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## THE SUPPRESSION OF THE MONASTERIES UNDER HENRY VIII.

[The following paper is extracted by permission from a little volume on *English Monasteries*, of which it forms the concluding chapter, published by Messrs. G. J. Palmer and Sons. The author is a well-known antiquary, who writes under the initials "F. S. A.," and it is thought that this estimate of the work of Henry VIII., coming as it does from an Anglican source, may carry weight with some who are unwilling to accept the testimony of Roman Catholics.]

MOVED, as he chose to assert, with a desire "to purge the Church from the thorns of vices and to sow it with the seeds and plants of virtue," Henry VIII., the most immoral and covetous king that England has ever known, determined towards the end of 1534 to take active steps to secure the suppression of the religious houses. The Supreme Head Act of that year had conferred visitatorial powers on the Crown. For this purpose Henry appointed Thomas Cromwell as his Vicar-General, suspending meanwhile all episcopal or other forms of visitation. This absolutely unscrupulous minister, well worthy of the king who appointed him, and who never lost an opportunity of obtaining bribes in money, goods, leases, or estates, had the fullest authority

and jurisdiction conferred upon him, with power to visit and exercise such control through his appointed commissaries.

The visitation of Cromwell's agents began in August, 1535, and extended to February, 1536. The chief visitors were the notorious Legh, Layton, and London. They had not completed the visitation of the Northern Province when Parliament met, but reports were forwarded to Cromwell of the visited houses, both small and great. They had also during this period managed to frighten some houses into making "voluntary surrenders," and, by imposing a series of harsh and unreasonable injunctions, had endeavoured to drive out the remainder. Legh, writing to Cromwell with reference to these injunctions, had no hesitation in showing his hand: "By this ye see that they shall not need to be put forth, but that they will make instance themselves, so that their doing shall be imputed to themselves and no other."

In March, 1536, a Bill for the dissolution of the smaller houses under £200 a year was introduced and forced through Parliament by royal threats—"I hear that my Bill will not pass, but I will have it pass, or I will have some of your heads." About 400 houses then fell; the superiors receiving pensions, and the monks, notwithstanding their alleged depravity, obtaining admission to the larger houses or leave to act as secular priests. This first suppression was hateful to

the majority of English folk, save those who profited by the spoils, and brought about the Pilgrimage of Grace, with the execution of twelve abbots, as well as many monks and sympathetic laymen of all ranks.

The main excuse for this step in the general suppression was the report of Cromwell's visitors as to the condition of the monasteries. This was the infamous *Comperda*, a pestiferous document of unrivalled mendacity and malignity, which for three-and-a-half centuries surrounded the memory of the latter days of England's religious with a miasma of noxious effluvia. If any unscrupulous or hasty controversialist desires to think evil of monks and nuns, he will herein find a surfeit of garbage. But with the printing of the Domestic State Papers, and the revelations therein afforded of the character of the visitors as displayed in their own letters, the falsity of most of their statements has been manifested beyond gainsaying. Dr. Gairdner's cool judgement in editing the official Letters and Papers of Henry VIII.'s reign gave the first definite blow to the possibility of placing any reliance on the *Comperda* documents, as they are flatly contradicted in so many places, and are obviously incredible in others. Abbot Gasquet has further exposed their worthlessness after a masterly and searching fashion; but it has been reserved for scholarly members of the Anglican communion, such as the late Canon Dixon and Dr. Jessopp, to denounce the

authors of the monastic Black Book in terms of extraordinary but justifiable severity. In short, it would not be possible for any one of a decently-balanced mind—we care not whether he is English Catholic, of the Roman obedience, non-conformist, or agnostic—to make a careful documentary study of the times of the suppression of the monasteries of this country, without rising from the task with a feeling of almost unqualified disgust for the actual visitors, and of indignation with a king and a minister who could use such miscreants as their tools.

“When the Inquisitors of Henry VIII. and his Vicar-General, Cromwell,” writes Dr. Jessopp,<sup>1</sup> “went on their tours of visitation, they were men who had had no experience of the ordinary forms of inquiry which had hitherto been in use. They called themselves Visitors ; they were, in effect, mere hired detectives of the very vilest stamp, who came to levy blackmail, and, if possible, to find some excuse for their robberies by vilifying their victims. In all the *Comperta* which have come down to us there is not, if I remember rightly, a single instance of any report or complaint having been made to the Visitors from any one outside. The enormities set down against the poor people accused of them are said to have been confessed by themselves against themselves.

