipated a future millennial kingdom, but did not distinctly perceive of the rapture or of a seven-year tribulation period for which he would later become known. Nevertheless, in his critiques of his contemporaries, Darby was careful to distance himself from what he regarded as extreme expressions of premillennial historicism that were being advanced at that time.

The Scottish lay-theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathen (1788–1866) was among those with whom Darby took exception.[6] Like Darby, Erskine was a lawyer by training. He had fallen into the company of Edward Irving, and adopted a similar eschatological outlook. Although he would later be remembered for his theological contributions in the area of universal atonement, during this time, all the hubbub was about biblical prophecy, and so Erskine did his part to advance the cause. Darby's criticism of Erskine was principally a response to an article of Erskine's that had run in a Christian periodical called *The Morning Watch*,[7] a journal which

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[5] John Nelson Darby, "Reflections Upon the Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in It," [1829] in *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, vol. 2, *Prophetic No. 1* (London: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.), 1–31.

[6] William Hanna, *Letters of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884 [4th ed.]). Cf. T. Hart, *Thomas Erskine of Linlathen* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1993).

[7] M. R. Patterson, *Designing the Last Days: Edward Irving, the Albury Circle, and the Theology of the Morning Watch*, PhD Thesis (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2001).

served as a promotional vehicle for Edward Irving's swelling prophetic movement. As such, *The Morning Watch* did not last beyond the untimely passing of its founder, in 1834.[8] Nevertheless, its short-lived print run was impactful for a growing number of readers who were taking up interest in biblical prophecy, due in no small part to the sustained efforts of Edward Irving.

Irving was an enterprising itinerant preacher with a magnetic attraction for ecclesiastical polemics. Before he got swept away with charismatic demonstrations of ecstatic mysticism, Irving translated into English and wrote the foreword to the controversial apocalyptic work of the Jesuit, Manuel de Lacunza y Diaz (1731–1801), *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*,[9] more than a decade after its original release in the Spanish language.[10] As many historians have noted, the book quickly became a hit with the prophetically-inquisitive Evangelicals in Darby's day.[11] It fanned the flames of apocalyptic speculation for the same crowd that attended the 1826 and 1827 Albury Prophecy Conferences.[12] These conferences, held in Surrey, London, served as the precursor for the Powerscourt prophecy conferences that would emerge in Ireland, in the following decade. Nevertheless, in 1829 Darby's differences with Irving's premillennial expectations were made evident in his *Reflections Upon the Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in It*.

A year later, Darby offered a critique of what he viewed as the more extreme premillennial view of Samuel Roffery Maitland. Maitland's book, which discussed the prophetic

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[8] A.L. Drummond, *Irving and His Circle* (London: James Clarke & Co., no date); Cf. H.C. Whitley, *Blinded Eagle: An Introduction to the Life and Teaching of Edward Irving* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1955).

[9] Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra [Manuel de Lacunza y Diaz], *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty by Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, a Converted Jew*, trans. with a preliminary discourse by Edward Irving (London: L. B. Seely and Son, 1827).

[10] Irving's translation was released in 1827; the original Spanish text was published in 1812.

[11] Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 18-19; Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, 221; Martin Spence, *Heaven on Earth: Reimagining Time and Eternity in Nineteenth-Century British Evangelicalism* (Eugene, OR, Pickwick Publications, 2015), 53.

