

*Protestant missionaries in Spain, 1869–1936. 'Shall the Papists prevail?'* By Kent Eaton.

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The history of Spanish Protestantism has attracted only sporadic attention from scholars, for obvious reasons. Spanish Protestants by the end of the twentieth century probably numbered little more than 100,000. It is not generally known that between the revolution of 1868, which briefly opened Spain to religious freedom, and the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the Christian (or Plymouth) Brethren in Britain sent more Protestant missionaries to Spain than did any other Protestant agency. In the imagination of British Brethren, Catholic Spain at times even eclipsed India, Central Africa or China as a mission field in which Evangelicals sought to spread the light of gospel truth amidst the darkness of error. In Brethren mission rhetoric, Spain bore comparison with India as a country of practical polytheism in which crafty priests wielded malign influence over an ignorant populace. Brethren evangelists placed their confidence above all in the dissemination of Scripture portions and tracts as the divinely appointed means of breaking the stranglehold of Romanism. In Barcelona in 1872, in the heady atmosphere created by Spain's 'glorious revolution' of 1868, the leading Brethren missionary George Lawrence and two assistants sold more than 3,000 Gospels, 2,500 Epistles, several Bibles and Testaments, and distributed about 7,000 tracts, all in the space of about ninety minutes. But Brethren Scripture-based evangelism continually encountered the practical problem of low levels of literacy – 64 per cent of the population was estimated to be illiterate as late as 1900. As a result, Brethren missions, contrary to their professed theology of mission that privileged preaching and church planting, became more and more involved in popular education. Brethren schools, however, generally failed to produce the educated church leadership that the missionaries desired. The harvest of souls proved modest – perhaps 10,000 Protestants in all by the 1920s. Eaton places much of the blame on the aversion of the Brethren to the creation of an ordained ministry, which left the small Spanish assemblies continually dependent upon the leadership of foreign missionaries from Britain. In an interesting precursor of what happened on a much larger stage in China after 1949, it took an enforced missionary exodus in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's accession to power in 1939 to stimulate the development of indigenous leadership and open the way for modest church growth. Although many Spanish Brethren have since found their way into other sections of the Protestant community, the imprint of Brethren dispensational theology remains apparent in Spanish Protestantism. Eaton's book is a meticulously researched study grounded in extensive Spanish and English primary sources. Its lengthy footnotes betray its origins as a Lampeter PhD thesis from 2000. The author could have done more to update his thesis by referring to the considerable volume of scholarship on Brethren and mission history that has appeared since then – the work of Tim Grass is noticeable by its absence. Nevertheless, this is a valuable study that reminds us that, for British Protestants, not all overseas mission was directed to the tropical world.

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