

PART ONE

THE BLAND FAMILY IN LONDON, 1555-1665

CHAPTER 1

AN END: THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF JOHN BLAND

July 12, 1555

The rains over Kent County were hard and frequent during the spring and summer of 1555. Queen Mary's execution of religious heretics had begun the previous February and they dragged on through the summer. Citizens were compelled to witness the grisly spectacle of clergy and laymen and women, high born and lower classes, being burned to death. The heavy summer rains sometimes doused out the flames when the ugly business was half done, leaving the victims half dead and screaming in pitiful agony. Presently, in a perverse humanitarian gesture, the executioners took to fastening bags of explosive powder to the victims, bringing instant and merciful death.¹

At Canterbury, on July 12, 1555, John Bland, rector of the Adisham Church at Kent County, was burned to death, "at two several stakes but in one fire together,"² with fellow heretics John Frankesh, Humphrey Middleton and Nicholas Sheterden. John Bland was the 26th victim of Queen Mary's purges, which reached more than three hundred before her death in 1558.

John Foxe, chronicler of the Marian Martyrs, brings to life John Bland's last years in a long essay about his trial and death. John Bland is described by Foxe as "a common preacher...this Master Bland

¹ The description of the weather during the executions is found in Paul Johnson, Elizabeth I (London: 1972), p. 54.

² John Foxe, The Acts and Monuments, Vol. VII (1570: Reprinted in 1965 by AMS Press), p. 313. Hereafter referred to as Foxe.

was so little born...that no part of his life was separated from the common and public utility of all men."¹ He was trained at Cambridge, receiving his B.A. with Honors in 1532-33, and his M.A. in 1536.² Although his birthdate is not known, it is reasonable to assume, based upon his matriculation dates at Cambridge, that he was born about 1515. His career as a teacher preceded his career as a minister.³ The story of his last years of life is told, in Foxe's construction, through a long letter to his father⁴ in which John Bland tells of his heresy, his imprisonment and the trials that brought him to death. Other sources indicate that Bland was strikingly consistent in his Protestant belief, refusing to shift faiths when the winds blew from Protestantism to Catholicism upon the death of Edward VI.⁵ He was training for the ministry during the time of King Henry VIII's "great question" when Protestantism supplanted Catholicism as the English religion. All of this suggests that John Bland was a devout and dedicated, unyielding Protestant. One wonders, if the tables had been reversed, whether he would have been more merciful toward Catholics.

¹ Foxe, Vol. VII, p. 287.

² John Venn and John Venn, Compilers. Alumni Cantabrigenses, Vol. 1, Part 1 (1922), p. 164. Hereafter referred to in notes as Venn and Venn.

³ Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. II (1902), pp. 659-660.

⁴ Much to the regret of genealogists, Foxe does not identify the name of John Bland's father, who must have been living in 1559, since he was the source of Foxe's narrative.

⁵ John Strype, Ecclesiastical Memorials, Vol. III (London: 1630), p. 211.

John Bland, The Marian Martyr

John Bland's crime was his denial of the transubstantiation of consecrated bread and wine into the body of Christ. In other words, he rejected the Catholic sacrament. There may also have been some economic motive in Catholic interest in his particular rectory, which Carlisle describes as a very lucrative one.¹ But undoubtedly, the major force at work was the reflexive imposition of Catholicism upon the people of England by Queen Mary, Henry VIII's daughter by his first wife, the Spaniard Catherine of Aragon. Mary's motives were a mixture of politics, religion and biological vindication. For Mary's mother had been set aside by Henry VIII in a divorce that enabled him to remarry Anne Boelyn and precipitated England's shift to Protestantism. The divorce had, in effect, rendered Henry's marriage to Catherine null and void, and therefore made Mary legally a bastard. Thus, affirmation of Protestantism, from whatever source, struck at Mary's heart, challenged her legitimacy, and so her ability to rule.

It was a fearful time, when one's religion could be a badge of honor one day, and the certificate of death the next day. The great masses accommodated to the shifting political and religious tides. Some of the powerful changed their religion in order to preserve their estates and their lives. Others, John Bland among them, clung stubbornly and honorably to their faith, braving persecution and death. The Adisham rectory was fractured along those lines in John Bland's last years (1553-55).

