

THE EARLIEST LIFE OF ST. JOHN FISHER

THE beginning of all our knowledge of St. John Fisher is a life written in the reign of Queen Elizabeth from thirty to forty years after his death. This account, after circulating in manuscript for almost a century, was finally published as *The Life and Death of that renowned John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. Comprising the highest and hidden Transactions of Church and State in the Reign of Henry the 8, with divers Morall, Historicall, and Political Animadversions upon Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas Moor, Martin Luther, with a full relation of Queen Katherine's Divorce. Carefully selected from severall ancient Records, by Tho. Bailey, D.D.* London. Printed in the year, 1655.

The Dr. Bailey thus responsible for this first publication was not however the author of the Life. A manuscript of it, that belonged at one time to the English Benedictine monks of Dieulouard in Lorraine had come into his hands and "making some alteration therein"—"verbiage, méprises, et sottes interpolations," the later scientific Bollandist styles them—he had printed it as his own work. Bailey was soon found out, but his ill-informed and stupid manipulation of the text threw a discredit upon the biographer whom he had exploited which lasted down to our own times. The pioneer in the work of restoring the credit of this sixteenth century writer was Fr. T. E. Bridgett, C.S.S.R., whose monumental life of the martyr appeared in 1888. A few years later in the *Analecta Bollandiana* Fr. Francis Van Ortruy, S.J., produced a critical edition of the Life¹ and in 1921 the early English Text Society printed the transcription of the Life made many years ago by the Rev. Ronald Bayne. A new edition of the Life, with the text, for the first time, in

¹ *Vie du bienheureux martyr Jean Fisher, Cardinal, Evêque de Rochester* (1535). Texte Anglais et Traduction Latine du XVI siècle publiés et annotés par Fr. Van Ortruy, S.J., Bollandiste. Extrait des *Analecta Bollandiana*, t. X (1891) et t. XII (1893). Bruxelles: Imprimerie Polleunis et Ceuterick 37, Rue des Ursulines, 37. 1893.

modern spelling is about to be published.

For anything like a definite judgment on the place of this anonymous work in the history of English literature the present writer must refer the enquirer to the scholar who has not yet appeared who will follow in the way of the learned editors of Harpsfield's *More*.² The *Life* is undoubtedly the most vivid portrait of the scholar, the patron of learning, the bishop and the martyr that we possess, and as I have read and re-read it in the last few months it has seemed to me that we possess in it a literary masterpiece worthy to rank with the best that its age produced. To state that it is comparatively unknown is merely to say that it has shared the fate of many other books produced by the generation of Catholic scholars whom Cecil and Elizabeth suppressed and exiled. It is singularly direct in style, its sentences carefully constructed, paragraph linked to paragraph by a single ceaseless rhythm that makes the hundred and fifty pages of the whole one thing. The comparison continually comes to my mind of the longer and more elaborate plainsong melodies where each neum and group of neums has its own perfected life, is a thing perfect and complete in itself, and yet is part of a greater thing and at the same time that it goes to make up that greater thing derives therefrom whatever itself possesses of life and movement. Nowhere is there a trace of the literary affectation that characterizes the writers who were the anonymous author's fashionable contemporaries. Nor is it ever hampered by that cumbrous heaping of phrase on phrase to the utter obscuring of meaning, which, again, we must allow to characterize much of Elizabethan writing. Whoever he was, this unknown biographer of Fisher, he wrote with a simplicity, a clarity, a dignified eloquence and an effect that often suggest Cicero himself.

It is not enough that the life of a saint should be a work of art. The story it tells must be true. What then are the sources used by the anonymous author and how far can we

² Professor R. W. Chambers and Miss E. Hitchcock for the Early English Text Soc., 1932.

be certain that he was a man careful and critical in his use of them? These are usually questions as difficult to answer as they are important. There has survived, however, along with the different manuscript copies of the Life, a collection of papers that show us the Life in the making. This is the MS. 152 of the Arundel Collection in the British Museum, and the relation of these precious relics to the finished Life has been admirably worked out by Fr. Van Ortrouy. The codex contains the final draft of the Life with the author's own corrections. It contains some of the letters of enquiry which he wrote to men likely to have known the saint himself and other prominent personages of the time. It contains also the valuable extracts, which are, alas, all that we possess of it, from the Life of St. Thomas More written by his nephew William Rastall. We can confidently say that the author of this Life of St. John Fisher was methodical and conscientious, that he was in touch with men who knew the saint's contemporaries, and who were in a position to favour him with copies even of state papers, such for example as Wolsey's correspondence with the English ambassadors sent to Rome on the business of the king's divorce.

