

# Responses to revolution: The experiences of the English Benedictine monks in the French Revolution, 1789–93

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Following the formal proscription of the formation of Catholic religious houses in England in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, English Benedictine communities were established on the Continent from 1606 onwards. At the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, there were three independent houses belonging to the English Benedictine Congregation in France. The Revolution presented the English monks with a very real and tangible threat to their existence and securities, introducing a series of decrees that impacted on monastic life greatly. The monks responded to these incursions not by assuming the role of passive victims, or religious refugees caught up in a foreign conflict, but rather showed themselves to be shrewd operators, adept at playing the game of revolutionary politics and by navigating legal niceties. This article will illustrate that the monks' sophisticated networks of information gathering and sharing allowed them to coordinate more coherent response strategies to the Revolution amongst other British and Irish exiled communities, whilst also permitting themselves to employ a series of delaying tactics. The impact of the monks' responses to the Revolution, however, extended beyond British and Irish exiles, and impacted directly on the local French populations, through their work in the 'refractory Church'.

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Writing in the early years of the nineteenth century, a senior English Benedictine monk, Richard Marsh, compiled an account of his own community's dramatic escape from the clutches of the revolutionary guards, in the aptly named 'Escape from Dieulouard'.<sup>1</sup> He began by informing readers of the following: 'It may perhaps appear not uninteresting, not altogether useless, to write an account of the manner in which the Houses of the English Benedictines were broken up in France during the revolution.... So

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<sup>1</sup> Anselm Cramer, O.S.B., ed. *Fr Marsh's Escape from Dieulouard* (Ampleforth: Ampleforth Abbey Press, 1994).

while they are yet fresh I will throw some of them on paper.<sup>2</sup> The tenor of Marsh's publication was not all that unusual, however, joining an already burgeoning body of 'return narratives', compiled by repatriated British Catholic religious communities.<sup>3</sup>

When in August 1789 the National Assembly made its first major legislative assault on religion in France, the Church losing its privilege and its tithes, Marsh told readers that his own community of St Laurence's at Dieulouard, saw themselves as 'foreigners and perfect strangers to the civil and religious disputes which might divide some in the country'.<sup>4</sup> The picture that he painted was one of the English monks living in an almost constant state of fear, unsure of how to negotiate the perilous waters that flowed forth from the Revolution. The impression often given in return narratives is that religious assumed the role of passive spectators in the events of the Revolution. And while it might be tempting to see the suppression of religious communities in France as an inevitability, the reality among the religious themselves was, however, considerably more complex.<sup>5</sup> Research has revealed that religious did not view suppression as a *fait accompli*, with many hoping that a compromise could be reached.<sup>6</sup> The suppression of French orders was not fully implemented until August 1792, and exiled British and Irish communities survived into 1793. In the intervening period, community life continued, and religious responded in varying ways to the Revolution.

This article examines the ways in which the English Benedictine monks responded to the very real and direct threats to their religious life that the Revolution brought. The relationships between monks and the Revolution is one which unfortunately has been neglected by historians. Mary Kathryn Robinson notes in her study of the Maurists of Normandy, that 'historians have devoted little research to the fate of the male members of the religious orders'.<sup>7</sup> This article addresses

<sup>2</sup> Cramer, *Fr Marsh's Escape from Dieulouard*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of return narratives see Scholastica Jacob, ed. *A Brief Narrative of the Seizure of the Benedictine Dames of Cambray and Two Hairs & a Dish of Tortoise* (Stanbrook: Stanbrook Abbey Press, 2016); Richard Trappes-Lomax, ed. 'Records of the English Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre at Liege, now at New Hall, Essex, 1652-1793', *Recusant History*, 17 (1915): 106-56; Caroline Bowden, ed. *The Chronicles of Nazareth: (The English Convent) Bruges 1629-1795* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2018); Cramer, *Fr Marsh's Escape from Dieulouard*.

<sup>4</sup> Cramer, *Fr Marsh's Escape from Dieulouard*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Gemma Betros, 'Liberty, Citizenship and the Suppression of Female Religious Communities in France, 1789-90', *Women's History Review*, 18 (2009): 313.

<sup>6</sup> See Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1992); Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au Féminin* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Kathryn Robinson, *Regulars and the Secular Realm: the Benedictines of the Congregation of Saint-Maur in Upper Normandy During the Eighteenth Century and French Revolution* (Scranton: Scranton University Press, 2008), xiv.

this gap in scholarship, and in doing so shows that the nature of the English monks during this period was not one of timidity and passivity, weak victims simply accepting the revolutionaries' commands. It will be argued that the English monks' responses were not homogenous. Some monks, for example, were willing to engage and play the game of politics with the revolutionary governments, in the hope of safeguarding their monastic existence, their financial securities, and ultimately, their liberty. One monastic community was even ready to profit materially from the Revolution. All this turns the traditional understanding of events on their head; the English monks were not simply victims, nor religious refugees caught up in a foreign conflict, but rather were astute operators, some of whom showed themselves to be adept at playing the game of revolutionary politics.

### *Background to revolution*

At the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 there were three priories belonging to the English Benedictine Congregation in France. These houses had been established in the early decades of the seventeenth century, in the wake of the formal proscription of the formation of religious communities in the British Isles by royal statute.<sup>8</sup> The earliest of these was St Gregory's, Douai (then in the Spanish Netherlands), founded in 1606. This was followed in 1608 by St Laurence's, Dieulouard, in the Duchy of Lorraine.<sup>9</sup> In 1616 St Edmund's was founded by monks from St Laurence's, on Rue Saint Jacques, Paris. Although the houses each retained a certain degree of autonomy, the Congregation had a centralised character, and was presided over by the General Chapter. This comprised a president and other officials, elected from members of each house, serving for fixed terms of four years. By the time of the outbreak of the Revolution there was a total of forty-five monks resident in the three French houses (out of a total membership of 118)- fifteen at Douai; fourteen at Dieulouard; and sixteen at Paris.<sup>10</sup>

While the outbreak of the Revolution in France in July 1789 brought with it very real and immediate dangers for clergy and religious,<sup>11</sup> especially for contemplatives, the English monks had been

<sup>8</sup> For further reading see David Lunn, *The English Benedictines, 1540-1688: from Reformation to Revolution* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> The Duchy of Lorraine was not incorporated into the Kingdom of France until 1766.

<sup>10</sup> Alban Hood, O.S.B., *From Repatriation to Revival: Continuity and Change in the English Benedictine Congregation, 1795-1850* (Farnborough: New Abbey Press, 2014), 37. The remainder of the monks were either resident in a fourth house belonging to the Congregation at Lamspringe, near Hannover in Germany, or were serving in England as missionaries.

