XV. *Observations upon certain inaccuracies in the published Letters of sir Thomas More; in a Letter by JOHN BRUCE, Esq., F.S.A., addressed to Thomas Amyot, Esq. F.R.S., Treasurer.*

Read April 6, 1843.

MY DEAR SIR,

Chelsea, 23 March, 1843.

HAVING some years ago communicated to the Society of Antiquaries, in a letter addressed to you, certain documents relating to sir Thomas More, you will, perhaps, allow me again to trouble you upon a subject connected with that illustrious sufferer for conscience-sake.

The interesting letters written by sir Thomas during his troubles, were first made known to the world in the collected edition of his English works, published in 1557. That fine folio volume, of nearly 1500 pages, was printed "at the costes and charges of John Cawod, John Waly, and Richard Tottell;" but the materials were got together by William Rastall, then a serjeant-at-law, and afterwards a judge of the common pleas. "I dyd diligently collect and gather together," he remarks in the dedication to queen Mary, "as many of those his workes, bokes, letters, and other wringings, printed and vnprinted, in the English tonge, as I could come by, and the same, certain yeres in the euil world past," (that is, during the ascendancy of the reformation under Edward VI.), "keping in my handes very surely and safely, now lately haue caused to be imprinted in this one volume."

William Rastall was sir Thomas More's nephew, being a son of his sister Elizabeth, by her husband John Rastall the printer. He was born in London in 1508, and was a student at Oxford in 1525, but removed from thence without taking a degree, probably on account of the illness or death of his father. After leaving Oxford he carried on his father's business for several years, and then entered at Lincoln's inn, and studied the common law. In 1547 he was a reader in his inn-of-court; but shortly afterwards,

upon the predominance of the reformed faith, he quitted England, and went to reside at Louvain, a place much frequented by English Roman catholic refugees. On the accession of queen Mary he returned to his native country, and, in 1554, was made a serjeant-at-law. Chalmers adds, but upon what authority I have not found, that he was one of the commissioners for the prosecution of heretics.

His professed design in the publication of the works of his admirable relative was, that they might be “hadde and redde of euerye Englishe man that is studious, or desirous to know and learne, not onelye the eloquence and propertie of the English tonge, but also the trewe doctryne of Christes catholike fayth, the confutacion of detestable heresy,es, or the godly morall vertues that appertaine to the framinge and fourminge of mennes maners and consciences to liue a vertuous and deuout christen life;” and he dedicated the work to queen Mary, “as to that person, to whom specially of all worldelye creatures, I truste, this boke shalbe most acceptable, both for that (I thinke) that it beinge red of many, as it is likely to be, shall much helpe forward your maiesties most godly purpose in purging this your realme of all wicked heresies, (which are, thankes be to almighty God, thorowe his great goodnes and your maiesties meanes, very much abated, and, as I trust, if it may please God to graunt your highnes longe to reigne ouer us, which I beseche him of his most mercifull goodnes to do, in time shalbe clearly extinct), and for that also syr Thomas More (the auctor of these workes,) whyle he lyued, dyd beare towardes your highnesse a speciall zeale, an entier affection, and reuerent deuocion; and, on thother syde lykewise, your grace (as it is well knowen) had towardes him, in his life time, a beneuolent mynde, and synguler fauoure, not only for his great learnyge, but also for his moch more vertue.”

Burnet commented with severity upon the omission out of this collection of one of More's letters to Cromwell, in vindication of his conduct in reference to Elizabeth Barton, the Kentish impostor. “Rastal,” he said, “printed the second letter he wrote to Cromwell, yet did not publish that account which he sent first to him concerning it, to which More refers himself in all his following letters; though it is more like a copy of that would have been preserved, than of those other letters that refer to it. But perhaps it was kept up on design; for in queen Maries time

they had a mind to magnify that story of the nun's, since she was thought to have suffered on her mother's account: and among other things she talked, one was, that the lady Mary should one day reign in England; for which Sanders has since thought fit to make a prophetess of her. And it is certain, More had a low opinion of her, which appears in many places of his printed letters; but that would have been much plainer if that full account he wrote of that affair had been published; and therefore that one of their martyrs might not lessen the esteem of another, it was fit to suppress it. Whether my conjectures in this be well-grounded or not, is left to the reader's judgment."^a

