

Fox's Book of Martyrs

A History of the lives, sufferings and triumphant deaths of the early Christian martyrs

Edited by William Byron Forbush

CHAPTER XIV

An Account of the Persecutions in Great Britain and Ireland,

Prior to the Reign of Queen Mary I

Gildas, the most ancient British writer extant, who lived about the time that the Saxons left the island of Great Britain, has drawn a most shocking instance of the barbarity of those people.

The Saxons, on their arrival, being heathens like the Scots and Picts, destroyed the churches and murdered the clergy wherever they came: but they could not destroy Christianity, for those who would not submit to the Saxon yoke, went and resided beyond the Severn. Neither have we the names of those Christian sufferers transmitted to us, especially those of the clergy.

The most dreadful instance of barbarity under the Saxon government, was the massacre of the monks of Bangor, A.D. 586. These monks were in all respects different from those men who bear the same name at present.

In the eighth century, the Danes, a roving crew of barbarians, landed in different parts of Britain, both in England and Scotland.

At first they were repulsed, but in A.D. 857, a party of them landed somewhere near Southampton, and not only robbed the people but burned down the churches, and murdered the clergy.

In A.D. 868, these barbarians penetrated into the center of England, and took up their quarters at Nottingham; but the English, under their king, Ethelred, drove them from their posts, and obliged them to retire to Northumberland.

In 870, another body of these barbarians landed at Norfolk, and engaged in battle with the English at Hertford. Victory declared in favor of the pagans, who took Edmund, king of the East Angles, prisoner, and after treating him with a thousand indignities, transfixed his body with arrows, and then beheaded him.

In Fifeshire, in Scotland, they burned many of the churches, and among the rest that belonging to the Culdees, at St. Andrews. The piety of these men made them objects of abhorrence to the Danes, who, wherever they went singled out the Christian priests for destruction, of whom no less than two hundred were massacred in Scotland.

It was much the same in that part of Ireland now called Leinster, there the Danes murdered and burned the priests alive in their own churches; they carried destruction along with them wherever they went, sparing neither age nor sex, but the clergy were the most obnoxious to them, because they ridiculed their idolatry, and persuaded their people to have nothing to do with them.

In the reign of Edward III the Church of England was extremely corrupted with errors and superstition; and the light of the Gospel of Christ was greatly eclipsed and darkened with human inventions, burthensome ceremonies and gross idolatry.

The followers of Wickliffe, then called Lollards, were become extremely numerous, and the clergy were so vexed to see them increase; whatever power or influence they might have to molest them in an underhand manner, they had no authority by law to put them to death. However, the clergy embraced the favorable opportunity, and prevailed upon the king to suffer a bill to be brought into parliament, by which all Lollards who remained obstinate, should be delivered over to the secular power, and burnt as heretics. This act was the first in Britain for the burning of people for their religious sentiments; it passed in the year 1401, and was soon after put into execution.

The first person who suffered in consequence of this cruel act was William Santree, or Sawtree, a priest, who was burnt to death in Smithfield.

Soon after this, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, in consequence of his attachment to the doctrines of Wickliffe, was accused of heresy, and being condemned to be hanged and burnt, was accordingly executed in Lincoln's Inn Fields, A.D. 1419. In his written defense Lord Cobham said:

"As for images, I understand that they be not of belief, but that they were ordained since the belief of Christ was given by sufferance of the Church, to represent and bring to mind the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, and martyrdom and good living of other saints: and that whoso it be, that doth the worship to dead images that is due to God, or putteth such

hope or trust in help of them, as he should do to God, or hath affection in one more than in another, he doth in that, the greatest sin of idol worship.

"Also I suppose this fully, that every man in this earth is a pilgrim toward bliss, or toward pain; and that he that knoweth not, we will not know, we keep the holy commandments of God in his living here (albeit that he go on pilgrimages to all the world, and he die so), he shall be damned: he that knoweth the holy commandments of God, and keepeth them to his end, he shall be saved, though he never in his life go on pilgrimage, as men now use, to Canterbury, or to Rome, or to any other place."

Upon the day appointed, Lord Cobham was brought out of the Tower with his arms bound behind him, having a very cheerful countenance. Then was he laid upon a hurdle, as though he had been a most heinous traitor to the crown, and so drawn forth into St. Giles's field. As he was come to the place of execution, and was taken from the hurdle, he fell down devoutly upon his knees, desiring Almighty God to forgive his enemies. Then stood he up and beheld the multitude, exhorting them in most godly manner to follow the laws of God written in the Scriptures, and to beware of such teachers as they see contrary to Christ in their conversation and living. Then was he hanged up by the middle in chains of iron, and so consumed alive in the fire, praising the name of God, so long as his life lasted; the people, there present, showing great dolor. And this was done A.D. 1418.

