

**John Foxe, Martyrologist
and
'Editor' of Old English**

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At first blush, and perhaps even on further thought, John Foxe the martyrologist seems an unlikely figure in the ranks of editors of Old English texts, but then Foxe is not as familiar to modern readers as he certainly was to earlier generations. In the sixteenth century his *Book of Martyrs (Acts and Monuments)* was ordered to be set up beside the Bible in English churches, and it has gone through innumerable editions of one sort or another to the present day. For those who *have* looked into any illustrated edition of the book, and especially for the desultory browser, what remain most clearly in the memory are, of course, the lurid stories of the Marian martyrs, illustrated as they often are with woodcuts that leave little to the imagination and impress the memory even after details of the stories have faded.

But there is a good deal in the book besides. For the second English edition of the *Acts and Monuments* (1570) Foxe had done a considerable amount of reading in medieval English records which had not been available to him on the continent when he was writing the first (Latin) edition. The result was a volume vastly increased in size over both the two earlier Latin editions published on the continent, and the first English edition (1563). The period before Mary Tudor and — what is of more interest here — the period before Wycliffe in particular, came in for much longer treatment.¹

For the period on the old Saxon Church Foxe must have been dependent on Latin records or on the research of other people into the Old English records, since he knew no Old English himself. That this is so is clear from the preface to his effort as ‘editor’ of an Old English text published in 1571 as *The Gospels of the Fower Evangelistes*,² to which I shall return in a moment. That he had, however, made at least some nodding acquaintance with Old English just before the publication of the *Gospels* is also clear, for in the 1570 edition of *Acts and Monuments* he had reprinted the *Paschal Homily* of AElfric on transubstantiation, together with sections of the pastoral letters which AElfric had written for Wulfsige and Wulfstan on the same subject (pp. 1302 ff.). All these pieces, together with translations, come direct from *A Testimonie of Antiquitie* (1566), the first book ever printed

¹ William Haller, *The Elect Nation* (New York, 1963), p. 129.

² *The Gospels of the Fower Evangelistes translated in the olde Saxons tyme out of Latin into the vulgare toung of the Saxons. newly collected out of the Auncient Monumentes of the sayd Saxons and now published for testimonie of the same.* London, 1571. Except in a title such as this I have not retained the older spelling. *Acts and Monuments*, however, is thus spelled in deference to the most frequent usage of this form in modern works.

in Old English.³ This latter work, as is well known, was the combined effort of Archbishop Parker and his secretary John Joscelyn, and in it they reproduce the Homily and pastoral letters Ælfric in an attempt to prove that the doctrine of the Catholic Church in Anglo-Saxon England [page 517]

was quite at variance with that of the post-Conquest Church on the matter of transubstantiation; the foreigner Lanfranc had, they felt, introduced this new doctrine, and the reformed Church of England was merely returning to the true teaching of the ancient *Ecclesia Anglicana* on this matter, a teaching that was exemplified in these writings of Ælfric, a respected figure in the Anglo-Saxon Church.⁴

Precisely what Ælfric *did* mean has been an object of dispute ever since the matter was raised in *A Testimonie*; but even to the lay mind it would seem that if, in this sermon for ordinary uneducated people, Ælfric is aiming at nice theological exactitude he is not a great success. True, the preacher is dealing with a delicate subject at a time before disputation among better theologians than he had established a more precise terminology; he is, moreover, writing in a tongue not yet sufficiently developed to be a totally suitable instrument for abstruse exposition. At any rate, he certainly lays himself open to being credited with such an attitude to transubstantiation as Joscelyn and Parker attribute to him in the preface and marginal notes to *A Testimonie*. The value of the Ælfrician pieces as controversial evidence in favour of the Protestant position is clearly seen in the frequency with which they have been reproduced and quoted ever since. Even less partisan modern historians of the Anglo-Saxon Church sometimes find room to discuss their value.⁵

A Testimonie was merely the first in a long series of books in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which Old English was used, in large or small part, in the polemical battle between Protestants and Catholics. The astuteness of the choice of the Ælfrician pieces as openers is made even clearer by the fact that, whatever other evidence future scholars dug up, they almost invariably adverted to the *Paschal Homily* and pastoral letters as prime

³ See John Bromwich, 'The First Book Printed in Anglo-Saxon Types' in *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Soc.*, vol. III, Pt. iv (1962), 265-291. This article is a very detailed bibliographical examination of *A Testimonie*.

⁴ The matter does not, I think, centre on the notion of communion in both kinds, as Bromwich says. The chief point in dispute is the doctrine of transubstantiation which, unlike the matter of communion in both kinds, was and is central dogma of the Catholic Church.

