

JOHN HUGH AVELING, 1917–1993

by ABBOT GEOFFREY SCOTT

John Aveling's obituary in *The Daily Telegraph* (19th February 1993) spoke of him as 'the historian of the Counter-Reformation who brought a particular understanding to the complexities of his subject'.¹ After schooling in Grantham, John Aveling went on to take a double first in History at Cambridge in 1938, where he described himself as 'a rip-roaring traditionalist'. During 1938 and 1939, he studied at the Gladstone Library in Hawarden, where he regretted not persuading the Warden, Alec Vidler, to act as his spiritual director. He studied for the Anglican ministry at Lincoln Theological College, and having been ordained, worked in an Anglican parish in Leeds. During this time, he tried his vocation to the religious life by joining the Anglican Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield. He was received into the Catholic Church in 1945 at Campion Hall, Oxford, and soon afterwards joined the Benedictine novitiate at Ampleforth Abbey. Aveling remained a member of the Ampleforth community for twenty years. He was a student at St. Benet's Hall, Oxford, the Benedictine private hall, when he said that his contemporary monk students were 'an array of the young with marshals' batons in their knapsacks' (i.e. six abbots were to emerge from this set of Benedictine students). He returned to Ampleforth to teach Church History to the junior monks and was Senior History Master in the school attached to the monastery between 1954 and 1966.²

Those who knew Aveling as a monk will be better equipped than myself to speak about his monastic vocation, but in criticising the neo-medievalism of the monastic revival at Downside ('dreeing their weird round Cuthbert Butler's monastic ideas'), Aveling seemed to approve of the traditional missionary and parochial apostolate of the English Benedictines, and worked with enthusiasm as the parish priest at Kirbymoorside, near Ampleforth. The Ampleforth community, he felt, was 'part-bored, part-amused' by the nineteenth-century rows among the English Benedictines, and he himself quite late in the day came to read David Knowles's 'blockbuster' account of Abbot Cuthbert Butler. At Ampleforth 'there seemed to be a general impression that the 19th-century English Benedictine Congregation was an utter backwater, remote from contemporary Catholic movements (apart from the parochial expansion)'. An old monk of Ampleforth, Illtyd Williams, he said, 'used to lecture me by the hour on the oddities and horrors of Maredsous (the neo-gothic abbey in Belgium) where he was sent for studies and which he regarded as a sort of Devil's Island'.³

In the early 1960s, as a monk, Aveling was writing orthodox defences of Church teaching on birth control and dogmatic theology, but suffered a

crisis of faith in 1966, and moved back to St. Benet's Hall. He left the Ampleforth community for good in 1967. A few months later he returned to the Anglican ministry. However, this did not last, and he returned to the Catholic Church as a layman. His marriage in 1968 gave him stability and helped his self-confidence. After some years of research in Cambridge, he took charge of the history department in a large comprehensive school in Bracknell, Berkshire. At the same time, he continued his academic interests, contributing numerous entries for the *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques* and lecturing on Post-Reformation Catholic history through papers like 'Berkshire recusancy' which he gave in the extra-mural department of Reading University. He began delving into strange backwaters. In the mid-1980s, he was, for instance, exploring the lives of Victorian expatriates. The 'Memoires' of the authoress, Georges Sand, who was a girl at the Paris school run by the English Augustinian Canonesses, c.1817–1820, fascinated him because of the light they threw on human psychology. Aveling's academic ability was, however, never to be recognised through his being awarded a university post, and he often wondered privately whether this was the result of his chequered past. John, he dropped the 'Hugh' after he left the monastery, died from cancer in 1993.⁴

Aveling's earliest published work was devoted to late English medieval monasticism. It is easy to see now that it was a stepping stone to his later major research on the Reformation. As a junior monk, he had initiated a correspondence with Dom David Knowles, asking him in 1951 for details about the monastic outlook and spiritual life of Abbot John Feckenham, the last abbot of Westminster Abbey which had been briefly restored under Queen Mary Tudor. These were soundings for Aveling's first published commission, the chapter on Tudor Westminster, 1540–1559, written for *Ampleforth and its Origins* (London 1952), a volume which commemorated the St. Laurence's Community's one hundred and fifty years' establishment at Ampleforth. Aveling was meanwhile searching for some 'ideology' which he felt might characterise the black monks on the eve of the Dissolution, and whose outcome, he believed, was to be found in some sixteenth-century reformed Italian abbeys of the Cassinese Congregation, like St. Justina in Padua. Cardinal Reginald Pole, who was partly responsible for the revival of Marian Westminster, had been Cardinal Protector of the Cassinese Congregation. Knowles, however, was unhelpful, replying to Aveling's query regarding an ideology, that refectory improvements at Westminster, like seats down the walls and servers passing dishes along, 'not like a restaurant!', were motivated by a desire to reduce waste and improve choice, rather than by more elevated spiritual concerns. Knowles was here answering a question from Aveling who had asked why the monks of revived Westminster sat 'four to a mess', facing each other, and not in a single row as elsewhere. Knowles also dampened Aveling's attempt to find heroism in the English Benedictines

on the eve of the Dissolution, by defining them as ‘simply conservative’ in their objections to the king’s divorce, and as ‘of the earth, earthy’. Ampleforth could not, it seems, find at Westminster forbears of monastic virtue to adorn the pages of its house history.⁵

