

Stranger than Fiction in the Archives: The Controversial Death of William Cowbridge in 1538¹

Abstract:

This essay considers the life, death, and afterlife of William Cowbridge, a religious eccentric executed for heresy in 1538. It explores the significance of his religious beliefs, which became the source of a heated controversy between the Protestant martyrologist John Foxe and the Catholic polemicist Nicholas Harpsfield. The case casts light on a range of issues, including the dynamic between Protestant and Catholic controversialists, the use of the label of ‘madness’ in argument, and the value of archival documentation alongside the use of oral sources in Reformation-era polemic. It also yields insight into Thomas Cromwell’s authority over the English Church during the late 1530s, and highlights his position among Henrician evangelicals as a source of influence and aid. Finally, it offers a critique about interpretations of early modern belief and the designation of the label ‘Lollard’.

On an autumn day in 1538, William Cowbridge was burned, as a heretic, in Oxford. He apparently died with fortitude and made a good end but, nevertheless, this should have been the end. Although a notorious and controversial figure, whose fate had been debated at the highest levels of government, there was no intrinsic reason why the hot cinder of his reputation should

¹ The authors wish to thank audience members present at the Early Modern British and Irish History Seminar at the University of Cambridge for their comments on this essay. Unless attributed, all Latin translations are our own. The Latin passages have been modernized, with i/j and u/v alterations.

not have been extinguished in the waters of Lethe. Martyrdom may secure one entry into the kingdom of heaven, but it does not necessarily earn one a place in human memory. And if it were not for the presence of a young fellow of Magdalen College at Cowbridge's execution, the memory of Cowbridge might have faded over the decades into total oblivion. The young scholar and eyewitness to Cowbridge's final hours was John Foxe, the martyrologist, and his efforts to memorialise Cowbridge triggered a new cycle of controversy, vilification, self-justification and polemic long after Cowbridge's ashes were scattered to the winds.

In 1559, when composing the Latin precursor of what would become *Acts and Monuments*, Foxe stated that he remembered the burning of Cowbridge. Foxe went on to relate that Cowbridge was arrested and sent to Oxford where he was imprisoned in the Bocardo, the city prison. There, according to Foxe, the Oxford theologians had Cowbridge starved and deprived of sleep with the result that his health was broken and he was driven mad. In this state, Cowbridge 'poured forth many inconsistent and absurd words, [which were] foolishly demented'.² Rumours spread among the people of Oxford that Cowbridge could not bear to hear the name 'Christ' spoken, although he was untroubled by the name 'Jesus'. Because of this, Cowbridge had few supporters in Oxford and he was duly burned. And despite the allegations that he rejected Christ, 'we saw that while in the midst of the flames, he often called out the name of the Lord Jesus Christ having commended his life with great tranquillity to the Lord'.³

² 'multa absona atque inconcinna, amentium more, effunderet'. John Foxe, *Rerum in ecclesia gestarum...commentarii* (Basel: J. Oporinus and N. Brylinger, 1559), 136.

³ 'demum in mediis flammis Domini Jesu Christi saepe inclamato nomine magna cum tranquillitate vitam eum Domino comendasse vidimus' (Foxe, *Rerum*, 139).

Although Foxe's initial account of Cowbridge was brief – about 250 words – it contained several striking, indeed unusual, features. The first is that Foxe placed the blame for Cowbridge's martyrdom on the theologians at Oxford, indeed one would not know from Foxe's account that anyone else had been involved in Cowbridge's fate. Yet as English readers of Foxe must have known, only a bishop or one of his officials had the authority to condemn someone for heresy and a death sentence for heresy had to be confirmed by the Lord Chancellor.⁴ Even more peculiar was Foxe's grudging acknowledgement of the oddity of Cowbridge's beliefs. Foxe had two strategies for dealing with these. The first was to allege that Cowbridge was crazed as a result of ill-treatment he received while in prison. The second was to imply that reports of what Cowbridge believed were, at best, mendaciously exaggerated, if not completely untruthful. The unorthodox nature of Cowbridge's beliefs, even by evangelical or Protestant standards, helps to explain why Cowbridge's execution was not mentioned by English Reformers before Foxe. (While some burnings in the more obscure corners of England might remain a matter of only local knowledge, a burning in Oxford should have had a much higher profile.) But this leads to another question: Why would Foxe have wanted to run the polemical risk of glorifying such a controversial figure?

⁴ For the English laws on heresy at the time, see Thomas More, *The Debellation of Salem and Bizance*, eds. John Guy, Ralph Keen, Clarence H. Miller and Ruth McGugan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), xlvi–lxxvii.

In the first edition of *Acts and Monuments*, printed in 1563, Foxe reprinted the material he had already related about Cowbridge but he added a number of significant details.⁵ One of the more minor additions was that, whereas Foxe had initially stated that Cowbridge was burned in 1536, he now changed the date to 1539, which was closer to the actual date of the execution, but still inaccurate. More importantly, Foxe now sketched in something of William Cowbridge's background. According to Foxe, Cowbridge came from a family 'whose ancestors even from Wiclef's time hitherto had been always favourers of the gospel'.⁶ Cowbridge's father, whom Foxe claimed was also named William, was a wealthy man and head baliff of Colchester. After his father died, Cowbridge distributed the wealth he had inherited among his sisters and other family members. He roamed England, 'sometime seeking after learned men, and sometimes, according to his ability, instructing the ignorant'.⁷ Eventually he came to Wantage, a village in Berkshire where he for 'a long season exercised the office of a priest in teaching and ministering of the sacraments, but being no priest in deed'.⁸ After he had converted many to the truth, he was at last arrested for heresy and taken to the bishop of Lincoln's palace in High Wycombe for interrogation. From there he was sent to Oxford and Foxe amplifies his earlier claim that Cowbridge was mistreated in the Bocardo. Foxe also repeats his denunciation of the cruelty of

⁵ John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of these latter and perilous dayes touching matters of the Church...* (London: John Day, 1563), 570–1. (Hereafter this edition will be cited as *1563*).

⁶ *1563*, 570.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

the Oxford theologians.⁹ But this time he adds that when the request for a the writ authorising Cowbridge's execution was sent to Sir Thomas Audley, the Lord Chancellor, articles listing Cowbridge's heresies were sent with it. (A writ from the Lord Chancellor was required for executions for heresy, but it was quite unusual to notify the Chancellor of the specific heresies involved; yet, as we shall see Foxe was quite accurate on this point.) Foxe states that he could only learn what two of these articles were. One was that Cowbridge maintained that the second article of the Apostle's Creed, should not read 'Et Jesum Christum' but instead 'Et Jesum Jesum'. The second was that 'every poor priest be he never so poor or needy being of a good conversation hath as great power and authority in the Church of God and ministration of the sacraments as the Pope or any other bishops'.¹⁰ Foxe finally rewrote his account of Cowbridge's death to underscore parallels with Christ's death. This time, 'the meek lamb of Christ was brought forth unto the slaughter with a great band of armed men' and then burned.¹¹

Most of Foxe's additions to this original narrative of Cowbridge are verifiably accurate. Cowbridge did indeed come from a prominent Colchester family. His father, Robert Cowbridge (not William, as Foxe mistakenly claimed) was a prosperous clothmaker and Colchester alderman who had twice been elected head bailiff (the town's highest municipal office) in the

⁹ 1563, 570–1.

¹⁰ 1563, 571.

