

CHAPTER II

A BEGINNING: ADAM BLAND, YOUNG MAN

FROM THE PROVINCES

It is convincing to me that John Bland's martyrdom was responsible for lifting the name of Bland out of oblivion. He was born in Sedbergh Parish in the West Riding of York County, with no more than a sliver of land in Westmoreland and Lancaster counties between his birthplace and the Irish Sea. Tradition and empirical information confirms¹ that the Bland surname is derived from Bland's Gill, a hamlet within Sedbergh, which itself is just east of the Lone River that marks the boundary between York and Westmoreland County. Sedbergh is just to the south of Orton Parish in Westmoreland County which is usually identified as the birthplace of another young man, Adam Bland, who lived during the 16th century. During the middle of the 17th century, Adam's grandchildren settled in Virginia. Philip Slaughter, the chronicler of Bristol Parish, Virginia, calls Adam the "cousin" of John Bland.² Unfortunately, Slaughter does not document his statement,

¹ Carlisle, p. 3; Ralph Thoresby, Ducatus Leodensis (1715), pp. 583-584. Hereafter referred to in notes as Thoresby. A massive computerized collection of births and marriages in England for 1500-1900, held by the Church of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, includes about 200 pages of Bland names, including some 11,000 names. Sixty pages of names are taken up with York and Westmoreland County, far more than any other location except London, which has 35 pages. It should be added also that this was a period in which York and Westmoreland were among the most sparsely populated counties.

² Philip Slaughter, A History of Bristol Parish, Virginia (1894), p. 150. Hereafter referred to as Slaughter.

but one is inclined to respect his observation because of the close geographic proximity of Sedbergh and Orton Parishes. During the 16th and 17th centuries, "cousin" was rather loosely used to describe not only cousins, but nieces and nephews, and sometimes in-laws. John and Adam Bland could have had a wide range of relationships, but given the apparent difference in their ages, John may have been Adam's uncle, belonging perhaps to the same generation as Adam's father, Robert (or as he is traditionally called, Roger), a husbandman from Orton.¹ For the later generations of Blands in America who trace their name back to England, then, Robert (or Roger) and possibly, John the Martyr, are members of the first known generation, and Adam the second. It is my belief, as I shall presently show, that the fates of these two young men, Adam and John Bland, were inextricably interwoven.

Both were born in the early part of the 16th century, in the Sedbergh-Orton region, and it is probable that they both were born poor, and given ordinary circumstances, might not have come to historical notice. Evidence of their poverty is offered by John Foxe's assertion that John Bland was "little born"² and from the traditional representation of Adam's father as an "husbandman" (ordinary farmer).³ Further, during the 16th century, Cumberland, Lancaster and Westmoreland counties and the West Riding of York County were among the poorest, and least densely populated counties in England.⁴

¹ See the subsequent discussion about Adam's presumed first son, for my reasons in changing Roger to Robert.

² Foxe, p. 287.

³ Thoresby, p. 208.

⁴ John Patten, Ed., Pre-Industrial England: Geographical Essays (London: 1978), p. 13.

About 1542, Adam came to London, the magnet city of that age, which drew its labor from the provinces in great numbers. Most likely, Adam was fourteen when he began his apprenticeship as a Skinner to Richard Bewe.¹ The Skinner's Guild got its start in 1327 as a collective engaged in the trapping, processing, merchandising, manufacture and sale of furs. Adam was "made free" or gained the freedom of the city to practice his craft February 1, 1549/1550,² meaning that he became a full-fledged member of the Skinner's Company. There were, by the mid-16th century, three ways to gain the freedom in London. The traditional way, the one that gave birth to the guilds, was to work as an apprentice under a master, as Adam Bland did in his service to Bewe. Apprenticeship was the poor boy's way to learn a craft. The other ways were to gain the freedom by patrimony (financed by one's father), or by redemption (paying one's own way into the guild without doing the traditional apprenticeship). Redemption entailed a rather substantial fee that closed such a route to the freedom for such poor provincials as Adam was in 1542. Adam's sons, Peter and William, were admitted to the Skinner's Company by patrimony, and undoubtedly, Adam's youngest son, John, bought his way into the Grocer's Company in 1626 by redemption. Adam, however, took the poor boy's route of apprenticeship.

