

**THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO ADOPT THE GREGORIAN  
CALENDAR IN ENGLAND.**

By **ROSCOE LAMONT.**

When the reform of the calendar, published by Pope Gregory in 1582, was heard of in England it excited great interest and Queen Elizabeth decided to accept it. At that time there was living in England an astronomer and mathematician of some note named John Dee, famous also as an astrologer and spiritualist, and the papal plan was submitted to him for examination. Mr. Dee said:

"As Caesar and Sosigines  
The Vulgar Kalendar did make,  
So Caesar's pere, our true Empress,  
To Dee this work she did betake."

Dee studied the matter carefully and made a report entitled, "A playne Discourse and humble Advise for our gracious Queen Elizabeth her most Excellent Majestie to peruse and consider, as concerning the needful Reformation of the Vulgar Kalendar for the civile yeres and daies accompting, or verifiyeing, according to the tyme truely spent." His report was dedicated to Lord Burghley with the following verse:

Tò oti and Tò dioti<sup>1</sup>  
I shew the thing and reason why,  
At large, in brief, in middle wise  
I humbly give a playne advise;  
For want of tyme, the tyme untrew,  
Yf I have myst, commaund anew  
Your honor may, so shall you see  
That love of truth doth govern me.

Dee approved of the reformation of the calendar and advised the acceptance of the plan of Pope Gregory, although he considered that it would have been better to have restored the equinox to the day of the month on which it fell at the birth of Christ, rather than at the time of the Nicene Council, thereby omitting, as he said, eleven days instead of ten. (In reality in that case twelve or thirteen days would have been omitted instead of eleven).

Dee's "playne discourse" was submitted to some men "very skilfull in the mathematicks", and the result of their examination was made known in a report by the Lord Treasurer Burghley to the Lords of the Council, a part of which is as follows:

"It was agreed by Mr. Digges, Mr. Savell, and Mr. Chambers, that upon their severall perusal of the booke written by Mr. Dee, as a discourse upon the reformation of the vulgar callendar for the civill year, that they doe allow of his opinions, that where in the late Romaine Callendar reformed there are ten

<sup>1</sup>The why and the wherefore.

days cutt off to reduce the civill year to the state it was established by the councill of Nice, the better reformation had been, to have cutt off eleven days to have reduced the civill year according to the state the sun was in at the birth of Christ; and so they all accord with Mr. Dee, that such a reformation had been more agreeable to the accompt of Christians, but yet they doe also assent that having regard to the counsell of Nice the subtracting of ten days are agreeable to truth, and therefore to accord the better with all the countries adjacent that have received that reformation of subtracting of ten days only, they think it may be assented unto without any manifest error, having regard to observe certen rules hereafter for omitting sum leape years in sum hundred years."

It was thought necessary, however, to refer the matter to the Archbishops and Bishops of the Church for their opinion, which was done in the following letter from Sir Francis Walsingham<sup>1</sup>:

Mr. Secretaries letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury tuching the alteration of the Calendar.

"It may please your grace. Upon the setting furth latelie of a new Calendar in forren parts, called Calendarium Gregorianum, for the reformation of the ould received course of the year, wherebie there are now ten days cutt off in the new year, her majestie thinking it meet that the like reformation of the yere should be so receaved, and have his course in these her majesties realms and dominions, thereby to avoid diverse inconveniences that might otherwise follow, between her own and other princes her neighbors' subjects, by reason of the diversity of computations, hath caused this bearer, Mr. Dee, to set down a new calculation to be here published, to the said intended reformation of the yere, which my Lord Treasurer being directed by her majesty to refer to the consideration of Mr. Digges and two or three other very skilfull in the mathematicks, his Lordship hath returned answer that the said calculation is well lyked of as grounded upon good knowledge and probable reasons. Now, for that things of this nature ought in course to be referred to the considerations of the Archbishops and Bishops of the church, my lords of the councill doe therefore think meet that your grace, calling unto you such bishops as are about London, as the Bishops of London and Salisbury, and him of Lincoln, if he be not departed, should consider of the said new calendar, and thereupon return your opinion what you think of the same, and whether it be meet to be passed as it is set down, which it may please you to do with all convenient speed, for that it is meant the said callendar shall be published by proclamation before the first of May next; and so I humbly take my leave of your grace. Att Richmond, the 18th of March, 1582.

Your graces to command.

FRA. WALSINGHAM".

The year began in England at that time on March 25, and therefore the year 1583 began one week after the date of this letter.