By the fall of 1553, John Bland's congregation was under Catholic control. But John Bland continued to speak out against the Catholic

¹ Nicholas Carlisle, Collection For a History of the Ancient Family of Bland (1826), p. 6.

sacrament. On September 3, 1553, not long after Mary came to power, and again on November 26, 1553, he spoke against the sacraments. In his later statement, he was challenged by leading members of the congregation.

On December 28, 1553, John Bland was apparently excluded from delivering the church service, and a Catholic priest was summoned to say the mass. In a dramatic gesture, John Bland disrupted the service, seized the pulpit and contradicted the visiting priest. He was promptly arrested, and imprisoned.¹

After a brief detention, friends kept him out of prison until July 3, 1554, at which time he was confined and never again released. This last year of his life consisted of a series of confrontations with Catholic authorities, who evidently pleaded with him to recant. Foxe's construction of the trials of the martyrs always poses the immense power of the established clergy against the seemingly simple and homespun, but actually subtle and profound wisdom of the martyrs. It should be remembered that when Foxe wrote in 1563, he was part of the restored Protestant clergy, and was thoroughly partisan. He may have even doctored some of the evidence to suit his own political and religious imperatives. John Bland may have been less heroic, and the Catholic clergy undoubtedly were not as one-dimensionally evil, as Foxe paints them. But even allowing for Foxe's selective use of evidence, the following exchanges between Bland and the clergy indicate clearly their essential impasse:

Bland: "...for my Lord of Dover asked me... 'dost thou believe, after the consecration, that it is the body of Christ?', and I said, 'no, I do not believe: for the

¹ Foxe, pp. 287-293.

scriptures tell me that there should remain the flesh of Christ, to eat as a man should eat man's flesh'."

Faucet: "Master Bland...ye must humble yourself...to the holy church, which hath determined that after the consecration there remaineth no bread, but the natural body and blood of Christ."

Bland: "I do not believe in any such transubstantiation, nor ever will, God willing."

Faucet: "Then I have done with you: I will no more pray for you than for a dog."¹

The "Lord of Dover," Richard Thorenden, Bishop of Dover and Suffragan of Canterbury, became the chief judge against Bland. Most writers on Bland's trial agree that Thorenden was an opportunist who had been, in Foxe's words, a "gospeller" (Protestant) before the reign of Mary, and had simply shifted with the tides, something John Bland in an admirable fiestiness threw up to him repeatedly.² Carlisle, the chronicler of the Bland family, implies that Thorenden arrested Bland because he wanted the wealth of the Adisham rectory.³

Bland had been imprisoned for almost a year when he made three fateful appearances before Thorenden on June 13, June 20, and June 25, 1555. Each time, Thorenden implored John Bland to recant his heresy, but as Foxe puts it, each time Bland "openly and boldly withstood the

1 Foxe, pp. 297, 299-300.

2 Ibid., p. 297.

3 Ibid. Strype, pp. 211-213; Nicholas Carlisle, Collections For a History of the Ancient Family of Bland (1826), pp. 6-7. Hereafter referred to in notes as Carlisle.

authority of the Pope."¹ Following his last refusal, John Bland was condemned and committed to the secular authority. In his final prayer, Bland said:

Lord Jesus, for whose love I do willingly leave this life, and desire rather the bitter death of this cross ...than to abide in blasphemy of thy holy name...I chose rather the torments of this body and loss of my life...that I might win thee.²

¹ Foxe, p. 304.

² Ibid., p. 305.

December 28, 1553. John Bland challenges the authority of the Catholic Priest,



Drawn by F. W. LAWSON.

[Engraved by W. L. THOMAS.]

"I stood up in the chancel door, and spake to the congregation."

July 12, 1555. John Bland, the Marian Martyr, was executed with John Frankesh, Humphrey Middleton and Nicholas Sheterden "at two several stakes but in one fire together."



Engraving by G. DU MAURIEK.]

Illustrated by W. L. THOMAS.

"They were all burnt together, at two several stakes, but in one fire."

These are artist's conceptions that appeared as illustrations in John Foxe, The Book of Martyrs, Revised by Rev. William Bramley Moore, M.A.