

Review of James G. Clark, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (Yale 2021)

Roger Kingdon
June 2024

Hypothesis: ‘They could, so they did.’

The necessary prerequisite for Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries was the presence in his Court of sufficient *literate*s that they could *wrest control* of the state offices from the Church.

From the word-definitions below it’s clear that in the Middle Ages *literacy* was seen as the distinguishing aptitude and exclusive province of the clergy. But in England by the sixteenth century this was no longer the case. The most striking evidence of this transition is the list of lord chancellors, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lord_chancellors_and_lord_keepers, which until 1529 comprises clerics (with very few exceptions), and after 1529 comprises lawyers (likewise). The associated creeping loss of *power and influence* marginalised the Church to the extent that the subsequent dissolution of the monasteries seems almost inevitable.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_destroyed_libraries includes, in the 1530s, “The monastic libraries [that] were destroyed or dispersed following the dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII.” This also can be explained with reference to *the control of literacy*. It’s all part of the rewriting of history that’s the prerogative of the incoming regime, the office equivalent of nonparental infanticide in the wild, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infanticide_in_carnivores. Indeed, the selective wasting or doctoring of predecessors’ written records persists as a routine practice right down to the present day; as I touch on in my review of Nicholas Ostler’s *Empires of the Word*, in relation to the ‘culture change’ playbook favoured by modern managers.

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/literate> : “Noun | literate (*plural* literates) | 1. A person who is able to read and write. | 2. (*historical*) A person who was educated but had not taken a university degree; especially a candidate to take holy orders.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clergy> : “The word *cleric* comes from the ecclesiastical Latin *Clericus*, for those belonging to the priestly class. ... ‘Clergy’ is from two Old French words, *clergié* and *clergie*, which refer to those with learning and derive from Medieval Latin *clericatus*, from Late Latin *clericus* (the same word from which ‘cleric’ is derived). ‘Clerk’, which used to mean one ordained to the ministry, also derives from *clericus*. In the Middle Ages, reading and writing were almost exclusively the domain of the priestly class, and this is the reason for the close relationship of these words.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clerk> : “The word *clerk* is derived from the Latin *clericus* meaning ‘cleric’ or ‘clergyman’ ... The association derived from medieval courts, where writing was mainly entrusted to clergy because most laymen could not read. In this context, the word *clerk* meant ‘scholar’. Even today, the term ‘clerk regular’ designates a type of cleric (one living life according to a rule).”

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/clericus> : “Borrowed from Ancient Greek κληρικός (*klērikós*, ‘(adj. in church jargon) of the clergy’), from κλήρος (*klēros*, ‘the clergy, what is allotted, a lot, inheritance, originally a shard used in casting lots’). | Noun | clēricus *m* (*genitive* clēricī); *second declension* | 1. (*Late Latin*) a priest, clergyman or clergywoman, cleric | 2. (*Late Latin*) a learned man, clerk”.

For the following quotes, [S] = Supports hypothesis, [U] = Undermines hypothesis. If a quote has neither of these annotations then it is neutral to the hypothesis. (Nevertheless it gives interesting and/or relevant background information, otherwise I wouldn’t have included it.)

Read-through quotes and notes

Quotations from *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* are delimited using < >, while quotations from elsewhere are delimited using ‘ ’ or “ ”.

p.11: Contemporary justifications for the dissolution cite the monks' <pride>, <vice, mischief and abhominacion of liuyng>, all <formes of counterfeyte>, and <deceytfull workemanshyp> such that the obvious purpose of their <contynuall stodye, labour and sekyng was always to blynde>. [S]

p.14: Fuller (1655) laments the loss of libraries and books from his historian's perspective. [S]

pp.23-24: <The people of Tudor England were charged with greater knowledge than their forebears. Most of them were literate and learned: many of the men had acquired a formal education; well-born women were multilingual readers and writers. They were at ease with the new technology introduced from the European mainland and originating in the East: gunpowder, print and double-entry bookkeeping. Yet still they based their fundamental understanding of the world not on deeper study or new discoveries but simply on the impressions they absorbed from the people and places that had surrounded them since birth. Such were the unreasoned knowledge and unproven values created and conveyed by stories, sights and other sensory experiences, shared across the community and down the generations.> Not what I'd call 'true literacy', then; nevertheless, quite enough to break the Church's monopoly in this key domain. [S]

