MR. BASKERVILLE AND THE MONKS

MANY extravagant claims have been made in the Press for this book,[1] none however as sweeping as that made by a writer in the *Daily Telegraph* of March 5, in which he gravely assures us that "the result of his [Mr. Baskerville's] study of these sources [the contemporary documents in the Public Record Office] is a book which one must accept as the most authoritative account yet published of this curious chapter in English history" [namely the Suppression of the monasteries]. He also tells us that the "sob-stuff" writers, against whom, he requires us to believe, Mr. Baskerville tilts with complete success, are those who "have either not consulted contemporary documents or have ignored them."

This is indeed devastating, for the most prominent twentieth-century "sob-stuff" writer (a "sob-stuff" writer being one who refuses to accept the religious houses as "corrupt, immoral, and obviously having outlived their usefulness") was the late Dr. James Gairdner, a non-Catholic, who during his fifty-four years of work in the Record Office edited the twenty-one volumes divided into thirty-one parts (each part a great tome) which form the *Calendar of Letters and Papers of Henry VIII,* a work so much appreciated by Mr. Baskerville that he has liberally helped himself from it to the extent of no less than one hundred and eighty-eight quotations. At the period of Mr. Gairdner's work another assiduous toiler in the Record Office was the late Father C. F. Raymund Palmer, O.P., busy between 1870 and 1890 compiling his many works on the history of the English Dominicans. His is a very honourable name amongst research students. Although not a sob occurs in all his many writings he cannot escape from the "sob-stuff" category refusing as he does, in company with Gairdner and Cardinal Gasquet (another worker for years in the Record Office), to take the oath of "supremacy in truth" to the royal monastic visitors sent round by

[1] *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries,* by Geoffrey Baskerville, M.A. (Jonathan Cape; 15/-.)

Cromwell. Yet, says the *Daily Telegraph,* "the contemporary documents are not difficult to find. One need journey no further, Mr. Baskerville tells us, than the Public Record Office." Truly our Daily Press is a remarkable institution. And how the author must be amused with his naïve reviewers, for he himself knows that many writers of repute have waded through the same unpleasant mass of scandalous accusations against the monks in order to arrive at a just conclusion on the state of the religious houses on the eve of the suppression, and have arrived at a conclusion far different from the one he himself arrives at. It is not as if Mr. Baskerville had discovered anything really new or significant. His main authority is, as I have said, Gairdner's collection of Henry VIII's Letters and Papers, from which the major portion of his work is drawn. His other principal authorities are the episcopal visitations, both printed and in manuscript, and the very ancient work, much used by Dr. Gairdner in his *Lollardy and the Reformation,* known as *Letters relating to the Suppression of the Monasteries* printed by Thomas Wright in 1843 for the Camden Society.

From the episcopal visitations of Bishops Atwater and Longland of Lincoln, which are in manuscript, the author cites, between 1514 and 1534, seven cases of religious houses in bad shape: Peterborough where the abbot was accused of cutting down the monks' food and pocket money, and of speaking against them before seculars; Leicester where the abbot of the Austin Canons blamed his subjects for keeping far too many hunting dogs, and the Canons in return accused him of dabbling in magic and alchemy; Eynsham whose abbot had his sister dwelling in the precincts to the no small expense of the community; Kirby Bellars where the prior was accused of browbeating his monks to prevent their telling tales to the bishop; and Bruerne, Caldwell, and Great Missenden where disgruntled monks charged their superiors with breaches of chastity, none absolutely proven. These are the only adverse reports given us by the author from these original documents. He should have given more if he would have us draw the conclusion that all the 345 religious houses in the diocese of Lincoln were in a corrupt state before the

royal visitors came round in 1535. From the episcopal visitations of Norwich and from a few other stray sources he, in the course of the whole book, enumerates twenty-six other adverse reports which, from cases of undisciplined religious and wasteful abbots and abbesses, work up to fourteen cases of alleged immorality.[2] Yet there were more than 1,800 religious establishments in England. Surely he should have supplied more instances if he wished us to accept even a large proportion as decayed from true religion.

