Editorial: The problem with book reviewing

Due to unforeseen circumstances, as the airlines/train companies say, we are running this issue with very few books reviews, in the sure and certain expectation of a plenitude in the next (spring 2025) issue.

But in the meantime, our shortfall has caused me to think about book reviewing.

In the case of just about every journal that includes book reviews it has to be said that the selection of books that get reviewed is often not made with the most rigorous of methods. Keen publishers send advance copies without solicitation, impoverished graduate students need and demand a particular niche and expensive book, the books of a friend or friend of a friend oblige a timely favour (I'll review yours if you review mine), then there is a chance meeting with a publisher at a bookstall. It's all rather random. Moreover, publishing houses are businesses. They are often (if they are in any sense successful) ruthless in knowing their core clientele and how not to alienate those, but expand its reach by wooing the non-aligned, those whose place of belonging is not settled. People who work for publishing houses are human beings, usually of a friendly disposition, which helps in commissioning and selling books and putting up with the egos of authors, and when those people are Christians, they can bring an integrity even a saintliness in befriending authors and readers alike, asking: what do you really need from me? This is often done against the grain of the institutional pressure, to be charming, efficient, and make a good profit, sometimes 'in the name of the Lord'.

Fairly early on as a university-employed academic I was told that book reviews were worthless as publications, for they did not get counted as 'research' by our employers, and that really they justified less than an hour of time to write. If one takes into account a saving of £90 by getting the book for nothing, then perhaps two hours is justified. As Tony Thiselton once said to me, the good news about academic theology books is that they do not have to be read cover to cover. Yet the danger of missing the point by reading too speedily is real. How many books have we read slowly, deliberately and meditatively in any case? It would be genuinely interesting to know. Slow reading, *lectio divina* and all that is commendable, but really deliberate *lectio divina* is usually reserved for classics that come highly recommended through generations of edifying readers, not for works which clamour to be reviewed within the first two to three years of appearing. Further, it is often authors who attract reviews because of their reputation and their latest offering is often given the benefit of the doubt. Are we reviewing this book or the last but one book before that

by this author on which he or she rightly forged a reputation, even when, however, this book is just not as good? Furthermore, the dangers of missing things, even getting the wrong end of the stick, are real enough. Quite often live book reviews at conferences by a panel of 4 or 5 people of a particularly significant-looking book can promise more than they deliver, because one plays safer with the author and friends at the same table or looking beseechingly as the reviewer speaks, or because reviewers are picked to come at it from a variety of angles, and find completely different things to discuss in it, some of which seem rather incidental to the main messages of the book in question.

How do reviews themselves proceed? There are two risks: first, one simply spells out the contents, chapter by chapter. Many publishers now do this anyway in profiling books online. Chapter-precis by chapter-precis is useful if the book for review is in a language other than that of most of the readers. But otherwise, as postgraduate students are told, keep that to a 50% maximum, and the rest should engage the reader with thoughts about the point of the book, its message for us, comparison with other relevant books. Second, the review becomes a vehicle for point-scoring, score-settling, or is lop-sided. This other extreme is where a review gets overly critical, and seems to serve too much the reviewers' opinions. This is what one might call the *London Review of Books* approach, where the reviewer writes an article on a topic and reviews two or three books recently published on that topic along the way (fodder to his cannon, grist to her mill), but that approach is exceptional and mostly to be resisted. There should be some amount of judgement and opinion-sharing beyond 'yes' or 'no', but this should not dominate a review. One should try to say what the book does offer more than what it does not. 'What I would have said had I written this book?' is not a good approach. We need to take the book on its own terms, to try not to think of 'which stable does this come?' and to appreciate it according to its own merits.

Now, not to prejudge does not mean to refrain from contextualising. For it can be illuminating of the book to illustrate how this book came out of a certain project, or is the follow-up to something, or belongs to a series, or is a response to the recent book by X. It is arguable that the Reformed churches and their theologians do a better than average job in theology being Church-facing while of a good academic standard, which perhaps says something about the educational level of the Reformed demographic. Yet there is always the worry of existing in silos, only being interested in the hot topics of controversy (children and the Lord's Supper/the nature of Scriptural authority/justification, or whatever.)

In this day and age of podcasts, 'vlogs' and substacks (all ugly words, incidentally) are books valid currency in any case? For academic employ-

ers, research articles are more valuable per page (roughly two articles = one book). Neither books nor much less their reviews are as valued as they might be. Even government research funders (it would appear) care more about the gist and the impact of a book than about the detail and the finer points of the argument.

Some amount of intelligent 'corrections' or perhaps simply 'questions' are to be encouraged. We get as sick of blandly positive endorsements as we do of dismissive put-downs, for these are but two sides of the one coin. It is too easy for publishers to send books they think we will like; they are probably right, but then a journal becomes an echo chamber. 'This book will be of interest' is not the same as 'those who like this, will also like that'. A book we don't agree with can be a book we can learn from.

But there is no substitute for creative scholarship based on careful research leading to arguments and points that can help the church to think better about a range of topics they might not otherwise consider. Other things will be learned depending on one's starting-place, but I can say that one will learn about the relationship of creation and redemption from the figure of Duncan Maclean as related by Donald Meek, in an expanded version of a section of his plenary talk to the 'Outlanders for the Faith' Church History Conference at Highland Theological College in April 2024. Or about the logic of the purpose of defending the faith with arms, at least given the way early modern Scots thought about war and just causes—in the essay by Alasdair Macleod. The view of Christ's Atonement as one of satisfaction and vicarious repentance and how a theological controversy was handled in the Kirk of the 1830s is outlined by Nick Needham. Then there is a most helpful overview of how the life of an eminent professional natural scientist, who was also no mean theologian, had his life and work informed by the theme and actual events of 'revival': this presented by Bruce Ritchie. All four papers were trialled at that very enjoyable Church History Conference at Highland Theological College. The final essay is by a Korean student working at Vancouver School of Theology. After a summary of the thought of Jürgen Moltmann (1926-2024), the story of his direct influence on the Pentecostal Church in South Korea is told, and implications are drawn, leading to a fuller, while not wholly uncritical appreciation of Moltmann's efforts to balance traditional systematic theology with biblical and experiential features.

As I said at the top, this issue is a bit short of book reviews. But the ones we have are fairly substantial. The editor will seek to evade all responsibility if the review penned by himself fails to live up to what he outlined above in this editorial….

Mark W. Elliott. All Hallows' Eve, 2024.