

CHAPTER 6

A Millennial Maelstrom: Controversy in the Continental Society in the 1820s

Kenneth J. Stewart

An inquisitive visitor to London during May in the 1820s had open before him the prospect of surveying the annual general meetings of some of the most dynamic Christian agencies in the world – the London Missionary Society, the Religious Tract Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society.¹ Though to modern minds, accustomed to rapid global dissemination of information, the idea of trekking from one society's annual meeting to another is distinctly unappealing, the Georgian evangelical did not necessarily see it this way. There was then no superior way of monitoring the pulse of these great agencies than the one just named: progressing from the annual meetings of one pan-evangelical agency to another.²

The meetings of the London Missionary Society (founded 1795), the Religious Tract Society (founded 1799) and the British and Foreign Bible Society (founded 1804) were, in fact, scheduled in a staggered fashion. Ministers of the Gospel and laymen from the regions and the capital city were often present for a succession of these meetings.³ There was often overlap among the Boards of

¹ The author is happy to acknowledge the assistance rendered to him by Drs. Don Lewis and Ian S. Rennie, Vancouver, Canada, Timothy C. F. Stunt, Newtown, CT, and Mr. David Stewart, Princeton, NJ, in their reading and commenting on a preliminary draft of this paper.

² This era of pan-evangelical cooperation is well described in Roger Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical Stirrings in Pre-Victorian Britain, 1795-1830* (London, 1983).

³ One person who has left a record of his sequential attendance at various May meetings is Sampson Wilder, an American merchant at Paris who journeyed to London to be present in 1816 and 1820. He thereafter helped to found affiliate Bible, tract and mission societies in the French capital. See

Directors of the agencies – a practice which could only encourage collaboration and sharing of resources. Similarly, it was not unknown for the same distinguished foreign visitor to be featured in the meetings of more than one society. Each of these agencies represented the collaborative efforts of evangelicals in the National and Dissenting Churches, though the L.M.S., flanked by explicitly Baptist and Anglican mission societies, primarily existed to further the missionary aspirations of Independents, Calvinistic Methodists and Presbyterians.

But our concern is not with these first-generation co-operative agencies (though they form the backdrop of our investigation), but with an agency of the second generation, the Continental Society for the Diffusion of Religious Knowledge. It too held annual meetings each May in Georgian London. Yet it had been conceived of only in early 1817 and formally inaugurated at London in the following year. The Continental Society was, to a large degree, the continuator of concerns for Europe which had always been present in the minds of the directors of the three older societies just named.⁴ These had already placed some agents, Christian publications and Bibles in Europe since their own foundations; but as Europe was never more than a subsidiary interest of these agencies with their global objectives, there was clearly room left for collaboration and fresh initiative.

The new society was the joint inspiration of two British evangelicals of immense wealth: one a banker and former M.P., Henry Drummond, and the other a Scottish laird-turned preacher, Robert Haldane. The paths of the two had crossed at Geneva in the

Records from the Life of S.V.S. Wilder (New York, 1865), 76, 145. See also the record of the attendance at the May meetings in Robert Philip, *The Life, Times, and Missionary Enterprises of John Campbell* (London, 1841), 313.

⁴ This continuity of purpose was especially evident between the London Missionary Society and the Continental. Of the thirty-six persons memorialized by John Morison in *Fathers and Founders of the L.M.S.* (London, 1844), ten were numbered among the supporters of the Continental Society in the 1820s. Of that number, three had journeyed for the L.M.S. to France in 1802 to investigate missionary prospects. The need for Scriptures in French figured significantly in the origin of the British and Foreign Bible Society; see Roger Martin, 'The Bible Society and the French Connection', *JURCHS* 3:7 (1985), 278-290. See also K. J. Stewart, 'Restoring the Reformation: British Evangelicals and the *Réveil* at Geneva 1816-1849' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1991), chap. 4. L.M.S. founder John Townsend spoke in the 1823 meeting of the Continental Society of the continuity of effort between the cooperating agencies; see *Proceedings of the Continental Society* (1823), 76-7.

spring of 1817 as the Scot, Haldane, was completing a series of expository lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans. These lectures had not only gathered a large proportion of the theological students of the university, but had led to the conversion of many and the establishing of others who were poorly grounded in the Christian faith. As Haldane prepared to leave the city for Montauban in the south of France, Drummond – himself a recent convert to the evangelical faith – arrived from Genoa, where he had learned of the stirrings at Geneva from Swiss businessmen. Drummond in effect inherited a situation which Haldane had helped to create.⁵ There were now theological students at Geneva whose own path to ordination and placement in the canton of Geneva and beyond would be blocked on account of their identification with Haldane and his attacks on the clergy and theological faculty of the city. As well, an independent evangelical church was in process of formation. Something would need to be done to deploy these enthusiastic young evangelicals. And so the idea of a missionary society employing indigenous workers began to be conceived. The society, which would pursue the principle of employing European evangelists and colporteurs with British funds, began fledgling efforts there and then with two workers;⁶ Drummond and Haldane were operating on a 'handshake' basis. More consultation followed at Paris in April of 1818 with the society formally inaugurated at London, on October 20 of that year.⁷

⁵ Regarding Henry Drummond, see Donald M. Lewis (ed.), *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Oxford, 1995), s.v. The standard source on Haldane is that of his nephew; see Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Alexander Haldane* (London, 1852). An account of the Genevan activity of both is found in A. L. Drummond, 'Robert Haldane at Geneva, 1816-17', *RSCHS* 9 (1947), 69-82; A. L. Drummond, *The Kirk and the Continent* (Edinburgh, 1956); Deryck W. Lovegrove, 'The Voice of Reproach and Outrage: The Impact of Robert Haldane on French-Speaking Protestantism', in D. W. D. Shaw (ed.), *In Divers Manners* (St. Andrews, 1990); Stewart, 'Restoring the Reformation' (1991); Lewis (ed.), *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (1995), s.v. 'Robert Haldane'; and T.C.F. Stunt, 'Geneva and British Evangelicals in the Early 19th Century', *JEH* 32:1 (1981), 35-46, and *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-35* (Edinburgh, 2000), *passim*.

⁶ *Report of the Continental Society* (1819), 8.

⁷ The young American pastor, Matthias Bruen, then in London, was present at the inaugural London meeting. He was also an eyewitness of Haldane's Geneva ministry; Mary Lundie, *Memoir of Matthias Bruen* (New York, 1832), 108.

The Continental Society: A Strong Beginning

An organization which was under girded by so extensive a reconnoitering of the European scene as had just been carried out by Haldane and Drummond and which had at its call so extensive a network of potential workers in Switzerland and France was assuredly poised for a strong formal launch.⁸ As it turned out, a strong following was gathered for the formal inauguration of the society at London. Especially of note was the fact that the Continental Society was a truly interdenominational mission agency – uniting Anglicans, Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, and Methodists in support of European mission. The posture was a deliberate one which found expression in a stated objective: ‘To assist local native ministers in preaching the gospel and in distributing Bibles, Testaments and Religious publications over the Continent of Europe, but without the design of establishing any distinct sect or party.’⁹ The society sought, furthermore, to safeguard this stance of non-sectarianism by pledging that Britain’s denominational differences would not be exported to Europe. No Briton would ever be employed.

A survey of the early annual reports of the society makes plain that this agency was rapidly successful in meeting its objectives at home and abroad. It could soon count among its members and contributors such Anglicans as Charles Simeon, Zachary Macaulay, Josiah Pratt and Hugh McNeile, such Independents as David Bogue, Rowland Hill, George Burder, John Angell James, and John Pye Smith, Presbyterians such as Alexander Waugh, Robert Gordon, John Love, and Edward Irving, Scottish Baptists such as Robert and James A. Haldane, and the Methodist leader Jabez Bunting.¹⁰ At least eight past or current members of Parliament were connected with the society – the most famous being William Wilberforce.¹¹ Not only in support, but in extent of operations there was great reason to be encouraged. From the initial two agents employed in impromptu

⁸ Haldane’s work among theological students at Geneva was followed by similar work at Montauban, then home to France’s only Reformed seminary; Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Alexander Haldane* (1852), chapter 19.