¹¹ *Ibid*; compare Isaiah 53:7.

first decade of the sixteenth century.¹² And Robert Cowbridge was certainly affluent, perhaps even wealthy, as Foxe claimed. In his will, which was dated 5 January 1513, and probated in March of that year, Robert Cowbridge left £45 in various bequests as well as a dozen properties; nine in or just outside of Colchester and another three further afield in north-eastern Essex.¹³

And while we have no idea if Foxe was literally correct in maintaining that the Cowbridge family had been Lollards for generations, the religious beliefs of both Robert Cowbridge and his wife Margaret, the parents of William Cowbridge, both repay scrutiny. In the case of Robert, there are two suggestive, although not conclusive, indications of them. His will contains very few religious bequests, only the modest – for a person of his affluence – provisions of 10 shillings to the Crossed Friars and 20 shillings for hanging the bells in the steeple of the church St. Mary-at-the-Wall in Colchester. (Robert Cowbridge also left a payment of 13 pence to St Paul’s cathedral, the mother church of St. Mary-at-the-Wall, which was his parish church and where he would be buried.¹⁴ The house of the Crossed Friars was also in Cowbridge’s parish). Perhaps most tellingly, he also provided for only a only single obit in his will. Robert Cowbridge¹⁵’s eldest daughter Katherine married the son of John Bardfield, another bailiff of

¹² Andrew Hope, ‘Lollardy: the stone the builders rejected?’ in Peter Lake and Maria Dowling, eds. *Protestantism and the National Church in Sixteenth Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 5.

¹³ The National Archive, PROB 11/17/332. (Hereafter the National Archive will be cited as TNA). William Cowbridge was bequeathed £20 and houses, woods, groves and land, in and out of Colchester.

¹⁴ The steeple of the church had just been finished when Robert Cowbridge died; see Essex Record Office D/ACR1/138. His bequest may well have been motivated more by civic pride than piety.

¹⁵ TNA PROB 11/17/332.

Colchester and the patriarch of a family that was at the heart of Colchester's Lollard community.¹⁶

Margaret Cowbridge's Lollard sympathies are much clearer. She is known to have attended and hosted Lollard meetings and she was described as a 'known woman' (a Lollard shibboleth for fellow believers).¹⁷ On 15 July 1528, over fifteen years after the death of her husband and ten years before the execution of her son, Margaret Cowbridge was summoned before Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall's vicar general (who was in Colchester investigating the circulation of heretical books) and accused of heresy. By 17 July, she had produced eight compurgators who swore to her innocence and she was released.¹⁸

¹⁶ For Katherine Bardfield as well as the Bardfields and Colchester Lollards, see Andrew Hope, 'The lady and the Bailiff: Lollardy among the Gentry in Yorkist and Early Tudor England' in Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, eds. *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 262. (It should be noted that Shannon McSheffrey is less certain that the Bardfields were were Lollards; see *Gender and heresy: women and men in Lollard communities, 1420–1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 133. We find Hope's observations on this subject more convincing.

¹⁷ John Strype, *Ecclesiastical memorials...under King Henry VIII, King Edward VI and Queen Mary I*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1822), 1:pt. 1, 121 and 129.

¹⁸ British Library, Harley MS 421, fo. 30r; printed in J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R.H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII, 1509–47*, 21 vols (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1862–1910), 4:pt. 2:no. 4545. (Hereafter the *Letters and papers* are cited as *L&P*).

Additional accuracy is seen in the two articles that Foxe attributed to Cowbridge: the one about 'Jesum Christum' being rendered 'Jesum Jesum', matches the eighth article against Cowbridge as recorded in the bishop of Lincoln's register and the second article Foxe presents may be a garbled version of the fourth article in the Lincoln register (these articles will be discussed shortly). This accuracy, particularly on Cowbridge's background, suggests that Foxe had at least one knowledgeable informant quite possibly a member of Cowbridge's family.¹⁹ It is an interesting question as to whether this informant knew of the account of Cowbridge in Foxe's Latin martyrology and volunteered further information or whether Foxe had made directed inquiries about the man whose burning he had witnessed a quarter of a century before.

Internal evidence from a letter that Cowbridge later wrote suggests that he was born around 1498.²⁰ We do not know when Cowbridge left Colchester or where he went before he came to the village of Wantage. We do not know how long he stayed in Wantage, beyond Foxe's

¹⁹ A further indication of this is Foxe's comment in his 1563 account, that Thomas Audley, the Lord Chancellor at the time of Cowbridge's execution, was 'somewhat allied' to the condemned man (1563, 571). This is quite possible as Audley, the former town clerk of Colchester and a MP for the town could very easily have been linked to Cowbridge through marriage or even mutual friends. In any case, the comment does suggest that Foxe's source had some knowledge of the Cowbridge family.

²⁰ In the letter, Cowbridge states that he is 38 years old (TNA SP 1/104, fo. 256r). The letter is calendared (*L&P* 10: no. 1253) and the editor dated it to 1536. There is no date on the original letter and we do not know how the editor arrived at his date of 1536, but if it is correct, then William Cowbridge was born around 1498. There is a further corroboration that this date is not far off. In his will, Richard Cowbridge, describes his son William as a minor who had not yet come of age (TNA PROB 11/17/332).

declaration that it was a ‘long season’.²¹ One attraction of Wantage for Cowbridge may have been its relatively recent history as a village of marked Lollard sympathies.²² But there were other attractions as well. The living in this village belonged to the royal chapel at Windsor and it appears to have been vacant at this time.²³

A rather enigmatic letter by Cowbridge survives from 1536 and casts some light on his situation.²⁴ The late A. G. Dickens characterized the letter as being ‘incoherent to the point of

²¹ 1563: 570.

²² For Lollard activities in Wantage and the surrounding area as late as 1521, see J. A. F. Thomson, *The later Lollards 1414–1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 80–81 and J. H. Plumb, ‘John Foxe and the later Lollards of the Thames Valley’ (Cambridge PhD Thesis, 1987), 78.

²³ Henry I had granted the parish church to the abbey of Bec. It, along with all the properties of Bec in England, were administered by the abbey’s daughter house at Ogbourne. In 1208, these properties were incorporated into the newly formed prebend of Ogbourne at Salisbury cathedral. During this time, however, the abbey of Ogbourne retained the right of presentment to the living. In 1414, Henry V dissolved the alien priories and his brother John, Duke of Bedford, farmed the property of Ogbourne abbey until 1421, at which point he gave the property and spirituality of Wantage to the warden and chaplains of St. George’s Chapel at Windsor. St. George’s retained the advowson and the rectory manor of Wantage throughout the early modern period. (See P. H. Ditchfield and W. Page, eds., *The Victoria history of the county of Berkshire*, 4 vols. [London: Victoria County History, 1906–1924], 1:328 and 4:329, as well as M. M. Morgan, *The English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946], 131–2 and 138–9).

²⁴ TNA SP 1/104, fos 256r–257r.

madness' but this assessment is exaggerated.²⁵ The letter is rambling, and because it is unaddressed and full of casual allusions which are often hard to decipher, it can be unclear. Nevertheless, certain points are manifest. Cowbridge complains that a certain 'cathedral church' (although Windsor is not a cathedral, Cowbridge is almost certainly referring to it and its patronage of the living at Wantage) used to pay him for his services from the rent provided by a chantry.²⁶ Now these funds have been diverted to paying for building works and Cowbridge is owed 10 shillings in back salary, which he sorely needs. He then moved beyond his personal complaint to hope that Parliament will correct the abuses associated with chantries and denounces the payment of money rather than penance and true contrition for attaining salvation.²⁷ In the letter Cowbridge refers to himself, jocularly, as 'dull wit' and he simply signs

²⁵ A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the diocese of York 1509–1558* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1982), 146.

²⁶ It is possible that the rent Cowbridge refers to can be identified. In 1351, William Fitz Waurin received a licence to alienate property to the value of £15 to support three chaplains to celebrate mass daily in the church of Wantage for his soul and the souls of Edward III and his queen (H. C. Maxwell Lyte, ed. *The Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward III* 16 vols [London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1891–1916], 9:108). In 1358, Fitz Waurin was granted permission to divert £10 *per annum* from the money for the chantry to a house of friars at Hounslow. 100 shillings a year were allotted to a chaplain to celebrate mass daily at Wantage (*CPR Edward III*, 11:44). Cowbridge was probably being paid a portion of this sum to act as a *de facto* curate at Wantage.

