



Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet

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This definitive biography reveals the complicated inner life of the founding father of the Protestant Reformation, whose intellectual assault on Catholicism ushered in a century of upheaval that transformed Christianity and changed the course of world history.

On October 31, 1517, so the story goes, a shy monk named Martin Luther nailed a piece of paper to the door of the Castle Church in the university town of Wittenberg. The ideas contained in these Ninety-five Theses, which boldly challenged the Catholic Church, spread like wildfire. Within two months, they were known all over Germany. So powerful were Martin Luther's broadsides against papal authority that they polarized a continent and tore apart the very foundation of Western Christendom. Luther's ideas inspired upheavals whose consequences we live with today.

But who was the man behind the Ninety-five Theses? Lyndal Roper's magisterial new biography goes beyond Luther's theology to investigate the inner life of the religious reformer who has been called "the last medieval man and the first modern one." Here is a full-blooded portrait of a revolutionary thinker who was, at his core, deeply flawed and full of contradictions. Luther was a brilliant writer whose biblical translations had a lasting impact on the German language. Yet he was also a strident fundamentalist whose scathing rhetorical attacks threatened to alienate those he might persuade. He had a colorful, even impish personality, and when he left the monastery to get married ("to spite the Devil," he explained), he wooed and wed an ex-nun. But he had an ugly side too. When German peasants rose up against the nobility, Luther urged the aristocracy to slaughter them. He was a ferocious anti-Semite and a virulent misogynist, even as he argued for liberated human sexuality within marriage.

A distinguished historian of early modern Europe, Lyndal Roper looks deep inside the heart of this singularly complex figure. The force of Luther's personality, she argues, had enormous historical effects—both good and ill. By bringing us closer than ever to the man himself, she opens up a new vision of the Reformation and the world it created and draws a fully three-dimensional portrait of its founder.

Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet Details

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From Reader Review Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet for online ebook

Jan-Maat says

I don't know. In the beginning was the word. And for the first 100 pages or so I thought the words fantastic, after that it went down hill. Is it the word or is it me? Does the book drown under the scope of the subject or does my thinking drown out the book? Is that my weariness rather than an objective criticism. I think on the whole this is a very ok biography of Martin Luther, with some good points but not enough of them to make a very good biography overall rather like a pain au chocolate that doesn't have much chocolate. Probably too detailed for a new comer to the subject, equally not really thorough enough if you are a bit familiar with Reformation history. This a biography about a theologian that doesn't go into depth about theology, about a would be church reformer who eventually founded a new church which passes over very lightly what a profound development that must have been for Luther and his supporters. It is a history written by a woman in which women are entirely silent, except for Argula von Grumbach (view spoiler)for two paragraphs a couple of pages before the end of the text. Even closer to the end, Roper tells us that Luther's translation of the Bible into German was perhaps his "*most lasting achievement*" (p.421), so profound and important an achievement that she barely mentions it in the main course of her book. Perhaps she was spoilt for choice, or just couldn't decide what the focus of her book would be.

Above all it seems to me this is Martin Luther as seen through the story of his relationships with other men, friends, enemies, and father figures (sometimes all in the same person).

Towards the end of the book (again) Roper contrasts Luther with Albrecht Dürer, the parochial versus the world-open, a consistent and well handled theme is that Luther was (shockingly) a product of his environment. Roper argues that the key point that the mining communities owned by the squabbling Counts of Mansfeld, three of them, sharing an odd triple castle, from whom independent mining contractors, like Luther's father, Hans Luder, held short term leases, was a peculiar place many of his attitudes Roper says, on a gendered division of labour, towards secular authority, against Capitalism and high finance, come from that highly specific environment, one which was atypical for the Germany of his age. Implicitly Luther's reformation was never going to be democratic, conciliary and egalitarian because that wasn't the world he grew up in, instead it was a macho, competitive environment in which God gave you ores in your lease, or the Devil fooled you into paying to work a dud patch. This was very different to the communal political environment which shaped the fundamental outlooks of Martin Bucer and Zwingli. The latter and later Calvin leading reformations, Roper argues, which were focused on the community rather than on the individual instead.

Another important pattern established by his father and repeated in Luther's monastic experience was of the father figure planning the son's future and placing him in roles useful to the father, with breaches and breakdown experienced by both sides as intense and unforgivable experiences (view spoiler). In time Luther repeated this pattern on his friends and supporters, earmarking them for certain roles and going through emotional turmoil when they went sour.

