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The Piety of Thomas Meynell: ‘no thinge was spared how holy soever it was’

Sarah L. Bastow

Thomas Meynell, writing in the early seventeenth century, opened his commonplace book with this remembrance of the dramatic religious changes that had swept through England. His distress at the attack on the physical symbols of Catholicism is clear. His memories were clearly focused upon the removal of the monasteries, the attempts to obliterate the role of saints and how this was symbolised by the removal of statues and images.

...Gentlemen (either for feare of the Civil Warres wch then did Rage or for the love and devotion wch they did beare to godly and Religious men) did leave and ly up their evidences in the monasteryes, holding them to be the safest custodie, because as they Reasonably thought, none wold dare or be so ungracious, as to Commit direct sacriledge.

BUT when tyme inlarged vilonie to Commit all profane and sinister actes, no thinge was spared how holy soever it was. All was turned up side downe, and the bodyes of Saintes and other heriocall persons being wrapped in lead were turned out thereof, and lead sould to plummers, bookes and pictures were burned, Evidences not Regarded: all was subject to violence and Rapine.¹

Alexandra Walsham has written on the nature of religious memory as reinforced by the landscape noting that the Protestant reformation brought with it both an ‘ideological assault’ on Catholic culture and a disfigurement of both the man-made and natural environment.² It was clear to Thomas Meynell that this ungracious and villainous attack was upon both his religion and his heritage. The ‘evidences’ he refers to are the three chests containing his family’s pedigree and papers which thus defined his status, heritage and place in society. His religion and his status were inextricably intertwined. Thomas Meynell reflects the concerns of many northern gentlemen in the early modern period; their concept of ‘self’ was defined

¹ Ampleforth Abbey Library, Meynell MSS, Thomas Meynell’s Book, f.1 (summary referenced as SS289A) now on microfilm in Northallerton, North Yorkshire Record Office, ZIQ/MIC 2050.

² Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 80-81.

by their land holdings, their social position and crucially their religion and thus the material culture of that religion represented a great deal. For Thomas the Catholic order attacked in the Reformation, was gracious, secure and stable even in times of political and social upheaval. Catholicism was therefore not just a religion, but was integral to Thomas' concept of stability, essential to his definition of social status, grace and gentility, and represented traditions upon which he, via his ancestors, relied to define his place in the world. This article will examine the way in which he expressed his piety in an age where Catholic practice and thought was prohibited and look to the wider implications of this in terms of the way Thomas and his family engaged in social interaction.

The history of post-reformation Catholicism and Catholic piety

The history of Catholicism in post reformation England has traditionally been the 'poor stepsister of mainstream Reformation historiography' argues Peter Marshall.³ He attributes its lack of integration with mainstream histories of religious change to the 'introspective "confessional history"' approach taken by Catholics writing this history and the 'distaste for Catholicism' amongst English intellectuals who were keen to associated Catholicism with backwardness.⁴ An attachment to tradition, superstition, magic and feudal hierarchy have often been attributed as Catholic traits in the early modern period, with Alison Shell acknowledging that Catholics have often been seen as 'religious conservatives'.⁵ This has in turn been interpreted as the opposite of the new reformed religion which was as a force that heralded a modern bureaucracy in government, a civic ideology which dominated new

³ Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480-1642* 2nd edition (London, Bloomsbury, 2003: 2013), p. 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge, University Press, 1999), p.6.

thinking embodying the modernity of the Tudors and ushering in the modern age.⁶ Yet as historians have come to see the value in studying popular and material culture, the importance of landscape and space and of seeing that the ordinary can in fact give a better sense of the lived past, a reassessment has taken place.⁷ Traditions, superstitions, local precedents and practices are no longer dismissed as simply indication of backwardness. Thus there is space for the reassessment of Catholic practice as expressions of piety and signs of continuity with a traditional Catholic past that is not inherently or implicitly backward. This encompassed not just religious belief, but intertwined important principles about status, responsibilities to the locality, social duty and debts owed to ancestors and valued the importance of custom and practice in shaping an individual's world view.

The debate on the nature of post reformation Catholicism had centred, within both confessional historical interpretations and in later revisionism, on the extent to which English Catholicism had links with its medieval past or was a product of post-tridentate ideas and the Catholic mission. John Bossy's *English Catholic Community* argued that the English medieval Catholic Church was dead prior to the arrival of the mission.⁸ The Catholic community of his study was withdrawn and to a great extent isolated from the mainstream existing in a separate, yet parallel community to that of the Protestant nation. Subsequent works on the nature of English religion have instead argued for much greater continuities with the medieval past.⁹ This debate was also extended to examine the counter or Catholic Reformation. Michael Mullett has emphasised the 'enduring tradition of reformism in the

⁶ Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and 'The Disenchantment of the World Reassessed'', *The Historical Journal*, 51, 2 (2008): 497-528.

⁷ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012);

⁸ John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p. 11.

⁹ For these arguments see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (London, Yale University Press, 1992) and *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (London, Yale University Press, 2001); Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993).