p.24: <The Henrician Reformation is still thought of by many as the moment when the old age of medieval England was swept away. The regime of Henry VIII, his counsellors, Crown officials, most of the nobility and gentry and a good many of his subjects shook off the traditions of their forebears. Learning, literacy, at least some self-determination in their own labour and sources of income, and a line of sight to the wider world made possible not only by the success of the press but also a settled peace in the kingdom gave this generation ambition, independence and a thirst for change. When they turned their attention to the religious houses left in their locality by their ancestors, at once they concluded there could be no place for them in their new world. Their removal, however it was done, was surely inevitable. | This account has endured because it is so compelling in its perfect alignment of cause and effect. But in the light of what has survived of these people, their behaviour and, above all, their patterns of thought, it does seem at odds with lived experience.> Like Clark I recognise <This account>, and like him I question whether it's a complete and compelling explanation. Unlike him, however, I don't accept the notion that the religious houses were terminated just because they were an unfashionable relic of <the old age of medieval England>. Of course not! Whilst the houses were always a tempting target, on account of their great wealth, still they could consider themselves safe from attack just as long as they were the primary source of literates to the Court. Conversely it was their increasing vulnerability in precisely this area that sealed their fate, such that following the Break with Rome their termination was only ever a matter of when, not if. But, like every other historian I've read, it seems that Clark underestimates the crucial role of literacy as an instrument of power and control. [S]

p.59: <By 1509 there was a grammar school in geographical reach of most of England's provincial population.> This is a significant change from the situation 200 years before, see *The Origin of the Kingdons*. Clearly it contributes directly to the breaking of the Church's monopolistic provision of education over the period. [S]

p.60: <It was those in the middle tiers of Tudor society whose developing cultural attitudes and professional ambitions had sustained the spread of school foundations; it was they too with the money and large households that could bear the cost of boys spending years on end at their books. It was a broad social category that included city merchants, provincial tradesmen, yeoman farmers and gentry clans claiming a capital manor and a portfolio of property.> ... and the Kingdons!

p.60: <In a peaceable kingdom, with a rapidly expanding royal household, permanent court and widening array of offices of state there was no shortage of occupations for noble youth; meanwhile the expectation of a formal education effectively closed off the cloister to those whom school charity was unable to reach.>

p.98: <The life opportunities for men and women of middling, or better, society and some learning were widening in the Tudor realm at the beginning of the sixteenth century. For the men, there were now more schools, a greater number of which with an advanced syllabus and more of them well endowed than ever before.>

p.100: <Alice Warner blamed the loss of her husband, and her own livelihood, on the immutable presence and power of Bury's monastery. It did not take a violent hit-and-run in Henrician England to view the religious houses in this way. Their congregations may have been centuries old, and the Tudor regime may have been reaching out for a new, centralising authority over its realm, but there was no evidence of any diminution in the regulars' social power.> Indeed, as per my hypothesis, the <Tudor regime> *was* <reaching out for a new, centralising authority over its realm>. [S]

p.107: <The houses also retained cohorts of secular clerks, those in minor orders as well as ordained priests, some occupied in the precinct, others provided to the chapels and churches under their control. The greater abbeys and cathedral priories whose spiritual jurisdiction was hedged around by papal privileges organised their clerks like the clergy of a diocese: they were summoned to synods, were addressed by the monks in sermons, and saw their further education facilitated and even funded by the abbot and convent.> This description lends support to various arguments that I advance in *The Origin of the Kingdoms* and *The Kingdoms from Quethiock to Coldridge*.

