A. G. Dickens and his critics: a new narrative of the English Reformation

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Abstract
This article considers the debate on the English Reformation triggered by the revisionist assault on the work of A. G. Dickens. It questions the narrow view of Dickens as the protagonist of a ‘rapid Reformation from below’, drawing attention to the far greater subtlety of ideas that permeated Dickens’s early work. Finally, it offers an alternative framework for a new Reformation narrative.

Unlike many of the people who gathered together for the conference in his honour, I did not know Geoffrey Dickens well. In fact, we met only once, when he invited me for lunch in the Senate House dining room in London, shortly after I had taken up my post in St. Andrews. It was a pleasant occasion, and we talked about the debate on the English Reformation. This was, for me, an interesting and memorable conversation, for the debate on the English Reformation had been the central event of my years of training as an academic historian. In 1975, when Christopher Haigh published his milestone monograph on Lancashire, I had just finished my A levels and was on my way to university.\footnote{C. Haigh, \textit{Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire} (Cambridge, 1975).} In 1979 I was just beginning graduate work when Christopher Haigh arrived in Oxford: I was one of the first participants in his informal graduate seminar in which we discussed newly published books, including many that were to be the building blocks of the new history of the English Reformation. While I was still a graduate student Jack Scarisbrick gave the Ford lectures that were to become \textit{The Reformation and the English People}, the first full statement of the revisionist case.\footnote{J. J. Scarisbrick, \textit{The Reformation and the English People} (Oxford, 1984).}

And so it went on. My first academic conference was a meeting in Southampton of what was then known as the Local Reformation Studies Conference, then very much the creation of the generation of students of G. R. Elton who were together re-shaping the archival study of the English Reformation through county studies. This generation of scholarship is well represented in the three volumes of essays edited by
Felicity Heal and Rosemary O’Day, which included many essays by these Elton students, and others. It is not unfair to say that in those days many conceived of a revised, modern understanding of the Reformation emerging from the completion of a patchwork quilt of county studies, and there was much discussion of counties (Shropshire, for instance) that had not yet found their graduate student. Discussion of European topics was not entirely neglected, but included more as a gracious gesture to friends who were kind enough to attend, but were not working on England. A single session after lunch normally sufficed to fulfil this collegial obligation.

In all of this activity A. G. Dickens was a rather spectral presence. To those of us starting out as the debate on the English Reformation took fire, A. G. Dickens was mostly a name: the established authority. He was known to us, and to later generations of schoolteachers, sixth-formers and postgraduates, first for his textbook, *The English Reformation*, and then largely through the revisionist assault on his work. Indeed, since his textbook was by then already well over a generation old, it is possible that many experienced Dickens’s work first through the characterizations of those creating an alternative narrative of the English Reformation. Here one thinks principally of the work of Christopher Haigh, and his influential article on the ’Recent historiography of the English Reformation’ (1982), where Dickens is epitomized as the protagonist of a ’rapid Reformation from below’. I cannot think of any other scholar who has been so effectively skewered by a single phrase. In the intervening decades it has become so widely accepted as the shorthand distillation of his thinking that one still meets it in undergraduate essays today.

I was very much of the generation that was introduced to A. G. Dickens in this way: as the dignified monument of scholarship being subjected to such bracing and exhilarating deconstruction. By 1983 Christopher Haigh was confident enough of the changing balance of forces to declare, in a review of Margaret Bowker’s book on the diocese of Lincoln, that ’the Dickens Reformation is now in tatters’. If that was perhaps premature, there is certainly no doubt that in the following twenty years Haigh, Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy and others effectively rewrote the Reformation narrative. I have to admit, however, that I have always had my doubts. For my own doctoral work I had chosen to study the foreign Protestant congregations established in London during the

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English Reformation, combining the then fashionable local study with my developing interest in the continental Reformation. This gave me a slightly different perspective on events. For however much revisionism was then emphasizing the slow progress of Protestantism, it was absolutely clear that the foreign refugees who came to England in such numbers saw in Tudor England an environment far more sympathetic to dissent than their own continental homelands.\(^6\)

Yet even putting aside this rather particular perspective, I quickly came to doubt whether the historiographical shorthand – the ‘rapid Reformation from below’ – was really fair to A. G. Dickens. In this regard, a powerful statement, although at the time scarcely recognized as such, was embedded in the collection of A. G. Dickens’s essays published in 1982.\(^7\) Drawing together a miscellany of articles published over a spread of some fifty years (1939–89), this work demonstrates a subtlety of understanding that would be astonishing to those who know Dickens only through the discussion of his writings by others. Three aspects of these essays demand emphasis. First, the fact that they range over both English and continental subjects, addressing themes as diverse as the intellectual forces in the German Reformation, the Reformation historian Johannes Sleidanus, and the Edwardian arrears in augmentation payments. Second, they demonstrate Dickens’s command of local archive material, and his recognition of subtle regional variations in the impact of the Reformation. In their descent into the local archive, the Cambridge scholars of the local Reformation were in this respect more faithful disciples of Dickens than of G. R. Elton, whose view of the English Reformation was dominated by the role of a strong central government. (In other respects, in arguing for the importance of a strong Tudor state, revisionism would prove itself very faithful to the Eltonian model.)

