

*J. I. Packer: A Biography*, by Alister McGrath

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

*By Alister McGrath, J.I. Packer: A Biography. (Baker, 344 pp.)*

James Packer has witnessed massive changes in evangelicalism in the English-speaking world. He left his native Britain to teach theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1979, and thus has had the unusual opportunity to speak to and mediate between evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic. Packer played a key role in the intense struggle in the '70s in North America to define the nature of biblical authority. He has led efforts to strengthen orthodoxy within Canadian Anglicanism and participated in the dialogue which resulted in the statement "Evangelicals and Catholics Together."

Packer has the rare distinction of being able to write about theology in a manner that makes people want to read about it. *Knowing God*, published in the mid-'70s, brought him to prominence. A plain-spoken, gimmick-free survey of the divine attributes, the book has sold more than a million copies in English alone. According to a survey of *Christianity Today* readers, only C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* has had a greater influence.

Alister McGrath knows Packer's home ground--the theological landscape of Britain in the '50s and '60s, and especially the tensions and political intricacies within British evangelicalism--much better than he understands the North American scene. McGrath emphasizes Packer's discovery of the Puritans, and their influence on him, directly and through Martyn Lloyd-Jones. But his later, equally influential encounter with Princeton's Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield is not given similar attention.

McGrath describes so carefully the complex environments of Oxford, London, Birmingham and Bristol in which Packer learned his trade and made his first reputation that a good many North American readers will want the story to move along more quickly. The overall impression is that amid periodic outbreaks of conflict at theological schools where Packer taught (Bristol and Oxford) he was often a target of unfair treatment. Packer came to the conclusion that what he had to offer the church would increasingly be better received in North America.

Packer's early interest in biblical authority (*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, 1958) and his painful experiences with sectarian Protestantism in the '60s led to his balanced and constructive approach to the North American "battle for the Bible" in the '70s and to his later willingness to pursue a policy of "co-belligerence" with Roman Catholics in the '90s, even in the face of harsh and personal criticism from some erstwhile allies.

The relationship of the biographer to his subject is intriguing. Both are Oxford men who came to Christian faith as adults, and both have seized on the strategic importance of writing well and getting published often. No contemporary evangelical theologian is better positioned to build on Packer's legacy than McGrath is.

But biography seems an awkward genre for this most prolific of evangelical scholars. McGrath presents not so much the person as the story of the person. As in so many other biographies by men about men, scant attention is given to Packer's spouse, whose character and support for such a busy and well-traveled ministry must have been important.

Robertson Davies has said that every biographer walks a tightrope: on one side is the temptation to be too free with the subject, in the attempt to create an original work of art. But on the other lies the lure of being too close to the subject and forgiving his every failing. Since Packer is still among us, this biography cannot be the final word. It reads more like a tribute than a critical appraisal. What it does provide is a thorough summary of Packer's background, the course of his life and his contributions, simultaneously surveying transatlantic evangelicalism at the end of the millennium.