

Prayer Book Rebellion

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Introduction

The Prayer Book Rebellion, Prayer Book Revolt, Prayer Book Rising, Western Rising or Western Rebellion was a popular revolt in Cornwall and Devon, in 1549. In 1549 the Book of Common Prayer, presenting the theology of the English Reformation, was introduced. The change was widely unpopular — particularly in areas of still firmly Catholic religious loyalty (even after the Act of Supremacy in 1534) such as Lancashire. Along with poor economic conditions, the attack on the Church led to an explosion of anger in Devon and Cornwall, initiating an uprising. In response, Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset, was sent with an army composed partly of German and Italian mercenaries to suppress the revolt.

In June 2007 the Bishop of Truro, the Right Reverend Bill Inge, described the Church of England's role in the massacre of thousands of Catholic rebels during the suppression of the Prayer Book rebellion as an "enormous mistake".[1]

Cranmer's Prayer book of 1549.

In the late 1540s the government of the very young Edward VI —he was nine years old when he acceded to the throne in 1547— introduced a range of legislative measures as an extension of the Reformation in England and Wales, the primary aim being to change theology and practices of the Church of England along Protestant lines.[citation needed]

In 1549 the Book of Common Prayer, reflecting the theology of Protestantism while keeping much of the appearance of the old rites, replaced, in English, the four old liturgical books in Latin. The change was unpopular, particularly in areas of traditionally Roman Catholic religious loyalty, for example, in Devon and Cornwall.[2]

It is possible that the roots of the rebellion can - in part - be traced back to the Cornish Rebellion of 1497 and the subsequent destruction of monasteries from 1536 through to 1545 under king Henry VIII which brought an end to the formal scholarship supported by the monastic orders, that had sustained the Cornish and Devonian cultural identities. The dissolution of Glasney College and Crantock College played a significant part in fomenting opposition to future cultural reforms. Scholars like Stoye have argued that the Catholic Church had "proved itself extremely accommodating of Cornish language and culture" and that government attacks on the traditional religion had reawakened the spirit of defiance in Cornwall, and in particular the majority Cornish-speaking far west.[3]

When traditional religious processions and pilgrimages were banned, commissioners were sent out to remove all symbols of Catholicism, in line with Thomas Cranmer's religious policies favouring Protestantism ever more. In Cornwall, this task was given to William Body, whose perceived desecration of religious shrines led to his murder on April 5, 1548, by William Kylter and Pascoe Trevian at Helston.[2]

Immediate retribution followed with the execution of twenty eight Cornishmen at Launceston Castle. One execution of a "traitor of Cornwall" occurred on Plymouth Hoe — town accounts give details of the cost of timber for both gallows and poles. Martin Geoffrey, the pro-Catholic priest of St Keverne, near Helston, was taken to London. After execution his head was impaled on a staff erected upon London Bridge as was customary.[2]

Sampford Courtenay is where the rebellion started, and where the rebels were defeated.

The new prayer book was not uniformly adopted, and in 1549 the Act of Uniformity made it unlawful to use the Latin liturgical rites from Whitsunday 1549 onwards. Magistrates were given the task of enforcing the change. Following the enforced change on Whitsunday, on Whitmonday the parishioners of Sampford Courtenay in Devon compelled their priest to revert to the old service. The rebels argued that the new English liturgy was "but lyke a Christmas game." This claim was probably related to the book's provision for men and women to file into the quire on different sides in order to receive the sacrament, which seemed to remind the Devon men of country dancing.[4] Justices arrived at the next service to enforce the change. An altercation at the service led to a proponent of the change (William Hellyons) being killed by being run through with a pitchfork on the steps of the church house.[5]

Following this confrontation a group of parishioners from Sampford Courtenay decided to march to Exeter to protest at the introduction of the new prayer book. As the group of rebels moved through Devon they gained large numbers of Catholic supporters and became a significant force. Marching east to Crediton, the Devon rebels laid siege to Exeter, demanding the withdrawal of all English liturgies. Although a number of the inhabitants in Exeter sent a message of support to the rebels, the city refused to open its gates. The gates were to stay closed because of the siege for over a month.[2]

"Kill all the gentlemen"

Thomas Cranmer, chief author of the Book of Common Prayer.

Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset, his response was swift and crushing.

