

# Bloody Mary?

A radio producer asked me a couple of years ago if I would take part in a programme called “The most evil people in history”: she wanted to know if I thought Mary Tudor qualified, and if not, whether I would be willing to come on the programme and make the case for the defence. I never did appear on the programme, but the call brought home to me just how deeply embedded the loathing of Queen Mary Tudor is in English popular culture. The legend of the sad sterile queen whose younger husband abandoned her, who deluded herself that she was pregnant but died childless, who entangled England in a disastrous Spanish war and in the process lost Calais to the French – all that has persuaded generations of historians and their readers that the five years of Mary’s reign was the low point of an otherwise glorious Tudor Age. But above all, it is Mary’s persecution of Protestants which has coloured later perceptions of her reign. 284 people burned alive on account of their religious beliefs takes some explaining.

These Marian martyrdoms loom large in English national mythology. The “Black legend” of Catholicism as intrinsically foreign, cruel, and reactionary, and the association of “popery and tyranny”, shaped English Protestant identity through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That legend has been a long time a-dying: the lurid portrayal of Mary’s reign in Shekhar Kapur’s enormously successful biopic *Elizabeth* is a case in point: you may remember the film’s evocation of Mary’s



Queen Mary Tudor

court – fanatical, gloom ridden and apparently populated by evil dwarves and crafty bishops in enormous black mitres. No-one watching that film would ever guess that the real life Queen Mary was in fact a kindly and cheerful soul, who loved gossip, music, and dancing, and took a magpie delight in brightly coloured clothes and expensive jewellery.

The facts of religious persecution in her reign, however, are grim enough. In the four-year campaign to suppress heresy by force which began in February 1555, 284 Protestants, fifty-six of them women, were burned alive for their beliefs, and approximately thirty more died in prison. The enormity of these statistics and the terrible human reality they

represent hang like a pall of smoke over the history of Mary Tudor's England. No-one can read through the major source, John Foxe's great martyrological polemic, *Actes and Monuments*, without mounting pity for the victims, and revulsion at the process in which they were caught up.

This side of the Enlightenment, we all of course agree about the horror of burning men and women alive for their fidelity to deeply-held beliefs. But we need to be clear that that shared horror is a matter of moral hindsight: it was felt by very few people in the sixteenth century. Mary pursued and burned Protestants because in sixteenth century Europe, heresy was viewed much as we now view the drugs trade. Heretical preachers were seen as we see drug-pushers – they were corrupting others, ruining souls, degrading lives. So, as a Christian ruler, Mary was bound to enforce orthodoxy, punish and seek to eliminate the error which would damn and ruin her people. And then there was the political reality. Mary's accession had been achieved despite a Protestant plot to disinherit her and put a Protestant puppet-Queen, Lady Jane Grey, on the throne: the plot nearly succeeded, and it confirmed what almost everyone agreed about anyway, that conflicting religions were fatal to a country's stability and social cohesion. As the Marian Bishop of Chichester, John Christopherson, wrote, "nothing there is, that bredeth so deadly hatred, as diversitie of myndes touching religion".<sup>i</sup>

Nevertheless, the Marian campaign, 284 victims in four years, was one of the fiercest and most concentrated in sixteenth century Europe, dwarfing Spain's toll of a hundred dissidents executed in approximately the same period, and exceeded only by the Spanish Netherlands, where 385 died in seven years. But the Marian campaign's ferocity was a matter of degree, not of kind. Religious persecution was employed by Catholic and Protestant governments all over

Europe well into the seventeenth century, not least in England. Elizabeth I *burned* no Catholics, but in the wake of the religiously motivated northern rebellion of 1569 she and her ministers insisted on hanging more than six hundred of the defeated Catholic rebels, thereby killing in a matter of a few weeks in January 1570 more than twice as many religious dissidents as Mary had burned in four years. Elizabeth's vengeful and implacable behaviour in 1570 contrasts starkly with Mary's granting a full pardon to most of those who had risen against her in Wyatt's rebellion in 1554, just as she pardoned Lady Jane Grey and her husband, despite the fact that Lady Jane had accepted her proclamation as Queen, and was therefore guilty of high treason. Contemporaries commented on Mary's gentleness and clemency to her enemies, and thought her foolish to be so soft. No-one ever accused her half-sister Elizabeth of softness towards *her* enemies: and quite apart from her savage reprisals against the Northern rebels, Elizabeth went on to strangle, disembowel and dismember more than two hundred Catholic priests and laypeople during the rest of the reign: yet no-one calls Elizabeth Bloody Elizabeth.

