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Mark Burden, Anne Dunan-Page

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Puritans, Dissenters, and their Church Books: Recording and Representing Experience

Mark Burden and Anne Dunan-Page

Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

On 27 December 1821 the Dissenting antiquarian Benjamin Hanbury prefaced his recent transcription of the eighteenth-century records of Isaac Watts's church with a description of the source text. This manuscript, dating in part from the ministry of the tutor Samuel Morton Savage, had been placed into his hands in a 'mutilated state', having been 'lately bought for waste paper'; indeed, Hanbury feared that the 'major part of the original MS. is therefore entirely lost', although 'what is here preserved must be exceedingly valuable to the inquirer into Church History among the Dissenters'.¹ In fact, Hanbury was only partly correct in his analysis: it is now known that several copies of the early register of Watts's church had already been made, beginning with Watts's ministerial successor Samuel Price, whose version extended back to the register of Watts's predecessor, the minister and tutor Isaac Chauncey.² This story of loss, re-emergence, partial transcription and misunderstanding is so typical of the history of Church Books and registers from Puritan congregations and their Dissenting successors that readers could be forgiven for dismissing such texts as too scarce in number and too problematic in content to merit serious investigation. It is our contention that the reverse is true: Puritan and Dissenting church records exist in surprisingly large numbers from the 1640s onwards, and Church Books – the most materially and intellectually substantial subset of those records – are the key documents for understanding the beliefs and organization of these congregations.

On the one hand, Church Books were engines of social discrimination and hierarchy between church officers and other members, members and hearers, the obedient and the disorderly, the obstreperous and the penitent. Yet they were also repositories of collective wisdom, in which the equality of members in the eyes of God (however conditional its worldly manifestation) was embodied in the act of signing the members' register, or subscribing to a mutual covenant. Church Books are sites of individual stories, portrayed in letters, testimonies, church acts and orders. They are also vital sources for reconstructing

the social history of families, transforming temporal disjunct into spatial conjunct through registers and family trees, or revealing in their rules, debates and cases of conscience the underlying assumptions governing the position of women and children in religious life.

Defining Puritan and Dissenting Church Books

In the mid- and late seventeenth century much of the Puritan interest began to coalesce into what are now known as ‘gathered churches’, although the congregations themselves generally preferred to use the designations ‘church of Christ’, ‘society’, or ‘fellowship’. The first period for which manuscript books survive from gathered churches spans the time from the Civil Wars, when a great number of these congregations were first ‘gathered’ or ‘embodied’ by ministers and members across parish boundaries, to 1714, a year of mixed emotions for Dissenters as they pondered the rival effects of the passage of the Schism Act and the accession of George I. Church Books survive in large numbers for three groups of non-parochial churches operating during this time: Particular Baptists, General Baptists, and Congregational churches. One particularly significant group is less well represented: the evidence for non-parochial Presbyterianism in England and Wales prior to the Toleration Act of 1689 is patchy and difficult to interpret, and the church records tend to take the form of registers rather than Church Books.³ There are other problems with nomenclature: ‘Particular Baptist’ and ‘General Baptist’ churches are rarely referred to using those terms in the surviving documents. Instead, the practitioners of these groups preferred to describe themselves using theological language: Particular Baptist congregations were labelled ‘Churches ... of y^e baptized persuasion holding y^e doctrine of election ^{^and the} Saints final perseverance’, while General Baptists were referred to as ‘Churches who own {the} Doctrine of universall Redemption’.⁴

By contrast, there was no shortage of attempts to define ‘Congregational’ churches in the mid-seventeenth century, not least since they generated so much polemic. One good example is the definition given by the Devon Congregational minister William Bartlet, in his church order called *Ichnographia, Or a Model of the Primitive Congregational Way* (1647):

this visible Church-state is a free society of visible Saints, embodied or knit together, by a voluntary consent, in holy fellowship, to worship God according to his word, consisting of one ordinary congregation, with power of government in it selfe[.]⁵

The church is here defined as ‘a free society of visible Saints’, that is to say, members who have joined by an act of their will, a ‘voluntary consent’, and not because they have been born in a particular place at a particular time. Secondly, church members are described as God’s ‘Saints’, ‘visible’ to themselves, to their fellow-members, and to the world. The ‘visibility’ of the saints is a key concept in Congregational ecclesiology.⁶ The Congregational and Baptist churches had instituted a series of tests for admitting their members, most notably by asking them to give an account of the believer’s ‘experience’ of God. Bartlet also refers to self-government: the congregations were ‘autonomous’ – not ‘Independent’, a term they disliked because they regarded themselves as being in a state of mutual dependency. The congregations had the autonomy to ‘gather’ themselves, to elect their church officers, to admit members (‘receiving them to Communion’), to discipline them through ‘noting’ or ‘admonition’, even ‘excommunication’, to hear their repentance and readmit them, and to administer the current affairs of the church.⁷ Finally, the congregations were ‘ordinary’, in an archaic sense meaning ‘orderly’: they followed a specific church ‘confession’, ‘order’, or ‘rule’, such as the Westminster Confession (1646: Presbyterian), the Savoy Declaration (1658: Congregational) or the London Confession (1677: Particular Baptist).⁸ Nevertheless, since the ultimate power of administration was vested in a congregation that regulated itself through the adoption or adaptation of a particular order, it seemed wise to keep records of the congregation’s transactions. Bartlet’s definition reminds us that seventeenth-century congregations were understood as spiritual but also as administrative entities. They meant business, and they used their Church Books to discuss the very ‘business’ of personal and national reformation.⁹