Catholic church' and argued the 'aspirations towards religious reform found in late medieval Catholicism were strongly endorsed and affirmed in the Catholic reformation.'¹⁰ The model of an entirely 'introspective seigneurial Catholicism' has also been rejected in more recent scholarship, with assertions of a greater political awareness role for Catholics.¹¹ Whilst Kuashik and Questier have asserted that there was rigidity between loyal and resisting Catholics.¹²

Recently studies of Catholic experiences rather than of Catholic communities have allowed a wide scope of analysis which has drawn comparison with a variety of confessional identities. Through the lens of 'persecution' and 'toleration' it is possible to see if 'getting along' with someone who was ideologically opposed to you was possible in a world where it was the duty of a monarch to correct or eliminate 'heterodox opinions and beliefs'.¹³ It can be seen that whilst it was not always possible to co-exist peacefully, particular at times of heightened tension and unease, a good deal of compromise was in fact in operation in everyday life and confessional divides were less rigid than they first appeared.¹⁴

As the sixteenth century progressed into the seventeenth it is clear that it was increasingly a minority of the population who remained Catholic, yet they represented a notable presence in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. This was magnified in the north of England where proportionally a higher percentage of the population remained Catholic or at

¹⁰ Michael Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (London, Routledge, 1999), p. ix

¹¹ Margaret Sena, 'William Bludell and the networks of Catholic dissent in post-Reformation England', in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (ed.), *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000) pp. 54-55.

¹² Sandeep Kaushik, 'Resistance, Loyalty and Recusant Politics: Sir Thomas Tresham and the Elizabethan State', *Midland History*, 21 (1996), 37-72; Michael Questier, 'The Politics of Religious Conformity and the Accession of James I', *Historical Research*, 71 (1998), 14-30.

¹³ Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 228; Similar themes are explored in the edited collection *Getting Along? Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England – Essays in Honour of Professor W.J. Sheils*, Nadine Lewycky and Adam Morton eds. (Farnham, Ashgate, 2012).

¹⁴ Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, p. 208;

least sympathetic to conservatism in religion.¹⁵ Thomas Meynell's lived experience recorded for us in his own hand show that for him there was no differentiation between the old 'superstitions' of the medieval past and his early seventeenth century Catholicism. Both combined to form his religious identity, set in the context of his status as a member of the gentry and secured through inherited land. His notion of the sacred and the profane, his ideas of social responsibility and honourable conduct and his religious beliefs and his financial security were intertwined. He experienced persecution for his faith yet we can see from his papers that he was not living a life entirely separated from the rest of society. Even when imprisoned he made connections, noted the relationships that were important to him and had ties to the outside world.

The Meynell family

So who was Thomas Meynell and what information does his commonplace book provide us with? The Meynells were a gentry family from the North Riding of Yorkshire. They had increasing their land holdings in the North Riding in the sixteenth century and showed themselves to be particularly dedicated to maintaining Catholicism even at the expense of imprisonment. Hugh Aveling notes that 'the Meynells were the leaders of recusant society in a locality unusually full of Catholics'.¹⁶ J.T. Cliffe estimated that of the 567 gentry families in Yorkshire in 1570 around 368 were Catholic; in the North Riding this proportion rose to 122 of 154 families.¹⁷ By the early seventeenth century these numbers (at least in official records) had declined. Reformed ideas had taken a firmer hold and thus the norm was

¹⁵ This has been particularly emphasised in regional studies see: J.T. Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (London, The Athlone Press, 1969) and J.C.H. Aveling, *Northern Catholics: The Catholic Recusants of the North Riding of Yorkshire 1558-1790* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966).

¹⁶ 'The Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family of North Kilvington, North Riding of Yorks. 1596-1676', edited by J.C.H. Aveling, in E.E. Reynolds (ed) *CRS Miscellanea*, vol. 56 (1964), ix.

¹⁷ Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 169.

increasingly a Protestant conformity. Combined with this the penalties for Catholicism had become more severe and more readily imposed. At the beginning of Elizabeth's reign the availability of Marian priests was more assured, but by the late 1570s and 1580s retaining Catholic practices was becoming more difficult as access to Catholic clergy was declining. Both Bossy and Marshall have argued the pull of the parish church, the desire to worship with your neighbours and for the elite their need to be seen local leaders were all factors in maintaining conformity.¹⁸ What is clear however is that the number of Catholics in the North Riding ensured that Thomas Meynell was operating in an environment where Catholic life and culture had not vanished. The possibility of remaining Catholic and still maintaining local friendship, worshipping amongst neighbours and retaining standing in local society were much greater in areas with a high concentration of Catholic population. Thomas' commonplace book records a great deal about his way of life and those things he considers to be important. He comments on those areas where he felt loss had occurred or where a threatened loss was imminent; through his writings we can see that he was becoming increasingly challenged on his right to maintain his religious beliefs and his everyday practices.

The Meynell family spent large sums on acquiring property throughout the period under examination, demonstrating their desire to establish themselves as a prominent gentry family in the North Riding. Thomas Meynell spent £1000 on purchases in the period 1612-21.¹⁹ Not all the branches of the family did as well as each other and the senior branch of the family based at Hawnby, led first by Robert and then by his son Roger Meynell, was forced to sell a considerable portion of their estate in the 1560s.²⁰ The economic success of the

¹⁸ John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), p 124; Marshall, *Reformation England*, p. 191.

¹⁹ Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 375.

²⁰ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 3

family was therefore high on Thomas' list of priorities and much of the commentary in his book is concerned with land transactions, rents, land ownership and monetary exchange. Yet even here his religion is ingrained in his expression and in the notes he makes in his book, with mention of religious affiliation acting as one of the determinants Thomas used to judge a man's worth. For example Thomas celebrated the Catholicism of his wider family noting that his 'dearly beloved father Roger Meynell, a gentleman very kind to his friendes, and of a bountifull and liberall disposition by nature, died a Catholik' as did his uncle Richard Meynell.²¹ The traditional methods of gaining wealth via inheritance and marriage feature prominently in his book as would be expected from a member of the gentry. He also often notes the religious persuasions of the people involved in the marriages, matches and associated transactions making an implicit value judgement on both their financial and spiritual wealth. Thus in cataloguing the marriages made by members of his wife's family he noted that one of her Aunts was married into the Lassell family, from which Mr William Lassells was a 'worthie and Catholike gentlemen'.²² In contrast the other Aunt married into the Fairfax family, who in turn married into the Lord Sheffield's family. This convoluted family tree was Thomas' way of noting that he was, albeit distantly, kin of the man who was 'nowe our President'.²³ Confessional divides were clearly not the decisive factor in securing all marriages and whilst the kinship connection with Lord Sheffield brought no direct benefit to Thomas it was significant that he wanted to record his link to the Lord President of the Council of the North. Michael Questier has argued that the listing of these kinship networks, translated into practical political realities, which included families clubbing together 'to fight off predatory recusancy commissioners'.²⁴ The practical advantages to large networks were

²¹ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 18.

