CHAPTER TWENTY

RICHARD HOOKER'S REPUTATION*

Diarmaid MacCulloch

From my undergraduate days in Cambridge, I remember a lecture by the late Sir Geoffrey Elton in which he pronounced not altogether kindly on the achievement of another giant of early modern historical writing, Professor Lawrence Stone. Elton said of Stone’s magnum opus, The Crisis of the Aristocracy ‘Lawrence Stone has written a great book. [Pause] A huge book. An ENORMOUS book.’ In a similar fashion, Richard Hooker’s many admirers, detractors and manipulators can agree on one thing: Hooker wrote a very big book. Everyone remembers that. Take, for instance, the early seventeenth century clerk of Canterbury Archdeaconry Court who compiled the index to the probate register volume which deals with Richard Hooker: when the clerk came to Hooker’s name in his index, he showed an uncharacteristic spark of interest, and he commented in the margin ‘he wrote an Ecclesiastical Polity.’

Now we know that it was not just an Ecclesiastical Polity, but the Ecclesiastical Polity: a majestic and hallowed testimony to the character of Anglicanism and the via media of the Church of England. But it may give us pause to find, if we take up the formidable task of reading Hooker’s works—all seven volumes of them in the latest edition,

* A version of this paper formed the first in a series of lectures sponsored by Corpus Christi College, Oxford in autumn 2000, commemorating the quatercentenary of Hooker’s death, and I have to thank the President and Fellows of the College for doing me the honour of asking me to begin the series. Among the many debts incurred in writing the paper, I am extremely grateful for the generosity of the following in allowing me access to their unpublished work: Patrick Collinson, Susan Doran, Michael Brydon, Peter Lake, Jessica Martin, Peter Nockles. I must also thank Steven McGrade for his invaluable detailed comments on a draft of the paper, Peter Groves for assistance in Pusey House Library, Séan Hughes for some provocative conversations in seminars, and Conal Condren for supplying various secondary sources. My particular debt to Michael Brydon should be apparent from the footnotes, in which I have endeavoured to specify precisely where I have used his material.

1 R. Keen, ‘Inventory of Richard Hooker, 1601’, Archaeologia Cantiana 70 (1957): 231–6, at 231. I am grateful to Dr Kenneth Fincham for alerting me to this reference.
including commentary and notes—that nowhere in any of his writings does Hooker use either the word Anglicanism or the phrase via media. That may suggest that the legacy of Hooker is not as straightforward as it has sometimes been portrayed; indeed it may mean that Anglicanism and the via media are more interesting and fluid concepts than the complacent version of Anglican historiography has sometimes made them. Did Hooker defend Anglicanism in his book, or did he, as Professor Peter Lake famously suggested a dozen years ago, invent Anglicanism? Did he write a great book, or just a huge and enormous one? To find out who he was and what he has been understood to have intended requires an exploration of the extraordinarily varied ways in which he and his big book have been encountered over four centuries.

Hooker started his public career as a rather predictable Reformed Protestant: one among the swelling number of young clergyman whose formation in early Elizabethan Oxford fitted them to lead a Church very conscious of its place in the wider family of European Reformed Churches. Hooker’s family back in Devon was precociously Protestant. His uncle John Vowell, alias Hooker, was a passionately committed historian of the Hookers’ home city, Exeter, but also a cosmopolitan scholar whose higher education had included time in Cologne and Strasbourg. More important still was the young Richard’s debt to his patron Bishop John Jewel, first defender of the Elizabethan Protestant Settlement, veteran both of Edwardian Oxford and the Zürich of Heinrich Bullinger: in the 1590s, Richard Hooker remembered Jewel with affection and awe as ‘the worthiest Divine that Christendome hath bred for the space of some hundreds of yeres’. Both the elder Hooker and Jewel had sat at the feet of the great exile theologian Peter Martyr

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6 Laces II.6.4; 1:171.2–4.