[12] Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time*, 356-357.

period of 1260 days expressed by Daniel (7:25) and the Book of Revelation (11:3; 12:6). A popular take among premillennialists, at that time, was that the 1260 prophetic days were intended to represent years, and so the tribulation period was a protracted length that spanned the history of the church. Darby lent his voice to this debate in 1830 when he offered his critique of Maitland's views, as presented in the *Christian Herald*.[13] While Darby affirmed that "the hope of the individual is being with Christ; the hope of the church is His coming,"[14] he nevertheless advocated a historicist understanding of the tribulation period that followed the popular year-day theory.[15]

Darby's commitment to this historicist eschatology is not some obscure matter that has only recently surfaced with the emergence of the *Powerscourt Notebooks*.[16] In some of his earliest tracts, preserved in the *Collected Writings*, Darby can be seen arguing for this view. It is evident that as late as 1830 he remained committed to an historicist understanding of the tribulation. Several decades ago, one researcher called attention to Darby's developing eschatology, noting: "what is rarely mentioned is that the early Darby espoused a historic premillennialism before the famous Powerscourt Conferences of 1831–33."[17] Whether the label "historic premillennialism" is the best term for what Darby espoused in these early years we will set aside for now to consider the claim that Darby abandoned that position and instead adopted

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[13] *CW* 2:6.

[14] *CW* 2:10.

[15] John Nelson Darby, "On 'Days' Signifying 'Years' in Prophetic Language," [1830] in *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, vol. 2, *Prophetic No. 1* (London: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.), 32–40; cf. *Powerscourt Notebooks*, iii:24.

[16] The *Powerscourt Notebooks* refers to a set of three manuscript notebooks containing annotations and recordings from what is referred to as the first Powerscourt Prophecy Conference that met on October 3–7, 1831. They are held in the private possession of Tom Chantry, who acquired them through private auction in 2015, and has digitized the contents to make access available to researchers. The contents of the *Powerscourt Notebooks* reveal that Darby not only did not introduce the pre-tribulational rapture to the Irish evangelicals who attended that conference, he in fact, argued vehemently against those who did.

[17] Floyd Sanders Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby." Unpublished Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991.

dispensational/pre-tribulational premillennialism prior to the 1831 Powerscourt Conference. If correct, this shift in Darby's eschatology occurred sometime between the end of 1830 and the beginning of 1831.

At this point it should be stated that there are several competing narratives: the first and most widely-held position is that Darby adopted his pre-tribulational eschatology before 1831, since he is thought to have promoted it at the first Powerscourt Conference in October of that year. However, a competing narrative has been advanced by Darby enthusiasts that suggests that claims Darby understood "dispensational truth" which "entails the pre-Rev. 4 rapture" of the church as early as 1827.[18] Roy Huebner, aggressively promoted this idea, thinking that by it he established Darby as a prophetic pioneer who received the doctrine from divine illumination.[19] However, the fact is that these dates correspond much more closely to Edward Irving's Albury Prophecy Conferences, and could potentially form a stronger link between Darby and the Irvingite movement, with all of its influences—whether Jesuit, mystical, or otherwise. But as it has already been shown, above, Darby took exception with Irving's eschatology.

However, the landmark release of the *Powerscourt Notebooks*, reveals that Darby had not changed his opinion concerning the post-tribulational rapture of the church prior to the 1831 conference.[20] The extent to which Edward Irving, or as some have suggested, Margaret Macdonald,[21] might have shaped Darby's mind in this direction, cannot be determined.

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[18] Roy A. Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through Darby, Volume One Revival of Truth 1826-1845* (Jackson, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1993), 10.

[19] Huebner, *Precious Truths, Volume One*, 7–18.

[20] *Powerscourt Notebooks*, i:37, iii:24.

[21] An American conspiracy theorist by the name of Dave MacPherson has worked hard to spread the narrative that the Pre-trib rapture originated with an off-kilter Irving enthusiast from Glasgow, having even published multiple small books on the subject titled: *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Missouri: Pedestal Press, 1973); *The Incredible Cover-Up: The True Story of the Pre-Trib Rapture* (New Jersey: Logos International, 1975); *The Great Rapture Hoax* (North Carolina: New Puritan Library, 1983); and *The Rapture Plot* (Oklahoma: Artisan Publishers, 1995).

