
Pro Rege

Volume 41 | Number 1

Article 8

September 2012

John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2012) "John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 41: No. 1, 31 - 33.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol41/iss1/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

and unintended consequences,” Maraniss writes, maybe a third of the way into the book, “yet I also believe that there are connections that illuminate our world, revealing its endless mystery and wonder.”

We could do much worse than to listen to someone who is radically taken by awe.

On the other hand, there’s no doubt that Maraniss is interested in taking on some of the radically conservative myth-makers who’ve made outrageous claims about Obama’s birth, his childhood and background. For instance, he makes very clear that while Obama’s Kenyan grandfather was a Muslim, Hussein Onyango’s development as a free-thinker, as a human being for that matter, was far more profoundly influenced by Christian and white missionaries in his Kenyan neighborhood than by his own adopted Islamic faith. In a way, Hussein Onyango was more Seventh-Day Adventist in his thinking than he was Moslem or Mau Mau.

What Maraniss does quite convincingly is explode the attitude or perception that Barack Obama is not “one of us,” an idea that is at once as bizarre as it is misguided. Plainly, the man’s story is rooted in American history far more than it is in anywhere near Kenya—he barely knew his father, after all. Maraniss’s biography prompts even an Obama supporter to wonder why on earth the President, years ago, wrote a book about his father (*Dreams From My Father*), since it’s very clear that, for most all of his life, Barack Obama, Sr., was simply never there. What’s more, the reality that his father was a half a planet away, given the man’s innumerable personal problems (alcohol, womanizing, temper problems), undoubtedly was, for his own son, a sheer blessing.

Obama is, without a doubt, as much a “rags-to-riches” hero as Ben Franklin sold himself to be in

his *Autobiography*. His being conceived was almost an accident—his mother (a 17-year-old white girl) and father (a 25-year-old African) were husband and wife for barely more than a month and lovers for little more than that. The senior Obama was already married and the father of two in Kenya, a family he’d left behind when he came to America to study. For all intents and purposes, through much of his life, this President grew up with his grandparents. Not only that, if Maraniss is right, Obama’s Kansas-born grandfather was himself, as people here might say, “a piece of work.” His was never an easy life.

Some of the claims Obama himself makes in *Dreams From My Father* about his mother’s devotion to him when she was half a world away sound like wishful thinking. Maraniss shows clearly that Barack Obama pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, the paradigm we love to attribute to the quintessential American hero, the dream of thousands, even millions, who would still like to live here in America. The man made it himself.

His story—documented in incredible detail by David Maraniss in this new and comprehensive biography—is the real American story, the story of a hard luck kid who nonetheless succeeded in a country and a culture where personal initiative and plain old grit promise precisely the startling things he’s been able to achieve.

All of that isn’t a reason to vote for him, of course; but it is, or so it seems to me, a reason to respect him. After all, in purely American terms, the man made it, and he did so on his own.

David Maraniss’s new and almost endless biography is fascinating reading and helpful, or so it seems to me, in understanding what we can of just exactly who it was this country voted for in the 2008 presidential election.

Cooper, Tim. *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011. 343 pages. ISBN: 9780754663614. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History, Emeritus, Dordt College.

We are told that on the day Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) died, a great thunderstorm rolled across much of England. It was hard in those days, as well as now, not to see the event as portentous. Within four years immense changes befell England and the rest of the British Isles. The English Republic—“the Commonwealth of England”—was swept away, and the Stuart monarchy restored. The leaders of those within the English Church who had labored persistently for the further reformation

of its government and worship, now often dubbed “puritans,” were manipulated out of their pulpits and livelihoods by the ensuing “Great Ejection” of August 24, 1662. In the 1640s these Puritans had triumphed over their opponents in church and state, the high Anglican and Arminian party led by Archbishop Laud (1573-1645), but after 1660 the situation was reversed, and the Puritans themselves had to suffer the bitter perils of marginalization, exclusion, and persecution.

