
**REVIEW**  Cecilia Hatt

This volume consists of three main items. The most important is a postgraduate thesis written by the newly ordained Fr Vincent Nichols in the early 1970s and until now unpublished. It is preceded by Archbishop Nichols’ 2011 introduction and followed by an Afterword by Kevin Eastell, designed “to augment the detailed study done by Vincent Nichols with more recent work that has contributed to our knowledge of Fisher and his life and times”. I emphasise the composite nature of this publication because, although its *raison d'être* is the presentation of Nichols’ thesis as a work valuable and interesting in its own right, which it is, there is no point in denying the fact that it has been published now because its young priest-author subsequently became Archbishop of Westminster. As the archbishop himself honestly remarks in his introduction, “this text is now outdated and incomplete”. At first blush this presents the reviewer with something of a puzzle as to how to proceed. However, the shape of the book establishes a metatextual character for the whole volume: quite apart from the merit of Nichols’ observations about John Fisher, his thesis also stands as a document that illuminates a part of his own biography and
illustrates the historiographical temper of its time. Nichols’ introduction places it in the context of his life, while Eastell’s Afterword proposes at least to bridge the gap between the Fisher scholarship of 1976 and that of today.

As for the thesis itself: this is a study of John Fisher’s training and development as priest, and not a biography, as Nichols’ introduction makes clear. It was not designed for a general readership, and the biographies available at that time, including those of Fr T.E. Bridgett and E.E. Reynolds, provided the more personal details that a general reader might look for. It is recognisably the work of a young priest still occupied with his own priestly formation and the writer’s attention is given to the subject of what Fisher would have learned at school, what authors he would have studied at university and who influenced him in his controversial writings. Nichols clearly felt that there was a serious lack of information available about late medieval university curricula, for he frequently bemoans the paucity of documentary sources. On this subject, J.A. Weishepl’s useful article on the 14c university curriculum in Mediaeval Studies 26 (1964) might have answered some of his questions. Admittedly, a relatively new student could not be expected to know where to look for such a thing, but for these purposes his supervisor should be at hand to supply a hint and one occasionally wonders about the role of Nichols’ supervisor. The impression received from Nichols’ work is of an almost entirely solitary effort, except at the very end of his studies. There is something touching about the young and inexperienced scholar’s excitement at finding himself in the company of old books and manuscripts: he writes of the thrill of handling material that, “in all likelihood had lain undisturbed for hundreds of years”. In fact this was a romantic, but quite erroneous, fancy, for at the time Nichols was encountering his early printed books, other researchers were also busy studying the same ones. It
was during this time that the eminent bibliographer David Rogers was working at the Bodleian, specialising in recusant literature with a particular interest in John Fisher. He would have been an ideal source of information, but, although his existence and availability was signalled in several parts of the Reynolds biography, it does not appear that the young priest was advised of it.

As he says himself, Vincent Nichols is not an academic, but the thesis was offered as an academic project and it deserves to be taken seriously as one. It has many virtues and is clearly the product of a great deal of serious study. He concentrates on John Fisher’s anti-Lutheran Latin works, submitting them to careful examination. His judgement of Fisher’s controversial technique is not entirely favourable and could even be considered rather severe. Some criticisms would still be upheld today, as for instance, Fisher’s adducing support for doctrine by invoking the evidence of miracles, which Nichols reasonably describes as “dubious material”. However, his thesis is very much of its time, and some features of Nichols’ style of argument would now seem unnuanced. The late 60s and early 70s were a time of great social and political upheaval, in European life generally, but more particularly within the Catholic Church, because of the changes brought about by Vatican II. No doubt, like his contemporaries, the newly ordained Fr Nichols was accustomed to think rather disparagingly about the past. He writes in several places, for example, about a style or an argument being “thoroughly medieval”, as if this automatically removed it from serious consideration, and he has little time for the scholastics, so much so that the term “Scotist” becomes almost synonymous with “unprofitable”. John Fisher greatly admired the subtlety of Scotus’ thinking (although he wished it could be expressed in better Latin), which, for Nichols, makes his theology regrettably old-fashioned. We are thus offered the dramatic but mistaken picture of a troubled bishop whose intellect was tugging him towards the delights of the
New Learning, but whose sense of pastoral responsibility pulled him back to the security of traditional dogma. Over and over again, Nichols suggests that in writing against Luther, Fisher somehow betrayed his humanist inclinations and that his arguments would have been much more effective if they had been more “linguistic”. This is not the case. Luther was not really a humanist at all: he cared for correct translation, but he had no interest in classical learning and his theology (and his Latin) owes nothing to it. As regards Fisher, his openness to the new humanist scholarship was entire because of its deeply religious nature, not in spite of it. John Fisher’s Hebrew was only rudimentary but his interest in the Jewish Scriptures was far more profound and respectful than Erasmus’, and, it goes without saying, than Luther’s.

