

**AN INTRODUCTORY
SKETCH TO THE
MARTIN MARPRELATE
CONTROVERSY, 1588-1590**

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An introductory sketch to the Martin Marprelate controversy, 1588-1590 by Edward Arber

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EDWARD ARBER

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Old and Modern Works

An Introductory Sketch to the
Martin Marprelate
Controversy

1588—1590

EDITED BY

EDWARD ARBER

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GENERAL PREFACE.



ON the threshold of much heated Controversy, it is needful to say a few words as to our standpoint thereto. This Series is not calculated to the meridian of either the Assent or Dissent of British islanders to the principle of a State Church; but appeals in ecclesiastical matters to the cultivated common sense of all men who can read English.

It is confessed that in no colony or new commonwealth now-a-days should the foundation of a State Church of any kind be attempted. Apparently also we are in the last century of such institutions in this island: so that when the Centenary of the abolition of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Ireland arrives, there may be no State Presbytery in Scotland or State Episcopacy in England in existence. Yet while such organizations are politically doomed; they never were more useful, they never came nearer to their ideal. If they pass away, it will be because they are a fundamental violation of the equality of Protestant citizenship in this realm. All assumptions and theories for them have expired. They confessedly subsist by the will of the majority of the voters: so that one or two political waves of Liberalism may accomplish their removal. Whenever it may come; may it be done considerately, and with a full regard for the individual interests of the State clergy: and especially may it result in the ministry of all GOD's teachers being strengthened as the First of the Professions; so that mere money-makers may not have sway in all things.

2. *The Enthralment of Dogmas and Creeds is gone.* A man may with the most perfect rectitude be either an Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Quaker, Baptist, or Congregationalist, just as he finds he can get most good or be able to join others in doing most good. Denominations are borrowing from each other whatever seems likely to be useful in leading men to higher motives and aspirations. Even Dissenters—who originally separated for a purer process of worship—do not now claim for their imitation of the methods of the infant Christian church any higher authority than that of inherent fitness. Their seven Deacons are going out of fashion, and are replaced by Church Committees elected by ballot. Many of the Nonconformists know half the Prayer Book by heart, and delight especially in its Collects. There is also in progress a general levelling-up of the Dissenting clergy to the culture and thought of their State confrères; who in turn do emulate them in their preaching power and adapted eloquence.

So that the experience of the last three hundred years has notably and utterly falsified the cardinal doctrine of the Puritans that GOD has appointed for all men any one certain necessary and perpetual order for discipline: and it will never again be in the power of religious teachers—whether from personal conviction or from self-interest—by any manner of formulated truth to separate and isolate the laity from mutual sympathy and regard with those who do not worship in precisely the same way. For the mind of man is so frail, his nature so weak, that a large margin must be allowed for idiosyncrasies, temperament, education, and what not. Is not each man's Theology but the expression of GOD's truth after its passage through his human character; just like the sunlight—sometimes clear, sometimes dimmed with earthly clouds—streaming through a stained glass window? All which is an everlasting argument to us men, for moderation and mutual toleration.

3. *We are therefore now not much concerned about the ecclesiastical theories of either Protestant or Precisian. If WHITGIFT believed in the Divine Right of Archbishops, or UDALL was ready to wage his life on a disputation for the "Holy Discipline;" both matters were fair subjects for argument. Either view might be held by a Christian man. But if WHITGIFT, by an abuse of his prerogative, imprisoned PENRY for a month or kept BARROW six months a close prisoner in the Gate House, without accusation or trial; that excites in us an immediate and intense interest.*

It is in this matter of Civil Rights that the MARTIN MARPRELATE tracts are so important in our history. In many respects, they were the attempt of Wit to fight (though at desperate odds) against Cruelty for permission to worship GOD according to the dictates of Conscience.

Whatever frenzies or narrow-mindedness may be chargeable to the Puritans, they were undoubtedly the Founders of our present freedom: while the Bishops and their entourage, with all their patristic learning and general culture, were the supporters of arbitrary power and the active instruments of the people's repression. No amount of historical research can obliterate this distinction.

It is important to remember that a Bishop after the Restoration was but a shadow of what a Bishop had been, before the Long Parliament broke the rod of their oppression. They continued to be Personages and Presences until almost our own day, but their temporal power departed for ever in the time of the Commonwealth.

4. *We have at least one ready test at hand wherewith to measure the wisdom or unwisdom of these Puritan Reformers, in the verdict of posterity upon their propositions.*

They protested against the general circulation of the Apocrypha with the canonical Scriptures. It has ceased to be so circulated, and is all but banished from the Lectionary of the Anglican

Church. They protested against oaths; these have been almost altogether abolished. They argued that marriage was a civil contract, with which the Minister had necessarily nothing to do. Marriage before a Registrar is now of constant and increasing occurrence.

On the other hand, some of their views on secular subjects, as the supporting of a ministry by pure almsgiving, have been found to be impracticable and visionary.

At any rate, whatever our personal prepossessions may be, this rough test is available for us, especially in considering the ecclesiastical abuses of that time.

5. *This special Controversy was the outcome of WHITGIFT's deliberate plan of Church Government: but it is also an episode in that general movement of English mind upon which we delight to think.*

What a wake up the Reformation under HENRY VIII. was to English thinkers? The Faith of ages found to be an imposture! What was there before them in the future? How Thought went out! and went forward! Then came the first labours of a literary Infancy; translations, compilations, abridgements. Then, with some checks, came mental Adolescence; the dawn and glow of Imagination revelling in Fancy and Love, in Drama and Allegory, in Madrigal and Sonnet. Then the "dry light" of an intellectual Manhood, reaching forward in its breadth and strength to all the questions of which the nature of man can have any cognizance, from the roots of human society to the heights of heavenly contemplation.

Two books may express the beginning and the maturity of this education of the English mind—TYNDALE's translation of the New Testament in 1526, and HOBBE's Leviathan in 1651.

In this continued movement, this particular Controversy occurs about the time when the "dry light" came to the front.