These events were part of a wide sweep of developments that had their origins prior to the Hampton Court Conference (January 1604) and that only came to a measure of resolution with the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 and its aftermath. From 1689 onwards, late Puritanism emerged as “Protestant Dissent” and received a limited measure of ecclesiastical and educational toleration. Ensuing generations of “Protestant Dissenters” were not permitted to fully participate in public life until the later nineteenth century. In this entire story, the 1650s and early 1660s are pivotal. Tim Cooper, lecturer on the History of Christianity in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, focuses his recent book on the relationship between two important leaders on the Puritan side, Richard Baxter (1615-91) and John Owen (1616-83).

Of course, within the broad outline of the history of Puritanism, we encounter many sub-plots and subtly inter-woven themes. Among these is the question of the differences among the Puritans themselves. From the mid-1640s onwards, the two principal groups among the English Puritans were the Presbyterians and the Independents. The Presbyterians were in broad agreement with their Scottish brethren, but they were not necessarily accepting of every detail of how Presbyterian principle was implemented in the Scottish Church. The Independents advocated an approach closely akin to the “Congregational Way” in New England. In the face of an undeniable plurality of opinion, the Presbyterians sought a comprehensive national church, while the Independents opted for the toleration of diversity. It is possible to see the Presbyterians as clinging to the ideal of a National Church because they were still wedded to the ideal of “Christendom.” It is also possible to view the Independents as helping to open the door to the multi-denominational fracturing that is such a feature of contemporary Protestantism.

A carefully considered discussion of the relationship between Baxter the Presbyterian and Owen the Independent has been long overdue, and Cooper has accomplished the task with caution, precision, and sympathy. He has not written a pair of parallel lives but has focused specifically on their relationship. Baxter and Owen could agree on what they did not want—prelacy, an unreformed prayer book, and so forth (18-19)—but they were much less able to concur on a positive alternative.

The divisions between Baxter and Owen bespoke the deep rift within Puritanism between the Presbyterian and Independent standpoints. Most Puritans were not committed separatists (like the Pilgrim Fathers), and the Presbyterians of England remained very close to the national church they were forced to quit in 1662 (15). On the other hand, the notion of a national church was much less central for the Independents. They saw each local congregation as complete under Christ (25). These Independents—later generally known as Congregationalists—appeared less interested in a general nation-wide settlement and more ready to fight for outright victory than find a conciliatory path.

To these differing standpoints, with their resulting divergent priorities, Cooper adds the perspectives imparted by differing experience. Baxter and Owen were from opposite ends of England: Baxter from Shropshire in the west, Owen from Essex in the east. While the First English Civil War (1642-1646) only minimally touched the east, it much more severely affected the midlands and parts of the west (38-51). It is hardly surprising that what Baxter experienced as divine judgment on England, Owen could view as the realm’s deliverance (53).

As the critical late 1650s approached, the two leaders were already deeply divided by differences in both principle and temperament. The two men shared many assumptions (139) but were animated by differing priorities that put them on a collision course (168). Cooper draws a series of carefully nuanced contrasts. Where Baxter was fervently anti-antinomian, Owen was intensely anti-Arminian (74-83). Where Owen was astute, determined, and shrewd (119), Baxter could be uncomfortably forthright—perhaps because he was less well-connected to the Puritan leadership (126-131). Where Owen was self-contained, Baxter was self-absorbed (136). Although he lacked the skills necessary to effectively advocate his standpoint, Baxter stood for a broadly reformed comprehension (141-6). For Owen, visible unity was much less of a priority—unity was essentially spiritual.

