People of the book: Success in the English Reformation

Abstract (summary)

English Reformation, 16th century religion changing from Catholicism to Protestantism, is a crucial event in English history, causing a wide discussion. Konkola and MacCulloch use the evidence of the book publishing to contribute to the debate about how widely the English Reformation affected ordinary men and women.

Full text

Headnote
Kari Konkola and Diarmaid MacCulloch use the evidence of book publishing to contribute to the debate about how widely the English Reformation affected ordinary men and women.

WAS THE ENGLISH REFORMATION a success? Over the last four decades, discussion of this crucial event in English history has changed drastically. In 1964, A.G. Dickens published his now-classic The English Reformation, describing how sixteenth-century England eagerly and rapidly embraced Protestantism, and how it pushed medieval Catholicism into oblivion with equal alacrity. This view was substantially challenged in 1984 by J.J. Scarisbrick, who argued that sixteenth-century English people were mostly devout and enthusiastic practitioners of the traditional Catholic faith, mourned its destruction, and lost much by its passing. Doubts about the effect of the Reformation gained support from local studies, showing both vigour in the old religion and hesitancy in accepting the new. In 1992 Eamon Duffy introduced a new dimension, with his panorama of traditional liturgy on the eve of the Reformation: he also showed that many aspects of traditional Catholicism continued to thrive in Protestant England. By 1993 the 'revisionist' view of Catholic practices continuing with few modifications well into the Reformation had become so widely accepted that Christopher Haigh could close his study of sixteenth-century religious changes with a disparaging two-word sentence: 'Some Reformations'.

Different perspectives on the nature of the Reformation bring to mind the story of a set of blindfolded people who are put to work to study an elephant by investigating different parts of it by touch: fierce debates follow when the 'researchers' try to convince each
other that each has the whole answer to what an elephant really looks like. So it may be that a view of the Reformation which concentrates on structural change in Church government or parish organisation, or change in the forms of worship, may come up with very different conclusions about success or failure from a view which concentrates on ideas and their expression in words.

Words are crucial. The Reformation was above all a revolution of words, in which the Word of God was at the centre of the arguments. Even in the mid-seventeenth century some 60-70 per cent of Englishmen could not read, and the lack of this skill might seem to make it impossible for these people to have participated in text-based Protestantism. Haigh's 'Some Reformations' comment might well seem an accurate description of the Reformation's effect on the illiterate majority of England's population - a large part of the 'elephant' of early modern English religion. People who could not read might chiefly be influenced by Protestantism through the new forms of worship provided by Archbishop Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer, or by the words that they heard from the pulpit. The effect of those rites and sermons could be questioned. How can we tell whether the unlettered were bored by the English Reformation?

Christopher Haigh fired one of the more recent salvos in the 'revisionist' debate in an article entitled 'Success and Failure in the English Reformation' (2001), discussing possible ways for making reliable quantitative estimates about the effect of Protestantism. Building on earlier models, most notably Gerald Strauss's study of the German Reformation in his path-breaking Luther's House of Learning (1978), Haigh argued that the only sources of solid evidence available to historians are visitation records and tests about the knowledge of catechism. An investigation of these two sources suggested that by the early seventeenth century most people in England seem to have been able to pass the clergy's examinations on catechism, and that, in one sense, the educational effort of the Reformation thus succeeded in teaching Protestantism to people. However, Haigh noted that the reformers themselves did not consider knowledge of the catechism as enough for true religion because 'it did not teach justification by faith or predestination or anything that was definitively Protestant'. This observation led Haigh to the pessimistic conclusion that 'by the standards evangelical ministers set themselves, [the Reformation had failed]'. The revisionist case, from this perspective, has a certain plausibility.

It is obviously sensible to test the Reformation by its own criteria: did it succeed in persuading people of its message? Did the English people come to see the Word as Protestants wanted? Amidst the torrent of words released in the Reformation struggles, did the Protestant torrent persuade the English of its value? At first sight, Haigh's evidence provided by visitation records and tests of catechism knowledge seems strong: the results were disappointing for Protestant activists.

Yet there remains room for doubt, and it is provided by one of the greatest monuments of British scholarship over the last century: the work of a small group of dedicated researchers, who spent decades collecting information about the books published in early modern England. The results have been published as the Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1475-1640 (often known in its first incarnation from its editors' names as 'Pollard and Redgrave', and now commonly abbreviated STC). First published in the 1920s, and then republished in extended form over more than a decade from the late 1970s, since 1987 the STC has formed part of a hugely ambitious programme to list all works printed in English-speaking countries from the beginning of printing up to 1800, based on the collections of over 1,600 institutions world-wide, and directed from the British Library in London. Thanks to the STC, we can say more about books and readers in the
English-speaking world than in any other culture affected by print between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. So what does the pre-1640 section of the STC tell us about what books sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishmen bought, and how many editions and copies of those books were produced?

