

The education of the Anglican clergy, 1780–1839. By Sara Slinn. (Studies in Modern British Religious History. Pp. x + 276 incl. 2 figs and 11 tables. Woodbridge–Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2017. £70. 978 1 78327 175 7
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‘To facilitate the tenure of some preferments and to satisfy the prejudices of the world, it will be necessary to take academic degrees. This cannot reputably be done without becoming a member of an English University’ (Vicesimus Knox, 1782, quoted by Sara Slinn). The author was intrigued to explore the routes towards ‘other’ preferments that did not require a degree or that set aside the ‘prejudices of this world’, and that impelled her to produce a study of recruitment and education for the ministry of the Church of England, based on the backgrounds of men ordained in the late Hanoverian period. She aspires to re-orientate the discussion away from a ‘golden triangle and a Canterbury-centric tendency of the Established Church’. The book charts the diversity of the clerical body and its underlying dynamic. It draws attention to the talent and resourcefulness of many non-graduate ordinands, who were propelled by their networks of tutors, small schools and colleges and through audio-didacticism. Some of these ordinands were from relatively wealthy and well-connected; others were from poorer backgrounds. It was rewarding for this reviewer to return, after a gap of twenty years, to see how scholarship has advanced and to appreciate the richness of the evidence now available. The author used prosopographical techniques to valuable effect, interrogating quantitative data, especially data from the Church of England clergy database project and from diocesan records. The book refers to aspects of the wider context, including the impact of social and political developments on clerical recruitment and formation, and some of the trends in the development of professions during the period. There are interesting comparisons with the Nonconformist ministry. It was good to read the corrective to the excessive claim to originality staked by the biographer on behalf of Bishop Thomas Burgess of St David’s (1803–25), the distinguished founder of St David’s Lampeter, who has had much credit for his pioneering educational work. Slinn identifies the biographer’s statement that, until Burgess’s reforms, ‘the general custom was for young men to continue at the plough till the year before they attained the age of twenty-three, when, after spending a single month at the Seminary of Ystrid Merug [six] they were deemed competent for ordination’ as inaccurate and unfair to Burgess’s predecessors and their own work for the education of the clergy. Indeed, it is difficult to have an entirely original idea: the author has perhaps over-estimated, to some extent, the freshness and breadth of the contribution of her study to broader societal, cultural and educational insights and to wider understanding of social mobility and entrepreneurship. The book, however, is a readable work based on the solid, systematic scholarship that would be expected from the academic ‘stable’ which has created the Clergy of the Church of England database. It offers detailed insight into the vitality of the Hanoverian Church and exposes some of the roots of social and educational development that would become increasingly powerful through the nineteenth century.

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