

A Rough And Ready Reformer Against Polished Papacy

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Born in poverty and squalor

We expect great things of those born with silver spoons in their mouths and encouraged from infancy to climb every social, political and cultural ladder. Those born in great poverty and brought up by public institutions rather than in a cosy family background often give cause for concern regarding their future. Yet, in the year 1495, one of the greatest Reformers ever was born into a very large family of poverty-stricken parents and ragged children in the tiny village of Cove in Suffolk. Indeed, John Bale's parents, Henry and Margaret could not afford any kind of education for their son and he spent his childhood as a farmhand until his parents, despairing of giving John a livelihood, took him to the Carmelite convent at Norwich and left him there to serve the monks. Bale's rough upbringing so coloured his language that he never learnt, as he said, 'to speak as if butter would not melt in my mouth'. In his evangelisation of English and Irish farms workers, this always stood him in good stead though his more polished, less able, papist critics covered their defeats in debates with Bale with contempt for his lowly origin.

Bale's parent-substitutes soon realised that in spite of his roughness, he was no ordinary child and were astonished at his quick learning. They thus gave Bale every encouragement to study and financed his course of training at Jesus College, Cambridge, believing that John would soon rise in the Roman hierarchy. Whilst at Cambridge, Bale studied with Augustine friar, Robert Barnes who became one of England's few Lutherans and who was martyred at Smithfield without charges being raised against him and without a trial. Bale commented, 'no cause for this horrible deed being assigned, except that he was a strenuous supporter of the Gospel of Christ'. Humble Bale said of Barnes, 'he far outstripped me in literary attainments owing to his particular genius and abilities'.

Finding a new foundation for his life

During his Cambridge days, Bale tells us that he ‘wandered in utter ignorance and blindness of mind’. No monk or priest could help him until he was pointed to the Word of God by Lord Wentworth who also told him of the blessings to be found in Christ. Bale listened with a changing heart and mind and soon, he tells his readers:

I presently saw and acknowledged my own deformity, and immediately, through the Divine Goodness, I was removed from a barren mountain to the flowry and fertile valley of the gospel, where I found all things built, not on the sand, but on a solid rock. Hence I made haste to deface the mark of wicked antichrist, and entirely threw off his yoke from me, that I might be a partaker of the lot and liberty of the sons of God.

Bale’s conversion took place around 1529 when he was teaching Civil Law at Cambridge. He immediately began to preach openly the unsearchable riches of Christ, which seemed to cause less scandal than the fact that he married his beloved ‘faithful Dorothy’ who stood close by his side in all his subsequent trials. Happily, Lord Cromwell came under Bale’s ministry and protected him from the Roman clergy. When Cromwell died, Bale was pressed by the Romanists to sign Henry’s notorious Six Articles, commonly called the Whip with Six Strings. He refused at the risk of his life but managed to escape to Germany where he remained almost eight years. During this period, Bale compiled a number of reformed works which he published at Wesel.

Combating Irish Popery

One of Edward’s first acts on becoming King was to call Bale back to England and settled him as Vicar of Bishopstoke where he became close friends with fellow Reformer, Bishop Ponet. Bale, however, became very ill and Edward was told by Bale’s enemies that he was now ‘dead and buried’. On a visit to Southampton, the King was delighted to see Bale, fresh from his death-bed, standing thin, pale and austere before him. Edward wasted no time in sending Bale to deep, popish Ireland, giving him the bishopric of Ossory. The letter from the King and Lords appointing Bale has the unusual greeting ‘To our very lovinge friende Doctour Bale’.

Bale refused the offer because of premature old age, ill-health and poverty, but the King waived all fees and taxes and four months after his call, Bale, his wife, children and his one sole servant left for Ireland via Bristol. Bale was provided with a relatively small income but enough farmland to make an industrious man wealthy. Being only used to poverty and not coveting riches, Bale gave the vast bulk of his income and profits to the poor of Ossory so that the entire district benefitted both spiritually and materially from his witness. Yet, Bale shocked his popish colleagues by preaching the gospel diligently, making sure that all popish imagery and superstition were removed from his diocese. Though Bale made many converts amongst the people and the nobility, the clergy remained his enemies.

