

**A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE CONFLICTS
BETWEEN JESUITS AND SECULARS IN THE
REIGN OF QUEEN ELIZABETH, WITH A
REPRINT OF CHRISTOPHER BAGSHAW'S 'TRUE
RELATION OF THE FACTION BEGUN AT
WISBICH' AND ILLUSTRATIVE DOCUMENTS**

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A Historical Sketch of the Conflicts Between Jesuits and Seculars in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, with a Reprint of Christopher Bagshaw's 'True Relation of the Faction Begun at Wisbich' and Illustrative Documents by Christopher Bagshaw & Thomas Graves Law

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CHRISTOPHER BAGSHAW & THOMAS GRAVES LAW

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION,	i
1. The Seminaries and the Jesuit Mission,	v
2. The Armada and its Consequences,	xv
3. Disturbances at the Roman College,	xxviii
4. The Prisoners at Wisbeach,	xxxviii
5. The Appointment of the Archbishop,	lix
6. The Appeal and the Books,	lxxxiv
7. The Judgment of Rome,	cii
8. The Sequel,	cxx
9. Bibliographical Notes,	cxxxviii
A TRUE RELATION,	1
The Memorial against the Jesuits,	96
Censure of the Paris University,	123
Letter of Dr. Dorel,	126
APPENDIX—	
A. List of Priests imprisoned at Wisbeach,	135
B. Letter of Blackwell to Cardinal Cajetan,	137
C. Letter of Henry Tichborne, S.J., 1598,	139
D. Extract from Father Lister's <i>Adversus Factiosos</i> ,	143
E. John Sicklemore to Dr. Bagshaw, Aug. 1598,	145
F. Letter to Dr. Bagshaw, June 4, 1599,	146
G. John Mush to Dr. Bagshaw, May 1599,	147

Contents.

	PAGE
H. John Blackfan, S.J., to John Floyd, S.J., Sept. 7, 1599,	149
I. Dr. Bagshaw to Mr. Thomas Bluet, April 27, 1601,	150
J. Letter of the Archpriest Blackwell to his Assistants, June 23, 1601,	151
K. Declaratio Thomæ Bluetti exhibita cardinalibus, etc., 1602,	153
INDEX,	159

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION.

THE *True Relation of the Faction begun at Wisbeach* is something more than the story of a quarrel among Roman catholic priests of interest only to themselves. The quarrel was indeed fierce and prolonged and widespread, and could not but leave its mark upon the condition and character of the clerical body itself. But although on the surface it seemed principally concerned with matters of ecclesiastical government and discipline, this Eight Years' War of the priests had its origin and its issue in political differences of no small historical importance. The faction led by the jesuits contended for the Spanish succession and the subjection of England to the pope by force of arms. Their opponents were for the king of Scots whether catholic or protestant. The one party upheld the papal claim to depose princes, while the members of the other party came to protest that in case of any attempt to enforce such a claim they should be bound in conscience to defend their sovereign in defiance of all ecclesiastical censures. These same men aimed at securing some measure of toleration for their religion, and at establishing a *modus vivendi* with the state. The jesuit zealots were for war to the knife, and for obvious reasons detested the thought of toleration.¹ Their ecclesiastical scheme which gave most offence—the appointment of an archpriest—was mainly projected with the view of gaining vantage-ground for political action. These grave con-

¹ See the interesting letter of Father Tichborne, *infra*, Appendix C. pp. 141, 142.

tentions therefore caused as much anxiety at the court of Madrid as they did at Rome, and were watched throughout with eager interest by the government at home. The end of the struggle found the seminarists as a whole standing in a new relation both towards the pope and the English crown. There had meanwhile sprung up among the clergy a strong national party. The back of the great catholic reaction, in England at least, was already broken. A direct outcome of petty disputes about the morals and behaviour of certain Wisbeach prisoners in 1595 was the famous protestation of allegiance drawn up by thirteen of the leading secular clergy, January 8, 1603, the very day that Elizabeth was seized with her last illness. This was the significant though tardy response on their part to the bull of Pius v., and their virtual condemnation of the insane act of John Felton, now beatified as a martyr, who had stuck that bull on the bishop of London's gate just thirty-three years before. Thus with almost her last breath the queen may be said to have won a decisive moral victory over her lifelong foes. If the winds and the waves had fought for her against the catholic Armada, this her final victory was given into her hands by the priests themselves. Catholic Europe, which had looked on for many years with pious hope and pride on the combined onslaught made upon protestant England by the forces spiritual and temporal of the pope and his seminarists, the Guizes and the king of Spain, now witnessed with disgust a disaster more humiliating than the wrecking of Philip's ships. Priests, jesuit and secular, were flying at each other's throats; and 'designed martyrs' and confessors were reviling each other in language not exceeded in bitterness or violence by the most hostile of the puritans. Protestant preachers were pointing at the scandal with derision, and statesmen were chuckling over the suicidal follies of men who had been boasting of adding new glories to

the catholic Church. 'It was a pitiful thing,' cried one of the leaders in the fray, looking back upon his own battlefield, 'that men dedicated to God's service in so high a duty and holy a work' should be turned aside, 'and fall the one upon the other, seeking to buffet and break heads with the laughter of all their enemies and the intolerable grief of their friends and superiors.' No one knew better than Father Parsons what this buffeting of heads had cost the cause for which he spent his life.

To the ecclesiastical historian the episode is well worthy of attention. In the institution of the archpriest we have a novel experiment in church government, while the disturbances which arose out of it present some instructive examples on the one hand of the kind of discipline possessed by the clergy, and the procedure of the papal court on the other, at a time when a more than usual strain was laid upon their relations. The picture of prison life among the veterans of the pope's clerical army is unique. We learn something too of the manner of men who left the universities at home to join the papal seminaries abroad, what sort of training they there received for their new vocation, and how they lived and acted as confessors for their faith and in expectation of martyrdom. Much has been written of the religious enthusiasm of these men, their undoubted courage and heroism under the rack and on the scaffold. We have here the reverse of the medal, but no less a faithful portrait.

Well-nigh a score of contemporary tracts, of which some detailed account will be given later on, were written upon these affairs. Dr. Christopher Bagshaw, whose book is here reprinted, is not the most respectable or the most impartial of the writers. His is however by far the most full and circumstantial narrative of the so-called 'Wisbeach Stirs,' or the earlier stage of the quarrel in which he was one of the