²⁷ Cowbridge's hopes were realistic. From 1534 onwards evangelicals were openly preaching and agitating for the abolition of chantries. Although they were, for the time being, unsuccessful, it looked they might get chantries abolished by the 1536 Parliament. (See Alan Kreider, *English chantries: the road*

it ‘By me Cowbridge’.²⁸ These facts, together with the assumption that his correspondent knows the background to the situation he is describing, would suggest that Cowbridge was writing to a friend at Windsor. The letter is now in the State Papers and it probably got there because it was sent to Cromwell in an attempt to defend Cowbridge.²⁹ At some point, Cowbridge also began preaching in Standlake, a village about eight miles north of Wantage.³⁰ There is no evidence or mention of Cowbridge doing this in any official or quasi-official capacity and he was very likely invited to preach by those sympathetic to his beliefs.³¹ For like Wantage, Standlake had a Lollard past. The village was the home to a number of Lollard families who, as recently as 1521,

to dissolution [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979], 116–20 and Stanford E. Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament 1529–1536* [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 227]. In fact, Cowbridge’s hopes that Parliament would deal with chantries may be the reason why this letter was dated to 1536 in *Letters and papers* (see note 19 above).

²⁸ TNA SP 1/104, fo. 257r.

²⁹ As will be seen, two men of Windsor would complain to Cromwell about the fairness of Cowbridge’s trial. They might have sent this letter to Cromwell—one of them might have been the recipient of the letter—in an attempt to win Cromwell’s sympathy by demonstrating Cowbridge’s hostility to monasticism, purgatory and chantries.

³⁰ Lincoln Archives Office, Register 26, fo. 284v.

³¹ When he was accused of heresy, it was charged that Cowbridge preached in the parish church (LAO, Register 26, fo. 284v). The circumstances are unknown as, thanks to a lack of surviving records from Standlake, is the question of whether the parish had a resident incumbent at the time.

had been investigated for heresy and forced to recant their beliefs.³² Cowbridge may have found a congenial audience in Standlake, but preaching there was a fatal mistake. Wantage was a peculiar of Windsor, which seems to have unconcerned with happened in the parish. Moreover, Wantage was in the diocese of Salisbury and Nicholas Shaxton, its evangelical bishop was not the man to launch heresy hunts. However, Standlake was in the south-western corner of the sprawling diocese of Lincoln and its prelate, John Longland, was conservative and conscientious and resolved not to let heresy infect his flock. Cowbridge was summoned by the bishop and placed in custody in one of the bishop's manors.

There are three basic sources for the events that followed. The first is a letter from Longland to Thomas Cromwell, justifying his handling of the case.³³ The second is a copy of the writ stating that Cowbridge was a relapsed heretic, which most unusually, listed specific heresies that Cowbridge had admitted holding. Equally unusually the writ was copied into Longland's episcopal register.³⁴ The third is an account of Cowbridge's case written by Nicholas Harpsfield, the former archdeacon of Canterbury under Mary I. Early in Elizabeth's reign, Harpsfield lost his offices, his livings and his freedom when he refused to swear to the Oath of Supremacy. While in prison, however he emerged as one of the leading Catholic controversialists and historians of

³² John Foxe, *The first volume of the ecclesiasticall history contayning the actes and monuments of thynges passed in every kynges tyme in this realme, especially in the Church of England* 2 vols. (London: John Day, 1570), 2:957–60. Hereafter this work will be cited as *1570*.

³³ TNA SP 1/13, fos. 222r–223r.

³⁴ LAO, Register 26, fos. 284v–285r.

Elizabeth's reign.³⁵ One of his major works, was his *Dialogi sex*, a set—as its title indicates—of six dialogues, attacking such major Protestant historians and apologists as Matthias Flacius, the Magdeburg Centuriators, Johannes Sleidan and John Jewel.³⁶ The sixth, and longest, of these dialogues was devoted to attacking Foxe's *Acts and monuments*. It contained a lengthy discussion of Cowbridge because, in Harpsfield's words, 'if everything else in the book [i.e., *Acts and Monuments*] was reliable and flawless, the prodigious distortion of this tale alone would destroy the credibility of entire book among the pious'.³⁷

Harpsfield began by correcting Foxe on a number of points: he accurately dated Cowbridge's execution to 1538, he correctly stated Cowbridge was tried in High Wycombe, not Oxford and he pointed out the legal absurdity of Foxe's claim that the Oxford theologians had condemned Cowbridge.³⁸ Harpsfield went on to declare that he based his account what really happened on 'certain narratives of grave and pious men, who, like Foxe, were not only

³⁵ For an overview of Nicholas Harpsfield's life and writings see Thomas S. Freeman, 'Harpsfield, Nicholas (1519–1575)' in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Hereafter this work will be cited as *ODNB*.

³⁶ Nicholas Harpsfield, *Dialogi sex contra summi pontificatus, moasticae vitae, sanctorum, sacrarum imaginum oppugnatores, et pseudomartyres* (Antwerp: Christopher Plantin, 1566). Hereafter this work will be cited as *DS*.

³⁷ 'si cetera in eo omnia sarta recta essent et illibata; vel ob hanc solam narrationem tam prodigiose deformatam ab omnibus piis foret explodendus' (*DS*, 853). Harpsfield's discussion of Cowbridge is *DS*, 851–61.

³⁸ *DS*, 854–5.

eyewitnesses to the burning but also some of them were eyewitnesses to what happened to Cowbridge at High Wycombe or at Oxford'.³⁹ Later we will identify who the most important of Harpsfield's informants was, but for now let us simply say that he was someone who had been in a position to know exactly what happened.

According to Harpsfield, Cowbridge was charged with several grave heresies. Among the most heinous was that he refused to read or say the name of Christ. Cowbridge did not deny his heresies and even if he had tried to, there were numerous witnesses to testify that he had said them. Furthermore, Cowbridge clung obstinately to his heresies despite the efforts of Longland and the learned men in his household to dissuade him. Yet he gave no sign of madness (except, Harpsfield remarks, that his heresies were insane). Cowbridge was confined for several months at Longland's manor at Wooburn and during this time, he lacked food neither for his body nor for his soul. As it became clear that Cowbridge would not abandon his heresies, Longland warned him that he would face trial for heresy unless he recanted. Cowbridge still persisted in his heresies and he was finally tried in ecclesiastical court. Longland himself presided over the trial. People from all over the region flocked to attend the trial. After exhorting Cowbridge to repent, Longland urged the spectators to pray for Cowbridge's conversion and they poured forth their prayers. Throughout the trial, Longland pleaded with the defendant, weeping and praying. A learned and pious preacher (whom Harpsfield stated was either alive when he was writing or had only recently died) asked the crowd to increase their prayers for Cowbridge and then asked

³⁹ 'ex certis piorum et gravium virorum narrationibus, qui non solum incendii, ut Foxus, sed partim eorum, quae Vincamiae, partim eorum, quae Oxonii cum Cowbrigio agebantur, oculati testes errant (*DS*, 856).

if he would acknowledge his errors. Cowbridge remained silent. Longland, recognising his obstinacy, sentenced him to death.⁴⁰

Nevertheless (Harspsfield continues) the bishop still did not despair of saving Cowbridge's soul. Sending Cowbridge to Oxford, Longland urged the theologians there to save his soul before he was to be executed. They diligently attempted to reason with Cowbridge but failed. In the meantime, Thomas Cromwell, a staunch champion of the evangelical faction, had heard complaints that Longland had flown into a rage at Cowbridge's trial and denied Cowbridge the opportunity to recant. It was also alleged to Cromwell that Cowbridge's beliefs were not truly heretical. Cromwell sent letters to Longland demanding to know if Cowbridge had been examined with sufficient care, if he had been given the chance to recant and if his beliefs were indeed heretical. The bishop immediately sent a trusted messenger to Cromwell with a letter and documents about Cowbridge's case. When Cromwell read these documents he declared to the messenger that Cowbridge was an irredeemable heretic and commanded that the burning take place. In fact, Harspsfield concludes smugly, it was the very Cromwell whom Foxe praises to the skies, who really condemned Cowbridge.⁴¹

Harspsfield's account is both confirmed and complemented by Longland's letter to Cromwell. Longland's missive was prompted by a letter from Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's vicegerent in spiritual affairs. Cromwell's letter has not survived but its contents can be readily inferred from a letter Longland wrote in response. Apparently two men from Windsor had been present when Longland interrogated Cowbridge. They reported to Cromwell that Longland had

⁴⁰ *DS*, 856–8.

