

Elizabeth Barton

If the road to hell be paved with good intentions surely the ghastly fate that ultimately befell Elizabeth Barton is proof enough of such an aphorism. Certainly, on the best of interpretations of her life, one cannot accuse her of pure malice, but foolishness, indiscretion and lack of political awareness very definitely. She lived in a harsh age, and consorted with individuals often more sophisticated than herself whose motives were not as pure as her own.

Elizabeth Barton, known as the Nun of Canterbury or alternatively as the Holy Maid of Kent, was born in 1506. Her place of birth is not precisely known – there is some evidence that it was in the village of Aldington – and her family history remains obscure. Her only recorded relation was a sister, but her ultimate history is lost. From about the age of nineteen she was employed in the household of Thomas Cobb. The latter was the steward of an estate possibly belonging to Archbishop Warham who also owned the manor of Aldington.

The parish of Aldington seemed to have been a desirable living, having been held by Thomas Linacre, physician, scholar and preceptor of Henry VIII's elder daughter, the Princess Mary. During much of Elizabeth Barton's life the cure was held by Richard Masters who apparently coped with the vagaries of the religious establishment residing comfortably through all the changes until 1569.

The role played by Richard Masters in Elizabeth Barton's early career is unclear. It was presumed that his sermons inspired her later visions, and that he may have taught her certain verses of scripture to assist in her devotions. Certainly, however, he was never a party to any sort of fraudulent or false prophecies later attributed to her. The same cannot be said so precisely about Edward Bocking who was to be closely associated with her in Canterbury.

From the extant evidence of her earlier medical history it would seem that she suffered from epilepsy. Her health was at no time particularly good, but such was the regard in which she appears to have been held by the Cobb family she continued as a dependant. In 1525 she went into a sort of coma, and for some days was unconscious and in much mental distress. While in this state she seems to have foretold the death of a child

of Thomas Cobb being very precise as to the day and the time. Naturally, such an utterance with its consequences created a very considerable impression on the village.

The initial trance was to be followed by others in increasing frequency. When in such a state her face was, according to local reports, contorted, her throat showed obvious swellings, and she lay rigid and immobile. While in this condition her remarks were divisible into two categories. In one she may be said to be clairvoyant, describing events and activities which occurred elsewhere and of which, under ordinary circumstances, she could have no possible knowledge. Her speech, while making these pronouncements, was precise and clear. Her other sort of commentaries were of a theological nature. She talked in a coherent manner of heaven, purgatory and hell in a highly orthodox fashion, and these remarks were in no way heretical. It was observed that when she spoke of heaven and good things her voice was sweet and melodious while, on the contrary, when observing of the pains of hell and purgatory her voice acquired an almost demonic tone and could quite terrify her hearers. It was reported, too, that she uttered much of her remarks without seeming to move her lips, which of course added to the peculiarity of her situation.

While in a trance she seems to have directed her audience to attend mass on a regular basis, admonished her fellow villagers to make special prayers to the Virgin against the dangers of Satan, and promoted the Christian life generally. She appears also to have had visions and was something of a clairvoyant. She insisted that society must repudiate the corruptions of the world, and advocated the traditional values of the Church. At times she also seems to have given highly sophisticated expositions on abstruse theological matters. Critics and enemies later were to imply that on these occasions she was being coached by Masters and later by Edward Bocking.

To accuse Masters of devious behaviour is highly unfair. He seems to have been sincerely impressed by his parishioner. Moreover, his actions regarding her were most sensible. He was an intelligent and educated man, and decided to act in a realistic fashion concerning the various prophetic sayings of Elizabeth Barton. He wrote a lengthy letter to Archbishop Warham describing the state of affairs in his parish. The Archbishop ordered that an investigation be made and two Benedictine monks and two Friars Observants were to join Richard Masters to resolve the matter.