Behind Aveling’s discovery of the large number of Westminster Benedictines who had been Oxford-trained lay surely the assistance of Dr. Billy Pantin of Oriel, who had acknowledged the monastic drift to the universities in the period leading up to the Reformation. Pantin had himself written the preceding chapter of the Ampleforth volume on ‘Medieval Westminster’. Aveling, in his chapter, showed he had little time for the dangerous ‘fifth column’ of university-trained Westminster monks who, imbued with the new learning and Protestant ideas, had willingly surrendered the abbey. He was more sympathetic to the endearing figure of Abbot Feckenham caught up in the religious conflicts of the period, and he provided an alternative pen-portrait of the abbot to that given by Knowles in his third volume of *The Religious Orders in England*. The fruit of these early labours on Feckenham was to find a place in Aveling’s extensive article on the abbot in the *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques* in 1967, the same year that Aveling edited with Billy Pantin, *The letter book of Robert Joseph, monk-scholar of Evesham and Gloucester College, Oxford 1530–33*. It was Tudor Westminster which provided the inspiration for Aveling in the early 1950s to investigate the future careers of monks in the Yorkshire abbeys of Rievaulx and Byland following the dissolution of these two houses.⁶

Knowles admired Aveling’s zeal for historical accuracy, and even begged a few stray references from him for his final volume on *The Religious Orders*. He hoped Aveling might be persuaded to study ‘the rebirth of the English religious orders in exile’. Professor Knowles was ‘amazed at the amount of information’ Aveling ‘had been able to comb out’, and accepted Aveling’s portrait of Feckenham as ‘a not unworthy end to pre-Tridentine monasticism in England’. Aveling responded to this magnanimous patronage by a fulsome review in an edition of *Blackfriars* in 1964 of Knowles’s collected essays, *Great Historical Enterprises and Problems in Monastic History* (Cambridge 1963). For Aveling, Dom David Knowles was a mediator ‘between Catholic learning and professional secular academic historians, and ‘a mediator between research historians and the general educated reading public’. His ‘vulnerable points’, like the ‘near-banality’ of his syntheses and his ‘occasional Edwardianisms of style’ did not detract from the virtues or impact of Knowles, which Aveling broadcast much later in a book review in 1980, where he bemoaned the fact that the English Benedictines, conscious of their traditional tolerance, had not been able ‘to satisfy the aspirations’ of such an uneasy spirit as Knowles. The *Blackfriars* review gave Knowles an opportunity to answer Aveling’s criticism that he neglected manuscript

sources in his research. Knowles excused this reliance on printed material by explaining that he had come to historical study late and, as a monk, had no wish to be a ‘traveller’. Thus he had ruled out tracking down any material which necessitated a journey. Palaeography was, however, a discipline which attracted Aveling, while Knowles, by contrast, believed work on manuscripts could become merely ‘an [unrewarding] fetish’.⁷

Aveling’s most important contribution to English Catholic historiography was his pioneering research devoted to post-Reformation Yorkshire Catholicism between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. He insisted that too much recusant history in the past was written only to edify, and tended to become, as John Bossy felt, ‘a series of snapshots in a family album’. So, Aveling adopted a new approach to his research: a meticulous study of documents relating to recusancy. He began publishing articles on papers in the York diocesan registry which revealed, for instance, a ‘verie olde’ monk of Peterborough reconciling to popery just after the 1571 Act made it treasonable to do so. In the same article he unpicked the ‘declaration’ from the Yorkshire parish of Easingwold which revealed, through its financial accounts, the frustration of a poor rural parish which had thrown out all its Catholic gear during the reign of Edward VI, then found it had to buy new vestments, rood, and church stuff when Catholicism returned under Mary. An intimate knowledge of the papers of the Yorkshire Catholic gentry allowed Aveling to compare and contrast the impact of parliamentary sequestrations on these ‘delinquent’ families, as well as the ingenious tricks they employed to survive fines and confiscations. He was struck by the new method used by the Archbishops of York in the eighteenth century of ‘sweeping’ the diocese which necessitated ‘the summoning of Catholic gentry in queues to Bishopthorpe where pressure was put on them to moderate the activity of themselves and their priests—or even to dismiss their priests if too active’. Aveling was well aware of the deficiencies in such documentation, Gaps and eccentricities, for instance, in Visitations Records and Quarter Session papers made their evidence ‘tantalizing’ for the statistician trying to calculate the Catholic population.⁸

