

English Presbyterianism, 1590-1640

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Early modern English Presbyterianism found its expression in two bursts of activity: during the Elizabethan period as a movement to perfect the Reformation from the Elizabethan compromise and during the mid 17th-century Civil War and Republic as a contender for the Parliamentary settlement of the Church of England. Although English Presbyterians survived the Restoration, they, so received wisdom goes, were in a terminal trajectory of decline until they eventually fell to Unitarianism in the 18th century. A Presbyterian Church of England was founded in 1876 (from which the modern day United Reformed Church in part derives) but this was essentially a Scottish foundation deriving from congregations of workers and entrepreneurs who had emigrated from Scotland to England during the Industrial Revolution and not from early modern English roots.

With the exception of a few works such as A.H. Drysdale's 1889 *History of the Presbyterians in England: Their Rise, Decline and Revival*, a thorough but confessional history written essentially to provide justification to the new Presbyterian Church of England, the judgment of modern historians has not been favourable to English Presbyterianism. For many decades of the 20th Century, the Elizabethan Presbyterian campaign led by figures such as Thomas Cartwright, John Field and Walter Travers was seen as the extremist foil to the moderate and centrist founders of Anglicanism. In the later segment of the last century, this story was challenged and, to some extent confined to the historiographical grave, at least in the Universities, by the authoritative research of historians such as Patrick Collinson and Peter Lake. Nevertheless, Collinson himself saw Presbyterianism die an effective death after the Hampton Court Conference and saw little connection between the Elizabethan Presbyterian movement and the Presbyterianism of the Westminster Assembly.⁽¹⁾

Mid 17th-century Presbyterianism has fared far worse in historical judgement. William Shaw's turn of the century *History of the Church in England during the Commonwealth*, following the Whig interpretation, which had its roots in Daniel Neal's massive 18th-century *History of the Puritans*, set the parameters of the modern interpretation in seeing the Presbyterianism of the 1640s and 50s as an unwelcome foreign (i.e. Scottish) theocratic import that was alien to the essentially Erastian and tolerant English national character. In most histories since Shaw, the English Presbyterians of the period have been dismissed as 'conservative and intolerant' failures and cast as the bogeymen in the story of the rise of toleration and religious pluralism or the emergence of a theologically woolly but pious popular Anglicanism. Alternatively, historians have sought to deny the existence of genuinely committed English Presbyterians, instead seeing those that were called 'Presbyterians' as a body of Puritan clergy sheepishly following the 'Melvillian' Scots' demands for confessional uniformity. In this story the Scots provided the ecclesiological framework for an English Puritan clergy seeking to avoid the horror of sectarian liberty by a theocratic, but politically and socially conservative settlement of the Church of England. Of course, historians have good reason to make this argument: Presbyterianism clearly failed to receive widespread support in either Parliament or the country. Further, whilst historians have largely ignored the (admittedly often long and unfathomable) works of English Presbyterian theory by authors such as the London ministers, Charles Herle, or Samuel Hudson, they have found the tenor of English Puritanism in a more moderate tradition exemplified by Archbishop James Ussher or the idiosyncratic moderate Episcopalian pastor Richard Baxter.

Recent research has begun to challenge this picture by recovering and revising the history of Presbyterians and Presbyterianism in early modern England. Ann Hughes' work on Thomas Edwards and his *Gangraena*, the chief bugbear of the Whig historians, has revealed a world of clever polemic, vigorous debate and political mobilisation issuing from London Presbyterian circles. December 2011 hopefully sees Oxford University Press publish Chad Van Dixhorn's five volume edition of the *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, a source that will finally reveal the intellectual development of mid 17th-century Presbyterianism(s?) in England and the debates, conflicts and compromises that ensued from the Westminster Assembly. The forthcoming publication of Kirsteen MacKenzie's doctoral thesis promises to show the importance of Presbyterianism and the covenants in a three kingdom context. In addition the recent online availability of Carol Schneider's and Rosemary Bradley's magnificent and weighty doctoral theses provides cogent guides through the difficult debates of this period.