The commission put a number of queries to Elizabeth Barton, and they found no reason to doubt her orthodoxy and no evidence of heresy or demonic possession. To celebrate the favourable report she and a considerable group of adherents went to a chapel at Court-at-Street. In this chapel it was noted that previously she had fallen into a coma, and it was said that she had remained in such a state for nine days taking neither

food nor drink. On this second occasion she again went into a trance-like state, and from the contemporary evidence her face became contorted, her tongue extended, her eyes protruded; it would seem to be an epileptic fit. She spoke of the Virgin, the importance of total adherence to the Christian faith, anathematised all the opponents of the Catholic Church, and of the certainty that such heretics were doomed to damnation. At this time she also avowed that God had directed her to accept Edward Bocking as her spiritual advisor, and that she was to become a nun. On emerging from her trance she appears, as have other mystics, to have had no recollection of her statements. These events were to be recorded in a tract entitled, *A Miraculous work of Late done at Court-at-Street in Kent, published to the Devout People of the Tyme for their Spiritual Consolation*. It appeared in 1527 and was written by Edward Thwaites.

With the report of the commission, and the account of the events at Court-at-Street, Archbishop Warham apparently accepted the facts as presented. However, he was a notoriously cautious individual and sent a copy to be placed before the King. The latter appears to have perused the contents in a casual fashion and, after reading, gave it to Thomas More, who, like his sovereign, evidently found nothing heretical or politically dangerous in Warham's communication, and the whole affair was thought to be of little consequence. Other women had similar experiences and, indeed, More had openly supported the supposed divine inspirations of Anne Wentworth, "the Maid of Ipswich", whose prophesying was not dissimilar to that of Elizabeth Barton.

Following her experiences at Court-at-Street her general health was much improved, and it was thought that her recovery was due to the miraculous intervention of the Virgin. Those who had previously expressed doubts were now totally certain that she was a holy individual.

The Church authorities decided that she should enter the Benedictine convent at St Sepulchre in Canterbury. Initially, the prioress was somewhat reluctant to accept the new postulant: her general ill health, despite the seemingly miraculous cure, and her lack of a dowry were put forward as objections. St Sepulchre was a small and impoverished institution but through Bocking it was avowed that the Virgin had decreed that all would be well. Having a visionary as a member of the community could bring its own problems. The prioress allowed herself to be convinced, and as Elizabeth Barton was a protégé of the Archbishop, permitted her to join the small community of five professed nuns and herself. It was at this time that Elizabeth Barton becomes more widely known as "The Nun of Kent".

For the next couple of years her prophetic powers and theological preaching continued. The subject matter was varied. On occasion she asserted that although physically in Canterbury, her spiritual body was

transported to the little chapel at Court-at-Street. The chapel had been much improved owing to its association with Elizabeth Barton, and was often visited by the pious. She was now no longer the serving maid of Thomas Cobb but the Reverend Dame Elizabeth Barton, O.S.B. Incidentally, the fact that she could become a fully professed choir nun indicated that probably she was fully literate being able to read and write in Latin. On occasion Warham would despatch collections of her oracular pronouncements to London, but the King seems to have been completely indifferent to their import or significance.

Up to this point her ecstatic exhortations brought her only notoriety. It was said that “Divers and many as well as great men of the realm and mean men and many learned men but especially religious men had great confidence in her and often resorted to her”. Her supporters regarded her utterances as being divinely inspired, and she had few detractors. She was, however, to be attacked by Tyndale in 1530 as an impostor; she with Anne Wentworth were to him “false, dissembling harlots”. His criticisms would have had little consequence but for the advent of “The King’s Great Matter”.

In 1528, King Henry VIII began to discuss with his advisors, and in particular with the Archbishop of York, Cardinal Wolsey, who was the King’s chief minister, his doubts about the validity of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, his brother’s widow. A dispensation from the Pope had been given to allow the nuptials which otherwise would have been regarded as contrary to divine and canon law. Henry avowed that in entering such a marriage he and Catherine had sinned, and that the sign of God’s displeasure was that they had no living male offspring. The heir to the throne was their daughter, Mary, born in 1516. English history really had no real precedent for a Queen regnant. While Henry I’s daughter, the Empress Maud, ruled in her own right during the civil war of 1141-1147, the anarchy of those years was probably a major reason for the prejudice against regnant queens. The King, perhaps naively, believed that a divorce could be obtained through Wolsey’s influence in Rome but political events on the continent made it impossible, as the Pope was the virtual prisoner of Catherine of Aragon’s nephew, the Emperor Charles V, and was therefore disinclined to do anything that might make his situation worse. At this juncture Elizabeth Barton was only marginally involved, merely stating that disaster would ensue if princes failed in their obedience to the church.

