



**Dr Tim Hancock Review of John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion. By Andrew Hadfield. London: Reaktion. 2021. 248pp. £16.95. ISBN 978-1-78914-393-5**

Hancock, T. (2022). Dr Tim Hancock Review of John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion. By Andrew Hadfield. London: Reaktion. 2021. 248pp. £16.95. ISBN 978-1-78914-393-5. *Modern Language Review*, 117(4), 702-704.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**  
Modern Language Review

**Publication Status:**  
Published (in print/issue): 01/10/2022

**Document Version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**General rights**

The copyright and moral rights to the output are retained by the output author(s), unless otherwise stated by the document licence.

Unless otherwise stated, users are permitted to download a copy of the output for personal study or non-commercial research and are permitted to freely distribute the URL of the output. They are not permitted to alter, reproduce, distribute or make any commercial use of the output without obtaining the permission of the author(s).

If the document is licenced under Creative Commons, the rights of users of the documents can be found at <https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/licenses/>.

**Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk)

Offprinted from  
MODERN LANGUAGE REVIEW

VOLUME 117, PART 4

OCTOBER 2022

Together, these six authors all have seriousness and stature. The same goes for others mentioned in passing, such as Augustine Baker the Welshman or George Fox the Quaker. A further presence is the Book of Common Prayer: a document with divisive spiritual and political implications, not (as often thought now) a mere repository of stately prose.

Behind the above is revolution and civil war. *Gifts and Graces* is not about some remote and dusty past, but perennial questions, often those of a Saint Augustine or Pascal or Newman or T. S. Eliot. Hardly a page lacks insights, of which the following is a mere selection. Dissenters hostile to set forms of worship saw the Book of Common Prayer as 'a vestige of a past Catholic tradition or a present instrument of government coercion' (p. 4). George Herbert 'affirms the prayers and sacraments of the official Church in richly didactic meditative poems' (p. 36). Jeremy Taylor is quoted as having 'a poet's mentality' (p. 50). Claims of Independents in 1645 that Cranmer would approve abolition of the Book of Common Prayer prompt the remark, 'Making the dead speak is going to some lengths' (p. 57). We hear how 'The ecclesiastical calendar of early modern England was a site of conflict' (p. 123). In dramatic accounts of John Bunyan on trial, we are reminded that, tinker or not, he 'had far more knowledge of the Bible than his judges imagined' (p. 130). It yet brought him inner turmoil, wherein zeal was 'a sacred flame' endangered by blasphemy, 'a vicious flood' (p. 139). A further dynamic comes from present-day controversy. 'Secularism demands tolerance to religions so long as they break no civil laws' was John Locke's submission of 1689; yet 'that tolerance is contradicted when the state regulates religion', following what a Muslim critic terms a secular 'claim to a monopoly on reason' (p. 164).

Plenty for reflection, then, in this moderate and yet eloquent book, which is also quietly Canadian in reference to that country's philosophers or constitution (as also those of the USA). On one level we encounter ancient struggles for justice or power, and reasons (specious or compelling) used to back them up. Of deeper interest are an Anglicanism taken in earnest, as also poetry and prayer (often the same thing, as with George Herbert). David Gay is hence among those few scholars who help us to 'think the thoughts of the past', to enter the lives and emotions of people long dead. In short, a golden volume. It should be recommended, bought, studied. Its issues of freedom and order, of authority and tradition, are as timely as ever. It would be a poor reader who went through *Gifts and Graces* and was not greatly rewarded.

UNIVERSITY OF NAVARRE, PAMPLONA

ANDREW BREEZE

*John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion.* By ANDREW HADFIELD. London: Reaktion. 2021. 248 pp. £16.95. ISBN 978-1-78914-393-5.

Andrew Hadfield identifies his sympathetic portrayal of John Donne as part of a contemporary reassessment of the English poet's work that looks beyond the *Songs and Sonnets* in order to achieve 'a more balanced approach to his writing

