

The Holinshed editors: religious attitudes and their consequences

By Felicity Heal
Jesus College, Oxford

This is an introductory lecture prepared for the Cambridge *Chronicles* conference, July 2008. It should not be quoted or cited without full acknowledgement.

Francis Thynne, defending himself when writing lives of the archbishops of Canterbury, one of sections of the 1587 edition of Holinshed that was censored, commented :

It is beside my purpose, to treat of the substance of religion, sith I am onelie politicall and not ecclesiasticall a naked writer of histories, and not a learned divine to treat of mysteries of religion.¹

And, given the sensitivity of any expression of religious view in mid-Elizabethan England, he and his fellow-contributors were wise to fall back, on occasions, upon the established convention that ecclesiastical and secular histories were in two separate spheres. It is true that the *Chronicles* can appear overwhelmingly secular, dominated as they are by scenes of war and political conflict. But of course Thynne did protest too much. No serious chronicler could avoid giving the history of the three kingdoms an ecclesiastical dimension: the mere choice of material proclaimed religious identity and, among their other sources, the editors drew extensively upon a text that did irrefutably address the ‘mysteries of religion’ – Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*.² Moreover, in a text as sententious as Holinshed the reader is constantly led in certain interpretative directions. Those directions are superficially obvious – the affirmation

¹ Citations are to *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, ed. Henry Ellis, 6 vols. (London, 1807-8): 4:743

² D.R.Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England* (Toronto, 1990), ch 1

of the Protestant settlement, anti-Romanism and a general conviction about the providential purposes of the Deity for Englishmen.

But this is to assume that all the editors/compiler/contributors spoke as one on these issues and this is clearly not so. Annabel Patterson in her chapter on religion (or rather ecclesiastical politics) in *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*, has urged us to think of the texts in terms of their multi-vocality, and this is what I propose briefly to do.³ This multi-vocality exists on two levels: firstly in the diverse views of the main contributors to a plural text; secondly in the choice of sources, what the 1577 text calls 'manie and sundrie authors'.⁴ Holinshed's preface spoke of the diversity of the writings of his authors, denying that he sought to 'frame them to agree to my liking', but a careful investigation of the texts and their prejudices might well prove otherwise.⁵

The careers of Raphael Holinshed (always the most shadowy of the group), Abraham Fleming, William Harrison and John Hooker all point in a committed Protestant direction. The first three were clerics, and Harrison and Fleming wrote copiously from a 'godly' perspective.⁶ Hooker's Protestant credentials were established as early as the Henrician period, when he stayed with Peter Martyr Vermigli while studying theology in Strassburg. Although he remained a layman, he was closely associated with the religious establishment of early Elizabethan England.⁷ The four other contributors present a more varied picture. The description of Ireland, and some of the earliest material on her chronicles, was begun by Edmund Campion,

³ Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 128-53.

⁴ *Chronicles*, 2: Preface to the Reader, i. For the range of sources employed by Holinshed, see the initial listings on this web site

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ On Fleming see Cyndia Clegg in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and E.S. Donno, 'Abraham Fleming: a learned corrector in 1586-7', *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989), pp. 200-11. On Harrison the definitive work is G.J.R. Parry, *A Protestant Vision: William Harrison and the Reformation of Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁷ On Hooker see S. Mendyk in *ODNB* and V.F. Snow, *Parliament in Elizabethan England: John Hooker's 'Order and Usage'* (London, 1977).

described by Holinshed in his preface to the 1577 edition as ‘fellow sometime of the John Baptists college in Oxford’ but better known to the Elizabethan world as one of the first and greatest of the Jesuit martyrs. It was continued and developed by Richard Stanihurst, a son of one of the leading Dublin Anglo-Irish families, who himself left Ireland and then England for exile in the Low Countries, eventually becoming a Jesuit. Though neither Stanihurst nor Campion had made active proclamation of their Catholic identities at the time of writing the Description and Chronicle, they were certainly not in sympathy with the direction of the English Protestant Settlement.⁸ This indicates that we might expect the greatest clash of religious ‘tone’ in the Irish volume of Holinshed, since the 1587 version was enlarged and developed by the godly John Hooker, who had served Sir Peter Carew in the island.⁹

