

‘My-Parish’ Book Review (February 2017)

Valerie Hitchman and Andrew Foster (eds), *Views from the Parish: Churchwardens’ Accounts c. 1500-1800* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015)

This collection of essays, most of which are based on papers delivered at a conference, “Early Modern Churchwardens’ Accounts: Uses and Abuses”, held at the University of Kent in 2010, provides an interesting multi-faceted view of the uses of Churchwarden Accounts. Both editors are well-known to members of the Warwick Network for Parish Research.

The editors, in their introduction, list their aims as: ‘to raise the profile of churchwardens and their accounts; to highlight material from different parts of the British Isles; to help in overcoming difficulties in using these accounts; to encourage systematic use rather than anecdotal quotes from this material and establish an agenda for further research on the value and uses of churchwardens’ accounts. This is an ambitious agenda and certainly the individual papers range widely over the subject – a number treat with the subject in possibly rather traditional ways, but the introduction of contributions dealing with Wales and Ireland, together with unusual subjects, such as the control of vermin in Yorkshire parishes and the continuation of the pre-Reformation musical tradition in several Elizabethan London parishes widen the scope. The editors’ introduction as well as other papers provide comprehensive references to well-known works by, amongst others, Clive Burgess, Eamon Duffy, Andrew Foster, Ronald Hutton and Beat Kümin which have demonstrated the richness and potential of these sources.

The adoption of a British in addition to the usual English perspective emphasises not just religious divides but also linguistic obstacles to common understanding. The latter is well-demonstrated in two papers based on Welsh sources. In Ireland, the Anglican Church had a different problem: the majority of the population, away from Dublin and the Ulster plantations, continued to adhere to the Roman Catholic Church and therefore were not subject to the churchwardens. Clearly there are geographical limitations to the extensive use of Churchwardens’ accounts.

There are other limiting factors as Gary G Gibbs demonstrates in ‘London Parish Records and Parish Studies: Texts, Contexts, and Debates over Appropriate Methods’. In this paper, he takes a wider view of material available to parish researchers in the post-Reformation period and highlights some of the associated difficulties. He considers four main types of parochial records namely parish registers (from 1538), vestry minutes and parish inventories, as well as churchwarden accounts, all of which can be supplemented by wills. Difficulties arise not only because of incomplete survival but also the challenge of locating pertinent documents. In addition, what survives may be not the original but an edited version. For example, a scrivener may have made a neat version from the churchwardens’ rough notes or even their remembrances. This clearly introduces room for error of transcription and interpretation. But, perhaps the more significant difficulty as highlighted by other contributors as well as Gibbs is locating such records in archives where they may be catalogued in such a way that their origin and potential value is not clear. This is the issue that the new Churchwardens’ Accounts Database, due to go live at <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/my-parish/projects/cwa> will hopefully address. It should certainly facilitate future systematic use of these sources.

Quite apart from the technical aspects of Churchwardens’ Accounts, this collection of essays will be of interest to those who work on sixteenth, seventeenth and even eighteenth- century political, religious and local history. It should, as Joan Dils hopes in her afterword inspire more professional and amateurs to query these ‘chronicles of the past’.

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