

# Origins of England's Urban Catholicism

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Today probably the majority of practising Roman Catholics in England would identify themselves as English, even if their origins are not altogether English, but how deep are the English roots of this English Catholic community? The answer to that question is important because the self-understanding of any community depends, to some degree, on its understanding of its own history. Twenty years ago it was almost universally assumed that the English Catholic community was dwindling away at the end of the eighteenth century and only saved from extinction by the 'second spring'— the great influx from Ireland and the flow of well-educated Anglican converts in the nineteenth century. Now it is known that Irish immigrants went where Catholics were in industry already, but detailed studies are needed of how so many English Catholics came to be in those places. In the May number of *Recusant History*<sup>1</sup> I have done one such study for a place in the heart of industrial England, Walsall, within reach of Oscott, between 1720 and 1824, using evidence from a variety of local records. I now want to point tentatively to some elements in the situation there that have parallels elsewhere.

The first is memories of the Civil War. After defeat at the Battle of Worcester in 1651 Charles the Second took refuge in woodlands in and around the parish of Walsall from the Presbyterian party who dominated the borough after the war and during the Commonwealth. In 1715 and 1751 the Presbyterian Meeting House there was wrecked by a mob who in 1750 celebrated Oakapple Day, the anniversary of the Restoration of Church and Throne in 1660, by hanging and burning an effigy of King George the Second with an orange in one hand and a bunch of turnips in the other. This mob included buckle-makers and awlblade-makers. Some of them were Catholics, but more might have blown their noses loudly at the state prayers for King George and Queen Caroline and all the royal family in the Anglican parish church and the chapel-of-ease at Bloxwich if only they could have got in, but, as we shall see, this was not easy.

Before 1818 it needed a private Act of Parliament to alter the boundaries of a parish of the Established Church, or to make a new parish, and that was difficult to get in the long period of Whig rule after 1714, and so long as the second Tory party was led by the younger Pitt, who was at heart a Whig. The roots of Whiggery lay in distrust of government, of any central government, including their own, and of the Established Church. The 17th-century Test and Corporation Acts to

promote conformity remained to avoid inflaming at one and the same time the fear of Popery and indignation against the ambitions of Protestant Dissenters, but occasional conformity with the Church of England and annual Acts of indemnity allowed Dissenters into some important and profitable places. By 1818, when more began to be done for church building, in the typical industrial parish absence from church and chapel was normal, not exceptional.

The Free Churches, including the Quakers, had licensed places of worship. Until 1791 the Catholics had not. Attendance at Mass was secretive and incalculable. At Walsall we know that the long list of Catholic recusants compiled in 1767 was not complete, for the members of the Thornhill family are left out, who are in local directories for 1767 and 1770 and are known to have been Catholics by family tradition. Moses Bird is listed as 'a reputed Papist', but in 1762 he was churchwarden of 'the foreign', the parts of the parish outside the original borough of Walsall, and in 1773 overseer of the poor in these. Such officers were chosen at a vestry-meeting at the chapel-of-ease at Bloxwich. Not all who attended this would come regularly to a church service there or elsewhere. In the situation in and around Walsall absence from church was not evidence of recusancy.

The other side of the coin is shown in the baptisms of four children of Thomas and Frances Daniel, recorded in the register of the chapel at Bloxwich between 1781 and 1788. I have not found Thomas in any compilation of recusants, but Frances was listed in 1767 with other daughters of her mother and father, who was a labourer at Yieldfields, where Mass was celebrated once a month. From the point of view of the Anglican curate and of godparents in his congregation the baptisms were a step towards conformity with the Church of England, but the family could not be pressed to compete for seats in the chapel, which was rebuilt and enlarged by subscription in 1791 to hold twelve hundred, but with no free seats<sup>2</sup>. Thomas Daniel was godfather at a Catholic baptism in 1807. His daughter Ann, baptised in the chapel in 1788, was married by Catholic rites in 1815.

