

the different types of images and explores many of them from a fresh perspective, such as the controversial calendar of martyr-saints and the elaborate fold-out woodcut titled the “table of X persecutions.” Moving from the intentions of the compiler and publisher, King looks at the early modern readers and viewers of these woodcuts, who sometimes filled in the empty banderoles with words or colored in the illustrations; such details provide fascinating evidence for how these images affected their audience.

The final chapter focuses more specifically on readers of Foxe’s book and what we can learn from their reactions, which were anything but monolithic. King once again draws a sharp line between the *litterati* and *illiterati*—a distinction that is perhaps overemphasized throughout his work. Nonetheless, King’s command of the anecdotal material in this section, as throughout the book, inspires a complex picture of the history of early modern reading. For example, we learn about readers of Foxe’s book from Archbishop Laud to John Bunyan, about the provenance of various copies, about how some copies were worn out from too much reading, about the explorers who carried the *Book of Martyrs* to the New World, and about the tendency of subsequent generations to add their own events (such as the Gunpowder Plot) to Foxe’s master narrative.

Like the *Book of Martyrs* itself, King’s book provides much in the way of paratext that is an aid to the readers, such as numerous images (51), organized subheadings, clear summaries at the end of each chapter, and a glossary of printing terms of the hand-press era. By approaching this subject from the perspective of Darnton’s “communications circuit,” King supports the assertion that “books result from the collective impact of human activity on the material elements that went into production” (320). Thus, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and Early Modern Print Culture* is indeed an impressive book history that substantially improves our understanding of this work in particular, as well as of early modern printing in general.

**Gretchen E. Minton**  
Montana State University

doi: 10.1017/S0009640708000218

*Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England.*

By **Tim Thornton**. Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell, 2006. + 269 pp.  
\$85.00 cloth.

This book studies non-biblical prophetic traditions in England from the sixteenth century to the present day. The author focuses on Mother Shipton,

Merlin, and Nixon the Cheshire prophet. The author teaches at the University of Huddersfield, where he is head of the department of History, English, Languages, and Media. By prophecy he means a range of phenomena in the early national period—not just a matter of forecasting the future. In particular, Thornton zeroes in on ancient prophecy, that is, prophecy allegedly spoken or written in the past.

How were these prophetic traditions perpetuated over several centuries? What was their influence? How did society respond to them? Who controlled these prophecies—the elite or the common people? In this volume, the author endeavors to answer these questions. And in doing so, he notes three problems.

The first problem centers on the powerful influence on politics of the people outside the rural and urban elite. Thornton notes that the interpretations of most historians tended to downplay the role of the non-elites. Conversely, other historians accord the rank and file of the people with considerable political influence as it relates to the ancient prophecies. Thornton argues for a mediating position. Written prophecy compelled the elite's attention but was not exclusively under their control. The immense popularity of the Shipton, Merlin, and Nixon prophecies indicates that they did not simply trickle down to the lower ranks of society but actually originated with them and were under their control.

The second problem encountered by a study of ancient prophecy is the role and importance of regional and local political cultures. Most studies assume the unity and national coherence of prophetic traditions. This position, of course, assumes an elite dominance of prophecy. The author argues for the importance of regional, as opposed to national, culture in respect to ancient prophecy. In doing so, he demonstrates considerable variety in the prophetic tradition.

The third issue encountered by a study of ancient prophecy entails the power of mystical, supernatural, and non-rational powers in British political and social life throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Here the author interacts with the traditional Keith Thomas theory—namely, that magic and the supernatural lost much of their practical usefulness in the face of modernization and secularization. He questions whether the power of prophecy was that strong in the medieval period or that weak in the modern era. Thus its decline is often exaggerated.

Thornton approaches his study of prophecy in early modern England with two assumptions. One, he assumes that there never were three individual prophets who uttered a set of prophecies attributed to them. There was not a Nixon active in Delamere Forest who set forth a series of prophecies, nor an old woman named Ursula Shipton in York or Knaresborough with incredible ability to predict the future; and if there was a Merlin, he was mired in medieval myth. Two, the author assumes that the prophetic tradition did not foretell the future but actually post-dated the events described.

*Prophecy, Politics and the People* contains four chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. Chapter 2, "Ancient Prophecy in the Sixteenth Century," demonstrates that ancient prophecy was significant in the sixteenth century among both the elite and the common people. Moreover, it had considerable political and social influence with the potential for affecting even the monarchy. Nearly everyone, from the poorest of the poor, gave some credence to the prophetic traditions.

Chapter 3, "Prophetic Creation and the Audience in Civil War England," analyzes the challenges facing ancient prophecy during the seventeenth century, especially as they related to Merlin and the rise of the Mother Shipton tradition. The historical foundation of the Arthurian and Merlin traditions was called into question. But there was no rapid disappearance of the Arthurian themes during the seventeenth century. While this study is not about biblical prophecy, its greatest influence came in the apocalyptic context of the Civil War years, and this reinforced ancient prophecy. The major development during this time frame was the rise of the Mother Shipton tradition. It developed from regional considerations to national prominence. The main themes of this tradition concerned kings and noblemen, civic responsibility and the Scottish threat.

The next chapter, "Prophecy and the Revolution Settlement," demonstrates that despite skepticism toward ancient prophecy, the prophetic tradition did not die out. Biblical prophecy encountered challenges, astrology declined, the Arthurian tradition experienced disbelief, and the Shipton tradition deteriorated. Still, these years witnessed the rapid development of the Nixon tradition and its rise from regionalism to national prominence. Chapter 5, "The Re-rooting and Survival of Ancient Prophecy," examines why ancient prophecy was able to survive in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Merlin continued to decline, and the Nixon tradition experienced some irrelevance. But Mother Shipton staged a comeback because her prognostications connected with contemporary events.

*Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England* can be viewed from several perspectives. On one hand, it represents solid scholarship and interacts with various opinions regarding ancient prophecy. On the other hand, this volume is more suited for the narrow specialist. It deals with the various shifts and interpretations of ancient prophecy. One learns about how prophecy was transmitted and its relevance, but one learns little about the prophecies themselves. If this is what readers desire, they will be disappointed. As a result, the title of the book is a bit misleading.

**Richard Kyle**  
Tabor College