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In the 21st century John Owen (1616–83) already looks likely claim the prize as the most studied of the 17th-century puritans. Compared to the ubiquitous Richard Baxter, contender for the same prize in 20th-century scholarship, Owen was more cerebral and less alive to the power of fashioning a cult of personality around himself. What Owen lacked in literary self projection he made up in theological complexity, political ambition and influence. Born to a puritan family in Oxfordshire in 1616 and studying at Oxford in the early 1630s, Owen obtained parish livings in godly Essex at the outbreak of the first English civil war. In 1648 during the second civil war siege of Colchester he became a New Model Army preacher, cultivating the patronage of Sir Thomas Fairfax and most crucially Oliver Cromwell, who was the key to his meteoric rise. Owen quickly became the favoured preacher and theologian of post-regicide regimes. His position in the 1650s as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford and Dean of Christ Church settled his status as the leading theologian of the republican era.

Thanks to the efforts of the Banner of Truth Trust, an Edinburgh-based evangelical publishing house, Owen's works are well known to modern evangelical readers. An inexpensive paperback edition of Owen's soteriological treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* has remained in print for over 60 years and a quick search on Google shows that, despite its complexity, it is still avidly being studied by a non-academic readership. Banner of Truth also publish reprints of Owen's *Of Communion with God* and W. H. Goold's 19th-century edition of Owen's (not quite) complete works for a relatively reasonable price. The result is that many of the major works of Owen are readily available to modern readers. Owen has had his share of biographies in recent years, with the offerings of Peter Toon, Carl Trueman and Tim Cooper's comparative survey of Owen and Baxter being notable studies in the field. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the study of Owen and his theology has become an academic discipline in its own right, with numerous companions, books and articles tackling the minutiae of Owen's voluminous output reaching publication.

Crawford Gribben's compellingly written biography of Owen ranks as one of the most accessible yet intellectually satisfying biographical studies of Owen to date. Rather than produce a thematic study, Professor Gribben has chosen to present Owen's life and works in a narrative of nine chronological chapters. Thankfully he has given a critical and contextual assessment of his subject rather repeating the near hagiography that mars so many biographies of puritans. While using Goold's edition of Owen's collected works as the backbone of his citations, Gribben has been careful to return to the original physical copies of Owen's literary output, noting any fresh insights that inspection of the original material throws up. This is to be expected from Gribben, who has gained a well deserved reputation as a careful student of early modern religious literature. Gribben's literary background gives the reader special insight into the play of Owen's language, particularly his famed tendency to coin Latinate neologisms ahead of their time. In terms of research, Gribben

has gone well beyond reading Owen's works, consulting a good collection of manuscripts, printed primary sources and secondary material.

Gribben's study provides the fullest personal life and back story of Owen that we possess to date. This is necessary to fulfil Gribben's subtitle and the biography's organising motif, the 'experiences of defeat' that Owen apparently suffered throughout his life. Of course, this trope is drawn from Christopher Hill's 1984 book on Milton and one wonders if the experiences of defeat suffered by the rather successful Owen might be better classed as the failure of idealism and the attendant lack of perspective that such a mentality inculcates. Nevertheless, Gribben's task in reconstructing Owen's private life is no mean feat, as Owen, in complete contrast to his contemporary Baxter, chose to keep himself largely out of his texts. Gribben is clearly more sympathetic to Owen than Tim Cooper was in his excellent 2011 study, a work that Gribben successfully builds upon.<sup>(1)</sup> Often separated from his wife and family by his manifold public engagements, the reader finally gets some insight into the tragedy and sorrow felt by Owen over the deaths of his 11 children and first wife. In reconstructing Owen's often inscrutable private existence, Gribben makes full use of a wide range of sources. In particular the diary of Ralph Josselin, a neighbouring minister to Owen's parish of Coggleshall in Essex, is deployed to provide the contextual background often missing from Owen's works.<sup>(2)</sup> The total effect of Gribben's effort in reconstructing Owen's biography is that Owen the man is brought out sensitively and without either the excessive admiration or crass censure that can ruin a biography.

