

OTHER REVIEWS

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David Vincent, *The rise of mass literacy: reading and writing in modern Europe*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. ISBN 0-7456-1444-2 (hb); 0-7456-1445-0 (pb).

Literacy is two skills not one. In Europe at least up to the mid-nineteenth century, reading and writing were taught as separate skills, sequentially and sometimes by different teachers. Many of those, especially women, who could see the uses, both improving and entertaining, of learning to read had neither the time nor the incentive to go on to acquire the other, much more rarely used skill. Often families, communities even, combined resources and if one could wield a pen, he would act as scribe for the others. It was only very slowly in the course of the nineteenth century that some stigma began to be attached to the inability to sign one's name.

Historians, seeing access to new ideas as transforming, have been preoccupied with the spread of the reading skill; although paradoxically, most of their best evidence has come from marks and signatures on marriage registers, wills, and other legal documents. Because the acquisition of one skill preceded the acquisition of the other, one can with some confidence infer that those who could write their names must already have learned to read. It remains probable, however, that use of signature evidence to measure the diffusion of the reading skill understates its extent, particularly among women, and is an uncertain guide to change over time. In the nineteenth century an increase in the numbers able to sign their names may simply signify a change in the interval between the acquisition of the first and second skills: instead of meaning that more people learned to read it may only mean that more of those who could read were beginning to see a use to writing.

One of the major contributions of David Vincent's excellent new survey is to mobilize serious quantitative data on this *use* of the writing skill: correspondence, as he remarks, 'represented an altogether more sustained and sophisticated application of the written word' – this is the true functional literacy. He makes admirable use of the statistics assiduously collected by the Universal Postal Union following the Treaty of Berne in 1874 to show the explosion in letter-writing and sending in the period up to 1914 and beyond. In 1876 3 billion letters and postcards a year were circulating within and between the countries of Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world; by 1913 the total flow had reached 25 billion. The statistics allow comparisons within Europe: between the extremes of Britain which numbered thirty-eight items per head in 1876 and Russia which numbered one; and between societies which were more evenly matched. These statistics can also be juxtaposed against the more familiar signature evidence to produce a more complex picture. Although by the 1890s half the countries in Europe had achieved nominal literacy rates of around 90 per cent, their per capita postal levels varied much more widely. For example, Sweden and Norway had long led with the dissemination of reading skills but they were writing fewer letters per head of population than Italy, still decades away from eradicating illiteracy in the south.

A second contribution of this survey is an exploration of the importance and the difficulties of the transition from literacy as a project of individuals – or churches – to literacy as a project of states. Vincent notes that even in the most developed states such a project took at least a century from promulgation to achievement. It made huge demands in terms of resources and personnel; spending on education tended to come second only to spending on defence. It entailed persuading parents, even more than their children, that there was something in it for them. Yet in the process the Enlightenment ambition to liberate, the conviction that knowledge was power which animated so many autodidacts, were bent and distorted almost out of recognition: as he acknowledges, ‘inequalities of class, occupation, ethnicity, age and gender were much more frequently reproduced through the schoolroom than challenged by it’.

Although European states invested increasingly heavily in educational infrastructures, the economic outcomes were neither as immediate nor as positive as they hoped. Vincent mobilizes a vast range of examples to show how contingent and complex a relationship there was between literacy skills and economic growth. His well-supported conclusion that there was ‘no single narrative of literacy and economic development either across a national economy or in related sectors across Europe’ will surely free historians at last from the more naïve model-making of development economists and human capital theorists.

Altogether this is the best sort of general survey, bringing together old and new findings in a coherent, sophisticated, and admirably clear discussion.

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Rival Jerusalems: the geography of Victorian religion. By K. D. M. Snell and Paul S. Ell. Cambridge: University Press, 2000. Pp. xvi + 499. ISBN 0-521-77155-2. £50.00.

In 1971 J. D. Gay published *The geography of religion in England*, a useful book that mapped the broad regional outlines of England’s major religious denominations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His most important source was the mid-Victorian census of religious observance, an attempt to count the number of attendances at every single place of worship in England and Wales on Sunday, 30 March 1851. Now K. D. M. Snell and Paul S. Ell have published another book based largely on the same census. What have they done that Gay left undone?