A wider readership gained access to Aveling’s work through the quartet he published on Yorkshire recusancy. The first volume appeared in 1960, *Post-Reformation Catholicism in East Yorkshire, 1558–1790*, a pioneering study of a subject ‘still in its infancy’. The themes which were to predominate in his later books on recusancy are to be found here: the gradual disappearance of medieval Catholicism, and yet evidence of some religious continuity between the medieval and the Elizabethan periods, the acceptance of the new order alongside the emergence of church papistry, and the creation of landscape canvas spangled with countless Catholic lights derived from what he had unearthed in local archives. Two appendices dripping with references to Catholicism in the wapentakes and archive repositories concluded this work on the East Riding. The volume was

not without the addition of his own personal reflections as a zealous convert to Catholicism. Speaking of the changes wrought by the Elizabethan Reformation, he concluded: 'The completeness and revolutionary nature of this astonishing change is, to some extent, concealed from the modern Englishman, partly because he has no imaginative picture of medieval Catholicism and partly because the Church of England has undergone an aesthetic and ceremonial revolution since 1840. He cannot imagine how bleak and empty Elizabethan churches were'.⁹

Two years later his longer study of Catholics in the West Riding appeared. *The Catholic Recusants of the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1558–1790* (Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, 1963) was a more mature work but had the same shape as that on the East Riding earlier, and again, his mastery of the sources allowed him to measure the impact of the central government's penal legislation on a locality. Interestingly, Aveling employed on his first page the analogy of the handle and the axe, which was to form the title of his most famous book over ten years later. The same axe blade to which was added numerous replacement handles helped to illustrate a continuity of Catholic faith despite changes in circumstances and forms. He explained his reasons for writing about a small religious Yorkshire minority. In the first place, Catholics, though numerically small, had absorbed a great deal of the government's attention and time, and, secondly, they were remarkable for their vigour and tenacity. West Riding Catholics were seemingly more obstinate and contumacious than their counterparts in the East Riding, he concluded, and West Yorkshire had a firmer bedrock of hereditary Catholicism. In examining the role of the Presidency of the North in the repression of recusancy, and in bringing together the results of his recent explorations into the role of the religious orders in Catholic education, he painted a comprehensive picture of Catholicism throughout the north which made this book serve as a spring-board to his later work on the North Riding.¹⁰

The third Riding was covered by Aveling and 'a small group of research workers' and appeared as *Northern Catholics* in 1966. The book, termed 'a progress report', followed the divisions established by his studies on the other two Ridings. Pride of place was given to the development of government repression against Catholics, its quirky administration, and its dismantlement during the Civil War. This was followed by details of the conformity of the bulk of the clergy and the laity, then the advent of the seminary priests and Jesuits from the early 1580s and their internal squabbles, and, finally, the numbers, mentality and religious practice of the continuing remnant. All this was fleshed out with an enormous mass of local examples which leaves the impression that the volume was a compilation drafted by many hands.

As a teacher at Ampleforth, Aveling would use the time made available in school holidays to go off alone with a packet of sandwiches and burrow

into papers in some Yorkshire Record Office or materials belonging to some local Catholic family. He tended to work from the grass roots upwards and having gained a strong grip of the local scene would then use the information gleaned to piece together a general survey. The Yorkshire studies provided him with a vast amount of archival material which he was able to bring into some order in his work on Catholicism in York. *Catholic Recusancy in York, 1558-1791* (1970) was the fourth book in the Yorkshire quartet. Not surprisingly, since it was written for the Catholic Record Society, over half of it is given over to dense appendices on archival sources, although in the eyes of the author it was merely ‘a preliminary study’. ‘Forty maids with forty mops’, he admitted, would be needed to do York Catholicism full justice. York’s recusancy was perhaps more of a struggle for Aveling than the rest of Yorkshire. He had to resolve two contrasting opinions. Catholic piety believed the city to be a hot-bed of popery, while Protestant academic historians, like A. G. Dickens, used the paucity of evidence to demonstrate that this was probably not the case. Aveling’s conclusion was that York Catholicism, at least until the late eighteenth century, had nothing like the strength of Catholicism in the Ridings. A tiny group of persecuted urban papists in the city had been propped up by local Catholic gentry lodging in town houses in the seventeenth century, and this minority was transformed and enlarged in the eighteenth century by immigration, by the tolerance of the municipal authorities, and through the sustaining presence of the Bar Convent which housed the Mary Ward sisters. Despite the unrivalled knowledge he had by now of Yorkshire Catholicism, Aveling was haunted by a key question which was to be highlighted at this time in his correspondence with his fellow historian, John Bossy: how do we, as historians, he asked, gain some knowledge of an individual’s internal spiritual life?¹²

The book on York Catholicism appeared after Aveling had returned to Anglicanism, whose lack of an infallible magisterium and visible unity he had criticised in 1954. As an Anglican curate at Yaxley, near Peterborough, he was prevailed upon to write a parish history of the church. It is a packed little pamphlet in small print, designed for the ‘intelligent reader’—a whole paragraph, for instance, is devoted to an explanation of the old land measure, the pole. It betrays little of his Catholic and Benedictine background, except, perhaps, in the amount of detail he gives to the section on Yaxley during the Reformation. There are some bizarre atmospheric touches: the section, for instance, on ‘very unfamiliar smells’ inside the Church:

We are used to churches cleaned regularly with Hoovers, polished brasswork, discreet flowers and a special ‘churchy smell’—compound of Rentokil on old woodwork, floor polish, dust raised by modern heating systems and whiff of damp. [Medieval St. Peter’s Church] was pretty dirty [except just before feast-days], and had a rank, animal smell—of much use by many people who

washed and changed their clothes infrequently, smoke of lights and candles, incense, rank straw and rushes, manure. The great south door generally stood open, as it was not unknown for straying hens to wander in, or travellers caught in storms to bring their horses in for shelter.

