The combination of classicism, humanism, and Protestantism in English education is something many of us have probably taken for granted, and it is always exciting when a careful scholar discovers a novel way of examining what has been sitting right in front of us. This is a significant study that will shape how both Protestantism and humanism are viewed in early modern England. In this book, which began as a series of Waynflete Lectures at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 2006, Ian Green explores the longevity of humanist forms, practices, and ideas in Protestant England. How, he asks, did these humanist elements coexist with Protestantism, and what was the nature of this “long-lasting symbiosis” (x)? Green’s work on print and Protestantism—two books have been published and a third is on the way—makes him ideally situated to address these questions.

Green’s main concern is “to try to tease out the implications of a humanist education for the ethical beliefs and religious understanding of those who attended a Protestant grammar school or college” (xii). Upon closer inspection, religious education and the texts that supported it are seen to coexist “cheek by jowl” with humanist and classical texts that built on the legacy of pagan Greek and Roman culture. Gauging influence and impact is always difficult, and Green is not only extremely careful in his analysis to avoid the numerous traps of such attempts, but he also readily admits when there is not enough information to warrant substantive conclusions. In fact, while Green does suggest important new ways of looking at the humanist legacy in England, much of this book should be viewed as a foundation for further studies of humanism and Protestantism. Repeatedly, Green calls for further research and points out numerous aspects of early modern educational and print culture that remain understudied. As a result, this book could be an ideal catalyst for graduate students searching for the perfect dissertation topic.

Readers of this Yearbook will note that the book only tangentially and intermittently touches on Erasmus and his influence in England. Green does, however, routinely take publications of Erasmian texts as indicative of humanist influences and, in the conclusion, notes that English classicism may have supported the continued influence of Erasmian moral thought. Melanchthon plays a larger role and, according to Green, Melanchthon demonstrated a “persistent belief in the benefits of the study of the liberal arts in a Christian education and in the capacity of the human mind, aided by grace, to understand and agree on the essentials of the Christian faith” (13). While Green discusses
an English union of classical and religious texts, he also suggests that classical
and neo-classical texts and humanist pedagogy outpaced religious studies in
English schools. One somewhat startling piece of evidence is that the works
of Calvin and William Perkins, both of whom were widely read, were outsold
by editions and translations of Ovid and Cicero (25). This alone should give
us pause in our assumptions about Calvinist dominance in early modern
England. Indeed, Green notes a large increase in the consumption of classical
and humanist works in translation from the mid-sixteenth through the mid-
seventeenth century. The popularity of these texts, including their ubiquity in
grammar schools, prompted Green to ask “how far did the trickle-down effect
of classical education, together with the commercially motivated production
of English translations of classical texts and of works by humanists such as
Erasmus, help to produce many thousands of what might be termed ‘denizens’
of the republic of letters …?” (25). While no absolute answer is provided,
Green is clearly suggesting that we need to rethink the potential influence of
humanism in England.

The first chapter introduces the topic with an excellent, though perhaps
overly long, historiographical discussion (which students might find useful,
particularly if they are using this monograph as a stimulus for further revision
of the field). In concluding his introduction, Green writes that “this is a provisional
exercise, an attempt to explain the importance of the subject, to set an agenda
of questions and obtain some preliminary results, and offer a new framework
in which others might be encouraged to pursue those questions further” (52).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Green focuses on grammar school education and
the use of Latin in grammar schools. Unlike previous studies, which have
tended to focus on elite educational institutions, Green provides an amazingly
detailed picture of grammar school education across England. The extent of his
research is impressive and demonstrates both the growth of grammar schools
and the striking similarity in the education offered throughout England. Green
is particularly interested in looking at moral instruction that derived from
classical and humanist texts. In doing so, he makes it clear that the moral
landscape of England was shaped as much (if not more) by classical conceptions
of virtue, honor, duty, and practical moral choice as by religious doctrines of
providence and predestination. It is highly significant that Latin culture spread
well beyond schools that educated boys from elite and aspiring middling and
merchant classes. There was also a high demand for translations by adults who
never learned Latin. The prevalence of humanist texts in education and for the
book-buying public demonstrates the popularity and potentially widespread
influence of humanist beliefs.