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William R. McKelvy. *The English Cult of Literature. Devoted Readers, 1774-1880.* Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007. xiv+322 pp. \$45.00

This book represents a welcome attempt to elucidate the relationships between religious and literary vocations in the long nineteenth century. Insightful, revealing, and scholarly in many ways, the author's approach demonstrates a genuine interest in and commitment to illuminating the ways in which Christianity—its teachings, institutions, and clergy—remained integral to British nineteenth-century literary life. The book's considerable ambition is reflected not only in its commitment to an interdisciplinary methodology, but also in the range of issues and personae which it discusses. In certain important respects, this ambition is amply justified. Nonetheless, there are occasions where it greatly overreaches the evidences and theoretical structures presented to support it.

The book consists of six chapters. The first provides a critical introduction and lays forth McKelvy's central thesis: the nineteenth-century literary sphere in Britain—contrary to received wisdom—was not a milieu steadily overtaken and thenceforth characterized by the twin forces of “romanticism” and secularization. Rather this period (which McKelvy extends back to 1774 and takes through to 1880) witnessed the energetic labour of numerous literary men and women who both discerned and enacted personal religious vocations in their art, whilst also providing spiritual refreshment for a nation of readers who, at the same time as enjoying ever-increasing levels of religious freedom, nonetheless remained the ‘devoted readers’ of the book's title (4). Chapter 2 examines in detail the life and work of three such writers—Robert Lowth, Thomas Warton, and Thomas Percy—and demonstrates the interconnectedness between their clerical and literary vocations and its implications for our understanding of British literary

history. The third chapter investigates the early poetic career of Walter Scott and seeks to recover the spiritual import of his writing from beneath the weight of an (auto)biographically and denominationally determined reputation. Chapter 4 sets out to assault further the notion that a sudden ‘crisis of faith’ was inaugurated within Britain’s religious culture by the coalescence of scientific theory and new Biblical criticism. The chapter instead endorses a lengthened chronology for these debates as well as showing how concerns about reading and education sustained and shaped them. This chapter takes further McKelvy’s thesis concerning the close relationship between literary and religious modes of writing through case studies centring on John Keble and his *Christian Year* (1828) and T. B. Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842). Chapters 5 and 6 are also closely concerned with the literary expression of ecclesiastical vocation: in the Homeric scholarship of British prime minister William Gladstone and the clerical subject matter of author ‘George Eliot’ respectively. Chapter 5 most clearly draws on the author’s established area of expertise and seeks principally to re-habilitate Gladstone’s much-maligned Homeric within the book’s revised literary context. Attention is also paid to Gladstone’s character as book collector and reader, and the implications for both his political and literary careers of his unfulfilled calling to the Anglican priesthood. Chapter 6 offers an expansive and engaging reading of the vocational genesis and clerical and prophetic themes of Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

As noted at the outset, this monograph is an ambitious piece of work both in terms of its scope and its paradigmatic contentions. The author shows not only imagination, but also commitment as a researcher, by introducing a cast of characters in which names long-forgotten jostle alongside the canonical stalwarts of nineteenth-century literary studies such as Coleridge, Carlyle, and Arnold. In important ways, the ‘English Cult’ of the title does insufficient justice to the breadth of McKelvy’s literary interests: his well-informed section on Thomas Percy and James Macpherson and

chapter on Scott testify to his alertness to the complexities inherent in national identities in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the way in which McKelvy brings together and demonstrates the intellectual, cultural, and vocational connections between clerics, politicians, and writers does much to recover the reality of Victorian culture's many-sidedness (14, 21ff). He succeeds wholly in demonstrating how important the church and its clergy were to making the modern literary culture which is familiar to us but from which history the story of their contributions had been unfairly marginalized or expunged (37, 267).

In two important respects, however, the book's central thesis is less than convincing. The first is the author's maintenance and vigorous assertion of 'the secularization of the state' during the late Victorian period, and the second is his relative neglect of reader-reception in the monograph's delineation of 'the nation's first mass reading public'.(3)

The arguments that McKelvy asserts at the outset and maintains throughout—that, by 1880 secularization of the State had occurred, that: 'After 1880 the state no longer had a substantial religious identity for literature to challenge' (3), displayed 'an agnostic religious conscience' (32), and operated as 'a kind of agnostic police agency' (169)--are simply erroneous. These assertions, seemingly based on a belief that the British State's Christian character rested entirely on its strict adherence to the Thirty-Nine Articles of faith, are not supported by strong evidence rather a catalogue of 'secularizing' legislation culminating in the Dissenters' Burials Bill and Education Act of 1880 is deemed sufficient. The vicious wranglings over whether or not to admit the atheist MP Charles Bradlaugh to Parliament between 1880 and 1886, which immediately call into question 1880 as a terminal date, are not discussed, and the assertion that, by 1880, church disestablishment was 'as politically implausible as it was functionally unnecessary' entirely ignores the question of the Church in Wales, which was not resolved until 1920

