All Things Made New: Writings on the Reformation

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In his 2009 article ‘(Re)defining the English Reformation’, Peter Marshall described the recent explosion of English Reformation scholarship as something that had become ‘a large and untidy garden, alive with luxuriant foliage, periodic colorful blooms, and a smattering of undesirable weeds’.⁽¹⁾ If the English Reformation is a large, untidy garden, then the scholarship on the broader European Reformation(s) is an estate ranging across forests, fields, bogs, hedges, and rolling hills, encompassing much more than the theological and political shrubbery of decades past. It includes extensive research on musicology, literature, the politics of the crowd, devotional practices, phenomenology and epistemology, art and visual history, gender history, the history of the book, and much more. In the past two years, Oxford and Cambridge University Presses alone have published more than 20 books with the word ‘Reformation’ in their titles. These works vary from the more traditional religious and political histories like Margaret Aston’s *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* and Robert Bireley’s biography of Emperor Ferdinand II to the more esoteric like Robin Barnes’s *Astrology and the Reformation*, demonstrating the breadth of current scholarly directions and approaches.

Certainly one of the principal and most vibrant corners of this acreage is the work of Diarmaid MacCulloch, who, over the past thirty years, has proven instrumental in reshaping much of the academic landscape, in particular the relationship of the English reforms to their continental counterparts. From his finely crafted biography *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* and his many poignant essays that seem to run the entire gamut of Reformation history to his most formidable books *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided, 1490–1700* and *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, MacCulloch’s writings cast a very large shadow in the foliage of Reformation scholarship. His most recent book *All Things Made New: Writings on the Reformation* is an intriguing and somewhat unusual addition to these earlier books. In 22 short chapters, MacCulloch revisits the last 20 years of scholarly production, bringing together a collection of previously published pieces into a coherent volume that takes readers from the early reforms of Henry VIII to the development of Anglicanism in the second half of the 17th century.

There is a great deal about *All Things Made New* that recommends it to both the lay and academic reader. First and foremost, the book is an exceptional example of MacCulloch’s prose. The majority of the essays are wonderfully crafted, balancing erudition and wit, which will be enjoyed both for their scholarly depth as

well as their polished style. Second, the collection as a whole echoes the more sustained Reformation narratives that MacCulloch has created in the past and offers his insights into recent works of Reformation historiography, including: John O'Malley's *Trent*, Kevin Sharpe's *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, Alexandra Walsham's and Peter Marshall's edited volume *Angels in the Early Modern World* and David Loades's *Mary Tudor*. Finally, the book can be read as both an introduction to Reformation scholarship and to MacCulloch's thought, which can take on a variety of tones. We hear the quippish MacCulloch who can sweepingly characterize Thomas Cranmer as distinctively 'unAnglican' (p. 276). When he turns to that most fundamental of Anglican books *The Book of Common Prayer*, he comments that Cranmer believed that 'a crowd of ordinary Christians left to themselves were incapable of spontaneously finding appropriate words to approach God in corporate prayer' (p. 141). Even John Calvin, MacCulloch reminds us, quietly conceded that *sola scriptura* needed 'a little glossing' from time to time, in order that the truth was clearly conveyed to the ignorant masses (p. 60). Readers also get the compelling MacCulloch who, with only a few paragraphs, can induce even the most skeptical reader to rethink their opinion of Henry VIII, who had a deep 'conviction of his unique relationship with God as his anointed deputy on earth' (p. 116). The prickly MacCulloch even makes one or two appearances in remarks like 'A religion claiming to be based on precepts of love and forgiveness cannot but hang its head in shame at the record of inquisitions in the Western Church of the Latin Rite', reminding readers that nothing so barbaric was ever systematized in the Orthodox Church (p. 79).

All Things Made New is at its best when MacCulloch analyzes the more misunderstood or underappreciated figures of the period. Turning to the royal sisters Mary and Elizabeth, MacCulloch revisits well-trodden terrain with an eye for what truths have stood the test of the historiographical meat grinder through which these two queens have been processed over the past few decades. Both have been excoriated and both have been lauded. Only recently, with the work of David Loades and Eamon Duffy, has Mary received the sort of positive historical assessment that her sister typically has enjoyed over the *longue durée* of Tudor scholarship. Although he recognizes the importance of the revisionary work on both queens, MacCulloch reminds us that there remains some bedrock truth to the traditional views of these sisters:

Elizabeth was always likely to be more successful than Mary, even if they had been granted an equal number of regnal years. She knew how to make the best of a situation ... However much we try to be revisionist about Mary and write down Elizabeth, the personalities of the two monarchs laid on the dissecting table show Elizabeth's advantage (p. 156).

Most importantly, Elizabeth had the time to create a space, even unofficially, for various groups that did not easily fall into straightforward categories of religious conformity or nonconformity. Elizabeth's court, itself, became a strange *milieu* of conforming puritans, Anglicans, and a pocket of surviving Catholics like the artist William Byrd, who was supported by traditional-minded nobles like Robert Cecil, Thomas Sackville, and the Howard family.

