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London Street: A Memoir (Book Review)

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London Street: A Memoir. Jane E. Griffioen. Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2020. 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-7252-6755-8. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt University.

Let me be honest. I have two significant problems talking about this book. The first is that it's a memoir. Memoirs aren't inherently problematic, but they do make us make judgments about people's lives, judgments that aren't always pleasant to make. "Here's what happened," they report, and then they expect us simply to believe it—or, more to the point, expect us not to guess that there isn't more to the events than we're being told. I kept wishing Jane Griffioen's *London Street* was a novel, not a memoir. If it were a novel, it would be easier to talk about because its truth would have been fictional and not, as in the case, biography.

And then there's this. Jane Griffioen's *London Street* examines a life that is so close to mine, so exacting with respect to what it felt like to grow up within the powerful reach of a peculiar American religious community—mine too—at a particular time in that community's history, that at times throughout the book, I could not help feeling she was talking about me, and blushing.

Frederick Manfred used to say that ethnic writers—and he considered himself one—had to be careful not to use too many “ins,” too much ethnic minutiae, because readers who don't share heritage or background can quickly feel walled out. In the world of the old-line Dutch Reformed, a Sunday peppermint is as much as a sacrament as communion bread.

Jane Griffioen is so precise, so exacting in the verities of a post-World War II Christian Reformed world, that the exposition almost hurt. At one point in the memoir, she uses the lyrics from an old psalm no CRC ever sings anymore. I started reading those lyrics without remembering, and suddenly the music simply returned, eerily drawn from memory's deep recesses. I enjoyed that phenomenon, and I loved the fact that she played with the nuances of a theological history that tried so hard to keep us—Jane Griffioen and me—well away from “worldliness.”

“Worldliness.” I don't know that I've ever spoken to my children about the dangers of “worldliness.” That word would likely have no psychic resonance with either of them. But darkness still arises in me when I see that word because the evil that constitutes its horror is still resonant, even if the word itself has lost what was once its inherent danger. “Worldliness” creates abundant darkness in the story Jane Griffioen tells of her life, as well it should, saith the old Calvinist.

And now, since I'm telling you about Jane Griffioen's life, I am myself falling into sin because I can't help the feeling that I'm gossiping. The life she opens up on the pages of her memoir is so vivid to those of us who grew up as she did that simply telling you about it makes me feel I'm talking behind the back of a member of my own small community. And I am.

Let me say just a word or two about the genre of memoir. When I say that I wished she'd written this as a novel, I mean that the opportunities for her story to carry universal truth, or so it seems to me, are simply more available. *London Street* is Jane Griffioen's story, right down to her preachers' names (both of them, by the way, occupied the pulpit at First CRC, Sioux Center!). Because I knew both of those preachers quite well, felt their stunning impact, meeting them in the story actually threw me, and will throw a reader like me, off the narrative.

Memoir tests the faith of the reader in a way that fiction doesn't. I kept second-guessing Griffioen about the weave and the fabric of the story. For instance, she gives scant reference to her husband. I'm sorry that's true because his relative absence makes me wonder about their relationship, which is not, nor need it be, somehow a part of the story she tells.

While it's true that critical readers might greet a fictional account of this life with similar questions, when the writer's commitment to verifiable detail creates a narrative that's as exact as *London Street*, there are too many opportunities for me to wonder whether others who know the story would note some significantly “other” details of the events—i.e., what does her father remember of this moment or that, where he does remember, and how might he tell the story with a different focus?

But those questions have far more to do with genre of *London Street* than they do with book itself. It is a memoir. It is not fiction.

On the other hand, the deliberate and convincing exactness by which she catches the nuances of the world she grew up in is the memoir's great strength, and I loved reading it, all of it. *London Street*, the street in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on which Ms. Griffioen was raised, was in every way a small town, even though she grew up in a city. If you're Dutch Reformed and you don't like the title—too British, maybe—fine; just rename it Oostburg or Lynden or

Zeeland or Whitinsville, all of which are cut from the same ethno-religious fabric.

