

Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution

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On 28 January 1648 Thomas Edwards (c.1599–1648), Presbyterian controversialist and 'true hammer of the heretics', died in exile at Amsterdam. The previous month Edwards had drawn up his will, claiming he had 'dealt faithfully, and with a good conscience, in all that I have preached or written, against the late sects and errors which have risen and sprung up in *England*' (pp. 1, 2). For most modern scholars Edwards's reputation rests largely upon a single work published in three parts: *Gangraena* (London, printed for Ralph Smith at the sign of the Bible in Cornhill near the Royal Exchange, 1646). Part one, 'A Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errours, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these four last years', was issued in three broadly distinct editions; part two, 'A fresh and further Discovery...' was published in two editions with separate printings; and part three, 'A new and higher Discovery...' published in one version.

Probably born in London of a modest family, Edwards matriculated at Queens' College, Cambridge in 1618, graduating BA in 1622, proceeding MA in 1625, and ordained deacon in January 1626. Queens' was then renowned for its puritan reputation and, as Hughes points out, 'contacts formed at university were a starting point for the creation of Puritan networks'. Indeed, Edwards's near contemporaries at other colleges would include 'numerous future allies and opponents' (pp. 24, 25). Notes taken at sermons preached from Cambridge pulpits indicate Edwards offered 'a conventional if awkward Calvinist position on the horrors of the fall, and the deceptions of Satan' (p. 25). An intemperate sermon in St Andrew's church, however, resulted in proceedings before the Vice-Chancellor's Court and an order on 31 March 1628 that Edwards preach a sermon of recantation. This knack for inflaming passions was to prove characteristic of his entire career and Edwards emerged as 'an early and forthright opponent of liberty of conscience for gathered congregations' (p. 34), arguing against even limited toleration:

[It] will not onely breede Divisions and Schismes, disturbing the peace and quiet of Churches and Townes ... but will undoubtedly cause much disturbance, discontent and divisions ... (1)

Edwards's second book *Antapologia, or a Full Answer to the Apologeticall Narration* (1644) was a three-hundred-page response to the thirty-page justification of their congregational way by the leading 'Independents' of the Westminster Assembly. Hughes believes that Edwards wrote from 'a sense of bitter polarization, from intense anxiety about religious radicalism and fear of the growing power of Independents'

(pp. 42, 43). Lacking a sense of proportion, this attack on Independent church government brought Edwards to national prominence. In addition, Hughes argues, it facilitated the creation of networks 'vital to the construction of *Gangraena*' as men in London and the provinces, alarmed at the influence of 'Independents', began supplying him with material he would put to use in what Hughes calls 'a massive and notorious assault on religious liberty' and its consequences (pp. 50, 55).

Hughes correctly regards *Gangraena* as 'a disorganized text with complex or even contradictory messages and approaches' (p. 55). Its title derives from a scriptural verse that had become synonymous with the struggle against doctrinal error: 'And their word will eat as doth a canker [margin or gangrene]' (2 Timothy 2:17). As Hughes demonstrates, the book can be placed in a long line of anti-heretical writing: a heresiological tradition beginning with Paul – even if modern biblical scholarship doubts his authorship of the epistles to Timothy – and including church fathers such as Augustine and Theodoret, as well as major figures of the sixteenth-century Reformation like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. Of course 'there are dangers in taking heresiology ... as an accurate guide to what it denounces' (p. 73). The great manuscript discoveries of the twentieth century which revolutionised Manichaean studies have led to a fundamental reappraisal of the accuracy of Augustine 'On the Manichaean heresy'. Similarly, it is only through extensive quotation in Calvin's works that we are familiar with the ex-priest Anthony Pocquet's ideas; if this libertine's writings were found we would doubtless question Calvin's judgment that they amounted to goat dung. Indeed the difficulties with heresiography as a genre are manifold: the sources from which many were constructed have not survived or are only partly extant, making it impossible or tricky to establish authenticity; their purpose was not accurately to report errors – usually represented as inversions of truths – but to extirpate them; compilers could be alarmist and self-serving; they attached labels (sometimes borrowed from their predecessors) to facilitate categorisation, thereby providing loosely connected individuals with a sectarian identity and genealogy that may have deliberately blurred or ignored subtle doctrinal distinctions. The problems with heresiography in general are also the problems with *Gangraena* in particular. Yet this was 'never a finished product', but a text 'ever in the making', by an author 'almost overwhelmed by events' who early on decided against complete coverage (pp. 64, 65).

