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HOW THE ENGLISH LEARNED TO HATE CATHOLICS

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It was, for most of the English, an almost miraculous deliverance: a sudden end to a national adventure that had spent twenty years curdling into a nightmare. It had begun simply as a row between Henry VIII and the Pope, of the kind that was almost routine, but for reasons that were difficult to fathom for most English people, this row had blown up into an existential conflict. Within a few years the queen was being thrown out to make room for a scheming girl from the French court. And then it started to bite in the parishes: everyone in the country was forced to swear an oath accepting the king's new marriage, preachers started to insist that the king was now head of something they were calling *the church of England*, your parish priest started to mess with the order of service so that the pope didn't get mentioned in it, royal commissioners started nosing around to ask how much money your church had. And then the monasteries were closed and all their lands and goods taken, and the shrines closed and the relics smashed, and then there was a new service in English where you suddenly had to pray against the detestable enormities of the bishop of Rome, then the old king died and you wondered if things might go back to normal, but the new King Edward VI was just a boy, and there was no-one to stop his council doing whatever they wanted. So now the chantries were all closed down, along with most of the schools and the hospitals, and commissioners were back and started stripping your church of everything of any value, and then breaking down the rood lofts and all the other statues, and they started messing with the coinage so suddenly your money seemed to be worth nothing at all, and then they replaced the old service entirely with a new one in English where you mostly just had to sit and listen, and while a few fanatics and townspeople liked all of these changes most people were just appalled and devastated, but what could you do? It was the king! And those who spoke out wound up in gaol, and when the people in the North and then in Cornwall marched against it they ended up in a noose, so all you could do was endure it and pray that when the boy king grew up he'd put these heretics and plunderers straight, but it the boy was fifteen now and it was starting to look like he was one of the fanatics too and there was no end to it, old England was gone ... And then came the new rumours: that the king was sick. That he was very sick. That the Council had declared that the throne wouldn't pass to his sister, who anyone could see was the rightful heir, but to some cousin who was married to the wicked duke of Northumberland's son. That when the king died, God forgive him, the Lady Mary stood up and wouldn't accept this silly new queen. That crowds were coming out for her everywhere. That even London, that Babylon of heresy, was turning on the so-called Queen Jane. And before anyone knew it, it was all over. The Lady Mary was queen. Bonfires were lit all over the country in jubilation. And soon enough the hopes were fulfilled. The Mass was restored. The heretical bishops were driven out. Her cousin, Cardinal Pole, came back to England after his twenty-year exile as the pope's emissary and was soon made archbishop of Canterbury. He led England back to where it should be, at the heart of Europe, reconciled to Rome. It was all over, and England's twenty-year dalliance with the horrors of heresy would surely teach her to be faithful to Mother Church for ever more.

It was not, after all, as if England had ever shown any sign of Rom-o-scepticism before. This was the country that was proud, maybe inordinately proud, that it had been converted to the Christian faith by the initiative of a pope, Gregory the Great, who had famously seen blond English boys in a slave market, had been told that they were *Angli*, and said they were not *Angli* but *Angeli*: Angels. And the English had been Rome's angels ever since, or close enough. The pope had given William the Conqueror his crown and made Henry II lord of Ireland. And English kings had been famously loyal to the pope, from Richard the Lionheart on crusade to Richard II standing up for the pope in Rome when the French set up their own puppet alternative in Avignon; even Henry VIII, as a young man, had fought for the papal league against his enemies, and had written against the heretic Martin Luther. None of the anti-papal nonsense you heard from the French. The only English king who had ever fallen out with Rome was King John, and everyone knew he was a wicked man who had murdered his cousin and was brought low in the end. It was in England's blood and soil to be loyal Catholic Christians, faithful sons and daughters of the Pope and soldiers of Rome. Now, at last, the madness was over and it could be so again.



