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Review of W. B. Patterson, Thomas Fuller: Discovering England's Religious Past

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W. B. PATTERSON. *Thomas Fuller: Discovering England's Religious Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 368. \$85.00 (cloth).
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Even the most celebrated early modern historians are now more frequently read in excerpt than perused at length, and those who came later are especially prone to neglect. Less familiar today than William Camden or Raphael Holinshed, Thomas Fuller is most often remembered as the author of “Fuller’s Worthies” (*History of the Worthies of England*, 1662), which was both England’s first biographical dictionary and a county-by-county study of notable local features. As recently as the nineteenth century, however, *History of the Holy Warre* (1639) and *Church-History of Britain* (1655) were read with admiration and enthusiasm, and not just for their historical content. Coleridge ranked Fuller second only to Shakespeare in exciting “the sense and emotion of the marvelous,” and his friend Robert Southey listed Fuller’s *Church-History* among the twelve books he could not live without—a library that included works by Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton in addition to Shakespeare (337–38). It is the project of W. B. Patterson’s new book to recapture some of this esteem.

In part a biography of Fuller, Patterson’s work does an admirable job filling in the details of Fuller’s life and the way it reflected or responded to the momentous years he lived

through. An exact contemporary of Milton, Fuller took a different path than the poet, staying on at Cambridge for his master's degree and ordination and voicing dissent from the Laudian church in mostly muted ways. A moderate when moderation was out of fashion, Fuller saw himself as neither a puritan nor a high royalist, but as belonging to what he presented, in *Church-History*, as the large middle group of Calvinist supporters of episcopacy (254). This meant, of course, that Fuller lost his living during the civil wars, but he had enough friends and supporters—and enough of a reputation as a godly and talented preacher—that he continued his work as a minister through the Interregnum. It was also in these years that Fuller turned most seriously to his writing, and particularly the work that Patterson sees as his masterpiece, the *Church-History*, which traces the British church from its origins to the moment that might well have been its extinction, the execution of King Charles.

As a biography, it is difficult to imagine Patterson's work being superseded any time soon. For most readers, however, the chief interest of the book will be Fuller's considerable and varied literary output. In one sense, Patterson's treatment of these works is extremely thorough. In addition to two and a half chapters on *Church-History*, there are separate chapters on *The Holy Warre* (the first English account of the Crusades), *The Holy State* (1642) (a collection of essays and character sketches), and the *Worthies*; Patterson also discusses Fuller's three collections of meditations and a number of published sermons or works of religious controversy. Each work is set firmly within its historical and biographical context and summarized, usually at length. This is an excellent resource for anyone hoping to get up to speed on a particular work or on Fuller's corpus as a whole.

As an analysis or interpretation of Fuller's works, the book is more intermittent in its successes. Patterson's short introduction gives a sense of the issues at stake in memorializing England's past, while chapter 5 effectively situates Fuller within early modern historiographic trends, tracing the influence of classical history, humanism, and the demands of religious controversy on both the rise of historical writing and the forms that it took in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But in Patterson's lengthy treatments of individual works the reader can easily lose the forest for the trees. Although Patterson amply credits the previous historians upon whom Fuller depends, there is rarely much discussion of how his analysis differs from theirs; moreover, his detailed summaries of Fuller's works often give the mistaken impression that there is something unique in, for example, his mild skepticism about the legend of Joseph of Arimathea or his lack of deference toward Thomas à Becket (162, 197). Patterson's remarks about Fuller's successes and failures as historian can also seem a mismatch for his likely audience: the fact that his works downplay popular support for the Crusades or get things wrong about early Celtic religion will surely not materially affect the value of his works for twenty-first-century readers, who are not coming to them for the same reasons they read the latest historiography (59–60, 219). The importance of the *Church-History* is less what Fuller gets right or wrong about the distant past than how it reflects the concerns of his contemporary moment. The story of the early British church had been told many times in the century before Fuller. But as he and his audience grappled with the seeming loss—or at least the transformation—of the church of their parents and grandparents, what Fuller chooses to borrow or alter from Matthew Parker or Holinshed can tell us something important.

Fuller's other enduring strength is the power and peculiarity of his voice. In his introduction, Patterson says that Fuller “wrote in an unpretentious, pungent, and frequently amusing way that made his work accessible and appealing to the general reader” (8), and this is an understatement. Fuller's voice stands out in every one of his works and is sometimes (as in an otherwise unremarkable tract on pedo-baptism) their chief delight. Patterson quotes Fuller, if not as often as this reader would have liked—but as with all early modern prose, it is hard to truly get the flavor from a short excerpt. To share Coleridge and Southey's esteem for

Fuller, we need to read his works as they did: as works of literature as well as history. If we do, Patterson's book will be an essential companion in the process.

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