Along related lines, Luther was a highly successful and innovative polemicist, but this was something that made coalition building and reconciliation almost impossible, indeed when once or twice Luther was reconciled with those he disagreed with it was only by the other party agreeing they had been completely wrong.

One senses that in place of the authority of the Church and its tradition Luther placed the authority of his own opinion, he placed scripture first, although he read scripture non-literally, he believed its meaning was self-evident and couldn't deal with divergent readings. I wondered if Roper much liked Luther, and since she apparently spent ten years working on this book, it wouldn't be surprising if she came to hate him, yet another strength I felt was her take on Luther's physicality.

Perhaps for her the core of Luther's theology was that the body was God's creation (view spoiler), sexuality as much as the enjoyment of food and drink was part of God's intention, man of course was inherently sinful but this meant that everything human was equally sinful, for Luther the struggle throughout his life and one which affected him painfully with melancholy and anxiety were issues of faith - could he believe in the grace that God extended to man - particularly when his own experience with father figures was combative and unforgiving. Roper shows a sunny side of Luther; enjoying married life, the progress his children made in their toilet training, beer, games and friendship. It's moderately interesting that the views of Church father St Augustine had been strictly orthodox back in the day but by the sixteenth century inspired both Luther and Calvin and were to split the church.

There's a certain amount of psychologising which isn't to everybody's taste, but is a temptation hard to avoid when Luther's complete works run to 120 printed volumes and he returns to key experiences and significant dreams, he certainly found his own inner life compelling - his father confessor in the monastery telling Luther that he didn't understand him as Luther attempted to explain his spiritual angst. I feel though that it takes an axe to church history (and maybe that is no bad thing) and I wondered how far the author's experience of her own father's time as a presbyterian minister in Australia shaped her approach. If the history of religion is rich and varied because human psychology is rich varied, well so be it, but again that won't be an attitude that is to everybody's taste.

Less appealing, aside from the bullying, was the anti-semitism, here largely and curiously dumped in to a several page section towards the close of the book - the big question in every biography I guess is how far does a person develop and change - Roper here implies that Luther was absolutely the same all the way through, she doesn't contextualise his anti-semitism, although she cites a letter of his in which he expresses his fear of catching diseases from the breath of Jews which strikes me as unusual, (view spoiler) peculiarly anxious, it's all a bit Martin Luther and the halitosos of Doom.

That leads on to the issue of Luther's influence which is curiously absent from Roper's book, in his early life he is a media superstar sparking Reformations across Germany, he has, Roper shows, a close relationship with Georg Spalatin, a key adviser to Friedrich the Wise. Friedrich doesn't become a Lutheran though he protects Luther and tolerates his activities and those of his supporters, even when they go against his interests - causing disorder or undermining the income he made from allowing access to his extensive relic collection. Once Friedrich dies there is no mention of any comparable bond, but Roper occasionally asserts Luther's influence without exploring it (view spoiler). At the same time Luther's rigid support for secular authority is an important part of his outlook, while we can see that he literally owed his life to Friedrich's protection, this is something implicit in the text - as the implications of the expectation of imminent martyrdom on the reformer's thinking and behaviour.

Cranach the Elder gets his due - a fair amount of space given over to his woodcuts and his importance in shaping Luther's image and the iconography of the Lutheran church, in the beginning was the word, but in the end is the image.

Scott says

In terms of Reformation books to come out this year, I have been very much looking forward to this one. While early reviews had highlighted it to be extremely learned and critical, I wasn't expecting to find so much sympathy and care for the subject. Roper, who worked on this book for over a decade, has written one of the most fascinating accounts of Luther's life to date. She tells familiar stories but highlights often overlooked aspects, especially dealing with the relational context of many disputes. Her understanding of early modern Germany also makes this book such a treat. And while she wants to replace the Erickson model of "psychological interpretation" ala Freud, she never veers to far off the course in ungrounded speculation.

I would not recommend this as the first book on Luther for new readers looking for an introduction. But for those of us who have waded through many waters of Luther studies, this work stands at the top for its erudition, lucidity, and engagement with the subject. A wonderful read!

Jill Meyer says

This year, 2017, is the 500th anniversary of the posting - in whatever manner - by Augustinian monk Martin Luther, of his "Ninety-five Theses" on the All Souls Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Historians aren't too sure how these Theses was actually mounted on the door, a fact explored in Lyndal Roper's new bio of Luther, "Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet". Luther's grievances were mainly about the selling of indulgences by agents of the Roman Catholic Church. The purchase of these indulgences were supposed to lessen the time a soul spent in purgatory. The sale of the indulgences were supposed to help with the cost of the new St Peter's Church in Rome. The "middlemen" in the deal also made a profit. Luther's denunciation of the sales was heard in Rome - along with his other complaints about the Church - and Luther was called to defend his ideas at the Diet of Worms in 1521. He eventually left the priesthood, married, translated the bible into the German vernacular, and was excommunicated by the Church.

