

From the Archives: Henry Garnet SJ (1555-1606)

At the end of May 2021, I gave a short presentation to the Jesuit London community on their chosen patron saint, Henry Garnet, via Zoom. Former Province Archivist, Fr Thomas McCoog SJ, also joined the call and provided some thoughts on the importance of Garnet to Jesuits today. As the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Province's establishment in 1623 is fast approaching it might also be of interest to others to learn a little more about one of the early Superiors of the English Mission.

Here is the presentation that I gave:

I would like to preface this talk by saying that I am an Archivist and not a historian. I am interested in history of course, but I do feel that I still have so very much to learn and so feel a little unqualified in giving a presentation on Henry Garnet. So, this will not be a critical look at Garnet's life but rather just a very quick summary of some facts concerning his life, whilst also outlining some of the material that can be found in the Archives relating to him.

It is for this reason that it is particularly wonderful to have Fr McCoog, former Province Archivist, and a historian, here to provide you with reflections on the relevance of Garnet to you today.

Most of my information comes from Br Henry Foley's *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus: historic facts illustrative of the labours and sufferings of its members in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. This was published in the late nineteenth century and is comprised of seven volumes and covers the early history of the mission and of the Jesuit priests who served it. It is a compilation of research that is invaluable, and has now been digitised by various organisations, and I think Michael was going to send you the links to the relevant sections.

I have also been reading Philip Caraman's *Henry Garnet 1555-1606 and the Gunpowder Plot*, though I have to admit I have not completed it in time for tonight's presentation. I have enjoyed discovering more about one particular Jesuit and I think it will be certainly something to consider doing as part of future Archive work as it is a great way of uncovering more of the history and also seeing how this is supported by the material in the Archives.

Henry was born in late 1555 to Brian and Alice Jay in Derbyshire or Nottingham (there seems to be some confusion with Foley following the accepted norm of stating Nottingham, whereas Caraman has taken up John Gerard's claim for Derbyshire). He had at least two brothers and four sisters (three of whom became nuns). It seems he attended the Free School in Nottingham, before being admitted to Winchester College in 1568 (aged 12). The family conformed to the Church of England, but Winchester College was the last to accept the change in religion and this may have been part of the reason for sending Henry there. The school motto was *Manners Makyth Man* meaning that he was educated in moral uprightness that even his enemies later acknowledged.

According to an account by Fr Thomas Stanney SJ about Garnet in *Collectanea P*, a bound volume of manuscripts collected by Christopher Grene on the early English mission and now

kept in the Archives: 'He [that is Henry Garnet] was the prime scholar of Winchester College, very skilful in music and playing upon instruments, very modest in his countenance and in all his actions, so much so that the schoolmasters and wardens offered him very great friendship, to be placed by their means in New College, Oxford...Two of them were Catholics at heart...'

He left Winchester in about 1571, but he did not go to New College, Oxford as was the normal path for Winchester leavers, and this is explained by his doubts on religion. 'No one could enter a university unless he was or pretended to be a heretic' as he later wrote in a letter to Aquaviva (ARSI: FG 651 f25 Letter from Henry to Aquaviva 25 May 1590) and it is reported that on leaving school he was reconciled to the Catholic Church.

He was taken into the employment by Richard Tottel, best known legal printer in England, as a 'corrector for the press' apprentice, which led to his sense of accuracy as marked in his long correspondence. Here he learnt the technicalities which would be useful in establishing a secret press later in life. Tottel's print shop was in Temple Bar, known as 'The Head and Star' and Garnet would have met many distinguished people there, including John Popham, who would later pronounce sentence of treason on him.

It is probably in early 1575 that he decided to seek admission into the Society. At that time there were no Jesuits in England though he would have known about Thomas Wodehouse, a priest who was reportedly admitted to the Society whilst imprisoned and who had been executed in June 1573. He travelled directly to Rome with a fellow Winchester pupil Giles Wallop by sailing to Portugal and then making their way overland to Rome, which they reached in late summer. According to his own account, which seems to be supported by what is listed in the Noviciate Ministers' inventory, he arrived on foot having travelled lightly and with little money remaining.