Third, these essays demonstrate that Dickens was fully aware that the English Reformation was a troubled and difficult process, often unloved, often resisted, particularly in the north. In two careful and evocative essays in this collection Dickens reviews the career of the Yorkshire cleric Robert Parkyn, whose unflagging devotion to Catholic tradition during the difficult years of mid-Tudor change was charted in the manuscript narrative rediscovered and published by Dickens.\(^8\) Forty years later Eamon Duffy would bring to life a similarly doughty defender of traditional values in the vicar of Morebath.\(^9\) In these places Protestantism did not find easy converts. In his essay on popular reactions to the Edwardian Reformation in Yorkshire Dickens acknowledged this very frankly. This prescient essay begins thus:

\(^7\) A. G. Dickens, Reformation Studies (1982).
\(^8\) Dickens, English Reformation, pp. 247–312.
At no stage of the Reformation were there wanting in Yorkshire manifestations of that conservative outlook which viewed with apprehension the proceedings of the reformers in both church and state. The Edwardian Reformation, with its new liturgy, its dissolution of chantries, religious gilds, free chapels and other foundations, its later confiscation of church goods, inevitably provoked unrest in a society for which the institutions of the church had by no means relapsed into general discredit.\(^{10}\)

This neat encapsulation of much of what came to be the revisionist case was written by A. G. Dickens in 1939.

In many ways this volume was Dickens’s most effective response to the debate on the English Reformation – and some might wish that he had left it at that. By the time it was published (coincidently in the same year as Haigh’s milestone essay on the historiography of the English Reformation) Dickens was seventy-two years old, long into his retirement. And in any case, his intellectual interests had moved on – by this time he was far more engaged with new projects, on Erasmus, and on the first historians of the Reformation, work that found its splendid monument in the volume *The Reformation in Historical Thought*.\(^{11}\) But Dickens was undoubtedly nettled by his critics and determined to re-engage with the debate.

For me the tragedy was that he elected to do so by taking up the argument at his point of maximum weakness – in effect accepting the revisionist caricature of his work as the protagonist of a quick Reformation from below. In preparing his response he engaged the help of his old friend John Fines, who (rather laboriously in the pre-computer age) had been compiling a biographical register of early English Protestants.\(^{12}\) With this ammunition Dickens felt able to re-affirm in an article, published in 1987 with the defiant title, ‘The early expansion of Protestantism in England, 1520–58’, that ‘Having widely surveyed the evidence so far presented, I still conclude that by 1553 Protestantism had already become a formidable and seemingly ineradicable phenomenon in fairly large and very populous areas of marked political importance’.\(^{13}\) A new edition of *The English Reformation* grafted some of this recent material into a fresh chapter which, for good measure, re-affirmed the role of anticlericalism in the English Reformation.\(^{14}\) The vast bulk of the text was unchanged.

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Even though I approach these writings from a position much more sympathetic to Dickens than many, I believed then and still believe that these late works were ill-judged: not helpful to a mature appreciation of Dickens’s work, and not helpful to the subject. For on the central point at issue – the manner in which the events of the English Reformation changed the religious culture of England – the logging of individual Protestants as a sort of primitive opinion poll focused the debate in a manner that was profoundly anachronistic. This was not a democratic age, and raw numbers prove little. John Fines accumulated information for his register of early English Protestants on some 3,000 individuals. But England could have become a Protestant country in some circumstances had there only been 300 (as was probably the case in Sweden), and it could have failed to become a Protestant country even if there had been 30,000 (as may well have been the case in the Netherlands under Charles V).15

Now whether or not one accepts the validity of such European comparisons, it should be acknowledged that in introducing them I am moving away from the contours of the debate on the English Reformation, as it was then conducted. In this respect the descent into the county archives was not without a price. For a period, and with diminishing returns, ever more counties were studied largely from the perspective of whether they exhibited signs of early evangelical activity, or continued devotion to conservative practice. The English Reformation became in every sense, good and bad, more parochial. With the question of religious allegiance apparently settled, scholars turned their attention to recapturing the nature, quality and spirit of life and worship in the English parish, without any longer making the identification of the aberrant heretic their primary concern. The result has been much powerful and evocative work, with Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* the most resonant, but by no means the only distinguished example.16 But few of these works make a persuasive attempt to place this English experience in the wider context of other European societies that also faced the challenges that confronted Church and society in the sixteenth century. One effect of the debate on the English Reformation has been to turn attention inward, and back to a ‘long’ fifteenth century.


To some extent this was a natural consequence of the way the debate had developed, for if it is thought that early German and Swiss evangelism had made comparatively little impact in England, then the study of these phenomena would be less relevant. But the extent of this cultural myopia has become almost wilful. If it can be seriously argued, as it has been in a recent book on English humanism, that attention to the continent is, for an understanding of English Protestantism, positively misleading, then belief in the English Sonderweg has cut very deep indeed.  

