

Chapter Twenty-Six

REFORMATION AND REVOLUTION

WHEN Henry VIII informed Wolsey that he wished his marriage to be annulled by the pope, it was at a time when the experience of going to church was as it had been for centuries. The congregation gathered in the nave to hear the Latin mass. The walls and windows of the church were bright with paintings and stained glass depicting the gospel stories and the lives of the saints. There were carved images of the Virgin and saints before which candles were lit as prayers were said asking for their intercession in heaven. The nave was divided from the chancel by a screen beyond which the laity did not pass, and above which was suspended a life-size image of Christ on the cross flanked by the Virgin and St. John, known as the rood. Beyond lay the chancel, the area of the church sacred to the priest, with a stone altar against the east end. Sometimes near the altar there would be relics of saints exhibited, bones or fragments of clothing, kept within a container of some precious material. The altar was adorned with rich hangings which were changed according to the season of the church's year, white for Easter or red for the feasts of martyrs. The altar was the focus of the entire church, for on it was re-enacted in the mass each day the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The priest wore embroidered vestments, incense was burned, and at solemn moments bells were rung. Above the altar a small piece of consecrated bread, the host, was exhibited within a suspended container called a pyx, covered by a veil or cloth. In this way, even outside the mass, Christ's body was perpetually present, heaven came down to earth. Medieval Catholic Christianity was a vivid faith approached through things seen and the senses.

Half-a-century later that experience was to be very different. Although the stained glass might still remain because of the expense of replacing it with plain glass, the interior was virtually stripped bare, every painted or sculpted image either painted over, taken away or defaced, the walls whitewashed and

Henry VIII at prayer in the royal closet, a specially canopied enclosure within the Chapel Royal. The illumination dates from the middle of the 1530s and appears in the borders of a manuscript recording the activities of the Order of the Garter.



adorned only with biblical texts. Over the rood screen instead of the cross there was the royal arms. Within the chancel the stone altar and pyx had gone. Instead there was a wooden table used only very occasionally when Holy Communion, the service which replaced the mass, took place, when it was taken down into the body of the church with only a linen cloth laid over it. The priest was no longer attired with vestments but a surplice. On most Sundays the service would have been one of morning prayer, said not in Latin but English, and in which the congregation took part. Lessons were read from an English Bible, and the main focus was no longer the chancel but the pulpit from which the sermon was delivered. A Christianity which had appealed to the eye had been replaced by one whose prime organ was the ear and whose aim was to hear and receive the word of God.

