

Memory and the English Reformation

Review Number: 2444

Publish date: Friday, 26 March, 2021

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ISBN: 9781108829991

Date of Publication: 2020

Price: £90.00

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Publisher url: <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/british-history-after-1450/memory-and-english-reformation?format=HB#bookPeople>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

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‘The English Reformation has not ended’, concludes *Memory and the English Reformation*’s introduction. ‘Continually refought in memory and the imagination, the battles it began will never be over’ (p.45). Through memory studies, this volume nudges the very worn question of England’s long Reformation(s) in a revitalising direction. Noting that scholars have rarely focused on how the English Reformation ‘became crystallised in the historical imagination’ (p.12), *Memory and the English Reformation* analyses how this ‘tangled web’ of lived experience, became embedded in the collective imagination as a recognisable and distinct event of great cultural significance (p.3). As a whole, the volume suggests that while the Reformation’s events may be located in a discreet and definable period, the continuation and development of its conflicts through social memory mean it never really ended. One is left with an overall impression that the Reformation never stopped being a ‘tangled web’, even once it had become a cultural milestone. That the term itself was, and will probably only ever be, a signifier for the conflict over the collective imagination, or social memory, of religious change in Western Christianity, rather than the events themselves.

Agreeing with various Memory scholars that too hard a distinction between individual and collective memory is misleading (p.8), the volume provides a wealth of evidence for the interdependence of individual, collective, and institutional memory-making around the Reformation. This is effectively highlighted through the inclusion of chapters focusing on different ends of this continuum, for example, Ceri Law's on Archbishop Parker's life-writing, set in close proximity to Johanna Harris's work on the printed reproduction of Protestant martyr letters. The volume sets out to consider 'the dissident as well as the official' memories of the Reformation (p.3) and in the case of Catholicism it certainly opens the door to a rich area of modern scholarship through the work of Christopher Highley, Susannah Brietz Monta, Victoria Van Hying and Emilie Murphy. The juxtaposition of chapters on Catholicism with those on conservative Protestants, as well as Calvinists and puritans, provides a valuable and oft-ignored context through which to view the various shades of Protestantism. This provides the reader with a more complicated and diverse view of mainstream English Protestantism than we can often grasp by concentrating on the dichotomies of puritan or Laudian, Calvinist, or traditionalist.

The volume is weaker in covering the kaleidoscope of Protestant dissent, both within the Church of England and without, with the most notable exception of Rachel Adcock's foray into the Fifth Monarchists. Given the predominance of literature on Protestant dissent some may not consider this a problem and it may simply be a result of giving more space to Catholicism, but one wonders whether this absence is actually a symptom of the volume's periodisation. Claiming to focus on 'the two centuries following the Henrician schism' (p.3), it covers the first century more heavily than the second, and although the volume repeatedly asserts the Reformation was not one single event, there is a notable propensity to discuss the Dissolution above all other "events" which might comprise it. Chapters focusing on the period between 1660 and the 1730s are comparatively few in number. This is particularly surprising after opening the volume with Peter Marshall's incisive tour of the English legacy (or lack thereof,) of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, from 1517 right up to its quincentenary. Given that Protestant dissent exploded in the much-less covered period of the Civil Wars and latter seventeenth-century, perhaps it is unsurprising to find them under-represented here. While the limited periodisation somewhat constrains the argument that the Reformation was 'Continually refought in memory and the imagination,' (45) it nevertheless proves the vigour of that ideological battle in its first 150 years exceptionally well. Moreover, it presents an open invitation to scholars of the enlightenment and eighteenth century, to consider more seriously how the memory of the Reformation continued to affect not only the religious, but intellectual and political cultures they study. Whether they notice a book so squarely aimed at "Reformation historians" and focused on periods before their own, we can only hope.

