Br. Cathol. Hist. (2018), *vol.* 34(1), *pp.* 166–172
doi:10.1017/bch.2018.8

Eamon Duffy and the challenges of doing micro- and macro-histories of post-Reformation England

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Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 441 pp., £30.00, ISBN: 978-1-4729-3436-9.

Despite their heavy debt to John Bossy, including the one expressed in this book by Duffy himself in dedicating this volume to his memory, contemporary historians of early modern English Catholicism owe more to Eamon Duffy than to any other scholar. His fine-grained study, *The Stripping of the Altars*: *Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (1992), gave them the evidence and arguments necessary to expose the inadequacies of the dominant Protestant/Whig version of English religious and political history as they constructed a counter-narrative of English post-Reformation history. Others, such as Christopher Haigh, whose earlier study, *The English Reformation Revised* (1987), called into question the top-down model of the English 'Reformation' (or, in Haigh's formulation, 'reformations'), but Duffy's relentless assault on the traditional grand narrative of English history has had major and lasting effects. His other books and articles, including his intellectually-oppositional study of the reign of Mary I (*Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (2009), his account of some traditional English devotional practices (*Marking the Hours: English People & their Prayers 1240-1570* (2006), and his study of an early modern English town's resistance to officially-mandated religious change (*The Voices of Morebath: Reformation & Rebellion in an English Village* [2001]), all try to balance the macro-historical and the micro-historical, the top-down and bottom-up, views of the cultural crises of the English post-Reformation period. Now, in his retirement, he has gathered, revised, and expanded ten of his published essays on English Catholicism and Protestantism, incorporated some of his earlier writing in two more essays, included one new piece being published simultaneously in another

collection, and added a one completely new essay on 'The Mind of Gregory Martin'. While concentrating on the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, in taking a long view of English Catholic history and historiography, Duffy moves forward to examine some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers and historians—though, outside his main period of historical interest (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), the evidentiary infrastructure is weaker. The book's title associates it with the efforts of historians of early modern Catholicism to wrest the term 'reformation' out of its usual Protestant context in order to highlight various late-medieval and early modern reform efforts in the Catholic Church, most notably those that followed the Council of Trent (1545-63).

The collection is divided into three sections: 'Thomas More and Heresy' (three essays), 'Counter-Reformation England' (seven essays), and 'The Godly and the Conversion of England' (four essays). In the first of these, 'Thomas More and Heresy', Duffy is eager to attack both the scholarly and popular portrayal of More as a psycho-sexually disturbed religious persecutor and to examine closely some of More's polemical works that have not, according to him, been read carefully enough—particularly the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*. In the context of religious and political crisis, Duffy defends More's shift in mid-career from Erasmian humanism to the relentlessly polemical hostility to Protestant reformers, primarily William Tyndale, whose mistranslation of the New Testament More perceived as theologically erroneous and socially destructive. More's opposition to Luther's denigration of good works was based, according to Duffy, on the belief that it was 'an attack on the very roots of rational virtue' (33). Duffy argues that More's 'defence of the cult of the saints, and, in general, of the practices and underlying assumptions of late medieval popular Catholicism' (55) was grounded on his traditional notions of a Christian community he felt was being threatened, a topic Duffy explored at length in *The Stripping of the Altars.* In discussing the rhetorical ferocity of the *Confutation*, a book Duffy defines as a 'compendium' or 'manual of controversies' (91-92), he excuses its stylistic extremity as endemic to its polemical genre, at the same time identifying it as a model used in later religious controversy.

In part two, 'Counter-Reformation England', there is a more varied selection of pieces: chapters four, five, and six examine 'three key figures in the emergence and radicalisation of the post-Reformation Catholic community in confrontation with Protestantism' (110)—Cardinal Reginald Pole, William Allen, and Gregory Martin. Chapters seven and eight deal with devotional matters: the former highlights the importance of the *Manual of Devout Prayer* and the latter 'recusant piety and pastoral organisation in their European contexts' (12). The ninth chapter moves forward chronologically to the

late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century internecine Catholic debates provoked by Jansenism. The tenth chapter is presented as 'a survey of Catholic polemical use of the history of the English reformation to contest the national protestant narrative, from the writings of Cardinal Pole down to the subtler apologetic of Lingard in the age of Catholic emancipation' (12).