⁹ *Report of the Continental Society* (1819), 3, 4.

¹⁰ The names of these representative supporters are found listed either as committee members or as contributors in the *Report* (from 1822, *Proceedings of the Continental Society* (London, 1819-1832).

¹¹ The others being Thomas Baring, Henry Drummond, R. H. Inglis, Thomas Lefroy, George Montague, Spencer Perceval Jr., and Abel Smith. Again, these may be noted in the *Reports* or *Proceedings*.

fashion at Geneva in the spring of 1817 for ministries of itinerant preaching and Scripture distribution, the number had grown to four by the time the first published *Report* was issued for the 1819 annual meeting; fifteen were at work by 1822 and thirty-one by 1829. London Independents and Presbyterians gathered on a number of occasions beginning in 1821 to examine and ordain those agents for whom such certification was necessary to satisfy the European authorities.¹²

While the initial and major sphere of operation was Francophone Europe, by the 1821-22 period the Society was seeking to place an agent in Spain.¹³ European committees were established in two cities to aid in the selection of local workers.¹⁴ In 1823, the Society employed a German who had temporarily resided in Scotland as its agent in Hamburg and by 1825 claimed to employ five agents in German regions.¹⁵ An agent first visited Austria in 1823 while another settled in Norway in 1828.¹⁶ The committee of the Continental Society sent one of their own number, a Captain Cotton, to visit personally each European site in which their agents labored in 1827.¹⁷ This energetic interdenominational labor brought very welcome words of encouragement from a European Christian of stature, Professor August Tholuck of Halle, who addressed their annual meeting in 1825 and urged the rapid expansion of their work.¹⁸

Such exponential growth could only be sustained by the mounting

¹² Agents Henri Pyt and M. Falle were so ordained in July 1821 at Poultry Chapel, London; Felix Neff was similarly ordained in May 1823. See Emil Guers, *Vie de Pyt* (Toulouse, 1850), 130; and Ami Bost, *Life of Felix Neff* (London, 1855), 110, 111. Agent Carlos Von Bulow was ordained in the same church in the spring of 1827; *Proceedings* (1827), 51.

¹³ *Report* (1821), 15. An agent visiting Spain in 1823 stayed long enough to distribute 500 Spanish New Testaments; *Proceedings* (1824), 6.

¹⁴ *Proceedings* (1822), 36, would indicate only that the two cities with personnel committees were 'G__' and 'M__' (likely Geneva and Montauban). It was believed that the security of operations required this measure of anonymity.

¹⁵ *Proceedings* (1824), 6, 49-52, and John Hunt Cooke, *Johann Gerhard Oncken* (London, 1908), 24. Oncken appeared in person to speak at the meeting of 1828; *Proceedings* (1828), 42. Oncken's work has most recently been investigated by Wayne Detzler, 'Johann Gerhard Oncken's Long Road to Toleration', *JETS* 36:2 (1993), 229-40.

¹⁶ *Proceedings* (1827), 51; *Proceedings* (1828), 7. The agent was Carlos von Bulow. See also footnote 12, above.

¹⁷ *Proceedings* (1827), 7.

¹⁸ *Proceedings* (1825), 41.

of a much wider appeal to the Christian public. A promotional trip through Scotland in March 1821 led to the creation of auxiliary societies in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and supporting committees in Dundee, Perth, Stirling and Paisley.¹⁹ By the following year, such auxiliary societies existed at Belfast and Dublin, in Ireland.²⁰ Thirty English cities had auxiliary societies in support of the Continental by 1825.²¹ Such a support base enabled a rise in mission income from £200 in 1821 to £1625 by 1825, and £2733 by 1826. Even the £200 disbursed to Francophone Europe in 1821 exceeded the expenditure of the L.M.S. or R.T.S. for that region in any year in that era.²² These were very considerable sums for an organization only a decade old. Collaboration with the longer-established pan-evangelical agencies made the Continental Society's resources go farther. The printed *Proceedings* repeatedly pay tribute to the benevolence of the Bible and Tract societies in making Christian literature and Scriptures available for economical distribution through the agents of the younger society.²³ These resources were often channelled through the European auxiliary societies which the Bible and tract organizations had nurtured and encouraged at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

¹⁹ *Report* (1821), 9, 10. The promotional tour was undertaken on behalf of the Society by its secretary, Isaac Saunders, and one regular member, the Rev. S. R. Drummond.

²⁰ *Proceedings* (1822), 5, 6. Robert Haldane and a French agent, Pierre Mejanel, had itinerated through Scotland and Ireland on behalf of the Continental Society in this period.

²¹ *Proceedings* (1825), 1.

²² The *Proceedings* of 1821 is the first report to list specific receipts and expenditures. Yet it can be stressed that the £200 contributed for 1820-21 exceeded the expenditures of the L.M.S. or R.T.S. for Francophone Europe for any year in this era. See 'L.M.S. handlist: Disbursements to France 1800-1837', L.M.S. Archive, University of London; William Jones, *Jubilee Memorial of the Religious Tract Society 1799-1849* (London, 1849), 284. For the purpose of overall comparison it may be noted that the total annual income in mid-decade for the R.T.S. was £12,568 and for the L.M.S. £38,860. See Jones, *Jubilee Memorial* (1849), Appendix 1; and Richard Lovett, *History of the L.M.S.* (London, 1899), ii. 753.

²³ See, for example, *Report* (1821), 19; *Proceedings* (1822), 38, 39; *Proceedings* (1824), 15; *Proceedings* (1829), 10. Oddly, the biographer of Haldane claims that the B.F.B.S. refused to supply Scriptures to prominent Continental Society agents; Haldane, *Lives of Robert and James Alexander Haldane* (1852), 507.

The 1820s: Four Waves of Controversy for the Continental Society

Why should not this upward trajectory of progress and expansion have continued indefinitely? The sober fact is that the decade of the 1820s was one in which the Continental Society passed through four controversies which aggregately worked to dissolve the bond of pan-evangelical goodwill. Of the four controversies, only one – the first – was a strictly internal matter.

I. Baptist and Restorationist Practices

As early as 1821, evidence emerged that some agents of the Society in Francophone Europe had engendered strife by advocating practices which the majority of the sponsoring membership in Britain could not endorse. The annual meeting at London requested to know, ‘what are the sentiments of the agents in doctrine and discipline?’ In reply it was explained that while the majority of the agents were connected to the Reformed Church of France, there were also two Baptists and two ex-Catholics. Two of these (presumably the Baptists) had in fact engaged in advocacy of adult baptism and had carried out this rite in two settings.²⁴ Plainly, such practices went contrary to the convictions of many Society members; an explanation was therefore demanded. The governors did their best to douse these flames of controversy by providing assurances that the agents of the Society were all in doctrinal accord with the Articles of the Church of England and the Shorter Catechism. Yet their efforts to assure the membership that all was well seem to have involved only a partial disclosure of a complex situation. These problems of doctrine and discipline would continue to plague the society as a direct outworking of the fact that so many of the agents had been recruited through earlier contacts with Henry Drummond and Robert Haldane.