p.140: <From the turn of the fourteenth century Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries had opened elementary schools for boys, to provide themselves treble voices for the new polyphonic performance in their Lady chapels and, over time at least, their very own choirs. These schools continued into the sixteenth century and the largest of them at the wealthiest houses may have maintained as many as forty scholars, with teaching that took them as far as the threshold of university entrance. In origin they were charity schools but in a provincial landscape in which school foundations of any kind were sparse, in time they were opened to fee payers, extending their catchment to the property-owning interest that surrounded them.> This supports my assumption in *The Origin of the Kingdoms* that Totnes Priory (Benedictine) undertook elementary schooling in the early 1300s. Indeed it appears that this school was sufficiently valued by the townspeople that it continued after the dissolution, such that in 1553 it was (re)founded by royal charter, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totnes> .

pp.199-200: <Wolsey had been dismissed because the priorities of the monarch he had served for so long had quite suddenly and profoundly changed. By 1529 Henry was consumed by the case for the divorce; and in so far as he looked beyond this goal, his sights were on the garnering of an imperial power – material as much as territorial – abroad and at home. Treaties, peace, and brokering the balance of power, hallmarks of Wolsey's policy for the Tudor Crown, were now pushed aside.> Radical disruption, not conservative reformation.

p.205: <It is difficult to see in Henry's treatment of Aldgate, any more than of Waltham, a rising impulse to destroy monastic England. Perhaps more apparent is quite the opposite: a conviction, growing ever stronger, that the collateral of centuries of regular foundations might be harnessed to the ambitions of his Crown. On the eve of the Break with Rome, the king and, probably, the Wolseyan Cromwell, looked to a future where monasteries, ever more subjected and reformed, might continue to play their part.> Sustainable exploitation, not cataclysmic extinction. Curiously this seems to contradict the previous extract, pp.199-200.

pp.206-208: <A fortnight after Easter 1535, Sir John Markham, sheriff of Nottingham, set out into his county with a new commission arising from King Henry's 'supreme headship of the Englyshe church'. With two colleagues, he was charged with making a survey 'for the rate and the trew value of all spiritual promotions and possessions withyn the countie'. ... For Sheriff John it started badly. Just seven miles from Nottingham, at Beauvale Charterhouse, their progress was blocked. 'The proctours and others of the convent apperyd before,' reported their clerk, 'at shewyng the pryour was absent and in London.' Then they demanded that their 'facioun' of 'lay persons' should be present with them if there was to be any inquiry made of their property. 'Seyng them of such scruploisite'; they stood on their dignity. ... Markham wondered if he should make an example of them; but for now at least they withdrew. | It was a year of commissions for different causes but under the same premise. In the summer fresh writs were issued to further teams of commissioners to carry out a visitation of every religious house in England and Wales. Now there were new riding parties passing over the same trail, sometimes at each other's heels; and the regulars gathered in their chapter houses to treat with the representatives of the Crown for the third time in little more than a year. Six months after the scene at Beauvale, at the end of September at Bruton another commission was suddenly arrested in its tracks. Thomas Legh and his clerk presented their patent as king's visitors to the canons of the Augustinian abbey. Not for the first time in his career there was a portentous, pompous bearing to Dr Legh. Some of the king's commissioners carried a thirst for reform but what fired Legh above all was the Crown's vision of an imperial authority. His reading of his writ was reported in a laboured Latin that perhaps captures something of the sight and sound of the moment, posturing and awkward in equal measure. | The abbot, John Ely, stepping forward (comparuit), cut Legh short, arguing forcefully (allegavit) that the house had only just received another visitor also acting under royal authority, Richard Leighton, also identifying himself (ut asserebat) and claiming to be charged with the king's commission. Legh, conscious that his own authority was suddenly undercut, blustered petulantly about the high purpose of his own commission, 'for the praise of God, the honour of the crown and the increase of the divine cult and true religion'. But the abbot deflated him again, showing the injunctions for reform which Leighton had presented to him three weeks before. | These encounters seem out of step with the traditional narrative of an uncompromising assault on the religious houses advancing after the royal supremacy had been secured in parliament at the turn of 1534. Henry's new headship of the whole Church was pressed home over the next two years in a succession of royal commissions intended decisively to see them 'annexed and united to the Ymperiall crowne of this realme'; an investigation of the foundations of their wealth and seigneurial and social power; a root-and-branch reform of their administration, domestic and observant life; and then, the suppression of those too small, weak and unwilling to submit. | As ever in the history of Henry VIII's reign, the evidence for the effects of the commissions is not nearly as robust and persuasive as the parliamentary statutes that prompted them.> Evidently, a lay official did not need to display *competence* in order to qualify as a king's commissioner. All that was required was a working ability in *reading*, *writing*, and *riding*. [S]