Lyndal Roper, who has written previously about witchcraft in western Europe, as well as the lives and places of women in Reformation-era Germany, turns her eye on Martin Luther and his life, work, and, most importantly, his mighty influence on the times. Her writing is very, very smooth and she makes a complicated subject interesting to the armchair historian. I enjoyed this book so much, that I stopped in the middle and preordered the Audible version. It's one of those books that I think will make great listening and that will be how I finish it.

By the way, another book - historical fiction - that readers of this book might enjoy is Christopher Buckley's "The Relic Master". Published in 2015, I wrote in my review: "Christopher Buckley's book can be both a fun read and a chance to look at the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. Luther doesn't play a large part in the book, but his ideas and influences on others is always in the background."

Alana says

This was a very dry read, even for someone who is interested in the topic. There are a *lot* of names, dates, facts, and jargon.

It certainly does not paint Luther in the most flattering light. How truthful it is to his character is hard to say,

although it does appear to be highly researched and it feels very honest. All too often, Luther is practically held to the level of sainthood (ironically enough) by Protestants, but his temperament and manner of dealing with others, let alone his apparent misogyny and antisemitism, certainly don't make him sound like someone you would want to be friends with, let alone who you would want as your religious leader.

Roper does make the point that some of his actions are indicative of the times, and of the type of person one would need to be to stand up to the overreach of the papacy at the time, but that his personality tended to make him a lot of enemies and probably caused more rifts in the early days of the separation of denominations than was really necessary. Based on his letters and works, this is very likely true.

The psychological profile Roper makes of Luther as having so much to do with animosity with his father felt like a bit of a Freudian stretch to me. I hardly think all of his life and theology can be traced back to "daddy issues." However, I am sure his relationship with his family shaped how he approached life and certainly impacted his study of Scripture.

I have to admit, I had no idea that the writers of the day were so crude and enjoyed talking about excrement and other bodily functions quite so much!

I don't think this is the "definitive biography" of Luther, but it's very enlightening and gives insight into the "other side" of this man who sparked so much debate and controversy in the early days of the Protestant Reformation.

2.5/5 (for pure dryness, not for lack of research)

Melora says

It's a complete coincidence that I finished this on Reformation Day, as I'm neither Lutheran nor a huge Luther fan girl (and rather *less* a fan after reading this), but there it is. Luther was an authoritarian and a bully, and he could be a spiteful, crude, vicious hypocrite, spewing hate at Catholics, Jews, and fellow Evangelicals who failed to accept his doctrines as "gospel," but there's no denying the lasting significance of the religious reform movement that he so powerfully and effectively put in motion. And it seems plausible that putting reform in motion *required* a passionate, stubborn, even a pig-headed man.

Lyndal Roper's long research has produced a detailed, nuanced study of her complex and often contradictory subject. While I found his misogyny, social conservatism, and antisemitism repugnant, his religious insights and convictions, hard won and deeply considered, offered an emphasis that was sorely needed at the time. Roper only brushes on one of Luther's contributions which I value very highly indeed – his emphasis on hymns and congregational singing – but she spends more time on another that I think he "nails" – his insistence (in contrast and in *conflict* with Zwingli's followers) on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

It seemed to me that Roper did a fine job of balancing her presentation, providing a rich but not overwhelming level of detail about Luther's family and cultural background, personal history, political context, and religious controversies, and not going overboard with ideas about his "psychological" motivations. I finished this with a far better appreciation of Luther's contributions to the Reformation, both positive and negative, and to the doctrines of Anglicanism, my branch of the church, than I began with, and enjoyed Roper's ability to create an engaging study of her prickly and combative subject.

David says

Anniversaries attract histories and biographies like, uh, cold pizzas attract cockroaches, hm, note to self, practice generating more appealing similes.

Anyway, Luther might have glued (or nailed, which seems more dramatic somehow) his Theses to the church door in October 1517, so I guess we can anticipate self-styled opinion makers speculating in a few short months on what it all means, even if they (the opinion makers) haven't attended a house of worship in earnest since before they got their second teeth.

