Early Modern Prose: Non -Fictional Prose writers of the 16th Century

 Early modern prose, from the reign of the first Tudor, Henry VII, to just before the Civil War was a crucial period of about 150 years. In 1485, printing had only just been introduced to the British Isles, and most material circulated in manuscript form. It was in the sixteenth century, particularly in its later part , that the English language came to its own. With the arrival of cheap mass printing English prose became the popular medium for works aiming both at amusement and instruction. Many types of non-fictional narrative, such as history, were produced in verse as well as prose and reached a limited audience of the literate. Virtually all literature of high status was written in verse. By 1640 far more people could read and were eager to participate in the public sphere of print, whether as readers or writers, consumers or producers, and prose had become the most established medium of written communication. Prose was now the dominant form of the written word, as it has been ever since. We have the Chronicles and the histories of England, mixed with legends and myths. Literary forms such as the novel, developed out of the varieties of prose fiction and romance produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Richard Hooker (1547-1600):

Hooker’s masterly work *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy*is the greatest of the non-fictional prose works of the Elizabethan age. It began appearing volume by volume in 1594 and continued till the author’s death. It was the first book in England which used English for a serious philosophic discussion. Hooker was a Protestant who combined the piety of a saint with the simplicity of a child. His purpose in writing the book was to defend the Church of England and to support certain principles of Church government. Hooker modelled his style on Cicero. His diction is simple but his syntax is highly Latinized.

Bacon (1561-1626):

Exactly opposite to Hooker’s Ciceronian style was Bacon’s English prose style which has been called the anti-Ciceronian style. The first edition of his *Essays*appeared in 1597. Bacon borrowed the term and the conception of the essay from the French writer Montaigne, whose *Essais*first appeared in 1580. In spite of the fact that Bacon took them lightly, his essays make pretty heavy reading. They are full of memorable aphorisms which have passed into everyday speech. The scope of his essays is vast, and they embrace all kinds of issues, but, mostly, those of practical life. By writing his essays Bacon became “the father of the English essay.” Even though his essays differ from the kind which was later established in England, he is a worthy predecessor of the line of essayists ranging from his own times up to ours.

Robert Burton (1577-1640)

Burton occupies a high position in English literature for his famous work *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). It has been constantly revised and reissued. It is an elaborate and discursive study of melancholy, its species and kinds, its causes, results, and cure. Although the book is a laboured exercise it demonstrates keen common sense and a true sympathy for the humanity. Burton’s work immensely fascinates many scholarly minds like those of Dr. Johnson and Charles Lamb. Despite his sympathy for the humanity, its humour is curiously ironical and subdued. The note of ‘melancholy’ that is anatomized is pervading but not oppressive. The diction has a colloquial naturalness and is rarely obscure. However, the long-tailed sentences, stuffed with quotations and allusions, are loosely woven.

Richard Halkyut (1552-1616)

 One other principal prose writers are Hakluyt. Halkyut was an editor and a geographer. He acted as one of the chief propagandists of English colonization in North America. Halkyut sponsored the publication of books concerning geography and exploration. In 1589 Hakluyt published the first edition of his major work, The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation, a historical compilation of English enterprise abroad. The second edition of the Principal Navigations was  about twice as long as the first, appeared in three folio volumes between 1598 and 1600. The final sections of the book focused on English activities in the Americas. Hakluyt also played a key role in producing a book that brought England’s first American colony to the attention of a wide and lasting audience. It contained new material from all periods, including new information on the exploits of Sir Walter Raleigh. Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* is the most significant collection of travel literature ever to be published in English. It is also one of the largest collections of Renaissance English prose, intimately connected with both its predecessors and successors in the field of travel writing.

John Foxe-(1516-1587)

John Foxe, an English Protestant preacher, published The Acts and Monuments, a highly influential work which soon became known as The Book of Martyrs in 1563. It was one of the first histories of the English Reformation — the sixteenth-century political and religious crisis, in which Henry VIII and his successors broke away from the international Roman Catholic Church and established a national Protestant Church of England. John Foxe’s book tells a compelling story, of oppression by the corrupt medieval Catholic Church, of resistance by heroic Protestant martyrs, and of the mounting strength of a powerful Protestant movement in England. Foxe’s book had a significant impact on English culture and religious belief.