professio nobis injungitur.[8] No wonder Luther admired Valla more than any other Italian humanist. Of all their line he was the least respectful of tradition and seems the nearest in spirit to Protestantism. In him their common anti-scholasticism comes nearest to being a genuine criticism of traditional theological language; and their common tendency to *simplify* Catholicism, to reduce it all to 'I and Christ', comes nearest, perhaps, to a break with the Church.

[8]From Valla's defence of the *De profess. rel.*, in a letter to Pope Eugene IV, ed. J. Vahlen, p. 191: 'the way of Christ . . . where no religious profession is imposed on us'.

Catholic Historians and the Reformation—II[1]

PATRICK McGRATH

The dangers which threaten the Catholic historian writing on controversial topics were all too plain in the works of Hilaire Belloc. Great as Belloc was as a writer, outstanding as he was in his capacity to recreate the past, he was nevertheless primarily a controversialist with a number of bees in his bonnet, and tragically, in many ways, he was a man in a hurry who had to turn out many books in order to support his children, who were, he said, crying out for pearls and caviar. All this helps to explain why Belloc, who was capable of being on occasions so brilliant an historian, wrote a remarkable amount of bad history. Moreover, partly because he had been denied the opportunity of pursuing his work without the perpetual nagging of financial worries, he turned on the university which had failed to give him the chance of exercizing his undoubted talents, and built up a picture of official academic historians, stupid, prejudiced, deceiving their readers by a spurious critical apparatus and footnotes which on investigation did not support the text. The

[1]The first part of this article was published in BLACKFRIARS, March 1963.

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stupidity, the ignorance and the deceitfulness of the dons became something of an obsession with him, and he thought official historians had entered into a conspiracy to conceal the truth. Now it must be admitted that when Belloc started writing, there was accepted by most educated Englishmen a picture of, say, the Middle Ages or the Reformation which is vastly different from what would be accepted now, and it is probable that Belloc's writing did something to break down the old myths and prejudices, but it is still true that if Belloc was not acceptable to many non-Catholic historians it was because much of what he wrote was unbalanced and unsound. The way to break down the anti-Catholic prejudice of the time was not to produce erratic if often brilliant works such as Belloc produced, but works of genuine scholarship, and Belloc's history, alas, was often far from being that. He might have been for the twentieth century what Lingard had been for the nineteenth, but circumstances, combined, I think, with a certain lack of intellectual humility, prevented him from doing a work which he was in so many ways qualified to do. Cardinal Gasquet's failure earlier was perhaps even more tragic. He, for a time, was accepted by everyone as an established authority, but so much of his scholarship was in fact unsound, and there were so many other defects in his work and in his character, that in time he came to be found out.

Belloc not only despised academic historians, but he taught a great many of his fellow Catholics to despise them too. As a schoolboy and even as an undergraduate, I shared with youthful enthusiasm those feelings which Belloc expressed in his verses on the weak and ineffectual don who dared attack his Chesterton, and it was perhaps only poetic justice that much later a Catholic writer whose book I had ventured to criticize should accuse me of wandering in a typically donnish fog. Now dons are as capable as any one of being myopic and of failing to see wood for trees; they are full of prejudices, and a great many of them have surprisingly little knowledge of the nature of Catholicism. But nevertheless one can hardly blame them for not taking their history from Belloc or for asking to see his evidence. They were prepared to listen to a reasonable case, as the great success of Professor Knowles or Dr David Mathew and others was to show, but it had to be a reasonable case. It has to be one based on accepted historical methods of investigation, it had to be one which attempted to take all the evidence into account and which was not based simply on the brilliant imagination and intuition of someone who said that things must have been so and that as a Catholic he knew they were so. There is the lovely story told

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by Christopher Hollis of Belloc's advice on how to write history – you say that William the Conqueror got out of his aeroplane and when all the dons write in and say there weren't any aeroplanes in 1066, you accuse them of anti-Catholic prejudice.

