

Comment

English Catholics on the English Reformation

Since the publication of J.J. Scarisbrick's *Henry VIII* (1968), historians, Catholic and otherwise, have done a good deal to change received perceptions of the English Reformation. Fine books by Christopher Haigh, Eamon Duffy, Diarmaid MacCulloch and others, have transformed the picture of a people desperate to throw off the incubus of Papal sovereignty — or, alternatively, the picture of a royal despot even more desperate to get rid of Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn.

In the popular mind, in so far as anyone cares these days, the myths linger on of corrupt monasteries, 'Bloody' Mary, 'Good' Queen Bess, and so forth. Suspicion of popery goes deep in English popular culture. Had it succeeded, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 would have been the greatest act of terrorism in European history. No wonder that the Book of Common Prayer, as late as 1859, had a form of service of thanksgiving for its failure. On the other hand, as witticisms about the wedding of the present heir to the throne and next Defender of the Faith would confirm, Catholics remain inclined to regard the Church of England mockingly as nothing but the by-product of an earlier royal divorce.

Historiography is never easy to keep clear of ideology and even of mythology. John Vidmar (currently teaching church history at Providence College, Rhode Island), in his recently published *English Catholic Historians and the English Reformation, 1585-1954* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press 2005), traces how the Reformation has been perceived by Catholic writers, from Nicholas Sanders (c. 1530-81) at the outset, through to Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) and Philip Hughes (1895-1967), among many others less well known.

John Lingard (1771-1851), of course, with his *History of England*, appears as the first serious historian, remarkable for his extensive use of contemporary documents and determination to cast new light on controversial events. Even if Lingard 'mistook the reproduction of a manuscript for the exhibition of its truth', as Father Vidmar says (page 74), he raised the writing of history from the level of ideology to that of documentation. Lingard's work offered an entirely different reading from that of David Hume (1711-76), whose famous *History of England*, written from a Tory, sceptical and anti-Catholic viewpoint,

was much read at the time. Indeed, school history textbooks into the middle of the twentieth century seem, by then no doubt quite unwittingly, still indebted to Hume's story. Lingard's mistakes, so Vidmar argues, serious as they no doubt were, cannot be put down to his being a Catholic. Much attacked at the time, by reviewers determined to expose Catholic bias, he is now appreciated for his innovative objectivity. It began to become possible to study the Reformation in the context of English history as a whole.

Admiration for Lingard's achievement is no surprise. The reputation of Aidan Gasquet (1846-1929), on the other hand, the Benedictine monk who became Vatican Librarian in 1919, suffered greatly from the exposure of inaccuracies at the hands of medievalists such as G.G. Coulton. While not minimising the defects, Vidmar nevertheless contends that Gasquet's contribution cannot be ignored. One reason for the need of 'reform' was allegedly the degeneracy of the monasteries: if the monks were nothing like as corrupt as was assumed, as Gasquet had begun to show, what was the Reformation 'reforming'? Ridiculed by contemporaries and ignored by the next generation, Gasquet's studies of the actual condition of monasticism were eventually to change the agenda, if surreptitiously, by forcing scholars to re-examine the state of the question.

Hilaire Belloc took a First in History at Oxford. His first two biographies, *Danton* (1899) and *Robespierre* (1901), were well received. According to Vidmar, they represent the fruits of his Oxford training, though they suffer from a fault which haunted Belloc for the rest of his history writing — 'they include no authorities and no documentation' (page 139). Catholics, too, such as Herbert Thurston SJ, commented on how 'chary of references' Belloc's scholarly efforts were. While making excuses for him ('his poverty forced him to travel, lecture, and write newspaper articles or hack biographies', etc.), Vidmar concedes that Belloc wrote a great deal of 'bad history'. Rubbish though many of his books are, Belloc nevertheless shaped Catholic consciousness about the English Reformation. Above all, in a line that goes back to Nicholas Sanders, so Vidmar shows, Belloc firmly established the thesis that rejection of the papacy was the determining factor in the English Reformation — not, that is to say, socio-economic, political or other non-theological circumstances.

The story culminates with *The Reformation in England* (1950-54), the three volumes in which, as Vidmar says, Philip Hughes carried through Belloc's emphasis on the spiritual authority of the papacy as the central issue (but supplying the footnotes!). These volumes — how much are they read today? — are 'a testimony to the pre-Vatican II English Catholic Church' (page 147). Archivist for the Archdiocese of Westminster from 1931 to 1943, Hughes was Professor of Church History at the University of Notre Dame from 1955 until his death. Not beyond criticism (what historian ever could be?),

Hughes needs to be supplemented, for example by detailed studies about what people actually believed before the Reformation (Vidmar mentions Eamon Duffy's 'masterpiece', *The Stripping of the Altars*). In the end, however, from Sanders to Belloc and Hughes, English Catholic writers have kept coming back to the perception that, in the Reformation, a royal despot took away from the English people their ancient religion.

As the author says (page 9), this book is not a contribution to the history of the Reformation nor to the history of Catholicism in England. Rather, it is a history of the views that English Catholics have taken of the Reformation. 'We cannot fully understand an age unless we understand how that age regarded the past, for every age makes it own past', Vidmar quotes from Christopher Dawson, one of the greatest of English Catholic historians. How the English Catholic community understands its past today, of course, is another matter. How the defining event in that past was understood, by many others besides Lingard, Gasquet and Hughes, into the mid-twentieth century, is carefully explored and assessed in this contribution to the history of the self-understanding of the English Catholic community.

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