JOHN PONET, BISHOP OF WINCHESTER 1551-1553

By Anne Lovett

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The information board by Gardiner’s Chapel in the Cathedral’s North Presbytery Aisle tells us that Stephen Gardiner was Bishop of Winchester between 1531 and 1551 and between 1553 and 1555. (Fig. 1) But who was the Bishop of Winchester during this gap when Gardiner was in the Tower of London?

Fig 1 The information board
Photo: Anne Lovett

The answer is John Ponet, little known, but one of the leading intellectuals of his age, a significant reforming theologian, one of the most important bishops in the brief reign of Edward VI, the senior ranking cleric among the Marian exiles and ultimately an innovative political thinker. [His surname is spelt Ponet, Poinet, Poynet, Poynette, but Ponet is the version most frequently used by historians].

LIFE BEFORE WINCHESTER

It is usually written that he was born c.1514 in Kent but 1516 is more likely. [1] There are at least 22 relatives or namesakes who lived and died in Kent between 1465 and 1584, densely clustered around Tenterden, Willesborough and Smarden in the centre of county. Smarden had a long history of dissenting theological opinion. [2] It is possible that Ponet was aware of non-orthodox ideas from an early age.
The first we know about him for certain is in 1533 when he obtained his Bachelor of Arts at Queens’ College, Cambridge. Ponet proceeded to Master of Arts in 1535. Between 1537 and 1542 he was bursar and then Dean of Queen’s; from 1539 to 1541 he was a university Professor of Greek and in 1547 he became a Doctor of Divinity. Meanwhile in June 1536 he had been ordained a priest at Lincoln.

Ponet was a prominent Greek scholar and together with Thomas Smith and John Cheke, two leading humanists, he was closely involved in the development of the new pronunciation of Ancient Greek. Not only was he a classical scholar, theologian and a great preacher but he knew mathematics, German and Italian. His interests included astrology and he made astronomical devices.

That he studied at Cambridge is of some significance. In 1520, copies of Luther’s early writings were smuggled into London and Cambridge. Cardinal Wolsey ordered their destruction. Some, however, were saved and a group of scholars had access to them. According to John Foxe in his Book of Martyrs – and he is the only source – they met from 1521 in a back room of a tavern named The White Horse Inn and were known pejoratively as ‘Little Germany’ by sneering townspeople as they discussed the ideas of Luther. The group included a significant number of the early reformers, many of whom met a sticky end! Whilst the pub undoubtedly existed (it was demolished 1870 but is commemorated today by a Blue Plaque), several scholars have questioned the existence of the ‘White Horse’ meetings. Nevertheless, Cambridge from an early date was a centre of reforming ideas which Ponet adopted.

It looked as if Ponet was set for an academic career but Archbishop Cranmer recognised his abilities and by 1545 he was Cranmer’s chaplain. He had evangelical leanings, like Cranmer, but in order to receive patronage under Henry VIII, he kept them quiet. His views only became public when Edward VI became king.

During the power struggles early in Edward VI’s reign Ponet was a supporter of Somerset and suspicious of Warwick (late Duke of Northumberland). Following Somerset’s fall from power in October 1549, he was arrested. [3] By the spring of 1550 he had been rehabilitated, probably because of his association with Cranmer, and in Lent 1550 he preached the Friday sermons before Edward VI, clearly back in favour.

In March 1550 Ponet was nominated as Bishop of Rochester (aged 34, the youngest bishop in the Tudor period) and in June 1550 consecrated at Lambeth Palace by Cranmer, probably the first bishop consecrated according to the new Ordinal of 1550 which, according to Christopher Haigh, ‘provided Protestant pastors rather than Catholic priests’ [4] and indicated the move from priest to minister.

The Bishop of Rochester traditionally served as a stand-in for the Archbishop of Canterbury which shows the faith that Cranmer must have had in him. [5] He was allowed to augment Rochester’s rather meagre episcopal income (net taxable income of £411 p.a. re Valor Ecclesiasticus) [6] by continuing to hold his other substantial preferments. He was the last bishop allowed to do this and in his case there was some
reason in that there was no palace for the bishop when he was consecrated, and the very low income of the bishopric.