²² *Ibid.* p. 10.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Michael Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c. 1550-1640* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 72-3.

undeniable, though whether the families themselves couched this in term of political resistance to the current regime is more questionable. After all strategic manoeuvring to retain property was nothing new to the gentry, nor was it necessarily determined through strictly confessional boundaries. Thomas wider ranging genealogical account suggested that practices of inter-marriage and other strategic practices to retain property within wider kinship networks had operated prior to the reformation and there was continuity of practice.

In 1604 the Catholic nature of Thomas' household was clear. Amongst those listed in the 1604 survey of Catholics for Thornton le Street in Allertonshire were Thomas Meynell esq. and his servants. Listed are Dorotheie Watson, spinster servant to Thomas Meynell alongside three male servants, Thomas Cooke, Gilbert Browne and Richard Robinson.²⁵ This was therefore a Catholic household where the family and the servants retained the old religion. Despite his obvious concern with the financial standing of his family Thomas was willing to incur financial hardships for the sake of his religious beliefs. Thomas was convicted for his recusancy yet also displayed some of the pragmatism of an early modern gentleman. Appearing before the Northern High Commission in 1607 he took the oath of loyalty to the crown alongside other Catholics from the Anne and Gascoigne families.²⁶ In drawing a distinction between the heroic Catholic (unwavering recusant and martyr) and the Catholic pragmatist (occasional conformist) Alison Shell has acknowledge that '[n]either is more real or more typical than the other'.²⁷ Michael Questier has questioned whether there was any such thing as a loyal Catholic in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England, arguing that a discussion framed around loyalty simply accepted contemporary polemical

²⁵ E. Peacock, (ed.), *A List of the Roman Catholics in the County of York in 1604: transcribed from the original Ms. in the Bodeleian Library* (London, John Camden Hotton, 1872), p. 92.

²⁶ Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 178.

²⁷ Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination*, p. 6.

accounts and assumed that there was a dividing line between religion and politics.²⁸ The politicisation of religion had occurred with the unification of church and state, and anti-Catholic rhetoric was framed in terms of treason. The propagandists on both sides therefore polarised around loyalty, with the official line from both suggesting that you could not be both 'catholic' and 'loyal'. Official literature provided by those leading the Catholic mission advocated no compromise or compliance and English authority too officially insisted on unwavering conformity and oath taking.²⁹ Neither of these stances reflected a reality of compromises, shifting positions or in fact the human tendency to do whatever seemed most expedient at any given moment.

Piety and Kinship relations

Thomas' concern with cataloguing his heritage and lineage is typical of many early modern gentlemen. The importance of genealogy based on a patrilineal structure to the early modern psyche has been observed by a multitude of historians.³⁰ Thomas was mainly concerned with cataloguing the male descent as it related to land and inheritance. Predominantly the aim was to explain how he gained his manors and land, yet that is not to say he was uninterested in the women in his family and he does make quite extensive mention of female relatives and friends in his text. In particular he notes the marriages of the families of both his wives and those of his female descendants; he catalogued in detail the marriages made by his daughters, nieces, wider kin and their offspring often in relation to their religious affiliation, status and provenance of their spouses. Whilst the cataloguing of his ancestors is clearly focused on showing the prominence of his line of descent there is a shift as he reaches the later

²⁸ Michael Questier, 'Elizabeth and the Catholics' in E. Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the Protestant nation: Religious politics and identity in early modern England* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 71.

²⁹ Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (London, Boydell Press, 1993: 1999), xii-xiii.

³⁰ Laurence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 22.

Elizabethan and early Stuart eras. From this point he clearly has his own experience to colour the information with nuances and details. These people were either still alive or exist in living memory and the notion of a wider community, beyond his direct blood relations, seemed particularly important to him. This is especially relevant in consideration of the details regarding who these wider kinship relations brought into the Meynell's orbit and moreover if they were family members who could be trusted in increasingly perilous times.

Thomas spent a significant amount of time in his *Commonplace book* discussing his own marriages and devoted notable space in his papers to writing about his wives and his feelings for them. He married twice, firstly to Winifrid Pudsey and secondly to Mary Thwaites. His first marriage was as a young man and he and Winifrid had children together; his second marriage was to Mary who was the widow of James Thwaites and this took place when Thomas was forty-one but they did not have any further issue. He made mention that his second wife was 'so answerable to my other wife in virtue, huswiferye, and almost all Conditions that I have great cause to thank Allmightie god for his providence ad great Clemencie towards me unworthy wretch'.³¹

Despite the illegality of such actions both Thomas' marriages were Catholic ones. He recorded that 'Notwithstanding the Tempestuous stormes of the tyme' that he was married first to Winifrid at Barforth by Sir George Raine, a 'vertuous Catholik Priest: who died happelie afterwars in Yorkcastle'.³² His second marriage to Mary was 'in a poore howse in the Lordshippe of Huttonbonvile by sr Hugo Ile' who was a 'vertuous Catholik Queene Mary Priest'.³³ The latter marriage was a source of great triumph for Thomas as he was brought before the High Commission in York regarding its legality. He recorded in Latin the account

³¹ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 8.

