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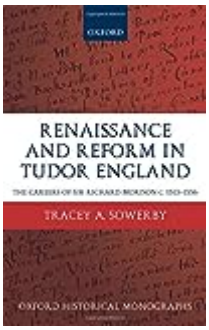

Tracey A. Sowerby. *Renaissance and Reform in Tudor England: The Careers of Sir Richard Morison.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xi + 299 pp. $115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-958463-5.

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Sir Richard Morison: A Tudor Humanist, Polemicist, and Diplomat Reevaluated

His contemporaries had no doubt regarding the fame of Sir Richard Morison, the Tudor polemicist, scholar, politician, and diplomat. Roger Ascham wrote that Morisonâs ââarguments are so pointed and have such force and strength, to which he adds an extensive knowledge of affairs and a strong memoryââ (p. 194). John Sleidan called him ââthat renowned man of lettersââ (p. 240). To G. R. Elton, Morison was the man âwho wielded far and away the best propagandist pen in Henrician England.â[1]

And yet Morison, so admired in his own age and so acclaimed by a distinguished scholar in our era, has been neglected by historians of early modern England. As Tracey A. Sowerby writes, he is âa familiar if shadowy figure to most early modern historiansâ (p. 1). His polemics have not received a modern edition; his life has not been given the attention its importance merits. A few articles have been written about him and three unpublished doctoral dissertations have been devoted to him, but until the publication of this book–derived from a fourth doctoral thesis, presented at Oxford–no study of his life of any great length or comprehensiveness has been attempted.

Sowerby is honest about the limitations that have been imposed on her work by the circumstances of the surviving evidence. Little, she tell us, is known of Morisonâs life before 1536, between 1541 and 1547, or after 1553; she is unable therefore to produce âa straightforward chronological biographyâ (p. 2). What can be said about him is constrained by the fact that few of his papers survive outside the National Archives in London.

These limitations have not prevented her from producing a book that is learned, original, and convincing; nor have they stopped her from giving us an account of Morisonâs life and career that is as comprehensive as can be expected. The gaps in her account are not great and they do not handicap the comprehension. Her work is based on a wide range of archival sources (those found not only in the National Archives but also in local and university repositories) as well as printed primary works; her knowledge of the secondary literature is thorough.

Morison arrived at Cardinal College, Oxford (Wolseyâs foundation, which later became Christ Church), in 1525. There he first encountered the early Lutheranism (Sowerby prefers the term âevangelicalismâ) which became his own religious allegiance. But he did not tarry in England. Already the recipient of a pension from Cardinal Wolsey, he went to Venice and Padua in 1530 in the company of his patronâs illegitimate son, Thomas Winter. His trip abroad was to lay the intellectual foundations for the remainder of his life.

At Padua Morison matriculated at the university. His time there âestablished him as an eclectic scholar in contact with some of the leading academics in Europeâ (p. 21). Among the English contemporaries he met there were John Mason and Thomas Starkey. His study of civil law at Padua suggests to Sowerby that at this stage he was thinking of a career in ecclesiastical or government administration. It was there that he gained knowledge of classical and patristic authors and an acquaintance with contemporary Italian writers, Machiavelli included–Morison was the first English author to refer to him in print. He was eventually to acquire what was probably among the largest English libraries of his time (the collection may have included a large part of the library of John Fisher). By the summer of 1535 Morison had abandoned Padua for Venice, living there with Reginald Pole. In May 1536 he left for England; having returned home he embarked on the career for which he is best known, propagandist for Henry VIII.

In his *Lamentation* (1536) (in this and subsequent instances the short title given by Sowerby is used), written in response to the Pilgrimage of Grace, Morison denounced sedition as a sin and promoted obedience, which was to him a duty. He claimed the pope stirred sedition. The kingâs rejection of the papacy, however, âcreated a special relationship between him and Godâ (p. 48).

In his *Remedy*, written also in 1536, and like its predecessor probably sent to the rebels in the North by the king in November 1536, Morison dealt with Englandâs problems. He justified the presence of the base-born (such as Thomas Cromwell) among the kingâs ministers: ââtrewe nobilitie is never but where vertue isââ (p. 50). In this work too the link between knowledge of scripture and obedience to the king was stressed; he urged a sermon campaign to promote the gospel.

These works were directed at a domestic readership. His next tract, *Apomaxis*, was aimed at Europe and was a refutation of *De Matrimonio* (1535) by Johann Cochlaeus. Papal primacy was attacked and the royal supremacy was defended. *Apomaxis* was intended by its author to signal that Henry aimed at a rapprochement with Lutheranism. Morisonâs two tracts on the debate on the calling of a general council by the papacy, *A Protestation* (1537) and *An Epistle* (1538), stressed that the king was agreeable to a council not convened by Rome. These two tracts may have been the most widely disseminated works of Henrician propaganda; copies were distributed at the Frankfurt book fair. *A Protestation* appeared in Latin and German, while *An Epistle* appeared in English, German, and French.

