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Subscribing to Faith? The Anglican Parish Magazine 1859-1929 [Book Review]

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Jane Platt, *Subscribing to Faith? The Anglican Parish Magazine 1859-1929*. Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. £60 hardcover.

If you live in the UK you have probably picked up a Church of England parish magazine - and quickly put it down again. Like someone else's local newspaper, their focus on small parochial matters is meaningless unless it's your parish. That's the outer pages; the inner pages are usually less local, covering the diocese (region controlled by a bishop) or national matters, also worthy but dull.

Yet, as Jane Platt explains, the parish magazine quickly became the leading genre of religious periodical within a few years of its invention by a Derby vicar, John Erskine Clarke, in 1859. By the early twentieth century, there were around 20 nationally published 'insets', sold to individual parishes who then added local pages – the most popular insets sold 700,000 copies of each issue, rivalling the sales of secular magazines.

The parish magazine was an ingenious combination of genres and techniques, a mixture of the religious tract, the fiction and homely advice of the new mid-century family magazines such as the *Family Herald* and *Leisure Hour*, and the intensely local detail of the provincial weekly paper. Erskine Clarke found a publishing system perfectly suited to the dual nature of the Anglican church, a national organisation made from thousands of individual local parishes. He took the method of 'partly printed sheets' used by some publishers to assist small local newspaper operations, whose common national content could be supplemented by local editorial and advertising.

Platt suggests that this significant periodical genre, which survives today, has received little scholarly attention because its hybrid nature has been underestimated, the national insets have been dismissed as derivative, and their huge popularity goes against the accepted narrative of secularisation. Yet this fascinating, well-written book, based on a PhD, makes a convincing case for their significance, revealing Church anxieties and theological factions, perceptions of implied readers, and understandings of the periodical as a form.

Platt's argument is that the parish magazine as a media form enabled a multiplicity of conflicting voices to share the same pages, although its success in the highly competitive market of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century periodicals meant that the voice of God was often drowned out by Mammon, particularly in the form of modernist fiction and illustrated adverts for ladies' underwear. This view is supported by many examples and a huge amount of content analysis, used sparingly but effectively. Platt studied the magazines of 359 parishes, sampled from the dioceses of Carlisle, Oxford and part of London. She acknowledges this is only 'a small fraction' (3) of the number published in these three dioceses alone (an overall estimate of the total number would have been helpful). The study starts in 1859 with the launch of the first national parish magazine inset, and stops in 1929, at the end of the Prayer Book controversy. The parish magazines are contextualised with an impressive range of other sources, including publishers' archives, diaries, memoirs and private papers, and a wide-ranging secondary literature, the latter successfully relating the parish magazine to the wider ecology of periodicals, secular and religious. The blend of quantitative analysis and literary close reading, all set within the bigger picture of publishing, theology and denominational politics, is well executed.

Chapters cover the parish magazine's origins; Erskine Clarke and the first national inset; the scale and economics of this publishing model; the personnel involved in editing and writing the insets (often vicars, but also professional writers) and how the major titles differed according to church politics and theology; a particularly original study of what the content reveals about masculinity and the Church; the female authors of the short stories and serialised novels; the readers (perhaps the least successful chapter, focused mainly on implied readers, with limited evidence of who really read them); Church anxieties revealed by the poetry and fiction; how the Church dealt with scientific modernity and the Great War, and a final chapter taking the story from the end of the First World War into the twenty-first century.

Platt perhaps under-sells the significance of her study. The parish magazine publishing structure is relevant to debates on national and local media, on the media of pressure groups and membership organisations, the mobility of genres (of form and of content) and on the concept of gatekeeping, which is traditionally seen as a largely editorial function. In this model, gatekeeping was also done by the vicars who chose their insets, usually on theological grounds, occasionally on price. The readers got what they were given (or sold) in tiny local monopoly markets.

The parish magazine's lack of originality is what makes it such a valuable object of study. Its 'dull pastiche' (5) reveals so much about what Victorians thought of national and local identities, periodicals, genres, the activity of authorship, working-class reading and media influence. Platt addresses big issues by asking the right questions of a seemingly insignificant media form.

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