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BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES No. 1

THOMAS CRANMER

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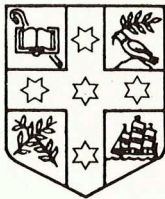
R. G. MARTIN

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THOMAS CRANMER
ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

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THOMAS CRANMER

INTRODUCTION

THE apple of his eye, the skin of my teeth, casting pearls before swine, the handwriting on the wall—such phrases and a score like them have become the common idioms of English speech; we use them almost every day, yet few recognize their origin in a book which we owe to the dedicated lives of two men. “This Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords,” is Britain’s most priceless possession thanks to one who endured an exile’s life and a martyr’s death in the Low Countries and to one who for his faith perished in the flames at Oxford.

The Sunday-school movement, the development of general education, the freeing

of the slaves, the liberation of the worker and the child, the general improvement in social conditions at home, the foreign missionary enterprise, bringing life and health and peace to backward peoples overseas—all have their origin in some pioneer's knowledge of the Bible. And for all this we have to thank William Tyndale (whose story is told elsewhere in this series) and Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. He brought Tyndale's work to a great fulfilment; the translator's dying prayer, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes," was answered two years later in Thomas Cromwell's *Injunctions*, which Cranmer had urged and sponsored, whereby the Bible in the mother tongue was first made available to the English people. To Cranmer may justly be given the title of the Maker of the English Reformation—yet he nearly destroyed it and only saved it with his dying breath. He had to contend with a

forceful king, a ruthless regent, a bigoted queen; to plunge into politics when the study and the sanctuary were his sphere. He stood between the old and the new, and has in consequence been derided by the upholders of both; he has been called an intriguer and a place-seeker, but he was neither, though he had constantly to deal with both types of men. He was called from obscurity to prominence to serve the whim 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.

EARLY LIFE

Cranmer's origins were humble enough; his father was the holder of a small estate in Nottinghamshire which, with others in the

district, belonged to the Crown, though he was never of sufficient standing to be appointed as one of the royal representatives in the county. "I take it", said the future Archbishop in after years, "that none of us all here, being gentlemen born, but had our beginnings that way from a low and base parentage." He was one of three sons born to Thomas and Agnes Cranmer of Aslacton; John, the eldest, in course of time succeeded to the family estate and ended his days in rural obscurity; Thomas (b. 1489) and Edmund, since the family was unable to support them, were as a matter of course in due season quartered on the Church. Since a clerical career demanded a clerical education, Thomas as a youth was sent to school with a "marvellous, severe and cruel schoolmaster, a rude parish clerk in that barbarous time", from which record it seems that some local grammar school first had the training of the

future Archbishop till in 1503 or 1504 he entered the college recently founded on the site of the former nunnery of St. Rhadegunde at Cambridge, now known as Jesus College. The University had not yet been affected by the New Learning, the dry bones of medieval scholasticism were still very dry, and young Cranmer was "nozzled in the grossest kind of sophistry, logic, philosophy, moral and natural (not in the text of the old philosophers, but chiefly in the dark riddles of Duns and other subtle questionists), to his age of twenty-two years". But the day of better things was at hand: the distinguished 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 upon the greatest scholar of the age, Eras-

mus of Rotterdam, the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred.

A few years later, by which time Cranmer had been made a Fellow of Jesus, Erasmus—as the Lady Margaret Professor—began his lectures which had so marked an effect on the Cambridge of his day, and through her sons on the life of the whole country. Marriage with the maid at the Dolphin Inn deprived Cranmer for a time of his Fellowship; though on her death a year later, he was immediately reappointed—a sign that his character and intellectual gifts were held in high esteem by those who knew him. Now he threw himself into the new movement which Fisher and Erasmus had inaugurated; the publication of Erasmus' New Testament in 1516 and of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in the following year drove the future holder of the See of Canterbury to the study of the Scriptures as never before.

As the years passed he became more and more affected by their influence upon him, and about 1525 "he began in private to pray for the abolition of the papal power in England. But he avoided any open expression of his views, for he does not appear to have incurred any suspicion with regard to his orthodoxy. Naturally of a reticent and unaggressive disposition, he was the very reverse of an enthusiast; his slowness in reading was characteristic. New ideas won their way to his mind with painful, hesitant steps; and they were only adopted after years of mature reflexion. His caution bordered on timidity, not so much from moral cowardice as from an intellectual perception of both sides to 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 are entirely right and their op-

ponents entirely wrong. His career was that of a conservative reformer, reluctantly abandoning ground which he felt to be untenable, but somewhat doubtful of the security of his next foothold".¹

He was still occupied with obscure academic work when he was sent for to settle a matter which helped to change the whole course of English History.

