

# THOMAS CRANMER

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*For Chris Hogg and her daughter Sarah,  
whom, sadly, I never met*



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is hoped that this small book will help to introduce a wider readership to Thomas Cranmer, a key figure of the English Reformation. He was, as James in the New Testament describes Elijah, 'a man subject to like passions as we are', but nonetheless a hero of the faith as so clearly and courageously demonstrated on the day of his martyrdom.

If this book had been a biography of John Calvin (1509–1564), Cranmer's more famous contemporary, I might have been overwhelmed by the task of digesting the material that has been written about him in the last fifty years alone. This is not the case with Thomas Cranmer. The modern literature on him is sparse, but is dominated by Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial account *Thomas Cranmer*, published in 1996. Although I have drawn on a wide variety of sources available on the Tudor period, it is Professor MacCulloch's book I found myself turning to most. Anybody wanting to explore further the life of Cranmer after reading this short biography could do no better than to start there. Furthermore, I would like to thank Day One Publications for giving me permission

to reuse some of the material from my own biography of Anne Boleyn published by them in 2007.

To maintain narrative flow, explanations of any specific Christian doctrines (for example, on the Eucharist) have on the whole been omitted, but to avoid ambiguity a glossary has been provided.



## PREFACE

**T**homas Cranmer, one of the Reformation's most famous martyrs, can accurately be described as the architect of the Church of England and, consequently, of the worldwide Anglican communion. Despite this, compared with other key figures of the Reformation, little has been written about him in recent years.

This omission is both remarkable and understandable: remarkable, because undoubtedly Cranmer's involvement in England's break with the historic Roman Church was crucial — a break which formed the foundation for the freedom of the gospel in England for the next 450 years; understandable, because his was no dramatic conversion loved by storytellers — rather, he undertook a lifetime journey away from the Roman sacramental system to an understanding that heaven was the gift of God to all those whom he loves. Furthermore, despite the fact that we are all fallen men and women, we so often want to see our heroes as giants, able to cope with every situation life throws at them without faltering — Cranmer was not such a man.

This book looks to assess his life from the perspective of a twenty-first-century evangelical Christian — that is, someone who accepts the Bible as the final authority on what God requires of men and women in this life. It is a term that Cranmer, as he neared his famous, dreadful and glorious end, would have been happy to have applied to himself.

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n 1525, England was a Roman Catholic nation, a faithful outpost of Rome. The pope had awarded King Henry VIII (1491–1547) the title ‘Defender of the Faith’ for upholding the church’s doctrine of the Seven Sacraments against the teaching of Martin Luther (1483–1546). But by 1535, England had rejected the ‘mother church,’ embraced the ‘new learning’ of the emerging evangelicals and had started on the road to being what many would term today a Protestant nation with an established church that owed no allegiance to Rome.

It is difficult for the twenty-first-century mind to envisage the dynamics of this on the contemporary religious and social situation of the time. Perhaps, if it could be imagined that in the next ten years England became an Islamic state with the current Archbishop of Canterbury presiding as its chief imam, the monarch having played a significant part in the transition, this might give us a flavour of the turbulent times that were the hallmark of sixteenth-century England. Yet all this was achieved without revolution or invasion. How had it happened?

Although there were many personalities and complex forces at play, four characters dominated. Henry VIII, married to the Spanish Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), was the unpredictable, all-powerful king. But in 1522, a vivacious young woman, Anne Boleyn (1501–1536), a daughter of a courtier, arrived home from France in time to attend the Christmas celebrations at the Tudor court. Henry was soon besotted. Anne was highly intelligent: a linguist, musician and dancer — but more significantly, she had come to faith in Christ during her time abroad. It soon became clear to all that she was no ordinary debutante or potential plaything of the king; she was immensely principled and courageous, and prepared to make a stand for her newfound faith. That relationship, and Anne's eventual marriage to Henry in 1532, set England on the road to a totally new mindset and outlook as increasing numbers of people rejected the teachings of the Roman Church.

The power came from the throne, but the midwife of the transition was Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540), distant ancestor of the famous Oliver Cromwell, and a political genius who put his weight behind the new learning, although seemingly never embracing for himself the Saviour it spoke of. But still a key figure is missing. Where was the gifted theologian needed to effect this immense change in English national life? Our fourth character, the Cambridge University academic Thomas Cranmer, emerged on the scene as a result of a 'chance' meeting in 1529. Without him it is difficult to see that the road Henry VIII pushed the nation down would ever have been successfully navigated.

Cranmer was plucked from relative obscurity and thrust into the highest ecclesiastical office in the land, being appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533. He was not

a natural public figure; he could be timid, even frightened. At difficult times he would prevaricate, and when in a tight corner, he would often make a compromise. He would sometimes be confused and baffled by the turn of events, yet his impact on English national life in subsequent centuries has been immense.

Furthermore, he was prepared, at the end, to make the supreme sacrifice for his faith. On the last day of his earthly life, Thomas Cranmer, who like his famous New Testament namesake, had prevaricated and doubted, doubted and prevaricated no more and openly declared for his Saviour and the gospel. The man who had so often not wanted to 'rock the boat' stunned Christendom with a display of moral and physical courage rarely paralleled in the history of mankind.