

The Evidences for Kett's Rebellion.

BY

J. W. M. VYSE.

Sixteen years after Kett's Rebellion one of Archbishop Parker's younger secretaries produced an official account, perhaps with Parker's help—*Alexandri Nevylly Angli, De juroribus Norfolciensium, Ketto Duce*, published in London, in 1575, by Henry Binneman. This work gave offence by reason of its remarks concerning the cowardice of the Welsh troops, and, as a result, most copies of it have the offending pages (131-134 inclusive) torn out. The account was appended under the title "Kettus" to Christopher Ocland's *Anglorum Prælia* in 1582, and in 1623 an English translation by the Rev. Richard Woods, "Minister of Fretnam," appeared with the title *Norfolke Furies, and their Foyle. Under Kett, their accursed Captaine*.¹

Other early histories of the Rebellion are to be found in Sir John Hayward's *Life and Raigne of Edward the Sixt* (1630), and in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. John Strype, whose mother was a Norwich woman, Hester (Bonnell), gives a considerable amount of space to the subject in both his life of Parker (1711), and his *Ecclesiastical Memorials* (1721). Blomefield's account rests almost always on Holinshed. In 1859

¹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, under Neville.

the Rev. F. W. Russell wrote his book: *Kett's Rebellion in Norfolk*, and, since then, there has been only Clayton's *Robert Kett and the Norfolk rising* (1912). The older of these two books has never been superseded, for Russell was typical of his period in possessing a voracious appetite for very full quotations from his authorities—a habit which, happily, seems to be returning; but he did not include everything. Meanwhile the broad outlines of the story are fairly well known and they, together with a few chosen details, are chewed over and over again in lecture-room or newspaper column. Norwich in this generation seems too narrow in its regard for the details of the Rebellion and appears to forget how much the city was, in the summer of 1549, the centre of interest—politically—of the whole of England, and, indeed, of most of Europe.

Apart from the printed accounts of the rebellion there are documents, notably an account of (1576) the "Commoysen in Norfolk" of Nicholas Sotherton, who was Sheriff of Norwich in 1572.¹ In addition there are the State Papers, foreign and domestic—proclamations, letters, and the like—the indictment and other evidences connected with the trial of Robert and William Kett, certain papers of the Cottonian MSS., and, finally, the records of the City of Norwich, especially the Chamberlain's Accounts,² and the Registers of various Norwich churches which record the burial of gentlemen slain in the course of the rebellion.

Besides these, there is the City of Norwich itself. St. Leonard's Priory—"Mount Surrey"—still dominates the city from the ridge, and the water-tower on Quebec Road marks roughly at least the site of "the Oak," the centre of that host of the "common pepyll of Norff. and Norwiche . . . Inkennelld upon Mushold hethe and in thorpe wood and in the place cald leonards thereunto adioyning";³ there are, too,

¹ Harleian MS., ff. 564, *seq.*

² Which are quoted by permission of the Corporation.

³ Chamberlain's Accounts.



Kett's Oak, by the Wymondham—Norwich road, at Hethersett.

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on that side of the river, Camp Road and Kett's Hill, with the "Kett's Castle." Bishop Bridge remains, which bore the brunt of the rebel attacks, and the Cow Tower; still, on Palace Plain, there is a tablet that has superseded the old stone, carved with an "S" (which, Russell says, "lay originally at the corner of the Cupid inn, but was removed some years ago by the poor man living at the adjoining cottage to where it now lies"), marking the spot where Fulks the butcher killed Lord Sheffield; up on Tombland there is Augustine Steward's house where both Northampton and Warwick were lodged, and, at the "Maid's Head," Northampton ate his last breakfast in Norwich before his ignominious retreat after the fight on Palace Plain. In St. Clement's Church, Matthew Parker, then Master of Corpus Christi College at Cambridge, preached against the rebels, and put them thereby in such bad humour that he had to "lame" his horses to prevent them being stolen, and, that same afternoon, took a walk to Cringleford where his horses were brought to him restored and whence he galloped off back to Cambridge. When Warwick had defeated the rebels the city paid "Gabryell the peynter" "for setting up the raggyd staff in sylver paper at all the gats of the cyte," and, towards the end of last century, a "Bear and Ragged Staff" flourished in Fisher's Lane. Then there is "Kett's Oak"—or oaks—an ever fruitful source still of correspondence in the local press; there is the gun at the Great Hospital,¹ and the "two pylletts of gonshotte . . . in the Museum at Norwich, having been found while digging a well on Mousehold, near Kett's Castle . . . and presented to the Museum by the Rev. C. Morse,"² and there is always Mousehold itself, where, according to Russell again, human remains were found "near Magdalen chapel . . . as Goddard Johnson, Esq. informs me," and somewhere there the "slaughtered bodies" must lie of the "cuntry gnoffes, Hob, Dick and Hick," for somewhere there is "Dussyndale."

¹ N. & N. A. S. original papers, vol. xvi, p. i.

² Russell.

Sifting out all that remains as evidence of the rebellion, one or two points in particular become apparent; and the importance of the rebellion is seen to increase the wider the net is cast for evidence.