These men, whom we have identified as the originators of the Society, were themselves of a decidedly ‘restorationist’ outlook. Haldane, the older of the two, had moved beyond his national Church (the Church of Scotland) in 1799 and passed successively through a sponsoring of connexional Independency to what may be called a Sandemanian Baptist position, all in advance of his journey to Europe. He had plainly imparted more than a simple ‘ruin and redemption’ exposition of Romans to his young Francophone disciples; restorationist practices such as the weekly Lord’s Supper,

²⁴ *Proceedings* (1821), 15-16.

the kiss of peace, multiple eldership (i.e. joint pastorates), and mutual admonition (spontaneous utterances delivered in a fellowship meeting) seemed to crop up regularly in the wake of his travels. Those influenced by him were seldom afterwards so warmly inclined as before to ally themselves with national churches.²⁵ Drummond, for his part, while still likely a communicant of the Church of England at the time of the society's foundation,²⁶ was plainly moving in the direction of suspecting all national churches of apostasy. The troubles among the agents, then, in 'doctrine and discipline' were troubles which Haldane and Drummond would have done nothing to prevent and quite likely, something to promote. In

²⁵ That all these practices occurred in the Genevan circle from which Haldane parted is clearly indicated by the record of participants and visitors; see *New Evangelical Magazine* 4 (1818), 96. David Bogue and James Bennett, *A History of Dissenters from the Revolution Under King William to the year 1808* (London, 1808), iv. 124-5, had attributed all these features to the pre-European ministry of Haldane. It is Stunt's view that these restorationist practices were already in place among persons attending a Moravian-pietist circle in Geneva, the Société des Amis, which included numerous theological students subsequently influenced by Haldane; see T.C.F. Stunt, 'Diversity and Strivings for Unity in the Early Swiss Réveil', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Unity and Diversity in the Church* (Oxford, 1996), 351-362. The present writer acknowledges the prior existence of that circle, but believes the correspondence of the practices championed by Haldane c. 1808 in his homeland and those occurring at Geneva c. 1817 to be too great for the theory of local origin to explain them. The matter was certainly not clarified by the nineteenth century Haldane biographer, who emphatically denied that while his subject was in Geneva, he in any way 'advocated the questions which agitated and divided the Congregational Churches of Scotland'; Haldane, *Lives of Robert and James Alexander Haldane* (1852), 425, 229, 431.

²⁶ We infer Drummond's continuation in the Church of England primarily from his exercise of patronage in the appointing of Hugh McNeile to the living of Albury in 1823. Drummond considered himself a member of William Dodsworth's Chapel at Margaret Street when in London until 1831 when he began to attend Irving's chapel; see Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession* (2000), 167. However, Grayson Carter indicates that the latter had some involvement with a member of another prominent London banking family, Thomas Baring, who was active in the Western Schism of 1815, a movement among certain evangelicals in the West Country leading to withdrawal from Anglicanism; see *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (1995), s.v. 'Henry Drummond'. Yet Carter admits that it is not certain that Baring (who would later be president of the Continental Society, 1818-1827) himself seceded. See Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850* (Oxford, 2001), 111, 160-72.

1821 the Society accepted the assurances given, and carried on.²⁷ Yet the underlying issues pertaining to the doctrine and practice of the agents were never truly resolved.²⁸ The supporters of the young Society had never anticipated that persons with perspectives so different from their own on these questions would be their pioneer agents.

II. The Apocrypha Controversy

There were also three issues not properly part of the Society's own internal affairs, which adversely affected the organization's ability to function. The involvement of prominent Society members as individuals in these controversies reverberated through the Continental Society as a whole. I will refer to the first and last of these here in a compressed way so as to develop most fully the second. Mention has already been made, above, of the cordial and fraternal working relationship enjoyed by the Continental Society with the older British and Foreign Bible Society. In its first half-decade of existence the former was more than happy to engage in Scripture distribution in Europe in league with the British and Foreign Bible Society and its European affiliates. The older society provided the Scriptures and the younger provided the colporteurs who distributed. In this half-decade, the Continental Society raised

²⁷ Robert Haldane had been first the patron and latterly the scourge of early Independency in Scotland upon his own withdrawal from the Church of Scotland in 1799. But he upset an Independent movement (consisting of eighty-five congregations), which looked to him as financial patron, when, with his brother, he adopted a restorationist and Baptist perspective in 1808. This was all remembered clearly in 1818, when a writer for the Nonconformist *Eclectic Review* reminded his readers of 'the chilling effects' of Haldane's earlier predilection for 'the Sandemanian hypothesis'; *Eclectic Review* 27 (1818), 13. This was a clear reference to the disruptiveness of 1808.

²⁸ One of the earliest and most enduring agents of the Society, Henri Pyt, never overcame his restorationist and Baptist principles, though for a time he struggled to overcome the latter. Churches formed under his labours in the 1820s often wished to be called 'neither Protestant or Catholic'. Yet in 1832, the Society accepted a proposal that he be made their chief agent for France; see Emil Guers, *Vie de Pyt* (Toulouse, 1850), 112, 136, 297. Pierre Méjanel, similarly one of the earliest agents of the Society and Pyt's predecessor as chief agent for France, was eventually carried by his longstanding restorationist leanings into the Catholic Apostolic movement which spread to France after 1832; see Alice Wemyss, *Le Réveil 1790-1849* (Toulouse, 1977), 103, and Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession* (2000), *passim*.

no objection to the distribution of the Bible most familiar to Francophones, the De Sacy New Testament and Martin Bible; the latter naturally contained the apocryphal or deuterocanonical writings. The printing of these by the Bible Societies and their distribution by the colporteurs of the Continental Society was not so much an endorsement of the disputed writings as an action recognizing that nominal Catholics would be reluctant to accept any Bible from which they were absent. The arrangement seemed to work well and Scripture distribution went forward.²⁹

Yet by 1826, acting in a private capacity, persons so prominent in the Continental Society as Henry Drummond, Hugh McNeile, rector of Albury, and Robert Haldane had entered into controversy with the British and Foreign Bible Society in this matter. They joined with others to charge that the Bible Society, in printing Bibles which included the apocryphal writings, had departed from its original mandate to print only the Holy Scriptures without note or comment.³⁰ The controversy divided the Bible Society and rival Bible societies began in both London and Edinburgh. Drummond, McNeile, Haldane and their supporters apparently made some headway with this cause within the Continental Society, for by 1826 the society was cautioning its agents to 'promote as much as possible the circulation of the Scriptures *exclusive* of the Apocrypha'.³¹ But confusion was in the wind. At the 1827 May meeting, Hugh McNeile, representing the committee of the Society, found it necessary to openly combat the rumour that the Continental Society 'was opposed to the Bible Society'.³² McNeile gallantly admitted that the quarrel with the Bible Society had been that of himself and Henry Drummond, not that of the mission society itself. He rejoiced that the Bible Society itself had reviewed and reversed its earlier decision to print Bibles including the Apocrypha. But here was an admission that two societies which had formerly operated fraternally were perceived to be at odds. That perception, however formed, was an ill

²⁹ *Report* (1821), 19; *Proceedings* (1822), 38, 39. The Society agent in the High Alps, Felix Neff, found it impossible in 1822 to distribute Bibles without the Apocrypha; see Ami Bost, *Letters and Biography of F. Neff* (London, 1855), 251.

³⁰ Hugh McNeile was, from 1824, a prominent member of the Continental Society's committee of management. Robert Haldane, though resident in Scotland, continued to be the Society's largest benefactor after Henry Drummond; see *Proceedings* (1824), preface and records of donations 1821-32. The controversy targeted not only the inclusion of the Apocrypha, but the welcome given by the B.F.B.S. to members who did not affirm the Trinity.

³¹ *Proceedings* (1826), 16.

³² *Proceedings* (1827), 115.

wind for the younger society.