THE DIVORCE QUESTION

The desire of Henry VIII for a son was the most powerful force that led to Cranmer's eventual appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury. Katharine of Aragon had borne him a daughter, Mary, but there was no prospect of other children by her, and Henry in consequence cast about for reasons

¹ A. F. Pollard, *Thomas Cranmer and the English Reformation*.

for divorcing her. He applied to the Pope, but Clement VII was in an awkward position. In himself he was not unwilling to accede to the request of a king who had only a few years before proved himself such a champion of Papal prerogatives; but Clement was on the horns of a dilemma. If he agreed to the divorce he would please Henry and immediately find himself confronted with an outraged Emperor, Katharine's uncle, Charles V, whose armies had already pillaged his city and shut him up as a prisoner in St. Angelo. As a result Clement temporized; a decision was delayed; Katharine's party in London hoped the affair would blow over, while Henry seemed to accept the situation and started on a royal progress through England. In the course of it two of his officers, his almoner and his secretary, two old friends of Cranmer, fell in with the Cambridge professor. Their talk

turned to the burning question of the hour, and Cranmer, confessing himself unlearned in the ways of the law, suggested that the matter be referred to university theologians. Such a suggestion, strange enough to-day, was in harmony with the customs of the time, for frequently the Universities had been appealed to for arbitration in contentious affairs. Henry was delighted with the idea and "commanded them to send for Dr. Cranmer. And so by and by being sent for, he came to the King's presence at Greenwich." Six months however elapsed before Oxford and Cambridge produced their verdict in Henry's favour, maintaining that the Pope had the legal and moral right to annul Henry's marriage with Katharine if he chose to exercise it. But Clement's position had become no easier with the passage of time; though he had great regard for Cranmer, who headed the deputation con-

veying the Universities' decision to Rome, it became more and more obvious that his final decision would be against the king. Two years went by in negotiations with the Curia, and meanwhile in England Henry and his advisers were busy undermining the papal power so that when the contrary verdict at last was known, its effect in popular sympathy against the king would be largely nullified. In January, 1533, Henry knew that Anne Boleyn was pregnant; by hook or by crook her character must be saved and her issue made legitimate. Fortunately the See of Canterbury had recently fallen vacant by the death of Wareham; immediately Henry took steps to have Cranmer succeed him, and by threatening to withhold the first-fruits of English benefices from the papal coffers secured Clement's authority for the appointment, while at the same time he forced Parliament to forbid appeals to Rome.

Everything was now in his favour; at an archiepiscopal court held at Dunstable in May the marriage between Henry and Katharine was declared void, and five days later at Lambeth the king's marriage with Anne Boleyn was pronounced valid. On June 1 she was crowned Queen in Westminster Abbey, and three months later gave birth to the Princess Elizabeth, under whose rule the break with Rome was finally to be assured.

Cranmer's part in the divorce proceedings has brought upon him much obloquy; it has been frequently urged that he was merely a pawn of the king. It is nearer to the truth to recognize that in the quiet seclusion of Cambridge he had become convinced against the papacy and an adherent of the reform movement which was gradually seeping through English life, and that when the issue arose, he accepted the matter of the royal marriage

as an occasion which could be used to throw off the papal yoke and enable real religion and piety to develop among the English people unhindered by Roman claims and pretensions. It is commonly asserted that England became Protestant at the whim of Henry VIII's matrimonial adventures; the truth is otherwise. For twenty years before the marriage question was raised the reform movement had been growing, and the liberal ideas of Erasmus and the teachers of the New Learning had been finding English soil in which they could grow and ripen. The influence of Wycliffe had not utterly died out; the spirit of nationalism had for a hundred years been struggling to express itself. With all these factors Cranmer was by training sympathetic, so that when the psychological moment arrived he of all men was most suited and best fitted to express them in a practical situation.

CRANMER AND THE BIBLE

Thus when he came to Canterbury in 1533 he became virtually the leader of the English reform movement. During a visitation of the diocese of Gloucester he examined 311 clergy. Of these he found that 171 could not repeat the Ten 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 never resided in their parishes at all. Nor was this state of affairs exceptional. If religion in England was to be saved in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, a man of undoubted piety and ability must be found to save it. In Cranmer England found that man, and by two signal acts he wrought its salvation.