³² *Ibid*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid*., p. 20.

of this interaction saying that he felt that it was only right to provide this verbatim as his was the first marriage legally proved since the ‘cessation of the holy mass in England’.³⁴ Thomas’ marriage was proved legal as he was able to produce the original letters of order for the priest who married him, showing that he was a lawful minister, who was therefore acknowledged by the Chancery Court as able to conduct a legal and valid marriage.

His first marriage to Winifred was very fruitful producing twelve children between 1588 and 1602, despite his imprisonment during this period.³⁵ In the period of Thomas Cecil’s presidency of the Council of the North (1599-1603) Thomas was imprisoned first in the house of Sir Edward Stanhope who was an active member of the Council of the North. It is not clear from Thomas’ comments whether this was in Stanhope’s house in the Minster garth, or at Grimston just outside the city of York.³⁶ Thomas Meynell’s next period of imprisonment was in less salubrious condition in the ‘North-blockhouse neare Kingston upon Hull’. He laments that during this latter period of imprisonment ‘we weare misrable restrained for we might not privatlie conferre wth any man: neyther cowld we git leave for owr wives to come unto us.’³⁷ Notwithstanding the apparent lack of opportunity to spend time with his wife there were three children born in the period in question, Roger in 1599, Helene in 1601 and Ursula in 1602, so Thomas’ imprisonments were clearly sporadic rather than continuous.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 20.

³⁵ His children were Elizabeth (1588), Marie (1589), Katherine (1591), Anthony (1592), Richard (1593), Margaret (1594), Wenefred (1595), Thomas (1597), Anne (1598), Roger (1599), Helene (1601) and Ursula (1602).

³⁶ ‘STANHOPE, Edward’ (c.1543-1603) in P.W. Hasler (ed), *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1558-1603* (London, Boydell and Brewer, 1981) available online <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/stanhope-edward-i-1543-1603#biography> [consulted 5 April 2016]

³⁷ ‘Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family’, p. 17.

For Thomas his expressions of affection for his first wife are inextricably linked to his expression of piety. For example he breaks off from his long patriarchal list of his male forebears and relations to include in his writings a copy of Winifrid's epitaph (written in Latin).³⁸ This gives vital facts that we may expect to see in such memorialisation for example he states that she died aged thirty-three and was seventeen when they married and was mother to four sons and eight daughters.³⁹ It also leaves her soul to God's care and protection. He did clearly mourn his wife's death noting on the epitaph that she was the best of wives, was of good family and finishing with a rhyme:

Grace, honour, fame gave ayre to hir breath
Rest, glories, Joye, were sequels of hir death.⁴⁰

Thomas' forays into verse are seen again in regards to his imprisonment and again the words are addressed to his wife. His separation from his wife is the theme of the poem, but alongside this runs links to classical literature and references to him suffering for his faith. He starts with the premise that worldly authorities have no right to separate those joined by God:

Whom God haithe yoyned, Let no man part,
So Saithe my Lord, my sweete, my Love:
Yet peevish men of forward harte,
Men from their wives nowe far remove:
God give them grace to mende their falte,
That lovlie Lovers so assalte.⁴¹

His expressions of love then became more direct 'But mucche I woulde contende to see,/They lovlie selfe beloved of me' and 'I coulde not wyshe my staite to mende: /Thow sweete faire wife did me wel please,/ Thy harte wth mine combined in ease'.⁴²

³⁸ Winifred died 29 January 1603 (1604).

³⁹ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 17.

⁴² *Ibid* p. 17.

The formality of early modern prose and letter writing has been the subject of analysis discussing to what extent the stylisation of letter writing hid true feeling. Verses in the form of ballads are to be found in the writing of the Blundell family with William Blundell writing polemical political verses.⁴³ Yet it is also that case that writing of love was becoming more fashionable in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁴⁴ It is in Thomas Meynell's second marriage where we see a transformation via the language used. The language in reference to his first wife reflected the love and respect he held for Winifred, yet when discussing Mary this language converts into expressions of desire. His commonplace book contains a letter written to Mary illustrating that his friends had recommended her as a good match but it was on seeing her that he fell in love: 'I conceived a Love by report wch I fownd upon the sight of yowe, so much to quicken and stirre: that I can not but deliver yt to yowe my dearest choyse.'⁴⁵ He also noted that God had clearly had a hand in securing the meeting and he urges her 'Repell me not Ladye, be not bashefull, Rewarde my Love' and continues that 'my hart ys nowe in yowr possession'.⁴⁶ Mary was also from a Catholic family and as committed as Thomas to her faith, she had also had children via her first marriage, one son and five daughters.⁴⁷

Thomas records in his book key moments of his life.

In 1558 Elizabeth I had overseen a religious settlement that implemented a new reformed regime. The nature of this settlement has been long debated, with a focus upon the extent to which it was truly reformed, but as Elizabeth's reign progressed it is inescapable

⁴³ Sena, 'William Bludell and the networks of Catholic dissent', pp. 55-63.

⁴⁴ Ian Frederick Moulton, *Love in Print in the Sixteenth Century: The Popularization of Romance* (New York, Palgrave, 2014), p. 107.

