



David L. Edwards. *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit.* London: Continuum, 2001. xiii + 368 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8264-5155-2.



Reviewed by Gayle Gaskill (Department of English, College of St. Catherine)

Published on H-Albion (July, 2002)

Donne for the Common Reader

Donne for the Common Reader

David L. Edwards offers his critical biography of the early modern amorous poet and Anglican preacher John Donne (1572-1631) “to readers who are not specialists” (p. ix) and who are consequently receptive to the author’s summary explications of Donne’s doctrinal points, grateful for his updated comparisons between the issues of Donne’s era and those of more recent times, and appreciative of his own stylistic wit. Moreover, he assumes that his non-specialists will tolerate the vagueness of his scholarly annotation, accept his imaginative leaps in dating individual poems simply as common sense, and, above all, welcome his conviction that Donne’s writings are best understood as the autobiographical utterances of a man ruled first by sexual desire, then by a fulfilling married love, and finally by sincere religious faith.

Now retired as Provost of Southwark Cathedral, Dean of King’s College Cambridge, Speaker’s Chaplain in the House of Commons, and Canon of Westminster Abbey, Edwards presents himself as one whose affinity with the great Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral derives from his own experience as a London preacher. The insouciant confi-

dence with which Edwards asserts his credentials recalls that of C. S. Lewis, who over sixty years ago in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* asserted the advantage of his own Christian belief to his role as a critic of Milton with the facetious question, “What would you not give to have a real, live Epicurean at your elbow while reading Lucretius?”[1] Prompted by the affable Edwards at his or her elbow, the “non-specialist” common reader may well assume the comfortable conviction that Donne’s writings are transparent autobiographical confessions. If Edwards’s portrait of Donne grows hazy under his repeated qualifying phrases, “it seems probable that.... it seems very unlikely that....” (pp. 216-7 ff.), it is all the more attractive because it displays Edwards’s certainty that with a little nudging, the common reader will recognize the writings of John Donne as those of a lively and sympathetic contemporary.

Edwards engages his readers in some major points of Donne’s Anglican theology by refuting influential critical biographies of Donne. John Carey’s *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (1981 and 1990) he finds “unfair” because frankly Carey “despises Donne’s religion so em-

phatically that he avoids the trouble involved in trying to understand it" (p. 158). With entertaining, personal combativeness, Edwards wrestles with Carey's assertion that Donne was an apostate Roman Catholic driven to the Anglican priesthood by desperate ambition. On the contrary, Edwards asserts, Donne merely rejected papal jurisdiction and the medieval corruption of his childhood's faith, not its essential, universal tenets of mercy and charity. Donne's mature Catholicism, he remarks, which Donne retained even after his ordination to the Anglican priesthood and which was not in conflict with it, supported the best thinking of Catholics and Puritans alike. Maintaining the drama of dispute, Edwards enthusiastically pairs Carey's arguments with brief excerpts from Donne's sermons, all to represent Donne's sensible place in the *Via Media*, the middle way of the Elizabethan Compromise that for Edwards still preserves the best of Catholic and Calvinist beliefs without veering to their extremes. On the other hand, Edwards briefly dismisses Dennis Flynn's documented conjecture in *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (1995) that Donne in his impressionable teens traveled in Catholic Europe in service to the Catholic Earl of Derby: the idea is simply "improbable" (p. 156). To the common reader, Edwards's confidence appears to offer the assurance of common sense.

Similarly, Edwards's use of updated analogies to explain Donne's topical and doctrinal references offers the common reader helpful contexts in which to understand them, albeit contexts that mirror Edwards's idiosyncratic outlook. For example, the widely quoted passage from Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* that asserts "No man is an island" supplies Ernest Hemingway the title for "his greatest novel" *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Edwards explains, because it offers "a vision of human unity in life and death, a pride in the Catholic Church of Christ, a love of learning in an international fellowship" (p. 129). Edwards thus uses the Hemingway allusion to bring Donne squarely into the twentieth century. Later he casually compares Donne's understanding of the Anglican and Calvinist doctrine of "election," that God has already chosen whom he will love before those persons are born: it resembles the discussion of predestination, he asserts, by "the greatest modern theologian in the Calvinist or 'Reformed' tradition, Karl Barth" (p. 183). As such, Donne's theology seems no more remote than the 1960s. By contextualizing the themes of Donne's bitter Satires and erotic Elegies as works of the 1590s, when Donne was in his twenties, Edwards portrays the poet as an impatient young man scorning the legal corruption of more

powerful old men while striving to indulge his own sexual urgings, "resulting in a motto such as 'make love not war'" (p. 201). The common reader who easily imbibes Edwards' analogies will feel he or she recognizes Donne's attitudes in his or her own.

Finally, Edwards convinces the common reader with his own display of verbal wit. He introduces Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, for example, with its author's readiness to spare no details in discussing his own suffering and illness: "Naturally Donne, who at the best of times was extremely interested in himself..., was both emotional and clever with an agitated intensity" (p. 127). Thus with witty understatement Edwards proposes that the self-absorption that makes Donne a fascinating, observant writer also makes him a tyrannical patient. Of the poem "Woman's Constancy," a complaint by one of Donne's personae that one day of faithful love presages a future of excuses for infidelity, Edwards comments parenthetically and with comic irony, "Here the light-hearted bachelor is not yet the father of the Donnes' first daughter, named Constance" (p. 206). It is satisfying to accept Edwards's commonplace that Donne will love women better when he grows up. Edwards even honors Donne's feats of wit with his own verbal imitation. The Holy Sonnet that begins "Batter my heart, three person'd God," for example, addresses the Trinity with the complaint, "for, you / As yet but knocke, breathe, shine and seek to mend," and Edwards offers this astonishing and highly visual paraphrase: "The God he has known has been too like a tinker asked to mend some old kitchen utensil" (p. 236). Though not quite a match for Donne's conceit, the paraphrase is nonetheless the tribute of a style-conscious preacher to an admired predecessor.

Instead of notes or a bibliography, Edwards supplies a detailed list of suggestions for further reading, and instead of carefully identifying Donne's individual works by titles and line numbers as he quotes from them, Edwards inserts an Index of Writings at the back of the book. He evidently directs his critical study not to a fastidious scholar who is ready to question the contexts of his quotations but to someone who prefers to focus on Donne as a man speaking now and directly to the reader, a "man who is clearly not a saint or a mystic, not even a very good man—who is one of us—but who preaches with an urgency more to be expected when a man is inviting a woman to bed" (p. 5). The urgency of Donne the man and the preacher, who despite the intervening centuries is still "one of us," is what Edwards chiefly conveys.

In summarizing the tradition of Donne biography

from the 1640 Life by Izaak Walton to Dennis Flynn's disputed biography of 1995, Edwards includes the work of Augustus Jessopp, the Victorian country clergyman who in half a century of studying Donne produced only one brief monograph, an elaborately annotated but unsuccessful edition of Donne's *Essays in Divinity*, and the article on Donne's life in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Edwards's respect for Jessopp in the tradition of the Anglican clergyman as a gentleman and a scholar offers a touching insight into his own approach to writ-

ing Donne's life. He writes from his double conviction first that the strong personality that produced Donne the preacher and the poet is a lively subject for the common reader of today and next that his own experience as a clergyman and sensitive student of Donne's writings makes it his pleasant duty to make Donne available to this audience.

Note

[1]. London, 1942, p. 65.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Gayle Gaskill. Review of Edwards, David L., *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6494>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.