There is one topic that church orders do not discuss: how a church of Christ should keep its books. In the absence of precise scriptural precedent, the nature of these books, and the forms they should take, were internal matters for each community. It was up to each congregation to decide how to represent and narrate their monthly proceedings, although there were many Church ‘orders’ or ‘disciplines’ to guide them in the constitution of a gathered Church.¹⁰ The ‘power of government’ clearly extended to the power of self-representation.¹¹ As a result, the way that Church Books were kept, by whom, and when, differed widely, and the questions of what constitutes an ‘original’ Church Book for the period 1640–1714, and how to distinguish between ‘records’ and ‘registers’, are problematic.¹²

Church Books are in many ways imperfect, both as records and as material objects. Many did not survive the ravages of time; several of the surviving books were interrupted during periods of persecution or became the victims of neglect. One of the scribes of the

Templepatrick Presbyterian church near Belfast explained the hiatus in records between 1660 and 1670 as a ‘blanke upon y^e p^{er}secution of The Prelates’.¹³ Other Church Books are heavily redacted *a posteriori* accounts that incorporate material from earlier documents now lost; some show signs of deliberate censoring, either to avoid leaving an embarrassing image to posterity or to heal internal strife. In 1697, the Baptist church members of Bampton in Devon were quite explicit that they did not wish to record an internal dispute, being ‘in such Confusions and disorders as are better to have a vaile drawn over them {than} to leaue on record or transmit to posterity’.¹⁴ In 1700, in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, the papers relating to a four-year dispute between the minister John Eckells and his church were ‘Burnt to A {shes} or obliterated’ in an attempt to bring about a reconciliation.¹⁵ The minutes of the Devonshire Association are missing for the years 1717–20, when its members were embroiled in a bitter and damaging dispute over subscription to articles on the Trinity which had national repercussions.¹⁶ A final example concerns the memory of disciplinary cases. Most manuscripts record charges brought against their members, including absence from meetings, fornication, theft, the use of charms, marriage outside the faith, and other matters. If members were admonished, or even excommunicated, they could be readmitted after public penance, thereby ‘giving satisfaction’. The church at Tattershall in Lincolnshire believed that once satisfaction had been given, all previous accounts of wrong-doing should be erased from the records; as a consequence, the manuscript often becomes illegible where disciplinary entries have been crossed out.¹⁷

Perhaps as a result of such imperfections, church records have rarely been studied in their own right, and it has often been assumed that they deal only with disciplinary cases. Only about twenty either complete or partial editions of Church Books have been published since the 1840s,¹⁸ and the various unpublished transcriptions by antiquarians (whether handwritten or typed) now lying in denominational archives and county record offices are virtually unknown.¹⁹ The 106 Puritan and Nonconformist registers for 1640–1714, currently held by the National Archives, have never been sensitively investigated, despite their importance as ministerial records and church histories.²⁰ A recent *Inventory of Puritan Church Records* undertaken by the Dissenting Experience research group has revealed that there exist in excess of 350 manuscript Church Books, registers, and account books for Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist churches which refer to the period 1640–1714.²¹ This figure includes copy records as well as contemporary and near-contemporary documents, and it is hoped that the *Inventory* will finally enable scholars to

begin the process of examining the geographical and temporal spread of Church Books, as well as their acquisition, form, and reception.

Purchasing the book was an important act that even preceded, in some cases, the formal gathering of the church. In 1691 the General Baptists of Covent Garden ordered ‘That Bro: Price doe buy a booke to enter therein the Act of the Churches and all matters & proceedings relateing to the said meeteing’.²² The circumstances of buying the book, and its price, were sometimes inserted on the first folio of the manuscript, a practice also found in parish registers of the period. The Bromsgrove Church Book was bought on 3 June 1670 for two shillings, whereas the congregation at Speldhurst ‘paid to Tho Harrison Snr ... 2s 6d’ for their book; in Lincolnshire, John Lupton of the Tattershall congregation (at that time meeting at Coningsby Mill) bought a suitable book while visiting London in 1654.²³ The earliest Puritan Church Books tended to be quartos, although deacons’ account books might be smaller; from the late seventeenth century onwards, some of the larger Dissenting churches such as the London Baptist congregations invested in folio volumes.²⁴ Two main types of binding were employed: leather (sometimes with the titles embossed on the front cover) or vellum, as for commonplace books. However, a significant proportion of surviving church records were originally written as loose papers, and later bound together, or pasted into guard books; others were rebound in the nineteenth or twentieth century by congregations and archivists anxious to preserve their heritage.²⁵ All kinds of approaches to writing can be found: sometimes densely packed, sometimes with entries only at the top of the *recto* pages.²⁶ Often, the manuscript starts at both ends, with, perhaps, minutes or deacons’ accounts at one end, and registers of members at the other.²⁷ In several books the earlier entries are sparse, and there is a gap of several years before the book is redeployed with any regularity; sometimes the opposite is true: the earlier references are full and frequent, with a few isolated later notes. These contrasting examples suggest that some manuscripts were begun by the scribes with no precise idea of how much they would write, when they would write it, or how quickly they would exhaust the space available.