It seems to me that the Catholic historian must be doubly careful in all he writes since any lapses which he makes will inevitably be denounced by hostile critics not merely, or even mainly, as lapses by an historian, but as lapses by a Catholic. I hold no brief for the Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford, but I think that any Catholic historian should not only keep in mind the imperious claims of truth, but that he should also have before him as he writes a little notice stating 'Trevor-Roper is watching you'; and that he should make sure that there is no possible justification in his work for the kind of criticism which Professor Trevor-Roper made when he alleged that 'just as Fr Philip Hughes has contrived to write a portentous three-volume history of that "immensely harmful" movement, the English Reformation, in which the great religious movement for reform of the Church is unobserved and such details as the burning of Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley are never explicitly mnetioned, so Fr Devlin, in his new biography of Robert Southwell, contrives never to make clear the interesting and relevant fact that throughout Southwell's mission England and Spain were at war'.[2] Whether Professor Trevor-Roper is entirely fair in the criticisms he has made of Catholic historical writing is another matter, but I think one must admit that there is at least a case to answer and that there is need for more than ordinary caution among Catholics writing on these controversial topics.

A very depressing illustration on a different level of the kind of Catholic historical writing which ought at all costs to be avoided is to be found in a recent Catholic Truth Society pamphlet called *The Story of the Forty Martyrs*.[3] It is right and proper that the story of the forty martyrs should be widely known and the pamphlet has a very large circulation, but it is difficult to understand why the Catholic Truth Society should approve the publication of a number of historical statements that are misleading, if not actually false. We are told that when Henry VIII brought in his religious changes, a great many people were confused, but, continues the writer 'the monks in the monasteries that Henry, with the help of his tyrannical minister, Cromwell, was busy

[2]H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Historical Essays*, p. 116, in his essay 'Twice Martyred: The English Jesuits and their Historians'.
[3]John Bate, *The Story of the Forty Marytrs*, 1962.

closing down, so that he could steal their land, refused to agree to th religious changes.' When one considers how only a handful of monk did in fact refuse to accept the royal supremacy, one is left gasping a such a statement. The pamphlet then refers to the martyrdom of th Carthusians and the Bridgettines and adds 'There were not a few othe martyred monks at this time . . .'. Since there were in fact *only* a few the word *not* should have been omitted. The pamphlet dismisses th question of Catholic loyalty under Elizabeth I by stating simply tha Catholics knew that the Pope was head of the church but they knew tha Elizabeth was their queen, and that they loved and obeyed her as thei queen. There is no reference to the activities of Nicholas Sander or t the efforts of Persons and Allen to overthrow the government by force The only comment on the Armada is a statement that Catholic sailor fought with Protestants in the English fleet. The Bull of Excommunica tion is not mentioned. To paraphrase Belloc's judgement on Oxfor historians, it makes one blush for Catholic history.

It is essential always to keep in the forefront of our minds that or most of the problems connected with the Reformation in England w are not, as it were, doctrinally committed and that our business a historians and teachers of history is to consider them simply as historica problems, to ask what is the evidence, not what is the Catholic line However much we would like as Catholics to think that the majority of Englishmen were opposed to the Reformation, we are not as Catho lics committed to the view that they were. The Catholic Church woul be no less the true church even if every Englishman in the sixteenth century had wanted to overthrow it. It is a purely historical question - how many of them were opposed to the church and to what extent And in considering the evidence, which is so obviously capable o different interpretations, we must be particularly on our guard against wishful thinking. It is perhaps comforting to our self-respect as English Catholics to read that the Reformation was 'a violent revolution, by which the people of England were torn against their will from the unity of the one Catholic Church'.[4] or to be told that the English Reformation was forced through by a lustful king who terrorized the opposition Such statements surely over-simplify a highly complex situation. There is an underlying assumption that Englishmen must in their hearts have been opposed to the changes and that the lack of any really effective opposition can be explained in terms of 'Tudor despotism', 'Tudo tyranny' and a combination of brutal terrorism and brilliant official

[4]Gerald Culkin, *The English Reformation*, p. 101.

propaganda. It is too often forgotten that the Tudors had in fact no standing army and no police force, and that their government would have collapsed if it had not enjoyed the active support of a majority of the gentry and at least the passive obedience of a large number of humbler men. That same Tudor despotism which put through a religious revolution was remarkably ineffective in its efforts to enforce the laws against enclosure.

