John Bale (21 November 1495 - November 1563) was an English churchman, historian and controversialist, and Bishop of Ossory. He wrote the oldest known historical verse drama in English (on the subject of King John) and developed and published a very extensive list of the works of British authors down to his own time, just as the monastic libraries were being dispersed. His unhappy disposition and habit of quarrelling earned him the nickname "bilsous Bale".

Outline of his life
He was born at Cove, near Dunwich in Suffolk. At the age of twelve he joined the Carmelite priory at Norwich, removing later to the house of "Holme" (possibly the Carmelite priory at Hulne near Alnwick). Later he entered Jesus College, Cambridge, and took his degree of B.D. in 1529. He became the last Prior of the Ipswich Carmelite house, elected in 1533. He abandoned his monastic vocation, and got married, saying, "that I might never more serve so execrable a beast, I took to wife the faithful Dorothy." He obtained the living of Thondon, Suffolk, but in 1534 was summoned before the Archbishop of York for a sermon against the invocation of saints preached at Doncaster, and afterwards before John Stokesley, Bishop of London, but he escaped through the powerful protection of Thomas Cromwell, whose notice he is said to have attracted by his miracle plays.

In these plays Bale denounced the monastic system and its supporters in unrestrained language and coarse imagery. The prayer of Infidelitas which opens the second act of his Three Laws is an example of his profane parody. These somewhat brutal productions were intended to impress popular feeling, and Cromwell found in him an inviolable instrument. When Cromwell fell from favour in 1540, Bale fled with his wife and children to Antwerp. He returned on the accession of King Edward VI, and received the living of Bishopstoke, Hampshire, being promoted in 1552 to the Irish see of Ossory. He refused to be consecrated by the Roman Catholic rites of the Irish church, and won his point, though the Dean of Dublin made a protest against the revised office during the ceremony. He also quarrelled bitterly with the aged and respected judge Thomas St. Lawrence, who travelled to Kilkenry to urge the people to reject his innovations.

When the accession of Queen Mary inaugurated a violent reaction in matters of religion, he was forced to get out of the country again. He tried to escape to Scotland, but on the voyage was captured by a Dutch man-of-war, which was driven by bad weather into St Ives, Cornwall. Bale was arrested on suspicion of treason, but soon released. At Dover he had another narrow escape, but he eventually made his way to the Netherlands and thence to Frankfurt and Basel. During his exile he devoted himself to writing. After his return, on the accession of Queen Elizabeth I, he received (1560) a prebendal stall at Canterbury, where he died and was buried in the cathedral.

Mysteries, Miracle Plays, Kyenge Johan
John Bale attacked his enemies with vehemence and scurrility, much of which was directed against the Roman Catholic Church and its writers: but this cavil does not significantly diminish the value of his contributions to literature. (The Roman Catholic sympathiser and antiquary Anthony Wood, a man of "uncouth manners" and a condemned libeller, described him as "foul-mouthed Bale" a century afterwards.) Of his mysteries and miracle plays only five have been preserved, but the titles of the others, quoted by himself in his Catalogus, show that they were animated by the same political and religious aims. The Three Laws of Nature, Moses and Christ, corrupted by the Sodomytes, Pharisees and Papists most wicked (produced in 1538 and again in 1562) was a moral play. The direction for the dressing of the parts is instructive: "Let Holatry be decked like an old wench, Sodomy like a monk of all sects, Ambition like a bishop, Covetousness like a Pharisee or spiritual lawyer, False Doctrine like a popish doctor, and Hypocrisy like a gray friar." A Tragedy, or entertainle manifesting the chief promises of God unto Man, The Temptacion of our Lorde, and A breife Comedy or Entereule of Johan Baptistes preaching in the Wyldernesse, etc. were all written in 1538.

Kyenge Johan
Bale is a figure of some literary-dramatic importance as the author of Kyenge Johan (c.1538), which marks the transition between the old morality play and the English historical drama. It does not appear to have directly influenced the creators of the chronicle histories (such as The Troublesome Reign of King John (1591)), but it is remarkable that such a developed attempt at historical drama should have been made fourteen years before the production of Sorphode. Kyenge Johan is itself a polemic against the Roman Catholic Church. King John is represented as the champion of English church rites against the Roman see.