All of which is to say: when Mary Tudor unexpectedly became queen in the summer of 1553, she had a fair wind behind her. She was popular, she was legitimate. She was female, but so were all the serious alternative candidates. In fact, her gender was going to be a serious, maybe even a fatal political weakness for her. The problem was securing her succession, to which the only good route was to marry and have a child. In a world where it was uniformly assumed that wives ought to be obedient to their husbands, for a reigning queen to marry was a problem, and none of the queens who reigned in England and Scotland in the sixteenth century found a good solution to it. Mary's solution was probably the least bad one, at least in principle: she married a foreigner, Philip of Spain, who took the title of king – hence the coins – but thanks to his absence for much of the time, he was not as dominant as he might have been, and a well-negotiated marriage treaty preserved English independence to an impressive degree. If it wasn't for the fact that she was a 38-year-old woman with a history of gynaecological ill health and a mostly absentee husband, it might all have worked out fine. But in fact, of course, although she was twice convinced that she was pregnant, she was not, and she died childless, most likely of a cancer that may well have been implicated in her fertility problems, in November 1558, a little over five years into her reign. And the bad news for those who had celebrated her accession with such joy and relief was that it was all about to start again. For her heir was her surviving half-sister, Elizabeth, a Protestant, and it was all reversed: The Pope was once again thrown out, the churches once again stripped, the English service restored. England's Catholic restoration had not been the end of the heretical nightmare: it was a brief respite from what would become a new world.

So, for a long time these five years of Catholic England have been treated by historians as a curiosity, a kind of throwback, a doomed attempt to turn back the clock. But as the records have been re-examined more carefully over the past few decades, we've come to a rather different view of Mary's short reign and of her doomed Catholic restoration. To summarise, that view is that, right up to the point when it was cut short by her death, the effort was going quite well. The parish churches, ravaged after the destruction under Henry and Edward, were being rebuilt: there was a lot to do, and a lot of make-do-and-mend, like this example from the parish church of Ludham in Norfolk, where in place of a proper new rood, a life-size carved crucifix, they erected this painted board across the chancel arch. This sort of thing testifies both to how much damage had been done, and to the pious ingenuity of the people who were doing their best to make it good. And while the parishes were rebuilt, Cardinal Pole, the queen's cousin and right-hand-man, imposed new discipline on his clergy, providing them with training materials and preaching resources. There was even artistic inspiration. One of the finest composers of the day, Orlando de Lasso, was brought over from Flanders. In 1554 he wrote a motet in honour of Cardinal Pole and his work of bringing England to repentance and reconciliation, a motet that was sung in St Paul's Cathedral at the service of reconciliation between England and the papacy. His text speaks of England's tears of repentance, but also anticipates something that had not quite yet started, but which everyone knew was going to begin very soon. I mean the auspicious fires. Because for all the creativity of Mary and Pole's restoration, they had a problem. A vocal, committed and powerful minority of the queen's subjects had fervently embraced the heresies her father and her brother had promulgated. If a truly Catholic England was to be rebuilt, these people would have to be dealt with.

So, Mary did not merely throw these bishops and preachers out of office: she had them arrested, and she restored the old heresy laws, allowing unrepentant heretics to be executed by burning. Pursuing the Protestants with the full rigour of the law was not the only option. Some of the queen's Spanish advisers, despite their reputation for inquisitorial cruelty, tended to advocate caution, and that it was better, as one put it, for heretics to 'live and be converted', fearing that persecution might stir up trouble. That, however, was a tactical preference rather than a moral stance. As the motet indicates, burning heretics was a moral stance, a matter of principle and of public safety, something to be applauded rather than concealed, and in fact it was the lily-livered pragmatists who proposed turning a blind eye to the evils in their midst whose position seemed like political cynicism.