His review of the first volume of the Dominican, Godfrey Anstruther's *Dictionary of Seminary Priests*, was also written during his brief return to Anglicanism, and betrayed his current sympathies. Thus, he criticised the *Dictionary* for containing too much hagiography, or 'holy history', the 'goodies' (the secular priests) contrasting favourably with the 'baddies' (the Elizabethan Protestant government), and he disliked Anstruther speaking of the Anglican clergy as 'ministers' rather than priests.¹³

Aveling's *The Handle and the Axe: the Catholic Recusants in England from Reformation to Emancipation* (London 1976), is possibly his most famous book. It provided a valuable synthesis of English Catholic history from the time of Elizabeth until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unknown to Aveling, however, John Bossy, who was soon to become Professor of History at York, was busy at the same time with his own survey of the same period, *The English Catholic Community, 1579–1850* (London 1975). Both works complemented each other, Aveling's being more political and therefore traditional in approach, Bossy's, more sociological and innovatory. Nevertheless, both broke free of that apologetic mould which for so long had imprisoned Catholic research on the Reformation and its aftermath. Aveling's hard graft in archives, where research was often hampered, he believed, by the deliberate 'security' measures taken by English Catholics of their property and papers, allowed him to demonstrate the extraordinary diversity within English Catholicism which was largely, he insisted, due to English Catholicism's dependence on the laity, who had to cope, by compromise and strategy, with living under the penal laws.¹⁴

Aveling would have liked to have discussed face to face with Bossy the issues which both men had addressed in their books, but he found Bossy elusive.¹⁵ However, Bossy welcomed the differences in approach between Aveling and himself, and made extensive use of Aveling's Yorkshire monographs in his own work. Three years before the two overview volumes were published, Bossy had reviewed Aveling's Yorkshire quartet, and these local studies helped him to sharpen his own ideas on post-Reformation Catholicism generally. He partly derived from Aveling, it seems, firstly, the profitability of viewing English Catholicism primarily in terms of a community. Secondly, from Aveling also came the broadening of the time-scale whilst not emphasising overmuch the Elizabethan period. Thirdly, Aveling's work persuaded Bossy to give greater emphasis to Catholic relations with the state. Bossy was by this time ahead of Aveling in his appreciation of the need to subject Church History to new disciplines like sociology, but by the time Aveling came to review Jean Delumeau's work *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire*

(London 1977) in 1980, he seemed to have caught up in this respect with Bossy. He was attracted to Delumeau's view that the Counter-Reformation as 'a period-category' should be discarded, since he had come to realise that all Catholic and Protestant religious history up until recent times had an identical character; it demonstrated 'a persistent clerical effort to 'christianise' the masses.¹⁶

For his part, Bossy had been especially struck by Aveling's arguments that the Catholic community had been numerically small in the Tudor period, and had gradually increased over the following two centuries. The theory that English Catholics had therefore formed a kind of sect, which Bossy adumbrated in the final sentence of his appreciative review of Aveling's quartet, became central to his own book. In his *The English Catholic Community*, he tried to define the post-Reformation English Catholic body in terms of a nonconformist sect, which he later admitted to Aveling was a controversial and 'wilful' idea. Such a 'heuristic device' might, however, he believed, encourage 'a more sensitive exploration of the psychology of Catholics' during this period. Bossy welcomed Aveling's earlier detailed research into this psycho-history, which he recognised was treated for the first time with any seriousness in Aveling's *Catholic Recusants of the West Riding*. He argued that 'No judgment about whether being a Catholic really meant something different say 1570–1700 from what it meant say 1400–1550' could be arrived at without an understanding of a Catholic's interior spiritual life. Aveling had already himself noted the 'dislocation between [the] objective situation and interior feelings or mythology'. He was always aware of the danger of interpreting religious history along purely materialistic lines, criticising what he called 'nominalist' historians for underestimating 'the immense strength of real religion' right down even to the eighteenth century. Post-Reformation Catholicism, he could not believe, was 'a new creation after a "Laodicean" sixteenth century'. The 'insensitivity' of many modern historians to religion he maintained was a great failing. For these scholars tended to see medieval religion as a 'weary kind of modern Anglicanism', and they were inclined to be interested more in externals rather than in theologies. In reviewing in 1961 the meditations of the monk of Fame, a late medieval Benedictine, Aveling voiced his reservations about academic historians' lack of sympathy with the spiritual background of medieval life.¹⁷

