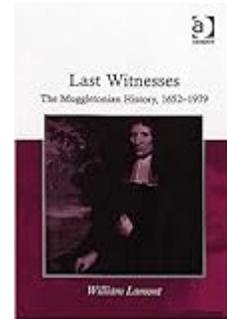




William Lamont. *Last Witnesses: The Muggletonian History, 1652-1979.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. xvi + 267 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5532-9.



Reviewed by Tim Cooper

Published on H-Albion (August, 2007)

No Ordinary Sect

This remarkable and delightful book traces the continuous history of the Muggletonian sect from its mid-seventeenth-century origins to 1979, when the last Muggletonian passed away. The story can be told in detail due to the existence of a substantial archive, discovered by E. P. Thompson in 1974 and deftly handled now by William Lamont. Indeed, the archive itself is as much a player in this story as anyone else. The Muggletonians would be pleased that it finally fell into the hands of a historian who always treats them with respect, who displays an easy familiarity with their eccentricities and commonalities, and who fairly points out their flaws as well as appreciating their merits. Though not entirely easy to read or always accessible, the result is a satisfying exploration of the Muggletonian mind in all its shifting contexts. At the very least, we can no longer dismiss the Muggletonians as fond tipplers, curious oddities, or—the guiding thesis of the book—fanatical millenarians.

The movement began not with Lodowicke Muggleton but with his friend, John Reeve, who in February 1652 heard an audible, external voice (thus forever setting him and his followers apart from their close rivals,

the Quakers) confirming Reeve and Muggleton as the two last witnesses referred to in Revelation chapter 11. This is the third commission, following from that of the law and the gospel, in which the two men are commanded to curse the antichrist, a rival prophet called Thomas Tany, as well as another prophet, John Robins. This was hardly the end of it. Reeve developed a lengthy list of Muggletonian doctrines, including the belief that hell was internal, not physical and external; that two competing seeds, faith (good) and reason (bad), are planted in each individual; and that while others may be saved, only Muggletonians can have assurance of it. From the beginning there was a fastidious aversion to evangelism; converts would seek out the sect, not the other way around. And yet numbers accrued. Reeve died in 1658, though it was not entirely clear who would continue what he had begun, or that this movement would take on the name of his friend and mouthpiece, Lodowicke Muggleton.

Chapter 2 closely examines three of Muggleton's maneuvers in the early 1660s. First, he shut down Lawrence Clarkson, who had been seeking to shoulder Muggleton aside from his place of prominence within the movement

in the wake of Reeve's death. Second, Muggleton revised Reeve's *A Divine Looking Glass*, which had first appeared in 1656 and was effusively dedicated to Oliver Cromwell as the agent of God's final purposes in the world. One of Lamont's most impressive insights here is to look beyond the obvious political realignments required in these opening months of the Restoration period. Muggleton's revision was not the expected retreat from earlier millenarian expectation, since Reeve's movement was never millenarian; instead, Muggleton was straining out the providentialism in Reeve's work, now convinced that God took no notice of his creatures at all, Lord Protectors or otherwise. The third focus is Muggleton's lengthy exposition of Revelation chapter 11, published in an effort to show that he and Reeve were the two last witnesses mentioned in that chapter, though in a curiously understated fashion that reflected his new understanding of God's non-providentialism.

If the 1660s began with moves from Clarkson to oust Muggleton, the following decade began in a similar fashion with outright rebellion from several followers who felt that Reeve's legacy had been betrayed by Muggleton's non-providentialism. Muggleton staved off the threat with relative ease. Chapter 4 is, then, an assessment of Muggleton's increasingly confident leadership of the movement. Its nature is revealed primarily through his extensive correspondence, which delivered the material that made its way into the form of three books published on the whole of Revelation (1665), against the Quakers (1668), and on the non-existence of witches (1669). There is little in the way of expanded themes to give this section coherence—the main letters are described in turn—but they reveal Muggleton's mix of pragmatism and militance, his doctrinal emphases, his consistent concern for the lot of the poor, and his sensible pastoral advice. Remarkably, "Muggleton emerges as a high-class Puritan casuist in the great tradition of Perkins, Sibbes and Gouge" (p. 87). Through his letters he served as an able prophet for the movement until his death on March 14, 1698.

The remaining chapters follow the sect out of the seventeenth century. They show that while leadership changed hands in successive generations, the movement itself maintained a remarkable adherence to the kinds of convictions that Muggleton had invested in it at the beginning—"How well Muggletonians knew their history!" (p. 151). Of course, that did nothing to stop some-

times vigorous internal debate—"They are united, except when they disagree" (p. 187)—but even at the end the enduring convictions are telling. The last Muggletonian, Philip Noakes, agonized over when to tell his wife and daughter about the faith, for fear that they might reject it and be damned.

Lamont's study is an attempt to "locate this small and derided sect in a wider and continuing reappraisal of intellectual history," one that reveals "the seventeenth-century mind" (p. 348). The final chapter caps this off by shifting gears from a vertical to a horizontal approach, employing conceptual horizons not available twenty years ago. As a result, Lamont is able to place the Muggletonians in the company of such figures as Thomas Hobbes, Oliver Cromwell, Edmund Ludlow, John Bunyan, Richard Baxter, Ralph Josselin, William Prynne, and Sir Isaac Newton—all men who shared a distaste for millenarianism but who lived with an expectation of the End at some point. This places the derided Muggletonians in respectable company indeed—and justifiably so.

Yet Lamont might have gone further in revealing the seventeenth-century mind. If one question dominates his book, it is the (non)connection of the Muggletonians with millenarianism. But there is another question that remains strangely unasked: why did this sect appeal to its adherents, not just in the mid-seventeenth century but even into the twentieth century, if in declining numbers? Why did people want to convert to a movement that had such a pronounced distaste for evangelism? What did people see in a belief system that denied God's taking notice of people and yet was predicated on the conviction that God had spoken audibly to John Reeve in 1652? These kinds of questions are absent from the book. Only at one point does Lamont allude to "the thrill of the chase" in cracking the privative Bible code and the "appeal" of the sect's "materialist basis" (p. 215). Beyond this, there is no hint as to why people continued to sign up to Muggletonianism. It is not certain if this is because Lamont has failed fully to sketch what this says about the seventeenth-century mind, or because he has so successfully immersed himself in it that the question—which seems obvious from the perspective of the twenty-first century—simply did not occur to him. Whatever the case, this useful, faithful, and often humorous study has delivered us much more insight into what is clearly "no ordinary sect" (p. 124). It is a fine work of history from a very fine historian.

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Citation: Tim Cooper. Review of Lamont, William, *Last Witnesses: The Muggletonian History, 1652-1979*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

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