But in the end, pragmatism and principle pointed in the same direction. Committed Protestants were a small minority of the English Church and people, but they were energetic, vociferous and implacable in their opposition to the regime. If a stable Catholicism were to be restored, these people simply had to be silenced. This was hard. They could be driven out of the country, and the regime certainly allowed people to escape when they could have arrested them, but exile did no more than muffle their voices. Exile was hard, but exiles



continued, despite the regime's efforts, to be able to draw income from their property in England, and they settled in half a dozen German and Swiss cities and started to crank out printed propaganda which was smuggled back into the country. And if exile failed to silence the Protestants, imprisonment was not much better. Tudor prisons were notoriously porous, principally because prisoners were required to pay the costs of their own incarceration and could thus virtually become their own gaolers' employers. It only took a little bribery to ensure that prisoners could send and receive letters, receive visitors and even make short trips outside. Even the most closely guarded prisoners managed at times to obtain writing materials and to smuggle letters out. The prison writings of Marian prisoners fill several volumes in their modern editions, testimony both to their quantity and to how their words were cherished by other Protestants. If neither exile nor prison would shut these people up, what else was left?

Another line of reasoning led in the same direction. English heretics had a long tradition of breaking under pressure. Medieval English people arrested for heresy, and there were quite a few, had generally been timorous, virtually never persisting in their errors when recantation could have saved their lives. Protestants who had run ahead of Henry VIII's Reformation and had been arrested had been only a little braver. A few had stood firm, but many more – including leading figures – had tried to negotiate their way out of trouble, with varying degrees of success and of principle. Mary's regime plainly expected the same pattern to continue. King Edward's chief minister, the duke of Northumberland, when he was facing death, followed the script precisely: he abjectly recanted his Protestantism in an attempt to save his life, a vain one as it happened, since in his case the charge was treason, not heresy. Several others were more successful, including John Cheke, formerly one of Edward VI's tutors. Had large numbers of others joined them, matters would have turned out very differently. Recantation was the best possible outcome for the regime. Purity of doctrine was preserved; it was a propaganda coup, and a public humiliation for the Protestants; and, not least, a soul was snatched from the jaws of hell. For the bishops who led the anti-heresy campaign, a firm line might be necessary, but there was no escaping the fact that for a Christian minister to have to consign one of his own flock to death by burning as an unrepentant heretic represented a pretty disastrous pastoral failure. So, the regime expected recantations, and it worked hard to secure them. Very senior members of the government spent days and weeks on end debating with prisoners, trying to win them round or to wear them down.

And yet, against all expectations, many Protestants held firm, particularly the leaders. Under Henry VIII, matters had been different: the king's policy was ambiguous, and the evangelicals' beliefs often ill-defined. Now things were plainer, and the divide sharper. The exiles exhorted those in England to stand firm. Prisoners wrote to one another with the same message. Once the executions had begun, their precedent provided another motive to remain steadfast. The regime would have undoubtedly preferred for Protestants to live and be converted. But those who would not be converted could not be allowed to live.

The first burning, of the Bible translator and London minister John Rogers, took place on 4 February 1555. A series of others followed: in that first year of executions, almost all of them leading preachers, ministers and theologians. Amongst them were four bishops. The Protestant cause was being decapitated. The last of this wave of leaders was the most prominent of all, Thomas Cranmer, Pole's predecessor as archbishop of Canterbury, who after a long and difficult process which I'll be coming back to shortly went to the fire in Oxford on 21 March 1556. The end of that first phase of the persecution marked a further debate in the government; some wanted to leave it at that, for a time at least, to see what happened now that the head of the snake had been cut off. But Mary, and Pole, and their most energetic enforcer, Edmund Bonner, the bishop of London, decided instead to press their advantage. The symbolic purging extended to the dead. German Protestants who had taken refuge in England under Edward VI and had died there, were exhumed and their bodies burned. As to those who were still alive, the focus now shifted to those who gathered in secret to hear and spread the word. Such conventicles were (correctly) seen by the regime as critical to the Protestant resistance. The attack on conventicles tended to produce mass executions, as whole groups were rounded up, and so the rate of executions climbed, peaking in the summer of 1557. From then on it began slowly to fall, but burnings continued until the very end of the reign. Three men and two women were burned together in Canterbury on 15 November 1558, only two days before the queen herself died. The exact total of the victims of this purge is disputed, but the best guess is something in the order of 290 people burned alive, plus another



dozen or two who died in prison – and, it should be said, at least 800 exiles. By modern standards of mass killing that may sound positively restrained, but in its own time this was an unusually sharp bout of persecution, although not off the scale: the numbers executed in the Netherlands during the 1550s are comparable.

