

Recusant history and after

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It is now fifty-six years since I wrote my first piece for *Recusant History*, and I am happy to have survived to welcome its reincarnation. Since its foundation in 1951 as an addendum to Gillow's *Biographical Dictionary of English Catholics* it has had an honourable career, getting into print a number of essential contributions to the history of Catholics in England, mainly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. It has been a companion to the distinguished bibliographical work of Anthony Allison, David Rogers and Tom Birrell. It was a creation of laymen, which is to say that it was an attempt to transcend the efforts of a period when this history had been largely a monopoly of the clergy, and ran the risk of degenerating into feuds between rival sections of that body. This lay input was much strengthened by the effect of the 1944 Education Act, which produced numbers of students keen to make a mark in the field. In view of their education, they did not necessarily alter the terms in which questions were put, and when the modest journal was launched a degree of hegemony in the Catholic Record Society was being exercised by the Jesuit side, which ought to have but failed to put out the letters and papers of Robert Persons. It had an invitation to wider thoughts in the philo-Jesuit lectures on the Counter-Reformation of the Cambridge academic Outram Evennett, delivered also in 1951.¹ As these were not published until 1968 the invitation was muffled, but something of it was in the atmosphere.

Anthony Allison, the moving spirit in *Recusant History*, was a Catholic of his time and had a Jesuit background and education.² This was probably a help in his bibliography but it also had an effect on his historical writing. He thought that the journal, once it had grown from a handmaiden of bibliography, should deal with central matters of English Catholic history, which he saw as political. The suggestion of Rankean objectivity, reactionary in the prevailing view of the historical profession, was welcome in the state of the subject, and calculated to

¹ H. Outram Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter Reformation*, ed. John Bossy (with a postscript by myself) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968): note my pugnacious introductory paragraph, p.1. It was not entirely wrong; but it was a pity I did not include a lecture on mysticism, which Evennett had excluded because it did not reach a sharp conclusion; it would have given some balance.

² *Recusant History* (hereafter *RH*) 19 (1989): 355–8.

induce sharpness and breadth. It turned out that his politics included, as they would, ecclesiastical politics, which led him to investigate the conflict in the Catholic community set off by the claims of Richard Smith, bishop of Chalcedon, to institute episcopal government over the English mission.³ In pursuing this he found two weaknesses in Smith's position. The first was strictly political; that Smith's appointment was due to the intervention of Cardinal Richelieu over the heads of the representatives of the English clergy. The second was ecclesiastical-political: that it represented, not via Richelieu but via Pierre de Bérulle and others, a rigorously hierarchical view of the Church which Allison described as Gallican. His account of Smith was fairly devastating, but calls for two comments: Allison's idea of the Church was that of an English Catholic of 1870–1960, where any diminution of papal authority was thought unorthodox; the unattractive aspects of Smith's conduct, revealed by his trawl of the papers of the secular clergy, might well have been balanced by similar failings exposed by the records of his Jesuit opponents, but they were, Allison said, tight-lipped.⁴

Here I must introduce myself. I was part of a cohort that had written pieces generally in line with Allison's idea, though mine were not actually inspired by him.⁵ But his work on Smith contributed to a very general sketch of Counter-Reformation history which I wrote as a post-script to Evennett's lectures. Here I described activist and hierarchical frames of mind as grand alternatives for the conduct of the Church, which was a respectable idea marred by the flaw that my sympathy was all on one side. In a less aggressive mode this was the theme of at least the first part of my *English Catholic Community*; later I found reason to wonder.⁶

Allison's vision faded when entrants into the historical profession became drawn by other things, and notably by the perspective of locality, which in view of the sources meant local recusancy. This might well be both a consequence and a cause of equating catholicity with recusancy, but it would be absurd to see it, as may now be done, as pernicious: what was the alternative? We owe to the disentanglers of recusant rolls, and to the tracers of local recusancies from John Aveling onwards many precious things: acquaintance with actual people; a warning against numerical and other inflation; a view of the distribution of Catholics not inspired by progressive notions about the 'dark corners of the land'. Among the localisers, I single out Marie Rowlands, who

³ *RH* 7(1964): 148–211; *RH* 16 (1982): 111–145; *RH* 18(1987): 329–401; *RH* 20 (1990): 164–206.

⁴ *RH* 7(1964): 156.

⁵ *RH* 5(1959): 2–16; *RH* 8 (1965): 80–122.

