

The New Criterion

Books

January 1997

A see of troubles

by [Marc Arkin](#)

Review of Thomas Cranmer: A Life by Diarmaid MacCulloch

On March 21, 1556, in the third year of the reign of Queen Mary, Thomas Cranmer, late archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of All England, then sixty-seven years old, prepared to preach his last sermon. He had spent the early morning reciting the litany, tending to personal business, and signing some fourteen additional copies of his sixth recantation of his evangelical faith. Then, flanked by two Spanish Dominican friars, one of them the recently appointed Regius Professor of Divinity, he made his way to the University Church at Oxford. It was rainy; otherwise, much of the ceremony would have taken place outdoors, in front of Balliol College, where the day's events were to conclude.

Inside the sanctuary, the assembled dignitaries first heard a sermon by Dr. Henry Cole, provost of Eton, explaining why it was entirely proper under canon law that a repentant sinner should be burned at the stake. Cranmer spoke next. He began conventionally: he requested prayers for his sins; he discussed three forms of love; he pled with the rich to avoid covetousness; he wept as he described how the poor were starving as food prices soared. Only then did he come to the heart of the matter, "the great thing which so much troubleth my conscience."

And, departing from his prepared text, Cranmer explained, this "great thing" was "my sending abroad of writings contrary to truth which here now I renounce and refuse as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, written for fear of death, and for as much as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, it shall be first burned." His next words were almost swallowed in the commotion: "And, as for the Pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine." As he called out a parting shot for the Eucharistic theology of his old enemy, the bishop of Winchester, the outraged authorities pulled Cranmer from the pulpit, an image immortalized for generations of Protestants in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, also known as the "Book of Martyrs."

Cranmer was hustled through the streets of Oxford, trailed all the way by a dazed Dominican friar—probably the Regius Professor—who kept repeating, "*Non fecisti?*" ("You didn't do it?"). Asked point blank if he would have declared the pope to be head of the church if it would have saved his life, Cranmer, astonishingly, admitted as much. At the stake, nevertheless, Cranmer made good on his promise: he held his right hand in the flames until it was consumed. Only then, reciting the words of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, did he give up the ghost. Tradition records that his heart was found unburnt among the ashes.

Here, by most reckonings, was a man whose death became him better than his life. Born in 1489, to the Nottinghamshire squirearchy, Cranmer spent a quarter century in residence at Cambridge

without attaining any fame beyond his fellowship at Jesus College. About 1515, he married obscurely, but, soon after, his wife died in childbirth. In 1520, he was ordained priest; six years later he became doctor of divinity, specializing in scriptural studies.

By 1527, however, Cranmer began to move on the periphery of the Henrician court, having somehow caught the eye of Henry VIII's great minister, Cardinal Wolsey. There were a few diplomatic missions, a personal meeting with the king himself, and, in 1529, a move to prominence when Henry seized on Cranmer's suggestion that the king's Great Matter—the divorce from Catherine of Aragon—should be settled by academic theologians rather than by canon lawyers. Entering the royal service, Cranmer traveled to the continent and helped canvass the Italian universities. Returning to England, he attached himself to the religiously progressive Boleyn household. Then, in 1532, while in Nuremberg on an embassy to the emperor, Cranmer did something odd for a conventionally ambitious middle-aged diplomat under a vow of celibacy: he married the niece of a prominent Lutheran divine.

Meanwhile, Cranmer continued his rise to power fueled by the king's marital situation. Within months, Henry recalled Cranmer, announcing his intention to make him archbishop of Canterbury. Whatever reservations Cranmer may have harbored about the papacy—or other matters of Roman doctrine—he accepted his office from the hands of Pope Clement and immediately set upon the work for which Henry appointed him. Consecrated on March 30, 1533, he formally annulled Henry's marriage to Catherine on May 23; on June 1, he officiated at Anne's coronation; in early September, he stood as godfather to the newborn princess Elizabeth.

By the time the dust cleared at the end of 1534, England had a national church with the king at its head, a reformation accomplished by a series of parliamentary acts. What England did not yet have was a reformation in theology or worship. During the next twenty years, Cranmer would attempt to achieve that second reformation by resort to the authority that had so effectively engineered the first, the crown in parliament.