But atrocities are never just about numbers. The question is what the executions mean. And here we need to confront an awkward truth: as a matter of policy, there is every reason to believe that this was working. The dead preachers, bishops and theologians may have been remembered as martyrs, but there is no denying that they had been successfully silenced. There may have been more groups of clandestine Protestants than the regime had expected, but the fact that the numbers were tailing off by 1558 shows that they were not unlimited. Religious persecution sometimes works, when it is part of a wider programme of reformation, and that is what seems to be the case here. If Mary had lived longer, if the policy had really had time ... well, what would have happened? English Protestantism would not have been eradicated quickly or easily. Its partisans were not numerous, but they were determined and well-connected. Executions would have continued for the foreseeable future, monthly if not weekly events. Indeed, the regime might have had to become more ruthless. There are numerous accounts from Mary's reign of Protestants saved from arrest or condemnation by legal niceties or by the squeamishness of individual officials. A little less due process and a little more inquisitorial zeal might have been necessary. But what we are talking about is how long the inevitable victory would have taken and how complete it would have been. There would have been some bloodshed, but probably fewer deaths than in Elizabeth I's campaign against Catholics and her suppression of Catholic rebellions, and certainly far fewer than in the religious war which England's unfinished Protestant Reformation eventually festered into in the 1640s. One sign of the coming victory was that already in the 1550s the Protestants were splintering under pressure: the exile communities fell out viciously amongst themselves between moderates and hardliners, and the hardliners themselves were split between mere radicals and actual revolutionaries. If all had gone according to plan, that is how English Protestants would have faded from view: with their hands at one another's throats.

Still, already in the 1550s, there were already signs that not everything was working. The Protestants were not going quietly. I've already mentioned their surprising and dismaying insistence on standing firm and dying rather than recanting. What made this worse was that the executions were, like most criminal justice in this era, acts of public theatre, intended to have a salutary effect on spectators. But if you put your enemies on stage it is hard to guard against the possibility of their stealing the show, and Protestants at the stake, and their supporters who gathered, did their best to wrest these events to their own purpose. If prisoners, instead of being penitent or showing obvious fear or behaving in some unhinged way, showed dignity, prayed for the queen and for one another, forgave their accusers, or spoke calmly and convincingly of their faith, dying in apparent peace with Christ's name on their lips, they could seize the moral high ground even as the flames licked around them. It was certainly hard, having witnessed a performance like that, to deny that the Protestants were sincere. And in some cases, depending on the victims, this could be pretty effective. The English were used to burning heretics occasionally, but they expected heretics to be opinionated peasants with eccentric views, offensive and faintly ridiculous figures. Bishops, scholars, priests: in a very hierarchical society, this was a different game. There was a definite squeamishness about burning women: around a fifth of the Protestants executed by Mary were women, especially as whole congregations began to be rounded up. The execution of teenagers or of old men was also liable to stir up unease. We shouldn't get any of this out of proportion: there was some worry about unrest at executions, but there were no incidents like those in France or the Netherlands, of condemned heretics being broken out of prison or even rescued from the stake, and the worry seems to have been much more about small groups of already committed Protestants showing up to cause trouble than about the mass of the population being won over.

That applied even to the most vividly theatrical execution of all, an event which was probably Mary's government's worst single tactical mistake. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the architect of Edward VI's religious policy, creator of the Book of Common Prayer was the regime's prize prisoner. His trial for heresy was a long, drawn-out process, and during 1555, kept in isolation and under relentless pressure, Cranmer slowly crumbled. He had never been as combative as some of his co-religionists. Moreover, his Protestantism had been built around his conviction of the monarch's God-given authority, and now his queen was commanding him to return to Roman obedience. Over the winter of 1555–56, he signed a series of recantations, each more



unambiguous than the one before. The regime was on the verge of a spectacular *coup*: Cranmer publicly renouncing his heresies.