⁶ Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter Reformation*, Postscript, 139–142; John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975, *vere* 1976), 12–76; 'The Heart of Robert Persons', in *The Reckoned Expense, Edmund Campion and the Early English Jesuits: Essays in Celebration of the First Centenary of Campion Hall, Oxford (1896–1996)*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1996), 141–158.

took her own path by beginning in 1688 her account of Catholics in Staffordshire, so avoiding recusant problems. Combining the deposit of the contemporary taste for political arithmetic with that of initiatives and disagreements among the members, she achieved something solid, and showed that the eighteenth century was not an age to be neglected by historians of or successors in the community. More recently she has gathered the result of decades of local investigation in the careful synthesis of *Catholics of Parish and Town, 1558–1778*.⁷ This is, in principle, an account of Catholics below the ranks of the gentry, inadequately recognised, I guess, in such narratives as my own; it has numerous virtues. Among them I prize her close narration of the fortunes of the average Catholic through the seventeenth century; her account of the emergence in the mid- and later-eighteenth of what Bishop Challoner called a ‘new people’; and of that wonder of census-taking the Returns of Papists of 1767, where she strove to bring to light the staple of any religious community, the congregation. This was a distinguished achievement; without the labours of recusant-hunting it is inconceivable.

The title adopted for the journal was, in hindsight, polemical. At the time it was thought simply descriptive by those who practised it and, a little dismissively, by those who observed them. But it was restrictive in time, place and subject; it grew out of those restrictions without knowing quite what it was doing except gathering up the fragments. It did not consider such differences as the one which emerged between Christopher Haigh and myself about the continuity or discontinuity of English Catholicism across the chasm of the Reformation;⁸ I think it did not consider it because it knew the answer already. As time went on, and the subject became of increasing interest to historians outside, it seemed to have less to offer them.

I pass over two substantial and long-ranging accounts of the subject, John Aveling’s and my own, which both appeared in 1976; though both of them had off-message things to say about the recusant ethos, they were neither genuinely revisionist of it.⁹ For that we had to wait until 1993, and the appearance of Alexandra Walsham’s *Church Papists*.¹⁰ This short book had started as an M.A. thesis by a young post-graduate in the University of Melbourne; she had by then become

⁷ Marie Rowlands, ‘Catholics in Staffordshire from the Revolution to the Relief Acts’ (Birmingham University M.A. Thesis, 1965); Catholic Record Society, Monograph Series 5 (1999).

⁸ John Bossy, ‘The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism’, *Past and Present* 21 (1962):39–59; Christopher Haigh, ‘From Monopoly to Minority: Catholicism in Early Modern England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series 31 (1981), 129–47; *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 176–208, and elsewhere.

⁹ J.C.H. Aveling, *The Handle and the Axe: The Catholic Recusants from Reformation to Emancipation* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1976); Bossy, *The English Catholic Community*.

¹⁰ Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993).

a Ph.D. student of Patrick Collinson in Cambridge, where she is now, very properly, a professor.

Her purpose, in the first place, was to rescue non-recusant Catholics, ‘church-papists’, from the condescension of posterity, at least of Catholic posterity. She held that: (1) recusancy as a necessary posture of a Catholic was an effect of clerical polemic: church-papists were scapegoats of clerical bigotry and recusancy ‘largely an impractical polemical ideal’; (2) in practice and theory there was considerable support for church popery among Catholics, and it was tolerated even by the heads of the missionary party, as in their official books of casuistry; (3) it lasted a long time; and (4) it had a properly religious justification. Besides being a general attack on ‘recusant history’, *Church Papists* was a particular attack on my *English Catholic Community*, which she held, reasonably, to exemplify it. It had the occasional flaw, which I shall come to; but it was essentially sound, and gave me personally a salutary shock.

Alexandra Walsham was not writing in a vacuum, and had a string of writers to cite in her favour. The earliest of them, whose work just pre-dated my and Aveling’s books, was the Canadian Elliot Rose, whose *Cases of Conscience*, half about recusants and half about Puritans, came out from Cambridge in 1975.¹¹ It was a wonderfully humane and beautifully written book, which reminds me of Harry Porter’s *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge*,¹² but did not get the attention it deserved. Rose began with a confession that, of the different sorts of adherents whose dilemmas he discussed, his ‘sympathies ... [lay] mainly with the church-papists’. He offered a number of striking formulations about questions that arose. I quote two of them. As against believing that the seminary priests’ teaching had ended an argument about the legitimacy of conformity, ‘it is’, he said, ‘more reasonable to suppose that the teaching started the argument’. On the intentions of the Queen: ‘It is a question ... whether compliance with the Act of Uniformity [by going to church] was inevitably bound to be conscientiously impossible to Catholics ... If we think we know the answer to that question, I do not believe that Queen Elizabeth did in 1559.’ He added that the formal decision of the papacy did not materialise until 1606, and might have added that it was issued by the worst pope of the Counter-Reformation, Paul V. Borghese. I agree with both these points, but there is something wrong with his last thought: ‘the future of English Catholicism lay with [loyal recusants], not with the zealots of the Spanish party.’ This is primitive language.¹³ In so far

