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The People and Post-Revisionist Reform

Ethan H. Shagan burst upon the academic scene in 1999, when he published an article on the "Protector Somerset and the 1549 Rebellion" in *The English Historical Review*, his analysis of nine letters sent by Edward VI's government to rebels in East Anglia and the midlands, which he discovered among the Yelverton Manuscripts in the British Library. His article provided a post-revisionist explanation for the Lord Protector's failed policy of appeasement (of making serious concessions, rather than sending troops and hanging the rebel leaders, as Henry VIII had done during the Lincolnshire Rebellion and the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536). Somerset and the rebels entered upon intricate negotiations, of tailoring their messages in light of each other's perceived demands, Shagan argued, which ultimately cost the Lord Protector the support of England's landed elite. Shagan's article stimulated a debate with M. L. Bush and G. W. Bernard in a subsequent issue of that venerable journal, and moreover, it established his own reputation as something of an enfant terrible among the rising generation of Tudor historians.

His new book, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, continues along some of the same lines that the "Protector Somerset" article drew. There he was concerned with the authority of the king's uncle and his use of power at the expense of the local landlords, and here Shagan has extended his horizons to explore some of Reformation England's inherent ambiguities in its conflicting claims of authority. The "people played an important role in choosing what sort of Reformation they experienced and constructing the meanings of that Reformation in their communities," and Shagan sets out to examine how ordinary English subjects "received, interpreted, debated and influenced" religious change in the first quarter century of the reforms (p. 22).

By carefully reexamining many of the manuscript collections that have long been the main sources for scholars (including the mountain of material associated with the Pilgrimage of Grace from the Public Record Office [PRO] and the dauntingly large "Prebendary Plot" dossier in the...
Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), he has emerged with gems. To cite one example, in the papers of the Court of Star Chamber in the PRO (made famous by G. R. Elton's *Star Chamber Stories* [1958]), Shagan has discovered that Anne Askew's brother ordered the plunder of a chapel near one of the family's residences in Lincolnshire in 1544, only two years before she was burnt for heresy (p. 246).

Such diligence has also been amply rewarded in his discussion of the case of Elizabeth Barton, also known as the Nun of Kent, who was, Shagan tells us, "the living antithesis" of Henry VIII's supremacy over the English Church (p. 79). By issuing frightening prophecies as to what the realm might expect from God's vengeance should the king marry Anne Boleyn, she marshaled leading courtiers and her vast clientele of clergy into a potential "protest movement" that pitted divine authority against the king's (p. 72). Once Barton's reputation for holiness was undermined by the government's successful propaganda campaign (resulting in her execution in 1534), her allies were left not only vulnerable, but unable to mount a coordinated defense on behalf of the Catholic cause. Shagan too, in his fifth chapter, on the dismantling of Hailes Abbey (which had been a favorite of pilgrims for its "Blood of Hailes," a crystal vial reputed to contain a sample of Christ's own blood), and his discussion of the dissolution of the chantries in chapter 7, provide fascinating fresh material and interesting discussions about motives behind iconoclasm and spoliation by the laity.

Shagan's book, however, also exhibits some deep methodological problems, in that he claims for his work a certain exclusivity that cannot essentially be supported in all details. Consider his definition of "popular politics," which, he writes, refers simply to "the presence of ordinary, non-elite subjects as the audience for or interlocutors with a political action" (Shagan's emphasis). Nearly any political action by peasants was "popular," since their attentions were directed towards the king and his auxiliaries, whom they asked to "legitimate those actions." What defined popular politics was "the extent to which the governed played a role in their own governance" (all p. 19). This explanation, though, does not really get at the heart of what Shagan means by "popular," nor by "politics." He does not open up these terms for discussion as, for example, Patrick Collinson did for the word "popular" (for a slightly later period) in *The Religion of Protestants* (1982). Not even "elite" nor "non-elite" is explored here, a puzzling omission, for certainly even a humble cottager might be a miniature king in his own household and hold sway over its inmates. Because Shagan has been led by the unavoidably miscellaneous nature of his manuscript sources, his lack of definition leads him to wrestle with a wide variety of events and circumstances, which gives his book the appearance of a loose-knit collection of essays.

Readers will be nonplused by his assertion, as he concludes the volume, that in focusing on "sources where ordinary people can be observed playing an active role in the drama of the Reformation," and not merely as the "hapless recipients of religious change," he has presented "a narrative which acknowledges for the first time that the Reformation was necessarily based, like all aspects of Tudor government, on the collaboration of the governed" (p. 307). For the first time? Hardly. To explore that essential issue has been one of the longest themes in the study of the English Reformation, and to Elton and Collinson, we can add the names of A. G. Dickens, Susan Brigden, and Eamon Duffy (as well as many others), all contributors to that great endeavor. Indeed, in 1970, M. E. James concluded his seminal article on "Obedience and Dissent" during the Lincolnshire Rebellion (*Past and Present*) with the observation that despite the execution of its leaders, the grievances of the rebels ultimately proved successful in shaping some policy, for certainly their hated Thomas Cromwell did not long outlast them.
Not only have previous scholars noticed the intricate ways in which Tudor governments responded to their subjects, but Shagan is operating in the midst of a community of letters that, unfortunately, he seems to choose to ignore (Professor Bush said much the same thing during The English Historical Review debate), though perhaps he does not mean to leave the reader with that impression. What may be new, it is true, is Shagan's presentation of his material in a trendy post-revisionist mode. But what is post-revisionism anyway, other than a convenient Humpty Dumpty term, like post-modern, that can mean precisely as much (or as little) as its user wishes? Shagan declares that the "archetypal conversion narratives" of Saints Paul and Augustine lack sufficient nuance, and lead to "inevitable confusion as historians have reduced complex cultural processes to debates over the success or failures of impossibly totalising revolutionary agendas" (p. 309). Instead, he wishes to provide "more subtle models" to analyze the Reformation, borrowing from the ambivalence of James Joyce's "alter ego," Stephen Dedalus, in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Is this a helpful approach? Is Paul not, in some sense, indispensable, if only as a cultural referent? Joyce would not surrender the classics or his knowledge of religious thought in order to achieve his masterpieces. If anyone has any doubt that the great conversion narratives lack no nuance, I would invite them to view how adroitly Collinson uses them in his newly released book The Reformation (2003). If one discards most of the old essential landmarks upon which a common consensus of scholarship and culture have been based, then certainly much of what follows is bound to look new. Popular Politics has just been awarded the Whitfield Prize by the Royal Historical Society, which tends to be given to young scholars on the rise. Certainly, this book is filled with a young man's achievements, and a young man's vaunts. Shagan has presented a re-fashioned study of the ever-engrossing interplay between the governed and the governors of the early English Reformation, as he continues in his progress toward becoming an enfant prodigue.
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