

Introduction: The Reformer

By Shakespeare's classification Thomas Cranmer was one of those who have greatness thrust upon them. Neither by birth, training, connections, nor opportunity could he expect to play any great part in the affairs of church or nation. Born in 1489 at Aslockton in Nottinghamshire, the second son of a small squire he had little option but to seek a career in the ministry. His early education under a "marvellous severe and cruel schoolmaster"¹ was not helpful, for as a result "he lost much of that benefit of memory and audacity in his youth that by nature was given to him, which he could never recover".² But his natural ability could not be destroyed, and when he proceeded to Cambridge he graduated B.A. with sufficient distinction to be awarded a fellowship in Jesus College and to follow the more serious reading in divinity which this entailed.

From his election to a fellowship to his sudden translation from the university the story of Cranmer was the quiet one of progress in academic learning, status and reputation. An early marriage – he was not yet in orders – threatened to interrupt his career,³ for the statutes of the college did not allow married fellows. For a time Cranmer had to be content with a readership in Buckingham College (now Magdalene). But when his wife died in childbirth he was re-elected to his forfeited fellowship, and there were no further checks to his progress. He took his doctorate in divinity and for some years acted as examiner in the theological schools. He received and declined an invitation from Wolsey to serve in the newly founded Cardinal's College at Oxford. Already in the twenties he had that developed reputation as a scholar which would assure him of a minor eminence in his own sphere.

1. *Narratives of the Reformation*, pp. 238-239.

2. *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

The years at Cambridge hardly prepared Cranmer for the onerous duties to which he was to be called, but they determined the use to which he would put his new opportunities. As the contemporary narrative has it, he had been “nozzled in the grossest kind of sophistry”,⁴ and he himself recalls “an ignorant reader, whose scholar I was in Cambridge some forty years passed, who, when he came to any hard chapter which he well understood not, he would find some pretty toy to shift it off, and to skip over unto another chapter, which he could better skill of”.⁵ But he quickly came under the influence of the new learning, and perhaps from Colet, or more likely from Erasmus, he acquired a new respect for the Bible,⁶ and a taste for plain and simple exposition. His pursuits kept him well-informed in theological matters, and while he did not plunge hastily into Lutheran teaching, he could not ignore the doctrines for which Luther contended. Like all educated churchmen, he was also alive to the ecclesiastical abuses which Colet castigated so freely, and he seems to have come early to the conviction that no real progress would be possible until the power of Rome was broken.⁷ Fundamentally, Cranmer had not moved very far from what we might call an enlightened orthodoxy, but he came to a wider sphere of ecclesiastical service with very definite views of the Bible and the Papacy, a general if not very decided sympathy with some of Luther’s teaching, and the concern for an instructed faith.

By temperament, Cranmer would have been quite content to live out his days in the modest light of academic success. He had no desire for power or wealth. In reply to a later criticism of Cecil, he said quite honestly: “I am not so doted to set my mind upon things here, which neither I can carry away with me, nor tarry long with them.”⁸ Financially, indeed, a bishopric was no great attraction, for as he said in the same letter: “I took not half so much care for my living when I was a scholar of Cambridge, as I do at this present. For although I have now much more revenue, yet I have much more to do

4. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

6. *Narratives of the Reformation*, p. 219.

7. P.S., II, p. 327.

5. P.S., I, p. 305.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 437.

withal. ... And if I knew any bishop that were covetous, I would surely admonish him; but I know none, but all beggars.”⁹ Again, Cranmer had no great taste or aptitude for the ecclesiastical and political administration in which he was later to be enmeshed. He must have foreseen that his entry into the King’s service would involve preferment, but if he looked for a reward it was that of “some smaller living, that he might more quietly follow his book”.¹⁰ When he learned that the King had actually marked him out for the archbishopric, he felt “a great inability to such a promotion, and was very sorry to leave his study”.¹¹ At his examination he put it in this way: “There was never a man came more unwillingly to a bishoprick than I did to that,”¹² and there can be little or no doubt that he was telling the simple truth.

