

Thomas Cranmer

The Reformation in England from the very beginning did have a political element, as well as a spiritual element. The growth of the national self – conscious made it inevitable that sooner or later the bondage of Roman Interference would be challenged and shaken off.

It has to be recognized that Henry VIII's quarrel with the Pope regarding the formers wish to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn was also a significant element what took place.

What must however be firmly refuted, is the opinion expressed by some that the Reformation in England was altogether or even mainly a political movement, or that, which has been maintained by many Roman or Anglo-Catholic writers, that the Reformation in England was no more than the consequence of Henry VIII's quarrel with the Pope.

The Reformation in England was very far from being a mere act of political assertion by a burgeoning nation, or the selfish act of a restless King. The Reformation was first and foremost a spiritual revival. The fruit of the seeds sown by John Wickliffe and the Lollards, and of course the influence of the spiritual awakening on the Continent, particularly in the early years of the English Reformation the teachings of Martin Luther. Here was the source of the English Reformation.

We cannot overestimate the influence of John Wickliffe on the Reformation in Britain, both England and Scotland were touched by him, and indeed we cannot forget his influence in Bohemia. His works were sent into Bohemia by Anne of Bohemia the wife of Richard II, and subsequently influenced the teachings of John Huss and through Huss, Martin Luther.

Wickliffe's life and work is one of the great turning points of Church history. When he died the Reformation had begun. Minds had been enlightened, souls converted, preachers sent to the four corners of the land. By "the seriousness of his language, the holiness of his life and the energy of his faith," he left an example that multitudes were to follow. "He must have been," says J. C. Ryle, "singularly filled with the Holy Ghost." As a bold and fearless witness to the truth when it was least popular Wickliffe reminds us of an Old Testament prophet. As an exponent of the doctrines of grace he anticipated the Reformers. Wickliffe, writes D' Aubigne, "is the greatest English Reformer. If Luther and Calvin are the fathers of the Reformation, Wickliffe is its grandfather."

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If time permitted, we could go further back than Wickliffe to men like Thomas Bradwardine c.1219 – 1349.

In 1338 Bradwardine was appointed chaplain to King Edward III. Bradwardine who up until this time had been a lecturer at Oxford University was called to accompany the King on his French campaigns. He was present at the famous victory of Crecy and the capture of Calais. Such was his moral influence upon the King and his troops, the many contemporaries attributed the English success as much to the holiness of their chaplain Bradwardine as to the valour of their army. It is certain that Bradwardine preached the doctrine of justification by faith alone to the English troops in the fields of France during that military campaign. When he returned to England in 1348 the King appointed him to the Archbishopric of Canterbury. This was a position, unfortunately for the nation, which he never fully occupied. In 1349 he fell victim to the Black Death which was then raging through the country and died at Lambeth on the 26th August 1349.

England was truly a favoured nation and one can trace out a series of cycles of revival from the earliest times. Christianity arrived in Britain in the first century A.D. and there was steady progress until the fifth century when the British church became corrupted by Pelagianism and was fearfully judged according to the historian Gildas by the invasion of the Saxons (A.D. 449). About 100 years after this Celtic missionaries (notably Columba who established Iona, and Aidan who evangelized Northumberland (A.D. 635 - 651). This began a new period of spiritual prosperity. Again after this falling into doctrinal error and the decay of piety. The church entered into a long "Dark Age", and was visited by such judgments as the invasion of the Danes and Vikings (A.D. 835) onwards, and the Norman Conquest (1066), which brought some blessing but also for the first time brought the English church under the full domination of Papal authority.

It is important for the understanding of the Reformation to acknowledge that God has long been gracious to this nation. If I might return to John Wickliffe for a moment and comment that Wickliffe was himself drawing on some of these influences which had long been present in English life. He not only anticipated the Reformation, but he also refocused the nation to appreciate more fully many of the truths, and liberties and outlooks that had gone before.

I'm quoting now at some length from Daniel Hannon's new book on *How we Invented Freedom and why it Matters*.