He entered the noviciate on 11 September 1575 at Sant'Andrea, Rome (aged 21 or almost 21) where he was under the direction of Fabio di Fabiis SJ ( -1615), who had been a novice with Claudio Aquaviva (1543-1615) and through him Garnet formed a close friendship.

William Weston SJ (1550-1615) arrived no less than two months after Garnet, who later wrote 'There was never a man to whom I was more closely united in bonds of peace and friendship...I will say nothing of our noviceship together, when in the same city, at the same time, in the same house of Sant'Andrea, under the same teacher, we had set before us the same ideals we share today in common.' (Anglia, 2, 34 Weston to Fr Oliver Manares, 27 March 1598)

Another fellow English novices was Robert Persons SJ (1546-1610), who had been there a few months already.

*[I have now also learnt that Thomas Stephens SJ (c1549-1619) was another of Garnet's fellow novices. Thomas was a missionary to India and was famous for writing books, such as the Krista Purana (Story of Christ), in local languages. So, this was a distinguished group of novices.]*

Garnet was received into the Society on 12 September 1577. Immediately he began studies for priesthood at the Roman College, the seminary founded by Ignatius in 1551 which combined school, university & seminary. He was taught by the likes of Christopher Clavius SJ (1538-1612; Mathematician and astronomer) and Robert Bellarmine SJ (1542-1621; Professor of theology and later Rector of the Roman College).

In the Roman College he took part in weekly 'disputations' which Caraman argues: "...perhaps it is not fanciful to trace in the accounts of Garnet's own defence at his trial something of the Roman manner of debate, accurate and rigid in its processes of establishing truth but unsuited to the cut & thrust of an English court determined to secure, at all costs, a prisoner's condemnation". (Caraman, p17)

It is likely that Garnet was ordained no later than 1582 and he joined the staff of the Roman College, teaching first Hebrew and Mathematics, and then, for two years 'scientific questions'.

He returned to England in 1586 along with Robert Southwell SJ (1561-1595). Before leaving he was given instructions by Aquaviva which meant that under "no circumstances were they to 'mix themselves in the affairs of state'; they were not even allowed to recount political news in their letters to Rome....Nothing they did was to endanger Catholics, whose spiritual good was their only concern".

Just to give a bit of context, two years previous, in March 1584, an act was passed by Parliament known as the Jesuits, etc Act 1584. This Act made it treason for a priest ordained overseas to return and minister in England and it extended the penalty to lay people who assisted Catholic priests in any manner. So, it was a time of great danger to be a Catholic and a Catholic priest in England.

In a letter that Garnet sent to Aquaviva in 1590 he appeals for more priests, but he is also honest and does not conceal the stark prospect of imprisonment, torture and execution that await these men. He stresses though the urgent needs of Catholic laypeople for the sacraments and thus the need for more priests.

Supposedly on his arrival in England he found one Jesuit, Weston, out of prison and another Jesuit, Br Ralph Emerson (1551-1604), arrested. By his death in 1606 he left about 40 Jesuits working on the mission. His first few years in England were spent meeting new priests in London and then finding them safe places to minister, including John Gerard (1564-1637) and Edward Oldcorne (1561-1606).

Shortly after their arrival and meeting with William Weston, who was then the Superior of the English Mission, they were part of a meeting which took place at Hurleyford to discuss their mission and learn about Catholic houses that would shelter them whilst they carried out their work. Almost immediately after this meeting Fr Weston was arrested as part of the Babington Plot and Garnet was thus appointed Superior, which he remained until after his own arrest.

The Jesuits in the English mission held gatherings twice a year. In a letter to Aquaviva dated 13 September 1590 he wrote " We derive from these reunions immense benefit which

abundantly compensates for the risk” and “we all came together...since the nature and conditions of our work keep us so much apart, your Lordship can well imagine what a joy it is even to set eyes on one another”. At these meetings they sought solutions to the difficulties in common to them all. Caraman states that ‘Garnet had asked and heard the opinion of his brethern. When it was divided on an important issue, he suggested that they should defer to the judgement of Aquaviva.’ (Caraman, p116)

Communications with Rome were difficult and made more difficult after the Spanish Armada in 1588. Robert Southwell had been the first to establish safe and regular communication with Rome while Garnet was busy in the country building up a network of Catholic families to mission to. A code was arranged and developed to conceal the contents of letters from anyone intercepting them.