I certainly don't know what it all means, which is why I took this opportunity to get to know more about Luther. But this is not a book for people who have achieved adulthood mostly in ignorance of the life of Luther, as I have. I don't feel tremendously at fault: if the Catholic weekend-school teachers had their way, our classes would have been complete uncontaminated by ideas of any type, and of course US public schools gave religion a great big letting-alone, too, because they already had their hands full with all the other stuff we were supposed to learn.

In any event, this book requires a lot of background knowledge that I didn't have. Maybe if I had been an American of German Lutheran descent, I would have had more of the knowledge necessary to enjoy this book. As it was, I scratched my head some over the crazy quilt of princes, electors, landgraves, margraves, bishops, and other aristos that somehow miraculously coalesced into modern-day Germany. Furthermore, even though the author struggled heroically to explain them all, I had trouble keeping the competing philosophies that did battle in this period, which include:

Fuggers (Kindle location 638), nominalists (l. 903), Ockhamists (l. 913), followers of Duns Scotus (l. 1594), antinomians (l. 2380), Aristotelians and anti-Aristotelians (l. 2830), scholastists (l. 3701), Thomists (l. 3743), humanists (l. 3746), followers of the Free Spirit heresy (l. 4212), Anabaptists (l. 4425), sacramentarians (l. 4840), irenicists (l. 5747), practitioners of the Nestorian heresy (l. 5948), conciliarism (l. 6093), Sabbatarians (l. 6530), and Pietists (l. 6848)

If you can explain to yourself what most of these are, you are ready for this book. As for me, O.K., I know Ockham's Razor, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas are, and can take an educated guess what the important points of contention were for Anabaptists and Sabbatarians, but sometimes the exact nature of the squabbles among these groups were difficult to follow.

Again, this is not the author's fault – this is just not the right book for the uninformed general reader. There's some compelling bits where the nature of Luther's achievements (e.g., his translation of the New Testament into vernacular German) are stated clearly and memorably. But *a lot* of this book chronicles Luther's unending quarrels with his peers. I understand that this took up a lot of his time, but I wasn't really convinced that the quarrels were so important.

To summarize, if you know something about Luther or learned about him in your youth, this may be a good long serious book to refresh your knowledge of this complex revolutionary. But if you are coming at this from a state of fairly comprehensive ignorance, as I was, it may be a little hard sledding.

I received an free unfinished galley of the ebook for review. Thank you to Netgalley and Penguin Random

House for their generosity.

Paul Ataua says

A detailed and sometimes critical biography of Martin Luther that gave a fairly clear picture of the man and the period. It dealt well with the opposing poles of the reformer and the historical conditions that begged reform, and although I would have liked a little more of his theology, there was enough within to whet my appetite for further study.

Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

This review and others can be found on BW Book Reviews.

I know that I should be drinking a nice glass of lukewarm beer while I write this but, sorry, I'm not.

My first real brush with Luther's theology was this past semester when I took a course at my college called Christianity II: Development. It covered Christianity from after 500AD to modern times. So, that included Luther and the Protestant revolution. I like to think that I won my professor over by my reactions in class to Luther's writings. I was sitting in my corner seat, silently laughing to myself at his comments because, man, Luther can slay. I don't know if any of you are familiar with him, but he's hilarious. (If you want to, check this link out for some of his writings.) He throws shade left and right at people, bringing up bowel movements and farting. All in his theological writings.

Not only that, but Luther was extremely anxious. It shows in his theology and his writing. He was constantly worried that he wasn't good enough, something I think that people can really connect with no matter the time period.

Roper sets out to create a psychological profile of him, relating to the above examples and his theology. Everyone puts something of themselves into their religious beliefs and their religious beliefs affect their personality. It's a pattern you can consistently see throughout different biographies. Get to the heart of their thoughts and you'll understand their actions, or if you look at their history then you can decide how they could have thought.

Since I'm largely unfamiliar with Luther's life, I learned a lot about his family and how that impacted him. It was interesting to see the root of his anxieties then how they translated into his anxieties with religion, and further into his choice to reject the idea that we have a hand in being saved by God.

I wish that I could have paid more attention to the analysis (hence the four stars) because I was so busy absorbing the historical timeline. That fault is entirely mine. There was only so much I could absorb at a time and I was more focused on keeping events straight and who people were in relation to Luther.

This really is a great book. A great historical biography of Luther and one that I would recommend to anyone who wants to know more about the man behind what I would call the greatest schism in Christianity.

