

THE RECUSANTS' BEDE

TUCKED away, among a million other books, there is in the British Museum Library¹ a handsome small volume which must have had quite an eventful history of its own before it reached its present peaceful seclusion, but which must, nevertheless, be wishing that its purport and contents were better known, especially in these days when so much has been said and written on account of the twelfth centenary of the death of Saint Bede the Venerable. Not that there is any secret as to its existence. For many years this particular volume has been there, duly catalogued, for all to find who might chance that way. Yet so few people, apparently, are aware of it, that it seems worth while not only to draw attention to it but to its author and subject besides.

The fly-leaf alone is worthy of notice. It is covered with bold writing in several hands, which in themselves betray a little of the romance that can follow a humble book. These inscriptions read thus:

- (a) this book belongs to the
english convent of St. Doks
order at Bruxelles.
- (b) this book belongs to the
English Convent of the Domicno
order in Br—— order in —(sic)

And the third, which supersedes both the others, apparently, is quaintest still:

this Books belongs to the
English Nuns of St. Dominicks
order in Bruxells—
for the use of Sister
Mary Catherine with
Leave of her Superiour.

These three inscriptions leave no doubt about it, that this book did indeed belong at one time to the Dominican Nuns at Brussels, and, from the style of handwriting, it seems at

¹ 4707, aa. 35. "H.B.": *England's Old Religion from Bede.*

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a date soon after its publication, in 1650-1658.

The title page adds to the interest. It is printed thus:

ENGLAND'S
OLD RELIGION
Faithfully gathered out of the
HISTORY
of the
CHURCH OF ENGLAND

As it was written by the Venerable Bede, almost a Thousand years ago (that is) in the year 698 after the Passion of our SAVIOUR.

BEDE saith he ended this History in the year 731, after the Incarnation.

We have not altered any part of the *Father's* own words in any *Point* concerning *Faith*; only here and there is omitted what belongeth not to that purpose.

By H. B.

It was needful for me to exhort you, that you should earnestly contend for the Faith which was once delivered.—Jude v, 5.

At Antwerp. With Permission. 1650

At a glance, how many small points of interest arise? Who was H. B.? What was he doing in Antwerp, at such a time, writing a book in English, and on such a subject? And when one remembers the fate which threatened all or any who dared to preach the Old Religion in 1650, the short quotation from St. Jude's Epistle brings added pathos.

"H. B.," it seems, was none other than Father Henry Beaumont, son of Sir Henry Beaumont, of Stoughton, who entered the Society of Jesus in 1630, and, under the pseudonym of Henry Harcourt, he appears in the Lancashire District in 1649, and again in 1655 in Hampshire. So one may suppose that he actually wrote this little book in the midst of the dangers of the English Mission, and, with equal bravery, circulated it freely, if secretly; for it ran through two editions. It is a copy of the second edition which is now kept in the British Museum.

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In the preface Father Beaumont reveals his purpose. He writes to his "Dear Countrymen." He wishes to show them, "That the faith first delivered was the true faith," which no man can deny but "he that will accuse Christ of falsehood." And he wishes to show them that the faith practised by the ancient Britons, and in England after the conversion under Pope Gregory—these are his own words, as far as possible—was "not one jot differing" from the faith as practised by St. Bede who described it all in his History, or as it was found in England more latterly.

This History was written by "as worthy a man as ever was known to have handled pen in England, in a book which no man ever judged corrupted or written by any other pen that Venerable Bede's, a person not to be paralleled by any other of our nation."

"H. B." supports his theme by quoting from Protestant divines well known at the time. "Whence Polidore Virgil alledging Bede saith, 'Bede, an Englishman, than whom none more chaste, none more true' . . . and your own Campden, treating of the Bishoprick of Durham saith, 'Here our Bede was born, the singular Glory and Ornament of England, who for his Piety and Learning got the surname of Venerable.' " He also points out that he has used the translation of St. Bede's History, "lately set forth by Abraham Welock, a prime Protestant Doctor."

This was audacity itself, to singe the enemy with their own fire. If they would admit the worth of Bede thus, and acclaim his veracity, how then could they refuse to accept the truth of that which he wrote?

The substance of the book is a list of forty-nine points which "H. B." terms a "map" giving a brief sum of all that thou art to see in this old Church of England, when she was in her greatest purity.

The first is a sufficient example.

1. Before ever St. Augustine came there were so many monks that even one monastery (of Bangor) contained above one and twenty hundred monks—but now in this our new English Church, to be a monk is to be a Traitor: then they were our Apostles.

And then, point by point, he skilfully guides his readers,

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in a most ingenious fashion, through the whole maze of controversy of the time, showing that these "near half a hundred things all to be seen by thee in that old English Church, not any one can be seen in the present English Church. . . . All that you most scoff at in the Religion which you call Popery was then most in use."

With the same weapon he attacks the "gross ignorance and overlashing boldness of Dr. Henry Fearn (how many to-day remember his name?) who durst lately say that the faith which England cast off in Hen. the 8, his daies, or rather in the daies of Q. Eliz., was not the same faith which was brought into England under St. Gregory."

"You have cast off the faith," he concludes thus urgently with a plea, "agreeing in all points with that faith (of St. Bede's); therefore you have cast off the true faith. And this very faith is the only faith which England cannot now endure, but forceth us *point by point* to abjure in her new coined oath of *Abjuration*: so unlike is this present *English Church* to the Old English Church. If this short work makes thee not to see with thy eies, I desire no kind of credit with thee; but if with thy own eies thou seest all this, then I beseech thee as thou lovest thy own soul, not to let those find credit with thee, who would perswade thee that to be false which thy eies tell thee to be most true."

From all of which it appears that the opponents of Catholicism in the seventeenth century lacked logic and consistency then, even as they had done in the previous century and continued to do afterward. Willing to bask in the reflected glory that was St. Bede's, and to claim kinship with one whose sanctity and scholarship no man could find fault with, they were yet unwilling to acknowledge the veracity of that Saint's Faith. "H. B." might well have been writing for a later age and generation.

H. M. GILLETT.