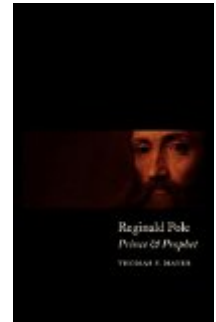


**Thomas F Mayer.** *Reginald Pole: Prince and Prophet.* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xv + 468 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-37188-9.



**Reviewed by** Margaret McGlynn

**Published on** H-Albion (July, 2001)

## A Prophet in His Own Time

This biography of Reginald Pole will invite comparison with Diarmaid MacCulloch's recent biography of Thomas Cranmer.[1] Though the books are visually similar, and both Cranmer and Pole played an important role in the English Reformation, the differences between the men are far greater than the superficial similarities, and the same can be said for their biographies.

Pole's life was lived in a number of contexts; he was a cousin of Henry VIII, a major figure in the European reform, and Mary's advisor and archbishop of Canterbury. In addition to his many roles, however, Mayer argues that Pole's biography is complicated by the nature of the sources about and by him. Pole was a prolific writer, but refused the appellation, arguing that he never wrote to publish. Partly for this reason, the authorship of works attributed to him, and his circle, is confused. Further, Pole and his contemporaries wrote and rewrote his life story, both during his life and after his death. As a result of all of this textual revision, Mayer argues that "Pole always existed in two phases, the life as lived and

the life as written" (p. 3). Rather than trying to evade this difficulty, Mayer has chosen to build his biography around it, giving equal focus to the texts and the man, and hoping that the juxtaposition will help to explain both. This ambitious aim has spawned more than simply the biography, which stands as the keystone to an entire Polian edifice.[2]

The decision to give text and man equal room leads Mayer to open the biography with Pole's most famous work, the *De unitate*. Written in 1535-36, this was Pole's response to Henry VIII's demand for his opinion on the divorce. With this text Mayer establishes the ambiguity of Pole's relationship to Henry and to papal authority, as well as the nature of Pole's identity as one of the spirituali, and the various prophetic and familial personae that Pole creates for himself in the course of his writing. Mayer argues that Pole's rhetorical attitude was often playful, but that the element of play in his writing was often misunderstood or overlooked. These are themes that recur throughout the book. Having analyzed the text, the chap-

ter then moves back to look at the circumstances of its composition and Pole's education.

The rest of the volume follows Pole through his European career. Following the writing of *De unitate* he was appointed cardinal, given a legation to England, and took part in the commission that produced the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*. Pole's legations to Henry in 1537 and 1539 were well-funded but accomplished little, demonstrating that Pole's strengths did not lie in diplomacy. His failure did not harm his standing in Rome however, and in 1541 he was appointed legate to Viterbo, where Mayer argues that he was quite successful. Pole saw his time in Viterbo as a period of leisure and learning, and here Mayer examines the community that he gathered around himself, their activities and their ideas. Pole was next appointed legate to Trent in 1542 and again in 1545, when he left Trent to avoid defending his ideas on justification. Mayer argues that this departure "to avoid face-to-face conflict followed by a writing ... fits Pole's pattern" (p. 154). Despite this pattern Pole's standing in Rome remained high, and in 1549 he came within a vote of the papacy. Following his election, Julius III appointed Pole to the inquisition, a post which Pole quickly abandoned, Mayer argues, because he objected to the inquisition's harsh manner of proceeding. Given Pole's views and those of his circle, the loss of influence within the inquisition was impolitic, but Mayer sees it as another example of Pole's unwillingness to deal with controversy and confrontation.

Following the accession of Mary in 1553, Pole's career entered its final stage, as he faced the opportunity to bring England back into communion with Rome. Mayer argues that Pole fumbled the chance through his unwillingness to deal with those holding monastic property, but that he made real progress with reforming the English church. The election of Paul IV and the breakdown of relations between the pope and Philip II made Pole's job increasingly difficult, as did grow-

ing concerns over his orthodoxy in Rome. Mayer argues that Pole accomplished a good deal under difficult circumstances before his death on November 17, 1558.

The last two chapters of the book focus on the construction of Pole's image after his death. Chapter nine takes us neatly back to the problems with which Mayer opened the book; the difficulty of disentangling the written word from the lived experience. This chapter follows the story from Pole's death to the twentieth century. It also discusses Pole's graphic image through the same period, somewhat less successfully, as Mayer raises issues of Pole's gender identity that have been otherwise absent in the biography. Chapter ten is a catalogue of images of Pole, and the conclusion gives a final consideration of Pole's rhetorical style and his gender orientation.

This is not an easy book. For those who are not already familiar with the broad outlines of Pole's life, it may be difficult to follow.[3] This biography is concerned with drawing the links that lie below the surface of such a narrative, setting Pole's life in the nest of his relationships with people like Contarini, Morone, Priuli, Bembo, Carafa and Vittoria Colonna. An astonishing amount of work has gone into tracing those networks, and the density of the narrative can be dizzying at times. However, it provides a remarkable richness of context, and allows Mayer to draw a character of formidable complexity. He paints a picture of Pole as an influential thinker, a conscientious and tolerant reformer, a warm and sustaining friend and a prolific writer who was, admittedly, a bad diplomat and politician. Mayer concludes that "Pole had greatness thrust upon him and it missed" (p. 439); what strikes the reader is how effectively Pole avoided greatness. He was placed in numerous positions of influence, importance and opportunity, and regularly fled them, only to be offered another chance. Mayer argues that Pole "succeeded best in private away from the public stage" (p. 442), but given his birth, his

education, and the times, it seems that Pole never had the option of privacy.

#### NOTES

[1]. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996).

[2]. Thomas F. Mayer, *A Reluctant Author: Cardinal Pole and his Manuscripts* (Trans. Am. Phil. Soc., 89:4); *The Correspondence of Reginald Pole*, ed. Thomas F. Mayer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Thomas F. Mayer, *Cardinal Pole in European Context: a via media in the Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

[3]. The brief overview in Mayer, *A Reluctant Author*, may be helpful.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Margaret McGlynn. Review of Mayer, Thomas F. *Reginald Pole: Prince and Prophet*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5273>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.