In the early modern period books were relatively expensive, and the need to spend what for many people was a significant sum makes it safe to assume that people were seriously interested in the subject of the books they bought, and that they also read those books. As a result, the publication statistics contained in the STC catalogues are as significant and reliable evidence as any hard statistics can ever be about human thoughts and feelings.

Some 561 editions of the Bible were produced in English between 1520 and 1649 (enough bibles were printed in the 1630s alone to provide a copy for one in every four English households). An edition of a small bible might run to around 3,000 copies, a large one fewer, but perhaps 1,500. Perhaps 1,137,000 bibles in total were sold in the English market up to 1640. Psalm-books are as crucial as the bible, because singing psalms was indeed one way to counteract the boredom of the illiterate, supposedly worn down by the numbing dullness of hearing the word in their Protestant parish churches. It has been calculated that for psalm-books alone between 1603 and 1640, 240 editions and around 720,000 copies were produced for the English-speaking market, an average annual production of almost 20,000 psalters.

Once we have eliminated cheap broadsides, pamphlets and ballads (which sold in huge numbers), as well as bibles, prayer books and psalm books and all but the longest catechisms (substantial omissions, it is true), we are left with a category of substantial printed texts on spiritual and theological matters which can be best (if crudely) termed 'long theological books'.

It is the words about religion contained in the expensive 'long theological books' which may give a significant alternative perspective on the elephant of the Reformation. What they reveal is a sudden leap in the book market as Protestantism took root in England. From the 1530s, the number of editions of these 'big books' rose from the single figure numbers which had been common early in the sixteenth century to a plateau of around twenty-five to twenty-eight editions a year: this remained constant over four decades to the end of the 1560s. Then there was a great jump, from around thirty-seven per year in the 1570s to around a hundred per year in the 1590s, and ever greater numbers thereafter - nearly 150 a year by the 1630s.

What would this mean in terms of numbers of books actually printed? Where contemporary estimates of particular editions survive, they range from less than a hundred copies to a high of three thousand. The average may have been a thousand copies per edition. That suggests that in the 1530s, around 20,000 new 'long religious books' were printed each year. By the 1630s, that figure had reached nearly 150,000, at a time when there were around 1,100,000 households in England. That means that in the 1650s there were around thirteen books produced for every hundred households in the land.
Not all the religious books in the STC are Protestant. A group of self-consciously distinct Roman Catholics still existed in Protestant England. The book-sales data of the STC bear witness to their willingness to buy books too: 10 per cent of 'long theological texts' between 1560 and 1640 are identifiable from Catholic presses or with Catholic agendas. Furthermore, this 10 per cent probably underestimates the market: efforts to suppress Catholic publishing clearly reduced sales below their free-market level, although there were no doubt many Protestants who would read such works with all the thrill of eating forbidden fruit. There were also curious crossovers in the literature. A strength of Roman Catholic publication was devotional literature which helped its readers in private meditation on divine mystery and glory. Sixteenth-century Protestantism was slow to produce similar material, possibly because Protestant clergy were so busy preaching and catechising that they had little time for quiet and reflection. Indeed, Protestants - even English Puritans - actually read specially sanitised versions of Catholic devotional tracts for lack of their own literature in this genre, the most notorious case being the Christian Directory or Exercise, a devotional work of the English Jesuit Robert Parsons: there were twenty-four bowdlerised Protestant editions of Parson's tract, minus references to Purgatory, the Virgin Mary and the like, in contrast to only four Catholic editions.

It was not only the Roman Catholic book market that was censored in Protestant England. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose searingly materialist view of religion appalled the bishops of Charles II's restored Anglican Church, found his published works rigorously suppressed by officialdom, and he heard threats of heresy charges which frightened him enough to make him burn some of his papers. His writings had caused a public sensation, if only because of second-hand reports of their scandalous character, and demand for them was huge - but the press was not allowed to satisfy it. As a result, only four editions in English of his most shocking work, Leviathan, are listed in the short-title catalogue which continues STC into the late seventeenth-century, two supposedly from 1651 and one doubtfully attributed to 1680. On that evidence alone, we might virtually write off the impact of Hobbes. In fact the meticulous scrutiny of the Hobbes scholar Noel Malcolm has revealed that this is to some extent an optical illusion. Over the decades, ingenious publishers tried to meet a demand from the public (and also get round the destruction of existing stock of Hobbes in the Great Fire of London in 1666). With the help of Dutch printers, they put out two new editions with a false 1651 print, one around 1675-78 (using an aborted effort of 1670) and one in the early eighteenth-century. The licensing agency, the Stationers' Company, looked the other way, and did not keep the bishops informed. Censorship rarely achieves its goal, and in this case it is likely that the bishops did as much to advertise Hobbes as they did to suppress his message.

