John Foxe: Reporting and Shaping the History of the Reformation

by Mark Sidwell[1]

"Anybody can make history," said Oscar Wilde. "Only a great man can write it." That bit of tongue-in-cheek wit highlights an important truth: writers of history shape not only their work but also their audience. A good case in point is John Foxe, the historian, martyrologist, and some would say hagiographer who had an outsized impact on how English-speaking Protestants viewed the Reformation. His magnum opus, the *Acts and Monuments* (often better known in abridgements as "Foxe's Book of Martyrs") became one of the most influential products of the Protestant Reformation.[2] John Foxe did not simply chronicle the events of the Reformation; he acted as an agent to establish the Protestant position and worldview in the minds of his readers.[3]

The New Protestant Historiography

Arguments about the Bible and its theology were, of course, central to Protestant-Catholic conflicts, but arguments over history played a significant role as well.[4] Catholics thought an unanswerable question was that which a priest in Rome asked English diplomat Sir Henry Wotton: "Where was your religion to be found before Luther?" Wotton typified Protestant responses by replying, "My religion was to be found then, where yours is not to be found now, in the written Word of God."[5]

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[1] Mark Sidwell (PhD, Church History) is retired professor in the Division of History, Government, and Social Science at Bob Jones University, where he still serves as adjunct faculty. In addition, he is adjunct professor of church history at Geneva Reformed Seminary. His books include *Free Indeed: Heroes of Black Christian History* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth, 2002) and *Set Apart: The Nature and Importance of Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2016). The author would like to thank Craig Jennings and John Matzko for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

[2] In a fashion typical of the sixteenth century, the full title of Foxe's work was *Acts and Monuments of the Latter and Perilous Days, Touching Matters of the Church, Wherein are Comprehended and Described the Great Persecutions & Horrible Troubles, that Have Been Wrought and Practiced by the Romish Prelates, Specially in this Realm of England and Scotland, from the Peace of Our Lord a Thousand, unto the Time Now Present.*

[3] This article uses Foxe's final 1583 edition of his work as found in the online edition, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online,* hereafter abbreviated *TAMO* 1583 (Sheffield, UK: HRI Online Publications, 2011), accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/. The spelling has generally been modernized. Among the best of the many abridgements are *Foxe's Book of Martyrs,* ed. G. A. Williamson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Select Narratives*, Oxford World's Classics, ed. John N. King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[4] Although the major reformers did not write on history *per se,* their arguments reflected certain assumptions about history. See John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), and W. Stanford Reid, "Calvin's Interpretation of the Reformation," *EQ* 29, no. 1 (1957): 4–22. On the approach of English historians, see Glanmor Williams, *Reformation Views of Church History,* Ecumenical Studies in History (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1970), which includes a chapter on Foxe, 46–62.

[5] Izaak Walton, "The Life of Sir Henry Wotton," in *The Lives of Dr. John Donne; Sir Henry Wotton; Mr. Richard Hooker; Mr. George Herbert; and Dr. Robert Sanderson* (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1796), 165–66, accessed July

Catholics used historical arguments to trace their church back through historical succession to the apostles while the reformers replied with arguments based on the Bible. Such an approach was consistent with the Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura,* the authority of Scripture alone above all other authorities, including history. A common approach among Reformed leaders, classically laid out by Martin Bucer (1491–1551), the reformer of Strasbourg, was to identify what he saw as three biblical marks of the true church: the gospel rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and church discipline rightly practiced.[6]

Nonetheless, because Protestants believed a true look at history would vindicate their position, they also wrote historical apologetics. The preeminent example was a pioneer work under the general editorship of German Lutheran theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75) published in successive volumes from 1559 to 1574. Titled *Ecclesiastica Historia,* but commonly known as the *Magdeburg Centuries* (because it was published in the city of Magdeburg and followed a century-by-century organization), this massive work attempted to trace the history of the true church in opposition to Rome.[7] The effect of the *Magdeburg Centuries* and other such works was to create an interpretive grid in which every pre-Reformation opponent of Rome became in some sense a Protestant, despite whatever other views he or she might have held.

A more direct forerunner to Foxe was English writer John Bale (1495–1563), who published various attacks on Rome and gathered materials (e.g., the story of the martyr Anne Askew) for what he hoped would be a new Protestant history of England. Though his death ended the project, Bale inspired Foxe, and many of Bale's materials found their way into Foxe's history.[8] In addition, his

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13, 2026, https://archive.org/stream/izaakwaltonslive00walt#page/n7/mode/2up. As one modern writer puts it, to Protestants the "answer was, of course—in the Acts of the Apostles," in "the most primitive churches as established by Christ and the Apostles." David Daniell, "Tyndale and Foxe," in *John Foxe: An Historical Perspective,* ed. David Loades (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 24.

[6] See Martin Bucer, "De Regno Christi," in *Melanchthon and Bucer,* ed. Wilhelm Pauck, vol. 19 in the Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 232–47. For secondary literature, see Amy Nelson Burnett, *The Yoke of Christ: Martin Bucer and Christian Discipline* (Kirksville, MO: Northeast Missouri State University, 1994), and Robert M. Kingdom, "Peter Martyr Vermigli and the Marks of the True Church," in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History,* ed. E. Forrester Church and Timothy George (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 198–214. An example of this approach is article 29 of the Belgic Confession: "The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin." Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:419–20. The three marks are also found in John Knox's First Scots Confession (1560), art. 18; see Schaff, *Creeds,* 3:461–62. It is worth noting that one of Foxe's earliest publications, from the reign of Edward VI, was on the question of discipline in the Church of England. See Catharine Davies and Jane Facey, "A Reformation Dilemma: John Foxe and the Problem of Discipline," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39, no. 1 (1988): 37–65.

