Few popular historical images have proved more durable than the one that this relatively brief and wonderful book confronts: on October 31, 1517, the rebellious Augustinian friar and theology professor Martin Luther, in a courageous act of conscience, nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In doing so, he not only called into question the theology and authority of the Roman Catholic Church but also struck a blow for liberty and individual conscience, laying one of the crucial foundations of modern Western civilization. In the recent observances of the five hundredth anniversary of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, few images were as widespread as Luther posed before the door, hammer in hand.

It is now more than fifty years since Erwin Iserloh challenged the historicity of the *Thesenanschlag* (the actual physical act of posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*). In the first two chapters, the author examined the evidence for (quite slight) and against (very considerable) an actual physical posting of the theses on the church door, at least on the eve of All Saints’ Day. It is much more likely that Luther first sent the theses to Albrecht von Hohenzollern, archbishop of Mainz (whose ascent to that position, quite unbeknownst to Luther, helped to set in motion the Indulgence Controversy that prompted the theses); it is, however, a little unclear whether or not Luther actually sent them on October 31 or some time later. If the theses were in fact ever posted on the church door, this may have taken place at a later date, perhaps in frustration at a lack of response from the archbishop. What is not in doubt, of course, is that Luther’s theses became ever more broadly known in late 1517 and early 1518, whether or not they were actually nailed to the door. What emerges as equally certain is that, contrary to the widely perceived mythos, there was nothing at all revolutionary or daring about the theses. Not only did Luther not question the validity of indulgences or the authority of the pope, but the great hallmark of Luther’s Reformation—salvation by faith alone—also does not appear in them. Luther would later disparage his theses as displaying his “weakness and ignorance,” for “in many important articles I was not only prepared to yield to the pope, but beyond that I even honoured him” (p. 58). Nevertheless, looking back from later in his life, Luther himself (not to mention his many followers and admirers) would date the beginning of his opposition to Rome to 1517 and the *Ninety-Five Theses*.

This is of course well known to specialists in the field, and (if they have been paying attention in class) to students in courses on the Reformation. What then is the justification for revisiting...
an old, largely settled, and (according to some) trivial debate? This book is very much more than an academic debunking of popular stereotypes. Peter Marshall uses the details surrounding the alleged Thesenanschlag and the reception of the Ninety-Five Theses to illustrate the origins of the Reformation in the hostile reception of the theses, rather than in Luther or the theses themselves. In a manner accessible to the non-academic reader, the author masterfully and painstakingly examines the construction of the theses as the genesis of the Reformation. All this is a very concise, useful, and accessible account, but more than that, the rest of the book is concerned with the afterlife of the Thesenanschlag: to elucidate “the cultural history of an imagined event,” to “explore[e] how a ‘non-event’ ended up becoming a defining episode of European history,” and to “follow a fascinating trail through the changing meanings of Luther and the Reformation, along the fractures and fault-lines of the modern historical imagination” (pp. 13, 16).

The final three chapters are ostensibly organized around successive centenary celebrations of the Ninety-Five Theses in 1617, 1817, and 1917. (The commemorations of 1717 are folded in with those of 1617.) More than that, however, these chapters detail the evolution of perceptions of the theses and their supposed posting, and their relevance to perceptions of Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the relationship between the two. The commemorations of 1617 were in fact the first “large-scale modern centenary” (p. 86.) Tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Germany were high and growing, and would shortly erupt in the Thirty Years’ War. This put a premium on pan-Protestant solidarity and on drawing sharp distinctions between Protestants and Catholics. In conscious imitation of Catholic jubilees (an act of “theological piracy” [p. 88]), Protestants throughout Germany sought to reaffirm the divine provenance of their movement through commemoration of Luther’s revolt: “The Reformation, as we know it today, was in a real sense discovered in 1617” (p. 91). Contemporary circumstances decided that it had begun in 1517 with the Ninety-Five Theses, rather than with other, perhaps more logical milestones: Luther’s burning of his Bull of excommunication in 1520, or his dramatic defense at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Even now, however, the Thesenanschlag itself was not the focal point, nor indeed did the date of October 31 figure prominently. Depictions of Luther were rather allegorical in nature and focused on his role in restoring the Gospel rather than on any purported historical event.

