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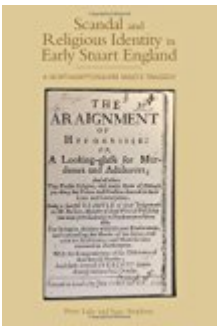

Peter Lake, Isaac Stephens. *Scandal and Religious Identity in Early Stuart England: A Northamptonshire Maid's Tragedy.* Studies in Modern British Religious History Series. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015. 403 pp. $99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-014-9.

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As the title and subtitle suggest, *Scandal and Religious Identity in Early Stuart England: A Northamptonshire Maid's Tragedy* by Peter Lake and Isaac Stephens is simultaneously narrow and ambitiously broad in scope. Section 1 explores rival accounts of the tragic and squalid affair between John Barker, puritan vicar of Pytchley, and his niece Barbara, which brought them both to the gallows in July 1637 after Barbara had borne their child and strangled it on the advice of her maid, who was hanged too. Section 2 uses private sources to reconstruct the religious mind-sets of three Northamptonshire contemporaries. The authors subject all these texts to sensitive and exhaustive analysis and contextualization. Their book is exploratory and polemical in equal measure. Their aim, spelled out in the introduction, is to challenge any picture of a broadly consensual Protestant mainstream, a picture that is artificially created by consigning either puritans or Laudians to marginality and insignificance.

The authors accordingly have numerous targets in their sights, among them Patrick Collinson, Peter White, Kevin Sharpe, Christopher Marsh, Judith Maltby, and Christopher Haigh. But their heaviest guns are aimed throughout at Alec Ryrie's *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*. Ryrie argues that when we look at the "lived experience of religion in this period," the supposed differences between puritan and conformist dissolve, and "even the extremes do not differ" very much.[1] Devotional writings, he urges, provide a surer guide than doctrinal or polemical works, and reveal a broad-based, largely consensual religious culture. Lake and Stephens reject both propositions. Their Northamptonshire evidence, they insist, demonstrates the exact opposite: that the public, partisan representations of the Barker affair match very closely how puritans and anti-puritans understood themselves and their opponents, as revealed through private letters, a diary, and a spiritual autobiography. This, they maintain, was a church deeply divided, indeed polarized.

The story of an adulterous puritan minister and his "godly" niece hanged for infanticide be-

fore a huge crowd provided a wonderful opportunity for propagandists. "The Northamptonshire High Constable," a tract in dialogue form, showed a countryman and minister discussing both the case and its wider significance. The minister explained how Barker's crime and gallows "performance" proved the puritans' hypocrisy and the dangerously antinomian implications of their creed, before going on to set out the Laudian understanding of true faith and religious practice. The tract was clearly intended for the press. Its title page claimed that it was "calculated for the torrid zone of Northampton-shire" but would serve for all of England, a formulation borrowed from the ubiquitous almanacs of the period and intended to underline the wider applicability of its message. Though it remained unpublished, with the authorities anxious to cool public debate, copies circulated locally. More striking, however, is an astonishingly bold attempt by local puritan ministers to transform this propaganda disaster into something positive for their cause. Puritan ministers guided Barker, tormented and contrite, into accepting that his faith hitherto must have been merely outward and worthless. But as he awaited the gallows, he found at last a truly saving faith, and on the scaffold presented his story as proof that even the most wicked sinner could find grace and ascend to heaven. Convinced that he was indeed one of God's elect, he used his dying speech to edify as well as warn the watching crowd. The puritan narrative of this scene is remarkably close to the Laudian version on matters of fact. In dispute were not the facts but their interpretation.

