REVIEW


Though much has been written about John Knox within larger histories, there have not been many works that are wholly devoted to understanding this complex personality who occupied a somewhat central place, even if not directly political, in the midst of enormous sea changes in the history of Western Europe.

Rosalind K. Marshall offers in this book a helpful and credible effort to fill this void. She does it in a manner that is accessible while academic, making the book a rare gift to the reading public, as well as the scholar. The substance is well referenced (end notes) and indexed. Happily, for those of us whose mind’s eye often wants for adequate images, Marshall has included a central section of illustrations, which include even a few helpful photographs. She also includes a map of Western Europe at the beginning of the first chapter. Though helpful, this reader would have happily received a few more such maps to help contextualise more of Knox’s many movements.

Though the subject at hand is John Knox, Marshall does a creditable job of locating him within the web of situations and people that constituted his multi-faceted world, as well as the broader tumult in Western Europe known as the Protestant Reformation. As a result, not only does Knox appear more three dimensional, many of his contemporaries do as well; rulers, reformers, and Roman Catholic leaders.

Marshall also accomplishes the somewhat tricky task of moving Knox beyond the typical constraints of perceiving him as merely an ill-tempered misogynist; someone you probably wouldn’t want to be in the same room with, let alone invite to a
dinner party. In fact, by the time I finished the book, I actually had some degree of sympathy for the man, his heart, and many of his actions.

Marshall sets this conciliatory tone early in the book, even in talking about his early work as a notary apostolic (something like a country lawyer with church court connections). Marshall notes that Knox was ‘By nature an energetic man with a keen sense of responsibility for others...’ and comments that he ‘...must have learned to listen to people’s troubles and settle their quarrels with a firm hand.’ (p. 6) Though there can be little argument with the ‘firm hand’, Marshall proceeds to do a credible job of helping us see how Knox’s sense of responsibility for others bore itself out in the course of his tumultuous life. In fact, as Marshall unfolds the details of Knox’s life, it becomes more apparent that his various confrontations with authorities were the outworking of a highly-principled life; one in which being true to one’s understanding of scripture and its imperatives was absolutely central.

So, though Knox might have been an awkward presence at a dinner party (especially for female royalty), he certainly seems to have provided a glimmer of hope to the broader population in a time when their interests were certainly subservient to those of the ruling class and families of western Europe. This, in fact, may have had more to do with his immense popularity than his efforts at reformation. His clarion call to reform may well have resonated more with the masses at the level of church polity and politics than that of doctrinal purity. Marshall’s assertion of his popularity contradicts the assessment of Michael Lynch. He maintained Knox rarely reflected the feelings of Edinburgh’s citizens, with only a minority of Protestants supporting Knox to the hilt and more than half the town having strong loyalties to Catholic Queen Mary. Marshall’s biography therefore returns to the more traditional view.

To say these were complex times, full of many mysteries with inadequate clues, is to understate the situation. To even come close to doing this period of time justice is no small task. It is a great credit to Marshall that she manages to take so many disparate threads and patches and work them into an understandable and believable tapestry of personalities, places, and events. I would wholeheartedly commend this work to
students, teachers, and avocational historians. It will serve you well. I look forward to further reading of Marshall’s other works if they are of this calibre.

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