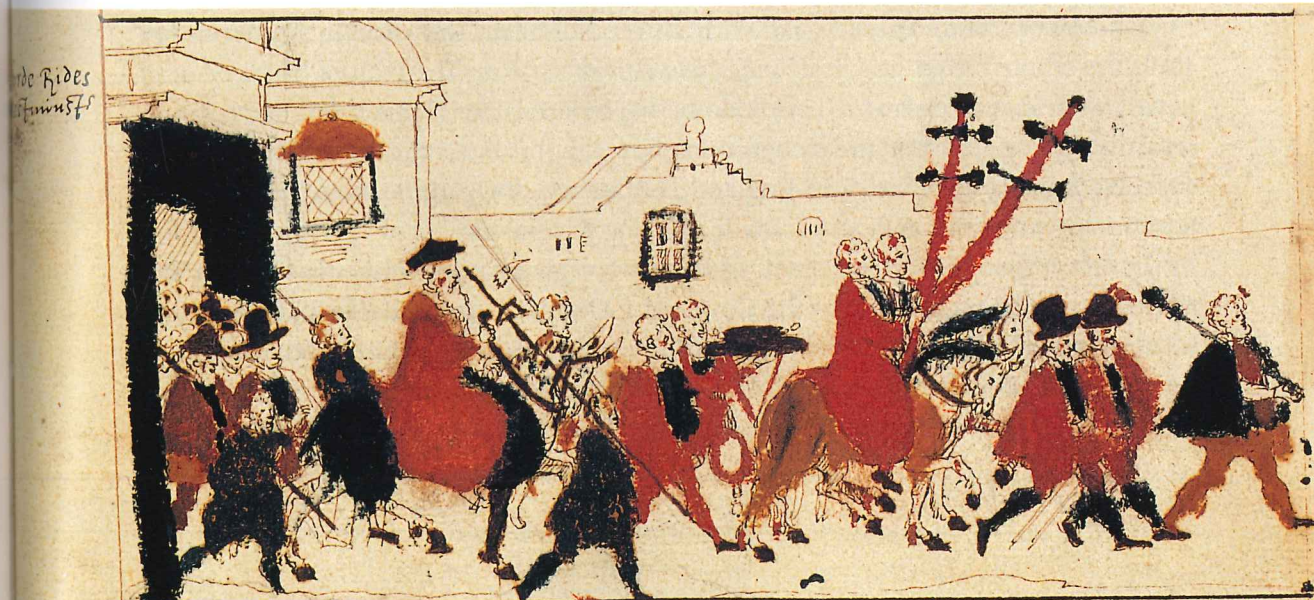
In terms of the people of England that was to be the greatest change of the century. No one in 1527 could have foreseen that this would be the long-term consequence of what began as the king's marital problems. This huge change needs also to be set against the broader backcloth of the movement known as the Reformation which swept across Europe. Up until the beginning of the sixteenth century the Catholic church had remained one, with the pope at its head ruling through his bishops. For centuries the church had gone through good and bad periods, yet always managing to respond to reform in time to avert schism and division. Always, that is, until this century, when the response came too late, reinforcing, instead of lessening, the divisions. The result was the breakup of Christendom into Catholic and Protestant, between those who remained loyal to Rome and Catholic Christianity and those who rejected Rome and embraced a form of Protestantism. This caused a catastrophic division across the whole of Western Europe, one which affected not only families but whole countries, leading to bloody persecution and war.

By the time that Henry VIII wanted his divorce from Catherine of Aragon this great movement was well established in Germany under the leadership of Martin Luther, whose ideas were already reaching England. These ideas anticipated much of what was eventually to happen during the coming decades: the rejection of papal authority, the abolition of religious orders, the ability of priests to marry, the right of the laity to receive the wine as well as the bread at mass or communion, the use of the vernacular for church services and the sweeping away of the cult of the Virgin and saints, pilgrimages and relics. The medieval church had preached seven sacraments, baptism in infancy, confirmation in childhood, matrimony and holy orders, penance and the Eucharist to cleanse and feed the soul, and anointing to comfort the sick and dying. Luther only preached two: baptism and the Eucharist. The theological debate over what happened at the latter raged furiously, the reformers seeing it more as a

commemoration than a literal transmutation of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. As if all of this were not enough, the reformers redefined man's relation with God in such a way that much of what the church had laid store by – good works, pilgrimages, pardons, formal penances, masses for the souls of the departed – was rendered redundant. Returning to St. Paul the reformers proclaimed his words that man could be justified or saved by faith alone. Such beliefs changed the nature of the clergy; they ceased to be a caste set apart acting as intermediaries between God and man.

In 1527 Henry's queen was forty and past child-bearing. Her only surviving child was one sickly daughter, Mary. The king saw this as a judgment for marrying his brother's widow, something which the Bible explicitly forbade and which had only been made possible by a special dispensation from the pope. Henry wanted a son and he was now deeply in love with a lady of the court, Anne Boleyn, young enough to bear one. Anne was an ambitious, educated woman whose time at the French court had left her sympathetic to the reformers. Wolsey's task was to obtain a divorce from the pope so that she and the king could wed, something which he failed to do, not only because the pope saw no reason to grant one but also because during that time he was under the control of the queen's nephew, the Emperor Charles V. The cardinal's attempts dragged on for two years until, in 1529, the pope saw a way of prolonging the saga even further by setting up a court in England presided over by Wolsey and an Italian cardinal. It sat for five months through the summer of 1529 achieving little, when the pope suddenly revoked the case to Rome.

Cardinal Wolsey's public appearances began to rival in splendour those of the king. Before him were carried massive silver crosses and his cardinal's hat.