Wickliffe believed that the church had amassed too much wealth and was drifting away from the example of Christ. He opposed the selling of indulgences, rejected transubstantiation, and emphasized salvation by faith. He thought the priests should be allowed to marry, and that they should be accountable before the civil courts like everybody else. He rejected papal authority in England, arguing that the nation was bound instead to its own Crown and institutions. Above all, and exceptionally for the first time Wickliffe believed in the centrality of the Bible. He told the people to read the Scriptures for themselves and not rely on the interpretation of priests and prelates. In his last years, he devoted himself to the translating of the Bible from Latin into

English. The Holy See considered him such an abominable heretic that, 44 years after he died, his bones were dug up, ground to powder and cast into the River Swift.

"Government of the people, by the people, for the people" was, in Wickliffe's mind, a concept with political, religious, and educational implications. If men and women were free to make up their minds on theological questions, they would also be better suited to independence in secular affairs.

The association between religious and civil freedom was to become a central tenet of the Anglo-sphere, (the English-speaking nations) critical to the self- definition of its people's. National history tended to be understood as the Providential triumph of those values in the face of opposition – and not without reason.

For the next century and a half, until the arrival of the Protestant Reformation in England, Lollardy survived as a clandestine and largely lower class movement, disseminating its doctrines in private homes. A Bible – based sect, it was limited by its lack of access to a printing press that huge advantage enjoyed by the Continental reformers who reached England in the 1530s. As A.G. Dickens, the supreme authority on the English Reformation, put it, Lollardy created an underground, and that awaited the appearance of liberators. When liberation finally came, it was compelled, like any underground resistance, to yield the leadership to regular armies with heavier and more modern equipment."

Protestantism was to become critical to the identity of the English-speaking peoples. It was the main binding agent when England, Wales and Scotland formed a united nation. The fact that most of the Ireland remained Roman Catholic largely explains why the United Kingdom now ends where it does.

Protestantism also bound the peoples of Great Britain to their kindred across the oceans. As late as 1773, Benjamin Franklin was pleading with his fellow colonists not to surrender their links with Britain lest they thereby tip the European balance in the pope's favour: "Remember withal, that this Protestant country (our mother, though lately an unkind one) is worth preserving, and that her weight in the scales of Europe and her safety in a degree mat depend on our union with her."

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Defining the Reformation in England as a spiritual movement

T.H. L. Parker in his book the English Reformation, defines the Reformation in England as follows.

We may define the English Reformers as those Englishmen who, in the half-century that began about 1520, confessed that Jesus Christ is the complete and only mediator between God and men, and who therefore endeavoured so to shape the doctrine and practice of the Church that her earthly existence should correspond to the truth of his existence.

In this definition we place the Reformation within the sphere of faith in Jesus Christ, of repentance for sin, of love for our neighbour, of looking above the bewildering turmoils of 16th century England to the eternal and unchanging Kingdom of Heaven; within the sphere of the Church and of assembling together to worship God, and therefore of the ministry and of the reading and expounding of the Bible and for this reason once again of faith, hope, and love; within the sphere of being baptized and of receiving the Holy Communion, singing hymns and praying in private and in public; within the sphere of obedience to God's demands and commands and of a rightly ordered moral life in private and in society.

Parker goes on to comment very aptly that there are in the events of the Reformation times when we cannot see these elements clearly. Times when we can only see their contradiction. We see them in the services now ordered by the pattern of The Book of Common Prayer, the preaching of the Homilies, or in Tyndale sacrificing himself to give England a Bible in its own tongue and language. We see them obscured in the intrigues of Henry's divorce proceedings, or in the worldly ambition of the Duke of Northumberland. We see them obscured even in some of the actions of the Reformers themselves, they were after all that sinful men dealing with extremely complex, difficult and dangerous issues. But for all that we see nevertheless blazing clearly through it all, the confession of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Providence of God in the raising up of Thomas Cranmer

At this time England was politically and geographically different to other areas in which the Reformation began. England was a united and relatively peaceful state, largely as a result of the policies of Henry VII, after the Wars of the Roses. A wise and sagacious king as he has been called.

Henry VIII was one of the most powerful, autocratic, and even despotic monarchs of his day.