III. Controversy over Edward Irving

Similarly, the Society suffered loss of the public's confidence through the increasing notoriety beginning in 1827, of prominent committee member Edward Irving, always closely associated with Henry Drummond.³³ From that year onward Irving, minister of London's Regent Square Church of Scotland, began to be associated with controversy over the relationship of Christ's human nature to sin. In time, he was charged and found guilty of heresy in the matter. But before that matter could be fully resolved, Irving was also, from 1830, the centre of a movement seeking the restoration of the charismatic gifts of the apostolic age. The London congregation he served became the site to which persons claiming the gifts gravitated.³⁴ Now this double-barrelled controversy placed the Continental Society in a very embarrassing situation for he had been featured as anniversary preacher and had served as member of the executive. In consequence, Irving was denied his role in the management of the society after 1829;³⁵ yet the matter had gone on too long. The public once more had reason to question the integrity of a mission society in which such persons played prominent roles; support sagged.³⁶

³³ Irving had been active in the Society since as early as 1823 and was on the committee of management in 1828 and 1829.

³⁴ The standard account is provided in A. L. Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle* (London, 1937). Irving's popular ministry had drawn crowds which could no longer be accommodated at Hatton Gardens. A new edifice, Regent Square, was the scene of his ministry from 1827.

³⁵ This inference is drawn from the omission of Irving's name from the *Proceedings* after that year and the claim of agent Henri Pyt, that he was promptly removed from the committee 'as soon as he propagated his errors'; see Guers, *Vie de Pyt* (1850), 296.

³⁶ Between 1829 and 1832, *Proceedings* are unavailable, but in that period donations had fallen from £2440 to £1909. The crisis brought upon the Society was plainly felt among its Francophone agents. Henri Pyt, from 1832 the central agent of the Society in France, observed on the basis of a trip to Britain in that year that 'the Society was quickly abandoned both by the supporters of Irving and by those who were opposed to the continued involvement in the Society of his comrade, Drummond'; see Guers, *Vie de Pyt* (1850), 296. Guers also records that this debacle in the Continental Society was shortly followed by efforts to direct evangelical itineration in France by an indigenous society based at Paris, the Société Évangélique Française. Dissolution of interdenominational goodwill was signalled by both the withdrawal of former Continental Society members in order to support the

IV. Controversy over Premillennialism

But it is now time to take up the middle controversy of three; like the tumults of the apocrypha and Irvingite controversies, this also was a case of Society members whose agitation of questions outside the mission organization inevitably affected the affairs of the Society itself. I refer to the rise of strident premillennialism in the 1820s.

For the last half-century it has been commonly asserted that a strident historicist (as distinguished from futurist) premillennialism controlled the outlook of the Continental Society.³⁷ Leroy Froom, that oft-quoted but undisguised Adventist apologist, insisted in 1946 that this Society had as its supreme motive 'heralding the impending judgement hour', and had as its 'real purpose' and 'unchanging keynote' the summoning of Europe to come out of 'Mystical Babylon'.³⁸ In more recent times, Froom's judgement has been followed by the better-esteemed Ernest Sandeen, who gave it as his opinion that the Continental Society was 'very quickly dominated by millenarian concerns'.³⁹ Froom, to his credit, had surveyed eight annual *Proceedings* of the Society in the 1819-1836 period before making his assertions.⁴⁰ Yet there are very good reasons for disputing his characterizations. It is not exaggerating the matter to suggest that in his partisan zeal, he investigated the Society only so far as was necessary to fuel his contention that premillennialism was in the ascendant.⁴¹ What is of great significance for us is not simply

new Paris organization directly, and also by the formation of a Baptist Continental Society; see *The Evangelical Magazine* 12 n.s. (1834), 158.

³⁷ Historicist premillennialism holds that the Biblical prophecies pertaining to last things and the return of Christ have been in process of fulfilment across the centuries of Christian history. There are, naturally, differences of opinion as to where the Christian church stands in the process of fulfilment at any given time. Futurist premillennialism, which arose in the 1820s, held that the bulk of biblical prophecies are as yet unfulfilled and await fulfilment at some indefinite future point.

³⁸ L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, DC, 1946), iii. 441-46.

³⁹ Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids, 1978), 17. Sandeen names Froom's *Prophetic Faith* (1946) as the basis for this judgment, yet Sandeen had surveyed no printed *Records* or *Proceedings* of the Society, whereas Froom had.

⁴⁰ The present writer has located fourteen annual *Proceedings* of the Society and its successors, the European Missionary Society and the Foreign Aid Society.

⁴¹ Indeed, so great was Froom's concern to press his millennial hypothesis, that he contended that the Evangelical Revival of the preceding century was

what Froom found in those materials, but what he overlooked. In fact, two viewpoints clashed within the Continental Society. What is at stake here, I would stress, is not simply the truth about a modest-sized mission society in the 1820s, but more importantly, the accurate characterization of evangelical thought in pre-Victorian Britain. Was the 'wind' of premillennialism truly so ascendant as Froom suggested? The evidence suggests otherwise.⁴²

It will be my aim, in what follows, to show that the Continental Society mirrored then-contemporary disagreements in British evangelical Christianity over the relationship of the present world-order to the events surrounding Christ's return; that the pan-evangelical supporters of the Society, overlapping so substantially with the constituencies of the existing missionary, tract and Bible societies, largely reflected the still-prevalent older optimistic eschatology which had under girded them; that it was supremely the steady efforts of the Society's co-founding patron, Henry Drummond, which ensured that a circle of self-conscious premillennialists, nurtured in Drummond's enclave for prophetic study known as the Albury Conferences, progressively assumed places of influence in the Continental Society and used its annual meetings as a springboard for their views; and that it was the inner-Society discord resulting from this clash of divergent views over the relation of the present world-order to the events surrounding Christ's return which ensured the steady decline of its reputation without, the dissolving of pan-evangelical goodwill within, and eventual inability to cope with the sharp crisis provoked by the strange doctrines of Edward Irving. In short, this quarrel more than any other doomed this society.

itself the consequence of the superseding of the 'desolating flood' of older postmillennialism by the 'counteracting antidote' of premillennialism. From this vigorous counteraction had flowed religious awakening and the birth of the missionary societies; Froom, *Prophetic Faith* (1946), iii. 265.

⁴² One may consult with profit the survey of this period provided by David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), chapter 3; Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London, 1970), chapter 9; Ian S. Rennie, 'Nineteenth Century Roots of Prophetic Interpretation', in Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque (eds), *Dreams, Visions, and Oracles: The Layman's Guide to Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, 1977); and Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* (1978), passim.

**The Continental Society: A Mirror of the Outlook
of British Evangelical Christianity**

The ministers and laymen who supported the Continental Society should be seen as a representative section of those British evangelical Christians who observed the revolutionary era in France (1789-1815) with a mixture of expectation and apprehension. The sense of expectation was attributable to the fact that the decades immediately preceding this revolution had been decades of heightened spiritual awareness – the era we call the Evangelical Revival. The Christian optimism engendered by this era of Christian advance had itself under girded the launch of the missionary, tract and Bible societies of which we have made mention.⁴³ In the early decades of the nineteenth century the implications of this movement for society were still being worked out in campaigns against slavery, degrading prison conditions and the like. The difficulty however (and this is what gave root to the apprehension) lay in determining whether the events of the revolution in France furthered or retarded the world-changing purposes of God which the preceding revival had seemed to display.

There was plainly a cleavage on this question between persons loyal to the national churches of England and Scotland and those who were nonconformist.⁴⁴ The latter saw in the granting of complete religious liberty to French Protestants and extending to them of government subsidy comparable to that awarded Catholicism a harbinger of their own possible deliverance from the handicaps imposed by the terms of the Act of Toleration a century before. English Independents, Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists could neither vote nor sit in Parliament as the nineteenth century dawned; their chapels could only be erected by the obtaining of a licence and their marriages registered only when solemnized by an Anglican rector. They regretted the wanton bloodshed of the revolutionary era, the subsequent era of de-Christianization (which temporarily closed all churches) and the spread of French military dominance into surrounding nations; yet they concluded that on the whole, the

⁴³ On this subject, one may consult with profit the essay of Stephen Orchard, 'Evangelical Eschatology and the Missionary Awakening', *JRH* 22:2 (1998), 132-151.

