

BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Religion, print and controversy during the Reformation

INTRODUCTION

'The excellent arte of printing, most happily of late found out, and now commonly practised everywhere to the singular benefit of Christ's Church, [is] a providential gift from God to the Reformation cause'

John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of these latter and perilous days touching matters of the Church* (first English edition, London, 1563)

English Protestant writer John Foxe (1516/17-1587) wrote these words during a war; an ideological war every bit as bitter and bitterly fought as the Cold War of the twentieth century. Religion rather than economics divided Europe into rival Catholic and Protestant blocs in the 1500s. **The battle between Catholic and Protestant was fought physically – but it was also a contest of mentalities.** Deeds achieved by steel and blood were equalled or outdone by words crystallised by the iron and ink of the printing press. Foxe's own words (see case 3) highlight the power of the printed word – and highlight also how people even then saw the printing press as an important weapon of mass conversion on the battlefield of religion.

Books were a means of making an argument and persuading people to accept that argument in many places at once, across vast distances. One author could now debate with many people at the same time. **The only effective way to reply in such a discussion was to write and print your own book.** Foxe was writing in the 1560s, when the printing press was still a relatively new technology, but it was already recognised as an immensely powerful innovation within sixteenth century European societies. The term 'meme' today describes the ability of ideas and cultural concepts to be 'contagious' in the same way as diseases. Writers and scholars such as Foxe were aware in the 1560s of the infectious potential of words and phrases and they were determined to argue persuasively and vehemently that their own particular claims were correct. The central focus to these endeavours during the Reformation was religion and religious belief.

Hotly disputed, closely interlinked with politics and economics, religion provided meaning, morals and morale for the vast majority of Europeans in the period. To some extremist minds it also motivated and justified murder and massacre in the name of salvation. **The key question unleashed by the German monk Martin Luther in 1517** (see case 1) **was whether or how to fundamentally reform the Catholic Church.** Unexpected by most, unthinkable to some and unwelcome to many, 'reformation' of the Catholic Church was for others like Luther and John Calvin (see case 1) an urgent and obvious necessity: **they 'protested' their aims very publicly and very soon they and**

their supporters were known as Protestants. What started as a ‘protest for reformation’, and might well have ended as a relatively minor controversy, eventually **brought much greater change than anyone could have foreseen in the form of a religious revolution: the Protestant Reformation.**

From this long and violent transformation eventually emerged a Europe divided into Protestant and Catholic. **Print was a powerful factor in this process and bequeaths to us many of the works now housed on the shelves in the Old Library** – print made possible an ‘argument in the archives’, whose rich legacy adorns these shelves today. Located within these collections of the Old Library of the Irish College in the Centre Culturel Irlandais are many important works that featured in an intense intellectual struggle – a battle, for hearts, minds and, above all, souls during the Reformation and its aftermath: conflict, real and rhetorical, was very bitter from the early 1500s until well into the late 1600s; by the 1700s the division was accepted as permanent but deep tensions, sharp divides and sporadic controversy remained long afterwards.

Martin Luther and John Calvin are two of the most famous people associated with the Protestant Reformation on the European mainland. But in the islands off the northwest coast of the Continent, **in England, Ireland (and Scotland) other people became prominent in continuing or countering what Luther and Calvin had started.** King Henry VIII’s desire to divorce his wife so he could marry and father a male heir with a new spouse changed him from an opponent of the Protestant Reformation into a monarch who undertook his own form of Reformation. From the mid-1530s Henry promoted ministers who supported his divorce; when the Catholic Church refused to allow the new marriage he so desperately wanted, Henry became the head of the Protestant Church in his kingdoms. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was one of the key supporters of the king; Bishop John Fisher was a vocal opponent of the monarch’s actions – both were accomplished and influential writers, and both eventually died for their beliefs (see case 2).

England, Ireland and Scotland became a battleground for belief. Religious change ebbed and flowed. Catholicism had slowly retreated from much of the Three Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland by the early 1600s in the face of the success and expansion of the Protestant Reformation, supported and promoted by Protestant authors like John Foxe (see case 3). But Catholicism never entirely faded from the islands. Colleges established by English, Irish and Scottish Catholic exiles in France (with Paris playing a central role), Spain and other European countries worked to retain and eventually win back hearts and minds within the islands. William Allen, Robert Persons, Henry Fitzsimons and many other accomplished scholars and persuasive writers began an on-going effort to re-establish a renewed version of the Catholic Church in all three countries. The process was far from unopposed (see cases 4 & 5). Stout resistance came from Protestant writers who believed as fervently in their position in matters of faith as did their Catholic opponents. Thousands of books and millions of words were written and printed arguing the merits of each case over decades and centuries. The Old Library is exceptionally fortunate to enjoy a rare and rich patrimony of many of these important books in its collections and **some of the most influential printed volumes in European history are displayed in these exhibition cases.**

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CASE 1

Martin Luther, *Lutheri catechismus* (Marburg, 1529)

Martin Luther (1483-1546) became a Catholic priest in 1507, a Professor of Theology at the eastern German University of Wittenberg in 1512 and ultimately - in 1517 - the creator of the Protestant Reformation.

