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Antwerp in the Age of Reformation: Underground Protestantism in a Commercial Metropolis, 1550-1577 (Book Review)

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Book Review by John B. Roney, History Department, Sacred Heart University

Marnef, Guido. *Antwerp in the Age of Reformation: Underground Protestantism in a Commercial Metropolis, 1550-1577*. Trans. J. C. Grayson. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. ISBN 0-8018-5169-6

Many historians writing in English have recognized a direct correlation between the rise of commercial cities in sixteenth-century Germany, Switzerland, and France and Protestantism. Few, however, have offered a similar analysis of the Low Countries. Guido Marnef, a senior researcher at the University of Antwerp, fills this gap. He has already contributed significant histories of Protestantism in the Low Countries, such as his study of Mechelen, making him uniquely qualified for this monograph, which is intended for a scholarly audience. This is his first major book in English translation, however, and therefore this study will make available scholarship that, until now, has been limited to the Dutch academic community.

By the sixteenth century, Antwerp had emerged as the most important hub for northern European trade; only Paris was equal in population. The noble families of Antwerp, like their Venetian or Florentine counterparts, designed a system of government that tenaciously protected international trade. Toleration for a large group of foreigners with a plurality of social and religious backgrounds was important for a secure market. Despite these natural and historic roots, Antwerp had one major political problem. In 1555 Philip II of Spain enforced centralized power and rooted out heresy from within the Catholic regions, especially the rebellious northern provinces. The Antwerp Catholic hierarchy was able to keep the Inquisition out of their city until 1558, but from then until 1562 executions and exiles abounded.

Marnef has found that Calvinism flourished because of a very large "floating middle group." Represented by the guilds and religious fraternities, some fifty in number, the group wanted more lay involvement. Anticlericalism found expression in the popular rhetorical plays (*rederijkerskamers*), and widespread education led to a growth of Erasmian and Reformation ideas. Although Antwerp had no university, it had a record number of schoolmasters (88) and mistresses (70)--a very high number of women. In addition to having 55 percent of the book trade in the Netherlands, Antwerp was an important center for foreign books, and before 1540 it was the largest publisher of Protestant literature in English. Although many residents from the floating middle group did not become Protestant--by 1567, seven out of ten remained Catholic--it is significant that by 1566 some 4,000-5,000 are reported to have attended some of the popular Calvinist preachers at one time.

Marnef's study is filled with evidence from the wealth of statistics he has uncovered, documented in numerous graphs, maps, and tables. He has provided a very convincing argument for why Protestantism flourished and eventually declined. Although one could have hoped to see more attention placed on the religious sensibilities and theological debates, Marnef's concentration on the necessary political and economic arguments offers a new approach to a study of the Reformation cities.

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