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UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

THE QUESTION OF MONASTIC FUNCTIONS
ON THE EVE OF THE DISSOLUTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

Of the Graduate School of the University of Louisville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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Of Master of Arts

Department of History

By

Winona Bryan Money

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ON THE EVE OF THE DISSOLUTION

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**THE QUESTION OF MONASTIC FUNCTIONS
ON THE EVE OF THE DISSOLUTION**

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

"Matrimonial discords, have from the days of Helen of Troy, been the fruitful source of public calamities; and one of the most decisive events in English history, the breach with the Church of Rome, found its occasion in the divorce of Catherine of Aragon."¹

In the year 1509 King Henry the Seventh of England died. The winter of the old reign was passed and spring, in the person of young Henry the Eighth, proved not only to be glorious, but also revolutionary. In 1527 he startled the Christian world by announcing his intention to divorce his loyal wife, Catherine of Aragon, thereby causing the breach between London and Rome. A few years later, with the aid of Cromwell he began a movement which culminated in 1539 in the complete dissolution of all monastic houses in England.

"The old monastic chapels had been profaned, plundered and dismantled, and now served as pigeon-lofts."² Thus a description of what once had been pointed to as beautiful landmarks of the English countryside. Were Henry's actions in the dissolution justified? Had the religious houses become as degraded as his agents

1. A. F. Pollard, Henry the Eighth, p. 173.

2. G. Constant, The Reformation in England, p. 171.

claimed, and thus worthy of a dissolution? Or were the cloistered ones falsely accused?

In answering these questions, it is very difficult to arrive at any objective and unbiased conclusion. The historian's path is a treacherous one. The majority of authorities on the subject take quite a determined standpoint. The anti-Catholics contend that the religious bodies in England had fallen so far below the ideals and practices originally established for them that they well deserved the fate which befell them. On the other hand, the pro-Catholic writers assert that, for the most part, the religious in England were continuing to perform their functions to the best of their ability. The evidence on which they were convicted was propaganda, created for a specified purpose by Henry and his agents. The King was not so interested in whether or not the monastic functions were being performed, as he was covetous of the monastic lands and wealth. Thus the historian who is seeking the truth finds himself entangled in a web of very biased material. To arrive at some semblance of truth is indeed difficult.

It hardly seems possible that as many religious houses in England could have been so completely degraded as Henry's agents would have us believe. However, it is impossible to accept the fact that many were not in need

of a severe reformation. For is it not true that where there is so much smoke there must be some fire? It only seems probable that the slow, smouldering, unchecked flame that was gradually, but definitely undermining the monastic institutions in England was fanned into a raging, devastating inferno by the carefully and strategically planned propaganda of Henry and his agents. Thus this early campaign of propaganda only brought to destruction at an earlier date the already doomed monasteries of England.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND OF SIXTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

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In the year 1047 A.D. Raoul Glaber, a Benedictine chronicler wrote, "'It is as if the whole world had thrown off the rags of its ancient time, and had arrayed itself in the white robes of the Churches.'" Spence, the English historian, refers to the eleventh century as the time of the awakening of the Western Church.¹ However, four centuries later, in the latter part of the fifteenth century, another historian describes the Church as going through one of the darkest periods of its history.² This may be a slight exaggeration of the extent to which the religious organizations had declined by the sixteenth century, for after all there was still much good being done. Nevertheless, it was true that something had happened in the centuries between 1100 and 1600 which caused a decline in church life. What had happened?

In the short span of a little more than a hundred years England experienced two national catastrophes, the two terrible plagues, disease and war. In the middle of

1. H. D. M. Spence, History of the English Church, p. 64.

2. W. W. Capes, English Church in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, p. 214.

the fourteenth century the dreaded plague, the Black Death swept over the country, taking its toll of lives everywhere. From 1348 until 1350 the ravages of this disease were felt in every part of the British Isle; death and desolation ruled supreme; people died and circumstances changed. Thus certain social and economic changes were brought about that were to have far-reaching effects on the future history of the country and its people.

After the scourge of the Black Death had passed, England was left a desolate country. From 1348-1350 thousands of people had died as a result of this dreadful plague. A great many accounts place the death toll as high as (50% or) one-half of the entire population.¹ Although it is hard to believe that as many as 50% of the English people were wiped out, one can go too far in minimizing its ravages. W. E. Lunt says, for instance, that the death rate was probably only slightly higher than in this country during the influenza epidemic of 1917. Succeeding events (e.g. Statute of Laborers) show that by 1350 there was a noticeable decrease in the country's population. The cloistered groups proved to be no exception in this case. Death visited the

1. A. C. Flick, Decline of the Medieval Church, p. 337.

monasteries, as well as the nobles' castles and the poor man's hut. As the monks went forth from their homes to help minister to the sick and dying they came in contact with the disease and many perished. "In some places whole monastic communities were wiped out, in others the Bishop and all his Chapter died."¹ Spence has estimated that two-thirds, or at least considerably more than one-half of the religious died. "In the ranks of those then lost, were many of the most earnest and devoted. The gaps thus made were very slowly and imperfectly filled."²

Thus the numbers in the religious houses were greatly reduced and in many cases the newly-made vacancies were never refilled.

The monastery of St. Albans, one of the great typical monastic institutions of the West, sank to, and remained at, half its old numbers. The same was roughly true of the great monastic houses throughout Europe. Some, later, received further endowments and greater numbers. But the monastic institution, like all other institutions in Europe, was hit in its vitals, and the effect of the blow was felt for generations.³

It has been found that up until the time of the dissolution some houses still had very few members. The case of Bildewas Abbey might be cited. "About the time of

1. H. Belloc, How the Reformation Happened, p. 46.

2. Spence, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

3. Belloc, op. cit., p. 46.

the suppression, here were twelve monks, who were endowed with 110pds. 19s. and 3 pence per annum, according to Dugdale; but Speed estimates the value at L 129, 6s. 10d."¹

If the number of inhabitants in the religious houses were thus reduced to a fraction of their former number and these vacancies were not filled, it is only natural that some of the work which had previously been carried on was now neglected. In cases where the work was done, it could not be carried on efficiently by two or three monks or nuns, where twelve had formerly been required. Such was the case of Bromehall Priory, where only two or three nuns resided.²

Labour was very scarce at this time, especially among the poorer classes.

'The sheep and cattle strayed through the fields and corn, and there was none left who could drive them out.' Harvests rotted on the ground. The demand was so great for help that wages rose to a point where the landlords complained and sought to regulate both labour and pay by the Statute of Labourers in 1351.³

Therefore, help was not easy to get and what work the monks did not do was left undone, for there were no

1. T. Phillips, The History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury, Vol. I, p. B7 (Appendix).

2. E. L. Taunton, Thomas Wolsey Legate and Reformer, p. 84.

3. Flick, op. cit., p. 337.

others to do it for them. This situation was unavoidable in 1350, but by 1500 those houses that had failed to replenish their ranks with the necessary numbers could expect little sympathy.

The decline in numbers and the neglect of duties was also accompanied by a growing laxity of discipline. A Franciscan annalist of that time writes: "The masters of regular discipline and the seniors of experience being carried off, the rigours of discipline, being relaxed, could not be renewed by the youths received without the necessary training rather to fill the depopulated houses."¹ It took many years to educate and train the new monks to the point where they could expect to fill the places vacated by the experienced leaders taken by the plague. In some houses the patience and time required for this task were lacking, and the new inexperienced monks placed in responsible positions could not possibly keep as good control over their charge as their more learned predecessors had done. There is one story told of a very small lad being appointed to a responsible position.

A certain bishop having received a gift of a basket of pears, asked them who sat at meat with him, to whose custody he should commit them. His young nephew, to whom he had even then committed

1. Spence, op. cit., p. 102.

an archdeaconry answered and said, 'I will keep the pears.' To whom his uncle answered, 'Thou rascal, ill wouldst thou keep them.' Then said a certain honest man who was there present, 'O wretch. How hast thou dared to commit an archdeaconry of so many souls to this youth, to whom thou dardest not commit a basket of pears?'¹

To all the other handicaps under which the monks struggled after the seige of the Black Death, was added that of financial difficulty. The monastic incomes were considerably lowered immediately following the year 1350 and continued to be for several years thereafter.² Many of their tenants died or moved elsewhere, leaving the monastic fields uncultivated. Thus the income formerly received from this wasting land was missing, plus large gifts which generous nobles probably felt that at this critical time they could not afford to make. However, the monasteries recovered more quickly from their financial burdens than they did from the decrease in numbers and the neglect of duties and discipline.

The second plague which England experienced between 1350 and 1500 was that of warfare, namely the Wars of the Roses. Wars between nations are disastrous enough, but a country torn by a civil war, with family fighting against family, brother against brother, is

1. G. C. Coulton, Life in the Middle Ages, Vol. I, p. 94.

2. R. Graham, Essay on English Monasteries, p. 27.

even more tragic. This was the condition in England during the Wars of the Roses. From the time of Henry VI until Henry VII finally seized the throne in 1485, England was torn by the conflict between the Duke of York and his followers, and the loyal supporters of Henry VI and the Lancastrian family, in their struggle for the throne.

For thirty years the wars continued. There was not constant fighting, a year or two often lapsing between battles, but the feeling of hate and suspicion was everywhere and the country remained in a deplorable state. There was no permanent central government, no stabilized authority in any one person or group of persons, many members of the noble families were dead or doomed to die before the conflict was finally settled, and every phase of the nation's life was disrupted. A description of the prevailing conditions reveals that:

In a war of succession, where the great families were divided in their allegiance, and supported their rival claimants in evenly balanced numbers, the inveteracy of the conflict increased with its duration, and propagated itself from generation to generation. Every family was in blood feud with its neighbours, and children, as they grew to manhood, inherited their duty of revenging their father's death. No effort of imagination can reproduce to us the state of this country in the fatal years which intervened between the first rising of the Duke of York and the battle of Bosworth; and experience too truly convinced Henry VII that the war ceased only from general

exhaustion, but not because there was no will to continue it.¹

What of the religious houses during this period of nationwide conflict? Although they had endured their share of suffering and death during the siege of the Black Death, now the cloistered ones were little disturbed by the general strife in the outside world. In fact, during the thirty years when the rest of the country was perishing, they enjoyed relative prosperity. Many of the nobles who formerly had made demands on the monasteries and had interfered in their daily life, were now either engaged in fighting for their colors, or had already been slain in battle. Likewise, those in authority who might have had some power over the religious were now elsewhere occupied, and probably felt that their position was already weak enough without incurring the enmity of the monastic houses.

Therefore, the monasteries were practically free from any lay interference for over thirty years. Their life continued as usual, they became wealthier, and theirs was the one institution in England which stood out above the destruction and chaos of civil warfare as powerful, wealthy, and stolid as it had been before. "The abbots and the bishops almost alone had ready money

1. J. A. Froude, History of England, p. 110.

in these troubled times, and used it to buy up, at nominal prices, the lands depreciated by the civil wars. The destruction of the nobility, moreover, in these long and terrible struggles, helped them, for while the territorial aristocracy had well-nigh perished, that of the Church remained intact."¹ "The immunity which they enjoyed from the general sufferings of the civil war contributed to deceive them."²

Henry VIII was the first to bring about the dissolution of all the monasteries in England, but he was by no means the first to attack the religious groups. For many years before this time certain people had come forth, some to criticise the church organizations, others to try to reform them. One of the earliest reformers to attack the monks was Wycliffe. His purpose was not to change the doctrines of the Church, but to reform the Church from within. He complained that the monks neglected their religious duties to care for their property and he frequently referred to them as "possess-ioners."³ In criticising them he said: "'These un-religious that have possessions, they commonly have red

1. C. Geikie, The English Reformation, p. 81.

2. Froude, op. cit., p. 96.

3. Capes, op. cit., p. 118.

cheeks and great bellies.'"¹

'Dead dogs' they were, of whom the realm should be freed. In his tracts he calls their cloisters 'Cain's Castles.' Once when Wycliffe was thought to be dying a company of exasperated friars surrounded his bed and exhorted him to repent, but he found strength to raise himself, and with prophetic instinct exclaimed that he should yet live to denounce their errors again.²

Wycliffe's successor in the campaign to "clean up" religious life was the satirical scholar, Erasmus. He principally criticised the monks' idle isolation and greedy acquisitiveness which gradually led to the monopoly of monastic wealth by a chosen few.

It was intolerable that large bodies of men should live in idleness, waited on by troops of servants, when the revenues thus wasted had been given for the support of learning, the exercise of hospitality, and the relief of the old, the infirm, and the poor; that institutions which were bound by their statutes to have a certain number of members should deliberately allow that number to sink to half or even a third, that there might be more money to divide among the rest: above all that there should be, over England, a vast network of establishments, nominally for the Glory of God, and the edification of the people by a righteous example, but in practice worldly, grasping, sensual, and hypocritical.³

Erasmus was even more biting in his criticism than

1. Ibid., p. 118.

2. W. H. Beckett, English Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, p. 70.

3. Geikie, op. cit., p. 257.

Wycliffe. He hated the monks and friars and referred to them in such uncomplimentary terms as "pest and vermin, vile rascals, bats and owls who hated light."¹ In his Praise of Folly, which was an open attack on the monks and which caused considerable comment among the people of that time, he spoke of the "brain sick fools who style themselves monks."² In regard to vows of celibacy he decried the fact that: ". . . they [the monks] have licence to go with harlots, but they must not marry wives. They may keep concubines. If they take wives, they are thrown to the flames."³ Erasmus felt that the religious, instead of lamenting their sins were conveniently overlooking them: ". . . they fancy they can please God by snorting in their throats."⁴ In a letter to Servatius, he wrote in 1514: "Your religion is your dress; -- your religious orders, as you call them, have done the Church small service."⁵ Later, in 1517, Erasmus wrote to Pirkheimer: "The Pope

1. D. Hague, Church of England Before the Reformation, p. 222.

2. D. Erasmus, Praise of Folly, p. 143.

3. Hague, op. cit., p. 223.

4. C. D. Warner, ed., World's Best Literature, Vol. XIV, p. 5532.

5. Ibid., p. 5532.

himself is afraid to provoke the monks. Those wretches in disguise of poverty are the tyrants of the Christian world."¹

Wycliffe and Erasmus were outstanding characters who dared to criticize and denounce the strongholds of the numerous monks and friars. Although these two names are well-known to history, they were not the only ones who realized that some reform was necessary. For instance, Bishop Grosseteste in 1250 foresaw the need for monastic reform, but unfortunately found that it was impossible to do anything about it: ". . . the gold of the monks prevailed with the pope more than the claims for monasterial reform. 'O money, money, what can't thou not do in the court of Rome?' was the disappointed prelate's exclamation."²

Likewise, Archbishop Bouchier realized the need for reform and in 1455 in his commission to reform the religious, he said:

Many illicit and criminal concubinages, fornications, and adulteries are encouraged among our people; declarations of succession are set aside, and made void. Wherefore we, desiring with what diligence we can to stop so many and great dangers, grant you, in whose fidelity and activity we have confidence in the Lord, full power duly to correct and reform such defects, crimes, and excesses, and

1. Ibid., p. 5532.

2. Beckett, op. cit., p. 38.

(we grant you) the apostates, if you find any to, to be punished, and others, moreover, failing in the premises or any of the premises or notoriously tainted with any disgrace, so far as we are concerned, according to the demands of law, to be well admonished or caused to be admonished by our authority.¹

Even the popes, namely Innocent III, Honorius III, and Gregory IX tried their hand at reforming the cloisters, but with little success.² During the reign of Henry VII, Cardinal Morton made a visitation of the monasteries. The purpose of this visitation was not to prove that the monasteries were "hotbeds of vice," but in the course of the examinations the Cardinal discovered that even among many of the great abbeys there were flagrant examples of vice and corrupt living. Nor was this charge limited to the great abbeys, for similar charges were made against some of the smaller houses. Cardinal Morton believed that the monastic superiors were the instigators of this profligacy, with their subordinates following in their worldly footsteps.³

Finally, after attempts at reform by scholars, prelates, and popes had proved failures, the king intervened and tried his hand at reform. Henry VII had an

1. H. Gee and W. J. Hardy, Documents Illustrative of English Church History, p. 144.

2. C. R. Cheney, Episcopal Visitation of Monasteries in the Thirteenth Century, p. 17.

3. A. D. Innes, England Under the Tudors, p. 55.

act passed by Parliament, by which he hoped some of the existing conditions might be remedied.

'For the sure and likely reformation of priests, clerks, and religious men, capable, or by their demerits openly noised of inconsistent living in their bodies, contrary to their order, be it enacted--that it be lawful to all archbishops and bishops, and other ordinaries having episcopal jurisdiction, to punish and chastise such religious men, being within the bounds of their jurisdiction, as shall be convict before them, by lawful proof, of adultery, fornication, incest, or other fleshly incontinency, by committing them to ward and prison, there to remain for such time as shall be thought convenient for the quality of their trespasses.'¹

Numerous other instances could be cited where, before the dissolution, attempts were made to remedy conditions that must have existed in some religious houses. Although these efforts fell short of their objective, they succeeded in one thing, namely, in stirring up some public opinion against the religious houses. For instance, during Wycliffe's time one London woman became very aroused against the abuses in the church.

She sat up an altar in her chamber and taught her daughter to burlesque the action of the priest in the solemn function of the mass, with dress and tonsure all complete, continuing the practice til it reached the bishop's ears, and the offenders were made to do penance for their sin.²

Demonstrations like this one not only took place,

1. Froude, op. cit., p. 96.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 147.

but pamphlets and poems were published, which if read, were bound to influence public opinion. Two poems, in particular, show the existing lack of respect for the religious.

All wickedness that men can tell
 Reigneth them among;
 There shall no soul have room in hell,
 Of friars there is such a throng.¹

- - -

Thai say that thai distroye synne,
 And thai mayntene men moste therinne;
 For had a man slayn al his kynne,
 Go sheyve him at a frere,
 And for lesse than a payre of shene
 He wyl assoil him clene and sone,
 And say the synne that he has done
 His soule shal never dere (harm).²

Perhaps the most well known pamphlet of the time, a satire on the monks and friars, was The Supplication For Beggars. It referred to the monks as "Holy Thieves do nothing,"³ and complained that the real beggars throughout the kingdom were starving and dying because of the monastic ones. "Another sort, not of impotent, but of strong, puissant, and counterfeit, holy and idle beggars and vagabonds", had 'craftily crept into the realm', and had 'increased into a kingdom.'⁴ "The

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 152.

2. M. W. Patterson, History of the Church of England, p. 171.

3. S. Fish, A Supplication For the Beggars, p. 6.

4. Geikie, op. cit., pp. 258-259.

'Supplication' ends with the rough advice, noteworthy as a sign of the times: '. . . Tie these holy idle thieves to carts, to be whipped naked about every market town till they fall to labour.'¹

Published in 1527, this bitter satire proved to be popular for several years. Even the king is supposed to have been secreted a copy, and after having had it read to him, was asked for his opinion. According to Foxe, Henry replied: "'If a man should pull down an old stone wall, and should begin at the lower part, the upper part thereof might chance to fall upon his head.'²

"All the wonder-working changes -- the new learning, the marvelous invention of printing, the great awakening of the people under Wycliffe and his followers-- was ignored by the men to whom the charge of the church was entrusted. But a time of great changes was at hand."³ The pathetic part is that the church was aware of its weaknesses and shortcomings and failed to act before it was too late. The speeches of the reformers, the poems, the pamphlets, and satires published about the monasteries only served to pave the road for Henry's campaign of

1. Ibid., p. 260.

2. Froude, op. cit., p. 104.

3. Spence, op. cit., p. 107.

propaganda which followed not many years later. Very fortunately for the king, when he decided to act against the cloisters, he found that his work had already been begun by Wycliffe, Erasmus, and the others. All he had to do was to take it up where they had left off.

In considering the inevitableness of the dissolution one does not have to accept the idea of the fatalist who believes that things that are to be, will be, regardless -- but rather that the dissolution was unavoidable because it was harmonious with the spirit of the age. This was an age of awakening, of rising from the sleep and inactivity of the Middle Ages. New inventions were being planned and new ideas were being formed, which were to revolutionize the old order of things. It was an age of change from the old and decaying to the new and progressive. If the old refused to change or modify its actions, it was swept away in the path of the new.

Many people of the time felt that the "monkish ideal was antiquated."¹ Modern thinkers could not reconcile the idea of complete withdrawal and seclusion from modern life, with that of a useful, good life. The monasteries had undoubtedly done a splendid, useful work

I. M. W. Patterson, A History of the Church of England, p. 183.

in the past. Their mode of life had been accepted by many people. Countless individuals had been educated and trained within the cloistered walls, while many more lived helpful lives there. However, this idea of seclusion as a prerequisite for good deeds was constantly becoming more and more incongruous with the increasing secular character of the times. Whereas asceticism formerly had been universally approved, it was beginning to be more frequently questioned, doubted and finally rejected as the ideal way of life. "The monastic ideal of going out of the world to seek something, which cannot be valued in terms of pounds, shillings, and pence, is abhorrent to a busy, industrial age; and every principle is hated most when it most is needed."¹

Even prelates of the Church were beginning to question whether the monasteries were still as useful as they had been in former days. One wrote to the Archbishop of York: "'There are many and very great foundations of this kind, which it is commonly said are neither profitable to God nor men; for men are neither trained in them to live regularly as monks for the honour of God, nor brought up to arms to defend their country.'"²

1. Pollard, op. cit., p. 342.

2. F. Warner, Ecclesiastical History of England, Vol. I, p. 142.

The monastic conflict in England was inevitable. Too much had occurred during the preceding centuries to delay the blow indefinitely.

The Reformation was not the work of a day. Its foundations were laid deep in the nature of things. Its roots lay in the ages. Its causes were the cooperation of the thoughts of many thinkers and the events of many years. It was the result of a deeply laid train of coincidences. The great things that mark an age, and the great men that make history, converged as if by arrangement. It was not accidental; it was providential."¹

"We may only venture to express an opinion that if the dissolution had not taken place in the reign of Henry VIII, it would have come about sooner or later on account of the great riches the monasteries possessed and the rather dangerous quantity of land they held."² And along the same line: "If Henry VIII had not quarreled with the Pope over the matter of divorce, the Reformation would have come all the same, though in point of time it would have been later, and the circumstances would have been different."³

By 1535 the Continent was already feeling the effects of the Reformation. Luther and his followers had started movements against the Church which were having

1. Hague, op. cit., p. 218.

2. J. W. Clay, Yorkshire Monasteries Suppression Papers, p. iii.

3. Patterson, op. cit., p. 208.

far-reaching consequences. How could England expect to escape this new deluge? She could not wall herself in according to the Chinese technique, or cut off all communication with the rest of Europe. Therefore, it was only natural that these new ideas would creep into the country, and once there, their effects were bound to be felt sooner or later. Whether in the reign of Henry VIII or James I, only time would tell.