⁵ For a full bibliography up to 1898 see C. L. White, *Ælfric* (Boston and New York, 1898). For the present century there are, e.g., H. Gem, *An Anglo-Saxon Abbot, Ælfric* (Edinburgh, 1912) which adopts the old Parkerian view; and Marguerite Dubois, *Ælfric* (Paris, 1943) which disputes it. John Godfrey's *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1962) is the latest non-partisan attempt that I know of.

evidence. The publication of *A Testimonie* was, as John Bromwich remarks, ‘a shrewd blow, well timed and accurately delivered’.⁶

Foxe’s inclusion of the Old English texts in the *Acts and Monuments* is — with some changes — a kind of second ‘edition’ which he has worked into the fabric of his denunciation of the first of Henry VIII’s *Six Articles* (1539), which affirmed belief in transubstantiation. For his remarks on the subject Foxe depends very heavily on the long preface to *A Testimonie*; he does not, indeed, reproduce the preface, but he paraphrases much of it. It is hardly reasonable to call this reproduction plagiarism, as Bromwich does, except perhaps in some very restricted technical sense. Parker, Foxe and Day were closely acquainted and all interested in promoting

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the Protestant cause by every means in their power, so Parker could only be pleased at this diffusion of *A Testimonie* in a popular book.⁷

As for the changes he made, there is some irony for the modern reader in the major one: just before he reproduces the sermon Foxe retells the story from the preface to *A Testimonie* about the medieval reader who had erased a passage in the Worcester MS of one of Ælfric’s letters. This particular passage had evidently been felt by a post-Ælfrician reader to be at variance with the teaching of the Catholic Church on transubstantiation, and so this ‘reviser’ had erased it in the Latin version. Joscelyn and Parker had discovered a complete Old English version, however, and had gleefully pounced on the erasure as an example of post-Conquest romanist perversion of true and ancient doctrine. The irony is that, although Foxe righteously reproduces this story, he does not blush at committing the same offence himself. He deliberately omits, without mention of the omission, the tales of two miracles recounted in the sermon and faithfully reproduced in *A Testimonie*. Perhaps, however, he felt exculpated by the marginal comment in that book that these tales ‘seem to be infarced’ (*A Testimonie*, p. 21).⁸

⁶ The First Book Printed in Anglo-Saxon Types’, p. 271.

⁷ See Bromwich, p. 265, n. 3. Parker had also communicated to Foxe other matter for inclusion in *Acts and Monuments*. See J. Strype. *Life of Parker* (Oxford, 1821), ii, 519-520.

⁸ This pagination is that of the Boston Public Library copy; in the Huntington Lib. copy it occurs at p. 39. For the different pagination in the varicus ‘issues’ see Bromwich’s article. The unmentioned lacuna occurs in Foxe at p. 1306, col. 2 for the Old English; p. 1309, vol. 2 for the translation.

Foxe's attitudes, expressed in the preface to the *Acts and Monuments* are those familiar from the writings of Leland, Bale and Parker. He thinks that a full history of the Church in England based on early writers (though not including 'every vain fable') would 'open the plain truth of times lying long hid in obscure darkness of antiquity. Whereby all studious readers, beholding as in a glass the state, course, and alteration of Religion, decay of doctrine, and the controversies of the Church, might discern the better between antiquity and novelty' (sign. ii^v). In common with many of the Reform writers he insists on the existence of much Christianity in Britain before Augustine, and mentions the names of some prominent British (as distinct from Anglo-Saxon) Christians. And

All this while about the space of four hundred years, Religion remained in Britain uncorrupt, and the word of Christ truly preached, till about the coming of Austen and of his companions from Rome, many of the said Britain preachers were slain by the Saxons. After that began the Christian faith to enter and spring among the Saxons, after a certain Romish sort, yet notwithstanding somewhat more tolerably, than were the times, which after followed, through the diligent industry of some godly teachers' such as Bede, Alcuin, Ælfric and others who, though they erred in some few things,

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yet neither so grossly, nor so greatly to be complainod of in respect of the abuses that followed. For as yet, all this while, the error of Transubstantiation and leuation, with auricular confession was not crept in for public doctrine in Christs church, as by their own Saxon Sermon, made by Ælfricus and set out in the second volume of this present history may appear (pag. 1304). During which mean time although the Bishops of Rome were had here in some reverence with the Clergy: yet had they nothing as yet to do in setting laws touching matters of the Church of England: but that only appertained to the kings and governors of the land as is in this story to be seen (pag. 922 of A &M). ('A Protestation', sign. iii—iii^v).