The real point at issue between Mr. Baskerville and such an accepted authority on Henry VIII's reign as Dr. Gairdner, is that the former is willing to accept as true the accusations made against the monasteries by the royal visitors, whereas the latter could not bring himself to do a thing so repugnant to his scholarly instincts. In his *Lollardy and the Reformation,* published in 4 vols. between 1908 and 1913, Gairdner set forth the result of sixty-three years spent in historical research, mostly on the Tudor period. His findings on the question of the monastic suppression are consequently of too great authority to be set aside in the absence of new material. The following quotations are significant:

The defaming of the monasteries was simply a step towards their suppression and the confiscation of their endowments. [*Lollardy and the Reformation,* ii, 88.] The reports (of the visitors), however, will hardly command much credit *from the student of contemporary State papers.* [Italics mine.] That abuses may have existed in some monasteries, and that impurities from laxity of rule may not have been effectually dealt with, are facts that we might presume as probable from the infirmity of human nature; but before we can believe that the abominations were anything like so gross as were reported, *we ought to have better evidence of the honesty and truthfulness of the Visitors than appears, even in the light of their own reports.* [Italics mine.] Some of these filthy revelations, indeed, are of a nature that could only have been known, if true, through the confessional, and that any of the

2 *Wilton* (nunnery), Bayham, *Merton, Aldgate,* Upholland, Westacre, Hickling, Wymondham, *Cockersand, Dale,* Woodbridge, *Walsingham,* Norwich, *Eye,* Pershore, Welbeck, *Cambridge* (*St. Radegund's nunnery*), Daventry, *King's Langley,* and the nunneries of *Elstow, Godstow, Higham,* and Bromhall, and *Nuneaton, Littlemore* and *Easeborne.* Italics denote charges of immorality against one or more members of the community.

monks or nuns chose Legh or Layton for a confessor is past belief. [*Ibid.*, p. 78.]

Of the *Compendium compertorum* containing the findings of the visitors in the dioceses of York, Lichfield, and Norwich, Dr. Gairdner says:

> Foul as it is, with a most unspeakable foulness, even this document does not by any means justify the numbers stated to have been tainted with the grossest impurity. [*Ibid.*, p. 84.]

Again on p. 87 he says:

> Supposing that, against all reasonable probability, vice reigned universally in houses which did not possess £200 a year of revenue, the King's Visitors had not, with all their diligence, traversed more than half of England, and that half very hastily; so that there was no means of judging the characters of half the houses suppressed. In fact, the total number of houses actually visited was not nearly one-third of all the monasteries of England; so there could have been no report at all against two-thirds of the houses suppressed.

Mr. Baskerville omits the fact that the visitation was a partial one, but, whilst agreeing that it was hasty, maintains it was thorough, on the precedent set by the bishops who "could often manage to visit two monasteries in a single day." Two wrongs do not make a right. Who in the name of justice would maintain such an episcopal visitation a fair one? The author pleads that a bishop knew a great deal about the internal state of a house beforehand; but the bishop or his secretary must have had a wonderful memory or a very large notebook to deal with the 345 houses in the Lincoln diocese, or the 194 in that of Norwich. Also in common justice the bishop would be under an obligation to give each religious a hearing.

What has been quoted from Gairdner is sober history and he and Cardinal Gasquet have much to say against the visitors' characters. Mr. Baskerville however says: "Now of what type were these agents?—were they really the scoundrels that sentimentalist writers picture them?" (p. 124). "That they had their failings is obvious, but it is ridiculous to assert that they were the unsavoury persons they have been represented. They were the zealous servants of the Crown in the same measure that inland revenue officers are

now." These are very harsh words to use of our modern revenue officials, for the very best we can say of these visitors is that they were time-servers and on the look-out for graft. Layton and Legh actually asked for the position. The latter was accused later on by Sanders of soliciting the nuns to breaches of chastity, and though Sanders was but eight years old at the time of the royal visitation, "he was," says Gairdner, "much better informed and more accurate about many things when he wrote than past historians have believed" (*ibid.*, p. 71). The Imperial ambassador, Eustace Chapuys, whom Mr. Baskerville on p. 113 for no alleged reason calls a liar, tells of a distinct incident of this kind on the part of one of the visitors.[3] Foxe the Martyrologist relates on the authority of Archdeacon Louth that another visitor, Dr. John London,[4] had to do penance in public "with 2 smocks on his shoulders" for his misconduct with "Mrs. Thikked and her daughter Mrs. Jennings." Mr. Baskerville, who on page 9 accepts Foxe's work as "that good and tried book," now on this occasion (p. 127) dismisses his witness as unworthy of credence. Of Layton, Archbold[5] says that his letters to Cromwell preserved in the Record Office "fully display the heartless and unscrupulous character of the writer." When so many unsubstantiated accusations are made by these same visitors against the monks, it is only fair that what has been said against *them* should be put on record. That from the very outset their determination was to act the wolf blaming the lamb for fouling the waters is abundantly clear, and not even the author denies that the cause of the monks was pre-judged. We can confidently state that, even supposing these visitors men of ordinary honesty, they were not the men to dare to return to Henry with a clean dossier for the monks.