These words occur in the first part of Burnet's History of the Reformation. Before he wrote his second part he found a copy of the letter to which he had alluded, and published it with the following comments. "In publishing his works, one piece of fraud has occurred to me since the former part was printed. I have seen the manuscript out of which his letters were printed, where the originals of the letters that he writ to his daughter, Mrs. Roper, are; with the copies of those that he writ to Cromwel. But among these, there is a long letter concerning the nun of Kent, in which he speaks fully of her hypocrisie and other villanies. It contains many remarkable passages concerning her, of the high opinion he at first had of her; how he was led into it, and how he was afterwards convinced, "That she was the most false dissembling hypocrite that had been known, and guilty of the most detestable hypocrisie, and devilish dissembled falshood; and he believed that she had communication with an evil spirit." This letter was at that time concealed, but not destroyed: so I find the conjecture I made about it, in my former part, has proved true; though I did not then hope to come by the letter it self, as I have done since. It seems it was resolved to raise the credit of that story; and since the nun was believed to be both a martyr and a prophetess, it is like she might have been easily gotten to be canoniz'd; and, therefore, so great a testimony from such a man, was not thought fit to be left in her way."^b

There is much inaccuracy in these prejudiced observations; but I will at present merely remark upon them, that it is somewhat singular, that the

^a Burnet's Hist. Reform. vol. i. p. 149

^b Ibid. vol. ii. p. 316.

presumed fraudulent suppression by Rastall of a letter which he ought to have inserted in his volume, did not arouse the suspicions of Burnet, or has not aroused those of some subsequent inquirer upon subjects connected with sir Thomas More, as to the accuracy of the letters which Rastall did publish. Burnet, with the letters to Mrs. Roper, and copies of those to Cromwell, before him (as he says), did not compare them with the printed book. Dr. Johnson pronounced of that book, that it might "be better trusted than any English book of that or the preceding age." Since Burnet's time these letters have been published over and over again; but the volume edited by Rastall has, in all cases, been taken as the authority, and no attempt been made at collation with the originals.

Of those originals, I am aware of the existence of only three, one in the Arundel MS. No. 152, fo. 314, and two others in the Cotton MS. Cleopatra, E. vi. fo. 149, and fo. 182. But it will have been remarked that Burnet professed to have seen "the manuscript out of which his letters were printed," and which comprised, as he says, "the originals of the letters that he wrote to his daughter, Mrs. Roper," with "the copies of those that he wrote to Cromwell;" and, amongst the latter, "the long letter concerning the nun of Kent," which Rastall is charged with having suppressed. Such is Burnet's statement, and he has fixed the MS. to which he alluded, by describing the letter which he published from it as derived "*Ex MSS. Norfolcianis in col. Gresham.*" Those MSS. it is well known, were a part of the collection of the great earl of Arundel. They were given by Henry duke of Norfolk to the Royal Society, and a portion of them now forms the Arundel collection of MSS. in the British Museum. The volume, No. 152, in that collection, contains the letter which Burnet published, and is no doubt the very "manuscript" which Burnet saw; but, if so, how are we to account for the inaccuracy of his description of it? It is certainly *not* "the manuscript out of which Sir Thomas's letters were printed," inasmuch as it only contains *one* out of the many letters which are in Rastall's collection.^c It does *not* contain "the originals of the letters that Sir Thomas wrote to his daughter,

^c Rastall published eighteen letters of sir Thomas More: 3 written to Cromwell, one to the king, 8 to Mrs. Roper, a general letter addressed to his friends, 2 written to Dr. Wilson, one to Master Leder, one to Anthony Bonvyse, and one to his wife before his troubles; he also published 2 letters written to sir Thomas by Mrs. Roper, one by Lady Allington to Mrs. Roper, and one in Mrs. Roper's name to Lady Allington.

