JOHN GERARD, JESUIT

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HAD Fr John Gerard been a highwayman instead of a Jesuit his name would doubtless be familiar to every schoolboy, for his exploits are far more exciting than those of Dick Turpin or Robin Hood, and have the additional recommendation of being authentic. It is strange that such a thrilling autobiography should have been allowed to remain out of print for half a century, and Fr Caraman is to be congratulated not only on making good this deficiency, but on producing an edition[1] that may be read as easily as a novel. The former editions edited by Fr John Morris, S.J., had obvious shortcomings. The homely Latin had been turned into solemn, Victorian prose with a mock-Elizabethan tang about it quite unsuited to the original. The text was so interlarded with notes that one could never be sure whether one was reading Gerard, or his editor, or some spy's report. Fr Caraman has extricated the text from these encumbrances, and put the notes at the end of the book. He has translated Gerard's brisk and unstudied Latin into exactly the sort of colloquial English that it demands. He has brought Gerard to life in a remarkable way: at last we can fully appreciate his simple piety, his sense of humour, his love of field sports, and his amazing courage. Those who do not know Fr Gerard should read his narrative straight through as they would a novel, and then turn to the notes, and see how almost every incident may be checked and amplified by reference to State Papers and other sources. Those who know Gerard already will enjoy reading him in this new translation, while all who have the responsibility of talking to children will find here stories of hiding-holes and hairbreadth escapes, of courage and endurance, of torture and martyrdom—indeed, all the ingredients of a dozen thrillers—which will both edify and entertain.

It is not, however, only as brilliant entertainment that this book is to be recommended. Until Fr Caraman gives us a critical life of Fr Henry Garnet this narrative must remain the most important

1. *JOHN GERARD, The Autobiography of an Elizabethan. Translated from the Latin by Philip Caraman. Introduction by Graham Greene.* (*Longmans;* 18*s*.)

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available account of the English Catholics during the closing years of Elizabeth's long reign. It is all too easy to confuse the era of Campion with that of Gerard. In 1580, when Campion landed, there was a strongly-organised Protestant minority, an enthusiastic Catholic minority, and between them the mass of the people, intensely patriotic and religiously indifferent. It was the main task of the two minorities to win them over: the Catholics by representing the government as heretics, the Protestants by representing the Catholics as traitors. It was an uneven struggle, for the government had all the degrading machinery of a totalitarian régime; a monopoly of rewards and punishments, prisons and police, and complete control of printing, universities and churches. Yet against these odds the zeal of the first missionary priests was wonderfully successful. They sent back to Douai exhilarating accounts of their miraculous draughts of fishes. The fields were 'white with the harvest', and all that was needed was an increase in labourers. The vicious and bloody reaction of the government only increased the prestige of the Seminary priests. By 1586 their heroic fortitude in the face of torture and death had beaten the enemy to a standstill. The blood of the martyrs was still the seed of the Church. A report of this year admits that

> 'the execution of them as experience hath showed, in respect of their constancy or rather obstinacy, moveth many to compassion, and draweth some to affect their religion, upon conceit that such an extraordinary contempt of death cannot but proceed from above'.

'Arraign one papist', said the Recorder of London more tersely, 'and you make two; hang two and you make twenty.'

But what else could they do with these young priests that poured into England? To keep them in prison was to turn the prisons into Mass centres and places of pilgrimage. If they were banished they came back by the next boat. Nobody seriously believed that these men, who protested their civil loyalty to the Queen and prayed for her on the scaffold, were guilty of treason. The plots, real or imaginary, that the authorities always discovered so opportunely, never appear to have aroused much public indignation or to have been taken very seriously. There was still a hope, in 1586, when Gerard set out for Rome, of a Catholic England. Then in the summer of 1588, at the very time of his ordination, the Armada was sighted in the Channel. Nobody

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could pretend that this was a government plot foisted on the Catholics, and it probably did more than all the other plots together to alienate the sympathies of the nation. Henceforth Catholicism meant Spanish domination, and it grew ever more unpopular.

After the defeat of the Armada the government felt strong enough to take more drastic action. There were no less than thirty martyrs in three months, and the executions were no longer restricted to well-guarded spots like Tyburn and York. They were spread all over London, while others took place at Canterbury, Chichester and Ipswich. The quarters of these martyrs were still exposed on city gates when Gerard landed in November, and the battle was already lost. There were to be individual converts still, but no more talk of a Catholic England. All that could now be hoped for was some measure of toleration in the next reign.

About this time further misfortunes assailed the Church both at home and abroad. The Seminary at Rheims (it returned to Douai in 1594) had become impoverished, and was now producing only a trickle of new priests. The Venerable English College at Rome had fallen on evil days and was torn by internal dissensions. At home there was a spirit of restlessness among a section of the hard-pressed priests. There was growing resentment at the influence wielded by the Jesuits and a laudable desire for an English bishop. But some few, in their hatred of the Jesuits, went to lengths that were quite indefensible. Fr Gerard speaks of them with great restraint, and it seems incredible that his first editor, eighty years ago, should have thought it necessary to omit a passage (now on page 142) as likely to give offence. Fr Parsons made capital out of the apostates produced by the anti-Jesuit faction, but it was not the apostates who caused the real trouble. They are the price that each generation must pay for high priestly standards. The real trouble was caused by priests of exemplary character, many of whom had suffered years of imprisonment for the Faith. They no doubt sincerely thought that the Jesuits were too aloof and intransigent: that it was possible to come to an agreement with their persecutors. We know now that they were tragically wrong; that the government would be satisfied with nothing short of complete and abject apostasy. The papers of Richard Bancroft (then Bishop of London) among the Petyt manuscripts in the Inner Temple, reveal how effectively Bancroft

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played off one party against the other, till they were publishing scurrillous attacks on each other that caused no small scandal. The Chief Justice (Sir John Popham) said that

> 'not any man in this land had done greater service to this state than the Bishop [of London], for, said he, he hath put a division betwixt the priests themselves; he hath caused them to write one against another, and to subscribe their names, which all the world thought impossible ever to come to pass'.

Nothing was gained by these conciliatory gestures, even for the individuals concerned. George Watson, who dined at Bancroft's table, was executed for treason, while the other priests, after a few months of uneasy freedom from prison, were sent to Wisbech, and finally banished with the rest who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

It is against this sombre background of growing hostility, of fading hopes, and internal discord, that Fr Gerard's story should be read. He hardly does more than allude to these disquieting signs, but they must have made his work more arduous. He was ministering to Catholics who had grown disheartened and desperate: his chief enemies were those of the household of the Faith. Yet his work was more fruitful than he would have us believe. The registers of Valladolid give the names of no less than twenty students for the priesthood sent there by Fr Gerard, and there were many others sent to Douai and Rome, as well as to the Society.

Then the last crushing blow fell on the afflicted Church and destroyed all hope even of toleration. The Gunpowder Plot completed the work of the Armada. Gerard was proclaimed a principal conspirator, was hunted relentlessly, and finally slipped abroad in the livery of the Spanish ambassador. Here his story ends, but he was destined to live another thirty years and to see much of his work apparently brought to nought. Harrowden Hall, where he had spent the last eight years of his apostolate, was raided in 1611, his heroic hostess, Elizabeth Vaux, and her son sentenced to life imprisonment, and the rich altar furniture, which he describes, looted and defaced. It was, in his own words, the 'last era of a declining and gasping world'. Could he but have peered into the distant future, how his heart would have rejoiced! For he would have seen a new Harrowden Hall on the site of the old, with a beautiful chapel beside it, and the descendants of Elizabeth Vaux dwelling there, obstinate papists still.

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