



J.D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, 455 pp., ISBN 978 0 8028 6906 7).

Few in the contemporary Netherlands have much appreciation for the fact that the nineteenth-century statesman Abraham Kuyper continues to appeal to a wider public imagination, from North American evangelicals to South Korean Presbyterians. James Bratt's new biography is a critical but sympathetic study of Kuyper as a person and of Kuyper's ideas, ideas which continue to have resonance among these constituencies, including those centered around Calvin College in Michigan, where Bratt is professor. Whereas the most recent Dutch biographer of Kuyper, Jeroen Koch, downplays Kuyper's long-term historical significance, Bratt seems to share the estimation of the American historian Mark Noll in seeing Kuyper as perhaps the most seminal public theologian in the modern history of global Protestantism.

This is furthermore an important consideration because Bratt's mission of analyzing Kuyper's ideas for a (Christian) Anglophone readership has important consequences for how he situates his book historiographically – or rather how he chooses not to. Unlike another recent English-language book on Kuyper, John Halsey Wood's *Going Dutch in the Modern Age* (2013), Bratt engages very little with the existing Kuyper historiography. In this respect he steadfastly chooses to stay on his side of the Atlantic. He has read Koch, for example, but does not position his own biography in reference to him, and this characterizes his whole work, which seems to assume that its readership would not wish to be encumbered by any historiographical debate. The book has no footnotes or endnotes as such, but each chapter is supplied toward the end of the book with an annotated bibliography which indicate the sources of Bratt's work. These 'notes' do suggest that Bratt is well acquainted not only with the Kuyper literature, but also with the key works in political and intellectual history of late nineteenth-century Europe and America, a context in which the author places Kuyper.

At the same time, it is placing Kuyper in his context which is sometimes one of the weaker aspects of the book. The descriptions of religious, social and political life in the Netherlands are often done in impressionistic brushstrokes; the reader all too seldom benefits from a clear read of what motivated Kuyper's allies and opponents – or why Kuyper reacted to them as he did. In this respect, Koch's biography offers more texture and insight. At other times, Bratt's systematic efforts to tie Kuyper's world to international cultural developments, such as the work of Freud and Picasso,

though sometimes refreshing, are often too broad to offer much additional insight.

Bratt is an intellectual historian, and what he does impressively in this book is to offer an intellectual biography of Kuyper that effectively shows the compelling interaction between the creative range of Kuyper's ideas and the changes in his personal life, including the several breakdowns which he suffered. Bratt shows, for example, how the electoral loss of 1905 that removed him from the premiership shaped the devotionals that Kuyper wrote in the months afterwards. He sketches effectively how Kuyper's shifting theology of the church were modified over time, starting in the very different pastoral experiences in Beesd, Utrecht and Amsterdam and culminating in the *Doleantie*, which produced a different outcome than Kuyper had hoped. Kuyper's evolving views of politics, 'sphere sovereignty' and the church also receive extensive analysis, and constitute some of the very best parts of the book.

Though Bratt is chiefly interested in Kuyper's ideas, his biography is admirable for its comprehensive attention to Kuyper's life, covering the relationship with his wife and children, as well as more embarrassing parts of his life, such as the knighthood-for-money scandal. The tone of Bratt's biographical analysis seems to be set by his judgment at the beginning of the book that 'Abraham Kuyper was a great man, but not a nice one'. Despite this critical appraisal Bratt succeeds as a biographer, more than Koch, in sensitively entering into Kuyper's own internal struggles and limitations, both in respect to the intellectual (in)consistency of his thought as well as his personal demons.

The biography is divided into three sections. The first, 'Foundations', begins with the national and familial context into which Kuyper was born in 1837 and follows Kuyper from his studies in modernist Leiden to a Calvinist orthodoxy, ending with his mental and physical collapse in 1877 following his intense encounter with the British Holiness movement in Brighton. The second, 'Constructions', follows Kuyper from his organization of the Anti-Revolutionary Party through to 1897, when Kuyper was feted during the twenty-fifth anniversary of his newspaper *De Standaard*. Bratt identifies this moment as the high point of Kuyper's life, when he was widely recognized for having established a party, denomination and a university, as well as for his role as journalist, theologian and cultural critic. The last section, 'Shadows', starts with Kuyper's tour of the United States in 1898 and ends with his death in 1920. Kuyper's successes and failures as a political leader are highlighted, as well as his views of race, of Islam, and of the perils of modernity for Christian belief. Kuyper's diminishing intellectual abilities to adjust to new developments are discussed in the last couple of chapters. A concluding section ends with a reflection of Kuyper's significance, and his possible importance as 'a man for many countries'.

To Kuyper specialists, Bratt's biography may not yield radically new insights. But it is a signal achievement to bring the life and thought of this eclectic and productive statesman into a comprehensive study characterized by intellectual depth and subtlety. It is, moreover, well-written, even witty. And despite the limitations of his approach, Bratt rescues Kuyper from a narrow Netherlandic focus and allows for new reflection about the historical significance of this outsized and controversial figure.

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