But although Cranmer was in every way fitted and prepared for a scholar’s life, fate or circumstances or Henry VIII or the devil or providence – however we like to view it – had apparently decided otherwise. It all came about from a chance encounter in the summer of 1529. The plague had visited Cambridge as it so often did, and Cranmer retired with two of his pupils to their house at Waltham in Essex. While they were there, the King made a twofold visit to the house. It was just after the last and most vexatious delay in the so-called divorce, when on July 23 Henry had expected Campeggio to find in favour of a dispensation to annul the marriage, but a fresh turn in the complicated European situation had caused him instead to adjourn for the vacation. Cranmer did not see the King in person. There was no reason why he should. But he had a meal with his two Cambridge friends, Gardiner and Fox, who were both employed in the business. To these two he dropped his quiet but in its own way revolutionary suggestion, that since the legality or otherwise of the marriage with Katherine of Aragon was an academic question it should be decided by a majority opinion of the appropriate faculties of the Christian universities. Judgment could then be given accordingly in the English ecclesiastical courts without waiting

9. P.S., II, p. 437.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

11. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

for Rome. Gardiner and Foxe had some doubts as to how Henry would receive the suggestion, so they took good care to throw the responsibility for it on Cranmer. But in his mood of exasperated frustration the King welcomed it with enthusiasm,¹³ and it was only a matter of months before Cranmer was summoned to the court.¹⁴ He did not at once abandon his academic career, but his days of scholarly seclusion were undoubtedly at an end.

In the King's service, Cranmer's first employment was entirely in relation to the divorce. His initial task was congenial enough. He simply had to state his own views of the question in writing as a basis for discussion and persuasion in the English universities. Cranmer's approach was purely academic and not in any sense personal. He believed that the marriage had in fact been invalid from the start. Henry had been permitted to marry his deceased brother's wife, but the Papacy had no authority at all to dispense against a clear ruling of Scripture. He not only stated this view but also defended it against the wit and eloquence of Reginald Pole, of whose book he had to admit that "in many things he satisfieth me very well".¹⁵ He was also committed with the task of arguing out the case in Cambridge, and in 1530 he was attached to an embassy to Rome with the particular duty of broaching the matter in foreign universities and discussing it with the Pope. Finally, in 1531 he became ambassador to the Imperial Court with the special task of making contact with the German Lutherans and if possible enlisting their support. The results of all this activity were very mixed. As concerns his mission he made no headway with either the Pope or the Emperor, but he had some success not only in Cambridge but also in several foreign universities, helped no doubt by royal pressure in the one case and appropriate rewards in the others. For himself, he, received the archdeaconry of Taunton from Henry, the high-sounding office of Penitentiary for England from the Papacy, and a second wife, the niece of the reformer Osiander, from Lutheran Germany.

13. Foxe, VIII, p. 8.

15. P.S., II, pp. 229 f.

14. *Narratives of the Reformation*, p. 242.

It was while Cranmer was still in Germany that Archbishop Warham died, and with unusual celerity Henry nominated his ambassador to the vacant office. Normally, of course, the revenues of vacant sees formed a useful addition for a while to the royal treasury. But in this case there was an obvious reason for haste. Henry had already carried through legislation which had brought his relation with the Papacy to snapping point. Before the break came, he wanted a properly recognized archbishop who could give definitive sentence in his matrimonial suit. The choice fell on Cranmer, partly because he had suggested the course of action which Henry was now following, partly because he was so transparently sincere in his advocacy of the cause, and partly because he was not the character to try to impose his own policies or ideas on his royal master. It was not a popular choice either with the contemporaries of Cranmer whom he had suddenly outstripped, or, as we have seen, with Cranmer himself. Gardiner in particular seems to have found it extremely unwelcome, no doubt because he would have fancied the archbishopric himself. His resistance to the later visitation of Cranmer makes it quite plain that he did not take at all kindly to the overlordship of his one-time inferior.¹⁶ But Cranmer himself did not want the office. He did everything in his power to avoid it, first prolonging his journey abroad, then trying to influence the King indirectly, and finally declaring quite plainly that he had scruples against the oath of loyalty to the Papacy.¹⁷ But Henry had made up his mind, and all the obstacles raised were quickly overcome. To deal with the conscientious objections Henry devised a legal proclamation of reservation, of which the most that can be said perhaps is that it is better than the more common concealed and mental reservation.¹⁸ Gardiner and others simply had to make the best of a situation which they could not alter. A judicious deployment of money ensured that the bulls came through with record expedition, and on March 30, 1533, Cranmer was installed in his new office.