[7] The single best source on the *Magdeburg Centuries* is Ronald Ernst Diener, "The Magdeburg Centuries: A Bibliothecal and Historiographical Analysis" (ThD dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 2004), a massive study of the background, approach, and contents of the work. Much briefer but nonetheless succinct evaluations of the place of the *Centuries* in Christian historiography are found in Ferdinand Christian Baur, *On the Writing of Church History,* ed. and trans. Peter C. Hodgson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 79–105, and Robert L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (1971; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025), 104–13.

[8] See Leslie P. Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1976). See also chapter 3 of Williams, *Reformation Views of Church History,* 33–45.

writings on the theory of history, particularly his use of the Book of Revelation, foreshadowed Foxe's approach.[9]

Life of Foxe

Foxe's own life was one of physical and intellectual pilgrimage.[10] Born in 1517, Foxe became a student and fellow at Oxford (1534–45) but felt compelled to leave because his strong Protestant convictions were out of step with the current leadership. He served as a tutor for several years, and during the reign of King Edward VI he met John Bale and wrote his first works in support of the Reformation. The accession of the Catholic Queen Mary, however, forced Foxe like many other Protestants to flee to the continent as a "Marian exile." He lived in Frankfurt, Strasbourg, and Basel, working for a time with the exiled Scottish reformer John Knox.[11] Foxe also published a proto-edition of what would become the *Acts and Monuments* and eked out a living as a poorly paid proofreader. Following the death of Mary, Foxe returned to England in 1559. He published the first edition of the *Acts and Monuments* in 1563 and devoted much of the rest of his life to revising and expanding this work, publishing four editions (the last three in 1570, 1576, and 1583) in which he corrected mistakes he had discovered in previous editions and nearly doubling the length of his work between the first and second editions. Foxe died in 1587.

Movable-type printing was a major weapon in the Protestant arsenal against Rome. Johannes Gutenberg's development of this new "information superhighway" in the fifteenth century was a technological revolution comparable to the development of the Internet in the late twentieth century. It was not simply the posting but the publishing of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses that spread Luther's name and ideas across Europe. Foxe believed the invention of printing was providential, so that "by this one argument of printing, the bishop of Rome might understand the counsel and purpose of the Lord to work against him." Foxe wrote "that almost how many printing presses there be in the world so many blockhouses there be against the high castle of St. Angelo. So that either the pope must abolish knowledge and printing, or printing at length will root him out."[12]

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[9] See *John Bale's "The Image of Both Churches,"* ed. Gretchen E. Minton (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013). For a summary of the interpretation of Revelation as a guide to history in medieval and early Reformation times as well as Bale's use of this approach, see Fairfield, 61–85.

[10] Most books on Foxe concentrate on his writing more than his biography. For the life of Foxe, see the first part of J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (1940; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1970). For a convenient overview of his life, see Tom Freeman, "John Foxe: A Biography," *TAMO,* Essays, accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/index.php?realm=more&type=essay. Also consult Thomas Freeman, "John Foxe" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 695–709, as well as the full chronology in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Select Narratives,* xlix–lviii. The notes in this article will highlight the many useful sources on Foxe's work, but a very good, concise evaluation of Foxe's contribution as a historian is Donald T. Williams, "John Foxe," in *Historians of the Christian Tradition,* ed. Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 117–38.

[11] For details of Foxe's time with Knox, see Mozley, 44–46.

[12] *TAMO* 1583, 732.

The Plan of Foxe's Work

Although the *Magdeburg Centuries* have never been translated from Latin into English, readers can discover the gist of the Centuriators' approach in the work of Foxe. He relied on the *Centuries* as one of his resources in writing the *Acts and Monuments,* particularly for matters from earlier centuries beyond England. In both general approach and its details, the *Centuries* provided Foxe a valuable guide. But the *Centuries* covered only to 1298, and Foxe brought the story up to his own time. Foxe not only popularized this approach to history in English but also expanded the chronological scope.

Although his work has often been called a martyrology and is often called "Foxe's Book of Martyrs" in abridgements, Foxe intended to write a history.[13] The *Acts and Monuments* was rooted in the tradition and literature of Protestant martyrology, to which Foxe himself contributed during his continental exile,[14] but his approach was broader. More than just a martyrology, Foxe's book encompassed the history of the entire church, "the whole state and course of the Church in general."[15] Foxe may be said to have written a comprehensive history although with a strong emphasis on martyrdom. He recounted his story in part by reproducing numerous original documents. In fact, the "monuments" referred to in his title are not only testimonies of the martyrs but also documents, which are so numerous that they make Foxe's work read at times like a historical sourcebook.

What were these documents? Mark Breitenberg notes that "nearly every form of written document known to the Renaissance appears somewhere in Foxe's collection," including declarations from the crown, acts of Parliament, legal proceedings, sermons, accounts of ecclesiastical visitations, records of the investigation of alleged heretics, and speeches. Church registers were a major source, and likewise letters, some written to Foxe personally.[16] For some martyrs such as John Rogers and Anne Askew, Foxe had first-person narratives by the martyrs themselves that had been smuggled out of prison. Despite his diligence, Foxe tended to be overly trusting of his sources. Mozley says that when Foxe came across incredible details "in the printed books of the continental historians or in the manuscripts of his English informants, he swallow[ed] them without difficulty."[17]

Foxe set his theme early in the work by applying the words of Christ from Matthew 16:18, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Foxe drew three points from this verse, first "that Christ will have a Church in this world," second "that the same Church should mightily be impugned" by "the world"

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[13] The first abridged edition came out in 1589, only six years after Foxe's final edition and two years after his death. See Margaret Aston and Elizabeth Ingram, "The Iconography of the *Acts and Monuments*," in *John Foxe and the English Reformation,* ed. David Loades (Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar, 1997). 78.