Had Henry VIII been a weaker, less determined king, the dissolution would probably not have occurred as soon as it did in England.¹ Henry was only eighteen years of age when he came to the throne, but he was able to assume the responsibilities that were placed upon him. He was well-educated, well-informed, and a king who was prepared to rule as well as reign. Luke Owen Pike in A History of Crime in England describes "Bluff King Hal" thus: ". . . the king, the whole king, and nothing but

1. A. W. Wishart, Short History of Monks and Monasteries, p. 292: "If he had possessed less intelligence, courage, and ambition, he would not now be as conspicuous for his vices, but the history of human liberty and free institutions, especially in England, would have been vastly different. His praiseworthy traits were not sufficiently strong to enable him to control his inherited passions, but they were too regnant to permit him to submit without a struggle to the hierarchy which had dominated his country so many centuries. Such was 'The majestic lord, that broke the bonds of Rome.'"

the king.'"¹ He has also been known as "Machiavelli's prince in action."² Henry was king first, last and always, and none were allowed to forget that fact, the religious organizations proving no exception.

The Tudor dynasty was still young when Henry came to the throne, and the conditions under which it existed were new to English history. Instead of being supported by the nobility and the aristocratic groups as the English kings had formerly been, the Tudors had behind them the new middle classes. After the Wars of the Roses a great many of the heads of the noble families and their followers had been killed, leaving the country rather depleted of powerful nobles. Those who had survived the conflict were in a weakened condition financially, their fortunes exhausted, their estates demolished, and their lands wasting. Therefore, when the Tudors came into power they found that the rising influence in the country was not the old broken-down nobility, but the newly-rich merchants and middle classes, who had been gaining wealth and prominence in the nation, while the nobles were foolishly killing one another.

The second of the Tudor monarchs was not as economical as his father had been. "He [Henry VIII]

1. Wishart, op. cit., p. 290.

2. C. Read, The Tudors, p. 55.

inherited a great treasure chest, accumulated by the thrift of Henry VII. his father."¹ However, the young ruler had dissipated his father's wealth in wars with Scotland and France. In fact, by 1525 he had found that not enough money could be raised through taxation to carry on his campaigns: ". . . taxation was too elastic to depend upon in emergencies."² Therefore, whenever a chance arose to increase the royal income, Henry did not overlook it. Such was the case with the monasteries. Besides the factor of money involved, there was also that of securing the allegiance of the middle classes. They had supported the Tudors during the reign of Henry VII, but how long could this backing be depended upon? "Machiavelli's prince in action" wanted to make certain that his dynasty was enduring. "Wealthy merchants longed to have estates in the country that they might become gentlemen."³ This being the case, what could better cement the loyalty of the new defenders of the Crown than the gift by one of the Tudors of large estates of fertile acres of valuable monastic land?

By the beginning of the sixteenth century England

1. F. C. Dietz, A Political and Social History of England, p. 146.

2. Ibid., p. 146.

3. Constant, op. cit., p. 151.

had entered upon an era of great transition. The Black Plague, the Wars of the Roses, the writings of Wycliffe, Erasmus, and Fish, the teachings of Luther and his followers, the invention of the printing press and other modern instruments, and the rise of a new dynasty backed by a new class were all to have effect, either directly or indirectly, on the age-old cloisters. Mindful of these things, let us now turn a page to the sixteenth century, and view the monasteries as they were on the eve of their dissolution.

CHAPTER II

USUAL MONASTIC DUTIES AND ACTIVITIES

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The ideal monastic life was not one of idleness and inactivity. Although the monks were withdrawn from the world, they had certain duties which they undertook to perform to the best of their ability. These monastic duties were, in reality, services that they rendered to all mankind, services for which the silent, grey-cloaked figures are still remembered, even though their once glorious establishments have long since been destroyed and forgotten.

The duties or activities which the monks performed might be classed under four general headings: prayers, hospitality, almsgiving, and education. The first duty to be considered is that of prayers. The cloistered ones spent much time each day at their prayers, and rightly they should, for there were many for whom they were obligated to pray. The founder of a monastery always made certain, while he was living, that the inmates never forgot him and, in death, his memory was recalled by the prayers said for his departed soul. Besides the prayers due to the deceased founders, the present patron also demanded his share. "The enthusiasm of the noble founders who endowed the convents was

stirred by the sense of the ascetic aims of the recluses, and by some hope to gain the merit of their prayers."¹

The task of praying for all the deceased founders and patrons was a momentous one in itself, but added to that the monks and nuns were supposed to pay their respects to the departed souls of all the former superiors of their house. Considering the many centuries that some of the older monasteries had been in existence and the many officers that they had had, this proved rather an endless task. If the monks had really been conscientious about it they would have been on their knees from dawn to sunset. The convent of Barking found the task so big an undertaking that the abbess decreed that the anniversaries of abbesses who had been dead over one hundred years would no longer be observed.²

The largest group to which the religious owed their prayers was the vast sea of all Christian souls. The religious were supposed to perform their duties for these people faithfully and without neglect. The deceased founders, the present patron, the departed

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 284.

2. G. Baskerville, English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries, p. 21.

abbots and abbesses, and all Christian souls were to be remembered in their daily prayers. Whether these tasks were carried out as they were supposed to be shall be discussed later. The purpose here is to mention briefly the monastic activities.

The second duty which the religious houses were expected to perform was that of hospitality. Today this seems an unnecessary task to expect the religious to undertake, but in the days when hotels were unknown and small inns were poorly equipped and long distances apart, this work of the monks was most welcome to any traveller. The hospitality of the houses was not limited to any one group of people. Patrons, kings, nobles, and ordinary travellers, all were privileged to enjoy it, if they desired.

Some cloisters, especially the larger ones, had a guest house separate from the monastery itself, where travellers might stop to rest as they journeyed along the countryside. In the Rites of Durham such a place is described.

'There was a famous house of hospitality, called the Guest Hall, within the Abbey garth of Durham, on the west side, towards the water, the Terrar of the house being master thereof, as one appointed to give entertainment to all states, both noble, gentle, and whatsoever degree that came thither as strangers, their entertainment not being inferior to any place in England, both for the goodness of their diet, the sweet and dainty furniture of their lodgings, and generally

all things necessary for travellers. And, withal, this entertainment continuing, (the monks) not willing or commanding any man to depart, upon his honest and good behaviour. This hall is a goodly, brave place, much like unto the body of a church, with very fair pillars supporting it on either side, and in the midst of the hall a most large range for fire. The chambers and lodgings belonging to it were sweetly kept and so richly furnished that they were not unpleasant to lie in, especially one chamber called the 'king's chamber', deserving the name, in that the king himself might very well have lain in it, for the princely linen thereof.¹

"Finally, they [the monasteries] made it a sacred duty to show hospitality to the traveller, and whether a man was faring across the border, or king or princess were making progress through England, the monastery supplied both food and lodging."² Naturally the king or the patron of a house received better accommodations than an ordinary wayfarer. When an important personage stopped to share a house's hospitality, elaborate preparations were made to see that excellent food was served and that their guests' visit was a pleasant one. Some monasteries even employed professional minstrels and actors to amuse their guests so that the evenings would not be dull and boring. "In Finchale Priory there was a 'players' chamber', in which actors were lodged or entertainments given. The accounts of many houses show how much money

1. Abbot Gasquet, English Monastic Life, p. 31.

2. Henry Gee, The Reformation Period, p. 90.

was spent in hiring troupes of mimes to entertain guests."¹ Often a king, or member of the nobility, and especially the patrons, would spend long periods at a time visiting the monastery. Although no fees were charged for their accommodations, they usually expected a gift upon the departure of their guest, which would more than compensate them for their trouble. Sometimes the monks were mistaken in the liberality of their guests, as in the case of King John, and such guests as he were not always anticipated with joy.

'We thought', wrote Jocelin of Brakeland, 'that the King (John) came to make offering of some matter, but all he offered was one silken cloth, which his servants had borrowed from our sacrist, and to this day have not paid for. He availed himself of the hospitality of St. Edmund, which was attended with enormous expense, and upon his departure bestowed nothing at all either of honour or profit upon the saint, save three pence sterling, which he offered at mass on the day of his departure.' That was not the kind of guest that was wanted.²

In spite of the fact that the ordinary traveller was not as royally entertained as the more illustrious monastic guests, he nevertheless preferred the hospitality of a religious house to stopping at a medieval inn. The inns of the fourteenth and fifteenth century were not exactly inspiring places to visit. They were usually frequented by a rowdy class of people

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 27.

2. Ibid., p. 28.

and their accommodations were miserable. The restfulness of a religious house was a relief after the noisy, stuffy atmosphere of one of these inns.

Naturally travellers preferred staying at monasteries to facing the horrors of a medieval inn. The cooking and accommodation in monasteries were far superior to those that could be got in inns, the bread whiter, the beer of better quality, the feather beds in the guest chambers softer, the sanitary arrangements far in advance of the time. It was as important to monasteries to attract wealthy and influential guests as it is to hotel companies today.¹

"Also the abbeys were one of the beauties of this realm to all men and strangers passing through the same."² Thus wrote a sixteenth century monastic sympathizer. The monasteries were indeed houses of beauty and comfort to a weary traveller, be he noble or wanderer. They offered a shelter to all who knocked at their gates. They loomed up as havens of refuge in desolate, out-of-the-way places, where inns or other shelter could not possibly be found. The monks took upon themselves the task of opening their doors to all travellers, offering them food and lodging. Their job was a tremendous one but they performed it to the best of their ability. If for nothing else, then for the hospitality that they offered to medieval wayfarers the

1. Ibid., p. 26.

2. F. A. Gasquet, Henry the Eighth and the English Monasteries, p. 96.

monks will long be remembered.

The third activity which the religious performed was that of almsgiving and charity. At the time when the monasteries were so powerful and influential through-out England there were no organized charity groups or no state provision for the poor. Therefore, the monks were the only large groups who undertook to alleviate some of the suffering of those who were less fortunate than themselves. During the Middle Ages the religious were famous for this work, and the beggar, like the traveller, looked toward the monastic walls as a place of help.

The philanthropic work that the monks did, came mainly under the supervision of the almoner and the infirmarian of each house. The almoner was the one whose duty it was to give what alms the house had for that purpose to the poor, while the infirmarian cared for the sick, both of the monastery itself and those who came from the outside for aid.¹ "According to the rule of the Austin canons again the almoner should be 'pitiful and Godfearing -- old men who are decrepit, lame, and blind or bedridden, he should often visit and suitably supply.'² The monks of all orders, especially

1. Gasquet, Monastic Life, p. 90.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 285.

the mendicant orders, helped people who were sick or in distress. "The poor, the indigent, the sick, the aged of the district looked to the almoner or the hospitaller for help; and whatever knowledge of simples, whatever surgical skills existed, was to be found in the infirmarer and his helpers."¹ At Winchester Abbey, Abengdon, and in other places also, the house supplied a hospital out of the abbey funds; ". . . but they consisted really of almshouses for which there were commonly trust funds, and the infirmary of the convent did not, of course, receive sick folk from the outside."²

Most of the charity work of the monks was carried on by funds left to the monastery for such purposes through the will of the founder or by endowments made by wealthy noblemen. "Thus, at Meaux, among the lists of donations for special purposes made to the abbey, eighteen grants are mentioned for alms to be given at the gate."³ At St. Agatha's, Yorkshire, similar contributions were made:

. . . an endowment of fifteen shillings a year provided one poor person with food and two poor people with a meal on the anniversary of the death of the founder. There was in the monastery of

1. H. Gee, The Reformation Period, pp. 88-89.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 285.

3. Ibid., p. 286.

St. Nicholas, Exeter, 'a certain house, called the "Poor Men's Parlour" to which place there repaired daily seven poor men before dining-time, and to every one of them was delivered on the flesh days a two-penny loaf, a pottle of ale, a piece of flesh, and on the Fridays likewise at afternoon, as soon as dinner was done, all such poor as were tenants came, and every one of them should have also a two-penny loaf, a pottle of ale, a piece of flesh and a penny in money.'¹

The charitable work of the monks consisted chiefly of making gifts or "doles" of money, food, and old clothing at the monastery's gates to beggars, or of aiding those poor people who were ill. It must be remembered, however, that although most of the houses did do some charitable work of this type, there was no organized system of charity among all the monasteries as a whole. The work that each house did was accomplished independently of the others.

The fourth activity which the religious performed was that of education. There were three groups who received their training in the monasteries: the monks themselves, the children of the patron of the house and the children of rich nobles, and the poor children who were under the care of the almoner.²

Many of the monks who were admitted to the monastery were very young and had little or no education. Therefore, it was necessary that some schooling be

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 31.

2. Ibid., p. 37.

provided for them, especially since the knowledge of Latin was a prerequisite of promotion.¹ Grammar schools were established in some houses, particularly the larger ones, where the young monks were taught grammar, logic, and philosophy. They were instructed by one of the older, learned monks. If no one could be found in the house who was capable to undertake this task, then a "secular master" had to be engaged.² Some zealous monks went on to the universities to pursue their studies after they had finished the monastic schools.

The second group educated by the religious were the children of the patron or of wealthy families. The houses had quite a number of these students. They came and lived at the monastery as at a boarding school, and oftentimes they were entered at a very young age. The abbot of Reading wrote to Lady Lisle concerning her son, James Basset:

'I have set your young gentleman with William Edwards, my under-steward, that he may be well seen to by a woman for his dressing, for he is too young to shift for himself. He is the most towardly child in learning that I have known.' James' brother, George, was at Hyde Abbey by Winchester; and a correspondent of his mother was able to report that the boy is very well and profiting by his learning and that the new prior says he shall be treated by him as well as he ever was by the old.³

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 285.

2. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 39.

3. Ibid., p. 37.

Most of the abbots and monks were very interested in their young charges and paid special attention to their training. Many of them worked hard and tediously with these lads to impress upon them the things that they would have them learn. Frequently in the later lives of some prominent person of the Middle Ages one can discern the influence of his earlier training by some friar or monk. "This influence is most clear in England, where Grosseteste and Adam Marsh were the friends and teachers of Earl Simon de Montfort, and it is not too much to say, that it was their influence which converted Simon from a wild and reckless adventurer into an English patriot."¹

Naturally this educational work was not done gratis. The rich children paid a certain amount tuition to attend the monastic schools. However, it was not always certain that the houses would be able to collect their money. Many cases can be found where the nobles were very negligent about paying their childrens' tuition fees.

'The house of Hyde looketh for every penny,' wrote a Hampshire clergyman to Lady Lisle, 'we are in debt to it twenty shillings (say L 30).' Lady Lisle wrote hastily to order that the prior of Hyde should be paid for the keep of her son, and the abbess of Nunnaminster for her daughter. That

1. M. Creighton, Historical Lectures and Addresses, p. 110.

school bills of this kind were often in arrears is shown by a complaint of the priory of Westacre in Norfolk in 1494. 'There are many boys, sons of gentlemen, in the house, but the prior can't get the money to pay for their board and tuition.'¹

The nuns likewise kept young ladies in their houses, whom they educated and trained. For the number of convents in England, they probably did as much, if not more, work of this kind than the monks did. They trained some poor girls as well as the rich ones. The schooling of the young ladies differed considerably from that of the young men. John Aubrey, an eye-witness at the Wiltshire convent said:

'The young maids were brought up (not at Hakney Sarum Schools to learn pride and wantonness but) at the nunneries, where they had examples of piety, and humility, and modesty, and obedience to imitate and practice. Here they learned needlework, the art of confectionery, surgery (for anciently there were no apothecaries or surgeons, the gentlewomen did cure their poor neighbours: their hands are now too fine) physic, writing, drawing, etc.' Old Jacques could see from his house the nuns of the priory (St. Mary's near Kington St. Michael) come forth into the nymph-hay with their rocks and wheels to spin; and with their sewing work. He would say that he had told threescore and ten: but of nuns there were not so many, but in all, with lay sisters, as widows, old maids and young girls there might be such a number. 'This', concludes the author, 'was a fine way of breeding up young women, who are led more by example than precept; and a good retirement for widows and grave single women to a civil, virtuous and holy life.'²

Wealthy families were very thankful for the convents,

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 37.

2. Gasquet, English Monasteries, p. 224.

for aside from them there was no other place where their daughters could be sent to receive such training and care.

The nuns also had their troubles collecting tuition accounts, which were usually in arrears. Dame Petronilla of Grace Dieu convent, in her account book (1414-1418) made an entry to the fact that, for each of the daughters of Thomas Hunter 17s 4d was to be paid to the convent.

Lady Beaumont also had a daughter in the convent, for whom she and her lord undertook to pay L2 13s 4d a year; but when Dame Petronilla last made up her accounts, or rather in the last accounts we have from her pen, the nuns had only got L2. Lord Beaumont, however, was evidently too great a personage to be reminded of the missing 13s 4d, and the convent authorities evidently desired to stand well in his favour. They fed him well, for instance, when he came to see his child; for on one occasion Dame Petronilla gives some of the expenses of his entertainment. These included, besides 1½d for 'one shoulder le molton', and 8d for two lambs, an almost unique payment for two fowls for the nobleman's table.¹

The third group educated by the larger monasteries were the poor children placed under the care of the almoner or the sub-almoner. These lads were taken into the house and taught, fed and clothed at the expense of the monastery. They were trained to be choir-boys or "choirsters" as they were sometimes called. "Towards the end of the Middle Ages the larger monasteries began to

1. Gasquet, Monastic Life, p. 163.

house 'choirsters to sing the anthems in her honour in the Lady Chapel', in the almonry by the great gate of the monastery."¹ Besides their musical training, they were given other instruction. "They were under the charge of the almoner or sub-almoner and were taught the rudiments of learning by a secular master for a term of five years at the most, for 'this period suffices for becoming proficient in grammar.'"²

These boys who received this free board and instruction were very fortunate, for had the monks not given it to them they could not have obtained it in any other way. "Richard Pace, the well-known Greek professor at Cambridge was a poor boy in a school which Thomas Langton, Bishop of Winchester had established in his own house."³ The monastic establishment of Canterbury College, Oxford, helped many students go on with their studies, who otherwise would not have been able to do so.

At this college there were not only the monastic students, but also clerics and even laymen who had been sent thither by the archbishop or convent of Christchurch to receive free quarters at the University. In all probability Linacre, after receiving his early education at Canterbury from

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 38.

2. Ibid., p. 38.

3. F. A. Gasquet, England Under the Old Religion, p. 48.

Sellyng the monk, was lodged at the Canterbury Oxford College; certainly the university career of the celebrated Sir Thomas More was passed there. . . .¹

While referring to the educational work of the monks, the glory of their old libraries might be recalled. "'A monastery without a library is like a castle without an armoury' was an old monastic saying."² Most of the houses had their few collections of books stored away in various places throughout the building, but it was not until the latter Middle Ages that the large houses started to set aside a certain room, or part of the building to be used as a real library.

At Durham, about 1446, Prior Wessington made a library, 'well replenished with old written doctors and other Histories and Ecclesiastical writers', to which henceforth the monks always repair to study in, 'besides the carrels' in the cloister. So, too, at St. Alban's, Michael de Mentmore, who was abbot from 1335 to 1349, besides enriching the presses in the cloister with books, made a collection of special volumes in what he called his study. This collection grew; but it was not until 1452 that abbot Whethamsteds finally completed the library, which had long been projected. About the same time at Canterbury, Prior Thomas Goldstone finished a library there, which was enriched by the celebrated Prior William Sellyng with many precious classical manuscripts brought back from Italy. In the same way many other religious houses in the fifteenth century erected, or set apart, special places for their collection of books, whilst still retaining the great cloister

1. Ibid., p. 48.

2. Gasquet, Monastic Life, p. 35.

presses for those volumes which were in daily and constant use.¹

This is not the place to discuss whether these libraries were simply storehouses of old records and written materials, or if they were frequented by the monks. It is enough for us to know that they were storehouses of historical material to which many outstanding chroniclers later turned for valuable information.²

Thus we have the medieval cloisters performing four worthwhile duties for society. These services which they undertook for so many centuries were such important ones that today two of these same activities have been taken over by the state; that of charity and that of education. If we ungraciously forget everything else that the monks did for humanity during their "golden age", we should bear in mind their preservation of books, chronicles, and pamphlets, which, but for their care, the modern age would have lacked. The religious took upon themselves a momentous task, and not for a few years but for many centuries they performed their work nobly. In accusing those who were inhabiting the cloister on the eve of the dissolution,

1. Ibid., p. 35.

2. Gee, op. cit., p. 89.

all were found guilty and condemned, their homes destroyed and their possessions wiped out. In the furious accusation of the few of the sixteenth century we are liable to forget the glorious deeds of the many in the preceding centuries.

CHAPTER III

**EXTENT OF MONASTIC POSSESSIONS IN
ENGLAND**

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The dissolution of the monasteries was a very important step in English history because of the great amount of wealth and power involved. When the issue of the dissolution arose it was not a question of whether to take a few acres of land and a pittance of money away from a group who were said to be unworthy of their trust. Instead, it concerned the possession of a large area of valuable English land, plus untold fortunes in riches. If smaller amounts had been involved, perhaps very little would have been said about the decay of religious life, and still less action would have been taken to remedy the situation. However, so much land, wealth and power were connected with the monastic "scandal," that the pages of history still resound with the query, "could not the greed for these vast possessions have been the real reason behind the dissolution of the monastic houses?" Is it not true that the higher the stakes, the more fierce (and sometimes less honest) the fight is likely to be?