They have done a lot more. Gay did not have the benefit of computerization, made little use of the primary manuscript returns, and omitted Wales. Snell and Ell have more than compensated for those omissions, and have also compared the 1851 returns to the 1676 Compton census of religious affiliation. In fifteen counties they have compared religious practice at the parish level with other variables including population data, gender ratios, housing, poor-relief expenditures, the values of clerical livings, the availability of clerical housing, landownership, etc. Snell and Ell are thus able to generate an apparently endless supply of fascinating and significant detail about Victorian religious practice. Their statistical analysis is tempered with admirable sensitivity to local history and denominational distinction. Anyone interested in the social history of religion will wish that they had written an even longer book.

Their big picture of regional diversity remains very much the same as Gay’s. Whether

measured by church accommodation, total attendance, or places of worship, the established church was strongest in 1851 in Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, and the west midlands. Roughly half the churchgoing population had abandoned the established church for Nonconformist denominations, creating the classic Victorian 'church and chapel' social division that reflected regional as well as class and theological distinctions. The Baptists and Independents (Congregationalists) were strongest in the south midlands, Essex, and Hertfordshire, while the strength of the two largest Methodist denominations, Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist, lay in the north-east and north midlands. Nonconformists totally dominated Wales by 1851, while Roman Catholics were concentrated in Lancashire and the west midlands.

This is all well known, but the Snell and Ell database allows sophisticated analysis on more topics than can be mentioned in a short review. To take only one example, their work on Sunday school attendance suggests that throughout most of England Sunday schools were by mid-century closely associated with paternalistic landowner and employer control. Furthermore, there is a clear association between density of Sunday schools and the incidence of child labour, a phenomenon that deserves further investigation.

If the strength of this book lies in its wealth of suggestive detail, its weakness lies in its arguments about the causes of the decline of Britain's churches. Snell and Ell discuss this problem under the heading of 'secularization', which they identify as one of the most important subjects of modern history, and suggest that pluralism, i.e. the presence of several denominations at the parochial level, caused secularization. These findings are undermined, however, by their inconsistency in the use of the term secularization. At times they treat secularization as nothing more than another word for the decline of the churches; at other times they treat it as a fundamental trend embedded in modern history; at other times it appears as a scientific hypothesis to be proven or refuted.

Snell and Ell appear reluctant to address the issues raised in the vigorous discussion of secularization that has appeared in print during the last thirty years. Instead they cite the works of critics of secularization theory such as Callum Brown, S. J. D. Green, and Robin Gill without acknowledging the importance of their revisionist arguments. Unwilling to subject the word secularization to the same kind of disciplined scrutiny that they give to their statistical data, Snell and Ell replicate the confusion that surrounds secularization theory.

Despite its lack of clarity on the question of decline, this book will be an invaluable source of information for future discussions of the decline of British Christianity because of its wealth of suggestive detail. Snell and Ell's discussions of occupancy rates, denominational competition, and urbanization contain potential elements of an alternative theory of the decline of religion, one based on an analysis of the competitiveness of religious institutions rather than on global trends such as urbanization, industrialization, or pluralism. Their 'occupancy rate' index, which measures very roughly consumer demand for the provision of seats for worship, illuminates lost opportunities for growth on the part of some mid-Victorian denominations, although the reasons for this lack of leadership in areas of potential church growth remain puzzling. Snell and Ell also confirm the observations of Mark Smith and other historians about the vigorous nineteenth-century response of the Church of England to both urbanization and industrialization, and reinforce Callum Brown's argument that there is little consistent relationship between urbanization and low levels of religious practice.

Because these trends do not fit comfortably into the big picture provided by secularization theory, they remain for the most part isolated observations in Snell and Ell's book. Newly identified historical patterns will remain difficult to interpret as long as secularization theory remains the only general theory of the decline of religion. When scholars of modern British religion have at their disposal even one conceptual alternative to secularization as a plausible explanation for the decline of Britain's churches, this database of 2,500 variables covering 2,443 parishes will be far more useful.

