The many lives of John Bale

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For those historians who have studied the English Reformation or the writing of polemics, histories and plays in the 16th century the name John Bale (1495–1563) appears high on the list of English scholars supporting a reformist agenda. Bale popularised the genre of martyrology for an English audience, later taken to its logical conclusion in John Foxe’s Book of Martyrs. Bale helped to preserve England’s manuscript heritage in part through his cataloguing of ancient English writers and texts and in part through his influence on the Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, who became a great patron of ancient manuscripts. Bale is also remembered among much else for his polemics, theological treatises and evangelical plays. In addition Bale’s tendency to write autobiographical accounts makes him the perfect subject for novelisation.

That novel is John Arden’s Books of Bale. The framing sequence is set late in Elizabeth’s reign, when the playwright Anthony Munday finds himself in competition with the newcomer William Shakespeare. The story focuses on the relationship between Lydia (the daughter of John Bale and his wife Dorothy) and her own daughter Lucretia. Lucretia runs away from home at 16 and makes contacts within the London theatre scene. After being separated for some time mother and daughter re-establish their relationship through several connections to John Bale’s own involvement in plays, especially his adaptation of King Johan.
The main portion of the book, however, belongs to Bale’s wife, Dorothy. This is the story of the hidden presence behind John Bale. In her youth Dorothy works as a ‘singing-woman, a dancing-woman, a woman of “the business”’ in and around Norfolk and London (Arden, p. 11). Through an association with Lord Wentworth (1), Dorothy escapes this vagabond lifestyle, and is given premises in the Birdcage (a disreputable performance venue) where she gives birth to Wentworth’s illegitimate son. At the time of Henry VIII’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Dorothy’s room in the Birdcage is used as a secret meeting place for reformers intent on putting on evangelical plays. Included among this group is John Bale, appointed play-master by Wentworth under the auspices of Thomas Cromwell. Although Bale’s plays are largely successful the tides of religion are turning against them, as Henry VIII cracks down on the Protestant sympathisers in his government and, in the 1540s, begins to backtrack on many of the reforms that had begun to be implemented during his reign.

Dorothy and John Bale find themselves in exile twice; first during the latter years of Henry VIII’s reign, and then during the ‘bloody’ reign of Mary I. Dorothy also joins John Bale in Ireland when the latter is appointed Bishop of Ossary. They barely escaped from there with their lives when Mary came to the throne!

Dorothy’s life, as depicted by Arden, is both rich and traumatic. It is, unfortunately, also entirely fictional. Little is known of the real Dorothy other than her Christian name. She is a woman left almost entirely in the shadows of her husband. Bale himself mentioned in his *The vocacyon of Johan Bale to the bishoprick of Ossorie in Irelande his persecions in the same* (1553) that his wife accompanied him to Ireland – ‘Upon the .xxi. daye of January we entred into the shippe, I, my wyfe, & one servaunt’ (2) – but nothing more is mentioned of her in his account. Bale’s autobiography that appears in his *Catalogus* notes that ‘I took the faithful Dorothy to my wife, listening attentively to this divine saying: let him who cannot be content seek a wife’ (Happé (1985), p. 147). Bale earlier stated that it was better to marry than ‘to burn’ (*Summarium*, fo. 243). These appear as odd statements, suggesting that his marriage was part political, part religious and part a search for self-contentment. Indeed in Arden’s novelisation Bale’s motivations cross spectacularly from the personal to the religious in nature. John N. King is the most recent historian to presume that Dorothy was a widow as she married Bale with a child of apprentice age in tow.(3) While this is plausible, Arden’s alternative claim that Dorothy’s child was born a bastard is not inconceivable either, although the chance that it was Wentworth’s illegitimate son seems highly unlikely.

*Books of Bale* is now over 20 years old. The question therefore has to be asked: why look at it again now? Most of the other pieces written for this special edition of *Reviews in History*, I imagine, focus on books published in the last decade and held in higher critical esteem. Arden’s novel is nevertheless interesting to revisit, particularly because historians who look at Bale find themselves trapped in a web of fiction and mythmaking partly created by the man himself.

The historical Bale is derived in large part from the autobiographical accounts found in his *Vocacyon* and catalogue of English writers. In both instances Bale has exaggerated or twisted the facts and his role in events to make a point. In his *Vocacyon* Bale’s intent was to write a polemical account of his escape from Ireland as a parallel to St Paul. In his *Catalogus* Bale wishes to present himself as one link in a chain of English writers preserving the true faith against the heresies of antichrist. Although both accounts are filled with accurate facts about Bale’s life and career, neither can be taken as entirely true. Indeed, Happé claims that Bale’s autobiography ‘reads like a piece of fiction’ (Happé (1996), p. 19). Leslie P. Fairfield goes even further, charging Bale as being the ‘Mythmaker for the English Reformation’. (4) Fairfield argues that Bale formed a new mythology for post-reformation England and that while his works were basically true they were always written with a set picture of history in mind. The historical Bale is therefore bound within a fictional wrapper partly of Bale’s own creation. He is therefore the ideal candidate for novelisation and a constant enigma for historians searching for accuracy and truth.