<sup>11</sup> In August 1789, the Catholic Church lost its privileges and tithes. See Derek Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 213.

long accustomed to state interference in their affairs. This had come primarily in the guise of the Commission des Réguliers, the state institution established by Louis XV in 1766 to restructure and reform monastic life.<sup>12</sup> Inspired, in part, by the Catholic Enlightenment, the Commission had far reaching consequences for monasticism in France. It closed many small and what they considered to be 'inactive' monasteries, going as far as abolishing a number of orders outright.<sup>13</sup> In 1770, the English monks had been requested to revise their Constitutions, to take into consideration the Commission's emphasis on education. A cause of much concern was its decree regarding the age of profession, stipulating that candidates were to be twenty-one years of age or more. The respective communities each appealed for exemptions to decrees affecting them on a variety of grounds, but none were given, and they ultimately had to rely on their own ingenuities to solve this and other issues.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the monks managed to secure their continued presence in France, and they seemed, from outward appearances at least, to have achieved stability once again by 1789.

Thus, there had long existed a climate for the reform of monastic life in France. In Austrian lands, Joseph II was embarking on his own gradual programme of monastic reform, the so-called 'Josephinism', beginning in 1780, and continuing until his death in 1790. As enclosed, contemplative communities, the English female convents in the Austrian Netherlands faced the threat of closure, and were forced to respond accordingly. The English Augustinian Nuns at Bruges, for example, attempted to negate this threat, altering their mission somewhat, by schooling local girls and by offering shelter to those former residents of suppressed religious institutions.<sup>15</sup> Impetus for change had come from monasteries themselves too; the French Maurists had been championing the transformation of monasteries into 'communities of researchers and scholars' since the early eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For further reading see Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 169-178.

<sup>13</sup> Nigel Aston, *Christianity in Revolutionary Europe c. 1750-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39. The Commission des Réguliers had a considerable impact on the French Benedictines. 122 of their 410 houses were suppressed. See Geoffrey Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone: English Monks in the Age of Enlightenment* (Downside: Downside Abbey Press, 1992), 206.

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone: English Monks in the Age of Enlightenment*, 206. It was usual for postulants to be clothed at the age of sixteen and treated as novices until the age of twenty-one. After an initial period of postulancy, young men were accepted into a monastery as novices, in a ceremony known as 'clothing', in which they received the Benedictine habit. The noviciate usually lasted for one year, after which the monk was solemnly professed.

<sup>15</sup> Bowden, *The Chronicles of Nazareth: (The English Convent) Bruges 1629-1795*, xxx.

<sup>16</sup> Ulrich Lehner, *Enlightened Monks: the German Benedictines 1740-1803* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

Appetite for reform, therefore, had not been invented by the revolutionaries, but it was they who would eventually take this desire for reform to new and devastating levels. In August 1789 came the first major attack on religion, with the Church losing its privilege and its tithes; the National Assembly had harnessed ‘decades of hostility towards the religious state and presented itself as a destroyer of a despotic and anarchic way of life’.<sup>17</sup> Soon after the monasteries were targeted directly; the taking of solemn vows being suspended, albeit this was introduced initially as a temporary suspension.<sup>18</sup> The response by the French Church to the early legislative measures affecting religion was not unified; the hierarchy stressed the centrality of the Church to the French nation, while the lower clergy broadly lent their support to the initial reforms. At this stage ‘only the more suspicious and alarmist clergy doubted the good intentions of the Assembly’, and even within French male monasteries there was said to have been little opposition.<sup>19</sup> Amongst the English monks, however, there were signs that some were fearful of the course that the Revolution might take; its president, Augustine Walker,<sup>20</sup> floated the idea that the monks might evacuate France *en masse*, and find sanctuary on Bardsey Island, off North Wales, or at Rome, thanks to the proposed financial support of the Duchess of Albany.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately nothing came of the proposals, and they soon settled on trying to wait out the Revolution as best they could.

Nothing within surviving correspondence from the earlier stages of the Revolution conveys an overriding sense of the impending doom. The monks’ responses, on the contrary, appear to have been somewhat muted. As foreign religious they were exempt, initially, from the most damning of these decrees; their properties were not confiscated and the decree of February 1790 suppressing all religious orders that required solemn vows, did not apply to them. Their response at this stage was mixed. The Revolution was of course a serious threat, but having survived the Commission des Réguliers there may have been an optimism that a safe passage could be steered. Surviving letters from a small number of English monks written in 1789 have surprisingly little to say about the progress of the Revolution, except for concerns relating to securing rents due to them. This was in stark contrast to the alarm shared by their coreligionists in England, some of whom were quick to convey their concerns to the English houses across the Channel. George Doughty, the monks’ financial agent in London,

<sup>17</sup> Betros, ‘Liberty, Citizenship and the Suppression of Female Religious Communities in France, 1789-90’, 312.

<sup>18</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 252.

<sup>19</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 249.

<sup>20</sup> Monks in Motion database, <https://durham.ac.uk/mim/>, ID 175 (hereafter MIM).

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone: English Monks in the Age of Enlightenment*, 212.

wrote to Placid Naylor<sup>22</sup> at St Edmund's, Paris expressing his fear that 'I hear none of y[ou]r houses are likely to remain undisturbed but Lamspring- & that very probably it may not be long before we see you this side of the water'.<sup>23</sup> Peter Coughlan, the well-known Catholic printer in London, shared a similarly pessimistic outlook for their future, conceding that: 'The rumour here is such that if true, Religious establishments are [to be] abolished'.<sup>24</sup>

A sense that it was possible to work around the revolutionary edicts concerning religious life appears to have permeated the thinking of senior office holders, leading to the belief that as foreign religious, 'they could ride out the storm in France through adopting delaying tactics and resorting to constant petitions for exemption from damaging legislation'.<sup>25</sup> Writing in 1790, the prior of St Edmund's in Paris, Henry Parker,<sup>26</sup> professed a restrained optimism, stating that: 'We have good grounds to think that this house and our capitals may be preserved to us and pensions besides'.<sup>27</sup> John Fisher,<sup>28</sup> president of the Congregation during the years of the Commission, espoused a similar degree of hopefulness, declaring that: 'with a little help that we may stand our ground'.<sup>29</sup> Their expulsion from France, was not, therefore—at least in the eyes of some of the monks—a given from the outset. They hoped that their transnational identity would insure they would go unmolested, even though they had been bestowed with naturalisation since the early 1700s, allowing them to enjoy the same civil privileges afforded the French religious. Many within the Congregation believed that their Englishness exempted them from the intrusions that French religious were suffering.

1790 was a decisive turning point in the relationship between the Revolution and the Church in France. The changes introduced from then on differed significantly from what had gone before for three reasons: 'its scale, its speed, and most of all, its origin in a completely new popular institution—the National Assembly'.<sup>30</sup> In February of that year the National Assembly declared that all religious orders which had required solemn (lifelong) vows were to be disbanded and their properties forfeited. The worsening reality for religious was evident, forcing the monks to engage with the revolutionary government in the hope of securing a best possible outcome. And what this meant

<sup>22</sup> MIM, ID 298.

