

The stained glass windows of Margaret Agnes Rope (1882 – 1953)

ROME: THE VENERABLE ENGLISH COLLEGE: THE ST RALPH SHERWIN WINDOW

Background

Elizabeth I did her best to stamp out Roman Catholicism in England and Wales. She saw Catholics, loyal to the Pope in Rome, as a real threat to her authority and even to her life. Seminaries, including the English College in Rome, had been established on the continent so that men from England and Wales could be trained there as priests and then be sent back across the Channel on the English Mission, a mission to keep the Catholic faith alive in their homeland in the hope of ultimately reconverting the country. Once back there they had to minister in secret, moving from place to place to avoid detection, but many were caught and suffered imprisonment, torture and a horrendous death. St Ralph Sherwin was the first student from the English College to lay down his life for the Faith, and so has special significance here.

St Ralph Sherwin

Ralph Sherwin was born in Roodsley, near Ashbourne, Derbyshire, in 1550, to Church of England parents. He was educated at Eton and then at Exeter College, Oxford, where he proved to be a gifted classical scholar and philosopher and an expert in Greek and Hebrew. He was awarded an MA in 1574, and in the following year he became a Roman Catholic, as did many from the University of Oxford. He left England to study for the priesthood at the English College in Douai, France, and was ordained there in 1577. Later in the same year he was sent with several other Douai students to join what was soon to become the English College in Rome.

He was in Rome until April 1580, when he was sent with 13 companions on the English Mission. He arrived in England in August, and began a successful ministry, but on 9th November 1580 he was arrested whilst preaching in the house of a friend in London and imprisoned in chains in the Marshalsea. There he converted many of his fellow captives to the Catholic faith. After 4 weeks in the Marshalsea he was transferred to the Tower of London, where he was subjected to torture on the rack and starvation, but he stood firm in the Faith. A year after his capture he was tried for treason in Westminster Hall with fellow priest Edmund Campion and others, found guilty and condemned to be hanged, drawn and quartered. His sentence was carried out at Tyburn on 1st December 1581, Edmund Campion and Alexander Briant, another priest, suffering with him.

Ralph is also depicted in several scenes in the Seminary Martyrs Window in Shrewsbury Cathedral, and you are recommended to study that window and to read my commentary on it for further details of his story. He was beatified in 1886 and was one of the Forty Martyrs of England & Wales canonised on 25th October 1970.

The Feast of the English Martyrs, celebrated in England on 4th May each year, commemorates all the English men and women martyred for the Catholic Faith during penal times and since canonised or beatified, including St Ralph Sherwin. He is also commemorated on the date of his martyrdom, 1st December, in the Diocese of Nottingham¹ with the other martyrs of Derbyshire, and at the Venerable

¹ Because the diocese includes Derbyshire, the county of his birth.

English College in Rome with the other 43 martyrs who came from the College: there 1st December is known as Martyrs' Day.

The window²

The St Ralph Sherwin Window was installed in 1936 at the behest of the founder of the Martyrs' Association³, Monsignor William Godfrey, the English College's Rector. Its cost was met by Mrs. Agnes Maud Rope, the artist's mother⁴.

The figure of Ralph Sherwin forms the focus of the window. In his right hand he is holding aloft a palm branch: the palm, originally a pagan symbol of victory, was adopted by Christians to symbolise the triumph over death of the saints and martyrs. St John describes, in the Book of Revelation, how he saw the martyrs standing in heaven in the presence of Christ with palm branches in their hands⁵. Around Ralph's neck is a hangman's noose, signifying the nature of his martyrdom. He is wearing the vestments he would have worn to celebrate Mass. His full-length long-sleeved white tunic, a symbol of purity, is called an alb (the artist has actually made it cream to achieve a better colour balance in the window). Over the alb he is wearing a red cloak called a chasuble. The colour of a priest's chasuble depends on the liturgical season, feast or celebration: here red, the colour of blood, signifies martyrdom. Under the chasuble, around his neck, is draped a long, narrow band of cloth called a stole – you can see its two ends, decorated with the Agnus Dei⁶ symbol, a lamb with a cross, below the bottom of the chasuble. Over his left arm hangs another long, narrow decorated cloth band. This is called a maniple: it will be unfamiliar to most Catholics today because it fell out of general use following the ecclesiastical reforms of the 1960s.

The inset at the top of the window shows Ralph kissing the wounds of the risen Christ in Heaven, a reference to a letter which he wrote to a friend from the Tower whilst awaiting execution: 'I had hoped ere this ... to have kissed the precious glorified wounds of my sweet Saviour, sitting on the throne of his father's own glory.' Note the two six-winged angels: these are seraphim, members of the highest of the nine orders of angels. The seraphim surround God's throne and worship him continually⁷. At the bottom of the window is a small inset showing the infamous triangular Tyburn gallows, where he was to suffer.

