

Haskin, Dayton. *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. xxv, 315 pp. \$135.

Dayton Haskin traces the origin of his book *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* back to a public reading at which a fellow audience member voiced surprise that Donne had been a preacher. Haskin's involvement with the variorum edition of Donne's poetry had revealed that for long stretches of time, readers focused almost exclusively on his sermons and letters instead of his poetry. This moment of irony crystallized for Haskin one component of his book's thesis: that during the first half of the nineteenth century, study of John Donne meant reading the biography of a somewhat star-crossed, Elizabethan public figure; whereas, by the later half of the nineteenth century, study of Donne meant interpreting that man's various writings. It is a similar reception to that of Samuel Pepys, with the difference being we still read Pepys' diary as a historical document rather than as a masterpiece of autobiography.

The second component of Haskin's thesis contends that we today mistakenly believe T. S. Eliot "discovered" Donne's poetry for twentieth century readers. According to Haskin, Eliot's contribution to Donne studies was far more evolutionary than revolutionary. The groundwork for Eliot's uncoupling of Donne's work from British religious and political contexts had been set into place two decades before the publication of Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets." Both claims are convincingly substantiated, thanks to Haskin's impressive, meticulous research; moreover, many readers will find the journey towards those twin destinations as valuable as arrival at them.

Although Haskin's retelling of how the various editions came to be and how readers generally responded to them does not settle into a comfortably coherent linear narrative, that commitment to honesty is a strength of *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century*. Haskin painstakingly illustrates that there is no ultimate rhyme or reason as to why Donne's place in literary history developed in the manner it did. For every obvious factor--for example British reader's invariable default conception, thanks to Isaac Walton, of Donne as a one-time Catholic turned Bishop in the Church of England--there are three wildly contingent variables that defy prediction, such as Henry Alford's zealous over-standardization of Donne's writing, Alexander Grosart's inexplicable addition of hundreds of textual errors and dozens of inauthentic poems into Donne's canon, and Edmund Gosse's rather unfortunate wholesale plagiarism from none other than the before-mentioned Grosart. No matter how hard one tries to systemize the history Haskins provides, the best one can do is flit a squiggly flourish a la Trim from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Haskins paints a picture of Donne's reception in such a way that we can experience equally well both the satisfaction elicited from a well-argued, over-arching historical narrative and the exhilaration of encountering messy, authentically self-contained, ground-level moments in time that appear to have risen from nowhere.

One relatively minor weakness in Haskin's study is his uneven tone. As mentioned above, a major theme of the book is that critics make mistakes, often. This is true not only for minor critics but for major ones as well. Tracking down these errors, misguided decisions, and unadulterated wrongs certifies Haskin as one of today's most diligent reception historians; at the same time, his sporadic,

unforgiving, dismissive “Monday morning quarterbacking” equally qualifies him for a label Haskin’s specifically claims he wishes to avoid: the “saucy pedant chiding schoolboy” (224). Augustus Jessopp is waved off ultimately as a “toothless failure” (163); Leslie Stephen “misses the boat” on Donne’s willingness to critique King James (182); and George Potter and Evelyn Simpson are tagged as “condescending” (60) for criticizing fellow scholars when they do not arrive at the same conclusions Potter and Simpson had. Had Haskin merely rooted out critics’ failures for public expose and ridicule, we could write that off as cruel, yet certifiably fair. What unsettles the reader of *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* is Haskin’s rather dogged, intermittent habit of building up writers in his narrative, only to utterly tear them down. William “Billy” Phelps falls from being “one of America’s most celebrated English professors” (245) to the infamy of being “not only a showman but something of a charlatan” (250) in a matter of pages. Is such a Luciferian fall possible? Of course it is. Does it happen all the time in such stark terms? That is more of an open question. After reading Haskin’s book, you should not feel surprised if you experience a sudden existential worry that something is deeply wrong with you, because, according to Haskin, it is an affliction seemingly universal among Donne scholars.

On the positive side, an aspect of the text that will greatly interest early modern scholars is the sensitive, incisive readings of Donne that Haskin glosses from various creative writers, both in England and the United States. William Wordsworth considered Donne a definitive case study in the misuse by scholars of biography. To Wordsworth, we find genuine biography only in the creative works of writers. George Eliot, on the other hand, fixated throughout her life on Donne’s biography and greatly admired Donne’s resilient overcoming of despair, as well as his reluctant achievement of fame. Samuel Coleridge reckoned Donne to be a master of style, but not a terribly original thinker, whereas Henry David Thoreau held Donne’s style in little regard, but valued Doctor Donne as a thinker. Anyone who teaches Donne regularly knows that one of the most effective ways into Donne’s love poetry for students is through Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues. Haskin provides a lengthy description of how Browning admired Donne’s sense of irony, despite the Victorian’s vehement overall anti-Catholic sympathies. We soon after learn from Haskin that early defenders of Browning’s verse wrote the proverbial “playbook” for later writers interested in defending Donne. Most notable in this regard was Algernon Swinburne’s distinction between poets who are always obscure and offer only smoke from those poets, like Browning and Donne, who appear obscure when thoughtlessly read yet who strike us with lightning when examined correctly.

One of the strongest chapters dedicates itself to an exploration of how colleges in the United States, particularly at Harvard, saw to it that John Donne gained a prominent position in the literary canon. In fact, American attitudes towards Donne constitute a major concern for Haskin throughout the book. He details how Donne influenced the thoughts, if not the poetry, of Emerson and Thoreau. Readers are given substantial histories for the first edition of Donne’s work to appear outside of England, the Boston Edition edited by James Russell Lowell and the subsequent Gloglier Club Edition, which Lowell and a number of colleagues worked on. The chapter builds toward Haskin’s description of the early days of English departments and how individual professors labored deliberately to canonize John Donne. Once Haskin’s book steps into the halls of

the university, his extraordinarily thoroughly researched study suddenly engages its turbo drive. No detail is too minute for inclusion. We read about Billy Phelps six-month stint of eye trouble at Yale. We hear of Martin Brumbaugh, writer of the first dissertation on Donne, and his difficult job search in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We even witness a spat across space and time between Haskin and T. S. Eliot's memory over the course descriptions for classes listed on Eliot's first-year college transcript. One cannot help but observe that the only two illustrations in this book are of rooms in American university libraries.

While at first glance the accumulating focus on New England and the particular discussion of how Louise Imogen Guiney rehabilitated Donne's legacy for Irish Catholics might appear momentarily to lead in too pat a manner back to Haskin's own individual context at Boston College, one must admit that *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* constitutes a tremendously entertaining, unquestionably valuable reception study, which argues persuasively that Americans other than T. S. Eliot (including Eliot's own ancestor Charles Eliot Norton) largely rediscovered Donne.

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