<sup>23</sup> George Doughty to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 19 March 1790, MSS S4619 (uncatalogued), Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Coughlan to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 28 September 1790, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone: English Monks in the Age of Enlightenment*, 201.

<sup>26</sup> MIM, ID 139.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 14 October 1790, MSS 18/H/53(962), Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille (hereafter ADNLS).

<sup>28</sup> MIM, ID 239.

<sup>29</sup> John Fisher, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., undated, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>30</sup> Aston, *Christianity in Revolutionary Europe c. 1750-1830*, 189.

evolved over time, changing from hopes of a continued existence in France, to a desire of securing financial securities before the inevitable expulsion. The ways in which they responded, and indeed the successes of the responses, were, however, influenced by the nature of religious life as it existed within the three English houses in France.

By the time the Revolution had broken out, each of the houses was beset by internal turmoil, and none could claim to be in a healthy state. St Edmund's, Paris was undoubtedly in the most fragile condition, dogged by internal squabbles, leading to a virtual breakdown in monastic discipline. By 1790 the community there was small, comprised of some sixteen monks. Lack of communal discipline had consequences, leading in a number of instances to monks embracing revolutionary ideals. Broadly speaking, the English monks showed an indifference to the allure of French radicalism and revolutionary politics, but the experience at St Edmund's was different, with some within the community openly nailing their colours to the revolutionary mast. So serious was the situation that one monk referred to 'our expiring congregation.'<sup>31</sup> Amongst the most recalcitrant were Bennet Cawser,<sup>32</sup> who had been imprisoned for some six years (1788-94) due to his allegedly scandalous behaviour; Cuthbert Wilks,<sup>33</sup> a leading advocate of the liberal, Anglo-Gallican, English Catholic Committee, was excommunicated; Peter Marsh,<sup>34</sup> nephew of Prior Richard Marsh, apostatised on the breakup of the house in 1793. John Cromblehome<sup>35</sup> and John Turner<sup>36</sup> were, however, two more extreme examples, both embracing the Revolution and its promises of *liberté et égalité et fraternité*. Cromblehome joined the Republican Armies, where he acted as a drummer, just a few years after castrating himself, probably in an act of madness. Turner's embrace of radicalism was more fleeting, enlisting in the National Guard for a time, and even taking the so-called 'little oath' in August 1792, before eventually reconciling with the Church and the Congregation. Such was the state of his community that Henry Parker in a letter to a fellow monk, lamented that: 'Perhaps you may know that Kennedy<sup>37</sup> has left us sometime ago. Causer talks of leaving us soon; I could wish some others would either do the same or stay and do their duty!'.<sup>38</sup> This fracturing

<sup>31</sup> Augustine Kellett, O.S.B. to Bede Bennett, O.S.B., 18 September 1790, MSS A460-510 (504), Downside Abbey Archives, Somerset (hereafter DAA).

<sup>32</sup> MIM, ID 067.

<sup>33</sup> MIM, ID 184.

<sup>34</sup> MIM, ID 124.

<sup>35</sup> MIM, ID 074.

<sup>36</sup> MIM, ID 173.

<sup>37</sup> This was Basil Kennedy. MIM, ID 807.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Bede Bennett, O.S.B., 18 September 1790, MSS A460-510 (503), DAA.

was such that there eventually came a call from a number of monks to sell the property and share the profits amongst themselves.

At St Gregory's, Douai, the community experienced its own internal issues; between 1779-83 alone, five young men who had been admitted as novices left the community before profession.<sup>39</sup> A sign of the stress of the times, these are surprisingly high figures of departure, as there appears to have been only seven monks in formation at St Gregory's in these years, with only two going on to be solemnly professed. The Congregation also possessed a small house at La Celle, near Meaux, which by the late eighteenth century was functioning as a *refugium peccatorum* for recalcitrant monks, of which we are led to believe there were no shortage of candidates for admittance. At St Laurence's, Dieulouard, the principal cause for concern was economic; its finances had been crippled by the failure of its brewery, one of its main sources of income. Their situation was not aided by the added burden of an expanding student community, Dieulouard having taken in trainee monks from St Edmund's.<sup>40</sup> The community was said to have accrued debts of some 25,000 livres by the outbreak of the Revolution.<sup>41</sup>

That the English monastic houses were beset by a collapse in communality and unity was, of course, not unique; if anything, the experiences of native French monasteries may have been considerably worse. As Derek Beales has argued, when the commissioners of the revolutionary government entered the great male monasteries to conduct the prescribed inventories after the decisions of November 1789, 'they commonly- though no means invariably- found few monks remaining, and many of those quite ready to give up their vows and leave the life of the cloister.'<sup>42</sup> Over half the monks living in Parisian communities are estimated to have taken the opportunity to leave their houses when given the option of secularisation.<sup>43</sup> Nothing similar happened in the case of the English professed monks in France, with only a few opting to choose a permanent secular life.

### *Information gathering and networks of communication*

Hampered by internal quarrels and disunity, the English monks faced up to the challenges to religious life brought about by an increasingly intrusive National Assembly. To respond effectively they first had to

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Berry (MIM, ID 394), Joseph Bromley (MIM, ID 405), John Cooper (MIM, ID 430), William Holderness (MIM, ID 494), William Pemberton (MIM, ID 562).

<sup>40</sup> Richard Marsh, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., December 1790, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone: English Monks in the Age of Enlightenment*, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 258.

<sup>43</sup> Here the term 'secularisation' refers to monks who were laicised, opting for life in the secular world, as opposed to those becoming diocesan, or secular, clergy.



become aware of how the rapidly changing revolutionary climate would affect them. The success of their responses was ultimately dependent on how well-acquainted the monks were with the latest revolutionary decrees and their understanding of the prevailing political mood, and in turn, how they communicated the latest news, not just amongst themselves, but also with the wider British and Irish exiled religious communities. As had been the case with native French female religious convents, surviving correspondence suggests that the monks were in fact very well-informed, with effective channels of communication synchronised by Henry Parker in Paris.<sup>44</sup> Parker was a pivotal figure in the gathering and dissemination of information amongst the British and Irish exiled religious communities during the revolutionary period. Born in 1752 into a Catholic family in Kirkham, Lancashire, he had been professed at St Edmund's in 1773, before going on to teach at St Gregory's, Douai. Upon his return to Paris he was first appointed sub-prior of St Edmund's in 1786, before being elected prior in 1789, a position which he held until 1817. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, he was significant in attempts to secure the financial interests of the British and Irish establishments in France.<sup>45</sup>

During the Revolution Parker kept President Walker, then residing with the English Benedictine Nuns at Cambrai, in the north of France, abreast of developments in the capital, whilst also meeting with Dieulouard's prior, Richard Marsh, on a number of occasions in 1791-2. Interestingly, he shared information and coordinated responses with other Catholic exiles from Britain and Ireland. The English Benedictine convents at Cambrai and Paris were important links in his chain of communication, but so too the English Augustinian Nuns in Paris, and the important Irish cleric, an opponent of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, Luke Joseph Hooke.<sup>46</sup> In a letter dated October 1790, Parker recalled that he and Augustine Kellet, the procurator at St Edmund's, had attended a meeting with the Augustinian Nuns at their convent in Paris, where they had discussed the events at the latest meeting of the National Assembly's Ecclesiastical Committee. Their interests were focussed on the Committee's intentions to conduct inventories of foreign religious houses. Parker wrote: 'The committee will conclude in their rapport that the English houses shall retain their property; but they insist on the particulars of that property being mentioned, and it seems that each house will be mentioned by name.'<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> For further reading on how native French female religious communicated information see Betros, 'Liberty, Citizenship and the Suppression of Female Religious Communities in France, 1789-90', 314-6.