There is a very good case, to begin with, for saying that the rebellion was not caused by any great economic, or political, or religious grievances. Outside this country,¹ at a time when England was settling down, rather unsteadily, after the Reformation, it was certainly regarded, as will be seen later, as having at least as much significance, religiously, as the rebellion in the West; but nothing could be further from the truth. Robert Kett himself may, just possibly, have had leanings to the old faith rather than to the new, but his attempts to preserve the fabric of Wymondham Abbey against Flowerdew were bred, most probably, more of a sympathy with his fellow townspeople, who wanted their "money's-worth," than of any for the old belief. It would be impossible to say anything of the religious tendencies of the majority of the rebels, if the only evidence was that the crowd was quietened and soothed by being led in singing the "Te Deum," when Parker, in his sermon from the Oak, had "touched them for their living so neere that they were neere to touch him for his life."² On the other hand the fact that the rebels had Coniers for their chaplain, to read "both morning and evening . . . solemne Prayers" and that they had many sermons preached to them "either by entreaty or enforcement," allows no doubt as to their acceptance of the Edwardian settlement; and it would be hard to doubt the Protestantism of "the more part" of them who, at the appearance of Norroy Herald from the Earl of Warwick, "began to jangle," saying "that he was not the king's herald, but some one made out by the gentlemen in suche a gaie coate, patched together of vestments and church stuffe . . ."³

The rebellion began in a trivial, irresponsible way. Perhaps there were agitators at work in Norfolk, men

¹ Compare Cranmer's "Sermon concerning the time of Rebellion." (Parker Soc., 1846, pp. 188 *seq.*)

² Hayward.

³ Holinshed.

such as Strype speaks of—"lewd, idle fellows" running "from place to place, from county to county, from town to town to stir up rumours, raise up tales, imagine news . . . pretending the while they sought the redress of the Commonwealth." Perhaps the rustic imagination was stirred to what would to-day be called, no doubt, political consciousness, and, aided by wine and revelry at Wymondham Game, set out to "caste down certaine diches of maister Hubbards"¹ at Morley, and to practise "similar feats" on John Flowerdew of Hethersett, "a Gentleman," as Hayward says, "of good estate, but never expressing desire of quiet." Flowerdew, breathing fire and slaughter against the whole genus Kett, for their interference in his plans at the Abbey—and doubtless thwarted by them otherways also—threw the embryo rebels straight into the arms of a leader. No writer on the rebellion has ever dared to say exactly how this small riot at Wymondham became a rebellion, and, what is more, Kett's Rebellion; for nobody knows, and nobody can know what Kett's ideas were. Robert Kett was no small figure in Wymondham; he was the chief landowner, holding three manors, ironically enough, of the Earl of Warwick. All that can be said with certainty is that "the vulgar tooke him to be both valiant and wise, and a fit man to be their Commander, being glad they had found any Capteine to follow."²

Once Kett had started on the rebellion he could not go back; he must cloak the peasants' aims in demands to the Council, exceedingly conservative in tone, and he must pose—to excuse his action—as the King's friend against his evil counsellors; "Woe unto thee, O land, when thy king is a child." The most striking thing about the rebellion is its orderliness; Coniers was appointed chaplain; a pseudo-legal atmosphere surrounded the Oak, helped by the presence of Thomas Cod, the mayor of Norwich, and other notable citizens; even the plundering of parks and houses was carried out under warrant granting "from the King's friends

¹ Holinshed.² Hayward.

and deputies" "license to all men to provide and bringe into the campe at Mouseholde, all manner of cattell and provision of vittels, in what place soever they may finde the same; so that no violence or iniurie bee doone to any honest or poor men."¹ Prisoners were kept in Mount Surrey and, so far as is known, they were well treated; the King's heralds were received decently and in most cases were given a dignified reply. Only on one or two occasions did a section of the rebels break away to burn and plunder in the city. When Kett was in control in the city, between the departure of Northampton and the arrival of Warwick, he appointed his own watch, as he had chosen the representatives of the Hundreds of Norfolk and Suffolk represented in his camp; when Norroy Herald went to Mousehold from Warwick he was conducted through the city by about forty of the rebels "riding two and two together very pleasant and merrie." There is more than once a temptation when considering the whole course of events, to agree with Tawney's view² that the rebellion was "less a rising against the state than a practical illustration of the peasants' ideals, a mixture of May-day demonstration and a successful strike, embodied in one gigantic festival of rural good fellowship"; to question, in fact, now and then, whether "Kett's revels" would not be more apposite than "Kett's rebels."

But the rebellion was a very serious affair to the city, to the county, and to Western Europe generally. In the city, directly the rebellion began, on July 9th, the city gave "xl^s" to "Edmond Pynchyn for his costs rydyng to London in post and from thense to wynsore to the king's counsell with letters concernyng ye rysyng of ye sayd pepyll." Another man was sent off to Sir Roger Townesend, another to Sir William Paston. "Item for drynke in the counsell chambyr the ixth and xth days of July—vijsd." "Item to Pynchyns wyff for brede and drynke in ye counsell chambyr that day

¹ Holinshed.