¹¹ Elliot Rose, *Cases of Conscience: Alternatives Open to Recusant and Puritans Under Elizabeth I and James I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1–113, 230–50.

¹² H. C. Porter (Harry Culverwell), *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

¹³ Rose, *Cases of Conscience*, 4, 234–7, 241, 242–50.

as he meant supporters of the Archduchess Isabella or Gunpowder plotters he was right enough; but, to take one case, I think that Henry Garnet behaved very badly over the Plot and that his behaviour was an effect of the ethos of the mission, but he was not exactly a zealot, and I wonder whether without his efforts an organised and permanent mission would ever have been created. But it is very good that Alexandra Walsham has put Rose's excellent book back into circulation, and we owe a debt to Sir Geoffrey Elton for encouraging him.

Compared with Rose, Hugh/John Aveling was an insider, though his situation as a Benedictine put him between the Jesuit and secular camps. He was indeed a 'recusant' historian, whose principal effort was to report what the archives of recusancy had to say about the Catholics of post-Reformation Yorkshire; he also made important contributions about the marriages of Catholics and the Caroline system of compounding for recusancy.¹⁴ The upshot of his work was that, by quite early in the seventeenth century, the relation between the authorities and Catholics of a certain substance was not penal or persecutory but a sort of chess-match which turned out to be more or less a draw. His larger account of English Catholic history, *The Handle and the Axe*, was distinguished by a generally unheroic tone and by an unconventional reading of the recusancy question. 'It was', he said of the late Elizabethan period, 'the church-papists who saved the Catholic community'.¹⁵ This was a step farther than Rose's and was naturally taken into evidence by Walsham.

During the interval two other writers, both from the *Recusant History* stable, offered news about the church-papists. While working in Cambridge on a thesis about Elizabethan Catholic political writing, Peter Holmes had dug out the books of cases of conscience used in the college at Douai and Reims, and these he published through the Catholic Record Society. They appeared to say that, while the public statements of the seminary authorities and priests said that absolute recusancy was obligatory, they were both, privately, as advisors and confessors, much more flexible. They permitted a certain amount of Church attendance to the nobility and gentry so as to preserve them for the future reestablishment of Catholicism, and to men and women at court or in the royal household entry into the Queen's chapel.¹⁶

¹⁴ J.C.H. Aveling, *Post Reformation Catholicism in East Yorkshire 1559–1790* (York: East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1960); *The Catholic Recusants of the West Riding of Yorkshire 1558–1790*, Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society 10 (Leeds, 1963); *Northern Catholics: The Catholic Recusants of the North Riding of Yorkshire* (London: Chapman, 1966); *Catholic Recusancy in the City of York, 1558–1791*, Catholic Record Society, Monograph Series 2 (1970); 'The Marriages of Catholic Recusants, 1559–1642', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (1963): 68–83; *Miscellanea Recusant Records*, ed. C. Talbot, Catholic Record Society Record Series 53 (1961).

¹⁵ Aveling, *The Handle and the Axe*, 162; Walsham, *Church Papists*, 78.

¹⁶ P. J. Holmes, *Elizabethan Casuistry*, Catholic Record Society, Records Series 76 (1981), 2–3 and passim.

This was quite a shock to the assumption that recusant was the only description of a genuine Catholic. Holmes's book on Elizabethan Catholic political thought, which followed, remained roughly within the recusant framework; he thought, on reflection, that the casuists' solutions were as near as dammit to pure recusancy. He did shake up received assumptions by exposing as spurious the claims to political loyalty made from time to time by those of the activist side, which were a staple of the 'recusant' position; but on the whole he held to the doctrine that Catholics equalled recusants.¹⁷ Alex Walsham took a risk by resting on his evidence her claim that the demand for pure recusancy, as made by Persons at the so-called 'synod' of Southwark in 1580, was more of a stunt than an actual programme.