The fact remains that even the clandestinely-extended editions of Hobbes cannot possibly have reached as wide an audience as the 'long theological books' of mainstream Protestant divinity. Among these, we can turn the microscope on one best-seller, Bishop Lewis Bayly's Practise of Piety, first published in 1612 and going through forty-six editions by 1640. It was a long manual describing an ascetic, pious life, and was clearly aimed at heads of households throughout England, with detailed advice for ordering the life of the family. In the 1630s alone, sales included four pirated Amsterdam editions of 10,000 copies each; among the twenty-one other editions, the average print-run was probably 3,000 - so known editions translate into 103,000 copies for the decade. In 1640, therefore, allowing one copy per family, around 9 per cent of England's 1,100,000 households possessed a recently-printed copy of Bayly.

In fact this figure should be regarded as a lower limit: it is based only on the 103,000 copies of Bayly's work
printed in the 1630s. The book came out in 1612; by the end of 1630 it had already sold twenty-one editions. Admittedly, while producing the early editions, publishers did not know about the book's popularity, and they may not have dared to print the full 3,000 copies common of bestsellers. The pre-1631 editions probably produced a total of 40-60,000 copies. So assuming a reasonable survival rate of these earlier editions up to 1640, we can add around 20-40,000 copies of Bayly's book to the 1640 figure of 103,000. The corresponding rise in the number of households with Bayly sitting on the shelf would increase the size of a Protestant 'cultural wedge' in England to around 120-140,000 households, or 11-13 per cent of the population. If Bayly only achieved what sales departments today would call '90 per cent coverage' among godly families, that would make the number of literate Protestant households about 10 per cent greater than the number of Bayly's books in circulation. The size of the Protestant 'cultural wedge' would increase to about 12-14 per cent of England's population.

The significance of ignoring such evidence in the revisionism debate on the English Reformation can be seen in the stark contrast between the results produced by the different sources: on the basis of visitation records and observations about catechising, Christopher Haigh has argued that the educational effort of English Reformers failed to communicate the central ideas of Protestantism to the general population. The publishing statistics of the STC, however, show that in the early seventeenth century Englishmen bought several million long books describing in great detail precisely the ideas which Haigh argues they did not know. The bibliometric evidence thus leaves little doubt that a sizeable group of Englishmen had learned the core ideas of Protestantism very well indeed. They listened to the torrent of words: they bought them, and they read them.

In many areas and social groups, older traditions of reading continued with only small modifications throughout the Reformation, but there also took place an important change. This was the appearance of an entirely new group of highly literate Protestants, whose attitudes, behaviour and religion differed starkly from the traditional norms of late medieval England. The appearance of a new, highly literate form of Christianity is not a new idea: relying mostly on Protestants' own estimates, Haigh in English Reformations put the number of what he called 'informed godly Protestants' at 2.5-5 per cent of the total population (p. 281). The publication statistics of the STC suggest that the estimate about the number of Protestants of the 'religiously athletic kind' (to borrow Patrick Collinson's expression) needs to be increased to about 9-14 per cent of the population. Now recall the likelihood that, in the mid-seventeenth century, the level of fluent literacy among English males was 30-40 per cent: between a quarter and a half of Englishmen who could read well were committed Protestants.

Following this evidence, one might say that in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the elephant of early modern English religion developed an entirely new limb. The fact that many parts of the animal do not seem to have changed much forces us to put details in context by considering a serious objection: why pay much attention to text-centred Protestants? They were after all a relatively small group. The answer is that the small size of this group was compensated by the huge influence it exercised: this influence could be seen in both Lords and Commons in Parliament. For the STC is not the only source of quantitative evidence about the spread of text-based Protestantism. A second source documenting this spread can be found in parliamentary politics, because, even though early modern elections to Parliament would not pass any modern standard of popular representation, and were not intended to, the process still appears to have produced MPs who reflected reasonably accurately the views of the upper strata of society in their home districts.

