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The destruction of most of the libraries, music and art of England was not a religious breakthrough but a cultural calamity



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For five centuries England has been in denial about the role of Roman Catholicism in shaping it. The coin in your pocket declares the monarch to be Defender of the Faith. Since 1558 that has meant the Protestant faith, but Henry VIII actually got the title from the Pope for defending Catholicism against Luther. Henry eventually broke with Rome because the Pope refused him a divorce, and along with the papacy went saints, pilgrimage, the monastic life, eventually even the Mass itself – the pillars of medieval Christianity.

To explain that revolution, the Protestant reformers told a story. Henry had rejected not the Catholic Church, but a corrupt pseudo-Christianity which had led the world astray. John Foxe embodied this story unforgettably in his Book of Martyrs, subsidised by the Elizabethan government as propaganda

against Catholicism at home and abroad. For Foxe, Queen Elizabeth was her country's saviour, and the Reformation itself the climax of an age-old struggle between God, represented by the monarch, and the devil, represented by the Pope.

Fear of Catholic Spain, the greatest power in Europe, gave Foxe's story urgency. That fear escalated under the Stuart kings, for all of them married Catholics, and were suspected of favouring their wives' religion. The prospect of a persecuting Catholicism imposed by an apostate monarchy fuelled Protestant anxiety. It led to Civil War, and the execution of King Charles I. Ironically, Charles was a loyal Anglican, but both his sons, Charles II and James II, did eventually embrace Catholicism.

In 1679 fear of Catholicism triggered a last orgy of persecution. The so called Popish Plot, to murder the king and seize the throne, was a paranoid fantasy concocted by Titus Oates, but it unleashed a wave of gruesome executions, including the judicial murder of the Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, Oliver Plunkett.

At the height of the hysteria, Protestant mythology achieved definitive form in a book that would shape the writing of Tudor history down to our own day. In 1679 Gilbert Burnet, a Scottish cleric, published the first volume of a massive History of the Reformation, an anti-Catholic narrative given scholarly credibility by the inclusion of dozens of documents gathered from public and private archives. Burnet would be the chief propagandist for the "Glorious Revolution" which deposed James II and set the Protestant William of Orange on the throne. His history rammed home the message that Catholicism and Englishness were utterly incompatible: Catholicism was tyranny, Protestantism liberation. "They hate us," he wrote, "because we dare to be freemen and Protestants."

It was a message the nation wanted to hear: Burnet was thanked by a special vote of Parliament. His work was supplemented by John Strype, another ardent "Orange" cleric, in a stream of biographies and collections of Reformation documents, many of them gathered from Foxe's archives. Till well into the 20th century, historians of the English Reformation would rely on Burnet and Strype for their source materials, in the process perpetuating their late-Stuart take on the Tudor age.

The creation of the Public Record Office in 1838 made accessible thousands of documents from Tudor England, but didn't radically alter this traditional spin on the Reformation story. The greatest Victorian historian of Tudor England was James Anthony Froude, who eagerly explored the archives, but read them through inherited spectacles. A Protestant to his fingertips, he hated clergy, doctrine, religious mystery and, above all, Catholicism. He saw the break with Rome as the beginning of Britain's rise to imperial greatness, and the Reformation as a confrontation between two incompatible civilisations. Froude knew that the Reformation had been imposed to begin with on a reluctant nation, but he rejoiced that this had happened.

A disciple of Thomas Carlyle, he thought history was not for the little people, but was made by heroes. "Up to the defeat of the Armada," he wrote, "manhood suffrage in England would at any moment have brought back the Pope." Happily, there was no democracy in Tudor England, and the country had been saved from itself by the tyrannical Henry VIII, and if the abbeys were unroofed, and a few hundred priests butchered in the process, that was a small price for imperial greatness and the march of progress. Shorn of its more blatant jingoistic rhetoric, Froude's Protestant version of the Reformation would be recycled in the writing of academic history late into the 20th century.

Historians no longer take that venerable Protestant version for granted, but it is still alive and well in the wider culture. It underpins, for example, Shekhar Kapur's biopic Elizabeth. It was reiterated recently by the journalist Simon Jenkins when he wrote that "most Britons had, by the late 15th century, come to regard the Roman church as an alien, corrupt and reactionary agent of intellectual oppression, awash in magic and superstition. They could not wait to see the back of it."

But in multicultural England, the inherited Protestant certainties are fading. It is time to look again at the Reformation story. There was nothing inevitable about the Reformation. The heir to the throne is uneasy about swearing to uphold the Protestant faith, and it seems less obvious than it once did that the religion which gave us the Wilton Diptych and Westminster Abbey, or the music of Tallis, Byrd and Elgar, is intrinsically un-English. The destruction of the monasteries and most of the libraries, music and art of medieval England now looks what it always was – not a religious breakthrough, but a cultural calamity. The slaughtered Popish martyrs look less like an alien fifth column than the voices of a history England was not allowed to have.

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Eamon Duffy - The Telegraph