final appendix “offers a dynamic transmission—from the unique 1653 volume to digital hypertext then back again to the printed page—of on-going critical and scholarly engagement with one of An Collins’ most lyrical and accomplished poems” (216). This description could, in many ways, apply to the collection as a whole.

The greatest strengths of this collection lie not only in its elucidation of the elusive An Collins herself, but also in fleshing out the other poets surrounding her. By placing Collins within this active and vibrant context, even if we still know next to nothing about her life and circumstances, the nature and strength of her writing nonetheless shine through. An Collins and the Historical Imagination succeeds in not only calling attention to this long-obsured writer, but also in laying the groundwork for a great deal of future scholarship.


Careful readers will benefit tremendously from Leif Dixon’s thorough study of late Elizabethan and early Stuart predestinarian pastoral theology. Contrary to many previous treatments of the subject that either assumed or argued for the anxiety inducing potential of predestinarian theology, Dixon compellingly demonstrates that the doctrine of predestination was a source of tremendous comfort in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Along the way, he seeks to answer two key questions. First, why was the doctrine of predestination such a source of comfort? Second, how did predestinarian ministers understand and communicate this message of comfort (3)? The pursuit of these questions leads Dixon to the conclusion that as Protestantism became a matter of settled national identity the doctrine of predestination “was forced to change form” and increasingly became a “means of guiding believers”, of “strengthening their faith”, and of “helping them to interpret—and change—the world in a meaningful way” (7).

Methodologically, the book is oriented less to the reception of predestinarian theology among the religious public and more to the manner in which predestination was preached (8). As a result, Dixon
focuses on printed sermons and manuals of practical divinity. After the introduction and an opening chapter surveying the development of predestinarian theology in early modern Protestantism, chapters 2 through 5 are organized around individual pastors and theologians, including William Perkins, Richard Greenham, Richard Rogers, Thomas Wilson, and Robert Sanderson. The final two chapters widen the lens in order to survey predestinarian sermons from 1603-1625 (chapter 6) and funeral sermons (chapter 7).

Throughout the book, Dixon sets forth his historiographical sensibilities clearly and carefully. He is generally sympathetic with Nicholas Tyacke’s thesis that the “Calvinist consensus” that emerged under Elizabeth and James was challenged by the “rise of Arminianism” under Charles I (4), and also with Patrick Collinson’s narrative of a powerful and well-integrated puritan influence at the center of early modern English life upset by the changing tide of the Caroline regime (5). He accepts Peter Lake’s definition of puritanism as “an activistic style of piety” (5, 13-14), and also follows Lake and John Morrill in seeing it as an identity forged through a “cultural process” (13). The book’s dual emphasis on the cultural significance of theological ideas and the importance of cultural context in shaping the development and practice of theology is especially refreshing (4).

The chapters on the individual pastors are arguably the strongest, and one reason for this is that Dixon frequently pauses to compare and contrast the thought of each subsequent thinker with those previously considered. The result is a narrative that builds gradually and progressively adds categories of analysis, thus allowing for the easy digestion of what would otherwise be a dizzying array of ideas. Impatient readers could skip ahead to the useful spectrum summarizing Dixon’s understanding of the relationships between each figure (225-6), but to fully appreciate the nuance and care of the broader argument it is necessary to pay careful attention to the material that both precedes and follows this helpful summary.

Dixon makes several interesting claims in relation to the individuals he considers. His treatment of William Perkins shows that he developed his pastoral theology in response to a series of “inherited cultural anxieties about valid sources of authority” (63). Whereas W. B. Patterson has recently argued that Perkins was not so much a
puritan as an apologist for the established church, Dixon insightfully points out that the question is less one of whether Perkins supported the Church of England and more one of “the degree to which he supported it, and the conditions which he placed upon that support” (78). Dixon’s exposition of Perkins’s understanding of the conditions of obedience to the commands of both temporal and spiritual authorities regarding things indifferent convincingly demonstrates that he was no straightforward apologist for the policies of the Church or the Crown (81-91). With regard to Perkins’s soteriology, Dixon also demonstrates that he located the seat of faith in the mind rather than the will (93). Contrary to both Patrick Collinson and especially to Christopher Hill, Dixon argues that Perkins was more interested in the individual appropriation of salvation than in the pursuit of cultural change (117).