Edwards presented himself as 'cautious and meticulous, interrogating informants if they 'were ear and eye witnesses' and checking circumstantial evidence (p. 88). His method was simply to list error, heresy, blasphemy and schism indiscriminately; and his refutations were brief (pp. 93, 94). Even so, as Hughes observes, he 'lacked (or was unable to exercise) the basic skills of the effective heresiographer – to précis, classify, and sectarianize' (p. 98). The question is whether this 'poor' or 'idiosyncratic' heresiographer can be trusted to reflect what people really thought (p. 102).

Among modern scholars Christopher Hill is the 'most influential' of those who have stressed *Gangraena*'s value as a source. According to Hill, who used it notably for *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) and *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977), it is 'well documented and seems to stand up quite well to examination' (p. 5). Other historians of radical religion have 'accepted and used *Gangraena* as a source, albeit with some qualifications' (p. 5). Murray Tolmie relied on it for his pioneering *The Triumph of the Saints. The Separate Churches of London 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977), while Gerald Aylmer regarded it as an extraordinary compendium and the fullest available catalogue of the sects and their beliefs. As Hughes says, 'the sheer bulk of the work and its self-presentation as a truthful "catalogue" has often had a more seductive effect upon historians than it had on many contemporaries' (p. 6). Though other assessments have been more cautious they have not gone far enough to satisfy the extreme sceptics. For *The Rise of the New Model Army* (Cambridge, 1979) Mark Kishlansky lumped Edwards with Richard Baxter and the religious disputants, arguing that these men tended to 'polarize and exaggerate' the situations they observed (p. 7). Consequently he never cited *Gangraena*. Likewise, J. Colin Davis maintained that using *Gangraena* for 'evidence of the reality of sectarian development' was comparable to relying on Joseph McCarthy for 'sound, objective opinions' about American communist activities in his day (pp. 7–8). *Gangraena*'s trustworthiness has therefore, rightly or wrongly, played a considerable part in wider debates such as the extent of radicalism in the 1640s and the nature of the English revolution.

Ann Hughes's book is the first comprehensive study of *Gangraena* and its 'vainglorious, controversial, and ultimately disappointed author' (p. 2). Her aim has been to locate *Gangraena* in 'as many contexts as possible', ranging from 'cultural analysis to discussions of high politics, drawing on insights from literary criticism, the history of the book, and studies of print culture as well as local, political, and religious history' (p. 3). She discusses *Gangraena*'s 'narrative strategies and generic affiliations', explores Edwards's sources and attempts to unravel his connections, arguing that his work was 'a product of, and a major contribution to, a broad campaign for Presbyterian reformation, and against schism and heresy' (p. 3). Furthermore, Hughes insists that while the modern debate about *Gangraena* has focused on its 'usefulness as evidence', establishing its status as a source has not been her 'main purpose' (p. 8). Even so, she concedes that 'at the most fundamental level a study of *Gangraena* is concerned with truth, the status of evidence, and the validity of arguments' (p. 9).