[14] See Alec Ryrie, "The Unsteady Beginnings of English Protestant Martyrology," in *John Foxe: An Historical Perspective,* 52–53. Thomas S. Freeman and David Scott Gehring, "Martyrologists Without Boundaries: The Collaboration of John Foxe and Heinrich Pantaleon," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 69, no. 4 (2018): 746–67, discusses different martyrologists contemporary with Foxe, noting how Foxe used them, particularly the work of Heinrich Pantaleon for continental martyrs.

[15] *TAMO* 1583, 24.

[16] Mark Breitenberg, "The Flesh Made Word: Foxe's 'Acts and Monuments,'" *Renaissance and Reformation* 13, no. 4 (1989), 387.

[17] Mozley, 163–64.

and the "powers of all hell," and third "that the same Church . . . should continue." Foxe saw in history the validation of all three points, so that "the whole course of the Church to this day, may seem nothing else but a verifying of the said Prophecy." In particular the church's triumph in persecution showed "how the said Church all this notwithstanding hath yet endured & holden his own."[18]

In this passage Foxe displayed the guiding ideas not only of his own work but also of Protestant historiography in general, emphasizing both the perpetuity and the persecution of the church. Also implicit was another key notion, the idea of the remnant. This theme of the remnant recurs in the OT in reference to the preservation of Israel (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 19:29–31; Ezra 9:7–9; Isa 10:20–22; Jer 23:3–4). Paul applies the concept to the Jews from the story of Elijah in 2 Kings 19 (Rom 11:1–5), concluding, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace." Protestant historians applied this idea of the remnant to Christians, arguing that the perpetuity of the church meant that there must always be true believers in every age no matter how dark the circumstances might be. As Foxe himself wrote, "In Christ's time who would have thought, but the congregations and Counsels of the Pharisees had been the right church: and yet had Christ another Church in earth besides that, which albeit it was not so manifest in the sight of the world, yet was it the only true Church in the sight of God."[19]

Foxe divided the history of the church into five periods, each with a distinctive character. The first three hundred years of the church from the time of Christ and the apostles was "the suffering time of the Church" under Roman persecution. Then followed three hundred years of "flourishing." Next came three hundred years of "declining or backsliding," followed by four hundred years of the "time of Antichrist and loosing of Satan," typified by Popes Gregory VII (1073–85) and Innocent III (1198–1216), to the time of Wycliffe and Huss. Fifth and last was an era of reformation stretching from 1300 to Foxe's own day, and "how long shall continue more, the Lord and governor of all times, he only knows."[20] Within this broad framework he identified other important epochs. In line with his historicist interpretation of Revelation (discussed below), he reckoned the millennium from the "ceasing of persecution" under Constantine resulting in the "flourishing" he described. The loosing of Satan appears to overlap with the thousand years.[21] Likewise, following a common scheme of interpretation, Foxe numbered the Roman persecutions of Christians at ten.[22]

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[18] *TAMO* 1583, 24.

[19] Ibid., 11.

[20] Ibid., 24.

[21] Ibid., 24. Foxe revised his dates in different editions. Royal notes how Foxe reckoned the end of the millennium as 1000 in the first edition and 1294 in the second edition. Susan Royal, *Lollards in the English Reformation: History, Radicalism, and John Foxe Politics,* Politics, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2020), 28. In contrast to many dissenters and Protestants who criticized the church-state alliance based on Constantine's policies (e.g., the Waldensians, Anabaptists, etc.), Foxe viewed the "godly Constantine" as a hero and deliverer. *TAMO* 1583, 57.

[22] The concept of ten Roman persecutions goes back at least to the time of Augustine (*City of God* 18.52). Foxe, like many writers, credits the number ten to Eusebius. The idea apparently does not come from Eusebius, however. See "Persecutions of Christians," *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature,* ed. John McClintock and James Strong (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), 7:965. Schaff dates the interpretation to the fifth century. Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Christianity,* vol. 2 of *History of the Christian Church* (1910; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980),

The Nature of Foxe's Work

One can liken Foxe's work to hagiography, the writing of saints' lives, if that label is qualified. Foxe was more scrupulous in his sources than medieval hagiography. As Daniell says, "Foxe's colossal volumes are Protestant saints' lives with documentation."[23] Kathrin Reist points out that Foxe actually included a calendar of saints in his first and fourth editions, and she also theorizes that writings about the saints such as the ones Foxe preserved took the place of Catholic relics in recalling and memorializing them.[24] In general Foxe replaced Catholic hagiography with edifying history, replacing Catholic miracles with "providences" of the working of God. Like hagiography, but following his own pattern, Foxe tended to use hagiographic conventions in language and structure, such as martyrs not feeling pain or their giving formulaic responses at the time of execution.

As a Christian historian, Foxe adopted a theological framework based on what he saw as biblical patterns. One reason Foxe stressed suffering and martyrdom was that he saw persecution as a sign of the true church according to the Bible (cf. John 15:20; Gal 4:29; 2 Tim 3:12). As with many Christian historians, particularly in the precritical era, Foxe's views on biblical prophecy affected his approach to history. His scheme of history derived partly from the apocalyptic portions of the Bible such as Daniel and especially the Book of Revelation.[25] One can see the imagery from Revelation even on the title page of his work, which portrays several scenes from that book (see figure 1). Foxe held a historicist, as opposed to a futurist, view of prophecy, that is, he did not think prophecy related to events future to him but that it rather described events of the past in symbolic form,[26] calling Revelation "a Prophetical history of the Church."[27] For instance, he thought the two witnesses described in Revelation 11:3–5 were John Huss and Jerome of Prague.[28] As mentioned earlier, he viewed Constantine and the founding of Christendom as the beginning of a thousand-year millennium (based on Rev 20:2–7) that stretched to John Wycliffe. This period saw blessings and the spread of the gospel, seen in the establishment of Christian states. In line with this passage, Foxe thought the era of Wycliffe occurred during a loosing of Satan, as seen in the corruption of and persecution by the papacy. One writer suggests that this tendency in Foxe deepened over time, with a growth of anxiety

33–34. Among the Scripture "proofs" for numbering the persecutions as ten are the ten plagues on Egypt, the ten days of persecution prophesied for the church at Smyrna (Rev 2:10), and the ten horns of the beast (Rev 17:12).

