**London presbyterians and the British revolutions, 1638-64**, by Elliot Vernon

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This fascinating book has been in the pipeline for several years since Dr Vernon’s doctoral research, and in my view, has been well worth the wait. The last decade has seen a renewed focus on the Westminster Assembly, thanks in no small part to the monumental publication in 2012 of Chad van Dixhoorn’s Oxford University Press edition of the Assembly’s minutes, and there has been a small industry of publications emerging from American theological seminaries of works exploring the doctrinal and ecclesiological discussions of the Assembly’s members. What this study does is to look at what we might call ‘reformed Protestantism’ outside of the Assembly, and to trace clerical careers over a quarter of a century in a particular region (in this case, London), and to explore how those clergymen shaped the religious politics of the time. One risk in an enterprise such as this is that it might always feel that the study exists in the shadow of what might be perceived as the presbyterians’ ultimate defeat, in the failure of the post-Restoration church settlement to accommodate other ecclesiologies beyond the episcopal within the restored Church of England. That is not the case here. Vernon has a lively sense of the actors operating within their own contexts, be it the final collapse of Laudian episcopal government in the early 1640s and the sense of what might be possible in terms of church settlement, to the shifting negotiations with the captive King Charles I in the late 1640s played out against a backdrop of tense civic politics and the demands of a professionalised army facing demobilisation whilst wanting to secure the hard-fought religious freedoms which had emerged during the civil wars. Indeed, one of the stand-out features of this book is the skilful way in which Vernon explores the politics of each sub-section of time within this quarter century in order to trace the activism of London’s presbyterian clergy and the shifting accords and alliances which were formed and broken along the way.

Vernon’s book is structured chronologically, which allows for the trajectories of clerical careers to be traced through the shifting political sands of the period. Particularly effective is Vernon’s use of conclusions at the end of each chapter, which allows him to unpick the sometimes dense preceding material in order to highlight the most relevant strands. At the heart of this book is how puritan clergy moved from having been marginalised and indeed persecuted by the episcopal establishment during the 1630s to being central to the political machinations surrounding how the Church should be re-envisioned after the collapse of the Laudian hierarchy in the early 1640s. Vernon never sees these clergy in isolation, but rather, they are placed into a context of international networks (particularly towards Scotland and the Netherlands), and closer to home, into a web of aristocratic, gentry, and mercantile patronage.

What is striking is how despite their prominence, writing influential texts and preaching sermons to packed London churches, these clergy never seem to have been in the driving seat. One example where these tensions came to the fore was the debates in the Long Parliament during 1645-1646 over the exclusion of ‘ignorant and scandalous’ persons from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The determination of the legislators that Parliament should be the final court of arbitration in the event of any disagreement was a position which drove against a presbyterian ‘two kingdoms’ model, with the Church being a kingdom which existed within the state but separate from it.

Two chapters in this book particularly stood out for me. The fascinating account of Christopher Love and the events leading to his execution for treason in 1651 is handled adeptly, with the exploration of Love’s final days and his funeral drawing upon insights from the likes of Peter Lake and Michael Questier in order to view those events as spectacle, and how the London presbyterians sought to draw what capital they could from managing the spectacle as far as was possible within the bounds set by the Council of State. Similarly, the chapter which explores the functioning of presbyterian church government in London between 1646 and 1660 is built upon a careful examination of parochial records, and reveals something of how the presbyterian moment rather ran out of steam towards the end of the 1650s.

This is a valuable book which covers a topic which, whilst frequently commented upon tangentially within other works, has been little studied in its own right. As such, Vernon expertly opens up the politics of the London presbyterian clergy, and in doing so, has provided a great service to historians of this period. My only slight criticism is that for a book whose scope runs until 1664, there is very little coverage of events beyond ‘Black Bartholmew’s Day’ in 1662. Given that (as Vernon rightly notes) presbyterians would play a prominent role in the shaping of the modern Western world through their involvement in industry and colonialism (and indeed, the development of political thought), it would have been interesting to hear Vernon’s views about how these ejected clergy ‘dusted themselves down’ and set about their ministry within what would in effect be voluntary gatherings of believers. That said, this is a small criticism, and rather reflects a sense of wondering ‘what happens next’ after we have journeyed with London’s presbyterian clergy for the past quarter century. This is an important work, and for its insights into issues of church governance, parochial politics, political intrigues, and international networking, it will be a useful addition for scholars working on a wide range of topics regarding the mid-seventeenth century British Isles.

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