I have refrained from giving Gasquet's animadversions on these men, contenting myself with the above quotations from Gairdner, Hunt, and Archbold, all historians of repute with no Catholic axe to grind; but nevertheless it is scarcely

3 *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, ix, no. 873.
4 W. Hunt, D.Litt., in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v.
5 *Ibid.*

conceivable that a responsible historian should dismiss with the scorn Mr. Baskerville does the learned Benedictine who spent so many years of hard work gathering his knowledge from the original documents in the Record Office. "The tear-stained pages of Cardinal Gasquet" is a remark unworthy of the author whose own voice almost escapes his control when he contemplates poor Henry VIII, "this great King (*sic*) made a figure of fun for the benefit of film-fans."

The portion of his book which has caused some reviewers mild amusement is where he treats of the monastic pensions. His insistence on multiplying every sum mentioned by thirty, whilst it turns a miserable pension of £5 into £150, and a poor one of £40 into the very handsome one of £1,200, does not always work out so amenably. I speak from memory, but I think the reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* worked out Cardinal Wolsey's income on this basis and discovered it was a comfortable million pounds per annum. This makes the ready money left by Cromwell, some £720,000, seem very small, though fairly big considering it did not include his estates nor the very considerable amount of precious metal in his possession from monastic spoils. Of this ready money Cromwell had deposited £300,000 with his secretary, who with commendable prudence handed it to the king. Gasquet more reasonably puts the whole sum at a quarter of a million, but although this was a pre-war computation money value has hardly trebled since then.[6]

Things, however, seem to have been expensive at this period and, as Dr. Mathew has pointed out in *The Tablet* (February 20), according to Mr. Baskerville's standard "two old feather beds, old and rent, and two bolsters" seized from the Dominicans at Ilchester realized no less a sum than £13 5s. The "3 feather beds 3 bolsters 2 pillows and one pillow bare and 1 blanket" seized from the Winchester Dominicans seem to have been in better shape, for they were priced at 16s. 8d., or, as Mr. Baskerville would say, £25. A flock bed in the same house could be had as a bargain for £3 10s.[7] Sacristy and altar stuff were highly priced, so that

[6] *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, 1910 edition, p. 156.
[7] *Reliquary Magazine*, 1889, p. 214.

even at the poor Dominican house at Guildford for "all the vestry stuff poor" quite a stiff figure was asked, £225[8]; but better business was done at the Dominicans at Exeter where "a suit of vestments, 5 copes, 5 altar cloths, some small cloth frontals, a pair of old organs, and a metal lectern" were put down as valued at £23 15s., namely £704 15s., whilst "3 old coarse cloths" in the sacristy were estimated to be worth 20d., or £2 10s.[9] Again very handsome business. But we must remember the apparent dearness of all wearing apparel in those days. The author himself mentions on page 65 the case of a Master of Arts who was given by the abbot of Ford 4 yards of broadcloth costing 5s. a yard, namely £30, to make a gown. We can now understand why the Duke of Norfolk when he drove out the Norwich Black and Grey-friars gave the "poor wretches" in the kindness of his heart 40s. each and to the worst of them 20s. to buy themselves lay attire. But £60 and £30 sound heavy sums for clothes in our day.[10] I dare say the king or duke did not lose very much by it, seeing that the lead alone of the Dominican house in the same city brought the very acceptable sum of £152, say £4,560 in our money.[11] Still better business was done with the lead of the destroyed Coventry Cathedral which produced £647, say nowadays £19,410, but even this goodly sum pales into insignificance when compared with £3,302, namely to-day £99,060, the estimated value of lead from St. Edmundsbury. With lead at such a price it is small wonder that they hanged a tinker at Northampton for appropriating some.[12] At the risk of becoming tedious I add one more example of this money difficulty. On p. 42 where the author is busy showing the incapacity of the monks in artistic work, he shows us Prior More of Worcester prefering to employ an outsider, one John Stilgo, to gild and paint the statues of Our Blessed Lady and St. John on the altar of St. Cecilia. Surely he ought to have been warned by a stiff bill of 28s. 4d., or say

8 *Ibid.*, 1887, p. 18.
9 *Ibid.*, 1885, p. 260.
10 *Vict. Co. Hist. Norfolk*, ii, 431.
11 *The Reliquary Mag.*, 1889, p. 100.
12 Gasquet, *ibid.*, 420, 423.

