

The Age of Reformation

The Tudor and Stewart Realms 1485–1603

SECOND EDITION



Alec Ryrie

ROUTLEDGE

The Age of Reformation

The Age of Reformation charts how religion, politics and social change were always intimately interlinked in the sixteenth century, from the murderous politics of the Tudor court to the building and fragmentation of new religious and social identities in the parishes.

In this book, Alec Ryrie provides an authoritative overview of the religious and political reformations of the sixteenth century. This turbulent century saw Protestantism come to England, Scotland and even Ireland, while the Tudor and Stewart monarchs made their authority felt within and beyond their kingdoms more than any of their predecessors. This book demonstrates how this age of reformations produced not only a new religion, but a new politics – absolutist, yet pluralist, populist yet bound by law.

This new edition has been fully revised and updated and includes expanded sections on Lollardy and anticlericalism, on Henry VIII's early religious views, on several of the rebellions which convulsed Tudor England and on unofficial religion, ranging from Elizabethan Catholicism to incipient atheism.

Drawing on the most recent research, Alec Ryrie explains why these events took the course they did – and why that course was so often an unexpected and unlikely one. It is essential reading for students of early modern British history and the history of the reformation.

Alec Ryrie is Professor of the History of Christianity at Durham University. His previous publications include *Protestants* (2017), *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (2013), *The Sorcerer's Tale* (2008), *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation* (2006) and *The Gospel and Henry VIII* (2003).

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Series editor's preface

No understanding of British history is possible without grappling with the relationship between religion, politics and society. How that should be done, however, is another matter. Historians of religion, who have frequently thought of themselves as ecclesiastical historians, have had one set of preoccupations. Political historians have had another. They have acknowledged, however, that both religion and politics can only be understood, in any given period, in a social context. This series makes the interplay between religion, politics and society its preoccupation. Even so, it does not assume that what is entailed by religion and politics remains the same throughout, to be considered as a constant in separate volumes merely because of the passage of time.

In its completed form the series will have probed the nature of these links from c.600 to the present day and offered a perspective, over such a long period, that has not before been attempted in a systematic fashion. There is, however, no straitjacket that requires individual authors to adhere to a common understanding of what such an undertaking involves. Even if there could be a general agreement about concepts, that is to say about what religion is or how politics can be identified, the social context of such categorisations is not static. The spheres notionally allocated to the one or to the other alter with circumstances. Sometimes it might appear that they cannot be separated. Sometimes it might appear that they sharply conflict. Each period under review will have its defining characteristics in this regard.

It is the Christian religion, in its manifold institutional manifestations, with which authors are overwhelmingly concerned since it is with conversion that the series begins. It ends, however, with a volume in which Christianity exists alongside other world religions but in a society frequently perceived to be secular. Yet what de-Christianisation is taken to be depends upon what Christianisation has been taken to be. There is, therefore, a relationship between topics that are tackled in the first volume, and those considered in the last, which might at first sight seem unlikely. In between, of course are the 'Christian Centuries' which, despite their label, are no less full of 'boundary disputes', both before and after the Reformation. The

perspective of the series, additionally, is broadly pan-insular. The Britain of 600 is plainly not the Britain of the early twenty-first century. However, the current political structures of Britain-Ireland have arguably owed as much to religion as to politics. Christendom has been inherently ambiguous.

It would be surprising if readers, not to mention authors, understood the totality of the picture that is presented in the same way. What is common, however, is a realisation that the narrative of religion, politics and society in Britain is not a simple tale that points in a single direction but rather one of enduring and by no means exhausted complexity.

Keith Robbins, November 2005

Preface to the second edition

Revisiting this book eight years after completing it, I am relieved to find that I still broadly agree with the arguments made in the first edition. In places, however, fresh research has meant that I have had additional nuances to add or errors to correct. In other places, I have adjusted my own ideas; in others still, I now realise I made embarrassingly crass mistakes.

This second edition of the book, then, has the same structure and contents as the first, but every chapter has been revised and, usually, I fear, extended somewhat. Many of the changes are matters of detail, but more substantial alterations include revised discussions of Lollardy and anticlericalism in Chapter 1; more material on Henry VII's pursuit of legitimacy and popularity in Chapter 2; a revised discussion of Henry VIII's early religious views in Chapter 4; fuller discussions of several episodes of rebellion and popular unrest, in Chapters 5, 6 and 9; more material on Elizabethan Catholicism and its divisions in Chapter 9; and a lengthier discussion of perceived popular irreligion and what it might mean in Chapter 10. I have tried to do more justice, though still inadequate, to Welsh and especially to Irish affairs.

In the process I have accumulated a fresh series of debts, of which the chief are to my student Celyn Richards; to Henry Jefferies, for much guidance on Irish matters; to Paulina Kewes and Michael Zell, for some invaluable pointers and corrections; and, as ever, to Peter Marshall, who keeps me from veering too far off the straight and narrow.

Preface to the first edition

The sixteenth century was an age of reformation in the British Isles – in several senses. Most obviously, this was the century of the Protestant Reformation, which touched every part of British society, culture and politics. It was also the century when ‘Britain’ – the name of an ancient Roman province – began to be on people’s lips again. This book ends in 1603, when for the first time ever, the whole of Britain and Ireland came under the effective rule of a single sovereign. The relationships between the peoples of the islands, and between their political institutions, had been radically reshaped over the previous century, and like the religious Reformation, the consequences of this political re-formation are still with us. Nor was this simply a matter of English imperialism, for the English state itself had been reformed – indeed, transformed – during the century. The Tudor monarchs had set out to rebuild a stable, dynastic monarchy, following the ruinous wars of the later fifteenth century. They ended up creating something rather different: an immensely powerful monarchy, to be sure, but one which operated according to new, shifting and uncertain rules. A series of crises, most of which ultimately derived from religious change, had permanently altered the nature of English, and British, politics. This was, as the historians’ jargon has it, an ‘early modern’ age: no longer medieval, not yet modern, an age with flavours, possibilities and perils all of its own. A century, then, of breakneck, switchback, multifaceted Reformations, thick with unintended – and enduring – consequences.