Modes of writing: exhaustive acts and selective histories

Most of the time, the church wanted to claim ownership of its book, even if the entries were generally written by the ministers or elders. Two phrases recur at the beginnings of the manuscripts: either the book ‘belongs’ to the church or the book is for ‘the use’ of the church.²⁸ This is because a primary purpose of the book was to record the proceedings of the church meetings, often convened monthly, that dealt with church affairs. Like continental Reformed church documents, they included acts concerning the administration

of the church, and orders relating to the exercise of discipline.²⁹ The Church Book usually incorporated the church covenant, with the signatures of all members (at the time of signing and renewing), the church's articles or confession of faith, and – unless the church possessed separate books for them – correspondence, accounts, and registers of members.³⁰ Very often the records also contained a short narrative of the beginnings of the church, including its foundation from informal gatherings of hearers, as well as a brief account of the foundation ceremony in the presence of messengers from other churches.³¹ Broadly speaking, it is possible to distinguish two modes of writing in these records: the first is a mode which tended towards the exhaustive and led to the production of what may be referred to as 'act books'; the second is a mode in which information was selected and arranged according to its function, and which tended to coincide with historical writing about the church.

The function of the first mode of writing was to produce documents recording, when and where possible, all the acts of the church. For example, the Covent Garden General Baptists acquired 'a booke to enter therein the Act of the Churches and all matters & proceedings relating to the said meeting', the Cripplegate Particular Baptists ordered that 'all Matters & Things that are finally concluded In, & By the Church, be Recorded in the Church Booke', and the Canterbury Baptists owned a book 'wherein is to be Recorded y^e agre^ements orders acts & appointments of the S^d Church'.³² In many cases, the resulting documents were designed to be fair copies of 'minutes' taken during or shortly after church meetings. In the case of the Canterbury Baptists, for example, the Church Book that has survived is immaculate because debates were taken down in the meeting on separate sheets called 'wast paper' and 'rough draught'. These were preserved by the church because they contained the original signatures, but they have not survived.³³ In a quarto volume kept by the Baptist Maze Pond church, the term 'minutes' was clearly used in a distinct way to 'church book': on 12 February 1714 the church appointed five members 'to look over the Minutes of several Church Meetings past, & insert them in the Church-Book'.³⁴

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that church act books were working documents, often in constant use for many years, because it was necessary to find in them details of the spiritual life of members who were seeking letters of dismissal to move to another congregation. The exhaustive mode was not intended to provide chronicles neatly bound and kept on the minister's shelves. This explains the many signs of use, including worn pages, faded ink, and markings on the corners where pages were turned. To ease the work of scribes and readers, some Church Books included a list of contents, although these

might be written at a later date than ensuing entries.³⁵ Even with a contents page, clarity of structure could not be guaranteed: the Llangyfelach congregation divided its Church Book into nine sections, but by 1784 the list of baptisms had already spilled over into the remaining white space in several other parts of the book.³⁶ Their frequently haphazard contents meant that it was rarely easy to search Church Books written in the exhaustive mode. Unlike continental consistories, Puritan and Dissenting churches often failed to find satisfactory methods of indexing, which meant that at any given time they did not have an efficient means to discover who was a member, who had been absent from meetings or communion, who was under admonition, and who had been readmitted. The Bury St Edmunds Church Book index included a note that ‘the following Alphabet directs onely how to finde things that a registred in the Church booke, w^{ch} begineth in page 44’, since the earlier pages consisted chiefly of two church covenants and ‘other things’; these other unindexed ‘things’ included ‘Admissions of members & Children bapt^d & some cast out’, rendering the surviving alphabet a very incomplete record.³⁷ And because Church Books were in constant use, they degraded rapidly. In 1701, a certain Sister Hix wanted to move from the Sabbatarian congregation of John Belcher, in Bell Lane, to that of Mill Yard, but Bell Lane had to admit it had no idea of Hix’s history: ‘they found nothing about her in their Book but ... they had 2 Bookes that were Torn and therefore they could not tell but her Case might be thereby lost’.³⁸

Church act books contained potentially explosive material and permission to view them had to be sought and granted. The decision as to who could search them seems to have varied from one church to the next. In May 1694, for instance, a former member Robert Tibbutt asked to see the Rothwell book, but ‘y^e Church not knowing his Intentions refused to let him have it’.³⁹ Other churches might be reluctant to lend the book, but were prepared to divulge its contents to all their members. Very early on, in 1653, the Fenstanton church considered:

Whether it was not necessary that the book of Records should be read at the general meetings, in the presence of the congregation; several reasons were produced to prove it to be necessary, viz.: first, that thereby falsities may be prevented from entering in; secondly, that all the congregation thereby may become acquainted therewith[.]⁴⁰

Books could also be kept in the chapel, especially when the decision was taken to incorporate external documents, such as the minutes of General Assemblies. There is a (post-Toleration) example in the book of the General Baptist church of Shad Thames,

whose members agreed ‘that the Acts of the Assembly [of the General Baptists] be Kept in the Book for the view of Every member of this Church y^t desires it But not to be Caryed owt of the meiting hows’.⁴¹ Although the Shad Thames congregation desired their book to be consulted only by members, if the book was not under lock and key it could potentially be accessible to hearers and non-members. As well as attempting to forestall members from carrying the book home with them, the congregation was signalling its communal status through its location and visibility. In this manner the status of the church act book reflected the notion of voluntary, collective decision-making which many congregations believed to be fundamental to the idea of the gathered church.

Books begun in the second mode, those compiled using principles of selection and re-ordering, often included explanatory titles or notes near the front of the volume. The church of Christ in Woodbridge titled their volume ‘A Church Book Or A Register & Account of y^e most Material Transactions’; it consists of a brief church history with copies of the covenants of 1651 and 1690.⁴² The Mill Yard Church Book began with this note: ‘Reader: I have thought fit here in y^e beginning of y^e bo{ok} to give y^e some brief account of y^e intent thereof’.⁴³ Such an address ‘to the reader’ seems to be modelled on the prefaces in printed books; the statement reveals an unusually developed sense – for such a Church Book – of the distinct functions of author and reader, writer and public. Similarly, brother Murch of the Bampton Baptist church was asked to write a preface after the church bought a new book in 1702. Murch wrote the preface, and ‘read the same which was approved and ordered to be inserted’.⁴⁴

Addresses, accounts of intent, and prefaces were rarely needed in books whose primary purpose was to record acts and proceedings as comprehensively as possible. The scribes of books written selectively, by contrast, needed to signal that they were pursuing different objectives. Many Church Books were quite open about the selection of information. The church initially meeting at Coningsby Mill near Tattershall planned to use their book ‘to ke<e>pe in memory such thinges as are of much Consernement and of spetiall note hapninge to the baptised people and Churchis in Lincolnshire’.⁴⁵ The Arnebsy Baptists had ‘accation of late To writte down o^f judgments in matters of faith Because of some amongst us that we beleve not To be sounde in the Docteraine of Grace’.⁴⁶ These examples serve as a reminder that church histories and retrospective records were not purely designed for memorialisation, but frequently had practical and ideological functions, knitting congregations together through a continual process of self-definition in speech and writing.

The two modes of Church Book writing described so far – comprehensive and selective – were not mutually exclusive, particularly since the function of a book could change dramatically within a few years of its first use. The early pages of the first Church Book of the Llanwenarth Baptists were used to copy letters relating to Puritan churches in the 1650s; later pages record the proceedings of a few church meetings, before the church settled on using the volume as an account book.⁴⁷ Other volumes were expressly designed to have multiple functions. The Warboys Church Book was designed to include ‘Records ... since the time of thir first gathering together with their procedings & order of times – and other memorrealls’.⁴⁸ The scribe understood that the records had a chronological dimension that was being superimposed on the proceedings. Nevertheless, he was trying to produce a hybrid volume, a narrative of the history of the church that would not fail to record its proceedings as well. The following much later entry from the Hamsterley and Cold Rowley Church Book was written by Isaac Garner when he replaced William Carr as the book’s custodian:

N.B. This Book Came to my hand soon after Bro^r Carrs Death & I find their has been Omitted writeing any remarkable passages in it, since y^e year 1731./2. It belongs to y^e Church of Christ, Baptised on y^e Profession of Faith, meeting at Hamsterly & Coldrowly, in y^e County of Durham: & is Desighned for y^e Churches Book, wherein y^e Minister or Ruleing Elder or Pastor is to set downe some of y^e most remarkable Occurrances & Transactions of y^e Church, not only for y^e more Orderly Observeing of y^e things Concluded on for y^e time present, but also for y^e Direction and Comfort of y^e Generations to Come, into whose hands, thro’ y^e providence of God, it may fall. Isaac Garner.⁴⁹

This is perhaps the closest equivalent to a ‘preface’ to be found in an early Dissenting Church Book. The collective ownership of the Church Book is, once again, stressed but history writing appears, in the last instance, to be the responsibility of a single individual. The Church Book was meant to record ‘remarkable Occurrances & Transactions’, not just the minutes of the monthly meetings. The mundane and utilitarian management of church affairs coexisted with the writing of narratives about the exceptional status and fortunes of the churches of Christ. The one would have made little sense without the other. Pushing this logic to the extreme, ‘memorials’, ‘books of remembrances’, ‘books of speciall providences’, records of ‘things materiall’ – all phrases we find at the beginning of Church Books – could be turned into fully fledged historical records, redacted well after the events, such as those to be found in the Ilston, Smarden, Bristol, and Warboys Church Books.⁵⁰ These books were trying to achieve a balance between taking down the ordinary

providences of God towards his Saints, as represented through the management of daily affairs, and providing records of extraordinary providences. That Church Books often do both is not narratorial confusion; it springs from the conviction that both modes of writing have their role in compiling a working history of the gathered churches.