But the opportunity was thrown away – it seems, by the queen herself. Mary was determined that Cranmer should die. Her loathing for him is understandable, for it was Cranmer who, more than twenty years earlier, had pronounced her parents' marriage void and led England into schism. Yet as a penitent heretic, his life ought to have been spared. The decision to kill him anyway looks unpleasantly like personal vengeance. Perhaps the manifest injustice of the sentence changed Cranmer's mind. Or perhaps the knowledge that his death was unavoidable removed the temptation to try to buy his life with a recantation. In any case, he returned to his Protestantism in the most decisive fashion possible. Declaring at the stake that his right hand, which had signed the recantations, would burn first, he held it steadily in the flames until the smoke overcame him. It was the single most vivid – and memorable – demonstration of Protestant sincerity at any of the burnings. The regime's obvious confusion as it tried and failed to come up with a strategy to kill the story is matched only by the relief and enthusiasm with which Protestant propagandists seized on it.

Because, of course, the battle for control of the theatre of execution did not end when the fire was doused. Since the beginning of the Reformation, Protestants had been claiming that executed heretics were *martyrs*, witnesses to the faith, a momentous category which placed them in succession to the martyrs of the early Church. Their propagandists celebrated and burnished these stories, and in images like this – the cover of the first full-scale English account of a Protestant martyr, published in 1546 – they showed them, not dressed in normal sixteenth-century clothing, but in stylised Roman robes, carrying a martyr's palm of victory. Notice the dragon behind her wearing the pope's triple crown. When Mary became queen, Lasso was not the only one to anticipate that the fires would be starting up again: The Protestants in exile were celebrating their martyrs before anyone was executed. In particular, a young English scholar in exile in the Swiss city of Basel, by the name of John Foxe, took up the mantle of his mentor John Bale, the author of this book, and began planning a much more ambitious work of martyrologic history. The first versions he published in Latin in 1554 and 1559 were just ancient history, claiming the heretics of the Middle Ages for the Protestant cause, and with a Swiss friend he was working on a giant Latin martyr-book that would bring together Protestant stories from across Europe, but Mary's death brought him back to England and changed the nature of his project. He was urged to produce a history specifically of England's martyrs, in English: he was enough of a scholar to be wary of publishing in English, which felt at the time like crass pandering to the mass market, and when he sent the finished book to his old Oxford college he sent it with a covering letter, in Latin of course, apologising for having dumbed down like this. Still, he did it. This is the famous title page of the first edition, in 1563, and it's worth a look.

First, the full title: this book was uniformly known as Foxe's Book of Martyrs, but he called it *Acts and monuments of these latter and perilous days*, so both remembering the danger that has now passed, but also, with that phrase, these latter and perilous days, implying that this is one of the signs of the times, the nearing end of the world, and that therefore if these is a brief lull in persecution now, Protestants should not imagine that their troubles are over. Specifically, he's remembering the cruelties inflicted by the Romish prelates, and especially in 'this Realme of England and Scotlande' – there was of course no such place as that united realm, those two kingdoms were ancient enemies that had only very, very recently been brought into an alliance by their shared commitment to the Protestant Reformation, and in fact there were very few Scottish martyrs so Foxe had some trouble delivering on that particular promise. And it also takes the story back to the year 1000, which is not an arbitrary round number, but the date, according to one reading of the New Testament, when the devil was unchained; Foxe and others linked this to the longstanding tale of how Pope Sylvester II, who was pope in the year 1000, was a sorcerer who had conjured the devil, giving rise to the notion that ever since then, the Roman church had been in fact controlled and directed by Satan himself. That's just the title. But look at what's going on around it. At the top, of course, you have Christ in glory, emphasising as any good Protestant would that God is absolutely sovereign, that nothing takes place without his permission, that all the forces of evil only have as much power as he chooses to allow them, and that in the end they will all be trampled beneath his feet. And the angels on his right and his left proclaim his glory, but below that, the stories diverge. At his right hand is the true church, who declare God's mercy; at the left, the false church, the church of Antichrist, whose fate declares God's justice. So here the martyrs in heaven – with their trademark palms – praise him; and here the persecutors in hell,