In the autumn of 1528, Archbishop Warham wrote a letter to his colleague, Wolsey, to introduce Elizabeth Barton to him. She had proposed that she should have an audience with the King and also with Wolsey. Warham, cautious as always, indicated that she was pious and virtuous.

Upon reaching London, she was granted an audience with Wolsey. She

informed him that she was inspired by the Archangel Michael to say that if he or Warham furthered the King's divorce, and proposed marriage to Anne Boleyn they would be utterly destroyed. When Wolsey heard these remarks apparently he became alarmed. From her comments, it would seem that he would court damnation if he supported the monarch and risk death if he objected. He temporised, and arranged that she should confront the King directly.

Elizabeth Barton apparently had no qualms about the consequences of her utterances. In the royal presence she said that she had been instructed by the Archangel to say that the sovereign must not assume the rights of the papacy, that he must destroy all heretics, and that above all he must not put his proper wife from him to marry Anne Boleyn, and that if he persisted in this folly God would punish him severely.

Curiously enough, King Henry does not appear to have been unduly angered by her remarks. He seems to have listened intently enough, but totally disregarded their import, assuming they were utterances of a deranged person being convinced of the rightness of his cause. Elizabeth Barton was sent back to Canterbury.

The visit to London was to be the first of several. She again visited Wolsey, and on each occasion she reiterated her previous remarks prophesying his fall from grace and power and his ignominious fate because of his failure to obey the will of God. She seems also to have had another royal audience with the King in December 1529 at Haworth observing that the Angel said that he, the King, was acting against God's will and that if he persisted he would not long remain the sovereign, "he should not be King thereof one day, not one hour after [presumably following his marriage to Anne Boleyn]" and that "he should die a shameful and miserable death". It would seem that in her confrontation with the King it was in a humble fashion kneeling before him and with tears beseeched him not to divorce Queen Catherine for the good of his soul and for the welfare of the country. Again Henry seems to have been moderate in his reaction to what she said. He was, it appears, impressed by her sincerity and by her obvious piety. Apparently, he tried to persuade her of the rightness of his cause, but without success. Once again she was required to return to Canterbury.

On the way home she proceeded first to Rochester where she met Bishop John Fisher. Apparently, she told him all that she had said to the King and what had been the sovereign's reaction. Fisher evidently was much perturbed however when she indicated that the monarch was adamant in pursuing his course of action.

Although consorting with the mighty, she did not abandon her faithful adherents. Upon reaching Canterbury she had another vision, rather more

mundane. Several young monks had contemplated joining Tyndale in Antwerp. The Angel, she avowed, would ensure that the weather would be so inclement that the boat could not depart. Hence, the souls of these youthful dissidents were saved. The Angel also said that any person who was so misguided as to have a copy of Tyndale's bible should burn it immediately otherwise they would risk damnation.

Meanwhile Wolsey's career had come to an end because he had been unable to procure Henry's divorce. His death, too, was, as she had predicted, a solitary and melancholy event. However, she asserted that he was not totally damned, the devil wanted his soul, but he was allowed to remain in limbo until a final judgement ensued. She prayed for his deliverance, he was released and passed into heaven by her efforts. Wolsey was certainly no saint, and she was well aware of the fact but he had not succumbed to the temptation of earthly vanity and acceded to the King's wishes, he had not granted the sovereign a divorce and hence was not all evil. Other counsellors such as Stephen Gardiner, Edmund Bonner and Cuthbert Tunstall, all clerics, were not so virtuous.

She was now venturing into more dangerous waters. She continued to admonish and chastise the ungodly. She preached against Luther and the reformers. She insisted that all Christians must accept papal authority unquestioning. She claimed she had seen purgatory and hell and knew the torments that awaited the ungodly. She did not regard herself as a perfect being. She often lusted and desired sexual pleasure, as she said to her confessor Edward Bocking. She claimed the devil had attempted to seduce her and to have her perform sexual acts with him and to indulge in lewd behaviour. To save herself she had called upon her protectors the angels, in particular the Archangel Michael, to rescue her. Indeed, modern psychologists would declare that many of her visions were typical hallucinatory experiences.

