**The Reign of Mary Tudor - A Reassessment** By [Michael Hutchings](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/1714) [1] | Published in [History Review](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/83) [2] [1999](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/14773) [3]

Michael Hutchings argues that for too long Protestant historians have concentrated on the negative aspects of the era of ‘Bloody Mary' and that, in sharp contrast, there are positive achievements to her credit.

A reassessment of Mary Tudor, who ruled from 1553 to 1558, is much needed. For too long she has been denigrated. A. Pollard, for instance, concluded in a. famous dictum that 'sterility was the conclusive note of Henry's reign', and his pupil, S.T. Bindoff, pronounced Marian England 'politically bankrupt, spiritually impoverished, economically archaic, and intellectually enervated' at her death. The reasons for these negative verdicts lie in part with Elizabeth I, whose reign has been so eulogised as to obscure the years prior to her accession. Even the latest PolyGram film Elizabeth I, with the aid of computer wizardry, bolsters the myth of 'Gloriana'. Fortunately, however, the emphasis of recent scholarship has been on the real achievements of the reign. Professor Eamon Duffy of Magdalene College, Cambridge, insists that 'a convincing account of the religious history of Mary's reign has yet to be written’.

Recently scholars have begun to argue that Mary 'failed' not because her policies were wrong but 'because by sheer misfortune she ran into the worst harvests and epidemics in the century and died before her work had any chance to take root'. As to whether Mary may have misjudged her subjects in any fundamental way, Professor R. Tittler has argued that 'the conservative supremacy was gradually being reasserted in the country and that, given the similar conservatism of the majority of the peerage, political opposition to a Catholic government would have been overcome within a few years'. Other scholars have argued, like Dr Pogson, that the 'traditional church regained much of the ground it has lost, even within five years, and that had Mary's reign continued, the English Reformation would have aborted from the top as it had been initiated from the top'. Indeed it is now customary to argue that the Marian government pursued a coherent and generally well thought out strategy for the restoration of Catholicism Dr Jennifer Loach has found little trace of organised opposition in Mary's parliaments and much evidence of a sensible and constructive legislative programme.

This brief article aims to accuse and renew interest in Mary Tudor a. considered from new perspectives by examining the importance of wills, 'Foxey' executions, the exile and toleration of Protestants, printing and propaganda, as well as economic and social policy.

**Restoration by the people, for the people**

Professor Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars* demonstrates that the Marian Restoration was not an external act inflicted on parishes by official decree and enforced by bureaucratic procedure, as was done with the dissolution decrees under Henry VIII and Edward VI. The real hallmark of the Marian church (shown in court act hooks, visitations and church warden's accounts) was local enthusiasm, an enthusiasm which produced large sums of money raised at great speed, to devote to popular ecclesiastical projects and civic festivities of the great feasts of the Church, curtailed under Edward.

York's St George's day procession, with an image of the saint carried through the streets 'according to ancient custom of this city', was reinstated by the mayor and aldermen. Corpus Christi plays were revived at Ashburton, Chester, Coventry and Norwich. As Professor Haigh of Oxford states, 'Parishes were not now buying optional extras as the mood took them, and when funds allowed, they were financing crash revival programmes at heavy cost'.

Since many of the Reformation changes had been resented in the parishes, religion may now be recognised as one of the elements in Mary's appeal. In Henry's reign old usages had been questioned, in Edward's processions had been forbidden, images and altars smashed and the Mass suppressed. As Professor J. Scarisbrick announced in *The Reformation and the English People*, 'on the whole, English men and women did not want the Reformation and most of them were slow to accept it when it came'. But it is Professor Haigh who neatly sums up what appears to be the new orthodoxy: 'It was the break with Rome which was to cause the decline of Catholicism, not the decline of Catholicism which led to the break with Rome'.

So, on her accession in 1553, Mary could draw not only on a deep well of sympathy for her own position but affection for the old ways and a large measure of revulsion against the sheer destructiveness of Protestant change.