Adam's beginning in London may be illuminated by briefly considering the changing shape of the London guilds, particularly the Skinner's Company, at about the time he began his apprenticeship. Professor Elspeth Veale, a British historian who has done research in the Skinners

¹ Letter, J. W. Cross, Beadle of the Skinner's Company, to Charles L. Bland, October 27, 1980. Hereafter referred to in notes as Cross.

² Ibid.

of the late 15th and early 16th centuries, was good enough to provide information for this work about Adam Bland and his son, Peter. Her study of the fur trade also has been helpful. In it, Professor Veale analyzed the vocations of fathers of 132 freemen Skinners in London who had begun their apprenticeships from 1496-1515. Using the same source, she was able to ascertain the home county for 142 freemen Skinners. She found that thirty apprentices had been sons of husbandmen, and that thirty-six of them came from the York-Westmoreland, Lancaster area. Thus, in social status, Adam Bland seems to fit the stereotype of the typical London apprentice in the Skinner's Company during the early 16th century.¹

Adam was, then, a young man in his early twenties (born probably about 1528) when he gained his freedom through apprenticeship.

Subsequently, Adam enjoyed a very considerable career in London, rising in the Skinner's Company ranks to the yeomanry in 1551, and to the livery in 1559.² Since membership in the livery usually signified merchant status, it is fair to assume that Adam was economically very well off by 1559. On July 19, 1560, Adam was appointed to a life term position of Sergeant Skinner to Queen Elizabeth. His salary was 12d. per day,³ a decent salary for that time, but probably honorary

¹ Elspeth Veale, The English Fur Trade in the Later Middle Ages (1966), pp. 93-100. Hereafter referred to in notes as Veale.

² Letter, Elspeth Veale to Charles L. Bland, September 15, 1980. Hereafter referred to in notes as Veale to Bland. Attainment of the livery cleared the person involved to hold political office in the city, and to participate in the policy-making of the Company. In other words, it put him more or less in the inner circle.

³ Carlisle, p. 123.

in nature. Adam evidently held this position until his death, about May 1594. One modern biographer of Queen Elizabeth records the following information:

Adam Bland, 'our skinner,' furred a russet satin French gown with four 'luzrne' (i.e., lynx) skins, mended a pair of sables, but was mainly employed upon mending gowns and collars with the same.¹

Quite a record of accomplishment in one decade for a young man of poor parentage, and from one of the poorest areas of England. What accounted for Adam's rise? Certainly, he must have been an ambitious young man, making the right connections, the right acquaintances, perhaps marrying the right woman. But it seems somewhat unlikely that a strong will and driven ambition could account for all of Adam's success, even with the latitude that the new commerce allowed in transcending one's class. Something else must have intervened.

I would suggest that as the only close relative to John Bland in London at the time of Elizabeth's coming to power, Adam may have benefitted from John's horrible death. To understand the drift of my argument, the reader may recur momentarily to the circumstances surrounding the publication of John Foxe's Acts and Monuments (1563). Following the death of Queen Mary in 1558, many high ranking Protestant clergy, Foxe among them, began to return from exile. Protestantism was reestablished as the religion of England, under Elizabeth, and these clergy were restored to their former prominence. But it is not likely that they were content to simply have Elizabeth proclaim a reign of tolerance and to reinstate Protestantism. (In fact, Elizabeth

¹ A. W. Rowse, The Elizabethan Renaissance: Life of the Society (1971), p. 47.

tolerated a minority Catholic presence, and schisms within the Protestant Church, particularly Puritanism.) The hideous persecutions of Protestants under Mary created among the clergy a determination such events would never happen again. To this end, Foxe began immediately his Acts and Monuments in 1558, which comprised no mere collection of cases, but a profoundly political document. Foxe's work was chained to the doors of parish churches throughout the land to remind parishioners of what Catholicism had meant to them. And in that dawning age of literacy, Foxe's work was not only written with beautiful simplicity, but for those who could not read, was strewn with graphic woodcut renderings of the executions themselves.¹

So the act of martyrdom of John Bland became a celebrated and widely known event in English life, read or told by word of mouth from pulpits, to rich and poor alike. It is not too much to say that John Bland, like all the martyrs, became a folk hero in Tudor England.