Owen is largely known today as a confrontational theologian whose work targeted those who argued against the Reformed theological orthodoxy that had crystallised in the century after Calvin. Owen's principal targets were those who 'laid the axe to the root of Christianity', or at least its Reformed interpretation, particularly the ceremonial 'Arminianism' of the Laudian bishops and the emerging unitarianism of Socinian thinkers. Gribben summarises Owen's controversial works with lucidity and is careful to present each work both in its immediate historical context and in light of modern secondary scholarship. Of particular note is Gribben's discussion of Owen's attack on the Norfolk weaver and Arminian lay theologian Thomas Moore. In the mid 1640s Moore had published a series of tracts arguing for universal redemption. For his efforts Moore received a barrage of damning replies from university educated defenders of the orthodox Reformed position that Christ had died effectively for the elect alone. Owen, who came late to the debate to administer the *coup de grâce* to Moore's arguments, published *Salus electorum, sanguis Jesu*, now better known by its subtitle *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* in refutation. *Salus electorum, sanguis Jesu*, with its wide ranging deployment of academic learning, was an early demonstration of Owen's theological and polemical brilliance but also showed his capacity for condescension and even pomposity against an uneducated opponent. Yet, as Gribben shows, Owen's fire was not reserved for the unlearned alone and he was just as quick to attack

educated allies if he felt they came short in the defence of the Reformed cause.

Modern evangelical Christians are also aware of Owen's trinitarian meditations in *Of Communion with God* (1657). This work was a product of Owen's reflection on the challenge to the doctrine of the trinity spearheaded by Socinians such as John Biddle. Owen's controversy with Socinianism appears to have led him to perceive that the Puritan devotional tradition had not paid sufficient attention to the doctrine of the holy trinity. The product of this reflection was *Of Communion with God*, which advocated that Christians should focus on the distinct persons of the trinity to a far greater degree than was often the case in the Reformed tradition. Gribben's brief but informative analysis of this text sees him eschew Gould's edition of the collected works and return to original 17th-century sources to show just how radical Owen was in this re-statement of Christian trinitarian theology.

Aside from engaging opponents in controversy, Owen's main theological ambition was to establish the basic doctrinal fundamentals through which the Republic's vision of the Church of England would operate. It is often not appreciated that the Westminster Assembly's confessional documents failed to be established in law by the Long Parliament's legislation. Consequently the Republican era was left without a confession of faith to define the basic belief of the public church. This was all the more problematic because the interregnum 'public church' required its clergy to hold to what the Instrument of Government (1653) described as the 'public profession'. Owen's took advantage of opportunities that presented themselves in 1652 and 1654 to seek to establish a series of short credal statements of trinitarian orthodoxy that would serve as the public profession of the Cromwellian church. In this task he not only co-opted his fellow congregationalists but also willing presbyterians and baptists who wished to see Reformed orthodoxy settled in the religious chaos of the post-regicide state. That these attempts failed to obtain Parliamentary approval (largely due to the political instability caused by Parliament's military masters) was of great concern to many of the parish clergy in England, who remained wedded to 'a church by law established'. As Gribben shows, the failure to establish the public profession was seen by Owen as one of his greatest defeats.

Owen's focus on establishing basic doctrinal fundamentals was critical for the congregationalist project of supporting self governing churches under the oversight of the Christian magistrate. Gribben is particularly strong in exploring Owen's changing attitude to ecclesiastical polity. His early treatise *The Duty of Pastors and People* (1644) marked him as a presbyterian of sorts. As Gribben points out this work contains no discussion of the authority of synods and thus it is probably correct to infer that Owen was advocating parochial presbyterianism rather than the national church order being proposed by the Westminster Assembly. This position was similar to dissenting Assembly divine Joseph Caryl who licensed the work and became a long term friend of Owen. It was John Cotton's *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*, a well respected

conservative statement of congregationalist principles published later in 1644, which finally converted Owen fully to the congregational way. Owen's more mature works like *Of Schism* (1657) defended congregationalism against presbyterian charges of schism by a novel redefinition of the concept of schism as being an internal split within a particular assembly of Christians. This redefinition answered one of the main lines of attack advanced by presbyterian polemicists such as Daniel Cawdrey against congregationalists: that the gathering of a church out of an already existing 'true' church was an unforgiveable act of schism. This argument, coupled with Owen's stress on doctrinal fundamentals, was the basis for Owen's doctrine of toleration: that the 'saints' needed to show a mutual forbearance for each others' differences in matters that were indifferent to the fundamentals of salvation. Owen's redefinition of schism therefore paved the way for more modern evangelical notions that different denominations could be recognised as true churches despite their differences of emphasis and structure. Gribben accentuates the point that, while Owen's ideas were remarkably fluid and even radically changed throughout his life, his basic belief in the necessity of right thinking Christians to tolerate each other's eccentricities remained a constant feature of his thought.