The last two contributors reveal less about their religious convictions either within or without the text. Francis Thynne, the youngest and least experienced of the editors, wrote the continuation of the Scottish history in haste, and encountered most problems from the censors of the ’87 text. This seemed to owe something to his commentary on religious issues, especially in his material on the archbishops of Canterbury, but more to his impolitic venturing into Anglo-Scottish relations.¹⁰ Thynne was a close relative of Sir John Thynne, builder of Longleat and an active Protestant. He himself may have had a Catholic background – *ODNB* says he converted in the 1570s – but there is no solid evidence on this.¹¹ He seems to tread the

⁸ Colm Lennon, *Richard Stanihurst the Dubliner 1547-1618* (Blackrock, co. Dublin, 1981)

⁹ Patterson, *Reading Holinshed*, pp. 25-9.

¹⁰ His introduction to his Scottish text acknowledged the dangers explicitly: ‘the affaires of princes are not to be made common, to be submitted to the censure of their subjects...Into which yet I would not have so rashlie descended, or taken so hard a province in hand, had not...the commandement of such as I durst not gainsaie, interponed itselfe as a shield to receive and beat backe the sharpe darts of envious toongs’ (5:657). On the problems of the list of archbishops of Canterbury see E.S.Donno, ‘Some aspects of Shakespeare’s Holinshed’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50 (1987), p.238.

¹¹ Louis Knafla in *ODNB*. See also L.A.Knafla, ‘The “country chancellor”: the patronage of Sir Thomas Egerton, Baron Ellesmere’ in ed. F.R.Knogle and L.A.Knafla, *Patronage in Late Renaissance England* (London, 1983), pp. 61-2, 114-5.

paths of Protestant orthodoxy, though without the zeal that marks some of the other contributors. And finally there is John Stow, the great antiquary and chronicler of London a man who had encountered trouble early in Elizabeth's reign, when his study had been raided and a number of 'Catholic' texts found.¹² Stow certainly conformed thereafter: the secondary authorities debate how far his dutiful behaviour concealed a yearning for the religious past. For Barrett Beer, writing in *ODNB* and elsewhere, Stow's religious views were irrelevant – that he detached himself from religious controversy – and adopted a 'generally tolerant attitude' to all except the Irish.¹³ Others have more perceptively pointed out that Stow routinely wrote with more sympathy about the Catholic past than many of his contemporaries, that his nostalgia for the 'world we have lost' was particularly visible in his *Survey of London* and that his determined concentration upon his role as an antiquary may serve to conceal continuing alienation from aspects of Elizabethan religion.¹⁴

Thus much can be demonstrated, or inferred, from biographical evidence beyond the *Chronicles*. There are risks in bringing this external knowledge to bear too crudely on the text itself. However the 'voices' do identify themselves and their sentiments much of the time, either by laying direct claim to sections written – Harrison, Stanihurst, Hooker and Thynne – or by explicit insertions into the 1587 text by Fleming (usually marked with a margin identifier). So we can make some provisional approaches to the text with these claims in mind.

We may begin with the Irish material, where the ideological (and cultural) clash is most immediately visible. Stanihurst's *Description* avoids direct commentary on the

¹² Grindal wrote to Cecil in February 1569 listing the texts found : John Strype, *The History of the Life and Acts of the most reverend father in God Edmund Grindal* (London, 1821), pp. 516-9.