**Wills and Catholicism**

It has been pointed out by Duffy that historians had failed to note the pre-Reformation precedents for types of will formulae taken to be distinctly 'Protestant' and have ignored or discounted factors which led Catholic testators to omit or change Catholic formulae and bequests. The restoration of preambles to include the saints and prayers for the living and dead during the reign of Mary is of great significance as they represent 'an important aspect of Marian orthodoxy, the base line of a Catholicism which was anxious to spell out the teaching which had dominated the Church's deathbed ministry throughout the Middle Ages, and thereby to neutralise the claims of the reformers to a monopoly of faithfulness to a Christocentric gospel'.

**Foxe and executions**

On 18 May 1553 the Queen issued a proclamation making clear her own desire for the restoration of Catholicism, which duly came about in August. Mary and her bishops had only a little difficulty in reviving the old heresy laws the following year. From 20 January 1555 heretics convicted by the Church courts faced death by burning.

The facts are that in the last four years of Mary's reign, something like 273 of her subjects were executed for obstinate heresy. Acts and Monuments (Foxe's Book of Martyrs) is the historian's sole available source for much of the story. Yet while what Foxe has to tell runs to 1,889 pages of close print, nearly a third of this text has nothing to do with the lives of his heroes; and of the 1,302 pages given to their lives, nearly two-thirds, 832 pages in all, describe only 17 of the 273 victims on Foxe's list. Despite its size, the book is therefore far from authoritative. What of Foxe's reliability?

The execution of Thomas Cranmer provided English Protestantism with one of its most dramatic and moving martyr stories and an enormously prestigious propaganda success. Yet modern scholars tend to claim that Foxe exploited the Anabaptists by representing them as Protestant martyrs, whereas they would have suffered the same death at the hands of the Edwardian regime had Cranmer's reformed canon law ever come into force.

One striking fact about this violent attempt of Mary's government to stamp out heresy is that it was confined almost exclusively to London and the south-eastern counties. A good third of Foxe's martyrs came from the counties of Essex and Kent – 111 out of 273. Is it again merely coincidence that for the most part he chronicles little but their names? Perhaps he really knew no more about them than this. It is true, however, that the Marian government failed to profit by the advice of those who had experienced the campaign against heresy on the Continent at first hand. Significantly Phillip II's Spanish advisers were among those who urged caution in the policy of executions.

**The exile and toleration of Protestants**

The persecution, and the subsequent waves of Marian exiles, has monopolised the study of Mary's reign for too long. Marian Protestantism as a movement is reasonably well documented, partly because of the high status of those who left England, but there has been a naive assumption that all those who left England during Mary's reign were all religious exiles.

The exiles found the means to enjoy their property, which was often administered on their behalf by friends and family left behind in England. 'The government's attempt to inhibit the passage of money and goods to exiles abroad provoked one of the few serious parliamentary revolts of the reign, a rare public act of defiance to the new regime'. Not the severity of its policies but this failure to cut the finances of the finances of the exiles, and to restrict their flow of literature, may well have been a cause of the failure of the Marian regime. Certainly many Protestants, including some foreign Protestants, continued to live in England.

The vast bulk of the foreign population, comprising as many as 10,000 of London's total population of 100,000 inhabitants, was made up of French and Dutch Protestant refugees. There were also German and Italian merchants. Many foreigners had come to London for traditional economic reasons – to find work – or to profit from a market demanding new skills and luxury goods. Brewing, for example, had always relied heavily on foreign expertise, ever since beer brewing was introduced from Germany; and in the associated trade of cooperage something like 30 per cent of all workers were foreign-born. Their potential threat to the security of the government, and their impediment to the successful re-establishment of Catholicism, saw the closing of French and Dutch churches. However, if the authorities thought that all remaining foreign residents had left London they were mistaken. A proclamation only required those who had not applied for 'Denizen status' to leave; but this was to exclude many foreigners, including some members of the foreign churches. Denization was a sort of quasi-naturalisation and conferred significant economic and legal advantages. Consequently most foreigners who envisaged settling permanently, and could afford the fees, applied to be registered. Some of those who remained were protected by the solidarity of fellow, Catholic, merchants who did not wish to see them suffer.

