

Ian J. Shaw, *Churches, Revolutions, and Empires: 1789–1914*
(Christian Focus, 2012), xii+561 pages.

People tend to view the period between the close of the Napoleonic Wars and the outbreak of the First World War as a fairly sedentary period. Contrary to popular thought, however, this era, the so-called “long” nineteenth century, 1789–1914, was a time of massive political, intellectual and cultural ferment. And this was not without significant impact on the church in the West. Ian Shaw, the Director of the Langham Scholarship Programme in the UK when he wrote this book, capably and confidently charts the course of the western Church through this era of upheaval and change. Shaw’s grasp of primary and secondary sources is impressive as is his ability to synthesize.

Shaw’s chapter on the birth of the modern missionary movement (p.95–130), for example, is typical of the quality of the book. He refuses to locate its origins in the mind and heart of William Carey, as is so often done, but shows with reference to the scholarship of men like W.R. Ward, A.F. Walls, and Brian Stanley that “the cradle of the movement was more truly Halle [with August Francke and the Pietists], or Herrnhut [with the Moravians], than the parlour of the Baptist manse in Kettering [the traditional place where Carey and friends decided to form the Baptist Missionary Society]” (p.128). He also probes the factors that led to the rise of the missionary movement, from the Enlightenment to theology, and concludes that “undoubtedly...the reasons for the expansion of Protestant mission [*sic*] are complex” (p. 128). Shaw rightly recognizes that this does not take away from Carey’s achievements, which were truly radical in their day (p.129)—as the critic of evangelical missions, Sydney Smith quipped, “if a tinker is a devout man, he infallibly sets off for the East” (cited p.106). But what Shaw is doing in this chapter is setting Carey in the rich context in which his life must be seen if it is truly to be understood.

Each of the chapters that explore topics like the French Revolution and its legacy, the ending of the slave trade and slavery, industrialization, the revolution of Darwinian science does something comparable. This is history on the big scale and an excellent example of such. Shaw’s conclusion is sobering: he concludes that the First World War essentially buried Europe’s Christendom and that the real hope for the historical future of the Church lies in the churches of the Global South, where Carey interestingly enough had been active.

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