The Reformation tide ebbs

When Edward died in 1553, the papists told Bale that he would be forced to return to the Roman fold. The good bishop tucked his Bible under his arm, went to the market-place and preached before a large crowd on Mary's duty to God and her people. Bale told the papists that he was not Moses' minister but Christ's and they would never find him repeating the Mosaic sacraments and ceremonial shadows. On Bartholomew's Day, the papists spread rumours that Bale was about to recant, so he climbed into his pulpit, and preached on Romans 1:16, explaining how he was not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation. He then outlined all that he had taught his flock and warned them against the folly of re-adopting popish superstitions. The priests were beside themselves with anger and decided to kill Bale, storming his farm with a great mob. Bale's five farm hands were killed but the Governor of Kilkenny arrived with a hundred horsemen and three-hundred footmen and rescued the bishop.

With Mary the Bloody now on the throne, the popish priests claimed that they had never recognised Edward and that all his ministers were traitors and demanded that Bale should be handed over for punishment. After a period of hiding, Bale managed to obtain a passage in a Dutch man-of-war for Holland, but the captain immediately placed Bale in irons and confiscated all his goods and property. Forced by a storm to anchor in St. Ives, Cornwall, the Irish ship's pilot accused Bale of treason to the legal authorities, hoping that they would then allow him to share the captain's booty. The Cornish bailiff took to Bale at once and quickly found out that the Irishman, was only after Bale's purse. He dismissed the case but the captain kept Bale a prisoner and took him to Holland. Not being satisfied with the money that he had stolen from Bale, which was all the bishop had, the captain held him ransom in Zeeland for fifty pounds to be paid within twenty-six days. As Bale was not allowed to contact his more influential friends, he only raised thirty pounds, but Bale's jailor had become most fond of the likeable bishop and persuaded the cruel captain to free him. Bale now moved with his family to Frankfurt.

The Troubles at Frankfurt

Bale was immediately given a leading part in the affairs of the British exiles, and became the unwitting cause of a controversy in the refugee churches which tried their German hosts' patience almost to breaking point and threatened to block the development of the Reformation. The story of these troubles can be traced in the Parker Society's Original Letters (1537-1558) and Zurich Letters (1558-1602). The name given the controversy has been taken from that unique and fascinating book, *Troubles at Frankfort* (1554-1558), attributed to William Whittingham of the Frankfurt church. After the triumph of Presbyterianism in 1640, it became traditional for anti-Episcopalians to look upon the troubles at Frankfurt as a water-shed between an alleged 'Anglican' (Episcopal) faction of the church and an alleged 'Puritan' (Presbyterian) faction. T. M. Lindsey in his *History of the Reformation*

summarised the role that Bale and those who stood by him played in contrast to that played by John Knox in the words: 'The years 1554-58 ... witnessed the trouble in the Frankfurt congregation of English exiles, where Knox's broad-minded toleration and straightforward action stands in noble contrast with the narrow-minded and crooked policy of his opponents.' This view, claiming to represent 'evangelical thinking' presents a totally false, party-minded picture of the English Reformers Bale, Foxe, Cox, Grindal, Sampson, Whitehead and Becon on the one side and John Knox and William Whittingham on the other.