How the priests that time fared, blasphemed, and accursed, requiring the people not to pray for him, but to judge him damned in hell, for that he departed not in the obedience of their pope, it were too long to write.

Thus resteth this valiant Christian knight, Sir John Oldcastle, under the altar of God, which is Jesus Christ, among that godly company, who, in the kingdom of patience, suffered great tribulation with the death of their bodies, for His faithful word and testimony.

In August, 1473, one Thomas Granter was apprehended in London; he was accused of professing the doctrines of Wickliffe, for which he was condemned as an obstinate heretic. This pious man, being brought to the sheriff's house, on the morning of the day appointed for his execution, desired a little refreshment, and having ate some, he said to the people present, "I eat now a very good meal, for I have a strange conflict to engage with before I go to supper"; and having eaten, he returned thanks to God for the bounties of His all-gracious providence, requesting that he might be instantly led to the place of execution, to bear testimony to the truth of those principles which he had professed. Accordingly he was chained to a stake on Tower-hill, where he was burnt alive, professing the truth with his last breath.

In the year 1499, one Badram, a pious man, was brought before the bishop of Norwich, having been accused by some of the priests, with holding the doctrines of Wickliffe. He confessed he did believe everything that was objected against him. For this, he was condemned as an obstinate heretic, and a warrant was granted for his execution;

accordingly he was brought to the stake at Norwich, where he suffered with great constancy.

In 1506, one William Tilfrey, a pious man, was burnt alive at Amersham, in a close called Stoneyprat, and at the same time, his daughter, Joan Clarke, a married women, was obliged to light the fagots that were to burn her father.

This year also one Father Roberts, a priest, was convicted of being a Lollard before the bishop of Lincoln, and burnt alive at Buckingham.

In 1507 one Thomas Norris was burnt alive for the testimony of the truth of the Gospel, at Norwich. This man was a poor, inoffensive, harmless person, but his parish priest conversing with him one day, conjectured he was a Lollard. In consequence of this supposition he gave information to the bishop, and Norris was apprehended.

In 1508, one Lawrence Guale, who had been kept in prison two years, was burnt alive at Salisbury, for denying the real presence in the Sacrament. It appeared that this man kept a shop in Salisbury, and entertained some Lollards in his house; for which he was informed against to the bishop; but he abode by his first testimony, and was condemned to suffer as a heretic.

A pious woman was burnt at Chippen Sudburne, by order of the chancellor, Dr. Whittenham. After she had been consumed in the flames, and the people were returning home, a bull broke loose from a butcher and singling out the chancellor from all the rest of the company, he gored him through the body, and on his horns carried his entrails. This was seen by all the people, and it is remarkable that the animal did not meddle with any other person whatever.

October 18, 1511, William Succling and John Bannister, who had formerly recanted, returned again to the profession of the faith, and were burnt alive in Smithfield.

In the year 1517, one John Brown (who had recanted before in the reign of Henry VII and borne a fagot round St. Paul's,) was condemned by Dr. Wonhaman, archbishop of Canterbury, and burnt alive at Ashford. Before he was chained to the stake, the archbishop Wonhaman, and Yester, bishop of Rochester, caused his feet to be burnt in a fire until all the flesh came off, even to the bones. This was done in order to make him again recant, but he persisted in his attachment to the truth to the last.

Much about this time one Richard Hunn, a merchant tailor of the city of London, was apprehended, having refused to pay the priest his fees for the funeral of a child; and being conveyed to the Lollards' Tower, in the palace of Lambeth, was there privately murdered by some of the servants of the archbishop.

September 24, 1518, John Stilincen, who had before recanted, was apprehended, brought before Richard Fitz-James, bishop of London, and on the twenty-fifth of October was condemned as a heretic. He was chained to the stake in Smithfield amidst a vast crowd of

spectators, and sealed his testimony to the truth with his blood. He declared that he was a Lollard, and that he had always believed the opinions of Wickliffe; and although he had been weak enough to recant his opinions, yet he was now willing to convince the world that he was ready to die for the truth.

In the year 1519, Thomas Mann was burnt in London, as was one Robert Celin, a plain, honest man for speaking against image worship and pilgrimages.

Much about this time, was executed in Smithfield, in London, James Brewster, a native of Colchester. His sentiments were the same as the rest of the Lollards, or those who followed the doctrines of Wickliffe; but notwithstanding the innocence of his life, and the regularity of his manners, he was obliged to submit to papal revenge.