If Aveling had doubts about Bossy's nonconformist model for historic English Catholicism which was designed to explain the rise of English Catholicism as a novel phenomenon without antecedents, he was also unhappy with Christopher Haigh's 'violent revisionism'. This, according to Aveling, suggested that the Protestant Reformation was unpopular among the rank-and-file who remained attached to Catholic piety and devotion and from this Catholic medieval survivalism sprang the English recusants. Earlier, he had appreciated Haigh's theories of

medieval Catholic survival in Lancashire, and was struck by his conclusion that there was 'some mystical affinity between the 'Lancastrian peasant soul' and Catholicism. Doubtless, he believed Haigh was doing for the north west what he himself had done for Yorkshire Catholicism. However, Haigh's savage, though brief, review in 1978 of *The Handle and the Axe* killed any chance of future collaboration between them. *The Handle and the Axe* was described by Haigh as 'a curiously idiosyncratic book', and merely 'a political history of the catholic peerage', concentrating overmuch on 'the "raffish" catholicism of the Stuart Court', although Haigh did acknowledge Aveling's 'robust commonsense' and his 'mastery of the documents of provincial catholicism'. Both scholars, according to Aveling, avoided bumping into each other at a conference they attended soon after this review, and Aveling, wounded by Haigh's disdain, went on to categorize him as 'a not particularly religious academic who is more trad. in Church history than any High Anglican'. Haigh 'regards Dickens, Elton etc. as arch-enemies, wants to exalt the medieval Church, damn Henry VIII, prove that most Elizabethans were RCs etc.'. Aveling, by contrast, respected Geoffrey Elton's 'scientific' research which attempted to make Thomas Cromwell, rather than Henry VIII, the master-mind behind the English Reformation, and he was grateful to Elton, furthermore, for raising the profile of Tudor history in the universities in the 1950s. He was, however, less complimentary about the other great Reformation historian, A. G. Dickens who, according to Aveling, had 'tilted at . . . Sentimentalists' for allowing their religious sympathies to interfere with their historical objectivity, and had poured scorn on Catholics, presumably including Aveling, who argued that Yorkshire Catholic recusancy was a numerically large and continuous phenomenon. Dickens, Aveling maintained, discounted religious motives and overstressed economic ones. He made sixteenth-century priests into modern High Anglican clergy, and wrote with an Anglican bias, using, for instance, the strange, rather abusive, circumlocution 'Romanist' for Catholic. Aveling was dead before Eamon Duffy's moderate revisionist work, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven and London, 1992) appeared. Surprisingly, none of Aveling's influential works are listed in its bibliography, although in his later lecture on Cardinal William Allen, published in May 1995, Duffy criticised Aveling's account of the foundation of the English College, Douai, given in *The Handle and the Axe* as 'crude and facile'.¹⁸

The argument of *The Handle and the Axe* is subtle and inconclusive. Somehow, the axe of Catholicism had survived despite various handles and blades being renewed, so that in the end nothing of the original instrument had been preserved. In terms of continuity, baroque Catholicism, Aveling argued, owed a great deal to its medieval inheritance, and English Catholicism to its 'Englishry'. But, drawing on his vast knowledge, Aveling, the convert turned Catholic, turned monk, returned

Anglican, returned Catholic, felt happy in his conviction that change, variety and discontinuity were of the essence of Catholicism. In his opinion, the Church had ‘pullulated with liturgical accretions and changes to meet changing needs’ until, in the nineteenth century ‘a kind of defensive deep-freeze fell upon Catholics’. For him, the Church was, therefore, no unchanging monolith, in the way that, for instance, Bossuet had defined it, contrasting it with the Protestant variations. For Aveling, in *The Handle and the Axe*, the Church was the stubbornly parochial haven of converts and the leaky colander haemorrhaging the lapsed throughout its history whilst preserving an openness and allegiance to what Newman had called ‘the Great Communion’. Scrutinized closely in Aveling’s book, the totalitarian and nationalist Catholicism of Ireland, Poland and France was also subject to as many sea-changes as English minority Catholicism. It was reassuring for Aveling, watching the post-conciliar demolition of Church structures in the 1970s, to know that the Church had always nursed dissidence and dissonance in its breast. His book might, indeed, have been subtitled ‘The History of Catholic Variations’. He acknowledged that his search was ‘to discover the nature of its (Catholicism’s) underlying identity’. He discovered that in chameleon-like change, but he never took the next, higher, step, which was to communicate to his readers, its soul, although in his remarks about religious faith in history and the individual, one senses he was searching for a means to articulate it.¹⁹

In his latter years, Aveling turned to a study of the religious orders for which his earlier career as a monk must have given him a good grounding. The religious orders are commonly treated as distinguished army regiments in his books. As a monk, he had written, ‘the memories of religious orders, like those of regiments are long, and corporate loyalties very tenacious’. Much of this study was the fruit of his labours working on those families who maintained chaplains from the religious orders, but he soon moved off into the contribution of the religious orders to intellectual history. An exhaustive investigation of the provenances of incunabula and rare books in the Ampleforth library led him on to his study of eighteenth-century English Benedictine education whose basis was the 1764 Course of Studies, now known to have been the work of Dom Charles Walmesley. He introduced this topic by means of a statistical analysis of the English monks of the period, and identified parallels between their studies and those of contemporary Maurists which had been regulated by Mabillon in his *Treatise on Monastic Studies*. This research became the backbone of his discursive chapter on the eighteenth-century English Benedictines which he contributed in 1980 to the volume commemorating Bishop Richard Challoner. His conclusion here singled out some of the cherished notions he had shared in *The Handle and the Axe*; eighteenth-century monks had, he concluded, ‘a rather old-fashioned and quite strict observance tempered slightly . . . by “Englishry”’,

but their monastic vocation was ‘a valuable reminder’ that English Catholics had their place in ‘the great communion’.²⁰