tormented by demons, also unwillingly praise him. Then below, we move from the church triumphant in heaven to the church militant on earth, as the martyrs praise him as the flames lick around them. While amongst the false church, they are idolaters and blasphemers: they should be praising God but instead they are worshipping a piece of bread as if it were God. And then at the bottom we have the images of the two churches in their essence: so in the true church the preacher, whom you can just about see has a beard – none of your tonsured and clean-shaven monkish priests – leads his people in understanding the Word of God, and they listen, and the women here have their Bibles open in front of him to follow the teaching there. There are no idols, simply that anti-idol in the corner, the Hebrew letters name of God, the closest Protestants would let themselves come to a visual depiction of the sacred. Whereas in the false church, the women click-clack on their rosaries instead of reading Scripture, most of the people go on idolatrous processions to this shrine, and the lordly bishop has a canopy carried over him to assert his pomp.

This book, in other words, does much more than just assemble the stories of the martyrs of Mary's reign, though it certainly does that. It weaves them into a whole narrative, a single sacred story of which they are all exemplars. And it was indeed a monumental book, deliberately vast, 1800 folio pages in this first edition, including reams of original documents. Foxe was a careful and precise historian, and while he certainly selected his material, and he would sometimes deliberately suppress stuff that didn't fit the story he wanted to tell, he didn't make stuff up, and he didn't accept what his informants told him uncritically – his unpublished papers are full of materials which were sent to him and which he thought too dubious or problematic to include. There were, nevertheless, quite a few mistakes in this first edition, most of them minor niggles, one or two more embarrassing ones such as the tale of the persecuting Catholic magistrate who, by God's providence, died a horrible death soon afterwards, but who, when the book was published, indignantly protested that he was alive and well and living in Suffolk. The criticism which these mistakes attracted led Foxe to redouble his efforts. The second edition, which appeared seven years later in 1570, was a thorough rewrite, much more meticulously researched, now running to over 2300 pages, in two volumes, containing two million words, two and a half times the length of the Bible. And instead of starting at the year 1000, the story was now taken back to the time of the first apostles and the Roman persecutions, one continuous story of the sufferings of Christ's people at the hands of Antichrist's minions.

There is a bitter irony to this book, which is that John Foxe himself was not in the business of fomenting nationalism and religious war. He believed something which in this period was very unusual, not to say eccentric: that killing people over their religious beliefs, any religious beliefs, was wrong. He was very clear that Catholicism was a demonic plot, but when Elizabeth I's government started executing Catholic priests, Foxe did his best to intervene to stop it – to no avail, of course. Having begun as a cheerleader for Elizabeth, he became increasingly disillusioned, and the later editions of his book were progressively more open about celebrating figures who opposed priestly tyranny and even those who taught pacifism. And while his book was in English and chiefly about England, he never lost the international perspective his years in Basel had given him: the book always included accounts of other parts of the world, and England's story was part of that wider tale. He genuinely did not, it seems, intend his book to become a manifesto for violent religious nationalism. And yet that is what happened.

The book itself was republished: four times in Foxe's lifetime and regularly thereafter, with updated editions appearing at moments of hair-trigger religious tension. In 1641, as England teetered on the brink of civil war, and again in 1684, as England awaited the accession of a Catholic king, James II, publishers rushed out new editions of Foxe, just in case anyone had forgotten what Catholics do and why good Englishmen should fight them. But of course, these were books beyond most people's means, huge prestige projects printed in small numbers. The real achievement was getting something like this into the nation's bloodstream. And that happened in two main ways. One was the cut-down versions: the miniature Foxes, collections of Foxe's greatest hits, which summarised the most famous and most compelling stories and promised readers that there was a great deal more where that had come from. You didn't need to know too much about the quality in order to feel the weight of those two fat volumes. And the book itself was a more public phenomenon than we might imagine. It is not the case that a copy of it was made available in every parish church in England, though you will still sometimes see that claim made – there were never enough copies for that. But plenty of churches did