Nevertheless, Irving's influence on the Enniskerry elite cannot be easily dismissed. This can be seen from the impression the charismatic Scotsman left on Lady Theodosia Powerscourt (1800–1836), who is "now remembered primarily for inviting Edward Irving to Powerscourt during his visit to Ireland in September 1830, (when she introduced him to a number of influential Irish Evangelicals)."[22] When Lady Powerscourt first became introduced to Edward Irving is uncertain, but she was presumably on the short list of high profile guests invited to attend the earliest Albury Prophecy Conferences held in London. She did not attend the premier conference in 1826, but did not fail to make it to the second conference in 1827. She became so enthralled with the scene that she resolved to recreate the Prophecy Conferences at her palatial estate in Ireland.

To accomplish this, she invited Edward Irving to be her guest and planned an itinerary around his visit in 1830. Personal letters from Mrs. Irving, addressed to her sister, detailed Mr. Irving's feverish preaching tour in and around Dublin.[23] Within a span of eight days, Irving preached no fewer than thirteen occasions, including multiple sessions on Sunday and Monday, and a Wednesday clerical-summit with "upwards of thirty clergymen, some laymen, and a few ladies present."[24] Judging from Mrs. Irving's expression, this itinerary exceeded their expectations, and reveals the enthusiasm of Lady Powerscourt in hosting her special guests. Additionally, one can conclude from the tight window between the visit of the Irvings in 1830 and the first Powerscourt conference that took place just one year later that Lady Powerscourt already had a mind to open her estate to a cadre of guests, in an effort to bring the Albury Conferences home to Ireland.

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[22] Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, 208.

[23] Mrs. [Margaret] Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving* (London: Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1862), 299–300.

[24] Ibid., 300.

The fact that Lady Powerscourt toured Edward Irving around Dublin in 1830 has given rise to several misconceptions, including the notion that the first time the Powerscourt Estate hosted a prophecy conference was in September of 1830, and that Edward Irving participated.[25] A tract printed in London in 1838 titled *Questions for Eight Weeks' Consideration* purports to supply the schedule for a three-day conference under the heading "1830 P[owerscourt]. H[ouse]. E[nniskerry]. I[reland]."[26] However, this conference does not square with the days, times, and locations indicated in Mrs. Irving's letters. For instance it is clear that Mrs. Powerscourt escorted the Irvings to Bray on Tuesday and to an unnamed clergyman's house near Delgany on Wednesday.[27] While no dates are assigned to the alleged "1830 P. H. E. I." conference listed in the 1838 publication, it is almost certain that if a prophecy conference did occur in September 1830 at the Powerscourt Estate it did not take place during the week of Edward Irving's visit to Dublin.[28] Therefore, the claim that Irving directly participated in any of the Powerscourt Conferences cannot be substantiated.[29] This has led Donald Akenson to conclude that an 1830 Powerscourt conference that matches the schedule published in 1838 never actually transpired.[30] What's more, it is highly unlikely that Darby was present at the time of Irving's visit, as Timothy Stunt has noted that for most of the period between 1829 and 1832 Darby was not in Dublin, but was either in Paris, working with Frédéric Monod, or else in England.[31]

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[25] Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: the Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation, Vol. IV* (Washington D. C.: Review and Herald, 1954), 422.

[26] [anon.] *Questions for Eight Weeks' Consideration: Addressed to the Church of God* (London: Central Tract Depot, 1838) provided by Duke University Libraries and accessed at archive.org.

[27] Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving*, 300.

[28] *Questions*, 5.

[29] Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers, Vol. IV*, 1223.

[30] Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time*, 368.

[31] Timothy Stunt, "John Nelson Darby: Contexts and Pretexts" in *Protestant Millennialism, Evangelicalism and Irish Society, 1790-2005*, edited by Crawford Gribben and Andrew R. Holmes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 85.