<sup>1</sup> [*Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich*, Introduction, pp. xi., xii.]

In other words, the *Comperta* of 1535-6 can only be received as the horrible inventions of the miserable men who wrote them down upon their papers, well knowing that, as in no case could the charges be supported, so, on the other hand, in no case could they be met, or were the accused even intended to be put upon their trial."

On another occasion, when criticising minutely Legh's reports of the Papist houses, the same scholar says :—

"This loathsome return bears the stamp of malignant falsehood upon every line, and it could only have been penned by a man of blasted character and of so filthy an imagination that no judge or jury would have believed him on his oath."

Such testimony is all the more remarkable, for Dr. Jessopp tells us that few men in their early days had the current views against the monks more firmly fixed in their minds, and few had more difficulty in surrendering them under the stern pressure of historic facts.

The *Comperta*, or abstracts of minutes drawn up by the visitors, are almost entirely concerned with questions of morality; lists of offenders were compiled, with the charge against the name. The charges are absolutely unsupported, as a rule, by a shadow of evidence, save that the odious sins are said, absurdly enough, to have been voluntarily confessed by the culprits.

What was the character of the chief visitors, on

whose word the average uneducated Protestant is still inclined to believe in all that is odious against both monks and nuns? Cromwell himself was steeped in peculation and in the giving and taking of bribes. All England knew that he had his price for everything, great or small; his own papers reek with it; and when he fell so suddenly, and earned a well-merited scaffold death, his selling offices and grants "for many-fold sums of money" was one of the chief charges against him.

As with the master, so with the men.

Visitors Legh and Layton, and, in a smaller degree, those less busy visitors London and Ap Rice, were only too ready to extort money from the houses on which they reported, and to appropriate all they could or dared of the confiscated spoils. The evidence of this is overwhelming. Dr. Gairdner, writing some years ago in his preface to the tenth volume of the *Calendar of Letters and Papers*, expressed the guarded opinion that "we have no reason, indeed, to think highly of the character of Cromwell's visitors;" and since then very much more evidence has come to light.

Layton—a man from the ranks, and entirely dependent on Cromwell's favour and support, to whom he showed a blasphemously expressed servility—lost no opportunity of obtaining and extorting bribes. Moreover, he was ever ready to sacrifice truth to please his masters; and



wrote filthy suggestions and coarse jests with obvious relish. Cromwell rewarded him with much ecclesiastical preferment, which included the deanery of York. He utilized his position by pawning the cathedral plate, which the Chapter had to redeem after his death. He died at Brussels in 1545; England became apparently too warm a place for him, for he pestered Cromwell to get him "placed beyond the seas."

Of Legh we have a vivid picture drawn by his occasional assistant-visitor, Ap Rice. He was a young man of "intolerable elation," and of an "insolent and pompatique" manner. He dressed himself after a most costly fashion. At his visitations he was accompanied by twelve liveried attendants; he bullied and browbeat the Superiors, rating certain abbots most roundly for not meeting him at the abbey gates, even when they had had no intimation of his visit. The almost open way in which he extorted heavy fines, passed to his private account, was systematic. His accusations and bullyings went so far that his colleague Ap Rice felt constrained to write a protest to Cromwell, but he implored Cromwell to keep his communication private, as otherwise he felt confident that he would receive "irrecoverable harm" (a euphemism for murder) from "the rufflers and serving men" by whom Legh was surrounded. Legh took equal delight with Layton in telling coarse tales which were his own

invention. Sanders, the Roman Catholic historian, does not hesitate to lay still more serious accusations against him. As a reward for his unhallowed zeal, Legh was made master of the Hospital of Sherburn, Co. Durham, an office which he disgracefully abused, to "the utter disinherittance, decay, and destruction of the ancient and godly foundation of the same house," as was stated in depositions made in 1557 before a Commission of Inquiry.

Ap Rice himself, the accuser of Legh, had been in certain grievous trouble, was abjectly subservient to Cromwell, and was obviously, from his own letters, willing, nay eager, to give his reports the necessary colouring.

Dr. London, who made for himself a greater reputation as a spoiler than a maligner of monasteries, and who was particularly cruel towards the friars, held considerable preferments. He was canon of Windsor, dean of Osney, dean of Wallingford, and from 1526 to 1542 warden of New College. London also distinguished himself as a visitor of nunneries, a position for which he was eminently unfit through the coarseness of his life. Archbishop Cranmer calls him "a stout and filthy prebendary of Windsor." "I have seen complaints," writes Bishop Burnet, "of Dr. London's soliciting nuns." His after life was peculiarly odious; he was put to open penance for double adultery with a mother and daughter; and being subsequently convicted of perjury had to ride

with his face to the horse's tail through Windsor, Reading, and Newbury, and was then committed to the Fleet prison, where he died in 1543.

