
The limitations of this study are the obverse of its not inconsiderable strengths. In Martha F. Bowden’s own words, *Yorick’s Congregation* aims “to assemble together the historical and biographical materials in a single place so that the student of Sterne might have another context in which to read the texts”; in this respect it is eminently successful, gathering and explaining a range of valuable contextual material, much of which has the potential to illuminate not only the broad contours of Sterne’s fiction, but also the development of his characters and the intricacies of their relationships, with themselves, others, and the wider world. At the same time, however, it is precisely this focus on collecting “context,” which prevents Bowden from exploring, at any great length, the implications of the often insightful connections she draws between the lives and opinions of the novelist’s fictional creations and the world of the typical eighteenth-century English parish church. Thus, while she does present a coherent and generally persuasive case that in Sterne, “the parson and the writer are not incongruous fragments but two halves of a synthetic whole,” ultimately, there is much that she leaves only partially explored.

Through a series of case studies, each of which is structured around excerpted scenes from *Tristram Shandy* and, on occasion, *A Sentimental Journey* and the *Sermons,* Bowden represents the “Church of England in the Time of Laurence Sterne” from a wide range of perspectives: Sterne’s clerical inheritance, and the opposing examples of his great-grandfather, the Archbishop Richard Sterne, and his less illustrious uncle Jacques; the organization of the parish church, including the practical features of Anglican worship and the role of the church and clergy within the fabric of the community; the art and practice of eighteenth-century preaching, as reflected by William Rose’s 1762 collection, *The Practical Preacher;* the activities of women in the church, particularly as parsons’ wives and midwives; anti-Catholicism; and the liturgical patterns of the Shandean world. Every one of these chapters provides useful information, discussing the practicalities of worship, the specifics of theological controversy, and the responsibilities of church office, with clarity but also depth. For those new to church history a helpful glossary is provided and little previous knowledge is assumed, but at the same time, the profusion of sources...
from which Bowden draws, and the narrow focus of her analysis within each chapter, most notably the third on preaching, ensures that there is much to interest even those more familiar with the field.

But while neither category of reader is likely to argue with the assumption at the heart of this study—that the influence of the Anglican church upon the hearts, minds, and lives of eighteenth-century citizens was not only more substantial but also more complex than has been commonly represented in scholarly accounts which, until ten or so years ago, sought to emphasize its essential torpor and worldliness—it is equally likely that both might question the apparent consistency and stability which makes such a phrase as “The Church of England in the Time of Laurence Sterne” possible. Extending as it does, further back than the birth of the author in 1713, to the lifetime of his great-grandfather, who became Archbishop Laud’s chaplain in 1633, and whose involvement in the revision of the Book of Common Prayer dates from 1661–62, Bowden is not unaware of the controversy and conflict which shaped the church both before and after the Glorious Revolution; she is, though, only periodically attentive to them and, even more importantly, to their changes over time and with regard to the political climate. Works which have depicted these debates and developments in greater detail include: John Spurr’s *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (Yale University Press, 1991), which describes the “several Anglicanisms” which prevailed during the period it treats; John Redwood’s *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (Thames and Hudson, 1976), which outlines the divisions between high and low church doctrine from the Restoration to the middle of the next century; and, most proximately with *Yorick’s Congregation*, W. M. Jacob’s twin eighteenth-century studies, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680–1840* (Oxford University Press, 2007). It may be, that like William Gibson, who recently has argued for the *Unity and Accord* (Routledge, 2001) of the Church of England from the Revolution to the Reform Act, Bowden takes a more optimistic view, but this is a matter which could usefully have been brought to the fore, not least because within the portrait she paints of Sterne himself, the matters of division and instability are crucial. In a rebuttal of the trend amongst twentieth-century critics to emphasize and celebrate the satiric and ironic layering of his “doubled” prose, she trumpets “the sincerity of his best sentiments,” demonstrating not the division but the continuity between his sermons