
Eamon Duffy’s *Fires of Faith* is, like the author’s magisterial *The Stripping of the Altars*, a triumph of scholarship: meticulously researched, immediately indispensible, and an instant classic. The book arises out of the five 2007-8 Birkbeck Lectures in Ecclesiastical History delivered by Duffy at Trinity College, Cambridge, during Michaelmas term 2007. But where *The Stripping of the Altars* essentially ended the scholarly debate over the state of the Church and lay religion in late-medieval England—and decisively so—in favour of revisionism, *Fires of Faith* feels more like the first major assault in a war which is likely to continue for some time. It is a groundbreaking book, and will doubtless go on to define scholarship on Marian England for years to come. However, in shedding new light on the religious history of Mary’s reign, Duffy’s work also reveals how much of the battlefield still remains under- (and even un-) explored. Our knowledge of Protestantism under Mary is exposed as surprisingly under-developed, which makes Duffy’s decision to say “virtually nothing” (p. ix) about the Protestants that remained in Marian England rather counter-productive. The success of the Marian restoration and the vitality of the Protestant underground were, to some extent, different sides of the same coin.

In spite of its provocative title, *Fires of Faith* is not conceived simply as a reaction against the almost reflexive cultural bias which still colours as “bloody” most popular (and historiographical) opinion about Mary I. Duffy reserves much of his frustration for those scholars who have actually done the most to ameliorate the darkness and bigotry that often enshrouds the Marian regime, recognising their efforts but characterising them as lukewarm—David Loades’ assessment of Marian religion, for example, is described as “the sound at most of one hand clapping” (p. 2). In some ways, the problem here stems from the very brevity of Mary’s reign: Duffy is concerned to show not only what the Marian project began to achieve, but also what it might have gone on to accomplish had England’s first Tudor queen and her cardinal archbishop cousin not died so abruptly on 17 November 1558. Duffy’s warning not to become “mesmerised by hindsight” (p. 186) is something we should all take to heart: taking refuge in the seductive advances of counterfactualism is surely no solution either, although Duffy’s superb analysis never descends to this.
The material from the original lectures is “much expanded,” particularly surrounding the complex and sensitive topic of religious persecution. Despite the book’s subtitle, “Catholic England under Mary Tudor,” Mary herself is a somewhat ephemeral figure: it is Cardinal Pole who is consistently and convincingly portrayed as in charge and, more importantly, in control of the regime’s religious policy. Building on work by Jennifer Loach and his own *The Stripping of the Altars*, Duffy establishes beyond question the energy and activity of the Marian authorities in countering Protestant polemic by means of a broad-ranging mix of persuasive printed works and sermons of their own, as well as through the use of uncompromising force. The evidence is compelling, but Duffy is also unusually (and unnecessarily) defensive on the subject: he asserts that the Marian polemicians were just as effective as any John Bale; declares that their names were naturally soon forgotten by a victorious Protestant regime; and explains that, anyway, “tediousness is in the eye of the beholder,” and “the very qualities of satire and invective that have led twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians to award the literary laurels to protestant writing—its attack on tradition, its entertaining scurrility, its lack of reverence—were much more equivocal assets in the eyes of sixteenth-century people” (p. 71). Nevertheless, the anonymous 1555 *A Plaine and Godly Treatise Concerning the Masse* is classed as “powerful and racy” (p. 172), while Miles Hogarde’s 1556 *The Displaying of the Protestants* is described as an “inspired journalistic broadside… witty and formidable” (p. 176). Such relatively minor lapses do not detract from the broader thrust of his argument, but it is a sign perhaps that on some level even Duffy accepts the premise that the persuasive polemic of the English Protestant exiles remains the benchmark against which the efforts of the Marian regime and its unofficial supporters are still best judged.

The most controversial aspect of Mary’s reign is undoubtedly the burnings, and Duffy is certainly right to urge us to view them with a sense of perspective: as horrific acts in an age in which horrific acts were relatively commonplace and unremarkable. In many ways they have assumed, if not a significance, then certainly an emotional weight out of all proportion with comparable programmes of state persecution adjacent both geographically and chronologically to that of Marian England. Perhaps this is because, with hindsight, the burnings are commonly viewed as the regime’s only lasting contribution to the long march of history. The final contention in *Fires of Faith* is that Mary and Pole’s most lasting contribution was in fact the invention (creation, discovery even) of the Counter