In surveying this fascinating and confusing period, this book has two main aims. One is to provide a clear narrative and explanation of events, for the sake of readers who have little or no background familiarity with the period. I have tried to avoid swamping the book with detail, so that it does not become a parade of names and dates. Sometimes, however, I have gone into a particular incident or example in some depth, if I think it is particularly important or that it illustrates a wider point particularly well. Inevitably, too much has been left out. In particular, readers should note that ‘Britain’ here principally means Great Britain: Ireland is only tackled at length in the final chapter, and then mostly from the perspective of English

policy towards the island. There is much more to be said on that and on every other subject discussed here; but the book has to fit between its covers. I hope those who want to know more will find the bibliography useful.

The book's other aim is to provide a fresh interpretative synthesis of the period, drawing together some of the best recent research and assembling it in a way which seems to me illuminating. Some of the themes this interpretation covers are the international religious context of the British Reformation; the stubborn persistence of *de facto* elective monarchy in England; and the way violence (whether judicial prosecution, mass protest or warfare) tied religion and politics together, often in unexpected ways.

If the book has a single theme, it is contingency. The Tudor century makes a mockery of historical determinism. Chance determined the course of events at every turn – who happened to live and die, and when; coincidences and synchronicities; obvious roads not taken and perverse choices persisted in. Against the enduring historical belief that whatever has happened was always inevitable, I try here to expose the fragility and contingency of events. The century is full of much-predicted events which did not happen. The chaos following Henry VII's death; Henry VIII's papally sanctioned divorce; Mary, queen of Scots' death in infancy, or her marriage to King Edward VI; Mary Tudor's children; the French victory in Scotland in 1560; any of a legion of catastrophes which might have befallen Elizabethan England – these events did not happen in reality, but they happened again and again in the imaginations of the people we are studying, and so we need to take them seriously. The true course of events was predicted by no one, and if we understand what contemporaries *did* expect we will be better able to make sense of the world they lived in.

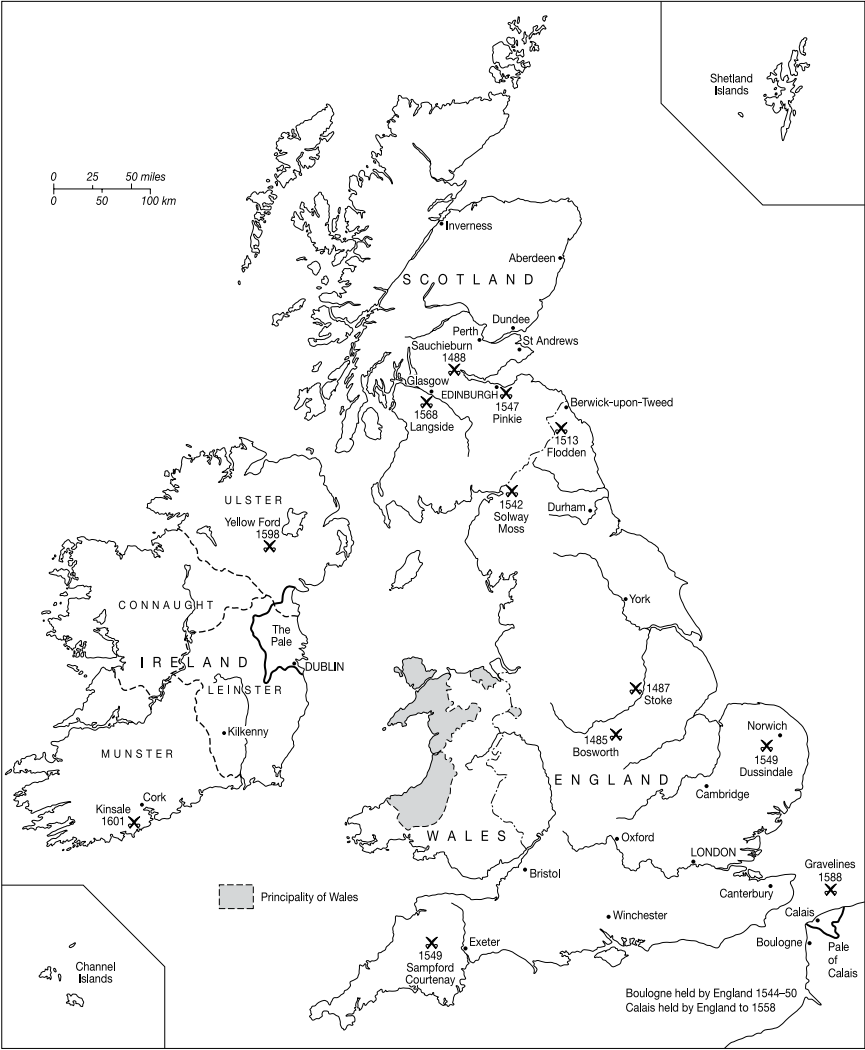
Acknowledgements

To call this book a ‘synthesis’ is a polite way of admitting that few of the ideas are my own. I have drawn heavily on other scholars’ work, and to make matters worse, I have rarely acknowledged them directly: for this is a work of history, not historiography, and I have tried to avoid giving accounts of the debates between historians. I have particular debts to Pat Collinson, Catharine Davies, Sue Doran, Eamon Duffy, Liz Evenden, David Gehring, Tadhg Ó hAnnráchain, Eric Ives, Paulina Kewes, Peter Lake, David Loades, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Graeme Murdock, Michael Questier and Ethan Shagan. I am especially grateful to Eric Carlson, Jane Dawson, Tom Freeman and Natalie Mears, each of whom read draft chapters for me as well as allowing me to plunder their work. Highest honours go to Peter Marshall, who read more than half of the text amongst many, many other services. Keith Robbins, the series editor, and the anonymous readers for Longman, were kind about the book while making some invaluable suggestions and pointing out some egregious mistakes. I am confident, however, that I have still managed to smuggle some errors and misjudgements past these scholars’ eagle eyes. Finally, writing this book has made plain to me how much I owe to my students, in particular those I taught at the University of Birmingham from 1999 to 2006. I am conscious, specifically, of debts to Louise Campbell, Anna French, Sylvia Gill, Bethan Palmer, Andy Poppleton, Sarah Spencer and Neil Younger, many of whom will recognise echoes of their work here. I hope I taught them a fraction as much as they have taught me, and I dedicate this book to them collectively in gratitude.