¹³ Barrett Beer, *ODNB; Tudor England Observed: the World of John Stow* (1998)

¹⁴ I.W.Archer, 'John Stow, citizen and historian', in ed. I.Gadd & A.Gillespie, *John Stow (1525-1605) and the Making of the English Past* (2004), pp. 20-23; P.Collinson, 'John Stow & nostalgic antiquarianism', in ed. J.Merritt, *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype 1598-1720* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 42-3.

current religious history of the island, but is engaged with the religious past in both implicit and explicit ways. Saints, local and universal, are invoked without any sense of unease, and there is a lengthy diversion on the controversial issue of whether St Patrick banished snakes and other venomous beasts from the island.¹⁵ Most striking of all is the description of the famous pilgrimage site of St Patrick's purgatory. It is the first site discussed in the chapter headed 'Of the strange and wonderful places in Ireland'. The role of Patrick himself in its identification is affirmed, and the solemn pilgrimage to the cave itself is reported in loving detail: 'people resort thither even at this daie for penance, and have reported at their returne estrange visions of paine and blisse appearing unto them'.¹⁶ The attitudes of the Anglo-Irish to such traditional religious practices were always somewhat ambivalent: cultural distain for the 'mere Irish' and a passionate desire to defend the use of the English language had occasional impact upon Stanihurst's judgement of Gaelic religious behaviour. Ireland, he remarked 'and especiallie the ruder part, is not stored with... learned men'. If it were, then by preaching and sincere example, they would introduce that civility common 'in other regions'.¹⁷ There is no hint that this reformation might extend beyond manners and morals.

All of this was allowed to stand (uncensored it may be noted) in the second edition of Holinshed, while following it John Hooker re-translated the early History of Giraldus Cambrensis, brought the narrative chronicle up to date, and provided a prefatory dedication to Sir Walter Raleigh that denounced the Irish as having a history 'barren of good things' and 'replenished with actions of bloud, murther and loathsome outrages'. In the current climate of rebellion he concluded that this was because 'there was scarce a God' known in the land, which in its turn allowed the people to fall prey

¹⁵ *Chronicles* 6: 9-18.

¹⁶ *Chronicles*, 6: 36-8; quotation at 37.

¹⁷ *Chronicles*, 6: 14.

to great ones who had ‘hollow hearts’ and were ‘addicted to papistry’.¹⁸ While Hooker’s detailed evaluation is more nuanced than these strung quotations suggest, it is shot through with the cultural hostility to all things indigenous that marks the Elizabethan ‘new Irish’. Hooker’s narrative is informed by a profound conviction that God’s judgement must light on those who are so stiff-necked in resisting their sovereign’s authority in state and church.

The English and Scottish texts of Holinshed have none of this overt clash in material or commentary. If John Stow still had lingering affection for a more catholic form of faith, it did not reveal itself explicitly in his textual contributions to the 1587 edition – which were first and foremost the addition of documents especially for the recent history of Elizabeth’s reign.¹⁹ This is a subject that still needs exploration, but my sense is that what can be derived from some of Stow’s texts is a ‘tone’ – in, for example, the extensive coverage of the deaths of the Catholic martyrs at the time of the Henrician break with Rome, or the relatively sympathetic description of the execution of Edmund Campion. Or, to reverse the point, his contributions seem to lack that voice of Protestant providentialism that characterises some of his colleagues. It is also worth exploring the possibility that Stow and Foxe were on occasions run against one another, offering multi-vocal approaches to, for example, the C15th rebellion of John Oldcastle.²⁰

¹⁸ *Chronicles*, 6: 103-4.

¹⁹ However, it is important to recognise that Stow’s overall influence on the work is not always easy to detect from the explicit marginal references to his contribution. His *Abridgement* (1570) is sometimes referred to explicitly, but on other occasions, as in the commentary on the Edwardian debasement, is not acknowledged. *Chronicles*, 3: 1031. Patterson, *Reading Holinshed*, pp. 92-3. Stow himself laid greater claims to the revised text than seem warranted when he spoke in 1605 of ‘my continuation of Maister Reine Woolfe’s Chronicle’: John Stow, *The Annales of England...untill this present yeare 1605* (London, 1605), p. 1184.

²⁰ I owe this suggestion to discussion with Tom Freeman. Patterson focuses on the multi-vocal accounts of Oldcastle’s revolt, but foregrounds Bale rather than Foxe: Patterson, *Reading Holinshed*, pp. 131-53.

