

## Cosmo Lang. Archbishop in War and Crisis

**Review Number:**

1402

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 11 April, 2013

**Author:**

Robert Beaken

**ISBN:**

9781780763552

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£25.00

**Pages:**

320pp.

**Publisher:**

I B Tauris

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Peter Webster

'I HATE Cosmo Lang!' exclaimed a member of the audience when Robert Beaken spoke to a seminar at the IHR about Lang, archbishop of Canterbury and subject of this important reassessment. As Beaken rightly notes, Lang's reputation has suffered in the years since his death. His time as archbishop (1928–42) spanned years of economic depression, the rise of fascism, a royal abdication and the outbreak of world war. But, despite this, the prevailing picture has been of a figure caught in the headlights, reactive rather than in the lead, a puritan and a snob; this image has not been altered by his portrayal (by Derek Jacobi) in the recent film, *The King's Speech*. Lang's case was not helped by the biography by J. G. Lockhart, published in 1949. Written without any particular acquaintance with Lang or access to his official papers, Lockhart's book has long been unsatisfactory, but it has taken until now for a replacement to appear; and Beaken's study goes a long way towards superseding Lockhart and presenting Lang afresh.

The book has three primary concerns: with Lang's relationship with the monarchy; with the disputed process of liturgical reform within the Church of England; and with the Second World War. Chapter seven deals with the last, presenting a panoramic view of Lang's work in the first and darkest days of the war, when Lang was in his mid-70s. Beaken very effectively documents Lang's interventions at the highest level: in the articulation of peace aims; in negotiating the rhetorically difficult transformation of Soviet Russia from enemy to ally; in articulating the need for national intercession and for remembrance of the 1914–18 conflict in changed circumstances. There are important refinements to the literature in relation to Lang's early opposition to the obliteration bombing of Germany (191–3), and (in response to the work of Tom Lawson) concerning who knew what and when within the Church in relation to the Holocaust (206–7).

But these national affairs were not the limit of an archbishop's concerns. Beaken very effectively documents Lang's interventions in relation to refugees, evacuees and conscientious objectors, to venereal disease in the army abroad, and to the observance of the Sabbath at home. Lang was supportive of the government and the war effort because he strongly believed that the struggle was a just and necessary one. At the same time, there were limits to what could be morally acceptable even in war, and Lang intervened in private and public as far as there was any likelihood of those efforts being effective.

Chapter six deals with the stalemate in relation to liturgical revision that Lang inherited after the rejection by Parliament of the revised Book of Common Prayer in 1927–8. Lang has been taxed by later historians, following both Lockhart and George Bell, bishop of Chichester and acute observer of the ecclesiastical scene, for failing to address the impasse between church and state, and the near-ungovernability of the Church while that situation continued. While this reviewer would want to stress the gravity of the crisis in church-state relations while Beaken downplays it, in the matter of Lang's role Beaken's interpretation is convincing. Lang may not have been gripped by liturgical reform, and so may have lacked a 'sustained pushfulness' (179), but it was probably beyond *any* archbishop to devise a compromise solution without being able to impose it. It was to be a quarter of a century after Lang's retirement before the means to revise the Book were finally secured, and even then not without the threat of a renewed crisis in Parliament.

Chapters four and five, which deal with Lang's relationship with the monarchy in general, and the abdication crisis in particular, are very clearly the centrepiece of the book. Beaken's aim is to emphasise Lang's role in the events of the reign of Edward VIII, in contrast to Lockhart who stressed the peripheral nature of the archbishop's role. In this aim Beaken is certainly successful: using recently declassified sources, he provides a scrupulous and minutely detailed chronological account of Lang's role; though this was never public until the very end, he was always (in the words of the former king) 'a shadowy, hovering presence ... invisibly and noiselessly about'. Of particular interest is the closeness of the relationship between Lang and Prime Minister Baldwin, perhaps one of the closest in modern times. The book may find a general readership for this section alone, and the recommendations on the dust jacket from A. N. Wilson and Rowan Williams suggests that this is the hope of the publisher.

