

*The professor and the parson. A story of desire, deceit and defrocking.* By Adam Sisman. Pp. viii + 232 incl. 27 ills. London: Profile Books: 2019. £12.99. 978 1 78816 211 1  
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This is a necessary review to write, in order to record with ruefulness the minor part that our beloved *JOURNAL* and its sometime editors played in the epically picaresque life and never-quite-final downfall of the conman, multiple bigamist and aspiring historian, the *quondam*-Revd Robert Parkins *alias* Peters. Sisman came across ‘Peters’ while researching his fine biography of Hugh Trevor-Roper and, aided by dossiers of documents collected by both Trevor-Roper and the church historian Gavin White (plus a sheaf of gleeful cuttings from the popular press over decades), he has meticulously widened our knowledge of Peters’s misdeeds over an eighty-seven-year lifespan. Trevor-Roper found the saga darkly amusing, and might have written it up himself had he not turned to the equally extravagant liar Sir Edmund Backhouse; following which he lost his taste for this sort of thing, thanks to his own disastrous credulity in the farcical ‘Hitler Diaries’ affair of 1983. So we owe gratitude to Sisman for taking up the cudgels and lining up the fraudulent would-be scholar alongside Backhouse, John Payne Collier and Robert Ware of Dublin. Parkins, born in 1918, was ordained in wartime Yorkshire in 1941–2, and unfrocked for bigamy in 1955, after spells in prison. Having so far failed to achieve any academic degree, he spent the rest of his career seeking or inventing the academic honours and honourable office that his lack of qualifications or suitability denied him; the one genuine component was a Manchester MA in 1963. His talent, energy and retentive memory would have sustained a conventional academic career, but at some level he may have realised that the result would never have been particularly distinguished, and a consistent pattern of his life became his heroic efforts to fool the undoubtedly great and good into accepting him at his own inflated estimation. Trevor-Roper was not thus duped for long, and neither was my old supervisor Geoffrey Elton. Repeatedly there is a queasy closeness in this book to people and places familiar to present readers among the Oxbridge dons whom he aspired to join or surpass; the lesson to be drawn is that the likes of us should have read more gutter journalism, since the popular press were a good deal better than we unworldly scholars at rumbling the ‘Romeo of the Church’ (*Daily Mirror*, 24 August 1955). Our *JOURNAL* commissioned no less a figure than A. G. Dickens to review his dutifully dull if apparently useful monograph on Elizabethan ecclesiastical administration in St Albans (this *JOURNAL* xv [1964], 258), having already published Peters’s article on the same subject (this *JOURNAL* xiii [1962], 61–75). As late as 2002, three years before Peters’s death, Sisman notes us as employing him to review Ashley Null’s *Thomas Cranmer’s doctrine of repentance* (this *JOURNAL* liii [2002], 603–4). In view of this commission (and, actually, it is not an incompetent review), I stand up to take my place in what I reckon to have been the second generation of three among historians to have been duped by Peters. Like our founder-editor Clifford Dugmore, plus Dickens (and indeed Geoffrey Elton), I had noted the St Albans monograph as dutiful but sound, and I still think well of the workmanlike article ‘Who compiled the sixteenth-century patristic handbook *Unio dissidentium?*’, in G. J. Cuming (ed.), *Studies in Church History* ii (1965), 237–50. What none of us realised was the likelihood that these impeccably

pedantic works were authored by one of Peters's wives, who soon afterwards escaped his clutches to lead a genuinely worthy academic career in New Zealand. In the 1990s I would meet Peters at academic conferences on the Reformation, and was nearly inveigled into becoming external examiner for his final *folie de grandeur*, a private Anglican seminary innocuously titled Monkfield College. I remember his technique of manipulation: a combination of breezy charm, an abrupt manner not unfamiliar among clergy (and he was always in clericals), plus an astutely-judged orchestration of sympathy for his physical disability. At least I did not get so badly engulfed in Peters's parallel universe as Professor Gordon Rupp at Manchester or a succession of Anglican bishops across the worldwide Communion; and I feel solidarity with the next or third generation of good young scholars, who had their trust badly abused in the old monster's latter days as they were beginning their careers. Questions remain unsolved: how did Peters end up finding a resting-place in a remote Norfolk churchyard? Where did he get enough money to sustain his constant shifts from continent to continent (admittedly, some of his journeys were courtesy of deportation authorities), let alone the tottery infrastructure of the various fantasy institutions over which he presided? Sisman's cover-blurb describes this anti-biography as 'a wholly delightful story of chicanery and fantasy'. That is one mood in which to read it; and the very useful appended chronology of the real story does make hilarious reading at one bite. Yet ultimately it is depressing. So many well-meaning people, doing their best to honour our profession's standards of truth and honest dealing, or to show decent sympathy to tales of woe, had their trust abused and their time wasted, simply in order to gratify the ego of a squalid and selfish misogynist.

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