

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



**Mackay, Christopher. False Prophets and Preachers: Henry
Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster**

Geoffrey Dipple

Volume 40, Number 3, Summer 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086156ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i3.28760>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dipple, G. (2017). Review of [Mackay, Christopher. False Prophets and Preachers: Henry Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40(3), 320–322. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i3.28760>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2017

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

instances she seems to submit to him in that role; however, it does not stop her from offering her opinion, and manipulating and controlling him.

The edited volume is an excellent addition to scholarship on the history of early modern women. While social and economic historians have cited Alessandra's letters on many occasions, Bryce's compilation provides a unique look into the concept of motherhood and what it meant to the elite Renaissance woman. Bryce admits that her edited volume is not a "quest for epistolary elegance and fine writing," but rather a compilation of private communication by a mother who is conveying day-to-day personal information to her distanced sons. These letters provide a valuable insight for professional historians as well as for general readers who are interested in Renaissance Florence.

NILAB FEROZAN

McMaster University

Mackay, Christopher.

False Prophets and Preachers: Henry Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster.

Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2016. Pp. x, 318 + 14 ill. ISBN 978-1-6124-8142-5 (hardcover) US\$65.

Anabaptist control of the city of Münster for sixteen months from February 1534 to June 1535 is one of the best-known episodes of the Radical Reformation. With its lurid tales of polygamy, communism, and sometimes theatrical executions, it confirmed the exaggerated suspicions of contemporaries about Anabaptism and has drawn the interest of students, and not a few scholars, ever since. Henry Gresbeck, a cabinetmaker and burgher of the city, lived in Anabaptist Münster for fifteen months as the besieging forces of the prince-bishop and neighbouring Protestant princes camped outside its walls. His chronicle, likely written within a year of the city's capture by those forces and presented here for the first time in an English translation, is the only known eye-witness account of events from inside Münster. However, Christopher Mackay offers us more than just the first English translation of a crucial Reformation source. His text also represents part of a new, authoritative critical edition. After its composition, the original version of Gresbeck's work disappeared—into the archives, Mackay

speculates, of the prince-bishop of Münster. A Low German critical edition exists, published by C. A. Cornelius in 1853, but it is based on two derivative manuscripts. Mackay has worked from an earlier manuscript discovered in the Cologne archives, possibly Gresbeck's own clean copy. The English translation includes the pagination of the original manuscript and will be supplemented by a companion volume in the original Low German which can easily be cross-referenced with the translation.

Mackay introduces his source with a clear summary of the geographic, political, religious, and military contexts for the events described in it, as well as solid background on Gresbeck and his manuscript. And he appends to it English translations of four documents he deems relevant to the discussion of Gresbeck's account: a letter sent back to Münster by the prophet, preacher, and turncoat Henricus Graes after he fled the city at the end of 1534; a letter Gresbeck tried to smuggle out of the city in late spring 1535 offering to open a gate to the attackers; and two accounts from the besieging forces which describe the capture of the city and Gresbeck's role in that process.

As a citizen of Münster whose relationship to the Anabaptist leadership in the city remains unclear—he appears to have played a significant role in defending one of the gates right up to the time of his defection—Gresbeck is hardly an impartial observer of events. His value as a witness is compromised further if, as Mackay suspects, he wrote this account to highlight his own role in the capture of the city and thereby gain restitution for his confiscated property. Finally, the account is often organized according to an associative logic that leads Gresbeck to insert detailed stories in the narrative on the basis of their thematic rather than their chronological connection to other events, thereby seriously confusing the chronology of the account. All of these shortcomings Mackay addresses effectively through his introduction and extensive and detailed footnotes. Particularly valuable are cross references to the other comprehensive account of Anabaptist Münster by a contemporary: a chronicle written a generation later by Hermann von Kerksenbrock, a Catholic schoolmaster who fled the city as a child when the Anabaptists seized power. Oddly, though, in a work seemingly published for English-speakers, Mackay's references are only to the Latin critical edition of Kerksenbrock's work and do not include citations of his own 2007 English translation.

On one other matter, Mackay's assessment seems slightly off the mark. While his introduction generally does a very good job of setting up the

context for the events described by Gresbeck, his explanation of the religious background could have been slightly more nuanced. On the one hand, he usually characterizes religious reformers as either Lutherans or Anabaptists; the Reformed appear only once in his account when he makes a brief reference to Zwinglianism in East Frisia. Similarly, he tends to treat the Melchiorite tradition of Anabaptism which flourished in north Germany and the Netherlands as synonymous with Anabaptism as a whole. There are brief allusions to other Anabaptist traditions, as on page 8 when he notes that Anabaptism began in the south, but these are few and far between and seem to ignore the fact that while Melchiorite Anabaptism did share characteristics with other varieties elsewhere, it was distinctive in some important ways. Together, these tendencies run the risk of pointing the unwary reader to an older view of both the radical Reformation and the beginning of the events in Münster, which over-emphasizes the importance of apocalypticism and ignores the observations of scholars such as James Stayer and Ralf Klötzer that the initial Anabaptist willingness to use force in Münster had much more to do with defending a communally-based Swiss/south German style civic Reformation, out of place in the north, than with realizing an apocalyptic timetable.

But these are minor problems in an incredibly valuable source. With his translations of the works of Kerssenbrock and now Gresbeck, Mackay has opened up events in Münster to a whole new generation of readers.

GEOFFREY DIPPLE

University of Alberta

Martínez, Miguel.

Front Lines: Soldiers' Writing in the Early Modern Hispanic World.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 309 + 12 ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-4842-5 (hardcover) US\$59.95.

This fascinating new book shows how the Spanish Golden Age was really made of iron—both literal, as in the metal used to make military weapons, and figurative, as in the unbending determination with which these soldier/poets faced enemy forces. In this engaging study, Miguel Martínez exploits a treasure trove of previously unstudied documents, many of them surviving in only a