

Through American Eyes: A View of the English Dominican Province

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Abstract

Reviewing a half-century of personal experience of the English Dominican Province by an American friar provides a rich gallery of unforgettable people, places, and events. But the following account is more a story than a history, which is better left to historians.

First, a disclaimer. When I think of the English Dominican province, I remember people more than places or events. My good fortune was to arrive in England when many of the outstanding friars of the previous era were still living, and the next generation of Dominicans was taking up their work. In the aftermath of the sweeping changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council, like many other provinces and entire orders, the English province was in the midst of a cycle of diminishment, experiment, recovery, and development from which it would emerge resilient and even stronger than before. In some respects, it was a sometimes harrowing pilgrimage. In most others, it was a journey of faith.

What follows is not a history, especially a critical one, but rather a series of more or less fragmentary vignettes, an impressionistic panorama rather than a thorough assessment. I should have kept better notes. As largely episodic impressions, I must add as a cautionary note that my accounts are not what customarily appears in standard biographies or even obituaries which are fortunately accessible elsewhere.

My first awareness of something called the English province occurred in New Mexico, when I was still in secondary school and someone gave me a copy of *The Divine Pity* by Gerald Vann, which is still somewhere in my library. I glimpsed Vann a few years later when I was a student at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. By then I was more familiar with Dominicans and was awed one afternoon when the famous friar was pointed out to me as he carefully crossed Michigan Avenue toward the Dominican House of Studies directly across from my dormitory. I was also startled to discover that he was not six feet tall or possessed of a mane of scholarly grey hair. He was not only shorter than I had imagined, but seemed not to have any hair at all, or very

little. Still, it was the great man himself and I was at least momentarily thrilled to see him in person.

I knew something of Oxford University from other reading in my years in secondary school. One of my favorite authors, C. S. Lewis, had some good things to say about it (and some other things, to be sure, not all of them good). My only other acquaintance was through Blackwell's bookshop from which I ordered a number of Lewis' works in colorful paper covers for two shillings and sixpence (or for *The Screwtape Letters*, three shillings and sixpence). Even with postage, it was a huge bargain by today's standards. The clerks at the bookshop occasionally included helpful leaflets and pamphlets about events and opportunities there and in the wider Oxford environs.

But the only English Dominican I had met so far was Anselm Townsend, who was English and a Dominican, but not an English Dominican, as he had joined the Order in the United States. At the time he was the superior at the Dominican house in Albuquerque, where in 1950 the friars of St. Albert's province had founded a chaplaincy at the University of New Mexico. Townsend was friendly and witty and smoked a huge yellow calabash pipe. It's hard to forget a detail like that, even after some sixty years. In many respects, this kindly, aging friar was a template.

As for Gerald Vann, I never saw him again, as he soon returned to England where he died in 1963. But I continued to feast on his books. The year he died I was in a Dominican novitiate myself, in rural farmland near the town of Winona, Minnesota. It was there that I met two English friars who made a formidable impression on me – Sebastian Bullough and Thomas Gilby, both out of Cambridge, both noted scholars and writers, who had been invited to address my class. Gilby in particular was mystified by the fact that our novitiate was located far out from town on a hill in the hinterlands of the upper Midwest.

'What are you doing out here?' he wondered aloud as he addressed us. 'Dominicans are an urban order'! Although it would be a delayed one, his protest had its effect, one almost as great as my learning that Sebastian Bullough got around on a motorcycle. Although I would never meet either friar again, Gilby's work, especially his multi-volume edition of the *Summa Theologiae* became a lodestone during my fledgling adventures in theology. (Later, my admiration grew when I learned that Gilby had written a novel, *Up the Green River*, a discovery that fortified my own ventures into fiction two decades later.)

Once into my philosophical studies at the Dominican House of Studies in River Forest, Illinois, my interest in and admiration of Oxford and its Dominicans kept growing. One of my finest teachers in the studium was James Weisheipl, who had earned a second doctorate in history at Oxford in 1957, his thesis dauntingly entitled 'Early Fourteenth Century Physics of the Merton "School" with special reference to Dumbleton and Heytesbury'.