With hindsight, one observes that in the minds of historians in the 60s and 70s, the “New Learning” of 15c and 16c assumed an almost symbolic character, a movement of progress and rationalism that would sweep away the accretions and superstitions of the past. It had, for not a few Catholic writers, become almost an objective correlative for the reforms of Vatican II. Looking back in more sober times, one wonders why an interest in textual criticism should have been expected to make such a difference. What was not apparent then, but is clearer now, is that the claims made for the achievements of humanistic learning were largely fuelled by the same Whiggish attitude to history that maintained that the Reformation was a movement welcomed by a populace weary of the stultifying influence of a corrupt, ignorant and idle clergy. Although Nichols knew that this latter view was flawed, and that the work of J.J. Scarisbrick had already gone a long way towards discrediting it, he was still influenced by the, mostly false, dichotomies it tended to provoke. An example of this is his judgement that Fisher does not make a clear distinction between Scripture and tradition. The modern understanding of a canon insists that one cannot have an
interpretation of any text that exists independently of the society that produces it: tradition draws on Scripture and Scripture itself is a construct of tradition. Fisher knew this from his study of the relationships between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text, and the Vulgate, the earlier Latin bibles and Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum*. But in the 1970s it would have been argued differently.

Another tendency of that time was the habit of quite rigidly separating disciplines and we see the effect of this in the different treatment Nichols accords to Fisher's Latin and English writings. First, he assumes that the English sermons, being more popular, are therefore less intellectually reliable, which can hardly be the case, considering that the 1521 Paul's Cross sermon in particular uses the same arguments as Fisher's *Assertionis Lutheranae Conflatatio* which he was composing at the same time. Secondly, and this is an area in which theological and historical studies have changed radically over the last twenty or so years, Nichols does not consider the literary qualities of the English sermons, by which is meant that he does not see what is to be inferred from Fisher's characteristic metaphors, or from the careful and deliberate structure of his sermons. In the Latin controversial works, Fisher was necessarily constrained by the structure of the book he was attacking, but this is not the case with his sermons, which he is free to arrange as he wishes, and the 1521 sermon is a perfect example of Fisher's disposition to conduct an argument in terms of structure as well as words. His four “instructions”, asserting the primacy of the Holy Spirit in the mind and actions of the Church, create an edifice within which Luther's preoccupations are disadvantaged because they appear awkward. In this way, the issues of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura* are given a minor structural significance: the real target of Fisher's attack is the Lutheran model of an invisible Church. His metaphors contribute to this attack, as the everyday world demonstrates how consistent logical events such as the growth of trees and the reflection of light
are readily visible as intimations of an ontological order of which
human communities, imperfect as they are, are an inevitable and
naturally graced part. To answer Luther by using Luther’s terms
would have been useless. Fisher, unlike Henry VIII and unlike
controversialists more learned than the king, recognised that
Luther’s theology was a matter of perception, not argument, and
Fisher’s primary purpose was, as he saw it, to save the faithful from
casting themselves adrift on a sea of private enthusiasm and religious
speculation unsupported by a communal understanding. For this
reason, Nichols’ desire to find alternative polemic techniques in the
writings of Fisher’s contemporaries strikes us today as something of
a distraction. Nichols comes to the conclusion that Fisher’s work
was still the best, but he does not entirely explain why.
Notwithstanding, the work of the other polemicists is interesting in
itself, and Nichols’ separate study of Edward Powel is fascinating.
This is an area in which little work has yet been done and it deserves
more attention, which this book may provoke.

There is one other detail that calls for comment. Nichols
claims that there was no tradition of a lay spirituality in Fisher’s
time and this is simply incorrect, as modern scholarship attests. The
non-literary material in Eamon Duffy’s *Voices of Morebath* also puts
paid to this idea. A huge number of devotional texts was produced
for lay use during 14c and developed in the following century. One
thinks of the *Somme le Roi* translations and the different versions that
grew out of them, Nicholas Love’s pseudo-Bonaventuran *Mirror of the
Life of Christ*, the Books of Hours, the works of Thomas à Kempis, the
many versions of Deguileville’s *Pilgrimage of the Life of Manhood*, the
hugely popular writings of Richard Whitford and so on. Very many
of these texts have been edited only in the last twenty or so years
and were not readily available in 1976, but it was possible to have
found out about their existence: this was a hasty and unfortunate
charge, rising, one suspects, less from research than from the
unexamined assumption of a young priest convinced that the legacy of the Middle Ages was something to discard rather than to appreciate. In recent years we have benefited from the unparalleled profusion of medieval texts that the Internet affords – a new Renaissance more democratic than the old –, and greater familiarity with the scholastics and their contemporaries has given us much more respect for them.