He proceeds to relate briefly the growth of corrupting superstition which began to be really felt in the later tenth century with the monkish reforms of "undesirables" like Dunstan, Athelwold and Oswald, and which continued with Lanfranc and Anselm. (He omits, as one might have expected, Ælfric in spite of the latter's close connection with the first three.) But it was with Gregory VII (1073-85) and Innocent III (1198-1216) that ruination really came to the true teaching of the Church. Even in those days however, there were staunch anti-papists, he says: and the reader may be a little surprised to find among such crypto-Protestants the names of Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer and Hoccleve, side by side with the names of Wycliffe and Hus (sign. iii^v~iv). Chaucer, he remarked

later in the book was a 'right Wyclevian or else was never any' (II, 695)⁹ So the boast of the Church of Rome that antiquity proves her truth is a hollow one, and the present Church of Rome is an imposition on the antiquity represented by Ælfric and other good members of the Saxon Church of England.

Thus, it is clear that Foxe did not put his name to the 1571 edition of the Saxon *Gospels* utterly devoid of some acquaintance with Old English; but neither the *Book of Martyrs* nor the *Gospels* yields any evidence of real knowledge of the language on his part. And, of course, this did not matter to Foxe. If Old English proved the antiquity of the Protestant position to those who could read it, then it was welcome, and those who could take it would. In the preface to the *Gospels* Foxe acknowledges that the moving spirit in the publication was Matthew Parker; and there is ample room for speculation about the reasoning behind the choice of Foxe as shadow editor. By this time the earlier editions of the *Book of Martyrs* had well begun that book's famous career, and Foxe's name was perhaps felt to be a best-selling attraction. Even if Parker was not aware of the publishing value of Foxe's name, the printer Day was undoubtedly more than alive to it. Day had Foxe right to hand; they were personal friends. Foxe had even

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lived in Day's house, and he acted for some time as Day's reader for the press.¹⁰

The timing of the publication of the Saxon *Gospels* makes it reasonably certain that the book was intended to be the tangible and documentary proof of what Protestant scholars had asserted and were to assert: that the translating of the Bible into English was no novelty, nor an idea contemporaneous with the Protestant reformation. It was an old and respected practice even here in their own island. A short time before, a new Bible translation, or revision rather, had been prepared and issued (1568) under the aegis of Parker. A second edition appeared in 1569 and a third in 1572. Apart from doing a good deal of the work on the revision Parker wrote prefaces for major sections of this version

⁹ For this sixteenth-century tendency to use old authors, particularly Chaucer, as anti-catholic witnesses see W. W. Skeat, *Works of Chaucer and Others, A Facsimile of the First Collected Edition of 1532* (London, 1905), p. xviii. Tyrwhitt's earlier comment is eminently sensible: 'it is probable that Chaucer, though he has been pressed into the service of Protestantism by some zealous writers, was as good a Catholic as men of his understanding and rank in life have generally been.' *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1851.), p. lxviii, n.

¹⁰ Haller, p. 114; E. Rowe Mores, *A Dissertation Upon Typographical Founders and Foundries*, ed. H. Carter and C. Ricks (Oxford, 1961), p. lxvii.

which became known as ‘The Bishops Bible’, In one of these prefaces he rebukes the Catholics for putting restraints on popular knowledge of the Scriptures:

they be far unlike their old forefathers that have ruled in this realm, who in their times, and in divers ages, did their diligence to translate whole books of the Scriptures to the erudition of the laity; as yet at this day be to be seen divers books translated into the vulgar tongue, some by kings of the realm, some by Bishops, some by Abbots. some by other godly, devout fathers. So desirous were they of old time to have the lay sort edified in godliness by reading in their vulgar tongue that very many books be yet extant, tho’ for the age of the speech, and the strangeness of the charact of many of them almost worn out of knowledge. In which books may be seen evidently how it was used among the Saxons, to have in their churches read the four Gospels, so distributed and piked out in the body of the Evangelists books, that to every Sunday and festival day of the year they were sorted out to the common Ministers of the church in their common prayers to be read to their people.. . it is not to be doubted, but that these latter holy Fathers of the English Church had the impulsion of the Holy Ghost to set out these sacred books in their vulgar tongue to the edification of the people..¹¹

What Parker asserted in this preface would not now be mere assertion; and if there were any sceptics they could be referred to Foxe’s edition of such an old version of the Gospels as Parker mentioned. There was no contradicting such concrete evidence, and Foxe himself took care to point out that the Saxons had had Scripture in their own tongue ‘translated both of kings and bishops’, citing among others Alfred, who was thought to have translated the Bible, and — inevitably — Bede, though Bede was no bishop. He also stressed Alfred’s statement in the *Pastoral Care* that other nations had had Scripture in their own tongue. As a move on the polemical chessboard the publication of the Old English *Gospels* was adept, and it was one further link in the chain by which Parker and his group sought to bind the Protestant establishment to the ancient Church of England.