⁴⁴ The literature describing this era is extensive. See Stephen Pricket, *England and the French Revolution* (London, 1989); V. Kiernan, 'Evangelicalism and the French Revolution', *PP* 1 (1952), 44-56; Deryck W. Lovegrove, 'English Evangelical Dissent and the European Conflict 1789-1815', in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *Persecution and Toleration: Studies in Church History*, 20 (Oxford, 1983), 263-71.

revolutionary era was tending to further the purposes of God in opening up France to the influences of the Gospel. Thus the London Missionary Society was surveying France as early as 1802 so as to take advantage of the changed climate there.⁴⁵ The progress of the kingdom of Christ on earth had, on the whole, been assisted by this era as by the preceding.

Supporters of the national churches of Britain, however much they may have recognized the advance of the purposes of God in their nation's spiritual awakening prior to the revolution, found reason to be dismayed by the patterns of events which the revolution displayed. The arrest and eventual execution of the French king, the confiscation of church lands in order to stave off government bankruptcy, and the general lawlessness of the period we know as the 'reign of terror' all served to illustrate the anarchy into which Britain might descend if revolution came to her shores. As for Napoleon, he was judged to be 'Satan personified and his legions'.⁴⁶ Of great significance for us is the fact that this attitude towards the revolutionary events, lodged deeply in the minds of supporters of the national churches of Britain, inclined very many to view post-war events at home as just so many examples of a hellish revolutionary tendency at work in Britain. It was not simply evangelicals in the national churches, but fellow churchmen of other theological outlooks who viewed the Catholic Emancipation Bill (1829), the Reform Bill (1832) and the rise of working class agitation as

⁴⁵ We have alluded to this activity above at footnote 3, above. The early L.M.S. activity following the Peace of Amiens (1802) is described in the biographies of two persons commissioned by that society to conduct the survey; see James Hay and Henry Belfrage, *Memoir of Alexander Waugh D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1839), 164; James Bennett, *Memoir of the Life of David Bogue* (London, 1827), 227; and Stewart, 'Restoring the Reformation' (1991), 110-116.

⁴⁶ The perspective of various evangelical ministers in the Anglican establishment on such questions is available through the recorded dialogues preserved in J. H. Pratt (ed.), *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders: Notes of the Discussions of the Eclectic Society, London 1798-1814* (London, 1856). Thus, in 1801, with the Peace of Amiens being negotiated, this society met on 26 October and discussed the question 'What have been the signal interpositions of Providence in favour of Britain during the late war?' The judgment of the members present was that Britain had been miraculously rescued 'from the principles of the French Revolution, which threatened to bring ruin on all constitutional governments'. In such troubles 'God had interposed and fought for England' (235). The remark regarding Napoleon was that of the Rev. John Venn, recorded in the Eclectic meeting for 21 May 1804 (331).

disturbing evidences of the spread of European leaven.⁴⁷ To such minds, the revolutionary era and its aftershocks were symptoms of the decay of society and of the impending day of judgement.

Representatives of both the optimistic and apprehensive outlooks would be heard in the meetings of the Continental Society. But with these differences of perspective acknowledged, there were certain things about which the pan-evangelicals could agree. As it had been generally accepted since Reformation times that the Pope fitted the description of the Antichrist described in the New Testament, it was felt to be a grave lapse of judgement for the Government of Britain to have provided a haven for Catholic clergy who fled France after 1792. Conversely, there was satisfaction expressed at the way in which the young commander, Napoleon, had humiliated the Pope by stripping away some of his territories and wealth in 1797. There was a kind of consternation mixed with satisfaction at the British role at the Council of Vienna (1815); British supporters of the national churches may have rejoiced at the restoration of the monarchy to France – yet they also observed with alarm, as did nonconformists, the consequent rapid re-cementing of the old relationship between the Bourbon monarchy and the papacy. Yet for all that, there was a growing consciousness that Britain's preservation and triumph in the military conflict with France had delineated for her a role as God's instrument in leading the world for years to come.⁴⁸ The pan-evangelical membership of the Society reflected the still-prevalent

⁴⁷ The tendency to view domestic upheaval as related to apocalyptic prophecy was most commonly, but not exclusively, found in evangelicalism. A growing body of literature illustrates that Tractarians like E. B. Pusey, and J. H. Newman viewed these domestic developments in an apocalyptic framework; see, for instance, Sheridan Gilley, 'Newman and Prophecy', *JURCHS* 3:5 (1985), 160-188; David N. Hempton, 'Evangelicalism and Eschatology', *JEH* 31:2 (1980), 179-184; David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends* (London, 1966); W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (London, 1978); and S. L. Ollard, *A Short History of the Oxford Movement* (London, 1963).

⁴⁸ 'There is a public stand for God here. Britain is a grand medium of diffusing truth', stated the Anglican Basil Wood in the 21 May 1804 meeting of the Eclectic Society, where the discussion ranged around the subject, 'By what arguments shall we plead with God to deliver us from the French?'; see Pratt (ed.), *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders* (1856), 330. Just such sentiments would issue from the pen of a Nonconformist writer in 1818, for in the *Eclectic Review* of that year one could read this sentiment: 'It is to her commercial character that England is, under Providence, mainly indebted for that high distinction which it is her noblest prerogative to enjoy, as the Evangelist of nations'; see *Eclectic Review* 27 (1818), 2.

older, more optimistic eschatology which had under girded the earlier pan-Evangelical Societies.

An upsurge in the more apprehensive premillennial thinking about the Christian future can be traced from 1806, the year when G. S. Faber published his *Dissertations on the Prophecies*. His treatise was followed in rapid succession by the offerings of four other writers: William Cunninghame's *Dissertations on the Seals and Trumpets* (1813), J. H. Frere's *Combined View of the Prophecies of Daniel, Esdras, and St. John* (1815), Lewis Way's *Letters* and John Bayford's *Messiah's Kingdom* (1816).⁴⁹ Interestingly, three of this number, Cunninghame, Way and Bayford would all be prominent supporters of the Continental Society. But it would be a very serious error to suppose that the affiliation of the three to the Society was indicative of any particular support by it for their views.

In point of fact, as one examines just how broad was the circle of supporting members in the Continental Society, one is struck by the paradox of how few pronounced premillennialists can be identified there and yet (here is the paradox!) how very often they seized the initiative in the May meetings.⁵⁰ Cunninghame and Way, for instance

⁴⁹ Froom, *Prophetic Faith* (1946), iii. 265. Froom indicates that the early decades of the new century witnessed the publication of four hundred such prophetic works.

⁵⁰ The numerical paucity of identifiable premillennialists in the Society is quite striking, especially in the early years. Even when relying on the efforts of Froom, who surely made it his business to highlight the activity of known supporters of the cause, the results are striking. In 1819, the Society executive (comprising President and Committee) consisted of twenty-six persons. Of these only two (Henry Drummond and John Bayford) emerge as pronounced premillennialists. In 1820 and 1821, of twenty-seven persons, only four (Drummond, Bayford, Lewis Way, and J. A. Wolfe) are of this stripe. In the following year, the proportion is unchanged though J. A. Wolfe, peripatetic missionary to the East, has given his place to C. S. Hawtrey, editor of the *Jewish Expositor*. Only by 1824 is there a sizeable influx of emergent premillennialists into the executive; in that year appear three premillennialist additions: Hugh McNeile, Spencer Perceval Jr., M.P., and Alexander Haldane, nephew to Robert, the co-founding patron. (That Alexander Haldane should himself be numbered as a premillennialist in 1824 is quite open to question; I assume this here on the slender ground of his eventual attendance of at least one of the Albury Conferences which commenced in December 1826.) The proportion rises to nine of twenty-seven persons in the executive in 1826 with the addition of Edward Irving and Gerard Noel, and eleven of twenty-seven in 1827 when the Hon. John James Strutt (later Baron Rayleigh) assumed the presidency and Viscount Mandeville joined the circle of vice-presidents. It must be added that persons of non-premillennial views also continued to join the executive. See the

often took opportunity to illumine the assembled members on the ruin of European Christianity, the apostasy represented in the Papacy, and the like. But from the rank and file of the executive and membership such speeches were regularly answered by persons taking a very different view. Several examples will serve to illustrate this.