She also counselled others who had mystical visions. One such individual was Elizabeth of Tottenham. Elizabeth Barton, perhaps seeing her as a potential rival, decided that Elizabeth of Tottenham's visions were inspired by Satan, and warned her against them. She seems to have been successful in her endeavours because Elizabeth of Tottenham ceased to have ecstatic experiences. Her success in this instance was reported to Thomas More who concluded that she was a pious and holy person.

Her prophetic utterances continued in an antigovernment mode. She declared that no person should attempt to deprive Princess Mary of her rank and position, a reference to the possible legislation declaring her a bastard. Moreover, if the Emperor Charles V came to Mary's assistance all good Christians should rally to her side. By now she was very hostile to the King and his adherents, and her position was not dissimilar to

that of most conservatives both lay and clerical. Her many sayings had considerable circulation, and were published in a number of tracts. A direct confrontation with royal authority was inevitable.

Further, she turned her attention to Archbishop Warham whom she saw as a weak person. She predicted what would happen at his death if he persisted in supporting the crown. She was convinced that her warnings of his dire fate, and ultimate damnation, made him an opponent of the King. Indeed, Thomas Cranmer, Warham's successor, was to assert that she exerted very real influence over both Wolsey and Warham. When the latter died in 1532, because he, too, had not surrendered to royal despotism, his soul was saved and ascended into heaven accompanied by St Thomas. Without her advocacy she was certain he would have capitulated and consequently been damned.

Warham personally had always been a moderating influence on her pronouncements, and with his death she became less and less rational. She was more radical in her public statements and predictions being totally unwilling or unaware to see potential dangers. More confirmed opponents of royal policy were now public allies, and she was championed by such reactionaries as Henry Gold who wrote to his fellow clerics pressing her virtues.

The nuns at Syon were to become involved with her public utterances. These nuns were particularly important because of their associations with the Courtenays and the Poles, who had connections with the previous dynasty, the house of York. She openly supported the pretensions of the Marquess of Exeter to the throne despite her championing of Princess Mary. In due course her activities were to bring both Exeter and Montague to the block. She uttered dire threats as to what might befall the papal agents, Silvestre Davio and Antonio Pollio, unless they actively supported Queen Catherine and Princess Mary. She even predicted a terrible future for Pope Clement VII if he failed to support the injured queen and her daughter. So powerful did she seem to be that the friends and relations of Anne Boleyn sought to bribe her to be silent, but without success. She went so far as to declare that she had been instrumental in preventing a marriage between the King and Boleyn at Calais.

When the royal couple returned to England they visited Canterbury. She forced herself into their company, repeated her admonitions against the proposed nuptials, and predicted that if they did occur the King would shortly die following the loss of his throne. Again, she said that his policies would bring grief and distress to the kingdom with plagues and destruction. Soon after this event she went to the chapel at Court-at-Street, and before the statue of the Virgin she declared that Queen Catherine would prosper and that Princess Mary would one day be queen. She

tried hard to gain an audience with Queen Catherine but failed. Neither Catherine nor her daughter was prepared to risk their fate by associating with the radical nun.

Inevitably, the question arises as to what degree she was manipulated by those individuals directly or indirectly in opposition to King Henry VIII. It is evident that the Yorkist faction still had ambitions to regain the crown, and were not above some quiet plotting. Their activities were not unknown to Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey's successor as chief minister, by means of informers.

One of her most prominent supporters was Hugh Rich, a well-known preacher. He had extolled Elizabeth Barton to Bishop Fisher. He also reported on her supposed vision with respect to St Mary Magdalene. This particularly interested Fisher who was involved with the vexatious question of how many St Mary Magdalenes there were. Some authorities asserted there were three. When Bishop Fisher put the question to Elizabeth Barton she asserted there was only one. This confirmed Fisher's own view and reaffirmed the assumption he had made in a book that he had written over a decade previously. Rich also conversed with More on the subject of the Nun of Kent. More sensibly declined to consider seriously anything she had said with respect to the King.

She was still at liberty to see people and to make oracular statements. She received Silvestre Davio, the papal nuncio to Scotland, on his return to Rome. She repeated her prediction to him that the King would soon die if he married Anne Boleyn. She was evidently totally unaware that the couple had been secretly married for some months. She told Davio that if Pope Clement acceded to the royal divorce he would suffer various painful afflictions. Moreover, he was to use his position to blacken King Henry's reputation as frequently as possible. On a visit to Syon Abbey she told Lady Exeter her husband would inherit the crown; this despite the fact that earlier she had asserted that Princess Mary would become queen with Lord Montague, another Yorkist, as her consort. All of these tergiversations on the part of Elizabeth Barton and her friends made the royal advisors highly suspicious. As yet there was no overt treason, but proposing or wishing the death of the sovereign was a matter of serious concern and this could lead either to the scaffold or to Tyburn.