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A nation collapses: the Italian surrender of September 1943. By Elena Agarossi, translated by Harvey Fergusson II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 175. ISBN 0-521-59199-6. £32.50.

On 8 September 1943 (referred to by Italian historians simply as *l'8 settembre*) the news of the unconditional surrender to the Allies of the Italian Empire was broadcast scratchily to the population of Italy. The prime minister, General Pietro Badoglio, instructed the country's armed forces to cease resistance to the Allies and to defend themselves from 'attack from any other direction whatsoever'. He himself, accompanied by most of his ministers and general staff, then fled from Rome with the king, Victor Emanuel III, to a warship waiting on the Adriatic coast, and sailed south to Brindisi, already occupied by British forces, where they established a ghostly simulacrum of government in the few square miles already 'liberated' by their erstwhile enemies.

The events and manoeuvres on the Italian side of the desperate equations leading up to and consequent upon this nadir of the history of the Italian nation state have now been given the attention and the focus they have long merited. Elena Agarossi, in this lucid exposition, elegantly translated by Harvey Fergusson II, establishes the political and diplomatic context within which the wartime Allies conceived and executed their strategies for breaking the 'weakest link' of the Axis, strategies that grew progressively harsher towards the Italians as the latter played for time in 1942–3. The inglorious post-Mussolinian interregnum (the forty-five days from the royal putsch of 25 July 1943 against the dictator to the acceptance of the terms of the armistice imposed by the Allies) was spent by the Italians in a reality-denying pursuit of ways to avoid the stigma of acknowledged defeat and the reversal of alliances. All that could be claimed for it, in the end, was the fiction of the 'continuity of the state', and its shabby consequence that none of those principally responsible for the disaster were ever brought to book.

Such a turning-point in national history casts a long shadow both backwards and forwards. For Agarossi the historiographical debate in Italy, which is largely along party lines both in academic circles and in the media, has not so far generated the necessary clarification of issues and the acceptance of their pedagogical consequences. There has, she says, been no *examen de conscience* comparable to the rethinking of Vichy set going by Marc Bloch decades ago.

Both sides in the debate agree that the Italian Republic founded in 1948 was in some sense constructed around a myth. Its earliest version was that, almost on the morrow of the 8 September surrender, a generalized but hitherto suppressed revulsion against

Fascism created a spontaneous armed Resistance that was the struggle of an entire people against Fascism. It was thus based on the demonstrably false premise that the Italian people had never really supported Mussolini and the Fascist regime. Some who reject this historical falsehood prefer a comparably problematic alternative: that the melting-away of the Italian armed forces, the desertion of the country's military and political leaders, and the collapse of the state, were the sign of an ineradicable moral weakness going back to the very foundation of the nation state.

Both sides thus tend to present a version of Italian history that conveniently casts the country and the people as the victims of circumstances over which no control was possible. Agarossi's analysis has the welcome merit of steering the reader away from any such 'alibi for the complete irresponsibility of the ruling class', which would empty 'the events associated with the Italian surrender of any concrete historical meaning' (p. 136).

Despite her loyalty to Renzo De Felice, Agarossi also rejects the assumptions both of Italian neo-nationalists that Italy's near disintegration in 1943 was the result of intentional Allied policies, and those of the Marxists: that it was simply the proof of the hollowness of the Risorgimento. She claims that 'old-fashioned King and Country patriotism' is still needed to explain the complexities of the response to 8 September:

The idea of the Italian nation neither was destroyed by the trauma of September 8, nor ceased to represent an important reference point for both public life and personal identities during the Resistance ... The anti-Fascist political parties that had fought in the Resistance became the building blocks of the new Italian republic; they gave it legitimacy and provided the Italians with means of expressing their political identity ... The weakening of the idea of the nation, however, meant that a common ideological principle in which all Italians could recognize themselves was lacking. Partisan identities prevailed over and erased an Italian identity. (p. 137)

It is a powerful point. The muted implication of Agarossi's Conclusion is that such an honourable Italian identity is once again being sought and may be in the making. One may, however, wonder whether it will carry much conviction for those familiar with the Italy of Berlusconi and Fini. It is the measure of this book that the question must be taken seriously.

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