MARTYRS WITH A DIFFERENCE:
DUTCH ANABAPTIST VICTIMS OF ELIZABETHAN PERSECUTION.¹

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In Tudor times Whitechapel without Aldgate was, as its name suggests, an outparish or suburb of the City of London proper, lying as it did just outside the walls. Though alien immigrants would have been a familiar sight in the East End,² the suspicions of William Friend, a sidesman of Whitechapel parish, were first aroused when he noticed a crowd of foreigners entering a house close to the church on Easter morning 3 April 1575. He duly reported this to the constable John Osborne, to whom the house belonged, and to two other officers and, together with the rector, Richard Gardiner, they went to investigate. On entering the house, they found some twenty-seven Flemish Anabaptists,³ assembled for

Abbreviations:
Ruytinck = Gheschiedenisen ende Handelingen die voornemelick aengaen de Nederduytsche Natie ende Gemeynten wonende in Engeland ende int bysonder tot Londen, vergadert door Symeon Ruytinck, Caesar Calendrinus ende Aemilius van Culenbergh ed. by J.J. van Toorenenbergen, Werken der Marnix-Vereeniging, III, (i), (Utrecht, 1873).

¹ In the preparation of this paper I received invaluable help, especially on the legal technicalities, from Dr George Bernard, Professor Patrick Collinson, and Professor Ralph Houlbrooke. Dr. Thomas Freeman generously shared his knowledge of the English martyrologist John Foxe and Dr Johan Decavele advised on Flemish Anabaptism. I am only sorry that circumstances prevented me from making the fullest use of their knowledge. I am also indebted to Mrs Mary Backhouse for the loan of material from the library of her late husband Dr Marcel Backhouse. My former student Sarah Douglas also deserves credit; the trial of these Flemish Anabaptists formed the subject of her undergraduate dissertation and it was while advising her that I became more aware of the long shadows this unhappy episode cast on relations between Reformed Protestants and Mennonites in the Low Countries and in the Dutch stranger communities.


³ The reason for preferring the generic ‘Anabaptist’ to more theologially correct
a religious meeting. They placed them under arrest, took their names and ordered them not to leave the building. While the rector and the constable returned to the church for the service, Friend and two other officers notified the bishop of London Edwin Sandys. The Anabaptists who had been left in the meantime without any guard were then escorted to the Marshalsea prison in Southwark on the south side of the Thames.4

Hitherto the subsequent trial for heresy of these Flemish Anabaptists in 1575 has attracted little notice. In the standard histories of Elizabeth's reign the case usually receives short shrift.5 This neglect is also evident among scholars of the Radical Reformation, with the exception of G.H. Williams, whose Radical Reformation neatly combines the several accounts to be found in the Martyrs Mirror.6 Yet this episode deserves to be better known, not least for it affected relations between the Anabaptists and the Calvinists in the late sixteenth century and affords an opportunity to consider the methodology of the Mennonite martyrologies in the seventeenth century.

The decision to condemn Jan Pietersz. and Hendric ter Woert to be burnt on 22 July can properly be described as sensational. The last Protestants to have been burnt at the stake for heresy in England had been executed only a week before the death of Mary Tudor herself on 17 November 1558. In the summer of 1575 the fires were lit again, this time on the orders of a Protestant Queen, and at Smithfield of all places. It was an outcome as surprising to the Spanish representative in London7 as

descriptions, such as 'Mennonite', 'Baptist', 'separatist' or 'radical brethren', is simply convenience; no more and no less.

4 This account of the discovery is based on the sworn statement of the Rector and the Constable made on 25 September 1575 for which see Hessels, II, 522-23; 702-03; according to Symeon Ruytinck, who in the early seventeenth century contributed to a history of the Netherlanders and their congregations in England, the Anabaptists had assembled for a baptism, but were interrupted, Ruytinck 108.


7 Calendar of Letters and States papers relating to English affairs ... in the archives of Simancas,