

A Review Article on Puritan Studies

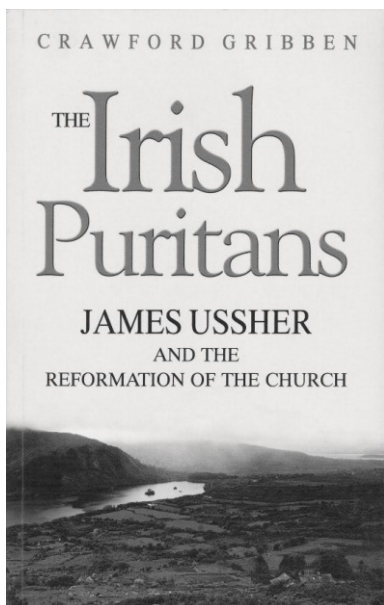
***The Irish Puritans, James Ussher, and the Reformation of the Church.* Crawford Gribben. Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2003, 160 pp., paper. ISBN 0-85234-536-4**

***John Owen the Man and His Theology.* Cd. Robert W. Oliver. Darlington, England and Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Evangelical Press and Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002, 190 pp., paper. ISBN 0-87552-674-8**

***The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience.* Geoffrey F. Nuttal. Introduction by Peter Lake. Reprint. [Original 1946] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 192 pp., paper. ISBN 0-226-60941-3**

The reprinting of Puritan texts or books is certainly a valuable enterprise, and in the last forty years we have seen several published. The three books brought together here constitute a wonderful body of literature, going beyond reprints to survey themes, men, and theologies of the Puritan period, revealing that many have been returning to the sources and are offering their assessments. I believe that is good, as it allows us to grow more astute in our assessments and to develop a deeper maturity of thought on Puritanism. We find ourselves at a new stage of Puritan studies from forty, or even twenty years ago.

The first work, *The Irish Puritans, James Ussher, and the Reformation of the Church* by Crawford Gribben, at last gives us a book in print on this most neglected Puritan, James Ussher. The great advantage here, though, is that Gribben actually places Ussher in his context within the Irish reformed church and the political backdrop. I had first encountered Ussher in the mid-1980's and was amazed to see how formidable an influence he was upon the Westminster Assembly of Divines, yet



he never attended it. Twenty years later there is at last a book to truly introduce us to Ussher and the Irish Puritans.

It is evident that Gribben, a Research Fellow in the Centre for Irish-Scottish Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, has been imbibing his subject for a long time. I was disappointed, however, that he chose to limit his “notes” and bibliography in an effort to be more popular. It made me feel that now I will have to wait for the expanded version. This does not mean the work is inferior – it is not – but it will push for more research

and writing. It is not the definitive text. The work is well illustrated – Presbyterian and Reformed and Evangelical Press has been taking advantage of recent changes in the publishing trade, which is a delight to see.

The content of Gribben’s book revolves around six chapters, beginning with “Ireland Awakening” to “Why Study James Ussher and the Irish Puritans?” He has also included the valuable “Irish Articles”, a rare document to locate. The writing style is easy to follow, frequently sprinkled with words of application. He is not afraid to speak out in the first chapter about the early Reformed attempts at evangelization by preachers and the reality that they “seemed more intent upon colluding with the official policy of the Anglicization than with witnessing to the trans-cultural reality of the gospel” (p. 21). I could draw contemporary parallels also on the “Old English” and “New English” colonists and the tensions which arose.

