

Joseph L. Black. *The Martin Marprelate Press; A Documentary History*. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2020. 170 pp. \$21.95. Review by JOHN MULRYAN, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

“The authorities who conducted the investigations recorded in this collection sought detailed information about every stage of the book-making process and about every person involved” (9). But their motives were hardly benign. While the primary goal of the Marprelate project was to publicize the Presbyterian campaign for church reform (10), the supporters of the established church would tolerate no dissent and hunted down the attackers, especially the supporters of the playfully impertinent advocates of the (possibly) fictional Martin Marprelate.

But the attackers of the press were remarkably immune to its charm and seductive eloquence, or the understanding of why anyone would find it entertaining or engaging.

Two of the key figures in the controversy were Job Throkmorton, considered the voice of Martin Marprelate and John Penry, the manager of the Marprelate press. “The Marprelate project was a communal operation. Job Throkmorton (primarily) wrote the tracts and Penry managed the press, but many others contributed. Producing and circulating the books required several printers and two presses, a stitcher, suppliers of ink and paper, the sympathetic members of four large households, several wholesale distributors, and probably scores of local distributors” (28).

Some putative Marprelates were tortured, while others were convicted and sent to prison on the basis of hearsay evidence or sometimes no evidence at all. Unfortunately, most of the attacks on the Marprelate faction are filled with confusion, inconsistencies, and non sequiturs. For example, in attacking Penry the claim is made that “a Noble man deceased did encourage him to write bitterly against the Bishops” (90). Hearsay evidence abounds such as: “he thinketh,” “hath heard it reporteth,” “he thinketh to be Waldegrave,” “as they believe,” and “Mr. Wigston being examined saith, that he was moved by his wife, that Hodgekyns might do a piece of work in his house, which himself saw not, but heard afterward, that *Martin Junior* &

Senior were printed in a low parlor of his house” (95). There was a press in Fawsley (a parish in Northampton, England) where many of the Marprelate tracts were supposed to have been printed. “Edward Sharpe saith that ... this press was carried to Sir Richard Knighley’s house” at Fawsley where the *Epitome* was printed in his house by Walgrave (105). “Edward Sharpe the minister of Fawsley who going to visit Walgrave’s man ... found new printed papers of Martin Marprelate lying in the chamber and also a printing press there standing” (105). So, the inquisitors were partially successful in thwarting the efforts of the Marprelate faction and impeding the unlawful printing process, but the Marpletian spirit remained unbowed.

Aside from the Marprelate controversy, the established church resisted all attempts to foster change of any kind. “To push for innovation in church government was to call into question the legal foundations of monarchical sovereignty” (38). It was even considered treasonous to *read* a copy if they attacked the crown, no matter how playful or brilliantly comical they might have been. In short, the inquisitors were not amused.

Women also played a prominent part in the controversy. Elizabeth Crane, who was supposed to be active in the reform movement, was accused of harboring the press in her home, but she replied with spirit that she would not be “her own hangman” by admitting the charge. When questioned by the Attorney General John Popham, she refused to answer any questions about herself (80).

Sometimes incriminating documents were “found” by the way-side. When Hoskins (perhaps Bishop John Hodgkins) asked Penry to tell him the location of a “Martin” book, he said “it would come to Hoskin’s hands.” And as they walked, Hoskins found two or three sheets of paper rolled up together which he took up and put in his bag (115).

The remarkable effectiveness of the Marprelate faction frightened the authorities who had no defense against playful mockery and biting wit. To my mind, the playful sallies of the Marprelate faction so infuriated the inquisitors that they took drastic and unmerited action against them. This is not the view presented in this account but I feel that I must follow the evidence where it leads.