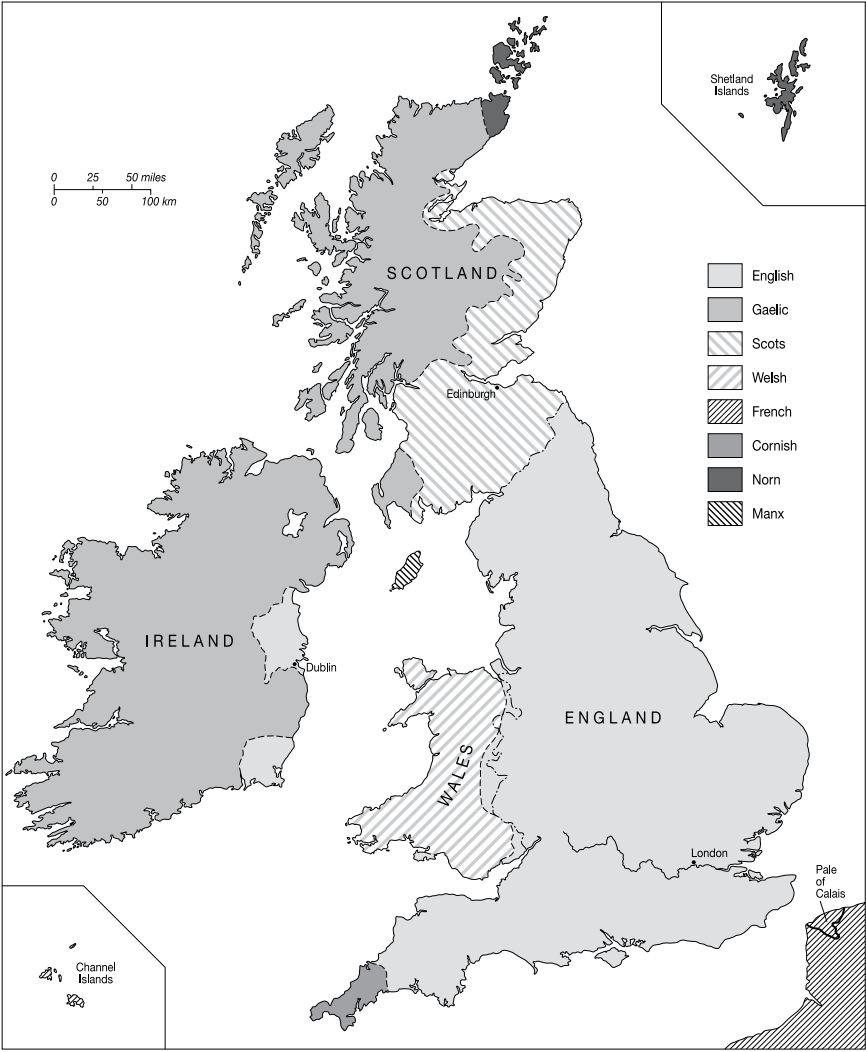
Chronology

1485	Accession of Henry VII (England)
1487	Lambert Simnel conspiracy
1488	Accession of James IV (Scotland)
1491	Perkin Warbeck conspiracy begins
1493	Lordship of the Isles suppressed
1497	Cornish rebellion. Capture of Perkin Warbeck
1502	Death of Prince Arthur Anglo-Scottish treaty of 'perpetual peace'
1509	Death of Henry VII. Accession of Henry VIII
1512–14	England at war with France. Wolsey's rise to power
1513	Battle of Flodden. Death of James IV. Accession of James V
1517	Martin Luther protests against indulgences
1518	Treaty of London ('universal peace')
1522–25	England at war with France
1525	Battle of Pavia: Amicable Grant
1527	Henry VIII begins campaigning for a divorce
1528	James V's personal rule begins
1529–30	Wolsey's fall from power
1529–36	English 'Reformation Parliament' meets
1533	Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn. Princess Elizabeth born
1534	Act of Supremacy. England breaks with Rome Lord Offaly's rebellion in Ireland
1536	Anne Boleyn executed Act of Union with Wales
1540	Fall of Thomas Cromwell
1541	Kingdom of Ireland created
1542	Death of James V. Accession of Mary, queen of Scots
1543	Evangelical opening in Scotland. Treaty of Greenwich
1544–46	England at war with Scotland and France
1547	Death of Henry VIII. Accession of Edward VI
1547–50	Renewed Anglo-Scottish war ('Rough Wooing')
1549	Rebellions across much of England. Protector Somerset falls First reforming church council in Scotland