² The article on pp 39-40 of *The Venerabile* Vol 8 No 1 Oct 1936 has been very helpful in the interpretation of this window.

³ The Martyrs' Association was an organisation set up in 1933 to encourage devotion to the martyrs of England and Wales, to pray for their canonisation and to continue the martyrs' work by praying for the welfare of their country.

⁴ Information from *The Schola Saxonum, The Hospice, and the English College in Rome* by the Rev. H.E.G. Rope M.A. (Rome, 1951).

⁵ Revelation 7:9,13-14.

⁶ Latin for 'Lamb of God', meaning Jesus Christ as the sacrificial victim who by dying on the cross conquered sin and death. When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching he said 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). These words are echoed by the priest during every Mass when he shows the host (consecrated bread) to the people.

⁷ See Isaiah 6:1-3.

The coat of arms to the left is that used by the English College in Rome between 1922 and 1951⁸. The crossed keys in the upper left quarter represent the supremacy of the Pope, for which the martyrs died. The crossed palms to the upper right are a symbol of martyrdom. The sword in the lower left quarter symbolises St Thomas of Canterbury, being the instrument of his murder, and the arrow is for St Edmund, King of East Anglia and martyr, who was shot to death by heathen Vikings. These saints were the patrons of two medieval hospices for English pilgrims in Rome, one of which was to become the English College⁹. The red background is another symbol of martyrdom, and the gold signifies the heavenly kingdom. Around the border of the shield the blue with silver waves represents the sea and the scallop shell is the traditional emblem of the pilgrim, recalling the College's origins. The priests on the English Mission had to cross the sea between the continent and England, as had the pilgrims in earlier times.

The arms to the right are those of Ralph's Oxford college, Exeter. They are not the arms now principally associated with the college but an alternative version which can be seen, with other colleges' arms, on the Great Gate of the Bodleian Library. The arms normally used by Exeter College are those of its original founder, Walter de Stapeldon, Bishop of Exeter, but this alternative version also incorporates the arms of Sir William Petre, who refounded the college in 1566. Bishop Walter's arms form the left half of the shield and Sir William's the right half. The artist may have chosen this version of the Exeter arms because Ralph was nominated by Sir William to one of the seven fellowships which he had endowed at the college.

The grassy island on which Ralph is standing symbolises England, across the sea from Rome, as do the oak tree and rosebush in the background: the roses also signify martyrdom. The sun behind the tree recalls Ralph's words to fellow prisoner Edmund Campion shortly before their execution: 'Ah, Father Campion, I shall soon be above yon fellow.' The rope around the outer border of the window represents the noose with which he was hanged¹⁰ and the chain represents the fetters which he wore in the Marshalsea.

The Latin inscription is in three parts. At the top is his name: B RODVLPHVS SHERVINVS (Blessed Ralph Sherwin)¹¹. Just below, SE POTIVS HODIE QUAM CRAS (He [is ready] preferably today rather than tomorrow [to proceed to England]) is part of the Missionary Oath which Ralph swore before his superiors at the English College on 23rd April 1579. The lowest inscription, which is heavily abbreviated, reads ASSOC.MARTYR ANNO FVNDAT.ET JVBII.HVM REDEMPT.DON.MCMXXXIV (the final piece, the date, is in the bottom border). This translates¹² as 'The Martyrs' Association gave [this window] in the year of its foundation and of the Jubilee of the Redemption of mankind 1934.' A jubilee in this

⁸ It is described and explained in *The Venerable Magazine* Vol 1 No 1 Oct 1922 pp 81-82. The 1951 replacement arms contain no references to martyrdom.

⁹ St Thomas's Hospice, founded in 1362, became the English College in 1578, and St Edmund's Hospice, on the other side of the Tiber, founded in 1397, had been united with St Thomas's in 1464.

¹⁰ Or is it a rebus on the surname of the artist who created the window (and who never, with one exception, signed her work) and of her mother who paid for it? The hangman's rope has already been shown around Ralph's neck.

¹¹ 'Blessed' because he had been beatified in 1886 but had not been canonised when the window was made.

¹² Thanks to Professor Whitehead, archivist of the Venerable English College, for his help with my interpretation of this section of the inscription.

context is a special year of remission of sins and universal pardon¹³: in January 1933 Pope Pius XI proclaimed a Jubilee in commemoration of the 1900th anniversary of the traditional year of Christ's redeeming death, to commence in April 1933 and end in April 1934.

The cartoon for this window can be seen in the church of the Holy Family and St Michael at Kesgrave, near Ipswich, Suffolk¹⁴. A surrounding inscription has been added by the artist to make it a memorial to her mother, who died in 1948.

© Roger Hall May 2021

¹³ See Leviticus 25:10.

¹⁴ To learn more about this church, its particular significance to the Rope family and the many other treasures it contains you are recommended to visit Simon Knott's Suffolk churches website at <http://www.suffolkchurches.co.uk/kesghf.htm>.