John Bunyan and His Times

Few historians can match Professor Richard Greaves's familiarity with the world of Restoration dissent and the sources necessary for understanding it. John Bunyan has been among his primary interests since the 1960s, when he published a study of Bunyan's theology. Glimpses of Glory is a professional summation of sorts: a wide-ranging study of a critical religious figure of the seventeenth century enriched by the author’s scholarly lifetime of reading and research. It is informed both by the wealth of new writing about Bunyan stimulated by the 1988 tercentenary of his death and by the new editions of Bunyan’s work released in recent years by Oxford University Press. Serious interpreters of Bunyan will need to deal with this book for a long time to come.

Although Bunyan has become marginal to the reconstructed literary canon, he remains a fascinating figure and writer. A largely self-educated tradesman—though according to Greaves, a better educated tradesman than was once thought—he nevertheless became one of the most widely read authors of his day. A lay preacher of few means and of fewer pretensions, he composed works that remain best sellers in multiple editions, translations, and media long after much of the formal theological writing of his age has been forgotten by all but specialists. In Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), Bunyan constructed one of the most compelling of all Protestant conversion narratives. In The Pilgrim’s Progress (1678, but written earlier), he turned his personal spiritual journey into a guide that many Protestant pilgrims have found useful. Above all, Bunyan wrote in a plain, evangelical style that continues to draw devotional readers into essential matters of heart and soul. And his biography introduces students to such critical historical experiences as the popular sectarianism of the 1650s, the religious coercion of the 1660s, and the great debates about church and state of the 1670s and 1680s.

The strength of Greaves’s work—and one of the characteristics that chiefly differentiates it from other recent academic studies of Bunyan, like those of Christopher Hill and Michael Mullett—is the historical contextualization to which he has subjected all of Bunyan’s authorship. He transcends the genre of intellectual biography by examining every Bunyan text—whether major or minor, whether published or unpublished—in the light of its times and of the appropriate scholarly literature. Greaves’s first substantive chapter, for instance, deals with the extended period of despair in the 1650s that is central to the conversion story that Bunyan tells in Grace Abounding. Greaves not only explores the surviving evidence about Bunyan’s recurrent spiritual angst, but in an extended analysis somewhat reminiscent of Erik Erikson’s Young Man Luther, he also interprets Bunyan’s obsession with his doubt and sin in light of contemporary psychological literature about depression and other mood disorders. Similarly, the question of when Bunyan began the composition of Pilgrim’s Progress is considered against the background of recent scholarly attention to the political and literary assertiveness of dissent in 1667-73; and many of the episodes in Bunyan’s allegory
are carefully related to political, social, and ecclesiastical experiences of the early Restoration or to Bunyan’s own experiences at that time. In some instances, Greaves’s careful contextualization of compositional circumstances leads to the suggestion of new dates for individual pieces: a more precise dating of every text in the Bunyan corpus (summarized in a useful appendix) is, in fact, one of the purposes of the book.

One of the most important general points to emerge from Greaves’s close reading of Bunyan’s life and writings is how conventional labels have distorted the rather fluid world of Restoration dissent. Although scholars generally refer to Bunyan as a Baptist, for example, he could not be fully claimed either by Particular or General Baptists (who disagreed about predestination), because he did not regard the adult baptismal rite as essential for membership in a godly congregation. An “open-communion, open-membership Baptist” (p. 214), Bunyan argued that the profession of a lively and active faith was the sole requirement for congregational membership. His own contacts and friendships extended to Fifth Monarchists and especially to those Independents who had the strongest reservations about the Restoration Church of England. He was comfortable preaching in and attending Independent churches, and he encouraged fellow nonconformists to commune with dissenting believers of different persuasions. But unlike many Presbyterian and some parochial Independent clergy who had once held church livings, Bunyan was unable to find any good in the restored Anglican order, which he rejected entirely as a false church. In fact, the “popery” of an Antichristian establishment that coerced conscience and deadened faith through its formality and uniformity disturbed him far more than the Roman “popery” that so troubled others.

In many ways, Greaves’s Bunyan bears resemblance to the plebeian prophet of Christopher Hill’s tercentenary biography, a figure with which many academic readers are comfortable. In addition to his complete rejection of the religious establishment, Bunyan excoriated the license and extravagance of the Restoration courtly and aristocratic elite, identified with ordinary folk deprived of spiritual consolation and material resources, and castigated the acquisitive spirit displayed by domestic traders and overseas merchants. He also had ties to other critics of the Restoration establishment who troubled church and state in parliament and in the press between 1675 and 1682.

At the same time, however, Greaves’s Bunyan is the foremost English evangelist of the seventeenth century, a great pastor of troubled souls and, thus, a figure far more difficult for secular readers to comprehend. Bunyan cannot, in fact, be understood at all without following his careful separation of the spiritual and the temporal and his elevation of the former over the latter, both theological motifs in which he shows indebtedness to Martin Luther as well as to the continental Reformed and English separatist traditions. This priority explains his preference, despite some inconsistency, for suffering persecution rather than actively resisting a persecuting government. It also explains his acceptance of James II’s toleration, an acceptance that Greaves treats with some residual whiggish constitutional suspiciousness. Bunyan’s hostility to any temporal coercion of faith was simply stronger than his hostility to Roman Catholicism per se; and Bunyan was not unusual among his dissenting contemporaries in seeing the James of 1687 primarily as a tolerant prince rather than as the tricky papist of subsequent Whig apologetics.