Mrs. Roper," but only one of them ; nor does it contain " the copies of those that he wrote to Cromwell," but only one of them ; that one, namely, which Rastall is charged with having suppressed, and which Burnet published. Burnet is clearly inaccurate in his description of the volume as it now exists, and in professor Perry's catalogue of these MSS.^d published in 1681, the very year in which Burnet's second part of his History was published, the MS. in question is accurately described as containing only the single letter and the single copy which are now found in it.

But this is not Burnet's only inaccuracy in reference to this MS. His statement of the contents of the letter which he published, will be found, upon comparison with the letter itself, to be greatly overstrained, and his mode of urging the charge of suppression against Rastall is most prejudiced and unfair. In the first part of his history Burnet guessed that a particular letter was kept back, and attributed to the editor certain motives from which he inferred that it was wilfully suppressed. In his second part he published the letter presumed to be suppressed, and his argument then was : " That which I formerly guessed turns out to be the fact. I have seen the very book from which the letters were printed, and, besides those which were printed, it contains the one which I conjectured was kept back. It is clear, therefore, that it was intentionally suppressed." Now the fact that the book which Burnet saw contained only one of the letters published by Rastall, and therefore was not the book from which he printed, annihilates Burnet's argument for the suppression. It may still be true that the letter was suppressed ; but Burnet's argument falls to the ground, or rather recoils upon himself, and in that recoil, subjects him to the charge of having most carelessly misdescribed the MS. which passed under his hands. Whether his admiration for the acuteness of the guess which he had hazarded in his first part, or his strong prejudices against Rastall and the Roman catholics, in any way contributed to the misdescription, we cannot determine.

But let us return to the letters themselves as printed by Rastall. I have already remarked that I know of only three of the originals ; those three I have collated with the printed book. The one which is in the Arundel MS., and which Burnet saw, is, in the main, accurately printed. The

^d Bibliotheca Norfolciana, sive Catalogus libror. quos Henric. dux Norfolc. Reg. Soc. Lond. donavit, 4to. Lond. 1681, p. 134.

variations are few in number, and consist principally of typographical errors and unimportant transpositions of words ; but the other two contain inaccuracies of an important character. These letters are addressed, one to Henry VIII. and the other to Cromwell, and contain a general vindication by sir Thomas More of his conduct, in reference to the three points in dispute between himself and his sovereign, which were ; 1. His opinion respecting the ecclesiastical supremacy ; 2. His conduct in reference to Elizabeth Barton ; and 3. His refusal to concur in the nullity of the king's first marriage.

Upon the first point More expressed himself plainly and boldly. The most strenuous maintainer of the papal supremacy could not desire anything more. His opinions upon that point stand in the published letters as he wrote them, with the exception of clerical or typographical errors, which are rather numerous, but not of any very great moment.

With reference to Elizabeth Barton there is the following alteration. In two passages, one in his letter to the king, and the other in that to Cromwell, he speaks of her distinctly and unequivocally as "the wicked woman." In the printed book this condemnatory appellation disappears, and she is represented by the milder designation of "the nunne." The complete passages are as follows. In the letter to the king, sir Thomas More wrote : "In this mater of the *wykked woman* of Canterbury, I haue vn to your trusty counsaylour maister Thomas Cromwel by my writing as playnly declared the trouth as I possibly can." This passage is printed : "In this mater of the *nunne* of Canterbury, I have vnto your trusty counsellor maister Thomas Cromwel by my writing as plainly declared the trouth as I possible can." Again, in the letter to Cromwell, he wrote,—"In the mater of *that wykked woman*, there neuer was on my parte eny other mynd than good." This is printed,—"In the mater of *the nonne*, there was neuer on my part any other minde than good." These are substantial alterations, and in a point of some importance ; but the next are greatly more so.

