Bloody Mary's Victims: The Iconography of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs

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Next to the English Bible, no other book enjoyed greater popularity among English Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than John Foxe's "Book of Martyrs." First published in English in 1563, the book went through four editions during Foxe's lifetime, and nine by 1684. Foxe's work provided the most complete, perhaps the most convincing, and certainly the most absorbing account of the Marian persecution to reach the English public.

From the beginning the text of the book was elaborately illustrated with graphically-drawn woodcuts. Numbering over one hundred, the anonymously-crafted pictures portrayed a broad range of subjects and scenes drawn fom Foxe's account. Although often overlooked by students of the period, the iconography of the book must have accounted in some significant measure for Foxe's success.

Mary Tudor succeeded to the English throne in July, 1553, upon the death of her younger half-brother Edward VI. Although she enjoyed an initial wave of acclaim, her popularity proved to be short-lived. Her marriage to Philip of Spain and her pursuit of formal reconciliation with Rome soon alienated many of her subjects.

Mary's policy toward the English reformers was at first cautious and tentative. During the first year of her reign many Protestant leaders were allowed to flee the country, while others quietly went underground. Those who persisted in their opposition to the new policies, however, were in due course arrested, imprisoned, and tried on one charge or another. When toward the end of 1554 Parliament voted to revive the medieval laws against heresy, Mary launched a direct and violent attack against the reformers. During the remaining four years of her reign approximately 275 persons were executed on her orders.

Among Mary's victims were several of the leading Protestant reformers, including Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. Other well known Protestants who suffered were John

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Plate 1

Rogers, the biblical translator and prebendary at St. Paul's, Bishop John Hooper of Gloucester, Bishop Robert Ferrar of St. David's in Wales, Dr. Rowland Taylor of Hadleigh, and the noted preacher John Bradford. Scores of others of lesser stature, among whom as many as 50 were women, were also included among the victims.

Judged by contemporary continental standards the religious persecution of Mary's reign may not have been excessive. But it was unprecedented in the English experience and by Mary's death in 1558 had succeeded only in alienating much of the country. From his exile in Geneva John Knox expressed the feelings of many Englishmen when he wrote of the "monstrous crueltie" of "that professed enemie of God, mischievous Mary."[1]

It was the work of Knox's fellow exile and historian-martyriologist extraordinaire John Foxe, however, which did the most to perpetuate anti-Marian sentiment [see plate 1]. Foxe's Book of Martyrs masterfully exploited the Marian persecution, converting it, as Gordon Rupp put it, into "the greatest single act of propaganda in history."[2]

Upon Mary's accession to the throne Foxe had fled to the continent, first to Strassburg, then Frankfurt, and finally Basel. He had returned to England in November, 1559, where he had formed a lasting association with the Lon-

[1]*The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), and Knox to Sir William Cecyll (1559), *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas George Stevenson, 1846–1864), 4:420; 6:16.

[2]*Six Makers of English Religion, 1500–1700* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), p. 67.

don printer John Day, in collaboration with whom he published his Book of Martyrs in 1563.

The origins of the work dated back to 1552, when Foxe first began collecting materials on the victims of Roman Catholic persecution in England. While in exile he had published two preliminary Latin treatises on the subject, taking his account down to the execution of Cranmer in 1556.[3] He entitled the work which appeared in 1563, *Actes and Monuments of These Latter and Perillous Times.* A large folio volume containing nearly 1,800 pages, the book included an English translation of his earlier work, to which was added a vast amount of new material.