Reasoning along these lines has meant that many of the most interesting debates in continental Reformation scholarship have made comparatively little impact on the English historiography. Blickle’s ‘communal Reformation’ and the Schilling ‘confessionalization’ paradigm have no English equivalent, nor is there anything to match Lyndal Roper’s deconstruction of the ‘holy household’. This is a pity, not least because such comparisons are by no means unhelpful to the new Reformation narrative. In Haigh’s slow Reformation one finds interesting echoes of Gerald Strauss’s presentation of the citizens of German villages as reluctant adepts of Protestant evangelism, although Strauss’s stark insistence on issues of ‘success or failure’ now seems over-emphatic. In Robert Whiting’s fine and illuminating study of Devon and Cornwall one observes a similar phenomenon to that noted in recent studies of the progress of the Reformation in German regions: that the potency of the Reformation lay first in its power for destruction, and that this could precede by years or decades any positive identification with the new order. And the study of the process known in Germany as ‘confessionalization’ has many echoes in the recent sustained investigation of the ‘Long’ Reformation in England. In these works the central issue has become how, rather than when, England became a Protestant country, or more properly, a country whose citizens associated themselves with a range of values and practices integral to the new English Protestant identity. Here one must acknowledge the powerful impact of Patrick Collinson’s The Birthpangs of Protestant England, and two fine studies published at around the same time: Tessa Watt’s study of Cheap Print, and David Cressy’s investigation of the symbols of the new Protestant calendar, Bonfires and Bells.

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18 G. Strauss, Luther’s House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation (Baltimore, Md., 1978); G. Strauss, ‘Success and failure in the German Reformation’, Past & Present, lxvii (1975), 30–63.
I think there could be no better way of honouring the spirit of A. G. Dickens’s contribution to Reformation scholarship than by re-integrating English Reformation scholarship into its continental context. I want to sketch a possible way forward along these lines. It will take as read the best of the work generated by the Haigh/Dickens debate, while acknowledging frankly where I feel revisionism falls short. It concludes with what I offer as an alternative outline framework of a new Reformation narrative.

If one observes the early responses to evangelical Protestantism over a wide geographical area, the typicality or particularity of the English experience can be placed in an interesting context. If, for the time being, one confines oneself to the first generation of the Reformation, the period of Luther’s lifetime (1517–46), one can see that the response elsewhere in Europe to the evangelical message emanating from Germany depended upon a variety of local cultural and political factors. Broadly speaking three main elements, working together or against one another, seem to have played a determining role in whether the Reformation would be eagerly embraced, or would fail: the condition of the local Church; the attitude of the ruler; and local social and economic structures. In this last complex two elements seem to have been crucial: the degree of urbanization; and the degree of connection between the local communities and the economy and society of the Reformation’s German homeland.

Such a comparison highlights a number of reasons why England was never likely to be among the first places to develop a vigorous indigenous Protestant movement. England was a rural country, with a comparatively modest intellectual culture. London apart, it was a land of villages and small towns: Norwich and York, second and third cities of England, would have ranked outside the top thirty of the German imperial cities. The English printing industry was small, shallow and undercapitalized, almost entirely based in one city and easily managed by the central regime.22 English printers were technically incapable of producing most of the staples of the old religious life, never mind the scholarly Latin editions that formed the technical bedrock of the new theological debates. The demand for breviaries, Books of Hours and works of theological scholarship, such as it was in England, was satisfied almost entirely by imports. England’s booksellers had such well-established and smoothly functioning relations with the major centres of print culture in northern Europe that there was little incentive to the printers working in England to try to capture a share of this market – particularly as works of devotion demanded (whether through woodcut illustration, musical notation or two-colour printing) the kind of high specifications that required quality

workmanship. England’s printers rubbed along on the sort of work that was so specific to the local market that no continental publisher would wish to be involved, such as English lawbooks, and the sort of vernacular translations of works of literature that first inspired Caxton’s English enterprise; but it was a small and provincial enterprise that bore no comparison with the great continental houses of Froben, Estienne or Aldus Manutius.\footnote{See esp. L. Hellinga and J. B. Trapp, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, iii: 1400–1557 (Cambridge, 1999). Even in the Elizabethan period the English book world was by no means entirely emancipated from this dependence on the larger continental book markets for quality works of scholarship (J. Barnard and D. F. MacKenzie, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, iv: 1557–1695 (Cambridge, 2002), esp. the introduction by John Barnard).}

The community of scholars served by England’s printers and booksellers was also small. England had only two universities, fewer even than Scotland, and neither had the reputation or renown of Louvain, Orleans or Salamanca, let alone Paris, Vienna or Padua. No one has seriously suggested that the quality of the English universities fell drastically below that of continental institutions, but the peripatetic life that was close to the normative experience for students on the continent was logistically far more complex for English students. Neither did Oxford or Cambridge experience the stimulus of competition that came with the foundation of new universities in close geographical proximity, as was the case in several of the major continental cities at this time.

These particularities of English intellectual life need to be considered, although the consequences were not straightforward. England’s relative cultural underdevelopment meant that, on the one hand, there were not the same obstacles to the reception of a German movement that existed in, for instance, Spain, Italy and France, each with its own highly developed indigenous cultural and intellectual tradition. Against this, England, in 1520, was simply not as connected in economic and cultural terms with the first Reformation heartlands in the German empire. Lands that were, like Hungary, Bohemia and the Habsburgs’ Austrian territories, soon to become the Wittenberg movement’s second home. In the circumstances it is rather remarkable that English intellectuals were able to play any part in the first Reformation debates, which they certainly did, through the role of John Fisher and others in anti-Lutheran propaganda.\footnote{R. Rex, *The Theology of John Fisher* (Cambridge, 1991); R. Rex, ‘The English campaign against Luther in the 1520s’, *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., xxxix (1989), 85–106.}

This in itself considerably raised the profile of English universities on the continent.