Signs of ownership: ministers, deacons and scribes

The collective function of the most prominent entries within Church Books, notably covenants and agreements, is reflected in the frequent appearance of first person plural pronouns and multiple signatures. Paradoxically, however, the individuality of each book's most prominent scribes could also affect its verbal and visual structure very considerably. Sometimes Church Books recorded the names of these scribes. The Aylesbury Baptists 'Ordered & agreed That br.^r T. Delafield or in his absence whom he shall appoint {be} Scribe or Register of the Churches acts & to be paid for soe doing', while the Arnesby Baptist church book explained that 'Names of Members' were 'wrote down (by Benjamin Winckles)'.⁵¹ While it was common for the scribe to be a church deacon, many of the records were compiled, written, and safeguarded by ministers, who asserted their private ownership of the records at the beginning of the manuscript. The book of the Great Gransden church in Huntingdonshire, for example, is inscribed 'Richard Conder His Book', and the book for Joseph Hussey's congregation in Cambridge is labelled 'A Church-Book kept for [his] own Private Use'.⁵² When the earliest known register of Watts's church was compiled retrospectively by Price, he proceeded to update the volume with new members and the deaths of existing members; when Price's health began to deteriorate, he interpolated a third-person account of his final 'Infirmitys'.⁵³ Much earlier, in the mid-1650s, the Baptist Church Book at Lothbury Square in London was written by the pastor Peter Chamberlen, who used it to control the church's self-presentation in the face of opposition from his rival John More. Chamberlen scribbled his own opinions and Biblical references over the official accounts of church debates, annotated More's letters to the church with caustic remarks, and used spare space to draft his own letters in response.⁵⁴

Church Books could pass through different hands in quite quick succession, and the distinction between being a custodian and an owner of the book was not always observed. This uncertainty over ownership further complicated a book's intended functions.⁵⁵ Most ministers wrote in the third person in the Church Book, but there are many examples where they reverted, at least temporarily, to the first person, and there are other signs of ministerial appropriation. In Burwell, for instance, George Doughty used blank pages at the end of the Church Book to register the birth of his children and of one grandson.⁵⁶ The

book for the gathered church at Lewes opens with a family tree, immediately followed by three columns designed for use as a baptismal register; however, the top of the middle column has been self-consciously appropriated by the minister as a space to describe his career and beliefs in the first person.⁵⁷ The book usually referred to as ‘Julius Saunders’s Diary’ contains a retrospective account of his imprisonment, minutes of church meetings for his Bedworth congregation, and a list of members annotated in various hands.⁵⁸ The first Church Book for the Ipswich Congregationalists was ‘An account of the Persons admitted into the Church’, begun by the minister John Langston, who also included a narrative of the gathering of the church in 1686; Langston periodically returned to his list of church members to record their deaths.⁵⁹

Even when a book was explicitly ‘for the use of the church’, the signature of the pastor, marks of ownership, and a recurrent use of first person narration introduced if not a confusion concerning the nature of the document, at least a strong connection between the minister and the Church Book. This in turn could indicate a symbiotic relationship between the Church Book and the minister’s other papers. The manuscript of the Congregational church in Great Yarmouth reveals the presence of two manuscripts; following the death of the minister, it was perceived to be necessary to transcribe important information from his own book of church affairs into the church’s communal record:

ther Being An omision of Entering into this Book of the names of the Children of the Brethren & Sisters: that were Batised By our late worthy Pastor M^r Thomas Allen: for about 7 6 years: they ar here entered as I find them placed by him in a book which he kept of the affairs of the Church.⁶⁰

The heavily redacted Altham Church Book indicates that ambiguity of ownership could also spread from pastor to church; inserted between the years 1711 and 1713 is a note attributed to Thomas Jolly’s successor, his nephew John, that mentions four documents: ‘the Register The Collection of Papers, A Vellum 8^{vo} [book] this Quarto and my Diery 8^{vo}’.⁶¹ Jolly does not hesitate to incorporate his ‘diary’ in a list of church documents. His note serves as a reminder that a Church Book was meant to be read in conjunction with others, such as account books, registers, and letter books containing church correspondence.

