

## **A Brief History of No-Popery**

**In 1927 Malcolm V. Hay wrote: “If there is a history not yet written, which should be written, it is the history of No-Popery.” Such a history is still unavailable, although its main outlines may be traced. ‘No-Popery’ can be defined as the consistent propaganda to instil a fear and hatred of the Pope and the Catholic Church. Although muffled under polite words and embarrassed silences, many prejudices inculcated over generations are not far beneath the surface of many minds today.**

When Martin Luther proclaimed his non-scriptural teaching, ‘salvation by faith alone’, the over scrupulous and those tired of the battle to maintain virtue, found it attractive. But in the opening battles of Luther’s revolt, theological arguments were of little interest to those outside narrow circles. So almost from the beginning, doctrinal disputes began to shift to historical terrain. Luther found it easier to persuade men and women that the Pope was the Antichrist than to explain shades of theological opinion.

Until this time the writing of history had largely been left to chance. Individuals such as Gregory of Tours (538 – 593AD) and, most famously, the Venerable Bede (673 – 735 AD) had made important contributions to historical studies, but the challenges of Lutheran propaganda demanded refutations suited to the new conditions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

George Orwell observed in 1949 that: “Who controls the past, controls the future”. But Luther had anticipated this observation four hundred years previously and, as early as 1536, was making history the servant of polemics. The new interest, which urged 16th century scholars to investigate the past, was not pure history, but fuelled by a hatred for the Church. It was this attitude of Luther that inspired the formation of a team of Protestant scholars directed by Flacius Illyricus (1520 – 1575). Based at Magdeburg, each researcher was allocated one century as his field of work so as to produce ‘The History of the Christian Church’. The team became known as: ‘The Centuriators of Magdeburg’.

The Centuriators combed history for scandals and calumnies designed to prove that the whole body of Catholics had always been the foulest of humans. This would befit a Church which Luther had proclaimed as: “The Whore of Babylon”. They specialised in misrepresentation and in mutilated and forged documents. Between 1559 and 1574, thirteen volumes of the history were published. The story of a ‘Pope Joan’ was typical of its output, and the alleged finding of 6000 heads of children in a convent fishpond so as to explain why convents were built close to large lakes and swamps. The stories were propagated in foul language, which probably aided rather than hindered their circulation.

Yet in the midst of this insanity, there was hidden the germ of an idea. It was Flacius and his team who established the methods of collective scholarly work, the idea of the continuity of history, interest in records and a motive for historical research. Long after their unworthy motive had been forgotten, the interest and study of history for its own sake survived.

The Centuriators did not go unchallenged. Pope Pius V entrusted Peter Canisius with the task of refuting the historical interpretations of Illyricus. Canisius, who described the Centuriators as embarked on an: ‘opus pestilentissimum’ (‘the most pestilential of works’), produced a stream of volumes defending the Church on strictly historical grounds. In addition, St. Philip Neri persuaded one of his Oratorian priests, Caesar Baronius (1538 – 1607) to devote his life to countering the work of the Magdeburg scholars. Philip drove Baronius relentlessly. But Baronius encouraged criticism of his works, even of trifling errors, so his ‘Annales’ took 19 years to complete, rather than the 12 envisaged. The combined works of Canisius and Baronius succeeded in transforming historical studies as well as helping to regain large areas of Europe for Catholicism. Later, another Oratorian, Odorico Rinaldi (1596 – 1671) published updates of the works of Baronius and he was followed by Jacques Bossuet (1627 – 1704), an outstanding French scholar and bishop.

During these years, Henry VIII had taken England into schism and the Regents of Edward VI had encouraged Lutheran teaching to buttress their own political agendas. Following the failure of the Lady Jane Grey coup, Mary had restored unity with the Holy See but Elizabeth became queen in 1558. The newly enriched English aristocracy, that had emerged following the pillage of church and charitable properties, needed a ‘tame’ Church. But the Catholic bishops and the ‘bible only’ Protestants refused to play this submissive role.

So on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1559, two Acts of Parliament created the Anglican Church. Designed by politicians, its doctrines were ‘protestant’ enough to attract moderate Protestants while its liturgy was traditional enough to confuse and reassure many Catholics. By retaining a hierarchical system, the government could, in time, shape public opinion down to the smallest village pulpit. The cement to keep the parts together was to be a narrow nationalism symbolised by the rejection of Rome’s authority.