² *The Agrarian Problem in the 16th century.*

(July 13th) and for candyll lyght above and bynethe, the counsell syttyng all that day and nyght tyll after mydnyght—xviij^d." Money was always being paid out for mending locks and gates, for guns, for "pylletts of Gonshotts," for "lede," "matchis," "for caryage of Sr William Pastons ij gret Gonnys from the Comon stathe to the Castyll—xvj^d," for "lynpyns for dyvers Gonnys—iiij^d." There was "my lord marques" to be entertained, and then "my lord of Warwicke." The Mayor was in the camp, and Augustine Steward was in charge; every now and then houses were burning after an inrush of the rebels, nobody knew which side to take; and then, suddenly, it was all over. It cost 3/9^d for "beryeng of xlix men that war hangyd at the cross in the market and for makyng pytts and caryeng to them," and another threepence "for mendyng of a leddys that was broken at the Crosse with hangyng of men"; and then there were well over four pounds to be spent on "makyng clene the market place," where nine men worked for about three weeks and removed over 270 "lods of mucke," and yet another 24/6^d for removing ten loads from the "common halle howses and cloyster, which war wonderfully sore noyed wt. horse mucke." Gates, too, had to be repaired, and Whitefriars bridge rebuilt, before the city could settle down once again to its normal life.

The Privy Council were already sufficiently perturbed about the state of the country, particularly after the revolt in the west, before Kett's rebellion began. On July 8th, as Kett was approaching Norwich, the King issued a proclamation "charging all Justices, Sheriffs, Bailiffs and other his officers" to keep a special watch for the "lewd idle fellows" who seemed to be stirring up ill-feeling all over the country. Then, when trouble broke out in Norfolk, it seemed as though the last blow had fallen. The Lady Mary, the King's sister, was lodged at Kenninghall, within only fifteen miles of the rebels, and the Council at once, on July 18th, despatched a letter to her, complaining of the

implication in the rebellion of certain of her retainers, which charge Mary hotly denied.¹ Somerset seems at first to have thought of coming himself against the rebels, but left the task eventually, instead, to the Marquis of Northampton, who failed to quell the rebellion. On August 3rd the Council wrote, in a letter—marked “Hast post, hast for thy lief”—to the Earl of Shrewsbury, bidding him be ready to march at any time against Kett. Several other letters exist ordering the recipients not to come to London, but to remain in readiness to march to Norwich,² and, on August 16th, a proclamation was issued ordering all gentlemen of Suffolk and Essex to leave London and to repair to their homes, and all gentlemen of Norfolk to join the Earl of Warwick.

Abroad the news spread just as quickly. On July 19th Van der Delft, the Imperial ambassador, wrote to the Emperor:—“Sire, the revolt of the peasants has increased and spread . . . In Norfolk where the Lady Mary is now there are over 8,000 of them . . . There is no mention of religion among them, except in Cornwall and Norfolk where they are in greater numbers. The Council are in great perplexity . . .”² On August 7th he wrote of Northampton's defeat:—“the Protector has been keeping me waiting from day to day, and I believe he has not had an opportunity of leaving court because of the continued consultations that are being held to prevent and remedy the peasants' evil . . . It is said that the Protector was to have gone (to Norwich) in person with the German infantry that remained near London, and Hacfort's company. Hacfort, Sire, asked me what he should do and it seemed to me that if he were asked to go he might say he had come with your Majesty's permission to serve the King of England against the King's Scottish enemies, but not in anything touching religion; . . . Sire, things are going very badly, and we hear nothing but that if foreigners begin

¹ Strype.

² State Papers, Spanish.

killing Englishmen, Englishmen will not leave one foreigner alive here." On August 13th he wrote of Warwick approaching Norwich, and, two days later, he mentions the proclamation ordering all gentlemen of Essex and Suffolk to return to their homes. Throughout the second half of July and the whole of August the Venetian ambassador in Rome was also kept informed from Venice of the state of affairs in England, that "the people have rebelled in several parts of the kingdom, not choosing to conform to the new religion."² On September 1st, Somerset wrote to the English ambassador at the Imperial Court:—"the living god hathe so wrought by the wysdome and manliness of my lord of Warwicke, that thei (in Norfolk) also are brought to subjection." By October 19th the news of Kett's Rebellion, and its defeat, was on its way to Constantinople, in a letter to the Bailo from the Doge and Senate of Venice.

Kett's Rebellion failed, and to say that it was a glorious failure is not merely to show a sentimental interest in lost causes. It collapsed like a pricked balloon, but it left a name behind it, and that name, because on his personality hung the whole rebellion, was that of Robert Kett. It failed, fundamentally, because he was losing heart, and was worn out with the strain of the previous six weeks; but the immediate causes of the failure were as trivial as had been the beginnings of the revolt. If a certain "vile boy" had not been quite so impudent, and one of the herald's party not quite so impetuous, the rebellion might have ended without much more bloodshed. It might, however, have ended much less quickly than it did if Kett, letting his common sense get the better of the superstitions of his followers, had preferred a stubborn resistance from the heights of Mousehold to a swift and inevitable defeat in the valley of Dussyndale.

¹ State Papers, Venetian.