<sup>45</sup> See MIM, ID 139.

<sup>46</sup> For further reading see Thomas O'Connor, *Luke Joseph Hooke: an Irish Theologian in Enlightenment France, 1714-96* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 14 October 1790, MSS 18/H/53 (962), ADNL.

Parker's correspondence suggests that these types of meetings took place on a regular basis throughout 1790-1, and were not *ad hoc*, especially those of an intra-Benedictine nature, where they shared the latest information and coordinated delaying strategies. As well as organising information sharing and strategy meetings, Parker distributed printed collections of all the revolutionary decrees, often with Prior Richard Marsh. Parker told Walker that he had given a 'collection of all the decrees relative to the Church and Religion' to Marsh, who was to pass them to Walker when he reached Cambrai, with two volumes then to be passed between a Mr Dormer, and Bede Bennet<sup>48</sup> at St Gregory's.<sup>49</sup> The principal interest in this particular consignment was that it contained a 'collection of most of the writings that have appeared for or against the civil constitution.'<sup>50</sup> Introduced the previous summer, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was a radical departure, essentially subjecting the Church to civil control, with all French clergy being obliged to swear an oath of loyalty from January 1791, if they wished to continue to exercise their ministry legally. This has been characterised as the point of 'official polarisation of Catholicism and the Revolution.'<sup>51</sup> 'We are in an alarming situation here', Parker lamented in another letter to Bede Bennet, 'particularly as to church affairs: a national schism seems to [be] unavoidable. Great numbers of the new B[isho]ps are chosen; some are consecrated.'<sup>52</sup> Writing again, this time to Walker, he foresaw that the 'Ecc[lesiastical]-Civil establishment will be quickly raised' and that 'the old Church', as he described it, 'must provide itself [with] places of worship, and in doing this, I question whether she will escape persecution, notwithstanding the reigning spirit of toleration.'<sup>53</sup>

Parker and his brother monks, on the face of it, appear to have been well-acquainted with the political situation as it affected them. That they were so owed much to the efforts of Parker, who acted as the linchpin in the gathering and sharing of information between British and Irish exiles. While much of this was achieved by conventional methods, some of it was thanks to their own direct interactions with the National Assembly. The monks enjoyed a regular presence at the National Assembly's Ecclesiastical Committee, in the figure of Augustine Kellet, the procurator at St Edmund's, which earned him the nickname 'citizen Kellet' amongst his *confreres*.<sup>54</sup> His presence at these meetings was

<sup>48</sup> MIM, ID 392.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 15 May 1791, MSS 18/H/53(947), ADNL.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Aston, *Christianity in Revolutionary Europe c. 1750-1830*, 190.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Bede Bennet, O.S.B., 14 March 1791, MSS B1-86(2), DAA.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 15 March 1791, MSS 18/H/53(932), ADNL.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Bede Bennet, O.S.B., 11 October 1792, MSS B1-86(27), DAA.

important, as Parker explained in a letter discussing the difficulties of securing rents from lands owned by the community at St Edmund's: 'Many other difficulties occur between farmers and directories', he wrote, 'which make the procurator's continual attendance on the committees of the N[ational] Assembly necessary, or else we should often have to reimburse considerable sums or lose those we have a right to: he contrives to get special permission from the committees.'<sup>55</sup>

Coupled with Kellet's attendance at the proceedings of the Ecclesiastical Committee, the monks' method of gathering information was enhanced thanks to, somewhat surprisingly, relatively cordial relations with a small number of members of the Committee. These men shared information with the monks, and on occasion offered a sympathetic ear to their concerns. In his letters, Parker occasionally spoke of communicating with revolutionaries. In August 1790, not long after the passing of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, he wrote the following: 'At last yesterday I had a letter from the committee Ecclesiastique, wherein one of the members informs me that the committee men had just concluded unanimously that our property in rue St Jacques should be left us and that we should be intitled to pensions on the same footing as other non-mendicant religious orders'.<sup>56</sup> The committee man, Parker told Walker, 'wishes us success in the assembly when the report comes on. How soon that be we cannot tell. I wish Douay had sent up a Memoire; the committee is now working on the article of English Establishments'.<sup>57</sup>

Richard Marsh, writing in July 1791, similarly acknowledged communication with a member of the Committee, who had sent a letter 'concerning the oath and processions'.<sup>58</sup> And while both correspondents may have been perfectly amiable, even to the extent of offering good wishes, neither received the gleeful affirmation that was afforded to one member by Parker. He informed Walker that: 'We have in the committee an advocate whom we had not expected, a Monsieur Lanjuinais, whose opinions are quite in our favour, but he says he is sure of nothing'.<sup>59</sup> The Lanjuinais that Parker referred to was none other than Jean Denis, comte Lanjuinais, a lawyer and politician. Lanjuinais had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution and its seizure of Church assets, fervently supporting the passing of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 15 February 1791, MSS 18/H/53 (929), ADNL.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 6 August 1790, MSS 18/H/53 (960), ADNL.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Richard Marsh, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 9 July 1791, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Parker O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 23 September 1790, MSS 18/H/53 (954), ADNL.

<sup>60</sup> John R. Ballard, *Continuity During the Storm: Boissy d'Anglas and the Era of the French Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 185.

*Responses to the Revolution*

As the Revolution progressed, the best possible outcome for the monks had shifted from a belief that they, as foreigners, could see out the Revolution and enjoy a future in France, to one where finding safe passage to more hospitable climes became the objective. Between 1790 and 1793, when the houses were eventually closed, the monks devoted much of their energies to employing delaying tactics, in attempts to stall the advances of the Revolution, largely in the hope of securing their financial interests, which in turn would allow for the transfer of communities elsewhere. In employing this strategy, their efforts fitted in with patterns of some, but not all, native French communities, whilst mirroring also the actions of exiled English female religious.