At the critical point, Owen had access to power, but he was not inclusive in his outlook, while for Baxter it was the reverse (169-171). Owen could view Baxter’s emphasis on inclusive Protestant comprehension, and comparative de-emphasizing of confessional statements, as opening the door to anti-Trinitarian Socinianism. Owen was not antinomian, and Baxter was not a Socinian, but in the eyes of each other, as Cooper manages to state

twice, “Owen was a near-Antinomian; Baxter was an almost-Socinian” (211, 215). Both men were “heartsick at the turn of events” in 1659, when the Commonwealth of England began to collapse (253). Owen sensed danger before Baxter did (235-6), with the Presbyterian side only later shifting from comprehension towards toleration. Of course, to opt for toleration was to open the door to an eventual toleration of Catholicism (269-270). Baxter had sided with Parliament in 1640 because he supported the “old cause” of the ancient constitution of England, a cause he could later see as wrecked by the radicalism of Independency (291-2). In the post-1662 era, the rift between them was deep. They viewed each other as contributing to disaster. Baxter’s ponderous *Reliquiae Baxterianae* of 1696 was his shot from the grave in the direction of the pre-deceased Owen (300).

Cooper is careful to do justice to both men. Their flaws and deficiencies are accounted for with grace and dignity. This is an able and perceptive study and by far the most comprehensive discussion of the Owen-Baxter relationship available. It will be valued by all students of the period. Some concluding observations are in order. Baxter and Owen were not, of course, ever the sole

leaders of their respective sides of English Puritanism. The mild Jeremiah Burroughs (1600-46), on the Independent side, and the measured Thomas Manton (1620-77), among the Presbyterians, were also part of the picture, as Cooper acknowledges (249, 301). Moreover, we should not allow the perceptiveness of this study to cause us to *over*-estimate the role of Owen and Baxter in the affairs of their day. Furthermore, differing views of church government—all typically claiming biblical warrant—tend to generate and reflect different views of what civil society ought to be like. Finally, more needs to be said about precisely *how* Owen and Baxter understood the Bible to be authoritative in their day and age.

Tim Cooper’s book is a valuable contribution to the literature on seventeenth-century English Puritanism. Beyond this, it sheds light on the origins of the Protestant denominationalism that is now such a feature of worldwide evangelical Christianity. What happened then still affects us now. This work uncovers for us some of the roots of the divisions and divisiveness that have served to undermine the reformed Protestantism for which Baxter and Owen undoubtedly stood.

Taylor, Mark Edward. *Branding Obamessiah: The Rise of an American Idol*. Grand Rapids: Edenridge Press, 2011. 373 pages. ISBN 9781937532918. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication, Dordt College.

Many people seem to think that political campaigns hinge on issues. But images may be more important than issues, as Mark Edward Taylor makes clear in his book, *Branding Obamessiah: The Rise of an American Idol*. After extensive study of the campaign, Taylor claims that Obama was marketed as the leader of a movement that looked more like religion than politics.

In his *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, Charles U. Larson describes the cultural myth titled “The Coming of a Messiah” that is popular in political campaigns. When society is perceived as “approaching disaster or is already in a terrible mess (economic, religious, or political) or we are in a period of great uncertainty and pessimism, . . . we want to be rescued from the chaos and danger of bankruptcy, unemployment, war, and other disasters by some great leader who projects a sense of confidence and who can turn things around.”⁷¹ Taylor claims that the Obama campaign appropriated this myth to propel Obama to the White House.

Taylor writes, “Obama offered *himself* to America—

his person rather than any solid policies or proposals. The gospel *according to* Obama—really the gospel *of* Obama—captured much of the nation’s imagination as a mood of hope rather than a map for progress. Obama’s promised ‘change’ was himself. . . . In their heart of hearts, the truest believers were choosing to elect their Messiah, to participate in the rebirth of the nation and of their own American lives” (45). Even MSNBC’s Chris Matthews said, “This is New Testament” (45). Many other commentators, bloggers, and columnists began using the term “Obamessiah” or similar terms.

Chapter 5 contains a description of six elements that form what Taylor calls the “Devotional Code,” which he claims guided the campaign: the creation story, the sacred words, the sacred images, the sacred rituals, the true believers, and a messianic leader. Taken together, these six elements, Taylor suggests, help explain why Obama was so successful in pleasing crowds, getting votes, and generating euphoria. The author argues throughout the book that “Obama’s political persona strategically