It is unfortunately in these two chapters that significant problems in execution show themselves. In the chapters on the war and the Prayer Book, narrative and analysis are effectively integrated and the writing is concise and incisive. In marked contrast, the royal chapters are marred by a luxuriant, not to say indulgent, level of narrative detail, and by numerous and very lengthy quotations from primary sources, which ought to have been either radically pruned and integrated more fully into the text, or (even better) given in full in an appendix. Beaken also opts to separate out narrative and analysis, giving the latter separately at the end of each chapter, but the approach left this reader, at least, hurrying through the detail to reach the pith. There are also some matters of interpretation on which Beaken is less sure-footed. For Beaken, Lang's radio broadcast of December 1936 (this source alone being given its full worth in an appendix) was 'an unusually unwise and unreflective action' (122), in that Lang allowed himself to reflect unfavourably on the mores of the social circle around the former king. However, the receipt of many letters and a 'torrent of abuse' in the popular press does not necessarily prove that an archbishop is not doing his job, but only that he has expressed an unpopular view. Despite Lang's evident enjoyment of the quiet entwining of archbishop and establishment, he was able to see where lines should be drawn.

At the broadest scale, the book is strangely shaped, such that it appears not as a rounded study of an archbishop at a time of crisis, but as three substantial studies of particular issues, hedged around with some rather desultory supporting materials. The three themes of the royal connection, the war and the Prayer Book crisis between them occupy two-thirds of the book, with the royal material alone forming nearly a third. This leads Beaken to neglect other issues that merited fuller treatment. Lang's path from bishop of Stepney (1901) to his arrival at Canterbury in 1928 are dealt with in five breathless pages (15–19), although this period included the controversy over Lang's public comments on the First World War, which cries out for more coverage. Similarly, Beaken's account of a pivotal time in ecumenical relations at home and abroad is perfunctory. Lang's time in office also saw acute economic hardship and the Jarrow March, as well as the

rise of home-grown Fascism and pitched violence on the streets to counter it. None of these receive the slightest treatment, in a study entitled *Archbishop in War and Crisis*. There is little sense here of Auden's 'low dishonest decade'. Significant space is instead given over to a discussion of Lang's sexuality. Beaken is largely successful in showing that Lang was probably not a repressed homosexual, but a lonely figure who found it difficult to form close personal relationships of any kind. To this reviewer, however, it is not clear that those making the case for Lang's homosexuality ever established why the matter should be all that important, and neither is Beaken convincing as to why it is important that Lang was not.

It is on the wider canvas of interpretation that there are opportunities missed. In the conclusion, Beaken rightly emphasises that in the period between the wars the office of archbishop still mattered in English public life. The opinion of Canterbury was sought and listened to on matters of moment, and the archbishop's correspondence clearly shows that many of the general public expected something of 'their archbishop', even if those expectations were inchoately expressed and neither compatible nor realistic. All this is right, and worth emphasising; but it is difficult to recognise the 'simple narrative of secularisation' against which Beaken sets himself as one now held by very many historians. The work variously of Callum Brown, Grace Davie, Hugh McLeod and many others have all deepened and complicated our understandings of what secularisation is and how it occurs; Beaken is therefore pushing at, if not an open door, one which has been unlocked and left ajar. Much the same degree of respect as had been accorded to the archbishop in the inter-war period was paid to Michael Ramsey in the 1960s, by which time the pace of secularisation had quickened and its effect spread much wider.

The range of manuscript sources is impressive: this must be one of few archiepiscopal biographies that takes in sources from the FBI, alongside an interview with the Queen Mother. It is clearly and accessibly written, although prone to cliché: Lang had a 'complex personality' (who doesn't); as a boy 'with a vivid imagination' Lang 'was a bit of a loner' (9); parts of Lang's radio broadcast after the abdication were 'surprisingly boring.' It is well-produced, with a comprehensive index (not always the case), but is let down in places by some lax editing. Both Michael Ramsey and Dick Sheppard (examples chosen at random) appear first by surname only, to be introduced formally to the reader only later on; a straightforward point that should have been picked up. These criticisms aside, Beaken's study is greatly to be welcomed, and may open the way for a better integration of Lang into the study of the period.

#### **Other reviews:**

Historical Association

[http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general\\_resource\\_6145\\_73.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general_resource_6145_73.html) [2]

Daily Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9667055/Essential-reading-for-the-new-Archbishop-of-Canterbury-Justin-Welby.html> [3]

Standpoint

<http://standpointmag.co.uk/features-december-12-online-only-langs-misunderstood-life-s-j-d-green-cosmo-lang-robert-beaken> [4]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1402>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/58444>

[2] [http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general\\_resource\\_6145\\_73.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general_resource_6145_73.html)

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9667055/Essential-reading-for-the-new-Archbishop-of-Canterbury-Justin-Welby.html>

[4] <http://standpointmag.co.uk/features-december-12-online-only-langs-misunderstood-life-s-j-d-green-cosmo-lang-robert-beaken>