Some of the letters are held by the Archives as well as transcripts of letters both of these and of letters held elsewhere.

Garnet established a pattern of movement that he observed year by year. In the spring, summer and for the autumn he would be in London for the assizes to witness the trials of any priests which he then related in his letters, so perhaps unintentionally he established himself as a detailed historian of the persecution.

Quite soon after his arrival in England Garnet and Southwell set up a printing press as a means to combat the spate of tracts, pamphlets and broadsheets written against the Catholic Church. Only after 10 years of its existence did Garnet dare mention it in a letter “we have equipped at our own expense a press which in a short space has filled the kingdom from the end to end with catechisms and other pious books.” (Anglia 2, 16 April 1596)

On the 8 May 1598 he made his solemn vows as a Jesuit.

Foley reports that no one was more actively hunted by the Protestants for death, no one lived in such a perpetual change of hiding-places...; besides peril to himself, as the Superior he was affected by the dangers of all, and had to sympathise with everyone’s troubles, imprisonment and death. He is described as such a hardworking missionary and an admirable Superior as to secure the veneration of his fellow Jesuits, the love of externs, and the esteem of all, being possessed of the keenest intelligence, a sharp and solid judgement, an extensive knowledge of affairs, readiness in counsel, as well as having the gifts of simplicity, candour, and a most confiding heart.

Garnet had several lucky escapes. In 1591, for example during one of their retreats a messenger arrived at the door of their lodging, they quickly hid away all the incriminating objects, rosaries, chalices, vestments, whilst the lady of the house used her skills in throwing off the pursuivants. Another time a Jesuit in the Tower learnt that Garnet’s safe house had been discovered and he managed to send a warning by writing a message in orange juice.

To avoid capture he used several alias amongst which Whalley, Darcy, Farmer and Allan.

Garnet realised quite early on the need for hiding places, sometimes several, in key houses to avoid heavy losses in further persecutions. Nicholas Owen SJ (c1562-1606), initially as a layman, was the principal maker of hiding holes from about 1587.

*[Since giving this presentation I have completed reading Caraman's biography and have learnt that Garnet repeatedly petitioned Aquaviva to be allowed to admit men to the Society, including Nicholas Owen, without needing to send them abroad for formation as the mission could not do without them and in some instances this was to provide comfort to secular priests about to be executed who sought to be Jesuits.]*

After King James I had ascended to the throne, there was hope that there would be more religious tolerance but when this hope faded many English Catholics were disappointed. In a letter written May 1605 Garnet stated "All are desperate, divers Catholics are offended with Jesuits; they say that Jesuits do impugn and hinder all forcible enterprises. I dare not inform myself of their affairs, because of the prohibition of Father General for meddling in such affairs".

The Gunpowder Plot, also then known as the Gunpowder Treason Plot or the Jesuit Treason, was a failed assassination attempt against King James I by a group of English Catholics who hoped to restore the Catholic monarchy. The plan was to blow up the Houses of the Lords during the State Opening of Parliament on 5 November 1605. One of the conspirators had queried the morality of killing innocent bystanders in confession to the Jesuit Oswald Tesimond (1563-1636). He in turn then sought counsel through confession with his Superior, Henry Garnet.

When the plot was discovered, the government used this to increase their persecution of Catholics. Garnet withdrew to Hinlip Hall, two miles from Worcester and the home of Mr Abington, to wait for the heat of the persecution to pass whilst Fathers Gerard and Tesimond left for the continent.

In January 1606, Sir Henry Bromley, nearest Justice of account to Hinlip Hall, was tasked with searching the property on suspicion that Jesuits were hiding there. There were four Jesuits who went into hiding in secret spots concealed in the house on the searchers' arrival. Owen and Ralph Ashley SJ ( -1606) were in one hiding spot with apparently only an apple whilst Garnet was concealed with Oldcorne, with a bit more provisions available to them. For almost a week all the men stayed hidden, putting up with a lack of food and discomfort from the confined spaces. After almost a week of the relentless search Owen and Ashley decided to come out. Foley says that it was not so much hunger, but the hope that if they were caught then the search might be called off. Unfortunately, the opposite happened, and the search was increased as they now knew that there were hiding spots concealing Jesuits and they were even more determined to find them, but it was a few more days before they were successful in finding the spot where Garnet and Oldcorne were hidden.