English female religious had proved themselves adept in their own political manoeuvrings, and enjoyed some success in their endeavours. Carmen Mangion has illustrated that the nuns attempted to avoid the rash measures of the revolutionaries by what she calls 'selective compromise', a process of accommodation and engaging in the political act of petitioning.<sup>61</sup> This was a tactic that had also been used by French female religious with some success, adopting revolutionary language to argue their right to exist, which, as Gemma Betros has shown, hampered the speed at which female religious houses were closed.<sup>62</sup> Betros argues that rather 'than wait for the Assembly to decide their fate, the women... attempted to influence the Assembly's policies by using the language of and concepts of the Revolution to argue their case.'<sup>63</sup>

The English nuns engaged in a complex game of give and take with the revolutionaries, and had chosen wisely which battles to fight, but accepting revolutionary demands when prudence was required. The English nuns were in regular correspondence with the monks, and the nuns' responses were undoubtedly affected by these interactions. In 1791 the English Augustinians at Paris, the White Nuns mentioned in Parker's letters, had addressed a petition to the National Assembly, requesting 'the preservation and security of their existence and their property'.<sup>64</sup> The nuns used the double-edged transnational strategy, arguing on the one hand that since their assets, having been paid for with English money, were thus outside the remit of the French

<sup>61</sup> Carmen Mangion, 'Avoiding "Rash and Imprudent Measures": English Nuns in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1801', in Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly, eds. *The English Convents in Exile, 1600-1800* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 47-263.

<sup>62</sup> Betros, 'Liberty, Citizenship and the Suppression of Female Religious Communities in France, 1789-90', 313.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Mangion, 'Avoiding "Rash and Imprudent Measures": English Nuns in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1801', 260.

government, whilst on the other claiming the protection of the state as naturalised French citizens.<sup>65</sup> At Bruges, Caroline Bowden suggests that the prioress of the English Augustinians, Mary Augustine More,<sup>66</sup> positioned the convent firmly as part of the ‘expatriate English community, drawing members and financial support from outside the local community and therefore not subject to the same laws as local communities.’<sup>67</sup> A letter from the Irish College, Douai, from February 1793 expressed a similar faith that their expatriate nature would ensure the College’s survival. The letter in question concerned the decree suppressing religious houses, but the writer was confident that Douai was safe on the basis that the decree did not affect them, ‘because we did not suppose it regarded strangers’.<sup>68</sup>

Once again, similarities exist between the delaying tactics used by British and Irish exiles, and native French religious. Examining the petitions of French female religious, Betros illustrates how some communities adopted their own ‘double identity’, speaking of themselves as ‘members of the religious state and loyal citizens of France, showing that they were willing and able to combine their civic and religious obligations without apparent conflict of interest.’<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Nigel Aston echoes these sentiments, suggesting that it ‘was not unknown for their supporters to use the revolutionaries’ own weapons against them. In February 1792, a ‘Petition of the Citizens of département of the Nord’ defended monks and their monasteries, insisting that any further moves against them would breach the Declaration of the Rights of Man.<sup>70</sup>

Henry Parker had mentioned the fate of the English Augustinians of Paris in a number of letters. In one from August 1790, he wrote that he attempted to quell the nuns’ fears ‘at an affiche in which, they understood, one of more of their houses were proposed to sale. It proves not so’.<sup>71</sup> When Teresa Partington,<sup>72</sup> the prioress of the Benedictine nuns at Cambrai, attempted to defend her own house from incursions, sending ‘papers to the district to prove that the convent has nothing or very little from France’, Parker was incredulous:

I know not what this is all for: I mentioned no such thing: the article of traitement is the only thing: it signifies nothing what they may have here to

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Who Were the Nuns? database, <https://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/>, BA145 (hereafter WWTN).

<sup>67</sup> Bowden, *The Chronicles of Nazareth: (The English Convent) Bruges 1629-1795*, xxxi.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Extract of a letter from Douay, dated Feb. 21, 1793’ [printed], MSS 117/6 (uncatalogued), Dublin Diocesan Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Betros, ‘Liberty, Citizenship and the Suppression of Female Religious Communities in France, 1789-90’, 315.

<sup>70</sup> Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780-1804* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), 227.

<sup>71</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 29 August 1790, MSS 18/H/53 (947), ADNL.

<sup>72</sup> WWTN CB143.

have received from France: now they are left to subsist upon their own, to pay their own debts, and have nothing at all from the nation by way of *traitement*.<sup>73</sup>

Parker, it would appear, was expressing a disappointment that his wishes had not been followed. Coupled with his other activities, it is reasonable to assert that he was a man of some importance, coordinating defence tactics for the exiled English Catholic communities in France, and not just for the male Benedictines.

Parker's disappointment came from the fact that, as he saw it, the monks themselves had become astute and adept players in the game of revolutionary politics, adopting the political tactic of petitioning and engagement with the revolutionary authorities. The way in which they played this game of revolutionary politics differed from house to house, with responses tailored to meet the most pressing needs of the respective communities. At St Gregory's, for example, the community united with the other British and Irish establishments to present themselves to the Directory of the District of Douai in December 1791, to answer charges against their continued presence in the town as foreigners.<sup>74</sup> Nothing seems to have come from this meeting, but the District's intervention at this stage did not bode well for their future. Douai, it would seem, was becoming increasingly inhospitable to monastic communities; a number of the district's wealthy monasteries had fallen victim to a violent outbreak of peasant sackings in the summer of 1789.<sup>75</sup> Concerns were further heightened as the priory's college was situated on lands belonging to the Abbey of St Vaast at Arras, which by then, was itself nationalised.<sup>76</sup> Whether or not the petitions played a part in their continued existence in the town is unclear, but the monks remained *in situ*.

With the fragmentation of the Church and the worsening political climate, their position as privileged foreign religious became increasingly threatened. In January 1793, the British and Irish establishments were charged by the president of the local Directory 'with disaffection to the French Government, attachment to the Roman see and to the enemies of the State'.<sup>77</sup> The prior of St Gregory's, Jerome Sharrock,<sup>78</sup> in an attempt to defuse the

<sup>73</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 25 April 1792, MSS 18/H/53 (11088), ADNL.

<sup>74</sup> Aidan Bellenger, *Monks with a Mission: Essays in Benedictine English History* (Downside: Downside Abbey Press, 2014), 115. Douai was an important centre of education for British and Irish exiles, home to separate English, Irish and Scots colleges, as well as the Benedictine priory and school at St Gregory's.

<sup>75</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 235.

<sup>76</sup> St Gregory's priory had an institutional attachment to the University of Douai, which itself had been established on lands owned by the wealthy abbey of Saint Vaast, Arras. See Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone: English Monks in the Age of Enlightenment*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> Bellenger, *Monks with a Mission: Essays in Benedictine English History*, 115.

