CLERICAL WILLS
OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

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The English Reformation has been, for many years, a topic of considerable controversy among students of sixteenth and seventeenth century British history. Over the years scholars have referred to the Reformation as an act of state, an act of God, a process of Protestantization, a retreat from orthodoxy. More specifically, for many years, from Maurice Powicke to Christopher Hill, one school of thought has maintained that the English Reformation was a revolution from above, that the English church and the English people were acted upon.1 Another point of view, which has gained increasing acceptance by scholars, is aimed primarily at seeing the Reformation not merely as an act of state, but also as the people's response to "a series of constitutional, social and religious changes."2 The growing acceptance of this approach has enabled students of the period to examine various aspects of the Reformation in a specialized and detailed manner in the hope of assessing in depth the diverse elements which compose it. This method of appraisal has given rise to a considerable number of specialized and localized Reformation studies.3 The purpose of this study is to examine

1Christopher Hill, Puritanism and Revolution (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), p. 32: "The Reformation in England was an act of state. The initiative came from Henry VIII, who wanted to solve his matrimonial problems...Some supporters of the Reformation were heretics; but the wide expansion of Protestantism in England was a consequence, not a cause, of the Reformation."


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certain clerical wills of the Reformation period. While these wills are interesting in themselves, they also provide us with part of the clerical response to the crisis years of the Reformation.

This study is based upon some two hundred fifty clerical wills and inventories of the sixteenth-century diocese of Coventry and Lichfield. This midland diocese, up to 1541, was comprised of Staffordshire, Cheshire, parts of Warwickshire, Lancashire, Shropshire, Flintshire, and Denbighshire. In 1541, Henry VIII took Cheshire and the southern part of Lancashire from the See of Coventry and Lichfield in order to form the new See of Chester. This left the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield possessed of some 3,000 square miles and approximately 100,000 people of whom perhaps 6,500 were clerics. Among all the information available concerning this clerical class, none is more revealing of their lives than their wills. These last testaments represent virtually the only documentation from this period which affords us any personal insight into this key class during the crisis years of the Reformation. The great preponderance of the other surviving materials deals with what might be called the “state-imposed” responses to the religious changes of these years, i.e. pension lists, tax surveys, loyalty oaths, proceedings against the married clergy, and the like. From this latter type of documentation, we get a view of the clergy from the top down, as it were. We see these clerics, in other words, being acted upon, as the passive recipients of the State-Reformation strictures imposed, and opportunities offered by their sovereigns and by statute law. To understand more clearly Cardinal Wolsey’s fatal involvement with “the King’s great matter” and Reformation politics, we must go to the state papers. To gain some insight into the repercussions of such state matters, we may go to the will of William Ludam, ex-monk of the dissolved monastery of Kenilworth in Warwickshire.

In the almost total absence of clerical correspondence or diaries, the wills afford valuable information which makes these often obscure men come alive: the kinds of houses they lived in, “a hall, parlor, high chamber, inner chamber”; the goods they left behind, “one picture of Lazarus, one map of England, one map of kings, emperors, and popes”; the disposition of their books, “and that the said books be fastened with chains in the church of Staunton and there to remain.”

4 Lichfield Joint Records Office, B/C/11, will of John Fenton, 1566.
5 LJRO, B/C/11., will of Thomas Sanders, 1570.
6 LJRO, B/C/11, will of William Lanchashire, 1566.