acquire copies, which were kept in the building, on chains, so that anyone could come and read them; the bishop of London ordered all one hundred of the City's parishes to buy it, partly because he was trying to help his old friend John Foxe to balance his books. Reading it would be a social, not a private activity; there are some hints that parish ministers actually read aloud from Foxe's book during services, in place of a sermon. Francis Drake took a copy with him on his circumnavigation in the late 1570s and read from it to his men on board ship, reminding them on the other side of the world who and what the Spanish really were. Fathers read it to their families and servants during household prayers, the full book if they were wealthy or an abridged version if not. And even if you could not read and there was no-one to read to you, there was the most compelling aspect of Foxe's book, its illustrations. Dotted through the book are these little images, all of them like one another, in fact occasionally there is one repeated, but generally distinct enough that their repetition is like a set of hammer-blows: again and again and again, saints lifting their eyes and hands to heaven as the flames engulf them. And alongside them, occasionally, are the more sumptuous full-page illustrations. These have been removed from a lot of the surviving copies: people cut them out and stuck them on their walls, sometimes colouring them in. Some of these reinforced particularly striking tales, such as the most notorious single atrocity of all, a case not from England but from the island of Guernsey, a separate jurisdiction whose legal structures were less firm: this one would certainly have been illegal in England, and I would like to imagine it would not have happened. According to the story Foxe told – and he seems not to have made stuff up, and when he published it, it was not challenged by those who would have known had he been wrong – anyway, according to the story we have, Perotine Massey was pregnant when arrested and condemned for heresy in 1556, and her pleas to be allowed to deliver her baby before execution were rejected; at the stake itself, she went into labour, gave birth, and tried to pass the new born baby out of the flames to safety – only for the child to be thrown back into the fire to die with its mother. But we also have illustrations of major figures in the story. Bishop Bonner of London, a pantomime villain of cruelty, lasciviously whipping a suspect in his garden, a sight so shocking that even his own men turn their faces away in shame. Bonner, again, holding a suspected heretic's hand in a candle flame to give him a taste of the fire to come. That one is also a nod ahead to the most iconic story of all: Cranmer holding his own hand in the fire.

I don't intend to put too much weight on Foxe. The persecution under Mary would have no doubt been seared onto Protestant England's memory anyway; the orders of service which were issued for Elizabeth's church, which at the beginning of the reign sedulously avoided any reference to recent history, increasingly began to mention the 'horrible fires' from which England had been delivered, looking back to 'the sharpe tryall which God made of vs in the raign of Queene *Marie*', praising God for how Elizabeth's accession had saved her people from tyranny. By 1585, public prayers were recalling 'the late dayes of persecution, when the bodies of the Sainctes were burned in our streates'. And Foxe was not the only writer to remember the martyrs: they left plenty of friends and pupils behind them ready to treasure their memory, and Foxe himself was involved in a project to collect and publish their prison writings. Regardless of the source of the stories, they seeped into the nation's consciousness. If not, everyone could have had a copy of Foxe, some readers certainly treasured it. One pious Exeter merchant claimed that he had read it cover to cover seven times. A reading group in Essex in the 1580s met regularly to read it to one another. Puritans did it, but so did advocates of the more ceremonial Protestantism that would eventually become Anglicanism: the famous community at Little Gidding in Cambridgeshire heard Foxe's book read to them weekly. One preacher, recommending Foxe to his flock, said that 'the very pictures of the fires, and Martyrs, cannot but warme thee': and it seems to have been true. It warmed people with indignation against Catholics, of course, but it also fired, if you'll forgive the term, their imaginations. To read these stories in a time of ease and safety was to engage in a kind of pious fantasising: to ask yourself, if it were me, would I stand firm? Would I really be faithful? In the seventeenth century, one woman remembered that, as a seven-year-old girl, 'I began to examin myself on this manner, what wouldest thou doe ... if thou shouldest be tempted to deny Christ, and be called to suffer for his sake, as some of thy kindred were in Queen *Maries* time?' What evidence we have suggests that she was by no means alone in that thought.