<sup>78</sup> MIM, ID 594.

situation, suggested that they, as Englishmen, posed the Revolution little harm, conceding that while they had a spiritual attachment to the Papacy, their civic loyalties lay with the French government.<sup>79</sup> Sharrock here was possibly referring to their position as non-juring clergy; the monks, as foreign religious, were exempted from the necessity to swear an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

While external events threatened the existence of the English foundations, a semblance of religious life continued within the houses. In 1790 the Congregation was faced with the potentially catastrophic revolutionary decree prohibiting the taking of solemn vows, building on a decree from 1789 that forbade communities from accepting novices. And while the decree suppressing native orders that required perpetual vows did not apply to them, what did concern them was, however, the clause that enticed inmates to leave the cloister in return for a more generous state pension.<sup>80</sup> The experience of the English monks in this regard was in contrast with their French *confreres*; in Paris, for example, one estimate suggest that half of the monks opted for secularisation and a pension.<sup>81</sup> Outside of Paris, however, the responses to the suppression decree and invitation to secularisation were more diverse; Robinson in her study of the French Maurists in Upper Normandy suggests that the monks from 'urban establishments also continued to reside within their abbey or in the same city after the suppression', simply ignoring the decree.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, she argues that the actions of the Maurists 'further reveal the fallacy of viewing the Revolutionary religious legislation as a culmination of secularisation or assuming that these policies were universally accepted and obeyed throughout France.'<sup>83</sup> Responses to the Revolution were as complex and varied amongst the French monks as they were between the English.

While only a tiny proportion of the English monks opted for a life outside of their monasteries, numbers were a concern for the Congregation, as the sizes of the English communities fluctuated, adding further significance to the decree forbidding professions. The monks responded by essentially ignoring the decree, and continued, where possible, to accept and profess new members. In 1790, Parker conceded, somewhat despondently, that 'Our habit is abolished by decree of the National Assembly: the thing has but this function to add, which he never refuses, to make our dress illegal, unconstitutional,

<sup>79</sup> Bellenger, *Monks with a Mission: Essays in Benedictine English History*, 115.

<sup>80</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 256.

<sup>81</sup> For further reading see Bernard Plongeron, *Les Réguliers des Paris Devant le Serment Constitutionnel* (Paris: Vrin, 1964).

<sup>82</sup> Robinson, *Regulars and the Secular Realm: the Benedictines of the Congregation of Saint-Maur in Upper Normandy During the Eighteenth Century and French Revolution*, 135.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

*lese-nationale*'.<sup>84</sup> Sharrock conceded that St Gregory's was, with regard to professed monks, in a dangerous position: 'I am sadly distressed for Ordinations', he wrote, 'you will observe that we are only three Pr [offesed] priests... in the house including myself, who am little to be relied on in my state of health, and business or an unforeseen accident may deprive us of another.'<sup>85</sup>

To combat this, the houses at Dieulouard and Douai continued to profess new members into their respective communities, albeit in relatively small numbers. As well as exploiting this loophole, professing new members was probably a necessary reaction; resident communities were in decline, internal discord coupled with the steady fall in the number of entrants since the mid-century must surely have been alarming to the Congregation's senior office holders. The issue of professions was discussed at a meeting of senior monks that took place in England in spring 1791, where, Marsh recalled: they 'decided that we might take young men to the habit without secular witnesses, but to know whether we could profess them without that solemnity, and whether we carry secular [habits], since the religious habit is so ill look'd upon in France, it was refer'd to the court in Rome'.<sup>86</sup> And this is exactly what they did: they professed without secular witnesses, which had been previously required under French law. Between them the houses at Dieulouard and Douai professed eleven men respectively between 1790-3. At Douai candidates were sent over the border into Austrian lands; Thomas Barker<sup>87</sup> and George Turner,<sup>88</sup> for example, made their professions on 10 October 1790 at St Mary's, Mechlin, before returning to their house.<sup>89</sup> On 21 October 1792 four professions took place for St Gregory's, probably the last before the community's repatriation.<sup>90</sup> At Dieulouard professions took place in secular dress, with five men being solemnly received into the community between 1791-3.<sup>91</sup> These figures compare favourably with solemn professions that had taken place in the period 1786-9, when the total number of young men completing formation was twelve.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Bede Bennett, O.S.B., 18 September 1790, MSS A460-510 (504), DAA.

<sup>85</sup> Jerome Sharrock, O.S.B. to Bede Bennet, O.S.B., 27 January 1793, MSS B1-86 (39), DAA.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Marsh, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 26 June 1791, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>87</sup> MIM, ID 383.

<sup>88</sup> MIM, ID 632.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Norbert Birt, *Obit Book of the English Benedictines from 1600 to 1912* (Edinburgh: privately printed, 1912), 121.

<sup>90</sup> Joseph Barber (MIM, ID 922), Raymund Eldridge (MIM, ID 444), Augustine Harrison (MIM, ID 474) and Joseph Hawarden (MIM, ID 479) were professed on this day (St Gregory's Liber Graduum, MSS 325, 331-2; 324, 325-7; 324, 329-30; 327-8, DAA).

<sup>91</sup> James Calderbank (MIM, ID 212), Alexius Chew (MIM, ID 2128), Francis Cooper (MIM, ID 220), John Dawber (MIM, ID 228) and Bennet Marsh (MIM, ID 290) were professed between 1791 and 1793.



The numbers resident within religious houses had attained an important significance for another reason though. In 1790, it had also been decided that those communities who had not been decreed to incur suppression, would be required to maintain a resident community of at least a dozen. This was a constant cause of concern for all the houses, but especially St Edmund's. If the size of the community fell below twelve it was in danger of being forcibly suppressed, seized, and losing all its financial entitlements. Parker informed Walker that

'The Procurator [Augustine Kellet] maintains that we must take care to keep above a dozen, or that we shall certainly be broke up: he seems to be persuaded that some will quit.... in all appearance[s], there remain but thirteen.... This number frightens the Procurator'.<sup>92</sup>

Parker went on to show how St Edmund's would effectively 'cook the books' to make the numbers artificially high, by including in the lists those monks on the mission in England, in order to lessen the opportunities that the revolutionaries might have to seize their house. 'As to their insisting on our numbers being more than twelve', Parker said: it seems inconsistent and out of the power of the municipality: for the property is left us, ie. the congregation, and if the congregation think proper to dispose of it what have they to say? I know that just at present it would be imprudent to attempt it; but it is only in point of pension that they have a right to prescribe to us.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, erring on the side of caution, he said that they would 'endeavour to make Mr Naylor count as one of the community', and also Causer and Kennedy, who themselves had already fled the house.<sup>94</sup> In both respects, by continuing to profess, and by falsifying returns to show that the communities were above the threshold to be considered for closure, the monks were showing themselves willing to do what they saw as necessary to ensure their survival and secure their financial securities. And while these acts of defiance against the revolutionary government were done in the means of self-preservation, another hugely significant act of disobedience, the impact of which extended far beyond the exiled English communities, was their involvement in the refractory church.<sup>95</sup>

In Paris, the English convents had established themselves as centres of refractory worship in the aftermath of the introduction of the oath

<sup>92</sup> Henry Parker O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 13 November 1790, MSS 18/H/53 (969), ADNL.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* Placid Naylor resided in Paris, where he was confessor to the Benedictine nuns, but was a member of St Laurence's, Dieulouard.