On reaching Frankfort, Bale found the flock without a shepherd. James Haddon had refused a call and Bale declined to take on the office owing to age and the research he was following. The church then elected a Nonconformist, David Whitehead to the pastorate, probably on a temporary basis. Knowing that Knox had been very useful to the Reformation in the compilation of the Book of Common Prayer and had been chaplain to Edward, and finding that the Scotsman was leaving his post at Geneva, Bale persuaded the church to invite Knox as co-pastor with Thomas Lever who had been recommended by Henry Bullinger. Knox's invitation, with Bale's signature uppermost, is of great importance in the subsequent controversy. It shows clearly that Bale, with other Anglicans, was in Frankfort before Knox. Modern defenders of Knox such as Lloyd-Jones argue that as he was there before the 'Anglican' faction, he had a greater right than they to determine the church's policy. The Frankfort church members had agreed to use a form of worship suitable for all Reformed churches whether British or Continental. Knox, prompted by Calvin, visited Frankfurt 'with a view' and found the church using a thoroughly Reformed order of service similar to the Liturgia Sacra of the French, Belgian, Dutch and Spanish Protestant refugees. Knox immediately refused to accept this international form, arguing that the public reading of Scripture and responses by the laity ought not to be allowed. He also refused to administer communion and baptism though the congregation received the elements standing and the sign of the cross was forbidden. Paradoxically, Scotsman Knox then insisted that the church must change their 'English face'.

Surprised at Knox's stance, the congregation said that he was quite welcome to use Calvin's Order. Again, Knox refused the offer, obviously wishing to compile his own. This reminded the brethren how Dean Weston had complained that when he reviewed the Edwardian Prayer Book Knox insisted that his own ability must be the measure of all things. Knox now gave the church the ultimatum, either a. to accept an order yet to be drawn up, or b. allow Knox to remain as a preacher or c. he should be discharged from their service. The church decided to retain Knox as a preacher but the troubles at Frankfurt had already started. Thomas Lever, regarded with Latimer as the foremost Reformer of the day, now arrived and was duly elected pastor. Knox viewed Lever with absolute distrust.

Knox becomes obnoxious

Knox, assisted by Whittingham, and hoping to gain support from Calvin, now adopted a most deceitful strategy. He sent to Calvin what he called a Latin Plat (summary) of the English Prayer Book, which the church was not using anyway, and told the Reformer that he had left out the most shameful parts. This garbled, Latinised, incomplete compendium, he assured Calvin, was the Frankfort church's order of service. Even Professor Arber, otherwise so sympathetic to Knox, calls this false representation a 'scoffing analysis' of how the exiles worshipped. This was a foolish deed as, on the advice of Frankfurt Senator Glauberg, the English church had just had a thorough and exact French translation of their order of service printed in Basil and it was widely known amongst English and French refugees. So the question is why did Knox refer Calvin to his own Latin 'plat' rather than the official French translation of the English service? Foxe put such vindictive acts down to Knox's incurable bad temper.

This was the situation prevailing when a large group of exiles including Richard Cox, Edmund Grindal and Thomas Becon joined the church. The party had hoped to persuade Knox not to break the peace of the churches in exile and ruin the Reformed cause. As Knox continued to adopt a go-it-alone attitude and it became obvious that the majority were on the side of those who wished to adopt a form of worship which included the public reading of Scripture, Whittingham now claimed falsely that he spoke on behalf of the church majority and asked Senator Johann Glauberg to intervene against the 'Anglicans'. This move angered the church, but, for the sake of peace, they agreed to bide by Glauberg's findings. The magistrate ruled that they should adopt the French order as the Senate considered them as one refugee church. Moderate Cox persuaded the church majority that the order was sound and they adopted Glauberg's ruling. The Senate then ordered Knox to keep the peace.