None of this was lost upon Queen Elizabeth. A far shrewder, wiser and politically more astute ruler than her sister, her reign was, for the time, a model of toleration and benefit for the people. She also realized that she could not retain power unless she could quiet the religious dissension within England. Further, she realized that Protestantism was the religion of England's future. Catholicism had lost its economic and social power during the reign of her father and younger brother. It had, except for the minority she tolerated, lost its moral authority because of the terrible crimes of Mary's reign. Now, Elizabeth needed the support of Protestant leaders like

¹ The political importance of The Acts and Monuments is analyzed in William Haller, The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs (New York: 1963), especially pp. 91-92, 122-124, 197-198.

Foxe to make her reign successful, and she knew that Foxe's book was to her a reminder of what had been and that the Protestant clergy would not support her unless she firmly supported them.

How to do this? The specific Acts of Religious Reconciliation taken by Elizabeth need not concern us, but it is also possible that she recognized the widespread heroism of the martyrs, and in a political gesture of good will, took action to as it were provide for the support of their living survivors. There was little conception of welfare as we know it in those days, but it may have been that Elizabeth granted relatively minor offices such as Adam's post as Sergeant Skinner to survivors.

Thus, my inference that the lives of John and Adam Bland were intertwined. Was this the case? Admittedly, there is no way of knowing. I have put the hypothesis to several British scholars, including Professor Veale, who seem intrigued by the idea, but cannot confirm or deny such a general practice by Queen Elizabeth. Though I am not a scholar on British history, I have read a number of pertinent works in British welfare history and have never come across mention of this in any discussion of antecedents to the Elizabethan Poor Laws. Professor Veale indicated that the reasons for appointment to the office of Skinner to the Queen (or King) in those days is not known, and not likely to be known.¹ Perhaps no one has ever asked the question, which admittedly is not high on scholarly agendae. I do not claim that my hypothesis is valid because of the absence of contrary proof. Yet it does seem like a plausible reason for Adam's career to have progressed so rapidly from such obviously humble beginnings.