The Reformation also found the going tough because much of the analysis of local German problems that won Luther a wide audience for his criticisms of the pope had little real resonance in England. By European standards the English Church was well and effectively organized and well led. Its bishops were well-qualified men who took
their duties seriously; and the exercise of temporal rule, so potent a part of the political landscape in Germany, was not an issue in England: English dioceses, especially in the south, were compact enough for good administration, but large enough to generate a decent income, avoiding the extremes of unwieldy, unmanageable units (such as in the Netherlands, where diocesan boundaries were badly antiquated) or dioceses so small and impoverished as to be hardly worth obtaining (as was the case in the south of France). Parish priests seem, on the whole, to have had the respect of their parishioners. It is now a debated question whether lay people in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe were scandalized by clerical concubinage. In some parts of Europe it seems to have been an absolutely ordinary part of the landscape, in others it was very uncommon. England tended very much towards the second model.

From this generally optimistic audit of English Church life one can identify two elements susceptible of closer analysis. First, I am uncertain what part scholars now believe monasteries played in English Church life before the Reformation. Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* is rightly praised as a wonderful evocation of parochial religion, but if English laypeople were now pouring their devotion, their emotional energies, and not least their money into parish religion, what was left for the religious houses? Had monasteries now drifted to the periphery of English devotional life?

The destruction of the monasteries in England was so brutal and (notwithstanding the modest re-foundations under Mary) so final that, not surprisingly, most scholarship has concentrated on these immediate events: the dissolutions, their victims and the subsequent division of the spoils. But if one casts one’s attention back before these tumultuous events, then the condition of England’s religious houses and their role in society still requires careful analysis. On one level, by calling into question the validity of purgatory and intercessory prayer, the evangelical challenge struck at the heart of the theological underpinnings of the whole monastic system. But in reality, it seems questionable whether the monasteries had for a considerable time relied upon such a direct association with core theological doctrines to earn their place in society. In any case, by the first decades of the sixteenth century the proliferation

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25 The problem of antiquated diocesan borders in the Netherlands (and the logical, although controversial, scheme of reform undertaken by Philip II in 1561) is well illustrated by the paired maps in *De Kogel door de kerk? De opstand in de Nederlanden en de rol van de Unie de Utrecht, 1559–1609*, ed. S. Groenveld and others (Zutphen, 1979), pp. 70–1.


27 These remarks are influenced by the developing work of my student Eliot Wilson, who is conducting doctoral research on the new foundations of religious houses under Mary Tudor. I am grateful to him for permission to develop some of these ideas here in advance of the completion of his work. C. F. J. Clark, ‘Reformation and reaction at St. Albans abbey, 1530–58’, *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, cxxv (2000), 297–328.
of altars and confraternities gave laypeople the means to focus their concerns for the health of their souls in institutions much nearer to hand. It is hard to resist the impression that in England, and in many other parts of Europe, monasteries now played a marginal role in the restless search for salvation that occupied the thoughts of many laypeople.

That did not necessarily make the monasteries immediately vulnerable. Evangelicals approached the issue of purgatory and intercessory prayer with considerable circumspection, perhaps sensing that this was a doctrine and practice that English men and women were scarcely ready to give up. The attack on monastic life focused far more on the familiar allegations of abuse and laxity. But the lack of any strong theological imperative may help to explain why the monasteries were not more urgently defended, and why the re-foundation of Mary’s reign – following on from the much more explicit attack on purgatory in Edward’s reign – was so half-hearted. Eliot Wilson has calculated that of more than 1,000 ex-religious who survived into Mary’s reign, fewer than three per cent took up the opportunity of joining one of the new foundations sponsored by the queen and her pious associates. Many had, of course, found alternative employment by 1553, but it hardly counts as a ringing endorsement of the religious vocation from which they had been so untimely separated by her father. Perhaps it would have encouraged them had the Marian government stopped their pensions.

Second, there is an unresolved tension between the new presentation of the parish as the centre of the religious life of the lay community, and the fact that many communities were multi-parochial. A complex web of communal observances, processions and confraternities centred on parish devotion makes sense where there is a clear identity between community and parish, as was the case in many English villages and middle-sized continental towns. But English towns were often made up of a large number of tiny parishes: London had over 100, York twenty-four, Bristol eighteen and Norwich forty-six. This peculiarity of local Church organization is, I think, insufficiently recognized when issues of religious identity are discussed. Some parts of Europe had a parish structure similar to the English model. In Italy, for instance, Pisa had forty-four parishes and Rome around the same number. But in other European cultures many considerable cities consisted of only a very small number of parishes. Hamburg had four, Leiden only two intramural parishes, Wittenberg only one, Geneva three.

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29 Communication from Simon Ditchfield, University of York.