Of all the church’s papers, perhaps the most distinctive in form was the book of accounts, usually prepared by the minister or a deacon, but invariably subject to the oversight of a wider committee of elders. Prominent among a church’s costs might be

building acquisition and repair, while regular expenditure might include bread, wine, and (for Baptist churches) baptismal garments.⁶² The significance of financial accounts as a form of Church Book increased after the Act for the Better Collecting Charity Money on Briefs by Letters Patents of 1705. An early Church Book for the Hereford Presbyterians began life as ‘A Register of Briefs’ recorded ‘according to y^e Act of Parliam^t: whereby ’tis Enacted that a Register be kept of all Briefs, & y^e Sum Collected thereon’.⁶³ The Baptist congregation in Paul’s Alley considered the ‘late Act of Parliam.^t relateing to Briefs’ to be so important that a copy had to be kept ‘constantly in y^e Library’.⁶⁴ In some cases, financial accounts were written into an existing Church Book. One end of the Woodbridge Church Book included ‘An Account of Monys Collected’ for the poor ‘to be Collected as above Express’d, and lodg’d in the Hands of the Pastor, and each Collection Witness’d p^{<er>} the Past.^r and Deacons, or some or the Principal Members of the Congregation’.⁶⁵ In other congregations, the reverse occurred as the account book began to usurp the functions generally reserved for church act books, including church minutes and lists of baptisms.⁶⁶ Not only do these processes suggest that books served multiple functions; they also indicate that many of these functions – registering, accounting, subscribing, and enacting – were perceived to be complementary (and in some cases performative) records of the life of the church.

Conclusion

Analysing the style and function of Puritan and Dissenting Church Books is not easy, especially since there is still no adequate calendar of their contents. What literary scholars may bring to the enterprise is a detailed attention to the way that the manuscripts present themselves and justify their existence. This approach will enable scholars to focus more on the self-conscious role of the church officers and scribes. On the one hand, they were quite clearly conducting business that, like any other businessmen, required them to keep their books. On the other hand, the very material form of the manuscripts, combined with the polyglot structure of early-modern record keeping, encouraged proceedings and historical narratives to coalesce, with the result that many of the surviving documents are hybrid fusions of the comprehensive and the selective. This process could occur in many different ways: the churches could keep a ‘fair’ Church Book alongside rough minutes; they could compose an historical account after the events; they could also insert narratives and texts to supplement the proceedings. The Rothwell Church Book begins with a copy of twenty pages from Francis Junius’ *Ecclesiasticus* published in Leyden in 1595; the Cripplegate Baptist Church Book has a dozen pages of procedure against its minister, David Crosley,

excommunicated for lying, drinking, and fornicating; the Wapping church book relates in great detail its tractations with a new minister, Thomas Eliot; Great Gransden includes the biography of Francis Holcroft by Richard Conder; White's Alley inserts minutes of Baptist assemblies that took place in its chapel, and, in this last instance, printed pages of controversies are pasted in the manuscript, turning it into a sort of scrapbook.⁶⁷

Church Books often display an irresistible drive towards narrativity and self-representation: towards the *literary*. We should not see them as a hodgepodge of texts and discourses, where everything is thrown in together without order or sense. Church Books changed hands, and were interrupted at many points in their history; they were copied from earlier books that have disappeared or even recalled from memory; they had more or less diligent keepers. So of course, they are rather disharmonious at times. But the record keepers knew what they were doing: they were writing history, and history meant relating the ordinary and the extraordinary, the collective and the personal. Taken together, Puritan and Dissenting Church Books represent the full variety of experiences witnessed by the self-styled Saints of the Reformation.

Mark Burden and Anne Dunan-Page

Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

Notes

¹ Congregational Library (hereafter CL), II.a.15, note preceding title page.

² Leicester University Library MS 19; also CL, II.a.38 and II.a.50.

³ For a recent discussion of Restoration Presbyterianism, see M. A. Goldie, *Roger Morrice and the Puritan Whigs: The Entering Book, 1677–1691* (London: Boydell, 2016).

⁴ Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford (hereafter RPCO), Barbican: Cripplegate (London) Church Book, 1689–1723, fol. 39; RPCO, Smarden (Kent) Church Book, 1706–1843, fol. 6. Our conjectural readings of a manuscript have been provided in { } while our emendations and additions are signalled by [].

⁵ William Bartlet, *Ichnographia, Or a Model of the Primitive Congregational Way* (1647), sig. c3r.

⁶ Geoffrey Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640–1660* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957); Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965).

⁷ Particularly detailed accounts of these processes are found in the records of the White's Alley Baptist church in London, 1681–1728: London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), CLC/186/MS592/1–3; see

also the records for the Templepatrick Presbyterian church near Belfast, 1646–60: Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), CR4/12/B/1, pp. 1–160.

⁸ *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines* (1647); *A Declaration of the Faith and Order Owned and Practiced in the Congregational Churches in England* (1659); *A Confession of Faith Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians* (1677).

⁹ *The Records of a Church of Christ, meeting in Broadmead, Bristol, 1640–1687*, ed. Edward Bean Underhill (London: J. Haddon, 1847), p. 22.

¹⁰ For instance, Thomas Goodwin, *Of the Constitution, Right, Order and Government of the Churches of Christ* (1696); Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church* (1697); RPCO, MS Isaac Marlow, ‘A Treatise of a visible and Regular Gospel Church’ (previously FPC E21).

