INTRODUCTION: CALVIN, HISTORY, AND MEMORY

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In a critical piece on the French intellectual, Jacques Ellul, the American theology professor George S. Hendry once observed that Ellul was not the first French Protestant who had been trained as a lawyer, but increasingly received acclaim as an author on theological subjects. John Calvin, the University of Paris graduate known as the Reformer of Geneva, had made such a career shift already in the sixteenth century. But how different, in Hendry’s estimation, had been the result. “Calvin commanded a comprehensive knowledge of theology from the ancient fathers to the writers of his own time.” Ellul, however, “concentrates his theological attention on Kierkegaard and the early Barth, and regards those who have written since as of less consequence.” For Hendry, the two Frenchmen also greatly differed in their writing styles and modes of discourse. “Ellul is a theologian of passion, who writes with power and permits himself sweeping statements and wholesale judgments which arrest attention, but hardly carry conviction.” By contrast, “Calvin presented his thought calmly and judiciously, with conviction but without passion.”

In his 1988 Calvin biography, William J. Bouwsma cites the last part of this passage, not for the criticism of Ellul that it implies, but as an example of modern clichés about Calvin that can no longer be maintained in the light of critical historical scholarship. Sentences such as the ones just quoted, Bouwsma explains, give evidence “of the persistence of a received figure who was infinitely more complex and interesting than this perception of him implies.” Indeed, from Bouwsma’s biography emerges a much more complex figure than Hendry appeared to have in mind. Rather than calm and passionless, Bouwsma’s Calvin is “a singularly anxious man and, as a reformer, fearful and troubled.” “Although his career was filled with accomplishment, his inner life showed few signs of the progress which he associated with godliness; he

was still wrestling at the end of his life with the self-doubt, confusions, and contradictory impulses that had been with him from the beginning.” Over against the tranquil figure of Calvin as chief architect of Reformed theology, the biographer places a typically sixteenth-century figure, whose writings reflected “the inner turmoil of a peculiarly troubled age.” In short, throughout his book, Bouwsma seeks to correct traditional images of Calvin such as those articulated by Hendry (and others) by historical means.2

Invaluable as such historical approaches have been for understanding Calvin in his sixteenth-century context, there is another way in which historians might respond to such images of Calvin as Hendry invoked in his criticism of Ellul. Instead of trying to correct clichés and myths, historians might also want to understand them. Instead of criticizing such images for distorting the “real” Calvin, historians might wonder why these images emerged, at what places and in which genres they appeared, and what roles they played in churches, schools, and popular media. Historians might want to inquire what sort of meaning a “passionless” Calvin had for audiences in the United States, why Protestants in nineteenth-century Europe came to highlight Calvin’s “convictions” or how free-thinkers around 1900 exploited an anti-democratic Calvin for anti-clerical purposes. Instead of “demythologizing” Calvin, historians might want to make “myths” created about Calvin their object of study and examine what such myths tell us about how the Reformer was remembered, interpreted, used, and (if one likes) misused by later generations.

The present volume is an expedition into this relatively uncharted territory.3 It examines how John Calvin was perceived, remembered, represented, constructed, and manipulated by advocates and adversaries alike. It is a study of Calvin representations and the use that was made

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