Despite the lack of direct interaction between Darby and Irving, the impression that the self-styled apostle left on the burgeoning Dublin Divines, to energizing their imaginations in the direction of prophetic themes, is not without significance. Within a year of Irving's visit to Dublin, Lady Powerscourt would famously open her estate to host the premier prophecy conference in October of 1831, chaired by the Rector of Powerscourt, Rev. Robert Daly (1783–1872), who would later become the Bishop of Cashel and Waterford. At the 1831 Powerscourt house party, Darby would emerge as one of the more central figures, establishing himself as a major player concerning matters of biblical prophecy related to the character of the church's last days on earth and the coming of Christ to receive the church to Himself. When Christ would come to receive the church to Himself relative to the 1260 prophetic days was a topic that was hotly debated, and on Wednesday, October 5, 1831, the Dublin Divines remained very much divided, with the majority preferring a historicist approach which Darby championed, as he still fought tenaciously for the day-year position which was popular among many of his contemporaries. Extracts from the *Powerscourt Notebooks* reveal Darby's commitment to this position had not waivered, being still fully convinced that "the 1260 days most unequivocally mean years" to which he added "all arguments against it are totally astray."[32]

Moreover, Darby did not shy away from directly attacking Rev. Robert Daly, who was appointed to chair the conference, when he remarked: "my friend who took the other side founded his argument on an absurdity, and all the conclusions he drew are absurd too."[33] Nevertheless, it would not be long afterward that Darby would come to hold the very same position he so adamantly argued against. Evidently Darby's thinking concerning the Church's

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[32] *Powerscourt Notebooks*, i.37.
[33] *Powerscourt Notebooks*, i.37.

end would mature over the next two years (1832–1833), bringing him to hold the very views which he characterized as "absurd" in 1831.[34]

Darby's Adoption of Pretribulationalism

As demonstrated above, for as many as five years after Darby's riding accident he was dogmatically asserting the "absurdity" of a futurist interpretation of the Apocalypse that placed the rapture of the church prior to the great tribulation. While the pre-tribulation rapture would later become a distinctive feature of Darby's dispensational view of eschatology, between the late 1820s and early 1830s he maintained that the Church would endure the tribulation that the Apostle John prophesied would fall upon the inhabitants of the earth. There is no indication that the position which Daly took at the 1831 conference had any effect on reversing Darby's mind in these matters. Although Darby did emerge from the 1831 conference with an awakened interest in biblical prophecy, as well as with a renewed appreciation for the collective energy of the Dublin-Enniskerry coterie who were given to exercise their collective minds toward such themes. In a private letter written from Limerick, Darby had the following to say, coming out of the 1831 conference: "the meeting at Powerscourt, as it has wrought conscious desires, and inquiry, and prayer too, in the minds of many of the evangelical people in this place, there has been a considerable plunge made into the minds of this country by it, and this has partly exercised me, as interested in this country."[35] Darby was thus eager to return to Dublin in time for the 1832 conference, and would thereafter make a priority of it in his annual calendar. Nevertheless, when Darby returned for the 1832 Powerscourt conference, he was no closer to accepting Daly's futurist interpretation than when he had left a year prior, despite the number of

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[34] *CW* 2:32–40.
[35] Darby, *Letters*, 1:13 (1832).

Anglican evangelicals in the Dublin/Enniskerry area who likewise embraced the futurist eschatology of Daly.

However, by the date of the 1833 Powerscourt conference, Darby had completely reversed his position, having become fully persuaded that the Church would be delivered from the coming tribulation, that the entire itinerary for that week centred around this theme, which Darby championed.[36] Regrettably, Daly would not be present at that conference to receive anything resembling an apology from Darby, had he been inclined to offer one, though that would have been entirely uncharacteristic for Darby. What's more, the reason Daly was not present that year was largely a response to Darby's influence the year prior. His highly polemic posture brought the senior churchman to withdraw from participating in the prophecy conferences at the conclusion of the 1832 Powerscourt Conference. In his closing address of that conference Daly made his public departure to the crowd of prophetic enthusiasts gathered at the Powerscourt Estate, and effectively washed his hands of the entire scene.[37]

