

Larry J. Kreitzer *Seditious Sectaries: The Baptist Conventicles of Oxford 1641-1691*. (Studies in Baptist History and Thought Vol. 30.1-2) Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2006 (1056 pp).

Larry Kreitzer is a New Testament scholar at Regent's Park College at Oxford. He has allied interests in the Bible and literature and, most pertinently for this review, the dissenting history of Oxford. These daunting volumes represent a massive, not to say exhaustive, examination of seventeenth century primary sources. The first volume is largely a prosopographical study focused on five individuals who are at some point or other identified with the Baptists of Oxford in that period. Volume Two is a documentary record comprising 500-odd pages of a 'Chronological Source Catalogue', reproducing such esoteric documents as apprenticeship contracts, antiquarian reports, council records, letters, wills, diocesan indictments, applications for meeting house licences, marriage records etc.

Of the thirty-six individuals whom Kreitzer concludes 'can confidently be described as Baptists living and worshipping in conventicles in Oxford between 1641-1691' (1:15) five are given extensive treatment. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the extant contemporary sources all are men and most were 'merchants, tradesmen and artisans'. So we read of the Tanner, Richard Tidmarsh, the Glover, Lawrence King, the Soldier, Roger Hatchman, the Gardener, Ralph Austen and the Milliner, Thomas Williams. Kreitzer has done an astounding job in reconstructing as much detail as possible on these men's lives. Of the five, only Austen left any substantial direct record in terms of private correspondence or published writings. The lives of the others are built tangentially, from such accounts as references in court records or mention in minutes books.

For all this exhaustive detective work, perhaps indeed because of it, one is left with the question whether we are in the end presented with too much information here, much of it bearing only slightly on any significant picture of the individuals concerned. In the case of the Tanner, Richard Tidmarsh, for instance, we find that five instances of his signature have been identified. Two are in relation to the Will and estate of Tidmarsh's son's father-in-law Edward Wyans. Due to this connection we are given twelve pages on the career of Wyans and his own son. Various appearances for Wyans's senior's failure to attend the parish church are detailed. Wyans appears to himself have been a Baptist but his story adds little to that of Tidmarsh, other than

establishing a marital link. The account is similar for Ralph Austen, details of his publications on fruit trees are given in detail with smaller biographical studies of some of his associates. Despite his writings on Quakers however we are left somewhat unsatisfied in terms of understanding his theology.

Volume one reads as if Kreitzer determined that absolutely everything he uncovered would be recounted in full. The historian's job is to sift, arrange and highlight. This is not done sufficiently in this volume. The significance of the bulk of the material is not made clear.

What then of the second, documentary volume? Here again we have abundant evidence of Kreitzer's exhaustive archival search and excellent textual work. How useful, however, is this collection to subsequent researchers? It is a companion volume, which provides the text of most of the manuscripts which are referenced in the main volume. These are arranged chronologically, with an assigned number which appears in the footnote entries in the main text. This clearly aids in pursuing the points Kreitzer makes about his subjects, but it is of limited value beyond this ability to check his sources. The problem is that there is no particular connection between the documents themselves, other than the people they mention. This is not like, say, a complete transcription of a Church's minute books across a period, which might facilitate a range of questions. These documents must essentially be approached with Kreitzer's questions, which limits their value.

Paternoster is to be congratulated on producing this valuable series. It would be better still with greater attention to editing. The copies reviewed had a number of blank pages which annoyingly interrupt the text. There is no question that the depth and extent of this study has revealed some important aspects of Baptist life in seventeenth-century Oxford. Unfortunately this massive work displays some of the faults associated with parish histories of the 'labour of love' variety. We don't need to know it all. We need to know what it means. Less detail and greater interaction with the secondary literature on religion in Stuart England and Oxford in particular would have made this material more useful.

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