The essay on Pole, whom Duffy characterises as an effective religious leader, defends the Cardinal against the charge that he did not support a program of preaching: Duffy reads Pole's letter to Bartolomeo Carranza not as a statement against preaching but as something more nuanced, pointing out that Pole insisted that preaching be done in the context of establishing strong church discipline. In chapter five, the positive treatment of the intellectually capable and resourceful leader of English Catholics, William Allen, is qualified by the major concessions Duffy makes: that 'by any standard recognised in Elizabethan England, [he] was a traitor . . . up to his neck in political schemes for the deposition of Elizabeth' (134), that he 'cannot entirely be absolved of responsibility for the disasters of Catholicism of the 1580s and 1590s' (163,) and that his 'political entanglements ultimately yielded nothing but grief' (163). He does, however, credit Allen with the long-term survival of English Catholicism: '[b]ecause of him, English Catholicism was given an institutional lifeline to the large world of Christendom, and a surer, clearer sense of its own identity' (163). Allen's collaborator, the 'half-forgotten' (169) Gregory Martin, gets separate treatment in the book's sixth chapter, which calls attention to Martin's role in shaping the curricula of the Douay College and the seminary of the English College in Rome and in writing 'effective polemics against both Church papistry and Protestant Bible translation' (169), especially *A discoverie of the manifold corruptions of the holy scriptures by the heretikes of our date* (1582). Duffy argues that Martin's 'greatest original work' (179) is *Roma Sancta*, an answer to attack on the papacy by the distinguished Protestant theologian, William Fulke. This work, which Duffy sets in the context of sixteenth-century (positive and negative) interest in things Roman, is 'an eloquent evocation of the antiquities of godliness' (197), defending Rome historically and in terms of Martin's own experiences of the many religious institutions of the city doing 'good works' (187). The fact that *Roma Sancta*, however, remained in manuscript until 1969 makes its historical value as part of the religious debates of the early modern period problematic.

The seventh chapter, 'Praying the Counter-Reformation', deals with Elizabethan Catholicism's need for 'its own distinctive vernacular idiom of prayer' (205). Duffy calls attention to the flood of devotional publications belonging to the second half of Queen Elizabeth's reign,

including the 'Tridentine Primer for English readers' (209) and that 'pillar of recusant vernacular piety, the *Manual of Prayers*' (210), the latter of which, he argues, 'decisively established the framework of the vernacular prayer of English Catholics for two centuries' (219). Finessing the question of whether late Elizabethan Catholicism represented 'new beginnings' (Bossy) or a basic 'continuity' with what preceded (Haigh and others), Duffy portrays Elizabethan and early Stuart Catholic devotional texts as a response to the 'pastoral urgency' (22) Robert Persons and others perceived in a clerically-depleted England.

In the eighth and ninth chapters, 'The English Secular Clergy and the Counter-Reformation' and 'A rubb-up for old soares: Jesuits, Jansenists and the English Secular Clergy', Duffy highlights the destructive and ongoing Catholic internecine conflict from the late sixteenth through the early eighteenth centuries between 'seculars' and 'regulars', between diocesan priests and those in orders, particularly the Jesuits. In the eighth chapter Duffy focuses on 'the renewal of the ideal of the secular priest' that accompanied 'the revival of confession' (226), the secular priests' engagement with the Salesian tradition of 'practical human piety' (235) and, their determined efforts of pastoral reform—the last a topic that recurs throughout the collection. He suggests that the usual historical accounts of such secular/regular conflicts as the Wisbech Stirs, the Archpriest Controversy, and the dispute over the appointment of Richard Smith as Bishop of Chalcedon are distortions and, setting them in a continental context (particularly that of the Netherlands), he expresses sympathy for the point of view of the seculars, whose 'rigorist attitude towards many aspects of the Christian life, and severity in ecclesiastical discipline' (231) he sees as justified in terms of their commitment to pastoral care of the faithful. He sees the Jansenism that took root in the Netherlands (and elsewhere) as a 'compensatory Augustinianism' designed 'to meet the Protestant challenge based on a Augustinian theology of grace' (231). In the ninth chapter, Duffy examines the phenomenon of Jansenism further, examining the (mainly continental) conflicts between Jansenists and others (particularly the Jesuits) over the doctrine of grace.

Duffy extends his preoccupation with historiography into the tenth chapter, 'From Sander to Lingard: Recusant Readings of the Reformation', returning to the sixteenth century to begin an examination of the tradition of English Catholic historiography. The influential historical point of view embodied in the Protestant martyrologist John Foxe's narrative of the English reformation was challenged by Nicholas Harpsfield, Robert Persons, and Nicholas Sander, the last of whose *De Origine ac Progressu Schismatis Anglicani* (1585) was a landmark publication: 'for most of continental Europe

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2018.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sander's reformation *was* the standard version of the English reformation' (287). He created what Duffy calls 'the Catholic myth of a reformation solely triggered by a tyrannical king's lust for a scheming courtesan', a story that 'is pure fiction' (290). Duffy traces the Protestant and Catholic historiographical models through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—on the Protestant side, from Gilbert Burnet's *History of the Reformation of the Church of England* (1679-1715), John Strype's *Ecclesiastical Memorials* (1721) and *Annals of the Reformed Church of England* (1725-31), to David Hume's derivative *History of England* (1754-62) and, on the Catholic side, from the Catholic convert Thomas Ward's four-canto Hudibrastic poem, *England's Reformation* (written during the reign of James II, but only published in 1710), to the high-church Jeremy Collier's *Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain* (1708-14), which Catholics read as sympathetic to many of their practices, through the secular priest Charles Dodd's [Henry Tootell's] *Church History of England* (1737-42), Richard Challoner's *Memoires of Missionary Priests* (1741-42), and Thomas Phillips' *Life of Cardinal Pole* (1764), the last 'more widely reviewed . . . than any other Catholic historical enterprise of the century' (306).