[23] David Daniell, "Tyndale and Foxe," in *John Foxe: An Historical Perspective,* 24. "Colossal" is a fair description. In the last printed complete edition (printed mid-nineteenth century and reprinted in 1965), the work ran to eight hefty two-column volumes.

[24] Kathrin Reist, "Writing the Relic, Fetishising the Written: John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments,*" *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 12, no. 2–3 (2010): 294–95, 297–98.

[25] At the time of his death he left an uncompleted commentary on Revelation, which his family published posthumously. See Mozley, 113–14. As mentioned earlier, Foxe's predecessor John Bale also wrote a book on Revelation, which likely influenced Foxe, treating the book as a symbolic history of the church.

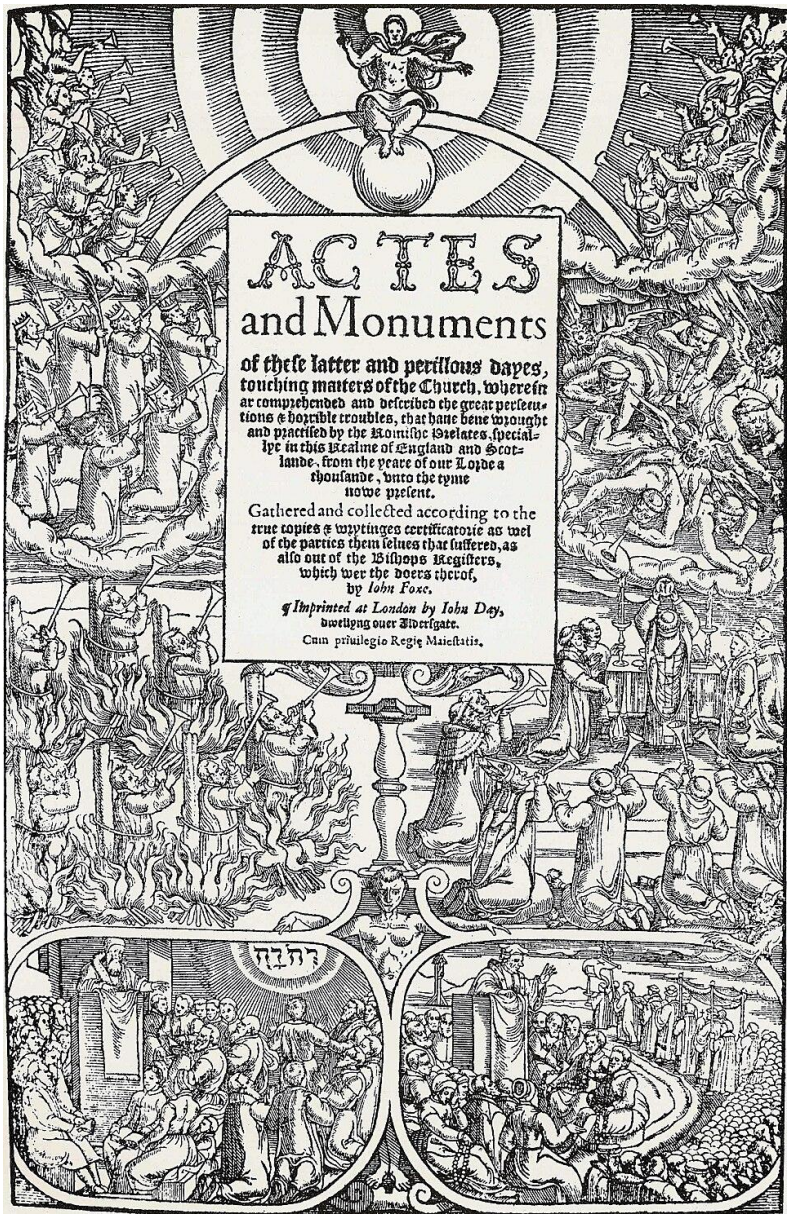
[26] Andrew Penny, "John Foxe, the *Acts and Monuments* and the Development of Prophetic Interpretation," in *John Foxe and the English Reformation,* 257–62.

[27] *TAMO* 1583, 18.

[28] Thomas Fudge, "Jan Hus as the Apocalyptic Witness in John Foxe's History," *Communio Viatorum* 56, no. 2 (2014): 161–62.

and pessimism from the first to the second edition of the *Acts and Monuments,* from "prophetic" to "apocalyptic," because the Elizabethan era did not prove as glorious as many Protestants had hoped.[29] Other parts of the Bible influenced him as well, such as the Book of Acts. Foxe often used biblical parallels in structuring his accounts, as in how he shaped the story of Tyndale after the model of Acts.[30]

Figure 1. Title Page of *Acts and Monuments*



[29] Tom Betteridge, "From Prophetic to Apocalyptic: John Foxe and the Writing of History," in *John Foxe and the English Reformation,* 213–18.

[30] David Daniell, "Tyndale and Foxe," in *John Foxe: An Historical Perspective,* 18–19, 24–25. He notes on page 19, e.g., the parallels between the death of Tyndale and his dying declaration and the account of Stephen's death in Acts 7:59–60.