These disparities – basic, but as yet largely unremarked – must imply very real differences in the way religious life was organized. In the one model, represented by English villages and many large cities on the continent, one could postulate a genuine identification between parish and community: the religious life of the community could legitimately be expected to find expression through parish institutions. In the larger, multi-parochial English towns, religious identity must have been far more complicated: one discovers a complex, layered society of multiple identifications – with parish, with the city community and with cross-parochial institutions such as a confraternity – organized on a vocational or simply social basis. The convenient shorthand ‘parish religion’ does little justice to the complexity of this situation and to the ways in which the call for reform or renewal might impact upon different parts of a rich and complex religious life. In particular such a multi-polar religious life was far more susceptible to competition – for loyalty, or commitment of time and resources – that opened the way towards disharmony and discord. Institutions which were instinctively on the same side of larger debates might find themselves in a far more corrosive relationship over the battle for scarce resources in troubled times. The classic example of this was the behaviour of many urban authorities who, while they had exhibited no prior enthusiasm for reform, often joined enthusiastically in the plunder of confraternities once their theological justification had been called into question by central government.\(^{31}\) As Ethan Shagan has recently observed, the cause of religious change was often advanced by those whose motives were far removed from the theological priorities of the partisans of reform.\(^{32}\)

The debate on the English Reformation has had many valuable consequences, not least the encouragement of the systematic study of the impact of the evangelical agenda over a much longer timeframe. There is, in the study of all European Reformations, Protestant and Catholic, now a mature understanding that to change the mind habits of the mass of the population is a matter of generations, if not centuries. In assessing the nature and success of such reforming initiatives it is important not to be bamboozled by the ritualistic despair of sixteenth-century preachers, inveighing against the obduracy of an ungrateful people. What is manifested here is the rhetorical model of the preacher as prophet, not the sober analysis of the social historian. English preachers had some very severe reflections about the quality of the people they served, and their denunciations of vice, ignorance and wilful resistance to change have been seized upon by scholars who look for evidence of the slow impact


of Protestantism. But the preaching clergy of Elizabethan England were in this respect no different from their continental colleagues, who warned incessantly against the decadence and vice that has been the enemy of true religion in every age. John Calvin was no exception – indeed, since his sermons were widely circulated in Elizabethan England, he may have been the model. And English divines could at one and the same time uphold Geneva as the unattainable model of a righteous society and eagerly consume Calvin’s own denunciation of his local congregation as a people wallowing in vice and wickedness. They saw no contradiction because, in the rhetorical traditions of the day, there was none.

To ask that the printed evidence be carefully contextualized – in both a literary and historical sense – is not, however, to deny the undoubted benefit that we now see the English Reformation as an extended event, or series of events. At one level this is no more than to bring the English Reformation into the continental mainstream – although there has not yet been a wholly convincing attempt to test the confessionalization model, which shaped discussion of the ‘Second’ Reformation in Germany for at least two decades, in an English context. But there is also a cost involved in the discovery of this English ‘Long’ Reformation, and that has been the relative neglect of events before 1559 – the period that A. G. Dickens regarded as the core of the English Reformation. In some respects (and not without a certain irony) revisionism here has mimicked the role of the sixteenth-century Protestant iconoclasts – smashing the old edifice of the Dickens Reformation without erecting a very convincing alternative in its place. The systematic under-valuation of the Edwardian Reformation is the most obvious consequence, but I also note a failure to provide a persuasive alternative narrative of events during the reign of Henry VIII. So in the last part of this article I want to turn back to this, the heart of the Dickens Reformation, and see where we now stand.

To exponents of the revisionist narrative of the Reformation, the reign of Henry VIII seems to pose a seemingly irreconcilable mass

34 This, for instance, from Calvin’s sermon on Micah: ‘How sad it is that nowadays there is among us more unbelief and impiety than has ever been seen before, and that this is so plain to be observed. In truth the Lord makes his Grace available to us in as much abundance as one could ask, but we trample it underfoot . . . The world is so disorderly that the impiety I can see in Geneva today is of such enormity that it is like seeing down a chasm into the very mouth of Hell.’ This was the reformer’s own perspective on the ‘perfect school of Christ’ (translation from Calvinism in Europe, 1540–1610: a Collection of Documents, ed. A. Duke, G. Lewis and A. Pettegree (Manchester, 1992), p. 33).
of contradictions. England was a country with a deep, rich and richly enjoyed religious culture, large parts of which were too easily, even casually, surrendered. The belief in purgatory, the honouring of shrines, miracles and saints, the practice of pilgrimage, all highly valued parts of English religious culture, were all, once assailed in the turbulent fifteen-thirties, tamely given up. This to me is the central conundrum that Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* failed to answer, partly perhaps because the author found it almost too painful to address. In the last part of that book Protestantism finally rears its head – nasty, brutish and destructive. But one does not have to believe that England’s early evangelicals were numerous to acknowledge that they were remarkably effective and, in their own way, courageous. Iconoclasm, which was often the first and most obvious manifestation of the new way, was not vandalism, but a most effective and powerful form of devotion. What could be destroyed in one opportunistic night was the work of many months or years to restore; and for this work of restoration neither the money, nor the will, was always forthcoming.

And what of the king? It is with the task of explaining the motivation of Henry and his closest intimates that recent work has been most ingeniously inventive and, in my opinion, most unpersuasive. According to some recent work, the Henrician Reformation can be seen as a prototype of a new brand of Catholic reform or reform humanism, shaped either by a circle of Catholic reformers close to the regime, or by the king himself. This re-interpretation is an attempt to draw out the threads of reformist writing circulating in England at the time, some of it influenced by Erasmus, to explain how rapid institutional change and conservative theological principles could co-exist, and indeed, were always intended to co-exist. Thus the king’s policies could be supported by those of a conservative bent, even while evangelicals were persuaded that the future lay with them. When conviction flagged, fear or ambition did the rest.