Both in Cornwall and Devon, the issue of the Book of Common Prayer seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Two decades of oppression were lately added two years of rampant inflation, in which wheat prices had quadrupled.[6] Along with the rapid enclosure of common lands, the attack on the Church, which was felt to be central to the rural community, led to an explosion of anger. In Cornwall, an army gathered at the town of Bodmin under the leadership of its mayor, Henry Bray, and two staunch Catholic landowners, Sir Humphrey Arundell of Helland and John Winslade of Tregarrick.[2]

Many of the gentry sought protection in old castles. Some shut themselves in St Michael's Mount where they were besieged by the rebels, who started a bewildering smoke-screen by burning trusses of hay. This, combined with a shortage of food and the distress of their women, forced them to surrender. Sir Richard Grenville found refuge in the ruins of Trematon Castle. Deserted by many of his followers, the old man was enticed outside to parley. He was seized and the castle ransacked. Sir Richard and his companions were imprisoned in Launceston gaol. The Cornish army then proceeded to march east across the Tamar border into Devon to join with the Devon rebels near Crediton.

The slogan "Kill all the gentlemen and we will have the Six Articles up again and ceremonies as they were in King Henry's time" highlights the religious aims of the rebellion. However, it also implies a social cause (a view supported by historians such as Guy and Fletcher). That later demands included limiting the size of households belonging to the gentry — theoretically beneficial in a time of population growth and unemployment — possibly suggests an attack on the prestige of the gentry. Certainly such contemporaries as Thomas Cranmer took this view, condemning the rebels for deliberately inciting a class conflict by their demands: "to diminish their strength and to take away their friends, that you might command gentlemen at your pleasures".[7] Protector Somerset himself saw dislike of the gentry as a common factor in all of the 1549 rebellions: "indeed all hath conceived a wonderful hate against the gentlemen and taketh them all as their enemies."[8]

The Cornish rebels were also concerned with the use of the English language in the new prayer book. The language-map of Cornwall at this time is quite complicated, but philological studies have suggested that the Cornish language had been in territorial retreat throughout the Middle Ages.[9] Summarising these researches, Stoye says that by 1450, the county was divided into three main linguistic blocs: "West Cornwall was inhabited by a population of Celtic descent, which was mostly Cornish speaking; the western part of East Cornwall was inhabited by a population of Celtic descent, which had largely abandoned the Cornish tongue in favor of English; and the eastern part of East Cornwall was inhabited by a population of Anglo-Saxon descent, which was entirely English speaking." [3]

In any case, the West Cornish reacted badly to the introduction of English in the 1549 services. The eighth Article of the Demands of the Western Rebels states: "and so we the Cornyshe men (whereof certen of us understande no Englysh) utterly refuse thys newe English".[10] Responding to this, however, the Duke of Somerset asked why the Cornishmen should be offended by holding the service in English rather than Cornish, when they had before held it in Latin and not understood that.[2]

Confrontations

In London, King Edward VI and his Privy Council became alarmed by this news from the West Country. On instructions from the Lord Protector the Duke of Somerset, one of the Privy Councillors, Sir Gawain Carew, was ordered to pacify the rebels. At the same time Lord John Russell was ordered to take an army, including German and Italian mercenaries, and impose a military solution.

The rebels were of many different backgrounds, some farmers, some tin miners, and some fishermen. Cornwall appears to have had a significantly larger militia than other areas of a similar size.[2]

Crediton confrontation

After the rebels passed Plymouth, Devonian knights Sir Gawain and Sir Peter Carew, were sent to negotiate, meeting the Devon rebels at Crediton.[11] They found the approaches blocked and were attacked by longbowmen. Shortly afterward the Cornish rebels arrived and Arundell now divided his combined force, sending one force to Clyst St Mary to assist the villagers, with the main army advancing upon Exeter, where it besieged the city for 5 weeks.[12]

The Siege of Exeter

The rebel commanders unsuccessfully tried to persuade John Blackaller, Exeter's pro-Catholic mayor, to surrender the town. The city gates were closed as the initial force of some 2,000 gathered outside.

Battle of Fenny Bridges

On 2 July Lord John Russell, 1st Earl of Bedford's initial force had reached Honiton. It included 160 Italian arquebusiers and a thousand landsknechts, German footsoldiers, under the command of Lord William Grey. With promised reinforcements from Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, Russell would have more than 8,600 men, including a cavalry force of 850 men, all of them well armed and well trained. Russell had estimated the combined rebel forces from Cornwall and Devon at only 7,000 men. On 28 July Arundell decided to block their approach to Exeter at Fenny Bridges. The result of this conflict was inconclusive and around 300 on each side were reported to have died with Lord Russell and his army returning to Honiton.[13]

Battle of Woodbury Common

Lord Russell's reinforcements arrived on 2 August and his army of 5000 men began a march upon Exeter, westward, across the downs. Russell's advance continued on to Woodbury Common where

they pitched camp. On 4 August the rebels attacked but the result was inconclusive with large numbers of prisoners taken by Lord Russell.