Aveling’s most important foray into the history of the Counter-Reformation was also to be his fullest account of a religious order. *The Jesuits* was published in 1981, but its gestation had been long; it took Aveling three years of intensive study. His first impressions of the Society of Jesus at Campion Hall in 1945 was its ‘ordinariness’, for he had gone there believing Jesuits were ‘like people from outer space’, and ‘consummate experts at everything’. Given the traditional mutual hostility between Benedictines and Jesuits, it is not perhaps surprising that as a monk reviewer of a clutch of historical works published by Jesuit authors in 1951, 1956, and 1965, Aveling had roundly condemned what he perceived to be the arrogance of the classic Jesuit interpretation of English recusant history, which had similarities with the Whig interpretation of history. His description of these Jesuit books as ‘touffu’, tightly stuffed, might easily, however, have been applied to his own. According to him, Jesuit interpretation of history sought to subject all aspects and triumphs of Elizabethan Catholicism to the efforts of a mere two or three Jesuits, whose manifest implication in the plots Jesuit historians had tried to whitewash and to turn attention instead onto government *agents provocateurs* among the plotters. Furthermore, Jesuit historians unjustly condemned the secular clergy for being tools of the government. It was all ‘too good to be true’. Aveling looked forward to ‘real competitors’ of the Jesuits coming forward in the field of recusant history, and doubtless, he cast himself in this role. Jesuit history needed to be ‘cut down to its true proportions’, which he duly did by demolishing the wildly inaccurate Jesuit analysis of Elizabethan York which insisted that hundreds of Catholics had been imprisoned and supposed the city had produced ‘an infinite number of prospective vocations to the priesthood’.²¹

The Jesuits, which did not attract fulsome reviews, was Aveling’s swan song. It is surprisingly autobiographical. The reader is conducted through Aveling’s time at Cambridge (1935–38) where he reacted to ‘the prevailing anti-liberal political and religious’ atmosphere and adopted a ‘reactionary form of Anglo-Catholicism’. This traditionalism, which had the character of a Catholicism both ‘reactionary and in a sort of revolutionary revolt against modern thought’ led him via Mirfield Tractarianism onto the doorstep of Campion Hall in 1945 where he was instructed. His vivid assessment of Campion Hall was of a place covered in brown paint, pungent with the smell of floor polish, with ‘many clear evidences’ of ‘an all-male “bachelor household”’, and with ‘the atmosphere of an old-fashioned Temperance hotel’. His attraction to the monastic life which followed conversion, owed much to his ‘romantic imagination’. He became a monk after the Second World War. That war, he believed, did not create a crisis in Catholicism’s history, for the pre-war religious traditionalism survived it, and was, in fact, strengthened by a growing

disillusionment with modern society. It was no surprise, he argued, that the Jesuits experienced a post-war boom, becoming the Church's largest religious order after 1945. But this stable and secure Church was not able to avoid the growing demand for change in the 1950s, and 'the volcano' eventually erupted in the 1960s, causing disorder, disorientation, loss of confidence, and an exodus of religious which badly affected the Society of Jesus in particular. It was an Order which had had the reputation of being able to adapt with the times and 'to use the devils methods, rather like the Salvation Army, against the devil'. Could the Jesuits, Aveling asked, maintain their balance when such a degree of change was 'impinging on many of the orthodox bases they have sworn to defend'? He saw the Jesuits losing from the 1960s most of their distinctive character, and their abasement had the effect of demolishing their intellectual arrogance. 'Jesuitism' was demythologized and the original Jesuit vocation, founded to fight for orthodoxy, needed to undergo a revival. In the midst of all this turbulence, he was also examining his own experience as a monk, and commented on the weakness of the Benedictine vocation which easily succumbed to hypocritical complacency or to an idealised interpretation of the past. The crisis of the 1960s, however, bore some fruit in that he was convinced that it had forced English Catholic historians out of their traditional apologetic fortress.²²

Aveling's book on the Jesuits was, in fact, about the Jesuit phenomenon rather than the Society as such. He found 'Jesuitism' everywhere: in every historical field, in every religious order, and deep within European politics and literature. The book, with its clear phobia of, and respect for, the Society, could easily have been written by a Protestant. It has been criticized for lacking the sureness of touch which he showed when keeping to a narrower archival discipline, but it is a refreshing change to have a history of a religious order which avoids a dull chronological catalogue of worthiness. His first chapter, for instance, is entitled 'The Jesuit Image in Literature'. His treatment of the seventeenth-century Society, when it was led by the General, Acquaviva, is particularly thorough, and we find Aveling repeating one of his inspirations, that it was Ignatius of Loyola who preserved much of medieval Catholicism in a hostile environment by adopting the methods employed by its enemies. He concluded his book by prophetically defining the Society as a 'utopian organization' which needed a 'totalitarian myth and structure' if it was to survive.²³