But the motivation behind the publication of the *Gospels* is perhaps best stated in Foxe’s own words which I quote at some length, as the syntax of his sentences here hardly allows much useful ellipsis. Here is part of the preface addressed to Queen Elizabeth I:

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[The book] being to our hands offered as an ancient memorial, meet and convenient to be published in print we, considering the duty of our service both to your highness and also to the public wealth, and especially to the utility of Christ’s church, thought to exhibit the

¹¹ Reproduced in Strype’s *Parker*, III, 244.

same first to your majesty and so by you to your subjects to be seen and read of all men in the selfsame ancient tongue in which it was then both written and reserved in the Saxons church; not so much for any great necessity we saw in that speech now to be used and practiced, being grown out of use and continuance ... [Though, he points out, knowledge of the Saxon tongue may be useful to lawyers and others who wish to study the old charters.] Howbeit, not so much therefore we have published this treatise but especially to this end that the said book imprinted thus in the Saxons letters, may remain in the church as a profitable example and precedent of old antiquity, to the more confirmation of your gracious proceedings now in the church agreeable to the same. Wherein as we have to see how much we are beholden to the revered and learned father in God, Matthew Archbishop of Cant., a chief and famous travailler in this Church of England, by whose industrious diligence and learned labours this book, with others more, hath been collected and searched out of the Saxons monuments, so likewise have we to understand and conceive by the edition hereof how the religion presently taught and professed in the church at this present is no new reformation of things lately begun, which were not before, but rather a reduction of the Church to the pristine state of old conformity which once it had and almost lost by discontinuance of a few later years; as it is manifest to be proved, not only in this cause of the vulgar translation of the Scriptures, but in other cases also of doctrine, as transubstantiation, of priests restraint from marriage, of receiving under one kind, with many other points and articles more of like quality newly thrust in and the old abolished by the clergy of Rome; whereof part hath been sufficiently detected already by the godly diligence of the said archbishop above mentioned, in his book of the Saxon sermon and other treatises: part likewise remain to be showed and set forth shortly by the Lords almighty Grace (Pref., sign § 1v-2v).

With the same purpose of showing that not only clerics but also the common people were acquainted with the Scriptures in Anglo-Saxon England some interesting rubrics have been retained from the original. The ‘division of the text for the Gospels is according to the Saxon book, but the divisions of the chapters and the numbering of the verses is as it is now used, which was observed for the better understanding of the reader’ (Pref., sign. A1v) The first divisions referred to are the old rubrics for apportioned readings on various days of the year, and this is what Parker means in his preface to the Bible when he speaks of the Gospels being ‘distributed and piked out’ for Sundays and festival days. There is no effort, however, to use the text of the Gospels themselves for polemical purposes.¹²

Foxe, as we have seen, takes little credit to himself for the publication of the

¹² There is a translation running down a narrower column on the right which is from the Bishops’ Bible. The Foxe edition later came in for unfavourable comparison with the 1665 edition of Junius and Marshall. See for example, G. Hickes, *Inst it utiones Grammaticae Anglo-Saxonicae* (Oxford, 1689), pref., sign. C 2v.

Gospels. His use of the Joscelyn-Parker text and commentary in the *Acts and Monuments* with some deliberate changes from *A Testimonie*, shows clearly enough that there was no personal research on his part into

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Old English documents.¹³ In incorporating the Old English and its translation into the *Acts and Monuments* Foxe was merely welcoming any reasonably relevant material which would support his censure of King Henry VIII for promulgating the *Six Articles*, especially the article on transubstantiation; it was just one more piece of evidence, in a very large book, of the doctrinal corruption of the Church of Rome. Putting his name to the edition of the Saxon *Gospels* was probably the result of representations from Parker and Day; for the book would be more widely diffused, and therefore more useful to the cause, if it were issued under a name even better known than that of the Archbishop, who was, anyhow, notoriously shy of putting his name to publications in which he had taken a large part.¹⁴

¹³ There is, moreover, a statement about Parker in the 'Matthaeus', the privately printed life of the archbishop which he himself oversaw and corrected: 'Edidit etiam quatuor Evangelia Saxonico idiomate: ut liqueret Scripturas antea fuisse, vulgari sermoni, Anglicano populo notas.' ['He edited the four gospels in the Saxon tongue, so that it would be clear that the Scriptures had been known to the English people in their vernacular language.'] Strype, *Parker*, II, 246-247 and III, 306. See also Parker's statement about himself in the preface to his edition of Asser's life of King Alfred, *Aelfredi Regis Res Gestae* (1574), Pref., sign. IIIv.

¹⁴ For prime examples of this shyness see Richard Vaughan, *Matthew Paris* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 154 ff. which tells of the Archbishop's editions of Paris issued under a pseudonym. See also Strype, II, 243 ff. for Parker's printing of the 'Matthaeus'.