

Ann Hughes. *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 482. \$108.27 (cloth).

This is a big book about an even bigger book. Thomas Edwards's *Gangraena* has featured in many works on the English Revolution, but this is the first full-length study devoted to the book in all its facets. As such it is very welcome. *Gangraena* is often cited in one or both of two closely related ways: as an expression of Presbyterian fears during the mid and late 1640s; and as a source for stories that illustrate Independent and sectarian excesses in this period – soldiers urinating into fountains, or baptising cats and horses, for example. The great merit of Ann Hughes's book is that it locates *Gangraena* within a rich variety of different contexts, and approaches it from a wide range of perspectives. Hughes draws on important recent developments in the history of the book and the press, the nature of popular religion, and the reception of reading material. She looks at both Edwards and his readers, at how his book came to be written and published, at the sources that it drew on, at the impact that it had at the time, and at how it has been perceived since. In other words, she offers a kind of 'histoire totale' of one particular, highly significant, book. It is a fascinating and fruitful exercise.

Such a multi-dimensional approach enables Hughes to explore the extraordinarily complex and interesting question of how far Edwards's accounts had a basis in any recoverable historical reality. Here Hughes's conclusions are admirably balanced and judicious. The main problem is that while some of the stories in *Gangraena* can be traced to other sources, many of them cannot. It seems that '*Gangraena* is not fantasy or invention, or at least some of it is not, for ... Edwards is frequently so vague or general that his stories cannot be checked' (p. 192). Hughes

argues that ‘where Edwards’s stories can be checked they clearly refer to recognizable events, people, and places’: she remains ‘convinced that he made nothing up’, but acknowledges that ‘so much cannot be checked that this must remain a provisional and contestable judgement’ (pp. 434-5). This is probably about as far as we can go, and Hughes deserves great credit for the depth of scholarship with which she has reconstructed the links between *Gangraena* and material recorded in other primary sources.

Hughes has much of interest to say about Presbyterianism in the 1640s, and about Edwards’s relationship with it. She shows how Edwards shaped the mobilisation of Presbyterianism, and was in turn influenced by it. In particular, she makes the very important point that there is a danger of seeing Presbyterians as more ‘conservative’ than Independents or sectaries, and she argues convincingly that the radicalism of Presbyterianism should not be underestimated: ‘The Presbyterian vision involved radical moral and cultural change through the participatory parish-focused discipline of a restructured church; it is the post-Enlightenment association of radicalism with individual liberation that has obscured this point’ (p. 350). Though often conventionally identified as a staunch Presbyterian, Edwards emerges here more as an anti-Independent than as a positive advocate of Presbyterian reforms. His polemical aggression played an important part in generating a spiral of growing hostility between different religious ‘sides’, and in encouraging the hardening of religious divisions. Yet this does not necessarily make him a representative figure. Although it seems that Edwards’s ‘priorities and obsessions were widely shared’, he remained ‘a singular, perhaps “extreme” figure’ (p. 495), and while he drew on fears that many others felt, his troubled and quirky personality ensured that he was to some extent typical of nobody but himself.

If *Gangraena* was a book of its time – a response to a specific web of religious and political developments – it was also very much a book of its place, and that place was southern and eastern England in general, and London in particular. *Gangraena* ‘was, and could only have been, a Londoner’s book’ (p. 130). Edwards had many contacts in the city, ranging from ministers and booksellers to members of the Common Council and of Parliament. At least ‘forty per cent of the specific stories in *Gangraena* concern London’ (p. 169), and the book brings the world of the capital during the 1640s vividly to life, recounting numerous episodes and conversations in colourful detail. London stood alone in *Gangraena* in being ‘fully realised as a place’ (p. 210). In comparison to his ‘overarching concern with London’ (p. 187), Edwards’s coverage of the rest of the country was decidedly patchy, with Kent, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk featuring more prominently than other counties. Edwards developed a wide range of contacts in these areas who were willing to provide him with information about ‘errors, heresies and blasphemies’ that he was able to deploy in *Gangraena*. This method of accumulation of stories perhaps helps to explain the book’s disorderliness, and its failure to discriminate between different strands of religious radicalism with any degree of precision.

All in all, Hughes has written a very fine book, characterised by a remarkable depth of research and a highly intelligent and imaginative use of a complex body of primary sources. The argument is presented crisply and elegantly, and sheds more light on the world of Thomas Edwards and *Gangraena* than one might have thought possible. It is a very mature and accomplished piece of scholarship, and its approach is one that might fruitfully be applied to other key texts of the period.

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