In the annual meeting of 1822, the Rev. Lewis Way, Society vice-president, director of the London Society for the Propagation of Christianity among the Jews, and ardent premillennialist, was delegated to move the adoption of the Society's report. He utilized the occasion to dilate at some length on the religious state of Europe as he had observed it on a recent tour:

There is a time for all things: and I think this is the very time marked out by prophecy and determined by the circumstances of Europe when this society ought to commence a scriptural crusade under that sacred communion...to call (its inhabitants) out of the mystical Babylon. This is the foundation on which this society ought to rest and if continued on this foundation, stand it must...There is just no religion on the Continent at all! I don't mean to exclude the thousands who have not bowed the knee to Baal; God has his people there – but they are so few that I could not find them!

Way's verdict was that Christendom was now defunct because both the Catholic and Protestant churches had abandoned the Scriptures and Gospel. The ruin of Christendom was not temporary, but final; there was to be no large-scale reversal of this situation because this state of affairs was itself indicative of the near-end of the Christian era. Evangelisation must do what it could until the day of judgement fell. But such sentiments did not go unanswered. Mark Wilks, another Society member, had also seen Europe first-hand, but had drawn entirely different conclusions:

The state of France is highly encouraging. There is a movement among the minds of men which is highly favourable to revealed truth. I shall neither therefore talk of the extent of infidelity nor of Catholic superstition, but tell you of the glorious appearance of divine goodness, truth and mercy in subduing infidelity with the Gospel...Certainly, if there are encouragements anywhere in the world to circulate the Scriptures, it is on the Continent and no portion of it excites more Christian feeling and hope than France...France however criminal its character, however disastrous its history, France is still what has been

Reports and Proceedings for these years. The reasons for the verbosity of the views of what was only a fraction of the executive and membership will be explored in the following section.

called a great nation and holds in its hands the destinies of the nations around it. The state of France is highly encouraging! There is among Catholics a disposition, perhaps not seen since the Reformation, to receive the truth and examine the truth...Bible Societies are now formed in France. Forty auxiliaries are established...Almost all the large cities in France now possess ministers of the Gospel who all preach the fall of man, the necessity of the sacrifice of Christ and the doctrine of salvation by faith.⁵¹

Such strikingly different characterizations of the state of Europe were to become regular features of the Society meetings. Apprehensive premillennialists were constantly ready to infer the nearness of the end from the decay of Christianity on the Continent, while representatives of the older and more optimistic view continually saw signs that their own Evangelical Revival of the century previous was being replicated across the Channel. In 1823, William Cunninghame of Lainshaw, Scotland, himself a premillennialist author, stood to lament the 'wreck of Europe in the past thirty years' and the 'almost Egyptian darkness which has brooded over the Continent of Europe'. Again, Mark Wilks reported a different Europe where 'we look at a revival of religion on the Continent and religion reviving in every part of France'.⁵² The differing perspective was not about the decay and destruction wrought by Enlightenment followed by revolution; on this all the pan-evangelicals were agreed.⁵³ The sharply defined difference had to do with what this decay of Europe meant in the timetable of the ages.

The premillennialist voices in the Society would grow more strident and vocal (though not because of numerical dominance) as the decade wore on. But always there was rebuttal from the older missionary postmillennialism which lay behind the pan-evangelical societies. The most doughty champion of this older view within the Continental Society was John Pye Smith, Professor of Theology at Homerton College and a Society committee member during the whole decade. In response to the apprehensive comments of founding co-patron, Henry Drummond, in which that now-committed premillennialist began to lampoon the over-confidence of those of the older view who viewed 'the present dispensation ending in the conversion of the world, rather than in judgements from God' and who believed that 'their (mission) Societies were to be the means of

⁵¹ The remarks by Way and Wilks are taken from *Proceedings* (1822), 9-17.

⁵² *Proceedings* (1823), 83, 89.

⁵³ It is instructive to find the premillennialists Way and Irving in essential agreement with the postmillennialists Alexander Waugh and John Pye Smith on this matter in *Proceedings* (1824), 33-38.

introducing this state of things', Smith rose to reply: 'When the kingdoms of this world should be declared to be the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, it should be by an extraordinary blessing poured out on those common means of grace which this Society was engaged in sending among the Continental nations.'⁵⁴ By 1829, the taking of such liberties had gone on too long. Pye Smith spoke for many when he defended the original pan-evangelical vision of the Society and protested against more tendentious premillennialist remarks:

This Society was founded upon the great common principles in which all Christians agreed; therefore he deeply lamented that there had been an infusion of other opinions, which to say the least were doubtful and which put those who conscientiously felt otherwise into the unwelcome alternative of seeming either to acquiesce by their silence, or, of raising their voices...He begged to express his dissent from the dark and gloomy views which some of them took of the state and prospects of Christianity. On the contrary, there was considerable ground for hope and for rejoicing. Smith respectfully conceived that opinions which are not generally approved by serious and devoted Christians ought not to be introduced on these occasions. As one of the original members of that Society, he wished to enter his humble plea against the introduction of these sentiments.⁵⁵

The Continental Society had been a bright example of pan-evangelicalism at its foundation. Those who kept alive this vision of the advance of Christ's kingdom during the 1820s had to row against the stream. But row they did. How can the change of emphasis in the Society be satisfactorily explained? Not simply by the re-emergence of premillennialism, for the number of actual adherents of this view within the Society was never predominant – only by the manoeuvrings of Henry Drummond.

Henry Drummond: Society Co-Founder and Promoter of Premillennialism

Henry Drummond was almost certainly not a premillennialist in 1817 when he succeeded Robert Haldane as advisor to the young Genevan evangelicals; the same may be said of his views at the time the Continental Society was formally inaugurated in London in the

⁵⁴ *Proceedings* (1828), 32-35.

⁵⁵ *Proceedings* (1829), 29.

autumn of 1818.⁵⁶ By his own admission, he was a rather late convert to the cause. In a speech to the Society in May 1828, he declared: 'When I first perceived that the present dispensation was not to end in the conversion of the world, but in judgements from God, I thought it so clear that I wondered why I had never seen it before and I concluded that all my Scripture friends were previously aware of it.'⁵⁷ The known premillennialists first identified with the Society were John Bayford and Lewis Way, each of whom had published a book on the subject since 1815.⁵⁸ Way had made the first recognizably premillennial speech to be heard in the Society in 1822. It drew a rebuttal and dropped out of sight.⁵⁹

Yet Drummond, who vied with Robert Haldane throughout the 1820s for the role of largest benefactor of the Society, was all the while undergoing the process of re-evaluation to which he alluded in 1828.⁶⁰ He was nominally (at least) a member of the Church of England and seems originally to have embraced the optimistic outlook on eschatology found among Anglican evangelical clergy of the era.⁶¹ But in 1825, under the influence of Edward Irving's London preaching on the Second Advent of Christ, Drummond's conventional views underwent change.⁶² Irving had himself come under the

⁵⁶ The same may be asserted also about co-founder Robert Haldane, but with this difference - the latter seems *never* to have entertained premillennial ideas.

⁵⁷ *Proceedings* (1828), 32.

⁵⁸ See [page 14](#) above.

⁵⁹ That of Mark Wilks, [16 above](#), and footnote 49.

⁶⁰ Drummond and Haldane each regularly contributed between £290 and £300 per annum throughout the decade. Combined, this comprised between 20-25% of total income.