The last few chapters that outline the nature of Anglicanism return readers to a topic that has occupied much of MacCulloch's career. In these chapters, MacCulloch reasserts the importance of Richard Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1594) in the history of English reform and the ultimate direction that the Church of England would take in its evolution. This is a book that MacCulloch places nearest to Heinrich Bullinger's sermons in the Protestant theological spectrum, and he reminds readers that Hooker's theology is the 'taproot of a tradition' (p. 236) that would become the Anglican Communion. Even though he was never much known outside of the British Isles, Hooker was the Master of Temple Church in London, where he made a name for himself opposing puritan leaders like Walter Travers. His *Ecclesiastical Politie* was a systematic response to the puritan attacks against the episcopal order of the Elizabethan church, and ultimately was a synthesis of broadly-understood Reformed theology and the Book of Common Prayer. It was, however, only at the end of the 17th century that Hooker's work became essential reading for anyone in British politics or theology. As MacCulloch puts it, 'anyone in English politics ... who wanted to score a debating point for their cause was ready to quote Hooker', including the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke (p. 310).

At the heart of Hooker's thought is the question of religious authority, which, MacCulloch argues, 'gives him a contemporary usefulness' because even the most modern disputes within Christianity are ultimately a matter of differing opinions over 'what constitutes authority for Christians' (p. 319). In fact, authority is a major, if not the major, theme running throughout *All Things Made New*, as MacCulloch moves from the Council of Trent to the Elizabethan Settlement and ultimately to the development of the Anglican Communion after the Restoration in 1660. Some confessions assert *sola scriptura*, some cling to a particular theological interpretation of scripture, others stand upon the tradition and authority of the Roman See, and then there is the Church of England, whose authority is not so easily encapsulated for MacCulloch. While some readers may think MacCulloch's assertion about Christian differences is overly simplistic, he is unapologetic about how the complex nature of what he calls the 'Eaton Mess of Anglicanism' is the very thing that makes it so compelling and humane. Anglicanism has no theologian that is easily quotable and upon whose works all Anglicans stand (or fall). It does not cling tightly to too many dogmatic assertions beyond the Nicene Creed. On the contrary, Anglicanism 'acknowledges that he [God] is often good at remaining silent and provoking more questions than answers' (p. 362).

Rather than dogma, MacCulloch sees the nature and authority of Anglicanism in the concert of several of its key components. First, although Anglicanism has no Calvin or Luther at the helm of its theology, it remains broadly Reformed. Second, the Book of Common Prayer, that 'ultimate double helix' of Christianity, remains for better or worse perhaps the most universal characteristic of Anglican churches around the world. Third, the survival and the intentional preservation of the cathedrals by Elizabethan and Jacobean bishops 'became a subversion of what was otherwise in essence a fairly typical Reformed Protestant Church' (p. 161). By the end of the 16th century, the English Protestant church service was a Reformed liturgy captured in the Book of Common Prayer but recited in a way that was reminiscent of Catholic books of hours, performed inside whitewashed walls with portraits in the stained glass windows, and William Byrd's music filling the air. Finally, the Anglican Church is unique in that it has evolved with both 'a vigorous external Protestant critique' (p. 360) from English-speaking dissenter groups as well as an internal rejuvenation of Catholic tradition in the Oxford Movement of the 19th century. It has survived both of these and integrated aspects of both to its traditions.

Compared to his book *The Reformation*, *All Things Made New* may seem like a minor contribution, particularly to those readers who expect a *tour de force* every time MacCulloch picks up his pen. The former provides a systematic narrative of the Reformation; the latter provides snapshots and still lives. The former sits as a mountaintop of Reformation scholarship; the latter is a series of rolling hills. Even without the comparison with his previous books, some of MacCulloch's most important essays like 'The myth of the English Reformation' and 'The impact of the English Reformation', as well as his essays on the cathedral city of Worcester (1998) and on Heinrich Bullinger (2006), are conspicuous by their absence. Nor is it entirely clear why they do not make the final cut, particularly the latter two essays which are directly

relevant to MacCulloch's description of Anglicanism. Nevertheless, these are minor flaws within an otherwise valuable summation of MacCulloch's thought and scholarship over the past two decades. *All Things Made New* not only distills many of MacCulloch's contributions to the field into an accessible format, it also explores in a few hundred pages recent developments in Reformation historiography, providing new and old students with something of a map to all of the untidy academic overgrowth of the past few decades.

Notes

1. Peter Marshall, '(Re)defining the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 564.
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The author is happy to accept this generous review and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/all-things-made-new-writings-on-the-reformation-by-diarmaid-macculloch-1.2731267> [2]

Financial Times

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Catholic Herald

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/july-15th-2016/a-witty-but-alarming-take-on-the-reformation/> [4]

Kirkus

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Times

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/all-things-made-new-writings-on-the-reformation-by-diarmaid-macculloch-wsh9htdh9> [6]

Literary Review

<https://literaryreview.co.uk/varying-the-diet> [7]

Washington Independent Review of Books

<http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/bookreview/all-things-made-new-the-reformation-and-its-legacy> [8]

London Review of Books

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