While no notebooks resembling those of the 1831 conference have emerged, to document all that transpired at the 1832 house party, nevertheless, several sources exist which reveal some of the characteristics of those meetings. Among these documents is a letter which Darby wrote, addressed to the editor of the *Christian Herald*, which has been preserved in the *Collected Writings*.[38] Additionally, some extensive transcriptions of at least one of Daly's talks which he delivered at the close of that week has been retained.[39] The difference of perspective on this

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[36] *Questions*, 8–9.
[37] Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time*, 410.
[38] Darby, *Letters*, 1:5–6 (1832).
[39] Mrs. Hamilton Madden, *Personal Reflections of the Right Rev. Robert Daly* (Dublin: George Herbert, 1872), 19–22. Cf. Mrs. Hamilton Madden, *Memoirs of the Late Right Rev. Robert Daly* (London, James Nisbet & Co.: 1875), 153–155.

week, offered through these two vantage points, serves to highlight the ranges of opinion concerning the value of these meetings. Whereas, Darby expressed enthusiasm over the fact that "the remarkable recognition of the Spirit, I mean practically, was very striking; and, it appears to the writer, met by a restraint on the thoughts and feelings of man, which, considering the variety of subjects, was very remarkable."[40] Daly expressed quite different sentiments:

> I must say that in truth I do feel my mind so harassed with all that has passed, that instead of saying anything more, I think it best to ask one of my brethren to entreat the Lord's pardon and forgiveness for all the evil that has crept in amongst us, through our defilement and infirmity; to ask for more of the Holy Spirit, for more light…. For myself, I never felt in spirit so much inclined to say, 'Oh! That I had the wings of a dove, that I might flee away and be at rest.' When my soul is forced to dwell in such an evil world; when I see before me the prospect of such divisions in the Church; when I think of those being so separated on earth, whom I do hope are joined together in the Lord; there is something within that causes me to say, 'Better to depart and be with Christ;' *that* is the wish of my heart… I certainly felt this evening a more awful sense of coming evil than I ever did before.[41]

Daly, therefore, came out of that meeting with a solemn word of exhortation for the young and eager men whom he perceived to be treading a dangerous line. He cautioned them: "[to] those ministers present who are younger than myself, and those who are likely at a future time to become ministers of the Gospel…whilst the great promises which we have considered are fit subjects for pulpit instruction, the minor points of detail, with regard to which all admit there must be great inaccuracy in our views, it is our duty to withhold at such times."[42] Darby, however, walked away from the same conference with quite a different sense, describing a scenario in which "evil and good came into great conflict,"[43] and he emerged with the feeling that he "had lived two years since [he] came to Ireland, in the development of the Lord's work,"

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[40] Darby, *Letters*, 1:5 (1832).
[41] Madden, 19–20.
[42] Madden, 21.
[43] Darby, *Letters*, 1:16 (1833).

thus, he resolved within himself "there is nothing, nothing else to live for."[44] While these two sources differ in some substantive ways, both perspectives make it clear that the meetings were not altogether edifying to everyone in attendance, though it may be that Darby was more troubled by the participation of one proponent of Irvingism to whom he later called attention:

> There was but one individual who introduced anything which could have given pain to any on these subjects; and that was a reference to the reception of "the gifts" and the principles connected with it. Little, however, was said upon it; and while the principles were calmly inquired into by a few, it did not, I think, affect the meeting, otherwise than to direct the earnest desires and prayers of many, for the more abundant presence of that Holy Ghost by which alone, error can be brought to light, and the believer guided into all truth.[45]