So the first point to emphasise is that most sixteenth-century English people thought it perfectly appropriate that the Queen should punish those who rejected the official faith of the nation. Most Protestant leaders agreed with their Catholic enemies that false faith was worse than no faith at all, and that stubborn adherence to religious error was rightly punished with death. In Edward's reign, Archbishop Cranmer himself had urged on the Duke of Somerset to burn the Kentish Anabaptist Joan Butcher. The issue was therefore not whether heretics should be burned, but who qualified as a heretic.

Who then was responsible for the Marian persecution? The Queen, her counsellors, the bishops, Cardinal Pole? The Queen herself had outlined the essentials

of the programme actually adopted, stipulating that the punishment of heretics should be done "without rashness", directed first at "such as by learning would seem to deceive the simple", and the rest "so to be used that the people might well perceive them not to be condemned without just occasion, whereby they shall both understand the truth and beware to do the like". In London in particular because of the presence of a strong and vocal Protestant minority, she declared, "I would wish none to be burnt without some of the Council's presence", and there should be "good sermons at the same" to explain and justify the burnings and correct heretical error.<sup>ii</sup>

In all of this Mary certainly had the backing of her Archbishop of Canterbury, her cousin Cardinal Reginald Pole. Mary's reverence for Pole, his constant presence at court, her anxiety to keep him by her even at the risk of the neglect of his other pastoral responsibilities, were all notorious. Observers of the court commented on his influence over her, and noted that the Queen would not allow "that [the Cardinal] should be the slightest distance from her", and Mary's instructions about the burnings required all those charged with the restoration of Catholicism to "have recourse" to Pole "to understand of him which way might be best to bring to good effect those matters that have begun concerning religion". In all matters of religion, Mary took her lead from Pole, with the possible single exception of the fate of Thomas Cranmer.<sup>iii</sup>

Pole was exonerated by John Foxe from complicity in the campaign of burnings, and did indeed have a horror of killing heretics. This was not because of any squeamishness about the death penalty, but because he believed that an unrepentant heretic not only died in torment, but went straight to hell for all eternity. So Pole placed huge emphasis on efforts to convert rather than to punish heretics. The most famous outcome of this policy came in the

summer of 1556, when Edward VI's tutor and one of the key figures in the Protestant diaspora in Europe, Sir John Cheke, was kidnapped and brought to England, where hand-picked theologians under Pole's direction argued him into submission. In October, Pole choreographed and probably drafted the text of a minutely detailed formal recantation by Cheke at court, in which Cheke threw himself at the Queen's feet, and received a pardon. He then made a speech praising the clemency which had forgiven him his treasons and which would win other heretics back to the Church "drawn by ... Mercy, and not plucked by extremity", because it showed that "their Life and Mendment is sought, not their Death and shame".<sup>iv</sup> Cheke's conversion, real or feigned, was a devastating blow to the Protestant cause, duly exploited in the campaign against heresy in London, and, whether by design or coincidence, providing some compensation for the bungled handling of Cranmer's recantations and death earlier the same year. From October 1556 Cheke was required to accompany Bonner when the bishop sat in consistory in heresy trials, and according to the Venetian ambassador, his recantation was instrumental in persuading thirty other imprisoned evangelicals to return to the unity of the church.

Everyone involved of course knew perfectly well that Cheke had been and probably still was a convinced Protestant, but what the regime was after was unequivocal outward conformity: Mary, no more than Elizabeth, did not seek to make windows into men's souls. Former Protestants who came to Mass and kept their opinions to themselves were left to their own devices. It was a sensible policy for, given time the children of such conformists, if not they themselves, would become good Catholics. Only those who publicly attacked or repudiated Catholicism were interfered with or pursued.

But for all his care for their souls, there can be no doubt

that Pole thought that heretics who would *not* repent, and who persisted in their deviant behaviour, were quite properly executed. Reporting the burning of Ridley and Latimer to King Philip in October 1555, he described the Spanish friar Peter de Soto's efforts to get them to recant. It did no good, Pole commented, since "no one can save those whom God has rejected". And so they were burned, "the people looking on not unwillingly, since it was known that nothing had been neglected with regard to their salvation", an echo of the Queen's own directions in such matters. With a canny eye on the propaganda possibilities as well as Cranmer's chances in the next world, he told Philip that the Archbishop seemed less obstinate, and if he could indeed be brought to recant, "the Church will derive no little profit from the salvation of a single soul". Had Pole's views prevailed with the Queen on this occasion as on most others, the outcome of Cranmer's case would no doubt have been very different.<sup>v</sup> But it was Cranmer who had divorced her parents, and led the kingdom into heresy, so her hostility to him is hardly surprising. In addition, Cranmer had taken part in the Privy Council plot to make Jane Grey Queen: he was guilty of treason, and had he been hanged for that crime no-one would have complained. Cranmer punished as a traitor would have been a moral lesson to churchmen not to get involved in politics. Cranmer alive as a convert to Catholicism would have been a major propaganda victory for Mary's government. His burning as a heretic, despite his repeated recantations was both unjust and a political blunder. It is also the one atrocity of the reign which has been laid, by myself as well as others, directly at the Queen's own door, for the truly horrific decision to burn Cranmer despite his recantations, must surely have been the Queen's. All the same, Pole must at least have acquiesced in it, and since the publication of my book I have come to think that he may have done rather more