£42 10s.; but he would not be taught and commissioned Stilgo to paint the remaining statues and to provide curtains for the same altar. We cannot be sorry that this time he was charged £10 7s., or as Mr. Baskerville would say, £310 10s. If this computation is correct Prior More had more money than sense. I cannot bring myself to make an act of faith in these figures, but the above quotations (too many, I fear, for the reader's patience) will, I think, convince him that no pontifical utterance should be made concerning the ample and even fat pensions which, the author states, were secured to the dispossessed religious by a beneficent government.

Mr. Baskerville is doubtless on the right track when he says that the number of friars had seriously diminished since the thirteenth century. At the risk of appearing pedantic may I point out that the fourteenth was the peak century for numbers in regard to the Dominicans, as is abundantly proved by Father Palmer's quotations from the Wardrobe accounts in the Record Office, given in his numerous articles in *The Archaeological Journal* and *Reliquary Magazine* between 1870 and 1890. But what Mr. Baskerville and his forerunners, Cardinal Gasquet and others, do not seem to have noticed is the doubt thrown on the reliability of the surrender lists by a study of the episcopal and other contemporary registers. Thus the register of Charles Booth,[13] bishop of Hereford from 1516 to 1534, supplies the names of 46 Dominicans ordained to various orders, of whom the eldest, given the canonical age as 24 years completed for the priesthood, would be 42 years of age at the date of the suppression. To descend to details, seven were in their twenties, sixteen between 30 and 35, seventeen between 35 and 40, and eight between 40 and 42. Of the total 46 only *five* names appear in the surrender lists, three at Hereford, and one each at Cardiff and Rhuddlan. In the register of Mayew, Bishop Booth's predecessor (1504-16), there are records of sixteen others whose ages in 1538 ranged from 43 to 56, only two of whom appear in the surrender list, Thomas Norman, the last prior of Warwick, and John Hoper of Gloucester.

[13] Registers of Mayew and Booth, ed. Bannister, 1919 and 1921.

Similarly in the diocese of Winchester between 1518 and 1524 ten friars were ordained for Winchester and three for Guildford, ten of them priests, two deacons, and one subdeacon, none of whose names appear in surrender lists.[14] Again at Cambridge in the years 1516 and 1517 three subdeacons, two deacons and three priests were ordained, and although the eldest could not have been more than 46 years of age we have not got their names as surrendering.[15] It would be of interest to consult the registers of the remaining fourteen dioceses which possessed Dominican houses, to see what numbers of friars were there ordained within twenty years of the suppression, also the still unconsulted portions of the Ely and Winchester registers.

We must not however attach too much significance to the fact that of the 83 names of those ordained, mentioned above, only seven appear in the surrender lists, for lists are preserved of three-fifths only of the total number of Dominican houses; for twenty houses there are no returns. But on the other hand we cannot dogmatically state that these 83 names would be found in the missing lists, for 62 of them are of the priories of Hereford (32 friars), Brecon (7), Gloucester (8), Worcester (9), Shrewsbury (4), Rhuddlan and Warwick (one each), of all of which priories with the exceptions of Worcester and Shrewsbury we have the surrender lists; and to distribute the survivors—some few might be dead although all were comparatively young—between these two houses would be out of all proportion. The friars ordained at Hereford would scarcely be likely to be found outside houses of the midlands or west, of which places we have surrender lists. That this is no unsupported opinion is abundantly clear from the lists of priors that have come down to us, in which with few exceptions the priors bear local names, and in many hundreds of cases of individual friars we find them working in or near the places of their ordination.