p.209: <The Act of Supremacy, the first outcome of the parliamentary session of November 1534, proposed a revolution in the governance of the regulars in England. ... a nationwide visitation was unprecedented. The scale and scope of the plan implicit in the statute's 300 words resounded among those who moved in the circles around the commons and the court in the winter of 1534. Eustace Chapuys, the ambassador of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, felt the febrile climate, caught 'murmur and hatred' in the air, and even sensed a certain caution in the king.>

p.213: <The apparent readiness of the regulars to recognise the supremacy may have been aided, even accelerated, by their experience of another conspicuous novelty that preceded it, the king's divorce. In retrospect some communities thought of 1533 rather than 1534 as the moment that presaged their calamity.>

pp.213-214: <Monastic communities saw, in many cases for the first time, the direct intervention, over and above their own governance, of agents of the Crown. Conspicuous troublemakers were taken into custody and subjected to examination. ... The sounds of dissent issuing from communities of nationwide influence caused the king and Cromwell to initiate targeted measures of reform. In the winter of 1533-34 the Carthusians in London and the Birgittines at Syon were subject to informal but persistent instruction. In a curious rotation, Bishops John Fisher, John Stokesley of London and Cromwell's clerk, Thomas Bedyll, conveyed to them 'the lernyng of theologians and that also of lawyers'.>

From these extracts it's clear that the monasteries were being tested-out and ground-down by a progressive series of statutory encroachments, conveyed to them in a manner designed to inflict maximum offence, through the uninvited visitations of lay officials, colluding clerics, and junior clerks. The surprising weakness of their ineffectual and uncoordinated resistance made it easy for Cromwell to refine his tactics, retrain his agents, hone his strategy, and complete his takeover.

p.222: <There is no indication that in securing the supremacy the commissioners made a systematic search of book collections; where the supremacy was acknowledged at convocations of secular and regular clergy together, royal authority did not reach into the precinct at all. ... The selective removal of the papal title in the surviving books adds to the impression that for now; at least conformity was taken on trust.> Excising the dodgy punctuation, the <for now ... at least> is worth echoing. This was all to change, of course.

p.266: <The capacity to conform was made the principal measure of the fitness of monasteries and friaries to fulfil a satisfactory role in the new state Church. Cromwell commanded his agents always to weigh their willingness to accept the king's will whatever the matter of business might be.>

p.269: <There was no strong tradition of political and public radicalism in monastic England. Passed down to them from their forebears was a simple loyalism, sustained by the verbal and visual reminders of monarchy as founder and protector that surrounded them. Looking up at the ceiling of their chamber, priors of Carlisle were reminded daily 'to love God and thy prync'. In this respect the English religious orders were quite unlike their European counterparts, where for generations the clerical and scholastic authority of convents, and their neighbourhood ministry, had drawn them towards the controversies of state, church and commune.>

pp.274-275: <The king's visitors of 1535 were often struck by the expressions of enthusiasm for reform, and sometimes downright radicalism, they heard inside the monastic enclosure. ... Given the Crown's small cohort of committed monastic and mendicant allies in 1533, the king and his counsel might have anticipated a challenge to the Break with Rome and the enforcement of its central legislation, the succession and the royal supremacy. Their pressure on the diocesan bishops to administer the oath and to compel conformity perhaps reflected their underlying caution. Yet as it happened, the divorce of the king from his Catholic queen and his kingdom from its Roman pope met with the least challenge from the regulars, and the most lasting conformity of any measure of the decade. The end of one royal marriage and the revelation of another did not provoke a principled response from any congregation or house, and certainly not a theological one. ... Nor did the rejection of papal authority disturb the congregations en masse.>