than acquiesce. The messenger carrying word of this decision to Cranmer, and then responsible for justifying it from the pulpit at Cranmer's execution, was Dr Henry Cole, Provost of Eton, and a former member of Pole's Italian household. Notoriously, Cole's sermon at Cranmer's burning justified his death on three grounds. Here are Cole's words as Foxe summarised them:

"First that being a traytor, he had dissolved the lawfull matrimonie betweene the Kinge her father and mother: besides the driuing oute of the Popes authoritye, while he was Metropolitan.

Secondly, that he had ben an heretike, from whom as from an author and onely fountaine, all heretical doctrine & schismaticall opinions that so many yeres haue preuailed in Englande, did first rise and spring: ... not without great ruine and decay of the catholicke church.

And further, it seemed meete, according to the lawe of equalitie, that as the death of the Duke of Northumb. of late, made euen wyth Thomas More Chauncellour that dyed for the Churche, so there shoulde be one that shoulde make euen wt Fisher of Rochester: and because that Ridley, Hooper, Ferrar, were not able to make euē wyth that man, it seemed meete, that Cranmer shoulde be ioyned to them to fill vp this part of equalitie." [1583 p 1885]

Each of these three core elements of Cole's sermon chime with prominent themes in Pole's relations with Cranmer – his special culpability in the Divorce, the schism, and the spread of heresy were issues explored at length in the harsh and urgent letters Pole wrote to Cranmer in prison. Even more strikingly, the

emphasis on the martyrdoms of More and Fisher is something especially characteristic of Pole and his circle: till March 1556, the regime, apart from Pole himself, had been strangely silent about More, Fisher and the other Henrician martyrs. Their prominence in Cole's funeral sermon for Cranmer suggest some direct input from Pole: if the Cardinal did not instigate Cranmer's execution, it seems likely he had some part in deciding the terms of Cole's attempt to justify it.

Nevertheless, throughout the reign it seems to have been Mary's Council which took the lead in urging on bishops and local officials to decisive action against "lewde and seditious" preaching and all forms of nonconformity.<sup>vi</sup> A royal letter to the Justices of the Peace in Norfolk on March 25th 1555 spelled out the role of the magistrates. The county was to be divided up into eight or twelve smaller units, allocated between the members of the bench as appropriate. They were to assist and support the preachers who were to be sent down into the country "to preach Catholic doctrine to the people", they were to search out absentees from church and religious dissidents, paying special attention to "preachers and teachers of heresy, and procurers of secret meetings for that purpose". They were to recruit in every parish "some one or more honest men, secretly instructed," to act as informers, and they were to charge constables "of the most honest and catholick of every parish" to vigilance against vagabonds, wanderers, "and such as may be probably suspected".<sup>vii</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the most prominent Protestant leaders, Bishops Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer, were earmarked for show trials. This involved a turbulent public disputation with the combined theology faculties of Oxford and Cambridge, to demonstrate that Protestantism had lost the argument as well as the political initiative. Their



*The burning of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury 1556. He was one of the many Protestant martyrs burned for heresy in the reign of Mary Tudor.*

Catholic opponents, however, were not primarily out for blood. It was hoped that the evangelical leaders might recant their "fantasticall & deuilish" opinions, and so "winne many, and do much good".<sup>viii</sup> Their condemnations and deaths were therefore postponed, while they were endlessly reasoned with to bring them to conformity – in Cranmer's case for more than a year. Meanwhile, the first four victims of the revived laws executed in February 1555 were also notable clerical leaders – John Rogers, Rowland Taylor, Laurence Saunders, John Hooper. All had been prominent in the establishment of the Edwardine reformation, and all were men whose high-profile resistance made a showdown with them inevitable.<sup>ix</sup> But the campaign widened in March to include lay people. By the end of the year seventy-five would have gone to the flames, the bulk of them in the summer months of

June to September. Many of these executions are poorly documented, but most of those for whom we have details were tough-minded evangelicals whose sustained defiance had perhaps surprised the authorities, and at any rate ensured that they became early targets. By the time the burnings began, some of the victims, having resisted all attempts to persuade them to conformity or even quietness, had already been in gaol for a year or more. By the end of the reign, many of those being executed were recidivists with one or more arrests and releases already behind them.