Polly Ha's *English Presbyterianism, 1590–1640* is, perhaps, the bravest thesis of the current wave of studies reassessing Presbyterianism. As stated above, historians of Elizabethan puritanism have doubted any continuity between the Elizabethan Presbyterianism of Cartwright and the Presbyterians of the English Revolution. The general view of historians of the period such as Keith Sprunger, Carol Schneider and Tom Webster is that the Jacobean and Caroline nonconformists rejected Presbyterianism in favour of a 'non-separating congregationalism' that stressed the single congregational church as the basic unit of ecclesiastical polity. Dr Ha takes this contention head on, arguing that not only did a body of Presbyterian opinion survive the demise of the Elizabethan Presbyterian campaign but actively contended within Puritan circles for Presbyterian polity.

Dr Ha's arguments are made possible by her use of a number of previously unstudied manuscripts belonging to the leading Elizabethan and Jacobean Presbyterian Walter Travers found in James Ussher's collection held at Trinity College Dublin. These manuscripts include Travers' notes made whilst the pastor of the Merchant Adventurer Church in Antwerp, a church that followed Presbyterian discipline, as well as a manuscript narrating an examination by a panel of English Presbyterians of Henry Jacob's 1616 experiment in non-separating Congregationalism. In addition the Trinity College Dublin manuscripts contain a late Elizabethan treatise on Presbyterianism as well as the lost third part of Richard Sheerwood's *Reply* to Bishop George Downname's April 1608 sermon in support of *iure divino* Episcopacy. Alongside this rich archive, Dr Ha also draws on the difficult pamphlet controversies between John Ball's circle of English nonconformists and New England Congregationalists such as Richard Mather as well as the printed and manuscript material surrounding John Paget and his battles to keep the English Reformed Church in Amsterdam a bastion of Presbyterian polity. These sources have formerly been well used in Alice Clare Carter's 1964 study of that

congregation (2), but have been freshly examined and re-deployed by Dr Ha to provide new insights into the operation of Presbyterian discipline as well as the connections between the Amsterdam church and English nonconformists.

Throughout the work, Dr Ha recognises that Presbyterianism was not a majority or widespread position among English puritans but argues that pockets of Presbyterians provided pressure on both Episcopacy and the emerging 'new disciplinary' tradition of congregational independency exemplified by Henry Jacob. As such Presbyterianism added a presence to the debates between nonconformists and conformists and was a source of criticism and conflict in the post-Hampton Court Conference Church of England.

The first part of Dr Ha's book looks at Presbyterian theoretical positions in relation to the established Church of England. Monarchs such as Elizabeth and James, as well as conformist writers, had contended that Presbyterianism, with its argument that the Church derived its power immediately from Christ as the king of the Church, was anathema to the royal supremacy. In addition, the Presbyterians's insistence on the participation of congregationally elected lay elders smacked, to conformist writers, of an anti-monarchical populism. Ha argues that Presbyterians countered this view by stressing the affinity of Presbyterianism to the royal supremacy. For Ha, Presbyterian ideas on the royal supremacy can best be seen in the nexus that connected early modern notions of mixed polity (Patrick Collinson's 'monarchical republic') with ideas of the godly magistrate and commonwealth. Against the charge of populism, Presbyterians argued that a Christian ruler, whilst not one of the divinely ordained officers of the Church, was set by God as a nursing father who, like Emperor Constantine, was to protect the Church when it was in peril. Presbyterians argued that their system worked in harmony with the Christian magistrates' suppression of sinful behaviour and that the Church was to provide counsel to kings and to act as a local watchman for the state. Indeed, for Presbyterians, the real threat to the royal supremacy was Episcopacy and the lordly bishops who, contrary to their ecclesiastical calling, intermeddled in affairs of state. Dr Ha argues that Presbyterian clergy such as Cartwright and Travers made common cause against the bishops with lawyers such as William Stoughton and those barristers and judges who might hear their sermons at the Inns of Court.