It is perhaps telling then, that John Arden depicts his 1988 novel *Books of Bale* as a ‘fiction of history’. Arden provides little explanation of this choice of description other than to state that ‘the central thread of
the whole story is necessarily invented’ while elements of the situations, characters and events are taken
directly from known historical evidence.

Arden attributes his research to notes and discussions provided by Peter Happé, Hubert Butler, Maurice
Craig, Jeff O’Connell and Mary Joyce. The latter four sources derive from Ireland and seem most utilised in
Arden’s chapter six, ‘I am of Ireland’. The final chapters of the book most certainly rely upon Bale’s own
account of his adventures as he tells it in his Vocacyon. Happé probably supplied Arden with a summary of
the Vocacyon which eventually formed the basis for a modern edition of the text (published by Happé and
John N. King in 1990).

*Books of Bale* was published eight years before Happé published his biography of John Bale and three years
after his publication on Bale’s plays (which Arden references).(5) This locates Arden’s novel at a mid-way
point between the two texts. Although there have been several previous biographies of Bale (most notably
by Leslie P. Fairfield in 1976, Honor McCusker in 1942 and W. T. Davies in 1940) and several vital texts
that highlight Bale’s work (such as William Haller’s ‘Elect nation’ of 1967 and Richard Bauckham’s study
of the apocalyptic tradition) there is little, if any, sign that Arden had access to them.(6) Arden’s Bale fits
very much the description given by Happé in his biography and that given by Bale himself in his
autobiographical Vocacyon.

The personality of Bale conceived of in the novel is larger than life, which in part reflects the requirements
of a fiction writer and in part relies on a comment by Happé that Bale presents himself in his Vocacyon with
a ‘self-dramatizing tendency’ (Happé (1985), p. 2). For instance Bale openly cries in front of Dorothy and
others in the story and acts highly emotionally in several scenes, beyond what would normally be acceptable.

The novel’s depiction of Bale’s attitude towards homosexuality is also questionable. Historical accounts and
Bale’s own words suggest that he may have been abused as a child by Carmelite friars but there is no
evidence that he himself had homosexual leanings, something that is strongly hinted at in Arden’s book. In
addition, in the novel Bale seems to have little difficulty ignoring the lesbian traits displayed by his, then,
future wife. The depiction of Bale’s character in this aspect of the novel, while reflective of Bale’s tendency
to exclaim against sodomy and ‘illicit’ sexual acts, seems intended entirely to add emphasis to the
complexity of the character.

The novel dots across the years with no seeming cohesion, at one moment focusing on Dorothy’s early life,
then to Ireland, and then back again to her first meetings with Bale and Wentworth, and then back to Ireland
again. But this matters little as the book is really about memory, about how various characters recall and live
through the events that circle around Dorothy and Bale. Entire chapters focus on different events from
particular perspectives: ‘IV: Letters of loyalty’ focus entirely on correspondence between Lord Wentworth
and Sir Thomas Wyatt concerning their involvement in reformist plays; ‘III: A Word from Til’ provides a
less favourable view of Bale and Dorothy during Henry’s reign and through their first exile, using the
recordings of a fictional character called Konrad Spielmann (or Conrad) who describes himself as a
pamphleteer and independent Protestant agitator born in the Siegenwald and educated at Wittenberg. Conrad
is a forcible presence throughout the first half of the book. In his youth he is a member of Dorothy’s ragtag
group of vagabond players. Later he falls in with John Bale and helps produce his plays under the leadership
of Wentworth and Cromwell. Then later still he helps Bale out of prison only to be exiled for his trouble
along with Bale and family.

Using Conrad as his cypher (Arden, p. 268), Arden stresses the difficulty involved in writing a fiction of
history and the limitations of historical sources in providing us with a true image of a person:
‘I am not sure that any of these theories were consistent one with another. I only record them here to show the difficulty of recording anything about so gargoyleish a man as Bale, so sphinx-like a woman as La Hant-Jambée [Dorothy]. We can but look at them as they appear to us, shrug our shoulders, write what we see, and that’s it’.

This sentence seems to sum up Arden’s own views about Bale – that despite our seemingly having a fairly full knowledge of his life and career we still, in fact, only have the bare bones. This is particularly the case for Bale who even historically is a difficult man to categorise. He is at once an ex-friar, a bishop, a scholar, a poet, a playwright, a polemicist, a collector of manuscripts, a bibliophile and cataloguer. The list goes on. What we do know of Bale is largely his own invention and has a tendency to lean toward the fictional with more than a little embellishment. It is this difficulty in interpreting the historical evidence that makes a ‘fiction of history’ about Bale all the more enticing. While Arden does not provide us with a truthful representation of the man, he may well have provided a caricature no less accurate than the one we are led to recount by Bale himself.

Notes


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