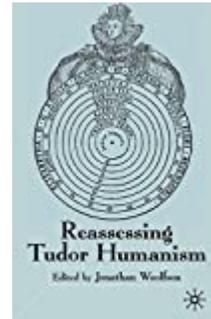




Jonathan Woolfson, ed. *Reassessing Tudor Humanism*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xii + 286 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-97144-4.



Reviewed by Steven Gunn (Merton College, Oxford)

Published on H-Albion (March, 2003)

Humanism looms so large in the cultural landscape of Tudor England that historians and literary scholars have found it hard to see in proper perspective. Some have depicted a movement so all-pervasive as to reshape church, state, and society in fundamental ways; others have defined humanism so narrowly that students can readily dismiss the humanists as a self-regarding clique of grammatical nit-pickers. The problem, of course, is not confined to England, and English debates have responded to competing definitions of the wider European movement. Jonathan Woolfson and his contributors seek, by a series of detailed studies, to contribute to a reassessment of Tudor humanism and its contexts.

One basic issue they address is the overall trajectory of English humanism. Traditional accounts move from a trickling reception of Italian learning in the fifteenth century, mostly under the patronage of Humphrey duke of Gloucester and John Tiptoft earl of Worcester, through the galaxy of embattled English friends of Erasmus to a generalized and increasingly diffuse Elizabethan humanist consensus. Here David Rundle plays down early noble patronage in favor of the spread of humanist texts and studies by a range of careerist clerics and monastic centers, while Cathy Curtis shows how even Richard Pace drew on his own experience of Italian teaching alongside his part in the Erasmian network in composing his *De*

fructu. At the Elizabethan end, Warren Boutcher stresses the interaction of classical studies with those of European vernaculars to show the unhelpfulness of narrow definitions of humanism in understanding late-Elizabethan culture.

Bound up with such themes is the relationship between humanism and medieval learning. It could never be the simple opposition that some humanist rhetoric suggested. In astronomy, as Robert Goulding shows, Oxford and Cambridge scholars acknowledged that their universities had been greater centers of discovery in the age of Roger Bacon than they were in the age of Elizabeth. In the composition of Latin literature, as Jim Binns shows, good twelfth-century work is hard to distinguish from good sixteenth-century work. And in the reception of classical texts, as Woolfson shows in the case of Aristotle's *Politics*, Tudor readers often read through the lens of Aquinas or other medieval commentators.

As Woolfson comments in his introduction, Tudor historians have often concentrated on humanism as a force for political or religious change rather than on the encounter with the ancient world as a source of scholarly pleasure in itself. These essays provide some evidence for the importance of the latter, especially when the careers of individuals are viewed in the round, as Binns does with the ever-inquisitive Roger Ascham. Indeed, they suggest

that humanist intoxication with “eloquence, the Greek language and civic philosophy” could choke other important fields of study, as Henry Savile was arguing at Oxford in 1570 (p. 231). Yet they do not neglect the political and religious impact of humanist ideas.

Two key political themes are the relationships between humanism and nobility and humanism and republicanism. Rundle argues that the quest for patronage led humanists—and hence historians—to overestimate the interest and importance of early aristocratic patrons. Boutcher argues that by the end of Elizabeth’s reign humanism was most strongly rooted in the educational and counseling practices of the aristocratic household and its colonization of educational institutions. Between their respective periods lie the years in which humanist ideas were successfully appropriated not just by the new nobility (as we have seen from Stephen Alford’s Cecil), but also by the younger generations of the old (Bill Sessions’s Surrey and Andy Boyle’s Arundel).[1] As for republicanism, Woolfson shows that Elizabethan commentators on Aristotle rather avoided than absorbed the anti-monarchical features of his thought.

The religious implications of humanism attract more, and more divergent, essays. Alan Stewart shows how, in his controversy with More, Tyndale was forced to dissociate himself from Erasmus, whose advocacy of vernacular scripture he admired. From this Stewart draws the wider conclusion that “in espousing Reformation politics, Englishmen forfeit[ed] the right to be Erasmian humanists” (p. 91). But in a looser sense English reformers were surely capable of feeling that they were fulfilling an Erasmian project even if it were one from which Erasmus, for various reasons, had dissociated himself. That was certainly the way, as John King shows, that John Foxe constructed Tyndale and others. It fitted with the combination of “godliness and civilitie” the early Elizabethans inherited from Edward’s court, where, as Anne Overell demonstrates, the dominance of an eclectic humanist Protestantism made natural the circulation of the tract *Il beneficio di Cristo*, masterwork of the Italian reformation. It also fitted with the prominence of Erasmus in informal study at the Elizabethan universities (as previously demonstrated by Margo Todd[2]) and with the fact that, as Binns comments, “Elizabethan Latin theologians are part of the humanist world” (p. 191)—Greek-reading, verse-writing—celebrated in humanist biographies. Broader and narrower definitions of Erasmianism can color our conclusions as much as broader and narrower definitions of humanism itself.

Such considerations lead us to perhaps the most fruitful area of research represented in this collection, the relationship between humanist ideas and the social institutions and practices in which they took root. Several essays focus on educational texts and methods: Curtis on Pace, Goulding on science, and Boutcher on households. Others look at the buying, giving and reading of books, from the gifts of individual volumes to Henry VIII set in their contexts by James Carley through Binns’s reflections on the success or failure of different printed works in achieving wide currency to Boutcher’s stress on the circulation and translation of works in the European vernaculars. Susan Foister uses the interaction of literary activity and the visual arts, witnessed by John Leland’s verse comments on paintings, to argue that early Tudor England was less impoverished in visual theory than is often imagined. Amongst these authors the alternative strand in recent intellectual history, the close analysis of language, comes into play only in Woolfson’s interesting examination of the various ways to translate Aristotle’s ambiguous term *politeia*. His example shows the two approaches are potentially complementary; any fuller history of Tudor humanism will surely have to adopt both.

Finally, several essays remind us that the English encounter with humanism was part of a wider encounter with Europe. The importance of Italian contacts, even in the full flood of Edwardian reformation, is stressed by Overell, as it is for earlier periods by Rundle and Curtis. The importance of France is touted in the introduction as a subject worthy of further investigation and Boutcher’s emphasis on the ubiquity of Montaigne’s works from the 1590s takes up the theme. The importance of the Netherlands is less stressed. In these essays as elsewhere in the study of humanism, England’s major trading partner and, before the 1560s and again from the 1580s, closest ally, tends to disappear behind the shadow of its most famous son Erasmus. Perhaps a fuller consideration of the range of intellectual contacts between the neighbors would help us set proper bounds to the troubled concept of English Erasmianism. That these essays, explicitly and implicitly, suggest such agendas for research is a tribute to the wide-ranging inquisitiveness with which the editor and authors have set out on the task of re-assessing Tudor humanism.

Notes:

[1]. Stephen Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity: William Cecil and the British Succession Crisis, 1558-1569* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); William A. Sessions, *Henry Howard, The poet Earl of Surrey: A*

Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); A.L. Boyle, "Hans Eworth's Portrait of the Earl of Arundel and The Politics of 1549-50," *English Historical Review* 117 (2002): pp. 25-47.

[2]. Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Copyright (c) 2003 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 other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

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

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

Citation: Steven Gunn. Review of Woolfson, Jonathan, ed., *Reassessing Tudor Humanism*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7342>

Copyright © 2003 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.