I do not dismiss the idea, since the ruling had a strong and immediate political application; but there are some points to raise against it. One is that she may have confused, in what she took from the set of opinions attributed to Allen and Persons and dating from 1582–85, two different sections, the 'resolutions' and the 'solutions'. The first, which are quite long, are attributed to an unidentified 'I' who is taking a relatively liberal line either because that is what he thinks or because, on the scholastic principle of starting with a *Videtur quod non*, that is what he has been told to do. The second are very short and by Allen and Persons: they are generally a summary dismissal of concessions made in the 'resolutions'. There is another passage which she cites as making room for a benevolent sort of conformist: I think she has misread it. It seems that Walsham has overdone the contradiction between these opinions and the public insistence on recusancy.¹⁸ But the point is not entirely blunted, and the sense she conveyed of persistent division about conformity among the laity and also among the missionary priests did rather shake the recusant paradigm.

So, it seems unwittingly, did Geoffrey Parmiter, to whose learned exposition of the sixteenth-century common-law tradition we are all indebted. The greatly respected common lawyer Edmund Plowden, of whom Parmiter wrote a short life published in 1987, had generally, as by Walsham, been presumed a church-papist. He was one until 1569, when he decided that he could not subscribe to a statement required by the privy council that, so he claimed, everything in the Prayer Book was orthodox. 'It seems', says Parmiter, 'that thereafter he did not attend church services'. I take this to be true of the Temple church, which was his professional parish; there does not seem anything to show that he was a recusant at home in Berkshire.

¹⁷ P.J. Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of the Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 124–5.

¹⁸ Holmes, *Elizabethan Casuistry*, e.g., 74–7; *Resistance and Compromise*, 103; Walsham, *Church Papists*, 66, cf. Holmes, *Elizabethan Casuistry*, 49.

It looks over-confident to put him into print as ‘an Elizabethan Recusant Lawyer’.¹⁹

So there was a fair amount of matter in the existing literature, which except for Rose was ‘recusant’, to support Walsham’s revisionism. Occasional interventions by distinguished historians whose work lay mainly elsewhere had not paved the way for it: Eamon Duffy’s view that a strong Catholic tradition had faded about the same time the mission was launched, and Jack Scarisbrick’s startling opinion that there was no good reason for the Jesuits to get in on it, both fitted the recusant framework.²⁰ There is more to say about the historian who has been the most authoritative defender of it, who has also the virtue of proceeding confidently into the first half of the seventeenth century. This is Michael Questier. We can observe this from his defence, against Aveling, of the pressure of the recusancy machine on its victims; of the need for proper attention to martyrs and martyrdoms, in which attempt he has been notably preceded by Anne Dillon; of the political doctrine about ‘evil counsellors’ pursued by Elizabethan Catholic polemicists; and of the standard objection to the taking of James I’s oath of allegiance, borrowed from Gordon Albion, which I myself consider pedantic and harmful.²¹

The hard-edgedness and sympathy for Catholic activism which Questier reveals does not always persuade me; but I must acknowledge that I am probably the source of them. His Ph.D. thesis on conversion, which had the merit of introducing into the subject the notion of ‘evangelical conversion’ as something available to Puritans and Catholics, was a learned working-out of a loose theme in my original piece on Elizabethan Catholicism.²² I suppose that this tendency provoked his falling-out with his supervisor Christopher Haigh, the object of much criticism in Questier’s later works. It also propelled his joining up with the Collinsonian Peter Lake in a model of bilateralism, the evilly-entitled *Antichrist’s Lewd Hat*. I am not sure what is Questier and what is Lake in the relevant part of this, and I admire the effort to get the Catholics into the larger history of the reign; but

¹⁹ Geoffrey de C Parmiter, *Edmund Plowden: An Elizabethan Recusant Lawyer*, Catholic Record Society Monograph Series 4 (1987), 105–8, 130.

²⁰ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 586; see example in Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 175 ff; J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 160.

²¹ Michael Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England 1580–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 137 ff and index under ‘conversion’, ‘evangelical’; Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 231–255 and Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1558–1603* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Michael Questier, ‘Elizabeth and the Catholics’ in Ethan Shagan, ed. *Catholics and the Protestant Nation: Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 69–94 at 89 and passim; Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion*, 106.

²² Bossy, ‘The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism’, 45.