The volume's primary aim, of course, is to 'demonstrate that the protracted religious revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries involved a concerted attempt to reshape social memory' (p.3). It certainly succeeds, particularly illuminating the role of purposeful forgetting and remembering in shaping social memory, and the social contexts of those practices, throughout the volume. Harriet Lyon's chapter, for example, points us to the Henrician policy of engendering collective 'amnesia' (p.77) around the Dissolution of the Monasteries, while Susan Royal's considers attempts to remember and forget certain aspects of Henry V's life in the context of Protestant patriotism. The effects of accidental, or perhaps incidental forgetting, takes far less attention, though Victoria Van Hying discusses the impact of memory gaps on Catholic devotional culture. Meanwhile, Arnold Hunt's chapter considers the friction arising from the perpetuation of customs via popular memory as institutional memory sought to forget them. Far from giving us a sense of 'a concerted attempt', singular, as the introduction describes it, the volume points us to multiple attempts at shaping social memory, from a wide variety of interested parties. No chapter demonstrates this more clearly than the final contribution from Alec Ryrrie, who argues that while successive Tudor and Stuart governments maintained a policy of obscuring the rupture and novelty of reform, they necessarily did so in quite different ways, and for very different reasons.

Certain chapters directly question whether the 'dramatic rupture' (p.3) being obscured by some, was a sudden break, as well as profound. As Emilie Murphy points out, her Catholic Miscellany compilers did not view the Reformation 'as a definable moment of discontinuity' but 'an ongoing process' (p.421), which

could not be reversed, but could be overcome. This chimes with Adcock's Fifth Monarchists who, like many other dissenters and puritans before them, insisted the Reformation was incomplete. While it was in the interests of the established church and the monarchy to either obscure the break, or insist upon its completion, (and therefore its temporal suddenness) these chapters suggest that for other communities the social memory of the Reformation crystallised around an insistence on its incompleteness. An insistence which positioned the Reformation not as past but present, rejecting and defying the Church of England and its party-line on the past. Adam Morton's chapter further complicates this picture, demonstrating how the traditional apocalyptic readings of the past, through which Protestants perceived reform as concerningly incomplete, also created an understanding of the Reformation as a definitive break: 'the culmination of time' (p.81). This urges us to consider rupture and continuity not as mutually exclusive forces, but mutually constituting, proffering a new way to grapple with the dichotomy of continuity and change around which historical discussion is commonly organised.

The contributors' engagement with the extensive scholarly literature around memory is largely indirect. Of the literature directly engaged with Daniel Woolf's *Social Circulation of the Past* (2003) and Andy Wood's *The Memory of the People* (2013) loom largest, having already received much attention among early modern historians. The volume points to the lack of religion in Daniel Woolf's discussion of English historical culture as a notable lacuna it seeks to correct (p.14). Arguably this is work already begun by a considerable literature on the confessionalised battle over pre-Reformation History, to which chapters by Morton, Law, and Royal in this volume directly contribute, though Lyon's chapter does directly address religion in the context of Woolf's antiquarians. Pierre Nora's renowned article on sites of memory, already much used in Alexandra Walsham's *Reformation of the Landscape* (2011), and Judith Pollmann's *Memory in Early Modern Europe* (2017), notably shape articles by Marshall, Walsham, Morton, and Sherlock. Meanwhile Jan Assmann's work on collective memory, Jonathan Gil Harris' *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (2008), as well as notable works on memory and books by Jennifer Summit and Mary Curuthers are notably applied in the context of textual and iconographical memorialisation. Just over a third of the authors do not cite memory studies literature and at times (such as Cummings' chapter on the wounded missal) this does leave them feeling a little detached from the volume's core theme. Though in other cases (such as Philip Schwyzer's chapter) this absence is hardly felt at all and the implications for understanding memory's role in creating, shaping, and interpreting the Reformation are self-evident.