In his *Comfortable Consolation* of 1537, Morison again drew parallels between biblical Israel and the England of his own day. Henry, he argued, was Godâs elect, chosen over Arthur, his deceased brother. Favor had been shown him at Flodden and in the suppression of the alleged plot of the Maid of Kent. He had been singled out to free England from the papacy; thus Morison anticipated the idea of England as a covenanted nation that became implicit in Edwardian Protestant writings and explicit in those of Marian exiles. In *An Invective* (1539), Morison denounced the Exeter conspiracy. Reginald Pole, the Marquess of Exeterâs brother, was attacked as ââthe very pole from whence is poured all the poisonââ (p. 95).

However, by comparing Henry and Hezekiah, Morison indicated that his support for the king was not unconditional; Godâs benevolence could be withdrawn. The increasing religious conservatism of Henryâs last years was to disappoint Morison; he later described them as ââdrie and barrenââ (p. 146). As Sowerby notes, the tracts of the 1530s were âoverly optimisticâ in their assessment of Henryâs religious inclinations (p. 109). The tracts may well have been designed to put pressure on the king âto develop his policies in a more evangelical directionâ but in this aim they failed (p. 114).

Morison was a figure to whom evangelical scholars appealed when seeking religious patronage in the 1530s. Morison also wrote a manuscript treatise on the seven sacraments. In this he argued, following Lutheran ideas, that there were only three sacraments, baptism, the eucharist, and penance. He supported clerical marriage. When a delegation from the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League arrived in England in 1538 Morison helped to entertain them. He told the envoys the king was one of the ââprofessors of the gospellââ (p. 174). He was openly pro-Lutheran in the 1530s, moving to a Reformed position in the 1540s.

Under Cromwellâs aegis Morison prospered. He acted as a secretary for the minister. It was while he

was in Cromwellâs circle that Morison wrote a treatise on legal revision that Sowerby dates to 1538-39.[2] In this work he urged, among other proposals, that the laws of England should be codified in Latin. Sowerby notes that this scheme âwas far more complex and developed than those of his contemporariesâ (p. 132). In 1539 Morison was elected to the Commons. He became a gentleman of the privy chamber in the same year. Contrary to David Starkey, he remained in this office after Cromwellâs fall in 1540 and continued to receive marks of royal favor.[3]

Although he was sent on embassy to Denmark late in 1546, Morisonâs public career (other than as a polemicist) did not become of great importance until the reign of Edward VI. It was not until 1550 that he was knighted; it was in the same year that he became a privy councillor. In August that year he was made ambassador to the imperial court. In March 1551 he had his first audience with Charles V. His mission was dominated by disputes over the withdrawal of permission to Princess Mary to hear mass in her own household. He was in financial difficulties and in December 1551, when the court was at Innsbruck, he was expelled from his lodgings; he was not allowed back until the following year. Back in England from the late summer or early autumn of 1553, Morisonâs public career effectively came to an end under Mary I. He was held in suspicion after Wyattâs rebellion in 1554. In April that year Morison, in the company of Sir John Cheke and Sir Anthony Cooke, left for Strasbourg. In June or July they moved to Basel and may later have gone to Zurich. During this period Morison may have written his *Supplicacyon* (c. 1555), in which Mary was called a tyrant. But on March 20, 1556, he died in Strasbourg.

Sowerbyâs work is notably free of errors, important or trivial. Some points are not explored or are left somewhat unclear. When she mentions that Morisonâs *Protestation* and *Epistle* echo Marsilius of Padua, it would be of interest to know whether Morison had any direct knowledge of that authorâs *Defensor Pacis*, whether in the first edition of 1522 published at Basel or in William Marshallâs English translation of 1535.[4] Her statement that âMorison could be open about his evangelicalism in the 1530s because Henryâs own religious views were not yet solidifiedâ is questionable (p. 187). There is no reason to believe that Henry ever entertained the pro-Lutheran views Morison expounded in his treatise on the sacraments; what gave Morison freedom was not so much the kingâs uncertainty as Cromwellâs patronage.

But these blemishes are minor. Sowerby has produced a book of very considerable interest and importance and one that has far more substance than its relative brevity might suggest. Her case for Morisonâs importance as scholar and polemicist is fresh and persuasive. This book is not one that can be ignored by scholars interested in Tudor intellectual, theological, literary, legal, or political history. But above all her work contributes to the history of humanist scholarship and thought. She argues that the case of Morison shows that âEnglish humanism was more vibrant and cosmopolitan than even recent corrective works have suggestedâ and that âMorison vividly illustrates the benefits of looking at Tudor lives in a European contextâ (pp. 254, 259). Sowerbyâs own work, wide-ranging and non-insular in its approach, ensures that Morison has at last emerged from the shadows.

Notes

[1]. G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 199.

[2]. Elton dates the same manuscript to 1535-36. Ibid., 185. Sowerby does not note her dissent from Elton on this point.

[3]. David Starkey, *The Reign of Henry VIII: Personalities and Politics* (London: G. Philip, 1985), 95-96, cited by Sowerby, 134.

[4]. This is of particular interest because of the differences between the text and the translation, for which see Shelley Lockwood, âMarsilius of Padua and the case for the Royal Ecclesiastical Supremacy,â *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, vol. 1 (1991): 89-119.