

Thomas Fuller: Discovering England's Religious Past

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With so many publications on religion in the early modern period it is hard even for the most assiduous reader to keep up with the constant supply of new publications. And yet, there are many reasons why W. B. Patterson's monograph on Thomas Fuller stands apart and is worthy of our utmost attention, filling as it does an important gap within the field whilst giving a strong and coherent argument outlining Fuller's important and often overlooked place in the English historiographical tradition. As such, this book, whilst being indispensable for students of the history of theology, also has much to offer the more general historian of the 17th century.

Whilst the moderate Royalist Church of England minister Thomas Fuller (1608-61) was an assiduous historian of English Church history and in many ways was a man ahead of his time, both in his historiographical approach and his call for tolerance between different Church factions, he has been the subject of very little secondary literature. Indeed, apart from an anonymous biography written immediately after his death, *Life of Fuller* (1661), only one other biography exists: John Eglington Bailey's *The Life of Thomas Fuller: With Notices of His Books, His Kinsmen, And His Friends* (1874). It was not until 1938, with the publication of Walter E. Houghton Jr.'s *The Formation of Thomas Fuller's Holy and Profane States*, that any substantial scholarly debate about Fuller developed. And yet Patterson's vast biography makes Fuller easily accessible to the modern reader and sets up a new standard in the field. Patterson builds upon previous scholarship but shows its inadequacies in identifying the importance of Fuller's legacy as someone who 'learned to see events in the past from a critical, rather than from an ideological perspective' (p. 342).

The parts of the biography that are descriptive of Fuller's life are vivid and engaging as Patterson portrays an irenic man caught up in the turmoil and division of the 1640s. A whole chapter is devoted to Fuller's education alone and is highly revealing of the curriculum of study at the University of Cambridge at this time in which so many great thinkers emerged, with Fuller being John Milton's senior by just six months (pp. 11-41). Patterson draws out Fuller's important effort as a peace-maker in the period as, with other men of royalist sympathies, he made the journey to Oxford from London to petition the King for peace on behalf of the House of Lords in January 1643 (pp. 92-4). Though this Oxford petition ended in failure, it shows how Fuller was a highly influential clergyman closely linked to the peace party in Parliament (p. 99). Patterson then gives a vivid description of conditions in Oxford during the Civil War (pp. 107-9).

Furthermore, Patterson weaves Fuller's actions in with a close reading of the theological reasons that motivated him to actively advocate for peace when to do so was becoming very dangerous: Patterson makes reference to his sermon, preached on 28 December 1642, at London's Savoy Chapel based on the Scripture 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' (p. 90). Fuller would go on to preach before King Charles I in Oxford in the summer of 1643 (p. 109) and subsequently went to the Hague as part of the delegation sent to welcome King Charles II back to England in May 1660, even writing a poem to commemorate the event entitled *A Panegyrick to His Majesty, on His Happy Return* (p. 274). Thus, Fuller's political role as a Royalist is convincingly portrayed as resulting from his theological convictions as he supported episcopacy built upon the foundation of monarchy with a desire for peace. Furthermore, and to his credit, Patterson avoids going over in excessive detail the well-worn ground of debates sparked by the Laudian Church, whilst engaging with enough of Fuller's sermons to help the reader situate Fuller along the theological spectrum (pp. 88-90).

However, the book is primarily analytical, not descriptive, and it is Fuller the historian, rather than preacher or peace activist, with whom the reader becomes most acquainted. For Patterson, Fuller must first of all be seen as a 'pioneer' historian (p. 223). Fuller's first major work, *Historie of the Holy Warre* (1639), was the first history of the Crusades in English and Patterson appraises this work favourably not only in comparison with modern scholarship but also as an example of the critical writing of history, with Fuller referring to over 160 medieval and early modern sources (pp. 53-9). Patterson also devotes two long chapters to analysing Fuller's *Church History of Britain*, which was 'the first comprehensive history of Christianity in Britain' (p. 343). Even the reader who has never read Fuller before will get a sense that he has because Patterson quotes Fuller extensively and essentially summarises his interpretation of key historical events, notably the Reformation (pp. 202-23). Patterson situates Fuller as more moderate than John Bale and John Foxe in his interpretation of events in the preceding century as he plotted a historical continuity between the pre- and post-Reformation English Church in his *Church History of Britain* (p. 221). Fuller even pleaded for a measure of toleration towards Roman Catholics (p. 111), and yet he was still firmly indebted to the Protestant historiography exemplified in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (p. 221). Finally, Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* (1662), which was published posthumously, was the first dictionary of national biography ever to appear in English (p. 343) and is dealt with at length by Patterson (pp. 291-333) to give us a fascinating social insight into early modern England as it explores notable characters in England's past county by county. Such an overview of Fuller's corpus is unique and satisfying.

