

SHREWSBURY: THE SEMINARY MARTYRS WINDOW

(lately known as the English Mission Window and formerly known as the Congress Window: see the penultimate paragraph below)

This window, in the chancel, commemorates the Catholic priests who died for their faith during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and contrasts their persecution with the religious freedom of the 1920s. It was presumably made soon after the events of 1921 depicted in it.

Background

Elizabeth I did her best to stamp out Roman Catholicism in this country. She saw Catholics, loyal to the Pope in Rome, as a real threat to her authority and even to her life. Seminaries were established on the continent so that men from England and Wales could be trained there as priests and then sent back across the Channel on the English Mission, a mission to keep the Catholic faith alive here in the hope of ultimately reconverting the country. Once back in England 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.

The main part of the window shows episodes from the lives and deaths of some of these English Mission priests. All the martyrs shown here were beatified (in other words they were given the title 'Blessed' and their veneration was permitted by the Pope) in 1886: they were among the first group of Reformation martyrs to be so honoured. Some were to become saints in 1970 when the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales were canonised.

First look at **the main right hand light. At its head** are the arms of Oxford University, where many remained or became Catholics. This light shows links between the University and Douai, one of the continental seminaries.

Now look at **the lower half**, which shows students from Oxford arriving at Douai. The main characters depicted are carrying or standing beneath flags bearing their college arms: their names are shown, but in lettering so small that the artist presumably wanted to identify them without making the names part of the design. Those who were to become martyrs have halos. In the foreground to the left, in green, is Ralph Sherwin (Exeter College), who was ordained priest in 1577 and martyred at Tyburn in 1581. He was canonised in 1970. In the centre, in blue is William Hart (Lincoln College), who was ordained in 1581 and martyred at York in 1583. Between and behind them, in brown, is Thomas Ford (Trinity College), who was ordained in 1573 and martyred at Tyburn in 1582. Other martyrs follow them. On the extreme left behind Ralph Sherwin is another figure: this is Gregory Martin (St John's College). He has no halo because he did not die for his faith: his significance lies in his being the principal translator of the Douai Bible, a translation for Catholics from the Latin Vulgate into English which was made at Douai. All these men are being greeted on arrival by William Allen (Oriel College: bearded), Douai's founder, and Thomas Stapleton (New College), who lectured there and gave the seminary financial support. Beyond the entrance archway can be seen the town of Douai. Below is a text from the Office of Martyrs: UNUS SPIRITUS ET UNA FIDES ERAT IN EIS (There was in them one Spirit and one Faith).

In the upper half we see a courtroom. Note the elaborately carved wall panelling

showing Queen Elizabeth, who looks as though she is presiding over the proceedings. The year is 1577 and the place is Launceston Castle in Cornwall. The inscription above explains: CUTHBERTUS MAYNE AD SUPPLICIUM DAMNATUR (Cuthbert Mayne is condemned to death). Cuthbert Mayne, a student at St John's College, Oxford and Douai, had been ordained in 1575 and was caught ministering to the Catholics around Launceston. He was the first seminary priest to be tried under the penal laws and was to become Douai's first martyr. Manacled at wrists and ankles he is lifting his hands and eyes to heaven, proclaiming DEO GRATIAS (Thanks [be] to God). The trial had been a travesty of justice: none of the charges against the prisoner could be proved, but the presiding judge instructed the jury that, in the absence of proof, strong presumption should be sufficient, and he directed them to convict Cuthbert Mayne accordingly. Still the jury were undecided so the High Sheriff of Cornwall, who had been present at Cuthbert Mayne's arrest and had just testified against him, spoke to them and persuaded them to find him guilty of high treason. After the trial there was a disagreement between the judges over the soundness of his conviction and Cuthbert Mayne was returned to prison for five months, but the government were determined to set an example to try to discourage the stream of missionaries entering the country and ordered the High Sheriff to proceed with the execution, which he did. Cuthbert Mayne was canonised in 1970.

In the small light just above a captured priest is being tortured on the rack. His torturers are trying to obtain information from him about other priests and Catholic sympathisers. The man in red is questioning him and controlling the 'racking', the one in blue is recording the conversation. To each side hands can be seen pulling the levers operating the rack. The inscription to this scene is to be read together with that under the trial scene below it: SI CORAM HOMINIBUS TORMENTA PASSI SUNT / SPES ELECTORUM EST IMMORTALIS IN AETERNUM (Though in the sight of men they suffered torments the hope of the chosen is immortality for ever). This is an antiphon from the Office of Martyrs and is based on Wisdom 3:4.

The lower half of the main central light shows the scene at Tyburn on 1st December 1581. Ralph Sherwin (see above) and two other Douai priests, Edmund Campion and Alexander Briant, are being martyred for their faith. We cannot see Edmund Campion but we can see at the back of the infamous triangular gallows the severed end of the rope from which he has been hanged and then cut down before being disembowelled, beheaded and quartered. Ralph Sherwin, in the cart, has witnessed all this but instead of showing fear he is kissing the executioner's blood-spattered arm before having the noose put round his neck. An Anglican minister (in black) is urging him, unsuccessfully, to renounce his faith. The nobleman standing to the right of the cart is Sir Francis Knollys, the Queen's representative at the executions. Alexander Briant lies praying in the foreground still tied to the hurdle on which he has been dragged, like the others, through the streets of London from the Tower. There is a large crowd of onlookers. In the distance is one of the City gates, on which can be seen the quarters of previously executed 'criminals', displayed there as a warning to others. Edmund Campion and Alexander Briant were canonised, like Ralph Sherwin, in 1970.