WINCHESTER

In March 1551 Ponet was appointed to the See of Winchester with a taxable income of £3885 p.a., a great contrast to that of Rochester. He was enthroned by proxy on 3 June 1551. In contrast to continental Protestantism where there was no place for bishops, in England bishops were a means of enforcing royal authority in religious matters. [7] Their wealth, however, drew attention. A condition of Ponet’s appointment to Winchester was that he should resign to the king the lands of the see, receiving in return a fixed income of 2,000 marks a year, chiefly derived from appropriated rectories. It amounted to £1334 – a loss of 60% but still the third wealthiest see after Canterbury and Durham. This reduction in episcopal income was not unique but the size of Winchester’s endowments ensured that it received special attention.

Ponet may not have been unhappy with these financial arrangements. He was of humble origins and would write quite strongly against the possessions of the clergy in coming years. What mattered most to him was that his episcopal ministry was an evangelical one in contrast to Gardiner’s: he prioritised the preaching and teaching of Scripture as necessary in a ‘true church’ and sought a morally upright clergy.

Ponet’s first Visitation with the diocese took place in September 1551 and it seems that he visited the majority of the 250 churches and chapels meeting nearly all the rectors, vicars etc. Consistory court books indicate that similar examinations took place throughout his episcopate. From the consistory court records his concerns can be detected, for instance:

- 23 clergy noted for failing to deliver quarterly sermons – preaching was a priority for Ponet
- At least 14 clergy whose church or property cited as being in a state of disrepair
- Ten clergy noted for non-residency
- Six clergy cited for not teaching the catechism to the children in their parish as required by the Prayer Book
- The Vicar of Longstock accused for being ‘day and night’ in ale houses and for playing unlawful games [8]

Ponet’s appointments were Protestants. His chaplains were John Bale and Hugh Goodacre, both later bishops in Ireland. The Archdeacon was John Philpot, a radical Protestant and future martyr, executed in 1555 (Fig. 2).
In the Winchester diocese the governing elite was conservative. John Bale, an evangelical, said that Gardiner, the clergy of Cathedral and College and lay magnates had allowed a group of nuns to maintain their communal life in Winchester but they alarmed even Gardiner’s officials by insisting on wearing their habits in public. [9] This must have ended under Ponet.

During this time Ponet worked closely with Cranmer on national issues: he was a member of the commission into Anabaptism in Kent and he was one of the 32 men commissioned to attend to the Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum, the overdue reform of canon law. Most importantly he drew up the Short Catechism which was to instruct the young in the faith which was issued jointly with the Forty-Two Articles in 1553. Together with Cranmer, and Bishop Nicholas Ridley of London he was consulted by the Privy Council on the matter of Princess Mary hearing mass. [10]

**LIFE AFTER WINCHESTER**

In 1553 on the accession of Mary, Ponet claimed that efforts were made to persuade him to conform to the new order, but he refused and was deprived of his Winchester appointment for being married. He always regarded this as an illegal act. Gardiner was restored as Bishop of Winchester. It is likely that Ponet and family retired to Kent and that he supported Wyatt’s Rebellion [11] but left for the Continent when he realised it was doomed. He was thus one of the Marian exiles and the highest-ranking ecclesiastic among them.

Ponet arrived in Strasbourg, which was the ‘centre of future Protestantism’ [12] in April 1554 and was granted citizenship in February 1555, which indicated that he planned to stay there. The core of the exile community in Strasbourg consisted of about 40 clergy and laymen and their families. We know little of his time in this city-state. On Advent Sunday 1554 John and Maria Ponet had their son John baptised and from later reports it appears that he lost goods to the value of 4,000 crowns in a fire in 1555. In August 1556 he died in exile in Strasbourg, most likely of plague.
WRITINGS

John Ponet was a scholar and continued his research throughout his career. Three works are of particular note:

In 1549 Ponet dedicated a work defending clerical marriage to the Duke of Somerset – *A defense for marriage of priests by scripture and auncient writers proved* – one of the most comprehensive works on the subject written in the English Reformation. It used examples of scriptural allowance of marriage, scriptural figures who married and early Church figures who married or permitted it to priests to argue that priests should be able to marry. He continued to work on this subject when in exile.

In the same year, Ponet published *A Trageodie, or Dialogue of the Unjust Usurped Primacy of the Bishop of Rome*, which was a translation of a work by Bernadino Ochino, a prominent Italian Protestant reformer. It argued against the primacy of the Pope, and that the Papacy had fallen into heresy. Cranmer was shown taking part in a three-way discussion also including Henry VIII and a papist, in which Cranmer constructed a case to show the identity of Antichrist with the Bishop of Rome. It clearly showed Ponet’s views.