The first actual depiction of the Thesenanschlag dates from 1697, and shows Luther supervising the posting rather than doing it himself. These depictions now became more common, without, however, assuming a dominant role in the iconography. The commemorations of 1717 were more exclusively Lutheran and ecclesiastical than those of a century earlier, and were complicated by the fact that the elector of Saxony, the descendant of Frederick the Wise, who had protected Luther, had converted to Catholicism in order to be elected king of Poland. There were celebrations in Wittenberg and elsewhere in Lutheran Germany, but it was in the Lutheran Kingdom of Denmark that the occasion was most lavishly observed.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, war, and the flowering of German romanticism and nationalism, the commemorations of 1817 saw the emergence of yet a different Luther. Luther became a “non-dogmatic, liberating, and patriotic” figure who “freed the German people from spiritual bondage, just as the liberal idealists hoped to free them from political repression by reactionary princes” (pp. 115, 120). Yet the Thesenanschlag itself, though widely accepted as historical fact, had not yet achieved its iconic status as the moment that initiated the Reformation. In Britain and the United States too, Luther now began to appear the champion of liberty of conscience, a fact reflected in Wittenberg’s develop-
ment as a site of tourism, although once more, the doors and the *Thesenanschlag* were not the focal points they would later become. Focus on the doors themselves was enhanced by their reconstruction, completed in 1858. (The Castle Church itself, along with its doors, had been badly damaged by fire in 1760 and again in 1813.) Growing emphasis on the *Thesenanschlag* was reflected in the visual arts and literature, where it was constructed “as a deed of boldness and valour, both mirroring and defining the heroic greatness of the man who undertook it” (p. 149).

The commemorations of 1917 were of course both muted and very different from the hopeful and confident image that had emerged in the nineteenth century. In the midst of a brutal war, within Germany Luther now became a symbol of German resistance and unity, which required some artful dodging in order not to offend German Catholics and Germany’s Catholic Austrian ally. In Britain and the United States, several views of Luther emerged. On the one hand, American Catholics pointed to Luther as the wellspring of Germany’s autocracy and aggression, while Protestant views emphasized the necessity of rescuing Luther from the Germans, noting that Germany had misappropriated and twisted Luther’s message. The question of Luther’s responsibility for Germany’s *Sonderweg* was of course magnified during and after the Third Reich and the Second World War. The Nazis were able to appropriate Luther as an embodiment of the German *Volk*, aided in large part by Luther’s anti-Semitic writings, which had previously been largely ignored, and many German Lutherans played prominent roles in the “German Christian” movement. If the Nazi regime had emphasized the congruities between Luther and Adolf Hitler, so did the victorious allies, and many Germans too now forsook their previous admiration. There was at the same time, however, a conscious attempt at rehabilitation both in Germany and abroad. In the English-speaking world, this is most evident in Roland Bainton’s highly sympathetic biography, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, published in 1950. In a variety of film and stage treatments, the *Thesenanschlag* was portrayed as a “seminal moment in the democratization of religion” or “a declaration of independence for the autonomous individual” (pp. 186, 188).

It was in this context that Iserloh in 1961 first declared that the *Thesenanschlag* was a legend. In Germany, this prompted significant controversy and debate, heightened by the fact that Iserloh was also a Roman Catholic priest, whom German Protestants accused of trying to “rob them of a cornerstone of their cultural identity” (p. 190). Outside Germany, the reaction was less acrimonious, and although many historians came to doubt the historicity of the theses-posting, the consensus opinion seemed to be that it hardly mattered, as the origins of the Reformation were increasingly seen transcending one hammer-wielding German monk.

Where does this leave us? To be sure, the author has led us through an enlightening and convincing discussion of the elaboration of a historical and cultural myth. But in the end, is it anything more than a sideshow? Does it really matter whether or not Luther actually posted the theses on the church door on October 31, 1517? The author makes an utterly convincing case that it does. If Luther actually posted the theses as the popular image would have it, he “has already initiated a movement of public agitation, setting himself up in opposition to the Church authorities, whose blessing of an execrable indulgence campaign represents a symptom of a deeper failure of leadership.” If he only “posted” or sent the theses to the archbishop, and publicized them after he felt he had been let down by his superiors, then he is a “responsible (if impassioned) Catholic theologian, concerned for the probity of his Church, and anxious for it to convey its teaching on penance in a doctrinally correct way” (p. 205).

As a last word, and as testament to the enduring power of historical memory, one could do no
better than to quote from the website of the German National Tourist Board: “it has been 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Although there is no historical proof of this happening, it was an event that changed the world” (p. 202).

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