In 1982, Aveling contributed a lengthy chapter, entitled, 'The English Clergy, Catholic and Protestant, in the 16th and 17th Centuries', to a composite volume of essays called *Rome and the Anglicans. Historical and Doctrinal Aspects of Anglican–Roman Catholic Relations*. In its constant refrain that far more work was required on the subject, it was very much an interim report. A surfeit of detail and lack of a strong and original argument suggests that it could have been further refined and its contents subjected to more analysis. It is wearisome to read. Aveling deals with the clergy of a Church

who, having lost their political and economic pre-eminence, have been reduced to a voluntary body. He looked at common ground between Anglican and Catholic clergy in their training, their spirituality and their apostolate, using copious illustrations from his previous research projects—even Yaxley is mentioned. He returned to his favourite theme: that we should, for instance, be warned off treating Counter-Reformation Catholicism, Lutheranism or Calvinism as monolithic, for all were quite eclectic, and, as he had attempted in his work on the Jesuits, he demonstrated here that the power of ecclesiastical conservatism, faced with a rapidly changing society, was as strong in the sixteenth as in the nineteenth century.²⁴

In 1964, Aveling addressed the inaugural meeting of the Berkshire Recusant History Society. After concisely reviewing the types of material available for research, he ended by exposing some of his own feelings: ‘The study of History is not an escape but a necessary part of the discovery of one’s own self and identity. We live surrounded by existentialism and opportunism and we are ourselves in danger of losing both identity and integrity. Our causes are buried in history, and until you know yourself and your nature, you cannot even change... English Catholics were caught in a whirl of fundamental change... It is fashionable now to blame them for conservatism, and for simply blocking the bowling. I think the fashion is foolish; English recusants were able both to adapt themselves and save their integrity... (The last justification for studying the recusant community)—and this was my first motive in time—(is that) it is an undying reproach to us that this mass of sources has lain so long gathering dust’.²⁵

NOTES

¹ An abbreviated form of this paper was given a meeting of The Catholic Records Society at York in the summer of 2001. I am grateful to Mrs Aileen Aveling for making available copies of her husband’s correspondence; archival material which is unreferenced remains in her possession.

² 30 April 1978, Aveling to Otto Smail. Douai Abbey Archives, VII.3.f Scott, 26 October 1989, Aveling to Geoffrey Scott.

³ Douai Abbey Archives, VII.3.f Scott, 25 January 1985, 19 April 1989, Aveling to Geoffrey Scott.

⁴ Douai Abbey Archives, VII.3.f Scott, 11 December 1988, 19 January 1990, 15 May 1990, Aveling to Geoffrey Scott.

⁵ Hugh Aveling, ‘Tudor Westminster’ in *Ampleforth and its Origins*, edd. Justin McCann & Columba Cary-Elwes, (London 1952), pp. 53–80, especially p. 54. 22 May, 22 September 1951, 11 October, 23 October 1956, 23 October 1961, David Knowles to Aveling.

⁶ David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England III. The Tudor Age*, (1959), pp. 428–430. H. Aveling, ‘Feckenham (Jean)’, in *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques*, ed. R. Aubert, vol. 16, (Paris 1967), cols. 803–09. Hugh Aveling & W. A. Pantin, edd., *The letter book of Robert Joseph, monk-scholar of Evesham and Gloucester College, Oxford 1530–33*, (Oxford 1967). Hugh Aveling, ‘The Rievaulx Community after the Dissolution’, *Ampleforth Journal*, 57, 2, (1952), pp. 101–113, ‘The Monks of Byland Abbey after the Dissolution’, *Ampleforth Journal*, 60, 1, (1955), pp. 3–15.

⁷ H. Aveling, review of D. Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises and Problems in Monastic History*, (London ?1963), in *Blackfriars* (April 1964), pp. 79–82. 14 April 1964, David Knowles to Aveling. J. C. H. Aveling, review of Adrian Morey, *David Knowles: A Memoir*, (London 1979), in *Ampleforth Review*, (1980), pp. 104–106.