The real significance lies not so much in the fact that the

14 Palmer, *Blackfriars of Winchester*, in *Reliquary*, 1889, p. 212, from Egerton MS. no. 2034, fol. 152, B.M.

15 Palmer, *Blackfriars of Cambridge*, ibid., 1885, p. 210, quoting Add. MS. 5827, pp. 149, B.M.

registers of one diocese and portions of two others give us so many names unknown to the surrender lists, but that a house like Hereford where only half-a-dozen friars surrendered there must have been, just previous to that event, a community of over twenty friars in order to provide such a steady flow of students ordained to major orders, for the major orders were given only to those doing the last two years of their five or six years' course of study. Even as late as 1532-3 six students at Hereford were ordained to major orders and, including one ordained acolyte, there would be at least an equal number of students doing their first three years of ecclesiastical studies. In addition to these there would be one or two officials such as the prior, syndic, master of students, the ministerial brethren (called *fratres ministeriales* in the Acts of the Provincial Chapters), whose duty it was to sing the conventual Mass and exercise the functions of hebdomadary in the choral offices, functions from which the chief officials and professors were exempt, and the professors, at least two, and several laybrothers to do the household work. And yet there were only *six* in the community five years later at the suppression. At Cambridge, where eight were ordained to major orders in two years, 1516-17, the community would certainly number at least thirty, yet twenty-one years later there were only a dozen left to surrender. Similarly at Winchester, where ten were raised to major orders between 1520 and 1524, the community must have exceeded twenty, but the surrenders did not exceed ten.

Two other registers may be consulted, those of Oxford University[16] and of the Masters General of the Dominican Order preserved in the Archives at S. Sabina, Rome, from which extracts were made by Father Palmer. From these two independent sources we find the names of 26 who took the degrees of Bachelor or Doctor in Divinity between 1520 and 1538 at Oxford and nine who graduated in the Order. In addition to these latter the Master General's register mentions by name 11 friars as having left the country. The

16 *Registrum Universitatis Oxoniae*, ed. C. W. Boase, M.A., for the Oxford Historical Society, 1885.

Grace Books of Cambridge[17] likewise give the names of 12 friars admitted to degrees during the same period. We should naturally expect to find the great majority of these alive in 1538, but only 14 out of a total of 56 appear in surrender lists of various priories. Of the remainder, two we know were dead, Robert Miles, formerly Provincial, and John Capel, prior of Oxford, and one was almost certainly imprisoned for preaching against Henry VIII's pretended royal supremacy, Thomas Charnock.[18] It is the Cambridge degree list that shows most surrenders, seven out of 12. Of the 24 of Oxford only six are recorded as giving up, and only one out of the nine in the General's register, William Perrin, is known to have accepted the schism.

At the risk of becoming wearisome I cannot refrain from calling to notice that, according to Mr. Baskerville's money computation, the Cambridge house seems to have been uncommonly wealthy even up to the eve of its suppression, seeing that Henry Aglionby, who afterwards was married in St. Margaret's, Westminster, in the reign of Edward VI, Thomas Pendreth, and Richard Ingworth, afterwards schismatical bishop of Dover and the suppressor of the houses of friars in 1538, paid between them £147 10s. in fees to the University, of which Ingworth alone paid £102. Still earlier in the same century Dr. Morgan, O.P., paid £160 on the occasion of his doctorate (1504), as also did another Dominican Doctor, Roger Beaumont, prior of Norwich, in 1501, and two others, Doctors Pescode and Gurney in 1494 and 1499. Considering the size of the sum required it is no wonder that the former requested extra time to pay. To arrive at the actual figures given in the Grace Book the reader must divide by thirty.

These notes from the various registers will, I think, make us pause before accepting the surrender lists as a safe guide to the number of Dominicans in England on the eve of the suppression. If we could find the lost register of the Master General, John de Ferrario, 1532 to 1538, we should be in a

[17] *Grace Books, A*, ed. S. M. Starkey, 1897, and *B*, ed. M. Bateson, 1903.

[18] *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, vol. vii, nos. 259, 260, 923.

better position to judge whether or not a number of friars escaped abroad during the period that the storm was brewing. Not every Dominican living in 1534 when the rumblings began can be proved a Vicar of Bray.

The one cheering thing in the book is Section IV of Chapter VII where the author shows that many heads of religious houses were able to forestall their spoilers by granting leases to friends and relations against a more than ordinary rainy day.

Unfortunately the bias of the author is only too patent. Much is made of the conservatism, meaning Catholicism, of such time-servers as Gardiner of Winchester, and Longland of Lincoln, Henry VIII's confessor, whilst respectable Catholics such as Pole and Fisher are treated with little consideration. Why is it suggested we should question the martyred Cardinal's motives in suppressing a relaxed nunnery and be expected to believe reports furnished by a Layton, a London and a Legh, not to mention a Longland? An unfair juxtaposition of facts on p. 111 will certainly lead the ordinary reader to think that Cardinal Campeggio's son was illegitimate, when the fact is surely known to every serious historian that Campeggio was a widower with five children before entering the service of the Church in 1509.

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