Were Mary's servants bloody? The black legend propagated by Foxe insisted on the cruelty and bloodthirstiness of the Bishops, and especially bishop Bonner of London. In fact, however, Bonner in particular was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid condemning those accused before him. He offered to set the

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Protestant apprentice William Hunter up in a shop, or to employ him as his steward, and told him

“I thinke thou art ashamed to beare a fagot and recant openly, but if thou wilt recante thy sayinges, I will promise thee, that thou shalt not be putte to open shame: but speake the worde here nowe betwene me and thee, and I wil promise thee, it shal go no further, and thou shalt goe home againe without any hurt”.

Bonner’s attempts to win over this Protestant apprentice certainly sprang in part from ordinary human compassion, the sense of the tragic waste of a young life – and an immortal soul – for persistence in what Bonner and his colleagues inevitably regarded as perverse and pernicious error. Even officials dedicated to rooting out heresy, might feel the horror of the fate awaiting the condemned when faced not with an abstraction but men and women of flesh and blood. Dr Michael Dunning, tough-minded chancellor of the Norwich diocese, was involved in more than two dozen of the thirty-three capital cases in the diocese. May 1556, however, was the first occasion on which he rather than Bishop Hopton had to pass sentence of condemnation. He found himself sentencing three defendants, one of whom was a farm labourer only nineteen years old. Unable to budge them from their fatal beliefs, the seasoned Chancellor “burst out in teares, intreatyng them to remember themselues, and to turne agayne to the holy mother church, for that they were deceiued and out of the truth, and that they should not wilfully cast away themselues”. The tougher-minded diocesan registrar, impatient of such hesitation, called out testily “in hast to ridde them out of the way, and make an end”, and Dunning eventually passed sentence.<sup>x</sup>

Even if one accepts the absolute sincerity of these

attempts to persuade the victims and so save their lives, there is something revolting in an offer of mercy to the hapless men and women accused, only at the price of their renunciation or concealment of deeply held beliefs. Revulsion intensifies when one considers that many of the accusers and judges had not long before promoted the very beliefs for which the accused were now to be condemned. Interrogating Thomas Drowry, the “blind boy of Gloucester”, the chancellor, John Williams, demanded to know who had taught the boy his heresies. To his confusion the boy replied that he had learned them from Williams himself, citing in detail a cathedral sermon in Edward’s reign in which Williams had taught that the sacrament was to be received by faith, “and not carnally and really, as the papistes haue heretofore taught”. The abashed Williams responded “Then do as I haue done, and thou shalt lyue as I do, and escape burning”. When Drowry refused, Williams gave sentence against him, though the diocesan registrar, also present, later claimed that he had protested, “Fie for shame man, will you read the sentence against hym, and condemne your selfe?”<sup>xi</sup>

But whatever considerations of compassion or personal compunction might give pause to those charged with the pursuit and punishment of heresy, to begin with, worry about the likelihood of a public backlash against the campaign was an even more pressing concern. This might seem to give support to the notion that Mary’s subjects did indeed think her bloody, and were revolted by the burnings. To begin with the regime seems to have feared as much. In the spring of 1555 in the city of London as everywhere else, the numerical weight and influence of evangelicalism remained an unknown quantity. Gospellers were certainly present in strength in the crowds who flocked to see the first burning, of the preacher John Rogers at Smithfield on February 4th 1555. Vociferous demonstrations of support for

the condemned man alarmed onlookers like the Imperial ambassador, who told King Philip that “Some of the onlookers wept, others prayed to God to give him strength ... and not to recant, others gathered the ashes and bones and wrapped them up in paper to preserve them, yet others threatening the bishops”.