- 1553** **Death of Edward VI. Accession of Mary I**
- 1554 Mary of Guise becomes Queen Regent of Scotland. England reconciled to Rome: Cardinal Pole returns
- 1555–58 Heresy executions in England
- 1558** **Death of Mary I and Cardinal Pole. Accession of Elizabeth I**
- 1559 ‘Elizabethan Settlement’ in England
- 1559–60 Reformation–rebellion in Scotland
- 1560 ‘Elizabethan Settlement’ in Ireland
- 1561 Mary, queen of Scots returns to Scotland from France
- 1567** **Deposition of Mary, queen of Scots. Accession of James VI**
- 1568–73 Civil war in Scotland
- 1568–87 Mary, queen of Scots a prisoner in England
- 1569 Rebellion of the northern earls
- 1570 Papal excommunication of Elizabeth I
- 1572 St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in France
Admonition against the Parliament
- 1577 Archbishop Grindal sequestered over the prophesyings
- 1578–82 Anjou marriage negotiations
- 1581 First presbyteries created in Scotland
- 1584 ‘Black Acts’ in Scotland: James VI’s personal rule begins
- 1585 Act of Association in England
- 1585–1604 England at war with Spain
- 1587** **Mary, queen of Scots executed**
- 1588 Spanish Armada
- 1588–89 Martin Mar-Prelate tracts: crackdown against Puritanism
- 1595–1603 Nine Years’ War in Ireland against Hugh O’Neill, earl of Tyrone
- 1599 Earl of Essex’s failed expedition to Ireland
- 1601 Essex’s rebellion and execution
- 1603** **Death of Elizabeth I. James VI succeeds to the English throne**



Map 1 The Tudor and Stewart realms, 1485–1603



Map 2 Principal language zones in c.1500

1 The world of the parish

Living in early modern Britain

A lost world

The men and women who lived in Britain and Ireland five hundred years ago lived in a world which is lost to us. The difference is a matter not only of the material circumstances of their lives, but of their mental worlds and their imaginations. This is fundamental to any understanding of the religion, politics and society of the sixteenth century.

Imagine an English Rip van Winkle: a peasant who dozed off in the year 1500, overslept and woke up in the modern United Kingdom. He would find himself in an exceptionally strange world. It would be a world filled with giants: the average height of an adult male in the sixteenth century was scarcely over five feet. It would be (as he would notice very quickly) a world filled with food, food in unimaginable quantity and variety. In his own century, our peasant would have derived some 80% of his calorie intake from a single foodstuff – bread. It would be a world filled with light: he would have grown up with nights that were pitch black, and with artificial light that was dim, often prohibitively expensive and which stank. Indeed, the modern world would generally seem strangely devoid of smell – but filled with noise. Our sleeper's home country was normally quiet. Only thunderstorms, bells and those rare things, crowds, could make truly loud noises. Above all, the sheer numbers of people in the modern world would astonish him. Sixteenth-century England had a population density like that of Highland Scotland today. It was a country of scattered settlements and subsistence farmers. Agricultural productivity was low; a peasant family might need to farm a dozen acres simply to feed themselves. There was almost nothing that we would nowadays call a town. In 1500, London was the only settlement in Britain or Ireland with a population of more than 10,000 people. A handful more breached the 5,000 mark. Only around 3% of the population lived in such metropolises.

The makeup of modern crowds might unsettle him most of all. The numbers of elderly people (over forty) would be surprising. The lack of the visibly sick, crippled and deranged would be more remarkable. Positively

2 *The world of the parish*

disturbing would be the lack of children. He would be familiar with a country where perhaps a third of the whole population was under the age of fifteen, and where babies and children were ever-present. To his eyes, the modern British would look like the survivors of a dreadful child-specific plague.

His world was both smaller and larger than ours. Smaller, for he lived – like some nine-tenths of England's population – in a community of a hundred or fewer households, often many fewer. He knew all his neighbours and they all knew him. Strangers were instantly recognised as such and treated with some suspicion. Anonymity was rare except in the towns. Even there, privacy in the modern sense scarcely existed, for most houses had more inhabitants than rooms, and their walls could rarely exclude prying eyes, let alone wagging ears. News from the outside world was, in rural areas, occasional and unreliable, although this was beginning to change. Government was distant: a face on a coin, a prayer in church for a king, quarter-sessions held by the county magistrates. More important were the parish priest, the churchwardens and the local lords or gentry. Roads existed, but were ill-maintained and hazardous. Water transport, the only practical means of moving heavy goods, was slow, and there were few navigable rivers. Travel of all kinds was arduous and dangerous.

And yet it was a larger world than our own because its vast emptiness could not be shut out. Britain and Ireland in 1500 were populated by between three and four million people, compared to some seventy million in the early twenty-first century. Wolves, bears and boars were long extinct, and the wild woods had mostly been tamed or chopped down, commemorated only in the towering forests of columns in the great Gothic cathedrals. Yet the natural world remained a place of fear. The notion that wild is beautiful is a very new idea, formed in an age when nature can be kept out by well-insulated walls. The long nights of winter, and the pervasive cold and enforced idleness that went with them, were annually marked by peaks in the death rate. And if there were no wild animals outside, there were wild men. Violent crime was ever-present and policing flimsy and informal. There were worse threats, too, out in the dark: fairies, witches, the Devil himself.

We might smile at such credulity, but the truth was that early modern life was by any standards dangerous and insecure. Life expectancy at birth was somewhere in the thirties, but this is misleading, since comparatively few people actually died at that age. The one significant group who did were mothers: some 6–7% of women died from complications of pregnancy or childbirth. Maternal mortality, however, was a fraction of infant and child mortality, and it is that universal tragedy which skews the statistics. In some times and places, as many as half of children born alive died before the age of fifteen. Those who survived this appalling cull and made it into their teens might, on average, expect to live into their late fifties. But this, too, is a deceptive figure. Old age was not especially uncommon: the tough and the lucky survived into their seventies or eighties. But death rates were

high at every age. War and civil unrest regularly claimed civilian lives. By European standards, England escaped lightly, but in Scotland and especially in Ireland the toll of both large-scale and small-scale violence was appalling. War often also aggravated the ever-present problem of food shortages. England, at least, was free of real famine until the very end of our period, the hungry 1590s, but malnutrition was a constant possibility at the bottom of the social scale.