Ponet’s most important work was *A Shorte Treatise of Politike Power* (1556) which was published in Strasbourg. Most Protestant thinkers struggled with the issue of obedience to civil authority when that authority was opposed to the ‘true religion’ but in this book Ponet went further and wrote about the lawfulness of resistance by force:

- Rulers were called upon by God to discharge their office - ‘to do good, not evil’
- He drew on the Bible, civil and canon law, John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas etc., to argue that a ruler who had inflicted injuries on his people had exceeded his office and should be treated as a criminal and punished.
- He put forward the theory of justified opposition to secular rulers
- Under certain circumstances (not clearly defined) even the killing of a tyrant by a private individual might be justified

This was the first book by an English reformer embracing the doctrine of tyrannicide. It anticipates by several years the Huguenot writers who have usually been taken to represent the tyrannicide theories of the Reformation. Historians debate whether these views were of a result of what happened in England in 1553 or whether they had been developing for some years. [13]

MARRIAGE

Some historians have argued that Ponet’s marital scandal weakened his moral authority and this, together with his short time in office, may have meant that he achieved little. [14] By November 1548 Ponet seems to have gone through a form of marriage. Parliament had not yet removed the ban on clerical marriage (it was only legalised in 1549), but he was not the first English cleric to marry, e.g., Cranmer in
1532. Ponet had only recently been appointed to Winchester when in July 1551 his ‘wife’ (name unknown) was found by a consistory court at St Paul’s Cathedral to have had a legal pre-contract to a butcher of Nottingham. Ponet was forced to ‘divorce’ her and had to make annual compensation to her rightful husband.

It has been said that his offence was compounded ‘by blundering across the social boundaries which should have been obvious to him’ [15] and that it was a social as well as a legal misalliance. [16] Contemporary critics, however, did not use the incident against him and there was no problem when he married/remarried. On 25 October 1551 he married Maria Hayman at Croydon church with Cranmer present at the ceremony. She was the daughter of one of Cranmer’s financial officers, Peter Hayman, a Kentish gentleman and, as such, was much more socially suitable. She went abroad with Ponet and survived him.

A VARIED PRESS

Ponet has received a varied press. He was greatly admired by Protestant contemporaries and seen by John Foxe and others as one of the most important reformers in Edward VI’s reign. Historians have not always been so kind to him: Garrett in 1930s called him ‘quarrelsome, avaricious, unscrupulous and a coward’. [17] This is probably a little harsh. He certainly should be better known: if he had not died in 1556 and had returned to England at Elizabeth’s accession he might have become a leading figure in the Elizabethan church. Had he remained in England after Wyatt’s Rebellion and been burnt at the stake we might know more about him!

FOOTNOTE

There appear to be no representations of Ponet, except for this one on a bottle of Bishop’s Gin. [Fig. 3]
This gin is produced in Belgium by Ponet Spirits which is owned by Thierry Ponet, who continues a family tradition as a distillery was founded in the city of Hasselt in 1763 by an earlier descendant of Bishop John Ponet. The Bishop’s Gin website [18] claims that it is ‘inspired by the unconventional character of John Ponet, the ancestor of the founder, Thierry Ponet’. On another website Thierry Ponet claims, ‘Like the renegade clergymen it was named for, Bishop’s Gin is reverently English, with a well-cloaked fiery soul.’ [19] I am not sure whether Bishop John Ponet would have approved this use of his name.

References


3. This was possibly in connection with his translation of a work by Ochino which was dedicated to Somerset – see later.


   *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was a survey of the wealth of the church so that Henry VIII could see how much he should receive from it in taxation. It drew attention to the wealth of the monasteries but it also included the income of other parts of the church, including the bishoprics. Henry VIII’s reign did not see an attack on the wealth of the bishoprics but some bishops were compelled to exchange lands with the Crown and laity – this was common among the laity and the Crown and its subjects.


8. Earngey, *Life and Theology*, pp. 138 - 139

10. Newcombe, ‘John Ponet’, p. 2. Newcombe quotes Strype - their response was that ‘to give licence to sin was sin: nevertheless they thought the king might suffer or wink at it for a time’

11. Earngey, *Ponet, English Reformer*. Earngey suggests that Ponet was one of the leaders of the rebellion.

12. MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, p. 529. At that time the mainly German-speaking Strasbourg was known as Strassburg.

13. Beer believes it was the trauma of 1553 that was responsible, whereas Earngey believes evidence of a move towards this position can be found in 1551 and even earlier.


18. [www.ponetspirits.com](http://www.ponetspirits.com)

19. [www.ginfoundry.com](http://www.ginfoundry.com)