It is only too easy for a Catholic to allow his sympathies and his preconceptions to affect his historical judgement on a whole host of questions concerning the Reformation in England so that he tends to explain away the inconvenient facts or to give them less weight than they deserve. It is, to say the least, disturbing to the Catholic to find that the English hierarchy – with so few exceptions – repudiated the Papacy and accepted Henry VIII as Supreme Head of the Church. It is unpleasant for him to see the overwhelming majority of the monks, nuns and friars following the lead given by their bishops, and most of the lower clergy – the clerical proletariat, as Fr Philip Hughes calls them, accepting *all* the religious changes of the sixteenth century. There is, I think, a temptation for the Catholic to offer as an excuse for these unpleasant facts the simple explanation that bishops and priests behaved in this way because they lived under a reign of terror.

There is, too, a temptation to escape from the inglorious aspects of the story by dwelling on the glories of the martyrs. They did indeed hand down to us a noble legacy, but if we concentrate excessively on them, we may get the picture out of focus. We may forget to ask why there were, relatively speaking, so few martyrs – a couple of handfuls under Henry VIII, less than three hundred executed for religion in Elizabeth's reign of forty-five years as against roughly the same number of Protestants put to death in five years of Mary's reign. We rightly think of the Elizabethan Age as one made glorious by the blood of our martyrs, but it is not so creditable a story as we sometimes suggest, even when we take into account the sufferings of those who were imprisoned or fined. In his novel *Helena* Mr Evelyn Waugh makes the pope say of the age of persecution before Constantine granted toleration: 'We look back already to the time of the persecution as though it were the heroic age, but have you ever thought how awfully few martyrs there were, compared with how many there ought to have been?'

The question of the condition of the monasteries provides yet another illustration of the way in which Catholic sympathy and Catholic prejudice have tended to affect Catholic historical judgements. A

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number of Catholic writers reacting violently against Protestant prejudices and appealing to that sentimental attachment which many Englishmen came to feel for institutions which their ancestors had destroyed, and thinking, perhaps, of sixteenth-century monasticism in terms of what they knew and liked in nineteenth and twentieth-century monks and nuns, have been, I think, over-anxious to defend the monasteries and to present the kind of view which Chesterton expressed when he wrote:

> They burnt the homes of the shaven men, that had been quaint and kind,
> Till there was no bed in the monk's house, nor food that man could find.
> The inns of God where no man paid, that were the walls of the weak,
> The King's Servants ate them all. And still we did not speak.[5]

The question of the state of the monasteries on the eve of the dissolution is a purely historical one. The issue is not whether monasticism as such is good or bad, but simply what was the state of the monasteries? It is a question which the Catholic must consider objectively – not through rose-tinted, or, as Dr David Mathew put it, Gasquet-tinted, spectacles. Theoretically the answer to the question should not depend on the religious views of the man answering it. The Catholic and the non-Catholic ought on this to be able to reach a measure of agreement about the actual state of the monasteries – although I admit, their differing religious views may possibly cause them to differ about the value of what was lost when monasticism was destroyed. Indeed, it may well be that broad agreement will be reached on the lines of that very sober and sombre judgement made by Professor Knowles when he wrote: 'In the first place, there were a number of houses . . . which no temporal or ecclesiastical sovereign would have dreamt of destroying unless he was prepared to deny the right of existence to any monastic house . . . Secondly, there was a larger number of houses . . . whose continued existence served no good purpose whatever. In this category would be found all the priories and cells of monks and nuns with less than ten or a dozen inmates, and, in addition, almost all the houses of Augustinian canons. Within no foreseeable future and by no practical scheme of reform could they have been rehabilitated spiritually. Between these two fairly large groups . . . there was a large *bloc* of medium-sized and large houses upon which it would have been difficult to pass judgement.