Just what was the extent of monastic holdings and possessions in England on the eve of the dissolution? This question cannot be readily nor accurately answered,

except to say that these possessions were numerous and extensive. Many guesses have been offered, many calculations worked out, ranging from foolishly high to absurdly low figures. The highest estimate that I have found is that the monasteries owned as much as seven-tenths of all the land in England, whereas the lowest claims that only one-tenth of English soil was under monastic ownership. The following are some of the various estimates that have been made as to the extent of monastic land ownership:

Pamphlet of 1717 -- seven-tenths of whole kingdom

Nasmith -- one-tenth of whole kingdom

Prof. Kovalevsky -- one-sixth of whole kingdom¹

Old Parliamentary Rolls -- one-third or more of landed property

Estimate made on Eve of Reformation -- one-fourth of landed property

Estimate dating from early Middle Ages -- one-third of landed property²

Yorkshire Suppression Papers -- one-third or one-fifth of whole land³

Even though these figures vary they show that the

1. A. Savine, English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution, pp. 81-83.

2. S. B. Liljegren, The Fall of the Monasteries and the Social Changes in England, p. 15.

3. J. W. Clay, Yorkshire Suppression Papers, p. iii.

religious groups held enough land in England to make them a very important factor within the country. If we take the most conservative estimate, that of one-tenth of the whole kingdom, the possession of that much land within a country would be a large share for any one group to hold. Even the possession of one-tenth of England's land makes the monasteries a powerful organized unit within another organized unit, the nation. Had they owned as much as seven-tenths of all English soil, then they would have been a real and threatening menace to the government. This latter figure seems much too liberal to be trustworthy. It is more probable that altogether the monasteries held anywhere from one-fourth to one-third of the land in England. An average of the seven sources mentioned above would give the religious approximately one-third of the whole kingdom.

In order to own this amount of a nation's land the monasteries must have been numerous. How many religious houses were there on the British Isle before the dissolution? There were altogether about four hundred convents of women, more than one half of which were Benedictine houses and situated in the county of York.¹ Of the friars there were about two hundred

1. Gasquet, English Monasteries, p. 204.

houses which were divided as follows:

	No. of Houses	No. of Religious
Franciscans	60	660
Dominicans	53	472
Austin	42	378
Carmelite	36	288
Smaller Orders	9	1
Cistercians	200	
Benedictines	160-170	
Praemonstratensions	20-24	2

Counting the various houses mentioned above, there were all told six hundred and thirty four larger houses scattered throughout the country, plus many smaller houses, the exact number of which we are not certain. Constant advances the reasonable estimate of eight hundred as the number of religious houses in England on the eve of the dissolution.³ There was an average of about ten friars to each house.

Each of these houses had not only large incomes from land and from other sources which shall be discussed later, but they also had valuable possessions within the monastic buildings. The worth of these articles can best be seen in the treasurer's account. After the dissolution the value of the plunder that Henry's agents took from the cloisters was estimated according to its weight

1. Ibid., p. 239 and Spence, op. cit., p. 94.

2. Spence, op. cit., p. 84.

3. Constant, op. cit., p. 147.

and recorded upon the treasurer's roll thus:¹

Pure gold -----	14,531 $\frac{1}{2}$	ounces
Silver gilt -----	129,520	"
Parcel gilt -----	73,774 $\frac{3}{4}$	"
Silver -----	67,600 $\frac{1}{4}$	"

This vast collection was estimated by Sir John Williams to be worth in money at that date at the melting price, £63,531 15s 1d. To this however, certain additions must be made. The keeper received in money for plate and other ornaments sold at the dissolution £15,550 1s 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ d and nearly £7,000 worth of plate was forwarded to the augmentation office in the earlier years of the dissolution. Hence the money values of the gold and silver spoils actually received by the king and estimated only at the weighing price was more than £85,000 or very nearly a million sterling of the present money.²

The acquisition of this wealth had not taken place suddenly, but was a gradual, slow growth, which continued from century to century. It was the customary thing for a monastery to get its land as a gift or a legacy rather than through outright purchase. As long ago as 712, King Luitprand popularized the practice of willing property or money to monastic houses; ". . . he permitted his subjects to make legacies to the Church."³ From that time on until 1279 large tracts of land openly passed into the possession of religious bodies, as endowments of monasteries. The Anglo-Saxon kings would

1. Gasquet, English Monasteries, p. 416.

2. Ibid., pp. 416-417.

3. R. L. Palmer, English Monasteries in the Middle Ages, p. 17.

sometimes give entire hundreds to the monasteries.¹

So much land was passing into the hands of the Church that in 1279 the Statute of Mortmain was enacted. The Statute:

. . . forbade the acquisition of land by the religious, in such wise that the land should come into 'mortmain'. Endowments of land were being constantly bestowed on the monasteries so that the service belonging to the lands in question due to the king or other lords were for ever lost, as the persons to whom the lands were granted were incapable of fulfilling legal obligations.²

However, from 712 to 1279 the monasteries had prospered well and their landed estates were numerous and quite extensive.

The land gifts were generally made by three groups of people. The first group might be classed as the wealthy, pious nobles, who felt that monastic endowments were the best possible use that a man could make of his worldly possessions. The second group included the wealthy but "careless." By that I mean those rich men who thought little about religion and church life during their active days; ". . . yet thought it well at the last to be on the side of the angels."³ These two groups would sometimes give whole manors to a monastery.

1. Savine, op. cit., p. 153.

2. Spence, op. cit., p. 97, footnote 1.

3. Palmer, op. cit., p. 17.

The third and last group of donors were the poorer people, who had little to give but would oftentimes give small portions of their land or rents.

In some instances the monastery might buy some of its land. It has been discovered that: ". . . some gifts of land were only secret sales, mortgages, and exchanges." "Most of the manors belonging to a monastery were generally situated in the same county as the monastery, but the monastic manors were seldom contiguous. Large monasteries possessed manors in many counties." Large and famous houses attracted more people and donors than the less well known ones, and for that reason the larger ones continued to draw more riches and land into their possession. The fourteenth and fifteenth century Englishman felt that he should be very careful in the choice of his religious advisor and, therefore, he usually chose a well-known monastery as his spiritual advocate. He founded his choice on the biblical saying: "'To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that he hath.' That is why Christchurch Canterbury acquired land in Devonshire and Norfolk, and Westminster Abbey acquired land in Nottinghamshire and Worcestershire."¹

1. Savine, op. cit., pp. 152, 153.

Besides large gifts of land and money the cloisters were always receiving smaller donations from visitors or guests who might accept the hospitality of the house. From the accounts of one convent, the following incident is recorded as taking place on a certain All Saints' Day:

Mary de Ecton, Joan Villiers, and the two daughters of Robert Neville were lodged and entertained by the nuns. These visitors eventually made an offering for the hospitality shown them; as, for instance, on this very occasion each of the Neville ladies paid 5s. and Joan Villiers 6s. 8d. The last named lady was at Grace Dieu no less than four times in the year 1418, and each time left behind a similar offering. At another time Giles Jurdon paid 7s. for the board of his daughter during the week of Pentecost, when she probably came to visit her sister, who known as Dame Elizabeth, was a nun in the convent. Roger Roby also, who was apparently the father of Dame Alice, was entertained by the nuns twice in the year 1416, and gave an alms of 6s. 8d. at one visit and 13s. 4d. at the other.¹

Each of the religious houses had a yearly income which they received from various sources, the chief one being the rural income from property that the monasteries owned. Monastic lands were usually divided into two classes, demesne and tenancies. The landed estates or monastic demesne was the least important of these two. Some houses had no demesne at all, while of those which possessed it, demesne amounted to only one-sixth of the

1. Gasquet, Monastic Life, p. 10.

monastic property, and gave the monks only one-tenth of their rural income from land. The income from demesne was only three-fifths of that received from the tenancies. "The bulk of the monastic demesne was leased for terms of years, and the bulk of the monastic lands leased for years consisted of manorial demesnes." The following chart shows the amounts that various monasteries received per year as their income from demesne:¹

		L	s	d
Beds.	Bushmead	10	0	0
Bucks.	Burmham	11	0	2
Devon	Canonleigh	1	16	0
	Hartland	45	0	0
Glouc.	Lantony	32	9	3
	Winchcombe	142	1	8
Hereford	St. Gothlac	0	13	8
Hunts.	St. Neots	20	16	8
	Sawtre	33	6	4
Kent	Dartford	26	18	4
	Horton	5	0	0
Lanc.	Furness	104	15	8
Leic.	Garendon	44	7	8
	Kirby Beller	14	0	0
	Launde	113	0	0
	St. Mary	41	0	0
	Ulverscroft	18	6	8
Linc.	Aillesham	9	0	0
	Greenfield	12	13	0
	Hagnaby	32	0	0
	Markby	19	0	6
	Sixhill	26	13	4
	Spalding	50	0	8
	Stamford, St. Michael's	9	14	7
	Swinesherd	46	7	4
Norfolk	Langley	20	8	0
Northants	Ashby	31	6	8
	St. Andrews	17	0	0
	St. James	13	10	0
	Sulby	133	6	8

1. Savine, op. cit., pp. 81, 148, 156, 154, 146.

		L	s	d
Notts.	Lenton	20	3	4
	Newstead	13	6	8
	Rufford	19	16	8
	Shelford	26	2	3
	Thurgarton	30	0	0
	Welbeck	20	13	2
	Worksop	9	17	8
Oxon	Thame	3	3	3
	Wroxton	10	1	4
Salop	Buildwas	20	9	8
	Haghmond	19	19	4
	Lilleshall	16	0	0
	Wombridge	6	13	4
Somerset	Athelney	3	17	0
	Barlinch	5	11	9
	Bruton	10	0	0
	Minchin Bockland	5	17	8
	Muchelney	8	6	0
	Taunton	15	11	9
	Worspring	24	3	0
	Croxden	36	16	8
Staff.	Dieulacres	8	18	6
	Roncester	22	16	0
	Bury St. Edmunds	25	13	4
Suffolk	Redlingfield	17	5	0
	Woodbridge	8	0	0
	Battle	20	0	0
Sussex	Michelham	25	11	0
	Robertsbridge	27	3	0
	Shubreds	25	6	8
	T ortington	8	0	0
Warw.	Warwick	25	7	0
	Worxall	22	0	0
Westm.	Shappe	16	7	8

The most important part of monastic property and that which yielded the most income was the land held as tenancies. The rent from this land was paid in money and labour, or in the performance of certain duties, according to the amount of land held. From the Rentalia and Customaria of Glastonbury examples can be found of the different types of payments that the tenants had.

A cotter with five acres of arable land paid 4d less 1 farthing for rent, and five hens as 'kirkset' if he were married. From Michelmas to Midsummer he was bound to do three days labour a week of farm work on the monastic lands, such as toiling on the fallows, winnowing corn, hedging, ditching, and fencing. During the rest of the year, that is, in the harvest time, he had to do five days work on the farm, and could be called upon to lend a hand in any kind of occupation, except loading and carting. Like the farmers he had his allowance of one sheaf of corn for each acre he reaped, and a 'laveroc', or as much grass as he could gather on his hook for every acre he mowed. Besides this general work he had to bear his share in looking after the vineyard at Glastonbury.¹

Another example is given of a smaller tenant.

"A certain Alice . . . had one-half an acre field for which she had to bring water to the reapers at their harvest and sharpen their sickles for them."² On the other hand, there were tenants who paid rather high rents. Dame Petronella of Grace Dieu kept an account book for the years 1414-1418, in which she recorded the rent from a farm at Belton as L21 17s 9d: ". . . this being the largest item in the receipts, and indeed a very large item in those days from any farm rent."³

The monastic tenants were apparently well treated by their landlords. Records have been found of "common meals" which were prepared for the tenants when they

1. Gasquet, Monastic Life, p. 197.

2. Ibid., p. 198.

3. Ibid., p. 161.

worked on the common land and provision was made for a common Christmas meal and entertainment shared together in the great hall. "They [the tenants] furnished the great Yule-log to burn at the dinner and each one brought his dish and mug, with a napkin 'if he wanted to eat off a cloth'; and still more curiously, his own contribution of firewood that his portion of food might be properly cooked."¹

Whenever the tenants were required to work over the time allotted them for their landlords work, at tasks such as harvesting, shearing, etc. they were paid extra. In Dame Petronella's accounts, the following examples can be found where tenants have been rewarded for extra services that they have performed:

In the lambing season, for instance, Henry, the shepherd, was given 2d 'for his good service and care of the sheep', and John Stapulford received the same sum 'for looking after the lambs before their weaning', whilst John Warren for 'fold-hurdling' was rewarded with 1s; and to take another instance of a somewhat different kind, the convent bailiff at Kirby, one Richard Marston, was given a purse, as a sign that the nuns appreciated his care of their property. One chance entry shows that when the sheep were being sheared, the labourers were given extra meat for their meals, since Dame Petronella gives 16d for a calf to feed them specially, on a day when evidently she and her sister in religion were eating fish in the convent refectory.²

1. Ibid., p. 198.

2. Ibid., p. 172.

Gasquet, after citing such cases, refers to them thus: ". . . numerous instances of the kindly consideration extended to their tenants by the monastic proprietors, and the relation which existed between them was in reality more that of a rent-charger than of absolute owners."¹

Although the monks were not supposed to engage in business enterprises they had certain activities on their estates for the benefit of their tenants from which they received a certain income. They were not actively engaged in industry and in most cases the income from this source was small. In the Commissioners' report, mention is made of tanneries, tileries, mills, and bakeries. "A bakery is mentioned in the monastery of St. Neots, Hunts; it is called a 'general' bakery and it is possible that it was an ancient seigniorial oven. Tileries were owned by the monastery of St. Augustine, Canterbury; Christchurch, Canterbury; and Battle."² However, the monasteries had quite a number of mills, especially corn mills, from which they received a considerable amount of money. It has been estimated that the income from mills was $2\frac{1}{4}$ per cent of the gross

1. Ibid., p. 200. The ecclesiastical landlords cannot be given all the credit in this regard, for similar customs were followed by some of the lay landlords.

2. Savine, op. cit., p. 125.

temporal income.¹ Following are some examples of the income from the mills as compared to the gross temporal income:²

Wardon	(a) L410 13s 4½d	gross temporal income
	(b) 37 13s 4d	income from mills
Milling in	(a) L196 0s 10½d	
Kent	(b) 19 17s 4d	
St. Neots,	(a) L192 13s 11½d	
Hunts.	(b) 24 3s 8d	
Rufford,	(a) L186 13s 4d	
Notts.	(b) 31 6s 8d	
Pollesworth,	(a) L 60 0s 0d	
Warw.	(b) 10 6s 8d	

From sixty monasteries:³

Gross temporal income	----- L 23,000
Total income from mills of 60	
monasteries	----- L 519 2s 0d
Revenue from mills	----- 2¼% of gross temporal income

Another source of monastic income, and one of the most interesting phases of monastic life was the granting of corrodies. There were two types of corrodies granted. The first type might be called an annuity plan or a provision against old age. It was used by the monasteries whenever a religious house was hard pressed and in need of ready cash. If a man wanted to make certain that he and his wife were provided for in their old age, he would

1. Ibid., p. 127.

2. Ibid., p. 127.

3. Ibid., pp. 126, 127.

pay to a monastery a lump sum of money. In return the monastery guaranteed to make certain provisions for this person after he retired from active life. These corrodians were referred to as pensioners.

Records have been found of many interesting cases where corrodies were granted. At Thetford, in return for the payment to the convent of 130 marks, a certain Dr. Nobys was to receive annually for the rest of his life five marks, the use of a stable for two horses, a house to store hay, two rooms for himself, and the use of the monastery's garden. The doctor had it arranged so that if the convent defaulted and he did not receive his annual five marks, he had distraining power on any two of the convent's manors.¹ A similar case was found at St. Swithun's, Winchester. "A pensioner paid 50 marks for certain allowances of food and clothing, and bound himself to give the convent the benefit of his services as physician."²

Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell at Ford Abbey were to have yearly 8 marks (L 150 nowadays), a house and garden, bread and ale from the monastery bakehouse and brew-house (far better than they could have got at an inn) and a pottage of fish or flesh 'as much as two of the monks of the monasterie receive.'³

1. Palmer, op. cit., p. 18.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 293.

3. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 66.

In the Compotus Rolls of St. Swithun's Priory, Winchester, several cases of pensioners are mentioned. The first mention of a corrody seems to be in the Hordarian's Rolls 1327-1334.

The convent granted William of Lillebourne in Normandy a Corrody of L10 in money, a Robe (10 ells of cloth), 2 furs and 2 Capes of Budge, 3 loads of hay, 2 of straw, 3 quarter of oats, and 2 cartloads of brushwood, in return for a Messuage, etc, at Drayton in Barton Stacey parish, a 'Gurges' or fishpool on the river, 3 acres of meadowland, a pasture, a small 'place' or piece of open land, and a virgate of land in Drayton. In return my lord William enjoyed the above rent for the rest of his life, that is, for about eight years.¹

Another case is cited from the Cathedral Records, No. 147:

In 1330 Alexander Heriard the prior granted Richard Becke a Corrody of one conventual loaf, and one pot of conventual beer daily, in return for L50 sterling paid down to the monastery.²

Prior Alexander Heriard in 1343 on receipt of L60 bound himself to Andrew Haywode and Alice, wife of Ralph Russel, promising to give Andrew a robe with fur or 20s., and to Alice and her son John one 'Miche' loaf and one white loaf, called 'Whitchin', and one 'just' or pot of Convent beer daily for her life-time.³

The following examples of corrodiess are found in the Yorkshire Suppression Papers:

1. G. W. Kitchen, Compotus Rolls of St. Swithun's Priory, p. 159.

2. Ibid., p. 159.

3. Ibid., p. 162.

Arthington -- Benedictine or Clunias Nunnery

Payment of annuities of 26s. 8d. to Leonard Bekwith, Esq., 20s. to John Riddyall, and 26s. 8d. to Robert Arthington and his brother Lawrence, with pensions to the nuns, and with 33s. 4d. to Margaret Wormewell for a corrody. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)¹

Charter House -- Carthusian Priory

40s. to John Swyfte for a corrody. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)²

Handale or Grendale -- Benedictine Nunnery

Annuity of 40s. to Thomas Henryson, Chaplain. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)³

Old Malton -- Gilbertine Priory

18 19s. 8d. for corrodiess to William Gascoigne and Agnes his wife, Thomas Norman and Agnes his wife. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)⁴

Thickhead -- Benedictine Nunnery

53s. 4d. for a corrody to Henry Wilkynson, Chaplain. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)⁵

Wilberfoss -- Benedictine Abbey

56s. for a corrody to Edward Harlynge, Chaplain. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)⁶

1. Clay, op. cit., p. 92.

2. Ibid., p. 120.

3. Ibid., p. 121.

4. Ibid., p. 132.

5. Ibid., p. 161.

6. Ibid., p. 167.

Yeddingham -- Benedictine Nunnery

33s. for corrodiess to John Pykerings and Agnes his wife, Richard Dobson and Maud his wife. (Ministers' Accounts, 4644)¹

The second type of corrody was that which the King or other patrons of monasteries were entitled to grant, and it was given as a reward to a faithful servant who was no longer able to work. The patron felt free to send any old retainer there with orders for the monastery to take care of him. When one died, there was always another sent in his place, so that the monasteries usually had one of the king's servants to take care of.

Nowadays retired generals and admirals, civil servants and the like, draw their pensions and live where they will. In the Middle Ages it was far less expensive to send them to a monastery, there to receive maintenance, food, clothing, shoe leather, firewood, and a chamber within the enclosure of the abbey for their residence. Each monastery was bound to keep one or two of these old gentlemen. They must have been a great nuisance.²

This practice brought no profit whatever to the house, but was instead a burden to it.

When a patron made demands of a monastery, they could not easily be refused. However, when corrodiess were asked for the servants of bishops or noblemen to whom the monks felt no obligation, the requests were

1. Ibid., p. 171.

2. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 65.

often rejected. Such was the case in the following instance:

Bishop of Lichfield demanded a corrody for his cook, but Peckham would not let the Prior of Tutsbury in Staffordshire consent to it. Even the high-minded Grandisson of Exeter made the same demand at Launcester for his own servant.¹

It has been found that in most cases the monks were the losers in the transaction of granting corrodies, for they were forced to pledge the resources of the future to raise small sums for the present, which were not always spent to the best advantages. This practice not only brought ruinous results financially to many houses, but also wrecked the routine of the inmates daily lives. Especially, in the smaller houses the presence of a few boarders, with their tastes for fine and luxurious things, their stories of the outside world, their amusements, etc. upset the ascetic life of the monks. Ralph of Shrewsbury, Bishop of Bath and Wells was shocked at the "fine beds and costly vessels" that the pensioners at Muchelney required.² When the bishops made their visitation they insisted that the practice of granting corrodies should be stopped.³

From all that has been said it can easily be

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 293.

2. Ibid., p. 293.

3. Ibid., p. 293.

realized that monastic property and possessions in England shortly before the dissolution were far-reaching and would stand out as a very tempting and rich prize for anyone who might dare to dream of gaining control of them. The annual revenue of the eight hundred English houses would be a nice little sum to add to any king's treasury. Two different estimates have been made comparing the national income from land with that of the monasteries in the sixteenth century.

Pamphlet of 1717:¹

National income from land -----	20 millions
Income from monastic lands -----	14 millions

Nasmith:²

National income from land -----	20 millions
Income from monastic lands -----	2 millions

Unfortunately we do not have the total national income for the year 1535 and are therefore unable to compare the total monastic income with it. However, there are several reliable estimates of the total monastic income for that year:

I. Gross revenue from all Church property -----	L 320,280 10s.
Revenue from the monasteries ----	L 150,000 or 200,000 ³

1. Savine, op. cit., p. 81.

2. Ibid., pp. 82-83.

3. Constant, op. cit., p. 148.

- II. Net income of the
monasteries ----- L 136,361 12s. 8d.¹
- III. Annual monastic income--- L 200,000²
- IV. Annual monastic income--- L 171,312 4s. 3d.³

Most historians take the most liberal figure, that of L 200,000 as the annual income of the monastic houses. Lord Herbert has ventured to suggest: "The monastic income amounted to one-fourth or one-third of the national income."⁴ Not knowing the exact amount of the national income it is hard to tell whether this calculation is trustworthy or not. However, assuming that L 200,000 a year was the income of the eight hundred houses in England, regardless of what the national income might have been, this sum serves to show the wealth that had accumulated in the hands of this cloistered group through the centuries of England's history.