Other hazards were more universal. Simple accidents were a significant cause of death: in an age when water had to be fetched and carried daily, and when bridges were rickety and guardrails non-existent, accidental drowning claimed a great many lives. Those too grand to fetch water risked falling from horses. House fires killed frequently, and also, proverbially, reduced the prosperous to penury within minutes. Perhaps nothing would seem more alien to our sleeping peasant than the modern culture of 'health and safety'. But most of the worst hazards were simply unavoidable by early modern means. Endemic disease and injuries of all kinds took a regular toll: everything from the new disease of syphilis, through the constant and often fatal problem of dental infections, to the biggest killer of them all, plague.

Plague and its aftermath

Bubonic plague and a series of related diseases arrived in Europe in the mid-fourteenth century without warning, nearly eight centuries after the last major pandemic. Between 1345 and 1352, the 'Black Death' killed a third or more of the population across an arc of territory stretching from India to Iceland. It was only the first of a series of outbreaks of plague, some local, some international, which persisted until the seventeenth century. Plague roughly halved the population of Britain and Ireland between 1345 and 1400. Thereafter the population stabilised, but plague continued to prevent a recovery: not by a steady cull, but in occasional large-scale outbreaks. A major visitation of the plague might strike once in a generation and could kill a third of the population of a city in a summer. Nor were rural communities immune. Most Europeans who reached adulthood would live through, or die in, an outbreak of plague.

This extraordinary catastrophe and its long aftermath hangs over the sixteenth century. It is not simply that outbreaks of plague continued to recur, alongside equally lethal epidemic and endemic diseases such as syphilis, influenza and the mysterious, terrifyingly fast killer known as the 'English sweat'. The post-1350 collapse in population had obvious economic consequences: with fewer people sharing the same amount of land, landlords found themselves relatively impoverished, whereas peasants suddenly had something of a scarcity value. The aftermath of plague in Britain saw the near-total disappearance of serfdom and a boom in the peasantry's living standards. This is sometimes known as the peasants' golden age, but we should not get carried away. Peasant poverty had once been absolute and

4 *The world of the parish*

was now merely grinding. Moreover, the price of the golden age was the ever-present threat of sudden, indiscriminating and exceptionally painful death.

The population finally began to rise again in the 1470s or 1480s, as plague slowly retreated and the birth rate rose. By 1500 the recovery was in full spate. The sixteenth century was almost a mirror of the post-plague period. The population rose rapidly: England's population roughly doubled during the century, to over its pre-Black Death peak. The economy grew, too, but not quite so quickly, as more marginal land came back under cultivation. Land became scarcer, labour cheaper. Generalised inflation pushed up all prices across the century, driven both by a flood of Spanish gold and by population increase, but food prices outstripped others, and the prices of necessities rose faster than those of luxuries. Whatever else this century was, it was not a peasants' golden age. The well-established inequality of wealth yawned ever wider. On one side of the gulf were landowners, a class which included the wealthiest peasants, the yeomen, who owned enough land to feed themselves and to produce some surplus. The landless were forced into ever-deeper penury. Increasing numbers fell out of the economy altogether, to become paupers and vagrants, a source of regular moral panics throughout the century.

It was a toxic mix of factors: inflation, continued large-scale plague, rising population and growing impoverishment. Of its many consequences, two are particularly worth noticing. The first is enclosure, a long-standing phenomenon which now accelerated dramatically. It is a polite term for an ugly process: landlords' denying their tenants the use of lands which had previously been available for all ('common land') so that they could be farmed intensively for the landlords' benefit. The most notorious form of enclosure was the conversion of low-quality arable land to sheep farming. Wool was England's most important export, and sheep, as Thomas More put it, were devouring whole villages. In the long term, enclosure was the foundation of Britain's later prosperity, since it made much more efficient farming possible. In the short term, however, it seemed to be a means of kicking the peasantry when they were down. The violation of long-standing precedent made its injustice obvious, especially when the wider economic and demographic changes were so imperceptible. Rural anger over enclosure regularly boiled over during the sixteenth century, with important consequences for both politics and religion, but it was not enough to stop the economic logic behind the process.

The second consequence of economic change was felt in the towns. In 1500 the islands' only real city, London, numbered some 50,000 people, at least five times the size of its nearest rivals, Bristol and Norwich. The largest towns outside England, Edinburgh and Dublin, were smaller still. By 1600, London had swollen to some 200,000 souls, spilling well beyond the old City to begin the process of swallowing the surrounding counties. Other towns were growing too, although none could touch the capital. Such

breakneck growth might look like prosperity, but often urban growth was a sign of despair. In the seething, unsanitary conditions of early modern towns, death rates were usually significantly higher than birth rates. Towns only grew through migration from the countryside. The rising rural population left increasing numbers landless and (therefore) destitute: the towns were their only possible destination. Towns were where the rural poor came to die. As a result, the towns became cauldrons of ambition and desperation, churning the supposedly tidy social hierarchies of early modern Britain. They increasingly frightened the respectable elites who nominally ruled them, and who struggled with mixed success to impose moral and economic order. All this made the towns – and above all London – potential engines of social, political and religious instability.

Our long-sleeping peasant, therefore, was probably wise in choosing to snooze through the sixteenth century. In so doing, he avoided likely impoverishment, hunger and early death from any number of causes. Even if he lived into old age, he would likely have done so while suffering from chronic pain or illness of some kind, quite possibly including the virtually untreated problem of mental illness. He would, at least, be poor enough to escape the attentions of the medical profession, an elite who jealously guarded their monopoly, and whose prescriptions were usually unpleasant, frequently useless and occasionally fatal. He would likely fall back on the only painkiller known to the age: alcohol.

