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Lamont's "Last Witnesses: The Muggletonian History" - Book Review

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LAMONT, William, *Last Witnesses: The Muggletonian History, 1652–1979* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. xv + 267. ISBN 0-7546-5532-6, Hardback, \$99.95, £55.

The Muggletonians were one of the many sects and religious groups who became established in the 1650s, at approximately the same time as Quakers. Unlike Quakers, they were not interested in converting others to their faith. As William Lamont argues, ‘it is not surprising therefore that, while the Quakers flourished, the Muggletonians grew ever smaller in number’ (p. xi). What may be more surprising is the fact that they survived, albeit as an increasingly small group, until Philip Noakes, generally believed to have been the last surviving Muggletonian, died in 1979.

While most scholars of the English Revolution have heard of the Muggletonians, few have detailed knowledge of their theology and history. Those that do are likely to be familiar only with their manifestation in the seventeenth century. Christopher Hill, Barry Reay and William Lamont’s *The World of the Muggletonians* (1983) provided information on that early period and T.L. Underwood’s 1999 anthology of early Muggletonian writings¹ allowed readers a glimpse into their unique mind-set, but until now, little if any work has been done on their story post-1700. Lamont has done scholars of religious history a considerable service by telling the entire Muggletonian story from their origins in February 1652 to their final end in 1979.

Scholars with a particular interest in Quakerism will find the richest material in the earlier chapters of this book. Direct interactions between Quakers and

1. Hill, C., Reay, B., and Lamont, W., *The World of the Muggletonians* (London: Temple Smith, 1983); Underwood, T.L. (ed.), *The Acts of the Witnesses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Muggletonians seem to have ended by the 1680s (before then there was open hostility between the two groups and a host of fiercely fought pamphlet wars). More broadly, however, there is much to interest them in Lamont's later chapters as well, particularly in relation to his discussion of church organisation and the relationship between the sect and its changing context.

The book is based on sound and detailed archival research and one of its virtues is the way in which Lamont makes the research process transparent. It is clearly and entertainingly written, and shows real passion about the topic. I must, however, sound a note of caution. At times, Lamont identifies so closely with his subjects that he presents Muggletonian opinions as though they were his own. This is certainly true of some of his discussion of seventeenth-century Quakers; at intervals his objectivity seems to slip and Muggletonian accounts of Quakers and Quaker theology are presented as fact, without clear acknowledgement that at those points in the narrative we are seeing through Muggletonian eyes.

As a reader and a historian of Quakerism, I found this disorienting and somewhat disturbing—although it also forced me to look at some of my own material and assumptions anew. It is a weakness in an otherwise informative and engaging book and one that suggests that readers should be particularly careful to distinguish Lamont's own views from those of his subjects, particularly where other religious groups are concerned.

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