[5]From 'The Secret People', *Collected Poems*, p. 157.

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None of them was fervent, but many of them were harmless, and, at least to a good-natured observer from the outside, respectable enough to pass muster . . . a tolerant man of the world would have allowed them to continue, a severe spiritual reformer would have found them wanting'.[6] That is, perhaps, something approaching the last word on the subject, but one wonders how long it will be before it permeates the whole Catholic body.

Another question which is liable to arouse Catholic prejudices is that of persecution in the sixteenth century. Excessive concentration on the persecution of Catholics in England may make us forget persecution by Catholics in other countries. We may treat persecution in England as though it were unique and ignore the treatment which Catholic rulers abroad gave to their Protestant subjects. We cannot, of course, ignore the Marian persecution for the legacy of Foxe is still with us, but we do tend to play it down and, consciously or unconsciously, to assume that those who fought against Catholicism were probably in bad faith. It might be asked whether Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley and the three hundred-odd Protestants put to death under Mary really get justice done to them, even by the very fair-minded Fr Philip Hughes. As for William Cecil, he is too often written off without further ado as a monster of wickedness and cruelty, even though he made a good end and appeared to think that he had saved his soul. It may be, for all we know, that he now rejoices in the company of Campion and the other martyrs in heaven.

The implications of the papal excommunication which absolved Elizabeth I's subjects from their obedience is another matter on which, it seems to me, Catholics must do some serious re-thinking. Too often the problem has been glossed over and we have not faced squarely and honestly the issues involved. The Bull is a stark, uncompromising document and presumably it meant what it said. It is true that no Catholic ruler was at the time prepared to take action and that the Catholic rulers were not in fact consulted. It is true that the seminary priests and the Jesuits were told that it was suspended for the time being and that they were not to meddle with politics. This, of course, enabled the martyrs to assert their loyalty to the Queen and to protest that they died only for the Catholic faith. Nevertheless some Catholic historians seem to me to have shirked the problem. The Bull was only suspended. Was it really so surprising that the Elizabethan government should be afraid that one day the suspension would be lifted? There was, after all,

[6]David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, III, p. 465.

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Nicholas Sander's expedition; there was the activity of the exiles; there was Allen's *Admonition;* there was an Armada. What, one wonders, would have been the position of the missionary priests and the Jesuits if the Spanish had seized a bridgehead and Catholics had been invited to further the cause of the true religion by supporting the invaders?

The historian must, as far as he can, present the whole truth and not select those parts of it which happen to suit his purpose. The courage of those who died for the faith in Elizabethan England, the determination and sacrifices of those who went to prison or paid heavy fines, the resourcefulness and the nervous strain of those engaged in the Catholic underground are rightly given prominence by Catholic writers, but the picture is incomplete if we do not also find a place in it for some comment on the inept handling of English affairs by Rome, on the tragic failure to replace the bishops as they died off, and on the savage feuds and bitter controversies which disgraced the history of the leaderless Catholic community in England in the closing years of the heroic age of the martyrs.

All this may seem to some controversial, at least in so far as concerns the particular illustrations I have chosen, but in principle, I think, it is not controversial, even though it may seem platitudinous. What it amounts to is that the Catholic in handling history must not be a propagandist. He must exercise charity in judging historical persons whose religious beliefs he does not accept. He must remember that a Protestant – even a sixteenth-century Protestant – is not *ipso facto* a man in bad faith. He must try patiently to understand what went wrong with Catholicism in England in the sixteenth century and why it went wrong. He must not be content with some simple and comforting explanation of the Reformation as the work of a brutal tyrant but must endeavour to bring out the complexities and examine the deficiencies which made the tragedy possible. Only by continual and honest self-criticism can the Catholic communities of the twentieth century hope to avoid the tragedy of the sixteenth century. In so far as the church is made up of human beings, it is subject to human weakness and a fair object for human criticism at all levels. The historian who is a Catholic can help us to see things as they were in reality, provided he is concerned only with historical truth and not with scoring debating points or winning the applause of his fellow Catholics.

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