His sister would face a slightly different mix of dangers. Women were less likely to be murdered or to engage in certain exceptionally dangerous occupations (soldiering, seafaring, construction). In exchange, they faced the sex-specific danger of maternity, along with more exotic threats such as (later in the century) the faint possibility of being hanged for witchcraft. Yet for all that, women's life expectancy was slightly better than men's. This carried its own problems, because in an economy centred on male activity, widows were frequently left destitute. Indeed, women of all ages were more at risk of extreme poverty and malnutrition than men. These calamities drove women as well as men down the desperate path to the cities, which offered one route by which some women could survive: the thriving business of prostitution.

Diversions and hopes

We can only guess at what it was like to live in such a world, although it does seem that the ubiquity of childhood deaths did not dull the pain which bereaved parents felt. Yet sixteenth-century life was not unremittingly grim, nor did peasants pass their lives in earnest discussions of enclosure, inflation and mortality rates. The towns bubbled with diversions as well as with discontent. There were improving civic entertainments, such as mystery and morality plays. There were occasional events of real grandeur, especially in London or Edinburgh, which enjoyed periodic royal entries, coronations,

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weddings or funerals. There were street traders and entertainers: jugglers, bear-baiters, barbers, minstrels, conjurers, salesmen, con-men. There was a booming book trade, of which we shall hear much more. And mixed with all the rest, shouting for attention, was the Church. The Franciscan friars, an urban order, had been described by their founder as God's minstrels, and their renown as preachers made them rivals for the best entertainment the secular world had to offer.

If the Church was one provider of entertainment in the towns, in the villages it had a near monopoly. The odd quack or ballad-seller might pass through, but the Church, with its highly visible stone buildings, was ubiquitous. Most people measured time not by days of the month, but by proximity to the major Christian festivals: not just Christmas and Easter, but dozens of holy days scattered through the year. The midsummer feast of St John the Baptist on 24 June was a particular highlight, marked by the lighting of bonfires. Such festivals could be raucous. The 'church ale' was one widespread custom: a kind of rowdy, alcohol-fuelled church fête, where the centrepiece was the sale of ale brewed by the churchwardens. Festivals were moments when the normal rules of society were suspended. They were a chance for the hungry to gorge and (a pastime which united all the British nations) to drink themselves into a violent stupor. But they also meant more active reversals of the social order. In a series of events which the social scientists call 'festivals of inversion', often at Christmastime, society's strict hierarchy was deliberately mocked and reversed. As a 1541 royal proclamation disapprovingly described these events:

Children be strangely decked and apparelled to counterfeit priests, bishops, and women, and so be led with songs and dances from house to house, blessing the people and gathering of money, and boys do sing mass and preach in the pulpit.¹

Some feared that the election of boy-bishops on St Nicholas' Day, or May Queens on May Day, mocked the social hierarchy. In truth it probably reinforced it.

For while the material conditions of our peasant's life were growing steadily worse, he was not an oppressed proletarian yearning for revolution. Occasionally, he stopped playing at inverting the social order and set about doing it in earnest. Riots and even full-scale peasant rebellions did take place. But while early modern peasants could be sharply aware of injustice, they did not seek to remake their society. The common people's daydreams took forms like the fantasy land of Cockaigne: a place of permanent festival, where there was always food and never work. No one could conceive of a society whose backbone was not composed of agricultural labourers. Rebellion or riot usually targeted immediate, specific and limited grievances, and wore a conservative face: an attempt to restore matters to how they had once been. The archetype of the common man

fighting for justice was the immensely popular figure of Robin Hood, the outlaw who remained loyal to the king. And while the Robin Hood stories mercilessly lampooned corrupt clerics and monks, most versions of the tale also stressed Robin's true piety. For it was the Church which was both the greatest force for social stability in the early modern world and also (potentially) the greatest threat.

The Church as an institution

The late medieval Church was, and was seen as, two things at once. It was a formidable, wealthy and bureaucratic institution. It was also the city of God and the body of Christ.

The structure

The Church's institutional face is easier to pin down. By 1500, the Church's institutions in western Europe were fully mature. The continent was geographically parcelled out into dioceses (administered by bishops), which were subdivided into parishes. There were seventeen dioceses in England, some of them very large and very wealthy by European standards; four in Wales, thirteen in Scotland and thirty-two (mostly small and impoverished) in Ireland. England and Wales comprised about 9,000 parishes, Scotland a further 1,000 and Ireland some 2,500. In theory, the network extended to every inhabited part of the islands. Most Christians met the Church principally in their parish.

A parish was a geographical area tied to a church building (the parish church) and overseen by a parish priest with responsibility for the residents' spiritual welfare ('cure of souls'). This system was not always as neat in practice as in theory. In the more remote, upland parts of Britain (although not in Ireland), parishes were sometimes vast and parish churches inaccessible, and subsidiary church buildings ('chapels of ease') were rare. The larger English cities had the opposite problem: tiny parishes. The square mile of the City of London contained more than 100 parish churches: in proportion to their populations, Norwich and York had even more. In such cities it was tempting to cross parish boundaries for churchgoing, and relatively easy to slip through the net and avoid churchgoing altogether. Yet with these provisos, the parish remained the basis both of most Christians' religion and of the Church's administration.

It was also the basis of the Church's finances. Although the late medieval church had a great many sources of income, including its vast landholdings, the bedrock of Church finance was the tithe. This was a levy which in theory required that one-tenth of all produce, of any kind, was owed to the parish church. In practice, many payments had been fixed or negotiated down. The payment of tithes still sparked disputes and tension, but surprisingly rarely: in any given year, it seems, fewer than 1% of parishes saw a tithe dispute

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which went to court. This is partly because rules and traditions were well understood, but also because tithes were not simply taxes. Wills from this period routinely include a small bequest to the parish church in token of ‘tithes forgotten’: a sign of the sense of moral obligation behind tithing. The taxman rarely receives such unsolicited gifts.

