

Robert Wilcher. *Keeping the Ancient Way: Aspects of the Life and Work of Henry Vaughan (1621–1695)*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. xiv+366 pp. £90.00. Review by DONALD R. DICKSON, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY.

Keeping the Ancient Way is the first book-length study of Henry Vaughan in nearly two decades and will take its place among the finest studies of the poet, such as Jonathan Post's *Henry Vaughan: The Unfolding Vision* (1982) and Philip West's *Henry Vaughan's Silex Scintillans: Scripture Uses* (2001). Robert Wilcher is well-known among Vaughan scholars internationally for his many contributions to Vaughan studies, especially on Henry and occasionally on Thomas, beginning with his doctoral dissertation and continuing into his retirement from the University of Birmingham. He has now synthesized these individual studies into a comprehensive account of Henry's life and works. As he explains, "I was struck by the preponderance of items intent upon placing his work in various historical contexts that had prompted or could be illuminated by it: biographical, literary, religious, political. It soon became apparent that the book I now had in mind would need to balance this approach with a more adequate treatment of the aesthetic dimension of Vaughan's poetry" (327). The result of Wilcher's stock-taking is the most comprehensive account yet of Henry life and work, *Keeping the Ancient Way*.

The first half of *Keeping the Ancient Way* places both Vaughan twins within their biographical and historical contexts. Wilcher summarizes what is known about their family, their education, and their corner of Wales before and during the Civil War, but what makes this familiar story quite rich is the interweaving of personal moments from their poetry and prose—especially that of Thomas who is comparatively unknown to most students of Henry's verse. Thus all the information on the Vaughans gleaned by Gwenllian Morgan and Louise Imogen Guiney that was passed on to F. E. Hutchinson is here but supplemented with the work of Roland Mathias, Donald Dickson, and others and then illuminated by the words of the twins. Within this larger frame Wilcher places both of Henry's early collections: *Poems, with the tenth Satyre of Iuvenal Englished* (1646) with its London poem "A Rhapsodie" celebrating literary gatherings in the Globe tavern that

contains hints of his association with the William Cartwright circle in London; and *Olor Iscanus* (1647, published 1651) which celebrates his native Wales, while also offering translations of Ovid's poems lamenting his exile from Rome as well as translations from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* that witness his psychological adjustment to the Royalist defeat. Wilcher also has a full discussion of Vaughan's royalist allegiance in the Civil War and his war-time poems.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the first half of *Keeping the Ancient Way* is the second one devoted to what Stevie Davies aptly called "the crucible of twinship." Again, Wilcher summarizes the known biographical data of their education together under the tuition of Mathew Herbert at Llangattock and then at Jesus College, their service together in Sir Herbert Price's regiment, and their domestic lives (though the evidence of their marriages is unfortunately scanty). Less well known is the evidence that the brothers remained involved in each other's literary lives despite the physical distance between Breconshire and London where Thomas lived. Henry had copies of Thomas's books in 1673 when he wrote to his kinsman John Aubrey, who was collecting biographical data for Anthony Wood's *Athenæ Oxonienses*, and he published some of Thomas's poetry in *Thalia Rediviva* (1678). More importantly, the record shows that Thomas served as his brother's agent in London during the 1650s. Wilcher's knowledge of their work is exhaustive, and he examines "twinship" in a profound way, showing how central ideas in Thomas's philosophy of Nature—the vitalist conception of the world, the belief in the restoration or resurrection of the creatures, and the possibility of ascent from the physical to the spiritual world—are also common in Henry's thought though with significant differences (63). The animating breath of Nature for the Hermetical philosopher may be God's, but the "devotional poet experiences himself as an integral part of a greater harmony to which all of Nature contributes—his soul 'breakes, and buds' into 'flowres, / And shoots of glory' like plants rooted in the earth and the blood courses through his body with the same life-sustaining energy as the '*Hymning Circulations*' of the quick and waking world of birds and beasts" (64). Wilcher's account of their work in the context of the times contains a wealth of such analysis. Chapters on Vaughan and the Interregnum and Vaughan and the Church place certain of his

poems in their proper perspective and remind us how his loyalty to the outlawed Church of England during the Interregnum affected his life and work. He offers a political reading of part of *Silex Scintillans* that illuminate many of the poems; he also places the prose works in this same context. Again, the comprehensive view of how the parts fit into a seamless whole is perhaps of even greater value than the discussions of individual poems.

In the second half of *Keeping the Ancient Way*, Wilcher explores the literary practices of Henry Vaughan as a poet and his relationship with other poets of his age—some of whom he may have known at Oxford or in London of the early 1640s—and especially with George Herbert. The sixth chapter is an interesting defense of Vaughan's “magpie” habit of borrowing from others. He had been accused of outright plagiarism in the case of his use of Owen Feltham's *Resolves*, but Wilcher shows how the borrowings of this bookish poet from Thomas Randolph, William Habington, John Donne, and even John Milton are characteristic of seventeenth-century modes of “imitation” and homage. His chapter on Vaughan's indebtedness to Herbert is one of Wilcher's special interests for it is the indebtedness that Vaughan himself acknowledged and has drawn the most frequent scholarly attention. After surveying the scholarship on this topic, he studies Vaughan's “Misery” with its clear indebtedness to Herbert's “Miserie” to show that “a great part of its subtlety lies in the complex tissue of allusions by means of which it draws both inspiration and authority from the work of a great poet whose name, by the end of the 1640s, had become associated among members of one substantial community of Herbert's readers with the cause of an outlawed church and the king who had died for it” (120). In short, Vaughan creatively imitates Herbert's poem rather than simply copies it. His chapter on Vaughan and the Scriptures is equally authoritative, mixing the wisdom of the critical tradition with his own insights.

While each of the chapters is self-contained and situates the subject within both past and current critical debates, the book's strength is its focus on biography and intellectual and political history in the first part and poetic craftsmanship in the second. This context provides the framework for critical readings that will be of interest to specialists in the literature and history of the Civil War and Interregnum and

will be invaluable to students of Henry and Thomas Vaughan alike. *Keeping the Ancient Way* is a great achievement.

Feisal Mohamed. *Sovereignty: Seventeenth-Century England and the Making of the Modern Political Imaginary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. x + 220 pp. \$77.00. Review by ALEX GARGANIGO, AUSTIN COLLEGE.

Feisal Mohamed's *Sovereignty: Seventeenth-Century England and the Making of the Modern Political Imaginary* makes an ambitious intervention into studies of both literature and political thought, bringing into productive conversation literature and theory; literature and law; the early modern and the modern; and Hobbes, Milton, and Marvell on the one hand and Tacitus and Carl Schmitt on the other. While it builds upon and transcends studies of early modern British republicanism and political theology, his study is best seen as an expansion of the latter and thus as an extended argument *with* Schmitt and *for* his continuing usefulness to us—purged, of course, of his Nazi associations and other mistakes. As Mohamed shows, Schmitt has become known principally for three adages: “sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception”; “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”; “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.” Unfortunately, these “potent ideas” have sometimes “deteriorated into slogans” (192), some literary theorists using Schmitt and political theology to discuss *any* connection between the political and the religious, however slight, and to read *any* moment of exception or ambiguity in a literary text as an opportunity for someone, sovereign or not, to construct reality performatively by deciding the exception arbitrarily in the absence of norms.

Mohamed makes the case that Schmitt remains useful because his thinking was more subtle than some vulgar political theologians have made out in recent years and that the even greater subtlety of Tacitism and reason-of-state discourse played a much larger role in early modern political thought than we have supposed, anticipating and correcting Schmitt (14). Among the book's many insights, for