This new synthesis, emerging in the work of Lucy Wooding and George Bernard, is in my view deeply flawed; but it does serve a useful purpose in pointing up the difficulties of a presentation of English events without reference to parallel events on the continent. I imagine that even Henry VIII’s most ardent defenders would concede that the events of the last months of his life, when the ageing king destroyed the careful balance of his council by disgracing the most powerful leaders of the orthodox faction, are hard to reconcile with this view of a policy of intended consequences. Certainly, its effect was to hand the initiative to a group

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in his council with strong and well known links to evangelicals. But even before this Catholic calamity, the cumulative impact of events had been such that it is hard to see with what vision of Catholic reform they can be reconciled. Viewed from the perspective of, let us say, 1539, the impact of a decade of Henrician initiatives constituted a record of which any German Protestant prince would have been proud: the Crown and the new Church hierarchy had between them denigrated purgatory, the cult of saints and pilgrimages, devalued treasured shrines and cults, cast doubt on five of the sacraments, abolished the monasteries and confiscated a large proportion of Church property to lay use, introduced an English Bible and made acknowledgement of the head of the Catholic Church, the pope, a capital offence. One could hardly have expected as much from Philip of Hesse or John George of Saxony.

The so-called Catholic reaction of the fifteen-forties reversed none of this structural change, despite the conservative theological statement of the Act of Six Articles. There was little persecution, and few evangelicals in positions of influence lost their places.\textsuperscript{39} Compared to the drastic deterioration of conditions for evangelicals in France and the Netherlands at this time, the Henrician reaction was mild indeed. And it was very short-lived.

The question now posed is whether this torrent of adjustments to old practices can be presented as consistent with Catholic reform. This case has indeed recently been made with reference to the works of Erasmus, and other Catholic thinkers, who in less contentious times advanced frank criticisms of the institutional Church, whether this was for the failings of the clergy or the over-exuberance of late medieval devotion.\textsuperscript{40} But here context is all: a frank analysis of clerical failings may be acceptable if the underlying unity of the Church is unchallenged. The same utterances take on a different hue when they are taken up by the leader of a schismatic Church who has denounced the pope as antichrist. Erasmus himself was not slow to realize that, in the world as reshaped by Luther, his more frivolous satirical writings were out of place. And it is hard to believe that had he lived he would not have been appalled by the destruction, violence, executions and hardship that accompanied the assault on the English Church.

So we are left with a double paradox: the Catholic king who pursued an agenda of change that, wittingly or unwittingly, prepared the way for a thoroughgoing evangelical Church by compromising much of the fabric of traditional religion; a Catholic population for whom the rich texture of their religious life was deeply and fully lived, but who swiftly accepted the rather arbitrary removal of important aspects of this culture, and

\textsuperscript{39} There is an important and convincing narrative of this period of Catholic reaction in D. MacCulloch, \textit{Thomas Cranmer: a Life} (1996), pp. 297–348.

\textsuperscript{40} Wooding.
moved on. The latter behaviour is the more easily understood. The point has been made many times that the changes of Henry’s reign were incremental in character, their ideological underpinnings uncertain, their end purpose unknown. This was reason enough for English parishioners to accept with dull resignation the changes to their traditional worship, as this was to varying degrees imposed by local priests, bishops or magistrates – although we have now been asked to recognize that this acceptance was also often accompanied by a swift recognition that the shift in government policy could also be turned to advantage.  

It is harder to absolve the Church hierarchy. For them the crucial moment should have been the repudiation of papal authority, for this was both a fundamental abrogation of their status and a key time of emotional convergence with European Protestantism. For Martin Luther, the repudiation of the papal condemnation of his writings was the decisive point of no return in his dispute with the Church in Germany. The appeal to the authority of a general council was a useful camouflage, but would have fooled no one: particularly not when Luther in his writings began to identify the pope as antichrist. With these events and utterances Luther had established the route to schism and separation. Issues like the validity of indulgences were perfectly capable of resolution, even theological fundamentals like justification by faith could be the basis of reconciliation, as was demonstrated at Regensburg in 1541.  

The crucial question was that of authority: for however much goodwill existed in such colloquies and conferences, contemporaries recognized that there was no such thing as Catholicism without the pope. By taking the country outside the papal obedience Henry associated England with parallel events in Europe in a manner far more telling than his private or public enunciation of theological differences with Luther. In this context English evangelicals were surely right to hitch their star to the turbulent, volatile figure of the king, for – unwittingly or no – he was doing their work. Far more questionable was the judgement of men like Stephen Gardiner, who persuaded themselves that the king’s policy offered the route to a coherent English Catholicism.

If the Henrician Reformation still eludes a post-Dickensian synthesis that makes sense of its relationship with continental events, that can no longer be said of the Edwardian Reformation. The events of Edward’s reign have never fitted comfortably into the revisionist narrative, and the major revisionist texts are at their most unconvincing when dealing with events in this short, but exceptionally creative, period of

41 Shagan.
English government. Taking his cue from M. L. Bush, who thirty years ago argued that Protector Somerset was so preoccupied with management of foreign affairs – principally his campaign in Scotland – that he had little time for religious concerns, Christopher Haigh presents an unflattering portrait of the duke, whose commitment to Protestantism he believes was essentially tactical. If Protestants seized the initiative they did so more through an oversight than an act of policy. This accidental Reformation fell quickly into confusion and disarray; with Somerset dead, and the ruling council at odds with leading Churchmen, the death of Edward VI allowed Englishmen to put behind them the turbulent experimentation of the last five years and return to their accustomed beliefs.