Thus on the eve of the dissolution there were eight hundred or more monastic houses in England, each possessing its own lands, its own wealth, its own power and prestige, and its own influence both in the district

1. Savine, op. cit., p. 100.

2. Gasquet, English Monasteries, p. 387.

3. Ibid., p. 387.

4. Savine, op. cit., p. 87.

in which it was located and throughout the nation as well. These eight hundred houses owned from one-third to one-fourth of the landed property in the nation, shared an annual income of at least L 200,000, not counting the rich possessions they had such as vestments, gold and silver plate, ornaments, etc. "All told the monastic property must have been worth some L 50,000,000 of our money."¹ They were undoubtedly a very powerful group within this rising modern state. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand how a king "who ruled as well as reigned" might have dreamed of how he might strengthen his rule without this religious force within the nation and of the added power, riches, and lands which would be his, thereby making him "the richest king in Christendom" if only he dared to make his dreams come true.

1. Constant, op. cit., p. 148.

CHAPTER IV

INTERFERENCES IN MONASTIC LIFE

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In spite of the fact that the monasteries possessed great wealth, much land, and had extensive influence throughout the countryside, they were not always free to rule their domains as they pleased. They were theoretically free institutions, but actually many people claimed the right to interfere in their cloistered life. The peaceful solitude inside many cloistered walls was shattered by the worldly clamor of "outsiders" who professed a right to meddle in their affairs.

This "right to meddle" dated from years past and most monasteries resented it. In some cases the interference in monastic life was necessary, in others the monasteries would have prospered more had they been left to manage their own affairs. Whether this interference was beneficial or not, it is necessary to remember that the sixteenth century monastery was not the secluded place it was supposed to be. Many people claimed the right to dictate the policies of the religious houses and to select their own candidates to fill vacancies. This outside interference must have had some influence on monastic life, probably causing more harm than good.

There were two different types of interference in monastic life, lay and ecclesiastical. The first to be considered are the different kinds of lay interference that the religious had to tolerate and which at times must have proved very trying to them. The founder or patron of a monastery was the most important of the lay group who interfered. The founder of a religious house took upon himself certain obligations which he was supposed to fulfill. In 1373 John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, wrote:

'I am bound -- as advocate of the house of holy religion of the nuns of Nuneaton to give succour and help to the said nuns, and their goods and chattels, that they may serve God in peace and quiet according to their foundation and the rule of their religion.' Protection, however, entailed right of interference.¹

The original founder of a religious house transmitted to his descendants, who thereafter were known as patrons, the same rights as he himself had shared. If the members of a founder's family died out, the right of patronage was not allowed to stop. It could be transferred from one family to another as a grant from the Crown, or it might even be sold.² Therefore, death did not promise the removal of this source of lay interference, it endured for generations, in fact as long as

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 46.

2. A. Esquiros, Religious Life in England, p. 14.

the monasteries themselves.

It would be unfair to say that the monastery received no benefits from the patron, except his promised protection. There were certain things that a patron could do for the house whose patronage he enjoyed, such as aiding the religious to get around the mortmain laws and thus increase the size of their estates, or to hasten the transaction of their business through the courts.¹ The patron also looked after the financial interest of the monastery. Whenever the chance presented itself, the patron was certain to use what influence he had at court to further the interests of his house.

Whatever services the patrons did perform for their houses they expected some remuneration in return. Oftentimes the payments were greater than the services rendered, frequently proving a burden to the smaller houses. One service that the patron expected from the cloister was that of hospitality. Every monastery had a lodging especially for the founder, where he and his family might come and stay for long periods at a time. It is not certain whether all monasteries allowed the women of the patron's family to visit with them, but

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 47.

cases have been found where the ladies were permitted to stay at some houses.

The Archbishop of York allowed the patron's wife to stop one night and one night only at Newburgh Priory. On the other hand the Duke of Suffolk and his wife, Queen Mary, sister to Henry VIII -- seem to have spent weeks at a time in the great Augustinian house of Butley near Ipswich. The Queen used to have picnic suppers in the canons' garden during the hot weather.¹

These extended visits were undoubtedly a great expense to the house. "The great Cluniac priory of Thetford was reported in 1279 as being crippled by the residence there of the advocate (the Earl of Norfolk's brother) who cost the house more than the whole prior and convent."²

Besides the right of hospitality, the patrons expected other services from the monks. While alive they had the first claim to the prayers of the religious, and required prayers said not only for themselves, but also for their deceased ancestors. After death they had the right of burial in the choir of the church, plus the saying of more prayers for their departed soul. Moreover, if a patron felt that all was not as it should be within his house, he could demand a visitation, and have superiors removed from office. "'The Earl of March', wrote Bishop Spofford of Hereford to the canons of Chirbury in 1423,

1. Ibid., p. 49.

2. Ibid., p. 51.

'complains, as patron and founder, that his priory is in a state of collapse. My duties force me to get the present prior out and have another elected.'¹ If the patron was a conscientious leader, really interested in the welfare of his charge, then this power to demand a visitation was a good weapon for him to have. However, in many cases this right of patronage was used for selfish ends rather than beneficial ones. Superiors could be worried into resignation if the patron wanted them removed from office so he might put one of his favorites in their place.

The monks were scarcely ever allowed to forget their founder, especially when a vacancy occurred in the monastic ranks. Before the place could be filled the permission of the patron had to be secured. It was always almost certain that the election had been "fixed" beforehand, as the patron usually had some preference in the affair. Such was the case of Lord Dacre when he wrote to the Prior of Lanercost in Cumberland.

'As I am your founder', he wrote to the convent, 'and bound in conscience to see to your welfare and give unto you my faithful counsel, please go to the chapter house and elect a sub-prior to look after the internal affairs of the house. What about Canon Richard Halton? I know that he has some obstinacy, but by the help of the Holy Ghost he is virtuously reduced of his own good mind and my

1. Ibid., p. 52.

singular pleasure, content and consolation. In my opinion you would do well to elect him. I am your founder, and as far as in me is, assent to his election. You had, therefore, better elect him without any obstinacy or grudge as you intend to please me.' There was not much doubt about the meaning of this letter and, considering that the priory was almost at the gates of Lord Dacre's castle at Naworth, it is scarcely to be supposed that the canons withstood their founder's wishes.¹

When a vacancy occurred at Croxton Abbey in Leicestershire the founder immediately took advantage of the situation.

Lord Berkely who was founder of the Premonstratensian abbey at Croxton in Leicestershire, took the extreme course of occupying the abbey the day before the election in 1534 and telling the abbot elect that unless he will pay £500 (£10,000 to £15,000²) another abbot would be elected at the patron's pleasure.³

The daily routine of monastic life was interrupted by still another group besides the patrons, namely the corrodians. Although they had no power to interfere in the affairs of the house, such as the patron had, they were "outsiders" who were used to living in a different atmosphere, having different tastes, amusements, possession, etc. than the "regular" clergy. Some of the older pensioners must have been terribly boring, if not annoying while others, with their expensive ideas and

1. Ibid., p. 51.

2. Equivalent in 1937.

3. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 53.

fascinating stories of the world outside, probably created an air of unrest and discontent within the cloister. The discipline problem was much harder for superiors who had these pensioners to contend with. The secluded life was not as it should have been when these "boarders" were permitted within the monks' home.

The third source of lay interference in monastic life was the Crown. The king remained the most powerful patron in the land, many being the houses of which he was founder. Besides interfering in the life of the religious in the ways in which the other patrons did, the king kept "his" abbots busily engaged transacting his business, while their own suffered from neglect. Numerous jobs were found for them, duties such as magistrates, commissioners of the peace, collectors of revenue, surveyors of royal estates and forests, and game-keepers.¹ In fact, they proved to be such remarkable game-keepers for the king that when a vacancy occurred at the wealthy Beaulieu Abbey in 1533, Sir William Fitzwilliam recommended the abbot of Waverly for the position because he had been a very proficient keeper of the king's game.²

Like all other patrons the king also meddled

1. Ibid., p. 69.

2. Ibid., p. 69.

in the election of the abbots and priors. He interfered even more than others since there were so many houses of royal patronage. It was the usual procedure for this right of interference to be in charge of the king's chief minister, at least such was the case during the reign of Henry VIII. And it might also be mentioned in passing that the chief minister did not consider himself too good to stoop to bribery in affairs of this nature. There are numerous cases where the minister, especially Wolsey and Cromwell, was personally enriched by the promotion of a certain candidate.

'We have elected John Bradley as abbot', wrote the convent of Milton, Dorset, to Wolsey, 'in accordance with your letters.' 'Letters' of this kind were not to be disregarded. The only stipulation that the monks ever seemed to make was that the Crown should appoint one of their own number and not a stranger. But even so they never seem to have refused to elect the royal nominee any more than the Chapter of Wells in 1526 'on receipt of the Cardinal's letters,' refused to elect one Thomas Wynter as Dean at the next vacancy. The vacancy occurred in the following year, and the new Dean was Thomas Wynter. Now Thomas Wynter happened to be the Cardinal's son, a boy in his teens.¹

The women of sixteenth century England were not to be outdone. Many wealthy, influential ladies saw to it that they had their chance to meddle also, and some of the worst trouble that the monasteries had was caused by the interference of these ladies. They were especially

1. Ibid., p. 71.

active in the capacity of appointing abbots and priors and the records of many houses show that superiors were oftentimes elected through the influence of some prominent woman. Following are examples of two such cases:

June 14, 1425. London. He [bishop] instituted Sir Thomas Hardy, chaplain, as rector of the parish church of Brakley, vacant by the resignation of Sir Simon Belton; at the presentation of the lady Joan de Beauchamp, lady of Bergevenny.¹

July 18, 1428. London. He instituted Sir John Bowlegh, chaplain, as rector of the parish church of Myster-ton; at the presentation of Anne, countess of Devon.²

Anne Boleyn and her sister, Lady Mary Carey, were always interfering in monastic affairs. This was not done for the sole purpose of placing a favorite in office; they usually were benefitted financially; for instance, Lady Mary Carey received an annuity of one hundred marks a year from Tynemonth priory because she was influential in getting a certain Stonywell elected as prior. But in April, 1537 Prior Blakeney, the successor of Prior Stonywell, wrote to Cromwell:

' . . . the lady can now demand no such annuity, as she can do no great good for me and my house.' In other words she had now no influence, since her sister, Anne the Queen, had by now lost her head.³

1. T. S. Holmes, Register of John Stafford, p. 30.

2. Ibid., p. 62.

3. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 67.

In cases where the patron of a monastery was a lady and her wishes were not obeyed in matters of election, revenge was swift and certain. Such was the case of the Countess of Oxford. Unbeknownst to the lady, one of her favorites was removed from office by the Bishop of London in 1395 and a new officer installed in his place. When the Countess learned of what had happened she took immediate action.

Directly she heard of the proceedings, she flew into a violent rage, collected a party of armed men, broke into the priory by night and carried off the intruding prior, clad only in his pyjamas (or whatever answered to them in those days), shut him up in her private jail and only released him after he had sworn by the Host to trouble her no further. The lady won the case.¹

The other type of interference under which the monasteries languished was ecclesiastical interference. Various ecclesiastical personages had authority over the houses and could meddle in their affairs if they so desired. The bishop of a diocese had charge of seeing that the discipline of the houses was in order. In case the office of bishop was vacant, then the archbishop carried out the duties until the place could be filled again. Besides the bishop and archbishop, a papal legate such as Wolsey, or a royal visitor as Thomas Cromwell could pry into the monks' affairs.²

1. Ibid., p. 53.

2. Ibid., p. 73.

These visitations were the interruption which the monks dreaded most. Visitations were supposed to be held at least once every three years. Although the bishop possessed this power he was very restrained in the work that he could do. For instance, he could not visit the Cluniac, Carthusian, Cistercian, Premonstratensian, Gilbertine, Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, Carmelite, and the greater Benedictine houses. These bodies enjoyed freedom of episcopal jurisdiction, while those who were forced to submit to it were continually causing trouble, either trying to exempt themselves, or refusing to admit the visitors when they did come. For example, the dispute between Hilary, bishop of Chichester and Walter, abbot of Battle abbey was due to the abbot's attempt to escape visitation.

The abbot pleaded exemption from the jurisdiction of the bishop, by virtue of the charter granted by William the first, their founder: and this dispute being brought before the king, the abbot's pretences falling in with the interest of the prerogative, Stephen, who was incensed at the conduct of the bishops towards him, declared the abbey a royal chapel, and took it under his own immediate care. This dispute succeeding in this manner, the religious began everywhere to find out pretences to exempt themselves from the jurisdiction of their bishops; more especially the ancient abbeys.¹

Bishop Grosseteste thought that it was a bishop's duty to visit every house in his diocese. The religious

1. Warner, op. cit., p. 338.

had different views on the question. Because Grosseteste continued to feel it his duty to carry on the visitations, he began a six years' feud with his own house besides involving himself in quarrels with numerous other monastic houses.¹

The monks resented the bishop's right to visit them so intensely that they seized upon any pretense to exempt themselves. Twenty-two years before Bothe became Bishop of Hereford, he worked as commissary of Bishop Smythe of Lincoln. In the year 1500 the bishop prepared to visit a religious house in his diocese, but was delayed by urgent business of state. However, he sent Bothe on ahead with orders to start the visitation for him. The house, claiming that only the bishop himself, and not his commissary, had the right to visit them, refused Bothe admittance and he was forced to withdraw.²

Even after a bishop had made his visitation and attempted to correct some of the abuses that he found in the monastery, the monks would again try to show their desire for independence. The bishop might order that certain things be done after his visit, but many

1. Patterson, op. cit., p. 133.

2. A. T. Bannister, Register of Charles Bothe, p. v, footnote 1.

times he had to invoke the help of the king's minister, or of the Crown itself, before his orders were obeyed. When the Bishop of London visited Spalding priory he encountered this trouble. He found that the prior was too easy-going and that the house was becoming notorious for its lack of discipline. He wished to replace the prior by a stern disciplinarian whom the monks feared. The prior and the monks had other ideas. Whereupon, the bishop was forced to write to Wolsey for help. "'I can't get the Prior of Spalding to resign,' wrote the Bishop of London to Wolsey, 'though all legal means have been tried.'"¹

There were some cases where the bishops were too occupied with matters of state to get around to supervising the monasteries. Henry VIII, like his father before him, believed in having the bishops attend to much of the state's business, thereby getting their work done at the Church's expense.

Whilst many of the bishops and other ecclesiastics were thus continually occupied in civil business, it was impossible that the people at large could really regard them as the actual pastors of their souls, responsible for each of them.²

Thus, few hours were left for the religious to attend to their affairs and almost no time for visitations.

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 72.

2. F. A. Gasquet, England Under the Old Religion, p. 51.

In case a bishop continually neglected the houses in his diocese, the patron or neighbors could, and did, often petition the king for a visitation. Usually before this step was necessary the archbishop had intervened and taken charge of the neglected affairs. This was done in the case of Richard Nix, the Bishop of Norwich. "The bishop's diocese was now in such disorder that the archbishop instituted a visitation of that see."¹

The monastic houses, therefore, were not left entirely to their own but were subject to many interruptions in their affairs. Of the two interferences, it seems that that of the ecclesiastics can be more justified than that of the laymen. The lay interference was more of a selfish nature, where the founders, patrons, nobles, Crown, etc. interrupted not so much for the benefit of the houses, as for their own personal aggrandisement. On the other hand, the ecclesiastical interference was not so mercenary and far less personal. If this supervision could have been carried on by the right sort of men, free to attend only to religious affairs, it seems that it would have been a good thing for the monasteries. It would have served as a restraining

1. J. Stype, Memorials of Thomas Cranmer, Vol. I, p. 41.

influence on the monks who were tempted to break their vows. Because of these people who had the right to meddle in their life, the monks may have made mistakes, which left to themselves they would not have made; for example, these difficulties were evident when the patrons were permitted to "elect" those whom they desired for superior positions. Many superiors, thus elected, were not competent enough for the post which they were to fill; whereas had the choice of superiors been left to the devout monks they probably could have chosen a more capable leader.

Many times we are prone to judge too quickly and too rashly those who cannot defend themselves. Often we place the guilt on those who were present at the scene of the crime rather than trouble ourselves to look elsewhere for possible suspects. Could it be that the primary cause of some of the faults that we lay at the feet of the monks and nuns might more justly be placed at those of these "outsiders" who took it upon themselves to tell the religious how to "run" their cloistered life?

CHAPTER V

BREAKDOWN OF MONASTIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES BEFORE THE DISSOLUTION

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In the early days of monasticism certain rules and ideals were set up by which those who chose this mode of life were to live. These aims were constantly kept before their attention and they strove to measure up to the standards established for them by their pious forefathers. These silent, cloaked figures hurried about their work with an admirable zeal, never losing sight of the ends to which they had dedicated their lives. This life of theirs was simple, exceedingly so compared to that led by those who followed them many centuries later.

In the beginning the monks had no property, possessions, or riches. They owned little of this world's goods, and with what they had they were contented. It was easier for them than for their fellowmen to live closer to God, for they had no worldly treasures or interests to distract their devotion. Their habits, homes, food, clothing were poor and simple, and so they were able to live up to their ideals. As the years passed and as the enrollment in the monastic army increased, the very nature of that life changed. It slowly evolved from the simple, crude routine of the

early days, to the wealthy, highly organized structures which covered the land on the eve of the dissolution.

One might gather from the title of this chapter that the following pages are filled with the condemnation of all cloistered groups as idle, lazy, immoral persons, unworthy of the name religious. Such, however, is not the case. All were not deserving of the fate which befell them in the 1530's, but some were. In this chapter attempts shall be made to point out the instances where monastic life was slipping; but it must be remembered that there were many exceptions to all the cases of laxness. All monks and nuns could not be charged with neglect of their vows, all could not be accused of immorality, but because a portion refused to live up to certain standards, all were made to suffer. Some historians try to excuse those erring monks by saying that they were not super-beings, but mere humans and thus were liable to submit to earthly temptations. That is true enough, but it must also be remembered that the secluded, religious ones had pledged themselves to be a little better than their fellowmen, to live on a higher plain than that inhabited by the rest of worldly mankind. Since they pledged themselves to higher ideals and to a nobler life, more was expected of them.

However many religious might have been immoral,

it is impossible to calculate the number that did not fall into this category. Writers of history and literature always seem more than anxious to call to their readers' attention the many instances of disobedience, neglect and scandal; whereas the courageous, useful lives of others pass unheralded by the chroniclers. Condemnation is so cheap; praise is so dear. The sensational scandals in the cloistered places were publicized far and wide, but how many ecclesiastical records list the number of obedient, truly penant religious souls who were living during the same age? Thus the difficulty confronting the historian is the impossibility of forming any reliable estimate of the percent of religious who really justified the layman's belief in them.

The foundations of all monastic life were laid deep in what we might call the four pillars of monasticism, that is labor, chastity, seclusion, and the possession of no property. When some monks began to disregard these vital obligations, they were dooming their order to destruction, whether in 1537 or in 1625 only circumstances could tell. One of the first vows that a man or woman took upon entering a religious life was that of relinquishing all property and possessions and promising not to acquire more.

St. Francis commissioned his followers thus:

"'I command positively', he said, 'all my brethren that they receive no money in any way, directly or indirectly; that they acquire no property, no house, no place, nothing whatever.'"¹ Ere many decades had slipped past, the friars, following the precedents established for them by the monks, laid up for themselves and their houses earthly treasures. Originally the friars were nomads who travelled about rendering services wherever they might do good. They had no cloisters, nor possessed any worldly goods. Whereas the monks, on the other hand, had always lived settled lives within the monasteries. However, by the fifteenth century little distinction could be made between the two groups. There is little doubt that the cloisters of England were wealthy establishments. What better proof do we have of this than the fact that their wealth and possessions were so extensive that they attracted the attention of the king and made even him desirous of making them his own?

One visitor in 1538 thus described the wealth and splendour of the Abbey of Glastonbury:

'A house meet for the king's majesty and no man else -- great, goodly, and so princely as we have

1. Beckett, op. cit., p. 28.

not seen the like. There are four parks adjoining, the furthestmost of them but four miles from the house, well stocked with great pikes, perch, and roach; four manor houses belonging to the abbot, the furthestmost only three miles distant. These princely mansions were dismantled, and remain still a wonder in their ruin.'¹

Another traveller has left us his description of some of the monasteries.

'The riches of England are greater than those of any other country in Europe -- above all their riches are displayed in the church treasures, for there is not a parish church in the kingdom so mean as not to possess crucifixes, candlesticks, censers, patens, and cups of silver. Nor is there a convent of mendicant friars so poor as not to have all these same articles in silver, besides many other ornaments worthy of a cathedral church in the same metal. Accordingly you may imagine what the decorations of those enormously rich Benedictine, Carthusian, and Cistercian monasteries must be.'²

Although the religious had been instructed not to acquire any personal property, somehow quite a few of them conveniently forgot their vows. For instance, there were a number of wealthy religious peers in the House of Lords. "Sixteen had a revenue of which the highest was equal in our money to L48,000 a year, and the lowest to L12,000. Six had equal to over L12,000 a year; and eleven had from L5,000 to L12,000."³ These annual incomes were rather a far-cry from the early admonition

1. Geikie, op. cit., p. 341.

2. Gee, op. cit., p. 17.

3. Geikie, op. cit., p. 261.

"no personal property." "The monks were living as country gentlemen, not always of high repute."¹

Around the year 1200 four attempts were made by the popes to stop the monks from acquiring personal property. They decreed: ". . . the monk found in possession of private property at his death should be buried in the dunghill, in token of his damnation."² This threat, however, seemed to have little effect on the brethren. Although they were admonished to put whatever came into their possession into the common store of the cloister, oftentimes the temptation of self-aggrandisement proved too great for even the religious. In 1303 the monks of Westminster are said to have robbed the royal treasury.

The famous robbery of the royal treasury showed that even in the cloister money could be used as well as hoarded. Suspicion fell on one of them because he dressed so finely and boasted of his wealth. After the imprisonment of many of them in the Tower, the sacrist and sub-prior were found guilty, and after their death the robbers' skins were fastened to the doors of the treasury beside the Chapter-house, to be a warning to the evil-doers of the future.³

Stories, amusing and childish, were spread among the cloisters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

1. G. W. Child, Church and State Under the Tudors, p. 41.

2. G. C. Coulton, The Medieval Scene, p. 79.

3. Capes, op. cit., p. 298.

in an effort to impress upon the inmates the necessity of remembering their obligations.