There is much in this admirably researched book to interest a variety of readers. Hughes provides an account of Edwards's early career, the making of him as a Presbyterian, his first polemical works and the background to *Gangraena* – which she suggests was 'a product of a debate that never was, the debate over Antapologia' (p. 53). There follows an excellent chapter on '*Gangraena* as Heresiography' which begins with an outline of *Gangraena*'s structure, though 'a concise summary risks giving the volumes a logic and coherence that Edwards never provided' (p. 55). This chapter also includes a lively section on heresiological traditions as well as a discussion of Edwards's research methods (such as they were), his central themes (that 'the godly faced the most serious crisis since the Reformation' (p. 105)), and main polemical purpose ('to implicate the mainstream Independents in the spread of religious chaos' (p. 107)). Chapter 3, 'Like a Universal Leprosie Over-spread this Whole Kingdom', examines *Gangraena*'s relationship with London and the provinces. It 'was, and could only have been, a Londoner's book' (p.130), and in her sketch of City life Hughes provides several significant contexts: the lecturing scene; the networks of London's puritan clergy which were 'by no means exclusively clerical but involved a range of laymen, of respected if rarely elevated social status' (p. 142); booksellers' contacts and bookshop debates; and how Edwards's networks were 'mobilized to provide material for *Gangraena*' (p. 151). Hughes calculates that at least 40 percent of the specific stories in *Gangraena* concern London and believes that it 'offers a compelling general picture of the religious (and political) culture of London' in the 1640s (p. 169) – even if Edwards's was 'a very partial view' (p. 183). As for the provinces, here Edwards's focus was on 'those parts of the country where parliament's armies held sway' and thus where parliament could be 'held responsible for the failures of orthodox reformation' (p. 187). A useful table indicates that Kent, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk were better represented in *Gangraena* than any other area, while there is nothing on Nottinghamshire (p. 188). Hughes concludes her survey of religious developments in provincial England by suggesting that Edwards did not exaggerate the extent of religious unorthodoxy: many of his local stories 'had some basis in "actual" provincial anxieties, incidents and disputes' even though *Gangraena* is 'selective and misleading' (p. 213).

Chapter 4, 'Books Lately Printed' concerns '*Gangraena* and the World of Print'. It shows how *Gangraena* was produced, considers the broadly distinct editions of each part and summarises the licencing procedure. Hughes claims that it 'drew extensively on this deeply partisan world of print' (p. 241). Moreover, she demonstrates the influence of treatises by William Prynne and Thomas Gataker, noting Edwards's technique of selectively quoting rather than misquoting radical authors such as John Lilburne, John Saltmarsh and Thomas Collier. No doubt Edwards also subjected Laurence Clarkson's *Pilgrimage of Saints* to the same treatment, though this is impossible to verify as no copies have survived. This, then, was a basic principle of heresiography: 'to isolate the most damning and dangerous passages.' (p. 248)

Understandably, *Gangraena* generated several 'outraged printed responses', especially from those named by Edwards (p. 250). His respondents adopted 'various strategies of justification and apology' (p. 251), some marginalising its damaging content, others confronting him directly both in person and print. And when his stories were challenged, Edwards 'was driven to ever more elaborate, exhaustive, and exhausting displays of his own evidence' (p. 265). Adopting the modern scholarly approach that readers 'are not simply passive recipients of a meaning that is clearly contained within a text' (p. 276), Hughes suggests that *Gangraena* was

'only possible as a series of collaborations' between Edwards and his informants, and between author and readers (p. 279). Less convincing in this context is the application of De Certeau's notion that 'Every story is a travel story' and that *Gangraena's* readers were embarked on a journey (pp. 123–24, 281). Books were certainly material objects, typography was important and illustrations could enhance meaning, though it is noteworthy that unlike broadsheets such as *A Discovery of the most Dangerous and damnable tenets that have been spread within this few yeares* (1647) and some anti-Royalist pamphlets, *Gangraena* contains neither engravings nor woodcuts. This suggests that Edwards's intended audience was educated and fully literate, which is borne out by Hughes's analysis of how *Gangraena* was purchased, and who owned and annotated it.

