

The Prayer-Book Rebellion

The ‘Prayer-Book’ or ‘Western’ rebellion, as it is now known, was the most important attempt in England to oppose the Protestant Reformation of the reign of Edward VI (1547-53). Its leaders produced demands in writing which they sent to the royal government, led by the king’s protector or regent, the duke of Somerset. These can be read in Frances Rose-Troup’s book, *The Western Rebellion of 1549* (1913).

Unlike the petitions produced by some other rebellions, in which protesters asked the king to grant what they wanted, the demands of the men of Cornwall and Devon were each introduced by the robust words ‘We will have...’. Most of the demands involved undoing the Church reforms that had been made under Edward VI. Doctrinally the protesters wanted the re-establishment of Henry VIII’s Act of Six Articles which upheld belief in transubstantiation, confessions to priests, and the celibacy of the clergy. The death penalty should be reintroduced for heresy.

In worship the protesters wanted the restoration of the old Latin services: the mass, matins and evensong, and processions. They described the new services of Archbishop Cranmer’s ‘Book of Common Prayer’ as ‘but like a Christmas game’, probably meaning a play in English such as might be staged at Christmastide. This particular demand may have

come from Cornwall since it goes on to say, ‘And so we the Cornish men (whereof certain of us understand no English) utterly refuse this new English’.

The protesters called for other traditions to be restored: the hanging of the pyx above the high altar, the distribution of holy bread and water after services, and the giving of communion only in the form of bread and only at Easter. Images were to be venerated again, and the dead to be prayed for. Two further demands are interesting, because they hint at undoing the religious changes of Henry VIII’s reign as well. One asked for the recall of Cardinal Pole, the leading Catholic exile, and for his recruitment to the king’s government. This implies a wish for the reunion of England with the Catholic Church under the pope. The other called for half of the monastic lands and chantry properties in anyone’s possession to be surrendered, and used to finance two religious houses in each county. This looks like an attempt to bring back the monasteries or something similar to them.

It is never easy to be sure who took part in Tudor rebellions, who drew up their requests or demands, and whether the demands really reflected the views of those who took part. It is also worth considering that many, perhaps most, Cornish men did not take part in the rising, and might not have subscribed to all these demands either.