As early as 1525 William Tyndale had completed his translation of the New Testament, but his work had been proscribed and burnt not so much because of the errors which it certainly contained as because of the approaches it made to the truth. "It was shocking", writes Professor Pollard, "to a generation which had believed that Jesus Christ had endowed the Church with the institutions, rites, and ceremonies it possessed in the sixteenth century to find *presbuteros* translated 'elder' instead of 'priest', *ecclesia* as 'congregation' instead of 'church', *metanoein* as 'repent' instead of 'do penance', and *agape* as 'love' instead of 'charity'." Nevertheless despite the opposition which greeted the translation of the Scriptures, Cranmer in 1534 induced Convocation to petition for the authorization of an English version, and Thomas Cromwell, the King's Chancellor, persuaded Coverdale to make

his translation in the following year. Compared with Tyndale's version the Coverdale edition was lacking in all claims to literary beauty and form, and in 1537 yet another version, by John Rogers, was submitted to Cromwell for the royal approval. This Book, commonly known as Matthew's Bible, purported to be the work of one Thomas Matthews; but the initials "J.R." at the end of the preface suggest that Tyndale's friend, John Rogers, was hiding under a pseudonym. Rogers' version was almost entirely that of Tyndale for the New Testament and for the Old as far as 2 Chronicles; the remainder was chiefly a borrowing from Coverdale. So delighted was Cranmer with the work and with Cromwell's acceptance of it that he wrote in glowing terms to the Chancellor:

"My very singular good lord, in my most hearty wise I commend me unto your lord-

ship. And whereas I understand that your lordship, at my request, hath not only exhibited the bible which I sent unto you, to the king's majesty, but also hath obtained of his grace that the same shall be allowed by his authority to be brought and read within this realm: my lord, for this your pain taken in this behalf, I give unto you my most hearty thanks; and I doubt not but that hereby such fruit of good knowledge shall ensue that it shall well appear hereafter what high and acceptable service you have done unto God and the king; which shall so much redound to your honour that, besides God's reward, you shall obtain perpetual memory for the same within this realm."

There followed the Royal Proclamation authorizing: "Ye shall provyde one boke of the whole Bible of the largest volume in Englyshe and the same sett up in some convenient place within the said Church that

ye have cure of, whereas your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and rede yt."

So the work of the heretic who had been burned less than two years previously received royal approbation at the instance of a zealous archbishop whose motives, unlike those of king and chancellor, were unmixed with any suggestions of worldly policy. Thus, in John Richard Green's words: "Sunday after Sunday, day after day, the crowds that gathered round the Bibles in the nave of St. Paul's (or in the parish churches of the country) were leavened with new literature. All the noblest teachings of scripture were flung broadcast over minds unoccupied for the most part with any rival learning." The Version issued however in 1539 was considered too advanced and in the following year an expurgated edition was printed in Paris and issued in England, known as Cran-

mer's Bible, on account of the preface which he wrote for it.

CRANMER AND THE PRAYER BOOK

But Cranmer's title to fame does not rest solely on his work for the Bible in English; it was his privilege to give not only Anglicanism but to the whole English-speaking world what George Borrow called "England's glorious liturgy". Uniformity was the natural outcome of the separation from Rome; diversity in worship was a luxury which the days could neither understand nor afford. The First Prayer Book of Edward VI (1549) was a compromise and in the nature of the case it had to be; it tried to satisfy those whose sympathies were Catholic and those who had the more eagerly embraced the newer interpretation of the Faith. It failed in both these objects. The Catholic

party was brilliantly led by Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, who claimed that in essential doctrine it was a truly catholic book—a judgment which strengthened the hands of more extreme Protestants in their demands for a more thorough reformation. Then, during the summer of 1549 Cranmer came closely under the influence of Martin Bucer who has been called “the third theologian” of the Reformation. Bucer came to this country in 1549 at Cranmer’s personal invitation and he spent some months at the Archbishop’s palace at Croydon before going to Cambridge as regius professor of divinity. Bucer at Cranmer’s request wrote a *censura*, or criticism of the new Prayer Book, particularly of the order for Holy Communion, and the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI issued on royal authority in 1552 shows how much Cranmer and the committee responsible relied on Bucer’s

advice. One example must suffice. Three years later a revised edition, known as the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI, was issued. Here the influence of the Swiss Reformers over against that of Lutheranism was particularly marked in the form of words used at the Communion Service in the administration of the bread. According to the First Book the words had read, “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.” In the Second Book they were amended to: “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.” (In the Book of 1559 the two Orders were combined.) At the time of the revision of 1552 there were some who wished that the Communion should no longer be received kneeling, but Cranmer withstood them, preserving the attitude of devotion as

the vehicle of the spirit and retained the devotional style of the prayers of the medieval Church which had characterized his First Book.