It was not a best-seller. But Weisheipl would shortly publish a groundbreaking biography of St Thomas Aquinas that remained the standard work for a generation. By the time I returned from my first two sojourns at Blackfriars, he had joined the faculty of the Pontifical Institute in Toronto. However, he returned to Chicago in time for a final meeting with me before his untimely death in 1985. He was more pleased that I had discovered the joys and perils of Oxford than that I had just been appointed to the Chair of Philosophy and Theology at the College of St Thomas in St Paul, Minnesota. The connection had endured.

First Foray into Oxford: 1972 and all that

A chance opportunity arose in the summer of 1972 that led to my long relationship with the English Dominican province. A young couple on the staff of Loyola University's Institute of Pastoral Studies, where I taught, invited me to join them on a two-week trip to Europe, thanks to a program supported by the St. Patrick's Missionaries (also known as the Kiltegan Fathers). We would fly to Shannon, cross Ireland, take the ferry over to England, and eventually tour parts of Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and France in a hired car before returning via Shannon.

Before departing, I was advised by my barber, who had been stationed in England at the end of the Second World War, that I should take a supply of nylon stockings, toothpaste, cigarettes, and toilet paper, all of which were in short supply and would be much appreciated by my hosts. I managed to squeeze some of each into my bags and thus equipped, set out with my friends on my first trans-Atlantic flight.

It was an ambitious trek, but we were young and it was my first trip abroad. Ireland was economically distressed but enchanting. Having roots there on all sides of my family, I began contemplating returning at some later date. London was exciting and a bit overwhelming. And, as it happened, damp and chilly. Having a day to myself, which all of us probably needed by that time more than we would admit, I decided to take the train from Paddington Station to Oxford, the lair of Lewis, Tolkien, Vann, and other famed Dominicans I had heard so much about.

'They're all pretty eccentric, you know', one of the better-traveled friars at the chaplaincy in New Mexico had earlier confided in me. I wondered if the English friars could be more eccentric than many members of my own province, but I was more than willing to find out.

It was only mildly wet but a cool and clammy noontime when I rang the bell at Blackfriars on August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption, 1972 – 751 years to the day on which the friars, led by Gilbert de Fresney, established their first priory in the city, not on St Giles Street but not far distant. I was about to begin an adventure that would continue for almost fifty years. In retrospect, the date was more auspicious than I

could have imagined. The cornerstone of the new priory planned by Fr Bede Jarrett had been laid by Cardinal Francis Bourne, the Archbishop of Westminster, on the same feast day – August 15th, 1921, seven hundred years after the first foundation.

Things did not go well at first. I was met at the door by Brother Martin Ashmore, who was also the cook. He was reluctant to admit me into the priory because to his eyes I didn't look like a proper Dominican. I was an American to boot. He finally relented, and I was allowed entrance to the refectory at the 'second table', along with the servers and other late-comers.

After the noon meal, I was escorted to the common room, where, as the community relaxed and enjoyed a modest post-prandial, I found myself sitting next to a middle-aged friar with a shock of unruly hair and a vivid personality by the name of Herbert McCabe. I had not really expected the English friars to be cool, detached, and remote, as well as learned, and while he was certainly learned, Herbert was anything but cool, detached, and remote. As he chatted me up, as the saying goes, he discovered to his horror that I was innocent of acquaintance with single malt whiskey. He arose and shepherded me by the elbow down St Giles Street to the nearest pub, the fabled *Eagle and Child* (or 'the Bird and Babe', as it had been dubbed years earlier). I soon learned that it had been a haunt of the Inklings, one of whom, C.S. Lewis, was that favored author of my late adolescence.

Two small glasses of Glenfiddich later, we were on our way back to Blackfriars because Herbert had agreed to take some visitors on a brief walking tour of the city. He invited me to go along, and I gladly accepted.

I had been to mass at Westminster Cathedral that morning. Perhaps it was the drizzly day and the clammy interior of wet bricks, but the preaching left me cold. So when Herbert announced that he had to leave our little group to preside and preach at the 6:15 mass back at Blackfriars, I decided to stay over and attend. That decision changed the course of my life. Herbert was a great preacher.