The burnings were real; the memories were authentic, for the most part; the admiration for the martyrs' heroism and their persecutors' cruelty was, with all the contextualisation in the world, justified. The damage, as so often with atrocity stories, came from how those stories shaped the way that English Protestants saw the world



around them. For new stories kept coming which could be made to fit into the narrative. The rebellion of the northern earls in 1569. The pope's excommunication of the queen in 1570. The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. The sack of Antwerp by Spanish troops in 1576. The Spanish Armada in 1588. The Gunpowder Plot in 1605. The crushing of the Protestants of Bohemia in 1620. The Irish Rebellion of 1641. It was all a single story: a story of Catholic cruelty, all of it read through the lens of Mary's reign, which told you, as plain as the pictures in Foxe's book, what would befall England if just one of this battalion of plots were ever to succeed. In 1617, an eight-year-old girl in Northamptonshire heard her elders talk of worrying foreign news, and a possible invasion. 'I will remember,' she later recalled, 'that at this time heareing sum talke of there cruelty ... and hearing of the joys of those Marters that suffered for the Prodistant Religion, I was,' as she put it, 'very apprehensive of there Blessednes'. In a little girl, that produces nothing worse than nightmares. In her elders, those sorts of fears – those convictions, so firmly rooted as to be truisms, of what Catholics are – lead to pre-emptive actions. They drew England into wars in the Netherlands and France, they eventually drove Elizabeth I, much against her instincts, to cut off her Scottish cousin's head, and they did more than anything else to drive the wars which engulfed first Scotland, then Ireland and lastly England in the 1640s. It was only then, in the mid-seventeenth century, that Queen Mary I was given the nickname 'Bloody Mary'; earlier generations were as yet too respectful of their monarchs openly to blame her. But the name has stuck and is now indelible.

And that is how the English learned to hate Catholics. It was a lesson well learned. Fear of Catholics was used to justified systematic massacres and mass expulsions of Irish Catholics. It drove a decade-long political crisis in the late 1670s and 1680s based on the fear of what another Catholic monarch might do, and it sparked a grimly farcical panic about an entirely invented 'Popish Plot' in 1678–81 which resulted in at least 22 executions. A century on, an attempt to loosen anti-Catholic laws in 1778–80 led to mass demonstrations, the so-called Gordon Riots, eventually put down by the army with a death toll almost equalling Mary's body count. Further attempts to relax the laws caused paralysing political crises in 1801 and 1829, in both cases bringing down prime ministers. The restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850 provoked a wave of protest, including a 'Grand Anti-popish Procession' against what was called the 'Papal Aggression'. In Victorian times there was a rash of monuments erected to the Marian martyrs, notably the ones in Oxford and this ironic one in my old home town of Gloucester, to Bishop Hooper, who regarded his bishops' robes as idolatrous rags and only wore them under excruciating pressure: but the evangelical Victorian Anglicans who wanted to commemorate him as a martyr had no such prejudices, and as ever, memorialisation is about the needs of the people doing it, not the people who are being remembered.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this legacy of prejudice has been at its most explicit in Northern Ireland, where loyalist marching banners still regularly feature the Marian burnings. But those of us on this side of the water should not kid ourselves that we are free of it. British law still requires the monarch to be a Protestant and until 2011 banned a monarch from marrying a Catholic. Britain has not yet had a Catholic prime minister. Tony Blair converted to Catholicism shortly after leaving office in 2007, and his inclination to do so was an open secret well before that, but he plainly felt that to convert while in office would risk stirring up troubles best left to slumber. The sexual abuse scandals which have broken over the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century are appalling in their own right, but to understand the way in which the story has gripped the wider culture, while comparable scandals in other religious or secular institutions have not, we need to appreciate that this is still, even now, how atrocity stories work: they take facts and give them meaning by weaving them into a longer story. The abuse scandals have fallen on still-fertile soil, feeding long-established patterns of anti-Catholicism in societies still primed to hear tales of a cruel hierarchy whose religion is a cloak for its authoritarian instincts and its brutal lusts. Of course, both the Marian persecution and the modern abuse crisis are real and are appalling crimes in any age. We do not need to doubt that to also recognise a centuries-old, only half-acknowledged fact of life: in much of the English-speaking world, anti-Catholicism is the last respectable prejudice.

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