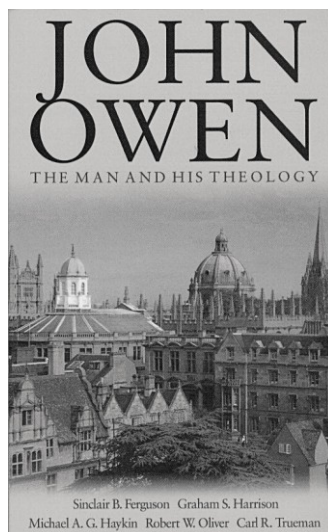
It is stirring to read of the revival in Ulster and the parallel revival in Scotland in the 1630’s. Gribben discusses well the collapse of Ussher’s Puritan church, its consensus, and the emergence of Irish Presbyterianism. His concluding chapter is

meant for contemporary Irish evangelicals, yet should not be bypassed by outsiders. It is thoughtful analysis, no doubt not relished by all, as he takes a hard hit at nationalism in all its stripes (p. 127) and admits that faithful witnesses in Ireland have still not made significant impact.

The next work, *John Owen, the Man and His Theology*, originated from the papers delivered at a symposium held on the life and teaching of John Owen at the John Owen Centre for Theological Study, (London Theological Seminary), London, England, in September, 2000. The opening paper/chapter is by the editor, Robert W. Oliver, “John Owen – His Life and Times”. This is a superb paper, one of the wonders of this book, and an excellent essay to incorporate in our course on Owen here at Haddington House.

Other chapters/papers include Carl Trueman’s “John Owen as a Theologian”, written in that even and well-reasoned manner that we have come to appreciate with this scholar. Trueman himself is the author of the book, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology*, and one sees a continuation of those themes here. Owen was a scholar, a thinker, and a polemicist.

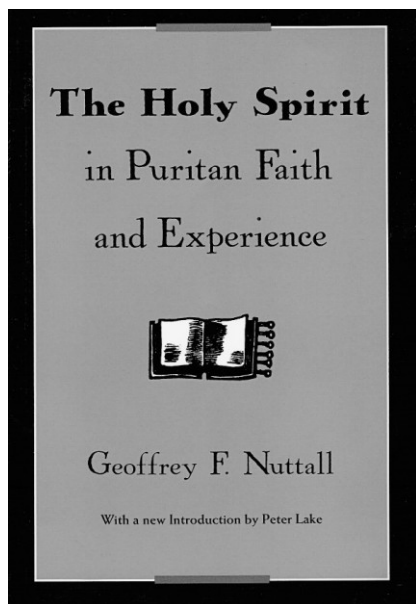
At the heart of the book are two papers by Sinclair Ferguson, who has been writing on Owen ever since his Ph.D. and his volume on Owen published with Banner of Truth. These two papers cover majestic themes in systematic theology: “John Owen and the Doctrine of the Person of Christ” and “John Owen and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.” This last paper was splendid and robust for the soul – clearly reflective of a matured life engaged with the subject.



The final two papers, one by Michael Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers” and the other by Graham Harrison, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Church”, called to mind several questions which remained unanswered. Haykin’s paper raises our awareness of the Quakers at a time when I suspect we have largely forgotten them. It is interesting and orderly, yet left me with questions unanswered on the Word and Spirit, and this not the fault of the paper, but reflective of our state of scholarship on the subject. Graham believes that Owen was not a Presbyterian ‘wolf’ masquerading in Independent sheep’s clothing (p. 186). This, of course, is a popular idea, and I will leave it with the reader as to whether Graham convinces you. I did feel there was a shallowness in giving all the nuances of Owen’s polity. It is a big subject and hard to adequately cover in one paper.

This second volume holds together well, and although a collection, it maintains unity, something not always achieved in such works. Between *John Owen, the Man and His Theology* and Ferguson’s *John Owen on the Christian Life*, we have two excellent textbooks to open the door to Owen’s *Collected Works*.

This new work is in general not overly technical but accessible to student, reading layman, and specialist. Well done.