One is said to have appeared after death to a brother monk and complained of the pains from which he suffered because he had hid his old shoes when new ones were distributed among the household, intending to give them to his father. The shoes were found and put back in the common store, and the spirit came back to thank his friend for the care which had released him from his pains. At Canterbury a rule was made that the 'vice of appropriation' should be punished even after death, the bodies of offenders disinterred, and cast out of the monastery.¹

Even the threat of dire punishment and the tales of departed souls doomed to wander the earth failed to curb the selfish appetite of some of the religious. By 1600 so many had acquired the taste for "possessing things" that cob-webby veils of disuse seemed to shroud completely the old law of St. Francis, "no property."

Before considering the next pillar of monasticism let us consider for a moment the fact that, besides not feeling themselves in the wrong by accumulating personal property, the professed religious also frequently went against their better judgment and did and said things that were contrary to the dictates of their conscience, in order to advance themselves. For example, such a case as that of Thomas More and the Abbot of Westminster might be cited.

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 298.

In 1534, Sir Thomas More, under arrest for refusing to acknowledge King Henry's supremacy over the Church, was put in (Abbot) Boston's custody for a few days. He tells us in a letter to his daughter how speciously the abbot tried to persuade him that 'conscience was not a guide to be followed when it was inconvenient.' 'Then saide my Lorde of Westminster to me, yt haw soever ye matter seemed to mine owne minde was erronious, when I se the gret counsaill of the realme determine of my mind the contrary, and that therefore I ought to change my conscience.'¹

The second pillar on which monasticism was based was labor. In the early days when a monastic estate consisted of a crude abode surrounded by a few acres of ground the monks found ample duties to keep them occupied. They tended their own land and performed all household tasks as well. But as the size of their estates grew and more and more land came into their possession, the place of the monk shifted from agricultural laborer to landlord. In fact, by the year 1300 this change had taken place. "It had become very exceptional for monks to work with their own hands in the fields or at any handicraft. The services they rendered to agriculture were rather as landlords than as labourers."² This change is not spoken of in a critical spirit, for with such large estates no other arrangement would have been possible. The monks could

1. A. L. N. Russell, Westminster Abbey The Story of the Church and Monastery, p. 75.

2. Coulton, Medieval Scene, p. 80.

no longer personally cultivate the huge tracts of land. The change to landlordship was the only alternative left to them. As country landlords the religious were certainly no worse than others of their day and possibly were a great deal better.

Not long after the monks gave up their duties as progressive farmers, the members of some of the houses, especially the larger ones, also began to neglect their household activities. Servants began to be taken into the houses and tasks were gradually shifted from the monks' shoulders to theirs. Accounts have been found where at the time of the dissolution, there were more servants employed by a monastery than there were inmates, thus showing that duties formerly carried on by the cloisterers were now performed by hired servants.

The account rolls tell us that the monks did not even shave themselves, wash their own linen, do their own kitchen or household work, or mow their own cloister-garth; these things were done by hired servants male or female. In a large monastery, there were usually servants in the proportion of three to every two monks."¹

The monastery employed not only a large number of servants, but these servants usually managed to enrich themselves while in the hire of the religious. At the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds, the offices of first cook and gatekeeper were so richly compensated that they were

1. Ibid., p. 80.

held by hereditary succession. Similar conditions existed elsewhere. At Glastonbury a girl was appointed as butler; 66 men were hired to do domestic work, in addition to the many farm laborers. One porter at St. Mary's, York, in 1404 fared so well that in his will he left 44 cows, 400 sheep and some land that he had acquired. At an early date the monasteries began to hire lay brethren (conversi) to help, either with the household duties or with the farm work. However, by the fifteenth century the religious were described by many popular writers of the day as being country gentlemen who enjoyed themselves as thoroughly as their secular neighbors.¹

The third pillar on which monastic life rested was that of strict morality. Here is the question which probably caused more controversy in the 1530's than any other issue brought forth in this religious war. If Henry VIII did any mud-slinging, this was the place where his agents worked overtime. The fury of war-time propaganda and that of political campaigns is mild compared to the charges made against certain of the religious. In the following pages some of the accusations will be mentioned. It is impossible to estimate what portion

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 291.

of them is true and what created for the purpose of degrading the religious in the eyes of all England. It must be remembered that many of these malicious tales were propaganda. However, it seems rather incredible that all could be so. Where there is smoke there may be some fire. The cloisters were not all dens of vice and immorality as Henry Tudor would have us believe, yet all were not above reproach. There was some immorality among the religious long before Henry's agents started to work, yet not as much as the Commissioners reported that they found.

Of the nunneries we hear much less gossip than of the homes of the monks. This, of course, might be partly due to the fact that there were very few convents in England compared to the large number of monasteries. However, even of these few nunneries little scandal was circulated. For the most part, the ladies of the religious bodies were much better behaved than their religious brethren. In the Comperta, Layton and Leigh mention very few cases against the nuns, whereas a multitude of accusations are charged to the monks. Of the thirteen counties that Cromwell's agents visited, only 27 nuns are charged with any wrong-doing.¹

1. Gasquet, English Monasteries, pp. 204, 205.

In the subsequent reports of the mixed commissions the character given to the convents is uniformly most excellent. Thus the White Nuns of Grace Dieu in Leicestershire, the only convent of the order in England, are declared to be 'of good and virtuous conversation and living, and all desirous to continue their religion there and none willing to have capacities' to return to a life in the world.¹

There were, of course, some unfavorable pictures drawn of the sisters, such as in the satirical poem, "Why I Can't Be A Nun."

A lady called Experience took her to a house of 'women regular', which was fair without, but not well governed, for dames Pride and Hipocrisy were there, and dame Envy too, in every corner. But Patience and Charity were not within: an outer chamber had been made for them.²

Cases such as the one mentioned above were exceptional. The literature of the time did not poke fun at or condemn the inhabitants of the convents as it did those of the monasteries.

The lighter literature of the time deals tenderly with the nuns, and drops its tones of coarseness and satire in their presence. -- On the whole the bishops' Registers, when they raise the veil rarely disclose gross misconduct, nor does it seem that things grew much worse as time went on. Immoralities confessedly there were at times; but when they became known the bishops' hands fell heavily on the poor frail women.³

Either Henry's agents overlooked the convents in their campaign of propaganda, or most of the houses were so

1. Ibid., p. 205.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 305.

3. Ibid., p. 305.

far above reproach and were held so high in the opinion of their contemporaries that they felt it would do little good to try and blacken their reputation. Even Chaucer favorably describes his prioress:

Of grete disporte
And full pleasant and amiable of port,
but refined and dignified and worthy of respect,
And all was conscience and tender herte.¹

On the other hand, much can be said of the lax morals and loose living of the monks.

'Every act of legislation in the Church tends to show the low condition of morals among the clergy, and their neglect of duty'. They are charged, besides, with constant quarrelling and litigation with one another, with frequenting taverns, shows, cells of suspected women, and unlawful games. 'It is admitted by all persons and by all parties that the Church from this time (fifteenth century) and a century before till the age of the Reformation was in point of morals and legislation in a very degraded state.'²

It has even been said of some of the religious houses:

"The monasteries had become stables for clerks, or fortresses for fighting men, or markets for traders, or brothels for strumpets, in which the greatest of crimes was to live without sin."³

Fish's famous pamphlet helped to accomplish some of the things that the king desired to have done. In his work, Fish accuses the monks of many practices of

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 305.

2. Child, op. cit., p. 42.

3. Flick, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 447.

immorality.

The monks, he tells the king, 'be they that have made a hundred thousand idle dissolute women in your realm, who would have gotten their living honestly in the sweat of their faces had not their superfluous riches allured them to lust and idleness. These be that when they have drawn men's wives to such inconsistency, spend away their husband's goods, bringing both man, wife, and children to idleness, theft and beggery. Yea, who is able to number the great broad bottomless ocean sea full of evils that this mischievous generation may bring upon us if unpunished?'¹

During the reign of Henry VII the people of Carnarvonshire complained to the Crown. "Among the records of Henry VII is a memorial from the farmers and gentlemen of Carnarvonshire complaining that their wives and daughters were systematically seduced by the clergy."² Probably the most corrupt and degraded house was the old and very wealthy cloister of St. Albans. Even Catholic historians can find little good to say in its behalf. Long before Cromwell and his men came upon the scene, this house was notorious for its lack of discipline and religion and for its open, worldly living.

The old and rich abbey of St. Albans was a den of prostitutes, with whom the monks lived openly and avowedly. In two of its priories, the nuns had been turned out, and their places filled with courtezans for the shameless use of the monks of St. Albans.³

1. Froude, op. cit., p. 103.

2. Flick, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 447.

3. Ibid., p. 447.

Countless charges were made against the monks. Drunkenness was said to have been very common among them. One monk, Ulrich von Hutten said: "'It is a gay time to live in our day.'¹ Many stories were repeated of the immoral life led by numerous of the religious. One of the favorite ones told by the common people of Shrewsbury was the story of the existence of a subterranean communication between Wenlock monastery and Buildwas Abbey. In defense of the religious it is said:

There is scarce an old monastery in England, but has some such story told of it, especially if it was a convent of men, and had a Nunnery in its neighborhood. These reports were probably invented and propagated in order to exaggerate the dissolute lives of the Monks and Nuns, and thereby to reconcile the multitude to the suppression of religious houses.²

Several years after the dissolution, Bishop Hilsey told of a scandal which had been revealed to him in a confessional twenty years previous, by a miller's wife who had been very friendly with the then Abbot of Hailes in Gloucestershire.

This abbot, he said, had given her many jewels that had been offered to the celebrated 'holy blood of Hailes' and derided her awe for the venerable relic itself, telling her it was but a duck's blood contained in a phial.³

1. Ibid., p. 453.

2. Phillips, op. cit., Vol. I, Appendix II.

3. J. Gairdner, English Church in the Sixteenth Century, p. 200.

There was much talk of the concubines kept by the holy men.

'Priest-girl' was a common term during the late Middle Ages and entire cloisters kept these women within their walls. -- Many monks kept their mistresses openly and even bought them houses in which they supported them. The priests had their concubines, and threatened punishments for such irregularities had little effect.

Some superiors tried to clean up their charges. Using the modern method of high taxation, a certain bishop thought that maybe he could end this evil if he taxed each of the 11,000 concubines of the priests in his diocese. One abbot is said to have admitted that he could not enjoy life without his dogs and women. Another was referred to as a second Solomon since he unselfishly loaned his wives; others died of syphilis and of drunkenness.¹

The Catholic historians claim that all these accusations were malicious lies told about the religious. The Catholic author, Constant admits:

So violent are those imputations that, if they were true, the English monasteries deserved a name other than that of religious houses. No doubt there were scandals here and there, but there are grave reasons for believing that the visitors purposely exaggerated.²

Edmund Burke waves away the charges by saying: "I rather suspect that vices are feigned or exaggerated when profit

1. A. C. Flick, Decline of the Medieval Church, Vol. II, pp. 296, 297, 300.

2. Constant, op. cit., p. 161.

is looked for in their punishment. An enemy is a bad witness; a robber is a worse."¹

If, as some assert, the charges brought back by the Commissioners and the tales told about the religious in the seventeenth century were exaggerated or intentionally created to ruin the reputation of the monasteries, there is still another place to look for further evidence. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reports were kept and stories were told, some of which have come down to us at the present time. Much of this material was in existence years before the days of the Tudors and certainly no one will go so far as to claim that some kind, far-sighted soul of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries foresaw Henry VIII's actions and thus, very thoughtfully started preparing for him propaganda which he could pick up and use two hundred years later.

The report of a visitation in the diocese of Norwich made in the early part of the fifteenth century reveals that some of the houses were in a very bad condition. "The editor of the report says of the priory at Wymondham that in the whole course of its history we hear little or nothing to its credit."² In Walsingham priory it was found:

1. Constant, op. cit., pp. 161, 162.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 300.

'The prior was living a dissolute and scandalous life; he robbed the treasury of money and jewels; he kept a fool to amuse himself and his friends with his buffoonery; he was commonly believed to be keeping up an illicit connection with the wife of one of the servants; he behaved towards his canons with the utmost violence and brutality; and the result was that the canons themselves were a dissipated, noisy, quarrelsome set, among whom the very pretence of religion was hardly kept up. . . . Of course, the servants were insolent, the boys in the school mutinous, there were evil reports everywhere and not without foundation; for the canons frequented the taverns in the town and worse places, and hawked and hunted, and occasionally fought and scaled the walls, and got out of bounds at forbidden hours; some broke into the prior's cellar and stole his wine, and some sat up all night drinking, and rolled into the chapel in the early morning and fell asleep and snored.'¹

One of the earliest charges was that made by the venerable Bede.

'There are some men, who under pretence of building monasteries procure lands from their kings which become their inheritance; and having obtained exemption from all secular service on that account, here they more quietly enjoy their lusts: . . . but those that design to spend their youth in chastity, are obliged to go abroad for their education, to the prejudice of their country which wants their service. Besides those who are educated in them being under no vows of chastity, run into such excesses, that they debauch the very women who have vowed chastity to God.' There is no ground to believe that the corruption of these societies was ever reformed or cured, till they were involved in the common calamities of the nation.²

The register of John Stafford, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, cites several cases of lack of discipline and order within that diocese.

1. Capes, op. cit., pp. 300-301.

2. Warner, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 143.

Burton -- The prior, John Schoyle, had allowed the discipline of the priory and its estates to fall into disorder, and it was clear that he was quite unfitted to rule over the house. Bishop Stafford was at the priory 15 April and again 19 September, 1427, and on March 20, 1428, issued a series of injunctions concerning the principle and management of the prior which he called upon the prior and canons to obey. Irreverence in the Conventual Church seemed to prevail and the canons were wont to walk about and hold conversation with suspected people during the celebration of the Mass. It was said that the prior himself scarcely celebrated mass twice in the year, and he is expressly enjoined to celebrate at the greater Double Feasts and to be present on Sundays and festivals. . . . All women are to be forbidden access to the priory and one woman who was evidently suspected is expressly ordered to be refused admittance into any part of the priory buildings. . . . Again 21 November, 1430, the bishop wrote strongly to the effect that he had heard that the prior and convent had not attended to his monitions and that he would suspend all who presided over the house if obedience was not promptly shown. He further ordered the sub-prior to read the injunctions that he had put forth twice weekly in the chapter house. The removal of suspicious women was expressly ordered.¹

Glastonbury -- The finances of the house as well as the morals of the monks seem to have needed the abbot's attention, and we find in 1443 that he had to prosecute Bartholomew Downton of Lyllington in Dorset because of his unwillingness to give up his accounts when he was receiver in that county for abbot Chynnock.²

Muchelney -- The report of the abbot of Glastonbury does not seem to have been favorable, and on 1 August, 1437, the bishop summoned the abbot and all the monks to appear before him in their chapter house on 30 August. In the following October the bishop through his commissaries convey to the abbot the bishop's order that a certain gate at the east of the conventual church called Sexteynegate is to

1. Holmes, op. cit., Vol. I, p. xl.

2. Ibid., p. xli.

be permanently closed. He had heard that laundry women and others were in the habit of using it all hours, and gave cause for suspicion, and this danger must be prevented. He also forbade the monks for going out for pleasure and shows. It was evident that the discipline of the house was somewhat lax.¹

Hemyngton -- It has been discovered in the visitation that dishonourable women have access to the priory and very often come there, with whom the prior and brethren have dishonourable converse, whence arise various temptations contrary to the dictum of Jerome to flee society of women, and on that account the bishop enjoins on the prior and convent to abstain altogether from converse with suspected women within or without the priory and not to permit such women to come to the priory in places and at hours likely to arouse suspicion, and specially enjoins on the prior entirely to repel from his society and company Joan Carvyle, wife of Thomas Carvyle and admit her not to his presence either in the priory or in any place without.²

1435 -- Commission to the abbot and convent of Muchelney, reciting that, although the bishop intended to make a personal of their conventual church for the reformation of excesses which (he grieves to say), according to common report, have for some time grown up therein, not without scandal, he is still too much engaged in a variety of important occupations in the office of chancellorship, in which he labours to come to the said place for this; and that he has called upon Sir Nicholas Frome, abbot of Glastonbury, to make a visitation of their monastery in his name. Dated in Wokey Manor, 27 March, 1435, the eleventh year of his consecration.³

Mandate to the abbot of Muchelney to appear, with all those of his house who are bound to attend the bishop's visitations, before him on 30 August in the

1. Ibid., pp. xli, xlii.

2. Ibid., p. 83.

3. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 182.

chapter house for a visitation, which he intends to hold there, on that or following days, because of frequent reports brought him of neglect of the divine office in that house and of dissolute morals of the monks. Dated in Dogmersfield manor, 1 August, 1437.¹

Commission to the abbot of Muchelney of the order of St. Benedict, -- reciting that in the bishop's late visitation of the abbey it was found that there is a gate at the east gate of the conventual church commonly called 'Sexteynegate', by which suspected persons and especially women of loose character, by colour of laundry and other pretended services have entry at undue hours and times, giving cause for suspicion and some of the monks also pass out for pleasure and shows; nay more some after complain go out singly by the said gate and are seen alone within the walls of the monastery with persons of doubtful character, and by this gate also victuals which should be distributed in alms to the poor, are taken out for the use of such persons; and that the bishop has decreed that the gate shall be closed and remain so; and commanding them within fifteen days to have the same walled up at the charges of the monastery, until the occasion of the scandal be known to be at an end and they have other order from him. Dated in Dogmersfield manor, 3 October, 1437.²

In the year 1455, Archbishop Bouchier formed a commission to reform the religious in his diocese. In speaking of the cloisterers, he said:

Some . . . like vagabonds and profligates run about through the kingdom and apply themselves to worldly gain, to revellings moreover, to drinking bouts, and to wicked adulteries and fornications, and besides, spend their time on all manner of vices, and waste the property, goods, fruits, and revenue of their benefices of this sort, and vainly and uselessly consume them on forbidden and profane objects.³

1. Ibid., p. 209.

2. Ibid., p. 210.

3. Gee and Hardy, op. cit., p. 142.

In 1485 the Abbot of Spanheim spoke of the religious as:

. . . ignorant, rude, and murdering the sheep of Christ by their infamous morals. 'No holiness of life,' he writes, 'no education, no purity is now required of candidates for ordination. . . . Instead of books they beget children, instead of study they seek concubines. The bishops are little better. They have either no copies of Scripture, or few, for they hate knowledge. They are set only on heaping up wealth. . . . I fear greatly that worse times will come for the clergy ere long.'¹

Thus are a few examples of what was written of the monks many years before the dissolution. All of this was said long before the slightest idea of a dissolution of the monasteries was born. These charges were not propaganda, for in most cases they were written by Churchmen themselves, who realized the sad state of affairs in many of their houses and who foresaw the result if conditions were not remedied. Over that period of years when conditions were deplorable within the cloisters, no great reformation took place and little effort was put forth to better matters in any one place. Therefore, since no step was taken to help stem the laxity, conditions were probably no better in 1537 than they were in 1337 or 1485. This could not be said of all houses, but probably many of the monastic population

1. Geikie, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

in England were in need of some moral reformation.¹ Their quiet, religious life suffered greatly because of their newly acquired taste for "pleasures of the flesh and of the devil."

The fourth and last pillar on which monastic life was founded was that of seclusion, a complete withdrawal from worldly life and pleasures. It is a known fact that by the sixteenth century the majority of monks had disregarded the order of seclusion and felt free to go and come as they pleased. This was in sharp contrast to the wishes of the monastic fathers, for St. Jerome himself once remarked: "'A monk out of his cloister dies spiritually, like a fish out of water.'"²

One of the reasons why so many religious, especially the superiors of cloisters, were taken away from their duties was their participation in political life. As mentioned before, many of the religious were called by the king to carry on business of state. "The

1. This need is evident by the fact that many of the church leaders themselves, even before the time of the Tudors, realized some monastic reform was necessary. All the reports could not have been false exaggeration. Where there was so much talk of scandal, there must have been some basis for these complaints. All could not be fictitious. Unfortunately, the exact number or percentage of disobedience and irregularities can never be proved.

2. C. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 272.

Church, no doubt, was a good training-school for statesmen."¹ Many of them had much influence in affairs of state. "In 1216, for example, from the North Province of England eleven abbots and eight priors, and from the South seventy-one abbots and priors -- in all ninety religious -- were summoned to Parliament by Henry III."² "Twenty-seven of the mitred abbots and priors ranked as barons of England and sat, or might sit, in the House of Lords, with the bishops; and the wealth of some of them was enormous."³ It has been estimated that there were more spiritual peers in Parliament than secular.⁴

Besides being involved in carrying on business of state, some religious meddled in political affairs for various interests of their own. For instance, a letter written by the Prior of Durham, shortly after the battle of Towton-Field, shows that the master of Jarrow was in restraint since he had proved himself favorable to the house of Lancaster.

'Right noble and worthy lord, I recommend me in my most humble wise unto your Lordship. -- I would beseech your Lordship that -- he (Master of Jarrow) might come unto you for his declaration; others

1. Gairdner, op. cit., p. 1.

2. Gasquet, English Monastic Life, p. 195.

3. Geikie, op. cit., p. 261.

4. Liljegren, op. cit., p. 15.

tell that it might like your good grace so to provide for him that he may surely ride and go in the country, where he liketh, for the well and profit of his place; for I dare say and make it good that he is, and hitherto has been, a true man, willing unto King Edward, my Lord of Warwick, unto you, and to all that belonged to that party. Written at Duresme, the fifth day of July, 1461. By your true and continual bedeman,

John, the Prior of Duresme,¹

Many of the religious of the realm were engaged in politics and thus could not devote the time they should to their religious duties. Those who were not important enough to interfere in state affairs, followed their superior's practices and likewise forgot their vows of seclusion. They went outside the monastery on many occasions, staying away days at a time. The nuns were also guilty of this.

