

## THE ENGLISH DOMINICANS IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

**S**TEALING lead from the roofs of church buildings, which has recently come into vogue, was under Henry VIII so strict a royal preserve that a poor tinker who purloined from the roof of the despoiled abbey of Pipewell a few pennyworths of it was hanged incontinently at Northampton. Tradition tells how Henry's monastic visitors lifted up their eyes with joy on beholding the rich harvest to be garnered from the abbey roofs. Rarely did king or courtier risk the expense of pulling down a large religious house, for Henry's pecuniary loss in taking down the vast church of Lewes priory, where he was reduced to employing gunpowder, taught him a lesson in economy. Henceforth he contented himself with stripping the lead and allowing the buildings to fall into the graceful ruins we see today at Furness, Tintern, Kirkstall, Fountains and a hundred other places. But it was quite another matter if the abbey or friary ruins lay in the heart of a city or busy town, where the lead-stripped structure could be turned into a residence for the gentry, as for example was the fate of the Dominican priories at Yarm and Gloucester, or the rows of poor cottages at Newcastle-on-Tyne and perhaps at Oxford. When the corporation of a town was loth to lose a more than usually handsome church it could buy it back from the thieving Crown, as happened to St Alban's abbey, and the Dominican church in Norwich which still is, to the lasting shame of that city, a centre for civic banquets and popular concerts.

As all the houses of friars were situated in busy centres of population their buildings after confiscation were thus either destroyed to make way for other erections, or turned to secular use, but, although the structures have disappeared through changes and rebuilding, doubtless the ground in most cases retains almost intact their buried foundations, as has been shown at Cardiff and Ludgate. Before this secularisation of their buildings the religious were forced to surrender all their movable furniture and not even the most trivial piece of cloth escaped the inventory makers, for all was grist to the royal mill. In an age which boasted of the new learning, naturally monastic libraries would have poor chances of survival, and of all the books of the fifty-three Dominican houses suppressed in 1538 scarcely a score of volumes are known to be extant.

Small then is the wonder that practically all personal traces of the friars have disappeared, and all that has since been found of English Dominican history has been laboriously gathered from government records, local or central, episcopal and university registers, and papal and Dominican archives abroad. This makes the work of the late Father Raymund Palmer all the more meritorious, for not only did he amass material on each of

the fifty-three priories, but he rescued from oblivion the names of the chief members of the Province and collected details on the careers of many hundreds of those of lesser fame. He was followed in his great work by Father Bede Jarrett, whose large volume on *The English Dominicans*, published in 1921, is still the standard work on the subject. And now we have a most important volume published by Father William Hinnebusch, an American Dominican, on the English Dominicans of the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> But although he confines his labours to the first eighty years of their existence, he gives much important data on the other centuries when dealing with the foundation and building of their priories, together with their system of government and administration.

What perhaps is not generally recognised is that the English Dominican Province was in pre-reformation days the largest in the Order, embracing all the priories in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. England and Wales were directly governed by the English Provincial, but Ireland and Scotland had vicars appointed by him who had complete authority unless the Provincial himself were visiting their country. After Bannockburn the Scottish friars refused to have an English-appointed vicar, and the Master General agreed to take over the future appointments to this office. In the late fifteenth century Scotland became a full Province, and Ireland was similarly constituted shortly afterwards. Even in England (so great was the number of the friars), the administration became so burdensome for the Provincial that the country was divided up into four visitations which ranked in the following order: London, York, Oxford, and Cambridge. London, the residence of the Provincial, was head of all the houses of the south, including Bristol, being fourteen in number; York was over all the houses including Lincoln and Boston, eleven in all; Oxford was responsible for all the houses of the midland and western counties including Wales, sixteen in number, and often called in official documents the visitation of the Marches; lastly Cambridge at the head of the priories of East Anglia, twelve in number, but with the largest average communities as was to be expected of the most populous and prosperous part of England. In the century dealt with by Father Hinnebusch these divisions were not yet fixed as permanent groups, but later they became so, each with its own vicar who made the visitations of these priories and reported to the Provincial, who however could make a personal visitation of the whole and presumably on occasions did so. England retained this special form of administration up to the dissolution.

Occasionally historians had claimed for the Dominicans other houses in addition to the customary fifty-three established by the careful Father Palmer, but absolute proof is wanting in all these new cases. Hull and

<sup>1</sup> *The Early English Friars Preachers*, published at S. Sabina, Rome, for the Dominican Historical Institute.

Plymouth are mentioned, as also is Doncaster, but on very doubtful authority, whilst a few genuine cases of small Dominican settlements such as Gillingham were probably nothing more than small cells or preaching stations. Father Hinnebusch deals with this question in a very valuable appendix, which will probably close the controversy.

In his three chapters on Dominican preaching he deals with the principal work of the Order, and shows the English Dominicans at their best. After his chapter on the English Dominicans in their primary work of preaching, and their success as teachers in Oxford, he provides an admirable account of their influence in public life, both political and ecclesiastical. In politics the great name was that of William Hothum, a brilliant scholar and professor, an able Provincial and skilled diplomatist who became Edward I's most trusted adviser. It was due to his prudence and tact that war was prevented between England and France, and he is noteworthy in history for the part he played in settlement of the Scottish succession which gave the crown to Balliol.

Perhaps some other scholar will continue Father Hinnebusch's work and give us the history of the Province in later centuries. It would indeed be an error to consider the influence of the English Dominicans as ending with the thirteenth century. In fact it increased in the fourteenth until it reached its peak towards the end of that century. The names of great doctors still abounded, preachers were perhaps even more famous and Dominican repute amongst all ranks of society was very high. Ecclesiastically and politically the Order exercised great power, and whilst kings still chose their confessors from it, and occasionally ministers of state, such as Bishop John Gilbert of St Davids, who was twice Lord High Treasurer, more than a score of English Dominicans were given charge of dioceses, no fewer than seven of them at the same time under Richard II. In the late fifteenth century this influence began to wane, but nevertheless the Province retained much vigour even up to the evil hour when all religious houses alike were suppressed.

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