

Review Articles

A fresh introduction to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer

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Susan Wabuda, *Thomas Cranmer*, Routledge Historical Biographies, London and New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. xxvi + 261, £90.00 / £24.99 ISBN: 978-0-415-50078-4

Susan Wabuda is to be commended for this fresh study of the life and thought of Thomas Cranmer. The purpose of the book is twofold: to provide a concise and accessible biography of Cranmer and to make additional contributions to our knowledge of the great reformer. It succeeds on both counts.

Wabuda's *Thomas Cranmer* is an eminently helpful introduction to the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury for scholars and non-specialists alike. The inclusion of genealogical tables for the Cranmer family and the ruling houses of Europe is useful, as is the chronological list of events surrounding the life of the Archbishop. Moreover, the inclusion of suggested readings is bundled in for further stimulation and is indicative of Wabuda's experience as teacher and scholar. Indeed, her ability to cover the complexities of Cranmer's career with scholarly accuracy and astonishing brevity is one of the high points of the book.

Following the introduction, the second chapter, 'Early life, 1489-1526', is a fine overview of Cranmer's upbringing and education. The inclusion of Leland's reflections upon Aslockton is a nice touch, and the new discoveries about Cranmer's ordination and subsequent narration of his Cambridge years are exceptional. The third chapter, 'The king's "great matter", 1527-1533', covers the main contours of this phase with erudition and includes insightful reflections on Cranmer's relationship with Nuremberg—a place of interest that Wabuda spotlights throughout the whole book. The fourth chapter, 'The new Archbishop, 1533-1535', surveys this period well, and elucidates some unusual contours of this time, such as the opposition to Cranmer in the parish of Croydon and some details concerning

the relationship between Thomas and Edmund Cranmer. The fifth chapter, 'Thomas Cromwell ascendant, 1535-1537', includes fascinating reflections on Cranmer's occasional opposition to Cromwell, and, most interestingly, Stokesley's opposition to Cranmer. The sixth chapter, 'Invincible Henry, 1538-1540', provides a terse summary of events with an emphasis on sermons preached during these years. The seventh chapter, 'The Privy Council, 1540-1547', plunges into the heady theological debates during these tumultuous years and makes some shrewd theological comments, for example, the fact that the martyrs for the 'spiritual presence' of the Lord's Supper both encouraged this view among fellow evangelicals and also made Lutheran doctrine less appealing. Importantly, Wabuda provides a nuanced account of these years which resists the narrative of total conservative reaction, and provides succinct accounts of the refounding of Canterbury Cathedral, the making of the King's Book, and the Prebendaries' Plot. The eighth chapter, 'Edward VI and the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1547-1552', traverses the myriad evangelical advances during this period and pays particular attention to the *Book of Homilies*. The ninth chapter, 'Oxford, 1553-1556', replays carefully the process of Cranmer's decline and fall, and draws various important connections back to the early stages of Cranmer's life, including the use of his original consecration oath against him, and the case of the turncoat Richard Thornden. The final chapter, 'Thomas Cranmer's legacy for the English Church', provides a short and succinct historiographical denouement which rounds off the book well. Most chapters are given just less than 30 pages each which preserve a buoyant narrative and bring forth excellent insights.

In addition to the fresh reflections on well traversed material, one of the highlights of the book is the regular penetration of preaching material. The attention to sermons—one of Wabuda's strong suits—provides an important lens through which to interpret Cranmer's life and times. This enables Wabuda to make astute remarks concerning Henry VIII's determination to have the royal supremacy preached weekly, the bishop of London John Stokesley's opposition to Cromwell, and so forth. One comment which piqued my interest was that Cranmer was a 'frequent and impressive preacher' (p. 71). Wabuda explains that this has been missed by many commentators because Cranmer's sermons have not survived. The *Book of Homilies* is well covered, although perhaps at the expense of a discussion of both the 1549 and 1552 editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This short chapter felt somewhat imbalanced as a result and perhaps an opportunity was missed here to cover other aspects of the Edwardian revolution. On the whole, however, the exploration of preaching is an immensely helpful window into the entirety of Cranmer's career.

The discovery of Cranmer's ordination records is one of the most outstanding features of Wabuda's book. Indeed, this is an entirely new contribution to our scholarly knowledge of Cranmer. Through Wabuda's careful reading of Wolsey's register at the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research at the University of York, we now know that Cranmer was ordained subdeacon on 24 March 1514/15, deacon on 7 April 1515, and priest on 2 June 1515. Furthermore, that his guarantee of support came from the Benedictine monastery of St John in Colchester. These invaluable details greatly inform our knowledge of Cranmer's early activities while in Cambridge.