and literary career' (p. 9). Seeking to give an impression of 'how capacious and interconnected his imagination was', Hadfield samples writing from a range of genres in which Donne worked: 'erotic lyrics, the divine poems, the controversial religious works, the satires, the verse letters, the long experimental poems, the devotions, the sermons, the proverbs, the epitaphs, the letters' (p. 10). These are discussed primarily within the contexts of Donne's times (especially the religious and socio-political climate) and his reading (debts to Roman authors such as Ovid and Juvenal, and differences from London contemporaries such as Michael Drayton and Ben Jonson). Chapters are devoted to Donne's speculation on the nature of the soul, religion, sexuality, marriage, learning, and friendship. In each case the writer is depicted as a sophisticated but pragmatic sponsor of peaceful coexistence, more thoughtful diplomat than unstable egotist, a characterization closer to R. C. Bald's portrayal in *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) than John Carey's in *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981). The polemical *Pseudo-Martyr*, for example, is interpreted as an attempt to moderate between competing affiliations to Church and state, outlining as it does 'an intellectual framework for supporting the established Church whatever the inclination or exact belief of the individual' (p. 53). Donne's diplomacy takes on a different register in his 'chatty and intimate' (p. 181) letters to Sir Henry Goodere, which are discussed in the context of the 'Renaissance ideal of friendship' as 'a relationship between equals where free and unrestrained conversation could take place' (p. 178), a model of human interaction that counterbalanced the elaborate hierarchical deference characteristic of the times. Acknowledging that some poems ('Twickenham Garden', 'Song', 'Woman's Constancy') appear to exclude women from this kind of mutually respectful camaraderie, Hadfield attempts to distinguish 'the fickle and myopic speaker' (p. 160) of such apparently misogynistic works from their author, suggesting that Donne is here bent on 'exposing ridiculous male attitudes to women' (p. 85) and that his concern with constancy might also be seen as reflecting 'the paranoia of the times, in which nobody told the truth because everybody had a motive to lie and be deceitful' (p. 161). The ridiculous male speaker of 'The Flea' is evidently a product of these times, although Hadfield's interpretation of this as 'a witty marriage poem' (p. 119), rather than one of premarital sexual badinage, seems more ingenious than persuasive (notably when he speculates that the 'three sins in killing three' indicated at the end of the second stanza 'could be taken to refer to [Ann's] pregnancy' (p. 121), rather than the manifest trinity of male, female, and insect).

If it necessarily curtails depth of enquiry, the broad scope of this book certainly leads to a sense that we are getting an impression of John Donne—a multifaceted individual if ever there was one—in three dimensions. It also allows for the salutary resurrection of some less familiar passages, such as this from a 1598 verse letter to Sir Henry Wotton:

Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls,  
For, thus friends absent speak. This ease controls

The tediousness of my life: but for these  
 I could ideate<sup>a</sup> nothing which could please,  
 But I should wither in one day, and pass  
 To a bottle<sup>b</sup> of hay, that am a lock<sup>c</sup> of grass.      <sup>a</sup> imagine      <sup>b</sup> bundle      <sup>c</sup> tuft  
 (pp. 193–94)

For all his speculation on the nature of the soul, Donne was a man of the world ‘who placed great value on his connections to other people’ (p. 175). Hadfield may give short shrift to John Stubbs’s *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* (London: Viking, 2006) in his appended bibliographical essay (pp. 233–38 (p. 235)), but here is something on which both authors would surely agree.

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

TIM HANCOCK

*Romanticism and the Letter*. Ed. by MADELEINE CALLAGHAN and ANTHONY HOWE. (Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print) Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020. xv+277 pp. £54.99. ISBN 978–3–030–29309–3.

‘The true art of letter-writing’, wrote Jane Austen, ‘is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth’—or so ‘we are always told’. The counter-truth is that the written hand of a letter might profitably unclasp itself from its author’s spoken conversation in want of an autonomous eloquence. Both principles are handsomely acknowledged in the course of this volume’s rich and persuasive demonstration that letters ‘at their finest stand as aesthetic achievements in their own right’ and are ‘a vitally significant mode of thought and feeling in the Romantic age’ (p. 9).

The collection boasts a train of essays which show how to enjoy the Romantic period’s varied epistolary voices. Oliver Clarkson finds in the relative ‘disappointment’ of Wordsworth’s letters a wisdom about disappointment; Gregory Leadbetter illuminates the flair with which Coleridge’s epistolary prose ‘kindles the life of ideas in both its reader and its writer’ (p. 85); in a piece ‘crammed’ (p. 122) like the writings it admires with entertaining illustration, Timothy Webb shows Lamb’s letters to have incubated a distinctively urban sensibility, which would later find a home in the Victorian novel; there is an essay by the late Michael O’Neill, alive with unparalleled responsiveness to the fluctuations of hope and despair in Shelley’s letters from Italy.

Efforts to discover a ‘poetics’ of the letter constitute some of the collection’s most intellectually adventurous pieces (it is a relief to find the word anchored in its proper sense and not bandied about as a high-flown label for ‘writing about such-and-such’). Andrew Bennett explores the performance of intimacy as a generic hallmark; Susan Wolfson chases an ‘epistolary poetics’ through the ‘illusion of real-time communication’ (p. 61) shaping William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s apostrophes in verse and prose; Stephen C. Behrendt’s contribution will satisfy readers with an appetite for network theory. For all this, one of the pleasures of