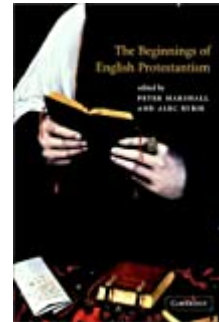


Peter Marshall, Alec Ryrie, eds. *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xii + 242 pp. \$30.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-00324-7; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80274-1.



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Early English Evangelicals Redivivi

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That English Protestantism had a birth would have shocked John Foxe, whose presence (not always openly) looms over this volume. Like the good ideologue he was and like most confessionally grounded historians since, Foxe traced a straight line of descent of the one, true church, always in being if usually persecuted until its final instantiation in Elizabethan England. Over the last decade or so this triumphalist interpretation has come under heavy pressure from revisionist historians who have stressed the vigor of traditional religion before and after the reformation in England. In this volume both traditional Protestant and revisionist, usually Catholic, historians come under fire. Instead of either a rigorously internalist history of Protestantism or an equally hard-nosed externalist version in which some extrinsic agency—a monarch, God, even a theologian or two—intruded a new religion into England, this volume offers a much more subtle dialectical interpretation stressing the “conversion,” the transformation through immanent forces, of England from traditional religion to something (or even somethings) not previously seen. In his essay,

Peter Marshall explicitly and very helpfully figures the transformation as conversion and offers a template of the textual ways in which conversion was conceived and how those helped to shape the experience. Richard Rex examines the pivotal role played by the friars whom he argues were most susceptible to “reform” precisely because they were most deeply immersed in the old religion and its most professional practitioners, and Patrick Collinson heroically struggles to pin down the moment at which his proto-Protestants decided they were in fact the only true Church. In the introduction Marshall and Alec Ryrie stress the fluidity of English religion in the recently somewhat neglected first half of the sixteenth century and the failure of present terminology adequately to grasp the situations. Their very important point about the varieties of both “Catholic” and “evangelical” (the “least-worst label” in Marshall’s infelicitous but exact formulation) religion during this period cannot be given too much praise and emphasis.

Not all the essays confront this process of unraveling as directly as these three, nor do all manage to achieve as high a degree of ideological neutrality (Rex’s attitudes

are, as usual, crystal clear, but they make no difference to his argument). Ryrie either counts Protestants, or he does not, in the course of offering some useful observations about the method by which one might pursue what, as he rightly points out, is the chimera of how many Englishmen and women might have gone over to the new religion. This is a classic case of a *question mal posée* since how many people became “evangelical” is strictly irrelevant in a hierarchical society like Tudor England. Ryrie concludes that “cadres” of advanced Protestants had succeeded by 1553 in convincing their fellow subjects that England was divided by religion, of whatever sort, an argument which might bear more than its fair share of ideological freight. Ethan Shagan’s piece on Clement Armstrong might also have more than a safe amount of axe to grind. He vociferously puts his point that magisterial and radical reformation are not exhaustive alternatives, a point which is nothing new to historians of the continental reformation, even if it can be found in those Shagan chooses to criticize. A close reading of Armstrong’s challenging prose uncovers elements which do consort somewhat oddly with one another including a radical redistribution of property, universal surveillance, and salvation through imperial kingship, but one may wonder whether these adequately support the suggestions that “radical” does not mean left-wing, that the royal supremacy was “a deeply contested process,” or most questionable of all, that Armstrong might have been representative of some larger group. If he was, some of his allegedly most distinctive ideas, the necessity of surveillance, for example, come straight out of *Utopia*.

Printing comes in for the now-expected amount of attention with two essays devoted to it. They overlap to some degree, but one comes much closer to the volume’s general approach than the other. Andrew Pettegree summarizes his work on printing as an industrial technology demonstrating the backwardness of the English industry. It depended heavily on the continent for technology and expertise, and had to import virtually all Latin books. A note of triumphalism creeps into the description of the astounding blossoming of the industry under Edward VI when the government used the press as a major part of its intentional program of fostering reasonably radical Protestantism. Naturally, these gains were mostly lost under Mary, even if Pettegree allows that the Marianists were not as behind-hand on this score as once was thought. The other piece on printing focuses specifically on John Day before he became the printer of Foxe’s *Acts and monuments*. John King traces his career in great detail including his patrons, begin-

ning with speculation about support by Katherine Parr whose “pietism” Day’s early work supposedly reflected on the pivotal role played by Sir William Cecil. In passing, King speculates that John Wayland’s press served as a front for Day during the reign of Mary, but this seems unlikely given some of the titles Wayland published, especially John Elder’s exultant report of the reconciliation of England (*A letter sent into Scotland*, 1555) and *An uniforme and catholyke primer* (also 1555 and reprinted frequently). King’s work is unabashedly celebratory in a rather antique way.

The two best essays are Susan Wabuda on the role of women in early Protestantism and Thomas Freeman on the Freewillers. Both are heavily, if subtly, revisionist. Wabuda almost slips her conclusion past the reader, “[i]f this was a revolt [against patriarchy], it was of the most stealthy, humble and self-limiting kind” (p. 128). As she shows, “the Pauline model of silent womanhood” (p. 126) was almost universally embraced, even as the problem of an unbelieving spouse put a certain amount of pressure on it. Usually, however, this amounted to very little since even the most radical reinterpretation still left a wife defenseless against a godly but merely cruel husband. There are a few exceptions, especially John Hooper whom Wabuda singles out as one of the heroes of her story for his treatment of a wife’s potential to educate her husband and enter into spiritual companionship with him. Freeman’s piece is perhaps the most subversive of the lot arguing a point not unlike Shagan’s, but much more carefully and less stridently. Freeman traces the history of what might be called the first English Protestant heresy from its origins in 1550 (or possibly before) to its nearly complete eradication by 1558. The Freewillers confronted the predestinarian Protestant majority from a vastly inferior position, while the majority used its large advantages (from an educated leadership to economic and social power) to suppress the challenge the Freewillers posed. The majority even more than trumped the Freewillers with its martyrs, of whom the poor Freewillers could not conjure up a single one. Freeman suggests that this situation may have arisen because the Marian authorities deliberately left the Freewillers largely alone in hopes of fostering a Protestant schism. Nevertheless, the intolerance and resources of the Protestant majority combined with the Marian repression led to the virtual extinction of the Freewillers by Elizabeth’s accession. Had they not disappeared, the prospects for a schism would have been greatly increased and the “Elizabethan settlement” (which still, almost incredibly, appears in several of the pieces in this volume) become even

more a “contested process.”

All in all, this is a challenging collection which manages to maintain almost uniform high quality. It is nonetheless a little disquieting. For one thing, both editors have previously studied traditional religion. While traditional religion may have had a little more play than it strictly deserved in the last little while, it has still only begun to receive anything like the attention it demands relative to its “evangelical” and Protestant challengers. It would be a shame were the balance of scholarly attention to swing back toward the victors. For another, despite one of the strengths of this collection, which is its attention to historical phenomena as at least in part textual, there is neither much discussion of historiography

nor of analytical categories, and perhaps most surprisingly little on reform or reformation. This is not peculiar to this volume; very little study has been devoted to what sixteenth-century men and women meant by either term, but were they put into play they would demand an even longer time frame than this volume embraces and if the same thing were done with conversion, it would immediately suggest a more global framework for the study of a local phenomenon which, as the editors admit, has received wildly disproportionate attention. This would further build on the salutary redress of the Anglophilic bias which has made England one of the central nodes of the sixteenth century when in fact it was much more nearly a backwater.

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