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The king was furious. And here, for the first time on any scale, emerges that personal characteristic which was to dominate the rest of the reign. Henry VIII made people but he also broke them if they crossed his path. Wolsey was to be his first major victim, one who evoked little sympathy due to his unpopularity. He was a failure with enemies on all sides. The cardinal was indicted of *praemunire*, that is of exercising an unlawful jurisdiction in this country, alluding to his legatine powers. Deprived of his office of chancellor he set off to visit his See of York. A year later he was arrested and was escorted south, but he was ill and sought shelter in the abbey of Leicester where he died, thus avoiding the executioner's axe. Some of his last words were: 'But if I had served God as diligently as I have done the king, He would not have given me over in my grey hairs.'

Events now began to take a sharper turn. The king appointed a new chancellor, Sir Thomas More. But of far greater importance was the summoning of Parliament which met in November 1529. This was to prove a turning point in its history. Henry needed support. Parliament consisted not only of the lords but more particularly representatives of the towns and shires. It was thus a means whereby the monarchy in its war against Rome could be seen to be at one with the country. The great statutes which it was shortly to pass demonstrated a new partnership which set a pattern for the future. The king was also fortunate, for he was able to benefit from the strongly anti-clerical mood of the Commons. People were envious of the wealth of the church which held a third of all the country's land. They resented paying tithes and also ecclesiastical courts. They were disgusted at the corruption of many of the clergy, typified by the worldliness of Wolsey. What was to play into the king's hands even more in this opening phase was the clergy's resentment of Rome, the result of having been ridden over roughshod by Wolsey with his legatine powers.

So the scene was set for acts which were to bring about the greatest changes to England since 1066. These began with an onslaught on the church. In December 1530 the whole clergy was indicted of *praemunire*, that is, like Wolsey, charged with having exercised an unlawful jurisdiction. Two months later Henry pardoned them in return for a huge fine and the recognition of the king 'as far as the law of Christ allows supreme head of the Church in England'. In this way the gauntlet was thrown down to the pope who ignored it and forbade the king to remarry.

In December 1531 these opening shots were given a new impetus through the admission to the inner circle of the Council of Thomas Cromwell. He, like Wolsey in whose service he had been, was of humble origins. Brilliant but also cold and calculating, he was endowed with a first-rate mind together with the attributes of a cunning tactician who knew how to manipulate Parliament. In Cromwell, Henry had

alighted upon the one man able to mastermind his will and offices were showered upon him. He was made Chancellor of the Exchequer and Principal Secretary.

Events began to move more swiftly. Parliament attacked the ecclesiastical courts. In a panic the convocations of York and Canterbury put them into the hands of the king in an act known as the Submission of the Clergy. Henry was now in control of the church. Early in 1533 he married Anne Boleyn secretly. She was already pregnant. In March Parliament passed the Act in Restraint of Appeals severing the church from Rome, in effect creating the Church of England as against the church in England. The preamble to the act proclaimed that 'this realm of England is an empire . . . governed by one Supreme Head and king'. In one mighty gesture England was severed from the Universal Church, the king replacing the pope with himself.

Meanwhile the old Archbishop of Canterbury had died allowing Henry to appoint one sympathetic to his plight but who was also a reformer, Thomas Cranmer. He granted the king his divorce, Henry remarried and, in September, the new queen gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. The year after the severance from Rome was wound up in the Act of Supremacy which transferred to the king as 'Supreme Head of the Church of England' all ecclesiastical dues formerly sent to the pope. In those days everything depended on precedent and the king claimed that he was doing no more than putting the clock back to the days of the early church. In his view the new power he exercised, to administer and tax the church, control its laws and courts and even define doctrine and lay down ritual, were those which had been enjoyed by Roman emperors before they had been usurped by the popes.

