Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Culture, Faith and Philanthropy: Londoners and Provincial Reform in Early Modern England

Review Number:
1531
Publish date:
Thursday, 16 January, 2014
Author:
Joseph P. Ward
ISBN:
9780312293864
Date of Publication:
2013
Price:
£40.00
Pages:
240pp.
Publisher:
Palgrave Macmillan
Publisher url:
http://us.macmillan.com/culturefaithandphilanthropy/JosephPWard
Place of Publication:
Basingstoke
Reviewer:
Brodie Waddell

Cultural conflict, religious reform, social change and commercial growth all simultaneously proliferated in early modern England, a development that has inspired more than a century of heated scholarly debate. Max Weber, Richard Tawney, Christopher Hill, Keith Wrightson, Robert Brenner and many other famous names have sought to explore the connections between these issues, but there remains much more to be learned. This volume from Joseph Ward offers a welcome new investigation of such links and correspondences, focusing on the social, cultural and economic roles of London?s tradesmen and merchants both within the metropolis and in provincial communities many miles away.

The three chapters that comprise the first half of Ward?s book centre squarely on London itself in the late 16th and 17th centuries. Borrowing a well-worn concept from E. P. Thompson, Ward argues that this period witnessed the emergence of ?a moral economy in the metropolis that constantly encouraged the prosperous toward philanthropy and away from its opposite, greed? (p. 14). This ?moral economy? can be seen not only in the regulatory interventions and charitable giving of the elites, but also in the ?popular culture? of the time expressed in plays, poetry and other literary creations. The case studies that he provides to illustrate this

process in action will all be extremely interesting to historians of early modern London. We learn, for example, about how people responded to the economic disruption caused by the recurrent freezing of the Thames, which happened on many occasions throughout the 17th century. Thus, during the freeze of 1621, the ?water poet? John Taylor praised his fellow watermen for remaining honest despite their hardship but critiqued the rich for their greedy and uncharitable behaviour towards their poor neighbours. A rather different manifestation of the metropolitan moral economy emerged in the evolution of commemorative philanthropy within the livery companies in this period. According to Ward, pre-Reformation practices were adapted but not entirely abandoned as ?many companies poured the new wine of godly benefaction into the old skins of individual commemoration? (p. 16). As a result, although traditional prayers for deceased donors disappeared, many other important forms of memorialisation remained, such as the gift of valuable plate to the Goldsmiths in the early seventeenth century that was inscribed with a rhyme: ?Keep me clean and bruise me not for I am Richard Croshawe?s pot? (p. 17). So personal charity, in all its diversity, underwrote many of the bonds between early modern Londoners. It may, however, be somewhat overstating the case to then claim that ?the metropolitan social safety net depended largely on the decision to be charitable or to be selfish that thousands of citizens faced individually? (p. 19). Such a claim receives some support from important previous research such as that of I. K. Ben-Amos ? whose recent monograph on this subject is curiously not cited in this chapter ? yet many historians of the poor relief system would no doubt argue that London?s ?social safety net? was primarily held together through mandatory parish rates rather than private philanthropy by this time.(1)