So, ironically, one of the problems I have been talking about in her memoir is an immense attribute: by talking about it, I can't help but feel as if I'm talking behind her back. She prompts guilt by evoking scenes so rich within my own memory that I know it all, chapter-and-verse.

At the bottom of the story, two deep and difficult concerns eventually emerge. First, mental illness. Much of the memoir arises from a story Griffioen didn't grow up with, even though she did, a story of her mother's girlhood horror and humiliation, a story which happened long before Griffioen herself was born.

But the shame her mother suffered—humiliation at the hands of a family and a community that simply repressed the story, locked it up behind locked doors, acted as if it hadn't happened—is the real villainy. What happened to her mother put her mother, her sister, and herself into Pine Rest (and that too is an “in”—into a mental hospital) at different times in their individual lives.

But Griffioen doesn't stop there. Why are there stories that really can't be spoken of in this peculiar tightly knit community? What she wants to answer—and she does—is that we all would rather not mention them, given that we (of the old-line Dutch Reformed cultural and theological ethos) don't want to blame a sovereign God we extol as a great lover and Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Shame, Lewis Smedes says in *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve*, is the dark side

of “family values.” It's the blessed curse of a deeply caring family and community.

Some say Calvinism rests on two significant pillars—the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. That dynamic duo is at the heart of things in the life and the story of Jane Griffioen. *London Street* is something of a rarity, a memoir that is maybe all about theological doctrine.

Which is not to say she rejects the doctrine or the man who dispenses it. Her father, who, late in life, wanders back into the Protestant Reformed Church of his youth (that's an “in” too), is the source of that overpowering theology, the theology at times you can't help thinking she would like to blame for the tonnage of emotional problems that's there in her own story.

But she can't. There's still something there in him she won't forsake—and, oddly enough, it's love. Speaking of her father, she says, “He might be a prisoner to his theology, but he hadn't locked his heart away.” The source of terrifying dogma that threatens to lock up the family in its own theological icebox is her father, a man who has literally given his life—held down two jobs for as long as she can remember—for the sake of a family he has always loved hugely, and a wife who had a child before he married her.

It would be nice if we could nail down the true villainy in all of this, but Jane Griffioen can't do it, and neither can we, not with the kind of exactness some readers might delight in discovering. Puzzle pieces are missing from this memoir, but then often enough they're missing from our own puzzles too.

That's life. Even for the Dutch Reformed.

Scriptural Reflections on History. K. J. Popma. Translated and edited by Harry Van Dyke. Aalten. The Netherlands: Wordbridge Publishing, 2020. ISBN: 978-90-76660-57-8, x + 142 pp. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt University.

Addressing the American Historical Association in 1951, E. Harris Harbison spoke of the rise of an Augustinian-style interest in the meaning of history. He was right. Beginning in the 1930s, and deepening in the 1940s and early 1950s, a highly diverse range of Christians offered their thoughts on the subject, including Herbert Wood (1934), L. E. Elliott-Binns (1943), Oscar Cullmann (1945), Emil Brunner (1947), Eric Rust (1947), Herbert Butterfield (1948/9), Karl Löwith (1949), Eric Preiss (1949/50), C. S. Lewis (1950), Jean Danielou (1950), and Christopher Dawson (1951). It is hard not to conclude that the deepening crisis of the 1930s, the Second World War, and the coming of the Cold War had a great deal to

do with this development.

Scriptural Reflections on History, now published for the first time in English, was part of this movement. It originally appeared as *Calvinistische geschiedenis-beschouwing* in 1945 and was published by Wever of Franeker. Its author was Klaas J. Popma (1903-86), a classical scholar who was among those influenced by the philosophical work of Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Many Reformed people in the Netherlands knew of him for his seven-volume work on the Heidelberg Catechism, *Levensbeschouwing* (1958-65), while English-language readers may know his *A Battle for Righteousness: The Message of the Book of Job* (1998).