⁴¹ *DS*, 858–9.

been sharp and abrupt with Cowbridge. These witnesses claimed that Longland had told Cowbridge that he would be burned for refusing to undergo penance, the punishment prescribed by papal decretals. They also described an exchange in which Longland, in response to Cowbridge's repeated citation of the Biblical verse 'ask and you shall receive', is supposed to have testily retorted that Cowbridge might ask God for £20 but he would not receive it. And they described an even sharper exchange in which Longland supposedly told Cowbridge that he could not be saved unless he did penance and Cowbridge supposedly answered that if that was necessary for salvation, then Longland and others should undergo it as well. On hearing this, Longland in a rage, allegedly excommunicated Cowbridge and cast him into jail.⁴²

On 22 July, two days after Cromwell's letter was sent. Longland penned a reply. And in it, the bishop's alarm at Cromwell's interference, his irritation and his desire to placate the Vicegerent are all readily apparent. Longland begins by reassuring Cromwell that he only just received from Cromwell's letter. He then proceeds to thank (and you can hear the sound of grinding teeth across the centuries), Cromwell for his 'honourable and gentle monition, council and advertisements'.⁴³ The bishop goes on to protest that he used 'no point of extremity or hastiness' in judging Cowbridge as people have complained to Cromwell. Longland claims that Cowbridge's errors and heresies, which he had taught to many 'are so strange and heinous hat I never did read of worse'.⁴⁴ The bishop goes on to state that he had already shown a list of Cowbridge's heresies to Cromwell who read them in the presence of the Chief Justice of the

⁴² See TNA SP 1/134, fos. 222r–223r.

⁴³ TNA SP 1/134, fo. 222r.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

King's Bench and the Dean of the Arches. Longland reminds Cromwell that upon reading the list the vicegerent had instructed Longland 'to do justice'.⁴⁵ To be sure of his legal ground in forcing Cowbridge to do penance, Longland consulted with the Dean and the Justice who assured him that it was legal to compel someone to carry a fagot as penance for heresy, particularly for such heinous heresies.⁴⁶ Longland informs Cromwell that he tried to do persuade Cowbridge, in a public hearing at High Wycombe on 17 July which had lasted from 9am until 1pm, to recant and undergo penance. The bishop declares that he even offered to remit some of the penance if Cowbridge submitted, but that the defendant refused.⁴⁷ Longland emphatically denies that he had told Cowbridge that he should be burned for denying penance according 'to the decretals of the bishop of Rome' and he also denied that he had told Cowbridge that he could not be saved unless he carried a fagot in penance. Longland did however concede that Cowbridge told him that if doing penance was necessary for salvation, Longland should do it as well and that on hearing this remark, he, Longland, lost his temper and excommunicated Cowbridge. Longland also asserts that many people who were present at the trial would confirm his account.⁴⁸

What appears to have happened is that Cromwell had gotten wind of the case as it was proceeding. One possibility is that he learned of it through Thomas Audley, the Lord Chancellor, whose his assistance may possibly have been requested by Cowbridge's family or friends.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ TNA SP 1/134, fo. 222v.

⁴⁸ TNA SP 1/134, fos. 222v–223r.

Another possibility is that the two Windsor men who reported on Cowbridge's trial to Cromwell, had been in touch with him about Cowbridge earlier. These men may have been friends of Cowbridge made during his days at Wantage. (In this context, it is worth remembering that there was a coterie of evangelicals at Windsor, three of whose members were burned in 1543).⁴⁹ Cromwell queried Longland about the case and the two apparently met in London, where Longland showed Cromwell a list of heresies to which Cowbridge had confessed. Perhaps overwhelmed by them, Cromwell gave the bishop permission to proceed. A nervous Longland, however, sought expert opinion on the legality of imposing penance on Cowbridge. In 1538, with the solid ice of tradition breaking under them and with Cromwell nipping at their heels, conservative English bishops were in a state of acute, and not unjustified, anxiety. On 29 May 1538, Bishop John Stokesley of London was charged with praemunire in the King's Bench. Ultimately, after some form of submission, Stokesley was pardoned, but the affair did nothing to reassure his episcopal colleagues.⁵⁰ On top of this, the relationship between Cromwell and Longland was uneasy; with Longland's biographer stating that Longland 'got on the wrong side

⁴⁹ 1570, 1425–38.

⁵⁰ For two different versions of the case, which differ on the extent of Stokesley's submission and the damage that the incident did to him, see G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 160–62 and Andrew A. Chibi, *Henry VIII's Conservative Scholar: Bishop John Stokesley and the Divorce, Royal Supremacy and Doctrinal Reform* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997), 152–54. We would like to thank Dr Richard Rex for drawing our attention to this episode.

of Cromwell' and commenting on the 'mutual distrust' between them.⁵¹ Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Longland sought expert opinions on the legality of imposing penance on Cowbridge.

But if legal opinion was willing to countenance penance, Cowbridge was not and he staunchly refused to recant, despite Longland's clear anxiety (with Cromwell looking over his shoulder) that a death sentence be avoided. In the event, two Windsor men reported on the trial, framing Longland's remarks in such a way, that it appeared that the bishop was defending papal authority and denying Cowbridge a chance to repent. Longland apparently managed to convince Cromwell that these charges were untrue, but, still moving cautiously, he sent Cowbridge to Oxford, to give the theologians there a chance to persuade him to recant. They failed and Cowbridge was duly burned, but not before rumours of his deviant beliefs had spread. (The authorities probably leaked them to in order to discredit Cowbridge and destroy any popular sympathy for him). In the meantime, Longland, still mistrustful of the situation, had not only had a detailed list of Cowbridge's heresies copied into the writ he sent to Chancery, notifying them of Cowbridge's excommunication as a relapsed heretic, but he also had a copy of the writ entered into his register.⁵² In this way, Longland protected himself in case there should be further inquiries into his treatment of Cowbridge.

⁵¹ Margaret Bowker, *The Henrician Reformation: the diocese of Lincoln under John Longland 1521–1547* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 74.

⁵² LAO, Register 26, fos. 284v–285r. It was legally required that, if a heretic was to suffer execution, the church official who condemned the heretic send a writ of excommunication to Chancery. Upon receiving

On the whole, Longland's letter impressively confirms the accuracy of Harpsfield's account. Admittedly, the interaction between Longland and Cromwell was more complicated than Harpsfield had described and that the two were communicating about the case even before Cowbridge was condemned. Nevertheless, Harpsfield was well-informed about the reports that reached Cromwell and the pressure Cromwell placed upon the bishop, details that were not, and could not have been, generally known. How did Harpsfield learn about them?

