



Tim Cooper. *The Last Generation of English Catholic Clergy: Parish Priests in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield in the Early Sixteenth Century.* Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999. xvi + 236 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85115-752-8.

Reviewed by Thomas F. Mayer (Department of History, Augustana College, Illinois)

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The English Catholic Clergy in Local Context

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Given the present status of far too many of their modern successors among the ranks of the academic proletariat, it is perhaps not entirely an accident that the most innovative section of this book concerns what has been called the “clerical proletariat,” unbeneficed clergy. In keeping with a major trend of at least the last thirty years in the historiography of Tudor England, Tim Cooper focuses on a limited geographical area, although his sparse sources do not allow him to attempt local history’s most stimulating method, micro-history. Instead, Cooper declares allegiance to one of the principal modes of revisionist history, joining the increasingly numerous historians who in the last fifteen years have argued that the English Reformation was not welcomed by the vast majority of the populace, because the institutional church remained in fully functioning order.

Cooper begins by raising the question of typicality. Taking off from the work of Jack Scarisbrick, Christopher Haigh, Eamon Duffy and Peter Marshall, the author attempts to test their generalizations in a limited place and time, the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield under Geoffrey Blythe, bishop from 1503 to 1531, through to the death of the last of his ordinands in 1567. He both implies and asserts that Coventry and Lichfield is something like a representative diocese, but the lack of much similar work makes this an inherently doubtful claim. Cooper’s sources are, as always, incomplete.

They consist of Blythe’s register, some court materi-

als, clerical subsidy returns of 1531 and 1533, the *Valor ecclesiasticus* of 1535, a few wills and inventories (a total of fifty-eight of both), and the records of a couple of visitations of the cathedral and the diocese’s religious houses. While this is a much less than ideal array, Cooper exploited the resources of the Lichfield Joint Record Office to the maximum degree. And although the numbers of clergy in his sample are very large – about 4,500 ordained priests, less than a third of that number holding benefices in the diocese – the numbers he can use in many of his tests are much smaller. The very small group of testators proves especially troubling, leaving a final chapter, somewhat oddly called “Construct,” to offer a survey of the grand total of six of these as a snapshot of the history of the 4,500. That this leads to the polemical conclusion “[a]s their [”the people’s”] world was brought down around them, the evidence would suggest that it was not by their pastors that they were deceived” (p. 189) may perhaps be inevitable.

Despite the limitations of his material and the fact that his framework of interpretation is almost entirely borrowed, especially from Marshall, Cooper has a great deal interesting to say. His opening chapter pulls together the various stages through which a man had to pass before becoming a priest. Here he is helped by a distinctive source, four lists of examinees, published almost thirty years ago. The most useful part of the chapter, heavily dependent on this source, is the discussion of titles to benefices, that is, the guarantee of financial support that allowed a candidate to proceed from acolyte

to subdeacon. The vast majority of titles for the ninety-three candidates (again, a distressingly small number) came from religious houses, above all, small and poor ones, which Cooper thinks may therefore have been delegated by the bishop simply to examine candidates without thereby providing a real guarantee, a hypothesis strongly suggested by the fact that only four houses subsequently presented a benefice to any of those men for whom they had provided a title. It could hardly be otherwise when the supply of clergy so wildly outstripped available church livings. Cooper suggests that the reason for the imbalance was the doctrine of purgatory which demanded increasingly large numbers of masses for the dead.

Unsurprisingly, the roughly twenty-five percent of his sample who acquired graduate and post-graduate degrees had a distinct advantage in the hunt for livings. The competition was fierce, there being an average of only fifteen openings per year during Blythe's tenure, yielding a ratio of more than 10:1 between qualified men and available benefices. The average delay between ordination and presentation to first and often only benefice was seven-and-a-half years. Once again, the religious houses played the dominant role in distributing livings, although lack of evidence makes it almost impossible to say how they did this.

Next came the laity, holding about thirty-eight percent of the advowsons, or rights of presentation to a benefice, which, as has been well-documented elsewhere, the owners regarded as property. Given the scarcity of benefices and the difficulty of attracting a patron's attention, priests tended to hang on for dear life to any benefice they were lucky enough to gain. On average, incumbents kept their cures for fourteen-and-a-half years, this despite the fact that almost all those held the longest had limited value. Cooper argues that geographical mobility was small, both within and outside the diocese, but the case of John Bulcombe suggests the need for a more comprehensive study (and of pluralism), at least if he is the same as the John Bulcomb who acted as proctor for Reginald Pole at his installation to a canonry at Exeter in 1527. Rector of Church Eaton in 1527, he disappeared thence by 1532, leaving open the possibility that he had gained preferment elsewhere, as Cooper allows. If he is Pole's Bulcomb, he had indeed, and at a very high level. Sir William Weston, prior of the Hospitallers, had presented him to North Petherton, Somerset.

Since for the vast majority of the non-graduate clergy pickings were so scarce and those who did manage

to move often did not gain much financial advantage, Cooper sensibly hypothesizes that "other [unnamed] considerations" (p. 61) entered into the decision to move. Pluralism, the successful augmentation of one's income through the holding of two or more benefices, was not widespread, affecting only about twelve per-cent of the livings and five per-cent of the incumbents in the diocese. For the rest, most could no more than scrape by, especially if Cooper's suggestions about likely overvaluations in the *Valor ecclesiasticus* can be demonstrated elsewhere.

Things were worse for the unbeneficed, and so is studying them, since they appear much less commonly in the records. Even if Cooper cannot say many convincing things about this large group, merely calling attention to it is important, and it may be that his conclusion that despite all their disadvantages this underclass still did its job effectively will be substantiated by further research.

The final chapter, "Priests and People," is the least satisfying. Although Cooper's suggestion that their sacerdotal character effectively separated the clergy from the laity must be unobjectionable, most of the rest of his sketch of their relations is thinly supported. His discussion of the meaning of clerical libraries (the handful that can be documented) is especially dubious, although it is salutary to be reminded that many books were disposed of before wills were written or inventories taken. This observation, of course, also serves to leave the question that much more securely up in the air. Throughout this chapter Cooper depends heavily on his tiny sample of wills and inventories, albeit at least some of the time with due caution. Nevertheless, the fact that he simply raised most of the questions to which they can even allegedly offer answers is nervous-making. It is also here that caution is too often abandoned, and claims crop up about what the evidence would undoubtedly say had it more conveniently survived.

Thus readers may be left wondering how much can be known about Coventry and Lichfield and therefore perforce how typical the diocese might have been. The book could have been improved had the author had the time and the resources (as much too often one does not) to investigate more thoroughly other sources outside the LJRO. He seems not to have looked for his clergy in central repositories, despite the fact that his graduates might well have testated in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury rather than in the diocesan court. He did at least check Cardinal Wolsey's dispensations. As is very often the case, it is especially unfortunate that the author

could not work in Rome, where the papal registers he mentions in passing likely contain information. Nevertheless, although his book is ultimately a little disappointing, Cooper raises a number of interesting questions and sketches the lines by which they might be answered,

were it not for the state of the evidence.

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