

The John Foxe Project

Professor David Loades, *Director of the Project*, explains the origin and significance of *John Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, a work of central interest to the English Reformation under Elizabeth I.

John Foxe (1517–1587) was an English martyrologist and divine. He was converted to protestantism in about 1540, while a fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford, and devoted the rest of his adult life to the promotion of the English reformation. From 1548 to 1553 he was employed by Mary, Duchess of Richmond, to tutor the children of her late brother, Henry, Earl of Surrey, who had died on the scaffold in January 1547. Among his pupils was Thomas Howard, later the fourth Duke of Norfolk, who was to be his patron and friend. In 1554, like many protestant clergy and gentry, he fled into exile to avoid the attentions of Mary Tudor's church, and while there conceived the idea of writing an ecclesiastical history to justify the protestant reformation which was taking place around him. Recognising the persuasive power of martyrology, he set out to prove that the Roman Catholic church had been a false church since about the eleventh century, using as his main evidence the persecution inflicted upon opponents of the papacy, which he traced back to the Waldensians. He published his first, brief Latin martyrology soon after arriving in Strasbourg in 1554, concentrating on the English Lollards.

The persecution which began in England in January 1555, however, altered his whole perspective. The men and women who were suffering and dying were often his friends, and his somewhat academic interest in martyrdom became an immediate and intensely angry engagement. The behaviour of the Marian Church confirmed and greatly strengthened his conviction that the Pope was Antichrist, and all those who served him were the devil's agents. The Marian persecution was not different in nature from that which had been conducted by Henry VIII, and by catholic governments all over Europe, but it was unusual in its intensity and ferocity, killing about 300 people in three and a half years. Exceptionally, even among protestants, Foxe did not believe that the death penalty was appropriate for religious dissent, however radical; and this added to the obsessive rage with which he regarded Mary's leading bishops, particularly Gardiner and Bonner. During his exile he began to collect information about the events in England, but seems not to have decided what to do with it, when Mary's death changed the whole landscape. In 1559 he published a slightly expanded version of his 1554 martyrology, but Mary's victims only feature in a fairly brief appendix.

On his return to England he was quickly persuaded that what Elizabeth's fragile settlement needed was the support of some major anti-catholic polemic. By both temperament and training

Foxe was ideally suited to this task. He abandoned his plans for a European martyrology in Latin, and began to assemble a huge book in English, designed to convince his fellow countrymen that the recently dispossessed catholic church had been a diabolical conspiracy, designed to destroy the very nature of English religion and identity. He was supported particularly by Edmund Grindal, the new bishop of London, and by Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth's Principal Secretary. His old pupil the Duke of Norfolk gave him an annuity and a place to work, and a somewhat amorphous group of wealthy Londoners (including the printer, John Day) funded the publication of the *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable*, which first appeared in 1563, printed by Day. Foxe only wrote a comparatively small part of the *Acts and Monuments*, which was assembled from a huge variety of sources; chronicles, registers, personal memoirs, letters and eyewitness accounts. Often documents were transcribed whole, or partly paraphrased. The impact was enormous, arousing intense emotions of approval and resentment, and Foxe quickly recognised that the revision of this book was likely to be the main part of his life's work.

Over the next twenty years he produced three further editions. In 1570 he took the story back from the eleventh century to the early church, in order to emphasise the congruence between the reformation martyrs and those of the late Imperial persecutions. He also revised and expanded his account of the events of the previous reign, responding both to criticism and to the appearance of additional information. It was this version which was ordered to be set up in cathedral churches for all to read. In 1576 there was a further revision, and an attempt to reduce the very high price by using cheaper paper. By this time there was already a demand for an abridged edition, but Foxe resisted such a suggestion, producing a further revision of the whole work in 1583. He died in 1587, still planning further modifications.

Although the *Acts and Monuments* remained the same book through these subsequent changes, they were far more than cosmetic. Not only did they reflect the author's reaction to praise and criticism, they also reflected a changing agenda as the fortunes of the English reformation fluctuated in Elizabeth's hands. The euphoria of 1563 was replaced with tense anxiety by 1570, and with a confident, but not entirely satisfied, sense of achievement by 1583. Throughout Elizabeth's reign, and for some time after, Foxe's work was the most forceful and the most complete statement of English protestant identity. Its importance in establishing that identity, particularly between 1563 and 1588, was immense. Although comparatively few people read it in its entirety (and even fewer could afford to buy it) the vivid imagery

of its words and its woodcut illustrations entered into the consciousness, particularly of those clergy and gentry who were the leaders and shapers of taste and opinion.

Unfortunately, it was a legacy of this powerful polemicism which led to the great revival of interest in Foxe in the nineteenth century, when many of the reformation battles were being refought. Several editions were produced between 1830 and 1880, all intended to serve the agenda of the evangelical party in the contemporary church. This was explicitly true of the major edition by S.R. Cattley and George Townsend (1837–42), which is the version now most widely available. Cattley and Townsend based their text on that of 1583, of which it is a reasonably accurate reproduction. However, they paid erratic (and not always acknowledged) attention to the earlier editions, making it impossible to trace the evolution of the text; and they ‘corrected’ Foxe’s errors, even when these were germane to his argument, making it hard to be certain whether the reader is dealing with Foxe’s own words, or with those of his nineteenth century editors. The Cattley/Townsend edition is thus virtually useless for serious scholarly purposes. At the same time none of the surviving original copies of the sixteenth century editions is full and perfect. All those traced and inspected have defects – pages missing or severely damaged, illustrations removed, and so on. This is equally true of the copies used for microfilming, to which also has to be added the vagaries of photographic reproduction – missing running heads, obscured gutters, damaged marginalia. For all these reasons, in 1993 the British Academy accepted a proposal to produce a new and complete edition of the *Acts and Monuments*, based on all four of the original texts for which Foxe had been personally responsible.

This project has evolved as the work has progressed. It was quickly decided that an electronic format would be the most appropriate, enabling the four texts to be viewed simultaneously. It was then also decided that each text should be transcribed into a modern typeface, leaving all its other features intact. The first conference in support of the project was held in Cambridge in 1995 to focus international interest and to recruit suitable experts to assist in the work. This was followed by a second conference in Oxford in 1997, and the proceedings of both of these conferences have been published. A third, and much larger conference was held at the State University of Ohio in Columbus in 1999, and a fourth will take place at Boston, Lincolnshire (Foxe’s birthplace) in July 2001. The project was originally based at the University of Wales, Bangor, but moved in 1996 to the Institute of Humanities Research in the University of Sheffield. In 1998 it was decided to produce the complete edition in stages; first books 10–12 (the Marian persecution), then books 1–4 (early church and middle ages), and finally books 5–9 (Henry VIII and Edward VI). Plans for a printed version were abandoned at that point but tentatively revived in 1999 when the funding base was transferred to the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

It is intended that the final electronic edition will consist of four transcribed texts, tagged and fully searchable; a complete collation

and commentary (including the marginalia); an index of personal identifications; and an apparatus of additional notes, mainly topographical and contextual. As a first step, a facsimile of the 1583 text, with limited search and index, has already been completed; it is being published on CD-ROM and will be available from Oxford University Press at the start of 2001.

CD-ROM, to be published early 2001.