Tithes were due to the rector, who in principle was a resident priest with responsibility for the cure of souls in the parish. A third was due to him personally, with the rest split between maintenance of the church building and support of the poor. Commonly, however, an institution – a monastery, a cathedral, or some other foundation such as a collegiate church – had acquired the rectory of a parish church. This process, known as impropriation, meant that the parish’s tithes were siphoned off to that institution to support its work. The institution would then spend a portion of the money – often only a small fraction – to pay a priest actually to serve in the parish. This priest, running the parish vicariously on behalf of an institutional rector, was called a vicar. Impropriation was widespread in England (where some 40% of parishes were impropriate), more so in Ireland (60%) and the norm in Scotland (over 85%). Impropriation has not had a good press from historians, and it certainly had some malign consequences. But in principle it could be an excellent way of taking parishes’ resources and using them to support other ecclesiastical institutions devoted to education, to the care of the poor or to prayer.

Impropriation was also only one of the ways in which money could be siphoned away from a parish. Simple absenteeism was another. A rector or vicar might use a parish merely as a source of income while appointing a more lowly priest actually to serve there as curate (or, indeed, neglect it altogether). Wealthy, remote parishes were particularly vulnerable to this. Pluralism – the practice of holding several posts (‘benefices’) in the Church simultaneously – was one obvious cause of absenteeism, but absentees might also be students, or administrators, or in service to the king or a noble family. Such practices were technically banned, but bishops freely granted exemptions and offenders could often evade prosecution. Again, absenteeism was often a good use of resources, since it meant that deserving clerics could be found incomes, but there were obvious grounds for resentment and corruption.

The clergy

Who were these priests? In theory, men of good character and sound learning, over the age of twenty-five, who had been ordained by a bishop. Ordination was one of the seven sacraments of the Church (the rites which, it was believed, could reliably apply God’s grace to a particular human situation). It set the ordained minority (the clergy, or clerics) apart from the rest (lay people, or the laity), marking them for God’s service. There were well over 30,000 clergy in England in 1500, and the number was rising rapidly.

It was one thing to be ordained, however, and another actually to secure a benefice, that is, a post in the Church which would provide an income of some kind.

Every benefice had a patron – a person or institution who had the right to nominate priests to fill that benefice. The patron might be a monastery, a cathedral chapter, or a bishop; or it might be the king, or one of the nobility or gentry. Often, but not always, patrons were the heirs of former benefactors or founders. Patrons' rights to nominate were almost absolute. In principle, the local bishop could veto a patron's nominee, but this virtually never happened. Patrons, therefore, had considerable power, and here too was an opening for corruption. It was a serious offence for priests to bribe their way into benefices (the crime known as 'simony'), but it was also fairly widespread; and mere favouritism was perfectly legal. Moreover, the right of patronage to a benefice (the 'advowson') was, in law, itself a piece of property, which could be leased or sold. This structure, in England and Wales at least, was to be entirely unaffected by the Reformation – much to the dismay of the more idealistic reformers.

The most obvious benefices were parish rectories and vicarages, but less than a third of the clergy ever became parish priests of this kind. For the remainder, the most attractive alternatives were chantries or collegiate churches. Chantries were foundations endowed by private individuals to pray for their souls. Typically, a chantry would be attached to a parish church, and it would employ a priest on a modest stipend to say Mass for the founders' souls and for all Christian souls daily, 'in perpetuity' (meaning, until the money ran out). Like parochial benefices, appointment to chantry posts was usually for life. There were almost as many chantry posts as parochial ones. There were also other less lucrative and less secure posts. Priests might serve as tutors or chaplains in private households; or as curates, standing in for absentee clergy. There were guild or fraternity chaplaincies – employment by an organisation of laymen to provide them with religious services, employment which lasted as long as the employers' goodwill. And at the bottom of the ladder, there was the large clerical proletariat, those clergy who eked out a living saying occasional Masses and other services for anyone who would pay them to do so. The stereotype would have us believe that such men lurked around churches waiting to pounce on the visibly unwell, distressed or pregnant, pressing their services on them like snake-oil salesmen. This stereotype probably existed more in satirists' minds than in reality, but there is no doubt that large numbers of priests lived from hand to mouth. They might supplement their income by working as teachers, scribes, smiths, or even construction workers. Here, the sacramental barrier between clergy and laity blurred.

Few of these men were highly trained. A university education was exceptional: less than 10% of English and Scottish clergy were graduates, and they tended to cluster in the towns. In Ireland, which had no

university of its own, the only graduate clergy were senior office-holders. 'Sound learning' meant simply being able to read the Latin service, which did not necessarily entail understanding it. A much-repeated sixteenth-century joke told of a priest who had long misread the word *sumpsimus* in the Latin service, saying *mumpsimus* instead; when his mistake was pointed out to him, he reacted indignantly, denouncing this strange new *sumpsimus* as a heretical innovation.² This sort of thing was good clean fun, but to focus on the educational shortcomings of the clergy is to miss the point. These men were not ordained chiefly to teach their flock, but to pray for them and to celebrate the sacraments on their behalf. It was not their learning that gave them their status, but their ordination. That status, that separation from normal human society, was marked in numerous ways. The clergy were supposed not to be subject to the criminal law, falling instead under the Church courts' own jurisdiction: a much-contested doctrine. Priests were usually given the courtesy title of 'Sir', the same as a knight in the secular world. (An unlettered priest might be mockingly called 'Sir John Lack-Latin'.) When performing their sacral functions, they wore holy garments, or 'vestments', derived from ancient Roman patterns. The colours of these vestments changed in harmony with those of altar-cloths and other church furnishings, with the seasons of the Church's year: a visible sign that the priest was not one of the people, but part of the Church itself. Priesthood was not a job from which one might retire, but a status which lasted for life. Being degraded from holy orders was an exceptional event, usually reserved for clergy who committed capital crimes. It was a medieval truism that one Pater-noster (the 'Lord's Prayer') said at a priest's behest had the same weight as 100,000 said by a lay person's own initiative – just one sign of the authority which was attached to priesthood.