Foxe attempted to set the Marian persecution within the broader context of the history of the Christian Church, the Church of England, and the Protestant Reformation. He sought to show that Mary's victims were worthy of being placed in the company of the great martyrs of the earliest days of the Church. "If Martyrs are to be compared with Martyrs," he wrote in his preface, "I see no cause why the Martyrs of our time deserve not as great commendation as the other in the primitive church."[4]

Among his preliminaries Foxe included an address to his Catholic readers:

> Se and behold, I beseche you here in this story the pityfull slaughter of your butchery. Beholde your own handy woorke, consider the nomber almost out of nomber of so many, silly & symple lambes of Christ, whose bloud you have sought and suckt, whose lyves you have vexed, whose bodies you have slayne, racked and tormented, some also you have cast on dunghils, to be devoured of Foules and Dogges, wythout mercy, without measure, without al sense of humanity.[5]

And yet for all his stress upon the Marian terror, Foxe's mood was one of triumph and victory. As Helen C. White has observed, the terror "is the terror of things remembered; it in no way impairs the confidence of the victory."[6]

Foxe soon found himself compelled to plan a new edition of his book, as its wide dispersal had produced a flood of new information. Consequently, in 1570 he published a greatly enlarged revision, printed in two gigantic folio volumes. Other Elizabethan editions followed in 1576, 1583, and 1596.

The response to the book among English Protestants was enthusiastic to say the least. In 1571 the convocation of Canterbury issued canons requiring

[3]These were his *Commentarii Rerum in ecclesia gestarum* (Strassburg: Wendelin Rihelius, 1554), and his *Rerum in Ecclesia gestarum . . . Commentarii* (Basel: Nicholas Brilinger and John Oporinus).

[4]"A Declaration Concerning the Utilitie and Profite of thys History," *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Dayes, Touching Matters of the Church, Wherein ar Comprehended and Described the Great Persecutions & Horrible Troubles, That Have Bene Wrought and Practised by the Romishe Prelates, Speciallye in this Realme of England and Scotlande, from the Yeare of our Lorde a Thousande, unto the Tyme Nowe Present* (London: John Day, 1563).

[5]"To the Persecutors of Gods Truth, Commonlye Called Papistes," *Actes and Monuments.*

[6]*Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 141.

that a copy be installed in every cathedral church and in the house of each member of the hierarchy, from archbishop down to resident canon.[7] The same year the mayor and corporation of London ordered it placed in city orphanages and the halls of city companies.[8] By 1577 it was available for visitors at the offices of court as well.[9] Francis Drake took along a copy on his voyage around the world, whiling away dull days at sea by coloring its pictures,[10] and during its early years the East Indian Company included it among the supplies to be sent out to its stations.[11]

Foxe's narratives were written in a plain and straightforward style which in and of itself is anything but exciting. Yet his extensive use of the words of his martyrs, both written and spoken, and his notable skill in presenting the striking and dramatic detail, enabled him to infuse life and vitality into the scenes which he described. The stories of the examinations and disputations, of the imprisonments and tortures, and above all of the final scenes at the stake were told with such power and persuasion that their impact upon his contemporaries must have been deep and unforgettable.

Nor was the audience of the Book of Martyrs confined to Foxe's literate contemporaries.[12] From the beginning the text of the book was illustrated with numerous woodcut drawings. Its fifty-four cuts in 1563, increasing to 105 in 1570, made it the most elaborately illustrated book yet to be printed in England. There can be little doubt that the woodcuts added considerably to the popularity and impact of the book.

The identity of the artist of the woodcuts is not known. He may well have

[7]*A Booke of Certaine Canons, Concernyng Some Parte of the Discipline of the Churche of England* (London: John Day, 1561), pp. 6–9.

[8]Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Register of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640 A.D.*, 5 vols. (London, 1875–1894), 1:496.

[9]William Harrison, "An Historicall Description of the Iland of Britaine," *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 6 vols. (London, 1807), 1:881.

[10]Zelia Nuttall, *New Light on Drake: A Collection of Documents Relating to His Voyage of Circumnavigation, 1577–1580*, The Hakluyt Society, ser. ii, vol. 34 (1914), pp. 19, 348, 354–57.

[11]Arnold Wright, *Early English Adventurers in the East* (London: Andrew Melrose, Ltd., 1917) pp. 70–71.

