
According to the series editor, Alan P. F. Sell, this volume “is intended as an appetizer, and a stimulus to further quarrying” in the literature of Protestant Nonconformity (ix). This modest statement of intent is met and exceeded by the volume of primary sources which it introduces. Implicated in everything from the Civil War to the origins of the Royal Society, no phenomenon looms larger in the history of seventeenth-century England than the development of Nonconformist and separatist religious groups, and this book is an excellent introduction to the topic.

“Protestant Nonconformity” in this volume is broadly defined to include all Protestant sects which found themselves outside the established Church of England in the era, whether merely objecting to the canons of uniformity in a given period, or genuinely separatist. This allows for the full range of dissent from the official church to be introduced in a single volume: from mainline Puritans, through Fifth Monarchists, through the Quakers. There is real value in this approach as it presents the tapestry of dissenting ideas and convictions in its genuine historical complexity, whereas in volumes focusing on “Puritan” or “Quaker” writings this sense that the authors are part of a larger picture is lost to the convenience of tidy categories. The editors recognize that “during the turbulent years between 1640 and 1650 virtually every group of Christians was at one time or another “Nonconformist” including Roman Catholics and Anglicans (9). The former had technically not “conformed” since the accession of Elizabeth, and the latter were technically Nonconformist through the Interregnum. These groups are not included within the volume since they have clear and official definitions through most of the period, and are not really the “dissenters” with which the volume is concerned (10). The reasoning should be clear to all who study religion in this era, but this attention to detail in defining the subject is laudable, and representative of the editors’ concern for historical accuracy throughout the book.
Another strength of the volume is its choice of categories which have been suggested by the content of the primary sources themselves. In this way the entire volume reflects the concerns of the Nonconformists themselves rather than the potentially anachronistic interests of later scholars. The book is divided into eight sections. The first four sections are chronologically arranged through the Glorious Revolution: “Part I: The Beginnings, 1550—1603”; “Part II: Perseverance, 1604—1642”; “Part III: Facets of Freedom, 1640—1660”; and “Part IV: Persecution, 1660—1689.” The section titles clearly reflect the concerns of the Nonconformists, and their interpretation of events, at the time. The editors have included in these sections official decrees such as Archbishop Parker’s Advertisements dealing with vestments and the 1672 Declaration of Indulgence in order to provide context for the documents of the dissenters themselves. These four sections walk the reader through the history of Nonconformity in the words of those involved, and are followed by three more which flesh-out the interests and concerns of the various movements: “Part V: Aspects of Nonconformist Experience” presents the interests in personal conversion and the subjective experience of the faith which dominated Nonconformist concerns; “Part VI: A Theological Miscellany” pans the range of theological concerns which were behind the various movements; and “Part VII: Poetry” includes a few hymns as well as selections from Milton. “Part VIII: The Dawn of Toleration” rounds out the book with the historical developments following the Glorious Revolution. In all sections the editors have shown a concern for the genuine diversity of the phenomenon of Nonconformity. Significant figures such as Milton (who is featured prominently throughout) appear not as isolated voices, but in their proper context as part of the spectrum of dissent which provided the motivation for so many events and policies in early modern England.

The historical introduction to the volume is concise, yet an impressively thorough overview of the narrative of English history related to Nonconformity. The individual introductions to the documents are also very well done, providing appropriate information necessary to establish each text within the context established by the volume introduction. The editorial care taken with this book extends to the selection of texts themselves. From a vast field of potential sources
the editors chose those which represent not only the theological concerns of the different movements, but the personal passion and very human concerns of the individuals as well. Selections from Philip Henry’s Diary (243-48) and the farewell sermons of ejected clergy (235-43) add considerably to what, in textbooks, is too often a lifeless social and political narrative; and the selections in Part V, relating to personal experience, give the reader a window into the interests and values which motivated the Nonconformists to risk everything for their convictions.

This volume serves its intended function, as a firsthand introduction to early Protestant Nonconformity, extremely well. The history of religious thought in Tudor and Stuart England is too often dominated by caricatures and generalizations of the groups involved, which only primary sources can dispel. This volume would work well as a seminar reading for graduate students, and it is a must-read for those who wish to address any issues of seventeenth-century English religion in a dissertation or monograph. It is an excellent starting point for all further research in the area. Although Ashgate always produces high quality books, the downside is a price tag which is prohibitive except for libraries. A graduate seminar would have to juggle a single text, when it would make an excellent required text for students of history and literature alike.


The surviving letters of Cassandra Brydges, first Duchess of Chandos, demonstrate the narrowness of those historical interpretations of the past thirty years that limited seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women of the upper classes to little more than reproductive and decorative roles. Rosemary O’Day has provided an annotated edition of the letters of Cassandra (Willoughby) Brydges, demonstrating that the duchess, who did not marry until she was forty-three, was a talented diplomat, investor, matchmaker, and wielder of influ-