While this hybrid church was serviceable in maintaining the political objectives of those in power, problems arose with candidates for the ministry. Catholic theology at Oxford and Cambridge had been purged, but the study of early church history and the country’s Catholic past provoked the asking of awkward questions. Students were known to slip away to mainland Europe and return later as Catholic priests.

The government found the need to promote a pseudo-history that would paint the Catholic centuries as being intellectually dark, morally corrupt and legally vicious. New history books were required.

During Mary's reign John Foxe (1516 – 87) had left England to publish 'Acts and Monuments of Christian Martyrs' in Latin. This claimed to recount the lives of Wycliffe and Hus. In 1559, accounts of those executed by Mary were added. During the same year the first volume of the Centuriators became available, so when Foxe issued an English edition of his book in 1563, he was also able to draw material from this source.

Queen Elizabeth was excommunicated in 1570 and retaliated in part by ordering that the book by Foxe be placed in the hall of every Episcopal palace. Probably no 16<sup>th</sup> century history book had such a wide circulation and for generations it was the only source for the mass of English people to learn church history. John Knox also utilised it in Scotland. Other authors produced works based on it or on paraphrases of Centuriator material.

Although the Centuriator's volumes were never translated into English, their contents dominated the teaching of history in England for two hundred years. This propaganda was not theological but mainly historical and appealed to the growing senses of 'patriotism' and 'loyalty'. It was so successful that the: 'evils of Rome' as the Antichrist or the: 'Whore of Babylon' became a determining factor in political life. King Charles I was friendly towards Catholics and married to the Catholic French princess Henrietta Maria. These facts were used by his political enemies to foment distrust and played an important part in his defeat in the English Civil War.

Following the war, the country became ungovernable, so in 1660 Charles' eldest son was recalled from exile to become King Charles II. Having grown up in France, both he and his brother James had realistic views of Catholicism. Although Charles II accepted Catholic beliefs he remained an Anglican so as to retain his crown. In 1678 Titus Oates, an ignorant and perjured fanatic asserted that he had discovered a 'Popish Plot' to kill all Protestant leaders and seize power. Charles knew the story was madness, but agreed to sign the death warrants of innocent priests. If he had resisted he would have confirmed in most minds the suspicion that he was a secret Catholic and have opened the way to his violent overthrow.

When his younger brother James became a Catholic in 1673, those who wished to weaken royal power, known as 'Whigs', saw their opportunity. If 'No-Popery' could be used in parliament to deny James the crown, the principle of the hereditary succession would be broken. But the royalist, mainly Anglican majority, now called 'Tories', upheld James' right and he became king in 1685.

For three years James strove to establish religious freedom for all Christians and Jews, but the Dutch invasion of 1688, assisted by Whig traitors in the army, drove James from power. William of Orange, the Dutch leader, became king but allowed the Whigs to control parliament. The following seventy years of Whig rule were times of irreligion, oppression of Catholics - although no executions, strict control of the Anglican Church, a collapse in educational standards and greatly increased social injustice.

Those who aimed to restore the native royal house were known as 'Jacobites' (from Jacobus, the Latin for James) and would probably have been successful if his son and grandson had not been Catholics. The Whigs realised the potency of spreading fear by fanning the flames of 'No-Popery'. It was the central theme of their propaganda and without it they would not have been able to retain power.

Herbert Butterfield in 1931 defined a 'Whig' historian as: 'one who interprets history as the continuing and inevitable victory of progress over reaction'. By itself this need not have been a threat to Catholics, but when combined with the Whig equation of 'Progress' as synonymous with freedom from papal tyranny, the mixture produced an implacable hostility to anything Catholic. Disraeli expressed this connection of 'No-Popery' with the Whigs when he commented: "I look upon an Orangeman as a pure Whig."