Another reason for distrusting the report of the visitors, even if their letters and other extant disproving documents did not exist, is the hasty nature of their visits. Is it for one moment credible that these two or three men, in those days of difficult locomotion, could have made any true examination into the affairs and morality of some 10,000 monks and nuns in less than six months? The rough estimate of the religious of those days is usually put at 8,000; but it is forgotten that the visitors' injunctions ordered the instant dismissal of the inmates under twenty-four years of age, as well as those who had been professed under the age of twenty; so that about 2,000 more would be driven out by Legh and Layton and their colleagues, without a fraction of pension, in addition to the 8,000 still resident when the actual suppression was enforced.

Bad as are the reports of the extant *Comperta*, there was a limit even to the eager credulity or the lying imagination of the visitors. For very shame's sake in many cases, particularly where the house was under the patronage of some highly-placed nobleman, such men as Legh and Layton could not, or dare not, allege any grave misconduct. Out of 155 houses on which they report, 43 escaped with no reflection on their morality. In the visited dioceses a number of

houses are not even named, presumably, as Dr. Gairdner thinks, because there was nothing to say against them. Even in the numerous houses where gross evil was reported, the charges were only levelled, on the average, against a decided minority.

Happily, however, for the general and particular character of England's religious houses and their inmates in the sixteenth century, it was found to be impossible to carry out the work of suppression of even the smaller houses on the vague charges of the visitors, who had confined themselves, for the most part, to scandal and slander, and had made no regular financial statements.

On the passage of the Bill for suppressing those foundations under £200 a year, in the spring of 1536, only a few months after the completion of the visitors' *Comperata*, the Crown issued a commission to report on the number of professed inmates and their dependents, and the "conversation of their lives," together with a statement as to the income, debts, and condition of the buildings. The commissioners were to be six in number for each district—three officials, namely, an auditor, the receiver for each county, and a clerk; whilst the remaining three were to be nominated by the Crown from "discreet persons" of the neighbourhood. The returns of these mixed commissions for the counties of Huntingdon, Leicester, Rutland,

Sussex, and Warwick, with a condensed form for Lancashire, were known to exist when Dr. Gairdner issued the Calendar dealing with the documents of 1536. Some of the very houses against which Legh and Layton had breathed forth their pestilential tales were found by the second set of visitors—who were not Cromwell's tools, but now that their suppression was resolved the Crown cared little or nothing whether the moral report was good or bad—to be “of good and virtuous conversation,” and the whole tone of the reports is for the most part so favourable that Dr. Gairdner remarks: “The country gentlemen who sat on the commission somehow came to a very different conclusion from that of Drs. Layton and Legh.”

A few years after Dr. Gairdner had thus expressed himself, Abbot Gasquet came upon the reports of the mixed commissions relative to the religious houses of Gloucestershire (and city of Bristol), Hampshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Wilts, which had been misplaced. Those for Norfolk have been printed by Dr. Jessopp in the *Norfolk Miscellany*, those for Hampshire by Dr. Cox in Volume II. of the *Victoria County History of Hants*, and the whole of them by Dr. Gasquet in the *Dublin Review* for April, 1894. Space forbids mentioning more than that house after house is named as “of good conversation,” “of good religious conversation,” “of honest conversation,” “of convenient conversation,” “of very good

name and fame," or "of virtuous living." Occasional defaulters from a virtuous or orderly life are named, which made the generally favourable reports all the more valuable. The extant reports deal with 376 religious men and women; of this number only twenty-two men and three women are noted as not of good repute. The great relief that the houses were to the poor and distressed of the district is mentioned time after time by the commissioners, who were occasionally bold enough to beg for the continuance of a particular foundation.

The foul charges of Legh, Layton, and their colleagues had served their turn; many copies of the abstracts of their minutes were made for circulation, several of which are still extant, and amid the odium of these malignant lies the suppression of the monasteries became possible. But it is quite clear that those in power believed in their hearts the reports of the mixed commissions of officials and country gentlemen instead of the egregious tales of Cromwell's tools. Had the charges made in the first visitation been accepted as true, it is quite impossible to believe that the guilty ones would have been pensioned, as was so frequently the case. Thus it can be proved that out of twenty-seven nuns accused of incontinence seventeen were pensioned. Various Superiors accused by the first visitors of criminal offences were afterwards given high secular preferment in the Church.

