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Review Article

Before the Edict of Nantes

by MARK GREENGRASS

The French wars of religion, 1562–1629. By Mack P. Holt. (New Approaches to European History, 8.) Pp. xiv + 239 incl. 9 maps and 7 figs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. £30 (cloth), £10.95 (paper). 0 521 35359 9; 0 521 35873 6

Reformation in La Rochelle. Tradition and change in early modern Europe, 1500–1568. By Judith Pugh Meyer. (Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 298). Pp. 182 incl. frontispiece, 9 figs and 21 tables. Geneva: Droz, 1996. 2 600 00115 8

A city in conflict. Troyes during the French wars of religion. By Penny Roberts. (Studies in Early Modern European History.) Pp. xi + 228. Manchester–New York: Manchester University Press, 1996. £40. 0 7190 4694 7

One king, one faith. The Parlement of Paris and the religious reformations of the sixteenth century. By Nancy Lyman Roelker. (A Centennial Book.) Pp. xiii + 543. Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1996. £50 ($65). 0 520 08626 0

When the French king Henri III appeared before the Parlement of Paris to enregister the Edict of Nemours on 18 July 1585, he was greeted with a eulogistic harangue from the first president of the parlement, Achille de Harlay. This was, he told the king, a true *lit de justice*, in which the king was united and reconciled with his people within a godly union around the one, true and Catholic religion. He went on to remind the king that it was twenty-five years ago to the month that the first edict of Catholicity had been promulgated. In the intervening period, the parlement had never accepted the principle behind the adventure of religious pluralism attempted in the various edicts of pacification with the Protestant minority. They had only enregistered them under the duress of 'the explicit command of the king' and the 'urgent necessity of the times', judging all such measures 'contrary to the tranquility of your state', and against the law of God. One observer recorded that the king wept during this speech. But these were not tears of joy, for this edict (which obliged the Protestant minority to abjure or depart the realm within months) had

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been forced upon him by the duke of Guise and the Catholic League. At a stroke it unwound the painfully slow efforts of the French monarchy to rebuild its authority on the basis of a royally imposed religious pluralism. The king appeared before his parlement to reap what rewards he could from a measure that also advertised his *faiblesse*. Like the more recent tear for the decommissioning of a royal yacht, these were the ways a monarch used to express the politically impossible. For us they are an important reminder of the passions that gripped French politics during its painful and bloody reformation and how sophisticated we must be in their interpretation. The four works under consideration here are very disparate – a socio-institutional study, an up-to-date, interpretative textbook, and two case-studies in the urban reformation. Their only common thread is that they represent the variety of 'Anglo-Saxon' (in the French denomination) scholarship on the wars of religion.

The late Nancy Roelker's study of that same Parlement of Paris promises us most. 'This book, the culmination of a lifelong career in French history, tackles head-on the central question of the French religious wars: why did France prove so consistently hostile and resistant to Protestantism?' says its blurb. That it does not live up to its promise is to say something of the condition of the book's publication and the difficulty of its task. The author, best known for her study of Jeanne d'Albret, had worked on the subject of the Parlement of Paris and Protestantism for many years up to her death. Older regulars of the *Salle Clisson* in the Archives Nationales will remember her well – a plumed hat wobbling determinedly behind an ample Parlementaire register. The text she bequeathed to us leaves (as her sympathetic editor, Barbara Diefendorf, says in her preface) 'many questions unanswered and many tasks undone'. In retrospect, it might have been kinder to her memory and reputation to have left it unpublished. It simply does not measure up to the formidably difficult task that she had set herself. The complex registers of the Parlement of Paris and the rebarbative nature of the scribal hands they are written in require any historian of this institution to be a highly skilled palaeographer and one with peculiar legal interests. Because the records are those of a law court, they do not easily reveal the political dimensions that the court also exercised within the absolute monarchy. Yet these political dimensions were exacerbated in the sixteenth century when the French monarchy and its advisors diverged over its place in the accepted political order. They were further highlighted by the institutional growth and change of the parlement itself (promoted, in part, by venality) and by the royal politics of accommodation with its Protestant subjects during the civil wars.

Roelker's study refers only tangentially to the institutional fabric of the parlement. Instead, she concentrates on trying to provide generational 'snapshots' of the 'mainstream views' of leading figures within the

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Parlement of Paris at various successive stages of the French Reformation. The result is old-fashioned, incomplete, impressionistic and vague. Representing the views of the parlement 'mainstream' are those who were lawyers, but not judges in the parlement (Étienne Pasquier), those who were judges but had become ministers of the crown (Pomponne de Bellièvre), and those who were never (in an institutional sense) anything to do with the parlement (Pierre de l'Estoile). Referring to 'the twin temptations to oversimplify and to interpret history from the point of view of the survivors' she then succumbs to the same with her abundant references to 'mainstream', 'conservative', 'liberal', 'central party', and 'politique' with which to describe the approach of particular magistrates to the multi-faceted problems of accommodation for a religious minority within the absolute monarchy. Many of the Paris judges were intellectuals. Their learning was vast, Latinate, legal and ecclesiastical – in sum cerebrally challenging to a late twentieth-century consciousness. Although Roelker provides a chapter on 'cultural values', this is not a study which investigates their understanding of law, humanist poetry and the fine debating points of Gallicanism, still less integrating it with their politics. The evidence from the trials of the *chambre ardente*, undertaken by the Parlement of Paris in the reign of Henri II (and reinterpreted on the basis of the written record by William Monter in a recent article), is largely taken from Weiss's study of over a century ago. The unpublished speeches on set-piece occasions by the senior judges are often ignored. Instead, Roelker lovingly harvests the findings of clutches of American doctoral dissertationists, sometimes at the expense of citing more significant and important French works on the subject. In the case of the best of these dissertations (especially that of Linda Tabor on the Parlement of Paris in the crucial period from 1559 to 1563) one is left wishing that this press had published that work in preference to Roelker's incomplete summary of its findings. The text is uneven and sometimes insecure on its chronology. The pacification of Fleix, for example, occurs in 1581 (p. 30) instead of 1580; and the famous sermon by the rector of the university of Paris, Nicolas Cop, takes place shortly after the affair of the Placards in 1534 (p. 204) when, in fact, it occurred a year earlier. The Edict of Nemours and its registration, the climax of 'one king, one faith' in sixteenth-century France (the central theme of the book) does not merit a mention in its pages. In short, this is a study that tells us little which is new; the Parlement of Paris and the Reformation is a subject which still awaits its historian.