His *Ninety Five Theses* (or objections) calling for reform within the Catholic Church shattered over 700 years of Christian unity and led to social and political upheaval across Europe. Thanks to the recently invented printing press, Luther's arguments had an impact like never before. His 'protest' quickly spread in written form and won over tens of thousands of 'Protestant' supporters, first throughout Germany and then throughout Europe.

Luther developed his ideas for reforming Christianity gradually; he expanded, reworked, and revised them in numerous publications over many years. It became difficult for his followers to know what to believe. Eventually Luther set out his own personal interpretation of what a Christian should believe in one book – the 'Great Catechism' or *Lutheri catechismus* (book 1). He defined the prayers he believed Protestants should use, the services to be followed, and how pastors and teachers should communicate these ideas to their congregations. **One of the most important books in European history, this 'Great Catechism' was published in Marburg in 1529.**

Jean Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London, 1574?)

Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation after 1517 was revolutionary and profoundly affected the lives of millions of Europeans. **Yet for some Luther's changes did not go far enough.** Frenchman Jean Calvin (1509-1564) was one of those who ardently believed that reform could and should go much further.

Calvin, born in Picardy, trained to be a lawyer in Orléans but had much more interest in theology. In Paris he attended a lecture at the Collège de France in 1533 calling for reform in the Catholic Church. When the lecture was condemned as heretical, Calvin was implicated: he fled Paris, and then France. In Geneva, a city already affected by the Protestant Reformation, Calvin reflected on his own principles and beliefs. Dismissing Luther's ideas as not fulfilling the requirements of a truly reformed church, **he developed his own conception of what Protestantism should be. He elaborated on his theories when he published *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536** (book 2). This laid the foundations for Protestant churches in Switzerland, France, The Netherlands, Scotland and parts of Germany, and today Protestant churches based on Calvin's *Institutes* are found worldwide.

John Fisher, *Assertionis Lutheranae confutation* (London, 1523)

Reaction to Martin Luther's writings highlighting abuses and calling for reform in the Catholic Church was swift. Much of the defence of traditional belief came from England, then one of the most solidly and securely Catholic countries in Europe. King Henry VIII, a pious Catholic, condemned Luther's 'heresies' in *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (London, 1521). The book was presented to Pope Leo X in October 1521, who rewarded Henry's loyalty with the title of 'Defender of the Faith' – still visible on British coins today.

Bishop John Fisher (1469-1535), King Henry's former tutor, and the foremost theologian in England, **took issue with Luther's arguments in a long and scholarly work of his own, *Assertionis Lutheranae confutation*** (book 3). Published in London in 1523, the book countered Luther's ideas with dense detail but in a way which was convincing, persuasive and memorable. **Fisher and his book rapidly became the most well-known and effective opposition to newly developing Protestantism**, and *Assertionis Lutheranae confutation* was widely circulated and reprinted throughout Europe.

Thomas Cranmer, *The book of common prayers and administration of the sacraments... according to the use of the Church of England* (London, 1678)

Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) enjoyed great fame because of the Protestant Reformation, becoming Archbishop of Canterbury but also being burned to death because of religious change. King Henry VIII's desire to divorce Katherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn brought Cranmer to prominence as the young theologian who argued the King's case. Cranmer's sympathies lay with European reformers like Luther and Calvin; travelling on the king's behalf in Germany, he married a Protestant theologian's daughter – an unthinkable action for the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Catholic Church in England. The marriage remained very secret for many years.

When Henry VIII officially renounced obedience to the Pope and declared himself head of the Church in England, Cranmer supported him fully, unlike Bishop John Fisher. While Fisher was executed in 1535, Cranmer prospered for the next two decades. He began work on revising the rituals and sacred texts to be used in ceremonies and eventually produced *The book of common prayers and administration of the sacraments* in 1549 (book 4). **The 'Prayer Book' is undoubtedly Cranmer's greatest legacy** - it became and remains the official prayer book of the Protestant Church of England and similar churches worldwide.

Cranmer himself suffered when Queen Mary I came to the throne in 1553. A firm Catholic, she restored traditional Catholic practices in England. Cranmer rapidly found himself out of favour despite efforts to conform and he was eventually burnt at the stake as a heretic in 1556.