Turning away from Owen's theology to his political career, Gribben sets Owen in light of the recent historiography of the revolutionary decade of 1649-59. Despite many of his fellow Essex ministers opposing the regicide and supporting presbyterianism, Owen sealed his meteoric political rise by preaching on the day of Charles I's execution to the House of Commons. Gribben argues that this sermon was ambiguous and shows that Owen was 'not yet the voice of army republicans'. The shift towards the Army soon followed, however, with Owen preaching on themes that blended the emergent military imperialism of the new Republic with the Protestant apocalypticism of the early civil war. This ideology would find its expression in the English Republic's decisive military invasions and conquests of Catholic Ireland and Presbyterian Scotland. In both campaigns Owen served as a chaplain and a voice to the conquering English army. Yet the exuberance of these years soon gave way to disappointment and struggle. While the later Cromwellian Protectorate sought to find healing and settling by withdrawing from the kind of political theology that Owen had provided in the early 1650s, Owen found his influence with Cromwell diminishing. Owen's loss of his former sway was complete with Richard Cromwell's accession as Lord Protector. I was somewhat surprised that Professor Gribben did not deal with the contemporary rumours of Owen's active involvement in preaching up the military coup against Richard and the Third Protectorate Parliament. Nevertheless, the narrative of Owen's political decline is handled in an elegant and economical way.

Gribben's final chapters deal with Owen after the return of the Stuart monarchy, a period of great danger for old Parliamentarians generally and particularly for committed supporters of the republican regimes of the 1650s. Much reduced from his former glory and experiencing chronic illness and a modicum of persecution from the revanchist Cavalier-

Anglican regime, Owen adapted to the new order by adopting 'a studied political ambiguity' and devoting himself to theology and his gathered church. Like many nonconformists, presbyterian and congregationalist alike, he could dissimulate about his attitude to the restored Church of England by stressing those parts of its core belief (such as the 39 Articles) that had never troubled pre-civil war puritans.

The Restoration was clearly a difficult time for Owen and Gribben brings out how Owen saw the Restoration in apocalyptic terms as an increasingly ominous series of defeats for the godly. Owen had considered emigrating to New England, with invitations to take the place of John Cotton as pastor of the church in Boston, Massachusetts, but conditions in the American colonies were also not favourable for supporters of the regicide. He settled on acting as a household chaplain (although surely not, as Gribben states, to Joseph Caryl's daughter referred to as 'Lady Abney' in 1663. Sarah Caryl did not marry the presbyterian merchant Thomas Abney until 1668 and Abney was not knighted until 1693 (3)). He also led his gathered church, hoping for Charles II's much promised indulgence for dissenters (which came briefly in 1672). It was in this period that Owen preached his massive series of sermons on Hebrews, taking up a total of seven volumes of Goold's collected works. In reconstructing Owen's sermon output in this period Gribben makes use of both printed material and unpublished sermon notes held in Doctor Williams's Library. Yet for all this, Gribben paints a picture of a man increasingly disappointed by the passing of the godly generation of the mid-17th century and the increasing spiritual declension of their children in the dissenting churches. Having peaked in the 1640s and 1650s, the years of the 'Puritan revolution', it is perhaps unsurprising that Owen found the latter half of the century a time of defeat and decline.

In short, Crawford Gribben has produced a fluent biography of a difficult historical figure. *John Owen and English Puritanism* provides an accessible and thorough starting point for any study of John Owen and his milieu. Gribben presents Owen in equal measures as an opportunist, a brilliant theologian and a puritan 'saint' whose personal losses and gains matched the defeats and failures inherent in the mid-17th-century project of godly rule.

## Notes

1. Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Farnham, 2011).
2. *The Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616-1683*, ed. Alan Macfarlane (Oxford, 1991).
3. Perry Gauci, 'Abney, Sir Thomas (1640-1722)', in *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1690-1715*, ed. D. Hayton, E. Cruickshanks and S. Handley (London, 2002) <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1690-1715/member/abney-sir-thomas-1640-1722> [accessed 28 August 2016].