In England a Reformation could humanly speaking, only be affected by state permission, through the instrumentality of an Archbishop of Canterbury, who was not only the Primate of the church but also constitutionally the first advisor to the crown. Spiritually speaking as we have said only a converted Primate could do this, and also as we have said only in a nation spiritually prepared, and spiritually awakened could such a Reformation take place.

Without the divorce there would have been no Reformation, which is not at all the same thing as to say that there was nothing to the Reformation but the divorce.

The New Cambridge Modern History G.R. Elton p. 229

We can only account for the Reformation in England by recognizing that there was a movement of God taking place, and a large groundswell of desire and longing for spiritual truth, an appetite for the Word of God, a spirit of repentance that cried out for the Gospel of Grace. This powerful force was building up like the waters behind a great dam. That dam was Henry VIII and the political and church establishment of the day. When they gave way, the waters flowed out freely.

One other important element of introduction is needed if we are to rightly understand the role of Thomas Cranmer in the English Reformation.

We need to grasp how those who were placed in positions of service to the state, viewed their role and responsibilities.

G.R.S. Cox's comments on this in one of the Puritan and Reformed Study papers given at the Westminster Conference 30 or more years ago.

Concerning the charge of hypocrisy in the case of those who held office in the 16th century State.

Cranmer was not alone in believing that, compared to the service of God and the State – usually linked in so few words and in the same breath – the claims of individual conscience one of no account. Thus a Minister of State remained in office until relieved of it by the King himself. Like today's civil servant he had to carry out official policy with no more choice than a man has today in the payment of his rates. Hence we find the same men in office under Henry VIII and Edward VI, under Mary and Elizabeth. Even so upright a man as Sir Thomas More remained Lord Chancellor while Henry was seeking his annulment from Catherine of Aragon – a measure which More abhorred. (It should be said in Henry's favour that he never forced his ministers to carry out what they disliked. More was not commanded to deal with the annulment, Gardiner did that. Other cases could be cited.) This principle was likewise applied to the Church when the King became its Supreme Head. Bishops, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, gave effect to legislation whatever its character. Heath, afterwards Mary's Chancellor, Tunstall, Day, Thirby and other Roman Catholics administered the First Act of Uniformity, and that action involved at least as greater sacrifice of conscience as Cranmer was required to make under Henry VIII, and he held far higher views that they didn't of the duty of subjects to their King.

We need to know this, if we are to understand some of Cranmer's actions, and apparent compromises.

With this further background to the times and circumstances in which Cranmer lived let us now proceed. to look at Cranmer's life.

(Let us first just remind ourselves in passing of emphasize the massive spiritual and moral benefits which arose out of the English Reformation not only here in Britain but far beyond these shores.

The English Bible, the Sunday School Movement, the development of general education, the freeing of slaves, the massive improvement in social conditions in the succeeding centuries, the Overseas Missionary Movement etc. etc.)

Tyndale with his dying breath famously prayed, "*Lord open the King of England's eyes.*" Thomas Cranmer humanly speaking brought about that opening of the King's eyes which in turn caused the king to give the order that the so-called Chained Bible, much of it Tyndale's work, was placed in every cathedral and parish church of the land.

Some would give Cranmer the title, "The Maker of the English Reformation", but we also know that he almost destroyed it by his temporary recantation's and only saved it ultimately with his dying breath.

Some of Cranmer's actions and interactions have been criticized and maligned, but he was not a naturally heroic type, temperamentally he was a quiet studious man but necessity thrust him into a position of great prominence and vulnerability, a position that laid upon him tremendous demands and put him into a position of great danger calling for constant courage, wisdom and nerve.

He had to contend with a forceful and as we have seen at times unpredictable and despotic King, he had to deal with a bigoted Queen and self- interested parties, and at times unprincipled politicians. He stood between the medieval world and the modern world, a task which was extremely demanding.

He has been called an intriguer and a place-seeker, but he was neither though he continually had to deal with both types of men. He was called from obscurity to prominence to serve the will of an arrogant despot, but once given his position he knew well the dignity that it demanded the honour that belonged to it and the responsibility that was its price.