Calvinist Batman says

Such a great biography (and IMO, the best cover for a book on Luther). This biography differed by really trying to focus on Luther's internal life, his emotions, and his thinking. While the book got weighed down here and there, I learned A LOT and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Due to this being Reformation 500, I recommend everyone read a book on Luther (among other reformers). I recommend this one. It's not the gold-standard. But it does have an audiobook version to it. ?

I also chose this one for two other reasons.

1. It was written by a woman, maybe the only one of its kind. This lined up with one of my goals this year and it also brought a unique perspective to this take on Luther.
2. Carl Trueman highly reco'd it among other new bios on Luther. I'll leave you with his comments:

"Of these two, Roper's perhaps has the edge. A feminist, she is not naturally sympathetic to Luther but has produced a remarkably nuanced and insightful work. What she does is present a Luther unaccommodated to modern sensibilities by pressing particularly on the issue of his eucharistic thought, a point which divides him decisively from strands of modern Protestantism which try to claim him as forebear. This is both theologically and methodologically important. Theologically, it presents the real Luther, the Luther who abominated Zwingli for his memorialism. Methodologically, it requires that the modern reader face Luther as he really was and not make him the comfortable companion of contemporary American evangelicalism – a move that can be made far too simply when his gospel of justification is abstracted from the doctrinal matrix within which it must be understood."

Pouting Always says

A nonfiction book that covers the life of Martin Luther and the actually nuance behind the reformation as well as the splintering of the movement with time that lead to the many sects of Christianity we see today. The book also shows that many of the things we see in the evagelic movement today has actually been around since Luther's time, specifically the doomsday rhetoric in particular.

This one took a look time to read because I read it on my commute and whenever I had a time, and the thing is I don't have the much knowledge about the 1500s or the religious thinkers of that time so I just kept forgetting who was who. I think if I had just read it in one sitting it wouldn't have been so bad but I kept forgetting the names in between reading the book and so it just took a while to get through it. The book is really well written and detailed but again as someone not familiar with this point in time or Germany's geography I had a little trouble keeping up with the politics taking place through out the book.

What I did enjoy about this book was reading about Luther's writing and thoughts, and I wish it had been more focused on that than the historical context. Like the fact that he did seem to have this idea that body and mind aren't separate or that his experience of being was more integrated than that of others. My favorite part is probably reading how happily he talked about his son learning to squat and defecate everywhere. Knowing that Luther was at times crude or tended to be stubborn and double down on his on views are things I found much more interesting.

It's just a personal preference but when I pickup biographies I'm more interested in the ideas and changes that

the person left behind and their personality. Things like Luther calling reason the whore is hilarious and I wish it was more of that than details about other figures who I had trouble keeping track of, even though I guess they're relevant because of their relationship to Luther and the reformation. It just made the book a little long to go into details that way and made it hard for me as a lay person to keep track of the many people popping in and out through out Luther's life.

Steven says

A serviceable, though at some moments fairly dense, biography. My interest in Martin Luther was primarily spurred by recently learning that he, Henry VIII and Michelangelo were all alive at the same time. I had no idea all of these important people and their associated revolutions were happening simultaneously and I wanted to learn more about how the conditions that enabled Michelangelo's extravagant art were related to the conditions that spurred Martin Luther's Reformation. This book, however, rarely addresses any of those topics. Instead, as mentioned in the introduction, the novel conveys the author's reading of Luther's inner space: his interpretations of scripture, his relationships with others, his method of finding spiritual truths, his fears, hatreds, and ambitions.

To Roper's credit, I came away feeling like i could predict Luther's moods as well as spot him in a crowd, which really is remarkable for a biography of a man dead for 500 years. Though I have no way of knowing if this portrayal is accurate, the portrait is certainly thorough and meticulously researched. Roper exercises a great deal of discipline within this book. Every observation of Luther's character is rooted in some source material.

I suppose another biography will tell me about the wider world during the Reformation.

L says

This is a very well written and researched biography on Martin Luther. However, at times I found it rather depressing. His political theory of two realms, one of God and the other of the world, seems to have successfully carried over to our present time.

According to Luther, Christians must not resist secular authority even if that authority is unjust and hurts people. In the realm of God, good works don't really get you anywhere because you are sinful and by doing good works, you are only trying to bargain your way to salvation. Only faith and grace matter. This is not my idea of being a "Christian," but an excuse to sit idly by while people suffer. The most telling part of this biography: " . . . his willingness to make compromises with political authorities, even when they were acting in an unchristian manner, provided the theological underpinnings of the accommodation many Lutherans would reach centuries later with the Nazi regime." He was off the charts with his anti-Semitism, and this was not, according to the author, just his being a product of his times.