His first duty as archbishop was to conclude the matrimonial suit which had first brought him into the royal service. This

16. Cf. P.S., II, pp. 304-305. 17. P.S., II, pp. 216-224. 18. P.S., II, p. 224.

did not take long. In accordance with the majority judgments of the universities the marriage was declared void in the archiepiscopal court. This was on April 23. Five days later the marriage between the King and Ann Boleyn was officially recognized and on September 10 Cranmer acted as sponsor for the baby Elizabeth. But the matrimonial difficulties of the King were not yet at an end and on three occasions the archbishop had to intervene again on Henry's behalf; first, to dissolve the marriage with Ann, then to break the unwelcome union with Anne of Cleves, and finally to report the infidelities of Katherine Howard.¹⁹ For his activities in this sphere he had ample justification in law and precedent, but Cranmer himself obviously felt the distastefulness of his work, especially in relation to Ann Boleyn.²⁰ Not even his warmest advocate can enthuse over this side of his activity. Perhaps the chief point in his favour is that he was always pressing for a reform of the canon law which made this type of adventure possible. But not unnaturally he could never overcome the innate hostility of the civil rulers, who had no great desire for a stricter ecclesiastical discipline.

In the wider sphere of ecclesiastical affairs, Cranmer succeeded to a situation which had changed vastly since his first encounter with Henry. Acting conjointly, the King and Parliament had not only broken the various links with Rome, but brought the church at home under closer political control. Willingly or unwillingly, Warham himself, supported by Convocation, had "given the supremacy to Henry VIII, and said that he ought to have it before the bishop of Rome, and that God's word would bear him".²¹ Temporarily the rejection of papal supremacy enhanced greatly the authority of Canterbury, but it was not long before Henry appointed an ecclesiastical vicegerent, and as concerns the larger administration of the church Cranmer had for the most part only an indirect and not a direct voice. Such measures as the suspension of annates and the ratification of Henry's lordship were carried through quite irrespective of the archbishop, although in matters of this kind Cranmer himself had no objections.

19. P.S., II, pp. 408-409.

20. P.S., II, pp. 323-324.

21. P.S., II, p. 215.

Indeed, he did a good deal to state the case for the royal as opposed to the papal supremacy. As distinct from Warham he had the advantage of sincerely believing it to be scriptural and therefore right. The dissolution of the monasteries was also outside the sphere of Cranmer's initiation or control. He had no great love for the monasteries, which had outlived their day and were centres of papal opposition.

But he could not approve, although neither he nor anyone else could arrest, the shameless spoliation of church property, which he himself would have applied exclusively to the endowment of new bishoprics, and works of scholarship and charity.²² These matters, however, came under the more capable if more ruthless hands of Thomas Cromwell.

