BOOK REVIEW

National Prayers: Special Worship Since the Reformation. Volume 1: Special Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings in the British Isles, 1533–1688. Edited by Natalie Mears, Alasdair Raffe, Stephen Taylor and Philip Williamson (with Lucy Bates). Church of England Record Society, Volume 20. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013. 939 pp. £100.00 (hardback). ISBN 9781843838685.

On Sunday, May 27, 1537, a service was held at St. Paul’s Cathedral to celebrate the pregnancy of Queen Jane Seymour: a solemn Te Deum was sung, and a sermon was preached by Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, to a congregation that included leading privy counselors, courtiers, and higher clergy. On October 11 of the same year, solemn processions were held in London after the Queen went into labor, and when news of the birth of Prince Edward was announced early the following morning, Te Deums were sung in all parish churches in the city, and a special service was held at St. Paul’s. As concerns increased for the Queen’s health post-partum, a solemn procession was held in the city on October 19. Finally, on November 12, the day of Jane’s funeral at Windsor, solemn dirges were held at St. Paul’s cathedral and knells rung in every parish church in London. Thus unfolded a sequence of officially-sanctioned public rituals, which that tracked the public and private emotional roller-coaster of the circumstances of the birth of Henry’s longed-for male heir.

The tracking of political events with forms of public worship as outlined above is a striking feature of the Tudor and Stuart periods, and is now comprehensively documented in this volume produced by the Church of England Record Society. The editors present a normally unnoticed narrative of the history of English, Scottish and Irish history in the period that mirrors the usual accounts of battles, treatises and marriages. Here we find the invocation of the divine, the undoubtedly political maneuvering of presenting God as being on one’s own side, and at times the raw emotional energies of collective and individual fear, even despair. Whichever party held power across the period – or contested it – expected their co-nationals to turn effectively as a religious congregation to invoke the divine blessing or mercy.

This is the first of three volumes devoted by the Church of England Record Society to the theme: the second treats the period 1689–1870, and third 1871–2012. This first volume, however, engages with what must be the meatiest of the material, covering as it does the Reformation era and the English Civil War, two periods when the political and religious lives of these islands were intrinsically interwoven. It offers, therefore, an important resource for engaging with the history of the period, slowly mapping the twists and turns along the way, and bringing to the fore the complexities that are too easily overlooked in smooth readings of history. The services held before and after the birth of Prince Edward illustrate the curious position of the English Church after the break with Rome. The need for this heir might have
precipitated the break, but ritually it is all very conservative. The processions of 11th and 19th October marked a powerful devotional continuity with what had previously prevailed,

with all the orders of friars and chanons, the monkes of Tower Hill, with all the priestes and clarke of everie church in London, with Powles quire, and the best crosse of everie parish in London, with the baner for the same borne in the same procession. (7)

These very crucifixes and images of patronal saints in a few years would be destroyed in iconoclastic fervor.

Surprisingly, the collection presents nothing in the way of special services for the introduction of the first editions of the Book of Common Prayer – presumably, the book was allowed to speak for itself. However, public liturgical thanksgiving of Mary Tudor’s reconciliation of England to Rome was enforced by a royal proclamation of January 1555. Elizabeth’s return to the Edwardian situation appears to have gone unmarked. The Scottish Church, however, celebrated the Edinburgh Parliament’s 1560 embrace of the reformation with a service in St. Giles in Edinburgh adorned by a fine Scots prayer by John Knox; one might wonder through what gritted teeth the acknowledgement of the English as instruments of the divine action was offered up:

seing that thou hes maid our confederatis of Ingland the instrumentis by quhom we are now sett at this libertie, to quhom we in thy name have promeisit mutuall faith agane; let us never fall to that unkyndes, O Lord, that ather we declair oure selves unthankfull unto tham, or prophanaris of thy holie name. (52)

The continuing instability of the Scottish reformation during Mary Stuart’s reign is marked by repeated public fast days until 1567. In England meanwhile, public prayers focused on the 1563–1564 outbreak of plague.

At the same time, this volume challenges any misconception that in their domestic concerns the inhabitants of the British Isles stood apart from broader international developments. Prayers were decreed during the 1561 Ottoman siege of Malta, and the victory of Catholic forces at the 1571 Battle of Lepanto was the cause of thanksgiving observed in London and suburbs. The positive attitude taken towards Catholics in these two sets of prayers was something of an exception rather than the rule. Services were decreed in 1572 against a perceived Catholic threat to the country in the wake of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre. Indeed, a strong sense of the invocation of the Almighty against the religious “Other” pervades many of the texts presented in this volume – not least in those relating to the period of the Commonwealth.

All of this is set out in clear chronological order by the editors. Each service of national prayer is preceded by an introductory section, which in some cases can be extremely detailed – the service for the Thanksgiving Day for the failure of the Spanish Armada being a good case in point. Then are given any orders, or authorizing letters, before the form of prayer – or a contemporary description of it if a form is lacking – is set out. All sources are meticulously identified. The volume opens with an extensive Introduction to the national prayers held between 1533 and 1668, and an analytical list of national prayers that covers not only this but also the other two
volumes in the series. All of this makes for a book that is easily navigable and falls readily to use.

Establishing the temporal divisions for a three-volume set always has an arbitrary nature, but there is a satisfying arc to the book as a whole, opening and closing as it does with two royal births of enormous significance. It begins with the thanksgiving ordered for the birth of princess Elizabeth to Ann Boleyn, and ends with a sequence of prayers ordered for the pregnancy of Mary of Modena and the subsequent birth of the child who was to become the “Old Pretender” in 1688. English history, set before God.

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