These extracts help us to understand why the vast majority of monks maintained their extraordinary passivity, even though it contributed directly to the eventual demise of their livelihood; which proceeded just as soon as Henry VIII and Cromwell could be certain that this outcome was both feasible and advantageous. And it's striking that there's no mention of the monks' literacy, either as a valuable resource or as a potential threat. Presumably by this time Cromwell commanded just as many literates as he needed – or wanted. [S]

pp.284-289: <Between October 1536 and February 1537 armed uprisings erupted in four counties of central and northern England, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria. The true size of the rebellions can only be estimated. There were certainly not the 20,000 or 30,000 spoken of by the loyalist lords sent to quell them. ... They styled themselves as pilgrims and their rebellion has been remembered as the Pilgrimage of Grace. ... The first narratives of events left no doubt that the monasteries were not only the central scenes of the unrest but also the sources of its inspiration. ... In fact, the religious were neither at the margins of the trouble nor were they its originators or its mainstay. ... No more than eight monasteries or friaries across the same number of northern counties were associated with any of the protests seen in the six months between October 1536 and March 1537.>

pp.296-297: <The royal supremacy had made a sweeping declaration of ownership of all commodities in the possession of the Church. ... In the parliamentary session in the new year [1536] the present danger of the spoliation of the Crown's commodities was among the arguments urged for starting the suppression of foundations ... parliament proposed to make the force of its statute retrospective ... The effect was not to end this form of resistance but to extend it, as houses so far exempt from suppression now committed to it in earnest. ... The actions of the religious were matched by opportunistic snatches by their tenants and surrounding neighbours. ... Remarkably, the defeat of the rebellions and the destruction of the rebels did not stall or even slow such activity.>

p.298: <The greater monasteries did not find themselves suddenly vulnerable when the smaller houses were suppressed; indeed, for a time their status as survivors of this measure of reform may have strengthened their relationship with their patrons. But by 1538 it was clear that their own continuation, whether formally under licence from the king, or informally under the patronage of Cromwell or one of his agents, could only be purchased. The constant demand for protective payments compelled them to pursue property transactions which challenged the general principle of the headship and the precise terms of the visitors' injunctions of 1535. As the pressure for surrender mounted from the summer of 1538, the remaining monasteries continued down this path, now with another motive: to provide for themselves and their membership in the post-dissolution world.>

p.302: <The commissioners' dispatches that spoke of the houses' own covert spoiling of their property were sent just as the superiors of the same received demands to present some other property to a crown nominee. In the second half of 1536 it seemed to have become a general policy, and Cromwell appeared to be targeting the premier houses in each monastic congregation. If monastic England now used the distribution of their property as their primary means of resistance, it was a weapon they took from the Crown itself.>

p.312, 15 November 1539: <It is difficult not to perceive a form of provocative theatre in the executions at Glastonbury, as the abbot, stripped of the trappings of power, was taken in procession to the Tor outside the town – standing five hundred feet above sea level, the tallest landmark in the west – to be put to death with two accused of thievery, albeit professed monks of his own house. Perhaps this was an appropriation of Gospel imagery to affirm that by punishing traitors to the king, the kingdom could be redeemed. The performance was also proof that it was the threat of a continuing challenge to the royal supremacy that finally decided government policy. The legacy of these abbots was the dissolution of the monasteries.>

From these extracts it's clear that Cromwell's strategy was indeed to test-out and grind-down the monasteries, until they crumbled to dust. They were no use to him, so he destroyed them. [S]

p.315: <The closure of religious houses was recalled in Tudor England as a short and sharp act of state: the authority of the Crown had suddenly descended and, in the words of Raphael Holinshed, 'all the orders ... with cloisters and their houses were suppressed and put downe'. The first printed history to narrate the events, the chronicle published by Edward Hall in 1548, offered an image that many kept in mind, of a forest being felled. Memory distorts: time is compressed and events are selectively preserved. Perhaps the only really reliable insight to be taken from these original witnesses is of the pace of the episode: between Easter 1536 and Easter 1540 – four years, five festivals – the 660 monasteries and 180 friaries of England and Wales were closed, their communities dispersed, and their assets taken into the ownership of the Crown.>