**Printing and propaganda**

Mary's government has often been accused of failing to understand the importance of printing, so that it 'lost the battle of the books'. If this was true it was the product of circumstances. Publication had already fallen from its peaks in 1548 and 1550, and if there were fewer printers it was because Protestant printers had lost their licences and many foreigners had returned home. Yet it was only in 1556 and later, when perhaps the market had been supplied, that the volume of publications declined significantly. As expected, most of the Protestant response, totalling some 114 titles, was produced on the Continent and smuggled into England. Fewer than 100 works of Catholic propaganda and polemic were issued in the five year period.

Yet we have to take account of quality and not merely quantity. We should not underestimate the quality of those Catholic works which were published. Eamon Duffy, for instance, points to the importance of primers, which have been virtually ignored by historians, especially the Wayland Primers which carried the government's stamp of approval. These books undoubtedly commanded a very high readership, offering an unrivalled insight into the religious preoccupations of the people who used them. Many Marian Catholics had a deep sense of the value of the scriptures. Only Protestant versions of the Bible were suspect in Marian England, not English Bibles as such. A project for a new English translation of the New Testament was agreed at the London Synod towards the end of 1555.

**Economic and Social Policy**

The economic and social policies of Mary Tudor's reign have, unfortunately, attracted very little attention. In the financial arena, with the aid of William Paulet, who retained his post as Lord Treasurer from 1550 to 1572, financial stability and strength was gained. The Muscovy Company was formed to open up trade opportunities with Russia in 1557 (a prototype of a new trading organisation). The navy was rebuilt and the militia reorganised – a milestone in English 'military history. D. Palliser, in his book England's Social and Economic History, states that in 1555 a new book of rates subsequently increased the Crown's revenue from customs. War with France prevented Mary from liquidating the Crown's debts, but she continued to be able to borrow money in Antwerp at normal rates (12- 13 per cent) because of her good credit whilst the French and Spanish Crowns went bankrupt in 1557. Mary ‘nearly revalued the coinage and, although the reform was deferred, Elizabeth’s government could never have tackled the problem so swiftly had the ground not been prepared’.

To rectify declining and uncontrolled standards of production in towns and industry, statutes were issued for the proper manufacture of particular wares. They ‘had the additional effect of placing regulatory jurisdiction in the hands of the local authorities’. This type of centralisation, by providing efficient and systematic measures regulated by law, constituted a landmark in the history of economic strategy.

To prevent unemployment and the loss of prosperity in towns because of competition in retail sales by the denizen of the countryside, three major acts were passed: the Retail Trade Act, the Weavers Trade Act and, the most comprehensive clothmaking legislation of the century, the Wollen Cloth Act. It is also of note that five hospitals were re-endowed by Mary, notably the Savoy Hospital in London and St Leonard’s in Newark. Licences were granted for seven more. She endowed only a few grammar schools but granted licences for at least sixteen others to be set up by towns or individuals from their own resources. Confraternities were encouraged, particularly those whose charitable works supported hospitals and the poor.

Mary's real tragedy was to be overwhelmed by demographic and agrarian difficulties. The disaster of 1556-1558, when epidemics of typhus and other diseases were followed by an outbreak of influenza, caused the greatest mortality crisis of' the 16th century. In addition, heavy rain caused disastrous harvests in 1555 and 1556.

**Cardinal Pole**

After twenty-three years of exile, caused by his opposition to the king's divorce, Cardinal Pole, a magnificent yet now largely forgotten first cousin of Henry VIII, returned to England. He was allowed into the country only in November 1554, after it had been agreed with Rome that Church property and lands could be kept by the private individuals who had bought them. On 30 November, at Whitehall, Pale absolved the members of both Houses 'with the whole realm and dominions thereof, from heresy and schism'. Michiel, the Venetian ambassador, saw Reginald Pole as the trusted key advisor during the last two years of Mary's reign.