For two matters the Life is of the first importance, and in each case the source of its unique information is very high, namely William Rastall, one of the most distinguished legal thinkers of his day and a judge of the Common Pleas. These two matters are the account of the famous Convocation of 1531 at which the question of the Royal Supremacy made its first appearance, and the account of the bishop's trial. If the last is important only to the student and client of the martyr, the first is something which must affect our view of the whole nature of the change made by Henry VIII in the religion of his people.

When was the Life written? The earliest judgment on this important question is that of the antiquary Thomas Baker, who on the manuscript Harleian 7047 has noted, "This life was wrote or begun under Queen Mary." Most modern writers down to Fr. Van Ortrouy went further even than Baker in their adherence to this opinion of an

THE EARLIEST LIFE OF ST. JOHN FISHER

early date of composition. "I have no doubt," wrote Fr. Bridgett, "that Dr. Hall not only gathered his materials during Mary's lifetime but had finished the Life before the accession of Elizabeth." Lord Acton, placing the date at 1580, is a solitary exception to this quasi-unanimity. The later researches of Fr. Van Ortrov finally settled the doubts. The Life speaks of Mary the Catholic as dead; it speaks of the restored royal supremacy in ecclesiastical matters. It quotes from books only published in 1564, and 1567. Again from the letters of the Cambridge correspondent the author was still sending out his questionnaires in 1575-1576. The work was indeed a long time in preparation but the bulk of it is later than 1567, much of it is later still, and the final draft is not later than the closing months of 1576.

Who wrote the Life? Down to Fr. Van Ortrov opinion was unanimous that the author was Richard Hall, a priest born in the diocese of York in the year 1537. Hall was a Cambridge man, a student of Christ's and a fellow of Pembroke. The Act of Supremacy (1559) brought his Cambridge career to an end, and in July, 1560, he resigned his offices and went into exile. He later lectured at the recently founded English College of Douai. He became a canon at St. Omer, and at St. Omer he died on February 26, 1604, after forty-four years spent in exile.

But the Life itself shows innumerable signs that the writer was resident in England.³ The Cambridge letters show that in 1576 he was a neighbour of Alban Langdale, then a prisoner in the house of the Bishop of Winchester hard by the Church of St. Mary Overy that is now the cathedral of the protestant diocese of Southwark—and a neighbour too of William Roper who was living at Eltham. Again the Life is obviously the production of a mature mind and of a man who was on familiar terms with the greatest men of his time, an intimate of Stephen Gardiner, the Lord High Chancellor, for example, at whose table he had met other Lords of the Council. Now Gardiner died in 1555 and Richard Hall was then a youth of eighteen who had not yet

³ Cf. Van Ortrov, p. 77

BLACKFRIARS

achieved his first university successes.

The book, according to the Latin translation of it in the Barberini Library, was the work of several hands, for it speaks of a bishop who was "one of them that composed this life." This bishop can be identified with Thomas Watson, Bishop of Lincoln, the most promising and, if we except the octogenarian Tunstall, the ablest of the prelates whom Elizabeth deprived and imprisoned. Watson had been in his day the president of the college the martyr-bishop had founded, and others who collaborated were theologians whom the same foundation had formed. Who was the writer finally responsible for the composition and definite form of the Life? Here we can only offer conjectures more or less reasonable. Professor Chambers has shown that it was not Harpsfield. Fr. Van Ortroys's suggestion is a Dr. Young who in Mary's reign was vice-chancellor of Cambridge, and president of Pembroke at the moment when Hall was elected a fellow. Young was a fellow student of Alban Langdale at St. John's in the earlier part of the century, and in Elizabeth's reign he lived in London and apparently close by Langdale. He can therefore, without any undue straining of texts, be identified with the writer of the letter to whom the Cambridge correspondent replies, "You may ask Mr. Langdale, your neighbour, what he can remember of him." Young and Hall furthermore continued their relations, for in 1573 Hall published his old president's *De Schismate*. As this was sent to him for publication may not the Life of Fisher also have been entrusted to his care? Hall had a copy of the final draft—for it is almost certainly he who prepared from it the finished Latin version now in the Barberini Library and which bears on its first page the *imprimatur*, dated April 7, 1599, of François Lucas, S.T.L., Canon Penitentiary of the Cathedral of St. Omer and Censor of books. This translation, though ready for the press, was never printed. Hall died five years later, and then, as the manuscript began to be copied and to circulate among Catholics, the name of the translator became attached to the original English work.

PHILIP HUGHES.