We may gather from the episcopal letters and injunctions that the nuns enjoyed much freedom of intercourse with the outside world, could pay visits in the neighbourhood to their friends, and even stay a night or two abroad. The bishops commonly assure that this was usual, do not treat it as irregular, but only try to fence it around with safeguards which may check possible disorders. The nuns of Godstow, for example, must really be more careful and not chatter or joke with Oxford students; the nuns of Cannington who have leave to stay with their friends in Exeter must not go elsewhere without permission; the sisters of Mynchin Baroow must wear their proper dress when they go abroad and not stay out too long, and wander in levity from house to house.²

1. Inventories and Account Rolls of Benedictine Houses of Jarrow, p. xxi.

2. Capes, op. cit., pp. 302, 303.

"Chaucer's Shipman's Tale, where the monk of St. Dennis comes out whenever he likes to visit his friends in Paris, is a perfectly natural picture of ordinary practice."¹ Wolsey, during his early career saw how often the religious were leaving the seclusion of the monastic walls for the world outside. "He saw the realities of the Church sacrificed to the unrealities of the passing hour. He saw Churchmen neglecting that which was God's for what they could get from Caesar."²

Next let us turn to the four monastic duties and activities mentioned in Chapter IV, prayers, hospitality, charity, and education, and see whether on the eve of the dissolution they were being performed nobly, or whether they were being neglected. The first duty mentioned is that of monastic prayers for founders, patrons, deceased superiors, and for all Christian souls. Many of the religious probably continued devoutly in their prayers up until the time of the dissolution, but there were some exceptions to this rule, and the exceptions were not few. In one monastery it was discovered after a visitation was made in the fifteenth century that the religious atmosphere was not always conducive to silence and prayers.

1. Coulton, Medieval Scene, p. 81.

2. Taunton, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

They were certainly no happy family; irreverent and remiss in the discharge of their duties in the choir or at the altar, they disturbed each other by their loud tones while at service, walking about the church when they should be in their places, gabbling through their private prayers while the high mass was going on, or making their confessions while wandering about the nave.¹

By the time of the dissolution the religious had worked out a system of rotation by which only a certain number of the members of a whole house would have to be present at each service. Thus each cloisterer had only a certain number of services to attend and all were not required to be present at each service. Although they have been criticized for this rotation, actually the religious would have been able to do little else. Had each member been required to attend every service, there would have been very little time left for other necessary functions.

However, one of the monastic enemies contends that this system of rotation was further proof that the religious were not attending to their duties nor living up to their vows. By only having to attend a certain number of services, the monks were given more opportunity to attend to their personal pleasures, thus taking more of their time away from their divine duties. "This system of rotation by which only a proportion of the religious

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 252.

were present at divine service seems difficult to reconcile with their obligations to founders and benefactors."¹

Another duty of the monks closely connected with praying was the burial of the dead. By the seventeenth century some of the religious had become so mercenary that they refused this sacrament to those who required it. During the early part of the sixteenth century an unusual petition was presented to Parliament about the unheard of demands that some of the religious were making. "It complained that the clergy refused burial until after the gift of the deceased's best jewel, best garment or the like, and demanded that every curate should administer the sacrament when required to do so."²

The second activity of the monks was that of hospitality, one which was greatly appreciated by medieval wayfarers. However, it has been charged against the religious that they caused to be constructed hospices or inns near the monastery, so that they would not have to open their doors to visitors.

At St. Albans towards the end of the fifteenth century, it seems that hospitality was quite dying out. The abbey, which of old had stabling for 300 horses, granted a licence to the landlord of 'the

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 21.

2. Pollard, op. cit., p. 235.

George' to have an oratory and low mass for the great men, nobles and others, who should be lodged at his hostelry, for they came no more to stay within the abbey walls. So too at Abingdon, while travellers of rank were entertained at the abbot's table there had been a hospice attached to the abbey for the meaner guests, but in 1414 this was superseded by a 'new hostelry' leased out by the convent at a yearly rent as a public inn. We hear of like conversion of the hospice into a public inn at Glastonbury and at Burcester, in the latter case soon after 1379, and the Pilgrim's Inn at Gloucester points perhaps to a like charge.¹

The entertaining of visitors was some expense to the smaller houses and some claimed exemption from this activity by the fact that their incomes were too limited to take in visitors.

Although some of the houses may have been turning their job of providing hospitality for travellers over to others, many more places continued to fulfill such obligations. In the county of Hampshire were two famous houses, well known for their hospitality to sea-faring travellers, the monastery of Quarr and of Netley.² Christ Church must have been a popular place since the prior claimed that it was the only haven of refuge from within eight to eighteen miles.³ These houses, unlike St. Albans and Glastonbury, continued to fulfill their hospitable duties and because of such service endeared themselves to

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 287.

2. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 29.

3. Ibid., p. 29.

many.

Arguments of this kind were reinforced by men who either had no sympathy with, or who had lost what they had in, the religious life; as is seen by Bishop Latimer's pleading for the priory of Great Malvern, by Bishop Barlow for Nostill, or by Sir William Parr, a prominent innovator in religion, for Pipewell Abbey. There can be no doubt but that the disappearance of the monastery was a cause of great inconvenience to many travellers, rich and poor.¹

Coming from an author whose ancestors profited well by the dissolution, this is quite a compliment to the religious.

The third activity of the religious was that of almsgiving and charity. In the performance of this duty, as in that of all others, many of the houses were not fulfilling their obligations. On the other hand, a few conscientious souls still felt it their duty to take care of their less fortunate brethren. For instance one superior was so concerned over the fate of those he had cared for while he was in authority, that after the dissolution he wrote to Cromwell in their behalf.

Robert Ferrar to Cromwell
15 November, 1539

I hastily beseech your lordship to be good and favorable to my poor fellow servants and other poor people which had relief and succor off me there, and verily I found Master Henley most worshipfull. -- Master doctor has taken possession of your farm of Huntwyke, myndynge so to haue doone atte the poor

1. Ibid., p. 29.

cell of Stokyeke whereunto I had put (by the whole consent and deed of the convent) a very poor man which married my sister, having many small children and no house to dwell in, both good Master Henley considered the poor man needy and also your honorable letters concerning my mansion have referred the matter to your lordship.

Robert Ferrar, late of S. Oswaldes
(Vol. 155, p. 13)¹

The work of the nuns is often spoken of in connection with the charity work of the religious. They were especially capable in the capacity of nursing and lending what medical aid they could to neighbouring peoples.

It has been said that there were houses where 'the nuns were nurses and midwives, and even now the ruins of these houses contain certain living records of the ancient practice of their inmates in the rare medicinal herbs which are still found within the precincts.'²

Unfortunately, however, the majority of the religious were not as faithful with their philanthropic work as they should have been. In most of the houses, especially the larger ones, funds had been set aside by the will of the founder or by endowment for that purpose to feed the poor and give alms to them. For instance, at Lilleshull Abbey:

Lady Katherine Leveson left rent of Ll20 per annun issuing out of Foxley, for the maintainence of twelve

1. Clay, op. cit., p. 73.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 304.

poor widows, whereof three were to be chosen by the Minister, Church Warden, and Overseers of the poor of Lilleshull; and to each of them a gown of grey cloth, with these letters, K. L. in blue cloth offixed therto; as likewise for the placing of ten poor boy apprentices, whereof two were to be of this parish.¹

However, when household expenses became great and in times when the budget could not be balanced, part or all of this donation to the poor was oftentimes withheld and used by the house itself. Savine has estimated: "Not more than 3% of monastic income was spent on charity."² Another calculation claims: "Not one-tenth of the enormous monastic incomes were spent upon charitable purposes."³

Several cases are recorded where the money which had been intended to be spent on charity was going for other purposes. For instance, at St. Peter's, Gloucester:

The archbishop found it needful to insist in 1301 that all the proceeds of the Manor of Stanedisch should be spent as by rule upon the poor and that there should be no general entertaining with good cheer at their expense. The Manor of Alton had been set aside (1080-87) by the Abbot of Hyde with the assent of the brotherhood for the maintenance of the pilgrims and the poor, and the deed of gift expressed with the wish that any one who robbed the poor of this 'might have his portion with Dathan, Abiram, Judas, and Nero'. But in the injunction of William of Wykeham to the abbey it stated that the poor and the infirm had been defrauded of their portion, notwithstanding the pious intention of the donors, and

1. Phillips, op. cit., Vol. I, Appendix G-21.

2. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 31.

3. Coulton, Medieval Scene, p. 81.

like complaints were made elsewhere, when the broken meals and cast-off clothes were no longer distributed, to say nothing of more costly gifts.¹

This money which the monks took upon themselves to discharge as freely as they pleased was, after all, not their own, but merely left to them to guard as trustees. Not only the money itself was ill-appropriated, but even the food and clothes which were to be given to the poor were many times re-routed into the possession of some of the abbots' friends or relatives, or what was even worse to the abbots' dogs. "The sub-prior (of West-acre) does not give the fragments to the poor but to his own friends, especially to Mrs. Waseney and another lady."² Alas, but what a far cry this was from what the original dispensation of food from the monks' table had been intended.

"It may be said in favour of the suppressed religious houses, that while they stood, no act was ever passed for the relief of the poor, so amply did these houses succour those who were in want."³ This may have been true, but regardless of this claim, it is questionable whether the charity work of the monks was as beneficial

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 285.

2. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 32.

3. Phillips, op. cit., Vol. I, Appendix B-1. The question might be raised as to whether or not there was a great deal of need for relief at that time.

as it should have been. It seems that the mere handing out of alms by the religious was likely to increase the rank of beggars rather than diminish their number. This dole system really in no way helped the unfortunates to better themselves permanently. What aid they did receive was only momentary and passing. And by simply handing them out "doles" it was likely to create permanent paupers rather than self-respecting citizens.

Beckett says, in speaking of the charity of the monks: "In its indiscriminate character was the occasion of increasing mendicancy with its train of vices; it was a charity which fed the clamorous with no thought of their improvement as fellow-beings."¹ In the vagrancy law of Edward VI the term "abbey-lubbers" is outstanding. "It may mean sturdy beggars, or else the useless dependents and servants of monasteries against whom the bishops were always inveighing."² It has been said that the type of philanthropic work undertaken by the religious actually did as much to increase beggars as it did to relieve them.³

The fourth and last activity of the religious was that of education. Perhaps in this, more than in any of

1. Beckett, op. cit., p. 5.

2. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 32.

3. Ibid., p. 32.

their other duties, many monks fell short of their standards. By the beginning of the sixteenth century there was a definite inertia among the monks when it came to learning. There were some who still pursued their studies zealously, but the majority only had the minimum education required of them. The grand old days of Matthew Paris were only a memory of the past. In speaking of such scholars as he, Capes says:

It is a great change to pass from the variety and picturesque detail of Matthew Paris of St. Albans to the narrowed themes and duller style of his successors, and in most of them the stream of monastic history flows feebly on during some part of the fourteenth century and then commonly ceases altogether. It was not merely a change in the direction of their studies: the monks did not devote their energies to other forms of literary work, or become theologians and preachers. The great schoolmen had no successors in the cloister; the revival of ancient culture found little sympathy from them, and Gascoigne insisted bitterly on the decline of scholarship among them.¹

Likewise, Patterson says,

In the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries they had produced great intellectual leaders among the schoolmen, such as Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas among the Dominicans, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham among the Franciscans; but in the fifteenth century their intellectual was as marked as their moral decline.²

Erasmus had something to add about the alarming lack of learning even in his day and age. "What a sight

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 283.

2. Patterson, op. cit., p. 184.

it is', says Erasmus, 'to see a theologian of eighty who knows nothing but empty sophisms, and can do nothing but dispute. . . .'¹ And at another time he is said to have remarked: "'Our theologians call it a sign of holiness to be unable to read. They bray out the Psalms in the Churches like so many jackasses. They do not understand a word of them.'² It is also interesting to note that in all the synods called together by Charles Bothe, the Bishop of Hereford, the articles and constitutions were read to the clergy in the English language, which seems to confirm their scant knowledge of Latin.³

The claim cannot be made that there were no sixteenth century monks who were intellectually inclined. There probably were some cases where cloisterers pursued their studies with zeal and interest. However, the deplorable fact was: "There was no widespread enthusiasm for learning."⁴

'The ignorance of the religious in the small religious houses,' wrote Doctor Gwent, Dean of the Arches, to Cromwell, 'is incredible. They can't construe their own rules.' 'There are fifteen brethren here,' wrote the Abbot of the large Cistercian house of Warden in Bedfordshire, 'and

1. Geikie, op. cit., p. 87.

2. Hague, op. cit., p. 224.

3. Bannister, op. cit., p. iii.

4. Gee, op. cit., p. 35.

except three of them, none understand nor know their rule, nor the statutes of their religion.' The Abbot of Hayles told Cromwell that none of his monks was learned enough to expound the scriptures to others and that he would have to get down an Oxford don to do so. At St. Benet's, Norfolk, in 1532, four of the monks were reported to be so ignorant that they could scarcely read or sing.¹

The university training of the monks was noticeably neglected. Of all the religious in England, only a very small percentage attended colleges.

It may be doubted if there were as many as a hundred monks and regular canons at Oxford University at any given time, and at Cambridge the number was always smaller; while the great monastery of Rewley and Oseney in the suburbs of Oxford, and that of Barnwell just outside Cambridge, seem to have contributed little or nothing to learning. Oseney 'though best in discipline of the Oxfordshire houses and with 26 canons in 1445 had no school or no learned canon.'²

The education of many of the monks was neglected because their superiors were little interested in the pursuit of learning. Many abbots and priors, and for that matter even bishops, cared little about the achievement of their charges. A certain Richard Nix, Bishop of Norwich was particularly bitter and harsh towards any person who attempted to better himself intellectually. He referred to them as:

'... savouring of the frying-pan.' He seized such books as were brought from beyond seas, of which sort there were now many, which tended to lay open

1. Baskerville, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

2. Ibid., p. 41.

the corruption of the Church and especially the New Testament, which he could not endure should be read.¹

Even the very pro-Catholic writer, Constant admits: "It cannot be denied that the English monasteries, like many elsewhere, stood in need of a certain reform. They were no longer the schools of learning they had been with a reputation commanding respect."²

"'Woe is me, simple friars enter heaven, while learned friars are disputing if there be a God.'³

Even though their intellectual life did decline greatly, we must credit the monks with keeping their libraries in order and preserving for future generations valuable collections which once lost to the world could never be replaced. Even though they used these libraries very little, the books were preserved, and but for them the modern world would be without many of these ancient works. "It is greatly due to the care of generations of monkish librarians that manuscripts were preserved even if they were not always widely used."⁴ Some of the chroniclers of old were very proud of their care and seemed to realize the valuables they were guardians over.

1. Stype, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 42.

2. Constant, op. cit., pp. 153-154.

3. Creighton, op. cit., p. 100.

4. Gee, op. cit., p. 89.

Their books were still guarded with proud pride, even if they did not read them so much as of old, and it seemed to the chronicler of St. Albans an abominable thing when a careless abbot offered to transfer some of their classics to a famous book-collector.¹

It can be said of the religious that while in their possession these ancient and oftentimes rare books were carefully preserved and their value appreciated, even if not by all the inmates of the house, at least by the chronicler. Unfortunately, however, the same cannot be said of those mercenary souls who came into possession of them after the dissolution. To them the only value these libraries had was the number of shillings they could get by selling the books. It has often been told that many old valuable manuscripts were torn apart, page by page, and the detached pages sold to merchants for wrapping paper. Another deplorable report admits that after the dissolution two "noble" libraries were bought by a merchant for 40 s. and taken over sea, although they were very valuable manuscripts.² After centuries of monastic guardianship and care, the vast collections were scattered as worthless trash by the four winds.

If all the charges made against the religious were

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 289.

2. Phillips, op. cit., Vol. I, Appendix B-1.

listed together, the fact would probably be very noticeable that the majority of their duties were neglected. Of all the various activities mentioned in this chapter it seems that only that of hospitality was still being carried on somewhat as of old, with those of labor and charity running a poor second and with the vow of chastity languishing behind. Unfortunately we cannot go back to old records and prove that 1,750 monks were breaking the vow of "no property," while 469 were still adhering to their strict code of morals. There are no definite figures by which to go. However, it seems probable from the evidence available that on the eve of the dissolution there were more cloisterers who were neglecting their duties and were failing to live up to their ideals and vows than there were those who were doing so. When Henry's Commissioners turned in their reports, they claimed that one-third of the houses in England were fairly well conducted.¹ Therefore, considering their tendency to exaggerate evils, it might be estimated that at least one-half were fairly well conducted. Granting that at least fifty percent were above condemnation and suspicion, is this a record of which the Church could be proud?

For each vow and activity mentioned in this

1. Wishart, op. cit., p. 317.

chapter there were undoubtedly some true religious who were nobly carrying on their work. Sadly enough we hear too little of them. Only their less religious friends are publicized. Those who so faithfully went silently about their tasks, never shirking their duties, were harshly made to suffer for the many careless ones who, forgetting their vows and monastic ideals, selfishly put the pleasures of man before their devotion to God, thus bringing about the downfall of monasticism in England.

CHAPTER VI

REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF MONASTIC LIFE

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Even though it is almost impossible to estimate the number of monasteries which had fallen into decay, or the extent to which they had decayed, it is certain that many of the English monasteries had fallen short of the ideals by which they were supposed to have lived. It seems from the evidence gathered that there were more monasteries in need of reform than there were cloisters which could withstand all suspicion. To explain the decay of the majority of English houses by saying that the monks and nuns were only human and too much was expected of them, is merely evading the issue. As there are always reasons behind every movement in history, there were certain definite causes for the decline of monastic life. By studying these reasons one can understand why many monasteries might be in the condition that they were before their dissolution.

The Church by the sixteenth century had proved itself to be a strong force not only in religious life but also in the political affairs of Europe. The influence of the Catholic Church was such that it did not hesitate to disagree with high nobles and court favorites, for that matter not even with kings themselves. The

kings of England had been no exception to this rule. Insults and grievances that they would not have endured from others they were forced to accept from the Church. English rulers who otherwise were free from any foreign domination often felt the influence and power of Rome. As a result, the Crown usually suffered a loss of prestige.

An outstanding example of Rome's power in England is shown in the controversy of King John and the monks. When the rector of the Church of Feversham in Kent died, the king presented his candidate for the vacancy to the Archbishop. The monks of St. Austin's, claiming a share of the profit, acted more quickly than the King.

They immediately on the incumbent's death, sent one of their body to take possession of the church and parsonage; who by force kept out the clerk presented by the king. The king being exceedingly provoked at this proceeding, ordered the sheriff of the county to dispossess the monks; which was accomplished but not without a resistance that caused some blood to be shed in the church.¹

All attempts of the king and nobles to breach over the unhappy situation failed and the monks continued to

. . . affront the king. . . . They knew what great things their brother monks of the cathedral had done for the fee of Rome by their obstinacy, and what returns had been made them for it. They saw that every insult offered to the secular authority, did something towards lessening it in the eyes of the people; -- For this reason, without taking any

¹. Warner, op. cit., pp. 415-416.

notice of the courts of law, the monks of St. Austin's appealed to the court of Rome. INNOCENT, we may be sure, immediately espoused the cause; and by an epistle, directed the bishop of Ely, to excommunicate those who had dispossessed the monks, to put the places they inhabited under an interdict, and then to restore the abbot and convent to their possession. The king forbade the execution of this insolent bull. . . . INNOCENT accordingly wrote a letter to the king; in which he tells him, that every one ought to stand or fall to his own master, and that it was not prudent in his majesty to intermeddle in the affairs of ecclesiastics, of which he had not the proper cognizance. Accordingly, after the king and the archbishop had had a great deal of fruitless wrangling with them about the patronage of this church, the king, seeing no other remedy, but either give up his right, or to come to an open rupture with the court of Rome, yielded at last to the usurpation; and permitted the monks to reap the fruit of their own pride and obstinacy. Had this been one of the first steps towards humbling the English monarchy, we might wonder indeed at the assurance of it; but they had been so frequently taken for many years past, that they have no other effect now, than to make us wonder at the folly and the madness of the English nation, in permitting an imposture . . . to grow upon them.¹

The subordination of monarchy to church authority continued up until the sixteenth century. Even the new-born Tudor dynasty had this threatening power held over them. The efficient Henry VIII, who ruled as well as reigned, felt papal domination as a threat to his power and prestige. The king not only resented this foreign influence, but also looked askance at the constant stream of money which flowed from all parts of England into Rome. The worst feature of this practice was that many

1. Ibid., p. 416.

times the money which had come to Rome from England was lent by the Pope to one of England's enemies. Although attempts were made at various times by the civil powers to stem the flow of gold to Rome, they did not succeed.

But the nation . . . continued in practice to allow the Popes to have a free hand in otherwise disposing of moneys left by Englishmen for the benefits of Religion in their own country. It is worthy to remark that England in those days acted towards the Pope in a most generous and filial manner; and often to her own immediate detriment, allowed him to exercise in temporal matters, a power which Spain, France and Germany sternly disallowed.¹

It has been said that the monks were Papists first and Englishmen afterwards.²

One of the Popes once remarked: "Truly England is our storehouse of delights, a very exhaustible well; and where much abounds much can be extorted from many."³

It is the great scandal of the medieval Papacy that its chief visible relation to English Church people consisted in extorting money. . . . its most irritative form was the payment of annates or first-fruits, which were paid by bishops and archbishops on their promotion and sent to Rome by the papal agents.⁴

The English people, especially the Crown, seemed to resent this constant flow to foreign treasuries and in 1376 a petition of the Good Parliament claimed:

1. Taunton, op. cit., p. 26.

2. Hague, op. cit., p. 304.

3. Taunton, op. cit., p. 37, footnote from Matthew Paris.

4. Gee, op. cit., p. 9.

' . . . that the taxes paid to the Church of Rome amounted to five times as much as those levied for the King; that the Pope disposed of the same bishoprics by reservation four or five times, and received each time the first fruits. . . . that the Pope's revenue from England alone is larger than that of any prince in Christendom . . . that his collector remits yearly to the Pope 20,000 marks, sometimes more.'¹

The great influence that the Church had, coupled with the fact that possibly some of this wealth, had it not been flowing to a foreign power, might have reached the king's coffers, made Henry VIII watch the Church with an anxious eye. When the chance came to cripple papal domination in England by striking at its greatest stronghold, the monasteries, Henry did not allow the opportunity to slip past him.

