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### **JOHN FOXE, A HOUSEHOLD NAME: THE 400<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY – A vindication of Foxe as a historian and faithful chronicler of the English Reformation.**

By Margot Lawrence

‘Upon the report of his death the whole city lamented, honouring the small funeral which was made for him with the concourse of a great multitude of people, and in no other fashion of mourning than as if among so many, each man had buried his own father or his own brothers’ his son wrote of the passing of John Foxe in 1587.

#### **BOOK OF MARTYRS**

The so-called ‘Book of Martyrs’, the work for which Foxe is famous, was the most widely-read book in England apart from the Bible, for a hundred years, until *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 1678. Foxe, however, was no one-book man. His first published work, in 1547, was a translation into English from Luther, followed by further translations, and in 1548 by a Latin tract composed by himself pleading against the then penalty of death by burning for adulterers. ‘I hate contention but cannot desert the cause of sinners for whom Christ died’ he wrote. Though we hate the vice we should not hate the men.’ That charity towards all was one of Foxe’s strongest traits, shown in good times and bad throughout his life. It was this, even more than his scholarship, that made all London lament his death.

Indeed, the strongest impression gained from J.F. Mozley’s scholarly *John Foxe and His Book* (S.P.C.K. 1940, and very well worth hunting for) is of the gentle sweetness of Foxe’s character, as revealed in letters, together with his firmness and courage. It should not be overlooked that his entire life was lived under the shadow of the Spanish threat. He actually died during the very days when Drake was singeing the King of Spain’s beard and never knew the outcome of that enterprise. Drake had asked for his prayers, was convinced his success owed much to them, and wrote to Foxe to say so as soon as he was clear of Cadiz. (See *Francis Drake* by A.E. Mason.)

From 1548 on, few years passed without some published work by Foxe, whether translations or original work. He was fluent in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and edited the Anglo-Saxon gospels for Archbishop Parker. Earlier he published a Latin grammar for schools (no surviving copy is known) and a religious drama in Latin verse, long used as a school text book.

When he embarked on his *Acts and Monuments*, popularly known as the ‘Book of Martyrs’ he merely intended a short history of the Lollards, in Latin. The work expanded as it proceeded.

#### **EARLY YEARS**

John Foxe was born in 1517. At Oxford, he took his bachelor’s degree at 20, becoming a Fellow of Magdalen. Surviving letters show him as an affectionate and friendly young man, studious and religious. By 25 he was a strong adherent of the reformed religion and writing ‘My accusers wish to crush me . . . for several months past all my actions have been watched.’

The college rules required him to take priest’s orders, but Foxe objected to celibacy. ‘There are other ways of living the Christian life’ he wrote to a friend. ‘All men have not the same nature. Do not judge me by yourself.’ Instead he became a tutor to the Lucy family at Charlcote, and while

there, married. (One of his pupils grew up to be that Sir Thomas Lucy lampooned by Shakespeare as Justice Shallow.)

The following years were so painful that Foxe never later spoke of them. He apparently moved around to avoid persecution or find work. He arrived in London destitute and despairing. In St. Paul's, a stranger approached and gave him money. 'Be of good cheer' said this man. 'I know not what your troubles may be, but they seem from your appearance to be no light ones. So do not refuse from your countryman a gift which common kindness impels me to offer. Fresh hope is at hand, within a few days you will find a more certain means of livelihood.' Within three days, he was appointed tutor to the Earl of Surrey's children. One of these was the future Lord Howard of Effingham, another was Thomas, later Duke of Norfolk and fatally involved in the Ridolfi plot. Foxe did not shrink from the painful duty of escorting his former pupil to the scaffold and consoling his lost moments.

The happy relationship between Foxe and his pupils is seen in an earlier letter from Norfolk in 1559. 'I am overwhelmed with joy, my dear Foxe, to learn that your coming now draws near . . . your love and labour bestowed upon me in my youth and poverty, I forget not . . . I am ashamed to show you by this letter my rustiness at writing, but love compels me to do for you what I would do for no other man, for I have not written a Latin letter in these five years now passed.'

## **EXILE**

With the accession of Mary, Thomas Howard had helped Foxe to escape to Europe. The position of the English reformers as refugees, may be compared to that of those German scholars who fled from Hitler to Britain or America. To support themselves they – including Foxe – did ill-paid literary hack work, proof-reading, translating, correcting, editing. In 1555 they learned that the programme of extermination of Protestants had begun.

Foxe was already beginning his book on the Lollards. He now realised that his second volume must include Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley (his personal friends) and others. The project became painful and difficult, isolated from primary sources or first-hand informants. Inevitably, errors arose, the best-known being the reported burning of John Merbecke, who in fact survived until 1585. Foxe zealously corrected such errors in his English editions after 1563. H.A.L. Fisher considered him 'far above the ordinary level of his age.' R.W. Dixon, a historian not favourable to Foxe's viewpoint, wrote 'No writer has been more severely treated . . . But the charges of falsification, suppression, alterations of documents, which have been laid against him, amount to little, most often to nothing.' Conyers Read in 1936 declared that Foxe wrote 'with a respect for facts which entitles him to a high place among honest historians.' Foxe foresaw the opposition that his book would attract. 'It is dangerous to publish anything now. The most circumspect writer is sure to be calumniated.' The controversy began at once. Many in England would have preferred his book unwritten. Bonner laughed it off but there were others (as in France and Germany after 1945) who wanted their roles in these events forgotten. The publication of *Acts and Monuments* was as controversial in the 1560s as any MI5 spy revelation today. A virulent campaign against him began, not least in Roman Catholic circles abroad.

## **HISTORIAN**

It is, however, possible to distinguish between the conscientious contemporary research (relying upon church or court records or the eyewitness testimony of at least two independent observers) and those sections dealing with the earlier Lollards where, like every other historian then, he mainly

drew uncritically upon older sources. Indeed there could be a case for calling Foxe the father of modern historical research method, for his work on the Marian period. S.R. Maitland, a nineteenth-century Lambeth Palace librarian, brought up the errors again (still ignoring Foxe's own scrupulous corrections.) *The Dictionary of National Biography* followed Maitland, as did *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, so anyone researching Foxe today starts from a built-in faulty premise. J.F. Mozley thoroughly refutes Maitland's criticisms and considers Foxe almost wholly reliable.

The material and style of Foxe's Book present difficulties today to the fastidious reader, unless he has a strong commitment to the subject. But Foxe cannot be blamed for this. These things happened and he was deeply distressed. His style expresses this.

Foxe suffers too from his supporters. One current paperback edition includes egregious errors which are not Foxe's fault and much later non-Foxe material. There is a note that Foxe has been added to and edited, but no indication of how or where or how much, so the total impression is of unscholarliness associated with Foxe's name. Another more recent edition is more pleasing, but *all popular reprints of Foxe must be approached with caution*.

Despite detractors, Foxe's Book remains a standard work of serious history. Nobody has ever done this story better and for much of the material, Foxe has been the sole means by which it has been prepared. It is the primary source of much, such as Latimer's 'Be of good courage, Master Ridley and play the man' that will always remain part of the cultural heritage of Englishmen as well as the religious heritage of every Anglican.

*Margot Lawrence (at the time of publication) was a freelance journalist.*