Akenson observed the following concerning Darby's participation in the second Powerscourt conference, "in 1832, John Nelson Darby endeavoured to push aside two big stags, Edward Irving and Robert Daly, both leading evangelical divines."[46] Though it is difficult to determine with certainty what his motive may have been for doing this, one probable reason is that Darby sought to diminish the stature of these two men in the estimation of Lady Theodosia Powerscourt. This is not to imply Darby had a romantic interest in Lady Powerscourt, such as some have suggested.[47] Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that both Darby and Lady Powerscourt possessed a mutual appreciation for the other, if not at least in the most platonic

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[44] Darby, *Letters*, 1:16 (1833).
[45] Darby, *Letters*, 1:16 (1833).
[46] Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time*, 394.
[47] Max Weremchuk received criticism for this kind of speculation in his original biography of Darby, when he wrote: "they fell in love and became engaged," and then continued the narrative that they later broke off the engagement after receiving pressure from some of the more heavenly minded "Brethren in Dublin." Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ, Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), 133. Though he has more recently revised his position on this and acknowledged "There is no 'hard evidence' proving a romantic interest between the two." Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: Updated and Expanded* (San Diego, CA, SCS Press, 2021), 105. Subsequently, Weremchuk has reassigned the affections of Darby to a romantic interest he supposes Darby may have had earlier in life.

sense. Their shared interest in the Church of God, as well as its prophetic end, made them kindred spirits, up until the day of her premature passing on December 30, 1836, at the age of 36.

Given their frequent fraternization and their shared affinity for eschatological themes, it is possible to also find a parallel in the development of their thoughts concerning the pre-tribulation rapture. It has been noted by several historians that Lady Powerscourt did not hold to a pre-tribulation rapture even into 1833 (after the first two Powerscourt conferences, but before the third),[48] as indicated in a letter dated 16 July 1833, where she disclosed:

> He waits for the last signal, when immediately after the tribulation, shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven; when the last elect shall have been born into the world, and fitted for glory, He will be found ready; and, as though too impatient to wait till earth is prepared for His reception, we shall be "caught up to meet Him in the air." He remembers He has jewels in Babylon; He will gather them for His crown, when about to visit the earth as King.[49]

One is left to wonder whether Lady Powerscourt became convinced of the pre-tribulation rapture after Darby planted his flag in that ground at the Powerscourt Estate in September of 1833. An additional point of inquiry would be whether Darby, while still developing his thought concerning the nature and timing of the Church's rapture, also shared Lady Powerscourt's proclivity to accept a partial rapture theory, where some members of the church could be taken to rule with Christ in the coming age, while others are left behind. In a letter dated 2 September 1832, just weeks before hosting the second conference, she wrote to her friend: "I should be glad to know what you think concerning reigning with Christ. Do you think it is for all, or only for the martyrs? I have been thinking a good deal on the subject of late."[50] Although the idea of a partial

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[48] This fact was recognized by Roy Huebner, though he tenaciously maintained that Darby perceived the pre-Rev. 4 rapture since 1826–27, despite evidence to the contrary; however, these ideas were undoubtedly jaded by his insistence upon Darby's early and abrupt spiritual enlightenment as qualification for his appointment by God to disclose divine truths. Huebner, *Precious Truths*, 59, 75.

[49] [Robert Daly, ed.], *The Letters and Papers of Lady Powerscourt* (London: Chapter Two, 2004), 118.

[50] [Daly], *Letters of Lady Powerscourt*, 97.

rapture of the church was never a mainstream doctrine within evangelicalism, due to the pessimism concerning the condition of the church in Dublin during the early to mid-1800s, the idea was not unprecedented. Lady Powerscourt articulated her rationale for the idea when she expressed:

> It seems to me the reason why it belongs to this dispensation to reign with Him, is because this is the dispensation of martyrdom; the fast-days of His church, because of the absence of her Bridegroom. Rest at any time seems a mere accident. "Sheep appointed to the slaughter;" the "off-scourging of all things;" "bearing about the body of the Lord Jesus;" "always delivered unto death;" – this is the character of these promised days of tribulation. It is still His hour of temptation. (Acts 1:4,5; Luke 22:28) When God would hear His furnace to the height for an example of faith to the end of time.[51]

Suffice it to say, these literary musings from Lady Powerscourt between 1832–1833, reflect the kind of uncertainty that occupied the thoughts of the Enniskerry evangelicals when dealing with apocalyptic themes.