I recently heard R. Marie Griffith interviewed on Fresh Air and this one statement of hers was a striking contrast to this portrait of Martin Luther:

"Jesus talked about caring for the poor, and loving the neighbor, and really living a life of self-sacrifice to help others." I didn't get a sense that this was important to Martin Luther and hence, for me, yet again

organized religion does not come across well.

Elizabeth says

This biography was very interesting and remarkably detailed. Although it was somewhat long, it kept me turning pages until the very end. This book was more than a decade in the making, and that shows in the care taken with the in-depth exploration of Luther's life. This well-illustrated biography delves into Luther's childhood, his formative years, and different stages of his life's work. It focuses on Luther himself, a complex individual, and analyzes him in the context of 16th-century Germany, with its particular social customs, politics, and culture. This book shows Luther's humanity, even his faults, and it does not present a flawless image of perfection.

However, in trying to demonstrate Luther's flaws as well as his strengths, I think that Roper sacrificed objectivity. For example, when Luther was isolated from both his family and the Reformation movement, he received word that his father had died. Alone, grieving, he sent his friend Melancthon a somewhat rude and impatient letter, which is explored in depth in this book. However, the close friendship they shared is downplayed, and even naming him godfather to his kids is mentioned only in the notes in the back of the book, after the main text is finished. Luther often reacted with strong emotion, and even over-reacted, but while I have read in other books that Luther himself admitted that "indiscretion" was "my greatest fault," neither that quote nor Luther's own self-awareness comes through in this biography. Instead, we are left with a portrait of a man who is uncontrolled, paranoid, violent . . . and completely clueless as to why this is a problem. But this image of Luther isn't borne out by history. He had his moments of extremism, to be sure, but taking a few extremes out of their larger context and avoiding the rest takes a powerful reformer and turns him into an unstable bumbler.

Last point, I promise! In this Luther biography, Roper criticizes the Lutheran composer J. S. Bach: "In *The St. Matthew Passion* the angular melodic line spares the listener nothing of the viciousness of the Jews' shouts of "Lass ihn kreuzigen" ("Let him be crucified"), and follows this with heartfelt individual meditations on Christ's suffering; the implicit anti-Semitism of the glorious music can be hard to take" (Roper, p. 403). Excuse me? Bach is anti-Semitic because he used strident music to portray some specific angry individuals from history? This is the same *St. Matthew Passion* that (1) shows that Romans, not Jews, killed Jesus (2) shows that Jesus and all his disciples WERE Jews (3) that uses beautiful instrumentation and choir to show the suffering of Jesus (4) showed the human conflict in Peter as he denied him, and (5) used a variety of melodic lines, vocal recitatives, choral harmony, and instrumentation to depict all sorts of emotions from all sorts of people. Arguably the strongest angriest music from the entire production is directed not at the Jewish high priests, but at Judas Iscariot; this passage features an adult choir, a children's choir, rapid angry orchestration, and an echoy grand pause. The words are equally chilling: "Are lightning and thunder vanished in clouds? Open up the fiery bottomless pit, oh hell! Smash, ruin, swallow up, break to pieces with sudden fury this false betrayer, this murderous blood." And Roper ignores all this human drama to say a few individuals in a different section prove Bach is prejudiced? Why is a Luther biography even so concerned with music of the Baroque period, 200 years later? One line in one song that directly quotes another source anyway doesn't prove a thing about Bach. But the fact that Roper would try to build this up into an argument makes me question her reliability as an objective witness to history.

It's really too bad because there is so much in this book that is valid, and interesting, and important to know, for both positive and negative. As you read it, be aware of what's in it, but also be aware of what is left out.

Chris Wray says

I really liked, but didn't quite love, this biography of the great Reformer. When Martin Luther nailed (or possibly glued) his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, he was challenging both the whole system of the medieval church and the authority of the papacy. It was a pivotal moment in the history of the church, and of Western civilisation. Luther is a hugely significant individual, as he achieved a decisive split with the Roman Catholic church, his theology has remained central to Protestantism, and his translation of the Bible shaped modern vernacular German.

As an overview and analysis of Luther's life, this is an excellent book. All the major events (Worms, Augsburg etc.) and personalities (Melancthon, Spalatin, Staupitz etc.) are explored in detail, and Ropers writing style makes it very pleasant to read. Her analysis of and conclusions on Luther's life and wider context are insightful, penetrating and solidly argued.