Print was a public medium and it could be used to energise political groups. Though Edwards was not 'an organizational leader of London Presbyterianism' (p. 318) *Gangraena* had angered the ranks of the New Model Army, 'thereby provoking the fatal confrontation with the Presbyterians in 1646–7' (p. 319). Even so, Hughes acknowledges that taking *Gangraena* as her focus 'inevitably risks crediting it with too great an influence on contemporary events' (p. 321). Instead she draws on earlier work by Valerie Pearl and Michael Mahony, as well as a recent study by Elliott Vernon to provide a nuanced, complex and persuasive study of Presbyterians far removed from the familiar caricature: inflexible, bigoted, paranoid, distasteful (though admittedly some were all of these). For Hughes, *Gangraena* 'did not stand alone, but was the most startling and notorious example of a broader Presbyterian polemical campaign' (p. 401). She concludes, perhaps inevitably, with a now obligatory discussion of the 'public sphere' before assessing Edwards's reputation and *Gangraena's* afterlife, declaring that 'Edwards is one of many examples of how lively, populist, dynamic, and seductive prose can serve a bad cause' (p. 442).

Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution is a very good book. Moderate in tone and often persuasive, it is an important contribution to on-going scholarly debates. Nonetheless, there are ways in which it could have been better. Excluding the introduction and conclusion, it consists of four chapters the shortest of which is 75 pages, the longest 98 pages. Though these are broken down into sections, chapter subheadings are not indicated in the contents and readers may wonder why there were not smaller chapters instead. In addition, readers are sometimes referred to fuller discussions elsewhere in the text, but without specific page numbers (p. 43 n. 109, p. 45 n. 114, p. 57 n. 3, p. 118 n. 197, p. 126 n. 220). At times the structure necessitates repetition and one wonders how much could have been avoided. Hence we are told on several occasions the same notorious stories; of Captain Beaumont's soldiers pissing in a font in Yakesley, Huntingdonshire and afterwards baptising a horse (pp. 60, 120, 166, 215–16, 273, 309); of Anabaptists dressing up a cat like a child to be baptised (pp. 126, 180, 309); and of John Goodwin playing at bowls on the day of thanksgiving for the victory at Naseby (pp. 90, 267–68, 310, 439). Indeed, Hughes fears that she has been 'infected' with Edwards's incapacity for organising his material and hopes her readers will be 'more tolerant' than many of Edwards's of her 'often necessary repetitions' (p. vi). There is of course more than one way in which this could have been written but the result here appears to be an echo of *Gangraena*. Like its progenitor, readers need a number of tools to navigate their way through the text. Despite places where Hughes's 'unwieldy manuscript' (p. vii) appears to have been cut, the published version is still too long – not that there is anything wrong with big books. But had *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* been condensed and the material organised differently it would have become more accessible to non-specialist readers.

As all researchers are only too well aware, there is a real problem of what evidence does and does not say – and how far one can push it to make a point. The question of Edwards's 'accuracy' and Hughes's attempt to check his 'facts' brought her 'face to face with the limitations of the historian's craft where certainty can never be achieved' (p. 435). She remains convinced that 'he made nothing up, but so much cannot be checked that this must remain a provisional and contestable judgement' (p. 435). But ultimately this book evades, defers or postpones the issue of 'accuracy' – which Hughes regards as liberating for her analysis (pp. 10, 170–71, 213, 270–71, 434–6). Then there is the matter of whether reading *Gangraena* helps or hinders the historian. Has it warped our view of the past and would our histories improve if no copies had survived?

After all, Edwards's version of events has so profoundly influenced modern discussions that 'it is almost impossible now to develop a view of London, not affected (or tainted?) by the prominence of *Gangraena* as a source' (p. 131). *Gangraena* has been available in facsimile since 1977 and can now be downloaded from Early English Books Online. While Hughes has convincingly shown that a critical edition is unnecessary, a re-issue of *Gangraena* with modern typeface, coherent pagination and index is still desirable. If this were ever produced it would complement *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution*. Even without this readers can still appreciate what a remarkable job Hughes has done in untangling and contextualising the original text.

Notes

1. T. Edwards, *Reasons Against the Independent Government of Particular Congregations* (1641), p. 26, quoted in Hughes, *Gangraena*, p. 39). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author would like to thank Dr Hessayon for his thorough and perceptive review.

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