Brief biographies Thomas Cranmer R.G. Martin pp.4-5

Cranmer's Origins

Cranmer's origins were humble enough; his father was the holder of a small estate in Nottinghamshire which with others in the same area belong ultimately to the Crown. His parents were Thomas and Agnes Cranmer of Aslacton. Thomas was one of three sons, the first John, inherited the family estate, John and Thomas went into the Church. Thomas Cranmer was born 1489 and eventually went up to Cambridge 1503 attending Jesus College, during this time the college was coming under the influence of the Renaissance, or the New Learning as it was commonly called. John Fisher - later Bishop of Rochester, was in 1502 made vice - Chancellor of the University, and under him the Lady Margaret Chair of Divinity was established; preaching in the vernacular tongue was instituted for the University Sermon, while the greatest scholar of the age, Erasmus of Rotterdam, was appointed Lady Margaret Professor.

On completion of his studies Cranmer was made Fellow of Jesus College. That is, he was now a lecturer in the University.

At the same time, he married it seems the daughter the landlord of the Dolphin Inn. This may have seemed a strange course of action at that time. That a man in Cranmer's position should have married one who was apparently beneath him in social status has puzzled many. Some have rightly observed that this shows the integrity of Cranmer's character as others in that time would have made the young woman their mistress and said nothing of it. For Cranmer it meant the resigning of his fellowship, as married men were not allowed to hold such fellowships. As it turned out his wife died a year later and he was immediately reappointed to his former position.

He threw himself into the new movement which Fisher and Erasmus has established in the University. At this time Erasmus's New Testament of 1516 was being produced and Luther's 95 theses were now available to be read. Cranmer began at this time to engage in the study of Scripture as never before. We do not know at which point he was converted but probably at this period. We do know that at this time he began privately to pray for the abolition of the papal power in England. Being a quiet and reserved individual though, he avoided any open expression of these views. No one at this time had the slightest suspicion in regard to his Roman Catholic orthodoxy. Cranmer never embraced new ideas quickly. He was known for his slowness in reading. He never took on any opinions without engaging in major reflection and consideration. It was said of him that new ideas won their way into his mind with painful, hesitant steps; and were only adopted after years of mature reflection. Cranmer could always see in any argument both sides of the question. He never possessed the burning zeal which blinds

men to all aspects of truth except one and enables them to go forward in the sublime confidence that they themselves entirely right and their opponents are entirely wrong.

Henry VIII and the divorce question

It was the desire of Henry VIII for a son and heir that led to Cranmer's eventual appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury. Catherine of Aragon was older than Henry had borne him a daughter, Mary, but there was no prospect of her having any other children. Henry consequently desperate for a son became genuinely worried that his marrying of his deceased brother's wife was contrary to the Scriptures in Leviticus which seemed to condemn such an action. He therefore applied Pope Clement VII for a bill of divorce. Clement was unwilling to deny Henry his request, because Henry himself had only recently written his famous defence of Roman Catholic Doctrine. The Pope was also on the horns of a dilemma because he did not want to fall out of favour with the Emperor, Catherine's uncle, Charles V who had already attacked the city of Rome and held him effectively as a prisoner in the Castle of St. Angelo. The Pope sidestepped making a decision leaving it to Cardinal Woolsey. Woolsey also prevaricated fearing for his position.

Cranmer's famous suggestion

In the Providence of God two of the King's officers, his almoner and his secretary, discussed the question with their friend Thomas Cranmer the University professor. Cranmer suggested to them that the matter might be referred to University theologians to make a decision upon. This he reminded the officers had been done before when difficult issues had arisen. Delighted with this suggestion the officers immediately reported it to the King.

Henry sent for Dr. Cranmer and proceedings were set in motion to seek an answer from the University professors.

In the meantime it became known that Anne Boleyn was pregnant and so it became urgent to make sure that the child to be born was born legitimate.

The See of Canterbury had recently fallen vacant by the death of Wareham. Cranmer was appointed and his successor, and it is said that Henry by threatening to withhold the first-fruits of English benefices from the papal coffers, secured Pope Clement's authority for the appointment.

The outcome of all this was that at an archiepiscopal court held at Dunstable in May 1533, the marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was declared void, and five days later at Lambeth the King married Anne Boleyn. About three months later the Princess Elizabeth was born under whose reign in later years the break with Rome was finally secured.

