

The History and Legacy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*

By Robert Liedl

In 1563, England was stirred by the appearance of a book dedicated to the feigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth. From the halls of royalty to the humblest village, there was no level of English society that escaped the commotion aroused by the work. While the book was spurned by enemies of the English Reformation, it was met with the admiration and approval of many, including the Queen herself. So impressed was she with the work, that she ordered copies to be placed in the hands of every church and college official in the nation, and that a copy also be placed in every parish church for the use of all people.

The book immediately found extreme popularity. It served to fuel the zeal of church reformers and soon became a pillar of the Puritan movement and one of the most influential and enduring works produced in the period of the English Reformation. The author was John Foxe. His book came to be known as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

John Foxe was born [at Boston, Lincolnshire] in England in 1517. He became a university teacher at age 25; and, while teaching at Oxford as a devout and zealous Papist (Roman Catholic), his study of the scriptures eventually brought him under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and to a knowledge of the truth of the Gospel. His sufferings began quickly when, because of his outspoken, public profession of the truth of the Gospel, he was charged with heresy and expelled from the university (1545). Foxe became a tutor for the Lucy family of Warwickshire. Shortly after, he married Agnes Randall of Coventry, a woman who shared his views on life in Jesus Christ.

So intensely did Foxe investigate the errors of the Papists and the truths of the Gospel, that before he was 30 years of age, he had read all the Greek and Latin Church writings and had also become a master of the Hebrew language. Foxe was meticulous in his research, not satisfied to leave any stone unturned or any shadow of doubt in any area of inquiry. This quality of research would eventually provide the foundation for the enduring reliability and veracity of his work on the history of the Christian martyrs.

During the four-year reign of Queen Mary, a staunch Roman Catholic who took the throne in 1553, 277 individuals were burned to death as heretics. Because of the intense persecution suffered under Queen Mary, Foxe was forced to flee his homeland and eventually took up residence in Switzerland. It was there in exile that he took up the monumental task of chronicling the known accounts of Christian martyrdom from the time of the early church to the bloody persecutions under Queen Mary.

Foxe earned a meager income while outside of England, but his chief labor was always his manuscript. He labored in this work for 11 years, writing every word of the thousand page text with his own hand. He carefully weighed the authority of every source and was painstakingly careful to ensure the accuracy of every account. With new material from home, he extended his chronicle through to Thomas Cranmer's death in 1556. Soon after, Protestant Elizabeth gained the throne of England, and Foxe returned to London with his family. [The manuscript was finally printed in 1563 as *The Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Days*.]

[Some have described John Foxe as a man of integrity and warmth who was often sought out as a spiritual counselor. His boldness in Christ gave him the courage to speak the truth before the great and the small. He won the friendship of Sir Francis Drake who read his book aloud on the western seas as he journeyed to the New World.]

Even following its original publication after his return to England, he continued to revise and improve subsequent editions. The desperate attempts of Papists to destroy the reputation of the book only served to drive Foxe to produce a history that was beyond reproach. The work took a great toll on Foxe's personal health from which he never recovered, but it was his life's crowning achievement. In 1587, after a long life of usefulness to his Lord, his soul was released from his withered body and promoted to glory.

Foxe's purpose in writing the book was not simply to provide an accurate account of Christians who had died for their faith; it was in fact far greater. His aim was to expose the errors and cruelties of the Papists and to promote the truths of the Reformation for which men were willing to suffer the most heinous treatment imaginable. They were willing by God's grace to endure hardship, torture, and death in their determination to be true to their Lord and the Gospel light that he was so mercifully shining on men at that pivotal point in church history. It has been said of Foxe's work that "no book ever gave such a wound to Popery."

It is moreover argued by some church historians today that Foxe had yet a further purpose for his writing. It is believed that Foxe deliberately traced the trail of Christian martyrdom from the realms of the Roman Empire to the shores of England in order to communicate to his countrymen his conviction that God had graciously and sovereignly determined to use the English people to serve His greater purposes of global redemption and to advance His Kingdom in the earth. It was precisely this vision that helped drive the zeal of the Puritan movement at the height of its influence in the 1600s. It has been accepted that in the centuries following its first publishing, no book apart from the Bible was more generally read by Englishmen; neither did any single volume besides the Bible have more of an influence in shaping the minds of Englishmen. Within a half century of Foxe's death, Puritans were setting out across the Atlantic with their English Bibles and copies of Foxe's book to establish an earthly expression of the kingdom of God in the New World.

Sadly, the power of the message that Foxe was attempting to convey in his work is lost in current popular versions which have been greatly abridged. Most only encompass about a quarter of the original text. These versions tend to focus on the details of the various martyrs' sufferings, but largely omit the explanations of the critical reformational truths for which the martyrs were willing to suffer and ultimately die.

In an introductory essay to an edition published in the 19th century, the essayist notes that there are three essential topics that the reader of the *Book of Martyrs* must be acquainted with: *firstly*, the sufficiency and authority of the Bible; *secondly*, the alleged authority of tradition and of the church; and *thirdly*, the right of private judgment. These issues were at the heart of the Reformation. The fact that in current editions these issues are seen as less important is further evidence that the foundations on which the Reformation were built are suffering serious neglect in the modern Protestant church and may be nearing danger of collapse.

In his honest and compassionate accounts of man's search for spiritual truth, and the persecution and death that accompanied that search, John Foxe etched a detailed picture of the English

Reformation that would have otherwise remained unknown. But more importantly, he has left the Christian faith of all ages a legacy of inspiration and courage.

An eminent church leader from the last century has stated that Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (in its unabridged form) "like a beacon, should be lighted up in every age as a warning to all posterity." While other things compete with Roman Catholicism as a threat to the church in our day, the truths that were so bravely fought for centuries ago must again be heralded by courageous men. May we pray that this light which shone so brilliantly into the darkness in the age of the Reformation would shine as brilliantly again in our times and that it would grow brighter and brighter until the full light of day!