Above all, priests were required to remain celibate for life. Clerical celibacy was not technically a doctrinal requirement of the Church, but it had long been an aspiration and from the eleventh century on it had hardened into an absolute rule. There were practical reasons for this, to do with the danger of clerical dynasties, but at heart it was a matter of holiness. Priests were set apart for God's work and needed to be pure; whereas most medieval Christians saw sexual activity of any kind as impure. Even for lay people, marriage was second best, recommended only for those too consumed by lust to remain celibate. Priests should be uncontaminated. Of course, not all priests agreed, and the rules were not always enforced. In Scotland and Wales, it was routine for clergy to live openly with concubines, and in parts of Ireland *de facto* clerical marriage was common. In England, where the Church's discipline was rather tighter, breaches of chastity tended to be occasional and surreptitious. The lust-filled priest, who seduces virtuous wives in confession and who prefers not to marry because he would rather have the run of all the beds in the parish, was an enjoyable literary stereotype but, it seems, something of a rarity in real life.

Beyond the parish

The Church beyond the parish did not have much impact on the day-to-day lives of most lay people. The pope was a distant name, prayed for in the Mass. The bishop was a great lord who was often, at best, an occasional visitor to his diocese (some bishops, especially in Scotland, literally never set foot there). His officials were seen a little more regularly. They were supposed to conduct visitations in his name periodically, ensuring that good discipline was being maintained. It did not always happen: visitations depended on energetic and conscientious bishops, capable officials and – vitally – sound diocesan finances. In poorer dioceses such as those in Wales and much of Scotland, visitations were simply unaffordable. In Ireland, by contrast, visitations actually generated fees from the parishes and so might take place annually or even more often.

The Church courts were a more regular presence. Moral offenders of all kinds might find themselves there: heretics, witches, bigamists, those accused of defamation or embroiled in disputes over wills and bequests. Sometimes clergy denounced their dissolute parishioners to the church courts, but more often it was a matter of lay people suing one another, or even of lay people suing clergy. Plaintiffs and defendants represented themselves, and the courts were accessible to the most ordinary of people. They were not criminal courts and could not impose the death penalty. (The partial exception to that was heresy cases, in which, squeamishly, the Church required the secular government actually to conduct the execution.) They could, however, exact fines and penances or, in the last resort, excommunicate. That is, they could exclude obstinate offenders from the Church and from Christian society until they repented. Excommunicates were, in theory, ostracised during life and damned to Hell after death. In practice, the penalty was rarely taken quite so seriously – especially in Scotland, where its fearsomeness was badly devalued by overuse.

The other churchmen whom lay people routinely met were the ‘religious’, or the ‘regulars’: monks, nuns, friars, canons and others who followed a religious rule of life. A quarter or more of all clergy were ‘religious’ in this sense. (Those clergy who did not belong to religious orders were known as ‘secular’ priests.) There was no formal requirement that members of religious orders should be ordained, and female religious such as nuns could not be (women’s ordination was not dreamt of). Yet by this period virtually all male religious were also priests. This was a hugely varied group. Alongside the traditional Benedictine and Cistercian orders of monks were the urban, preaching orders of friars, the Franciscans and Dominicans; newer, more scholarly orders such as the Augustinian canons; and many other, smaller orders, of whom the most renowned were the austere Carthusian monks. All told there were some nine hundred religious houses in England, not counting a few hermits or anchorites who set themselves up on an individual, do-it-yourself basis.

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Many of these houses were already of many centuries' standing. England and Scotland, at least, had seen relatively few recent foundations. This has been taken to imply that the religious orders were decaying, in anticipation of the Reformation, but that is an exaggeration: although individual houses fluctuated, the total numbers of religious were if anything still growing. It is true, however, that England was surprisingly indifferent to the main movement for renewal sweeping European monasticism in the fifteenth century. The 'Observant' movement was led by the Franciscan friars and insisted on returning to an austere rigorous discipline. In most of Europe, the Observants had swept all before them by the early sixteenth century. In Ireland, a wave of Observant enthusiasm left only a third of Franciscan friaries in the hands of the more lax 'conventuals' by 1530 and led to the foundation of a hundred new friaries during the fifteenth century. In much of Europe, Observant movements swept the more traditional monastic orders too. England was almost untouched by all this. Both the English and the Scottish crowns supported the Observant Franciscans, support which saw six Observant houses founded in England from 1482 onwards. These Observants were widely revered, but nearly 90% of English friaries remained 'conventual'. For good or ill, English monasticism in the years around 1500 was largely content with business as usual.³

So too, it seems, were their lay neighbours. Different religious orders interacted with the laity in different ways. The friars were actively engaged with urban life, and they included some of the Church's most gifted preachers. Monks and nuns were more withdrawn, but this did not necessarily lessen their impact. Most monasteries housed shrines of some sort and were sites for pilgrimage, small- or large-scale; pilgrims could also expect some measure of hospitality from them. The houses of the Benedictine monks (the oldest order) were usually located in towns: a visible witness of a holier pattern of life, as well as an important source of poor relief. Other orders, notably the Cistercians, had fled the corrupting influences of the urban life; but like most religious, they were landowners on an impressive scale. (Monks vowed poverty as individuals, but monasteries, as collective entities, were often exceedingly rich.) A great many people were tenants or neighbours of religious houses. These were of course business relationships which could (in the way of things) go sour. However, the regulars' place in society was ultimately defined not by their property portfolios but by their spiritual power. Their mere existence mattered even to those lay people who never laid eyes on them. It is here that we need to stop considering the Church as an institution and see it instead as the body of Christ on earth.

Parish Christianity

Inside the parish Church

We have already imagined a sixteenth-century peasant finding himself in the twenty-first century. Now picture his partner in this time-travelling