Moreover, Harpsfield unveiled further surprising details about Cowbridge when he printed articles enumerating Cowbridge's heresies:

1. I...William Cowbridge, publicly declare priests to be traitors to the divine majesty because they divide the Host into three parts and do not receive it whole.
2. No one should emaciate himself through fasting or chastise his body.
3. I do not wish to confess to a priest unless he would absolve me as I wish, as I should prescribe, 'God forgive me a sinner' and 'Bless me God the Father'.
4. Neither the Apostles nor the four doctors of the Church have explained how sinners should be saved.
5. My confession has been useless to me for seven years.
6. I affirm that neither a pious life nor pious deeds nor fasting can bring salvation to men.
7. I affirm that Christ is not the redeemer of the world but he will be the deceiver of the world.

it, Chancery would send a writ, authorising the execution, to the local sheriff. This is the only case we know of where a writ of excommunication was copied into a bishop's register.

8. I have held this name [Christ] to be a filthy name and I have crossed it out many times and wherever it appeared in my books.⁵³
9. I have replaced the name of Christ with Jesus. And when I recite the Apostle's Creed, instead of 'in Jesus Christ', I will recite 'and in Jesus Jesus'. I will do the same at prayers and at Easter.
10. I affirm and write that everyone who believes in the name of Jesus will be damned in hell.
11. I openly deny the name of Christ.
12. I interpret the following words of Christ—'Take and eat, this is my body'—in this manner: 'This is my body by which the people shall be cheated and deceived.'⁵⁴

⁵³ This word 'Christus' is Harpsfield's insertion to clarify Cowbridge's meaning. Harpsfield placed the word in square brackets.

⁵⁴ '1) Ego...Guilelmus Coubrigus publice asservi, sacerdotes reos esse laesae majestis divinae, quod hostias in 3 particulas distribuunt, et non integram more nostro recipiant.

2) Neminem debere jejuniis se macerare aut corpus castigare.

3) Nolle me confessionem apud sacerdotem edere, nisi meo arbitrio absoluat, et mihi praescribat, ut dicam, 'Deus propitius esto mihi peccatori' et' benedicat me Deus pater'.

4) Neque Apostolos, neque Evangelistas, neque. Ecclesiae doctors adhuc patefecisse, qua ratione peccatores salvi sunt.

5) Confessionem meam hoc septennio fuisse mihi inutilem.

6) Asservi neque vitam, pie actam, nec jenunia posse prodesse ad hominis salutem.

The articles in the writ excommunicating Cowbridge and copied in Longland's register make an interesting comparison with Harpsfield's version:

1. William Cowbridge has said and affirmed erroneously that priests are traitors to God by breaking the sacred Host into three parts and not receiving it whole as the laity does.
2. And no one should punish or chastise his body by fasting.

7) Asservi Christum non esse mundi redemptorem, sed futurum mundi deceptorem.

8) Arbitratus sum hanc vocem [Christus] esse foedum nomen illudque ubicunque in libris meis occurebat, plerunque dispunxi.

9) Christi nomen in Jesum commutavi. Et ubi habetur in Symbolo Apostolico 'in Jesum Christum', ego canebar et 'in Jesum Jesum'. Hoc idem egi in precibus [et] in Paschate.

10) Asservi et scripsi universos qui in nomine Christi crediderunt in inferno damnatos.

11) Aperte negavi me unquam nomen Christi confessorum.

12) Haec praeterea Christi verba: 'Accipite et manducate, hoc est corpus meum, quod pro verbis tradetur' ad hunc modum intepretatus sum: 'Hoc et corpus meum in quo populus circumvenietur et decipietur'

(*DS*, 859–60; the numbering of the articles follows Harpsfield).

3. Next, that I would not wish to confess my sins to a priest unless he had demanded and chosen such an absolution as 'God be merciful to me a sinner' and 'bless me God the Father, etc.
4. Neither the apostles of our lord Jesus nor the four evangelists nor the four doctors of the Church have hitherto shown or declared, at any time, by what means have sinners been saved.
5. To have stated and affirmed, heretically, openly and publicly that no means of living piously or justly, whether through abstinence or fasting, could profit any soul and lead to salvation.
6. And Christ is not the redeemer of the world but its deceiver.
7. And the name Christ was to be considered, thought and called a foul and filthy name.
And that the name of Christ was to be blotted out, effaced and eradicated from his service from his service books in many and , as it were, in all portions of the same.
8. And [Cowbridge confessed] to speaking and chanting publicly in his aforesaid parish church, against the universal order of the Church of Christ, that the name Jesus Christ is to be changed to Jesus Jesus [and then] it is to be sung and spread abroad.
9. [He confessed] to have objected, expressly, rashly and heretically, to the very name of Christ being spoken, used or published.
10. And [he confessed] to having written, stated and published, foolishly, erroneously and heretically, that all who believe in Christ are in hell.
11. And [Cowbridge confessed] to have interpreted these words of Christ, namely, 'Take and eat, this is my body, which has been given for you and for many', perversely,

erroneously and heretically, in this manner ‘Take ye and eat, this is my body wherein the people shall be deceived’.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ ‘William Cowbridge erronee dixisse et affirmasse presbyteros frangetis hostiam consecratam in tres partes et eam integram non recipientes (ut laici recipiunt) fore Deo proditores.

Ac neminem jejunare aut corpus suum castigare sine punire debere.

Sequens nolle cuius sacerdoti confiteri peccata sua nisi voluisset talem absolucionem sibi qualem ipsem et pecieret et eligeret videlicet ‘Deus pro potius [sic, ‘propitius’ is meant] esto mihi peccatori’ et ‘benedicat me Deus pater’ etc..

Nec apostolos Domini vestre Jehu Christi nec quator Evangelistas neque quator doctors Ecclesiae quo modo peccatores solventur adhuc ullo unquam tempore ostendisse seu declarasse.

Errorieque et heretice palam et publice dixisse et affirmasse nullum pie juste vivendi modum aut abstinentiam sive jejunium posse juvare et prodesse ad salvacionem animae suae.

Ac Christum non esse non redemptorem mundi sed deceptorem.

Atque nomen Christi nomen turpe et sordidum cogitasse, estimasse et vocasse. Illudque nomen Christi ex libro suo matutinali, in nonnullis et quasi omnibus partibus eiusdem oblitterasse, delensisse et abolevisse.

Ac contra universalem ecclesiae Christi ordinem nomen Jehu Christi in Jhesum Jhesum loquendo et cantando etiam publice in ecclesia sua parochia predicta mutasse, cantasse et divulgasse.

Illud etiam nomen Christi eloqui profiteri aut proferre expresse temere et heretice recusasse.

Omnesque in Christo credentes in inferno inane, erronee et heretice scripsisse, dixisse et publicasse.

There are differences between the two lists. Harpsfield's version has two articles that have no counterpart in Longland's register: the fifth article (on the uselessness of confession) and the eleventh (a denial of the name of Christ). It is possible that Harpsfield invented these articles but it is also possible that Harpsfield was consulting a different version of Cowbridge's articles.

There is some corroboration for this in the different tenses in the two documents. Harpsfield's is consistently in the present tense while the version in Longland's register moves from the first person to the thirds; probably as an arbitrary decision by the copyist. Apart from these differences the two lists are identical in substance, although Harpsfield may have changed the wording in some of the articles in the interests of clarity. But where did Harpsfield get his copy of Cowbridge's articles? And how did he get it, when he had been in prison in London since 1559?

In his biography of Thomas More, Harpsfield had cited 'Dr Draycott', the 'chaplain and chancellor' of Bishop Longland to refute the story that Longland, in his capacity as Henry VIII's confessor, raised doubts in the king's mind about the validity of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon.⁵⁶ 'Dr. Draycott' was Anthony Draycot, a chaplain to Longland, who later became archdeacon of Stow and then archdeacon of Huntington. He was also Longland's vicar-general

Atque haec verba Christi vidilecet 'Accipite et manducate hoc est corpus meum quod per vobis et multis tradetur', perverse, errone et heretice interpretatum fuisse sub hac forma, 'Take ye and eat, this is the body wherein the people shall be deceived' (LAO, Registrer 26, fos 284v–285r. The last sentence was probably left in the original English to underscore the outlandishness of the belief).