⁴⁵ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 8. William, Frances, Jane, Elizabeth, Marie and Ursula.

that it became more difficult to remain a Catholic. The scarcity of Catholic priests, the constant fines for failures to conform, restrictions on movements and by the 1590s the threat and in some cases the implementation of more severe punishments all combined to make retained old religious practices at best problematic and at worst a path to financial ruin, imprisonment and the ultimate sanction of death. The early seventeenth century saw further concerted attacks on those families who did not conform, the most effective of which was actually via other litigious members of elite society. Local justices and conformist gentlemen were beginning to take out private suits against various Catholic families laying claim to their lands and estates. The cataloguing of the various landed cases has been outlined by Aveling and Cliffe in their respective works so will not be recounted here except to say that the pre-eminence of the Catholic gentry was undermined very effectively by these less obvious means.⁴⁸ Whilst the High Commission pursued the Catholic population of the north, directly imposing fines and prison sentences, it was the undermining and removal of landed power by these less direct means that impacted widely and created a sense of a community under siege. It should also be noted that the Catholic families responded in kind, and often used indirect means to undermine the direct sanctions imposed by the authorities. Families were seen to be working together to pass land to conformist members of their kinship networks and relying on these wider networks to mitigate the specified punishments wherever possible.

Piety and prosecution: Resistance to authority

Thomas makes markedly few comments on the forces of national or local authority in his life despite that fact he was both fined and imprisoned for his religion, but does to a limited extent adopt some of the same language of persecution to be found in other lay and clerical

⁴⁸ Ibid, xxx-xxxii; Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry*.

texts of the era.⁴⁹ When he did comment on the fines or imprisonments imposed on Catholics it is always to display how this enhanced the character of the individual. For example he makes a note of the death of his mother-in-law in 1620, Elizabeth Pudsey who was the mother of his first wife and a Catholic. He noted her to be a ‘very prudente, vury iust, very steate, and very honeste’ woman.⁵⁰ He stated that Elizabeth had been left lands and money by her husband and never remarrying was ‘exceedingly liberall to Chatholokes and poore prisoners’ despite the fact she ‘payed to Queene Elizabeth, and Kinge James, greate somes of money for her Chatholike Conscience’.⁵¹ Thus her qualities were shown by her treatment of Catholics, her generosity and her support of prisoners, all good works admired by Thomas. The fact that Elizabeth Pudsey had paid substantial fines in both Elizabeth and James’ reigns suggested that she had not complied with the laws regarding religion and had suffered in consequence, but equally showed a lack of other resistance. She submitted to the law in paying the required fines.

On his own hardships he wrote that:

When Thomas Lorde Burleigh nowe Earle of Exceter was President here in the Northe, he shewed him selfe forward in the prosecution of the Lawes established against us poore Catholicks, but against none more then my selfe. I had bene committed before Henry the Earle of Huntingdon: but I was a prisoner almost al my Lorde Burleighe his Presidencie.⁵²

In 1572 Huntingdon was instituted as the new President of the Council of the North and he applied the laws against Catholics more stringently, a policy continued by his successor. Thomas was not compliant with the new laws on religion and did not waiver in his religious convictions. It has already been noted above that Thomas was subject to periods of

⁴⁹ Sena, ‘William Bludell and the networks of Catholic dissent’, p.58.

⁵⁰ ‘Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family’, p. 34.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 35.

⁵² Northallerton, NYCRO, Thomas Meynell’s Commonplace Book, ZDV, f. 11; ‘Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family’, p. 16.

imprisonment. He was imprisoned numerous times for his religion and faced fines and confiscation of lands. Thomas, Lord Burleigh was president of the Council of the North 1599-1603, and Thomas applied for licences to travel twice during that period, indicating he was not in fact incarcerated for the whole of Burleigh's presidency. Catholics were subject to the laws restricting movement and in 1596, 1597, 1599, 1600, 1609, 1610 and 1611 Thomas applied for licenses to permit him to travel beyond the five miles from his home that he was constrained by as a convicted recusant.⁵³

As has already been indicated Thomas also sent time in the Blockhouse prison in Hull which was noted for its harsh conditions. The keepers of this goal were reputed as rapacious in their desire for prisoners to pay high sums for rent, basic provisions and the conditions were notorious damp.⁵⁴ It should be noted that whilst this era of persecution could have created a sense of isolation for men such as Thomas, it was clear that there was a significant support network in place, at least in the later Elizabethan era. In 1597 George Grant wrote to the bishop of Durham complaining that the jury assessing the worth of Thomas Meynell's lands had grossly undervalued the estate at a value of five pounds per year when in fact it was worth at least 200 marks.⁵⁵ The jury was composed of thirteen men, but Grant noted that 'amonge whom were manie of the said Conyers & Mennell frends and namelie...George Holtbye who married Mennells systeer & is a nere kinsman to Holtbye the seminarie priest.'⁵⁶ Whilst this was a transparent undervaluing and was not a practise that could continue forever it did illustrate that resisting authority did not always involve violence.

⁵³ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', pp. 49-51.

⁵⁴ John Morris (ed), *The Troubles of our Catholic forefathers related by themselves* (London, Burns and Oates, 1877).

⁵⁵ Cecil Papers 39/110

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Thomas showed no outward disloyalty to the Tudor or Stuart regimes in his writing. Questier concedes that whilst the political concept of a ‘loyal catholic’ was an oxymoron the majority of Catholics did not rebel, and most expressed no outright opposition to Elizabeth in word or deed. It would seem loyalty was a shifting concept. Loyalty to an English head of state and retention of their religious beliefs were not incompatible in the minds of many Catholic gentlemen of the era, despite the obvious contradiction and even taking into account the papal excommunication of Elizabethan in 1570.⁵⁷ It also seemed to be the case that there was a separation between local triumphs which subverted punishments and outright rebellion against a King or Queen. Thomas was clearly a part of his local community and indicated throughout his writing a respect for the social hierarchy in the locality. It was also clear that much of the local hierarchy were complicit in actions to protect local men who were subject to the penal laws on religion. These were all part of the multi-layered characteristics that composed self-identity in the period and indicated that Thomas shared similar ideological concerns as other Catholics.⁵⁸ The lack of comment from Thomas himself may simply be evidence of a prudent man aware of not putting materials in writing that could be used against him. Yet it would seem rather that Thomas did not see his religious as a sign of disloyalty and this reflected in his lack of comment on rebellions or opposition more widely.