The second part of *English Presbyterianism* deals with Presbyterian arguments concerning the visible church, the location of power in ecclesiastical polity and the nature of the ministry. Scholars such as Rosemary Bradley, Robert Paul and Tom Webster have, either explicitly or implicitly, defined Presbyterianism exclusively around the idea of authoritative synodical government. Ha is deeply critical of this definition and argues that other topics such as the nature of the visible Church, the attitude to Old Testament models of polity, the location of church power and the extent of consent within the Church betray Presbyterian tendencies in pre-Civil War debates. This widening of the definition of Presbyterianism allows Dr Ha to tease out many of the arguments in notoriously difficult source material such as the 1630s debates between Thomas Hooker and John Davenport with John Paget or the exchange between the New England churches and John Ball's English conference.

English Presbyterianism particularly focuses on the exchange between Henry Jacob and the Presbyterian examiners over Jacob's new direction in polity, already in the 1610s being described as 'Independency'. For Ha, Jacob's idea of Congregationalist government strikingly drew on the Neo-Roman view of liberty more commonly discussed in relation to political thought by Quentin Skinner. Jacob held that any form of dependency on higher assemblies such as synods constituted a bar to the liberty of a congregation as a complete Christian society. On the other hand, the Presbyterians deployed an English Parliamentary analogy by arguing that just as early modern English cities sent their burgesses to Parliament without losing the liberties granted by their charter, it was no bar to the liberty of a congregation to be represented by its elders at a synod. For Presbyterians, the 'Church' of biblical passages such as Matthew 18:17 was the consistory of pastors and elders and not (as Jacob would have it) the congregation joined with its ministers by covenant. In addition Presbyterians held that the ministry were ordained into the visible church and not to a particular congregation and thus could operate with a degree of promiscuity by joining with other ministers and elders for mutual assistance in ordaining, preaching or administering discipline.

In the third part of her book, Dr Ha moves away from theory to discuss the practice of Presbyterianism in the

English congregations in the Netherlands and the lines of communication between the networks of English nonconformists and the Dutch churches. Whilst accepting that nonconformist views of church polity had a tendency to veer towards congregational independency as the early Stuart period wore on, the reality for many English churches in the Netherlands was that the political and financial reasons kept many congregations in conformity with the Presbyterian system dominant in the Netherlands. Ha's study focuses on Travers' Antwerp congregation and Paget's Amsterdam church and stresses the fluidity between Presbyterian and Congregationalist positions in the Netherlands and how differing circumstances and individuals could cause congregations to change their position. Dr Ha also provides an in-depth study of the workings and membership of the Amsterdam church and argues that whilst the eldership of the congregation was essentially elite, the poor members actively participated in the discipline by initiating cases or giving evidence against wrongdoers. Of particular interest is Ha's analysis of poor members long running disputes with the consistory. Ha deploys case studies to show how the Presbyterian discipline worked in practice and how the consistory's control of poor relief could be used as a weapon of reformation.

As one of Dr Ha's arguments is that Presbyterians concealed themselves in the period after the collapse of the Elizabethan Presbyterian movement, the inevitable criticism is that Ha is making an argument for the continuation of Presbyterianism from a convenient silence. Ideas do not have feet, and the existence of some manuscripts in Ireland written in bad handwriting (as Travers' apparently is) does not prove that anyone read them or their ideas were disseminated in any way. In anticipation of this potential charge, Dr Ha traces out connections between the Presbyterian churches in the Netherlands with nonconformists in early Stuart England. Starting from John Paget's connections back to his native country, Ha argues that pockets of Presbyterian, or at least Presbyterian-leaning, ministers can be discerned in areas known for Puritanism as such as Cheshire, Northamptonshire and London. Many of the figures discussed by Ha as being connected to Paget in the 1620s and 30s, particularly Simeon Ashe, William Rathband, John Brinsley, and Julines Herring, would reveal themselves as committed Presbyterians during the early 1640s and the inference can be drawn that their close connection to Paget (Herring, Ashe, Brinsley and the Newcastle minister Robert Jennison would be chosen as candidates to replace Paget in 1639) meant that they held Presbyterian views prior to the mid 17th-century crisis. I personally found myself crying out for more information on, and examples of, these connections, and I would recommend Carol Schneider's PhD thesis as a supplement to Dr Ha's book for suggestions as to how William Rathband and other individuals in John Ball's circle could trace a nonconformist heritage through Arthur Hildersham and John Dod back to Cartwright and Travers.⁽³⁾