⁵⁶ Nicholas Harpsfield, *The life and death of Sir Thomas Moore, knight*, eds. E. V. Hitchcock and R. W. Chambers, Early English Text Society 186 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 41.

from 1537 onwards. After Longland's death in 1547, Draycot became the chancellor to Ralph Baynes, the bishop of Coventry.⁵⁷ Both Baynes and Draycot were castigated by Foxe for their zeal in persecuting heresy. Foxe characterised Baynes as 'a cruel bishop' and Draycot as his 'more cruel chancellor'.⁵⁸ Thus Draycot had previously supplied Harpsfield with information and he was a committed Catholic with no reason to love Foxe. Moreover, like Harpsfield, Draycot had been imprisoned for refusing to swear to the Oath of Supremacy and like Harpsfield he was incarcerated in the Fleet prison.⁵⁹ It was natural that Harpsfield would ask his friend and fellow prisoner about a case in the diocese of which he had been vicar-general. And it would have been natural that Draycot had the contacts to supply Harpsfield with testimony about the case (Harpsfield said that he heard about Cowbridge's trial from a number of eyewitnesses) as well as documentation.

Faced with Harpsfield's superior documentation, Foxe beat a hasty retreat. In the next edition of *Acts and Monuments*, printed in 1570, Foxe rewrote his account of Cowbridge. Harpsfield had corrected Foxe on the date of Cowbridge's burning – neither 1536 nor 1539 but 1538 – and Foxe quietly amended his account accordingly. Foxe made a number of significant deletions to the account: gone was the background on Cowbridge (and thus his links with the Lollards); gone were the passages implicitly comparing Cowbridge to Christ; and gone were the claims that Cowbridge had been mistreated in prison. Instead, Foxe wrote of Cowbridge: 'What

⁵⁷ For Draycot's life and career see Gordon Goodwin and Andrew A. Chibi, 'Draycot, Anthony (d. 1571)', *ODNB*.

⁵⁸ *1563*, 1548; also see *1563*, 1706.

⁵⁹ Goodwin and Chibi, 'Draycot', *ODNB*.

his opinions and articles were, wherewith he was charged, it needeth not here to rehearse....And if his articles were so horrible and mad as Cope⁶⁰ doth declare them, than was he, in my judgement more fit to be sent to Bedlam, then to be burned'.⁶¹ After expiating on how Cowbridge's execution demonstrated the cruelty of the Catholic prelates, Foxe stubbornly concluded: 'But to end with Cowbridge, whatsoever his madness was before or however erroneous his articles were (which for the fond fantasies of them, I do not express) yet as touching his end, this is certain, that in the midst of the flames, he lifting up his head to heaven, soberly and distinctly called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and so departed'.⁶² And thus Foxe's account of Cowbridge ended where it begun so many years before, with the screams of a man being burned alive, echoing through the streets of Oxford and through the corridors of Foxe's memory.

Although Foxe's last ditch defence was to pronounce Cowbridge insane, this is rearguard rhetoric, which does not do justice to the man or his case. Cowbridge's beliefs horrified his contemporaries and they are remarkably, indeed uniquely, original. But they are coherent. Starting with a concern over what humans can do to achieve salvation, he rejected almost all of the traditional aids to guide one heavenward: the mass, prayer, confession, good works and ascetism. He was sceptical about these in his letter of 1536 and he died because he refused to do penance, which he seems to have regarded as useless. The most unusual and mysterious of

⁶⁰ The *Dialogi sex* was published under the name of Alan Cope, a Catholic exile who saw the work to press in Antwerp. Foxe is writing in the belief that his nemesis is Cope.

⁶¹ 1570, 1292.

⁶² 1570, 1292.

Cowbridge's beliefs was his conviction that Christ was evil but a separate entity, Jesus, was good. How Cowbridge came to this anticipation of Philip Pullman will probably never be known, but the belief was consistently held by Cowbridge and its implications thought out.

But why did Foxe even give Persons and Harpsfield the opportunity to attack his book by including the story of a religious eccentric? To explore possible reasons for this, it will be useful to compare Cowbridge's case to other examples of deviant, eccentric or simply awkward beliefs in *Acts and Monuments*, found chiefly among the pre-Reformation heretics. Foxe's inclusion of someone whose views he knew to be controversial or even suspect is all the more significant when seen in the context of the pseudo-martyr debate between Catholic and Protestant polemicists. Two related points were universally accepted among Christians in early modern Europe: that martyrs were an inherent and important feature of the True Church and that persecution alone did not make a martyr.⁶³ For a martyr to be regarded as a true martyr (and thus his or her Church as the True Church), he or she had to display a reasoned stoicism, which involved, *inter alia*, the martyr dying for a sufficient cause and understanding the cause for

⁶³ See Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), especially chapters one, three, four and eight; Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1553–1603* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), chapter one, and Thomas S. Freeman, 'Over Their Dead Bodies: Concepts of Martyrdom in Late Medieval and Early Modern England', in Thomas S. Freeman and Thomas F. Mayer, eds. *Martyrs and Martyrdoms in England, c.1400–1700* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007): 1–34. For the widespread acceptance of the dictum (from Tertullian via Augustine) that the cause for which one die, and not the death itself, made one a true martyr, see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 329–39.

which he or she died.⁶⁴ Thus one charge which Catholic polemicists consistently levelled at Protestants was that their ‘pseudo-martyrs’ lacked understanding and learning.⁶⁵ With this in mind, it seems all the more strange that Foxe would include this story. So why did he admit cases of religious eccentricity?

In answering this question it should be pointed out that the question itself rests on assumptions – too long unquestioned by scholars – that Foxe revised and rewrote his material in order to make his martyrs conform to an Elizabethan standard of godliness and awareness. For example, Susan Wabuda claims that radical and more moderate beliefs ‘were worked into a seamless, resolute stream by Foxe and his friends, at the cost of obscuring other, more minor species of Protestantism’,⁶⁶ and the suggestion of John Davis that there were cases ‘which Foxe either ignored or masked in order to present all the martyrs as adherents of the Edwardine

⁶⁴ Patrick Collinson, “‘A Magazine of Religious Patterns’: An Erasmian topic transposed in English Protestantism’, in Derek Baker, ed., *Renaissance and Renewal in Christian History*, Studies in Church History 14 (1977) 258–272 and Thomas S. Freeman, ‘The importance of dying earnestly: the metamorphosis of the account of James Bainham in ‘Foxe’s Book of Martyrs’, in Robert N. Swanson, ed. *The Church Retrospective*, Studies in Church History 33 (1997), 267–88.

⁶⁵ See, for example, William Wizeman, ‘Martyrs and Anti-martyrs and Mary Tudor’s Church’, in *Martyrs and martyrdom*, 166–71 and Dillon, *Construction of Martyrdom*, 45–52 and 345–55.

⁶⁶ Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 186; Susan Wabuda, *Preaching During the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.

settlement'.⁶⁷ The problem is that the tendency of scholars has been to emphasise cases where Foxe re-wrote the material while ignoring the many cases where he did not.⁶⁸ It is in the Lollard narratives of *Acts and Monuments* where scholars have perceived Foxe's heaviest editing. And if Patrick Collinson was right in his assertion that the the Lollards were 'represented in Foxe's rhetoric monochromatically as a "secret multitude of true professors", without nuances or shades of colouring', then the existence of Lollards or early evangelicals such as Cowbridge with eccentric beliefs found within *Acts and Monuments* require explanation.

