As novelists, the subjects of this lively and scholarly collection are strikingly diverse. As Anglican women, however, they all combine the familiarity of insiders with the objectivity of outsiders, for until 1994, women were barred from the hierarchy of the church, welcome only as members of and workers for it. Ranging across nearly two centuries, this book examines the work of thirteen (dead) British women novelists writing after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and Catholic Emancipation in 1829, which together changed the status of the Church of England.

The novelists considered here are Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), Charlotte Maria Tucker (1821-93), Margaret Oliphant (1828-97), Charlotte M. Yonge (1823-1901), Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957), Rose Macaulay (1881-1958), Barbara Pym (1913-80), Elizabeth Goudge (1900-84), Noel Streatfeild (1895-1986) Iris Murdoch (1919-99), Monica Furlong (1930-2003), and P.D. James (1920-2014). All thirteen assess a church continually changing and adapting. In a strong introduction, the editors point out that while studies of "the Catholic novel and the Nonconformist literary tradition" (2) abound, discussions of Anglican fiction are rare, and women's contributions to the church, literary and otherwise, are too often ignored. "Perhaps it is appropriate," they wryly suggest, "that the Church of England, begotten in scandal, should have been so good at producing writers who can give us insight into human flaws and limitations" (12). The novelists treated here, major and minor alike, certainly do so.

"Human flaws" furnish ample material for the fiction of Margaret Oliphant. Her depiction of the clergy may seem Trollopian or Pym-like in its focus on social concerns, but she was also sensitive to the moral and spiritual aspects of the religious life. Her remarkable, disturbing, and beautiful narratives of the supernatural, from ghost stories such as "The Open Door" (1882) to novels such as The Beleaguered City (1880), have been unjustly neglected for decades. Sympathetically probing their emphasis on the inescapable relationship between the living and the dead, Alison Milbank shows how Oliphant suggests the possibility of eventual mercy for the apparently damned: a heresy within the church of her day. The editors describe Oliphant as "imaginatively polarized" (5), and accordingly Milbank examines the realist as well as the supernatural fiction, focusing unsurprisingly on the Chronicles of Carlingford and especially The Perpetual Curate (1864), which shows how four radically different Anglican clergymen exemplify the nature of the "predestined priest" (Perpetual Curate [Virago] 437). But since Oliphant's stories about religious subjects characteristically combine serious insight and caustic wit, Milbank might have made more of the latter. Oliphant obviously respects clergymen who use their position to help the poor and suffering, such as Frank Wentworth in The Perpetual Curate and Reginald May in Phoebe Junior (1876: not discussed here), but she treats both of these worthy young men with her usual detached irony.

Charlotte M. Yonge brought less detachment to her fiction about the Anglican Church. Though she supported it through religious journalism, educational writings and activities, and large donations to missions, her greatest contribution was her fiction for both adults and children. In the 1850s and 60s, as Charlotte Mitchell explains, Yonge's fiction was remarkably successful in literary and well as commercial terms, "a real source of hope and inspiration" to her readers, partly because of her characteristic treatment of "the conflicts between feminine ideology and female aspiration" (64, 66). Her fiction did so well on the American market that according to Mitchell, it may have helped to create the demand that eventually led Louisa May Alcott's publishers to ask for the novel that would become Little Women (1868). But as Mitchell acknowledges, Yonge's work deteriorated in the last years of her long career, and she gradually dropped out of favor. In the 1920s and 30s, her appeal suffered largely from a general aversion to all things Victorian, and despite reprints of a few novels after 1980, her reputation has never quite recovered: partly, Mitchell suggests, because of her Anglican piety.

Mitchell's account of Yonge offers some small surprises, including an echo of Life of Luther (1873) 96, qtd. Cho 34). Along with this extreme Protestantism, Tucker's domestic fiction highlights what Cho calls a...
“priesthood of women” (41), whose role as religious educators and maternal directors of family prayers is central to Tucker’s concept of English family life.

Charlotte Brontë shared Tucker’s hostility to Roman Catholicism. But Sara L. Pearce argues that while the Belgian novels—The Professor (1857) and Villette (1853)—define “true Englishness . . . as being Protestant and not Catholic” (19), Jane Eyre (1847) and Shirley (1849) make Englishness mean membership in the Church of England rather than any other Protestant sect. In particular, as Pearce illuminatingly shows, the eponymous narrator of Jane Eyre assumes her readers' familiarity with the Church of England, its personnel, clerical network, and social role, and above all the language of the Book of Common Prayer.

Pearce also perceptively shows how Jane Eyre highlights the kindness of Anglican women as well as quietly accepting the role of female missionaries. While the cruel and hypocritical Mr. Brocklehurst leaves the students at Lowood school miserable and half-starved, they are fed and comforted by the head teacher, Miss Temple. At Moor House likewise, the coldly dutiful charity of St. John Rivers sets off by contrast the spontaneous compassion offered by his sisters, Diana and Mary. As for Shirley, Pearce finds it “quintessentially an Anglican novel” (25). Though she largely and questionably ignores the two young churchwomen who are its protagonists, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keelidar, Pearce argues that even Brontë’s trenchant critique of the curates and their superiors demonstrates her deep love for Anglicanism, which is voiced explicitly in the narrator’s impassioned prayer for the Church: “God save it! God also reform it!” (qtd. 26).