<sup>95</sup> The 'refractory church' is a term that refers to the body of French clergy who had refused to take the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which clergy were legally required to take from the beginning of 1791. These men were known as 'non-jurors', offering pastoral care, without official government sanction, to those unwilling to attend churches staffed by juring clergy.

of allegiance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1791.<sup>96</sup> Priests who had not sworn the oath were forbidden from ministering legally, and as a result many churches and chapels were closed to the public. Parker conveyed his concerns at the situation in Paris in a letter to Walker in December 1790:

The cathedral here has been shut, at least the choir, to the canons, at least ten or twelve days: it is the same in several others: I know not how matters stand in Cambrai. A stiff compliance on the part of the clergy would be a trying circumstance to the revolution: at the same I fear the fanaticism, particularly, at Paris, would make strange havoc.<sup>97</sup>

His comment that he had hoped to see a 'stiff compliance on the part of the clergy' may have been an endorsement of his support for the refractory church.

As a result of this 'strange havoc', a number of the chapels belonging to British and Irish exiled religious subsequently became centres of refractory worship. The English Benedictine convent at Paris defied wishes from the constitutional curé in their parish, who had ordered that 'no mass was to be said in the church of the convent by any priest, except he had faculties from the "intruding curate"'.<sup>98</sup> The convent chapel continued to offer Mass, however, which was said presumably by Placid Naylor, their confessor. The Convent of Our Blessed Lady of Good Hope, on Paris's Rue de Chant de l'Allouette had opted to submit to the authority of the Archbishop of Paris in 1657, thus detaching itself from the English Benedictine Congregation, while retaining English Benedictine monks as confessors.<sup>99</sup> At the English Benedictine convent at Cambrai, Dame Anselma Anne Knight wrote to her brother, Alexander, in June 1791, detailing her own convent's involvement in providing refractory worship to the local French population. Knight mourned their predicament; the 'disagreeableness of the times makes me have little courage to do anything, we hope for better'.<sup>100</sup> 'Nothing has been done to us', she wrote, going on to say that 'most places of pr[ayer] are shut up, our little ch[urch]. especially on Sundays & holidays is stuff'd like a black pudden.'<sup>101</sup>

At Cambrai, the involvement of the monks was important, with Augustine Walker acting as confessor and chaplain to the community. Walker, along with Placid Naylor at Paris, had been exempted from the

<sup>96</sup> Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780-1804*, 233.

<sup>97</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., 6 December 1790, MSS 18/H/53 (911), ADNL.

<sup>98</sup> John Goldworth Ager, ed. *Englishmen in the French Revolution* (London: Sampson Low, 1889), 153.

<sup>99</sup> K.S.B. Keats-Rohan, ed. *English Catholic Nuns in Exile 1600-1800: a Biographical Register* (Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research, 2017), xvii.

<sup>100</sup> Anselma Anne Knight, O.S.B. to Alexander Knight, 17 July 1791, MSS 328 (uncatalogued), Stanbrook Abbey, Yorkshire.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

oath to the Civil Constitution as foreign religious. Thus, both offered the sacraments in good conscience, in no way in opposition to French laws. However, the chapels of foreign religious were strongly discouraged by revolutionary officials from admitting locals to their religious services. Parker warned Walker of the situation at the Irish College, Paris, where locals had attended Vespers one Sunday in October 1791. 'The Irish college [on] Chevel vert was surrounded by a great crowd at vespers time', he wrote, 'and a whipping was loudly threatened' for those French who had attended.<sup>102</sup> Both Naylor and Walker's assent would undoubtedly have been required for the convent chapels to become centres of refractory worship, as it was the English monks who performed religious services there. At Dieulouard, St Laurence's own chapel accommodated locals who would not attend services conducted by juring clergy.<sup>103</sup> Richard Marsh stated that this angered the Municipality greatly, resulting in one instance where local religious sisters 'were abused, beaten and driven out of the village, because they came to our church.'<sup>104</sup> In his memoirs of the Revolution, he wrote that

from St Mark's day, 1792, our church door was never opened, nor our bells rung. From the time the church doors were shut, we had frequent bickerings with the Municipality, on account of letting people who would not go to Mass at the Parish Church come to hear Mass at our church.<sup>105</sup>

In allowing the chapels to act as centres of non-juring worship, the monks, at Cambrai, Dieulouard and Paris were not only participating in an act of defiance against the Revolution, but they had also effectively ensconced themselves within the refractory Church: they were not merely foreign exiles existing within a small national vacuum, but rather they were fully participating in the political and religious struggles that had engulfed their 'adopted' land.

### *Enlightened opportunists?*

However, while some of the monks involved themselves in the activities of the refractory church, to suggest that the English Benedictines were uniformly 'orthodox', refractory, anti-revolutionary would be a distortion of a much more complex reality. The actions of Richard Marsh, prior of St Laurence's at Dieulouard, are an important example of this. Marsh embodied the role of the cleric willing to engage with the new regime, and play the game of revolutionary politics at its most extreme level, in an attempt to safeguard his community's existence.

<sup>102</sup> Henry Parker, O.S.B. to Augustine Walker, O.S.B., October 1791, MSS 18/H/53(1043), ADNL. For further reading on this event see Goldworth Ager, *Englishmen in the French Revolution*, 88-9.

<sup>103</sup> This was the term given to clergy who had taken the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

<sup>104</sup> Cramer, *Fr Marsh's Escape from Dieulouard*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Even before the outbreak of the Revolution, Dieulouard had faced an uncertain future, wracked with mounting debts. However, a social and political upheaval, such as the Revolution, brought with it not only challenges but also opportunities for religious. Just as had occurred centuries before in England during the Protestant Reformation and the Suppression of the Monasteries, the Revolution in France presented openings, especially for those who were willing to take a pragmatic approach to the situation. Marsh was a man who was willing to go to seemingly extraordinary lengths to secure a future for his community, attempting to buy, in 1793, previously confiscated Church lands.