When the parish church of Walsall was rebuilt in 1819-21 'sittings were provided for 2,500 people, of which 1,136 were free'<sup>3</sup>. By that time the population of the whole parish was nearly 12,000. It was embarrassing for the clergy to visit those who, if they tried to attend church, could not get in. But the Catholic priest who came to Bloxwich in 1807 saw it as one of his 'most sacred obligations, to fly to the house of fever and contagion, to breathe the air of infection, and to sit down in the midst of filth and squalid wretchedness, there to raise up the dejected soul with hope, ... to mingle tears with the sobs of the repenting sinner, and take him by the hand to the brink of that eternity, into which ... the sacramental graces imparted to him bid him enter with confidence and joy.' He would 'consider every fellow-creature as my neighbour, without distinction of creed or sect, nation or people.'<sup>4</sup>

This was spoken in defence of his proceedings by Francis Martyn, the first recusant priest to receive his entire education in England, at the old Oscott seminary, within reach of Walsall, after a spell at Sedgley Park school. No doubt he was assailed by some for his machinations to secure converts, but the expansion of the Catholic community had begun before he arrived. A chapel for eighty opened in 1800 had already fifty communicants, more than twice the number reported at the time of its foundation. At Easter 1808 there were ninety, by 1819 three hundred, and expansion continued in two and then three churches and congregations. No doubt this owed much to his zeal, but as much, if not more, to the activity of a caring community whose leaders can be identified with the assistance of short lists of recusants.

One of these was drawn up by the Vicar of Walsall in 1773 in a report to the Archdeacon for his visitation. It is of twenty-one Roman Catholics, 'all common trading people and labourers', and fills a constricted space on a printed form. The list includes Ann Rogers, who kept a grocery in the borough, and three other women, but not Ralph Manley, Sarah Mold and Barnet or Bernard Askey, Haskey or Haskew, who appear in lists of recusants made by the constable of the borough in 1786-7 and again in 1799 (with one more name). These lists are clearly selective. Fifteen in the borough and eighty-six in 'the foreign' were reported in 1780, making 101. The list of 1767, also a national return, was longer, 110, with more information about names, occupations and movements, but, as we have seen, not quite complete.

Ralph Manley came to Walsall as a bookkeeper in his early twenties, employed by one of the larger firms to keep their reckonings with a number of small businesses, bridle-cutters, awlblade-makers and nailers, who supplied parts and tools for saddlers' ironmongers, buckle-makers and locksmiths. Small boys of eight might make nails and make mistakes in making them, and so it was part of the bookkeeper's job to keep justice and peace not only between firms but within them, to help the inexperienced to keep their own accounts. By 1791, when he made the declaration necessary to qualify for public office under the recent Act for Catholic Relief, Ralph Manley had been nearly thirty years in Walsall and was himself in business as a saddlers' ironmonger. In 1795 he was overseer of the poor in the borough. In 1801 he was godfather to the firstborn son, named after him, of another saddlers' ironmonger, Joseph Bagnal, who may well have been related to a Catholic family of Bagnals, farmers at Drayton-in-Hales on the borders of Staffordshire and Shropshire, where a widow Manley and her daughter, both midwives, were also listed as recusants in 1767<sup>5</sup>. Their ages, 56 and 22, fit in with Ralph's, who was presented as 26, but must have been older. He never married, but was a witness at Catholic weddings as soon as they began to be registered in 1807, 1808 and 1809, before he received the last rites and died in 1810 at the age of 73. His godson, Ralph Bagnal, went to Oscott and continued in the neighbourhood as assistant priest to Francis Martyn

and then priest-in-charge at Bloxwich from 1831.

Barnet, Barnard or Bernard Haskew came to Walsall in 1764 as a carpenter of sixteen, probably from Tamworth, where a Catholic family called Hasken<sup>6</sup>, including a Barnet, appear in the list of recusants for 1767. He married a widow, Sarah German, in 1783, who died soon. His second wife, Agnes Barton, may well have been a midwife as she is often a godmother in emergencies, with or without Bernard as a godfather. In 1813 he is still advertised as a carpenter and joiner, putting up shelves for small businesses. He died in 1816 at the age of seventy.

