

Character and Precision

THE PROTESTANT Reformation in England might never have happened, but for a missing horseshoe nail. How could such a trivial item have such devastating consequences?

THE REFORMATION

The Stripping of the Altars, Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580, by Eamon Duffy, was published in 1992 as a fundamental challenge to much that has been written about the pre-Reformation church.

This author, a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, reveals the richness and complexity of Catholicism in England by which men and women structured their experiences of the world and their hopes within and beyond it.

His speciality is **precision studies into primary sources** — such as letters, minutes and accounts of parish councils, and the many prayer books and catechisms by zealous priests and laymen. These manuals of faith and piety were hand-published, and included pictures of Creed and Commandments for the illiterates who could afford a book, including the Seven Deadly Sins in lurid detail. After 1450, Gutenberg enhanced printing with movable type. Duffy proves that late medieval Catholicism in England was neither decadent nor decayed, but strong and vigorous.

Then came the destruction of that Church — the stripping of the altars — from Henry VIII's break with the papacy until the Elizabethan settlement. The English Reformation represented the violent rupture of a popular and theologically respectable religious system, imposed with barbaric cruelty by dungeon, fire and sword.

THE BACKGROUND

King Richard HI of England was the last of the Plantagenets. His rival in The Wars of the Roses, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, defeated him in the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485.

Henry became King Henry VII, the first of the Tudors. His second son became 'the wife killer', Henry VIII.

THE LEGEND

The following legend is found in *The Book of Virtues, A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, edited and with commentary, by Richard J. Bennett, 1993.

It was immortalized by Shakespeare's famous line, "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"

This is what happened — at least, in legend: Richard's warhorse was newly shod that very morning. But the smithy ran out of nails and put on the last horseshoe with one nail missing. There was no time to make one... and the consequences were fatal.

The shoe came off, the horse threw the king, his army fled in dismay, and his enemies closed upon him.

Hence the famous ditty:

**For want of a nail, a shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe, a horse was lost,
For want of a horse, a battle was lost,
For want of a battle, a kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.**

Thus the Protestant Reformation in England might not have happened, but for a sloppy job. The moral is: **God, family and mankind deserve our very best.**

PRECISION VERSUS SLOPPY WORK

Shoddy work and weak character cause each other.

Character is shown by honesty in deed and words, by courage, determination, and all that make someone an admirable person, prized by friends, relatives and employers. And honesty includes precision work.

PRECISION WITH WORDS

"By thy words thou shall be justified, and by thy words thou shall be condemned;" Matthew 12:37.

"Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man;" Francis Bacon.

"Trifles make perfection and perfection is no trifle;" an Italian proverb.

BOOKS AGAINST SLOPPY SCHOOLWORK

The following books formed my attitudes on clarity and precision, hence on schooling and education:

Demolition Reading

1. *The House of Intellect* by Jacques Barzun, 1959: scathing on the state of USA colleges and universities.

2. *The Miseducation of American Teachers*, 1963 by James D. Koerner: the demolition of a system, with remedies prescribed.

Practical Reading

3. *Less than Words can Say, The Underground Grammarian*, 1979, by Richard Mitchell: a 'must' for those who teach the English language.

4. *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it*, 1955, by Rudolf Flesch "the classic book on phonics — use this book to teach your child to read in six weeks".

Lighter Reading with a serious message

5. *Good Morning, Miss Dove*, by Frances Gray Patton, 1947: a delightful story of an old-fashioned American primary school teacher dedicated to precision in schoolwork, and thereby to the formation of character. Catholic readers will be reminded of the nuns who taught school long ago.

6. *In-laws and Outlaws*, 1962, and *Mrs Parkinson's Law*, 1968, by Cyril Northcote Parkinson: witty, incisive, memorable, and forming good attitudes.

7. *The Complete Yes, Minister*, 1981, and *Yes, Prime Minister*, 1986/1987, by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay: why governments make decisions for reasons other than those stated, and how to outwit this system. It has helped me cope with worldly churchmen.

Harder Reading

8. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* by John Henry Newman, 1870, offers the intellectual underpinning to his conversion related in *Apologia pro Vita sua*.

To my mind, even the more thoughtful people of our day have become mental misers about time, spoiled by the speed of transport and communication. Many read or skim so fast as to trample any mental riches out of sight; or talk so fast as not to listen carefully, and chew and digest ideas. So they lack the mental muscle to read *A Grammar of Assent*, a book with the answers to the deconstructionist philosophy that has cancered many minds by reducing truth to opinion, and a background to Fr Joseph's *Sheehan's Apologetics*.

Father James Tierney