I must complain about the form of the parallel between Protestant and Catholic separatism and conformity which the book proposes. They, or one of them, takes the division Puritan/conformist among Protestants to equal the division Jesuit/secular among Catholics.²³ This will not do: the anti-Jesuit priests were recusants, and when they wanted to get the Jesuits off their backs they went to Rome to ask the pope to do it for them. There were indeed theoretically aware conformists among the Catholic clergy, but the Appellants were not among them.

A reason for doubting whether Questier went along with my description is his more recent book on two generations of the Browne family, Lords Montague. Half the book is about the first viscount, a conformist, who refused to talk to seminary priests, and half about his grandson the second viscount, a recusant who talked to nobody else. The latter made a speech in the first parliament of James I which inspired the thought that recusancy had destroyed the political antennae of the English Catholic nobility and gentry, which would in the circumstances have been useful.²⁴ More germane to my topic is Questier's full account of the first viscount, resolute in both Catholicism and conformity, which his chaplain learnedly defended against the missionary priests, vigorous in maintaining his authority in the county of Sussex and his influence among the Catholic peerage. Questier has put in its proper place the well-known account of the Montague household in Battle during the interregnum of his widow Magdalene Dacre and her priest Richard Smith.²⁵ He might have called it an instance of what I described as a matriarchal phase in the history of the Catholic community. That it was the effect of an alliance between a determined widow and a priest hardly casts doubts on the description, since priestly and womanly preferences tended to go hand in hand. I have detected them in the history of the Gunpowder plot and they shadow the early history of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary.²⁶

Questier is more competent than I to pursue these matters into the seventeenth century, where recusancy, at a price, was triumphant. I return to where I started, the story of the projected marriage between Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Anjou, which occupied the years (1578–81) when the mission was getting off the ground. My piece, almost as youthful as Walsham's dissertation, has enjoyed a remarkably long career as a mouse's nibble from the cheese of Elizabethan Protestant politics. Its error was to assimilate conformist Catholicism

²³ Lake and Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, 265–69.

²⁴ Michael Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c. 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 274–7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68–73, 161–4, 207–235.

²⁶ Bossy, *The English Catholic Community*, 153–60.

to the recusant model, in the sleight-of-hand that Walsham has exposed. But this has not quite led to the chopping-off of its head, in the manner that Simon Adams has proposed in his depiction of the non-confrontational frame of mind of the Elizabethan Privy Council before the 1590s. We are free to observe that the marriage scheme was a serious matter, that it was for a conformist consort, and that the Catholics who agitated for it were conformist Catholics.²⁷ The most serious of these was Lord Henry Howard, who from his conversion to Rome in 1577 to the end of the reign was the most distinguished conforming Catholic in the land. He was also, when free of the intense suspicion of his Protestant enemies, a genuine and valued friend of the Queen. For some years I have been writing an account of his Elizabethan life and works. One of his works was to try to unite conforming Catholics and moderate Protestants in a coalition which would represent the wishes of the Queen and dish the expectations of Puritans. This was the object of the marriage scheme, whose promoters planned for a reconstruction of the Privy Council which would include conformists like Montague.²⁸ It failed for several reasons, among them the arrival of the Jesuit mission. Howard tried again in the 1590s, but was stymied by the feud between the earl of Essex and the Cecils.²⁹ His recompense was to be taken as Robert Cecil's partner in arranging the smooth succession of King James, one of whose chief ministers he then, as earl of Northampton, became.³⁰ I offer him as a contribution to Walsham's revision without I hope undervaluing the recusancy which has been the topic of this journal until now. It may be that his programme, as illustrated by his heir Thomas, earl of Arundel, was more likely to insert a traditional voice into the Church of England than to support a separating community. Each of these outcomes seems laudable.

²⁷ *RH* 5(1959): 2–16; Simon Adams, *Leicester and the Court: Essays on Elizabethan Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 6, 59, 61.

²⁸ John Bossy, in *Image, Text and Church, 1380–1600, Essays for Margaret Aston*, eds. Linda Clark, Maureen Jurkowski and Colin Richmond (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2009), 239–258; 'English Catholics and the French Marriage', *RH* 5 (1959–60), 2–16 at 9; Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Cape, 1967), 198–200; Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 1991), 173–4.

²⁹ Albert Loomie, 'A Catholic Petition to the Earl of Essex', *RH* 7 (1963), 33–42; I take Howard to be behind this.

³⁰ Linda Levy Peck, *Northampton: Patronage and Policy at the Court of James I* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982).