The rest essentially utilise two forms of religious discourse when reflecting on national history. One is the anti-Roman and anti-monastic language that was more or less an obligation for the Protestant antiquary: the other the construction of a providentialist discourse. In the first edition Holinshed was willing enough to invoke these forms of religious sentiment when it suited his purpose: for example he used from Polydore Vergil the case of a ‘miracle’ of the Rood at Winchester, which spoke to defend the interests of Dunstan and the monks against the secular clergy. Holinshed argued that it was thought, even at the time, to be a fraud perpetrated by ambitious men, and signalled with his marginalia ‘a pretie shift of the monks to disappoint the priests’.²¹ It was Holinshed who made all the appropriate noises about the providential judgement that had made the reign of Mary wretched and brought her sister Elizabeth to the throne.

But it was Fleming’s revision of the text that established its ‘Protestant’ properties most decisively. For whereas Holinshed had largely adhered to the tradition of presenting narrative ‘unvarnished’, offering only the guidance of marginalia and the briefest of moral observation, Fleming allowed his reviser’s pen luxuriant commentary from time to time. I must quote a couple of examples to get the flavour, especially of his vigorous anti-papalism.

Here he is on the role of the papal legate in Henry II’s council following the invasion of Ireland:

Where we have to note the drift of the pope and all popelings to be far otherwise than they pretend. For who (unlesse he will be wilfullie ignorant) knoweth not, that he and his never attempt any thing, but the same beareth the hew and colour of holinesse and honestie? Hereto tend the sendings out of his legats and cardinals to make pacifications, to redresse disorders, to appease tumults, & I wot not what infinit enormities (for he must have his ore in everie mans bote, his spoone in everie mans dish and his fingers in everie mans pursse) but the end and scope of all his doings consisteth in this: namelie to set himselfe

²¹ *Chronicles*, 1: 700

above all sovereigntie, to purchase and assure to himselfe an absolute and supereminent jurisdiction, to rob christian kingdomes, to impoverish churches, chapels and religious places.²²

The contrast between the language of '77 and '87 can be pointed effectively in a passage on the papal collector under Henry III. Holinshed merely remarks:

But to declare all the practises of this the popes agent, as it would be too long and tedious a processe, so it is nothing stange that these his landloping legates and Nuncios have their manifold collusions to cousen Christian kingdoms of their revenues.

To which Fleming adds a colourful passage beginning:

For if they were not furnished with foxlike fraud and woolvish ravine, they were no fit factors for him, sith it is required that like maister have like man. And therefore he is aptlie described in the likenesse of a man, head and face excepted, wherein he resembleth a wolfe; besides that, he is set foorth with a crosiers staffe in his hand , at the hooke whereof hangeth his Judas pursse...²³

However, Holinshed and Fleming are not always so forthright in their commentary on religious issues. Sometimes they use the division between sacred and civil history as excuse for limiting their commentaries. On Wicliffe, for example, Holinshed is predictably critical of his clerical enemies, and has a vigorous swipe at the hostile views of the chronicler Knighton, but avoids any direct evaluation of the heresy by referring the reader to Foxe.²⁴ Neither chronicler automatically casts the pope as the whore of Babylon.

Both chroniclers, for example, are surprisingly restrained about the role of Pope Gregory and St. Augustine in the coming of Christianity to England. The story as told by Bede and William of Malmesbury is rehearsed with no adverse criticism of papal

²² *Chronicles*, 2: 173

²³ *Chronicles*, 2:401

²⁴ *Chronicles*, 2: 717-8. The relevant passage begins: 'as for the popish cleargie, to them not onelie the sect but also the name of Wickliffe was so odious, that in recording his opinions and sectaries, they exceed the bounds of all modestie, aggravating such reports as they infer concerning him with more than hyperbolicall lies'.