In 1569 the Earl of Northumberland and the Earl of Westmoreland led a Rebellion covering the North Riding and which spread to the North East with Durham as its focal point. The rebellion was ultimately a failure, and combined with the arrival of Mary Queen of Scots and the Papal bill of excommunication it encouraged the Elizabeth regime to see a Catholic presence as a Catholic threat. Thomas Meynell makes little comment on the events of 1569

⁵⁷ ‘Regnans in Excelsis, 1570’ full text at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius05/p5regnans.htm> [April 2016]

⁵⁸ Geoff Baker, *Reading and Politics in Early Modern England : The Mental World of a Seventeenth-Century Catholic Gentleman* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 34; Sena, ‘William Bludell and the networks of Catholic dissent’, pp. 58. Baker and Sena both found the same loyalties to the monarch expressed by the Bludell family alongside a story of persecution for retaining Catholic belief.

even though they must have been momentous for the locality and for his ancestors, Roger and Richard Meynell. Northallerton and the surrounding areas where these men held their lands were focal points for rebellion and so it is unsurprising that they were unable to retain the passive neutrality that they had maintained in 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace.⁵⁹ Their precise rôle in the rebellion is masked as the authorities were less concerned to document the activities of the minor gentlemen, focusing instead on the main players and events of the rising. Nevertheless the anxiety of Roger and Richard to obtain a pardon for their activities, whilst not automatically implying they had been active and willing rebels, certainly suggested that they recognised the potential danger and were unwilling to risk loss of money and status as a result.⁶⁰ Thomas' sole comment on the matter concerned the marriage of one of the daughters of Roger Meynell 'to ffulthrope of Ilebecke. Esquier whoe lost all his landes in the rysing in the northe, by followinge his Neighbour Thomas the Earle of Northumberlande'. Thus the comment is couched in terms of his concern with landed inheritance, but also suggested he did look favourably on following Northumberland into rebellion, but rather saw this as an unwise sign of alliance with an injudicious neighbour.⁶¹ There was certainly no attempt to venerate Northumberland as a near-saint in Meynell's writing as Walsham has indicated was the reaction of some Catholics keen to find new martyrs as militant symbols.⁶² Instead we can see evidence that Thomas venerated older Saints and it is to this aspect of his writing that we now turn.

Communion of Saints

⁵⁹ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, p. 83.

⁶⁰ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 45. The pardons are included in the papers and both include the rebel Earls' proclamation.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Thomas here appears to be associating involvement with loyalty to Northumberland, though the description of the earl merely as a neighbour and not a lord suggests a common aim and local grievance, rather than seigniorial or feudal loyalties.

⁶² Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, p. 178.

For Thomas the role that Saints played in his life was significant even into the seventeenth century when officially the relics of this part of the Catholic past were long gone. It is difficult to know if this relic of Catholic life was inherited knowledge passed down via the family and reinforced within a gentry community or if it was for Thomas new knowledge gain through access to printed texts and Saints lives. Alexandra Walsham's work has indicated that the older characterisations a Catholic community hostile to printing are untenable and that in fact the printed text was a vital part of a post Reformation Catholic life.⁶³ Elizabeth Ferguson's work on Saints lives suggests that the veneration of Saints remained integral to the English Catholic communities in the sixteenth century and Simon Ditchfield has argued that the range of Catholic Saints integrated into Catholic worship expanded in the early modern era.⁶⁴

Thomas marked his calendar year and noted significant dates based upon the days dedicated to particular Saints and this knowledge was also clearly commonplace amongst his wider family and kin networks given the frames of reference he uses. What is also significant is his devotion to the Virgin Mary who is frequently the focus of his prayers and dedications. He noted that his brother George Meynell of Dalton had a child on the 3rd November 1615 and named his daughter Winifred after the Saint of the day of her birth. Thomas recorded that he prayed to St Winifred and 'Our Blessed Lady' for the new child to obtain her 'grace and good fortē'.⁶⁵ He also catalogues the births of his grandchildren, Thomas (his namesake), John, Hugo, William and Anthony giving thanks for each with 'I pray swete Jesus blisse him.' He concludes this section with wider thanks to God and the virgin for his

⁶³ Alexandra Walsham, 'Domme Preachers'? Post - Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print', *Past & Present*, 168 (2000): 72-123.

⁶⁴ Simon Ditchfield, 'Tridentine Catholicism', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation*, ed. A. Bamji, G. Janssen & M. Laven, (Farnham, Ashgate, 2013), pp.15-31; Elizabeth Ferguson, 'Veneration, Translation and Reform: The Lives of Saints and the English Catholic Community, c.1600-1642' *Recusant History*, 32 (2014): 37-65, esp. p. 38.

⁶⁵ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 23.

grandsons: '(god be thanked and owr blissid Lady) God Almightye haithe blissid my Sonne, and inriched me with ffive sonnes within the compas of ffive yeares.'⁶⁶

In 1617 he writes of the death of his daughter Mary (wife of George Poole and the mother of Gervase Poole). Gervase was born on 19th October and Mary died upon the feast of the Annunciation in the following year 1617.⁶⁷ Thomas noted that her end was happie and full of hope and comfote and he hoped to meet her again in heaven. He noted that she was buried amongst the reliques of the Pooles and had been purely named after the blessed Lady (Virgin Mary) which he doubted not 'conduct her sowle unto glorye'. He also included an epitaph written by a friend John Talbotte as his daughter was not yet 28 years old and he clearly lamented the loss of her. In 1630 Ann, another of his daughters died (she had married Thomas Graine of Harlsey) and had four children. Ann was only thirty-two when she died and Thomas prayed that 'our blessed lady' should 'assist her [Ann] with her Clemencie and mercy.'⁶⁸ He included the words 'nunquam perisse legitur qui Mariam coluit, at coluit illa deo gratias' – indicating that there had never been any loss of devotion to Mary.