The categories developed in the chapter on Perkins serve as points of comparison for the treatments that follow. Richard Greenham and Richard Rogers followed Perkins in teaching the importance of perseverance as a ground of assurance, albeit in very different ways. Greenham’s solution was to “embrace extreme psychological states” and to find in affliction affirmation that one must truly be suffering for God, whereas Rogers chose to “dissuade his readers from emotional extremity” and rest in their continued desire to persevere rather than in their success or failure in actually doing so (173).

As for Thomas Wilson, Dixon argues that he simply identified faith with assurance, although in his later work changed his mind and separated the two (175f.). This may be true, but the change is not obvious from the evidence presented, and it is hard to reconcile why Dixon on the one hand argues that Wilson “at least to some extent, changed his mind” (206) and on the other hand claims that he “was not so much abandoning his previous position as paying more attention to the transitional phase between weak and strong faith” (199). One is left wondering whether the tendency to either identify or separate faith and assurance is less a function of doctrinal change or development and more a matter of the presentation of different aspects of the same doctrines in different pastoral contexts, as Dixon himself suggests when he critiques the work of R. T. Kendall at several points throughout the book.
The chapter on Robert Sanderson seeks to understand how his predestinarian preaching did not inhibit his ministry under Laud and Charles I. Instead of relying upon a distinction between “experimental” and “creedal” predestination, Dixon instead argues that Sanderson’s understanding of predestination was distinguished by its active rather than passive understanding of human agency and long-term rather than short-term perspective regarding the attainment of assurance (250). Sanderson’s downplaying of human agency and long-term perspective enabled him to take an expansive understanding of *adiaphora* (251). Coupled with his strongly Erastian understanding of the relationship between spiritual and temporal authority, this understanding of matters indifferent allowed him to prosper in spite of his predestinarian views (238). This is a very interesting argument, but perhaps it indicates that the importance of predestination as such has been overplayed in the historiography of the period. Perhaps it was not so much John Cotton’s understanding of predestination and assurance that offended Sanderson and inspired him to preach against him, but rather closely related doctrines such as Cotton’s understanding of God’s covenants with humanity and the political implications of the discontinuity he identified between the law and the gospel (215f.). It is worth pointing out that Dixon himself raises points along these lines (217-18), and he deserves great thanks for provoking interesting questions like these.

While the chapters surveying predestinarian preaching and funeral sermons do not inspire quite as many questions, they nevertheless do help to contextualize and clarify them. Generally speaking, the consideration of predestinarian preaching models a useful approach to the relationship between formal theological works and the genre of printed sermons (268), while the treatment of funeral sermons functions as a nice summary and conclusion to the book as a whole by demonstrating that the doctrine of predestination was about much more than assurance. Dixon identifies eight different practical pastoral applications of predestinarian preaching, of which assurance was only one (353-4).

In addition to these many areas of appreciation, one point of critique is worth noting. The opening chapter surveying the doctrine of predestination during the Reformation era does little to advance
the argument of the book and makes quite a few sweeping generalizations. Is the “matrix of cultural anxiety” really a sufficient explanatory mechanism for the “emergence” (recovery?) of the doctrine of double predestination (34)? Is it really true that during this period “the Catholic Church had not changed as much as had the world outside” (48)? Is there anything about the tendency of “predestinarians after Calvin” to “handle the doctrine in increasingly formalised and dogmatic ways, with human rationality making ever more confident and assertive inroads” (56) that could not also be said of scholastics after Aquinas? When Dixon acknowledges that his contention that “the powerful emergence of predestination during the early modern period was causally connected to a preceding epistemological and ethical crisis is difficult to prove” (58), it is hard not to nod vigorously in agreement and wonder what this chapter contributes to an otherwise excellent and thought provoking book.

Otherwise, *Practical Predestinarians* is a closely argued, carefully researched, and appropriately nuanced consideration of a very complex subject with important historiographical implications. Historians of early modern England as well as historians of Christian doctrine will benefit from it a great deal, not least because it invites them to participate in the same discussion.