During queen Mary's reign it was the custom of the dominant party to speak positively in reference to the validity of the king's first marriage, and to depreciate Anne Boleyn by every possible means. Sir Thomas More, on the contrary, spoke of the marriage as a matter the determination of which,

required deep learning of a kind which he did not possess, and as to which, therefore, it did not become him boldly to affirm this thing or that; he spoke respectfully of Anne Boleyn; he acknowledged her to be really “an anointed queen,” and he prayed for her prosperity and that of her noble issue. All this, which is expressed with that simple pathetic eloquence which abounds in the writings of sir Thomas More, may be found in the original, but not one word of it in the printed book edited by serjeant Rastall. In one place nine words, and in another place seventy-four words, are omitted, and with them all diffidence as to the marriage, and all respect for Ann Boleyn, disappear.

The particular passages are as follows. Touching the marriage, we read in the printed book the following sentence: “I am not he which either can, or whom it could become to take vpon *me* the determinacion or dici-sion of such a weighty matter.” The sentence as sir Thomas wrote it, stands thus: “I am not he which either can, or whom it could bycome to take vppon *hym* the determination or decision of such a waightly mater, *nor boldly to affirme this thing or that therin.*” Again, in the printed book, we read, “So am I he, that among other his graces faithful subiectes, his highnes being in possession of his mariage, wil most hartely pray for the prosperous estate of his grace, longe to continue to the pleasure of God.” Here is no mention of the queen, Anne Boleyn, nor any allusion to her coronation, nor to the birth of her issue, the little princess Elizabeth, then about six months old. The sentence in the original stands as follows; “So am I he, that among other his graces faithfull subgietts, his highnes being in possession of his mariage, *and this noble woman really anoynted quene, neither murmure at it, nor dispute vppon it, nor neuer did, nor will; but without eny other maner medlyng of the mater, among his other faithful subgiettes, faithfully pray to God for his grace and hers both, long to lyve, and well, and theyr noble issue to, in such wise as may be to the pleasure of God, honour and surety to theym selfe, reste, peace, welth and profit vnto this noble realme.*” All the words printed in italics, amounting in number to seventy-four, are totally omitted; and a testimony of respect for Anne Boleyn, which I consider to be an extremely valuable one, has thus been entirely lost.

And now the question arises—were these omissions intentional or not?

When I consider the period of Rastall's publication, the intention of the publication, and that all the alterations I have quoted tend towards presumed Roman catholic objects, I allow that it is hard to believe that such alterations were not designed, and yet I doubt it. The *prima facie* case against the editor is a very strong one; it is so strong that it reminds me of the remark of an eminent modern statesman which I have heard you, my dear sir, repeat in reference to the attempt to shew that sir Philip Francis was the author of Junius: "It is proved almost to demonstration, and yet I do not believe it." My reasons are as follows.

It seems clear that Rastall had not access to the originals of these two letters, nor to complete copies of them. This is evident from various circumstances, but especially from the following:

I. He did not know when these letters were written, but says it was "in February or in March in the yere of our Lord God 1533, after the computation of the church of England, and in the xxv. yere of the raigne of king Henry the eyght." Now the letters are both dated with great particularity of place and day of the month. The first concludes thus, "At my pore howse in Chelchith, the fifeth day of March, by the knowen rude hand of your moste humble and most hevy, faithfull subgiett and bedeman, Tho. More, K^t." the other thus, "At Chelchith the vth day of Marche, by your diepely bounden Tho. More, K^t." Both these passages are omitted by Rastall. I cannot find that any purpose was answered by such omission. I cannot think he would have omitted them if they had been before him; and, coupling the fact of their omission with his prefatory note as to the presumed dates, I think it pretty conclusive that he must have printed, not from the originals, but from some copies which were so far imperfect that they had not the concluding passages.

II. There are many other variations which lead to the same inference. For instance, the following passages are thus differently presented to us in the MS. and the printed book.

ORIGINAL MS.

To bestow the residew of my life *in myn*
age now to come, abowt the provision for
my soule.

PRINTED BOOK.

To bestow the residue of my life to come
about the prouision for my soule.

ORIGINAL MS.

To be your *gracys* bedisman.