John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of these latter and perilous days touching matters of the Church* (2 volumes, London, 1570?)

Mary I as a Catholic monarch was determined to root out all traces of the Protestant Reformation in her kingdoms when she became queen in 1553. This was a personal as well as a religious and political issue for Mary – it was her mother, Queen Katherine, whom Henry VIII had divorced, beginning the Protestant Reformation in England. Henry and his ministers' actions had also made Mary officially illegitimate. When she came to power she was determined to undo every Protestant alteration made by father and brother since 1533 and thoroughly purge Church and State of those not absolutely loyal to her vision of a renewed and revitalised Catholic England. Along with her close adviser Cardinal Reginald Pole, **she ordered the reorganisation of all major institutions to promote and support the new policy, beginning with replacing Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* with traditional Catholic texts.**

A number of Protestants who refused to convert or conform to Catholicism were arrested and charged with heresy. Over 200 were found guilty and executed by burning at the stake; some 800 more left for exile on the continent. One of these was John Foxe (1516/17-1587), a radical Protestant who had left England in 1554. He earned his living as a printer and author in Strasburg, Frankfurt and Basel. Closely involved with English Protestant exiles, he was deeply influenced by the ideas and writings of Protestant reformers.

Foxe returned to England in 1559 after Mary's death when her Protestant sister, Elizabeth, had become Queen of England.

In 1563, the first edition of *Actes and monuments of these latter and perilous days touching matters of the Church* appeared (book 5). Using oral and archival sources, the book, with graphic illustrations in later editions, **recounted horrendously gruesome stories of the people executed during Mary I's reign**, giving the book its popular name – 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs'.

English Catholic writer Nicholas Harpsfield contested Foxe's claims in his *Dialogi sex contra summi pontificatus, monasticae vitae, sanctorum, sacrarum imaginum appugnatores et pseudomartyres* (Paris, 1566) to little avail. **'Actes and monuments' was a major success financially and had an immensely profound impact in shaping English perceptions of Catholicism.** Foxe's work has defined Queen Mary I in English minds and memories forever as 'Bloody Mary'. It also set the tone for much of the religious bitterness and bloodshed which followed in the next two centuries.

PANELS

CASE 4

William Allen, *An apologie and true declaration of the institution and endeavours of the two English colleges* (Rheims, 1581)

Robert Persons, *The first book of the Christian exercise appertayning to resolution* (Rouen? 1584)

Allen left England in 1565, shortly after Elizabeth I, a convinced Protestant, became queen. He spent the rest of his life in exile trying to revive Catholicism in England. His main achievement was setting up the English College at Douai in 1568. One of the first dedicated training schools, or seminaries, for Catholic priests, it was soon followed by Irish and Scottish Colleges. *An apologie and true declaration of the institution and endeavours of the two English colleges* (the second English College had opened in Rome in 1579) brought Allen's ideas, and his hopes for such colleges to a wide audience: many more English, Irish and Scottish Colleges opened in France, Spain, Italy and Portugal – including the Irish College in Paris. Allen became a Catholic Cardinal in 1587 but he never returned to England.

Robert Persons (1546-1610) aided his fellow Englishman Allen in many of his endeavours but was primarily a writer. His *First book of the Christian exercise appertayning to resolution*, published in Rouen in 1582 (book 7), was immensely successful due to his brilliant writing style and reprinted many times. A spiritual guide to salvation, it became one of the most influential devotional works ever produced, even in predominantly Protestant countries.

Douai-Rheims Bible (1609)

The Catholic Church regarded the Bible in Latin as a sacred text. Pope Paul V (1552-1621) believed too 'much reading of the scripture ruins the Catholic religion'. The Protestant Reformation seemed to prove his point, but also caused a problem. **How could missionaries educated in colleges like Douai and Paris win converts in England, Ireland and Scotland, without a Bible in English?** Cranmer's *Prayer Book* was in English, as was Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (see Case 1). A Catholic translation was needed. Cardinal William Allen had doubts but understood it was necessary:

'... it would perhaps be desirable that the sacred writings should never be translated into the vernacular, nevertheless since in these days, either because of the spread of heretical opinions or for some other reason, even men of good will are apt to be inquisitive... it is more satisfactory to have a faithful Catholic translation than that they should endanger their souls by using a corrupt one.'

Under Allen's supervision, a Catholic Bible in English was produced at Rheims and Douai between 1582 and 1609/1610 (book 8). Displayed here is an original volume one printed in 1609, which originally belonged to the collection of St Gregory's English College, Paris.