Luther himself is a complex and fascinating character, and generally I appreciated Ropers insights. One exception is the level of significance placed on his early relationship with his father. No doubt his father was an important and influential figure in his life, but at times this line of thought seems a bit trite. More positively, she concludes that his extraordinary openness, honest willingness to put everything on the line, and his capacity to accept God's grace as a gift he did not merit are among his most attractive characteristics. He was certainly a man of courage and conviction, and admirably so. On the other hand she sees him as a difficult hero, with writing that was often full of hatred, and a tendency to be authoritarian, bullying, over confident and domineering. I think she is spot on when she describes his interactions with others as a contradictory mixture of warmth, holiness and condescension, even cruelty. Other aspects of Luther's character such as his frequent scatology and Antisemitism are somewhere between odd and extremely distasteful. Ultimately, despite his giant stature he is a flawed sinner, just like the rest of us. It also doesn't excuse him to point out that he's inherently difficult for a modern person to understand, because he lived in a time so unlike ours. I think that it's incredibly helpful to be reminded that our heroes have feet of clay, and this book feels like it gets much closer to the man than the idealised hagiographies we are often presented with.

As this is primarily a historical biography, there isn't as much engagement with Luther's theology, apart from as it relates to his life and historical context. Particularly, there is very little on how his theology developed over time, but really that's outside the scope of this book and is accessible in any number of books written by church historians and theologians. I also got the sense that Roper has a real distaste for Calvinism, and I would have liked to have seen more on the links between the different magisterial Reformers. But again, this is a biography of Luther and not a history of the Reformation, so it lies outside her scope. I think what I'm really saying is that I would have enjoyed reading Ropers opinion and analysis of these broader themes, even if I wouldn't agree with some of what she says.

One interesting insight was the importance to Luther's theology of his integrated view of human nature. An interesting manifestation of this was his insistence on the real presence in the Lord's Supper. He seems to have realised that there is no rational or real scriptural basis for this, and presents it as a matter for pure faith. I'm convinced he's wrong, but I can see how his view kind of makes sense in the wider context of his thinking on the integration of mind and body, flesh and spirit. Roper sees much of the rest of Christianity as characterised by unbending moralism and a suspicion of sexuality, and concludes that this is avoided by Luther's view of human nature, which doesn't emphasise the spiritual at the expense of the physical. I'm not

sure about either the premise or the conclusion in this case, but it's an interesting argument to consider nonetheless. I can also see how it probably grew out of a reaction against the ascetic monasticism he rejected as he began to understand and appreciate God's grace.

Another important aspect of his legacy is political, due to his distinction between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. So, the church should not enjoy temporal power while Christians should obey their temporal rulers, who should in turn protect their people from the godless. He was essentially conservative, coming down on the side of the authorities, and doesn't seem to have conceived of an occasion when a Christian or Christian ruler might rebel against a higher temporal authority. The Reformation is often lauded as heralding the modern era, with its emphases on freedom of conscience and of the individual. However, Luther meant different things by these concepts than we often do today, as he wasn't interested in everyone being able to do what they think is right, but rather in individuals becoming aligned with objective, God revealed truth.

All in all, this was an incredibly enjoyable and engaging study of a fascinating man who lived at a very significant point in history.

Wilhelm Weber says

This is not my regular "Luther-Diet". It was exotic reading and not only because of Lyndal Roper's Australian roots in Melbourne or references to Oberman and Küng in Tübingen or finally her current position in Oxford. She did not try to summarize Luther's theology or even attempt at writing its evolution and development over some 5 decades or so. Neither did she concentrate in the normal way on the "cities of the south" for her biography, but took into account the very crucial surroundings of Luther caught up in the previous German Democratic Republic (DDR) and undertook very successfully to give us an insight into the social history of the reformer and his time. She explains: "We lack a proper assessment of Lutheranism in its home social and cultural context, which was so unlike that of the southern cities." (xxviii) In contrast to the rather parochial Luther, Roper is very much into the original sources and even the latest hit by the secular historian Heinz Schilling is taken up most positively as she goes about in a very casual style to inform, consider and evaluate psychological, biological and biographical aspects of her protagonist. Aspects which normally did not feature in my education at least although it does really do a lot to explain the erratic and rather volcanic reformer.