Sarah Mold is not in the list of recusants for 1767, but in the local directory as a publican in New Street. For this publicity she was probably over thirty and in 1786-7 over fifty, a power behind the bar. In October 1787 her name is changed to Sarah Hunt. Under that name she appears again in the constable's list three times in 1799, when the future of Yieldfields as a place for Mass was in doubt and the new chapel being planned. By this time she was nearly seventy, and she does not appear in the Catholic obituary begun by Frances Martyn in 1807.

Those who look for leaders in Catholic communities without a gentry or a resident priest may find them among those educated in schools like Sedgley Park, near Walsall, which resembled Dissenting Academies in the attention paid to commercial subjects and modern languages. But most of those who moved into towns in search of a job had little or no education. They were concerned to 'establish a settlement' by being apprenticed, by leasing accommodation, or being hired on a contract of service. If they were not established they might be sent back to their original parishes if they fell into poverty and needed relief. This made them shy of churchwardens and overseers who might ask awkward questions, but did not incline them to identify themselves as Dissenters.

They came from country parishes where the parish church and churchyard were citadel and shrine. Where these were not easily accessible, alternative places of meeting might be found with the Methodists or where Catholics met more often for prayer than for the celebration of Mass. John Bossy has done much to establish statistically an increase in Catholic numbers in the eighteenth century<sup>7</sup>, but I think he misses the role in this of moments of crisis, of birth and death. Where the parish clergy could not be approached, Dissenters, including the Methodists, were concerned for members of their own communities, but Catholics for all. In his *Homilies on the Book of Tobias* (1817) Francis Martyn could take for granted that his congregation would not only teach their children 'to fear God and abstain from all sin', but also 'implant in their tender minds feelings of charity and compassion for their distressed fellow-creatures: and give them frequent opportunities of exercising these feelings, by making them occasionally the distributors of your alms.'<sup>8</sup> Here and elsewhere he assumes a community poor in this world's goods but generous to displaced persons.

Evidence of this may be seen in Protestant alarms about the increase of Popery. These were no doubt excited and exaggerated. However, what has been taken as evidence against it comes from the Catholic gentry and their chaplains, who saw the Catholic Relief Act principally as a step towards Catholic Emancipation. The Relief Act made no difference in practice to their own worship in their own manor houses with their tenants and servants, and did not open up enough public offices, but it did make public the presence of crowded chapels 'in some of the manufacturing and trading towns'<sup>9</sup>. Alarms about these must be played down, lest Emancipation should be delayed or averted. It did not occur to the Catholic gentry or to the politicians that the future of England lay in the manufacturing towns, and the future of the English Catholic community in chapels reinforced by displaced persons from country parishes in the three kingdoms. The origins of this English Catholic community are more complex than we have supposed.

1 Volume 19, no. 3, May 1989, pp. 313—31.

2 E.L. Glew, *History of the Borough and Foreign of Walsall*, Walsall 1856, p.76.

3 F.W. Willmore, *History of Walsall*, Walsall 1887, p. 150.

4 Francis Martyn, *Lectures*, Walsall 1830, p.6.

5 *Staffordshire Catholic History* 17, 1977, p.23.

6 *Ibid*, p.43.

7 In *The English Catholic Community, 1570—1850*, London 1975, *passim*.

8 P.24.

9 See Joseph Berington, *The State and Behaviour of the English Catholics from the Reformation to the Year 1780*, London 1780, pp. 114—9. This is the principal source of Newman's sermon on the second spring.

## Charles Davis *versus* René Girard

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In the course of the past twenty years René Girard has offered us a theory of the structure of human desire. Because desire is something very fundamental, his hypothesis is far-reaching and it gives us many original and, I believe, plausible results. However, not everything is explained and put into a new light because of a new insight into the structure of human desire. Thanks to Girard's hypothesis, I think we can see how many apparently very varied things may have much more in common than we thought, and sometimes we can even perceive much better why there are differences and what they are. But even I, who have restricted myself in the three articles on Girard which I have published in *New Blackfriars*<sup>1</sup> mainly to expounding his hypothesis, consider that hypothesis to be less embracing than Girard himself sometimes seems to think.