One of the specially bad cases, if Legh is to be believed, who visited the house on September 29, 1535, was Chertsey Abbey; he reported that seven were incontinent, four guilty of unnatural sin, and two apostate. The house at that time only consisted of an abbot and fourteen monks, so that there were but two of virtuous life! Two years later Chertsey was surrendered. The fickle King at that time was establishing "King Henry VIII.'s new monastery of Holy Trinity, Bisham," to consist of an abbot and thirteen Benedictine monks, who were to pray for the King and Queen Jane. To this short-lived new foundation Henry VIII. actually transferred the abbot of Chertsey and his whole convent in their entirety, although Legh two years before had solemnly reported them to be the foulest set of monks that he had anywhere discovered! The King had wit enough to use the lies of his first set of visitors to further his own covetous ends; but he could never have done more than pretend to credit them.

Among all the foul scandals set afloat by the King's first visitors, and afterwards supported by the discredited Bale, none was worse than that charged against the last abbot of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, John Essex (*alias* Vokes). Another of the monks, who was incriminated with his superior, was John Digon, the last prior of the house. If the odious charges had been true, it is hardly possible to believe that they would have

been pensioned ; but recently a strong piece of evidence has unexpectedly been brought to light through Abbot Gasquet drawing attention, in the *Downside Review*, to a small volume published in 1590 by Thomas Twyne, a learned doctor of medicine, containing a Latin tract by his father, John Twyne, the celebrated antiquary. It is entitled *De rebus Albionicis Britannicis atque Anglicis Commentariorum libri duo*. In the introduction we are told that John Twyne, who died in 1581, and left this tract behind him relative to the early antiquities of this island, was in the opinion of competent judges a most learned man. But it is the form in which the treatise is drawn up, and not the actual contents, that is of so much interest from a monastic standpoint. It is cast in the shape of a conversation supposed to be held between Abbot Essex, Prior Digon, and Nicholas Wotton, the first Dean of Canterbury after the ejection of the monks, a man of brilliant gifts. Though the conversation is imaginary, John Twyne tells his son that he had often heard these three men carry on similar learned discussions, and was evidently on terms of intimacy with them. The son entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1560, and this treatise was written for his information when on the eve of proceeding to the University. Had two of these men been odious reprobates, the father could not possibly have held them up to his young son as models of good scholarship.



Moreover, he goes out of his way to praise them in no slight terms, telling his son that "above all the many people whom I have ever known I have especially revered two, because in their days they were above all others remarkable for the high character of their morals (*morum gravitatem sunnam*), and for their remarkable acquaintance with all antiquity; they were, if you know not already, John Vokes and John Digon. The first was the most worthy (*dignissimus*) abbot, and the second the most upright (*integerrimus*) prior of the ancient monastery of St. Augustine."<sup>1</sup>

When the time comes for the writing of a true and fearless Life and Times of Henry VIII. (a monarch who has been aptly dubbed "the professional widower") by some thorough and conscientious student of history, there can be no reasonable doubt that Canon Dixon's statement will be amply substantiated when he wrote:—"I am inclined to believe that in the reign of Henry VIII. the monasteries were not worse, but better, than they had been previously, and that they were doing fairly the work for which they had been founded."

Be this as it may, the time has surely come for all educated English Churchmen to cease to gird at monks and nuns, or to sneer at the vowed

<sup>1</sup> Those who wish to see this exceedingly rare book for themselves, and to read other particulars of the last abbot, may like to know that there is a copy at the British Museum, press-mark 600, b, 47.

life ; for it is to such as these that England owes its conversion to the Faith, whether we think of the Celtic missionaries from the North, or of St. Augustine and his forty companions from the South—all trained in the “School of the Divine Service.”

For further information on the Suppression of the Monasteries the following should be consulted :—

*Letters and Papers of the reign of Henry VIII.* (Domestic State Papers). Dr. Gairdner.

*History of the Church of England*, 6 vols. Canon Dixon.

*Henry VIII. and the English Monasteries*, 2 vols. (1888).  
Abbot Gasquet.

*Henry VIII.* (1901). F. Darwin Swift.

*Reformation of the Church of England*, 2 vols. (1882). J. H. Blunt.



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