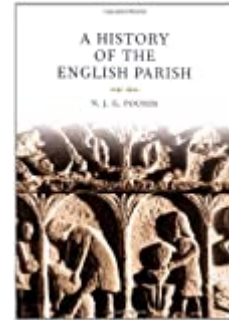




**N. J. G. Pounds.** *A History of the English Parish: The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria.* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xxvi + 619 pp. Â£60/\$95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-63348-2.



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## A Sweeping Survey of Parish Culture

Professor Pounds, perhaps best-known for his three-volume *Historical Geography of Europe*, is a venerable polymath: an archaeologist, antiquarian, anthropologist, medievalist and a cultural historian. This book is a fitting climax to a long and distinguished academic career in both Britain and the USA. It also fills a gap in the historical literature of the English Church. For while John Blair and others have given us a clear picture of the evolution of the Anglo-Saxon *parochiae*, and there is strong interest in the post-Reformation Church, the continuous cultural history of the parish has largely been ignored. Yet the parish was, and is still, the longest-surviving and only truly national unit of administration and, for many, one of local identity also. Over ten thousand parishes provided a structure for worship, popular culture, justice, rites of passage and – in the case of the tithe – the most successful form of taxation in English history.

Divided into three parts (The Origins of the Parochial System, The Functions of the Parish, and The Parish and its Church) this book distils a huge volume of scholarship into a readable and engaging survey. Indeed if

there is need for an argument for long-serving historians with encyclopaedic knowledge of the literature of their fields to write history, this book amply supports it. One of the best examples of the synthesis Pounds achieves is the manner in which he weaves the research of Blair, D.C. Douglas, Delia Hook, P.H. Hase, C.A. Raleigh Radford, and Pauline Spufford on the evolution of the parish into the clearest exposition of the process to date. Pounds shows how the fluid territorial ingredients of the Church under Augustine crystallised into parishes. Pounds posits a convection model of parish creation, with the generation of demand for a parish or chapelry occurring locally, and parishes growing until some were divided, redundant or absorbed into monastic or other structures. This is a bit too neat, but while Pounds understates the *ad hoc*, chaotic and non-linear nature of these developments, he captures the complex elements in parish formation.

Pounds also creates a sense of the periodic and tidal shifts of authority over the Church: from monarch and landowners to papacy and bishops, and back again. The

individual parish church was subject to the prevailing fortunes of boroughs, monasteries, population changes, dominant prelates and feudal obligations. It is from this thicket of conflicting forces and accident that Pounds clarifies our view of the place and role of the parish.

Pounds also makes the leap into the mind of the medieval Christian; he acknowledges that the payment of tithes – a regressive tax and one condemned by modern scholars – was for most medieval men and women a spiritual duty more than a secular burden. Pounds also recovers some of the practicalities of the medieval parish: how was it defined and how were its boundaries remembered and secured? He also clearly depicts the economics of the parish, showing how the income and expenditure of the parish, clergy and benefice evolved and separated. This spills over into the building, maintenance and expansion of churches, which Pounds traces with equal skill.

Pounds is also good on reclaiming the sheer intimacy of the medieval urban and rural parish. A good example is Winchester, which in the twelfth century had as many as seventy parish churches, an average of one for every hundred souls. For Pounds this makes Winchester ‘the most overchurched city in England, perhaps in Europe’ (p. 123). This average parish size, however, was probably reflected in a number of other English cities. >From a peak in the twelfth century most towns lost churches as populations fluctuated and it was easier to enlarge a smaller number of churches than maintain many. By the eighteenth century, churchmen were amazed that some Winchester parishes could be measured in square feet and some contained no inhabitants.

If Pounds had ended his book at the Reformation, this reviewer would have an unalloyed view of his book. But by pressing on to the nineteenth century, Pounds covers

material with which he is less familiar, and here his mastery slips. Little of the most recent literature on the post-Reformation Church is absorbed into Pounds’s study, and he falls into the error of the Victorian Church historians, which one hopes should have been laid to rest. Thus Pounds mentions that the office of rural dean was only revived in modern times, whereas Arthur Burns and others have suggested otherwise. William Stukeley’s pluralism is compared to that of medieval clergy with no reference to the rising education and social status of the clergy achieved by eighteenth-century pluralism. And Church courts are consigned to oblivion a little too early.

There are some modern historians who will doubtless argue that Pounds’s book is a little old-fashioned, perhaps antiquarian, in tone. Indeed Eamon Duffy suggested this in his review in the British journal *The Literary Review*. But this is not a criticism that this reviewer would share. There is, of course, a balance to be made between a lengthy survey and the overcompression of material in order to encompass ten centuries, but Pounds achieves this fairly well. What may be lost in such a broad survey is compensated by the way in which Pounds places the Reformation into a wide historical perspective.

Pounds’s book is a masterly synthesis of historical research and constructs for the first time a thorough survey of the history of the parish. While the coverage of the post-Reformation Church is flawed, it will nevertheless repay those seeking to trace the trajectory of the principal features of the parish. This fine book will become a standard work on the history of the parish.

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