(31). Even less sustainable is the assertion that, post 1880, the desire to influence State education along religious lines disappeared. There is reluctant acknowledgment in an endnote of the denominational debates surrounding the 1902 Education Act but this is explained away as a symptom of a newly interventionist State--allegedly in operation between 1880 and 1950--and is not given any significance in the text (276-7). The author shows here--as elsewhere--that he is unfamiliar with the work of Matthew Grimley on the political role and significance of the Anglican Church in twentieth-century Britain (OUP 2004).¹ Grimley's work demonstrates not only the Church's continued involvement in high political matters (such as devising policy to cope with mass unemployment and the abdication crisis of 1936) but also the Christian character of the State being vigorously defended *by* the State, even in the face of the Church itself (*viz* the Prayer Book controversy of 1929). It is unfortunate that, after taking such pains to demonstrate the continued relevance and contingent nature of religious practice, vocation, and language in the literary worlds of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the author insists on persistently denying its continued relevance in that of the political, ejecting the shibboleth of secularization he claims to abhor (28) from private spheres only to set it up in comfort in public ones.

The assumption that nineteenth-century politics developed along teleological lines causes instability in other areas of the book's argument. In the case of Gladstone, there is considerable mileage in conceptualizing Gladstone's approach to political life as a conduit for his very strong clerical vocation. On the other hand, there is no justification for presenting this relationship as a straightforward evolution in response to the development of 'an increasingly liberal state' (6). Gladstone's long career was punctuated with moments when he felt his sense of religious vocation demanded a eschewal of 'public life' rather than an engagement with it because of—as he saw it—unwelcome

¹ M. Grimley, *Citizenship, Community, and the Church of England: liberal Anglican theories of the state between the wars* (Oxford, 2004).

shifts in the unpredictable relationship between political and religious cultures, only for these to be subsequently resolved (or at least reconciled) in his somewhat tortuous thinking. In this respect it is disappointing that McKelvy did not properly engage with the most recent work of David Bebbington—the most senior Gladstonian scholar with published research not only on Gladstone’s Homeric work but also on his religious thought—whose book *The Mind of Gladstone* (OUP 2004), although listed in the bibliography, receives only a grudging acknowledgement in an endnote (284) and is not discussed in the text.²

As recognized above, the character of McKelvy’s book is freshened by the inclusion of several long-neglected figures. Nonetheless—as the author admits himself—the vast majority of his protagonists were elite figures (7). This is not a problem in itself; where it becomes problematic is in relation to the significant claim McKelvy makes about the light his book sheds on the development of a mass reading culture in nineteenth-century Britain, and how this bestowed on ‘the conceptualization of religious truth...a particular public character’ (7). Evidence of reading reception is notoriously hard to come by and even more problematic to interpret. Whilst it is hard to conceive of a mass audience for some of the more abstruse theological and Homeric treatises with which the book deals, there certainly was for Keble’s *Christian Year* and the novels of Eliot and yet we hear little of substance about such an audience and its approaches and responses to reading. Whilst McKelvy is at ease reconstructing the reading practice of figures like Thomas Warton (68), he remains less assured and less informed in the domain of mass readership. There are intriguing paragraphs here and there (at the end of Chapter 3 on a more popular audience’s reception of Scott and brief mention of Bible readers towards the end of Chapter 6) which ought to have been extended, perhaps at the expense of some of the denser pages of literary criticism.(126, 253).

² D. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: religion, Homer, and politics* (Oxford, 2004).

Without any substantive new evidence to support it, the author's contention that the nineteenth-century was the very first time that the 'putative religious function of literature became a self-defining subject for public debate' (1), remains unproven, especially when there already exists a considerable body of work on early-modern readers, their reception of texts, and the implications of their multifarious readings on both religion and politics by scholars such as Kevin Sharpe.³ In fact, the whole picture of a modern literature culture (16-20) or authority (25), created in the 1770s and reaching its acme by 1880 only really works if one concentrates solely on figures--like Matthew Arnold--who sought primarily to be active engineers of such a culture rather than consumers of it. Such a vision of a "modern" literary world takes no serious account of readers—even elite ones like Gladstone--who (re)read old and much-loved books as well as those just published, symbiotically read (auto)biography with the literary works of authors like Scott, and fervently admired the *oeuvre* of Gibbon in spite of his anti-Christian scoffing. In this sense, the book's subtitle--'devoted readers'-- is misleading as this is essentially a study of devoted *writers*.

In conclusion, this book has much to recommend it but in the end it overextends itself by making claims about both religious and political change in modern Britain that are simply not sustainable. Whilst the author quite rightly criticises some literary critics for ignoring historical context (29) and maintains an 'open gripe' (267) with those Victorianists who have marginalized the cultural significance of religion, it is a real shame that he did not extend his own acquaintanceship with the existing historiographies a little further.

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³ See, for example, K. M. Sharpe, 'Reading Revelations: prophecy, hermeneutics and politics in early modern Britain' in K. M. Sharpe and S. N. Zwicker (eds), *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 122-63, and K. M. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: the politics of reading in early modern England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

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