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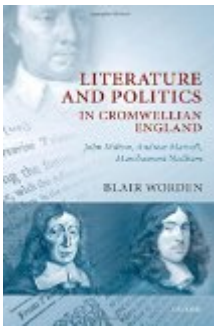

Blair Worden. *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xv + 458 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-923081-5.

Reviewed by Anne McLaren

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Commissioned by Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

When, in the 1980s, J. G. A. Pocock theorized a history of discourse, he urged scholars to recover the "languages" used by past political actors in their writings. That archaeological feat would give us access to "the present of practical necessity in which [they] found themselves," without which our understanding of past political worlds remains both superficial and always in danger of anachronism.[1] Blair Worden has spent a long and distinguished career heeding this call. He has been particularly interested in challenging the conventional perception, still reasonably deeply entrenched in the academy, of imaginative and political writing as fundamentally discrete enterprises. "Political thought," he notes, in his characteristically elegant prose, "is a modern conception, which can obscure the engagement of the practitioners who are claimed for it with the practical dilemmas of choice and emotion that confronted them" (p. 104).

By creating a dialogue between literary texts and political discourse of the Interregnum, *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England* does much to recapture the meaning and intensity of those engagements. Methodologically it follows on from *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney's 'Arcadia' and Elizabethan Politics* (1996). There Worden brought a nuanced understanding of the Elizabethan polity and his capacious knowledge of early modern imaginative writing to bear on Philip Sidney's pastoral romance. That book succeeded in illuminating both worlds, as only the best interdisciplinary work can do. Now he turns his attention to the mid-seventeenth century, and specifically to the writings of John Milton, Andrew Marvell, and Marchamont Nedham. Worden is an acknowledged expert on the period and has written extensively on the three authors. This book brings together much of the work that he has published in various forms over the past fifteen years and develops a rich and satisfying synthesis.

All three men--two deemed "immortal writers" and one until recently generally dismissed as a time-serving hack--were actively engaged in the public sphere during these most tumultuous years (p. 1). All three took to print, in verse and prose of

different genres, to reflect on and shape current politics. Worden's premise is that focusing on their lived experience and tracking commonalities in their writings will shed new light on them, their texts, and the rapidly changing "present of practical necessity" that thinking people confronted during a period when all was in flux. His starting point is that enough evidence exists of the interconnections between them--"of Milton and Marvell, of Milton and Nedham, and of Marvell and Nedham"--for us to be able to "assume the existence of a triangular relationship" (p. 11). Outlining its contours will leave us "unable to doubt the excitement of the talk among our three authors about the relationship of literature to politics, and of books to life" (p. 11). That hypothetical conversation smacks of anachronism to me, but certainly it is true that we will now, thanks to Worden, have a much better sense of how the three men's paths crossed and recrossed in ways that left definable imprints on their writings. To take one example, in one of the most suggestive of the close readings that fill the book, Worden advances new evidence for the theory that Milton had a hand in producing the editorials that Nedham wrote for the parliamentary newsbook *Mercurius Politicus.* Although we may never know exactly how writing by Milton got into *Politicus*--no feature of literary activity of this period is "harder for us to reenter than the practice of collaborative authorship," Worden reminds us--it testifies, at least, to a "close working partnership" between the two men that was predicated on their shared political beliefs (pp. 45, 204-213).

To foreground this triangular relationship, Worden begins with a chapter on Nedham, followed by chapters on Nedham in relation to both Milton and Marvell. These introductory chapters are followed by three chapters that explore Marvell's political poetry against the backdrop of his, and Nedham's, transition from royalist to Cromwellian writers. The remainder of the book then focuses on Milton as he writes his way through the Interregnum and into the Restoration. Worden ranges freely between the poetry and the prose, and again, as with Marvell, reads the writings with and against Nedham's polemical works. Worden's earlier research has been instrumental in establishing Nedham's significance as an innovative political thinker.[2] Now, examining Nedham's writings in conjunction with work written by Marvell and Milton in response to the same situations leads him to affirm the range and, at points, the subtlety of Nedham's thought. Like Marvell, he too is capable of "complexity, ambivalence, and contradiction" (p. 91). On the whole, however, Worden privileges Marvell's and Milton's quality of mind, finding Nedham irredeemably "practical," lacking both the "ardour" and spiritual intensity that he recognizes in Milton, and the multifacetedness that he attributes to Marvell (p. 226).