All the same, Cranmer was not by any means a spectator during these early years under Henry. His main work was done in much less striking ways, but in the long run it was no less influential. Not only did he argue against the papal supremacy, but he improved the occasion by attacking such specifically papal practices and doctrines as private masses and purgatory. He also initiated discussions with a view to a new doctrinal statement, and in the Ten Articles of 1536 and the more extended exposition usually known as the *Bishops' Book* there is a distinct if limited tendency in the direction of Lutheranism. At this time external events and the foreign policy of Cromwell favoured a Lutheran approximation, and Cranmer exploited the situation to the best of his ability. The injunctions of 1536 insisted on instruction in the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, and in the years immediately following many famous shrines were dismantled, the number of saints' days was drastically reduced, and Lutheran "orators" were brought over with a view to political and theological alliance.²³

But Cranmer's greatest achievement in this period was his successful introduction into the churches of an English Bible. Already in 1534 he had initiated the project of an officially revised version, but those bishops who were hostile to the project delayed it by obstruction. As a stop-gap, a licence was

22. P.S., II, p. 16.

23. P.S., II, p. 379.

procured for Coverdale's translation, but this was recognized to be only second-hand and inferior. Eventually, in August 1537, Cranmer came across a copy of the so-called Matthew's Bible, which consisted of all the work done by Tyndale completed by Coverdale. Whether or not Cranmer recognized Tyndale's hand it is difficult to say, but he certainly liked the version and sent it to Cromwell with a request to submit it to the King and if possible have it licensed for public reading.²⁴ When this was successfully done he wrote to Cromwell: "You have showed me more pleasure herein, than if you had given me a thousand pounds"; and he described Cromwell's part in the success as an action which would be remembered at the last day.²⁵ Rather typically, Cromwell took a financial interest in the publication. He had an eye for the earthly as well as the eternal treasure. It was soon realized, of course, that certain corrections would be necessary in the new version, but in its amended form Cromwell ordered that it should be set up in all parish churches. There was some delay in the carrying out of this order, for the printing was done in Paris and probably at the instigation of English bishops the work was interrupted by the Paris Inquisition. However, the Bible came out at last, and several editions were printed and circulated. Cranmer himself contributed a preface,²⁶ and for that reason it is often known as Cranmer's Bible. The title is a just one, for although many others had contributed to this notable reform, the interest of Cranmer was decisive. Of all his achievements in the earlier period, the introduction of the English Bible was perhaps the most far-reaching and influential.

So far conditions had been favourable to the archbishop, and if he looked back in 1539 he must have been astonished at the ground which had been traversed during the ten years since he had left Cambridge. Ecclesiastical control had passed out of the hands of the Papacy. Abuses due to the papal supremacy had been remedied. Ancient foundations and shrines were in process of dissolution.²⁷ The pattern of religious life and activity was changing. A beginning had been made not only with

24. P.S., II, p. 344.

25. P.S., II, p. 346.

26. P.S., II, pp. 118 f.

27. Cf. P.S., II, p. 378.

doctrinal revision but also with the dogmatic and ethical instruction of the people. The English Bible had been introduced into the churches and to some extent the homes and hearts of the nation. Cranmer himself could not claim credit or responsibility for all these changes. But it can hardly be denied that he had made skilful use of the situation to add the less tangible but no less important theological and religious renovation to the process of administrative and financial reform.

Nor was he without hope of even better things to come. Negotiations with the Lutherans were well under way. A matrimonial alliance with the reforming duchy of Cleves had been arranged. There was the possibility of further reform in both the doctrinal and ceremonial spheres, and Cranmer may even have hoped that he would soon be able to add to the English Bible an English Prayer Book.

As it turned out, however, Cranmer's main task during the rest of Henry's reign was to be one of defence rather than attack. For just at this juncture a variety of circumstances combined to bring about a complete reversal in religious policy. Perhaps the ultimate reason was the political, that the friendship of the Emperor had become more important than that of the Lutherans. But Henry's innate conservatism and his dislike for the dogma and dogmatism of the German orators made a change of this nature welcome to him. Again, he no doubt sensed the hostility of many of the people to too drastic reforms, and he could hardly ignore the very powerful resistance to Cromwell amongst the older nobility, both inside and outside the council. The final spur came with the arrival of Anne of Cleves, who unfortunately did not fulfil the high hopes held out by a flattering portrait. The more potent charms of Katherine Howard were only enhanced by comparison.