In the wake of the demonstrations at Rogers’ burning, extreme care was taken about the movement of the other clergy burned that month outside London. The sheriff charged with taking Rowland Taylor to Hadleigh for execution panicked when a former parishioner encountered at Brentwood recognised Taylor, shook his hand and spoke to him: Taylor was hooded the rest of the journey.<sup>xii</sup> When Bishop Hooper was taken under arrest through the city of London to Newgate by night, sergeants were sent ahead to douse the costermongers’ candles in the city streets, and he too was hooded for his final journey from London to Gloucester. But although there were some gestures of support from gospellers at both places of execution, there was no disorder.<sup>xiii</sup> As the burnings of lay Protestants began in March, the Privy Council took steps to ensure that grandees like the earl of Oxford and Richard Lord Rich were present “at the burnyng of suche obstinate personnes as presently are sent doune to be bourned in diverse partes of the countie ... and to be adying to the shirief of the said shire therein”.<sup>xiv</sup> Processions of the local gentry flanking the sheriff and his officers became routine at executions, a gesture of solidarity with the regime which in especially sensitive cases the Privy Council both demanded and rewarded.<sup>xv</sup>

For the regime, there was a delicate balance of advantage and danger to be weighed in the publicity surrounding the burnings. The Queen ordered that Hooper was to be burned in his cathedral city of Gloucester, “for the example and terror of suche as he hath there seduced and mistaught, and because he hath

done moste harme there".<sup>xvi</sup> If the burnings were to fulfil their deterrent purpose fully, they had to be staged where Protestantism had established a hold. So, although in 1555, at the start of the campaign, Essex heretics were burned at a range of locations spread across the county, from 1556 onwards all the executions in the county were carried out in Colchester, not despite but *because* opposition was most vociferous there. Gruesome deaths like the botched slow roastings of the wretched Hooper at Gloucester and of Ridley at Oxford certainly evoked pity from onlookers, as they still harrow Foxe's readers, but the public torment of condemned criminals was a hugely popular spectator sport in Tudor England, and we should not project modern sensibilities on to the people of the past. The crowds attending burnings were mixed assemblies of

evangelical sympathisers, hostile Catholics, and the great unwashed in search of sensation. A crowd of seven thousand turned out to witness the burning of Hooper in February 1555, and Professor Pettegree thinks such crowds "were not there to demonstrate their approval of this aspect of Marian policy".<sup>xvii</sup> Perhaps, or perhaps not. The burning of a bishop for heresy was an event without precedent in English history, and Hooper, the most abrasive of new brooms, had been a controversial and in many quarters an unpopular figure in both his midland dioceses. Foxe himself tells us that the crowd at the burning was so large partly because it was market day, and that "manye also came to see his behauiour towards death": curiosity was as likely a motive as sympathy in such spectators.<sup>xviii</sup>

All the same, everyone in authority was of course wary of

the persuasive effect of Protestant courage and eloquence at the stake, so to offset that, sermons against the victims were routinely preached at burnings. The Queen's instructions for Hooper's execution warned that he was "as heretiques be, a vain-glorious person, and delyteth in his tongue, and having liberty, may use his sayd tongue to perswade such as he hath seduced, to persist in the myserable opinion that he hath sowed among them". Neither at the place of execution nor on the way there was he to be allowed to "speak at large", therefore, but "thither to be ledde quietly, and in silence ..." <sup>xix</sup> Nevertheless, there soon emerged a symbolic code of behaviour at the point of execution, designed to underline the claim that the victims were martyrs for Christian truth. Laurence Saunders, Rawlins White, Christopher Wade and John Bradford all went to their



The execution of John Bradford and John Leaf at Smithfield 1555.

deaths dressed in long white shirts which friends provided for the occasion. There was a gruesomely practical dimension to this gesture: thick clothing prolonged the pain. But the white robes were also a deliberate allusion to the white-robed army of martyrs in the book of Revelation, whose blood cried out to God for vengeance.<sup>xx</sup> Some of the victims kissed the stake and the faggots, and John Bradford and his disciple John Leafe elaborated this gesture by prostrating themselves in prayer for a minute on either side of the stake before going to it and kissing it. Elaborate prayer or psalm-singing at the place of execution were other elements in the symbolics of martyrdom.

At first glance, the burning of Joyce Lewes at Lichfield in September 1557 provides a textbook example of spontaneous popular support for the victim of a cruel and politically inept regime. Members of the crowd – Foxe says “the most part” – shouted Amen to her prayer at the stake for deliverance of the realm from papistry, and “a great number” of the women present drank a toast with her before her death. In fact, however, the spectators were far from unanimous in her support. Bystanders railed at and reviled her as she passed through the crowd and while she stood chained at the stake, though Foxe insisted that this hostility must have been coordinated by the authorities. However that may be, there was certainly nothing spontaneous about the demonstrations in support of Mistress Lewes, either. Foxe tells us that the night before her death she “desired certaine of her frends to come to her, with whom ... shee consulted how shee might behaue herself, that her death might be more glorious to the name of God, comfortable to his people, and also most discomfortable vnto the enemies of God”. The authorities got wind of this, and a local priest was stationed by the pyre to write down the names of anyone offering encouragement or comfort. Her supporters from outside the town

escaped because the priest did not know their names, but eleven locals were arrested for drinking with her, nine women and two men, including a former sheriff of Warwickshire.<sup>xxi</sup> All later recanted.