When any organization decays and is so blinded that it fails to realize its need for reform that condition is bad enough. However, when a group, especially a religious one, is in need of reform and reorganization, and that need is fully recognized by its members and yet nothing is done to right the wrongs, that situation is even more tragic. This was the case of the Catholic Church in the later Middle Ages. A reform from within the Church would have been much better for the Church herself and certainly not as detrimental as the reform from

1. Child, op. cit., p. 29.

without proved to be. "A radical reformation of an institution which had survived a thousand years might easily have brought the monasteries up to date, and have fitted them for a new epoch of beneficent work."¹

It cannot be said that the Church was ignorant of the need for reform. As one of the Canons of the Church said:

A clerical reformation, a reformation without meddling with the Catholic faith, had been attempted already by the best sort of clergy throughout Europe. Three great councils had been held to bring it about . . . and to each of these councils England had sent representatives. The defeat of this attempted reformation by councils, which was effected by the intrigues of Rome . . . is the most mournful event of modern history. . . . it gave weight that no reformation was to be expected from the Church herself, and thus it opened the way for the invasion of the temporal power and for the doctrinal revolution which presently overswept Europe.²

At the beginning of the thirteenth century people realized that monasticism had fallen below its former standards and that some reform was needed. Even some of the newer Orders had become too much influenced by worldly things which they had vowed to renounce. Three ambitious and earnest Popes, Innocent III, Honorious III and Gregory IX tried their hand at reforming the monasteries, but little can be said of their success.³ Even the Crown

1. Gee, op. cit., p. 87.

2. Taunton, op. cit., p. 62.

3. Cheney, op. cit., p. 17.

realized the need for reform and in 1371 sent a letter to the monks of St. Paul's in which their scandalous departure from the religious way of life was severely rebuked.¹ In the early part of the fifteenth century visitations were made in several parts of the country and detailed reports were left of the conditions found.² In 1516 Bishop West of Ely visited the monastic house at Ely and found the need for reform most urgent.³ The Italian Bishop of Worcester wrote from Rome to a churchman in England in the year 1518 that he was often impressed by the need of monastic reform.⁴

When Cardinal Wolsey made preparations for a reformation, a well known prelate, Fox of Winchester, wrote to him as follows:

Great was the contentment and joy, most reverend Father, which I received from your recent letter which tells me that your Grace is set upon reforming the whole body of the Clergy, and that you have notified and fixed a day on which the work shall begin and be proceeded with. This day I have truly longed for, even as Simon in the Gospel desired to see the Messiah, the Expected of men. . . . As is duty bound, I indeed did strive to carry out within the limits of my small jurisdiction that same design which your Grace will soon bring about in the two provinces of this realm. For three years this great affair has been the object of my studies, labours, watchings, and travail, till

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 252.

2. Ibid., p. 251.

3. Pollard, op. cit., p. 338.

4. Ibid., p. 338.

I found out what had hitherto escaped me -- viz. that everything belonging to the primitive integrity of the clergy, and especially to the monastic state, is perverted either by dispensations or corruptions, or else has become obsolete from age or depraved owing to the iniquity of the times. As age was creeping on me, while the thought of this increased my will and desire, so all hope departed of seeing a revival, even in my own diocese.¹

Even though the Church and its officials realized the great need for reform, little was done about it and the many practices which were causing the constant decay of monastic life were allowed to continue. One of the privileges which the cloisterers enjoyed and one which tended to encourage lawlessness among them was that of immunities, or as it was often called, "benefit of clergy." The idea was based on the theory that the clergy was a sacred order and, therefore, should not be tried in the secular courts. Originally, upon suspicion of a crime of any sort, the clergyman was to appear before the king's court and claim "benefit of clergy." Whereupon he was turned over to his ecclesiastical superior, who had him tried according to church law in an ecclesiastical court. This privilege was claimed by the Church until the sixteenth century, but years before that time many unworthy ones had taken advantage of this position. The immunities were being extended to such unimportant offices as door-

1. Taunton, op. cit., p. 63.

keepers and readers.¹

Not only many of the secular class were escaping punishment for their crimes through the right of immunities, but with the lowered standards and the laxity of morals and conduct among the monastic orders, many of the monks felt less hesitancy about committing offenses since they knew they would not be tried in a secular court. Quite a number of offenders thus escaped punishment, who otherwise might have been found guilty in the secular courts.

The laxity of the courts towards clerical offenders was notorious, and it often happened that the ends of justice were defeated by the sentence passed upon a delinquent. Benefit of clergy, the technical name given to the immunity of the clergy, had come to be one of the most crying scandals, for it had the effect of shielding criminals from punishment due to the offense, and as minor orders covered a large number of persons, the criminals who escaped penalty cannot fail to have been fairly numerous.²

Even the pro-Catholic writer, James Gairdner admits:

This system probably worked well and was attended with good results in the days when the discipline of the Church was superior to that of the State. But centuries had passed away since then, and the system had gotten roughly modified in different directions.³

One of the vows that the monk took when he entered

1. Gairdner, op. cit., p. 42.

2. Gee, op. cit., p. 26.

3. Gairdner, op. cit., p. 42.

his order was the pledge to withdraw from the world, to remain secluded within the grey walls of the monastery and not to wander forth. In the case of the heads of monasteries and church officials, their obligation was to hold one office, to remain at their appointed place and see that their duties were performed. By the sixteenth century many of these obligations assumed by the religious were conveniently forgotten or flagrantly disobeyed. In the case of the cloistered monk, the problem of discipline was always a greater one if the monks journeyed into the "outside world." They often made such a habit of leaving the cloister.

The Benedictine houses combined to keep a proctor at the Curia to arrest any of their Order who went thither without license. A prior of Canterbury appealed even to the civil power to issue a writ of praemunire against a restless monk who had managed to procure papal letters of exemption from monastic discipline without having first submitted it to the king's council. But the hands of authority were sometimes weakened by the interested action of the papal agents. Thus the Carmelite friar, Walter Disse -- confessor of John of Gaunt -- was empowered to sell for Urban VI 50 appointments to the office of papal chaplain; these secured exemption from conventual control, and even liberty to take a rich rectory as well. A monk of St. Albans, William Shapeye, begged or borrowed money to buy one of these and gained thereby his freedom.¹

In 1455 Archbishop Bouchier's Commission for reforming the Church reported:

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 297.

The constant and noisy clamour of many, and public report, and the notoriety of the fact spreading it, it has now lately reached our ears, not without grievous bitterness of heart, that there are some within our diocese of Canterbury, render the profession of monastic observance, who have got possession of parish churches and their perpetual vicarages, under the pretext of certain pretended apostolic letter, and having scorned and discarded their regular habit, or at all events contrary to the manner of their religion, abandon the same secretly under secular garb, some of whom also wear a habit inconsistent fashion, and go about rashly and presumptuously, like secular priests, in no wise fearing sentence of excommunication and irregularity passed in that behalf against such, and damnably incurring and contracting them to thus incur and contract them.¹

It was bad enough for the monks to forget their duties and "go-a-travelling," but the example was set for them by their superiors. The practice of non-residence was often due to the fact that clergymen held more than one office at the same time. For example, Richard Fox was consecrated Bishop of Exeter in 1487, in 1491 he was transferred to Bath and Wells, and in 1494 to Durham. "Richard Fox is said never to have seen his cathedral at Exeter or to have set foot in his diocese of Bath and Wells."² Cardinal Wolsey held at the same time: the Archbishopric of York, the Sees of Lincoln, Tournai, and Winchester, and the Abbey of St. Albans. "He was also a Cardinal, a Legate, a latere, and a

1. Gee and Hardy, op. cit., p. 142.

2. Spence, op. cit., p. 109.

Chancellor of Henry VIII."¹

Bishops were often kept away from their diocese by their duties at court and thus no visitation or check-up on conditions in their territory could be made.² As the poet, Thomas Hoccleve tells us, the pluralist could care little for his charges. "His flock might pine in vain for holy sermonage. He rekketh never how rusty ben his schepe."³

Although the practices of non-residence and pluralities cannot be blamed wholly on the monks, nevertheless these must have had an indirect influence on the increasing laxity of their everyday life. Without the fear of visitation from the bishops, they naturally felt freer to do things which otherwise they might have refrained from doing. Among the things which were being neglected in the fifteenth and sixteenth century monastic life was the financial affairs of the various monastic houses.

It cannot be said that all the monasteries were in financial difficulties, nor can it be claimed that all were wealthy, prosperous houses. Henry VIII might have

1. Ibid., p. 109.

2. Patterson, op. cit., p. 178.

3. Capes, op. cit., p. 155.

expected them to be strongholds of wealth and riches, but in some cases he was sadly disappointed. For the greater part, the monasteries were rich houses, but in certain exceptional cases it can be seen that some were in dire poverty and financial difficulties. The following description, although it was written about the Abbey of Glastonbury, might be applied to the majority of English houses: "It had immense wealth; every Wednesday and Friday it fed and lodged 300 boys; it was esteemed very highly in the neighbourhood and received large donations from the knights in the vicinity."¹

In contrast we have those houses where, because of mismanagement on the part of the monks, they were forced to meet many difficulties financially. Sometimes this trouble was due to the fact that the monks, or an ambitious abbot, might wish to increase the splendour of their possessions and add large, spacious buildings to their cloister. These were usually examples of beautiful and fine architecture, but they left the monks deeply in debt.² Others claimed that the obligation of housing travellers and royal guests was too much of a burden to them financially. However, Archbishop Bouchier

1. Wishart, op. cit., p. 315.

2. Capes, op. cit., p. 282.

examples the lack of money to other reasons. He said:

"They waste the property, rights, goods, fruits, and revenues of their benefices of this sort, and vainly and uselessly consume them on forbidden and profane objects."¹

The following can be found in the Register of John Stafford:

The finances of the house as well as the morals of the monks seem to have needed the abbot's attention, and we find in 1443 that he had to prosecute Bartholomew Downton of Lyllington in Dorset because of his unwillingness to give up his accounts when he was receiver in the county for abbot Chynnock.²

We have other examples of poverty in monastic houses. "The Benedictine abbey of Tavistock in the fourteenth century was seriously troubled by debt, partly at least caused by an incapable and unworthy superior."³ Apparently there were cases of genuine poverty. Thus the canons of Aiguebelle wrote to the Bishop of Hereford: "They have had hard times -- their books and vestments are worn out, and they appeal for help from the bishop of Hereford."⁴

In some of the convents it was found that the superior, due to poor management, was leading the house into ruin. "She pinched the nuns and spent too freely

1. Gee and Hardy, op. cit., p. 142.

2. Holmes, op. cit., p. xli.

3. Gasquet, Monastic Life, p. 187.

4. Bannister, op. cit., p. vi.

on herself." "The abbess of Romsey must not keep many dogs or any monkeys, nor should she stint the nuns' food to provide for her own pleasures."¹

Another factor that helped cause poverty in some of the houses was the tributes exacted by the Papacy and the Crown.² Each year there was collected from the monks the king's first fruits and tenths, plus the money that the monasteries were obliged to send to Rome. The following itemized income shows the amount paid out to these various sources:³

Income for 9 months	L 2202	10	0
Dues to the king, vicars (of which about L130 to the king)	318	8	0
Fees, synodals, tithes, etc.	122	14	0
Chapel keeper and candles (guest's chapel)	4	11	0
Clothing (including L26 13s. for scholar's outfit)	136	13	0
Expenses on obits	20	7	0
Fees to steward, etc.	27	10	0
Fees to bailiffs	24	3	0
Wages to prior's servants	35	16	0
Wages to farm servants	134	4	0
Repairs of Churches, etc.	12	18	0
Repairs of buildings of monastery	17	10	0
Repairs of house property	49	14	0
Miscellaneous household expenses	24	0	0
Cost of journeys	12	8	0
Gifts in money	42	8	0

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 303.

2. Patterson, op. cit., p. 184.

3. Gasquet, English Monasteries, p. 508. Priory of Huntingdon - for 9 months from Michaelmas 1517. Figures multiplied by 10 to give some sort of approximation to modern values. House consisted of a prior, 11 canons, 34 servants. No mention is made of the amount sent to Rome.

Farm repairs, miscellaneous farm expenses (of which threshing L20)	67	15	0
Bread bought for guest (bishop's visitation) L6 2s.			
wine bought for guest (bishop's visitation) L2 10s.			
Goodale bought for guest (bishop's visitation) L 9	17	12	0
Fuel	33	5	0
Lights	9	0	0
Wheat, malt, barley, bought	141	19	0
Stock bought	111	8	0
Legal expenses	6	19	0
"Expenses of howshold as appereth by ye kechyn boke"	417	3	0
Debts paid	422	10	0
	<u>L 2210</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>0</u>

Another manner in which monastic wealth disappeared was the payment to officials for positions that they might bestow upon some favorite. A good illustration of this is the case of William Boston who was appointed abbot of Westminster in 1515. The records do not say that Cromwell appointed him, but shortly after his appointment he paid Cromwell L 661, 13s 4d and after his arrival at Westminster was still L 500 in debt to him and to the Controller of the Royal Household.

Before the year was out the new abbot had shown his hand. Ten of the abbey manors were given away to raise money for this debt; Cromwell was made Janitor of the monastery, keeper of the Gatehouse prison, and Seneschal (or Steward). As Seneschal he could hold manorial courts all over the abbey estates, a privilege which was no doubt financially profitable. In the next year Cromwell took further tribute from the monastery in the shape of 60 years leases of three manors and the right of presentation to Oakham. Various other people connected with the royal household obtained similar benefits, including Anne Boleyn, the Lord Chancellor, and the Court physician. No

attempts seem to have been made to gloss over the traffic in abbey property and privileges.¹

A variation of this was the payment to the Crown of a certain sum of money for the span of time between the death of one abbot and the appointment of a new one. From the Additions to Adam of Domerham's Chronicle are some instances:

Redemptions of certain abbeys when vacant:

The abbey of St. Edmundsbury undereth 1200 marks for every vacancy, long or short; and the monks have made fine for L 200.

The abbey of (Ulmo) 200 marks for each 4 months.

The abbey of St. Albans, for every vacancy of a year or less, 1000 marks; and if longer, then more in proportion.²

In the later years of English monasticism some of the monastic wealth went as bribes to save the houses from dissolution. After the commissioners visited many of the cloisters and sent in their reports, letters of the following nature came to Cromwell's attention:

'I submytt myselfe', wrote the abbot of Rewley, 'fulle and holle to your mastershipp, as all my refuge, helpe, and socor is yn yow, glad of my voluntarye mynde to be bounde in obligacion of one hundred powndes to be payed to your mastershipp, so that our house may be savyd.' We may well believe that this proposal did not fall on deaf ears.³

1. Russell, op. cit., p. 75.

2. Coulton, Life in Middle Ages, Vol. IV, p. 206.

3. R. G. Merriman, Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell, Vol. I, p. 168.

It offered Cromwell an excellent opportunity for private gain. It has been estimated that the monks paid out the sum of L 5,948, 6s, 8d in an effort to save their houses from the dissolution.¹ However, after these religious bodies raised huge payments to save themselves, they were treacherously destroyed anyway. Such was the case at the convent of Pollesworth.

After those monasteries had procured an authorization to continue in existence and in several cases impoverished themselves paying the heavy fines exacted by the King, the latter made Parliament pass another act -- which commanded the suppression of all monasteries. In this way, the King first got fines for exemption, and then the monastery itself.²

The life of the monastery was not always harmonious. Often times, as differences will arise in places of business or in families, there were disagreements and factions within the religious group which frustrated them from attaining the ideal monastic experience. The nuns of the Holy Sepulchre at Canterbury quarreled so much that they "must be kept in a dark room till they agree to live in peace."³ Such was the case at the monastery of St. Alban's at the end of the fifteenth century.

The abbot twice applied to the Crown, at an interval of sixteen years, for the arrest of an

1. Liljegrin, op. cit., p. 21.

2. Ibid., p. 21.

3. Capes, op. cit., p. 303.

'apostate' monk, and in the same terms: 'Like another son of perdition he goes about from town to town, and from market to market, more like a vagabond and an apostate than a monk, and causes in his travels the greatest scandal, as well to the Order as to religion in general.' Each of the two had been prior of a dependent cell; each had been sent as a commissioner to inquire into the conduct of the other; both were deposed and reinstated, and one at least confessed that he repented of the false charges he had brought. There are many illustrations of such discord and intrigues in the annals of the smaller houses, as notably in Meaux in 1353. Except in the Carthusian Order there was no chance of privacy for moody or impatient tempers, and the necessity of daily intercourse with uncongenial tastes and habits must have sorely strained the powers of self-control.¹

Besides disputes within the monasteries there were oftentimes feuds between the various houses. For example the abbots of Westminster and St. Albans disputed the right of precedent in Parliament for many years. Finally in 1417,

. . . they transferred the quarrel to land in dispute between their several estates. One erected a gibbet on it as a token of his feudal rights; the other had it levelled to the ground 'by force of swords and axes.' Set up once more it was again demolished, while the tenants of the neighbouring manors, 'for fear of their hides', stealthily made perambulations of the disputed ground and played thus at hide-and-seek for many years. . . . the Abbot of St. John's at Calchester sent, in 1399, a party of monks to Snape in Suffolk, who broke into the prior's house and burnt the deeds that were found there, and then lay in wait outside, wounding his servants, burning his crops, and carrying off his stock.²

This factious disorder can be best seen later when

1. Capes, op. cit., p. 295.

2. Ibid., p. 294.

the commissioners were sent to investigate the homes of the friars. At that time the royal agents would have had trouble in some monasteries at least, getting the truth (if the truth had really been the goal), since many of the inmates deliberately lied or made up slanderous tales about some of their brethren whom they happened to dislike. Sometimes members of one monastic order or house would elaborate on and then repeat as the truth detrimental stories that they had heard of a neighbouring house of which they might happen to be envious. Although this was a far cry from their religious teachings, they were conveniently laid aside for the time being. Even though the quotation, "united we stand, divided we fall" is a motto of an American state government, the same idea could have been applied very satisfactorily to organizations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was even true of the monastic orders, but they failed to realize that "in union there is strength." Instead they allowed silly personal differences and petty disputes among the brethren in the houses to divide the houses themselves. If they could not live together peacefully before, how could they, divided, expect to withstand the royal opposition and propaganda that they had to face during the reign of Henry VIII?

Long and fierce has been the "battle of words"

that historians have waged over the superstitions and relics held by the monasteries. The Protestant sympathizers have called the cloister "cradles of superstitions" and have condemned all their images as money-making fakes. Whereas the Catholic-inclined group hasten to the defense of the monks by claiming that these relics were not used but had long been discarded before the dissolution; or else they were used with the upmost trust and sincerity and with no idea of deceiving the people.

One of the most debatable of these relics was that known as the "Blood of Hayles", which was said to have been the Blood of Christ. It was supposed to have had certain miraculous powers, such as the ability to make itself invisible and visible. The monks were later accused of all sorts of trickery in connection with this miracle-working wonder. In the following letter to Cromwell from the abbot of Hayles we can see that the abbot himself realized the hoax that was being played on the people, and whether earnestly or not, we do not know, he attempts to free himself of the responsibility of continuing to allow it to be shown.

'It is not unknown unto your honour how that there is in the monastery of Hayles a 'blood', which hath been reputed as a miracle a great season. And now I come to tell your lordship plainly that I have a conscience putting me in dread lest idolatry be committed therein, giving the very honour of the blood of Christ to that thing, which I cannot tell

what it is. And, having this conscience I was and am wonderously perplexed: for to put it away of my own authority, seeing it hath been allowed there to be showed to such as seek for it, I feared to do lest I should condemn myself to be guilty in mis-using it, as changing and renewing it with drakes blood, wherein I offer myself to suffer the most shameful death that ever man suffered if ever it may be proved that it was either changed, renewed or ever looked upon to try what it is, to my knowledge, but is there still, as far as ever I can learn or know, as it was brought thither. And, there is one monk alive nigh eighty years of age, who hath kept it almost forty years. And he will (as he says) upon his life make the same answer. And for discharge of my own conscience in avoiding of idolatry and to save my honesty towards the world I do most earnestly beseech your honour to send hither your commission by whom it shall please you to examine my truth and honesty in this manner upon danger not only of my office and suppression, but also of my life, if I be found guilty in any word that I have said; and then further, by your authority, to order that blood that it may be nor more noted to minister occasion of idolatry.' (R.O. State Papers, Dom., 1538)¹

As a result of this letter from the abbot of Hayles, the King sent Bishop Latimer, the prior of Worcester, the abbot, and Richard Tracy, Esq., to the abbey on October 4, 1538 to examine the "Blood." In a report of their findings which was addressed to Cromwell, they stated:

'A certain supposed relic called the blood of Hayles, which was inclosed with a round beryl, garnished and bound on every side with silver, which we caused to be opened in the presence of a great multitude of people. And the said relic we caused to be taken out of the said beryl and have viewed the same being within a little glass. And we also tried the same according to our powers

1. Gasquet, English Monasteries, Vol. II, pp. 536-537.

wits and discretions by all means and by force of the view and other trials thereof we think deem and judge the substance and matter of the said supposed relic to be an uncterous gum colored, which being in the beryl appeared to be glistening red, resembling partly the colour of blood. And after we did take out part of the said substance and matter out of the glass then it was apparent glistening yellow colour like amber or base gold, and doth cleave to as gum or birdlime.'¹

Modern writers seem to agree that the blood was in reality that of a duck, which was renewed at certain intervals by monks appointed to that certain duty. The substance was kept in a crystal, very thick on one side and transparent on the other. If a wealthy man came to confess his sins, the thick side was displayed until he had paid for a number of masses, then suddenly, a reformation took place. "'One in a secret place behind the altar, near which the relic was placed, turned the thin side, and then the blood appeared.'"²

There was an abundance of other superstitious relics, although probably none as well known as the "Blood of Hayles." For instance there was the famous Road of Grace, or Road of Boxley as it was sometimes called, which was displayed at Boxley abbey. It was a figure on a crucifix whose eyes and mouth miraculously opened and shut. Cromwell's agent, Geoffrey Chambers

1. Ibid., pp. 537-538.

2. Ibid., p. 539.

describes it as follows: "' . . . certen ingynes and olde wyer wyth olde roton stykkes in the backe of the same, that dyd cause the eyes of the same to move, or stere in the hede thereof lyke unto a lyvelye thing.'"¹ The image was seized by Cromwell's agents and later exhibited to the public in Kent, Maidstone, and London. Gairdner excuses this relic by saying that it was merely an "old-fashioned toy." The description of it by Cromwell's commissioners shows that it was full of old wire and rotten sticks and therefore, must have been a thing that the people had worshipped many years before.²

Besides these two outstanding ones there were other less famous relics in the monasteries. A traveller in 1509 left an account of those that he saw at Canterbury, which he said were shown chiefly to arouse the many pilgrims' faith and thereby increase their gifts.