[12]It is impossible to determine with any degree of precision the proportion of the population of sixteenth century England which was literate. Thomas More's remarkable assertion in his *Apology* of 1533 that "farre more then four partes of all the whole dyvyded into tenne, could never rede englyshe yet," and Bishop Stephen Gardiner's declaration in a letter of May, 1547 that "not the hundreth part of the realme" was able to read, not only contradict each other, but were hardly intended as exact statistical statements. H. B. Bennett concludes that the "ability to read was widespread; that it was to be found in all ranks of society, among both men and women, and that it was powerfully increased by the products of the printing press and by the strong religious emotions provoked by the action of Henry VIII and by later monarchs and their advisers." *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, Vol. 9, ed. J. B. Trapp (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 13; *The Letters of Stephen Gardiner*, ed. James Arthur Muller (Cambridge: The University Press, 1933), p. 274; H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers, 1588 to 1603; Being a Study in the History of the Book Trade in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965, p. 29.

Plate 2

been one of the several foreign-born artist-cutters employed by John Day.[13] Whoever he was, he was a craftsman of some ability whose work on the whole was careful and painstaking. While some of his pictures are crude, repetitive, and unimaginative, his best work displays a quality of character and intensity worthy of some of the more celebrated artists of the period. His style is typically bold and sharply focused on the essential details. While as a portraitist most of his faces are types, he demonstrates a thorough familiarity with English facial features.

The subject matter selected for illustration varied considerably and reflected the broad scope of Foxe's historical treatment. Readers were shown such scenes as the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV waiting barefoot in the snow outside the entrance to the pope's residence at Canossa; Pope Alexander III treading on the neck of the Emperor Frederick; the burning of John Wycliffe's bones; and the hanging of Richard Hunne.

The majority of the illustrations, however, dealt with the Marian persecution itself. Protestant prisoners were shown being interrogated, bound in stocks, and tortured on the rack by their clerical tormentors. But it was in the depiction of the horror of the burnings that the illustrations achieved their greatest and most emotional impact. Here interest might vary from the number of people suffering together, to a unique gesture at the stake, to the

[13]Alfred W. Pollard, *Fine Books* (New York: Cooper Squares Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 263; Leslie Mahin Oliver "The Actes and Monuments of John Foxe: A Study of the Growth and Influence of a Book" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1945), p. 145.

especially agonizing death of one of the victims. But whatever the particular focus, Foxe and his illustrator were at their dramatic best in these scenes (see plates 2 and 3).

Through all the illustrations the basic themes remained constant, closely paralleling those of the written text. In one way or another most of the pictures called attention to the cruelty of the papist tormentors, depicted with all their unsavory attributes, and the triumphant witness of the martyrs, whose courage and steadfastness in suffering are reflected in the serenity of their countenances.

The title page of the first edition in 1563 is typical of Foxe's approach and sets the tone for the other illustrations (see plate 4). An elaborate production consisting of seven separate but related scenes, the page depicts Christ's judgement upon the persecuted and the persecuting churches—a favorite theme of Protestant polemics. Moving from bottom to top the reader is shown three pairs of contrasting scenes: a group of Protestant men and women listening to a preacher, Bibles open on their laps, contrasted with a Catholic group being instructed by a priest, rosaries in their hands, as a procession marches toward a crucifix in the background; Protestant martyrs in flames at the stake, contrasted with Catholics at the mass, kneeling at the elevation of the host; and the risen Protestant saints in heaven, crowns upon their heads, palms in their hands, and trumpets at their lips, contrasted with Catholic priests being cast down to hell by devils. At the top of the page Christ the Judge presides over all, flanked on either side by trumpeting angels, the world at his feet. The message may be a simple and familiar one, but it is told with unmistakable power.