⁶¹ Thus, for instance, when the Eclectic Society discussed the subject of the millennium on 7 June 1802, Thomas Scott, the Bible commentator, gave it as his opinion that 'More will in the end be saved than will perish. Diseases, wars, passions, will all be subdued'; see Pratt (ed.), *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders* (1856), 257. Edward Bickersteth, steadfast supporter of both the Church Missionary Society and Continental Society, like Drummond, himself underwent a change of view around 1833. His biographer recorded that he had formerly upheld this same view, 'the view that was then popular...[he] looked forward to the gradual conversion of the world, by the spread of missions and a larger blessing on the ordinary means of grace'; see T. R. Birks, *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* (London, 1851), ii. 42.

⁶² Irving had come to London in October 1822 as minister of the Caledonian Chapel, Hatton Gardens. For his influence upon Drummond in 1825, see Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle* (1937), 127. *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (1995), s.v. 'Henry Drummond', attributes

influence of J. Hatley Frere's writings upon his settling in London.⁶³ Having adopted the change of view, Drummond went to work with his conventional vigour, doing at least two things to advance his new understanding of Christian eschatology.

First, in December 1826 he began to host at his home in Albury, Surrey the first of what became known as the Albury Conference for the consideration of prophecy. The conference, which was repeated from 1827 through 1830 was attended by a group of not less than twenty persons selected either on the basis of their stature as premillennialists of renown, or because of some willingness to explore the viewpoint. As Sandeen has rightly pointed out, this conference was 'dominated by Anglicans, with scarcely three or four participants not affiliated with either the English or Scottish national churches'. The same writer correctly asserts that 'many of those attending ... had been previously associated in the work of the Continental Society.'⁶⁴ The practical outcome of these two facts was highly important, for the 'Albury consensus' (if it may be called that) came increasingly to be advocated in the annual meetings of the Continental Society by these very ministers and gentlemen affiliated to the national churches. The Albury consensus is reflected in a summation published by Drummond in 1829 stating those conclusions of these conferences on which all of the participants had been in agreement. They were:

1. This dispensation or age will not end insensibly but cataclysmically in judgement and destruction of the church in the same manner in which the Jewish dispensation ended.
2. The Jews will be restored to Palestine during the time of judgement.

Drummond's change of outlook not to Irving, but to Lewis Way. On this hypothesis, Drummond's re-orientation will have pre-dated 1825.

⁶³ Drummond, *Irving and His Circle* (1937), 125.

⁶⁴ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (1978), 19, 20. Sandeen provides a very comprehensive listing of both repeat and occasional attendees. It is not clear on what basis Sandeen suggests the Albury-Continental overlap; he shows no direct familiarity with the *Reports* or *Proceedings*. Even if it is only a surmise, it is correct. My own examination of the *Reports* and *Proceedings* of the Society enable me to identify no less than ten of the twenty regular attendees at Albury as persons also found among the Society's supporters in the years 1826-1828. Of twenty-five occasional attendees, only three are readily recognizable as Society supporters. *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, s.v. 'Henry Drummond', states that the conferences continued until 1830. In this case, Drummond's published *Dialogues* (see footnote 65) cannot have reflected the totality of the proceedings. See also Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals* (2001), 176-9.

3. The judgement to come will fall principally upon Christendom.
4. When the judgement is past, the millennium will begin.
5. The second advent of Christ will occur before the millennium.
6. The 1260 years of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 ought to be measured from the reign of Justinian to the French Revolution. The vials of wrath (Rev. 16) are now being poured out and the second advent is imminent.⁶⁵

Drummond's second stratagem, carried out simultaneously with the first, was to seek every opportunity to encourage the representation of this Albury circle within both the executive and the annual meetings of the Continental Society.⁶⁶ No doubt in his capacity of major benefactor and member of the executive it would have been quite simple in 1824 to secure the involvement of the Rev. Hugh McNeile as anniversary preacher and member of the executive committee. Drummond, in his capacity as wealthy landowner, had just previously secured the appointment of McNeile to the parish church at Albury near his own residence. McNeile was certainly already a premillennialist when Drummond adopted this viewpoint in 1825, was a consistent participant in and chairman of the Albury Conferences, and a forceful advocate of premillennialism in the annual meetings of the Society.⁶⁷ By some similar procedure, the preacher invited to address the annual meeting in the following year was none other than Edward Irving, then guiding Drummond through his change of outlook. By the meeting of 1826, Irving had joined the executive committee, as had Gerard Noel.⁶⁸ Both would be present at Albury in December. In 1827, a new Society president was announced; in place of Thomas Baring, who had filled the role since

⁶⁵ Sandeen has provided the six points from Drummond's *Dialogues On Prophecy* (London, 1829); these preserved the discussions of the Albury conferences without disclosing the identities of those whose personal opinions were being recorded. Pseudonyms were used to represent participants; Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* (1978), 21, 22.

⁶⁶ Drummond, to his credit, seems never to have forgotten that pan-evangelical cooperation was vital to the success of the Society. He sought not so much to exclude other opinions from the Society as to utilize the Society as an important venue in which to propagate the Albury perspective. Thus, even when he took the floor in 1828 to recount the tale of his own change of prophetic perspective, he was careful – since a member of the executive – to make it plain that the opinions expressed were purely his own; *Proceedings* (1828), 31.

⁶⁷ McNeile, of Irish birth, would continue in his premillennialism but break with Drummond and Irving over the Charismatic and Christological controversies. Liverpool was the scene of his ministry after 1832.

⁶⁸ *Proceedings* (1825, 1826).

1819, the Hon. John James Strutt (later Baron Rayleigh) would preside. Strutt had been at Albury as had been a new vice-president, George Montagu, Lord Mandeville.⁶⁹ We do not maintain here that Drummond forced the inclusion of such persons in the Society executive, or even that the executive came largely to represent persons favourable to him; only that when Drummond, co-founder and major benefactor, proposed the inclusion of a friend or associate, this was a proposal which was taken most seriously. With such a circle of Albury associates installed within the executive of the Society, it was only natural that this cadre would attempt to catch the ear of the Society. And attempt it they did; several examples will serve to illustrate this. We will find that in nearly every case, such an attempt provoked strong reaction and even disorder.

In the 1827 meeting, Edward Irving took opportunity to dilate upon the favourite Albury theme of the ruin of European Christendom. He asked, 'Are not hollow Protestantism and superstitious Popery environing the Continent on all sides, threatening eternal destruction to the souls of her inhabitants?' Yet it was difficult for Irving to continue; he paused to complain:

I would beg leave to suggest that those around me might be better employed than endeavouring to drown out the sound of my voice in the acclamation of their own...It is not to be endured that on such occasions as these a speaker should stand up and be overawed by the approbation or disapprobation of those that surround him, the effect of which must be to confine him to facts, not allowing him to give vent to those feelings with which every Christian heart ought to abound.⁷⁰

In the following year, Henry Drummond himself, having related to the meeting his own change of prophetic outlook went on to indicate some of the outworkings of this change of opinion for his general view of life and society.⁷¹ He began to decry 'the growth of tolerance in modern life' and cited as an example of this the foundation in that very year of 'that infidel London university'. The records of the Society meeting indicate that these remarks brought 'loud hissing from the bottom of the room and cheering from the platform'.⁷²

⁶⁹ *Proceedings* (1827). George Montagu, Lord Mandeville a society vice-president from 1828, was a commander in the Royal Navy. Regarding Strutt, see T. C. F. Stunt, 'Trying the Spirits: The Case of the Gloucestershire Clergyman', *JEH* 39:1 (1988), 95-105.

⁷⁰ *Proceedings* (1827), 103.

⁷¹ A change described at [page 18, above](#).

⁷² There had been agitation since 1825 for the creation of a London university free from the religious tests still in place in the older universities.

Drummond protested this behaviour, as had Irving the previous year; neither seemed the least inclined to take responsibility for having created the stir. At least one defender of the new London University rose to protest Drummond's remarks and to appeal for greater decorum.