Cranmer's part in the divorce proceedings has brought upon him much criticism; it has frequently been said that he was merely a pawn of the King. It is much nearer to the truth to recognize the Cranmer had come to be convinced of the truth of Scripture and the need for reformation. He was also thoroughly aware that the country was ripe and ready for such a spiritual revival. Grasping that the marriage issue was key to the overthrowing of the power of the papacy in England, Cranmer grasped this opportunity to set the nation free.

Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury

When Cranmer came to Canterbury in 1533 he became virtually at that point the leader of the English Reformation. During a visitation of the diocese of Gloucester he examined 311 clergymen. Of these he found 171 could not repeat the 10 Commandments in English, 10 could not say the Lord's Prayer, 27 did not know its author, 30 were ignorant of where it was to be found; 62 were absentee bishops or parsons. This state of affairs he discovered was not exceptional throughout the country. He realised that if true religion in England was to be saved, radical reformation must take place.

Cramer was undoubtedly the man for the hour. He was clearly led of God to see that two main issues needed to be addressed.

1. One was the making of the Scriptures available in English, and seeing to it that they were made widely available for all to read that could read.

We might add in passing that the teaching of reading became an important priority and issue in the later Reformation period, leading on to the concept of universal education

2. Cranmer's second priority was to ensure that all the services of the English church were in the English language. He achieved this of course through The Book of Common Prayer. (Of this whatever we may say as Free Churchmen, aware that many of the Puritans wished for greater reform of the Prayer Book, and many refused to have its use imposed upon them, and hence were ejected from the church in 1662). None can but agree that its introduction was vastly superior to what had gone before. Even as Free Churchmen we can acknowledge the many good things in The Book of Common Prayer. Even Matthew Henry had to rebuke a fellow minister in his day for criticizing it too heavily, pointing out its many excellent features.

Cranmer himself sought the advice of Martin Bucer in its production.

R.G. Martin says:

He set himself to make a worship book for Englishmen, Cranmer learned, borrowed, and adapted from various sources, but "whatever he touched he adorned. Under his hands the rudest and simplest of prayers assumed perfection of form and expression and grew into one of the finest monuments of sacred literary art."

The services which he compiled all helped to make more surely the English people, the people of the Book, and to establish its message in the life of the nation. "It was based as a whole on the time – honoured services of the monks which were now adapted for the common people; devotion was for all, not a select few. All were invited to worship twice a day; and the Scriptures figured largely here. The Psalms were to be read through in a month by the congregation itself; a portion from each Testament was read to them at each service

England had known nothing on this scale before. People were still free to browse at large and read where they pleased, but also selections were made and brought to their attention. The Book of Common Prayer drilled the worshipers to appreciate the finest points of the Bible, and did its work so well that even the parish churches of today still echo to the words of the Great Bible printed under Edward VI. (1948)

W.T. Whiteley quoted by R.G. Martin p. 26

Cranmer at the time of Queen Mary

Queen Mary's intention of becoming Queen was to reverse the Reformation. By this time, he had been Archbishop of Canterbury for 20 years. As a loyal subjects of the Crown he swore allegiance to the new Queen. We have already tried to explain this but Cranmer like so many others at his time believed that they had duty to obey kings and governors whom they believed to have been appointed by God. Voluntary resignation of an office on the ground that the holder's conscience could not put up with its duties was at that time a thing unknown. Unless a ruler desired to relieve a minister from official office, that individual was bound to retain the position; they had little voice in the matter themselves.

In the year following accession Mary once again submitted England to the sovereignty of Rome and Cranmer and many others were placed under arrest. That then began three years of persecution.

We might note that until the Pope gave Mary leave to act she did nothing. At last orders came from Rome to degrade Cranmer from his office, and at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford he was stripped of his clerical robes and handed over to the civil power for execution.

Cranmer as was his nature then went through a terrible period of indecision. As you noted Cranmer did not come to decisions quickly and could always see both sides of the argument. The question now was after all, Mary right and he in the wrong, tormented his mind.