_Glimpses of Glory_ presents the specialist’s Bunyan rather than the student’s Bunyan; and there may be too much Bunyan here even for some scholars. The exhaustive contextualization of Greaves’s approach, which is the book’s greatest merit, is also its greatest difficulty. Chronologically organized chapters that take up different works in succession lack dominant themes and sometimes repeat discussion, like the story of Bunyan’s recurrent despair, more fully developed elsewhere. A chapter that begins with Bunyan’s imprisonment in 1660 and the experience of persecution, for instance, concludes with a discussion of Bunyan’s advice about family relationships and behavior, matters that are later treated at greater length. Greaves’s analysis of Bunyan’s replies to the work of other authors—the Ranters Jacob Bauthumley and Lawrence Clarkson and the Anglican Edward Fowler, for instance—includes as much comment upon their work as upon Bunyan’s. Although we know virtually nothing about Bunyan’s whereabouts or activities in 1681, the analysis of _The Holy War_ (1682) is preceded by a fifteen-page summary of the main political events that occurred in the year or so prior to its composition. The whig conspiracies of 1682-83 are amply treated, even though “Bunyan almost certainly knew nothing” about them (p. 462). Greaves simply wanders into “by-pathmeadow” too often and has produced a book of unnecessary length. Another work constantly intrudes upon this one: a study of the politics and literature of Restoration dissent. But that is a work that Greaves has already written, in three fine volumes.[4]
Some of Bunyan’s life, like his unnamed first wife, is shrouded in obscurity and should perhaps be left so. Greaves is too eager to fill in the blanks. His readings between the lines are always informed and plausible; but he crosses the boundary between history and historical speculation too often. Many glimpses of Bunyan are provided through maybes, probablies, certainties, and undoubtedlys. In a brief discussion of *Israel’s Hope Encouraged*, for instance, we learn that the work “may have” been composed by Bunyan in London, “probably” in the wake of the Lords’ rejection of exclusion in the 1680-81 parliament; that its ideas “may have” been discussed with the Independents John Owen and Robert Ferguson, the latter of whom Bunyan “surely” knew; that he “may have known” how irritating the respect for Magna Charta that he shared with other dissenting authors, like Nicholas Lockyer (with which he “was undoubtedly familiar”), was to Anglican loyalists; and that his employment of Hebrew imagery about the valley of Achor “may have suggested radical reformation” for “some readers,” presumably intended ones, since the work was only published posthumously in 1692 (pp. 394-396). Despite the careful qualifiers, as qualifier is added to qualifier, author and reader alike lose sight of the more important question of what, if anything, we actually know about the composition of this work.

The same problem is found in the web of personal associations within which Greaves seeks to embed Bunyan. The previously mentioned Independent divine Robert Ferguson, an outspoken advocate of resistance, is a perfect example of this issue. Ferguson rates only one substantive mention by either Hill or Mullett in their studies.[5] But Greaves tells us much more: that Ferguson and Bunyan discussed, in 1675-76, the attacks on dissenters that Anglican Samuel Parker published in 1669-71 is “highly likely” (p. 318). Moreover, Ferguson was among those, including the revered John Owen, who “probably” read the draft of *Pilgrim’s Progress* and advised him about publishing it (p. 347). Ferguson “may have been” among the London clergy with whom Bunyan “must have discussed” the increasing harassment of dissenters in the winter of 1681-82 (p. 440). Ferguson and Owen were among the personal contacts that Bunyan shared with Whig parliamentary leaders, leaving him but “one step removed from Shaftesbury” and “a step away from Wharton” (pp. 358-360). Ferguson “probably headed the list” of the Whig plotters whose conduct disappointed Bunyan, because it was “highly likely” that Bunyan, who disapproved of rebellion, had discussed the subject of resistance in 1682 “in the London circles with which he was acquainted,” which included Ferguson (pp. 437, 472, 475). But what we actually know about Bunyan and Ferguson is only that Bunyan knew Owen, that Ferguson served as Owen’s pastoral assistant, and that Ferguson shared Bunyan’s interest in allegorical language. No one is better equipped than Professor Greaves to read Bunyan’s mind and personal contacts, but speculation on this scale actually tells us little about either Bunyan or his times.

In fact, Bunyan has long stood the test of time without such thick description of, and thick speculation about, his contemporary circumstances. The translation of *Pilgrim’s Progress* into over two hundred different languages as disparate as Yoruba and Dakota suggests that, whatever the different academic guilds may think of him, Bunyan achieved the status of global author long before “globalization” or the advent of “global” Christianity. What Bunyan now needs is a short, readable biography that re-opens his life and times for students and nonprofessional readers in light of the most recent scholarly work. Whoever writes that book will need to turn first to Greaves’s study as the most comprehensive analysis of Bunyan now available.

Notes


