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‘Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come!’
The Writing and Thought of Edward Nangle, 1828–1862

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Millennialism in Ireland, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, followed closely parallel developments and trends in England. Irish Anglicans in particular were shaped by what Ernest Sandeen terms this ‘first phase of British millennialism’. After 1850 a new hybrid matured that took on an increasingly Irish character. This ‘second phase’ coincided with the decline of the historicist interpretation and the rise of John Nelson Darby’s dispensationalism, which was derived from a futurist interpretation of scriptural prophecy. This chapter, which examines the millennial thought and writings of Edward Nangle, who graduated from Trinity in 1823, and then went on to found the Achill Mission, an Anglican missionary station established in 1834 to convert the native Catholic population of Achill Island, County Mayo, suggests that this second phase of millennial interest was shaped and inspired by the first. If we are to understand Nangle, we must take seriously his intense preoccupation with the cryptic images of biblical prophecy, which he probably acquired at Trinity and developed during his years on Achill. Attesting to his ardour in prophetic study, Nangle’s biographer admitted, ‘Few will perhaps agree with him in what he says on this remarkable subject, but all will admire the ingenuity of his arguments and the plausibility of his reasoning.’ To gauge the significance of prophecy to the mission of Irish evangelicals like Nangle, it is necessary to pursue a careful reading of his tracts, sermons, and pamphlets that deal with the obscurities of biblical prophecy. Nangle must be placed within the broader context of nineteenth-century premillennialism. This context forces us to see him as a man of the times.

Edward Nangle was born in 1799 at Kildalkey, near Athboy, County Meath, and died in 1883. The Nangle name went back for generations and his family could claim to be one of the oldest Hiberno-Norman families in Ireland. An ancestor, Gilbert de Angulo, had come over to Ireland with Strongbow in 1169 and for his services was given land near Navan, establishing a military heritage that remained with the family. Edward’s father, Walter Nangle (1747–1843), had served in an infantry regiment of the army, retiring with the rank of captain. There is no evidence that the Nangles were an overly religious family; they had only become protestant in the late eighteenth century when Walter took as his second wife a protestant woman called Catherine Sall, daughter of George Sall of Dublin. Edward was a product of his father’s second marriage and consequently was reared in the protestant faith by his mother, who died in 1808 when he was just nine years old.

Nangle was best known for establishing the Achill Missionary settlement. He and his close associates ran the settlement from its foundation in 1834 until 1852, when he was transferred to Skreen, County Sligo. The missionary settlement was from the outset controversial, polarising relations between protestants and Catholics along the western seaboard for at least a generation. When Nangle was not picking fights with Catholic prelates, he busied himself with prophecy. Especially after 1850, he directed the bulk of his intellectual energies towards investigating biblical prophecy’s relationship to secular history. Biblical prophecies are notoriously difficult to interpret, yet to expositors like Edward Nangle, they made perfect sense; and the signs of the times suggested, in the words of Scripture, that ‘the coming of the Lord is nigh’. Serious-minded nineteenth-century men and women frequently discovered within the pages of their Bibles the signs and forecasts of Christ’s second coming. This enthusiasm for prophetic Scripture may seem strange to modern readers, but the stuff of prophecy, both explicit and implicit, was a normal intellectual preoccupation in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland. Although many rational and moderate Christians had avoided dealing with prophetic books like Daniel and Revelation, others had enthusiastically embraced them. Nangle saw his evangelicalism and missionary work through the lens of biblical prophecy.

While contemporary Catholics were obsessed by the prognostications of Pastorini and the miracles of Prince Hohenlohe, militant protestants developed their brand of ‘folk’ religion based upon Holy Scripture. For Edward Nangle, all the books of the Bible met and ended in Revelation. Since the end of the first century AD, when Revelation first circulated among the early Christian churches, the visions of its author, who humbly