Foxe's editing of this work, as recent scholarship has shown, was meticulous to the point of being obsessive.⁶⁹ And in a few places, it is clear that he applied this to the Lollard narratives. For instance, Foxe altered Thomas Butler's declaration that 'nobody undergoes any punishment for any sin after the death of Christ' to 'no faithful man should abide any pain after the death of Christ',⁷⁰ and Elizabeth Sampson's denial of Christ's bodily resurrection is still plainly seen in

⁶⁷ John F. Davis, *Heresy and Reformation in the South-East of England, 1520–1559* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1983), 143.

⁶⁸ Susan Royal, 'John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* and the Lollard Legacy in the Long English Reformation', (Durham PhD thesis, 2014), 3–11.

⁶⁹ That this got past Foxe, a very close editor, by mistake is unlikely. See Thomas S. Freeman and Susannah Monta, 'The Style of Authorship in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*' in *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500–1640*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 522–543.

⁷⁰ Shannon McSheffrey and Norman Tanner, eds. *Lollards of Coventry, 1486–1522*, Camden Fifth Series 23 (London: Royal Historical Society, 2003), 70; see *1570*, 943.

the London Metropolitan Archives, but appears nowhere in her narrative in *Acts and Monuments*.⁷¹ Paradoxically, though, there are a number of cases where Foxe presents his martyrs holding what Foxe himself would consider to be heterodox belief. We have to look no further than the same bishop's register where Sampson's claims were recorded to find that William Pottier, a London Lollard, who had apparently jumbled beliefs he found in a Lollard text, was accused in 1508 of maintaining belief in six gods and of denying the benefit of Christ's passion.⁷² These are just a few passages that Foxe's evangelical contemporaries would have found unorthodox.⁷³ So it is clear that eccentric religious beliefs are indeed present within *Acts and Monuments*.

Frustratingly, there seems to be no discernible governing principle with regard to Foxe's Lollard inclusions and exclusions. What can be said is that, on the whole, aberrant beliefs were excused because of the Lollards' place in history. Foxe carefully prefaced the accounts of these medieval dissenters with the caveat that they had been living in the darkest days of the church, and that their testimonies were all the more precious because they evidenced that the Holy Spirit was active even at that time when it seemed God was absent from the English church.⁷⁴ Foxe's

⁷¹ London Metropolitan Archives, Diocese of London, A/A/005/MS09531/009, fos. 4r-v; see *1570*, 966.

⁷² *Ibid.*, fo. 26v; see *1570*, 939. On Pottier's confusion stemming from a Lollard text, see Andrew Hope, 'Lollardy: the Stone the Builders Rejected?', 18.

⁷³ *1570*, 572.

⁷⁴ For instance, Foxe says of the London Lollards: 'who in the fulnes of that darke and misty tymes of ignoraunce, had also some portion of Gods good spirite whiche induced them to the knowledge of his

understanding of the Lollards' place in history rested on the notion of gradual enlightenment. But the idea of progressive enlightenment does not really work in Cowbridge's case because Foxe and almost all of his contemporaries, Protestant and Catholics, would not have seen his doctrinal beliefs as enlightened. So, how then, can we account for the inclusion of the 'unenlightened' beliefs of Cowbridge?

There are two possible reasons. First, Foxe was obviously deeply impressed by Cowbridge's fortitude at his death; it is the one aspect of Foxe's narrative of Cowbridge that remains constant through every edition. At the same time, when Foxe began to glorify Cowbridge, he was unaware of the nature and extent of Cowbridge's beliefs. However, the inclusion of Cowbridge as a martyr of the true church left Foxe vulnerable to attack by Harpsfield and his co-religionists.⁷⁵

In fact, had longevity beyond Harpsfield's generation. His *Dialogi Sex* would serve as a resource to later Catholic polemicists who sought to counter the Protestants' claims to truth and longevity through the sacrifices of the martyrs. In fact Harpsfield, in his last major work, *Historia Wicleffiana*, would again discuss Cowbridge, reprinting his heresies in full, but this time

truth and Gospell...', 1570, 966. Among these men and women was William Pottier, whose confused and idiosyncratic beliefs forced Foxe to explain them.

⁷⁵ For instance, Thomas Harding used Cowbridge's story (among others) to offer some advice in his famous spat with John Jewel, who defended the Church of England on the basis of its true martyrs, saying 'Let M. Foxe make no martyrs. Or if ye will needs allow him for a Martyr-maker still, let him be warned to use...more discretion'. Harding, *A Rejoindre to M. Jewels Replie* (Louvain: Ioannem Foulherum, 1597), fo. 181r.

drawing a different moral. Now Harpsfield was using Cowbridge as an example of how the Lollard heresies, over time, evolved into even more grotesque and blasphemous forms.⁷⁶

In his ongoing debate with Sir Francis Hastings, Robert Persons reopened the Cowbridge affair. Persons made a point of observing that Cowbridge's beliefs were 'confessed openly by public register under the B[ishop] of Lincoln', and cited his source for this as Harpsfield's *Dialogi Sex*. Further, Persons ridiculed Foxe's 'devised excuse' of branding Cowbridge mad and beyond his senses, asking readers rhetorically if 'Is not this to make mad and furious men pillars of his new Church?'⁷⁷ So, drawing on Harpsfield, Persons was able to undermine the basis on which his polemical opponents staked their claim to be the true Church.

The case of William Cowbridge and its afterlife, then, offers a window onto several aspects of sixteenth-century English Reformation. First, the case throws light on the dynamic between Foxe and Harpsfield. This case also demonstrates the importance Reformation polemicists attached to using verifiable evidence in the form of testimonies or documentation. One of the major reasons for the impact of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* was Foxe's method of historical writing, which entailed the use of both documentation and oral sources. This made his work difficult to refute. As we can see in this case, both Foxe and Harpsfield appreciated the importance of oral sources and consulted them to find out about Cowbridge. At the same time, the significance of archival sources is demonstrated by the fact that Harpsfield, thanks to Draycot, was able to beat Foxe at his own game by producing a document proving that Foxe was

⁷⁶ Nicholas Harpsfield, *Historia Anglicana Ecclesiastica* (Douai: Marc Wyon, 1622), 679–680.

⁷⁷ Robert Persons, *The vvarn-vvord to Sir Francis Hastings wast-word* (Antwerp: A. Conincx, 1602), fo. 88v.

wrong. In doing so, while Harpsfield discredited Foxe's story, ironically validated Foxe's own method. This is demonstrated by the insistence of both Harpsfield and Persons that Cowbridge's articles could still be seen in Longland's register.

This case also affirms Harpsfield's important impact on *Acts and Monuments*. Prior to publishing the first English version of the book, Foxe was blissfully unaware of how intensely his work would be attacked. As a result, in his first edition, Foxe could be could be comparatively cavalier. Foxe's inclusion of Cowbridge, and in particular his printing of two of Cowbridge's wilder ideas, is proof of this. One of the effects of Harpsfield's criticisms was to make Foxe more cautious, and this is clear in the 1570 narrative of Cowbridge, where the heretic's beliefs are omitted and a defensive tone is assumed. Particularly telling is Foxe's omission of the material that associated Cowbridge with the Lollards. Foxe obviously was concerned that Cowbridge's example would be used to discredit the Lollards, which is in fact what Harpsfield would ultimately do.