Thomas Fuller is completely overlooked in many standard reference works on the causes of the English Civil War, including Ann Hughes' *The Causes of the English Civil War* (1998). In a long overdue correction of this, Patterson correctly posits Fuller as an early proponent of the school of thought that identified the failures of King Charles, as well as division within the Church, as the main causes that led to the Civil War (p. 253). Indeed, Fuller's 1655 *Church-History of Britain* is one of the first detailed historical analyses of the Civil War. Fuller was a realist who, though he stood on the side of the established Church and episcopacy, in his *Church-History of Britain* identified the failures of the policies of the King and his advisors for the war, rather than the antics of a radical Puritan fringe, as the primary cause for division (p. 255). In this way we see how he laid aside his inherent bias to come to a historically defensible viewpoint that would find much support in modern scholarship. For this Fuller received the ire of fellow Royalists, such as by Peter Heylyn, who attacked Fuller's interpretation of events leading up to the Civil War in his 1659 work *Examen Historicum: or A Discovery and Examination of the Mistakes, Falsities, and Defects in Some Modern Histories*. Notably, Heylyn accused Fuller of espousing 'a continual vein of Puritanism'.^[1] This is something that Fuller refuted in his response in 1659 entitled *The Appeal of Injured Innocence* (258-262). Patterson also clears Fuller of this charge made by Heylyn as he distinguishes Fuller from the Puritan Revolution thesis made by Gardiner (p. 255). And yet Gardiner richly imbibed Fuller's works in his *History of the Great Civil War, 1642-1649*, where he wrote of Fuller's moderation: 'Of the larger-minded men who were working for liberty, the most comprehensive in his genius was Thomas Fuller'^[2] (p. 338). In sum, Patterson has made a unique contribution to the continuing debates on the causes of the Civil War by identifying and making Fuller's early interpretation accessible and showing how Fuller actively engaged in the debate in its earliest days as an eyewitness of the events that led to war.

Even historians of gender will find something in *Thomas Fuller: Discovering England's Religious Past*. Patterson, in his chapter entitled 'Social historian' (pp. 291-333), analyses Fuller's portrayal of the lot of women in early modern England in his *History of the Worthies of England*. Indeed, Fuller only agrees with the first proposition of a common proverb of the time that 'England is the Paradise of Women, Hell of Horses, Purgatory of Servants' (p. 294). Fuller maintains that women across the class spectrum find 'the fairest respect, and kindest usage'.^[3] That Patterson makes no critical engagement with Fuller's assertion is typical of Patterson's style and, with passages like this, highlights Patterson's warm partiality towards Fuller.

Indeed, the whole of Patterson's chapter on Fuller as a 'Social historian' is a fascinating insight into life in the 17th century. Patterson notes in detail the different subjects that Fuller addressed in his *Worthies of England* and quotes Fuller's comments on how physicians are a growing profession (pp. 301, 327), on the rise of market gardening in Surrey and Kent (p. 319), but also on the struggles of the textile industry (pp. 318-320). Furthermore, Fuller's comments on England's economic opportunities would interest economic historians (p. 320) as Fuller would appear to lend support to Max Weber's thesis as outlined in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930): Fuller refers to John White, a Gospel minister who preached in Dorchester for nearly 40 years and through whose engagement with 'civic activities, the town was much enriched' (p. 320). Fuller wrote of the effects of White's ministry:

Knowledge causing Piety, Piety breeding Industry, and Industry procuring Plenty unto it. A beggar was not then to be seen in the Town, all able Poore being set on work, and [the] impotent maintained by the profit of a publique Brew-house, and other collections.^[4]

Indeed, the diversity of Fuller's writings even extends to comments on the slave trade as Patterson notes how in *The Holy State* (1642) Fuller, though not explicitly condemning the slave trade, 'describes the African as in the likeness of God cut in ebony, an idea that carries a message of equality in an unmistakable way' (p. 81). Fuller's high esteem for the plays of William Shakespeare is another point brought out and amply illustrated by Patterson (pp. 326-7) to give us a well-rounded figure of a historian with a diverse range of interests.