intervention, and Fleming only added to Holinshed's narrative a positive comment: 'thus have ye heard in what maner the Englishmen were first brought from worshipping of false gods, and baptised in the name of the living God by the foresaid Augustine'.²⁵ The response of William Harrison to the Augustine story is in marked contrast to that of Holinshed and Fleming. His early history, embedded in the *Description of Britain*, condemns the Saxons for their sins, but sees the coming of the apostle of the English as poisonous. God saw:

the sheepe of his pasture would receive no wholesome fodder, it pleased his majestie to let them run headlong from one iniquitie to another, in somuch that after the doctrine of Pelagius, it received that of Rome also, brought in by Augustine and his monkes, whereby it was to be seene, how they fell from the truth into heresie, and from one heresie still into another, till at the last they were drowned altogether in the pits of error digged up by Antichrist.²⁶

This is characteristic of Harrison, who Glyn Parry has taught us to see as a radical Protestant, deeply committed to a biblical interpretation of the past, and critical of the lukewarm nature of the Elizabethan Settlement. Harrison was convinced that history had witnessed a constant struggle between the true and the false church, and his own agenda was to construct a great English chronology, to show God's care for his elect in all ages. Even in the first version of Holinshed Harrison drew very heavily on his work for the Chronology, and the 1587 text is even more beholden to his unpublished *magnum opus*. All of this sat uneasily with the argument that the Chronicles were secular and not sacred history: Harrison clearly denied the distinction.²⁷

In practice, much of what he wrote in the *Descriptions* can be classified with little sense of anachronism as 'social history', and he could temper the appeal to scripture with the observation of an antiquary. In a chapter headed 'Whether it be likelie that any giants were, and whether they inhabited in this Ile or not' he began with 'the

²⁵ *Chronicles*, 1: 597.

²⁶ *Chronicles*, 1:47

²⁷ Parry, *A Protestant Vision*, pp.172-3.

scriptures, the most sure and certeine ground of all knowledge...which unto the godly may suffice for sufficient prooffe of my position'. But then he proceeded to demolish most of the sources that spoke of giants living England.²⁸ Parry sometimes seems to force his subject into too apocalyptic a frame by reading the Description against his unpublished MSS.

What I think is important to emphasise is that Harrison's contribution to the text allowed him to ride more distinctive hobby-horses than those who had to focus on chronological narrative. The most visible of these was a concern for the authority of the clergy. When discussing the Druids, for example, he remarked bitterly that their immunity from services and tributes, was greater under idolatry 'than under the gospell'.²⁹ He took advantage of the formal Renaissance position that sacred history had precedence over secular to introduce his detailed description of the realm with two lengthy chapters on the state of the church and its bishops.³⁰ Another was an early version of the 'Norman yoke' theory – cast in predictably providentialist terms. He saw the Norman Conquest (described usually as conquest by the French) as a consequence of our refusal of grace 'offered in time, and would not heare when God by his Preachers did call us so favourablie unto him'.³¹

Holinshed constructed a civil history, and there are other forms of multi-vocality that may be more important than religion when we look closely at the text. I think religious difference only intermittently destabilises the approach of the *Chronicles*: those who compiled it and marketed it must have been aware of the importance of appealing to the Protestant establishment, of avoiding censure and of pleasing patrons such as Burghley. If, like Stow, they did not always agree with the party line it was

²⁸ *Chronicles*, 1: 14-22, quotation at 15.

²⁹ *Chronicles*, 1: 36

³⁰ *Chronicles*, 1: 221-49.

³¹ *Chronicles* 1: 12

wise to concentrate on other issues. And, in the chronicling tradition, when divergent views of a set of events were expressed they could, without embarrassment, be juxtaposed on the page.³² It is, nevertheless, valuable to study the implicit and explicit steers that the editors offered to their elite audiences. As we begin to analyse the texts more closely, I would expect us to be able to offer a more compelling disentanglement of our various voices on religion.

³² D.Woolf, 'Genre into artefact: the decline of the English chronicle in the sixteenth century', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19:3 (1988), pp. 334- 6, though Woolf exaggerates the degree to which Holinshed represents a 'primitive' model of historical writing.