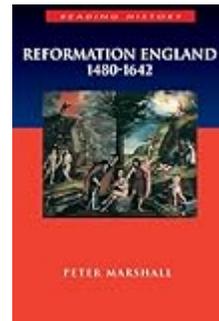




**Peter Marshall.** *Reformation England 1480-1640.* London: Hodder Arnold, 2003. xiii + 241 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-340-70624-4.



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### Is There a Reformation in this Class?

Lately the Reformation (read: reformation/reformations/Reformations/either of the last two but enclosing their “esses” in clever parentheses) has seemed nearly impossible to render in clear and straightforward classroom introduction. Too much went on in a past scholars are increasingly skillful at discovering—and too much goes on in a present where “revisionism” looks just about ready to demand its second prefixing “post-.” When doing one’s own work, or teaching graduate students, this bounty of archival materials and the sophistication and subtlety of academic approach is wonderful, invigorating. But when teaching college or seminary students in “Introduction to *Reformation*” and Required Courses, these can be, simply, maddening.

Peter Marshall’s new textbook, an entry in Arnold’s “Reading History” Series, is notable for introducing a complex historiography in a clear and confident manner without sacrificing Reformation to Outright Reductiveness. Marshall defines “Reformation” (a term he capitalizes and keeps in the singular) as an “event” or “process,” claims to give all sides in the current debates a de-

cent hearing, and intends to make his own sympathies known. This last will render, he claims, “the most fruitful lines of inquiry,” although it is not clear to this reviewer why it wouldn’t be welcome in a textbook aimed primarily at teaching “scholarly approaches” in any case. Marshall is compelled to defend his opinionated stance nonetheless, arguing that it will encourage students to be discriminating in their own subsequent reading of secondary sources, thus keeping them safe from the wiles of “persuasive ‘experts’” (p. xi).

We must assume that, in a world gone post-modern, Marshall has included himself in those skeptical inverted commas as well. But surely he could have defended his refusal to check his biases at the door on the simple grounds that to do otherwise would be to produce a deadly dull book—always the kiss of death (and a guarantor of querulous remarks on students’ course evaluations) in the required, introductory classroom. This, thankfully, Marshall has not done. The book accomplishes a very great deal in a very few pages, and if the prose doesn’t exactly dance off every single one, it always gets the

job done without sounding either soporifically stuffy or cheaply ingratiating.

While charm is important, textbooks need primarily to be evaluated on how well they support classroom teaching and learning. Less essential to this task than any specific content, arguably then, is the way a textbook structures basic information. *Reformation England* is meticulously set up and admirably architectonic. The book is divided into eight chapters, arranged chronologically. Each chapter opens with a succinct overview, goes on to present the three or four large topics characterizing the scholarship on the eras under discussion, and finishes with an equally brisk summation. The sections are numbered in repeating sequences (chapter 1 divided into 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4; chapter 2 with 2.1 and so on), which adds to the air of economy and pedagogical efficiency that pervades the entire text.

A larger structural point to ponder is Marshall's choice to set the bounds of Reformation England at 1480 and 1642. The 1480 he defends on practical grounds, "to allow the inclusion of as much as possible of the most relevant recent scholarship" (p. xii). But to conclude at 1642 is to invite some hard questions and here, I must say, I find his reasons less defensible. "Many of those who took part (on both sides) in the war felt they were fighting for religion," he states, "to preserve or put forward a particular vision of what the English reformation was." Marshall then goes on to point out that, in a sense, both sides failed in their campaigns: 1649 did not mark the return of anyone's vision of a unified and uniform English religion but instead a "reluctant acceptance of religious pluralism" (p. xiii). Fair enough for the 1650s, not to mention the reigns of the later Stuarts, but still it doesn't adequately explain why Marshall has elected to skip the 1640s, when the concepts he sets out in *Reformation England* were put to such singularly violent and transformative test.

In a short textbook with no room for expansive argumentation, periodization matters a great deal. The limiting effect of Marshall's choices makes an era with an overwhelming mass of historical evidence and a dizzying array of academic opinion less daunting, but it also cedes advantage to one side of the current historiographical debate from the outset. To begin a story of the English reformation in the Catholic spiritual ferment of the late

fifteenth century and end it before a mid-seventeenth-century era marked by Protestant fervor bordering on, even embracing, the revolutionary, is to overemphasize the challenges to the progress of the early reformation by default. Furthermore, devoting more than half his book to Catholicism in England (pre- and post-reformation) and questioning the spread, meaning, and appeal of reformation on many of the pages remaining surely makes Marshall look like a revisionist. But come to think of it, restricted to the consideration of what we might call the "long sixteenth century," who wouldn't? Poor Professor Dickens has become too much a straw man for anyone's polemical advantage these days, and the so-called triumphalist view Dickens is now assumed to have advanced simply won't fly, even in fiercely Protestant secondary classrooms.

In discussing methods and interpretations, however, Marshall maintains the long and broadly cast view of the social historian of religion he is and in so doing actually comes pretty close to describing the situation as fairly as any responsible classroom teacher could hope. We all know by now that any treatment of the "English Reformation," no matter our politics of capitalization, must in the end represent it as a clash between worthy and well-matched opponents. "[W]e should recognize," Marshall says in my favorite cover-all sentence in the book, "that deep divisions about what it was necessary to do or think in order to be a good-enough member of a national Protestant Church were at the heart of the contemporary religious experience" (p. 166). In those lines, Marshall also outlines the issues that bear on the writing of a good-enough textbook.

This brings me to my only real concern about *Reformation England*—Marshall's historiographical biases. Both the biases (to a certain degree) and his select bibliography (to a great degree) may make this textbook seem very dated very soon. The field of Reformation Studies is remarkably, even terrifyingly, generative, especially if we also consider (which Marshall doesn't all that much) equally relevant and recent contributions to the enterprise made by post-revisionists, as well as by scholars of English Literature and Historical Theology. Still, his ability to deal economically and thoroughly with a well-mined history and its long-winded historical tradition is commendable and distinctive.

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