The other side of the ?moral economy? is explored in chapter three and four, where Ward discusses popular attitudes towards wealth and enrichments though an analysis of the legends of two famous late medieval merchants and Lord Mayors, Simon Eyre and Richard Whittington. Stories about these men circulated widely in early modern England through pamphlets and plays such as Deloney?s *The Gentle Craft* (c.1597), Dekker?s *The Shoemaker?s Holiday* (1600) and Heywood?s *History of Sir Richard Whittington* (1656). In these tales, Eyre is presented as a civic hero whose various ?transgressions? in the traditional moral economy ?could be forgiven ? because his fortune facilitated his philanthropy? (p. 40), and Whittington provided a model ?in which anyone could reach the heights of society, so long as they had divine support when they accumulated their wealth and the best interests of society in mind when the decided how to spend it? (p. 61). Both chapters focus particularly closely on the vexed issue of the role of immigrants in London at this time. In the case of Whittington, the message on this issue is fairly straight-forward ? his optimistic story of escaping the poverty of the provinces though enrichment in the capital was ?a bourgeois fantasy? which encouraged such risky ventures (p. 55). In contrast, Eyre was presented as getting rich though employing ?alien? workers. Delony and Dekker portray this in a largely positive, or at least neutral, light and Ward argues that this hospitable attitude towards foreign labour can also found in manuscript material: ?The archival and literary sources all emphasized the willingness of some London citizens to embrace strangers? (p. 45). Yet, such a sanguine conclusion is not quite convincing given that the only evidence presented of such archival sources seems to be a letter sent by (or for) some freemen weavers to the elders of French Church in London in 1595. Although they complained about ?unfair competition brought by [French] strangers?, Ward notes that they also the employed the ?language of Christian brotherhood? (pp. 31?2). The fact that this single ambivalent letter sits amidst a much wider range of hostile petitions and libels against foreigners suggests to this reviewer that there was actually more contrast than overlap between literary and non-literary representations of foreign immigrants. Still, these chapters nonetheless very convincingly show the strength of ?the metropolitan moral economy? in employment, commerce and charity. They offer a good antidote to caricature of early modern London as a purely ?dog-eat-dog? struggle for money and power. Instead, what we see is a culture that embraced the possibility of social mobility and advancement but attached heavy responsibilities to those that achieved material success.

The second half of the book consists of three chapters examining the issue that provides the subtitle to the whole volume: Londoners and provincial reform. Ward begins with a broad look at the various associations and institutions which metropolitan elites used to promote godly religion and learning in county towns and villages. He cites their attempt to create a group of ?lay feofees for impropriations? which acquired properties to support the appointment of godly ministers in the 1620s and early 1630s. When this was

attacked by William Laud and suppressed by the Caroline Court of Exchequer, zealous merchants shifted their activities to the livery companies where they continued to be criticised but were more shielded from royal interference. Such controversial methods show that donors and company officials were ?not afraid to be innovative in pursuit of their goals? of ?godly, national reformation? (p. 79). The primary examples of this were the 19 or more provincial grammar schools established by metropolitan benefactors for which the livery companies often carefully vetted the godly credentials of schoolmasters and their assistants. Here we see an apparently consistent policy of promoting reform ?in ways that had the potential to overturn, rather than to support, the established order in society? (p. 72). Wealthy Londoners sought to bring illumination to the so-called ?dark corners of the land? at the expense of the many local authorities who might have preferred the dim light of tradition to the blinding radiance of godly zeal. The eventual fruits of such campaigns were, as Ward implies, probably more modest than their instigators may have hoped. In all likelihood, they were much more successful at merely increasing lay literacy in these communities than at promoting the more controversial aspects of godly reformation. The case of a new school founded at Sutton Valence (Kent) is interesting in this respect. Here, residents successfully pressured the schoolmaster and his livery company benefactors to teach English alongside Latin, because they thought that would be more economically useful to the local children. Intellectual and theological idealists in the capital could not simply impose their will on such ?backward? village communities.

Such conflicting priorities are the heart of the two final chapters which contain detailed case studies of schools established by London donors in Monmouth and in Kirkham (Lancashire). In both communities the initial foundation appears to have provoked little or no hostility. In the early Stuart period, there seems to have been a largely consensual relationship between the local magistrates and the metropolitan benefactors, whereby schoolmasters were appointed by mutual consent. However, in Monmouth, the relationship broke down during the Interregnum thanks partly to an abrasive London-appointed lecturer who decried the ungodliness of ?poor contemptable Wales? (p. 103). Conflict also erupted in Kirkham, perhaps stirred by the presence there of substantial Catholic and nonconformist populations. Ward admirably traces these two disputes beyond the oft-studied mid-century period into the Restoration era and beyond when conflict over the school left ?the political nation in the locality rent in two? (p. 111). In both cases, Ward presents the reader with a lively cast of characters who clearly disagreed about the proper purpose of a provincial school. The problem for the historian, as Ward acknowledges, is assessing how much of this conflict was caused by ?the politics of personal vendetta? (p. 106) or local power struggles rather than religious disagreement. As he says, it difficult to determine whether the ?the charities were the cause or merely the occasion? (p. 116) of the disputes that arose in these communities. Indeed, some of the most interesting parts of his analysis focus on auxiliary disputes such as argument in Kirkham in the first decade of the 18th century about whether girls should be permitted to study at the school. Relatedly, Ward?s claim that the new foundations were part of an attempt at *national* reformation is not always persuasive. For instance, he quotes a preacher in 1654 calling on his London audience to ?remember the place of our Nativity?, suggesting that those who arrived and grew rich in the metropolis retained a feeling of responsibility towards their old provincial communities (p. 74). But seeking to remit some of one?s wealth and enlightenment back to one?s hometown is not quite the same as seeking nation-wide reform nor is it necessarily an example of ?English nation-building before the era of nationalism? (p. 140). Ward is surely right about the motives of the donors and their trustees in some instances, but a lack of direct evidence in the form of diaries or correspondence make any generalisations about the benefactors? goals highly speculative.