Another influence that Foxe freely admitted was the early church historian Eusebius (c. 260–339), who provided not only source material but also a pattern for writing. Foxe followed the broad Christian tradition of a linear approach, found in Eusebius and particularly in Augustine, in seeing a progressive direction and purpose in history.[31] Specifically, "Foxe found in Eusebius a model for historical writing that foregrounds the dramatic role of martyrs while also emphasizing the stable textual documentation provided by the written record of ecclesiastical history."[32] In structure, the two works were parallel in highlighting the persecutions of Diocletian and Queen Mary followed by the relief and blessing of Constantine and Queen Elizabeth, respectively.[33] A key difference between the writers was Eusebius's focus on the history of the true church while Foxe recounted the story of two churches (false and true), a difference illustrated by Eusebius's hesitations about the Book of Revelation and Foxe's extensive use of that book as a model.[34]

The Scope of Foxe's History

It is significant that Foxe wrote *church* history and thereby differed from much of the historical work done in his own day and previously. As Collinson notes, Foxe's history was not simply "past politics," the accounts of rulers and wars as was common with histories dating back to the beginning of the discipline such as Herodotus's history of the Persian Wars and Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Foxe recognized the different character of his approach: "For doubtless such as these [martyrs] are more worthy of honour than hundred Alexanders, Hectors, Scipios and warlike Iulies [Julius Caesars]."[35] Rather Foxe offered "a kind of social history, history from the wrong side of the tracks."[36] Foxe wrote about common people, about theology and religion, in other words, about topics uncommon in most histories of the time. Admitting that other historians focused on "matters of policy, and rejoice to behold therein the variable events of worldly affairs, the Stratagems of valiant captains, the terror of foughten fields, the sacking of Cities, the hurly-burly of Realms and people," Foxe asked "how much more then is it meet for Christians to conserve in remembrance the lives, Acts and doings, not of bloody warriors, but of mild and constant Martyrs of Christ, which serve not so much to delight the ear, as to garnish the life, to frame it with examples of great profit, and to encourage men to all kinds of Christian godliness?"[37]

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[31] Patrick Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian," *TAMO,* Essays, accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/index.php?realm=more&gototype=&type=essay&book=essay3.

[32] Gretchen E. Minton, "'The Same Cause and Like Quarell': Eusebius, John Foxe, and the Evolution of Ecclesiastical History," *Church History* 71, no. 4 (2002): 718.

[33] Minton, "The Same Cause," 722.

[34] Ibid., 740–41. Eusebius devoted a large part of his history to answering heresy, but he did not give heresy the status of an institution, as Foxe did with the Catholic Church.

[35] *TAMO* 1583, 15.

[36] Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian."

[37] *TAMO* 1583, 15. In this emphasis, Foxe may be again following the model of Eusebius, who contrasted his work with histories of physical wars to "make indelible the wars fought for the peace of the soul and the man who battled courageously in such wars for truth rather than country, piety rather than family." *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1. Eusebius, *The Church History: A New Translation with Commentary,* ed. and trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

In his version of social history, writing about commoners rather than just elites, Foxe anticipated later developments in historical writing. As Hickerson notes, there are elements of modern women's history in his writing, because he described the martyrdom of independent-minded women who did not fit contemporary paradigms of femininity.[38] Bainton points out that Foxe "tells us more about the women of the Reformation in England than does any other source."[39]

Foxe's scope extended beyond church history in other ways as well. By focusing so much on his homeland, for example, Foxe may be said to have provided a comprehensive history of England. Foxe took English history back to the legend of Joseph of Arimathea introducing Christianity to the British Isles and organized much of his narrative in the Middle Ages around English monarchs.[40] William Haller takes this emphasis even further, arguing that Foxe popularized the idea that God had nourished England as he did Israel to preserve and defend his truth. England and particularly the Church of England served as bastions of the Protestant cause. Haller says that Foxe fostered an English consciousness of the nation as the New Israel.[41]

Controversies over Foxe's History

Foxe's enormous influence led to intense scrutiny of his work. There has been no shortage of critics since the time of the initial publication of the *Acts and Monuments*. Catholics, of course, contested the work from the beginning,[42] but other writers indicted Foxe on more purely historical grounds. As Collinson notes, "If not the father of lies, Foxe was thought to be the master of inventions."[43] A particularly influential critic was S. R. Maitland, who was the first to launch an attack from the perspective of a professional historian. In the nineteenth century, Maitland wrote a devastating series

[38] Megan L. Hickerson, "Gospelling Sisters 'Goinge up and downe': John Foxe and Disorderly Women," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 35, no. 4 (2004): 1035–51. She illustrates how Foxe included "disorderly women," such as Anne Askew and Alice Dryver, although she argues that Foxe presented them as submissive to their "heavenly spouse" in order to dampen any controversy over their behavior.

[39] Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in France and England* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973), 211. See chapter 12, "John Foxe and the Women Martyrs," 211–29, which provides a survey and summary of not only Foxe's accounts of women martyrs but also other women significant to the Reformation. Ellen Macek, "The Emergence of a Feminine Spirituality in *The Book of Martyrs,*" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 1 (1988): 62–80, provides a good enumeration and analysis of Foxe's portrayals of female martyrs, but her main focus is how these women experienced feminist empowerment and found ways to reimagine God in a manner more acceptable to feminist sensibilities.

[40] Thomas S. Freeman, "'The Reik of Maister Patrik Hammyltoun': John Foxe, John Winram, and the Martyrs of the Scottish Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27, no. 1 (1996): 43–60, also discusses how Foxe reported on Scottish martyrs, even though he never visited Scotland, and was an important contributor to Scottish history and martyrology.

[41] William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). Haller's ideas have provoked discussion, but not all interpreters agree with his analysis. He does, however, unquestionably demonstrate the emphasis that Foxe placed on English history.