¹¹ For a complete study of early Congregational Church Books see Joel Halcomb, ‘A Social History of Congregational Religious Practice during the Puritan Revolution’ (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009). For colonial America, see James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For church records as ‘acts’, see Anne Dunan-Page, ‘Writing “things ecclesiastical”: The Literary Acts of the Gathered Churches’, *Études Épistémè* 21 (2012), <http://episteme.revues.org/417>. For correspondences, see Michael Davies, ‘Spirit in the Letters: John Bunyan’s Congregational Epistles’, *Seventeenth Century*, 25 (2009), 323–60 and for dating church records, Michael Davies, ‘When was Bunyan Elected Pastor? Fixing a Date in the Bedford Church Book’, *Bunyan Studies*, 18 (2014), 7–18.

¹² See Mark Burden, ‘Church Books and their Copies’, <https://dissent.hypotheses.org/blog/2-church-books-and-their-copies-mark-burden>.

¹³ PRONI, CR4/12/B/1, p. 160; we have expanded early modern abbreviations in < >.

¹⁴ RPCO, Bampton (Devon) Church Book, 1690–1832, p. 9.

¹⁵ RPCO, Bromsgrove (Worcestershire) Church Book, 1672–1725, fol. 169.

¹⁶ Dr Williams’s Library (hereafter DWL), 38.24; *The Exeter Assembly*, ed. Allan Brockett (Torquay: Devon & Cornwall Record Society, 1965).

¹⁷ RPCO, Coningsby (Counsbury) and Tattershall (Lincolnshire) Church Book, 1654–1728, pp. 10, 18, 23, 25, 40, 43.

¹⁸ For instance, *Records of the Churches of Christ, Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham, 1644–1720*, ed. Edward Bean Underhill (London: The Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), hereafter *Fenstanton*, ed. Underhill; *The Nonconformist Register of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths*, ed. John Horsfall Turner (Brighouse: Jowett, 1881); *Some Early Nonconformist Church Books*, ed. H. G. Tibbutt (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1972); *The Records of a Church of Christ Meeting in Bristol, 1640–1687*, ed. Roger Hayden, vol. xxvii (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1974); *The Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford, 1656–1766*, ed. H. G. Tibbutt (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1976); *The Ilston Book: Earliest Register of Welsh Baptists*, ed. B. G. Owens (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1996); *A Transcription of the Church Book of Speldhurst and Pembury (later Tunbridge Wells)*, ed. Leonard J. Maguire (London: The General Baptist Assembly, 1998); *The Cockermouth Congregational Church Book (1651–c.1765)*, ed. R. B. Wordsworth ([Carlisle]: Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, 2012).

¹⁹ See especially DWL, 76.1–21.

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- ²⁰ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), RG 4/5–4491.
- ²¹ Mark Burden, Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page and Joel Halcomb, *An Inventory of Puritan and Dissenting Records, 1640–1714* (2016), <http://www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/online-publications/dissenting-records>. For New England church records, see Margaret Bendroth, James F. Cooper and Ken Minkema, ‘New England’s Hidden Histories: Colonial-Era Church Records’, <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/neh/main>.
- ²² RPCO, Covent Garden (London), Church Book 1, 1691–1700, fol. 2.
- ²³ RPCO, Coningsby (Counsbury) and Tattershall (Lincolnshire) Church Book, 1654–1728, fol. 1.
- ²⁴ Compare RPCO, Broughton (Hampshire), 1/1, 1655–84 (quarto Church Book), RPCO, Broughton (Hampshire), 1.2, 1699–1730 (octavo account book), and RPCO, Covent Garden (London), Church Book 1, 1691–1700 (folio).
- ²⁵ Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, Portaferry Presbyterian church register, 1699–1822; CL, II.a.50; RPCO, Barbican: Paul’s Alley (London) Church Book, 1699–1739.
- ²⁶ Kent History and Library Centre, N4/3/1; LMA, CLC/186/MS592/1.
- ²⁷ National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), 409B; LMA, CLC/179/MS20228/1B; Tyne & Wear Archives, C.NC68/2/1/1.
- ²⁸ For example RPCO, Tottlebank (Lancashire) Church Book, 1669–1854, p. 1; RPCO, Slapton (Northamptonshire) Church Book, 1681–1767, entry for 1681; DWL, 38.24, entry for 1717.
- ²⁹ For continental books, see Raymond Mentzer, *Les registres des consistoires des Églises réformées de France, XVIe – XVIIe siècles. Un inventaire* (Geneva: Droz, 2014); *Dire l’interdit. The Vocabulary of Censure and Exclusion in the Early Modern Reformed Tradition*, ed. Raymond Mentzer, Françoise Moreil and Philippe Chareyre, Brill’s Series in Church History 40 (Leyden and Boston: Brill, 2010); *La mesure du fait religieux: L’approche méthodologique des registres consistoriaux (Espace calvinien européen XVIe–XVIIIe s.)*, ed. Philippe Chareyre and Raymond Mentzer, Colloque international de Pau, 9–11 juin 2005, *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français*, 153 (October–November–December 2007): 457–711.
- ³⁰ See Mark Burden, ‘What is a Dissenting Church Book’, <https://dissent.hypotheses.org/blog/1545–2>.
- ³¹ RPCO, Tottlebank (Lancashire) Church Book, 1669–1854, p. 1.
- ³² RPCO, Covent Garden (London), Church Book 1, 1691–1700, fol. 4; DWL, 38.81, fol. 1; RPCO, Barbican: Cripplegate (London) Church Book, fol. 12.
- ³³ For an illuminating account of different versions of continental records, see Judith Pollmann, ‘Off the Record: Problems in the Quantification of Calvinist Church Discipline’, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 33 (2002): 423–38.
- ³⁴ RPCO, Maze Pond (London) Church Book, 1713–22, n. fol. (12 February 1714).
- ³⁵ Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, 1215/5, fol. 1.
- ³⁶ NLW, 369A, pp. iv, 61–128.
- ³⁷ Suffolk Record Office: Bury St Edmunds branch, FK3/502/1, fol. 2.
- ³⁸ DWL, 533.B, fol. 121.
- ³⁹ DWL, Rothwell Church Book, fol. 117 (microfilm copy).
- ⁴⁰ *Fenstanton*, ed. Underhill, p. 97.
- ⁴¹ DWL, OD15, entry for 23 June 1707.