The Archbishop did not reply "with all convenient speed" (so her Majesty thought), and eleven days later another letter was sent him by Sir Francis, a little sharper in tone, reading as follows:

"It may please your grace to understand that whereas I did of late send to you a reformation of the ould almanack set down by Mr. Dee and certain other learned in the mathematicks, which her majesty's pleasure was, should be considered of by yourself, and such other of the bishops as might be then about London before it were published, her majesty doth now find some fault that she doth yet hear nothing of the reports thereof that she looked to have received from your grace. Whereas you shall do well if that there be nothing don yet in the matter to call the said bishops presence unto you, and to consider of the said callendar with the assistance of Mr. Dee and such others as have been employed in the setting down of the same; to the end you may thereupon deliver

<sup>1</sup>Gentleman's Magazine (London) November, 1851.

your opinion thereof according to her majesty's expectance, wherein you are to use the more speed so that the said kallendar is meant to be published by the first of May next. And so I committ your grace to God. At Richmond, the xxix of March, 1583.

Your graces to commande.

FRA. WALSINGHAM."

Although the reform of the calendar had been discussed for more than three hundred years, and the papal commission had studied the subject for six years, the Archbishop was expected to digest the matter in less than two weeks, which he considered a short time. But complying with the request for "more speed", on April 5, 1583, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishops of London, Rochester and Salisbury, addressed a letter to Secretary Walsingham, enclosing "certen reasons for this short time by us collected", in which they gave her Majesty to understand that they could not accept the proposed calendar, and they also transmitted "the judgment of some godly learned in the mathematicalls". Three papers forwarded, two in English and one in Latin, contained the "certen reasons" mentioned, which consisted of many objections to the plan proposed, three of which are quoted:

"10. Item, we think that it will be scandalous and offensive to all the world to yeald herein to the Pope, for it will be thought that we of the Clergie will be as ready to yeald unto them in other things.

"11. Item, because the Pope in his preface doth use these words, 'praecipimus' (we direct), 'mandamus' (we command), 'under payne of excommunication', if we should admitt it, we should seem to fear his excommunication who hath most presumptuously excommunicated the Queen, and so confirm the Papists and offend the weak brethren.<sup>1</sup>

"13. Item, the matter being of no great importance or necessity (as we thinke), especially because that the latter day approaching, as by all conjectures in the opinion of many godly learned wryters and divines, it is to be presumed there cannot happen or grow anye much greater alteration in the order and course of the year than is already, we do think that the Pope might very well have spared his labour in this matter, as the Church hath done from Christ's time hitherto."

The paper containing "the judgment of some godly learned in the mathematicalls" states that in the 300 years from the time of Christ to the Nicene Council the error of the calendar had amounted to one day, and that the Pope "had no respect to the trueth at all" or he would have omitted this one day also. But if the error of the Julian calendar had been only one day in 300 years, from the time of the Council of Nice in the year 325 to the reform of the calendar, in 1582, the error would have been only four days instead of ten. Mr. Dee was to blame for this mistake originally, but Mr. Digges, Mr. Savell and Mr. Chambers, "very skilfull in the mathematicks", and those "godly learned in the mathematicalls", might have worked out for themselves a problem of this difficulty. The error of the lunar cycle was one day

<sup>1</sup>The words in the papal decree translated "under payne of excommunication" do not refer to the acceptance of the calendar, but to the printing of the calendar and martyrology without the Pope's permission, the sole right to print the calendar having been given to Antonius Lilius.

in about 300 years, and they may have confused that with the error of the Julian year which was one day in 128 years.

As stated by Secretary Walsingham, the intention of the Government was to adopt the new calendar by proclamation of the Queen, to be published before May 1, 1583, Mr. Dee's plan calling for the omission of ten days from the months of May, June, July and August "without changing of any feast or holiday moveable or fixed." But this method of bringing the calendar into use was abandoned, for the divines informed Secretary Walsingham that the cutting off of days from certain months in this way could not be done legally, as the Book of Common Prayer containing the calendar was established by Act of Parliament, and such an alteration would be against the statute. No answer was found to this objection, and the whole matter either had to be dropped or the approval of Parliament obtained, and the latter course was decided upon. Parliament did not convene until November, 1584, and on March 16, 1584-85, the following bill was read the first time in the House of Lords: "An Act giving Her Majesty Authority to alter and new make a Calendar, according to the Calendar used in other Countries." On March 18 the bill was read a second time, and there is no further record of it. The Journal of the House of Lords shows that when the bill was read the second time there were present two Archbishops and twenty-two Bishops, and the wonder is that the Pope's calendar-bill got as far as a second reading. Until Sir Harris Nicolas published his "Chronology of History" in 1833, it was not known that any such bill had ever been introduced into Parliament.

Pope Gregory XIII, who died on April 10, 1585, was succeeded by Sixtus V, who began to aid Philip Second of Spain in his preparations designed for the conquest of England, and many besides the Archbishop may have thought that the latter day was approaching when the Pope's calendar would not be used, and that he "might very well have spared his labour in this matter."

Mr. Dee, who lived until the year 1608, in communing with the spirits revealed to them his grief because the calendar was not reformed "in the best terms of veritie."

The world did not come to an end as soon as the Bishops thought it would, and after various attempts to adopt the Gregorian calendar, it finally came into use in England in 1752. A full account of this matter is given in POPULAR ASTRONOMY for January, 1920.

Washington, D. C.