[42] See, e.g., William Eusebius Andrews, *A Critical and Historical Review of Fox's Book of Martyrs, Shewing the Inaccuracies, Falsehoods, and Misrepresentations in that Work of Deception* (1824; repr., N.p.: Kessenger, n.d.). Mozley, 175–80, describes the work of two Catholic critics nearly contemporary to Foxe, Nicolas Harpsfield and Robert Parsons.

[43] Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian."

of studies accusing Foxe not only of bias but also of shoddy historical research and writing.[44] J. F. Mozley in *John Foxe and His Book* (1940) restored Foxe's reputation, admitting Foxe's bias but demonstrating both the accuracy and care Foxe took in his work as well as the weaknesses of some of Maitland's arguments. Furthermore, Mozley noted that many of Maitland's valid criticisms reflected the editions of Foxe available in the nineteenth century, not the original work. Later editors had altered Foxe, introducing some of the errors that Maitland and other critics objected to.[45]

Foxe was unquestionably partisan, but he was never a deliberate falsifier.[46] Foxe wrote, "I protest to you . . . and to all the world there is never a lie in all my book."[47] However, some of his narratives of early church history are certainly based on legendary sources and probably undependable, although he reported his sources faithfully. It is with Wycliffe, the Lollards, and particularly his own times (especially events in England) that Foxe becomes more reliable. As Bauer notes, Foxe's historical value is almost entirely limited to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[48] For this period, as mentioned earlier, Foxe was able to use records and personal reminiscences he had gathered and scrutinized, such as official ecclesiastical records. After working through some of the source material still available in order to double-check Foxe's work, Bauer concludes, "An impartial investigation of the *Acts and Monuments* leads one to the conclusion that in his martyrologies Foxe has given a fairly accurate description of a horrible episode in the history of civilization."[49]

Still, Foxe made errors. The very size of his endeavor virtually guaranteed Foxe would make mistakes. He admitted his limitations but pleaded the pressures of his task: "But here partly I hear what you will say: I should have taken more leisure and done it better. I grant and confess my fault, such is my vice. I can not sit all the day . . . fining and mincing my letters."[50]

Foxe's emphasis on violence, both in the text and in the often gruesome woodcuts that illustrated his history, added to the controversy over his work. The violence portrayed in Foxe's work resulted from his theological views, not his personal taste. The very violence of the accounts points to the

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[44] See, e.g., S. R. Maitland, *Twelve Letters on Fox's Acts and Monuments, Originally Published in the British Magazine, During the Years 1837 & 1838* (London: J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1841), accessed July 13, 2026, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo1.ark:/13960/t8rb7mk4x&seq=7. For an evaluation of Maitland's criticisms, see David Loades, "The Maitland Controversy," *TAMO,* Essays, accessed July 15, 2026, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/index.php?realm=more&gototype=&type=essay&book=essay11. Loades concludes about Maitland, "Foxe's most damaging nineteenth century critic thus deserves to be treated with genuine, but limited, respect."

[45] David Loades, "Introduction," in *John Foxe and the English Reformation,* 10. The standard published version from the nineteenth century, which is also the basis of many modern reprints, was not a critical text but instead contained editorial insertions and deletions. It was this situation that inspired the compiling of the modern Internet edition.

[46] "Foxe never made anything up." Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian."

[47] *TAMO* 1583, 607.

[48] Walter Bauer, "Foxe's Martyrs," *Church History* 3, no. 4 (1934): 250.

[49] Bauer, 266.

[50] *TAMO* 1583, 604. Mozley, 152–74, devotes a chapter to Foxe's "Method" in which he acknowledges inaccuracies in the historian's work, although often with some exculpation. To cite one case study, in his study of heresy trials John Fines adds an appendix comparing Foxe's account of persecution in Coventry with more recently discovered records. He notes various errors of detail in Foxe but recognizes the overall accuracy in the account. John Fines, "Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, 1511–12," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14, no. 2 (1963): 173–74.

historic oppression of the true church by the false. The violence is "not for the love of gore" but is rather evidence of the "testimony to the truth of the one and the diabolical falsity of the other." Williams notes, "For Foxe, then, the blood of the martyrs is not only the seed of the church but also its sign."[51] Personally, Foxe was much more irenic than his reputation as a martyrologist might suggest. In a letter to Queen Elizabeth, Foxe said he abhorred bloodshed and violence so that "I can scarce pass the shambles where beasts are slaughtered, but that my mind secretly recoils with a feeling of pain."[52] He opposed execution for heresy, and if the government mandated execution, then it should be by a more merciful means than burning.[53]

Historians are no better than their sources. Foxe wrote according to the sources he had available. For the pre-Reformation centuries he used whatever came to hand, often secondary works. Even a supporter such as Mozley admits, "From our point of view his stories of the pre-Wycliffe ages and of the continental reformers of the sixteenth century count for little or nothing. They have no first-hand value; they are simply based on previous writers whose works are open to us."[54]

Foxe as Historian of the Reformation

The question of Foxe's sources nonetheless demonstrates a strength of his work: his pioneer efforts as a historian of the Reformation. For his own age Foxe had numerous sources of good quality so that his history provided the first comprehensive history of the English Reformation. Although many modern historians dispute his interpretations and conclusions and question many details, they still have to reckon with Foxe as their starting point, the position which they must either dissent from or agree with. Foxe, for example, argued that Wycliffe was the beginning of the English Reformation,[55] following John Bale's description of Wycliffe as the "morning star."[56] Often writers use the imagery of the morning star to liken Wycliffe to Venus as it rises over the horizon before dawn to anticipate the coming of day. So Wycliffe presaged the Reformation by his teachings and actions, such as translating the Bible into English.[57] Bale took the image specifically from Ecclesiasticus 50:6–7 in the Apocrypha, which calls Simon the high priest, son of Onias, the morning star. Foxe used this same imagery, saying of Wycliffe that during an era of "lamentable ignorance and darkness," Wycliffe "stepped forth like a valiant champion, unto whom it may justly be applied that is spoken in the book called Ecclesiasticus of one Simon the son of Onias. Even as the morning star being in the midst of a cloud, & as the Moone being full in her course, and as the bright beams of the Sunne, so doeth he shine and glister in

[51] Williams, *Historians of the Christian Tradition,* 130.