Understandably, the contributors are largely more interested in what memory studies can add to the religious history of early modern England, than in furthering memory studies. Nevertheless, there were occasional insights and contributions. Emilie Murphy, for example, challenges Woolf's argument for a growing national focus of popular understandings of the past, by adding evidence to support Wood's assessment that the local remained one of the most important sites in which memory was constructed (p.410). Arnold Hunt, meanwhile, asserts that while early modern people did not have 'any concept of social memory in the modern sense of the term', they recognised that 'popular customs, once established, could be highly tenacious and resistant to change' (p.383). As a modern descriptor for a type of behaviour, rather than an early modern concept which has shifted and changed over time, I am curious as to what Hunt meant by the assertion that early modern people did not have any concept of 'social memory in the modern sense'. Though this does of course suggest that the question of whether 'diverse peoples' in this period came 'to think of themselves as members of a group with a shared (though not necessarily agreed upon) past' (as Scot A. French describes social memory) is one which is still unsettled. [1] A more thorough reflection on the extent to which this concept is useful in the early modern context would doubtless prove fruitful to discussions on nationalism, localism and religious dissent.

Perhaps the volume's greatest strength is its interdisciplinarity. Though largely split between Historians and English Literature scholars, the volume does boast contributions from Curators Tarnya Cooper (National Trust) and Tessa Murdoch (V&A). In addition to the application of memory studies at the heart of the volume, the contributors have been heavily influenced by material culture studies, book studies, life-writing, and theology. As a call to push scholarship beyond Walsham and Wood's work on memory and the English Reformation, this diversity benefits the volume and the field, attracting fresh eyes to this fertile ground. [2] It

enables these short chapters to scale confidently across an impressive interplay of factors, from how memory is created, retained, moulded, and forgotten, to the role of materiality, gesture, language, communication technologies, the senses, and emotions in those processes. Certain methodologies also appear to have encouraged a much longer view of remembering the Reformation, with chapters focused on art and material culture by Peter Sherlock, Alexandra Walsham, Joe Moshenska, Tessa Murdoch, Victoria Van Hyning, and Tara Hamling, notably pushing beyond the volume's periodical constraints.

Comprised of twenty-four relatively short but accessible chapters, encompassing a range of methodologies, this volume is ideal for orientating scholars in the early stages of their research in recent Reformation scholarship. While many chapters, such as those by Marshall, Hamling, and Highley, are particularly apt introductions for undergraduates, others are perhaps less suitable, either as a result of writing style or the limited contextualisation resulting from chapter length. Though the latter issue will very much depend on the course and year-group being taught. The chapters are grouped together by theme under four parts. "Events and Temporalities" focuses on 'Time', both because Protestantism precipitated a profound rethinking of it, and because remembrance involves movement between 'temporal planes' (p.26). This features: Marshall; Lyon; Morton; Highley; Monta; and Walsham's chapters. "Objects and Places" then aims to explore 'physical locations and artefacts' as 'sites and receptacles of memory' (p.29), as well as how things and places are imagined. Space and the agency of the material in memory production, remembering and forgetting, are explored in this section, which includes: Moshenska; Sherlock; Hamling; Murdoch; Stewart Mottram; and Schwyzer's chapters. "Lives and Afterlives" discusses 'memory in the biographical and autobiographical mode' (p.35). It uses the textual and pictorial afterlives of individuals and groups, in biography and autobiography, not as a window on the individual but the social (p.36). This comprises: Law; Royal; Harris; Van Hyning; Cooper; and Cathy Shrank's chapters. Finally, "Rituals and Bodies" seeks to understand 'the role of rituals and bodies in the work of memory' (p.41). Its chapters discuss how the repetition of ritual practice and bodily performance shape memory, and includes the chapters by: Cummings; Hunt; Adcock; Murphy; and Ryrie.

Although Cummings' chapter on the embodiment of iconoclastic violence in the pages of a book feels a little disjointed from the others in Part IV, which focus heavily on the sensual experience of human bodies in performance, it undoubtedly remains the most cohesive section of the four. [3] Several of the chapters in Part I, such as those by Highley, Monta, and Walsham, could have easily slotted into other sections. Indeed, Walsham's seems to have been placed at the end of Part I specifically because the afterlives of wayside crosses post-iconoclasm has more in common with the monuments and material culture discussed in Part II. As the vast majority of the volume's contributors reflect upon time and remembrance it rather throws into question the utility of Part I's theme. That said, while Parts II to IV are much more cohesive and distinct, all the sections do an excellent job of grouping together chapters which speak closely to one another, making the connections to chapters outside of their section stand out more clearly. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given I study the politics of Catholic material culture, two chapters particularly stood out: Joe Moshenska's and Tara Hamling's.