During this year, one Christopher, a shoemaker, was burnt alive at Newbury, in Berkshire, for denying those popish articles which we have already mentioned. This man had gotten some books in English, which were sufficient to render him obnoxious to the Romish clergy.

Robert Silks, who had been condemned in the bishop's court as a heretic, made his escape out of prison, but was taken two years afterward, and brought back to Coventry, where he was burnt alive. The sheriffs always seized the goods of the martyrs for their own use, so that their wives and children were left to starve.

In 1532, Thomas Harding, who with his wife, had been accused of heresy, was brought before the bishop of Lincoln, and condemned for denying the real presence in the Sacrament. He was then chained to a stake, erected for the purpose, at Chesham in the Pell, near Botely; and when they had set fire to the fagots, one of the spectators dashed out his brains with a billet. The priests told the people that whoever brought fagots to burn heretics would have an indulgence to commit sins for forty days.

During the latter end of this year, Worham, archbishop of Canterbury, apprehended one Hitten, a priest at Maidstone; and after he had been long tortured in prison, and several times examined by the archbishop, and Fisher, bishop of Rochester, he was condemned as a heretic, and burnt alive before the door of his own parish church.

Thomas Bilney, professor of civil law at Cambridge, was brought before the bishop of London, and several other bishops, in the Chapter house, Westminster, and being several times threatened with the stake and flames, he was weak enough to recant; but he repented severely afterward.

For this he was brought before the bishop a second time, and condemned to death. Before he went to the stake he confessed his adherence to those opinions which Luther held; and, when at it, he smiled, and said, "I have had many storms in this world, but now my vessel will soon be on shore in heaven." He stood unmoved in the flames, crying out, "Jesus, I believe"; and these were the last words he was heard to utter.

A few weeks after Bilney had suffered, Richard Byfield was cast into prison, and endured some whipping, for his adherence to the doctrines of Luther: this Mr. Byfield had been some time a monk, at Barnes, in Surrey, but was converted by reading Tyndale's version of the New Testament. The sufferings this man underwent for the truth were so great that it would require a volume to contain them. Sometimes he was shut up in a dungeon, where he was almost suffocated by the offensive and horrid smell of filth and stagnant water. At other times he was tied up by the arms, until almost all his joints were dislocated. He was whipped at the post several times, until scarcely any flesh was left on his back; and all this was done to make him recant. He was then taken to the Lollard's Tower in Lambeth palace, where he was chained by the neck to the wall, and once every day beaten in the most cruel manner by the archbishop's servants. At last he was condemned, degraded, and burnt in Smithfield.

The next person that suffered was John Tewkesbury. This was a plain, simple man, who had been guilty of no other offence against what was called the holy Mother Church, than that of reading Tyndale's translation of the New Testament. At first he was weak enough to adjure, but afterward repented, and acknowledged the truth. For this he was brought before the bishop of London, who condemned him as an obstinate heretic. He suffered greatly during the time of his imprisonment, so that when they brought him out to execution, he was almost dead. He was conducted to the stake in Smithfield, where he was burned, declaring his utter abhorrence of popery, and professing a firm belief that his cause was just in the sight of God.

The next person that suffered in this reign was James Baynham, a reputable citizen in London, who had married the widow of a gentleman in the Temple. When chained to the stake he embraced the fagots, and said, "Oh, ye papists, behold! ye look for miracles; here now may you see a miracle; for in this fire I feel no more pain than if I were in bed; for it is as sweet to me as a bed of roses." Thus he resigned his soul into the hands of his Redeemer.

Soon after the death of this martyr, one Traxnal, an inoffensive countryman, was burned alive at Bradford in Wiltshire, because he would not acknowledge the real presence in the Sacrament, nor own the papal supremacy over the consciences of men.

In the year 1533, John Frith, a noted martyr, died for the truth. When brought to the stake in Smithfield, he embraced the fagots, and exhorted a young man named Andrew Hewit, who suffered with him, to trust his soul to that God who had redeemed it. Both these sufferers endured much torment, for the wind blew the flames away from them, so that they were above two hours in agony before they expired.

In the year 1538, one Collins, a madman, suffered death with his dog in Smithfield. The circumstances were as follows: Collins happened to be in church when the priest elevated the host; and Collins, in derision of the sacrifice of the Mass, lifted up his dog above his head. For this crime Collins, who ought to have been sent to a madhouse, or whipped at the cart's tail, was brought before the bishop of London; and although he was really mad, yet such was the force of popish power, such the corruption in Church and state, that the

poor madman, and his dog, were both carried to the stake in Smithfield, where they were burned to ashes, amidst a vast crowd of spectators.