[52] Quoted in Mozley, 87.

[53] See John Thomas McNeill, "John Foxe: Historiographer, Disciplinarian, Tolerationist," *Church History* 43, no. 2 (1974): 222–23.

[54] Mozley, 152. He does note that one might justify the publication of these secondary accounts at the time because the works were inaccessible to English audiences (153).

[55] See Austin C. Dobbins, "Foxe, Wicliff, and the Church of England," *Review & Expositor* 52, no. 1 (1955): 63–83.

[56] Margaret Aston, "John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation," *Past & Present* no. 30 (April 1965): 24–25.

[57] See, e.g., Stephen Nichols, "The Morning Star of the Reformation," Ligonier Ministries, accessed July 13, 2026, https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/morning-star-reformation.

the temple and Church of God."[58] In fact, in his initial plan and the earliest editions of his work Foxe used Wycliffe as the starting point of his history and only later expanded his reach to the early church.[59]

Foxe likewise promoted the idea that the Lollards, Wycliffe's followers, were not only forerunners of the Reformation but also a bridge to the Reformation. On a basic level Foxe assembled the story of the Lollards into a coherent narrative that fit into his overall scheme of church history. Moreover, as Susan Royal argues, Foxe redeemed the Lollard reputation from rebels to "models" and "spiritual forebears."[60]

One can see the effects of Foxe's rehabilitation of the Lollards in his treatment of Sir John Oldcastle (Lord Cobham), one of the few nobles who backed the Lollard cause. Oldcastle had served both Henry IV and Henry V, but his Lollard views led to his arrest by Henry V. After escaping, Oldcastle led a rebellion against the king, which in turn led to his execution. In Foxe's telling, however, Oldcastle's death resulted not from treason but from his religious views.[61] So widespread did this revised account of Oldcastle become that it led to trouble for William Shakespeare. In the original version of his play *Henry IV (Part 1),* Shakespeare had taken the name of Oldcastle from one of his sources and made him the scapegrace, carousing companion of Prince Hal. Identifying a hero of the faith with such a character led to protest, so Shakespeare changed the character's name to Sir John Falstaff.[62] Shakespeare even added an epilogue to *Henry IV (Part 2)* in which the narrator says that in any sequels "for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already 'a be killed with your hard opinions; for Oldcastle died a martyr and this is not the man."[63]

In the Reformation era itself, Foxe preserved and propagated the story of Bible translator William Tyndale, whom Foxe called "the Apostle of England in this our latter age."[64] Foxe's account demonstrates how he was more than a martyrologist, for he provided a full biographical sketch of Tyndale.[65] For example, Foxe included Tyndale's famous reply to a cleric who said the pope's laws were more important than God's: "'I defy the Pope and all his laws': and further added, that if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that drives the plough to know more of the

[58] *TAMO* 1583, 448. G. H. W. Parker says that apparently the first to identify Wycliffe clearly as the "morning star *of the Reformation*" was historian of the Puritans Daniel Neal (1678–1743). Parker nonetheless acknowledges Foxe's earlier usage (and implicitly, Bale's). G. H. W. Parker, *The Morning Star: Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 56fn.

[59] Mozley, 118–19.

[60] Susan Royal, *Lollards in the English Reformation,* 4. Royal makes even more extensive claims of the impact of Foxe in that he preserved "radical" ideas in his presentation of Lollards, ideas that later fed English nonconformity and fueled theological divisions and controversies.

[61] *TAMO* 1583, 581–609.

[62] See John Julius Norwich, *Shakespeare's Kings: The Great Plays and the History of England in the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 139–40.

[63] *Henry IV (Part 2),* Epilogue.

[64] *TAMO* 1583, 1099.

[65] Mozley, 169–74, gives a full description of the development of Foxe's portrayal of Tyndale, describing the sources Foxe used and the revisions he made with each edition. Foxe's main account of Tyndale's career is found in *TAMO* 1583, 1099–1106.

Scripture, then he did."[66] Likewise, Foxe wittily recounts the story of selling Tyndale's New Testaments to the bishop of London. An early printing of the testaments contained numerous errors that Tyndale wanted to correct, but he lacked the funds for a new edition. In stepped merchant Augustine Packington who arranged to sell the defective testaments to the bishop, who wanted to burn them. As a result, Foxe reported, "the Bishop of London had the books, Packington had the thanks, and Tindall had the money."[67] Without Foxe we probably would remember the contribution of Tyndale's translation work but would perhaps be less likely to recall him as a Protestant hero.[68]

Foxe's work also had a larger impact on historical understanding. King says, "Foxe was notable not so much for his truthfulness, but for his masterly ability to construct powerful myths."[69] "Myth" here does not mean fiction but rather an account that creates a larger symbolism for interpreting events. In this sense a myth is a framework that shapes how an individual or a group thinks about something and creates a shared sense of history.[70] Foxe was likely responsible for the reputation of Mary Tudor as "Bloody Mary," although he never used the potentially offensive adjective "bloody" for her as he did for her henchmen.[71] Through his portrayal of Mary's reign particularly, he created fear and revulsion toward the Roman Catholic Church. Likewise, he helped promote the idea of Elizabeth as "Good Queen Bess" the agent of the Protestant deliverance, rallying English support to her reign.

