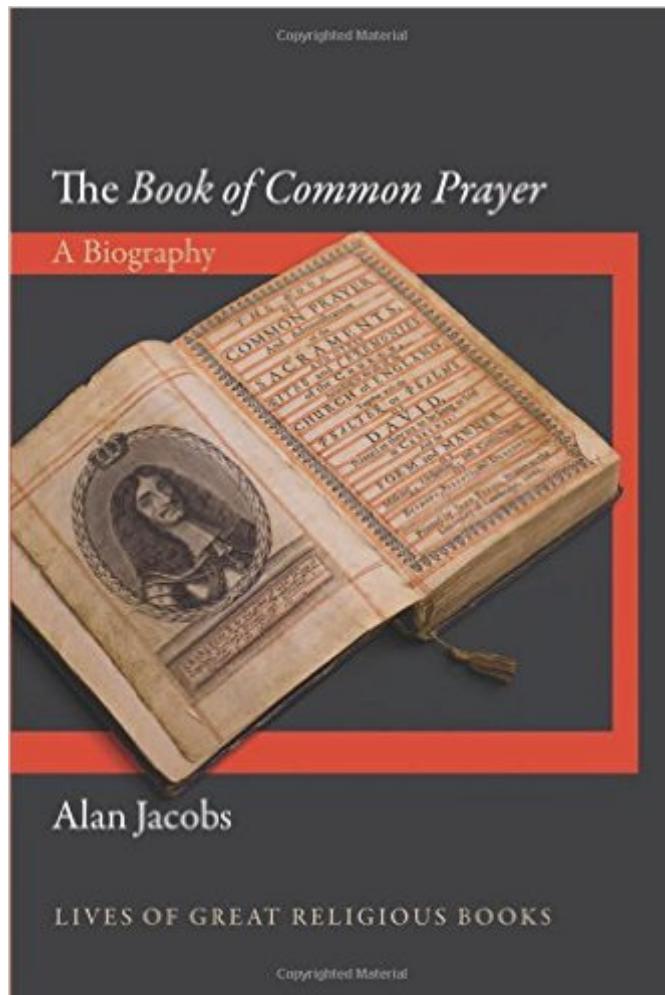


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The "Book Of Common Prayer": A Biography (Lives Of Great Religious Books)



Synopsis

While many of us are familiar with such famous words as, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here. . ." or "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," we may not know that they originated with The Book of Common Prayer, which first appeared in 1549. Like the words of the King James Bible and Shakespeare, the language of this prayer book has saturated English culture and letters. Here Alan Jacobs tells its story. Jacobs shows how The Book of Common Prayer--from its beginnings as a means of social and political control in the England of Henry VIII to its worldwide presence today--became a venerable work whose cadences express the heart of religious life for many. The book's chief maker, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, created it as the authoritative manual of Christian worship throughout England. But as Jacobs recounts, the book has had a variable and dramatic career in the complicated history of English church politics, and has been the focus of celebrations, protests, and even jail terms. As time passed, new forms of the book were made to suit the many English-speaking nations: first in Scotland, then in the new United States, and eventually wherever the British Empire extended its arm. Over time, Cranmer's book was adapted for different preferences and purposes. Jacobs vividly demonstrates how one book became many--and how it has shaped the devotional lives of men and women across the globe.

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Customer Reviews

I grew up low church baptist and have only come to see the value of the Book of Common Prayer

fairly recently. So this was a great book to bring some history to my understanding. Alan Jacobs is an excellent writer and his history of the book is both of solid history and readable. To me, what is most interesting about story of the BCP, is how it was intended as a tool of unity but from the very beginning that was thwarted. Cranmer, who compiled the BCP thought that a single prayer book with a single service was important both theologically and politically to the unity of the Church in England. This was not a simple expedient or politically motivated conscription of Christianity but a different world view on how church and state should relate. But from the beginning the minutia of the BCP and its practice were used to factionalize the church. As one very small example, John Knox insisted that communion should be taken while sitting (instead of kneeling) because he wanted to distance the church from the Catholic view of transubstantiation. Others wanted kneeling to show honor and devotion during the Eucharist. But as theological and cultural movements between high and low church Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals and other groups, the prayer book became like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Unchanging not so much because it was perfect, but unchanging because no one can agree on how to change it. And now it is venerated in part because it was unchanged. Outside the UK, most other Anglican churches have adapted their own Books of Common Prayer (and most have updated theirs several times), but in the UK it is still the 1662 version that is the authorized one.

I agree with many of reviewers' positive statements about this book which its cover indicates is also commended, for example, by Bishop Rowan Williams and which has been praised in a Church Times review by long-time stalwart BCP supporter, The Revd Professor David Martin, and I certainly welcome its publication. However, the work is not without faults. For example, Charles I was executed on the 30th not the 4th January (p.77) and there are generalisations that suggest that the author perhaps is writing as somewhat of an outsider (I may be wrong). There is at least one absurdity that suggests more careful sub-editing would have helped - the reference to "slippered priests bearing thurifers"! The "Chronology" at the beginning is a help for anyone coming to the BCP and its story for the first time, and there are detailed and useful notes (which somewhat make up for the lack of a bibliography) and there is a good index. However there are many older books that tell that story more clearly. I would share the author's high regard for the recent edition of the BCP edited by Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer : The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (OUP 2011) but much of *The Oxford Guide to the BCP* (2006) which he also commends relates to the prayer books of other parts of the Anglican Communion rather than to the BCP itself. I myself should commend, in addition, the new Everyman's Library BCP which includes as well as the text of

the 1662 BCP, the 1549 Holy Communion and Burial services, the formerly authorised services for January 30th, May 29th, and November 5th, an excellent introduction by historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, and a Select Bibliography. The books listed in the latter include D.E.W.

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