Worden is equally keen to preserve, and privilege, the distinctively literary character of Marvell's and Milton's poetry, even relative to their prose. Once we have assimilated the parallels and similarities between, for example, Nedham's prose propaganda for the Cromwellian regime and Marvell's poetic celebration of Oliver Cromwell's first year as Lord Protector in "The First Anniversary," we will be better positioned to "wonder" at the irreducible distance that separates the latter from the former (p. 9). His own wonder is nowhere more apparent than in his reading of Marvell's "Horatian Ode"-- a poem that he knows well and about which he has written before.[3] "It is a miracle of the ode to create, in a polarized world, a bi-polar language, at once direct and deceptive," he concludes, and few readers will be able to resist his eloquent response to the poem (p. 101). The final chapters follow Milton's career into the Restoration, where comparisons with the writings of "commonwealthsmen," preeminently Edmund Ludlow and Algernon Sidney, provide the basis for a thoughtful reading of *Samson Agonistes* and an attempt to resolve the

mystery of when Milton wrote the famous "Digression" to his *History of Britain.*

The book is thus, as he calls it in the preface, "an exercise in literary biography, but with a difference," the difference being that Worden locates the men and their writings in convincingly realized political contexts (p. vii). Over these years he sees them engaging with three main political conflicts that gripped the political nation as a whole. The first was how best to protect the revolution from the forces of royalist reaction. This continued to dominate politics at least until Cromwell crushed Charles II's forces at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. Before, and after, conflict emerged within Roundhead ranks over a related issue, between those committed to a radical reforming agenda as the only means of preserving revolutionary integrity and more conservative forces, often identified with "Presbyterianism," religious and political. If any consistency is to be found in Nedham's notoriously volatile political alignments, Worden argues, it will be in that "serial turn-coat's" willingness to embrace any force capable of stymieing a "Presbyterian ascendancy" (p. 30). Worden is particularly good on the third conflict. This one occurs when "Great Revolutions" throw up a charismatic military leader who then assumes the reins of government. "Citizens! the Revolution is made fast on the principles on which it began; *it is finished*," Napoleon declared on becoming First Consul in 1799, and debate has raged from that day to this over whether that extraordinary man embodied or betrayed its essence. In the English context, that conflict became acute once Cromwell came to power as Lord Protector in 1653. Within the ranks of the revolutionaries it pitted those who accepted or even embraced his new model government against those who regarded it as the death knell of what then came to be called the Good Old Cause. In Worden's words, from the beginning, "Cromwell's government was divided ... between statesmen who hoped, and those who feared, that the inauguration of the protectorate would be the first step in a return to hereditary--though now Cromwellian--monarchy," and he succeeds admirably in conveying the sense of betrayal experienced by men like Milton, Marvell, and Nedham as the Cromwellian juggernaut gained ground (p. 145). His depiction of how political exigency forced them to write in support of a regime about which they remained, at best, profoundly ambivalent, together with his analyses of the peculiar textures of the resulting writings, with their esoteric and exoteric layers of meaning, are among the most satisfying passages in this dense and thoughtful book.

Notes

[1]. J. G. A. Pocock, "Introduction: The State of the Art," in *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly on the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-37, 13.

[2]. See especially Blair Worden, "Marchamont Nedham and the Beginnings of English Republicanism, 1649-1656," in *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649-1776*, ed. David Wootton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 45-81; and Blair Worden, "'Wit in a Roundhead': The Dilemma of Marchamont Nedham," in *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England: Essays Presented to David Underdown*, ed. Susan Dwyer Amussen and Mark A. Kishlansky (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 301-337.

[3]. Blair Worden, "Andrew Marvell, Oliver Cromwell, and the 'Horatian Ode,'" in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Kevin M. Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 147-180.

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