He saw there a fragment of the robe of Christ; three splinters from the crown of thorns; a lock of Mary's hair; a shoulder blade of Simeon; a tooth of John the Baptist; blood of the apostles John and Thomas; part of the crosses of Peter and Andrew; a tooth and finger of St. Stephen; some hair of Mary Magdalene; a lip of one of the innocents slain by Herod the Great; the head of Thomas a Becket; a leg of St. George; the bowels of St. Lawrence; a finger of St. Urban; a tooth of St. Benedict; bones of St. Clement; bones of St. Vincent; bones of St. Catherine the Virgin; a leg of Mildred the Virgin; and a leg

1. Merriman, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 174.

2. Pollard, op. cit., p. 380.

of a virgin called Recordia. He saw besides in the cloister, a fountain which flowed at times with water, at other times with milk, and at still others with blood. It had been five times changed to blood, and just before his visit it had been changed to milk.¹

When Cromwell's agents made a survey of the houses, they listed beside the name of each monastery they visited the superstitions that they found there. The following are only an example of the many superstitions that they found and that they listed in the Comperta:

- Arthington Founder Henry Arthington. Rent 20 marks. Superstition the girdle of St. Mary.
- Basedale Superstition there that they had the Virgin's milk. Founder Sir Raleigh Everes. Rents 18 li.
- Nonneburnham Founder Lord Dakers. Rents 7 li. Here they have part of the Holy Cross.
- Haltemprise Founder the Duke of Richmond. rents 104 li. Here is a pilgrimage to Thomas Wake for fever and in veneration they have the arm of St. George and part of the Holy Cross and the girdle of St. Marie healthful for childbirth (as is thought).
- Keldham Here they have part of the Holy Cross and a finger of St. Stephen which is lent to lying-in women.
- Arden Founder the Duke of Norfolk. Rent 20 marks. Here women go to the image of St. Brigett and offer for cows lost and ill.

1. Geikie, op. cit., p. 74.

- Nunkeeling Founder the King. Rents 36 li.
Here is part of the Holy Cross.
- Clementhorpe Founder the Archbishop of York.
Here also they have milk (as
believed) of the Blessed Mary in
veneration.
- Fountains Six seek release. They have a
girdle of St. Mary (as is
believed). Founder the Arch-
bishop of York. Rents 1200 li.
- Pontefract Here they have in veneration
Thomas, Duke of Lancaster, and
his girdle, which is (as is
believed) safe for lying-in
women and his hat for pain in the
head. Founder the King. Rent
330 li. The house owes 20 li.
- Selby Here also they have the girdle of
the Blessed Mary as is pretended.
Founder the King. Rents 800
marks. Owes 300 li.
- Sinningrhwate Here they have the arm of St.
Margaret and the tunic of St.
Bernard as is believed safe for
the lying-in women. Founder
the Earl of Northumberland.
- St. Leonard's, York Here they have the arm and finger
of St. Leonard in reverence and
his image. Founder the King.
Rents 7 marks.¹

On August 24, 1431, the Bishop of Dogmersfield
ordered to have read in the cathedral at Wells and in all
of his diocese a charge against sorcery, lot drawing,

¹. Clay, op. cit., pp. 16-18. These are only a
few of the many superstitions mentioned, not only in the
Comperta, but in many other references.

incantations and any other pagan superstitions.¹ When almost one hundred years later the agents of Henry VIII visited the cloisters they still found in some many superstitions. The Commissioner John Ap Rice writes to Cromwell concerning one monastery that he visited:

'Among the relics we founde moche vanitie and superstition, as the coles that Saint Laurence was tested withall, the paring of Saint Edmund's naylles, and divers skulles for the hedache; pieces of the holie crosse able to make a hole crosse of; other reliques for rayne and certain other superstitious usages for avoyding of wedes growing in corne, with suche other.'²

It is difficult to tell just how readily the people believed in these old relics, but it is certain that there was an abundance of them in many monasteries. Had they not been profitable to the houses, they would hardly have been so numerous. They were displayed to the people as miracle-working wonders which could do anything from curing pains in the head, to making lost cows return home. For the most part, the monks realized the hoaxes that they were playing on the people. James, a Carthusian monk of the later part of the fifteenth century wrote: "There is so much superstition. There are so many of the worst and most scandalous practices in the church . . . all religion seems wellnigh choked, as if the enemy of souls had sown

1. Holmes, op. cit., p. xlv.

2. Wright, op. cit., p. 85.

tares over the wheat."¹ However, the money received through gifts to these "holy relics" was just as valuable to the monastery as any other source of income. After all the King should not be accused of being the only mercenary soul in sixteenth century England!

Institutions, like people, usually are either progressive or retrogressive. The progressive ones live, the others lag along for a span of a few years and pass out of existence. To be vitally alive it is necessary to be alert and progressive, but the monasteries failed to understand this reasoning. As has been pointed out before, one of the monastic activities was that of education. However, by the sixteenth century they were neglecting not only the education of the children entrusted to their care, but also the education of their own members. As a result many of the monks could not read; their books, chronicles, records, and sermons suffered from neglect, and their wondrous educational work of the past was lost to the world.

The cloisters failed to send forth writers such as Matthew Paris. As schools, libraries, and storehouses of culture of by-gone days, the monasteries were useful to civilization. However, as unprogressive places, abounding

1. Geikie, op. cit., p. 76.

with superstitions, they were no longer an asset to England. The people were beginning to feel that monasticism was becoming out-dated. "Landland, in holding up the Ploughman as one who had the ideal life, had in fact pronounced the death-knell of monasticism. The coming age looked on an active life as superior to one of contemplation and prayer."¹ By the writings of the time we can tell that people were becoming dissatisfied with this religious group. Even the friars had declined so in their moral and intellectual life that their illustrious forefathers, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham would have turned in their graves had they known. A poem of that period shows the feeling towards the friars:

'All wyckedness that men can tell
 Rynes ham (reigns them) among
 Ther shal no saule (soul) have rowme (room) in helle,
 Of frers ther is suche throng.'²

By the beginning of the sixteenth century some of the duties and activities that the monks had once so nobly performed were gradually being taken over by other groups of people. Two of the most important of these activities were, the care of the poor and the hospitality extended to travellers. Before this time the unfortunates had

1. Patterson, op. cit., p. 184.

2. Ibid., p. 184.

depended solely on the monks for donations and alms. However, at the beginning of the modern period, communities were becoming conscious of this need and mindful of the fact that it was their duty to do something about it. As a result we have the Elizabethan and other poor laws passed and finally the assumption of the care of the poor by the state.

Likewise, the monastic duty of hospitality has been assumed by other more modern institutions. Whereas, in olden days the monasteries were the only places to stop on a weary journey over the countryside, by the beginning of the sixteenth century inns and hotels were appearing to replace the monastic guest house.

This is indeed a changing world! For many years the monks had performed their duties and performed them well. But there finally came a time when this was no longer true, and the industrious, intellectual and really religious monastic life of the past was only a memory. This was not a rapid change. Let us compare the monasteries to a beautiful cathedral. The many reasons mentioned which caused the downfall of the monks were like so many tiny, but destructible termites. These creatures very slowly bored and cut into the foundation and supports of this building. Nothing was done to stop the deterioration and the structure continued to grow

weaker and weaker. One day an "outside force" caused the collapse of this great edifice. Although, among the wreckage there were some parts which were found to be as solid, as strong, and as beautiful as they had been the day they were placed there, they nevertheless had to be cleared away with the rest of the debris. Although they were strong, they were not strong enough to counteract the weakness of the other parts of the cathedral. People from the countryside around came to view the wreck and blamed the "outside force" for the damage done. However, had the whole cathedral been as strong and as perfect as some of the parts found among the wreckage, and had not many of the once beautiful arches and columns become rotten and devoured, no matter how hard this "outside force" had pushed, the building would have stood, as majestically and as nobly as it had always stood in the past.

CHAPTER VII

UNRELIABILITY OF EVIDENCE FOR THE SUPPRESSION

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"'When alle tresores arem tried, trewth is the best.'"¹

After Henry VIII definitely decided to bring about a dissolution of the religious houses in England, there had to be some evidence or proof, so that his actions might be justified. How, or by whom this evidence was obtained was not so important as it was to have the material there in case public opinion doubted the monarch's actions. The mere possession of such condemning evidence was justification in itself; its authenticity dared not be doubted.

Therefore, in 1535 Cromwell, acting for the King, sent out Commissioners or agents to visit many of the monastic houses and to bring back reports on existing conditions therein.

At the summons of the Commissioners, clerks, registrars, receivers, auditors of prelates and clergymen were bound to appear before them and give all the necessary information, and the Commissioners were to send in their returns to the Exchequer not later than in octabis Trinitatis 1535. . . . The Commissioners were sent to every diocese, shire, and populous place in England and Wales. . . . The Commissioners are to inquire into and record the names of all the abbeys, priories, monasteries and other religious houses and to inquire into all the financial and internal affairs of the house .

1. G. C. Coulton, From St. Francis to Dante, title page.

When all the local returns were completed, all the Sub-commissioners of the diocese were to meet together and compile one general book for that diocese. . . . The Commissioners were to hand the general book to the Exchequer.¹

Unfortunately, however, these Commissioners were not men who found "truth the best of all treasures." They recognized the task to which they had been assigned. This was not really a survey being made to ascertain honestly the usefulness of the old religious strongholds. Nor was it a commission to discover the weaknesses and immoralities of the cloisterers for the purpose of remedying the same. This commission had one purpose and one purpose only -- that being the king's purpose. "The king's purpose was rather to find a cause for appropriating the possessions of the monasteries than to mend their morals."²

Even though it has already been said that many of the inmates of the monasteries had fallen far below the standards established for them, and the majority were in a real need of some drastic and immediate reform, the fact must be admitted that the trial they received at the hands of Cromwell's agents was not a fair one. There is too much evidence against the Commissioners themselves to prove that they brought back true accusations. One factor against them was the time element.

1. Savine, op. cit., pp. 3-5.

2. Liljegren, op. cit., p. 19.

A thorough investigation into all the affairs of the monasteries visited was a task, which if done accurately, would have taken a very long, drawn-out time. To inquire into all the financial affairs of the cloister, to record the names of the inmates, the tenants, servants, etc., and the possessions of a house, to question the religious brethren and register all complaints made, were all tasks which could not be hurried through in a few hours' time if they were to be done carefully and justly. This was a slow, tedious job, which required patience and above all an unlimited number of hours to accomplish. However, it was not regarded as such. For example, in the diocese of York, ninety houses were visited in a fortnight.¹

The second evidence of the unreliability of this material gathered for the suppression was the very character of the men who made up the commission. They were a sorry lot indeed, to be sent out on a mission of this nature. They were men who, in order to accomplish the task to which they had been assigned, would stoop to any means. The chief Commissioners were Layton, Leigh (Legh), and Ap-Rice, all three men who knew what was expected of them and ambitious enough to see that it was done to please their superiors, regardless of the methods

1. Constant, op. cit., p. 162.

used. "Fuller probably sums up the character of these visitors correctly, that 'they were men who understood the message they went on, and would not come back without a satisfactory answer to him that sent them.'¹ It has also been said of them:

'Most of the persons whom he [Cromwell] used as his agents in the business were unprincipled men for whom not a word of good can be justly said; and most of those who encouraged and assisted the king in the dissolution did so for selfish objects, and for selfish objects alone.'²

The Commissioners used various methods to get the desired evidence. "But Leigh was foremost in a policy of laying down of severe regulations for the monks, binding them by antiquated restrictions which it had long been impossible to maintain."³ The unsubstantial character of Cromwell's agents and, therefore, the questionable methods used to extort the desired information, would give evidence to the unreliability of many of their reports. "The 'Commissioners found means', as it has been significantly stated, 'to make divers monasteries obnoxious.'⁴ Thus evidence acquired in such underhanded methods by characters who made little distinction between right and wrong can not be accepted as authoritative.

1. Beckett, op. cit., p. 144.

2. Constant, op. cit., p. 164.

3. Gairdner, op. cit., p. 164.

4. Merriman, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 167.

One of the most successful ways that the Commissioners found to secure the desired evidence was to play upon the dissenting groups within each house. In every cloister there could usually be found a certain number who had some ill-feeling towards their brethren, or as it usually happened, towards the superior. If these discordant individuals could be appealed to, and they usually could easily enough, then they would offer testimony as to the ill-repute of the house. Since this testimony was offered by brethren in a spirit of vengeance, it certainly could not be counted on as very reliable.

The spirit of faction and disorder within the conventual household was far more fatal to its usefulness and health. Such dissensions had not been unknown in earlier years; for the monks could not leave behind them at the cloister gate their natural infirmities of temper, but they became more frequent and intense, as life grew more self-indulgent and discipline more lax.¹

Many years before the dissolution, the bishops used to use this same policy that the Commissioners later found so successful. They formed a regular secret-spy system among the uncongenial cloisterers, who would report to the bishop all the gossip of the house.

The Bishop of Lincoln seems to have kept a regular party among the canons of Leicester, the members of which furnished him with gossip about the abbot, and who looked to the bishop for preferment. Hugh Oliver, prior of this abbey, was continually running off to

1. Capes, op. cit., pp. 294-295.

London or to the bishop on this errand, trying to work the resignation of the abbot in the hope of succeeding him.¹

Later, when Cromwell's agents visited the monasteries, they used these same tactics. When they called the different members of the house in for questioning, they were offered a chance to tell anything about their brethren. To complicate matters more, those dissenting members who had evidence against their superiors had the right to appeal to Cromwell. They could petition him with their evidence and it is most certain that their petitions did not fall on deaf ears.

One monk wrote to the Vicar-general that the inmates of his home cared nothing for true religion, but came to matins 'as drunk as mice and played some at cards, some at dice' . . . and finally imparted the significant piece of information that Cromwell's visitors had ordered him to write these opinions to headquarters. Another John Placett by name, sent cringing letters to the Vicegerent begging that his zeal in advancing the new doctrines and in reporting those who opposed them, might be rewarded by official exemption from rising at midnight and from observing the customary fasts.²

The old proverb, "a chain is as strong as its weakest link" held true in the sixteenth century. How could the cloisters steel themselves for the deluge to come if individual members were traitors within their own houses? The selfish persons who could not forget their

1. Baskerville, op. cit., p. 75.

2. Merriman, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 167-168.

petty differences in the face of nation-wide destruction were as much to blame for the terrible reports as Henry's agents. They deliberately helped to create and circulate many of the degrading stories which the Commissioners handed in to the Crown. Therefore the dissenting elements within the monasteries helped to bring about their own downfall and destruction.

If the agents of Cromwell were unreliable reporters, little more can be said for their leader and director. Cromwell himself was certainly ambitious and selfish. Admittedly Henry's chief general in this monastic war, and director of the Commission which was sent out to bring back incriminating evidence against the religious, Cromwell, nevertheless, was not above taking bribes from the enemy camp to save certain houses. Here we have the leader of the movement to dissolve the houses taking bribes to save them from dissolution. Along with the material which could doom the cloisters to destruction came letters of a different nature, offering Cromwell a chance for private gain should he intervene in their behalf and save them from the dissolution. For instance, the Abbot of Rowley wrote: "'I submit mayself full and hole to your mastership, as all my refuge, help and soccour in you now, glad of my voluntary mind to be bound in obligation of L 100 to be paid to your mastership, so that our

house may be saved.'¹ It is not likely that the numerous proposals of this nature that Cromwell received were disregarded. In 1536 after Henry had ordered the dissolution of the smaller houses, Cromwell intervened in the behalf of certain places. Some of these monasteries neglected to reward him for his trouble, but he soon reminded them that a due reward was expected and should be seen to immediately. The two letters following are examples of such high-handed bribery.

Cromwell to the Prior of St. Faith's
R. O. Cal. xi 484 Sept. 23 1536

Right wellbeloved In God I Recommend me to you etc., the cause of my writing at this time is that for as much as it please the king if his Regal power to take Reformation of all and singular houses of Religion within the diocese of Norwich like as his Grace has done. In other pleaces and For the absence of Religion and excesses of living (some) shall be disposed of the which your house was billed and named to be on that notwithstanding by the labor of your Friends made to me with my diligences your house is taken out of the king's books and without danger and so shall Remain till the Return of this may chaplain of woys Report hangs your Information to the counsell wome I will that your shall Receive as my trusty chaplain and this pleasure considered as I have deserved to look to my pains and to the berer here of as you would have Further pleasure scoyd off me In like matters For the maintenance of your house I am the more bolder to write by cause that I has been sumtws to me of late as the berer here off can express more plainly to you. Written at London the XXIII day of September

By me

Thomas Cromwell

Add. To the Reverent Father in God prior of saint Faiths
be thys d.d.2

1. Merriman, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 168.

2. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 32.

Cromwell to the Prior of Coxford
R. O. Cal. XI 485 1536

Right Reverent Father In God I Recommend me to you etc. and the cause of my writing at this time is this For as much as it please the king of his Regal power to take Reformation of all and singular houses of Religion within this his realm For the abbweyon of ther living and some shall be disposed of the which your house was named yet not withstanding by the Instance of your Friends, till the Return of this my Chaplain and kinsman I do keep you harmless werefore I will that you receive him as ye would me if I were present. Further I will this premiss considered wich belongs to the wealth of your house that you must do me some pleasure which is to lend me xli the which shall be paid you again, and For your payment you shall receive a bill of my hand wherein it set no sum but loke how myche as ye delouer so myche to write In and this day shall be Redy to keep you out of danger as the bearer here of can show you more plainly namore to yow brethat you look to the pains of this bearer. Written at London

By me

Thomas Cromwell

Add. To the Reverent Father In God prior of Coxford
by this d.d.¹

During the entire commission the agents were never allowed to forget the purpose of their tasks and it is most certain that pressure was brought to bear to see that their memories were often refreshed.

The men who in 1535 controlled the machinery of the state attached great importance to the work of the Commissioners and therefore wished to direct that work even in matters of detail. The Commissioners of 1535 felt the heavy hand of the Government throughout the whole of their work; they were in constant correspondence with it.²

1. Merriman, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 49.

2. Savine, op. cit., p. 5.

Finally the work of the Commission was completed and turned over to Henry and Cromwell for further use. All of this material that the Commissioners brought back was put together into a huge collection known as the Valor Ecclesiasticus, or Commissioners Reports. Not all English cloisters were visited, but the conditions found in those that were are recorded in this tremendous work. "The Commission reported about one-third¹ of the houses to be fairly well conducted, some of them models of excellent management and pure living; but the other two-thirds were charged with looseness beyond description." (From Commissioners Reports)²

Besides the Valor Ecclesiasticus there was a smaller collection known as the Comperta, which dealt mainly with the immoralities reported to be found within the cloisters.

There remain in the Record Office certain documents called Comperta, which are a sort of tabulated statement of the immoralities imputed to the religious persons and their houses. These cannot be regarded as historically reliable; but to find sufficient evidence against the purity and discipline of the 'religious' we need not travel beyond the bishops' register, the entries in which are above suspicion, and which go far to substantiate some of the worst accusations.³

1. It is important to note that the Commissioners admitted that one-third of houses were well-conducted.

2. Wishart, op. cit., p. 317.

3. C. G. Perry, History of the Reformation in England, p. 32, footnote 1.

The Comperta might be referred to as the "tabloid" sheet of the Commission. It disclosed all the scandals that the Commissioners could conjure together during their work. It listed by the name of each house visited the crimes committed and the superstitions found therein. It has been said of the Comperta: "This is of such a character that it is not entirely fit for publication."¹ The following are a few examples from the Comperta.

Clementhorpe -- Founder the Archbishop of York. Here also they have milk (as believed) of the Blessed Mary in veneration and here is made a pilgrimage to Saint Sitha.²

Thickhead -- Matilda Chapman seeks release from religion. Founder John Aske. Rents L 23.³

Fountains -- six seek release. They have a girdle of St. Mary (as is believed). Founder the Archbishop of York. Rents L 1,200.⁴

This edition of the Comperta has been censored to make it fit for publication. In its original form it was said to contain many shady tales of monastic wantonness.

Besides the Valor Ecclesiasticus and the Comperta, there was supposed to have been another publication about the cloistered groups. This much-debated work is referred

1. Clay, op. cit., p. 13.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

3. Ibid., p. 17.

4. Ibid., p. 18.

to as the Black Book and was even worse in its accusations than the Comperta. However, it is now questioned whether such a book ever existed. Some authorities claim: "The Black Book was a mere invention of a later age."¹ Others assert: "The original indictment against the monasteries called the Black Book has been destroyed or lost."² The Catholics claim that the Protestants destroyed this book so that the false evidence on which they acted to dissolve the monasteries might never be known. Others say that it was burned years later by an order from Queen Mary. It has never been definitely proved whether such a work did or did not exist.

Monastic sympathizers claim that the religious were unduly condemned.

These monastic ruins . . . were peopled by men and women who resembled mostly our ordinary selves, and who lived, if not strictly according to the Rule, at least with more regularity than the average of their fellow men and women outside. . . . Among all the lay critics, there were not many who would face the ordinary requirements of monastic discipline.³

This may have been true, but the religious had pledged themselves to live better lives than others, by more strict rules and regulations. Some may have been living

1. Patterson, op. cit., p. 227.

2. Perry, op. cit., p. 32, footnote 1.

3. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 281.

with "more regularity than the average of their fellow men and women," but the many were not. The many were serving as poor examples for the religious way of life. They were not only degrading themselves but they were pulling down the monastic structure with them.

Even the vilest criminal deserves a fair trial. Regardless of the innocence or guilt of the monks, they too, at least were due a fair examination. Such was not to be their lot, however. Instead, their homes were visited by men who knew the job expected of them and did it accordingly. True, many of the monasteries were corrupt and needed some kind of reformation, but the evidence used in suppressing them was certainly unreliable. The material turned in by Cromwell's agents was suited perfectly to Henry's purpose. Cromwell had chosen his men well. Their propaganda accomplished its work very successfully, but the king had "hit below the belt" in winning his fight.

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