The zenith of this premillennialist attempt to make the Society meetings a pulpit for the Albury consensus followed in 1829. The *Proceedings* make plain that not only the President, the Hon. John James Strutt, but executive committee members C. S. Hawtrey and George Montague, Lord Mandeville – all members of the Albury circle – came well prepared for more speechifying at the May 1829 meeting. Strutt, as president, led off with a statement which disclosed just how much the Albury premillennialism was wedded to the historicist approach to prophecy, which sought to find fulfilments of prophecy in then-contemporary events.⁷³ He proposed: 'The political aspect of affairs seems to confirm the opinion that the sixth seal is nearly expired and we see the kingdom which formed the image of gold, silver, brass and iron in Nebuchadnezzar's dream.'⁷⁴ C.S. Hawtrey followed up Strutt's remarks with an appeal to Zechariah 14; here he believed was a description of the dawning of the millennial day arriving by the cataclysmic return of the Lord. George Montague, Lord Mandeville was next; he proposed a motion declaring the Papacy to be 'the Apocalyptic Babylon' from which the Continental Society was to be steadfastly urging Europeans to depart. He went on to decry 'the spirit of liberalism, so called, which pervaded their public assemblies, which reached the palace, and from which not even the Church was free...Liberalism was that pestilence which had been foretold in the book of Revelation.'⁷⁵

John Pye Smith, professor in Homerton College and not a premillennialist, had agreed in advance to second Montague's motion identifying the Papacy with the Antichrist; yet he told the meeting that he believed many of Montague's additional sentiments were plainly erroneous. He did not think that such sentiments should be introduced in such a meeting. At this point, another Albury circle member, Hugh McNeile, chairman of the meeting, defended the right

As the tests effectively required that a student conform to Anglicanism, persons of nonconformist as well as non-religious views were barred from enrolling. Drummond and those of his outlook viewed this as the nation's embracing of atheism; *Proceedings* (1828), 33, 34, 39.

⁷³ See footnote 37 for a definition of these terms.

⁷⁴ Strutt was alluding to Daniel 2. His remarks are recorded in the *Proceedings* (1829), 23.

⁷⁵ *Proceedings* (1829), 28.

of Montague to speak his mind 'since the Society had agreed that it was not responsible for the sentiments of any individual'. Smith, who was not quite finished, completed his cautionary remarks 'to a combination of hisses, applause, and cries of chair!'⁷⁶ The strategy of the Albury circle had ensured only that the meetings of the Society would acquire the atmosphere of a circus. It was 1829, and the Society was now staggering under the triple blows of apocrypha, charismatic, and premillennial controversies, controversies in which the same outspoken personalities had recurrently been at work. Could this Society survive?

The Decline of the Continental Society

Ominous warning signs had been ignored by the executive of the Continental Society since at least 1826. Rumoured in that year to be 'opposed to the Bible Society', it took three years until a restoration of cordial relationships could be reported.⁷⁷ From 1826 onward the Albury circle, led by Henry Drummond, had made a concerted effort to highlight premillennial views within the Society. And while that sustained campaign was in progress, Edward Irving first made public statements which began to involve him in Christological controversy; simultaneously, with Henry Drummond he began his advocacy of the restoration of the charismata.⁷⁸ We have seen that the tremors of these controversies reached Europe and made the work of the society agents more difficult. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this mission Society had been imposed upon by those who claimed to be its friends.

By 1829-30 its once-promising prospects were severely damaged. From a noble launch, it had descended by degrees to being what the chairman of its 1827 meeting had termed a society

more or less spoken against. In one town the best friends of your society are found amongst the members of the Established Church, your Dissenting brothers being your opposers. In another, the situation

⁷⁶ *Proceedings* (1829), 31-34.

⁷⁷ *Proceedings* (1829), 10.

⁷⁸ To this series of developments, the executive of the Society seems to have been incapable of bringing any resolution other than to enunciate a policy 'that it is by its Report that the Society is to be judged and not by the opinions of any particular member'; *Proceedings* (1827), 116. But this was an evasion; the printed reports of the Society served to record and disseminate the questionable opinions of particular members uttered in the May meetings, as well as the decisions of the executive. Such weak resolve suggests strong internal differences within the executive.

is reversed, and in a third individuals of all classes are to be found for and against you.⁷⁹

From this, it sank to become something tragi-comic. Henry Drummond, the enigmatic co-founder, admitted to the meeting of 1829 that he could not dispute the daily newspaper's characterization of their organization as 'a Society whose annual meetings are the exhibitions of theological mountebanks'.⁸⁰ Here, at least, the noble vision of pan-evangelicalism had received several mortal wounds. The Continental Society would survive, but only to limp through the 1830s as a smaller, poorer organization. A change of name to European Missionary Society could not save it from financial calamity. It was finally absorbed into the all-Anglican Foreign Aid Society in 1841.

Epilogue

Villains and heroes may be easily identified in this tale of the Continental Society. But to content oneself in doing so involves the failure to observe the weakness evident in both those we find it easy to admire and those we find it easy to dismiss. On closer examination, the pan-evangelical optimists were rather like the pan-evangelical pessimists. These were alike in their readiness to chart their location on the sea of Christian history in reliance on soundings taken from both the contemporary society and the use of key Scriptures. But in a century which was supplying both reasons for expectation of massive Christian advance through missions and evangelism as well as reasons for alarm over the secularisation of life and society it is hard not to conclude that the difference was made for these Christian believers by a perspective which they brought with them to the survey of their world.

The Christian pessimists were so gripped by a sense of the social decay that they witnessed, that they began to dabble in speculation over the year of Christ's return. Dates in the 1840s and 1860s were suggested. Yet all the while, persons of this perspective as well as others were praying, giving, commissioning and being commissioned in the outworkings of what Kenneth Scott Latourette has called 'the

⁷⁹ *Proceedings* (1827), 12.

⁸⁰ *Proceedings* (1829), 35. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'mountebank' thus: 'itinerant quack who holds forth to an audience from platform'. It seems the press had got it right.

great century' of Christian missionary expansion.⁸¹ Though, of course, dwellers in the nineteenth century could not immediately perceive the expansiveness of the Christian advance which was underway (it was only properly estimable in hindsight), it was nevertheless underway and they failed to sense it. And so, in hindsight all their speechifying about Europe's 'Egyptian darkness' was somehow beside the point.

As for the Christian optimists, they who so easily believed that the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival was finding its echo in Europe, India and the Pacific, they could not perhaps then see that in the mysterious operations of the Spirit of God propitious times can be replaced with barren times. The Gospel advances in Europe which in 1819 seemed to bring nearer the day when Christ would come in glory, would by 1919 give way to a post-war Europe infinitely more wrecked and wretched than the most apprehensive members of the Albury circle could have envisioned. The carnage of the 1914-18 war apart, it is a simple matter of record that the era of nineteenth century evangelical awakening had ended for Europe as surely as it had in Britain.⁸² Where then the unabashed optimism that the kingdom of Christ would be brought forward 'by the pouring out of extraordinary blessing upon common means of grace'?⁸³ It is widely appreciated that the eschatology which fuelled the launch of the great pan-evangelical Societies of the early nineteenth century has fallen on very hard times in this one. As this century and millennium give way to another, have we any less fallible method of reckoning the times and the nearness of Christ's return than they? If this would be the case, where is the proof?

⁸¹ The title was given to the fourth volume of Kenneth Scott Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity* (London, 1944).

⁸² The verdict of August Gretillat who surveyed nineteenth century evangelical advances made in Francophone Europe was that this movement was a spent force by 1891. See his 'Movements of Theological Thought Among the French-Speaking Protestants From the Revival of 1820 to the End of 1891', *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892), 421-447.

⁸³ The words of John Pye Smith, spoken in the Society meeting of 1828; see *Proceedings* (1828), 35.