Wabuda puts these new ordination details to work upon the received dating of Cranmer's marriage. The traditional narrative of Cranmer's time in Cambridge—supplied by his servant and early biographer, Ralph Morice—suggests that Cranmer took an unusual eight years to complete his BA (1511). He subsequently graduated MA in the academic year 1514/1515. He then married and, consequently, lost his fellowship at Jesus College. Moving then to teach at Buckingham College—now Magdalene College—he remained here until his wife died in childbirth, after which he returned to his fellowship at Jesus College. Wabuda argues persuasively that since Cranmer was ordained priest in 1515 he could not have married *after* receiving his MA because he was ordained in that same year. She argues that the received chronology, cited by successive writers from Morice onward, is incorrect and that it is more likely that Cranmer married when a young student and a layman during his undergraduate studies. This would explain the unusually long time it took Cranmer to complete his first degree. There may, perhaps, be other ways to reconcile Cranmer's newly discovered ordination records with the received account of his marriage; Wabuda's important discoveries now open up new possibilities for scholars for such future research.

I have a few minor historical quibbles. In Wabuda's discussion of Queen Mary's convocation in mid-October 1553, the catechism in question is described as Cranmer's 1548 catechism (p. 228). However, this was John Ponet's 1553 catechism, as evidenced by the dispute between Hugh Weston and John Philpot over whether the previous convocation had properly agreed to its publication. Again, while recent work on Gardiner has attempted to cut through aspects of the 'Wily Winchester' myth, some further coverage of Gardiner might have sharpened our picture of Cranmer's rival. For example, Wabuda states that Gardiner 'opposed to the decisions that had been made since the old king's death ... began to prepare for his own return to the papacy' (p. 205). However, it is probable that these preparations came earlier—before the death of Henry VIII. The Papal Nuncio at the French Court reported in 1536—the year after Gardiner's *De Vera Obedientia*—that Gardiner desired to see Henry return to true religion, and his

exposition of true obedience was written for fear of martyrdom.¹ Wabuda notes that the Bishop of Winchester's examination sermon of 1548 was controversial because he evaded many of the subjects which Somerset specifically wanted him to preach on (p. 194). However, it was equally controversial because Gardiner included the one subject which he had been specifically instructed to avoid: that of the Lord's Supper.

There is some slight theological imprecision within the book. For example: on soteriology, Cranmer did not believe that salvation could be 'achieved'—but be 'received'—by faith alone (p. 2), and justification is not 'another word for the salvation of the soul' (p. 6). On the King's Book: although the 'prelates rejected Martin Luther's thinking of justification by faith alone,' the book's teaching on faith was ambiguous enough for Cranmer to maintain his solifidianism—a point which Wabuda helpfully outlines later in the book (pp. 165-66, 189). However, while the King's Book denounced the solifidian slogan of 'justification by faith alone', a careful reading of the book demonstrates that the core doctrine behind solifidianism could, nevertheless, be maintained. Wabuda could, perhaps, have softened her statement that the meaning of faith within the King's Book reflected the rejection of Lutheran doctrine (p. 166). The Lutheran slogan was rejected, but much of the Lutheran doctrine could still be retained.

On the 1548 parliamentary debate on the eucharist, it is not entirely accurate to frame the debate only in terms of the contrast between 'spiritual' vs. 'local' presence (p. 196). It is true that Cranmer publicly embraced this distinction, but, after all, the most striking feature of the 1548 parliamentary debate was the rejection of the *manducatio impiorum*. Thus the evangelical establishment ruled out any construal of the eucharistic presence whereby churchgoers received the bodily presence of Christ irrespective of a lively faith. This is important, and could, perhaps, have been teased out, because it demonstrates that by 1548, the dominant eucharistic position among the ecclesiastical leadership was incompatible, not simply with Catholicism, but with what would go on to be known as Lutheranism.

Lastly, the definition and use of the term 'evangelicalism' is not entirely persuasive (p. 5). Wabuda rightly distances the sixteenth century use of the term from modern definitions. However, by stretching out the meaning of the term to include all those who employed the theological method of Erasmus and Lefèvre, the term ends up being somewhat unstable. In fairness to Wabuda, her definition of 'evangelicalism' comes with the caveat that with Luther's emergence it was possible to perceive evangelicalism and the papacy at odds with one another (p. 30). But this

¹ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Volume 10: no.570, Bishop Faenza to Mons. Ambrogio on 27 March 1536.

further complicates the matter, for we might now have pre-Luther evangelicalism and post-Luther evangelicalism. It seems to this reviewer, that being an evangelical in early sixteenth century England was less defined by theological *method*, but more defined by theological *belief* (granting the interrelationship between the two). That the labels 'evangelical' and 'Gospeller' were used almost interchangeably supports this point.

Notwithstanding these minor cavils, Susan Wabuda's *Thomas Cranmer* is to be applauded for its admirable new research, helpful guides, and careful coverage of the life and theology of Cranmer. The helpful arrangement of endnotes for each chapter, concise suggestions for further reading, and efficient index make this a most accessible book for both scholars and the more general reader. It is an excellent introduction to the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury and ought to be wisely used and widely welcomed.