Hamling's chapter is yet another excellent example of her thorough case work yielding broader insight. Print, objects, and decorative architecture bring to our attention the 'synoptic power' of a single motif (p.206), to both memorialise the Reformation as a moment of rupture from evil and facilitate the memory of it among English Protestants. Hamling's demonstration of how iconographic short hands develop over time, furthers our understanding of how people "read" imagery, and how images convey meaning effectively. Moshenska's chapter discusses the ambiguities of children being allowed to play with the idolatrous materials removed from churches and the polemical attempt to stabilise the meaning of this behaviour as iconoclastic. It stands out for its incisive commentary (or warning) on the potential gap between the use and meaning of objects, in the uncritical use of polemic to analyse the meaning of material things and human performance, and especially in the discussion of 'play' as an ambiguous and potentially volatile interaction deserving of further research. It was also interesting to see recent scholarship on James VI of Scotland's religious policy through the lens of wider British and Irish politics, applied to the work of the ever-popular Edmund Spenser, in Stewart Mottram's chapter on the Dissolution in the *Faerie Queene*.

Despite the variety present within, the volume certainly comes together as a cohesive whole, with the introduction doing a great job of elucidating its framework. Key themes emerge clearly such as: the importance of the present and future in remembering the past; the influence of inward and outward pressures in shaping religious communities; and the tensions between what the Reformation meant to individuals, communities, and national institutions. Throughout, it highlights the 'tension and ambiguity' resulting from the competition over meaning which dominated the Reformation (p.45) and the adaptation and reframing, as well as eradication, of traditional religion. The volume constantly reflects on the fluidity of not just meaning, but belief itself, and the grey penumbra between clearly defined confessions. This rather hangs a lantern on the fact that Reformation scholarship is still dominated by sources from the well-defined centres of confessional groupings, who prioritised the very theological complexities they complained the laity ignored or lacked the capacity to understand. It is evident in our apparent lack of vocabulary to describe those who prioritised notions of Christian living over theology, to label Laudians and conservative Protestants as mere "conformists" or somehow less committed to Protestantism, to describe 'England's unfinished reformation' (p.13) without acknowledging that this was itself the stance of discernible groups, whose claims to the mainstream really need to be probed. It is even present in our tendency to debate whether the Church of England was predominately Calvinist, or a fudge, rather than ask whether the fudge was itself a rejection of the idea that theological precision was the keystone or defining quality of Protestantism.

For a volume on the English Reformation, the book is surprisingly outward looking, benefiting from certain chapters possessing a keen awareness of Scotland and Ireland, continental Catholicism, and International Protestantism. The bookending of the chapters with Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie's offerings also works particularly well, as they both deal with notable absences in English Protestant memory-making and pick up on the themes of unresolved contests, both over the ambiguities of the Reformation and between popular, church, and monarchical interests. Nevertheless, the volume leaves the threads it introduces unresolved, and ending on Ryrie's chapter feels so abrupt that one very much wishes they could finish off the collective thought. Perhaps it was the intention to leave us to our own conclusions, a deliberate ploy to encourage further discussion as to how we remember the Reformation?

References

[1] Scot A. French, 'What Is Social Memory?' *Southern Cultures*, 2:1 (1995), 9-18, quoted at 9.

[2] Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013).

[3] One must also note that Cummings manages to repeat many of the points made regarding erasure, biblioclasm, and post-Reformation use, in Eamon Duffy's *Marking the Hours* (New Haven, CT, 2006),

Chapter 9, without citing it once, and yet refers to Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars*.

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/333495>