Garnet tells his own account of the discovery stating: " When we came forth we appeared like 2 ghosts, yet I the strongest, though my weakness lasted longest". Following his discovery Sir Bromley kept Garnet in his house to restore him to health for the journey to London, where he was to be examined and trialled.

Once in London Garnet was examined several times by the Privy Council, the first time on 13 February and present was John Popham, whom he had dined with when an apprentice to Tottel.

Garnet's trial took place on Friday 28 March 1606. The evidence against Garnet was weak, and his prosecution's case was a long speech listing all the Jesuit intrigues in England for the past thirty years. Garnet was at a great disadvantage—he had been examined numerous times, had his confidential conversation with Oldcorne eavesdropped and his letters intercepted. He was frequently interrupted. His defence rested on that he had always opposed violent actions and that the details of the plot had been told him under seal of confession. He was found guilty and condemn to be drawn, hanged and quartered.

He was kept in the Tower until Saturday 3 May 1606, when he was taken to be executed at St Paul's Churchyard. The number who attended was estimated at twenty thousand. He once again declared his innocence: "As for the treasons which are laid against me, I protest now at my death that I am not guilty of them, neither had knowlegde of the Powder but in confession, and then I utterly disliked it and earnestly dissuaded it."

And before his final prayers he declared "...but ever meant to die a true and perfect Catholic".

The crowd was won over by Garnet and they made sure that he was dead before he was quartered by stopping the executioner from cutting him down too early, and apparently even one man pulled on his legs to ensure he was put out of his pain.

A young man, John Wilkinson, was in the crowd at the execution hoping to collect some relics, when out the basket where Garnet's head had been placed a bit of straw fell into John's hands. He took it to Mrs Hugh Griffin, formerly Mary Bellamy, who kept it in a reliquary. A few days later, it being shown to another person a face, Garnet's likeness was seen on it. The straw was kept and transferred for many years but was lost perhaps during the move from St Omers to Stonyhurst.

This straw box is in the Archives, though its original purpose is no longer known.

Others managed to obtain some relics, such as drops of blood and the shirt worn by Garnet were sought on the day of his execution and we have some relics in the Archives that belonged to Garnet. A few examples are shown here.

Finally, Henry was the uncle of Saint Thomas Garnet SJ, who was executed at Tyburn only 2 years after his uncle's execution. A relic of Thomas is featured in our virtual relic exhibition that was co-created with Stonyhurst College earlier this year.

I hope this brief overview of Henry Garnet's life has been useful. I've tried to indicate what material we hold as we have gone through the presentations and Michael has already suggested that perhaps later in the year you could visit the Archives for a tour and to see some items of interest. I would be very happy to welcome you.

Following his presentation McCoog addressed the question of why Henry Garnet was not canonised and explained that for reasons of expediency it was decided to exclude him from the list of 40 English and Welsh martyrs being put forward as his supposed involvement with the Gunpowder Plot was a mark against him. As a result, though of him being overlooked historians, such as Philip Caraman, swiftly came to his defence and much research was done on him, which we can now benefit from.

I admit that I had been a bit reluctant to offer to do a presentation as public speaking is not something I feel particularly comfortable with. However, I am glad that I did. I felt it went well and the feedback received was positive and commented on how the two presentations had been complimentary to each other. Given how useful I found doing the research, and how great it was to realise how much I unconsciously did know, as well as the benefit of raising awareness of the Archives through such work, I would like the Archives to do more of such. I am hoping to be in touch with Superiors later this year to offer to give a similar sort of presentation of a significant figure or work related to their community. Naturally, it would be wonderful if such talks could take place in person perhaps with a tour of the Archives or some of the material mentioned out on display to view, but the Covid pandemic has made us realise how much can be done remotely too via Zoom or other such tools when for understandable practical reasons in person meetings may not be possible. So, if I have not yet been in touch or you have any requests feel free to get in touch so that we can begin exploring such.

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