Duffy points out that late-eighteenth-century Catholic accounts were shaped by 'the struggle for political liberties and the revolutionary upheavals in France' which divided the Catholic community. He emphasizes the importance of John Lingard, who produced the enormously influential ten-volume history of England (1819-30), but stresses that 'he was no neutral historian' (310), but rather 'a dedicated warrior for Catholic civil and religious rights' (310). Lingard was, however, 'the first historian to bring material from European and Catholic archives to bear on the traditional narrative' (312). His 'apologetic agenda explains some of the omissions as well as the inclusions in [his] account of the reformation' (313). His biases also include siding with the seculars against the regulars in their disputes, and 'many of his contentions . . . in fact represented reworkings of polemical claims which had first been set out by Tudor Catholic polemicists' (335). Duffy's extended discussion of Lingard, then, is a cautionary tale for contemporary historians, including Duffy himself, who admitted that *The Stripping of the Altars* is 'a self-consciously polemical book'.[1]

In the last of the book's sections there are three related essays on puritan and dissenting Protestants, particularly on their efforts on the grass-roots level to catechize a populace that had little understanding of Christianity and whom they wished to move to an experience of

[1] *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition: Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 4.

religious 'conversion'. The last chapter in this section, on George Fox and Quakerism, something of an intellectual outlier, expresses an admiration for Fox's character and the closeness of original Quakerism to a kind of Franciscan mysticism. The focus in these four chapters is relatively narrow in terms of the whole spectrum of religious sectarianism, noticeably avoiding, for the most part, the mainstream English Church and its spokespersons (except when they came into conflict with dissenters). Duffy turns to his interest in popular religion in his discussion of on-the-ground puritan preaching and pastoral activity in chapters eleven and twelve. He explores the seeming contradiction between puritan preachers' condemnation of popular pastimes and their wholehearted commitment to pastoral care. The 'godlies' or popular chap-books written by nonconformist ministers also engaged a popular readership and, despite occasional hell-fire rhetoric, offered pastoral assurance and support.

Duffy seems most interested here in religious pastoralism of puritans such as Richard Baxter, whom he appears to admire, but there is no attempt to engage the broader debates and topics involved in historical accounts of English Protestantism. Duffy's sympathetic treatment in chapters eleven, twelve and thirteen of 'the godly tradition' of reform Protestantism, with its emphasis on catechizing and conversion and its dream of a thoroughly 'reformed' England, ultimately leads him to the conclusion that the project was a failure, especially because of the 1662 expulsion of puritan clergy from their ecclesiastical positions. He asserts that the English Protestant attempt at religious education and renewal was ultimately inferior to that of similar counter-reformation projects because the latter were based on the collaboration of itinerant priests in religious orders with parish clergy, the Catholic 'hospitality to ritual and drama' (407), and 'the harnessing of the centuries-old obligation of confession into the service of a newer and more demanding style of Christian commitment' (407-8). Of the last, he says 'The confessional was the ultimate weapon of the counter-reformation, the perfect forum for the meeting and integration of routinisation and the zeal of conversion, and Protestantism had nothing to rival it' (407). This coda makes Duffy's chapter on 'The Long Reformation' and the two that precede it into a kind of historiographical shaggy-dog story. The argumentatively lower-key piece on George Fox and Quakerism brings the book to peaceful conclusion, especially in the association of the Quaker commitment to the divine illumination of the believer and the spirituality of St. Francis—argumentatively a whimper, not a bang.

Doing ecclesiastical history in a modern (or postmodern), pluralistic world is a challenge. Readers are not wrong to suspect that the historian has an axe to grind, will make a misleading selection of evidence, have a covert or overt apologetic intent, or uncritically

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accept grand narratives that are intellectually untenable. Some historians put their biases out front: for example, Brad Gregory[2] unapologetically argues that the Protestant Reformation was a disaster that, in Duffy's words, was an 'assault on the intellectual and moral underpinning of Catholic Christianity [that] fatally if unintentionally undermined the coherence of the Western intellectual and moral tradition' (3). Others are less self-aware about their biases or less honest in admitting them. Eamon Duffy, however, knows what he is doing, knows its place in the larger historiographical debates, and, in order to continue his quest to correct the historical distortions of English religious history that persist on both academic and popular levels (he seems particularly annoyed in this book by Hilary Mantel), he is willing to be intellectually oppositional, offering new readings of old or neglected texts and gathering the mass of evidence that allows him to make telling connections between the micro- and the macro-historical levels.

[2] *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

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