The geographical spread of the burnings was very uneven: one hundred and thirteen in the diocese of London, seventy-five of them in or near the city itself, most of the others in Essex, fifty-two in Canterbury, where almost all the victims came from the towns and villages of the Weald. There were nine more in the other Kent diocese of Rochester, twenty-six in the diocese of Chichester, all of them men and women from the archdeaconry of Lewes, seven in Lichfield and Coventry, seven in Bristol, four in Ely, three in Oxford, two in the whole of Wales, and the rest of the dioceses with single executions, or, as in Durham, none at all.

Raw numbers alone might give the misleading impression that the scale and intensity of the campaign against heresy remained more or less constant through its first three years. In fact it intensified, both in ferocity and in its likely impact. There were seventy-five victims in the eleven months from the first executions in February 1555, eighty-five in 1556, eighty-one in 1557, and a significant scaling down only in 1558, a year of political disruption and epidemic disease. But the approximately constant numbers in the first three years conceal a dramatic change of direction and style from 1556. In the campaign's first year, no fewer than eighteen of the seventy-five victims were executed in Canterbury diocese. These Canterbury Protestants all came from the villages and towns of the Weald, but they were all burned in the cathedral city in four group executions, between July and November that year. No citizen of Canterbury could have avoided witnessing at least one of these grizzly spectacles. The majority of the other executions that first year (thirty-one out of fifty-seven) took place in the London diocese. Here, however, the approach of

the authorities was quite different, with most of the victims being burned singly, often in small and relatively obscure places, scattered widely through the diocese. Thus the fifty-seven victims from outside the Canterbury diocese were executed at forty different sites, and the public impact of these single executions must have been quite different from those in Canterbury. This difference in method in the London diocese probably reflected uncertainty about the likely public reaction to the burnings on the part of Bishop Bonner. If so, his doubts and those of the other bishops must either have been resolved by experience, or overridden by authority, because from 1556 onwards the Canterbury pattern was used. It has often been claimed that the campaign faltered and tailed off, in response to public hostility: in fact the figures reveal that it become more, not less, aggressive. From the start of 1556 onwards the majority of those burned died in group executions of three or more, and the fires were concentrated at fewer and fewer sites, so as to make a more impressive and public impact. So the forty-one places of execution used in 1555 were reduced to twenty-three in 1556, dropped again to fourteen in 1557, and finally to thirteen in 1558. There were especially gruesome mass burnings at Stratford-le-Bow, one of London's satellite villages, in June 1556, when eleven men and two women died in a single fire, at Lewes in Sussex in June 1557, when ten people were executed at once, and at Colchester in Essex the same month, when another ten died in two fires on a single day. A few sites – Smithfield in London, Colchester, Lewes, and to a lesser extent Bristol and Bury St Edmunds – served repeatedly as stages for these lethal dramas. The campaign was always fiercest in the summer months, peaking in June 1557, when a total of twenty-eight were executed in a single month.

By the last year of Mary's reign, the number of executions was declining steeply. This decline has often been interpreted as a

sign of loss of nerve by the regime: I think it makes more sense to see it as a sign of the loss of *evangelical* nerve, fewer intransigents to burn. It's true, however, that the inspirational and propaganda value of the burnings to the beleaguered evangelical community was prompting a tactical rethink in London. As one London informer told the evangelical book-smuggler Elizabeth Young, "You care not for burning, By God's bloud, there must be some other meanes founde for you".<sup>xxii</sup> By the summer of 1558 those in charge of the burnings in London had concluded that the Smithfield executions provided the London gossellers with too much publicity. John Story, one of the campaign's sternest strategists, suggested that in future condemned heretics should be sent for execution "into odde corners into the countrey".<sup>xxiii</sup> This is the conclusion Bishop Bonner himself drew. At the end of June 1558, in the wake of the demonstration organised by Thomas Bentham which I've already referred to, Bonner wrote to Cardinal Pole suggesting that six Islington conventiclers remaining in custody should be speedily and quietly burned elsewhere, to avoid such scenes. They were duly executed at Brentford on July 14th, and, as expected, nobody protested.<sup>xxiv</sup>

