



John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity

By Tim Cooper

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John Owen (1616-1683) and Richard Baxter (1615-1691) were both pivotal figures in shaping the nonconformist landscape of Restoration England. Yet despite having much in common, they found themselves taking opposite sides in several important debates, and their relationship was marked by acute strain and mutual dislike. By comparing and contrasting the parallel careers of these two men, this book not only distils the essence of their differing theology, it also offers a broader understanding of the formation of English nonconformity. Placing these two figures in the context of earlier events, experience and differences, it argues that Restoration nonconformity was hampered by their strained personal relationship, which had its roots in their contrasting experiences of the English Civil War. This study thus contributes to historiography that explores the continuities across seventeenth-century England, rather than seeing a divide at 1660. It illustrates the way in which personality and experience shaped the development of wider movements.

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Editorial Review

Review

Prize: Honourable Mention 2013 - The International John Bunyan Society's Richard L. Greaves Award for an outstanding book on the history, literature, thought, practices, and legacy of English Protestantism to 1700

'This is a dramatic and highly readable account of a poisonous feud between two thin-skinned giants of evangelical protestantism. This dual study not only gives us many new insights into the beliefs and actions of Baxter and Owen but (without taking sides) significantly deepens our understanding of the stress fractures within puritanism that led to the defeat of its hopes and expectations.' John Morrill, University of Cambridge, UK

'Tim Cooper, in this formidably learned study, examines the pre-history of separated Dissent: the rivalries from the 1630s to the 1650s among reformers over how to remodel a still-unified Church, and the internal conflicts that finally led not just to separation from the restored Church in the 1660s, but to separation from each other.' Church Times

'Cooper's book is unquestionably the most important study of Owen to have appeared in print, and it adds very significantly to our understanding of Baxter.'

Congregational History Society Magazine

'Tim Cooper's accomplished study of the acrimonious relationship between Richard Baxter (1615-91) and John Owen (1616-83) sheds much light on the development of English Nonconformity... the theological ideas of the book are explained with a clarity and accessibility that will appeal to anyone interested in religious debate in the seventeenth century.' Renaissance Quarterly

'... Cooper's work provides an intriguing window into the personalities of two of the most important men in seventeenth-century England.'

Calvin Theological Journal

'Dr Cooper has done his work well and has produced an excellent and highly readable book. His work tells us much about the work of the two men, the political and religious machinations of the Commonwealth and Restoration periods, and the legacies which were left to be suffered, or dealt with, by subsequent generations.'

Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society

'Organized around two very specific questions, Cooper's study clearly addresses the larger issue of how and why the orthodox godly came to differ and makes important contributions to this field of enquiry... Thanks to Cooper, the reader is in a better position to understand how the godly, for all their shared Calvinist theology, could find it easy to agree on what was wrong with the Laudian status quo but impossible to agree on what to put in its place, and why the broad divisions within Restoration nonconformity proved in the end to be permanent.'

Sixteenth Century Journal

'This is an intriguing, well-researched and at times poignant study of an epic rupture within the Puritan fellowship.'

The Journal of Ecclesiastical History

'This skilfully constructed and richly detailed study makes an important contribution not only to the study of its chosen period but also to the history of theological controversy and the powerful and fractious personalities that are often at its heart.'

The Journal of Religious History

'Cooper's book is excellent. He has done much painstaking research in reconstructing the lives of these two men and, by juxtaposing them, has offered the reader profound insights into the theological and political dynamics of the time.'

Catholic Historical Review

About the Author

Tim Cooper is Senior Lecturer in the History of Christianity in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Otago, New Zealand.

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