

Wall, Charles J., *Shrines of British Saints*. Methuen & Co. London, 1905.  
Larger images available on [Historyfish.net](http://Historyfish.net)

Public Domain text transcribed and prepared "as is" for HTML and PDF by Richenda Fairhurst, [historyfish.net](http://historyfish.net). August 2008. No commercial permissions granted. *Text may contain errors.* (Report errors to [molly@historyfish.net](mailto:molly@historyfish.net) or check the [historyfish](http://historyfish.net) site for current email addresses.)

## CHAPTER VI

### SACRILEGE

From various episodes recorded in the foregoing pages it will be seen that the custodians of these costly shrines were not needlessly appointed. Priceless jewels, fastened by merely a wire on to a wire trellis-work, and many a golden ornament would easily be wrenched from its position by pilfering hands if a vigilant oversight were not kept, and covetousness in all ages disregarded things sacred equally with things secular. For the better preservation of these riches, watching galleries were erected from which the Custos Feretri or one of the brethren could overlook the shrine. But few of these remain yet they exceed in number those objects for which they were built. The chamber in St. Anselm's tower has lost its mission—no offerings to St. Thomas are left to guard. Others remain at Christ Church, Oxford, and at Westminster Abbey over the Islip chantry ; but none are so complete as the beautiful gallery of wood which overlooks the shrine of St. Alban in the great abbey church of Hertfordshire.

The sad story of the destruction of England's shrines has been read piecemeal in the foregoing pages. Sad, not only on account of the sacrilege, but for the principles underlying such acts. If it had been for the conscientious prevention of certain abuses, as it pretended to be, that

--236--

violation of sanctuaries might possibly be partially condoned. Fanatics are usually irresponsible, trusting in no higher power than their own mental capacity, minds which have become distorted ; but official documents prove that the vast sacrilege committed by Henry the Eighth, whether in the suppression of monasteries or the destruction of shrines, was for his personal and worldly gain. The monasteries yielding broad lands and large states with rent rolls of enormous value, and the shrines producing that which could be easily turned into ready money. Marillac, the French ambassador, declared that Henry was so avaricious and covetous

“that all the wealth of the world would not be enough to satisfy and content his ambition . . . from which has come the ruin of the abbeys and the spoiling of every church in which there was anything to take. . . S. Thomas is declared a traitor because his relics and bones were adored with gold and stones.”<sup>1</sup>

And if many of the lands were bestowed on his subjects, it was yet for his own gain, for no greater influence could be exercised than lavish bestowal of gifts to make those subjects servile creatures, who, once enriched by these means, could have no power to withstand their prince’s enormities. It may be an easy matter to blame them for their non-support of higher principles, but Mammon, combined with the imperious will of an unscrupulous sovereign, can only be resisted by an ideal Christian.

Doubtless the people looked to the archbishop as the most able to defend the Church, but it was no St. Thomas who now sat in St. Augustine’s chair, and Cranmer was at greater fault than his king. As the spiritual head of the English hierarchy he betrayed his trust and cringed to the secular prince.

The instruments for the destruction of shrines, issued

--237--

in 1538, were local commissions under the Privy Seal, each one directed to two or more persons acting as visitors, and formally countersigned by the Lord Privy Seal—Thomas Cromwell. They dealt in words with the shrines and the treasures only, leaving the commissioners to deal with the relics at discretion. Although[sic] no general orders for the destruction of shrines were issued until about the middle of the year (1538), instructions were given to the Duke of Norfolk as early as May, 1537, directing him to remove that of St. John at Bridlington. The letter runs :—

“As for the shrine, the king’s highness, to the intent that his people should not be seduced in the offering of their money, would have it taken down.”

The jewels and place were to be sent to London.<sup>2</sup>

The “Declaration of Faith” written by Thomas Derby, clerk of the Privy Council, corrected under the instruction of the Council, and issued by royal authority in 1539 for preaching at Paul’s Cross, is a public vindication of the late proceedings of the king, and in it is the following passage in justification of the destruction of shrines and reliquaries, making special mention of that of St. Thomas of Canterbury. That portion which it was thought inadvisable to make public had a pen run through [was edited out, a line marked through it], and is here placed within brackets.

“As for the shrines capses<sup>3</sup> and reliquaries of saints so called, although the most were nothing lesse, for as much as his highness had found other idolatry or detestable superstition used thereabouts and perceived that they were for the most part feyned things . . . his majestye

therefore hath caused the same to be taken away and the abusyve pices therof to be brent [burnt], the doubtfull to be sett and hyden honestly away for feare of idolatry.