By contrast, Mack Holt provides a brief, sober and fair-minded interpretative essay on the politics of the wars of religion period. It is clearly designed for student use and manages to convey a lot of information concisely. Underlying the unity of the book is a proposition that comes close to a truism; that religion ('perceived as a community of

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believers rather than a body of beliefs or doctrines') was central to an understanding of the politics of the period. No doubt this is helpful to students as explaining some of the fundamental components of the story such as the Catholic reaction to heresy in the kingdom, the St Bartholomew's massacres, the mentality of the Catholic League, or the difficulties in enforcing the edicts of pacification. But (since it is transparently a proposition which can also be applied in neighbouring England) it does not explain why the French Reformation developed the degree of passionate intensity and community dissent that it clearly did. To do that, one has to go several stages further than 'putting religion back' into the story (as Holt puts it). Religion as the 'burning lamp to lighten the way of both great and small' (as Calvin expressed it) provided the canvas for an alternative picture of the French state and polity. The painting of that canvas was begun by French Protestants in the years from 1559 to 1563 but, for many different reasons, it was never more than inadequately sketched, leaving us with tantalising glimpses of the more radical tendencies in French Protestantism. These radical tendencies, as well as the nature of the French polity and state have also to be 'put back' into the story. However Holt does the state some service in taking the chronology of his clearly articulated text through the traditional boundary of 1598 and the Edict of Nantes to 1629, the logical (though dismal) end of the political aspirations of the French Protestant Reformation.

Finally, we have two contrasting micro-studies of the urban Reformation in France. Both are well-researched monographs seeking explanations for the experience of religious division in medium-sized cities on the French periphery. These comparisons aside, they differ in almost every respect. In Penny Roberts's Troyes, the Reformation was a brief, bloody affair. The worshipping Protestant community there quickly became (after a generation in the dark and two years of great optimism from 1560 to 1562) a shadow of its former self, barely capable of sustained revival in the periods of remission from harassment provided by the edicts of pacification during the civil wars. In Judith Pugh Meyer's La Rochelle, the Reformation is a curious culmination of a city's canny defence of its municipal liberties and privileges. Taking prudent advantage of the politics of the third civil war, La Rochelle's eventual commitment to the Protestant cause in September 1568 (which would sustain it over the next two generations) was a victory for the city's moderate Protestant notability, and not some radical fringe. The two studies differ, therefore, because the urban experiences they describe are also fundamentally disparate. So, too, are the sources they exploit. In addition to rich municipal archives, Penny Roberts has the manuscript history of the Reformation in the city written by a moderate Protestant contemporary to the events, Nicolas Pithou. By contrast, the absence of this kind of material forces Judith Meyer to exploit the notarial records of La

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Rochelle. It is one of the more significant paradoxes of the French Reformation that both official and unofficial sources at the local level tell us more (and in more graphic detail) about the suffering minorities than about the triumphant majority (in those cities like La Rochelle, Montauban, Orange and Gap, where Protestantism became the majority faith).

So Penny Roberts demonstrates the complexities of unenviable circumstances in which Protestant individuals and groups in Troyes found themselves. The strength of the monograph lies especially in the examples she gives of the ways in which sociability, kinship and neighbourliness worked across the sectarian divide to provide degrees of protection for fortunate individuals. At the same time, she is able to chronicle the minority of those whose commitment to Catholic integrism (sentiments that the majority of Roelker's Parisian parlementaires would have approved of, even if not their methods) led them to seize the political initiative at particular moments and to devastating effect. For, despite the comparatively large number of Troyes notables apparently willing to offer (varying) degree of support to the Protestant cause, it would remain vulnerable to intimidation, exclusion from the city's political life, exploitation and harassment. In Troyes, religion was not just 'community'; it was also 'faction' and 'individual' – the decisions of the latter being both heroic and prudent dependent on particular circumstance.

With admirable skill and great care, Judith Pugh Meyer puts together the evidence from property transactions, wills and mortgages alongside that from a surviving register of the church courts and what remains from municipal sources in La Rochelle. Some of her samples are very small, and there are inevitably problems in using sources from which some social groups (the truly poor and dispossessed) are *ipso facto* absent or heavily under-represented. Her conclusion, however, seems well-founded; La Rochelle was a stable, prosperous mercantile city with little or no hint of any social crisis upon which to base an explanation of its later adhesion to the Protestant reformation. The ecclesiastical court records reveal a decidedly chilly atmosphere for traditional religion in the city in the 1540s and 50s, and there was a lack of clerical muscle in it as well. But it is difficult not to conclude that La Rochelle's Protestant reformation is to be explained by the prudent, developing attitudes of its merchant notables. Their individual testimonies could only have been properly explored by taking the case-study beyond 1568 and through the siege of 1573. In doing so, she would have revealed more of the roots of the passionate commitment of that city (Bernard Palissy's 'new Jerusalem') to the Protestant cause.

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