Now we come to the third book, Geoffrey Nuttall’s *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*. A reprint of this seminal work, which first appeared in 1946, it now has a new introduction by Peter Lake in which he attempts “to set Professor Nuttall’s book in the context of the slew of literature on Puritans and Puritanism published since the volume’s first appearance in

1946” (p. ix). Lake’s seventeen-page essay is a slow go and very humbling. Why? Nuttall has been one of the intellectual giants who roamed widely in the Puritan’s annals and manuscripts, and one feels like a pygmy when reading his works. This work originated at Oxford for the Doctor of Divinity degree by thesis in the war years. He is perhaps the world’s most erudite scholar on Baxter, Doddridge, and the Congregational Puritans. Unfortunately, his works have not been as well known in North America. James Packer was able to popularize much better, and his living in Britain and Canada allowed the North American audience to learn more about his works.

Lake summarizes well the themes of this work:

The book represents an attempt to recreate, to imaginatively inhabit, and to analyze the thought world, the spiritual climate or atmosphere of radical Puritan piety and to relate that piety backward to trends and tendencies in prewar and contemporary moderate Puritanism and forward to the emergence of the Quakers. It is a model exercise in the study of change and continuity, organized around a central doctrine, that of the Holy Spirit, but using that single topos as an entry point into a much wider subject (p. xix).

Lake is correct. Nuttall has not produced a dogmatic text, but a book on experimental theology in Puritanism through collating, comparing, and interacting with Puritan writers. This can be daunting, however, because Puritanism as a movement was not static and there are tangents. Nuttall argues that there was a development from the Word and the Spirit to the Spirit and the Word and, amongst the radical, to the Spirit alone, culminating in Quakerism. Yet, he posits a centre for Puritanism – faith and experience, hence this is their unity, this is Puritan.

For any reader not familiar with the name Geoffrey Nuttall, this work will serve as a corrective. I suspect that we are never quite sure how to label Nuttall’s theology at the end of the day. Perhaps a mingling of Barthianism with extreme Puritan

mysticism is about as close as we can come. Yet, the book stands as one of those classical works on a subject that all must try to get their heads around – namely the doctrine of the Holy Spirit for the Puritans, hence the magisterial chapters: “The Spirit and the Word”, “The Discerning of Spirits”, “The Witness of the Spirit”, “The Spirit and Prayer”, “The Spirit and the Prophecy”, “The Spirit and the Ordinances”, “The Liberty of the Spirit”, “The Government of the Spirit”, “The Life and Fellowship of the Spirit”, and “The Spirit in Every Man” (which ends with Quakerism). Some will be disappointed that the Quakers are mentioned because they suppose they were unimportant in the seventeenth century piety. Yet, they were there, and history has a way of saying that the entire story must be told. Nuttall tried to do this. The book remains one of the stones to touch and stop at if we really want to dig deep into the Puritan theology of the Holy Spirit.

Born in North Wales, Nuttall’s writing and lecturing represent a phenomenal contribution to the study of Puritanism. As his research came out first in the World War II era, the reader should attempt to discern his theological presuppositions, just as with the other reprints coming out now with origins in the 1940’s, for example, Horton Davies or Lewis Bevens Schenck. We can learn from Nuttall, Davies, and Schenk, but need to understand the mindsets from which they operate. The reader will find Nuttall’s newly released *Visible Saints: the Congregational Way 1640-1660* by Quinta Press an absolute gold mine of Puritan Material.¹ His other recent release, *Studies in English Dissent*, is a must read for the study of non-conformity. Readers, practice discernment with your authors. As Robert Oliver recently wrote on Nuttall, “[he] knows the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism...he shows sympathy for evangelicals and men of the revivals, he stands back from them and endorses an ecumenism that sits lightly to the demands of subscription to firm doctrinal statements.”

¹ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The congregational Way 1640-1660*, second edition (Weston Rhyn, Shropshire: Quinta Press 2001), 190 pp. ISBN 1-897856-12-1

Ranking our three books, Gribben's *The Irish Puritans* is the most accessible for the non-specialist; next Oliver's edited collection *John Owen*; and last, Nuttall's *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, which is clearly the most demanding of these three books on Puritanism. What a rich field for Puritan studies has opened up since 1945. Here are two contemporary and one seminal work.

Reviewed by Jack C. Whytock