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- ⁴² Suffolk Record Office: Ipswich branch, FK3/9/1/1.
- ⁴³ DWL, 533.B.1, fol. 1. Unfortunately, nothing follows, and the Church Book begins without the promised ‘brief account’.
- ⁴⁴ RPCO, Bampton (Devon) Church Book, 1690–1832, p. 35; Murch’s ‘preface’ is probably the summary of doctrine with scriptural references, pp. 1–2.
- ⁴⁵ RPCO, Coningsby (Counsbury) and Tattershall (Lincolnshire) Church Book, 1654–1728, fol. 1.
- ⁴⁶ Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office, N/B/7/1, p. 11.
- ⁴⁷ NLW 409B, pp. 1–28, 37–41, 42–162.
- ⁴⁸ RPCO, Fenstanton, Warbois & St Ives (Cambridgeshire) Church Book, 1643–1824, opposite fol. 1; see *Fenstanton*, ed. Underhill, pp. 265–86.
- ⁴⁹ RPCO, Hexham and Hamsterley (Durham) Church Book, 1651–1848, fol. 17.
- ⁵⁰ Brown University John Hay Library, Ilston Church Book; RPCO, Smarden (Kent) Church Book, 1706–1843; Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, Edward Terrill’s records, 1640–1784; RPCO, Fenstanton, Warbois & St Ives (Cambridgeshire) Church Book, 1643–1824. Another relevant set of printed church records, *Ecclesiastica, or a Book of Remembrance ... of the Church of Christ ... of Axminster* (Exeter: Townsend, 1874) is not discussed here: the manuscript is lost, and the published text shows signs of very considerable editorial intervention and rewriting.
- ⁵¹ Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, NB 8/1; Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office, N/B/7/1, p. 28.
- ⁵² Cambridgeshire Archives, R107/109, n. fol.
- ⁵³ Leicester University Library, MS 19, fols. 11–12.
- ⁵⁴ Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS d.828, pp. 28–40, 85–8.
- ⁵⁵ See, for example, TNA, RG 4/68, combining the functions of ministerial diary, commonplace book, and register for the Barnstaple Congregational church, Devon.
- ⁵⁶ CL, I.f.36, n. fol.
- ⁵⁷ East Sussex Record Office, NU 1/1/1, fols. 1–2.
- ⁵⁸ Warwickshire County Record Office, CR802, pp. 1–22, 60–93.
- ⁵⁹ Suffolk Record Office: Ipswich branch, FK3/1/11/5, fols. 1–14.
- ⁶⁰ Norfolk Record Office, MS FC19/1, fol. 15.
- ⁶¹ CL, II.a.12, n. fol.
- ⁶² RPCO, Broughton (Hampshire), Church Book 1/2, 1699–1730, fol. 4 (reversed).
- ⁶³ Herefordshire Archive and Records Centre, AT88/1; see also Kent History and Library Centre, N4/3/1.
- ⁶⁴ RPCO, Barbican: Paul’s Alley (London) Church Book, 1695–1854, p. 105.
- ⁶⁵ Suffolk Record Office: Ipswich branch, FK3/9/1/1, title page.
- ⁶⁶ RPCO, Broughton (Hampshire), Church Book 1/2, 1699–1730.
- ⁶⁷ DWL, Rothwell Church Book (microfilm copy); RPCO, Barbican: Cripplegate (London) Church Book; Strict Baptist Historical Society, Wapping (London) Church Book; Huntingdonshire Archives, FR6/1/1; LMA, CLC/186/MS592/1–3.