In the summer of 1533 Thomas More finally acted. He wrote a letter to her saying that she should not cause people to believe things that probably would not happen. He reminded her of the folly of Nicholas Hopkins, who had so encouraged the Duke of Buckingham in his pretensions that finally ruined him. In other words, he indicated that Elizabeth Barton could destroy the Courtenay family and all of the Yorkist connections.

She had asserted that the Angel had told her that if the King married

Anne Boleyn he would lose his throne within a month. This did not occur; he continued to hold the crown without any adverse effects. One is tempted to wonder why people remained so credulous and continued to believe her prognostications. Her supporters took the position that the monarch had no real right to the throne, having lost divine approbation. Such assertions cannot but have perturbed and irritated men like Cromwell because what she was implying was that an insurrection, should it occur, would have not only papal and imperial but also divine approbation.

The monastic communities seem to have been particularly enthusiastic about her revelations, not only in Canterbury but elsewhere, such as at Sheen. The monks promoted her revelations in various communications among themselves, and this propaganda ensured that she was being taken seriously.

In the summer of 1533 the royal authorities determined to act, and Cromwell arranged for Cranmer to conduct an interrogation as to whether she was sincere and honest. The meeting took place on 23 July at Sevenoaks, where Cranmer was then residing. Despite the many rumours about her and her associates she was apparently, at this juncture, deemed to be not particularly dangerous. She was released and allowed to make a further pilgrimage to Court-at-Street, where her career as a mystic had begun. More surprisingly, perhaps, she was permitted to be there on 15 August, the Feast of the Virgin's Assumption, for her and her adherents a very special day of holy obligation.

Her liberty was not to be of long standing. She was, a few weeks later, placed under a form of house arrest, and was interviewed by Cranmer, Cromwell and Hugh Latimer, the Bishop of Worcester. At this juncture she declared, "She never had visions in all her life, but all that she ever said was feigned of her own imagination, only to satisfy the minds of those which resorted to her, and to obtain worldly praise." Privately she may have warned her close friends that her volte-face was a lie, and that it was for her own defence and their protection. She appears to have also told them that her revelations were in fact true and divinely inspired as they had believed.

The commission ordered the arrest of Edward Bocking and Thomas Hadleigh. Bocking was thought to have been the principal person involved in her imposture. Soon other of her associates, Richard Masters, the parish priest of Aldington, Hugh Rich and Richard Roley, Friars Observant, Richard Deving, Henry Gold, Thomas Gold and Henry Thwaites, were imprisoned. While under arrest she gave an example of her so-called ecstasy. She told the commission that certain priests gave her information from the confessional which she was able to use to ensure her knowledge had a divine source. She also said that the nuncio had told her that the

pope intended to preach a crusade against the king, and that he would be deposed and die in exile. She was to say in the presence of her friends Edward Bocking and Henry and Thomas Gold that all her revelations were mere inventions. The poor deluded men then said to her, "Woe be the time that ever thee were born for thine ungraciousness and false dissembling hath undone us all." They declared her to have been the falsest creature that ever lived for having deceived them so cruelly. All three men threw themselves on the mercy of the court.

The next step was a sort of trial. King Henry summoned an assembly of notables to determine the fate of Elizabeth Barton and her close associates. They debated for three days; on the last of them the accused were present. The Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas Audley, declared that she and the other accused had plotted rebellion and the King's dethronement. If the crown had hoped to find evidence that Queen Catherine had been involved they were unsuccessful. Nothing existed to show that there had ever been a direct contact.

In mid-November 1533, on order of the Star Chamber, Elizabeth Barton and her nine confederates stood on a scaffold erected in front of St Paul's Cathedral, and listened to a lengthy sermon preached by the Bishop of Bangor outlining the various charges, telling the story of her life and how by the work of Bocking and the others she had gained her reputations. After an hour the sermon ended, the accused read their confessions, asserted they were deeply sorry for their actions, and, then when they were done, hoped the king would forgive them. They were then taken back to the Tower where they had been imprisoned to await upon events.