pp.316-317: <The one factor that influenced the course of events above all was that the dissolution of religious houses was never a fully formed policy. ... If there was a guiding principle that was held to during these years, it was not for the complete extinction of religious houses but their total possession by their king-governor.> That's all very well, but I'm struck also by the absence of any organised provision for the former monks and friars. Deprived of any legitimate role in society, they were on their own, free to choose how they lived and died, but with no shelter or stipend from their former houses, nor any lasting support or remembrance from the uncaring authorities.

pp.399-400: <There were contents of the Church and convent buildings to which the king's commissioners were inclined to turn a blind eye. Books, especially, often seem to have escaped their closest scrutiny. This was something of a change from the mood at the visitation, when the commissioners appear to have been on the alert to appraise the contents of all institutional libraries. Famously, at New College, Oxford, Richard Leighton encouraged a dramatic purge of manuscripts from the library which saw leaves of Duns Scotus's medieval philosophy scattered from its first-floor windows. At the monasteries he visited, Leighton had picked out volumes of saints' lives and miracle stories and dispatched them to Cromwell as evidence of their superstition. It may be that months later, as the suppressions started, this interference was remembered as a sufficient purge of monastic and mendicant books. It is just as likely that the sequestration and sake of commodities, church ornaments, and ultimately the fabric of the buildings simply overshadowed objects which were among the least conspicuous of all their contents. ... The smallest and poorest houses may not have held enough books to maintain a recognisable conventual collection. Many of those suppressed in 1536-37 may have revealed to the commissioners a meagre stock like the 'xiii olde bokys of smale valwe' found at Coxford Priory. | Yet books of whatever number, age and condition, both manuscripts and printed editions, carried a market value: the best of them might have commanded a price comparable to the vestments which the commissioners did put up for sale. ... There may also have been a rough-and-ready removal of books. ... Books were also carried away by monks without any of these formalities. Often office-holders held on to the books associated with their roles.> Regardless of how it happened, the plain fact is that as a result of the dissolution none of the monastic libraries survived intact. [S]

pp.421-422: <After the legal extinction of the corporate body, the re-clothing of the professed members of the religious community was the primary responsibility of the king's commissioners. They were to ensure that each religious cast aside their old habits before they were turned out of the precinct. It was the principal reason for their payment of cash 'rewards', that appropriate secular apparel might be purchased, if it could not otherwise be found. Then their re-entry into the world might begin at the gatehouse. Also, there could then be no doubt of their standing as loyal subjects of the Crown: the loss of their habits was as much an expression of their personal acceptance of the *ecclesia Anglica* as the submission they had all made in 1534.> It was the religious equivalent of a dishonourable discharge from the military. In every sense, the monks and friars were 'sacked'.

p.433: <How and when regulars such as these, wholly dependent on those around them, passed out of the convent buildings is never recorded in the commissioners' notebooks. Perhaps they let them be until all other business was done. The incapacitated monastic superiors may have been saved by their status, as even under the 1536 statute the commissioners were expected to provide them with a pension, and sometimes it was supplemented with the right to accommodation and other benefits in kind. For the rest, the commissioners, assuming that family or the neighbourhood might step in, simply moved on.>

p.439: <The members of the communities who decided to go now were sent away with cash that would last them no more than a few weeks. The commissioners were charged with providing 'sum reasonable reward' sufficient to see them re-clothed and removed from the vicinity; the commissioners were advised to decide the amount 'accordinge to the dystaunce of the place'. ... Where cash was scarce it seems the commissioners' practice was to count what remained after outstanding charges and to divide it evenly between those electing to leave. ... These sums may have been enough to provide them with some secular clothing although perhaps not a complete suit of 'apparel', as the sightings of dispersed religious still wearing some part of their old habits would suggest. It hardly held out the prospect of cross-country travel.>

