

*Bath and Wells Ordinations, 1465-1526*. Robert Dunning, ed. Somerset Record Society, vol. 99, 2021. xxv plus 273 pp. Hardback £24.00. [ISBN 978-0-901732-49-1].

Bishops' registers provide a major source of information about the Church in England between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. They record the bishop's official business, visitations of churches, institutions of clergy to benefices, many individual licences relating to canon law, and (often but not always) the names of the clergy whom the bishop ordained. Three bishops had territories overlapping Bristol and Gloucestershire. Of these, all twenty-one registers relating to Hereford diocese have been transcribed and published and all fifteen of Bath and Wells, but only eight of the twenty-eight of Worcester which covered the majority of the county. When the last eight registers of Bath and Wells were edited for the Somerset Record Society in the 1930s, however, the editor – Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte, formerly deputy keeper of the Public Records – left out the lists of ordinations. He observed that 'the vast majority of these people were quite obscure, and it has not appeared necessary to load the volumes with their names'. The present volume, admirably edited by Dr Robert Dunning, reverses this omission. It contains the names of hundreds of men ordained in Bath and Wells diocese between 1465 and 1526.

Historical studies have moved on since the 1930s, and individual clergy are no longer judged unworthy of investigation. Much has been done to recover their careers, particularly those who studied at university, became cathedral canons, acted as schoolmasters, or merely led lives as parish clergy. Ordination lists not only record their names, but valuable details about them. The dates of the ordinations are given, along with the name of the bishop (diocesan or suffragan) who officiated, and the place where he did so. Since most clergy were made priests at about the age of twenty-four, this enables us roughly to estimate when they were born. Where they were later found holding parish benefices, we can often calculate their whole life-spans. Then there is evidence of institutional origins. Monks and friars were ordained as from the particular house where they were based. Other, 'secular', clergy who did not belong to institutions had to provide a 'title', meaning evidence of financial support since indigent clergy could not beg or do lay work. Titles were usually supplied by religious houses in the later Middle Ages, and these provide indications of geographical origins. A cleric with a title from St Mark's Hospital, Bristol, for example, is likely to have come from that city, and one from the collegiate church of Westbury-on-Trym to have had some connection with that foundation. In the late fifteenth century the Bath and Wells registers go even further by

indicating the cleric's place of origin, potentially enabling his family to be traced and, perhaps, its social status to be estimated.

It remains to establish the relevance of Dr Dunning's volume for Bristol and Gloucestershire. The evidence for Bristol is considerable. Although only the area south of the Avon was in Bath and Wells diocese, many would-be clergy from north of the river attended ordinations held conveniently nearby in south Bristol or Wells or even Taunton, which they could do by getting permission (known as 'letters dimissory') from their own diocesan, the bishop of Worcester. So the ordination lists in this volume contain many Bristolians: canons of St Augustine's Abbey, friars from the four Bristol friaries, and numerous clergy who would go on to hold parish benefices or work as chaplains and chantry priests in and around Bristol. There are also occasional examples of men from (or sponsored by religious houses in) Gloucester and some other places in Gloucestershire, as well as from Herefordshire and Wales. Indeed one notable aspect of the ordinations is the number of Welsh clergy whom they attracted, due no doubt reflecting the relatively easy access between Bristol and the ports of south Wales.

Altogether this is a very valuable contribution to knowledge, and although it provides only names, places, and dates, anyone studying clergy individually or collectively will benefit from using it. It is to be hoped that more of the twenty unedited Worcester diocesan registers may make their way into print. Those eight that have already done so have all appeared through the efforts of the Worcestershire Historical Society. It would be wonderful if Gloucestershire could make some contribution to the project.

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