For the remainder of Henry's reign, Cranmer managed, sometimes with difficulty, to navigate the murky waters of the king's shifting religious policies, diplomatic initiatives, and marital affairs. Thus, Cranmer weathered the fall of his patron Anne Boleyn (1536); the traditionalist rebellion known as the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536–37); the fall of his ally Thomas Cromwell (1540); and an effort to try him for heresy, known as the Prebendaries Plot (1543). At the same time, Cranmer managed to keep ahead of the king's alternating overtures to the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League and the Catholic powers of the Holy Roman Empire, overtures routinely reflected in the public worship of the Henrician church.

Such survival comes at a price. Despite his personal misgivings over Anne Boleyn's fate, two days before her execution, Cranmer annulled her marriage to Henry; on the day Anne died, he signed a dispensation from prohibitions of affinity for the king's marriage to Jane Seymour. Although Cranmer wrote Henry a letter in defense of the imprisoned Thomas Cromwell, as a member of the House of Lords, he dutifully voted Cromwell's attainder. Shortly after, he annulled Henry's ill-fated marriage to Anne of Cleves, support for which had led to Cromwell's downfall. In 1539, a moment of diplomatic retrenchment, Cranmer acceded to the traditionalist Six Articles, which among other things, reaffirmed clerical celibacy and punished with death any denial of the real presence in the Eucharist. Latimer resigned his diocese; Cranmer, in contrast, sent his wife and children back to the continent. In 1543, during another traditionalist phase in Henry's policies, Cranmer edited the so-called "King's Book," bestowing on it his own inimitable prose style, even as the text rejected the bedrock evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone and placed restrictions on lay Bible reading, previously one of Cranmer's cherished causes.

At Henry's death in 1547, Cranmer was, nonetheless, an established member of the evangelical

camp. On the accession of the more sympathetic—or malleable—Edward, Cranmer began to move the English church further from the Roman rite. During Edward's reign, the Book of Common Prayer appeared in two versions, both primarily from Cranmer's pen. The 1549 version, under the Somerset protectorate, retained features of the Mass, preserving prayers for the dead and a Eucharist that offered, "the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." By 1552, the revised prayer book, under the Northumberland protectorate, was radically different: prayers for the dead were expunged, vestments were limited, the priest became a minister, the altar a table, the Eucharist a Lord's Supper taken in remembrance and fed on in the heart by faith with thanksgiving. A year later Edward was dead and the devoutly Roman Catholic Mary was on the throne.

Having used the powers of his office to pronounce Mary illegitimate, Cranmer had little to expect from the new regime. What is more, he had actively participated in the effort to settle the succession on Lady Jane Grey, the Protestant granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister. (MacCulloch himself takes the somewhat novel position that Mary was a usurper who staged a coup d'état against the legitimate government of Queen Jane.) In September 1553, he sealed his fate by openly protesting Mary's restoration of the Mass, claiming that the 1552 prayer book, with its parliamentary approval, was the only legitimate usage. In November, he was convicted of treason for his support of Queen Jane. The Marian government devoted the next two and a half years to the convoluted procedures necessary to obtain Cranmer's formal papal condemnation for heresy.

In October, 1555, with the condemnation nearly complete, Cranmer witnessed his fellow bishops, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, burned at the stake. Shaken, isolated, in ill health, and under tremendous pressure from the Marian regime, between December and March, Cranmer signed no less than six different recantations of his evangelical views. He accepted sacramental absolution, was reconciled to the church of Rome, began attending Mass, and participated in the Candlemas ceremonies that he had vehemently condemned only a few years earlier. Inexplicably, he executed one more *volte face* on the day of his execution, reaffirming his evangelical principles and earning his place in Foxe's Book of Martyrs.

This, clearly, is no simple saint. In his play *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare preserved the tradition of Cranmer as a kindly man, a courtier devoted to the Tudor monarchy, who survived through the personal favor of the king. Other sources, perhaps less charitable, fostered the rumor that, until Edward was on the throne, Cranmer carried his intermittently inconvenient wife about with him in a trunk. It is the thesis of Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial—and decidedly partisan—biography of Archbishop Cranmer that, most, if not all, of the archbishop's tangled history can be explained by two factors: his unfaltering belief in royal supremacy and his evolving commitment to evangelical Christianity within the bounds of a national church. When Mary came to power, Cranmer's faith in royal supremacy could no longer coexist with his belief in a reformed national church. The resulting dissonance, in part, explains his last tormented months.