There are a couple of salient points that Patterson has missed, however, in his study of Fuller. Firstly, he

only devotes two paragraphs to Fuller's 1650 historical geography of the Land of Israel entitled *A Pisgah-Sight of Palestine and the Confines Thereof, with the History of the Old and New Testament Acted thereon* (pp. 143-144). I greatly admire how Patterson has made a Christian historian speak to a broader historical audience who may have less interest in the specificities of Fuller's theology, but to condense this work of over 700 pages to one paragraph summarising the work and a second giving an example of its reception history leaves the reader feeling a little short-changed. After all, this work has passed through four editions, the latest of which, in 2012, testifies to its enduring legacy, and the work is still used to this day as a reference amongst theologians and pastors for understanding biblical geography. The fact that Fuller never went to the Holy Land and yet wrote such a work of strong biblical scholarship deserves far more attention.

In a related point, Patterson also entirely neglects the anti-Judaic remarks present in Fuller's writings. Fuller perpetuated anti-Semitic tropes, as he wrote that Jews were 'gripping usurers' famous for their 'rapaciousness and tenaciousness'.^[5] Fuller, who had no time for the fervent apocalypticism and millenarianism of the 1650s, also engaged in eschatological controversy with Puritans as debate about the Jews reached fever pitch in 1655 as their readmission to England was hotly contested. Fuller writes, for example, in a typical a-millennial vein, that 'it is a conceit of the modern Jews that one day they shall return under the conduct of their Messias to the country of Canaan and city of Jerusalem, and be reinstated in the full possession thereof'.^[6] Fuller even indirectly referred to the famous apocalyptic Dutch Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604-57)^[7], albeit disparagingly, yet none of this is noted by Patterson. This is unfortunate as Fuller's attitude towards the Jews clearly shows the limits of his tolerant position.

These two points are secondary, however. Overall, Patterson is to be highly commended for making the writings of Thomas Fuller accessible to today's historians. I highly recommend this book as a text which the non-specialist in early modern theology can use to quickly navigate around Fuller's writings so as to find his viewpoint on a wide range of social and historical issues that were pertinent to his day whilst, for the student of the history of theology, this book is simply indispensable. Patterson provides us with more than just a biography of Fuller: he has contextualised him within the intellectual environment of his day as a highly admirable figure who sought the *via media* and ended up appalled as he saw the country he loved so dearly divide so bitterly around him. Indeed, Patterson reminds us throughout of an important lesson about reading 17th-century history, namely that the dividing line between religion and politics is very narrow indeed. And yet, by being a historian who largely suppressed his theological bias in his historical works, Fuller can be seen as a morning star of the Rankean historical method which two centuries later would see history fully separate from theology as an academic discipline. In this way, Patterson has aptly defended his book's main thesis that Thomas Fuller was a pioneer historian (p. 223).

[1] Peter Heylyn, *Examen Historicum: Or a Discovery and Examination of the Mistakes, Falsities in Some Modern Histories in Two Books* (Seile, 1659), part one, 'The Introduction to the Animadversions'.

[2] Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War, 1642-1649*, 4 vols. (London, 1901 (originally published in 1886)), vol. I, p. 279.

[3] Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England Who for Parts and Learning Have Been Eminent in the Several Counties : Together with an Historical Narrative of the Native Commodities and Rarities in Each County* (London, 1662), p. 85.

[4] Ibid., 'Oxfor-shire', p. 340.

[5] Fuller, *Church History of Britain* (1655), p. 385.

[6] Thomas Fuller, *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine and the Confines Thereof : With the History of the Old and New Testament Acted Thereon* (London, 1869), book V, chapter ii, section 2, p. 628.

[7] Ibid.

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