As for the shryne of Thomas Becket, sometime Archbishop

--238--

of Canterbury . . . it was arrested[attested?] that his shrines and bones shuld be taken away and bestowed in suche place as the same shuld cause no superstition afterwards [as it is indeed amongst others of that sorte conveyed and buried in a noble tower]. And for as moche as his hedd almost hole was found with the rest of his bones closed within the shryne, and that ther was in that church a grete scull of another hede, but much gretter by the iij quarter parts than that part which was lacking in the hede closed within the shryne, wherby it appered that the same was but a feyned fiction, if this hede was brent was therefore S. Thomas brent? Assurydly it concludeth not. S. Swythan and other reliques wherabout abuse of ipocrasy was to be layde safe, and not, as it is untruely surmitted, brent, but according to reason collocate secretely, wher ther shal be no cause of superstition given by them, as some say that for the like cause the body of Moyses was hyden lest the Jues shuld fall to idolatry.”

In 1541 Henry sent a letter to Archbishop Cranmer on this subject, who then sent his mandate to the other bishops :—

“Most reverend father in God, right trusty and right entirely well-beloved, we greet you well. Letting you wit, that whereas heretofore, upon the zeal and remembrance which we had to our bounded duty towards Almighty God, perceiving sundry superstitions and abuses to be used and embraced by our people, whereby they grievously offended him and his word, we did not only cause the images and bones of such as they resorted and offered unto, with the ornaments of the same, and all such writings and monuments of feigned miracles wherewith they are illuded, to be taken away in all places of our realm ; but also by our injunctions commanded,<sup>4</sup> that no offering or setting of lights or candles should be suffered in any church, but only to the blessed sacrament of the altar : it is lately come to our knowledge that, this our good intent and purpose notwithstanding, the shrines, covering of shrines, and monuments of those

--239--

things do yet remain in sundry places of our realm, much to the slander of our doings and to the great displeasure of Almighty God, the same being means to allure our subjects to their former hypocrisy and superstition, and also that our injunctions be not kept as appertaineth : for the due and speedy reformation whereof, we have thought meet by these our letters expressly to will and command you, that incontinently, upon the receipt hereof, you shall not only

cause due search to be made in your cathedral churches for these things, and if any shrine, covering of shrine, table monument of miracles, or other pilgrimage do there continue, to cause it to be taken away, so as there remain no memory of it ; but also that you shall take order with all the curates, and other, having charge within your diocese, to do the semblable, and to see that our injunctions be duly kept, as appertaineth, without failing, as we trust, and as you will answer for the contrary. Geven under our signet at our town of Hull, the 4th day of October, in the thirty-third year of our reign.”

The king must have concluded that his subjects had very short memories, for, until his evil desires for his first divorce brought him into conflict with Rome, Henry VIII. had himself been a frequent pilgrim to shrines, and a continuous almsgiver to all those of primary repute.

In the Injunctions of King Edward VI.[Henry’s son and boy king], issued in 1547, the clergy are told, among other things,

“that they shall take away, utterly extinct, and destroy all shrines, covering of shrines, all tables (of relics), candlesticks, trundles or rolls of wax, pictures, paintings, and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition ; so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass windows, or elsewhere, within their churches or houses.”

and in paragraph three it is ordered that all standing images were to be taken down and destroyed which had been “so abused with pilgrimages or offerings of anything made thereunto.” Also the Act of Parliament 3 & 4 Edward VI. c. x. § 6, spared only recumbent

--240--

“images set upon a tomb only for a monument of any dead peson who hath not been commonly reputed and taken as a saint.”

So thoroughly were these repeated injunctions enforced that no shrine of the primary class was left standing except that of St. David in the remote corner of Wales. No single feretory escaped the ruthless spoiler’s hand—for that was the object which received the costly gifts of the sons of the Church—except that of the Irish St. Manchán. Of the minor reliquaries only a small number escaped, and those through being but little known and of less value. Some few of the enamelled copper caskets are yet extant, but, with scarcely an exception, emptied of their sacred contents. Here and there, in a public museum or a private collection, is preserved one of these memorials of our forefathers’ reverence, but no longer the memorial of the saint to whom it was dedicated ; for the name of the beatified finds no place upon it, and the name inscribed on lead which was usual to place within has been lost along with the relics, leaving nothing by which it may be associated with any who find a place in the Calendar. Probably some few remain in the obscurity of cottage walls, like one described by the Rev. F. Bagot.

In the *Archæological Journal* (x. 369) he tells how in a cottage at Rodney Stoke, near Wells, he found a reliquary made of latten, the lid arched like the roof of a building, and surmounted by an elevated ridge. It measured 5½ inches long, 2½ inches wide, and 5½ inches in height including the ridge. The surface is rudely engraved, and bears an inscription, of which the letters MAGNIF may be deciphered, and on the roof may be read CONFUN, which he surmises to be part of the phrase, "Non confundar in æternum." The enamels had been cleaned away by oft-repeated scouring, and it had long formed *one of the well-burnished ornaments of the chimney-shelf!*

--241--

Footnotes~

1. Inventaire Analytique, ed. Kault, p. 211.
2. R.O. State Papers, Dom. 1537.
3. Coffers and chests.
4. Injunctions mad by Cromwell 1538. Burnet, i. pt.ii., App. Bk. iii. No. ii. 279-284. Ed. Oxon. 1829.

-end chapter six-