However, the 1833 Powerscourt Conference acted as a sort of turning point, at least as far as Darby was concerned. With Robert Daly out of the picture, the 1833 prophecy conference carried on with John "Pestalozzi" Synge of Glanmore Castle (1788–1845) serving as chairman, in Daly's stead. While Synge was no less loyal to the Established Church than his predecessor, he was perhaps more sympathetic to the cause of Darby and the emerging ecclesiastical movement that would later be known as the "Plymouth Brethren."[52] Synge took ownership of the 1833 prophecy conference, extending invitations to his own personal connections, whom he even hosted at his own private estate, up to a week prior to the scheduled programme. Among those

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[51] [Daly], *Letters of Lady Powerscourt*, 97.

[52] Timothy Stunt, "John Synge and the Early Brethren," *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal 28* (1976): 49.

whom Synge received as guests at Glanmore Castle were George Müller (1805–1898) and Henry Craik (1805-1866) of Bristol, in addition to Benjamin Wills Newton of Plymouth.[53]

Newton had most likely become acquainted with Darby through a shared association with Francis William Newman, who had served as Newton's tutor between the years of 1826–30, while he was a fellow at Exeter College, Oxford.[54] Newman had made Darby's acquaintance several years back, while he was recovering from his leg injury at the Pennefather Estate. Darby left such an indelible impression on Newman, that he later wrote about the encounter in his *Phases of Faith*, describing Darby as a larger-than-life figure whom he titled "the Irish clergyman," and whom he regarded as "a genuine 'saint' of the ancient breed."[55] If Newman conveyed anything resembling these sentiments to Newton, it would have been with great anticipation that Newton came to make Darby's acquaintance in 1830 in Oxford.[56] From that time, he developed a growing appreciation for this austere minister, who was his senior by seven years.[57] Prior to the 1833 conference they had shared several ministerial engagements in and around Plymouth, with Newton introducing Darby to Christians in that area.[58] However, these

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[53] Stunt, "John Synge and the Early Brethren," 49–50.

[54] Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren*, 61.

[55] Francis William Newman, *Phases of Faith, or Passages from the History of My Creed* (London, John Chapman: 1850), 25–30.

[56] Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren*, 65.

[57] Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time*, 422.

[58] An undated document from Darby's scrapbook, preserved in the University of Manchester John Ryland's CBA archive indicates that Darby intended to collaborate with Newton, among other early brethren, on a commentary of the New Testament. While this may seem rather unremarkable for these Bible-minded Evangelicals, who were always writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures, the authors assigned to the books is rather revealing. It may first be noted that Newton was assigned to write the commentary on Romans, which is commonly regarded as one of the most doctrinally rich books of the New Testament, specifically with regard to Christology, a subject that Darby would later charge Newton of holding to heretical views on the subject. A second noteworthy observation is that the book of Revelation was intended to be co-written by Darby and Newton, together, which could be interpreted one of two ways: either they shared a similar perspective on the book at the time (which is possible if this should be dated to the early 1830s), or else they had variant viewpoints and neither could trust the other with the sole task of writing the commentary on the apocalypse (which would suggest a dating closer to the mid to late 30s). Either way, the project never came to fruition. J. N. Darby's Scrapbook (CBA, JND/1/1/16 "Scrapbook of Personal Documents").

