1 Foxe’s American Publication History, 1794-1900

Shortly after its first publication in 1563, readers of John Foxe’s *Actes and Monu-
ments* lamented its massive size and high cost, calling for a shorter and more
affordable version.¹ Among them was John Knox, who complained that Foxe’s
work, “for the great price of therof [sic], is rare to be had.”² The nonconformist
William Turner likewise critiqued the expense and asked the martyrrologist to
produce a version that is “small and easily available to the small and wretched
flock of Christ.”³ Leslie Oliver states: “The monumental size of the book, and
the consequent expense of owning a copy, had long ago caused a demand for an
abridgment of more moderate size and cost.”⁴ In 1589, less than two years after
the martyrrologist’s death, this demand was satisfied by Timothy Bright, who
published the first Foxe abridgment. While this version and another abridgment
from 1614, *Christes Victorie Over Sathans Tyrannie*, by Thomas Mason, both went
through only one edition each, Clement Cotton’s *The Mirror of Martyrs* (1613)
was a very successful shorter version of the *Actes and Monuments*. The Water
Poet John Taylor (1578-1653) even published a versified version of Foxe’s work in
1616.⁵

While the seventeenth century saw four more unabridged *Actes and Monu-
ments*, in eighteenth-century Britain shorter versions of the “Book of Martyrs”
began to proliferate. Warren Wooden writes about them:

> Restoration and eighteenth-century editors were interested less in Foxe’s work as
> an ecclesiastical history than as a martyrology, and they cut away historical por-
> tions, especially Foxe’s material on the Middle Ages, to emphasize the sensational
> incidents of torture and death. As these editions were abridged on the one hand,
> so they were expanded on the other by the addition of new, contemporary mate-
> rial such as the Gunpowder Plot of 1604, the Irish massacre of 1641, and so on
down to accounts of the martyrdom of missionaries in the Far East in Victorian
> editions. At the same time his book was dismembered, Foxe had his language fre-
> quently “improved” by editors and the old woodcuts were replaced by new,
> graphic, and sensational engravings. Thus, by the eighteenth century, Foxe’s book
> has, in effect, passed into the hands of Protestant zealots concerned less with his
> meticulous tracing of history than with the book’s effectiveness as inspired propa-

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³ Quoted in Kastan, “Little Foxes,” 120.
ganda in kindling anti-Catholic sentiment in England by recalling the events of
the Marian era.6

Though Wooden is generalizing – not all editors of Foxe’s work used the book to
polemicize against Catholics, as we will see in chapter 3 – his description of the
changes the book underwent is largely accurate. Especially from the end of the
eighteenth through the middle of the twentieth century, with a peak during the
1830s and 40s, dozens of what Eirwen Nicholson has called “‘bastard’ versions”
of the Actes and Monuments appeared in print on both sides of the Atlantic.7
Nicholson’s assessment is one that many scholars have made – that the later
abridgments are merely corrupted, inferior versions of the unabridged Actes
and Monuments. However, for purposes of book history, it is important to exam-
ine the abridgments in their own right and to refrain from excessive compari-
sions with the original. I find Elizabeth Evenden and Thomas Freeman’s point of
view helpful here: “Admittedly, at best these [books] restricted the themes and
messages of Foxe’s originals, and at worst they distorted them. Yet they invari-
ably also disseminated and perpetuated some of the contents of Foxe’s original
editions.”8

Numerous abridgers and editors revised the famous work and published their
own version of the “Book of Martyrs.” Sometimes it is unclear who edited the
book. Most editors had their versions published by several different publishing
houses in different cities. More often than not, the books borrow the famous
work’s title and original author’s name but, apart from the general subject mat-
ter, do not have much in common with the unabridged Actes and Monuments. In
addition, many abridgments have clear propagandistic aims, which I will dis-
cuss in the next chapter. Still, William Haller’s claim of the continual declension
of the abridgments over time – he speaks of a “progressive corruption and vul-
garization of the original” – seems oversimplified to me.9 Many later abridg-
ments are respectable publications which, while not aspiring to be a republica-
tion of the complete Actes and Monuments, do indeed make the most salient
narratives from the original available to modern readers.

While several scholars have discussed shorter versions of the Actes and Mon-
uments, there has been no comprehensive study of the abridgments. David Scott
Kastan only details the early abridgments named above. Warren Wooden and
Devorah Greenberg both devote a brief chapter to some of the British ones, but
the American versions have never been studied in detail. I will discuss the most
important American versions (or rather, those that have survived) in this chap-
ter. For the nineteenth century alone I have found over eighty American ver-

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6 Wooden, John Foxe, 96.
7 Eirwen Nicholson, “Eighteenth-Century Foxe: Evidence for the Impact of the Acts and Monu-
ments in the ‘Long’ Eighteenth Century,” in John Foxe and the English Reformation, ed. David
8 Evenden and Freeman, Religion and the Book, 321.
9 Haller, Elect Nation, 252.