In several of the illustrations Bishop Edmund Bonner is cast as the arch-

Plate 3

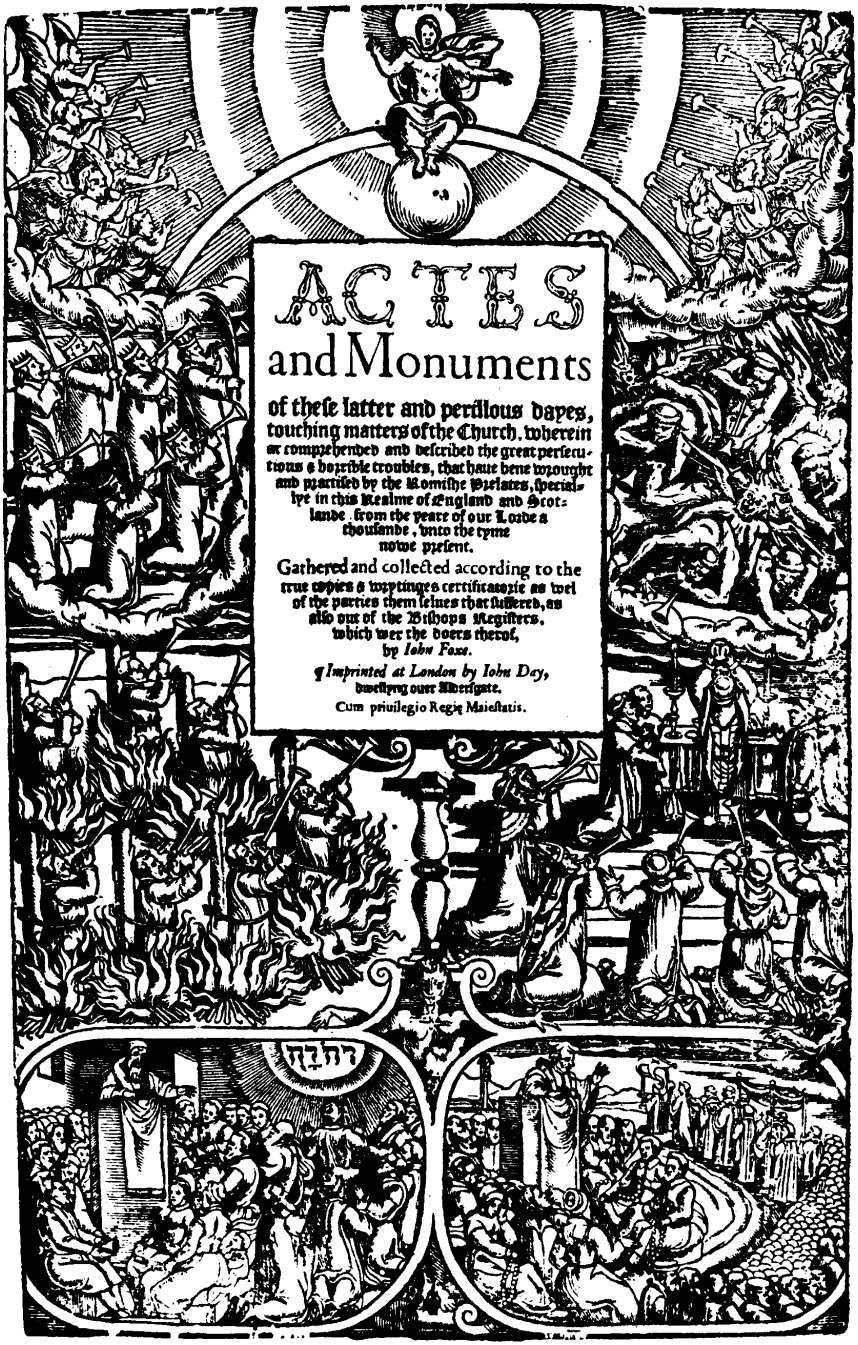
ACTES
and Monuments
of these latter and perilous dayes,
touching matters of the Church, wherein
are comprehended and described the great persecutions & horrible troubles, that have been wrought
and practised by the Romishe Prelates, specially
in this Realme of England and Scotland, from the yeare of our Lorde a
thousande, unto the tyme
nowe present.
Gathered and collected according to the
true copies & wrytinges certificatorie as wel
of the parties themselves that suffered, as
also out of the Bishops Registers,
which were the doers therof,
by *Iohn Foxe.*
¶ *Imprinted at London by Iohn Day,*
dwelling over Aldersgate.
Cum priuilegio Regiæ Maiestatis.

