

Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot*, (Simpsonville, S.C., Millennium III Publishers, 1995), paperback, 290 pages, \$14.95.

This work is a popular renewal of the claim begun two decades ago concerning the origin of the pretribulation rapture. MacPherson believes that the doctrine of the “secret rapture,” (the two-phase Second Coming or what has come to be called the pre-trib rapture) originated with a deluded teenage girl named Margaret MacDonald. She was a member of the Irvingites, a cultish band of unorthodox Christians centered in London who practiced visions. In fact, the claim is that the pre-trib doctrine originated with one of the visions received by this girl. The main thesis of the book, the so-called “rapture plot,” is that dispensationalists have been covering up this origin because of the embarrassment it would cause their position. They have consistently maintained that the pre-trib doctrine originated with John Nelson Darby and have sought to downplay the fact that he borrowed it from the Irvingites. The implication is that since this doctrine originated with a deluded teenage girl and since dispensationalists have sinfully covered this fact up, then, indeed the pre-trib doctrine itself is suspect and cannot be held to be the truth.

The book begins with a chapter on preliminary considerations and discussions of the earliest teachings of the pre-trib rapture from MacPherson’s point of view. The second chapter focuses on Margaret MacDonald and attempts to show her involvement in not only creating the pre-trib doctrine, but her participation in occult practices. Although he does not say so directly, MacPherson uses this section to leave the impression that pretribulationism is of Satanic origin. Chapter three discusses the Irvingites in general including the influence of Margaret MacDonald upon them.

Chapters four through six turn to Darby himself. Chapter four tries to catalog chronologically the development of his thoughts. In chapter five, the later writings of Darby are explored with the conclusion that Darby was a historical revisionist of his own earlier experiences. Chapter six entitled “Pre-Plot Practicing” begins to call into question the integrity of William Kelley, an early Brethren editor of Darby’s writings.

Chapter seven carries the title of the book itself. Here MacPherson evaluates William Kelley (d. 1906) in detail as to his alleged revision of Darby. The next and final chapter attempts to show the continuing influence of Kelley’s rewriting of Brethren history. MacPherson spends most of his time dealing with the claims of the pretribulationist R. A. Huebner. It is this concluding chapter which may reveal MacPherson’s motivation for his vitriolic attack on the pre-trib position. He comments that “during the 18th and 19th centuries genuine revival during the First and Second Great Awakenings swept two continents before pretrib dispensationalism emerged and extinguished the flames” (p. 234). MacPherson adds five appendices including one attempting to refute the recent claims that a pre-trib rapture can be found in Morgan Edwards (1788) and in Pseudo-Ephraem (374-627), an early Syriac church father.

One is hard pressed to find good qualities in the argumentation of MacPherson’s work. However, the detailed bibliographical information concerning original sources will aid the historian wanting to study nineteenth century eschatological developments. MacPherson as a former investigative reporter has done a good service to us in this area. Unfortunately, blinded by his rush to a preordained conclusion, his analysis of those sources is clouded by a hateful style which prevents much of what he says from being taken seriously. For example, beginning on page 91 he concocts a fictional conversation between himself and a dispensationalist to make points rather than interacting with detailed complaints with his own view. Although he does interact in other parts of his book to specific complaints, this disingenuous presentation here undermines his credibility. Another example is his labeling of Ephraem (the Syriac father in

question concerning the writing of Pseudo-Ephraem) as a “Catholic” (p. 268) probably knowing the connotation it would bring to his largely Protestant audience.

As to the details of his argumentation, several questions emerge from reading the book, many of which have to do with methodology. First, MacPherson has not dealt adequately with the debate over whether or not the Irvingites were pre-trib, partial trib or post-trib. His chapter on Edward Irving and his group totally ignores the fact that the group by means of visions and prophesying believed that they were living in the last three and a half years before Christ’s return and dated that period from January 14, 1832 to July 14, 1835. The Irvingites were historicists in contrast to the developing futurism of the Darbyites. It is amazing that a historian would totally overlook the impact of this teaching while discussing documents during the time leading up to the alleged Second Coming.

Second, MacPherson’s book shows the absence of any historical work involving followers of Irving and Darby on the Continent. There are emerging studies especially focusing on Geneva and the development of separatist movements in that region. Of special note would be the Darbyite Émile Guers who pastored in Geneva. His books *La Future D’Israël* (1856) and *Irvingism and Mormonism* (1853) help our understanding of the development of Darbyism prior to the supposed rewrite of it by Darby and Kelley. Furthermore, he shows the large wedge between Irvingism and Darbyism that existed as early as the 1830s. So for the conspiracy to be true, more players have to be added whose weight combines to increase the likelihood that the conspiracy did not take place! This conclusion is bolstered by a historian named Barron H. de Goltz (*Genève Religieuse au Dix-Neuvième Siècle* [1862]) who attacked separatist movements like Darybism and Irvingism. He also characterizes the great gulf between the visions of the Irvingites and the scripture readings of the Darbyites.

Third, MacPherson’s book amounts to an ad hominem attack. He suggests that the pre-trib position is wrong by guilt by association. However, even if Margaret MacDonald had a vision of the pre-trib rapture, that does not invalidate the doctrine. It does not guarantee that she was the originator. At best, his view should be held in a preliminary fashion. Fifty years from now after competent scholars have done the historical work for a little studied area, the one holding his view may find himself embarrassed. However, even the fact that Margaret MacDonald clearly gave a pre-trib vision is not at all a ready conclusion.

Fourth, MacPherson does little detailed analysis of those sources which support his thesis. Men like Robert Baxter and Robert Norton are automatically accepted as credible. My question for MacPherson is “are sources only valid when they agree with his thesis?” This is seen in his handling of the Pseudo-Ephraem material. He appears to accept Paul Alexander as the expert on Pseudo-Ephraem although Alexander is a nonevangelical who would not be studied in the nuances of eschatological readings from the various evangelical viewpoints. To expect him to present a summary involving rapture timing nuances is too much to ask.

Macpherson’s thesis has been rejected by many competent scholars who are not pre-trib. Men like F.F. Bruce, John Bray, Timothy Weber, and others have found his conclusions untenable. MacPherson misleads his reader by mentioning F. F. Bruce as a good friend of his without letting the reader know that Bruce, a Brethren scholar who rejected pre-trib, totally discarded the rapture plot idea (p. 40). The fact of the matter is that the real test of whether the pre-trib rapture is correct doctrine is not its historical origin but its exegetical support from the Bible. MacPherson’s book provides no help in this area.