Sales of confiscated ecclesiastical lands had begun in earnest in the latter months of 1790.<sup>106</sup> At Dieulouard, we are told that several attractive pieces of land had come on the market, in which Marsh was to show much interest. One such piece belonged to an unknown 'Community of Auttreville',<sup>107</sup> while another had been in the possession of the bishopric of Verdun, having been seized in 1789. From his comments to Naylor, Marsh realised that purchasing lands confiscated from a bishopric was a step too far, 'so that when the Nation sells it we cannot expect to procure any just purchase of it.'<sup>108</sup> With nothing, it seems, coming from either of these options, Marsh turned his attention to another possibility, a farm which he said 'would be exceedingly convenient for our house for several reasons'.<sup>109</sup> This particular plot of land had been confiscated from the Order of Malta, and serious consideration was given to its purchase. Marsh attempted to play down the negative associations for taking possession of these lands, suggesting to Naylor that the Order of Malta 'was not strictly an ecclesiastical Order'.<sup>110</sup>

Interestingly Marsh used Enlightenment and revolutionary language to justify this proposed land deal. In a series of letters to Naylor in 1792-3, he outlined his objectives and rationale. In one letter, he wrote: 'I know the objections to the project of purchasing are not a few. 1<sup>st</sup> it is a sort of ecclesiastical land which some have a scruple of buying'.<sup>111</sup> With not a hint of reluctance, Marsh set forth his justification for ignoring such scruples. He wrote: 'to this I say that the Order of Malta was not strictly an ecclesiastical Order, nor in my opinion a very useful one, so that I think they have not done so ill in suppressing it'.<sup>112</sup> This lament of an absence of social usefulness had of course been the classic attack made by the *philosophes* and reformers.

<sup>106</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 256.

<sup>107</sup> Richard Marsh, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 4 April 1792, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>108</sup> Richard Marsh, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 4 March 1792, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Marsh, O.S.B. to Placid Naylor, O.S.B., 1 December 1792, MSS S4619, AN.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

Marsh mockingly remarked that if the land had been genuinely 'ecclesiastical' to begin with, then the monks taking possession of it would return it to its true character.

Marsh's comments here may seem surprising, amounting to, perhaps, tacit support of revolutionary actions. On the contrary though, he was probably expressing a cold pragmatism to the situation that they faced. This pragmatism can be seen when, referring to the possible loss of monastic rents in the locality, Marsh wrote that this was brought about by their failure to take 'the oath of Liberté et Egalité', which he said, 'tho in my opinion it has nothing at all to do against Religion'.<sup>113</sup> Marsh here was referring to the so-called 'little oath', introduced in August 1792, which called for faithfulness to the nation and of maintaining liberty and equality.<sup>114</sup> His seeming indifference to the taking of the oath, on the face of it, may appear surprising. This apparent support for the 'little oath' was not unusual amongst the more senior non-juring clergy. Such had been the polarisation of Church and state, as Aston remarks, for 'most clergy, discussion of the merits or otherwise of the Liberty-Equality oath were not a priority. Their lives were in danger, and taking the oath did little to guarantee survival.'<sup>115</sup>

The timings of Marsh's letters are significant, and say much about the lengths that he was willing to go to in order to steer his community to safety. His attempts to acquire land reached their zenith in 1792. By this stage, the Revolution had taken on a decidedly anti-Catholic nature. In 1790 sales of confiscated ecclesiastical lands begun, whilst by 1791 half of the male monasteries had been suppressed.<sup>116</sup> A year later, in February, Martin-Michel Charles Gaudin, a member of the commission of the treasury, gave a speech to the National Assembly, in which he declared that 'Philosophy had taught us long ago the need to suppress the monasteries, and experience has now convinced us of the advantages that this suppression has brought to society. There is almost no one who does not applaud it'.<sup>117</sup> A few months later there came a vicious outbreak of anti-religious violence, culminating in mass executions of clergy and religious, what we know as the September Massacres.<sup>118</sup> That Marsh was discussing the purchase of land as late as March 1793 seems extraordinary though; in February of that year, St Gregory's had seals placed on its doors by the Municipality, which he was of

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780-1804*, 230.

<sup>115</sup> Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780-1804*, 232.

<sup>116</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 259.

<sup>117</sup> Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution*, 262.

<sup>118</sup> Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780-1804*, 232-3.

course aware of, signalling its closure was close at hand. Ultimately his plans came to nothing it seems; the land was never purchased, and the monastery was seized in early October 1793, leading to the evacuation of the remaining community.

The outlook for the English houses had worsened considerably by the early months of 1793; the option of a continued presence in France looked a distant possibility. By this stage France was at war with both Austria and Britain, and all foreigners were charged with leaving the country or face imprisonment. At Douai in February 1793 seals were 'fixed on different effects and different apartments in the 5 British houses established in our town. The Ceremony was executed with a certain military apparatus.'<sup>119</sup> St Edmund's, Paris was the first house to face seizure, officials entering the monastery in September 1793. St Gregory's was closed in October, with those monks who had been unable to secure passports for travel being arrested, and imprisoned at Doullens.<sup>120</sup> The house at Dieulouard was seized in the same month. Marsh fled alone, with the small band of monks who remained behind facing imprisonment at Pont-à-Mousson. The Congregation's president, Augustine Walker, would die in prison at Compiègne in 1794. Most monks were released later that year, with the majority setting off for England to re-congregate with their brothers who were already across the Channel.<sup>121</sup> The Revolution did, in the end, as many within the Congregation had always feared, have a fatal impact. Yet the Revolution had, paradoxically, a galvanizing effect for the English monks. It propelled them to return to their native England, stemming the congregational decline, and even led to their prospering and expansion in the nineteenth century.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that the English monks did not respond to the French Revolution with passive timidity, but rather that they were more than adept at engaging with the revolutionary institutions. The monks should not be seen simply as victims, nor religious refugees caught up in a foreign conflict, but rather were shrewd operators, adept at playing the game of revolutionary politics and by navigating legal niceties. They were well-informed of the latest developments within the Revolution, having cordial relations, as they describe them, with a number of revolutionary officials. They also established networks of communication with exiled English female convents, helping to coordinate more coherent responses to revolutionary decrees.

<sup>119</sup> Jerome Sharrock, O.S.B. to Bede Bennet, O.S.B., 20 February 1793, MSS B1-86 (42), DAA.

<sup>120</sup> Bellenger, *Monks with a Mission: Essays in Benedictine English History*, 115-6.

<sup>121</sup> For further reading see Hood, *From Repatriation to Revival: Continuity and Change in the English Benedictine Congregation, 1795-1850*.

Indeed, this cooperation with female religious is significant, and one which deserves further examination. The monks' responses to the Revolution were, however, often as complex and varied as the actions of their French coreligionists were. Nonetheless, these responses had some key differences; the monks' transnational status effectively bought them time, and spared them the difficult question of whether they would take the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. This freedom meant that their responses to the Revolution may have had a very real and direct impact on wider French society, contributing to, for example, the refractory church, which in itself was a means of resistance and counter-revolution, also a topic in need of further exploration. The monks were also willing to take advantage of the Revolution to safeguard their existence in France, illustrated by Richard Marsh's attempts to acquire confiscated ecclesiastical lands at Dieulouard. That the English monks behaved in this complex and nuanced manner should give us cause for thought on how we understand the experiences of British and Irish exiles in France during the revolutionary period.