Plate 4

Plate 5

Plate 6

villain among the persecutors. "Among all the Bishops," Foxe wrote, "Boner bishop of London was the greatest boucher against the poore members & saints of Christ."[14] As Bishop of London, of course, he was bound to handle a disproportionately large share of the cases. His coarse personality and imposing style also contributed to his unenviable reputation. Recent scholarship, however, has to some extent exonerated him of the charge of bloodthirsty persecutor.[15]

In one picture a group of Protestant men and women from Colchester are shown bound together and being marched off to "Boners stall," who "for more bloude styll dothe call" (see plate 5). A young woman among them is shown glancing back in resignation, perhaps toward family, friends, or home left behind.

In another picture Bonner himself is depicted whipping a bearded Protestant prisoner in his orchard, as his attendants cover their faces or turn away to avoid the sight (see plate 6). According to Sir John Harington, when Bonner was shown the print he laughed and said: "A vengeance of the foole, how could he get my picture drawne so right?" When reproached for whipping an old man with a beard, he replied, "If thou hadst bene in his case, thou wouldst have thought it a good commutacion of penance, to have thy bumme beaten, to save thy bodie from burning."[16] Assuming the words to be Bonner's, there would seem to be an unintended irony in this image, considering his reputation as heartless persecutor.

In both text and illustrations the treatment of the burning of the three Oxford martyrs, Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer, repesented the dramatic high point of Foxe's work. In March, 1554 the three reformers had been transferred from London to Oxford, where they had been examined and condemned. Owing to questions concerning the legality of their sentences, however, their executions had been delayed until the following year.

In September, 1555 Latimer and Ridley were again tried and condemned. On October 16 they were burned together just outside the city wall, "in the Dytch over agaynste Baily College." The woodcut of the burning is one of Foxe's most elaborate (see plate 7). The two men are shown chained back to back to a common stake. Armed soldiers form a circle to keep the crowd of onlookers at a safe distance. City and university officials sit to the side, while Richard Smith preaches the sermon. The text for the occasion was I Corinthians 13:3: "If I yelde my bodie to the fier to bee burnte, and have not Charitie, I shall gaine nothing therby." Cranmer is shown observing the whole scene from atop the nearby Bocardo prison, where he was being detained at the time.[17]

[14]*Actes and Monuments*, p. 1546.

[15]Cf. Gina Alexander, "Bonner and the Marian Persecutions," *History*, 60 (October, 1975): 374–91.

[16]*Nugae Antiquae: Being a Miscellaneous Collection of Original Papers, in Prose and Verse; Written During the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary, Elizabeth, and King James*, sel. Henry Harington, ed. Thomas Park, 2 vols. (London: J. Wright for Vernon *et al.*, 1804), 2:34.

[17]*Actes and Monuments*, pp. 1376–77.

Plate 7

It was just as the fagots were lit that Latimer, breaking through the tension of the moment, uttered his memorable words to his companion: "Be of good comfort M. Ridley and play the man: we shall this day lyght such a candle by Gods grace in England, as (I trust) shall never be put out."[18] Aged and frail, Latimer died very soon thereafter. But the fire was badly managed on the other side, and Ridley suffered through a long and extremely painful ordeal.