In all he made six recantations of his Protestant views. He was however still kept in prison for Mary and her advisors still saw him as a dangerous individual.

His recantations did not save him; neither did he ever think that they would. They never were made to save his own skin, his chief aim at all times was that truth and right might prevail.

At last he was ordered to be burned at Oxford in March 21 1556. He was taken to St. Mary's Church Oxford to listen to the sermon there, and when prayers for the condemned were finished he was to stand up and read what was to be his seventh recantation. However as is widely known when he did so stand up he withdrew all his previous six recantations and declared his thoroughly Protestant and Reformed convictions.

I renounce all things written with this hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart. As for the Pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine....

He got no further; a riot broke out: "stop the heretic's mouth!" was the cry. They dragged him from the church to the stake and as the flames leapt around him he held out his right hand and cried, *this hand has offended*, and held it there till he was burnt to ashes. In the last recantation, he not only saved his reputation, but far more importantly and he knew it he had saved the Reformation in England.

Mary might have silenced him, but too many had heard his declaration in favour of the Reformation. His death at the stake, in truth was a most significant factor in the confirmation and establishing of the Reformation here in England. Those who knew him well and understood him well knew what his death signified.

The character and principles of Cranmer

These final comments are taken from Approaches to Reformation of the Church. Westminster Conference Papers 1965. Paper by G.S.R. Cox. Vicar of Ross on Wye, Herefordshire.

What can we say of the chief English Reformer? Was he "an amiable and successful scholar" but "and irresolute and ineffective Archbishop whose character degenerated year-by-year under the strain which his responsibilities imposed?"

1. He was for one thing amazingly loyal to his friends both in private and public. He alone dared to plead to the King for Anne Boleyn, For Thomas More, for John Fisher, for the Princes Mary, and for Thomas Cromwell, when all around were disassociating themselves from the accused with maximum speed and condemning their wickedness most vociferously.

2. His private letters to Cromwell were packed with requests, it is true, but they were never for himself, always for others, and this same lack of covetousness showed itself in all his financial dealings. He gained not one penny from the dissolution of the monasteries and other Reformation plunder. And he complained more than once that his financial state as an Archbishop was far worse than when he had been a university don.

3. That he was without guile and utterly sincere show not only by the trust Henry placed in him, and by the testimony of many but above all by his behaviour during the various plots against him.

4. His theological learning was proverbial, and surely another title to Henry's favour, for the king himself was no mean scholar. "For at all times when the King's Majesty would be resolved in any doubt or question he would send word to my Lord Cranmer overnight, and by the next day the king should have in writing brief notes of the doctor's mind, as well divines as lawyers, both ancient old and new, with the conclusion of his own mind. He.... Would advise the king of more in one day than all the learned men could do in a month."

5. He has been accused of unnecessary subservience to the monarch, although to say this is surely to forget both the nature of the king and of the century. His early schooling could be somewhat to blame, as could his theological principles, while the charge that he was a traitor to reform because he was present at the trials of Frith and others surely is to assume that he had come to a reformed position – and concealed it! – Far earlier than at all can be proved. It always seems very unfair to blame a man in the midst of the hurly-burly of government for not seeing the future as clearly as we can see it now. To criticize Cranmer, as some do for not behaving as if from the outset of his work he had a clear vision not only of his First and Second Prayer Books, but even a third, before his eyes, is to betray one's own immaturity as a scholar, to say nothing stronger.

6. That he was more lenient to Romanists he himself explained thus, "What will ye have me do to him that is not yet come to the truth of the Gospel.... Severity, cruel behaviour? I take not this as a way to allure men to embrace the doctrine of the Gospel." But let an enemy sum him up. "He had in his favour a dignified presence, with a semblance of goodness, considerable reputation for learning, and manners so courteous, kindly and pleasant that he seemed like an old friend to those he encountered for the first time. He gave signs of modesty, seriousness and application." (Cox does not identify this enemy)

7. And what were his basic principles? Apart from the two we have noted above, I think that Cranmer's supposed confusions and contradictions can on the basis of Occam's Razor be explained by just two verses of Scripture:

1. Romans 13:1 and following, "The powers that be are ordained of God".... The king was the divinely appointed ruler, and he was therefore to be implicitly obeyed. (Article 37 of the Church of England). Only at the end did Cranmer see in fact that Thomas More had been right and that the individual conscience had a more final authority than the public ruler but his hesitation in struggling through to this belief showed how strongly he had held the other and explains much that is otherwise difficult for us to understand.