Some of the aristocracy who had been implicated decided to throw themselves on the King's mercy. Lady Exeter grovelled before King Henry, beseeching his forgiveness. Her husband likewise asked pardon. For the moment the monarch was inclined to be merciful.

The fate of Elizabeth Barton and her confederates took some time to decide. After consideration it was felt that the simplest method of getting rid of them was by attainder. This piece of legislation dispensed with any need for a proper trial. Before this was done the prisoners were returned to Canterbury where they went through the same ceremony as had taken place in London. Even the sermon was identical, although the preacher was different. The commissioners had also managed to get some 500 copies of Bocking's book praising the Maid of Kent's revelations. These copies were all ordered to be destroyed.

The government were still certain that there were other malefactors. Two in particular caught their attention, namely, Thomas More and John Fisher. More skilfully refuted all of the charges and he even reminded Cromwell that he, More, had been consulted by the king himself in 1526

with respect to Elizabeth Barton. He also asserted that, while others had tried to persuade him of the truths of Elizabeth Barton's revelations, he had always declined to support her cause. Cromwell produced evidence that she had attempted to visit More, but the latter was able to prove that such had not occurred. Cromwell begrudgingly accepted More's refutation. Less fortunate was John Fisher. He had participated more directly in the activities of the accused. He had seen her on various occasions, his apologia was less convincing than More's though he had done nothing that was actually treasonable.

The Bill of Attainder initially carried both their names, but More's was removed and Fisher was only charged with misprision of treason. More was penalised by losing his pension from the King while Fisher was placed under house arrest. The bill became law on 24 March 1534 having receiving royal assent some fifteen minutes after parliament was prorogued.

Some three weeks later Elizabeth Barton and her priestly companions were lashed to hurdles. Elizabeth Barton being the principal malefactor had a hurdle to herself. She was dressed in a shift; her companions, not garbed in priestly dress, wore cast-off gowns. It took two hours to get from the Tower to Tyburn.

Elizabeth Barton was the first to be executed. It seems she made a brief speech, repeated her confession, that she was responsible for her own death and that of her companions. She begged the populace to pray for her soul. She was hanged and left for dead, being only cut down when life was extinct. The corpse was then beheaded and the trunk buried in the cemetery of the Grey Friars, Newgate Street. Her head was parboiled and later placed on London Bridge. Her companions suffered the usual penalty for treason: they were hanged, drawn and quartered. They were disembowelled while still alive and their penis and scrotum placed in their mouths as a form of gag. Their heads were placed on the gates of the City of London. Perhaps the best summation of the event can be found in a letter written by Lord Lisle: "This Day the Nun of Kent with two Friars Observant, two monks and a secular priest, were drawn from the Tower to Tyburn and there hanged and beheaded. God if it be his pleasure have mercy on their souls." Hugh Rich did not share their fate. It is presumed he died in prison. The hanging of a woman was most unusual, for their normal mode of execution was by being burned at the stake.

Inevitably, it has to be asked whether she was a martyr or a pawn. If the former she received no plaudits from the Church as did More and Fisher. If a pawn in a larger plot she wrought havoc and destruction on those who chose to direct her in their treason. She brought down with her a number of worthy but perhaps naïve clerics. Only Edward Bocking can really

be thought to have been a source for her revelations. Her convent was closed in 1535, the prioress died with a pension some years later. Syon Abbey suffered the same fate in 1539 as part of the general closure. The Marquess of Exeter and Lord Montague were beheaded in 1538, as was the Countess of Salisbury in 1541. Anne Boleyn, who could be seen as the cause of the whole gory business, was executed in 1536. The King was to have four more wives. The prophecy about sudden death did not occur.

It is perhaps sad that the one person about whom she prophesied, namely, the Princess Mary, did nothing to rehabilitate her considering that she had been so opposed to “the King’s Great Matter” and had loyally championed Queen Catherine and herself. She had said of Mary, “That no man should fear but the Lady Mary should have succour and help enough, that no man should put her from her rights that she was born unto.” Mary became Queen regnant in 1553, going down in English history by the name of “Bloody Mary”.

SAMPLE