The title of this book is almost inciting. Despite all the existing work on Melanchthon, his role as a Renaissance humanist in the midst of the Lutheran Reformation has not yet been described comprehensively. So a book dedicated to this topic is an obvious candidate for a prominent position on my bookshelf. With such expectations, disappointments are inevitable. And the main focus of this book is not placed on the convergence of Renaissance humanism and Reformation theology. Instead, as described on the back cover, this is a book on Melanchthon as a contemporary of his era, about his impact on theology, science and art history, and about his significance for the history of pedagogy and philosophy as well as for ecumenism. The structure of the book follows the main themes, and its chapters originate from an interdisciplinary Ringvorlesung held in the winter of 2010/11 at the University in Regensburg on the occasion of the Melanchthon anniversary. Several of the chapters have kept traces of their original oral form; and for aesthetic reasons several of these stylistic leftovers could easily have been removed before publication.

Through Rudolf Keller’s introductory survey of Melanchthon’s life and work, the reader is introduced to this fascinating figure of the Wittenberg Reformation, and Keller does remember to make the obligatory connection between Melanchthon and Regensburg. This line is continued in Thomas Kothmann’s thorough survey of Melanchthon’s connections to Bavaria. In »Melanchthon und die Confessio Augustana«, Gunther Wenz provides a good introduction to the genesis of Melanchthon’s »masterpiece«, the Augsburg Confession. In this chapter the focus lies more on the text than on its author. In his article about humanistic intellectuality and confessional profiling, Albrecht P. Luttenberger examines precisely the confluence of these two lines, which includes some redundancy in the description of the Augsburg Confession owing to the previous article.

In the book’s only English chapter, Alasdair Heron has translated a number of lengthy quotations from Calvin’s letters related to his participation in the Imperial Diet in Regensburg in 1531, most of them written to Guillaume Farel in Neuchatel, others to Viret in Geneva.

Andrea König has written a very stimulating piece on Melanchthon’s view on women. Remembering the anecdotes on Melanchthon’s marriage with the almost anonymous mayor’s daughter, König succeeds in making Melanchthon almost a modern man in his view on women, not least regarding his view on women’s education and equality.

Hans Schwarz writes about Melanchthon as a dogmatic theologian and the inner Lutheran controversies. A relatively large part of this chapter is dedicated to his »Loci communes« from 1521, whereas the later »Loci«, where traditional dogmas play a much more prominent role than in the first
»minimalist« version, has been deselected in favour of the »Apology«. In view of the book’s title, one misses here reflections regarding the impact of Melanchthon’s humanist background on the development of a theologically sound methodus for summarizing Christian doctrine, and the importance of Melanchthon’s exegetical and patristic studies for his theology. Several studies in this field are actually available. Rolf Schönberger makes an instructive comparison of the understanding of human freedom in Erasmus, Luther and Melanchthon, but here, too, the textual foundations are unfortunately too fragile. Melanchthon’s position is very delicate; and more than a few sources are needed in order to illustrate all aspects correctly, as shown in recently published works by Timothy J. Wengert. However, Schönberger’s article points to the fact that the Reformation’s relation to stoicism has still not been satisfactorily clarified.

Hans-Christoph Dittscheid shows how differently Melanchthon and Luther were portrayed. The many illustrations and the careful analysis offers the reader a new look on the Reformation pioneers. The author clearly shows the amount of information inherent in painting. Christoph Meinel gives a highly enlightening survey of Melanchthon’s importance for the development of natural philosophy, not so much through his many text books as through his understanding of the independence of natural philosophy and his transformation of Aristotelian natural philosophy into a specific Lutheran discipline. Michael Fricke introduces the reader to Melanchthon’s great achievements in pedagogy bound to a central theological premise: to learn is to make known and to pass on and share. Michael Heesch gives a critical examination of Dilthey’s influential interpretation of Melanchthon.

Alfons Knoll examines Melanchthon from a Catholic point of view, offering quite a nice survey of the changes and showing how Catholic scholars have been almost exactly as eager as their Protestant colleagues to put Melanchthon to one side. This view seems to have changed recently. Werner Thiede discusses Melanchthon’s ecumenical relevance and importance, continuing the discussion of the Melanchthon anniversary year, during which attempts were made to understand Melanchthon as an ecumenical theologian. In commenting on the different estimations of Melanchthon as »Leisetreter«, tactician, compromiser and traitor, Thiede succeeds in presenting a multi-faceted understanding of Melanchthon’s role as both humanist and reformer. For this reason it is almost unbearable to find a repetition of Karl Holl’s critique of Melanchthon’s doctrine of justification (even though in a modified version) at the end of the book. This is definitely not the last word to say about Melanchthon’s Lutheran theology.

Although the volume actually succeeds in showing the many facets of Melanchthon’s work, it does not give the reader any ground-breaking new insights into Melanchthon. This does not mean, however, that one cannot learn anything from the book. On the contrary, several chapters offer helpful additional material to the well-known picture of Melanchthon, and in total the book offers almost encyclopaedic coverage of the whole range of Melanchthon’s oeuvre. But in view of the fact that the book actually can be used in this way, it is hard to understand why the editors did not find the time to make an index. Unfortunately they failed to do so and they have also failed to carry out other editorial duties. The book would have presented itself much better if the existing redundancies had been cut. We find the same
anecdotes used more than once, with or without the correct dialect (cf. p. 56 with p. 72), and the story of Melanchthon’s conversation with the highly educated abbess Caritas Pirckheimer is found in two different chapters (Kothmann’s and König’s). Another and more severe problem is the fact that the book exemplifies some of the still existing limitations of many Melanchthon studies: the use of quite a limited amount of source material – (some of the authors even quote Melanchthon from the excerpts in Hirsch’s »Hilfsbuch«); and the neglect of American studies of Melanchthon (including some crucial studies carried out by Wengert actually dealing with several of the issues touched upon in this volume). This means that we still find traditional stereotypes regarding Melanchthon, and any contemporary work on Melanchthon should actually be concerned to omit them.