

BOOKS

Images and idols: a smashing time

Nicholas Cranfield reads a scholarly record of a trail of destruction

Trevor Cooper, editor

THE JOURNAL OF WILLIAM
DOWSING: Iconoclasm in
East Anglia during the
English Civil War

Ecclesiological Society / Boydell &
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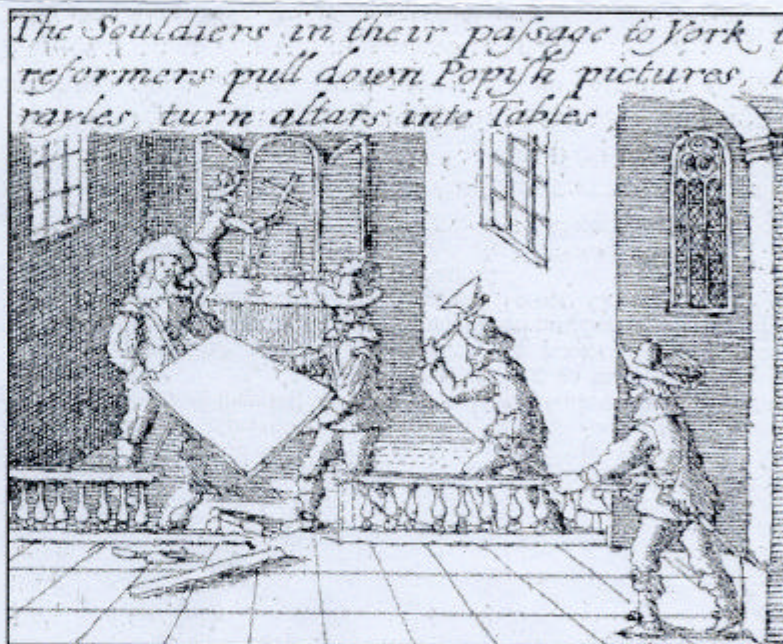
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"ON SOLEMNE DAYES a pot of incense is set upon the steps of the altar, and as the smoke ascends the organs and voices in the chappell are raised." The 1641 Parliamentary Visitors were scandalised by what they found in the chapel at Peterhouse, where sometimes even "the furniture is changed, and the dresse altered". Appropriately enough, this book was launched there with a choral evensong that would have led to calls for further reformation.

In part, the 1641 report illustrates Cambridge religion and the "Beauty of Holiness" debate of the 1630s and 1640s. It also prompted Parliament to act, and in 1643 William Dowsing (1596-1668) was appointed to destroy and deface "all Crucifixes, Crosses & all Images" in churches across his native Suffolk and Cambridgeshire.

No other commissions were, it seems, granted in the area controlled by the Eastern Association. Dowsing's charter for iconoclasm remains unique in the annals of Parliament and of the dear old C of E.

With bureaucratic precision, Dowsing kept a journal of his destructive path. He recorded visiting some 100 churches in South Cambridgeshire, and 150 in Suffolk. The journal has been printed variously before, but Cooper's magisterial edition brings both parts together in one publication, and offers a detailed commentary of the churches visited,



Turning altars into tables: the breaking down of chancel furniture in the early 1640s; an image first published in 1642. From the book reviewed

and a selection of essays that build up a comprehensive picture of official iconoclasm.

Tirelessly, Dowsing visited parish churches, estate chapels and the colleges of Cambridge. At Wrentham, "12 superstitious pictures; one of Saint Catherine and her wheel" were broken up. At Little St Mary's in Cambridge, "we broke down 60 superstitious pictures, some popes and crucifixes"; while at Haverhill "about a hundred superstitious pictures; and 7 fryers hugging a nun" were removed.

At Clare in Suffolk, as many as a thousand offending images were destroyed, the same number as was found at King's Chapel, where, surprisingly, Dowsing left the great east window untouched.

This lavishly illustrated volume includes a range of scholarly essays. They set Dowsing at the heart of the Puritan movement of Parliamentary voices (Professor John Morrill); with his discreet Protestant library (John Blatchley); and with his penchant for orderliness and detail (Robert Walker).

It will prove an inexhaustible source book for those visiting East Anglia, and will ensure that the history of East Anglia in the 1630s and 1640s will be accurately rewritten. It is an important book, of which the Ecclesiological Society should feel justifiably proud, and for which Trevor Cooper is to be thanked.

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