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New Essays on George Herbert

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Christopher Hodgkins, ed., *George Herbert's Pastoral: New Essays on the Poet and Priest of Bemerton*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010. 311 pp.

One difference between the critical fortunes of John Donne and George Herbert is that the latter has lacked a society even though there has long been a journal bearing his name. This difference no longer exactly holds (along with some others as well: a recent review in a no less august journal than *The Shakespeare Quarterly* erroneously conjures up someone called "John Herbert"). Almost single-handedly, it would seem, but with valuable help from fellow Herbertians named and thanked in the acknowledgements, Christopher Hodgkins has assumed responsibility for providing a venue for much current scholarship by organizing a two-year Herbert conference. The first meeting was held in Sarum, England, in 2007, a second at Hodgkins's home institution, the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, in 2008. A third is planned for 2011 in Wales, Herbert's ancestral home. As a result of these efforts, Herbert has become something of a moveable, if not quite annual, feast, and as the Donne Society has experienced for many years, these occasions can serve to stimulate productive research and scholarship.

The fourteen essays in this new collection represent the first fruits from these gatherings—the title of the volume being the title of the first conference. A second volume of essays from the second conference, "George Herbert's Travels," will soon appear by the same press. While the volume under review here has its own logic and organization, it is worth pointing out that it has a sequel, one with a deliberately broader

focus, concerned as it is with the poet's reputation, reception, and influence on both sides of the Atlantic. In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that this reviewer has an essay in the second volume.

The chief virtue and appeal of *George Herbert's Pastoral* is its concentrated focus on a number of special topics that have generally escaped notice in Herbert criticism but that come more fully into view under the general rubric of "pastoral." This is the area not so much of Herbert's poetry as of other aspects of Herbert's life and writing, especially *The Country Parson*. As Donald Friedman wisely notes at the outset in "Pastoral Conversions," shepherds figure into just four poems in Herbert, and while illuminating comments abound about specific poems in this and other essays, only Helen Wilcox's fine, broadly conceived study based on her keynote address, "'Hallow'd Fire'; or, When Is a Poet not a Priest?" provides an extended reading of the poetry, in this case, of those poems that focus on Herbert's dual vocation as priest and poet, which she sees as being inseparably bound: "Aaron," "The Windows," and "The Priesthood." Needless to say, the answer to her pointed question would look a little different if "The Forerunners" were one of her chosen texts.

Otherwise, the pastoral in the volume's title points to a nexus of related themes and ideas: the religious, hence pastoral, character of Herbert's writing generally (four essays)—the two already mentioned, plus Gene Edward Veith's exploration of Herbert's vocation in light of the "conservative reformation" associated with Luther, and Kenneth Graham's inquiry into Herbert's "holy practice" (as distinguished from holy calling). These are followed by five essays on local country lore relevant to Herbert's time in Wiltshire and Bemerton, then two essays on the significance of liturgy and scripture, especially the Psalms, in Herbert's poetry, and a lone foray into the subject of Herbert's pastor as herbalist. Concluding the collection seemingly with an eye toward the next volume are two essays appearing under the heading "Beyond Bemerton." Sid Gottlieb recounts with a hawker's wit and sympathy the late Victorian (and in places apparently unintentionally funny) novel featuring George Herbert, *Under Salisbury Spire* (1889) by Emma Martin Marshall; and David Jaspers offers an urgent explanation for why Herbert is crucial to his (Jasper's) valuation of post-modern theology. The whole is deftly introduced by Hodgkins, who locates the notion of

Herbert's "reformed pastoral" in the wider field of Renaissance pastoral, and, as an editor must, argues for the overall coherence of the volume.

For different reasons, I found especially rewarding some of the more off-beat pieces. These include two of a biographical kind, with neither subject having merited an entry in either the old or new *DNB*. Christina Malcolmson nicely brings into focus William Herbert's gardener, Adrian Gilbert (brother of Sir Humphrey Gilbert), who worked at Wilton House for two decades before his death in 1628. The lesser known Adrian, interesting in himself, helps Malcolmson link Herbert, via the magus John Dee, to a wider community of speculators and explorers, whose subjects and attitudes about the mathematical and material world often find a disputed place in *The Temple.* (For Malcolmson, Herbert's fascination with travel narratives is cinched by an "Indian nut.") The other is an essay on Edmund Duncon. As Herbertians know, Duncon's brief hour of fame is largely owing to Walton's identification of him as the person charged with delivering "this little book" (thought to be Herbert's poems) to Nicholas Ferrar, along with the fateful instructions to publish or destroy it as Ferrar thought fit. One still shudders about how much hung in the balance. Although Anthony Martin's study doesn't much concern itself with this episode, it sheds new light on Duncon's activities generally and also redresses some lapses that have crept into the biographical record: the belief that Duncon was a Puritan or anti-Laudian, initially promoted by David Novarr, or that monies Duncon received for the sale of the manuscript could not have gone into church refurbishments, including those for his Swannington Rectory in 1635.

Two other essays of a specialized nature also deserve singling out. "George Herbert and the Widow Bagges: Poverty, Charity, and the Law," by Chauncey Woods, a distinguished Chaucerian in an earlier life, is an exceptionally lucid, brief inquiry into Herbert's attitude toward poverty as expressed in *The Country Parson*. This essay might be the best example in the volume of the large rewards that can come from local inquiry. The other is Curtis Whitaker's "Herbert's Pastor as Herbalist." Considerable learning is worn lightly in a successful effort to illuminate Herbert's place in the proto-scientific wonder world of Renaissance herbals and their claims to medicinal knowledge, knowledge Herbert expected his parson to possess and which, as Whitaker describes, the poet of "The Rose" artfully deploys.

As for the broader critical implications of this volume, the emphasis on pastoral points to a further de-centering of the master tropes that generated much Herbert scholarship from the 1980s onward: the impact of protestant theology on Herbert's poetry, and the New Historical attention to power. Long gone too, of course, is the central place once accorded to Herbert as a supreme maker of poetic forms and fine lines, although Kate Narveson gets close to addressing this important issue in a satisfying manner in "Herbert and Early Stuart Psalm Culture: Beyond Translation and Meditation," as does Paul Dyck, in "George Herbert and the Liturgical Experience of Scripture," an essay that helpfully invokes, as well, Luther's characterization of the Gospels as "alieno verbo." But just as the initial conference is reported to have done, so this collection succeeds at bringing together a geographically and intellectually diverse body of Herbert scholarship. I, for one, to be sure, especially look forward to the appearance of the next volume of essays. I wish only that the current version of the profession of English were as hospitable to poetry (alieno verbo, indeed) as Powys promises to be to Herbert in 2011.

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