In eny sute that I should after haue *vn to* your *highnes*.

I onely byseche your *maiestie*.

The losse of all that ever I may lese *in this world*.

And *in the meane while* pray for your grace.

Shold conceiue eny such *mynd or* opinion of me.

Whose sight perceth deper into my *harte* than myn awne.

Neuer eny word wrote I therin to them-
payring of his gracis part, neither byfore
nor after, *nor eny man ellys by my procure-*
ment.

I wold not so mych as loke nor *wittingly*
lett lye by me eny boke of the tother parte.

After that I had redd his graces boke
therin, and so many other thinges as I
have sene in that point by this continuance
of *these x. yere*.

PRINTED BOOK.

To be your bedesman.

In any sute that I should after haue to
your grace.

I only beseche your grace.

The losse of all that euer I may lese.

And pray for your grace the while.

Should conceue any such oppinion of
me.

Whose sight passeth deper into my
thoughte than mine owne.

Neuer anye worde wrote I therein to
thempairing of his graces part, neither
before nor after.

I wold not so much as loke nor let lye
by me any boke of the tother part.

After that I had red his graces booke
therein, and so many other thinges as I
have sene in that point by this continuance
of this vii. yeres.

These alterations, it will be perceived, consist of variations of phrase, or additions of the MS. to the printed text, by way of amendment or completion of the sense; but, although valuable as adding precision to the style and completeness to the sense, they do not materially affect the substantial meaning of the writer. I see no reason, therefore, for attributing them to design. Why, then, were they made? They are too numerous to have been mere errors of transcription, for I have not quoted half of them. They are not like mistakes of the press. I can only suppose that Rastall printed not from the originals, but from some very imperfect copies.

III. There is one other variation that I must allude to which is of a different character from any of those I have already mentioned, but which

leads most convincingly to the same conclusion. The minor alterations hitherto quoted are either amendments of phrase or amplifications by the MS. of what appears in the printed book. The instance I now adduce is the reverse of this. It is the insertion in the printed book of a complimentary phrase applied to Cromwell, which does not exist in the MS. After More has urged what he thought right to adduce in his defence, he pathetically appeals to "good maister Cromwel, for our Lordes love," not to be weary of his "most comberouse sute," but, at an opportune time, to help that the king might be fully enformed of his faithful mind, "*that he may the rather,*" sir Thomas continues, "*by the meanes of your wisdome and dexterite consider*" that he had never meant any thing but good. Thus it stands in the printed book. In the original MS. the words "that he may the rather by the meanes of your wisdome and dexterite consider," are altogether omitted. This could not be design. In queen Mary's time Cromwell was as unpopular as Anne Boleyn or any other person. Rastall would never have dreamt of introducing any thing which was favourable towards him. The conclusion is irresistible, that he did not print from the original.

The existence of this passage relating to Cromwell seems to me also to negative the idea of suppression in reference to the passage relating to Anne Boleyn. I cannot think that if Rastall had dealt dishonestly with the other passages, he would have allowed this one to stand. Its publication is a guarantee that, although his copy differed from his wishes, he adhered to it.

If it be allowed that Rastall's copy differed from the original MS., I think we may also conclude that, inasmuch as the original evidently explains and completes the sense of the copy from which Rastall printed, it was, in all probability, subsequent to it in time of composition. This leads me to the only explanation which I can offer, which is, that Rastall printed from some rough draft of sir Thomas's, and that the alterations were made by sir Thomas himself, in the course of revision and transcription. The more I consider them, the more I am convinced, that they are just such alterations as would be made in that manner. Persons who think that because a letter is not printed it must be suppressed—without any proof whatever that it was accessible to the editor—will probably not be easily convinced that

omissions so agreeable and convenient were not made by design ; but for my own part I think otherwise, and am inclined to believe that those who give the subject a calm and candid consideration will ultimately agree with me.

Believe me to be, my dear sir,

Yours very sincerely,

JOHN BRUCE.

THOMAS AMYOT, Esq., F.R.S.,
Treas. Soc. Antiq.