He goes onto catalogue the births and deaths of family, friend, villagers and other acquaintances often asking for God's blessing and that of the 'blessed lady'.⁶⁹ In particular he makes an extensive entry regarding the death of his mother-in-law Elizabeth Pudsey, mother to his first wife Winifred, noting the date of her birth as the day of St Simon and St Jude, that she was fined for her Catholic conscious and that her life was gracious and her end glorious.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 5

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 32.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 41

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 33-35.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 35.

His recording of births reflects his wider knowledge of saints as well and it is notable that for several of his children he records the saint's day on which they were born or notes the saints' day nearest the day of their birth.⁷¹ Thus his first son, Anthony, is recorded as being born on 30th May 1592 on a day dedicated to St Felix. Richard is recorded as born on 16th September 1593 on a day dedicated to SSt Cornelius and Cyprian and Anne on the vigil of SSt Symon and Jude in 1598. He noted that Helene was born on the feast of St Marie Magdalene but that she died very young.⁷² His notation of calendar dates and those of the relevant Saints suggested that he still held Saints in regard and was keen to associate his children with them through the dates of their birth. His eldest surviving child Marie is noted as born 19th September 1589, but it is the day of her marriage to George Poole of Wakebridge 'a gentleman of her own religion and yeares' that is attributed to a Saint. The marriage occurred 25th August 1613 which was St Lodovick's or St Lewes' day.⁷³ Thomas particularly delights at the discovery via his friend Mr Richard Huddlestone of a St Meynell, a martyr of Rome, indicating a satisfaction in a new saint who could be patron and intercessor to his family.

Salvation

From his commonplace book it is clear that Thomas saw himself as a good man, worthy of salvation and that he viewed his family and friends in the same light. He held both his wives, firstly Winifred Pudsey and secondly Marie Thwaites, in high regard. He noted that he fully expected to see his first wife again in the afterlife as he was 'Confidente (almightie god assisting me wth his holly grace; and our blessed ladie ffavouringe me wth hir

⁷¹ His children were Elizabeth (1588), Marie (1589), Katherine (1591), Anthony (1592), Richard (1593), Margaret (1594), Wenefred (1595), Thomas (1597), Anne (1598), Roger (1599), Helene (1601) and Ursula (1602).

⁷² 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 4.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 4.

blessed prairs) to meet hir againe in heaven; and there eternally to paise and glorifie our Creator. Aftewr wch I resolve to love hers for her Cause.’⁷⁴

Friend and kinship were prominent in Thomas’ commonplace book. The extensive kin networks that he laid claim to was laid out in extensive texts noting the family’s pedigree and standing and how he was related to them, even if to find a connection it was necessary to look back several generations. The notion of a ‘Catholic Community’ was advocated by John Bossy, though the idea of it as a newly formed community which had little in common with medieval practice has long since been rejected.⁷⁵ The community Thomas described is extensive and incorporated a significant number of the local gentry families of Yorkshire and the North-East, yet it gave no signs of being isolated and operating in exclusion of the wider society in the North.

He noted that he was related to a friend of his, Sir William Middleton via his second wife, but only via her grandfather making them at best distant cousins. He held that Sir William was a ‘worthy and most memorable gentleman and an ‘Inward and deare friend’ who had been imprisoned with him in York Castle and other prisons for his Catholicism faith and confession.⁷⁶ Yet it was not just Sir William’s faith that made him a good man but rather that he was also an astute man who was able to retain much of his fortune and land for his heirs which were qualities that Thomas held as important. The concept of being both Catholic and a gentleman were intertwined qualities which Thomas expressed again and again in his writing.

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⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

⁷⁵ These arguments are advocated in Bossy, *The English Catholic Community*; Haigh, *English Reformations*; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars* and *The Voices of Morebath*.

⁷⁶ ‘Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family’, p. 10.

Thomas also indicated the continuity of practice between the medieval and early modern eras, even in those elements which would have been roundly condemned by those of reformed thinking; namely the notion of sacred sites and building imbued with holiness and often having links with a medieval and monastic past. Sacred sites in post Reformation England have most recently received attention from Alexandra Walsham who argues ‘that people of all social ranks continued to frequent hallowed places that had been vandalised or abandoned in the course of the Long Reformation.’⁷⁷ The importance of continuity in denoting sacred space is further attested by the case of William Blundell enclosing a space that had previously been the site of a Church to use as a recusant graveyard at Harkirk in Lancashire.⁷⁸ Thomas valued his heritage and ancestry and the material past was no less significant to him than the names of those of his lineage. The longevity of old practices and the integration of old tales alongside recognised piety was a persistent theme. In his editing of the records of the York High Commission JS Purvis noted that ‘the main issue is not that against recusants’ in the commission, but that ‘more frequent are proceedings against “superstition”, as it was called, and cases against such offenses as the retention of images’.⁷⁹

Thomas’ writing makes little differentiation between fact and folktale and the two are treated of equal value. He recorded in his commonplace book a story regarding Eskedale near Whitby. This he begins that in the fifth year of Henry II’s reign (a twelfth century tale) he tells of a wild boar hunt that took place on 16th October. A boar was found by the hunt and chased by the huntsmen and their dogs. The boar on the brink of death ran to the chapel of Eskedale where a Hermit monk of Whitby was at prayer. Having run into the chapel the boar

⁷⁷ Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, p. 166.