Yet, whatever the disappointments felt by Cranmer and his colleagues at the end of the reign, this presentation of the Edwardian Reformation as a calamitous and unsuccessful experiment contrived by a small governmental clique would have made no sense to contemporaries. The significance of English events was lost on no one in sixteenth-century Europe – whether on the Catholic or Protestant side. Events in England after the death of Henry VIII were followed with a close interest in all the major centres of European Protestantism, not least because England represented a rare beacon of hope in an otherwise gloomy time. The early fifteen-forties had been a period of sustained persecution for evangelicals in both France and the Netherlands, leading to the virtual collapse of the previously promising evangelical movement in these places. In Germany the death of Luther in 1546 was followed swiftly by the victory of Charles V at Mühlberg and the capture and imprisonment of the leaders of the Schmalkaldic League. No wonder the providential accession of a Protestant regime in England seemed so timely, and that Protestant Europe’s leading lights bent all their efforts to shape the emerging Protestant settlement.

Nor did contemporaries share the modern scepticism about the motives of Protector Somerset. When, in 1549, the protector was deposed by a cabal of his council colleagues, alienated by his high-handed style of government and the civil disorder of the summer revolts, English and continental reformers showed a tenacious loyalty that went far beyond what was politically prudent. Leaders of the foreign Protestant community in London were among those who stood by the duke at his execution in 1552. And when later in that decade the leaders of the Genevan reform were designing a new commemorative calendar to replace holidays associated with the discredited saints, the date of

46 Haigh, *English Reformations*, pp. 168–83, esp. p. 170: ‘Somerset had blundered into a total ban on images in London, and he had got away with it.’
47 See also John Calvin, *An epistle both of consolation and of advertisement to Edward Duke of Somerset* (1550) (Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed 1475–1640 (1926), no. 4407).
Somerset’s execution – 22 January – was one the few English events to merit commemoration.48

These indications of contemporary continental opinion must be taken seriously – and it is certainly the case that a re-evaluation of the Edwardian Reformation in recent years is beginning to create a more balanced picture, one more in keeping with judgements made at the time. Thanks to the work of Diarmaid MacCulloch, Stephen Alford and others, we now have a much more refined understanding of the motives and identities of those who pushed reform forward with an almost reckless rapidity.49 Building on Susan Brigden’s magisterial analysis of the role of London, one can see that the circle of those who favoured reform, while not large, was both politically powerful and strategically placed.50 A highly committed group close to Somerset, the lord protector, working in close partnership with Archbishop Cranmer, built links with the London printing industry, London companies and the inns of court, and provincial elites. The pace of change was both extraordinarily rapid, and extraordinarily sustained. And it was sustained by a remarkable level of theological coherence: those who worked with Cranmer to dismantle the old Church and erect a new Church in its place were well versed in the practice of the leading Swiss and German Churches. Where their expertise was lacking they made good the deficiency with invitations to the leading continental reformers to assist them. Several, such as Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr Vermigli, came in person; others sent their advice and writings, and expressed their solidarity in dedicating published works to leading figures of the new Edwardian establishment.51

The speed with which the Edwardian political regime collapsed in the face of Mary’s claims of legitimacy in 1553 should not disguise the enduring importance of what had been achieved, in both a positive and negative sense. While the statutory instruments of policy could be rapidly reversed on Mary’s accession, the depredations on Church property and fabric were not so easily made good. But a start could certainly be made, and there is no doubt that the new Marian regime set about the task with energy and, in the first years at least, a high degree of public goodwill.

51 John Calvin, Commentaria in utranque Pauli epistolam ad Timotheum (Geneva, 1548), dedicated to Protector Somerset; John Calvin, Commentaria in epistolae canonicae (Geneva, 1551); John Calvin, Commentaires sur le prophète Isaïe (Geneva, 1552), dedicated to Edward VI; R. Peter and J.-F. Gilmont, Bibliotheca Calviniana: Les oeuvres de Jean Calvin publiées au XVIe siècle (3 vols., Geneva, 1991–2000), i. 48/9, 51/5, 52/2.
The leaders of the Edwardian Church were swiftly removed, the foreign theologians despatched abroad, and the structure of the Protestant Church settlement dismantled. But with the Mass once again being celebrated the length and breadth of England, the question of what precisely Mary and her advisers intended for English religion becomes more difficult. What was the nature of the Catholicism that was to be restored – or rebuilt – or crafted from those elements of traditional religion that had survived, or could be resuscitated? There was much, after all, that could not. The statute restoring the Roman obedience famously made clear that monastic property would remain in the hands of its present possessors, so one enormous aspect of the fifteenth-century religious landscape would never be restored. Was this, then, an opportunity to create a new sort of Catholic Church – leaner, fitter, attuned to modern continental thinking: a beacon of reform Catholicism as the Edwardian Church had been to Protestants?