Henry FitzSimons, *A Catholick confutation of Mr John Rider's claim to antiquity, and a calming comfort against his caveat... and a reply to Mr Rider's rescript* (Rouen, 1608)

Henry FitzSimons (1566-1643) became a Protestant at the age of ten. Born in Ireland, he was educated in England and at the University of Paris, where he converted to Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest in 1587. He returned to Ireland in 1597, openly performed Catholic ceremonies, and challenged Protestant clerics to debate. His Protestant cousin James Ussher (1581-1656) volunteered but FitzSimons' main opponent was John Ryder (1562-1632), Protestant Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. **FitzSimons was arrested in 1599 for being a Catholic priest, a treasonable offence.** Imprisoned in Dublin Castle he argued with Ryder, who published the debates as *A Friendly Caveat to Irelands Catholickes* (Dublin, 1602). FitzSimons was furious at the contents. Deported from Ireland in 1604, he soon published *A Catholick confutation of Mr John Rider's claim to antiquity, and a calming comfort against his caveat... and a reply to Mr Rider's rescript* (book 9).

James Ussher, *An answer to a challenge made by a Jesuite in Ireland* (London, 1625)

First cousin of Henry FitzSimons, James Ussher (1581-1656) became a leading figure in the Church of Ireland, the official Irish Protestant church. Unlike England and Scotland, in Ireland most people remained Catholic despite Protestantism being the legal religion. In 1619 Ussher met and impressed King James I (of England, Ireland and Scotland). Rapidly promoted he became a key figure in arguing the case for Protestantism as the correct form of Christianity. Ussher's closely argued and brilliantly written *An answer to a challenge made by a Jesuite in Ireland* (book 10) was a reply to an earlier work by Irish Jesuit William Malone. The controversy itself was less noteworthy than the fact that **this book made Ussher one of the best known and most influential Protestant writers in Europe.**

John Sergeant, *Sure footing in christianity, or rational discourses on the rule of faith, with three appendixes relating to Dr. Pierce, Mr. Whitby and Mr. Stillingfleet* (London, 1665)

By the early 1700s, the division between Catholicism and Protestantism was accepted as permanent. But both sides still argued that they were right. In England, Ireland and Scotland, debate was particularly fierce. Catholicism was officially illegal, leading to the creation of institutions in exile, such as the Irish College in Paris, and its neighbour St Gregory's English College (now demolished). **St Gregory was a House of Writers, where English Catholic scholars like John Sergeant (1623-1707) took part in a war of words with their English Protestant counterparts in Oxford and Cambridge** (book 11). Crucial to this work was the large and impressive collection of books. Much of that collection eventually moved to the Irish College.

CONCLUSION

“You want weapons? We’re in a library. Books are the best weapons in the world. This room’s the greatest arsenal we could have. Arm yourself!”

(Russell T. Davies, BBC, 2006)

The wonderful and valuable literary legacy of the long and hotly contested ‘argument in the archives’ between the 1500s and the 1700s remains safely preserved here on the shelves of the Old Library. Specifically, a sequence of hugely important public clashes in print across Europe and subsequently in the Three Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland has left a rich body of material in the collections and patrimony of the *Centre Culturel Irlandais*.

It is remarkably fortunate that the collection and its rare works have survived to present a rich and rare opportunity to gain insights from the evidence contained within these pages of past turmoil. Religious tensions in England, Ireland and Scotland eased, at least a little, in the 1700s but remained a live issue; books debating and discussing religious controversy continued to be produced and widely read. But when the French Revolution erupted in 1789, many of its supporters viewed the Irish, Scottish and English Colleges and their activities with suspicion given their religious function, ‘foreign’ links, and close association with the French Crown.

Ironically, many of the exiles from religious conflict in England, Ireland and Scotland returned home where passions had cooled and full religious toleration was soon to be law. The end of the *Ancien Régime* brought the final words of the ‘argument in the archives’. Europe in the centuries to follow 1789 would find new arguments and new conflicts. The Irish College survived a period of closure to reopen on the rue des Irlandais – the street name changed in 1807 by decree of Emperor Napoleon. The close and cordial relationship of the *Centre Culturel Irlandais* with the French State, and of Ireland with France, continues to this day.

The collections of the Old Library are today a wonderful resource. This exhibition has sought to examine one significant facet of European history via what some of the most important books themselves reveal both to us and about us as Europeans: the words that were once wielded as weapons in a bitter struggle for hearts and minds that divided Europe and Europeans now serve as windows into our shared European past – and our shared European present.

Exhibition runs until 8th December 2013 (admission free):

Tuesdays to Saturdays 14.00 to 18.00 (Wednesdays until 20.00).

Sundays 12.30 to 14.30. Closed on Mondays and public holidays.

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