2. *Second Peter 1:20. "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." In other words, Cranmer believed most earnestly in the corporate nature of the Church, and of the duty of the individual when necessary to submit to the judgment of the body. He expressed his view very fully in the Preface on Ceremonies in the Book of Common Prayer, but we quote from Article 20, "The Church hath power to decree rites and ceremonies..." And Article 34, Whosoever through his private judgment, willingly, and purposely, doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by, common authority, ought to be rebuked openly. As he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of them Magistrate and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren."*

This may well explain his determination against some of the Reformers who had as yet gone further than himself, for they seem to set themselves individually above the Church, and Cranmer had seen for himself in Germany the excesses of Anabaptistry to which this could lead.

Concluding Remarks

Two final difficulties faced us all in the examination of characters from another age, the twin difficulties of atmosphere and prejudice.

a. Let Pollard speak here, "Cranmer has been termed a most mysterious figure in the English Reformation. The obscurity is not in his character but in the atmosphere which he breathed, and atmosphere is the most difficult of all things to re-create. As a rule, there are no materials for it. To the people who live in it a political or religious atmosphere is a familiar thing which needs no explanation and therefore is not recorded in documents. Then the atmosphere changes, and can only be recalled to posterity by an observation and reflexion compared with which the mere ascertainment of facts is easy."

We must make the effort to understand the atmosphere of the 16th century, and thus when faced with an action or inaction which we tend to condemn we must first seek an honest explanation before labelling the persona rogue or a knave.

b. This leads straight into our other difficulty, that of prejudice. We are all guilty here, and it will not save us to conjugate the verb, "he is prejudiced, you are obstinate, I am clear-sighted". Let us at least be aware of our prejudices. Many of our present – day concepts and beliefs are the direct fruit of this period and therefore of our English Reformation. (Take for instance our ideas of the freedom and duty of individual private judgment.) We must not give way to the temptation to judge Cranmer as if he were a mid- twentieth century Englishman. Brought up as, educated by, and for most of his life surrounded by, convinced or at least determined Papalists and Scholastics, he must be judged in his own era, and by his own biblical principles first, and only then by other biblical principles which we feel he may not have grasped.

"Nothing except Scripture for salvation, nothing against Scripture for edification". All right! But, Romans 13 and the Supremacy of the Sovereign, and Second Peter 1 and the Primacy of the Church. Could this man have been an evangelical Christian? He came at the last to the Sovereignty – under God and his Word – of the Individual Conscience, and so he came at the last to the stake for that belief. Let us therefore remind ourselves that he was truly such a man of God as we might covet to be, by closing with perhaps his most moving memorial, the prayer which he wrote in the night he prepared to die, and which he prayed before his final recantation and martyrdom:

O Father of heaven: O Son of God, Redeemer of the World; O Holy Ghost, proceeding from them both three persons and one God, have mercy on me most wretched caitiff (base, despicable fellow) and miserable sinner. I could of offended both heaven and earth, and more grievously than any tongue can express, whither should I fly for succour? To heaven I may be ashamed to lift up mine eyes; and in earth I find no refuge. What shall I then do; shall I despair? God forbid. O good God, thou art merciful, and refusest none that come to thee for succour. To thee therefore do I run. To thee do I humble myself saying, O Lord God, my sins be great, yet have mercy upon me for thy great mercy. O God the Son, thou wast not made man, this great mystery was not wrought for few or small offenses. Nor thou didst give thy Son unto death O God the Father, for our little and small sins only, but for all the greatest sins of the world; so that the sinner return unto thee with a penitent heart, as I do here at this present. Wherefore have mercy upon me, O Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. For although my sins be great, yet thy mercy is greater. I crave nothing O Lord, for mine own merits, but for thy name's sake that it may be glorified thereby; and for thy dear Son Jesus Christ's sake."