

## A GILDMAN'S VIEW OF THE REFORMATION

[Mr. Arthur J. Penty, one of the leaders of the National Guilds Movement ("Guild Socialism") in England, in the course of a series of papers which he is publishing in the *New Age* (London), discusses at some length the suppression of the Monasteries in England and the origin of the Protestant Reformation. We quote a few salient passages, which are of special interest as coming from a non-Catholic writer.—*New York Truth*.]

In the absence of any other intelligible explanation of the origin of the Reformation in England I feel I have no option but to accept the version of the Roman Catholics who assert that its immediate cause is to be found in the lusts of Henry VIII. It is certain that Henry was not moved by any sympathy toward the ideals of Protestantism. Had Luther not begun his work until a few years later Henry would doubtless have espoused the cause of Protestantism at the very start, for nothing would have suited him better than a new religion which allowed Luther and seven other of his brother leaders in the Reformation to grant a license to the Landgrave of Hesse to have two wives at one and the same time. But, unfortunately for Henry, not only had he not adopted this new religion before its possibilities and solid advantages for him had become manifest, but what was a still more serious affair, he had in 1521 opposed it, and had received from the Pope as a reward for his written defence of the Catholic faith the title of "Defender of the Faith," a title which English sovereigns still use, it being popularly supposed that the Faith referred to is Protestantism and not Catholicism, as is actually the case.

### Repudiated Papal Authority.

Henry was married to Catherine of Arragon, and with this lady he lived in the married state for 17 years. He had three sons and daughters by her, only one of whom survived, a daughter, who afterwards was Queen Mary. But at the end of this period, being 35 years of age while Catherine was 43, he cast his eye on a young lady, an attendant on the Queen—Anne Boleyn, whom he determined to marry; and after six fruitless years of negotiation, being unable to persuade the Pope to take any steps toward the granting of a divorce, he resolved to overthrow the power of the Pope in England by making himself the head of the English Church. In this task he was aided and abetted by the perfidious and cold-blooded Thomas Cranmer, whom he immediately afterwards made Archbishop of Canterbury, and who speedily granted Henry the divorce he desired.

It will be unnecessary for us to follow the matrimonial relations of this Bluebeard. It is sufficient for us to know that it was in order to gratify his lusts that Henry separated the Church of England from that of Rome. By making himself the supreme head of the Church he made himself master of its property too, including that of the monasteries, which he determined to suppress, partly in order that his position should remain unchallenged, but mainly, I imagine, out of love of plunder. The Princes of Germany had shown him the way, and he was not slow to learn their lesson, for it soon became apparent that sweeping confiscations were to be made. Doubtless many of Henry's councillors and courtiers who were hoping to share in the plunder were by no means averse to such measures, for the Reformation could not have proceeded apart from the concurrence of Parliament. But this could not be said of Parliament as a whole. For the Act of 1536 which transferred the property of the smaller monasteries, 376 in number, to the King and his heirs, stuck long in the Lower House, and was not passed until Henry threatened to have some of their heads.

### Suppression of the Monasteries.

The agent to whom Henry entrusted the work of suppressing the monasteries was Thomas Cromwell. He had been an underling in the family of Cardinal

Wolsey, and had recommended himself to the King by his sycophancy and by his treachery to his own master. Henry made him a peer and appointed him Royal Vice-regent and Vicar-General. In this capacity he took first place in all meetings of the clergy, sitting even before the Archbishop of Canterbury. The procedure adopted in the suppressions was first to set on foot a visitation of the monasteries. In this work Cromwell was assisted by deputies who were as villainous as himself. They prepared reports full of false accusations in order to find pretences for confiscating monasterial property. They menaced those who objected with charges of high treason. Subsequent visitors appointed by Henry from among the country gentry sent in formal reports distinctly contradicting many of the facts alleged by Cromwell's agents. But such protests were of no avail. Henry was out for plunder, and as Cobbett rightly observes in this connection, "When men have power to commit and are resolved to commit acts of injustice, they are never at a loss for pretences." The monastic Orders were never heard in their defence. There was no charge against any particular monastery or convent; the charges were loose and general, and levelled against all those whose revenues did not exceed a certain sum.

### Shared the Plunder.

It is clear that the reason for stopping the confiscations at the point where the revenues did not exceed a certain sum was that the public had to be brought into line before any seizure of the great monasteries could be safely attempted. The weak were first attacked, but means were soon found for attacking the remainder. Great promises were held out that the King, when in possession of these estates, would never more want taxes from the people. Henry employed preachers and ministers who went about to preach and persuade the people that he could employ the ecclesiastical revenues in hospitals, colleges, and other foundations for the public good, which would be a much better use than that they should support lazy and useless monks. It is possible, of course, that Henry may have thought that he would be able to fulfil these promises; but he soon found out that he would not be able to keep the plunder for himself, and that the nobles and gentry could only be persuaded to allow him to continue his dastardly work on condition that he agreed to share the spoil with them. They so beset him that he had not a moment's peace. After four years he found himself no better off than before he confiscated a single convent.

And thus it was that from confiscating the property of the smaller monasteries he went on to seize that of the larger ones, for there was no stopping half way once he had begun. Where opposition was encountered Cromwell and his ruffian visitors procured the murder of the parties under pretence of their having committed high treason. Here and there the people rose in rebellion against the devastations. But the local outbreaks came to nothing, since as nearly everyone of any consequence was sharing in the plunder the people were deprived of their natural leaders.

During the Middle Ages England had been the most prosperous and happiest country in Europe, perhaps the happiest country at any time in history. These monasteries were wealthy and full of things of gold and silver; and society was so well ordered that these things remained untouched, though there was no standing army or police. But Cromwell and his ruffians stripped them bare of all such things. . . . Among the libraries destroyed was that of St. Alban's Abbey, which was the greatest library in England. But the destruction of libraries at the Reformation was not confined to those of the monasteries. The original Guildhall Library, founded by Whittington and Carpenter, was destroyed, as were also the Library of St. Paul's Cathedral and the predecessor of the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Anything which was decorated apparently ranked then as Popish superstition, which was a convenient cloak for the pursuit of plunder.

### Structures Wantonly Destroyed.

After the monasteries were plundered, sacked,

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