The very diversity of topics that Ward is able to discuss in this short book attests to the strength of the underlying research. All six of the main chapters include at least some material that he has previously published elsewhere, but the range of sources that he draws on here is nonetheless impressive.(2) The records of the Guildhall Library, the London Metropolitan Archives and several private livery company archives allow him to provide detailed analysis of the actions of the key players in London. In addition, he also draws on major national collections, though the lack of any references to material from Monmouth or Lancashire was surprising in light of the importance of those localities to his argument. However, what makes this volume stand out is the way in which he integrates these traditional archival sources with the published literature noted above. This is not always flawless. For instance, his close reading of

Whittington?s cat as a symbol of growing early modern ambivalence about slavery is not especially persuasive (pp. 61?5). Sometimes a cat is just a cat. Yet, the careful analysis of the imaginative tales of Simon Eyre and Dick Whittington alongside freemen?s petitions and schoolmasters? depositions show the powerful resonance of ideas about morality and charity in early modern England. By bringing the tools of both historians and literary critics to bear on his sources, Ward adeptly highlights the long reach of the ?moral economy? and of ?godly reform? in this period.

Overall, although Ward may not quite have the evidence to prove that these charities were part of a ?radical agenda? that had ?revolutionary? consequences for the localities in which they were placed, he certainly shows that they were a key part of the circulation of economic and cultural capital between the metropolis and the provinces (pp. 142?4). The fact that both Londoners and local elites devoted so much time and so many resources to their attempts to control these new establishments suggests that they have not previously received the attention from historians that they deserve. Moreover, these struggles were intimately linked to the evolution of the ?moral economy? in the capital itself, where the responsibilities of newly-enriched citizens were reiterated in new forms. Ward?s book thus provides us with a thorough and well-crafted study that demonstrates the importance of metropolitan charity in the social and cultural changes of the early modern period.

Notes

1. I. K. Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2008). For the urban poor relief system, see P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988); idem., *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).Back to (1)
2. Joseph P. Ward, ?The taming of the Thames: reading the river in the seventeenth century?, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 71, 1 (2008), 55?75; idem., ?Fictitious shoemakers, agitated weavers and the limits of popular xenophobia in Elizabethan England?, in *From strangers to citizens: the integration of immigrant communities in Britain, Ireland and colonial America, 1550?1750*, in Randolph Vigne and Charles Littleton (eds), (Brighton, 2001), pp. 80?7; idem., ?"[I]mployment for all handes that will worke": immigrants, guilds and the labour market in early seventeenth-century London?, in *Immigrants in Tudor and early Stuart England*, ed. Nigel Goose and Liên Luu (Brighton, 2005), pp. 76?87; idem., ?Godliness, commemoration, and community: the management of provincial schools by London Trade Guilds?, in *Protestant Identities: Religion, Society, and Self-fashioning in post-Reformation England*, ed. Muriel C. McClendon, Joseph P. Ward and Michael MacDonald (Stanford, CT, 1999), pp. 141?57; idem., ??The Alehousekeeper's revenge?: London's role in the Reformation process in a Lancashire parish?, in *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Norman Jones and Daniel Woolf (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 113?30; Newton Key and Joseph P. Ward, ?Metropolitan puritans and the varieties of godly reform in Interregnum Monmouth?, *Welsh History Review*, 22, 4 (2006), 646?72; idem., ?"Divided into parties": exclusion crisis origins in Monmouth?, *English Historical Review*, 115, 464 (2000), 1159?83.Back to (2)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1531

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/70561