The burning of Cranmer was an event of special interest and importance, both because he had been Archbishop of Canterbury, and because of his much-publicized recantations. Since he had refused to recognize the jurisdiction of the court which had tried the other two, his case had been referred directly to Rome. Pope Paul IV in turn had authorized an inquiry by three English clerics, on the basis of whose findings Cranmer had been condemned, deprived of his archbishopric, and excommunicated. In February, 1556 he had been formally degraded by a special papal commission and turned over to the secular authorities for punishment.

Induced by the prospect that his life might be spared if he recanted, and influenced by his long-standing commitment to the principle of submission to the temporal power, Cranmer had been persuaded to sign six increasingly specific recantations. With these discrediting documents in hand, Mary had then given the order for his execution. He was burned at the stake on March

[18] *Ecclesiasticall History, Contayning the Actes & Monuments,* 2nd ed. (London: John Day, 1570), p.1937.

Plate 8

21, 1556, but not before publicly and dramatically repudiating his recantations.

On the day of his execution Cranmer was led in procession from the Bocardo to St. Mary's Church, where a large crowd had assembled for the final ceremony. Cranmer stood on a stage which had been erected facing the pulpit, while Dr. Henry Cole preached the sermon. When called upon to speak, Cranmer astounded the audience, which had been led to expect a final recantation, by dramatically renouncing his former statements:

> And nowe I come to the great thyng that so muche troubled my conscience more than any thynge that ever I did or sayde in my whole lyfe, and that is the settyng abrode of a wrytinge contrarie to the truthe, whiche nowe here I renounce and refuse as thynges wrytten with my hande contrarye to the truthe, which I thought in my harte, and wrytten for feare of deathe, and to save my lyfe if it myght be, and that is, all such bylles and papers whiche I have wrytten or signed with my hande sence my degradation, wherein I have wrytten manye thynges untrue. And for as much as my hande offended, wrytyng contrarie to my harte, my hande shal first be punyshed therfore. For maye I come to the fyre, it shalbe first burned. And as for the Pope, I refuse hym as Christes enemye and Antichriste, with all his false doctrine.[19]

In the chaos which followed, Cranmer was dragged from the platform and hurried off to the stake. Foxe's woodcut depicts the final scene (see plate 8). Encircling the stake are the familiar authorities, a persistent Span-

[19]*Actes and Monuments*, p. 1501.

Plate 9

Plate 10

Plate 11

ish friar, and the throng of onlookers. The eye is inevitably drawn toward Cranmer's dramatic gesture, as he makes good on his promise. Foxe's description of the scene is simple and straightforward, but in its own manner rises to the height of the occasion:

> And when the wodde was kindled, & the fyre began to burn nere him, stretching out his arme, he put his right hand in the flame, which he held so stedfast and immovable (saving that once with the same hand he wyped his face) that all men might see his hand burned before his body was touched.[20]

Possibly the most sensational of the woodcuts was that which depicted the burning of the so-called Guernsey martyrs (see plate 9). According to Foxe's account, which was included in the first edition but expanded in the second, Perotine Massey, her two daughters, and an infant to which she gave birth in the flames at the stake, were burned by the Catholic authorities of Guernsey in 1556. Having been rescued initially, the baby apparently was ordered cast back into the flames by the provost and the bailiff. "And so the infant," Foxe concludes, "Baptized in his owne bloud, to fill up the number of Gods innocent Saintes, was both borne and dyed a Martyr, leaving behind it to the world, which it never saw, a spectacle wherein the whole world may see the Herodian crueltie of this graceles generation of Catholicke tormentors."[21] Foxe's words and the visual image collaborate in this highly

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 1502.
[21] *Eccelesiasticall History*, pp. 2128–29.

controversial scene as nowhere else in the book to produce an impact of unsurpassed emotional intensity.

