

1st Place Winner, Dunham Bible Museum, Piece of the Past Essay Contest, 2020

Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Protestant Reformation
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The Dunham Bible Museum proudly shows a leaflet from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Both the frayed edges and sheer thinness of the page lend a delicate appearance to it. This is contrasted with a striking illustration centered on the page. It depicts a personification of Justice, a scale-bearing, blindfolded figure, who weighs the jewels of the Catholic church against the *Verbum Dei* offered by the humble protestant ministers. There is an unmistakable juxtaposition between the gravity of God's word and the cheap, fragile paper upon which it is printed.



Image Source: *An Original Leaf – FOX'S BOOK OF MARTYRS – Anno Dom. 1576*, Dunham Bible Museum, Houston, Texas.

The fragility of the paper is deliberate. Foxe produced his third edition of the *Book of Martyrs* with the express purpose of being compact, affordable, and widely accessible. As a result, he used a low-grade paper that commoners could afford, and divided the book into two volumes so that it could be transported. The quality of the paper is a reflection of the Protestant Reformation's populist values. Neither the quality of the medium nor the status of the reader mattered, only the word itself. Affordable, reproduceable paper was a crucial component through which the popular masses could realize this ideal and further their understanding of God.

Printing Culture of the 16th Century

The advent of the printing press made books easily redistributable and revolutionized the consumption of theological works. Simply put, it allowed the previously elitist practice of theological interpretation to be handed down to the people. John N. King notes that “Dozens of affordable editions of Tyndale's tracts and hundreds of editions of the Bible spawned by Tyndale's translation project sold out across the sixteenth century” (King 2001, 52). The improvement of the printing press allowed the common citizens of England to experience a new wave of literary consumerism. Foxe took advantage of this by adopting a writing style that could be understood by everyone. He utilized a “choreography of italic, roman, and black-letter founts address[ing] the changing requirements of a stratified audience comprised of literati and illiterate” (King 2011, 243). The *Book of Martyrs* was an effort, like the Reformation itself, to give God back to the people. As time went on, the editions of Foxe's book became more accessible as printing techniques became more efficient – a development which parallels the

development of the Reformation itself, which reached out to increasingly ordinary people as decades passed.

This particular leaflet comes from a section of the book entitled ‘The proud primacie of Popes’. This section includes twelve images depicting Popes humiliating a host of Protestant kings. It concludes with an illustration of Justice, depicting the comparative weight of the word of God (*Verbum Dei*) against the rosaries, jewels, and demons of the Catholic church. (Foxye, 780-795).

This heavily illustrated section was introduced in the 1576 edition of the *Book of Martyrs*, and all of the images were newly-made. These illustrations would not have been possible without contemporary printing techniques. It involved a process called ‘woodcutting’, which utilized wood carvings and ink in order to reprint images. Thomas S. Freeman indicates that this section was almost certainly included in response to the revolt of northern earls in 1569 and the papal deposition of Elizabeth in 1570 (HRI Online Publications, 2011). The depiction of Justice is found at the end of the first Volume, and “functioned as an eye-catching advertisement to potential purchasers” (King 2011, 127).

The inclusion of these images is significant because it represents Foxye’s efforts to appeal to the common people. Art is a universal, powerful language. His expanded use of illustrations in later editions demonstrates a continuous adaptation to the needs of an increasingly populist movement. It is only through the printing technology of the 16th century that these images were made possible. Thus, contemporary printing culture allowed the *Book of Martyrs* to reach the people at large, furthering the Protestant cause.

The Role of the *Book of Martyrs* in the Reformation

Foxe himself believed that the printing press was a revelatory tool, as well as a sign that the Word of God belonged in the hands of the common people: “the Lord [began] to worke for his Church, not with sword and tergate to subdue his exalted [adversary], but with Printyng, wrytyng, and readyng, to [convince] darkenes by light, errour by truth, ignoraunce by learning”. He reasoned that the development of the printing press meant that God wanted the people to read and interpret Scripture themselves (Foxe 1576, 706). It is with this mindset that he worked in exile while queen Mary I persecuted protestants in 1553. With assistance from English sympathetics, he obtained the necessary manuscripts to continue work on his martyrology. From his perspective, God provided the printing press as a means of combating the Catholic oppression. Eventually he completed his book, printing the first edition in 1559, one year after the accession of Elizabeth I (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019).

The *Book of Martyrs*’ several editions are not just adaptations to appeal to the masses. The ever-changing editions of the book can be viewed as a theological dialogue between the Protestant movement and its Catholic critics. As King accurately comments, “Each of the four editions overseen by Foxe and his publisher, John Day, consists not of a single ever-expanding book, but of four distinctive constructions that respond to Roman Catholic criticism and the shifting religio-political milieu of the reign of Elizabeth I” (King 2011, 23). This does not subtract from the populist nature of the work though. Foxe goes as far as to include some propagandistic interpretations of history, all skewed in favor of the English. The book’s depictions of the various Martyrs include pseudohistorical moments and claims that reinforce the commoner’s aversion to Catholicism. The *Book of Martyrs* assisted in developing English

resentment against the Catholic church on an unprecedented scale, and this division became central to English identity.

Foxe's Book of Martyrs is an answer to the frustration felt by Protestant Christians under the Catholic church. It not only provides a stark defamation of the Pope and Catholic institutions, but also symbolically embodies the populist nature of Protestantism. The development of the printing press and the perfection of its techniques provided the necessary medium by which Protestants could seek out the Word of God without Catholic infringements. Foxe's innovations in prose and printing allowed his work to reach the masses. The success of his *Book of Martyrs* represents a larger movement away from centuries of aristocratic theological dominance towards a culture that allows the common citizen to determine, on his own, what to make of Scripture.

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