affections would not remain indefinitely, as the relationship between Newton and Darby would sour in the coming years. Numerous points of conflict would arise between Darby and Newton, however, a particular point of contention that Darby would raise involved Newton's adherence to a view that is best described as post-tribulational premillennialism—a position that the two men seemed to mutually hold in these earlier years (1830–32). Akenson has called attention to the conflict that arose between Newton and Darby, resulting from the 1833 conference.[59] A decade later, Newton would publish his own commentary on John's Apocalypse,[60] and Darby who in previously challenged the "absurd" position of pre-tribulationism that Daly espoused in 1831, would turn around and call attention to Newton's "absurdity."[61]

It remains uncertain what brought Darby to change his convictions prior to the close of 1833. Besides ecclesiastical and prophetic concerns, Darby also addressed socio-political events between the years of 1832–1833 that serve to demonstrate that his thoughts concerning the church was not detached from all that was going on around him.[62] The National Education System established in 1831 that aimed to establish mixed-religion schools, where children from different religious backgrounds could be educated together, free from denominational bias, continued to be implemented and expanded in 1832. Similarly, the National Board of Education, comprising both Catholic and Protestant members threatened Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland,

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[59] Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time*, 435; cf. Fry MS 7061, Vol 7, 50a, 125a, 144b.

[60] Benjamin Willis Newton, *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* (London: Houlston and Sons, 1843).

[61] Darby, "An Examination of the Statements made in the 'Thoughts on the Apocalypse,' by BW. Newton; and an Enquiry how far they Accord with Scripture" (1844–1845), *CW* 8:1–320. This point will be discussed in chapter 5.

[62] Cf. Darby, "Some Observations on the Scripture Lessons of the Board of Education" (1832), *CW* 32:281–305; and "A Letter on a Serious Question connected with the Irish Education Measures of 1832" (1832), *CW* 32:306–314.

the consequence of which meant that "National Schools were allowed to become *de facto* Roman Catholic preserves."[63]

Adding insult to injury, the very next year the Church Temporalities Act granted the state a greater degree of intervention in church affairs—the very thing Darby had spent the past half-decade railing against. The Irish Church Act of 1833 also reduced the privileges and powers of the Church of Ireland, levelling the playing field for Catholics and dissenters, alike. According to one historian, the government's willingness to back the Church Temporalities Act in 1833 marked "an ultimate admission that [the Church of Ireland] would never become the church of the majority population, in other words a recognition of the failure of the Reformation crusade. It was the first nail in the coffin of the Church of Ireland that would culminate in its disestablishment in 1869."[64] Indeed, the legislation in 1833 marked a significant turning point in the relationship between church and state in Ireland and signalled a shift towards greater state control over church affairs and a move towards religious equality. Darby's concern over these societal changes is demonstrated through the flurry of publications he produced in the following year[65] that show the extent to which these legislations were bearing upon his thoughts. Whether these factors weighed into Darby's resolution concerning the church's deliverance up from the growing evils of the present age, remains uncertain.

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[63] Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70*, 76.

[64] Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, 233.

[65] Cf. Darby, "Christian Liberty of Preaching and Teaching the Lord Jesus Christ" (1834), *CW* 1:68–79; "Parochial Arrangement Destructive of Order in the Church" (1834), *CW* 1:80–91; "Speech Delivered at a Meeting held for the purpose of Promoting Scriptural Education" (1834), 32:315–321.

Conclusion

Between the years of 1829–1833, Darby's eschatology shifted from a post-tribulational premillennialism to a pre-tribulational premillennialism. In the early years, Darby and Newton shared a position concerning the church with respect to the tribulation and the future dispensation that was not at variance with one another. The only possible exception to this is that Darby's view seemed to account for a partial-tribulation, not dissimilar to the view expressed by Lady Powerscourt around that same time (1831). However, by 1833, as Darby's thoughts continued to mature concerning the ruinous state of the church, and its approaching end of days, his position gravitated toward that of Rev. Robert Daly's. Thereafter, he began to advocate for the very same ideas that he had rejected, and to condemn the very ideas which he himself had held.