What is surprising is how little opposition this revolution evoked. Perhaps people thought that this was merely a temporary dislocation which would later be patched up, but they were wrong. Those who realised the full implications and protested were savagely treated. A nun, Elizabeth Barton, who predicted a dire fate for the king if he pursued these policies was rounded up with her accomplices and executed. More victims followed after the first Act of Succession demanded an oath from every adult recognising that the king's first marriage had been invalid and that his heir was to be a child by Anne Boleyn. A handful of monks of the strictest order, the Carthusians, were cruelly tortured, hanged, drawn and quartered for refusing to swear it. Two saintly men, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and Sir Thomas More were sent to the scaffold. But on the whole the revolution which destroyed the medieval church in England was a bloodless one.

There was, however, to be no let up. In January 1535 Cromwell, in his new capacity as vicar-general of the Church of England, sent out commissioners to report on the state of the monasteries. Their findings could have been guessed even before they

were written. The crown needed money and the monasteries held a quarter of the land in the country. The monarchy also needed to bind to itself those who had supported the passing of the statutes in Parliament. Grants of the sequestered land would ensure a perpetual enthusiasm for this new status quo. Between 1536 and 1540 the monasteries were dissolved, some eight hundred in all, an act which ended the religious vocation for three centuries and changed the physical appearance of the landscape. Carts carried off the contents to the king's treasury after which the demolition gangs moved in, stripping off the lead from the roofs, smashing the windows, wrenching out any fittings and leaving anything that was left to be vandalised. The great monastic libraries had their books seized, sold abroad or destroyed. The inmates were either pensioned off or became parish clergy. Only three abbots resisted and their reward was to be hanged at the gates of their monasteries.

At the same time relics and images which were centres of pilgrimage were destroyed. Once again the carts appeared as the royal officials loaded into them the jewels, gold and silver for transportation to London. Some of the most famous of the images revered by pilgrims were brought up and burnt in public. The shrines of the saints themselves were levelled to the ground.

The fact that things happened without widespread outbreaks of civil unrest is a testament not only to a fair degree of support for these policies, at least in the south, but also to the power of the monarchy. Only from the north was opposition to come, first in Lincolnshire, which quickly petered out, and more seriously in Yorkshire. There in 1536 were enacted all the old tensions between north and south: lingering affection for the vanquished Yorkist party combined with dismay at the religious changes which were being thrust upon them. The city of York declared for the rebels who found a leader in a local lawyer, Robert Aske. He spoke of it not as a rebellion but as the Pilgrimage of Grace, the name by which it has been known ever since. The rebels took for their banner the five wounds Christ endured on the cross. Not only the populace but members of the gentry and noble classes were drawn to the cause. If they had marched south immediately they might well have vanquished the government, but they delayed and entered into negotiations with the king's representative, the Duke of Norfolk. He promised to take their demands to the king, ones which included the cessation of the closure of the abbeys, the restoration of the pope, a Parliament free of pressure from the crown and the removal of Cromwell and his cronies. Norfolk led them to believe that most of these would be granted and so they drifted back to their homes. Few could have guessed the fate that was shortly meted out to them. Neither Norfolk nor the king had any intention of giving in to the rebels' demands and a flicker of a renewed revolt in February 1537 gave them the excuse they

needed. Over two hundred people were rounded up and executed including Aske, the executions deliberately staged all over the north as a warning to any who might think of doing the same.

Royal power was exerted as never before. To ensure the Tudor hold on the north a Council of royal officials was established at York. Three years before a similar one had been set up to govern Wales which, in 1536, was absorbed into England and divided up into counties with Justices of the Peace to ensure government policy was carried out there too. Never before had a ruler been so truly king of England, able to exert his will through every part of the realm.

That assertion of royal power was immeasurably assisted by the wealth that had poured in as a result of the changes. The income of the crown had doubled calling for new financial departments to deal with the new sources of revenue. Cromwell saw that the structure of government was changed also to meet the will of the king. The role of Principal Secretary, which he held, henceforth became the key office in government and the Council he developed by creating a permanent inner ring called the Privy Council, was the ancestor of today's Cabinet. Even more significant was the place accorded to Parliament, and especially the Commons. Royal influence was built up, ensuring, for instance, the election of sympathetic members. Basically, however, that choice, although open to pressure, was in the hands of the local nobility and gentry. All of this signalled a new partnership of king, nobility and gentry expressed through the institution of Parliament by means of statutes.