Knox compelled to leave Frankfurt after four months of controversy

Now Knox's highly political and outspoken writings against his host Emperor Charles V, published in Poland, placed the Frankfurt church under political suspicion as the city was under direct imperial rule. Angered by Knox's and Whittingham's attempts to have the Frankfort Anglicans condemned as traitors and placed under the rule of the secular arm, Edward Isaac and Henry Parry decided to give Knox tit for tat. They informed the Senate of Knox's regicidal politics. The two men had no authority in the Frankfurt Church in 1555 and their names do not appear under the letters sent to Calvin by the church. The result was that the Senate now advised Knox to leave Frankfort rather than face Charles' wrath. Knox complied. Re-elected Whitehead, told Calvin that the church officials knew nothing of Isaac and Parry's interference until the Senate acted. Presbyterian and Independent sources claim that the bulk of the Frankfurt church left with Knox in protest. Actually, no one, not even Whittingham, accompanied Knox and Grindal wrote to imprisoned Ridley saying that peace reigned

once more at Frankfurt now that Knox had left. The congregation asked Bale and the other office-bearers to write to Calvin, explaining the precarious situation in which Knox had brought both them and the Reformation. They pointed out that only after Mary had read Knox' extreme political views, which included a denial of the right of a woman to reign over a country, had she started beheading the Reformers. Calvin denied any cooperation in Knox's revolutionary works and they were henceforth banned in Geneva.

Knoxians and Coxians

Edward Arber in his 1907 Introduction to *The Troubles at Frankfort*, calls the Knox party the 'Calvinists' and the Cox-Grindal-Bale party the 'Anglicans' and comes down on Knox's side. However, he strives for balance asking, 'How Knox could write such violent books, in such dangerous times, is another mystery in his life'. He also comments, 'Then, amazing as it seems to us, in men who made God's Word their sole rule in everything, these Frankfort Calvinists regarded the Public Reading of the Scriptures in Divine Service "as an irksome and unprofitable form"'.

Knox now gave Calvin a picture of the Frankfurt majority which defied all reality and showed a high degree of gullibility on Calvin's part as he obviously believed all that was told him. Indeed, he received the impression that it was the Anglicans who objected to the Edwardian reforms and who defied the German authorities, wishing to remain papal English at all costs. He thus wrote at least two scolding letters to the Frankfort church as if he were in authority over them. Calvin's letters are often quoted in highly edited translations to show that Cox, Grindal and Bale were less than Reformed and Anti-Calvinists, yet the church's sound defence is ignored. An imaginary controversy has thus been invented by subsequent denominational writers referring to a majority of Reformed 'Knoxians' combating a minority of High Church 'Coxians'. No such parties developed and the 'Anglicans' and Calvin were quickly reconciled.

Bale and his friends informed Calvin that although they had been given full freedom of worship by the Frankfurt authorities, they were in no way stubbornly 'wedded to their country' so as not to adopt other forms. They had specifically removed all matters of church order which were doctrinally unsound or unacceptable to the political authorities.

Relinquishing all hierarchical ties with the Church of England, they had elected one pastor, two preachers, four elders and two deacons. As the authorities had demanded that election must be based on a joint declaration of faith, the church declared with very few exceptions that their basis of doctrine should be the Forty-Two Edwardian Articles. This, together with the church's order of worship was printed at Zürich both in English and French, because of the French exiles who worshipped with the Englishmen and the English exiles in French speaking 'free' areas. The Englishmen also stated that in thus reforming themselves, they had banned private baptisms, crossings, confirmation of children, saints' days, wearing

vestments and even kneeling at communion. Notwithstanding, they were shocked to hear that Calvin had been told by Knox that the majority still practised imagery and crossing which had no basis whatsoever in truth. Knox's deceit was denounced as 'criminal' by the Frankfurt church.