pp.476-477: <The dissolution had created one particular royal collection which Henry VII had not known. By the time the inventories were made in the summer of 1547, there was established at Westminster Palace a new 'upper library'. The Tudors had acquired books as much as any educated and pious family of the social elite, but it seems it was their scrutiny of the regulars' resources and their repossession of them that spurred the curation of a permanent collection, housed at the heart of the principal royal palace. Books were the first monastic treasures to be taken by the Crown in any bulk. Most of those that were now found at Westminster had been demanded almost a decade before the dissolution began, during the preparation of the case for the king's divorce. The visitors of 1535 occasionally took hold of texts thought to be suspect or otherwise unusual, although most acquisitions made after 1534 may have come from John Leland who boasted to the king 'I have conserved many good authors, the which otherwise had ben lyke to have perysshed'. The first surviving inventory of the Westminster library, compiled in 1542 perhaps only shortly after the collection was settled there for the first time, captures the scale of the accessions: at least 195 volumes derived from the libraries of forty-three monasteries and friaries.> [S]

pp.528-529: <And there was another factor at work, the effects of which had influenced the course of events over a quarter of a century from the supremacy of Henry VIII to that of his second daughter. The people of England had long since made a separation between the fortunes of institutions and their own fundamental values. Thirty years of battles for the throne before the victory of the Tudors had not unsettled their investment in monarchy itself. For as much as a century and a half – since war in France had coincided with the first wave of the plague – churches had fallen derelict, been forcibly closed or transformed into colleges, but it had made no measurable difference to the practice of their faith. Abbeys featured in the landscape of their Christian history as far back as the tale of Joseph of Arimathea who came into England, but for most they had become the setting for a story of themes other than monasticism, its congregations and customs: patrimony, personal and communal identity, and the promise of salvation itself. In truth, people had begun to think of these places differently long before the Break with Rome>; if they gave them much thought at all; which I doubt. The common people attended church just as they always had, but still they sat through a Latin liturgy that meant no more to them than it ever did, irrespective of their ability to read and write in elementary English. Furthermore, since each monastery aimed to be self-sufficient, its contribution to the local economy could scarcely be less, so that on its demise the rural producers and urban traders must have been hoping for better things from the (presumably wealthy and well-connected) new landowners.

Summary observations and conclusions

Positive:

- *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* presents a vast wealth of anecdotal evidence that engages the reader both intellectually and emotionally. It's a helluva story!
- It gives clear and consistent support to my anticipatory hypothesis that the dissolution followed as an 'almost inevitable' consequence of the Church's 'creeping loss of *power and influence*'.
- And its account of education and literacy in sixteenth-century English society is a satisfying confirmation of several assumptions underlying my family history research.

Negative:

- *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* has a complex style of narrative whereby virtually every paragraph seems to equivocate between several conflicting facts or perspectives, such that it's not easy to discern a consistent line of argument over any short body of text, let alone infer an overall set of conclusions giving a plausible explanation for the eventual outcome.
- This style provokes one of my pet hates: "I prefer the historian to take a fixed point of view, and then to interpret the evidence from that perspective. Then, I may or may not agree with the point of view, but at least I'll be able to understand it. Without that clear perspective, it's just a load of interesting anecdotes, with no obvious connection between them." (Also referenced on p.13 of my review of Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*, available on my website.)
- Alternatively, if the book were presented more obviously as an encyclopedic reference then I wouldn't have objected to it at all. But in this case the prose narrative would have needed to be complemented by: maps showing the locations of the religious houses, and the individual trails of destruction of the king's commissioners; tables summarising the key events for each house separately; charts summarising collective statistics; and a timeline summarising the overall course of events.

Overall:

- *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* documents in unprecedented detail how the monks and friars were systematically stripped of their identity (honorifics and clothing signalling their religious order), personal security (residence and sustenance), professional tools (books and relics), agency (access to and influence in the Court), and role in society (following a rule of life, and supporting state officialdom). No wonder they just wandered off into oblivion.
- If Clark had wanted to spice-up this book for the mass market then he could have given it a provocative subtitle along the lines of *How to Use Power and Destroy People*. But maybe it's just as well that he hasn't. The last thing the world needs now is yet more wannabe tyrants.