The Cult of St George in Medieval England

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St George is enjoying something of a scholarly and popular renaissance at present – not that he ever really went away as a figure of interest in the many countries and cities beyond England which associate themselves with him. Rather, he is being rediscovered and to some extent rehabilitated within English consciousness, with many more celebrations of his feast day taking place than when I first started researching him some 15 years ago. Jonathan Good’s book is a timely addition to the canon of St George studies – and in many ways it is far more useful than a number of recent works, not least because it is supported by a full set of references, a piece of scholarly apparatus that is often denied to those authors (myself included) who may publish with less thoroughly academic imprints than Boydell.

Good’s title indicates that he aims to write about the cult of St George in medieval England, but in many ways this is something of a misnomer because there is relatively little to say about the early medieval cult of St George which directly relates to England. We know that that there was some awareness of St George in Britain from the 7th century, when he is mentioned by Adamnan, bishop of Iona (though we should of course note that Iona is an island off the coast of Scotland, so this is hardly indicative of a specifically English cult) and there are a couple of references in Bede and other texts, a life by Ælfric and some dedication evidence that indicates a limited cult in England in advance of and immediately after the Norman Conquest, but it has to be admitted that we cannot speak confidently of an English cult of St George until the late middle ages. Consequently, much of Good’s book focuses on a rather narrower timeframe than the title might imply, but it is commendable and indeed necessary that he has made real efforts to place the late medieval English cult in a wider context – chronologically if not necessarily geographically.

Good’s opening chapter, ‘Origins, Development and Arrival in England’, is generally very sound (though I would have liked to see some mention of the problems with identifying Diocletian as the heathen emperor who had St George martyred), and his commentary on the Council of Oxford of 1222, which is frequently credited with establishing St George’s day as a national festival, is a most welcome corrective. We then get into the meat of the book, a chapter on ‘Royal St George, 1272–1509’, which is followed by ‘Popular St George in Late Medieval England’; the titles of these chapters bolster my contention that this really cannot claim to be a book about the cult in England during the whole ‘medieval’ era. However, Good then compounds my concern about his title by adding a final chapter on St George’s post-medieval career – this is clearly not required by the chosen title of the book and although in some ways it makes an interesting
addition the author is demonstrably less sure of his ground in this section. I note also that there is no real conclusion to the book as a whole, with chronology – bringing the story up to the present day – perhaps being privileged over a desire to draw together the threads of the foregoing arguments and analyses.

One of the arguments which the author could usefully have returned to is the question of how we identify ‘the English nation’, the term which is used in the statement of interest in St George of 1351 which is so often claimed as evidence of his status as the patron saint of England as a whole by the mid 14th century. Good makes an excellent start on breaking down this term in his first chapter, but I would have liked to have seen some further problematisation of what this concept of ‘nation’ might mean, not least in relation to the social status which would be associated with the commissioning of many of the pieces of material evidence (stained glass representations of the saint, for example) that the author is bringing forward, not to mention the issue of the dedication of churches. This kind of evidence is vital, of course, and is invariably all we have to go on, but I would like to see greater acknowledgement of the fact that any evidence of this sort can only indicate something about the concerns of those who were affluent enough to be able to pay for these works to be created, or of a sufficient social standing to contribute to decisions about church dedication: this rules out the wider population. This crucial nuance is not coming through to me from these pages, and I really feel that we need some further discussion of the possibility that St George was imposed upon the ordinary people of England as a ‘national patron’: evidence such as the very low incidence of the use of ‘George’ as a personal name before the Hanoverians tends to suggest that he was of little account to most English medievals, so his remarkable survival of the purge of guilds which took place as part of the English Reformation seems to be due to something other than affection from the masses.

I note that Good does not agree with my own stated views on the question of the extent to which the Ridings of St George (processions held by Guilds of St George on the feast day of their patronal saint) signify imposition of a veneration by a higher social stratum onto those below them (p. 119). I do take his rejoinder about the likelihood that people of all social classes would have enjoyed the spectacle, but I still feel that there is a fundamental point at issue here. Specifically, Good does not really engage with the strong probability that the proletariat would have turned out for any kind of entertainment organised for them, and that they were not, as far as we know, organising any kind of St George-related activities for themselves. Guilds were not egalitarian institutions open to all, and in the case of the Norwich guild we have specific legal evidence that a shoemaker had some difficulty in demonstrating that he was the right kind of guild member, so it would be wrong, I feel, to identify the Ridings as civic events where all are equally involved. Poor people were engaged to carry torches; they did not get to decide who went where and how big the feast would be. Above all, just because an individual went along to watch a Riding of St George, partook of the free cheese and wine and otherwise engaged with what was happening, we should not assume that this was the result of, or indicative of, any real personal affection for the saint who was honoured by the event. By the same token, ordinary people who looked at a wall painting or stained glass image of St George, or even had him as the dedicatee of their parish church, need not have honoured him particularly as individuals: all these types of ‘evidence’ tell us about the decisions made by patrons, not how popular he was with ordinary folk.