With his story-telling skills, Foxe wove into the narrative of Reformation history many now familiar accounts and incidents. In perhaps the most famous of his accounts of the Marian martyrs, he recorded Bishop Hugh Latimer saying to his fellow martyr Nicholas Ridley before their execution, "Be of good comfort master Ridley, and play the man: we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as (I trust) shall never be put out."[72] There is also the memorable portrayal of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer at his execution thrusting first into the fire the hand that had previously signed a recantation of his faith. The dramatic impact of such scenes is hard to match.

Not to be overlooked are the woodcuts that illustrated the *Acts and Monuments.* Numbering over one hundred, the woodcuts underscored Foxe's theme of the suffering of the true church, communicating Foxe's message even to the illiterate.[73] Graphically, they reinforced the narrative, as in

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[66] *TAMO* 1583, 1100.

[67] Ibid., 1043.

[68] Mozley reports that he accepted the predominantly negative views of Foxe's work current in his own day until he began to investigate the life of William Tyndale. He found Foxe far more trustworthy about Tyndale than he had been led to believe, and the experience sparked his research into Foxe's work (Mozley, v). This incident resembles the experience of William Ramsay, who accepted critical views of Luke and the Book of Acts until his own researches convinced him of the dependability of Luke. See William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1911; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 35–52.

[69] John N. King, "Introduction," in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Select Narratives,* xxvi.

[70] See the discussion in C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 63–67.

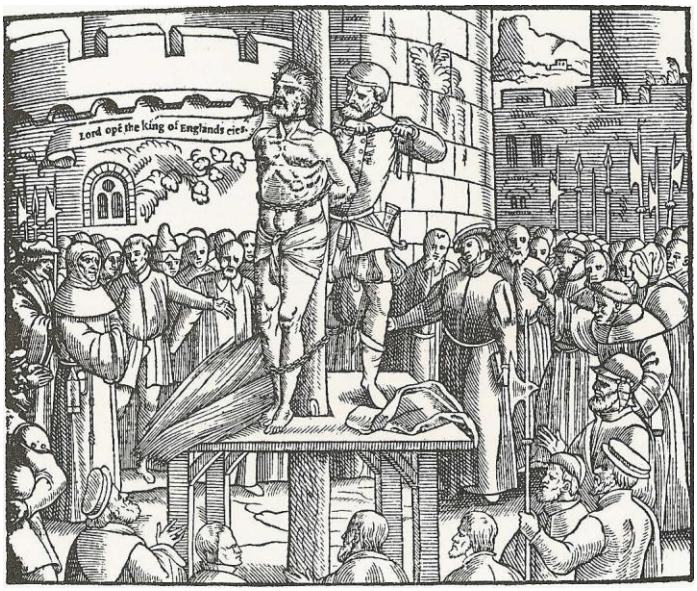
[71] Haller, 187, in fact argues that he provided the first comprehensive factual and interpretive history of Mary's reign.

[72] *TAMO* 1583, 1794.

[73] See O. T. Hargrave, "Tools for Bloody Mary's Victims: The Iconography of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51, no. 1 (1982): 7–21.

the portrayal of William Tyndale at the stake uttering his final words: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes" (see figure 2). When English-speaking homes kept versions of Foxe's works (often alongside the King James Version of the Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*), the woodcuts taught children his lessons before they could comprehend the text, even serving as a form of entertainment in that pre-electronics age. Sir Francis Drake, for example, filled in the time on his circumnavigation of the world by coloring in the woodcuts.[74]

Figure 2. The Execution of William Tyndale



Conclusion

The impact of Foxe's work was profound, and the book was widely read. Parry relates the story of how Francis Drake read sections of the *Acts and Monuments* to his crew before unleashing them to plunder Spanish possessions as just retribution for Catholic atrocities.[75] With several explanations and qualifications, Collinson is able to conclude that Foxe was "surely the greatest English historian of his age."[76] Sometimes he was guilty of fierce partisanship, but in this he was no worse than most of his contemporaries, both Protestant and Catholic. As Bauer says, "Foxe has plenty of shortcomings, but no honest critic can blame him for having to make the best of circumstances beyond his own control."[77] Whatever his failures, John Foxe created the standard accepted view of the English Reformation and the Church of Rome among English-speaking Protestants.

[74] Hargrave, 10.

[75] Glyn Parry, "Elect Church or Elect Nation? The Reception of the *Acts and Monuments,*" in *John Foxe: An Historical Perspective,* 174.

[76] Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian."

[77] Bauer, 259.

Writing in the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004, Thomas Freeman suggests that the increased availability of materials on Foxe in the late twentieth century could foster a renaissance of Foxe studies,[78] and the publication of a complete critical edition of the *Acts and Monuments* online would be one obvious expression of such a revival. Modern readers will discern evident shortcomings of Foxe's history. Its daunting size and the dullness that sometimes results by the repetitious narrative, aggravated by the extensive quotations from documents, reduce its readability. Perhaps in the long run it is better that Foxe is known so much by abridgements that are easier to read.[79] But one cannot escape the impact that the *Acts and Monuments* has had historically. It is a rare work that not only recounts the past (in this case, often in excruciating detail) but also shapes our understanding of history. As Donald Williams says, "John Foxe made history simply by writing it."[80]

[78] Thomas Freeman, "John Foxe," *DNB,* 708.

[79] One problem with abridgements, however, is that they may skew the reader's perspective on Foxe, as some abridgements tend to highlight the more sensational aspects of Foxe's narrative. A carefully edited version, such as John King's *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Select Narratives,* avoids many such pitfalls.

[80] Williams, *Historians of the Christian Tradition,* 117.