- ⁸ John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850*, (London 1975), p. 2. Hugh Aveling, 'Catholics and Parliamentary Sequestrations', *Ampleforth Journal*, 64, 2, (1959), pp. 103–11; 'Some Records of the Reformation in Yorkshire. A Monk of Peterborough in Richmondshire in 1572', *Ampleforth Journal*, 58, 1, (1953), pp. 9–15; 'Statistics of Catholics in the North Riding in Penal Times', *Ampleforth Journal*, 62, 1, (1957), pp. 7–11; 'Yorkshire Notes', *Recusant History*, 6, 5, (1962), pp. 238–246.
- ⁹ Hugh Aveling, *Post Reformation Catholicism in East Yorkshire 1558–1790*, (East Yorkshire Local History Society), (1960), pp. 1, 7.
- ¹⁰ Hugh Aveling, *The Catholic Recusants of the West Riding of Yorkshire 1558–1790*, (Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society), x, 6, (1963), pp. 191–306.
- ¹¹ Hugh Aveling, *Northern Catholics. The Catholic Recusants of the North Riding of Yorkshire 1558–1790*, (London 1966), p. 7.
- ¹² J. C. H. Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy in the City of York 1558–1791*, Catholic Record Society Publications, Monograph Series, vol. 2, (1970), pp. vi, 159–162. 21 January 1977, John Bossy to Aveling.
- ¹³ J. C. H. Aveling, *A History of S. Peter's, Yaxley*, (1987 repr.), pp. 3, 6, 9. Aveling's review of Godfrey Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests, I. Elizabethan, 1558–1603*, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 20, 2 (October 1969), p. 354.
- ¹⁴ J. C. H. Aveling, *The Handle and the Axe. The Catholic Recusants in England from Reformation to Emancipation*, (Colchester 1976). John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850*, (London 1975).
- ¹⁵ Douai Abbey Archives, VII.3.f Scott, 25 January 1985, Aveling to Geoffrey Scott.
- ¹⁶ John Bossy, 'The Catholic Community of Yorkshire, 1558–1791', *Ampleforth Journal*, 28, 2, (1973), pp. 27–31. J. C. H. Aveling, review of Jean Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, (London 1971), in *Ampleforth Review*, (1980), pp. 125–28.
- ¹⁷ 21 January 1977, John Bossy to Aveling. Hugh Aveling, review of Dom Hugh Farmer (ed), *The Monk of Farne: The Meditations of a Fourteenth-Century Monk* (London 1961), in *The Ampleforth Journal*, Vol. LXVI, 3, (1961), p. 196.
- ¹⁸ 30 April 1978, Aveling to Otto Smail. Aveling, review of Christopher Haigh, *Reformation & Resistance in Tudor Lancashire*, (Cambridge 1975) in *Ampleforth Journal*, 81, 3, (1977), pp. 60–62. Christopher Haigh review of *The Handle and the Axe*, in *The Historical Journal*, 21, 1, 1978, pp. 181–82. Aveling, reviews of G. R. Elton, *Reform and Renewal: Thomas Cromwell and the Common Weal*, (Cambridge 1973) in *Ampleforth Journal*, 78, 3, (1973), pp. 96–98, and *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government: Papers and Reviews, 1946–1972, Volume I. Tudor Politics. Volume 2. Parliament: Political Thought*, (Cambridge 1974), in *Ampleforth Journal*, 79, 2, (1974), pp. 59–60. Aveling, review of A. G. Dickens, *The Marian Reaction in the Diocese of York Part I. The Clergy, York*, in *Ampleforth Journal*, 62, 2, (1957), pp. 81–83. Eamon Duffy, 'William, Cardinal Allen, 1532–1594', *Recusant History*, 22, 3, (1995), p. 289, note 30.
- ¹⁹ *Handle*, Introduction, Epilogue.
- ²⁰ Hugh Aveling, 'The Education of Eighteenth-Century English Monks', *Downside Review*, 79, 255, (1961), 135–152. J. C. H. Aveling, 'The Eighteenth-Century English Benedictines', in *Challoner and his Church. A Catholic Bishop in Georgian England*, ed. Eamon Duffy, (London 1981), p. 172.
- ²¹ J. C. H. Aveling, *The Jesuits*, (London 1981). Audio-tape of Radio 4, programme of interview in 1965 with Aveling on his book, kindly loaned by Mrs. Aileen Aveling. H. Aveling, review of John Gerard, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, (London 1951), in *Ampleforth Journal*, 57, 1, (1952), pp. 22–23; review of Thomas Collins, *Martyrs in Scotland. The Life and Times Blessed John Ogilvie*, (London), *Ampleforth Journal*, 61, 3, (1956), pp. 143–44; review of William Weston, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, (London 1955), *Ampleforth Journal*, 61, 1, (1956), pp. 27–28 review of James Brodrick S.J., *Saint Ignatius Loyola: The Pilgrim Years*, (London 1956), in *Ampleforth Journal*, 62, 1, (1957), pp. 12–13; Hugh Aveling, 'Jesuit History', *Ampleforth Journal*, 70, 2, (1965), pp. 163–70.
- ²² *Jesuits*, Introduction. Radio 4 interview with Aveling (1965).
- ²³ *Jesuits*, Chapter 5, p. 372.
- ²⁴ J. C. H. Aveling, 'The English Clergy, Catholic and Protestant, in the 16th and 17th Centuries', in Wolfgang Haase, ed., *Rome and the Anglicans. Historical and Doctrinal Aspects of Anglican–Roman Catholic Relations*, (New York 1982), pp. 56–142.
- ²⁵ J. C. H. Aveling, 'Sources for Recusant History. A paper delivered to the inaugural meeting of the Recusant History Society of Berkshire and Hampshire', (7 November 1964), (typescript at Douai Abbey).