There were some other persons who suffered the same year, of whom we shall take notice in the order they lie before us.

One Cowbridge suffered at Oxford; and although he was reputed to be a madman, yet he showed great signs of piety when he was fastened to the stake, and after the flames were kindled around him.

About the same time one Purderve was put to death for saying privately to a priest, after he had drunk the wine, "He blessed the hungry people with the empty chalice."

At the same time was condemned William Letton, a monk of great age, in the county of Suffolk, who was burned at Norwich for speaking against an idol that was carried in procession; and for asserting, that the Sacrament should be administered in both kinds.

Sometime before the burning of these men, Nicholas Peke was executed at Norwich; and when the fire was lighted, he was so scorched that he was as black as pitch. Dr. Reading standing before him, with Dr. Hearne and Dr. Spragwell, having a long white wand in his hand, struck him upon the right shoulder, and said, "Peke, recant, and believe in the Sacrament." To this he answered, "I despise thee and it also;" and with great violence he spit blood, occasioned by the anguish of his sufferings. Dr. Reading granted forty days' indulgence for the sufferer, in order that he might recant his opinions. But he persisted in his adherence to the truth, without paying any regard to the malice of his enemies; and he was burned alive, rejoicing that Christ had counted him worthy to suffer for His name's sake.

On July 28, 1540, or 1541, (for the chronology differs) Thomas Cromwell, earl of Essex, was brought to a scaffold on Tower-hill, where he was executed with some striking instances of cruelty. He made a short speech to the people, and then meekly resigned himself to the axe.

It is, we think, with great propriety, that this nobleman is ranked among the martyrs; for although the accusations preferred against him, did not relate to anything in religion, yet had it not been for his zeal to demolish popery, he might have to the last retained the king's favor. To this may be added, that the papists plotted his destruction, for he did more towards promoting the Reformation, than any man in that age, except the good Dr. Cranmer.

Soon after the execution of Cromwell, Dr. Cuthbert Barnes, Thomas Garnet, and William Jerome, were brought before the ecclesiastical court of the bishop of London, and accused of heresy.

Being before the bishop of London, Dr. Barnes was asked whether the saints prayed for us? To this he answered, that "he would leave that to God; but (said he) I will pray for you."

On the thirteenth of July, 1541, these men were brought from the Tower to Smithfield, where they were all chained to one stake; and there suffered death with a constancy that nothing less than a firm faith in Jesus Christ could inspire.

One Thomas Sommers, an honest merchant, with three others, was thrown into prison, for reading some of Luther's books, and they were condemned to carry those books to a fire in Cheapside; there they were to throw them in the flames; but Sommers threw his over, for which he was sent back to the Tower, where he was stoned to death.

Dreadful persecutions were at this time carried on at Lincoln, under Dr. Longland, the bishop of that diocese. At Buckingham, Thomas Bainard, and James Moreton, the one for reading the Lord's Prayer in English, and the other for reading St. James' Epistles in English, were both condemned and burnt alive.

Anthony Parsons, a priest, together with two others, was sent to Windsor, to be examined concerning heresy; and several articles were tendered to them to subscribe, which they refused. This was carried on by the bishop of Salisbury, who was the most violent persecutor of any in that age, except Bonner. When they were brought to the stake, Parsons asked for some drink, which being brought him, he drank to his fellow-sufferers, saying, "Be merry, my brethren, and lift up your hearts to God; for after this sharp breakfast I trust we shall have a good dinner in the Kingdom of Christ, our Lord and Redeemer." At these words Eastwood, one of the sufferers, lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, desiring the Lord above to receive his spirit. Parsons pulled the straw near to him, and then said to the spectators, "This is God's armor, and now I am a Christian soldier prepared for battle: I look for no mercy but through the merits of Christ;

He is my only Savior, in Him do I trust for salvation;" and soon after the fires were lighted, which burned their bodies, but could not hurt their precious and immortal souls. Their constancy triumphed over cruelty, and their sufferings will be held in everlasting remembrance.

Thus were Christ's people betrayed every way, and their lives bought and sold. For, in the said parliament, the king made this most blasphemous and cruel act, to be a law forever: that whatsoever they were that should read the Scriptures in the mother-tongue (which was then called "Wickliffe's learning"), they should forfeit land, cattle, body, life, and goods, from their heirs for ever, and so be condemned for heretics to God, enemies to the crown, and most arrant traitors to the land.