Later allegedly Reformed writers, such as Prof. Heron in his *A Short History of Puritanism*, are clearly mistaken in describing this controversy as a battle between Episcopalians and Presbyterians, Arminians and Calvinists, Non-conformists and Conformists. The Frankfurt members were Calvinists to a man and both alleged sides contained the entire range of churchmen from moderate Conformists to fairly radical Non-conformists. Far from being the hero of the day, in 1554-5 Knox was not yet up to the Reforming standard of many of his fellow church members. He never renounced his papist oaths and ordination as did such as Bale. Indeed, Knox lagged behind on many Reformed principles outlined in my Go Publications book *The Troublemakers at Frankfurt*, some finding that he kept to over forty papist paths. Sampson, on the majority side, was as firm a denouncer of church hierarchies and papist customs as was Whittingham on the minority side. Before Knox arrived, the Frankfort Church was local, free and democratic and had less formal structure than many a contemporary or later Presbyterian or Anglican order. One of the major defendants of the Frankfort Church against the Knoxian Precisians was David Whitehead who was a true non-conformist. He sided with the majority because he found them more Reformed than Knox which, at the time, they most certainly were. Whitehead, who had refused a bishopric under Cranmer because of his non-conformist views, protested strongly to Calvin that the Knox faction had 'bold and wicked designs' and scolds him for allowing himself to be influenced by their 'bare-faced manner'. He tells Calvin concerning the troublemakers whom Calvin was encouraging:

We wish, however, that those persons who are filling your ears with these calumnious and slanderous accusations, had never abused our lenity, the kindness of the magistrates, and your authority which has given them no small encouragement to stir up this controversy.

Knox at Frankfurt, refused to work with Bale, Foxe, Grindal and a host of other staunch Reformers who are now called by Knox's admirers 'anti-Puritans' because they would not follow their less Reformed idol blindly. These men were of the purist Reformed calibre and thus can truly be called 'Puritans' in the best sense of the word. Furthermore, almost all the 'Puritans' of the English Church at Geneva which Knox led for a short time after returning to Scotland, left for England in 1567 to take over Anglican churches. Anti-Anglican Heron calls the Genevan church 'The First Puritan Congregation', little realising that his 'Puritans' were Anglicans to a man.

It is thus a travesty of history for authors to enhance their own denominational preferences by denouncing the Frankfurters as High Churchmen and high papists. Their church structure was simple in comparison to Knox's six-tier ideal which could hardly be called

Presbyterianism. Indeed, the trouble Frankfurt had with Knox was that he wished the church to conform to his principles alone and this attitude continued with him when he returned to Scotland. When the Knoxians eventually came to power in the Westminster Assembly, conformity became their catchword, and as Cromwell finally rebelled against their views, they invited playboy Charles II back, hoping that he would help them. Their ideas of enforced unity backfired as the new government carried on Cromwell's Parliamentary policy against them.

Bale was anxious to continue his research and find a good printer, so some time in 1555, he travelled to Basil with his family where he remained until Mary's death. There, on 'Reformation soil' Bale added four more centuries to his famous Church History.

Bale and the Elizabethan Settlement

Bale was called back to England in 1559 when Elizabeth came to power. He was offered many preferments but chose rather to serve as a preacher and finish the works he was preparing before the Lord called him home. He now added at least five new volumes to his church history and wrote defending martyrs such as Anne Askewe. One biographer says that Bale 'wrote with all the warmth of one who had escaped the flames', and another 'It is not surprising that many among those who never have seen the fires should think such delineations too vivid'. Bale, a skilled linguist, also made collections of German, French and Latin works, writing widely on Continental scholars and theologians. Thus Laurence Humphrey, in his *Vaticinium de Roma*, declared that though Luther and Platina had shown up many of Rome's errors and Vergerius had revealed some, Bale had detected all of them! Vogler testified that though Bale made himself so odious to the papists, his skill was so great that they had to praise his works. Matthew Parker, the first Archbishop after the Elizabethan settlement, dashed to Bale's house on hearing that he had died in November, 1563. He excused the haste by saying that he must buy up Bale's great collection of ancient MSS so that they could be preserved for perpetuity. Parker donated these manuscripts to England's ancient libraries which have treasured them ever since and enriched our knowledge of European church history immensely. Indeed, whatever Church histories one takes nowadays, including Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and Parker's *History of the English Church*, they would be slim volumes indeed were it not for John Bale. However, this humble man's great academic work tends to distract us from the fact that he always stood where the ordinary people stood and spoke to them in terms which they well-understood and which led many a working man to Christ.

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