Battle of Clyst St Mary

Arundell's forces re-grouped with the main contingent of 6,000 at Clyst St Mary, but on 5 August were attacked by a central force led by Sir William Francis. After a ferocious battle Russell's troops gained the advantage leaving a thousand Cornish and Devonians dead and many more taken prisoner.

Clyst Heath massacre

Russell pitched camp on Clyst Heath and it was here that 900 bound and gagged prisoners had their throats slit in 10 minutes according to the chronicler John Hayward.

Battle of Clyst Heath

When news of the atrocity reached Arundell's forces a new attack took place early on 6 August. Lord Grey was later to comment that he had never seen the like, nor taken part in such a murderous fray. As he had led the charge against the Scots in the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh, this was a telling statement. Some 2000 died at the battle of Clyst Heath. A group of Devon men went north up the valley of the Exe, where they were overtaken by Sir Gawen Carew, who left the corpses of their leaders hanging on gibbets from Dunster to Bath.[13]

Relief of Exeter

Lord Russell continued his attack with the relief of Exeter. In London, a proclamation was issued allowing the lands of those involved in the uprising to be confiscated. Arundell's estates were transferred to Sir Gawen Carew and Sir Peter Carew was rewarded with all of John Wynslade's Devon estates.

Battle of Sampford Courtenay

Main article: Battle of Sampford Courtenay

Lord Russell was under the impression that the Cornish had been defeated but news arrived that Arundell's army was re-grouping at Sampford Courtenay. This interrupted his plans to send 1,000 men into Cornwall by ship to cut off his enemy's retreat. Russell's forces were strengthened by the arrival of a force under Provost Marshal Sir Anthony Kingston. His army now numbered more than 8,000, vastly outnumbering what remained of his opposition. Lord Grey and Sir William Herbert led the attack and contemporary Exeter historian John Hooker wrote that 'the Cornish would not give in until most of their number had been slain or captured.' Lord John Russell, reported that his army had killed between five and six hundred and his pursuit of the Cornish retreat killed a further seven hundred.

Aftermath

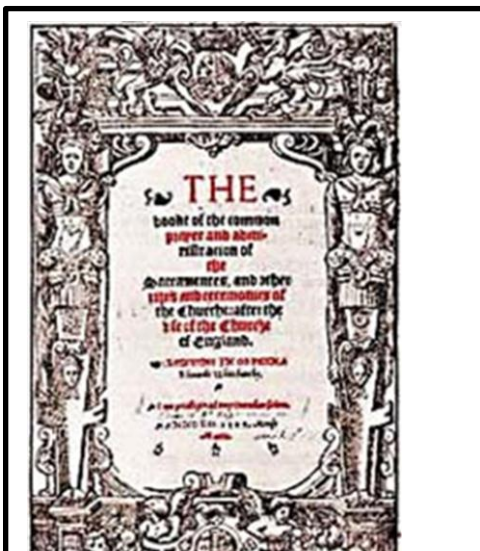
Many escaped including Arundell, who fled to Launceston. There he was later to be captured and taken to London with Wynslade, who was caught at Bodmin. In total over 5,500 people lost their lives in the rebellion. Further orders were issued on behalf of the king by the Lord Protector the Duke of Somerset, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for the continuance of the onslaught. Under Sir Anthony Kingston, English and mercenary forces then moved throughout Devon and into Cornwall and executed or killed many people before the bloodshed finally ceased. Proposals to translate the Prayer Book into Cornish were also suppressed.

The loss of life in the prayer book rebellion and subsequent reprisals as well as the introduction of the English prayer book is seen as a turning point in the Cornish language, for which — unlike Welsh — a complete bible translation was not produced. Research has also suggested that prior to the rebellion the Cornish language had strengthened and more concessions had been made to Cornwall as a "nation", and that anti-English sentiment had been growing stronger, providing additional impetus for the rebellion.[14]

Bishop of Truro expresses regret for the brutal response to the Prayer Book Rebellion

In June 2007 the then Bishop of Truro, The Rt Revd Bill Ingham, was reported as saying that the massacre during the vicious suppression of the Cornish Prayerbook rebellion more than 450 years ago was an "enormous mistake" for which the Church of England should be ashamed.[1] Speaking at a ceremony at Pelynt, he said:

"I am often asked about my attitude to the Prayerbook Rebellion and in my opinion, there is no doubt that the English Government behaved brutally and stupidly and killed many Cornish people. I don't think apologising for something that happened over 500 years ago helps, but I am sorry about what happened and I think it was an enormous mistake."



The Cause – A Prayer book



Thomas Cranmer, chief author of the Book of Common Prayer.