The significance of relics in medieval saints’ cults also needs fuller discussion in this context, especially the possibility that the apparent restriction of accessible relics of St George in England to the royal chapel at Windsor (the only English site of pilgrimage to St George we know about) may have limited his appeal to the rest of the country, in geographical terms at least. To my mind Good underplays the extent to which saints enjoyed localised cults, with varying responsibilities, and the probability that ordinary people would feel far more connection to their local cult than to any ‘national figure’, regardless of whom the monarchy, nobility (and perhaps also the urban patriciate) would like to have claimed as the national patron saint. Equally, it ought to be acknowledged that St George was identified as the patron of a lot of other places besides England: at the very least this may indicate that some 14th- and 15th-century English people will have had an awareness of the very wide and strong universal cult he enjoyed, and this may well have affected the likelihood that individual English people felt any particular connection with him.

Another point which deserves fuller treatment is the extent to which St George’s status as a martyr was as
important as, or even more important than, that of dragon slayer, as evidenced in late medieval English material. The record of the extensive St George cycle in the Stamford chancel windows, preserved in William Dugdale’s *Book of Monuments*, eloquently demonstrates this significant argument, for its focus is overwhelmingly on the martyrdom with only a passing mention of the dragon story. The very brief commentary on this important cycle (p. 102) gives me the impression that the author is unfamiliar with the primary source, and indeed with work which has been written on it, for there is no reference to the article I published on the cycle in 2001. In fact, of my work Good seems only to have read my less-than-entirely academic book on St George (published by Sutton in 2000 and in a revised edition in 2005), and while he is extremely kind about it I am disappointed to see that, on the evidence of his extensive bibliography, he appears to have overlooked the six articles I have published on various aspects of this saint’s cult in medieval England. Given the paucity of modern scholarly work on the cult of St George this omission is unfortunate, not least because it would have given him additional analyses to take issue with!

I noted above that I felt Good was less sure of his ground when he discusses the post-medieval cult of St George. This is signalled to me when he closes his chapter on ‘Popular St George in Late Medieval England’ by commenting: ‘By the sixteenth century St George was so ingrained as a representative of England that he survived the Reformation as a national symbol …’ (p. 121). Consequently, Good seems to skip over the whole issue of the reinvention of St George as an English figure in the Arthurian mode during the post-Reformation period. This factor seems to have great potential for indicating the role he played in the pre-Reformation period, in that he was clearly not understood as a native English saint in the 15th century; this was apparently so problematic that efforts were made to recast him as an Englishman, arguably to make him more acceptable to the wider populace who had, I would claim, had him imposed upon them by their social superiors and hence were stuck with him for good or ill as their national patron. The fact that his cult survived the Reformation in spite of his lack of Biblical authority does not indicate that he was popular with the English in general, but rather, I would contend, that he was a politically useful figure, a point that Good establishes with great clarity in his treatment of St George in relation to the English monarchy.

Good is also, on occasion, somewhat uncertain in his treatment of visual material. I note that he comments that he did not intend to go over the same ground as my own book on St George – which is largely driven by visual analysis – and this approach makes good sense, but on the occasions where he does venture into the description and discussion of visual material he tends to lose his sureness of touch. For example, there is no real examination of the implications of Benedicta Rowe’s identification of the St George in the Bedford Hours as a deathbed portrait of Henry V (p. 84), while in discussion of the Douce Hours miniature he claims that, ‘One cannot help but think it was a rebuke [to Edward II]’ (p. 61). Yes, this is a possibility, and the contention is interestingly argued, but it seems something of an overstatement to claim, in effect, that this is the only possible reading.

I also feel that Good sometimes demonstrates a lack of awareness of the wider context of debate about St George: his opening contains a simple statement about St George coming to be recognised as the ‘special protector of the English’ in 1351, noting that ‘he did not replace any other saint in this category’ (p. 1). I happen to agree with Good’s analysis about the lack of a prior national patron, but we should surely acknowledge that there are other commentators who seek to promote the claims of Sts Edward the Confessor, Edmund or Gregory to be recognised as a more appropriate patron saint of England, some even going so far as to say that their choice should be ‘re-established’ in this role. By the same token, at the very end of the book Good claims that St George’s status as ‘a crusading saint has not helped his reputation amongst England’s growing Muslim population’ (p.151). This analysis overlooks recent commentary on the well-established identification of St George with the Islamic figure Al-Khadr; indeed, there is increasing realisation of the potential for St George to act as a rallying point who cuts across Christianity, Islam, Judaism and even Hinduism, for he appears in one guise or another in traditions within all these religions, as well as in what may loosely be described as ‘pagan’ ritual, especially in relation to the coming of spring. Consequently St George has the potential to play a vital role in modern multi-cultural England, and it is a shame that this element of his ‘Post-Medieval Career’ did not make it into the book.

Despite these few flaws, I feel that this is a timely and useful text which will do much to assist the ongoing
invigoration of interest in St George and his English cult. However, it is not the definitive work on St George in English tradition – that has yet to be written.

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