

Peter Nockles and Vivienne Westbrooke, eds., *Reinventing the Reformation in the Nineteenth Century: a Cultural History*, Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, (2014), pp. 382, ISSN 2054-9318, ISBN: 9-772054-931005

This thematic edition of the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library tackles a subject close to the spirit of that great Victorian institution: the variety of ways in which the Reformation was revisited, debated, celebrated and denigrated in the nineteenth century. In a century that believed itself to be profoundly Christian and Protestant, no subject could have been of greater interest, or more contentious. It is amply demonstrated in this volume of sixteen substantial scholarly essays, plus an introduction and two afterwords, that there were few aspects of British religious, political and cultural life immune from reconsideration of the theological issues, historical events and personalities of the sixteenth century. An ambitious and wide-ranging collection by specialists in Irish, Scottish and Welsh history, as well as the fields of political history and musicology, this collection offers a set of complementary, rather than contradictory essays, and authors frequently make apt and useful cross-references to each others' contributions. A strong editorial hand appears to have encouraged authors to attend to a key person and a contemporary text. In some cases the text is visual, such the illustrations used in the 1870s edition of Foxe (Elizabeth Evenden), the paintings of Cranmer in the Palace of Westminster (Gareth Atkins), and the Tyndale monuments in Gloucestershire and Central London (Andrew Atherstone), or musical as in Suzanne Cole's essay on Victorian Church music. The focus on detail and text prevents this from becoming a collection of broadly repetitive essays, and brings to it a robust and scholarly approach, which, as Jeremy Morris suggests in his Afterword, opens up fresh avenues for further research.

One of the factors making the nineteenth century reappropriation of the Reformation so significant is that, as Richard Rex indicates in his Introduction, the place of Catholicism in British society was undergoing profound shifts: '...the removal of legal prohibitions and penalties really did make the option that little bit more acceptable, that little bit more thinkable. The 'perversion' of Catholicism became to some extent normalized' (p. 8). Thus attention became drawn to what the Reformation really meant in British politics, religion and society, and 'the Reformation myth' was frequently rewritten in the conflict between denominations, but also intra-denominationally. The central conflict, which dominated nineteenth, and indeed much of twentieth century, religion was that initiated by the Oxford Movement of the 1830s and 1840s. The impact of Tractarianism weaves throughout these essays, and the hostility to the Reformation that

came to be associated with Newman and the other Oxford men, provoked political and social as well as ecclesiastical responses.

The Victorians were obsessed with anniversaries and memorials that celebrated their heroic vision of Britain, its imperial leadership and its Protestant identity. Every era chooses its own heroes. The Victorian emphasis on the Bible, shared by the Evangelical wing of the Church of England, and the Nonconformist denominations in all parts of Britain, meant that John Wycliffe and William Tyndale were widely celebrated. The King James Bible became a cultural icon in Victorian religious and intellectual life, reissued and re-edited more than at any time in its history. Vivienne Westbrooke argues, however, that the real secret of the King James Bible was ‘the enduring stability of its text’, and that Victorian Biblical scholars made it into ‘the jewel in the crown and the open secret of England’s greatness’ (p. 197). Less convincing as a hero was Thomas Cranmer, about whom the Victorians felt increasingly uneasy. Not only was his part in the Reformation itself called into question, but, particularly in Macauley’s hands, Cranmer’s personal failings did not commend him. He was ‘a supple, timid, interested courtier, in times of frequent and violent change’ (Gareth Atkins, quoting Macauley, p. 269).

Inevitably, certain key texts, apart from the King James Bible, dominate the discussions. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* looms large, and it is clear that his characterisation of Mary I held sway in the nineteenth century, feeding into and being reinforced by, rising anti-Catholicism. Foxe remained, Judith Richards suggests, ‘a primary – perhaps the sole – source throughout the century’ (p. 290) for the almost universally hostile view of Mary’s reign. Foxe was central to the familiar theme of Protestant justice and liberty versus Catholic brutality and oppression, and this resonated with the unease felt among the Protestant majority at the growth of Catholic influence in Britain, and the attraction of Rome for Tractarian-inspired Anglicans.

In a society in which the new strength and visibility of Catholicism was provoking widespread reassessment of what it meant for Britain to describe itself as Protestant, and, therefore, what the Reformation really meant, it is ironic that one of the most influential texts came from the pen of a Catholic priest. In recent years, the historical scholarship of John Lingard has been rescued from obscurity, and his significance and influence rediscovered. He is the unseen presence behind this volume, frequently alluded to by authors on a variety of themes, particularly for his influence on the more popular and robust Protestant history published by William Cobbett in 1829. Although Eamon Duffy warns against overstating the claims for Lingard’s scholarly neutrality (‘he wrote to an agenda, and his sober history was consciously designed as Catholic apologetic’, p. 370), his influence was clearly substantial.

Whilst this volume offers a rich store of ideas, personalities and writings from the nineteenth century's struggle to understand the foundations of its Protestant Christian identity, the one thing missing is a distinct and separate attempt to set out a Catholic perspective. Lingard's historical writing underpins much of what is offered here, Newman and the Tractarians loom large, but there is sadly no opportunity taken to disinter an English Catholic viewpoint from the period. This is one of the tantalizing prospects for further research opened up by this rich volume

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