⁷⁸ Linda O’Halloran and Andrew Spicer, ‘Catholic Burial and Commemoration in Early Seventeenth-Century Lancashire’ in *Dying, Death, Burial and Commemoration in Reformation Europe*, ed. Elizabeth C. Tingle and Jonathan Willis, (London, Routledge, 2016), pp.98-99.

⁷⁹ J.S. Purvis (ed) *The Elizabethan High Commission of York: The Act Book 1561/2-1580* (York, Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1979), p. 14

died, the monk shut the door to the dogs and continued with his mediation and prayers. The gentlemen of the hunting party came upon the hermitage and called for the monk to open the door which he did. Upon spying the boar dead and their hounds denied the kill, the gentlemen ran the monk through, bringing him to the brink of death. The gentlemen realising their crime fled to take sanctuary at Scarborough, but the Abbot of Whitby petitioned and succeeded in having the king remove them. The men were brought before the injured hermit who forgave them and said he would give his life but asked that in payment they set stakes at the brink of the water each year that would stand without the tide removing them. This was to be done in penance and on pain of them and their ancestors forfeiting their lands and incurring God's wrath. Thomas advocated that this practice had continued every year since and moreover that it was essential that the practice should continue for the sake of the populace.⁸⁰

In addition to the above tale of the power of sacrifice and holiness Thomas also told a story of how the stone from Catholic chapels was itself sacred even if no longer in use as a chapel. He recorded that John Smith of Thornton in lez Beanes had demolished the old chapel there, taken some of the stone and had for many years 'sacrilegiously profained it'. However, Smith's attempts to remove the stone elsewhere had been thwarted, as a sign that the place of the former chapel was sacred as was the stone that built it. Thus he tell us the horses were prevented from drawing the cart of stones beyond the parish boundary and even adding more horses did no good as they still could not draw the cart. John Smith was forced to realise that it was God's will that the stone remained at the chapel. In temper Smith threw the stone into the road and two other men were forced to move it to the gutter of the hedge, where it lay until Thomas Meynell carried it back to the old demolished chapel in November 1629.⁸¹ Thomas makes the point that he left the stone 'as neare the original plac as I could guess and

⁸⁰ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 39-40.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 40-1.

there it is now.⁸² Thus the sacred nature of place and space as well as the material fabric of the demolished chapel was held as sacred. Thomas' attempts to restore the stone to this sacred site was a demonstration of piety and an expression of his religious devotion.

Yorkshire saw a number of sites held as having special status and Alexandra Walsham makes note of the ruined Lady Chapel on the hill above the ruined Mount Grace Priory in Allertonshire as attracting specific attention from the Northern High Commission who ordered that those visiting the site on the eve of the Virgin's feast day should be arrested.⁸³ The commission were keen to root out elements of superstition as embodied by pilgrimage sites, shrines and holy wells. Hugh Aveling laments the fact that Thomas failed to mention the Mount Grace pilgrimage site in his text despite the proximity of it to East Hardsley where his relatives the Granges lived.⁸⁴ What Thomas does mention frequently is visiting numerous horse races which reflect his interests as an early modern country gentleman, but also gave him an opportunity to meet with other Catholic gentlemen in a public forum. He records races at Richmond and Thirsk where he raced with his son Richard, Sir William Gascoigne and John Talbot.⁸⁵ In 1621 Thomas recorded that he had 'wonn' the 'Gould bell from Hambleton the silver bell from Bagby more a silver cupp for ever' indicating his successes in the races. The more materialistic pursuits of the early modern gentleman were not without their pious element. The chance to meet with like-minded individuals, share news and manage the consequences of remaining Catholic in a Protestant country were to be welcomed especially if offered alongside an enjoyable activity. The

⁸² Ibid, p. 41.

⁸³ Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, p. 167.

⁸⁴ 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', xxv.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 36.

confluence of sacred and secular, pious and popular was nothing new in England and throughout the continent.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Thomas Meynell was therefore a man of his time. He valued the Catholicism inherited from his family and was as happy to re-tell prophetic stories which modern historiography would categorise as superstitious, as he was to cite his contact with missionary and Jesuits priests. He embraced the poetic and literary trends of the day typical of the educated gentry and was subject to the persecutory laws on Elizabethan and Jacobean England defining him by his religious. Despite imprisonment and fines which caused financial hardship only occasionally in the text does he directly portray himself as a victim and the narrative of persecution often illustrates his triumphs over his sufferings. For example his description of the actions of the President of the Council of the North sees him use the phrase ‘us poore Catholicks’ and suggest that he was persecuted more than others.⁸⁷ More often he is willing to record his personal triumphs and those of his friends and family. His expressions of piety and religious beliefs were interwoven into his everyday life. A discussion of land transactions or of the prominence of his kinship connection was as likely to reveal his religious values as the epitaph he wrote for his wife. He valued the written word but also the material object and both were expressions of his belief in Catholicism and ways to secure his eternal salvation and that of his ancestors. He shared his religion with his ancestors for whom he recorded he was bound to pay forever. We can see in his poetry his

⁸⁶ The nature of sacred space discussed in Sarah Hamilton, Andrew Spicer (eds), *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005) and Alexandra Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*.

⁸⁷ Northallerton, NYCRO, Thomas Meynell’s Commonplace Book, ZDV, f. 11; ‘Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family’, p. 16.

belief in the sacramental nature of his Catholic religion and his avocation that it was through it that he and those around him would secure a place in heaven.

Yf wth swete Jesus we would dwell,
Then must we learne for him to dye:
Confess, and then we please him well,
None can be saved that do deny:⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Thomas Meynell's Commonplace Book, ZDV, f. 11; 'Recusancy papers of the Meynell Family', p. 18.