The first change came on the theological front with the adoption of six articles: transubstantiation, the vow of chastity, the private mass, auricular confession, the celibacy of the clergy, and the denial of the cup to the laity. Both in Parliament and Convocation Cranmer resisted this act to the very last,²⁸ but he was overborne by the King and the lay peers,

28. Foxe, VIII, pp. 14, 23; P.S., II, p. 168.

and he had no option but to submit. At first the act was not applied with any rigour and Cranmer himself had little to fear from it so long as he kept his more heterodox opinions to himself and concealed his wife. The attainder and execution of Cromwell had more serious consequences, for it deprived Cranmer of his main supporter, reversed the policy with which he had been identified, brought his most active opponents to power, and threatened ruin and disgrace to Cranmer himself.

Indeed, the odds in London were ten to one that Cranmer would share the fate of his lay colleague.²⁹ At the very least it was expected that a hostile vicegerent would be appointed, thus depriving him of all genuine power or influence. The hopes of Cranmer's enemies were all falsified by events, but with the fall of Cromwell the archbishop entered on a bitter and at first not very hopeful defensive.

Had he been more politically minded, Granmer might easily have consumed these years in attempts at sheer self-preservation. On at least three occasions he was exposed to damaging attacks which had as their final end his downfall. The first time he was accused by his own prebendaries. The second, he was attacked in Parliament by a certain Gostwicke. The third, he was actually summoned by his fellow-members of the Council who intended to commit him to the Tower. Cranmer was not much more than a child when it came to this kind of warfare. He had the guileless nature which does not easily make plots or counter or unravel them. He had an implicit faith in the truth which in that turbulent age only the long-range perspective of history can justify, not the short-term perspective of immediate advantage. If he survived the attacks, it was not due to precautions taken or his power of counter-attack, but to the powerful protection of the King, who valued his loyalty and scholarship and seemed to have a strange affection for the man who was in almost all things his opposite.³⁰ At any rate, Henry quickly saw through the conspiracy of the prebendaries and turned it against its authors.³¹ When he

29. Deane, *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 148.

30. Cf. *Narratives of the Reformation*, pp. 258-259; Pollard, *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 159.

31. *Narratives of the Reformation*, p. 252.

heard of Gostwicke's attack he threatened that if he did not apologize to the archbishop he would soon make him a poor gosling – he had profited greatly by the dissolution.³² He even gave Cranmer a ring which brought confusion to the Council, and rated his advisers for their unjustifiable and discourteous treatment of his most trusted servant.³³ Without this patronage, the outlook for the archbishop would have been black indeed.

As it was, his survival was important, for now that there was no vicegerent the archbishop had a greater influence in religious matters, and he could use his power to ward off the various counter-attacks and even to make one or two advances. He was not uniformly successful. The revision of the *Bishops' Book* took a reactionary direction which Cranmer could not resist, in spite of one or two minor victories. And this time the book came out not merely with the approval of Convocation but with the sanction of Parliament and the Crown. Again, he could not prevent a progressive restriction of the English Bible. New editions of the Great Bible ceased after 1541, and in 1543 the Tyndale version was proscribed and various classes were forbidden to read the Bible at all.³⁴ On the other hand, Cranmer thwarted a very serious attempt to revise the Great Bible, which would probably have resulted in its complete withdrawal. The matter was taken out of the hands of a committee appointed by Convocation and remitted to the universities, who seem quietly to have done nothing. It was not unimportant that the Great Bible did at least remain even if it was no longer widely circulated or read.

Again, Cranmer enjoyed one or two lesser triumphs, especially in the liturgical sphere. He successfully resisted a legalization of all existing uses. In this way the principle of uniformity was safeguarded and many customs and ceremonies remained unauthorized. He even made an attempt to “purge the antiphoners and mass-books of all apocryphas, feigned legends, superstitions, omissions, collects, versicles and responses”, together with references to the bishop of Rome and non-authenticated saints.³⁵ In the same field, Cranmer even had the

32. Foxe, VIII, p. 27.

34. Foxe, V, p. 527.

33. *Narratives of the Reformation*, pp. 254 f.