Pole's outstanding contribution was the Synod's provision for the training of future clergy and the provision for education to produce quality clergy, thus, anticipating the seminary decrees of the Council of Trent. Indeed, it .has been pointed out by Professor Eamon Duffy that 'there is something intrinsically problematic about the notion of Marian failure to discover the counter reformation, since Trent was suspended in 1552, and was not to reconvene until both Mary and Pole had been dead for more than three years'.

**Philip II and foreign policy**

Everyone knows that Mary married Philip of Spain and that, in her foreign policy, England lost possessor of Calais. Both of these facts are held against her, but unfairly. When the marriage articles were drawn up, they were 'as favourable as possible for the interest and security and even the grandeur of England'. Though Philip should have the title of king, the administration should be vested wholly in the Queen; no foreigner should hold any office in the kingdom; no change should be made in the English laws, customs and privileges; £60,000 a year should he settled on the Queen as her jointure to be paid by Spain if she outlived Philip; the male issue of this marriage should inherit, together with England, both Burgundy and the Low Countries and, if Don Carlos – Philip's son by his former marriage – should die leaving no issue, the Queen's issue, whether male or female, should inherit Spain, Sicily, Milan and all the dominions of Philip. Even before the marriage ceremony Philip's father, the Emperor Charles V, gave a deed consigning to his son the Kingdom of Naples and the Duchy of Milan, thinking it beneath the dignity of the Queen of England to marry one who was not a king. 'What transaction was ever more honourable to a nation than this transaction was to England? What queen, what sovereign, ever took more care of the glory of a people?'

The Tapestry Room in St James’s Palace, where Mary signed away Calais, still exists, and adjoining it is the Chapel Royal where Mary's heart is buried in a silver box. (We recall her famed words on the loss of Calais – that if they opened her body they would find 'Calais' lying in her heart.) Yet if the Queen had lived longer, Calais would in fact have probably been restored. Philip had freely offered help to defend it, 'but the English council, over-wisely jealous of Philip, neglected both his advice and proffer', In 1558 Philip and the King of France discussed terms for peace and one of Philip's was the return of Calais to England. However, Mary died in the midst of these negotiations, and the future and over-rated patriotism of Good Queen Bess renounced forever England's rights to Calais for a pot of lentils (125,000 Crowns)!

**Conclusion**

No, 'sterility' cannot be said to be the conclusive note of Mary's reign. She was very much supported by the common people; and as for the nobility, their contentment was to see their 'newly privatised monastic lands left alone'. There was a quiet restoration of piety, and the favourable mood of the people was reflected in their wills and in their devotional and catechistic material. Too much attention in the past has been focused on the executions, and we now have a fresh insight into the large population of foreigners, including foreign Protestants, who remained safely in England on account of economic factors.

The Marian church and government amply met the false charges of failing to win the printing, book and propaganda campaigns. Mary also gave financial stability to England by sound legislation and genuine attempts to counter unemployment and social problems.

Above all, simply by establishing her own claim to the throne – at the expense of Lady Jane Grey – and by successfully maintaining it, Mary re-established the legitimacy of the Tudor succession. Elizabeth was thus greatly in her debt. Had Mary lived longer, many more of her plans might have succeeded, but tragically she and her first minister, Cardinal Pole, both died on the same day, 17 November 1558, said to be victims of the influenza epidemic which struck after one of the worst harvests of the century. It is indeed true that, as Duffy challenges, that a reassessment is needed of Mary’s reign.

**Further Reading:**

* W Cobbett *A History of the Protestant Reformation* (1994)
* E Duffy *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992)
* P Haigh*English Reformations* (1993)
* P Hughes *The Reformation in England Vol III* (1953)
* J Loach and R Tittler *The Mid-Tudor Polity 1450-1560* (1980)
* D Palliser *Social and Economic History of England* (1992)
* A Pettegree *Marian Protestantism* (1996)
* J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Blackwell, 1984)

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