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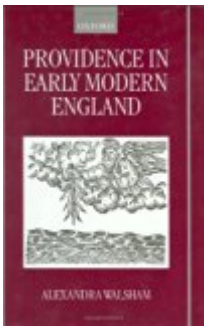
Alexandra Walsham. *Providence in Early Modern England.* Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xviii + 387 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820655-2.



Reviewed by Lori Anne Ferrell

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On 26 October 1623, nearly one hundred people, gathered in illegal assembly in London to hear Jesuit preacher Robert Drury, died when the jerry-rigged chapel in which Drury was preaching collapsed. With its combination of gruesome and unexpected death, outlaw religion, and local color, this "fatall vesper" was an irresistible, immediate news topic for the yellow journalists of the early seventeenth century. Soon thereafter, writers of numerous printed sermons and tracts (the "op-ed" pages of their day) interpreted the structural collapse at Blackfriars in the context of current events: it was clearly a "providential" act, divine retribution for James I's toleration of Catholics and his pursuit of a marriage alliance with Hapsburg Spain.

It is this desire to explain the inexplicable, to affix blame for and find meaning in accidents and disasters, that underpins the thesis of *Providence in Early Modern England*. Alexandra Walsham opens this intelligent and persuasive book with a new twist on an old theology. She expands the social reach and the cultural expression of the Calvinist doctrine of providence: the idea that God was "an assiduous, energetic deity who constantly intervened in human affairs" (p. 2). Walsham contends that arguments in favor of Providentialism were hardly limited to the university library, nor were its adherents to be found only in the minuscule and cliquish ranks of the puritans. Instead, Providentialism was "part of the mainstream, a cluster of assumptions that enjoyed near universal acceptance" (p. 2). Belief in (and a fascination with) Providential explanations united elite and humble, conservative and evangelical, educated and ignorant, commercial and unworldly, and the just and the unjust alike in post-Reformation England.

Walsham reminds us that even the hotter sort of Protestantism was promoted through such sensationalist tactics. "Zealous Protestantism could, in the broadest sense of the word," she writes, "be a popular religion" (p. 325). In this book, it is a popularity amassed through a variety of media: for every illustrated tract describing the birth of a two-headed baby in Chichester or a headless black bear rampaging through the bedrooms of Somerset, we find a hair-raising pulpit orator de-

termined to wring a lesson from such current events. Walsham also pays close attention to the sometimes poignant, sometimes gratuitous providential messages that enlivened much cheap print: the moral of stories that might otherwise pander solely to baser instincts. Her twin themes of Providentialism's persistence and ubiquity are based in an impressively thorough analysis of England's slow transition from oral to print culture that links high-minded sermons, low-minded ballads, and luridly illustrated tracts across a vertical axis of confessionally- and morally-oriented explanations.

Arguing for the general appeal of this particular doctrine, Walsham bucks a recent trend in English religious historiography by redirecting our scholarly attentions to Protestantism's success in early modern England. In contrast to older histories that located that success in the reformers' demand for a break with a superstitious and credulous past, however, Walsham ingeniously and counterintuitively argues for Protestantism's adaptive, syncretistic properties, its ability to attach more innovative doctrines like predestination to a delivery system fashioned from familiar attitudes and providential explanations. In doing so, we might say she has constructed a rebuttal to Christopher Haigh's ***English Reformations*** out of the elements of his own method: the very "slowness" of reformation seen as calculated asset rather than resistant liability.

Walsham's exegesis of Protestant doctrine thus requires her readers to understand not only the doctrine of Providence, but even Calvinism itself in "broadest sense," which in the pages of a less exhaustively-researched and astutely-documented book might have quickly deconstructed into mushy, indiscriminate cultural description. Her depiction of England's religion avoids the one-size-fits-all trap that looms before all historians determined to find models of consensus and continuity in pre-civil wars Britain. Widespread and generally accepted as Providentialism may have been, in Walsham's treatment it takes on an uncanny specificity when harnessed to early modern political events and doctrinal temperaments. Walsham analyzes her sources with an eye for detail and nuance, detecting complicated religious messages in accounts of "straunge" herrings, warlike starlings, and murders most secular in intent. The approach allows her to document the advent of religio-political crisis, as hot professors and prayer book Protestants alike detected the hand of God at work in a world increasingly afflicted with awful prodigies and woeful events.

It also allows her to peer around the Protestant-Catholic religious divide to descry the swift breakdown of Protestant-Protestant relations in this period. While most early modern men and women agreed on the evidences of ***digitus dei***, Walsham argues, their interpretations of providential events characteristically differed. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, celebrating recent deliverances from Armada and Gunpowder Plot, patriots found religious expression in tracts and sermons extolling "anti-Catholic Providentialism" (p. 280). By the 1620s, this "volatile" cultural attitude, once so useful in uniting English Protestants, served mainly to distinguish English Calvinists from English anti-Calvinists. Here Walsham has provided us with yet another measure by which we can identify parties at war within a Church and State reportedly dedicated to consensus and moderation.

Providence in Early Modern England is that rare accomplishment, a cultural history that doesn't merely pander to the academic cultural-tourist trade. Walsham has more on offer than quaint stories, "merrie olde" attitudes, or a Tudor-Stuart rework of ***Weird Tales***. First, and perhaps most important in a world filled with uninspired, painstakingly pedantic scholarly writing, ***Providence*** displays authorial verve: a stylishness of prose that always delights and occasionally astonishes. Walsham's research is impressively comprehensive (and documented in footnotes rather

than endnotes, Oxford University Press' editorial style-sheet Be Praised); her explanations of early modern theology lucid; her use of modern theory appropriate and helpful; her consideration of the social and cultural assumptions of early modern folk humane. In sum: this is a book that manages to be complex, demanding, AND compulsively readable -- and all in the service of historical theology, *mirabile dictu*.

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