But this was a change of tactics, not of heart: there was certainly no sign that the Privy Council, which had all along driven the campaign forward, was looking for an exit strategy. On the contrary, the growing political radicalism of Protestant writers like John Ponet and Christopher Goodman, openly advocating rebellion, had led in 1557 to a stepping up of the search for heresy, and a growing harshness in handling it. A new and more draconian national Heresy Commission was established in February 1557, and in its wake hitherto teflon lay leaders like the Sussex ironmaster Richard Woodman were finally tracked down and executed. As Foxe observed, "these new Inquisitours

... beganne to ruffle and to take vpon them not a little: so that all quarters were full of persecution and prisons almost full of prisoners".<sup>xxv</sup> Executions peaked in June that year, with twenty-eight burnings, most of them in Kent and Sussex. Determination to deal once and for all with the "devyllishe opinions" of dissenters provoked growing Conciliar impatience with the loophole provided by last minute recantations. In August 1558 this hard line manifested itself in the appallingly protracted execution of a Hampshire gentleman, Thomas Benbridge.<sup>xxvi</sup> Benbridge had been condemned by Bishop White bishop of Winchester for maintaining, among much else, that the devil was the head of the Roman Catholic Church. At his execution, hostile onlookers called for his tongue to be cut out, and the pyre was badly built – Foxe notes that "he was nothing like covered with faggotes". The sluggish flames slowly scorched his beard and legs, and Benbridge shouted out that he recanted: his friends hastily dismantled the fire. The Catholic preacher attending the burning, cobbled together a recantation, which the reluctant Benbridge signed, using the stooped back of a bystander as a writing-desk. The sheriff, Sir Richard Pecksall, thereupon called the execution off, on his own authority. This was entirely in the spirit of the Cardinal's declared hope that heretics even at the very last "having the terror of judgement before their eyes ... might plead for mercy".<sup>xxvii</sup> The Privy Council, however, were furious when they were informed. They ordered Pecksall to execute Bembridge "out of hande". Even if he continued in his recantation, "as he outwardly pretendeth", there must be no reprieve, but only "some discrete and lerned man", to confer with him "for the better confirmation of him in the Catholyke faythe and to be present also with him at his death for the better ayding of him to dye Goddes servaunte". Bishop White was ordered to provide a suitable priest, and the sheriff was summoned

to London to explain himself. The wretched Benbridge was duly executed, on yet another botched pyre, (Foxe thought it deliberate) "which did rather broyle hym, than burne him".<sup>xxviii</sup>

Was all this working? I think on the whole it was. By Mary's last years the regime was eyeball-to-eyeball with a hard core of the zealous and convinced. These men and women went to their deaths, and in some cases deliberately provoked their deaths, influenced by dismay at the progress of Catholic restoration and the defection of former gossellers, by guilt-feelings over their own earlier compromises or recantations, by the example of more courageous brethren, and by the steadily mounting pressure of anti-Nicodemite literature smuggled in from mainland Europe, pamphlets denouncing all compromise with the synagogue of Satan, and exhorting the faithful (from a safe distance) to make a stand. The Colchester serving-wench Elizabeth Ffolkes was a case in point: arrested for conventicling, her judges found an excuse to release her, in the hope she would leave the town. However, "hearyng that some doubted that shee hadde yealded to the Pope ... [she] was in suche anguyshe of minde and terrour of conscience, that (no remedye) shee woulde to the Papistes agayne ... and commyng before them at Cosins house at the white Harte in Colchester, she was at vtter defaunce with them and their doctrine": they had no option but to re-arrest her, and this time she was condemned.

But such doughty souls were a dwindling band: the half-convinced and the cowardly were running for cover, and conforming. At Ffolkes' execution along with five others in August 1557 her employer, Alderman Nicholas Clere, was "very extreme" against her and her companions, even preventing them from praying aloud at the stake. At her trial, Ffolkes had warned unspecified "halting Gossellers" in the court to "beware of blood". Clere himself was just such a "halting gosseller", having been a

notable evangelical under Edward. Like many well-to-do people all over England, he was now busy establishing a safe distance between himself and the fatal whiff of heresy.<sup>xxix</sup>

The executions had done their work, and none but the most determined and courageous held out openly. In 1558 the parish constable of St Bride's, Fleet-Street, notoriously a nest of evangelicals, was admonished by Thomas Darbyshire to counsel one suspect, Elizabeth Young, to conformity. "So do I", replied the Constable: "I bid her go to Masse, and to say as you say. For by the Masse, if you say the Crowe is white, I will say so too".<sup>xxx</sup> Such ignoble surrender was hardly the stuff of Counter-reformation Catholic zeal. But it boded even less well for continuing Protestant resistance.