Mr. MacCulloch, a fellow of St. Cross College and lecturer in church history in the theology faculty at Oxford, painstakingly reconstructs the evolution of Cranmer's religious views. Based on Cranmer's handwritten textual marginalia, MacCulloch persuasively argues that, contrary to received wisdom, Cranmer was relatively conservative during his Cambridge years. Instead of joining the evangelical circle at the White Horse Tavern, he remained a biblical humanist in the mold of Erasmus with conciliarist leanings and outright hostility to Luther.

Exposed to the cosmopolitan world of diplomacy and continental reformers, Cranmer became a moderate evangelical with Lutheran leanings, a position he maintained throughout King Henry's reign. He favored ending medieval cultic practices, replacing the Mass with vernacular worship, and making an English Bible available to the laity. By Edward's accession in 1547, however, MacCulloch argues, Cranmer had reached a more radical Protestant stance, closer perhaps to Calvin

than to Luther. In particular, as MacCulloch details, Cranmer's Eucharistic theology moved from transubstantiation in his early years to true presence during most of Henry's reign, finally coming to rest in the belief in symbolic presence that appears in the 1552 prayer book. No wonder Cranmer's papal interrogators were able to shake the archbishop by quoting Cranmer against Cranmer.

MacCulloch has given us an extraordinary biography of Archbishop Cranmer and, with him, of the English Reformation. Impeccably researched, with absolute mastery of an overwhelming body of source material and subsequent scholarship, engagingly written, the book is a remarkable achievement. However, this is not simply a book, it is an undertaking. At over six hundred close-set pages—almost seven hundred, counting appendices and the admirably exhaustive index—it follows the intricate doings of the English Reformation at ground-level detail. From the opening chapter, which traces Cranmer's family background and status consciousness from the changing heraldry of his seals, it is a model of that kind of intimate and leisurely English ecclesiastical history in which (quite literally) every bit of the landscape is known to the writer—and, presumably, to the audience as well.

This is a world of symbol and nuance. When Cranmer adopted the Lutheran numbering of the decalogue, according to MacCulloch, he set the stage for the destruction of images in the later English church. At the death of Henry, Cranmer signified his evangelical allegiance by growing a beard; Roman Catholic clerics were clean shaven. The liturgical reforms of 1548 required the clergy to break the bread during communion, paving the way for the doctrine of symbolic presence.

One of the virtues of MacCulloch's detailed approach is its cumulative picture of a medieval world perched on the cusp of the modern. The Christian Mass occupies the liminal space between living and dead, providing communication between the two. The executive arm of government is an extension of the king's private household, assisted by the households of powerful clerics, all of whom subsist on the tangible fruits of personal loyalty. The church and its devotions are entwined with the government in a way more reminiscent of the state cults of the late Roman Empire a thousand years earlier than of England a mere two hundred years later, which had become the world of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume.

As Doctor Johnson famously said of *Paradise Lost*, no one ever wished it a line longer, and it seems churlish to complain of omissions in a work of this length and depth. Nevertheless, there are one or two curious lacunae in the account. Although MacCulloch repeatedly stresses that Cranmer—primarily through his liturgies—played a central role in the development of the English language, he never particularizes this assertion, apparently assuming the reader's familiarity with the text of the Book of Common Prayer and the changes it effected in English usage.

Moreover, despite MacCulloch's best efforts, Cranmer himself remains a bit of a cipher. Although this may reflect the limitations of the surviving source material, apart from his close relationship with Henry, Cranmer's personal life is largely unexplored. More important, the book yields no clear sense of the origins of Cranmer's evangelical feelings or their depth. The most significant glimpse into Cranmer's inner life comes in MacCulloch's description of the archbishop's final months. There, he seems to hint that Cranmer drew his religious convictions from his friends and associates; alone, he could not maintain his evangelical faith.

Perhaps this is why Cranmer remains so perplexing, a medieval prince bishop thrust into the Reformation. It is certainly why it is tempting to say that the proper epitaph for Cranmer is the one Shakespeare put, instead, into the mouth of a predecessor in the see of Canterbury, Cardinal Wolsey, disgraced for failing to secure the king's divorce: "Had I but serv'd my God with half the zeal/ I serv'd my king, he would not in mine age/ have left me naked to mine enemies."

Marc Arkin is Marc M.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 15 January 1997, on page 68

Copyright © 2008 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/seeoftroubles-arkin-3415>