The experience of reading Vincent Nichols’ thesis has been a rewarding and interesting one. It is a great pity that it was not circulated at the time it was written, because it would have provided a valuable pendant to E.E. Reynolds’ genial and popular life, *Saint John Fisher*, which was published in a revised edition in 1972. In his preface to that edition Reynolds pays tribute to the more academic work of the Jesuit Edward Surtz, *The Works and Days of John Fisher* (Harvard University Press, 1967). This is just, but the idiosyncratic arrangement of Surtz’ book makes it inhospitable to a non-academic reading, and Nichols’ much more accessible study would have offered a clearer way forward for both the devotionally motivated reader and the student looking for a fruitful area of research.

We now turn to Kevin Eastell’s Afterword. If Vincent Nichols’ thesis is not to appear simply as a clerical curiosity it needs to be located clearly in the context of a continuing process of research and enquiry. The important requirement for the reader, whether familiar with John Fisher’s story or not, is a reliable bibliography. Nichols’ own, reprinted in the book, is very select, including only primary sources, and it should first of all have been augmented with the secondary material he had known (there is for example, no proper citation for the Reynolds biography, which is misleadingly jumbled up with Roper’s and Harpsfield’s *Lives of More*). It would have been appropriate to remedy the lack, lamented by Nichols, of books on late medieval education; a direction to the
magisterial work of Nicholas Orme on schools, and Catto’s *History of the University of Oxford* would be helpful here. But Eastell offers no pretence at a bibliography, select or otherwise, only an essay of generalising that seems to have strayed in from a different book. The most useful and relevant part of this Afterword is the footnotes and they are scarcely adequate. The most important subject, of course, is John Fisher himself. Eastell mentions Brendan Bradshaw’s *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation* (CUP 1989) and Richard Rex’s *The Theology of John Fisher* (CUP 1991), but that is the extent of his acquaintance with Fisher scholarship. Instead he writes at some length on material that is frequently out of date and not noticeably pertinent to John Fisher. On humanism, Fr Eastell could have drawn on a huge number of publications, and on the humanism of Fisher in particular, Maria Dowling’s work would have been an obvious choice, but instead he gives us thoughts from a coffee-table book of the late 1960s and a bewilderingly irrelevant excursus on paintings by Raphael and Michelangelo. In the absence of any knowledge of Fisher’s controversial technique, he attempts to illustrate it by extrapolating from More’s, describing a letter written by More to Johann Bugenhagen. A footnote remarks that More’s biographer, Richard Marius, also admires this letter, but does not, fortunately for Marius’ reputation, suggest that he also thought that a letter written by More might serve as an example of Fisher’s style.

Perhaps it was unreasonable to expect Eastell to know about the modern reprints of Fisher’s writings (and the 2009 paperback reprint of Bradshaw’s useful collection), the regular seminars and conferences on early modern sermon studies, which frequently feature papers on Fisher’s preaching and the book that arose from these, the new *Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* which includes a discussion of the bishop’s preaching. But, in an essay which claims to be bringing us up to date with “recent work that has contributed to our knowledge of Fisher”, what is one to make of
Eastell’s confident, but quite untrue, assertion that although recent historical studies have shown a lot of interest in Henry VIII and the Reformation, Fisher “receives passing mention, but really no in-depth treatment”?

Setting aside his ignorance of my own critical edition of John Fisher’s English writings, published by Oxford University Press in 2002, and including a reasonably in-depth introduction and commentary, anyone who cares about the study of John Fisher will be surprised and saddened by Eastell’s failure to make any recognition of Maria Dowling’s patient and meticulous scholarship, which during the 1980s and 90s produced many books and articles about Renaissance humanism, the Divorce and Fisher’s career, culminating in her austere and erudite *Fisher of Men* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999). This biography superseded Bridgett’s as a source of reference and dealt fairly with the events and controversies of John Fisher’s life in a quiet and dispassionate tone that contrasted refreshingly with what might be called the Indignant school of Fisher biography. Maria, who died in 2011, was generous with her research and prompt to acknowledge the work of others. We are in her debt, and no review of Fisher scholarship can be complete without an account of her contribution to it.

Many, perhaps most, of the people who buy *St John Fisher, Bishop and Theologian in Reformation and Controversy* will do so because of its author rather than its subject. Its strange character as an essay frozen in time puts it in danger of being regarded simply as an oddity, or worse, a vanity publication. Vincent Nichols’ thesis is better than that. All of his effort is directed towards an account of the making of Fisher the priest, and in so doing he offers some interesting reflections on Fisher’s work and introduces new and valuable material for consideration. It is an honest piece of writing, the result of hard work and a genuine admiration for Bishop Fisher. The Archbishop’s introduction is eloquent of his wish that the life
and works of St John Fisher should be better and more widely known. Unfortunately, the reader will leave this book believing that nothing has been written about Fisher for the last twenty years. In the interests of encouraging a wider appreciation of this impressive English bishop, we would suggest that a re-issue of the thesis should contain a thoroughly researched bibliography that would do justice to it and to its subject.

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