Section 2 explores the private letters of the Laudian minister Robert Sibthorpe, the diary of the puritan lawyer Robert Woodford, and the spiritual autobiography of the gentlewoman Elizabeth Isham. Though none referred to the Barker case, Sibthorpe's letters and Woodford's diary mirror the polarized religious mentalities found in the rival texts examined earlier. Sibthorpe expounded the beauty of holiness and the necessity of order, and damned puritan hypocrisy and divisiveness. Woodford gadded to sermons, agonized over his faith and his sins, and viewed Laudian "idolatry" with alarm. Both saw the church as under threat, while holding diametrically opposite views on where that threat lay. Barker left no writings, but in an earlier chapter the authors examine sermons preached at the Kettering lectures (where Barker himself had been a lecturer) by the puritans Robert Bolton and Joseph Bentham. These too emphasized the gulf that separated the godly from the worldly and profane, the merely "civil and honest," and even formal, "outward" Christians. The godly should beware of the threat these all posed. That, Sibthorpe would have countered, confirmed his charge of puritan divisiveness and arrogance. Isham's autobiography, brought to our attention by John Fielding and now attracting attention from literary scholars and historians alike, adds another intriguing dimension. She was raised in a cloistered, godly household, and her struggles to find a sense of saving faith and grace appear quintessentially puritan. But Isham gave little weight to preaching; her faith grew out of her reading, private devotions, and rigorous self-scrutiny. She respected the family's puritan chaplain, Robert Dod, while readily rejecting his guidance when she disagreed with it.

The authors use their substantial conclusion to reassert and develop their central thesis. Puritans and anti-puritans alike saw a church deeply divided and under threat. There was no Protestant mainstream, and never had been. The characteristics and values of puritans and Laudians, as depicted by their opponents, turn out to be startlingly close to those revealed in their own private writings. Far from being artificial constructs of their enemies, they were qualities both real and internalized, expressed in belief and behavior. Moreover, they point out, many "devotional" tracts had begun life as sermons. Lake and Stephens assail their opponent in language that sometimes goes beyond robust debate and can

feel patronizing and dismissive (for example, p. 367n21). Some editorial intervention here would have been welcome. But Lake and Stephens seek to build as well as demolish. Instead of looking for a chimerical Protestant mainstream, they urge, we should see a church that from its very inception contained strongly conflicting elements. Rival forces periodically sought to push it closer to their own ideals, in "struggles for the soul of the English national church" (p. 363). Both puritan and Laudian attitudes were, they suggest, in part responses to pressure and attacks from the opposing wing. The authors accept, though, that their picture of a highly polarized church is only one part of a more complex pattern of religious attitudes and behavior. The texts under examination here offer only very limited insight into the religious culture of all those, clerical and lay, who identified with neither extreme, and critics may ask how far the religious climate of the 1630s can illuminate earlier decades. Lake and Stephens are confident, however, that "country divinity" and "prayer-book Protestantism" are both inadequate labels to characterize the diverse religious mentalities of the period. Faith and behavior could be shaped by both the personality and the circumstances of the individual. Isham serves as their example here, fashioning an intense, domestic, female-centred devotional life in which both sermons and parish services played only secondary roles. John Taylor the water-poet comes to mind as another example, constructing a hybrid set of beliefs and practices that would have discomforted Sibthorpe and Woodford alike. Ryrie also acknowledges, we might note, that his Protestant godly "were a diverse bunch."[2]

The authors do not explain their division of labor. Stephens is an authority on Isham and no doubt had a significant hand in that chapter. Lake has published previously on the Barker case. The text displays some of Lake's characteristic stylistic traits, mixing the demotic and arcane; we have Barker's wife "putting the kibosh" on his plans and Woodford described as a "clerical groupie" (pp. 27, 214). The book is well produced, with relatively few typos, though proofreading standards slip noticeably in the later chapters, as so often is the case. While the textual analysis is exhaustive, the authors never lose sight of their central arguments, reiterated regularly with clarity and force. Their penetrating analysis of the Northamptonshire tragedy and its ramifications is skilfully linked to their thesis of a deeply polarized religious climate in the 1630s. I found their picture of a long-term, cyclical struggle for the soul of the church broadly persuasive too. This is an important book, and one guaranteed to trigger further lively debate.

Notes

[1]. Alec Ryrie, ***Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

[2]. Ibid., 9.

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