Amid the fierce contentions and rivalries of the age in which it was produced, the Book of Common Prayer gave to the Anglican Church unity, strength, and a way to the hearts of men such as no other church could claim. That Anglicanism survived in the sixteenth century, emerged from the tumults of the Puritan period, was in any way saved from extinction in the decadent era before Whitfield and Wesley, and has succeeded in bringing generations of Englishmen and women nearer to God, has been due in large measure to the exquisite charm of her liturgy and that was mainly the work of Thomas Cranmer.

As he set himself to make a worship book for Englishmen, Cranmer learned, bor-

rowed, 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 a 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 worshippers to appreciate the finest parts of the Bible, and it did its work so well that in this reign of George VI the parish churches still echo the words of the Great Bible printed under Edward VI" (*W. T. Whitley*).

CRANMER AND MARY

The Bible and the Prayer Book made Cranmer the avowed exponent of the Reformation movement in England, but he came within an ace of destroying it altogether. For twenty years he had been Archbishop when Catholic Mary succeeded her Protestant brother, Edward VI. As a loyal subject he swore allegiance to the new queen. For this he has been execrated by his foes and doubted by his friends in all later ages. For a

convinced Protestant to continue in office as Catholic Archbishop savours to modern minds of the tactics of the notorious Vicar of Bray. That he continued to say Mass under Henry VIII and again in the Catholic reaction under Mary does not permit of doubt. But Cranmer's official position, as Pollard reminds us, "and the constitutional views of his age afford a justification which cannot be pleaded to-day by private persons. Voluntary resignation of an office on the ground that the holder's conscience could not put up with its duties was then a thing unknown. Men believed with a fervour never since equalled that next to the service of God they were created to serve the State, while the claims of individual conscience were as dust in the balance. Unless the King desired to relieve a minister of office, that minister was bound to retain it; he had little voice in the matter himself."

In the year following her accession Mary submitted England again to the sovereignty of the Pope and had Cranmer placed under arrest. Then began those three years when the reformers and their followers were hounded to death in a prolonged fit of reactionary frenzy. But until the Pope gave leave Mary dare not allow harm to come to her Archbishop. At last the orders from Rome arrived degrading Cranmer from his office, and at Christ Church Cathedral at Oxford he was stripped of his robes and handed over to the civil power for execution. A terrible period of indecision and doubt awaited him. Cranmer was of that select company who are able to see more than one side of a question; he was able to recognize that Mary in her zeal for Catholicism was not wholly wrong. So he came to doubt whether he had ever been right himself, and such doubts, stimulated by pressure,

caused him to make six recantations in which he retracted all that he had ever said or done in the cause of reform. This was more than Mary and the Catholic party had ever dared to hope; here was the end of the Reformation in England; when the leader went back on everything he had done for twenty years, it would not be difficult to dispose of the followers. The great reforming Archbishop had recanted in abject and unmistakable terms; the Reformation was a thing of the past; once more England was back unconditionally in the arms of the papacy! But Cranmer was much too dangerous to be left alive; his recantations did not save him; nor did he ever imagine that they would; they had not been made to save his skin, but to save the truth as he had come to see it. The fires were ordered in Oxford for March 21, 1556.

THE SAVIOUR OF THE REFORMATION

Cranmer's sixth recantation had been practically the death-blow to reform in England; now in the days and nights that passed before his execution another thought—in line with all the past workings of his mind—began to dawn upon him: could a religious system which involved such refinement of cruelty as that to which he had been subjected be just or true or stand four-square with the New Testament? The light was burning again in that troubled soul; and the hope was reborn that he might yet strike a blow for reform. On March 21 he was taken to Great St. Mary's Church to listen to the sermon, and when prayers for the condemned were finished he stood up to read his seventh recantation. He began with a moral and spiritual exhortation to his listeners and then broke out in burning words to

demolish his six previous recantations and to stand forth as the prophet and champion of reform. "I renounce all things written with this hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart. As for the Pope, I refuse (reject) 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 church to stake and as the flames leaped upward he held out his right hand and cried, "This hand hath offended," and held it there till it was burnt to ashes. In that last recantation Cranmer had not saved his life, but he had saved the Reformation. Mary might burn him, but too many had heard that masterly assertion of Reformation principles in Great St. Mary's for his previous recantations to have any real power. He died at the stake, but the work to which he had given his life—a reformed Church in

THOMAS CRANMER

England—had been sanctified with his death and bought with his blood. The fact that Cranmer's work has stood the test of time almost unchanged is evidence of the faithfulness with which he reflected the deepest feelings of the English people of his own and subsequent ages.

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