

FATHER WILLIAM HOUGHTON, O.P.

1736-1823

WALTER GUMBLEY, O.P.

ALL but five of Father Houghton's sixty-three years of priesthood were spent in the care of a small and scattered missionary centre in the unobtrusive way of life forced on priests by the still-active penal code; a seclusion however that undoubtedly made possible the literary activity which was a marked characteristic of the Catholic clergy in the half-century preceding the Act of Emancipation. On literary grounds more than a score of Father Houghton's clerical contemporaries have been included with him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, whilst at least an equal number appear in Gillow's extensive *Bibliographical Dictionary of English Catholics*. When we reflect that the total number of priests in England during Houghton's life never exceeded four hundred, it can be seen that the percentage of those who wrote was very high. Moreover, there must have been many studious priests who from an excusable diffidence never published what they wrote. One remembers that even so industrious a scholar as the eminent historian Père Mandonnet admitted his dislike of putting pen to paper, leaving on his desk when he died a note with these words: '*Lire, joie; penser, délices; écrire, supplice*'.

Father Houghton was born in 1736 in the hundred of West Derby, Lancashire, where his family, a branch of the Catholic family of Houghton Tower, near Preston, had lived for some generations. In baptism he received the names of William and Narcissus, the second one for its classical flavour being much to his taste in later life and he kept it in constant use. Several saints who bore this name occur in the Roman Martyrology but we may doubt whether his parents or god-parents endowed him with it for that reason, and the officiating priest probably concentrated on the sanctity of St William of York. As a boy of fourteen he was sent overseas for his education, entering the school conducted by the English Dominicans at Bornhem in Flanders, opened a century earlier by Cardinal Howard. In 1753 William expressed a desire to enter the Order and received the Dominican habit on 15 October, taking in religion the name of the celebrated Dominican missionary St Hyacinth of Poland, but as classical a name as his own Narcissus. His noviciate

year was passed in the priory at Brussels, after which on 24 October 1754 he was admitted to profession at Bornhem. For his priestly studies he was sent to the English Dominican College of St Thomas in Louvain, built as a house of philosophy and theology with a munificent legacy from the same cardinal. He completed his studies in 1758 but being under the canonical age for ordination was sent to teach in the school at Bornhem and to act as prefect of discipline, tasks he continued until 1762, having in the meantime been ordained priest at Ghent on 25 February 1760.

In December 1762 he left Bornhem for England to take charge of the mission at Hexham begun about 1640 by the saintly Father Robert Armstrong and served continually by the Dominicans up to the year 1827. Four years later Father Houghton was transferred to the neighbouring mission of Stonecroft also served by the Dominicans. This was in February 1766 and his name was included in a list of Catholics drawn up by the bishop of Durham in 1767 as 'Wm Houghton, Warden, aged 30'. Little is known of his life in Northumberland but in 1775 he emerged from this obscurity to fill the office of prior at Bornhem and in 1779 was appointed professor of philosophy in his old college at Louvain. Here he taught with ability and general approval until he raised a storm of protest by printing some theses to be publicly defended by his students, in which he advocated some of the scientific theories of Descartes and Newton. The theses were printed at Louvain in 1780 under the following title:

'Theses ex Universa Philosophia de promptae, quas, praeside F. Wilhelmo Hyacinth Narcisso Houghton, Canonico Sacri Ordinis F. F. Praedicatorum, in Collegio S. Thomae Aquinatis Philosophiae Professore; F. Vincentius Bowyer, F. Benedictus Atkinson, F. Ceslaus Fenwick, Canonici ejusdem ordinis, et in eodem Collegio Philosophiae auditores. Lovanii 1780.'

In the stir that ensued the defension was cancelled, the theses withdrawn, Houghton relieved of his professorship and assigned to an obscure Catholic outpost in Lancashire. This was Fairhurst Hall near Wigan, and here he passed the remaining forty-three years of his life serving the Nelson family as chaplain and ministering to the spiritual needs of a few scattered Catholics in the vicinity. But being eminently a man of parts he was able both to employ and enjoy his leisure time in literary work, and as he was 'an excellent classical scholar and a good poet he contributed many poetical pieces to the periodicals of the day'. In January 1801 he brought out the first number of *The Catholic Magazine and Reflector*, the first Catholic magazine ever to be published in England, but it ran for six months

only, coming to an untimely end from lack of support due to the difficulties attending its circulation amongst so limited and scattered a body as the English Catholics. The six volumes contained in all 386 pages, so that averaging over sixty pages a number it must have been an ambitious undertaking. Gillow says that most of the articles and the poetry were written by Houghton.

He was a man of fine physique but so careless in his dress that on one occasion he was taken up by a pressgang in the streets of Liverpool and might have had difficulty in escaping from their clutches but for the chance meeting of an officer of his acquaintance who persuaded the men that their capture was not a sailor but a gentleman, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, and clinched his argument with a welcome allowance of grog.

Although so far removed from most of his brethren he kept closely in touch with the affairs of the Province, attending with commendable regularity the Provincial Chapters held once every four years. Perhaps to show that no cloud hung over him from the Louvain trouble the Chapter in 1786 petitioned the authorities of the Order to confer on him the degree of Master in Sacred Theology and to this the Master General willingly agreed. At these meetings, generally held in London in some private house from motives of prudence, Houghton frequently met four of his brethren who were also well known in the world of letters, and like him included in the *Dictionary of National Biography* or in the volumes of Gillow. The senior of these, Father Antoninus Hatton, as Constantius Archaeophilus, wrote a history of the Reformation, and several very lengthy controversial works, Father Thomas Norton confined himself to works on agriculture, Father Lewis Brittain published a grammar, a work on the divinity of Christ and the beauties of the Gospel, a considerable volume on the principles of the Christian faith, and a small book of poems, whilst Father Pius Potier wrote many articles on political affairs, and a slim volume of poetry mercilessly pilloried in the *Orthodox Journal* by a reviewer who signed himself 'Common Sense'.

Father Houghton's long life came to an end on 3 January 1823, and he was laid to rest in the old Catholic cemetery that surrounded an ancient chapel at Windleshaw near St Helens, a spot chosen for the burial of many Lancashire priests of the penal days. On his death, the chapel at Fairhurst was closed as the property had now passed from the Nelson family into other hands.