Above the martyrdom scene we are in the chapel at Douai. At the top are the arms of William Allen, the founder. The inscription on the scrolls within the scene explains that ALUMNI COLLEGII DUACENSIS MISSAM IN GRATIARUM ACTIONE PRO SINGULIS SACERDOTIBUS IN ANGLIA PRO FIDE NECATIS GAUDENTES CANTANT (The students

of Douai College sing Mass rejoicing in thanksgiving for every priest killed for the Faith in England). The chapel altar is flanked by two statues. The left hand one is holding a plaque bearing the phrase NON ANGLI SED ANGELI (not Angles but angels). This is an attribute of St Gregory the Great (about 540-604), Pope, who is said to have spoken these words on seeing Anglo-Saxon slaves in a market place in Rome. Gregory became known as the 'Apostle of the English' for his work in sending missionaries to convert the Anglo-Saxons, so his image is very appropriate for the chapel of a seminary for English Mission priests. The right hand statue is wearing an archbishop's pallium and holding a sword so may be St Thomas of Canterbury.

The words below the upper and lower scene in this light form one inscription, an antiphon from the Office of Martyrs: TRADID[ER]UNT CORPORA SUA PROPT[ER] DEUM AD SUPPLICIA / UT HEREDES FIERENT IN DOMO D[OMI]NI (They surrendered their bodies to die for the sake of God so that they would be made heirs in the house of the Lord).

In the small light just above and in the tracery light above that we have come forward in time to the 1920s and are in the chapel of Tyburn Convent, close to the site of the gallows and containing the Shrine of the Martyrs. Two nuns are kneeling in adoration before a monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament, the consecrated bread which, Catholics believe, has, by its consecration, become the Body of Christ: note the realism given to this tiny picture by the slight differences in posture between them. The Latin inscription reads REGEM MARTYRUM DOMINUM VENITE ADOREMUS (O come, let us worship the King of Martyrs, the Lord), a text from the Office of Martyrs.

The main left hand light shows scenes at another continental seminary, the English College in Rome. **At the head of the light** are the arms of Pope Gregory XIII, co-founder of the College.

The lower half shows Philip Neri, who lived opposite the College, greeting students in the street with the words (below the scene) SALVETE FLORES MARTYRUM (Hail flowers of the martyrs). Philip Neri, 'the Apostle of Rome', priest and founder of the Congregation of the Oratory, was canonised in 1622.

In the upper half Philip Neri is blessing two newly-ordained priests before they leave the College for England: above them are the martyrs' crowns and palms which await them. In an inset to the left of the door we see the two priests travelling incognito: to the right is the ship which will carry them across the sea. The inscription below the scene is a quotation from Romans 5:5, CARITAS DEI DIFFUSA EST IN CORDIBUS NOSTRIS (God's love has been poured out into our hearts).

Ralph Sherwin, whom we have already seen at Douai, was the first martyr of the English College in Rome, having gone there to study after ordination and before being sent on the English Mission. Margaret Rope also made a window commemorating him there. **In the small scene above this light** we see him with Edmund Campion. They have just left the court after being sentenced to death, escorted by guards, and Ralph is pointing at the sun and saying 'I shall shortly be above yon fellow'.

At the apex of the window we see Our Lady Queen of Martyrs (REGINA MARTYRUM). Below her is an inscription, partly obscured but probably reading ORA PRO ANGLIA

DOTE TUA (Pray for England your dowry), as this prayer (in English) appears in a glass roundel depicting Our Lady Queen of Martyrs at Tyburn Convent which was also designed and made by Margaret Rope. England has been known as Mary's dowry since the Middle Ages, when devotion to her was particularly strong. It was believed that England belonged to her and that she was the country's guardian. The idea that England had a special relationship with Mary became particularly important to those who still held to the Catholic faith after the Reformation.

Below are the crossed keys of St Peter, symbolising the authority of Rome over the Church in England, the principle for which so many were martyred.

The pair of small lights below that show the scene outside Tyburn Convent on the afternoon of 1st May 1921: Margaret Rope might well have been there. It is the end of the annual march in honour of all the Catholic martyrs who died for their faith in the 16th and 17th centuries. The marchers are kneeling in reverence in the roadway as Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, blesses them with the Blessed Sacrament. It was the Cardinal's episcopal jubilee – the 25th anniversary of his being consecrated bishop. To the right a policeman is protecting the crowd by stopping the traffic (note the London bus!): his inclusion here emphasises how much the treatment of Catholics by the authorities has changed since the persecutions of Elizabeth I's reign. The man in the crowd whose face is visible is said to be modelled on Dr Rope, Margaret's father. The scene is labelled MAIUS MCMXXI (May 1921).

This scene was previously thought to show the Eucharistic Congress of 1921, hence the former name of the window. Recent research revealed what it actually shows. There was no Eucharistic Congress in 1921! Following this discovery it was renamed the English Mission Window but it has now been renamed again (for the last time!) on the authority of annotations by the artist herself on a cartoon for parts of the window which has come to light in the Margaret Rope archive.

Two of the **tracery lights** contain an image of a white disk in a gold surround: perhaps this represents an Agnus Dei, a wax disk impressed with the figure of a lamb and blessed by the Pope. 'Agnus Dei' is Latin for 'Lamb of God', a title bestowed on Jesus by John the Baptist (John 1:29): hence the disk is a symbol of Christ. English Mission priests would wear an Agnus Dei secretly in a locket concealed under clothing: possession of one was a crime with which captured priests were often charged. Also shown in the tracery are martyrs' palms, candles symbolising the Light of Faith, and the words FOR THE KING and FOR ENGLAND expressing the loyalty of English Catholics past and present to monarch and country.

The Feast of the English Martyrs, remembering all the English men and women martyred for the Catholic Faith during penal times and since canonised or beatified is celebrated each year on 4th May.