History is kind to the victors. Mary's religious policies were undone by the coincidence of her own death and that of her cousin Reginald Pole on the same day, depriving the renewed English Catholic church she had recreated of the strong leadership it would have needed to defy a Protestant successor. Had she lived, Mary would of course have had a continuing Protestant problem, as her sister was to have a continuing Catholic problem. But a weak and divided European Protestantism would have been an altogether less formidable threat to a Catholic England than Habsburg Catholicism proved to Elizabeth's Protestant state. By the same token, a dissident Protestant minority in the 1560s and 1570s would have had a far narrower community base at home, and no major financial or political backers abroad. The burnings would almost certainly have gone on, but in dwindling numbers, and the lurid spectacle of fiery execution, so novel and so fraught in 1555, might have become as routine and unremarkable as a hanging for sheep-stealing or rick-burning. There would have been no Foxe's Book of Martyrs, no black legend, no government-sponsored

campaign to associate Catholicism with foreign invasion or treachery at home. The princess Elizabeth, if not fatally compromised by involvement in Protestant plots against her sister, would in all likelihood have been neutralised by being married off to a Catholic prince, and the English history books might well have been full of the praises of the golden days of good Queen Mary.

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## Footnotes, The Burnings

- i John Christopherson, *An exhortation to all menne to take hede and beware of rebellion*, London 1554, STC 5207, sig c iij.
- ii Printed in Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, vol II p cclxxiv (Records, Part II, Book II no. xxii).
- iii For Mary's acceptance of Pole's authority in relation to her father's reputation, see above, p XXX. Pole's letter to the bishops September 1555, endorsing Mary's instructions, CRP vol 3 no. 1363, *Epistolarum*, vol. V, p. 86-8, and below p XXX. For the Venetian ambassador on Mary's dependence on Pole's advice, *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* vol VI Part 1, pp 391-2: for Pole's account of his close collaboration with Mary, CRP vol 3 no 2252, *Epistolarum*, vol V, pp 71-2: and see the discussion of this letter (to Carranza) in my essay, "Cardinal Pole Preaching" in Loades and Duffy *Church of Mary Tudor*, pp 176-200, esp. p 180.
- iv John Strype, *The Life of the Learned Sir John Cheke*, London 1705, p 150; *Calendar of State papers Venetian*, vol VI part 1, pp 510, 526, 536, 668.
- v *Calendar of State Papers Spanish*, vol VI (i), p 226.
- vi APC IV, pp 322, 327-8, 330, 333, 338, 349, 387, 394, 395, 403: vol V, 17, 61, 88.
- vii Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, Oxford 1822, vol III part 1 pp 338-9: Gilbert Burnet, *A History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, Oxford 1850, vol II p cclxxi (Records, Part II, Book II no xix).
- viii Foxe [1583] p 1767.
- ix notably Robert Ferrar, Bishop of St David's at the end of March, in April George Marsh, formerly curate to Lawrence Saunders and conspicuous as one of the few evangelical activists in Lancashire, and at the end of May John Cardmaker, vicar of St Brides, Fleet Street.
- x Foxe [1583] p 1912.
- xi Foxe [1583] p 1912.
- xii Foxe [1583] pp 1525-7.
- xiii Foxe [1583] p 1508.
- xiv APC vol V p 104.
- xv APC V pp 139, 141, 147, 150, 153, 154.
- xvi Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, vol II pp cccxxx (Records, Part III Books IV-VI, no xxxvi).
- xvii Pettegree, *Marian Protestantism*, p 157.
- xviii Foxe [1583] p 1509.
- xix Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, vol II, p cccxxxi, (Part III, Books iv-vi, no xxxvi).
- xx For this connection, see the letters of John Denley printed in Foxe [1563] p 1246, of Richard Rothe, [1583] p 2019, and of William Tyms, p 2141.
- xxi Foxe [1583] pp 2012-3, 2023.
- xxii Foxe [1583] p 2063.
- xxiii *The Lyfe and death of John Story* (STC 23297) sig Di (verso).
- xxiv Petyt Ms 538/47 fol 3r, a reference I owe to Dr Thomas Freeman.
- xxv Foxe [1583] pp 1970-1.
- xxvi For Benbridge, R. H. Fritze, "Rare Example of Godlyness Amongst Gentleman": The Role of the Kingsmill and Gifford Families in Promoting the Reformation in Hampshire' in *Protestantism and the National Church*, ed. Peter Lake and Maria Dowling (London, 1987), pp 154-55.
- xxvii *Epistolarum* V p 88.
- xxviii APC VI p 361: Foxe [1583] pp 2246-7.
- xxix Foxe [1583] p 2008.
- xxx Foxe [1583] p 2064.