As a result, the composition of the House of Commons provides a series of opinion polls of the literate elite -
precisely the same group whose attitudes are gauged by book sales. Analysis of returns of MPs to the Commons, and the degree to which they were prepared to obstruct or further the course of the English Reformation, produces results that agree fully with those produced by STG data. Already around 1550 the Protestant regimes of Edward VI managed to overcome conservative opposition in Parliament to secure the passage of such momentous religious changes as the abolition of compulsory clerical celibacy, the introduction of a vernacular liturgy and the destruction of all English chantries. Mary I experienced continuous trouble from a significant minority in both houses of Parliament in the course of her restoration of Catholicism, despite the fact that at that stage, probably most of the political nation were in sympathy with her basic religious aims. Then, as soon as Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, Protestants effortlessly dominated representation in the House of Commons, and by the end of the century, they also formed the overwhelming majority of the English peerage. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the Protestantism of Parliament grew ever more Reformed in character, reflecting an understanding of the English Church as part of a European-wide Protestant international, even as the clerical leadership of the Church began being infiltrated by those who wanted to emphasise the continuing Catholic aspect of English official religion.

In fact, the text-centred Protestants came close to being the majority of the people who ran the economy and politics of seventeenth-century England. The historical significance of the 'cultural wedge' of influential, text-centred Protestants is highlighted by the wider context. The literate Protestant elite came into existence and took power at precisely the time - late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries - when England rose from a small backwater at the fringes of Europe into a kingdom at the vanguard of scientific and economic development, with a growing investment in exploration, commerce and settlement beyond Europe. This correlation might even lead historians to consider the possibility that somehow, somewhere the ascetic, conservative, hard-line Protestants did something right.

The value of the STC reaches beyond general trends, because the publication statistics show who were the bestselling authors and which of these writers' books were most popular. Although they do not provide the whole story, these sales figures again tell us a great deal about the preferences and mentalities of the literate elite. This gives rise to a further mischievous thought. The booksales present a view of seventeenth-century England that differs significantly from the current paradigm. Many authors whom the STC shows to have been popular - the Puritan moral theologian William Perkins (1558-1602), the reluctantly nonconformist divine Richard Baxter (1615-91), the great Presbyterian writer John Owen (1616-83), the gently Arminian bishop Jeremy Taylor (1613-67) and the moralist Richard Allestree (1619-81) - have not received from historians the attention that would befit their huge influence on their contemporaries. On the other hand, a great deal of research has been done on people and subjects whose books did not sell well in this period. The quantitative STC-perspective shows that historians have done years of intense work on authors whose thought and writings must have been much less well-known in the seventeenth-century, because few people at the time bought their books.
The discrepancy between what the STC shows to have been popular and what historians have investigated is, in one sense, understandable. Reasonably accurate versions of the STC have been available only for the last decade. Many of the still-hot research topics in early modern English history, on the other hand, continue by the force of academic inertia from origins that long-predate the existence of reliable quantitative evidence about the period. One could compare the amount of time today spent investigating and teaching the subject of early modern English literature with the time spent investigating and teaching early modern religion. The fact is that readers in early seventeenth-century England bought five long books of theology for every book containing poems, plays and sonnets. According to STC, the books of William Perkins sold almost twice as many known editions as those of Shakespeare - 188 versus 97 respectively up to 1640.

This raises interesting questions about understanding Tudor and Stuart England. One of the authors some time ago entered an argument with a graduate researcher in seventeenth-century English history; this student of the period had never heard of William Perkins, and he was astonished to learn that Perkins was a far more popular writer than Shakespeare. Similarly, he had never heard of Richard Allestree or The Whole Duty of Man. Yet The Whole Duty sold 56 known editions - about 200,000 copies - between 1660 and 1700, a popularity which means that the contents of Allestree's book must have been one of the most widely known sets of ideas at the time. The friend was working on Hobbes, and the discussion left several questions. Nowhere near as many among the literate elite of seventeenth-century England can possibly have read books such as Filmer's Patriarcha or Hobbes' Leviathan, compared with the numbers who read Allestree or Bayly. On the most generous estimate of its four early English editions, Hobbes' Leviathan, even in its various clandestine forms, cannot have topped 15,000 copies against Allestree's 200,000. Both Allestree's and Hobbes's sales were achieved over fifty years in a population with 400,000-500,000 literate households. Furthermore, equally meagre sales seem to have characterised all books published as part of the debates surrounding Hobbes' ideas (most of them intended to attack him). Yet there exists a thriving academic industry around Hobbes. Would it not make sense to pay more attention to The Whole Duty?

The discrepancy between what academics are teaching about Tudor and Stuart England and what early modern English people were reading raises a troubling question: are historians communicating an accurate picture of the past? Do modern students, many of whom will feel that religion is irrelevant in their lives besides being dull and incomprehensible, really learn about the ideas that were most common and most influential in seventeenth-century England, the formative period of the British Empire and of the colonies which went on to form the United States? If they do not, that is perhaps why they do not readily appreciate what a huge success the English Reformation became.

FOR FURTHER READING


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