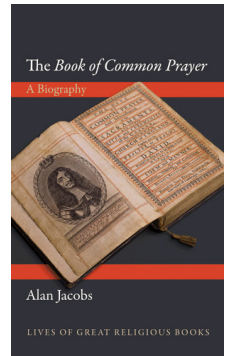


The Book of Common Prayer: A Biography, by
Alan Jacobs

Lives of Great Religious Books | Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013 | 256 pages | ISBN: 978-0-69-115481-7 (hardcover) \$24.95



A further volume in this fascinating series of profiles of the history of key texts, this one is an account of the prayer book which was and still is technically the only legally authorised text for services in many Anglican churches throughout the world, although in practice, as the author acknowledges, multiple local prayer books have largely taken its place.

Alan Jacobs is a distinguished professor at Baylor University, with a very fine writing style, who in recent years has written a number of works on topics of historical theology. His fine sense of style and craft makes this a compelling read and I finished what is admittedly quite a small book in a few hours.

The ingenious vision of this series is that the circulation, reputation, and reading of any book is a history worth telling. The focus is not on the broader “influence” of a work but of its direct history as a book. Jacobs’s work does not quite live up to this commission. Unlike some other books in this series, the work moves rather beyond the text at hand and into the history of liturgy

especially for the recent period of new liturgies. The actual history of the book, its production and publishing and distribution is relegated to a brief appendix (195–200)—which is a pity, because the story of how the crown copyright of the text was abused in Oxford and honoured by Baskerville in Cambridge is a very interesting tale.

The story of the abandonment of the Latin Mass and the creation of the four versions of an English prayer book and their authorisation by parliaments in 1549, 1552, 1559, and 1662 has often been told. There is rather a different focus in this book.

Most historians focus their accounts of the prayerbook on the shaping of its text. This is a very curious and important story for the history of the English Reformation. Stage one had been the translation of the Latin mass into English, but then Cranmer set to work in Edward's reign to create a Protestant prayer book, the one known as the 1549 book. When Cranmer became bolder in his theological views after completing the 1549 book, he began work on what became the 1552 book. Jacobs provides an excellent description of the construction of Matins and Evensong out of the monastic cycle of prayers. In contrast Jacobs is a bit inadequate on Cranmer's most radical revision at that time, for in the 1552 book he chopped the traditional Eucharistic prayer in half and re-ordered it, in order to undercut any notion that something happened to the bread when it was consecrated. Jacobs does explain this in his chapter on Gregory Dix at the end of the book but he does not provide any detail on the text of the 1552 communion. This chapter contains a most interesting discussion of the inadequacies of the prayer book as liturgy, but I fail to see why it was held back until this point. I would have preferred to have heard more about the construction of the text in the chapter on the 1552 book. The history of a book without some history of its text seems a little perverse.

The strength of this book is its account of the changing fortunes of the book over the last 450 years. Jacobs's history of the American text and how it developed is interesting. Jacobs also explores the huge liturgical debates of the nineteenth century and neatly summarises them. He very helpfully analyses the translation of the prayer book into a wide range of languages. There is a significant story not told here of how Selwyn in New Zealand used the BCP as the definition of Anglicanism and thus gave the prayerbook a defining status in the Church of the Province of New Zealand.

Among the most interesting chapters of the discussion is an analysis of the use of the prayer book during World War One. Jacobs suggests that this was

a profoundly difficult moment for the book when its widespread distribution to the soldiers in World War One did not provide spiritual resources for the soldiers, who found it too difficult to understand. I am not persuaded that three quotations from Robert Graves and Vera Brittain are sufficient to establish this point. Nevertheless the failure of the traditional words to resonate with working class soldiers who had little experience of church attendance certainly highlighted the need for revision of the text. So the 1929 revision was commenced. Then after a celebrated debate the House of Commons failed to authorise the revised prayer book for use in the Church of England, although in Scotland the book was adopted. Thus prayerbook revision only became acceptable in the postwar age, when the English church, now with its own General Synod, authorised the use of Series 1, 2, and 3, while other Anglican churches launched their own experimental liturgies. The author's researches do not note the significant role played by the New Zealand Anglican Church, since the New Zealand Prayer Book was one of the very first full prayer books to be issued.² These revisions have undone some of Cranmer's revisions and restored an order to the liturgy which closely resembles the recent vernacular texts of the Catholic mass.

Meanwhile the Book of Common Prayer, which once defined and united Anglicanism, has faded into insignificance. A brand of faith built on a state version of Christianity has had a difficult life over the last century and a half, and virtually its only coherence has been its prayer book. Cranmer's superb liturgical sense has given it more ability to survive than it might otherwise have had. But now much of this has been lost, in the plethora of new books of prayer. No wonder that people fear that Anglicanism is doomed to fray apart. Thus the history of the prayerbook reflects a very significant story.

The book does not profess to make any original contribution to the vast literature on this subject, but its summation of recent scholarship is very well done. Jacobs has not written a technical book; if you want that you will need to consult Dix or Wheatly, the great nineteenth-century liturgist. I have identified some deficiencies in the book, but it is certainly readable and reliable in the areas it covers.

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² This story has recently been described in Brian Carrell, *Creating a New Zealand Prayer Book: A Personal Reminiscence of a 25 Year Odyssey 1964–89* (Christchurch: Theology House Publishing, 2013).