The answer is that we do not yet know. In some respects the failure to deepen and develop analysis of the Marian restoration of Catholicism has been one of the major disappointments of the last twenty years. Since Rex Pogson first proposed his re-evaluation of the reign, and Jennifer Loach analysed the Marian parliaments, it is hard to see that we have progressed much further in understanding the spirit that motivated Catholic renewal in England. Revisionism has been generous to Mary. The misfortune of her death is often emphasized, but it hardly seems a sufficient answer to the question of how the regime would eventually have succeeded in creating a healthy, enduring Catholic culture – and what shape that Church would have taken. Of course, the failure to conceive an heir was a terrible blow – but the regime seems to have had no other plan for the preservation of the Catholic succession. The last best chance to secure it was probably lost with the decision not to execute Elizabeth after Wyatt’s rebellion. With that, shortly followed by the exposure of Mary’s phantom pregnancy, the nature of the reversionary interest seems to have been fairly clear. For Protestants abroad, and for their conforming sympathizers at home, this was sufficient encouragement, even if the date of Mary’s death could not have been precisely anticipated.

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53 Here it bears emphasizing that in Europe two lands whose rulers never wavered in their commitment to Catholicism – France and the Netherlands – were plunged into serious crisis by the growing threat posed by religious dissent in the 1560s. It is by no means certain that, had Mary lived, all would have been well.

54 Certainly not by John Knox, who with almost comically calamitous timing published his First Blast against the Monstrous regiment of Women just a month before Elizabeth’s accession.
But even when the crippling handicap of a hostile reversionary interest is brought to bear on the question, it is by no means clear what Mary and her advisers had in mind. Was it a pre-Reformation spirituality, in which case accepting the loss of the monastic lands to their new lay owners as the price of the Roman obedience was a crucial, unrecoverable concession? Or was it infused by the new spirit of continental Catholicism, in which case why was not more made of the new religious orders?

Of course there was little time; the dismantling of the structures of the Edwardian Protestant polity was a necessary priority, and by the second half of the reign Philip’s continental military commitments were consuming energy and resources. But so much of what was done did little to build for the future. The crusade against married priests was a strangely puritan obsession on an issue that even Charles V had conceded was not essential to a well-ordered Church. And by 1556 the most visible sign of Catholic renewal was the burning of heretics. Mary was not a well-travelled woman, but her husband would have been able to tell her that, as a means of building the faith, burning dissidents did not work; and that it put intolerable strains on the local communities required to take responsibility for carrying out such policies. It is often said that Philip was against the executions; why then did they persist? The intellectual heart of the Marian Reformation remains, to say the least, elusive.

The collapse of the Edwardian regime had been greeted with relief by many; but five years later Mary, it seems, was not greatly mourned. All eyes turned to the new queen; yet it is interesting that, whatever the debate on the Elizabethan settlement, then or since, there seems to have been no question to contemporaries that with the new queen would come a new, Protestant Church. The precise nature of that Protestantism remained unclear, and the opacity sown by Elizabeth (partly, in the first months, to give her breathing space to consolidate her power) has prepared the way for a vigorous scholarly debate. But contemporaries looked, shrewdly enough, at the people who surrounded her, and they concluded that whatever the precise shape of the Church settlement, it would certainly bring England back into the Protestant fold. For the people who now congregated around Elizabeth (and indeed, had in many cases graduated towards her before Mary’s death) represented the survivors of two interlocking clientages: the Boleyn connection, and the leadership of the Edwardian regime. Both were closely associated with the reformist cause; this much was clear even before the Marian exiles hurried back to take their appointed place on the bench of bishops. The

restoration of the Edwardian Church order, modestly modernized, demonstrated how much had been achieved by the first architects of the Protestant Church in the earlier reign; the comparatively lean pickings to be had from a new round of confiscations and dissolutions of monasteries and confraternities were a sign of how little of the traditional fabric of the pre-Reformation Church Mary’s reign had really been able to restore.

Many of these latter remarks point up gaps in the scholarship, and much still remains to be done. But one can see emerging from the sound and fury of the debate about Dickens and revisionism the outlines of a new narrative of the English Reformation. This new narrative should recognize the radical effectiveness of the early English Reformation in the work of dismantlement. In this context, Henry VIII’s eventual mix of Catholic theological elements with a reformed Church structure was intellectually incoherent, unstable and unsustainable. It should recognize how few of the reformist advances were lost in the fifteen-forties, a time of ominous revanchist symbolism, but little effective action against reformers. Finally, it should acknowledge the effectiveness of the Edwardian Reformation in reshaping the English Church. The influence of the Edwardian Reformation was, at the time, recognized throughout Europe, and it established what would be the essential structures of a Protestant polity that drew deeply from the experience of the leading continental evangelical churches. This policy was a coherent project pursued by a small cadre of nobles, lawyers and clergy with significant support among provincial elites and total control of the printing press.

The most significant achievement of the Marian Counter Reformation was the restoration of royal authority and financial stability. Despite the queen’s personal commitment, the partial quality of what was attempted revealed the limited intellectual horizons of Marian Catholicism. This was a short reign, and its creative opportunities were shorter still, once the inevitability of Elizabeth’s succession was acknowledged. For in 1559 no one doubted that Elizabeth’s accession would see the introduction of a fully Protestant Church.

The nature of this Protestant identity revealed itself quickly in the restoration of the Edwardian Church settlement. But if one is to understand the process by which the English people came to adopt this Church as their own, one must look beyond the questions of theological understanding that (rightly) obsessed Elizabethan preachers to more subtle cultural indicators: the way in which people embedded the practices of the new Church into issues of life, death, family and community life; and the emergence of English anti-Catholicism. In many respects this picture differs from that painted by A. G. Dickens in 1964. But I doubt if it would be one of which he would greatly disapprove.