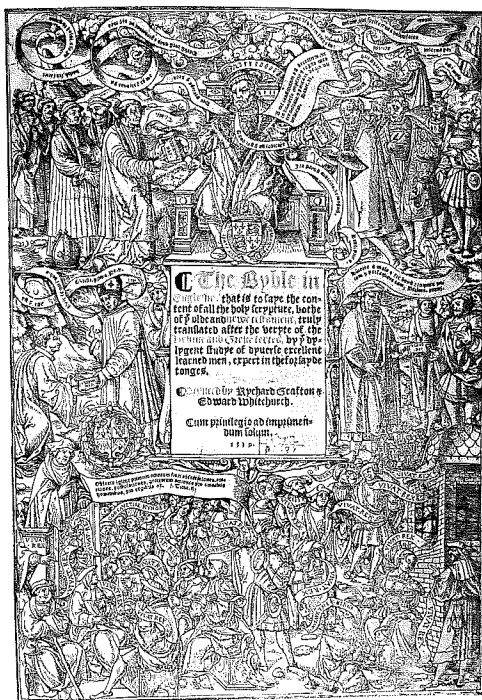
Meanwhile at court change of another kind had occurred. Anne Boleyn had failed to produce a male heir. Worse, gossip had it that she was more than generous with her favours. Her fate was sealed as soon as her predecessor died. On 19 May 1536 the new archbishop declared the second marriage void and the king married another lady of the court, Jane Seymour. Anne was executed. At the same time that the Pilgrimage of Grace was savagely suppressed Jane gave birth to the long-awaited heir, Edward, but she died shortly after.

By the close of the 1530s the pattern at court was beginning to take on a character it was to have in the future – a division between those who wanted no further change, or indeed even to go back, and those who pressed for more. The success of these rival factions ebbed and flowed according to the mood of the king, the one headed by Norfolk and Bishop Gardiner, the other by Cromwell and Cranmer. Abroad the Catholic powers came together in such a way that the king was forced to look towards an alliance with the emerging Protestant powers, one engineered by Cromwell in the form of Henry's fourth queen, Anne of Cleves. The match was a disaster and although the king created Cromwell Earl of Essex in April 1540 he was not

to enjoy his elevation for long. Henry's eye had fallen on the lascivious niece of the conservative Norfolk, Katherine Howard. Soon after Cromwell found himself in the Tower and executed. Thus ended the life of a man who was hated and yet whose impact on the history of the country was incalculable.

After Cromwell's demise the conservatives were in the ascendant, even though the new queen's notorious past came to light and she too went to the scaffold. Henry then made his sixth and last marriage to Catherine Parr. By this time he had become the gross monster of popular legend but she reunited him with his children and had a significant influence, seeing that Edward and Elizabeth were educated by those who favoured reform. Henry VIII died at the age of fifty-seven on 27 January 1547.

Not since the Norman Conquest, five hundred years before, had England undergone such dramatic changes imposed from above on her people. The victims still excite our sense of compassion but they were few when set against the enormity of what had been done. Church and state had been welded into one. A new alliance had been forged between the monarchy and the nobility and gentry who had co-operated in the destruction of the medieval church. The powers of the crown had been exalted to unprecedented heights. A new political identity had been established: the commonweal of England. What is surprising is how that survived the disastrous decade that followed. So far the interiors of the churches had barely been touched. Although there was an English Bible issued under royal auspices in 1536, the Latin mass remained unchanged. Henry VIII was barely buried before the intrusive hand of Tudor government began to touch the everyday religious life of England in a far more dramatic way.



Title-page to the English Bible. The translation was made under the aegis of Thomas Cromwell and appeared in April 1539. The first, by Miles Coverdale, was published in 1536. The advent of a Bible in the English language was to have immense influence on the English people and later their colonial offspring in the New World. Henry VIII hands it simultaneously to the Archbishop of Canterbury and to Thomas Cromwell and from them it spreads downwards to rich and poor, young and old, men and women.