Overall, Polly Ha's thesis provides a welcome corrective to the historical orthodoxy that has developed over the past 30 years. By showing that nonconformists had a wider range of distinctions, and a higher level of subtlety, in their internal debates on ecclesiastical polity than the one-dimensional issue of the power of synods, Dr Ha has re-opened a field that has been dominated by a monolithic definition of nonconformist views on polity as 'non-separating congregationalist'. Indeed, Ha's analysis of early Stuart Presbyterian themes goes a long way to show how in the early 1640s Presbyterian material such as the Smectymnuus tracts or the works of authors such as John Bernard or Charles Herle did not arise from a desire to please the Scots, from a nebulous moderate Episcopalianism or an equally unified nonconformist and Congregationalist tradition but from intellectual foundations that had long been debated in Puritan circles in England and the Netherlands.

It is clear, however, that some criticism must arise. At a banal level, Dr Ha has allowed a few small and careless errors to creep into *English Presbyterianism*: for example, the mid-century Presbyterian leader Edmund Calamy, has been misnamed as Edward Calamy (p. 107). On a deeper level, Dr Ha's use of the labels 'Presbyterians' and 'Congregationalists' can sometimes feel overwrought, especially when it is clear that these labels are used to describe a very small number of people at any one point in time. At times I felt that Dr Ha drifted into implying that Henry Jacob's theories of church polity were the source of all Congregationalist ideas, especially when commenting on Westminster Assembly Congregationalism. In attempting to make the connection between Jacob and later Congregationalism we should always remember, as Murray Tolmie had to concede in his *The Triumph of the Saints*, that the 'Independents' of the Westminster Assembly never cite Jacob.⁽⁴⁾ Likewise, one need only compare together the various treatises

on church polity of leading Congregationalists in England and New England to see substantial varieties of ideas and justifications within the Congregationalist position. In a similar vein, whilst Dr Ha adroitly reveals important common threads in Presbyterian thought, she does not provide for differences of emphasis amongst Presbyterians. This may be because *English Presbyterianism* stops in 1640 and thus infers too much continuity into the 1640s discussions on ecclesiastical polity, but one need only look at the Westminster Assembly's February 1644 debate on the crucial passage of Matthew 18:17 to show that, as Viscount Saye and Sele commented, the English Presbyterians 'agree not in opinion among themselves'.[\(5\)](#)

These minor criticisms aside, I applaud Polly Ha's attempt to provide a wide ranging corrective to the current historiography of early Stuart nonconformity. Whilst some will no doubt find the conclusions of *English Presbyterianism* disconcerting there is much food for thought in this book and one that will keep historians of early Stuart nonconformity busy for a good deal of time to come.

Notes

1. P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 464–5.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alice Clare Carter, *The English Reformed Church in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century* (Amsterdam, 1964).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. G. Schneider, *Godly Order in a Church Half-Reformed: The Disciplinary Legacy, 1570–1641* (Unpublished Harvard University PhD thesis, 1986).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. M. Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints* (Cambridge, 1977) p. 90. Hunter Powell of Selwyn College, Cambridge is in the last stages of a doctoral thesis promises to show the theological development of the Assembly's Congregationalists.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See J. Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot. Vol.XIII*, ed. J. R. Pitman (London, 1824), pp.159–170; G. Gillespie, *Notes of Debates ... of the Assembly of Divines*, ed. D. Meek (Edinburgh, 1846), pp. 21–7.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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