35. Wilkins, *Concilia*, III, p. 863.

opportunity to introduce a little English. Special litanies were ordered in view of the bad harvest of 1543 and the French War of 1544,³⁶ but they were not very well attended, and to stimulate interest Henry ordered an English translation.³⁷ At first, the Latin was translated directly, but Cranmer himself attempted a very free rendering³⁸ which was published the following year and by royal proclamation replaced all existing litanies. In this way the first part of the English Prayer Book came out even during the period of reaction, and already Cranmer displayed to the full those qualities of liturgical craftsmanship which he would reveal on an even greater scale in the completed work. The Litany is not used to-day as it still deserves to be used, but no one can easily deny either the comprehensiveness of its petitions, the balance of its structure, or the terseness and yet also the majesty and cadence of its phrasing.

The French War had rather curious effects on the ecclesiastical situation. On the one hand, Henry needed money, so he began to plunder the chantries. On the other hand, he needed the friendship of the Emperor, so he maintained the various ceremonies which Cranmer was trying to abolish.³⁹ In the autumn of 1546, the situation took a sudden turn in the archbishop's favour, for the religious war in Germany brought England and France together and there was talk of a thoroughgoing reformation in both countries in opposition to the Papacy and the Empire. Whether this project would have been realized it is difficult to say. Hooper thought it at least a possibility,⁴⁰ and Cranmer was certain of it. The matter was obviously discussed, and there is no doubt that the traditionalists, and especially Gardiner and the Howards, were all under a cloud. But the new development was not destined to come under Henry, for in January 1547 his turbulent life came to an end. In his last hours it was to his trusted friend the archbishop that he turned for spiritual comfort.

The death of Henry opened up a new era for Cranmer and his work, although he himself did not view it in that light.⁴¹

36. P.S., II, p. 493.

37. P.S., II, p. 494.

38. P.S., II, p. 412.

39. P.S., II, p. 415.

40. *Original Letters*, I, p. 41.

41. P.S., II, p. 415, n. 5.

By his will, Henry had appointed a council of regency, on which the reforming party had a clear majority. The weakness as Cranmer saw it was the lack of a strong and securely acknowledged leader, and the consequent danger of faction. But he could hardly have found a more sympathetic ruler than the Protector Somerset, who for all his faults and the weakness of his economic policy had generous ideas and sincere reforming convictions. Under Somerset Cranmer had a fairly free hand in more specifically religious and theological matters, and he used the opportunity to go forward with slow but penetrating changes. By temperament Cranmer was cautious and conservative. He came slowly to his own convictions, and he did not attempt to press them hastily on others. He was content to wait both for favourable circumstances on the one hand and a leaven of instruction on the other. His aim was not to sectionalize the church and nation, but if possible to carry them with him, reforming not merely by edict from without but by renewal from within. In this policy he had the enthusiastic support of the Protector.

A first task was to restrain the more revolutionary elements, who took advantage of Henry's death to initiate violent propaganda and even to invade churches and manhandle priests. All the same, in his own way Cranmer encouraged a progressive policy. A special course was selected for the Paul's Cross sermons. The *Paraphrase* of Erasmus was published in English, and the first book of *Homilies* was circulated. The injunctions of 1547 encouraged this tendency. It was insisted that once at least in each quarter there should be a sermon and that the rudiments of the faith should be definitely taught in English. The Bible and the *Paraphrase* had to be made available, and at the mass the Epistle and Gospel were to be read in the vernacular.⁴² In Convocation the cup was at last conceded to the laity,⁴³ and Parliament opened up a period of freer discussion with its repeal of the six articles and the heresy laws. A new chantries bill was opposed by Cranmer, who disapproved although he could not prevent the misappropriation of church endowments by the rapacious nobility.

42. P.S., II, pp. 498 f.

43. P.S., II, p. 511.