Summary of the Writers of Britain
Some view Bale's most important work as being illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriæ, ac Scotiæ Summarium... ("A Summary of the Famous Writers of Great Britain, that is, of England, Wales and Scotland") published at Ipswich and Wesel for John Overton in 1548, and 1549. This contained authors through five centuries: however, another edition, almost entirely rewritten and containing fourteen centuries, was printed at Basel with the title Scriptorum illustrium majoris Britanniae...Catalogus ("Catalogue of the Famous Writers of Great Britain") in 1557-1559.

This chronological catalogue of British authors and their works was partially influenced on the De uiris illustribus of John Leland. Bale was an indefatigable collector and worker, and personally examined many of the valuable libraries of the Augustinian and Carmelite houses before their dissolution. His work contains much information that would otherwise have been hopelessly lost. His autograph note-book is preserved in the Selden Collection of the Bodleian Library, Oxford. It contains the materials collected for his two published catalogues arranged alphabetically, without enlargement on them nor the personal remarks which colour the content. He includes the sources for his information. He notes: "I have bene also at Norwich, our second city of name, and there all the library monuments are turned to the use of their grossers, candlemakers, sopesellers, and other worldly occupations... As much have I saved there and in certain other places in Northfolk and Southfolk concerning the authors names and titles of their works, as I could, and as much wold I have done throughout the whole realm, if I had been able to have borne the charges, as I am not."

Other writings and catalogues
John Bale's written works are listed in Athenæ Cantabrigienses. While in Germany he published an attack on the monastic system entitled The Actes of English Votaries, three Lives as The Examinations of Lord Cobham, William Thope and Anne Askewe, &c, and the Pageant of Popes. While Rector of Bishopstoke he produced The Image of both Churches, and after his stormy association with Ossory he printed an account of his 'Vocacions to that see. The Resurrection of the Masse, purporting to be written by one Hugh Hilary, is generally attributed to Bale. John Pitts or Peteus (1500-1616), an English Roman Catholic exile, founded on Bale's work his Relationum historiarum de rebus anglicis tomus primus (Paris, 1619), better known by its running title of De illustribus Angliae scriptoribus. This is really the fourth book of a more extensive work. He omits the Wyclifit and Protestant divines mentioned by Bale, and the most valuable section is the lives of the Roman Catholic divines. Bale's Catalogus is a representative of John.
Leland’s work, though in all likelihood he only knew Leland’s work through his reading of Bale.

The Image of Both Churches

The Image of Both Churches was published by John Bale in 1545, and is a detailed commentary on the book of Revelation, the last book in the Christian Bible. Bale proceeded by taking short passages and following with a detailed paraphrase to explain the meaning and significance of such things as the opening of the seven seals, the first beast, the second beast with two horns, the blowing of the trumpets, and the going forth of the horsemen. Of central concern was the correct identification of Antichrist.

Bale’s central thesis is that the book of Revelation is a prophecy of how God’s word and those who love it (the “saints”) would fare at the hands of men and a false Church during the last age, meaning the time between the ascension of Jesus and the end of the world.

Bale identified two types of churches. First there was a false church, or Church of Antichrist, which persecutes those who do not bow to its dictates. He did not entirely limit his criticism to the Roman Church but, typical of the Puritans, accused also the young Church of England. By contrast, the “true Church” loves and teaches God’s word truly. He also speaks critically of the Church of Mohammed (“Mahomet”): its tyranny over the people (the “Turks”) and persecution of the saints.

In popular culture

He is the central figure in the 1988 novel Books of Bale by the novelist and playwright John Arden.

See also

- Dissolution of the Monasteries
- Foxe's Book of Martyrs
- Carmelites
- Ipswich Whitefriars

References

6. Printed in Harleian Miscellany volume i.

Further reading


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