If you're pressed for time, you should at least read Roper's brilliant introduction to her book - only about 16 pages if I've got the roman numerals right. They already convinced me, that I should read the entire opus, because it was bound to be fun. Well, it's a sorry truth about Luther's life, but it doesn't end that very well. Rather after the initial upsurge of the reformation in the 1520's it really has some serious setbacks - on the personal, communal and national levels. It's just so astonishing, that this legacy did not stop with Luther's passing in 1546. It really is a miracle and divine wonder! Obviously Robert Kolb in his memorable "ML and the enduring Word of God" (2016), who is not mentioned in this book, has got a point, when he points to the excellent team around Luther and most importantly also the "enduring Word of God" in the 2nd part of his book.

Roper does go to some lengths explaining Luther's complex relationships with parents, siblings, teachers, sponsors, colleagues, lords and masters. Some are friends even though their number continually diminishes, others are antagonists, enemies and in cohorts with the devils, therefore these latter opposing forces weighing heavily on Luther is hated most assiduously despite its constantly growing number. Roper explains: "For Luther's personality had huge historical effects - for good and ill. It was his remarkable courage and sense of purpose that created the reformation, and it was his stubbornness and capacity to demonize his opponents

that nearly destroyed it." (xxvi)

Roper explains her goal: "Where many historians have used this abundance of material to trace his theological development in detail, and to date specific events with greater accuracy, I want to understand Luther himself. I want to know how a sixteenth-century individual perceived the world around him, and why he viewed it in this way. I want to explore his inner landscapes so as to better understand his ideas about flesh and spirit, formed in a time before our modern separation of mind and body. In particular, I am interested in Luther's contradictions. Here was a man who made some of the most misogynistic remarks of any thinker, yet who was in favour not only of sex within marriage but crucially that it should also give bodily pleasure to both women and men. Trying to understand this apparent paradox is a challenge I have not been able to resist. A man of immense charisma, Luther's passionate friendships were matched by equally unrelenting rejections of those he believed to be wrong or disloyal. His theology sprang from his character, a connection that Melancthon... insisted upon: "His character, was, almost, so to speak, the greatest proof" of his doctrine." (xxvii-xxviii)

She sums up some of the difficulties faced by those looking at Luther and back at the Reformation in the 16th century in the last paragraph of her introduction: "It is hard for historians and theologians to tackle what now seems so alien, his disturbing obsession with the Devil, virulent anti-Semitism, and crude polemic. Exploring his inner world, however, and the context into which his ideas and passions flooded, opens up a new vision of the Reformation." (xxxiii)

Allow me another lengthy quote to finish off my strong recommendation to read this book if you are interested in Reformation History, the whole bunch of reformers and Luther specifically. The final word together with a big load of accolades goes to the brilliant writer and excellent biographer Lyndal Roper, who concludes her biography with these paragraphs: "Luther is a difficult hero, nonetheless. His writings can be full of hatred, and his predilection for scatological rhetoric and humor is not to modern taste. He could be authoritarian, bullying, overconfident; his domineering ways overshadowed his children's lives and alienated many of his followers. His intransigent capacity to demonize his opponents was more than a psychological flaw because it meant that Protestantism split very early, weakening it permanently and leading to centuries of war. His anti-Semitism was more visceral than that of many of his contemporaries, and it was also intrinsic to his religiosity and his understanding of the relation between the Old and the New Testament. It cannot just be excused as the prejudice of his day. His greatest intellectual gift was his ability to simplify, to cut to the heart of an issue - but this also made it difficult for him to compromise or see nuance. And yet only someone with an utter inability to see anyone else's point of view could have had the courage to take on the papacy, to act like a 'blinker horse' looking neither to right nor left, but treading relentlessly onward regardless of the consequences. And only someone with a sense of humor, a stubborn realism, and a remarkable ability to engage the deepest loyalties of others could have avoided the martyrdom that threatened.

The Reformation is often lauded as heralding the arrival of modernity, the freedom of the individual, or, alternatively, the growth of a confessional world that yoked religious to political identity. I hope to have shown that none of these views do justice to Luther or to the movement he started. Luther was not "modern", and unless we appreciate his thought in its own unfamiliar and often uncomfortable terms, we will not see what it might have to offer us today. What Luther meant by "freedom" and by "conscience" were not what we mean by these words now. It had nothing to do with allowing people to follow their conscience; it meant our capacity to know with God, a knowledge he believed to be objective truth. Luther split the Church and ushered in the denominational era, but he was always a maverick thinker who did not believe in following rules or in devising courts to impose morality. He was a man who retained a healthy mistrust of Reason, "the whore". (410f)

My suggestion: Tolle lege!

