

Wells-Oghoghomeh in *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Culture of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021). This book is especially suitable for undergraduate and general reading audiences but should enjoy a wider readership among academic scholars interested in the above themes and the art and craft of historical writing.

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***Visions of British Culture from the Reformation to Romanticism: The Protestant Discovery of Tradition.* By Celestina Savonius-Wroth. Histories of the Sacred and Secular, 1700–2000. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2023. ix + 311 pp. \$129.99.**

The entire field of eighteenth-century British religious history has been indelibly stamped with the late John Pocock's insight that the enlightenment occurred *within* the Church of England rather than in opposition to it. Celestina Savonius-Wroth's magnificent new study *Visions of British Culture from the Reformation to Romanticism* pointedly reminds us that the forces of counter-enlightenment were nursed there as well. But *Visions of British Culture* is not an examination of the Church of England's contributions to political reaction. Rather, as the title of her book indicates, Savonius-Wroth seeks to trace the religious origins of what she calls (borrowing from the anthropologist Mary Douglass) the "sensitivity to symbols" (10) that would find its full flowering in the British romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. In Savonius-Wroth's telling, British romanticism stood heir to a longstanding – largely Anglican – project "to mitigate the extreme Protestant rejection of ritual and symbolism" (18) that commenced with the Reformation. In other words, the high Victorian romantic disdain for puritan philistinism was centuries in the making.

The established Church of England strikes us as an unlikely seedbed for the energies of British romanticism. (As does the presbyterian Church of Scotland, which also features in the narrative.) For all the interminable wrangling over what constitutes romanticism, the British variant of the movement has been indelibly associated with political radicalism, individualism, and a decidedly post-Christian spiritual sensibility. The historian Sheridan Gilley's pioneering formulation of a "Victorian churching of romanticism"¹ necessarily suggests a movement that was far from orthodox in its inception.

Yet, Savonius-Wroth discerns an ancestry in the high-church Anglican ideal of the "beauty of holiness" (27). In preserving its liturgical calendar and the ritual elements of public worship against the more zealous proponents of reform, the Church of England promoted a complex of attitudes toward custom, community, symbolism, and embodied religious practice that anticipated romantic aesthetics and social thought. Such ideals licensed the exploration and spirited defense, often by Anglican and Scottish


¹Sheridan Gilley, "John Keble and the Victorian Churching of Romanticism," in *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism*, ed. J. R. Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 226–239.

presbyterian clergy, of the local customs and practices that were long known as “popular antiquities” before the nineteenth-century coinage of the term folklore. Thus, Savonius-Wroth devotes a considerable portion of *Visions of British Culture* to supplying the apologetic and pastoral context to the pious proto-ethnographers of the early modern era: John Aubrey, Henry Bourne, William Stukeley, John Brand, and others. Their documentation of vernacular culture was part of a broader vindication of the symbolist outlook that affirmed a correspondence between outward forms and spiritual truths. Underlying Britain’s so-called “long reformation” (or “reformation without end,” in Robert Ingram’s recent, incisive phrasing) was a vast, largely clerical, salvage anthropology, to record and preserve the ritual elements of provincial life. These efforts in popular antiquarianism, Savonius-Wroth shows, were positively haunted by theological anxieties. How much religious significance could popular rites and customs – many of them rooted in the Catholic, if not the primordial, pre-Christian past – be accorded? How much religious authority could tradition be granted before the *sola scriptura* tenets of Protestantism were irreparably compromised?

Although *Visions of British Culture* ranges freely over more than three centuries of British religious history, Savonius-Wroth’s work shines brightest as a contribution to the ecclesiastical history of the long eighteenth century. During this period, the Church of England was neither desiccated by enlightenment and politeness nor complacent in its cultural hegemony. It was rather, as this author demonstrates, a dynamic and intellectually resourceful entity, alive to the broader cultural turn against embodied religious practices and external rites and determined to maintain its liturgical and sacramental forms. As Savonius-Wroth shows, the clerical apologists for traditional religious offices were neither obscurantists nor hidebound reactionaries; their sophisticated defenses of custom drew upon a nascent enlightenment psychology of sensation and imagination, as well as an increasingly anthropological sense of folk culture as embedded in social structure.

These eighteenth-century debates on “embodied religion” pave the way for the surprising early nineteenth-century developments detailed in the final chapter of the book. Savonius-Wroth demonstrates the convergence of both radicals like William Cobbett and romantic conservatives such as Robert Southey on the salubriousness of provincial folk culture as a bulwark against the decomposition of bourgeois society. Such sentiments informed the early, radical William Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads* no less than the later conservative Anglican William Wordsworth of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*.

Visions of British Culture performs an inestimable service in bridging the classic Reformation historiography of Protestant acculturation and more literary-minded works like those of Raymond Williams and Stephen Prickett, which examine the genesis of the Victorian ideal of culture. And yet, it is a deeply original work, which restores centuries of learned writing about folk culture – in ethnography, natural history, homiletics, poetry, and social critique – to its religious context. If the work offers no respite from the never-ending culture wars of contemporary life, at least it provides a compelling account of their origins.

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