Another result of Harpsfield's critique was that Foxe was forced to surmise in his second edition that Cowbridge must have been mad to have uttered the words that he did. But the use of madness was a polemical tool employed by both sides: just as Foxe was able to claim that Cowbridge had been mad and therefore the Roman church should have treated him with sympathy and treatment rather than death, so Persons was able to claim that the witnesses to the false Church of England were, if not blasphemers, then madmen. This label, used for polemical

purposes, can often obscure the important context of beliefs in the past, as Alexandra Walsham has shown in her work on the Puritan rebel William Hacket.⁷⁸

This case is also significant because it gives us a glimpse of Thomas Cromwell in action. Despite a post-Eltonian tendency to scale back Cromwell's involvement in ecclesiastical affairs, his repeated interventions in the Cowbridge affair remind us of how meticulous his oversight could be.⁷⁹ The Cowbridge case also underscores Cromwell's immense authority in the Henrician church and his willingness and ability to intimidate the senior clergy. The fact that he could also apparently be asked twice by Cowbridge's sympathisers to intervene is a reminder of Cromwell's important role as a patron and protector of evangelicals.

A final reason that Cowbridge's case is significant is because it underscores the need to see pre-Reformation dissenters less as a cohesive movement (as many scholars consider 'Lollards' to be⁸⁰), and more as disparate groups of dissenters, with wide divergences among and between these groups.⁸¹ Until recently, the scholarly emphasis in Lollard studies has been textual

⁷⁸ Alexandra Walsham, "'Frantick Hacket': Prophecy, Sorcery, Insanity and the Elizabethan Puritan Movement', *Historical Journal* 41 (1998): 27–66.

⁷⁹ Contrast G.R. Elton, *Reform and Renewal: Thomas Cromwell and the Common Weal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) with Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸⁰ Especially Anne Hudson. See Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

⁸¹ For the ways Lollard communities were structured, see Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420–1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

and prosopographical, thanks to the monumental and groundbreaking work done by Anne Hudson⁸² and by her students, constructing networks of manuscript circulation and mutual contact.⁸³ Recent years, though, have seen a shift from concerns about textual traditions and social networking to a focus on belief: how outer signs indicate inner belief,⁸⁴ and ways that doctrines developed.⁸⁵ The result of this shift, most clearly seen in the work of Patrick Hornbeck, to say nothing of the work of Richard Rex, is that the Lollards cannot be conceptualized as

1995), especially chapter three. See also Susan Brigden's account of the London Lollards, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), chapter two.

⁸² Anne Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books* (London: Hambledon, 1985) and *Studies in the Transmission of Wyclif's Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

⁸³ See especially the work of Maureen Jurkowski; for example, 'Heresy and Factionalism at Merton College in the Early Fifteenth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48 (1997): 658–81 and 'Lollard Book Producers in London in 1414', in Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchinson, eds. *Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 201–228. See also the work of Andrew Hope: for instance, 'The Lady and the Bailiff: Lollardy among the Gentry in Yorkist and Early Tudor England', in Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, eds. *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 250–277. See also Margaret Spufford, ed., *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520–1725* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸⁴ Ian Forrest, *The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁸⁵ J. Patrick Hornbeck, 'Theologies of Sexuality in English 'Lollardy'' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009): 19–44.

members of a cohesive movement.⁸⁶ The case of Cowbridge buttresses this argument: If modern historians did not have Harpsfield's account and the highly unusual evidence from Longland's register detailing Cowbridge's beliefs, he would likely appear to be a Lollard. We know that the texts that were circulating around the Lollard community in Colchester included *The Prick of Conscience*, the *Dialogue between a Friar and a Secular*,⁸⁷ the martyrologies of two early Lollards, William Thorpe and Sir John Oldcastle,⁸⁸ and, perhaps most significantly (because it was the hunt for possessors of this book that led to the Colchester dissenters being discovered by Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London), William Tyndale's New Testament.⁸⁹ Since Cowbridge's articles are extant, however, it is evident that there are, in fact, few doctrines shared by Cowbridge with others of that group, whose beliefs were marked by a rejection of transubstantiation, denial of the validity of confession and baptism, flouting of fasting and holy days, and repudiation of the pope's pardons, pilgrimages, and images. Cowbridge's beliefs went much further than those of most other Lollards, but there are similar areas of concern, for instance, a scepticism of almost anything that comes between a man and Jesus' grace.

Cowbridge, speaking in the third person in the letter that he wrote when he was at Wantage, indicates that 'scrippter to hym is sufficient and perfecte' for understanding the nature of virtue; the Colchester community is perhaps best characterized by their scripture reading (certainly for

⁸⁶ J. Patrick Hornbeck, *What is a Lollard? Dissent and Disbelief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

⁸⁷ Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, 1: pt. 1:115.

⁸⁸ 1570, 1230.

⁸⁹ Craig D'Alton, 'Cuthbert Tunstall and Heresy in Essex and London, 1528', *Albion* 35 (2003): 210–228.

their book exchanges). Both Cowbridge and many other Lollards were skeptical (at a minimum) of confession and some of the other sacraments. However, there are no other known Lollards who articulated Cowbridge's separation of the evil Christ from the good Jesus. The problem is with the word 'known'. There is simply no way of ascertaining whether there were members of Lollard communities who held radical and eccentric beliefs but who dissimulated their beliefs more consistently and carefully as Cowbridge did.

When scholars have looked at belief, there has been a tendency to examine 'grey areas' between orthodoxy and heresy,⁹⁰ while less work has been done on the other side of the spectrum,⁹¹ where questions remain about the relationship between the beliefs of those termed 'Lollards' and those of religious outliers. That this area is relatively unexplored can be seen as a legacy of *Acts and Monuments*. Foxe inherited the idea from John Bale and Matthias Flacius that there were witnesses to the true church in every age. Despite their theological deficiencies, Foxe recognised the Lollards as individual holders of the truth. But the net effect of his portrayal has been to make them all seem like a movement of proto-Protestants. Even though this was not Foxe's personal position, unsubtle readings of *Acts and Monuments*, from the seventeenth

⁹⁰ Jill C. Havens, 'Shading the Grey Area: Determining Heresy in Middle English Texts', in *Text and Controversy*, 337–352; Anne Hudson, "'Who is My Neighbour?'" Some Problems of Definition on the Borders of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy,' in Mishtooni Bose and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, eds. *Wycliffite Controversies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 79–96; Rob Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England: Reconstructing Piety* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2006).

⁹¹ On the emphasis of 'continuum and spectrum rather than...dichotomy' in recent scholarship, see Mishtooni Bose and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, 'Introduction', in *Wycliffite Controversies*, 6.

century onward, have painted that picture. The case of Cowbridge offers a way to shift from the idea of a relatively cohesive Lollard movement and look at some of the idiosyncratic beliefs of English dissenters in the early years of reform.

It also shows how the desire of polemicists of both confessions to manipulate the past have succeeded in perpetuating myths about their reformation. Foxe's claim that the Lollards were direct precursors of the English Reformation, for instance, has dominated the historiography for centuries and has long held sway among modern historians.⁹² But this, much like the claims of Harpsfield and other Catholic apologists that Protestantism appealed to the 'lesser sorts' (the poor, the unlearned, youth and women) is not reporting fact but laying the foundation of enduring historical myth.⁹³

That this opportunity to delve deeper into the context and circumstances of an individual's beliefs even exists is the product of two happy historical accidents. If it was not for Longland's nervousness about the legality of proceedings against Cowbridge, he would not have copied the articles of belief into his register, and if Harpsfield had not known about them through Draycot, he would not have been able to employ them to deride Foxe's claims. If not for these two sources contradicting Cowbridge's story as it appears in *Acts and Monuments*, Cowbridge would likely appear to be a Lollard or a heroic if slightly eccentric martyr for the true church.

⁹² For a recent overview, see Peter Marshall, 'Lollards and Protestants Revisited,' in *Wycliffite Controversies*, 295–318.

⁹³ Thomas S. Freeman, 'The Power of Polemic: Catholic Attacks on the Calendar of Martyrs in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 475–95.

Very often the only traces that we have of figures like this is in the dusty archives, where their true stories seem stranger than fiction.