Among the illustrations which Foxe introduced in subsequent editions of the book were several which focused on the broader issues of Reformation polemics. One of the most striking of these shows Henry VIII seated on his throne, sword in hand, with Pope Clement VII pinned beneath his feet (see plate 10). Cranmer is presenting the English Bible to the king while Thomas Cromwell stands near by. Cardinal Pole and Bishop John Fisher frantically intercede for the fallen pontiff, whose crown lies dashed on the floor by his side.

Another noteworthy addition focussed on the theme of Justice and the Word of God (see plate 11). The blindfolded Justice is shown holding her scales, a sword in her right hand. The Bible in the pan to the left handily outweighs the assortment of papal trumpery heaped high in the pan to the right. The sober but confident Protestants look on from the left, while the confused Catholic dignitaries frantically pile on more items on the right. A grotesque devil hangs suspended like a monkey from the Catholic pan, as he attempts to tip the scales back in that direction.

Illustrations such as these must have had a tremendous appeal for Englishmen in the second half of the sixteenth century. By providing visualizations of key elements of the contents of the book they undoubtedly expanded, and at the same time, conditioned its influence. The monumentality of the design of the title page, the glimpses of personal tragedy revealed in the faces of victims and relatives alike, the boldness of the representation of the Guernsey scene, and the dramatic quality of the depiction of Cranmer's gesture at the stake, all combine to place Foxe and his illustrator in the same league with their continental Protestant predecessors and contemporaries in the effective appropriation of popular visual images for religious polemical purposes.

Perhaps the most persuasive testimony to the effect of Foxe's book is the haste with which the Catholics began to answer it. As early as 1565 Thomas Harding turned aside from his controversy with John Jewel to attack "that huge dongehill of your stinking martyrs, which ye have intituled Actes and monuments."[22] According to Harding, Foxe "hath into that Huge volume infarced lyes, moe in number, and notabler for vanitie, then ever were raked together into any one heape, or booke."[23]

Nicholas Harpsfield, who Foxe had described as "the sorest, and of leste compassion"[24] of the persecuting archdeacons under Mary, continued the assault the following year, in his *Dialogi Sex*. Thomas Stapleton, one of the most respected controversialists of the time, joined the fray in 1567, directing his *Counterblast* in part against Foxe's "madde martyrloge" and the "develish dirty donghil of his fowle heretical and trayterous Martyrs."[25]

[22]*A Confutation of a Booke Intituled an Apologie of the Church of England* (Antwerpe: Ihon Laet, 1565), fol. 14[r].

[23]*A Reionidre to M. Iewels Replie against the Sacrifice of the Masse* (Lovanii: Ioannem Foulerum, 1567), fol. 184[r].

[24]*Actes and Monuments*, p. 1546.

[25]*A Counterblast to M. Hornes Vayne Blaste Against M. Fekenham* (Lovanii: Joannem Foulerum, 1567), sig. P4[r].

By the end of Elizabeth's reign the Jesuit Robert Parsons was prepared to label Foxe "the most fraudulent and perfidious wryter that ever put pen to paper in our language."[26] He may have been closer to the mark when he charged that the Book of Martyrs "hath done more hurt alone to simple soules in our countrey by infectinge and poysoninge them unwares, under the bayte of pleasant historyes, fayre pictures, and painted pageants, then many other the most pestilent bookes togeather."[27]

But even before Foxe's death in 1587 the extent of the impact of his work was already becoming apparent. Catholic reactions notwithstanding, the Book of Martyrs remained the most widely read, as well as the most influential account of the Marian persecution. For good or ill it almost singlehandedly established the reputation of the Queen as "Bloody Mary" and the memory of her religious victims as martyrs. In the process, it virtually damned the cause of Roman Catholicism in England for centuries to come. The iconography of the book, by an unknown artist, played no small part in indelibly impressing Foxe's images upon the popular imagination.

[26]*The Warn-Word to Sir Francis Hastings Wast-Word* (1602), fol. 120[r].

[27]*A Treatise of Three Conversions of England, from Paganism to Christian Religion*, 3 vols. (1603–1604), 3:400.

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