In continental Europe during these years, Catholic historians were winning the war of competing religious histories. To counter this trend, Johann Mosheim (1693 – 1755) published 'Institutiones Historiae Ecclesiasticae' in 1741. The reckless abuse used by the Centuriators was abandoned, but his book still lacked contact with primary sources. When a reference was given it was, as often as not, unreliable. Shorter and easier to read than the Centuriators, it became popular in Germany and was translated into English in 1768. For many, it replaced the Centuriator material as a key resource when history was taught. The flavour of this 'history' may be gained from the words of John Mill, who was widely regarded as having a moderate and impartial mind, in 1757:

"I have no interest to praise or blame the See of Rome...avarice, ambition, sacrilege, perjury, an absolute contempt of everything sacred, the most amazing dissoluteness, every species of debauchery in excess, total depravity and corruption of morals, characterise the history of the Popes."

But an occasional flicker of light was to be seen. When Edward Gibbon obtained a book by Bossuet, the effect was dramatic. In 1753, aged eighteen, he became a Catholic. His parents withdrew him from Oxford University before he could be expelled, and sent him to a Calvinist minister in Lausanne, Switzerland.

By the time Gibbon returned home he had lost faith in any form of Christianity, although a formal return to Anglicanism enabled him to resume a literary career.

Gibbon's: 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' of 1776 was not based on original sources, but largely on the Centuriators and Mosheim; however some Catholics were favourably disposed towards the 'Decline' because it showed signs of Bossuet's influence. It still dismissed the Middle Ages as a time of inordinate superstition, but managed to expose at least some Whig and Protestant fictions. In fact it bore some resemblance to a 'real' history and one could apply the adage: "In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." Gibbon's work replaced Mosheim's as a standard text and became a new touchstone for the teaching of history. On account of its scholarly reputation, it was used as a reference by novelists and compilers of Encyclopaedias.

By 1770, George III was breaking the power of the Whigs in parliament and this led to a period in which new political groups emerged, some of which were favourable to the idea of reducing Catholic disabilities. Catholics were permitted freedom of worship in 1778 and this was followed in 1829 by the granting of civil rights, including that of sitting as MPs. The intervening years had seen an increased awareness – among both Catholics and more enlightened Protestants – of distortions implicit in the traditional, whiggish view of British history. In 1806 the parish priest of Hornby, John Lingard (1771 – 1851), produced his ground-breaking study: 'The Antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon Church', in 1806. Between 1819 and 1830 he revised and enlarged this work to a total of eight volumes, covering the period from the Roman invasion to the deposition of James II in 1688.

The radical, non-Catholic writer William Cobbett (1763 – 1835) drew heavily on Lingard's work. Due to Cobbett's vigorous, graphic and combative prose style, a wider section of the British public became aware of a challenge to 'official' history for the first time. However, while some progress was being made, Thomas Macaulay (1800 – 1859), although favouring Catholic political emancipation, published his: 'History of England' in 1849. Here, the archetypal Whig interpretation of English history was effectively revived. Written in a lively, journalistic mode, it soon attracted a large popular audience, not least among schoolteachers. Appearing at a time when widened access to education was an aim of successive governments, it became the main resource for new school textbooks on British history.

Since the time of Lingard, historians have been slowly dismantling the edifice of extreme Protestant/Whig history in the academic world. But, an anti-Catholic bias stubbornly refuses to die, although now often implicit in tone rather than explicitly stated.

Even today, historical novels, films and secular journalism addressed to the general public can be leavened with the anti-Catholic cultural assumptions of previous centuries.

As Britain becomes less insular and perhaps post-Christian in thinking, residues of 'No-Popery' will probably fade from public memory, but it would be premature to accept this as inevitable. 'No-Popery', like anti-Semitism is able to live like a dormant virus for long periods. Like all viruses, it awaits the right atmosphere and a 'carrier' in order to transform itself into a malign force infecting large populations.

The 'No-Popery' virus was first carried by a king's need for a divorce, then by an aristocracy's desire to retain the plunder from monasteries and then by a queen's need to strengthen her authority. This was followed by a Whig need to defeat the Jacobite challenge and later the need of some Ulster politicians to engender fear of Catholics so as to avert a united Ireland.

Today, European countries are merging to some extent their separate identities. But later generations may well react with a revived patriotism and nationalism. In itself this would not be a problem but, under the wrong leadership, such a movement could resurrect hate symbols from the past and thereby provide a latter-day carrier for the 'No-Popery' virus. The means of preventing this is to encourage a better understanding of the place of 'No-Popery' in our nation's history and to make a wider audience aware of the many vital contributions Catholics have made to the fabric of our national identity.

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