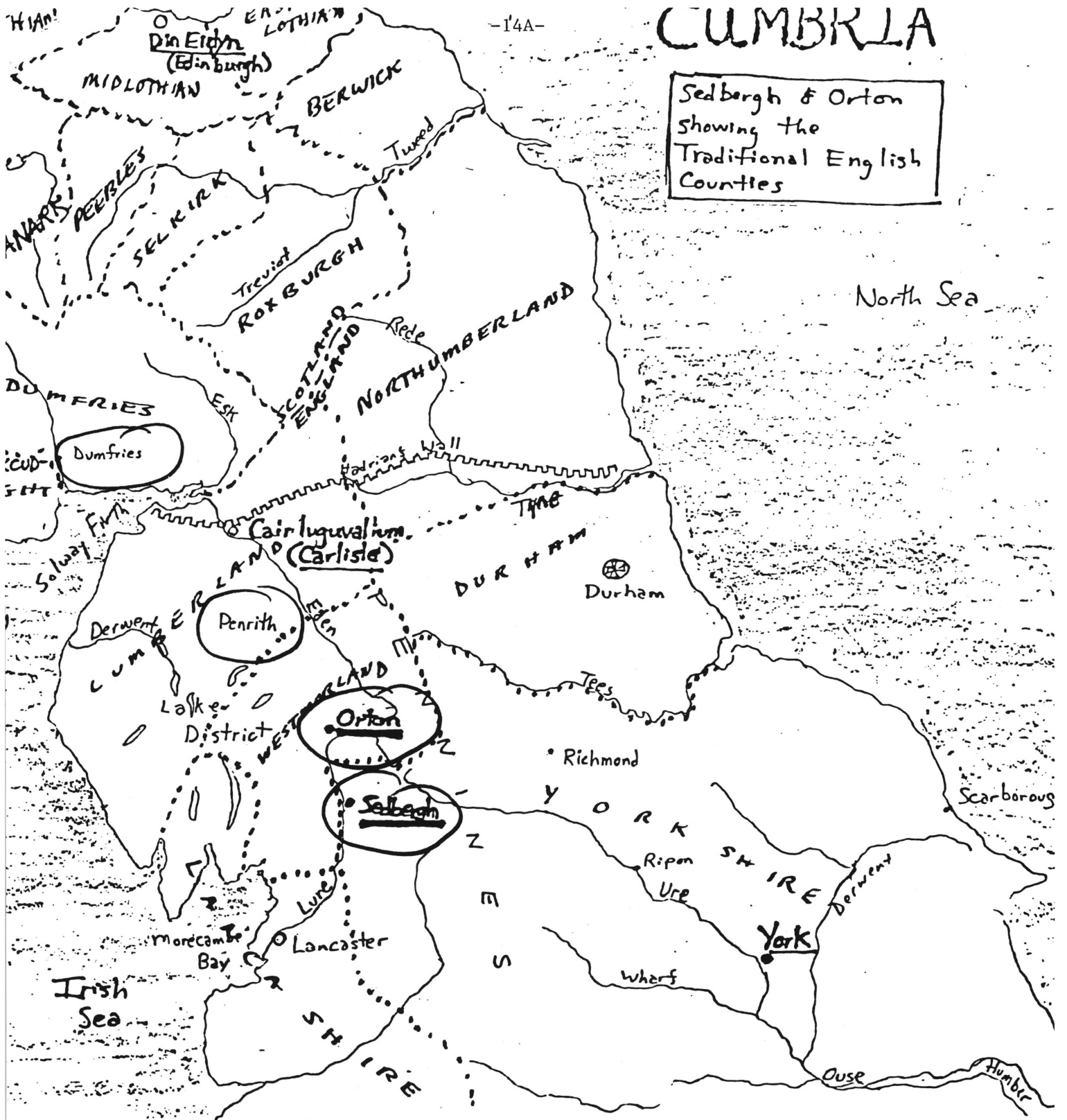
¹ Veale to Bland.

Thus, Adam Bland was from Orton Parish in Westmoreland County, a poor provincial lad of about fourteen when he came to London in 1542 to begin an apprenticeship in the Skinner's Company. He gained his freedom of the city in 1549/1550, presumably at age twenty-one. Also, we know that Adam died about May 1594, for on May 8, 1594, his son Peter assumed the office that Adam had been granted for life, that of Skinner to the Queen.¹

The release from apprenticeship in most Tudor guilds corresponded with legal adulthood for young men, age twenty-one, and also established him as a craftsman free to practice his trade in the city. Also, it marked the legal age for marriage. It was the time when a young man, in the quaint parlance of the time, took steps "to enter the married estate."²

¹ CSPD, Elizabeth I, Vol. III (1591-1594), p. 502. Cf. p. 24, note 2

² Edmund Morgan, The Puritan Family (1966), p. 55. Morgan's is an excellent, simply written study of the marriage and familial customs of what were only one variant of Englishmen whose difference in religion did not mean they differed greatly from Englishmen in other areas of social life.



The territory of the ancient Celtic kingdom of Cumbria, now northern England and southern Scotland. The Cumbrians were most closely related to the Welsh.

Orton and Sedbergh are both located in the modern county (since 1974) named for the kingdom. This map shows the traditional counties as they were at the time of Roger and Adam Bland.