Given the focus of Review19, the nine chapters on twentieth century novelists warrant briefer comments, despite their vital role in the narrative arc of the collection. As various contributors show, writers such as Barbara Pym, Iris Murdoch, and P.D. James all reflect the changing position of the Church of England during the twentieth century. Pym’s own literary career doubly reflects these changes in both the content and the publication history of her fiction. Between 1961 and 1977, when her publishers assumed that her church-centered novels no longer gratified popular taste, she published nothing. After that enforced silence, her fiction gradually moved away from church matters until they became “entirely marginal” in her last-published novel, An Academic Question (1986), as Jane Williams observes (118). But Williams also argues that Pym’s understanding of community is “profoundly Anglican” (122). By contrast, “Anglican Atheist” is the subtitle of Peter S. Hawkins’ chapter on Iris Murdoch, which examines her lifelong concern with religion and especially the decline of Christianity in the West. After interestingly contrasting the fierce Protestantism of her Ulster relations with the more relaxed attitude of her beloved parents, Hawkins probes three of her novels: The Bell (1958), with its Anglican sisterhood and lay community; The Time of the Angels (1966), clearly prompted by the 1960s death-of-God movement; and A Word Child (1975), whose antihero finds a possible place of rest in the London church where T. S. Eliot served as churchwarden.

In an outstandingly thoughtful and well-written chapter on the theological position and liturgical preferences of P.D. James, Alison Snell argues that throughout her career, she was preoccupied with “the decline in Anglicanism’s social centrality and status” (192). The clerical machinations of Death in Holy Orders (2001) reveal her distaste for Anglican modernization. In James’s fiction, the church repeatedly becomes the site of death, the priest becomes somehow a victim, and though her detective, Adam Dalgleish, is a vicar’s son, he lacks faith. But he is never without reverence or conscience. Senior policeman though he is, he understands that attempts at human justice entail “appalling collateral damage” (200).

The inadequacies of human justice also troubled Dorothy L. Sayers, as Jessica Martin shows in a well-argued chapter. Given her growing concern with Christian forgiveness, Martin claims, Sayers was increasingly uncomfortable with the necessary privileging of justice over mercy in the detective plot. For Martin The Nine Tailors (1934), whose resolution has nothing to do with human law, is “the perfect detective novel” (94), though Martin also stresses the value of disguise and the uncanny in the more flawed Murder Must Advertise (1933).

Until the early 1990s, Elizabeth Goudge—another “daughter of the vicarage” like Sayers—had long been largely dismissed as an old-fashioned sentimental novelist. But in 1993 a highly-praised novel by Indrani Aikath-Gyaltsen was revealed as a wholesale plagiarism of Goudge’s The Rosemary Tree (1956). Since the latter had been neglected as the work of an author best known for her children’s fiction, Susan D. Amussen argues that The Rosemary Tree deserves revaluation. Highlighting its alternative models of masculinity, Amussen finds that its vulnerable and self-doubting Christian men have more spiritual and moral strength than the dominant male of the conventional ideal.

Like Goudge, Noel Streatfeild is remembered more for her children’s fiction than for her adult novels. But as Clemence Shultze explains, her semi-autobiographical A Vicarage Family (1963) shows how her early experience sensitized her to destructive family dynamics, especially the inadequacies and injustices of parents. These inequities, Shultze argues, are communicated as skillfully in her adult novels as in the best of her children’s books.

Monica Furlong, once well-known as a religious journalist and activist, especially as Moderator of the Movement for the Ordination of Women, also wrote two adult novels and a trilogy for children. Peter Sherlock sympathetically probes Furlong’s semi-autobiographical treatment of the conflict between sexuality and spirituality in her two adult novels, Cat’s Eye (1976) and Cousins (1983), as well as her treatment of gender in the first of her young adult novels, Wise Child (1987). Like Furlong, Evelyn Underhill was better known for non-fictional work, most notably her extensive writings on spirituality, especially mysticism. But at the beginning of her career she wrote three novels: The Grey World, (1904), The Lost Word (1907), and The Column of Dust (1909). Since she wrote them all while being drawn towards both occultism and Roman Catholicism, Ann Loades suggests that, consciously or unconsciously, she used them “to work out some of her most fundamental convictions” (82) about the spiritual life.

Largely by foregrounding two texts by Rose Macaulay—her last completed novel, The Towers of Trebizond (1956), and her long essay on Evelyn Waugh, published in 1946—Judith Maltby brilliantly captures her particular kind of Anglicanism. Macaulay considered the novel inappropriate for “apologetics or propaganda” (qtd. 104). Though The Towers of Trebizond delighted such fervent High Anglicans as John Betjeman, Maltby shows that it consistently refuses to function as Anglican propaganda. Macaulay’s essay on Waugh, Maltby writes, likewise implies that literature should treat human complexities objectively. While praising Waugh’s early novels up to A Handful of Dust (1934) for their complete detachment, she thought the partisanship of his later writings undermined “his best gifts” (qtd. 109), and with its insistent conversion narrative, she found Brideshead Revisited (1945) too often self-indulgent.

Overall, the flaws in this collection are relatively few and minor: some contributors are slightly over-defensive of their subjects and interpretations or over-dependent on plot-summary. Questions also arise about both the novelists and the
novels selected for treatment here. If Iris Murdoch makes the cut as an "Anglican atheist," why not George Eliot, who was deeply interested in the moral dilemmas and inevitable failures of the clergy? If Tucker is included, why not Elizabeth Missing Sewell (1815-1906), whose pious novels are surely just as readable? As for the novels chosen, a brief discussion of Phoebe Junior would have enriched the Oliphant chapter, and in place of Murdoch's A Word Child, Hawkins might fruitfully have treated the vagaries of Father Bernard in Murdoch's The Philosopher's Pupil (1983). As the editors say, however, collections of critical essays are "acts of exclusion as well as inclusion" (4) and this one makes a genuine contribution to literary history, women's history, and the history of the Anglican church.

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