Return to Oxford: 1974 and all that

I would find my way back to Blackfriars early in December, 1974. At the time, I was pursuing a line of research into the varieties of religious experience as part of my doctoral work at Loyola University where I had just passed my comprehensive exams. I had read of the remarkable work of the Religious Experience Research Unit founded by Sir Alister Hardy at Manchester College, where he was also President. A fellow of Merton College and the foremost marine ecologist of his day, Hardy sought to pursue the suggestion of William James that the study of religious experience warranted an empirical approach. The unit

(generally known as RERU) had already amassed several thousand case histories.

Eager to escape the distracting controversies of the cinema-fed *Exorcist* frenzy of the time into which I was drawn by my work in religious experience, I volunteered to assist in the Unit's research and analysis. Sir Alistair graciously accepted my offer. But I needed lodging and nothing was more suitable than Blackfriars, less than a five-minute walk from Manchester College. I wasn't entirely unknown, but my request had to be vetted at a community meeting. I wrote to the prior, Fergus Kerr, and was informed soon after that my residence had been approved.

I was assigned a small room on the first floor (which Americans would call the second floor) of the annex, 'the Tower', part of the wing built according to Bede Jarrett's plans for the new priory. It happened to be next to a somewhat larger room that had been assigned to a young friar recently returned from Paris where he had earned a doctorate in theology under the critical eye of Yves Congar. His name was Timothy Radcliffe, definitely a good English name (more so than I realized at the time) and we soon began a friendship that would last almost fifty years now. Candidly, and without excessive fear of recrimination, I confess that I consider Timothy to be the most engaged (and engaging), well-informed, and accomplished friar I ever met. Not surprisingly, he was in due course elected prior of Blackfriars for two terms, but not until after he chose to serve as chaplain to the students at London University for several years. He was elected provincial prior in 1988, and in 1992 Master of the Order. He was the first, and until now, the only friar of the English province to serve in that capacity.

One of my cherished memories is of driving Timothy around Chicago the night before he flew to Mexico City for the general chapter that would elect him, discussing various ploys that would get him off the roster of candidates, for he knew that he was being considered. I suggested simply telling the electors that he did not want the job. In the end, in a surprising break with tradition, he didn't tell them anything when his turn came to make his case. He was elected the next morning.

At the time I returned to Oxford in 1974 there were over thirty-two of us living in the house, including a quiet Chilean refugee who spoke no English and was given a tiny room under the winding Tower staircase in exchange for menial duties he cheerfully performed. Sometimes a hungry student would join us at the long tables in the refectory. There always seemed to be enough to feed everyone, but the community was by no means economically well off.

Life at Blackfriars was never dull, although I was away when the priory was twice bombed, most likely by members of the National Front, incensed at Herbert's left-leaning editorials and public statements and then his support of Bernadette Devlin, the Northern Irish nationalist firebrand who was being relentlessly hounded by the press and unionist

politicians. The National Front effrontery might have been expected. Herbert was well-known for his involvement with the *Slant* group, a loosely organized but radical Catholic social movement and its journal of the same name put out by Terry Eagleton, a former student and life-long friend, Adrian Cunningham, Raymond Williams, Martin Shaw, and Leo Pyle. (*Slant* ceased publication in 1970.)

Neither bomb did significant damage, but the point was made. It didn't change Herbert's views, but at one point he found himself under attack because of his forthright approach to matters religious as well as political. It was in the wake of the disconcerting departure from the Church and subsequent wedding in 1967 of Fr Charles Davis, one of England's most prominent theologians. When queried about his decision, Davis was widely quoted as saying that the Church was hopelessly corrupt. In an editorial, Herbert admitted that the Church was corrupt, but added sagely, 'that is no reason to leave it'.

Reaction was swift, involving attacks in the conservative Catholic press and even by some of his own confreres in the Order. He was denounced to Church authorities in England and all the way to the Vatican. In a flurry of reaction, Herbert was suspended, summarily removed from his position, and effectively silenced. Cooler and wiser heads eventually prevailed, and Herbert was reinstated, famously commenting on taking up his editorial pen again in October 1970, 'As I was saying when I was so oddly interrupted, ecclesiastical authorities can behave in some fairly bizarre ways'.

Once my basic research at RERU was finished, although I would maintain my relationship with the Research Unit well past Sir Alister's death in 1985, I returned to the US but had already begun planning another return to Oxford as soon as possible.

The Second Coming: 1976 and all that

I made my way back to Blackfriars in 1976, and would continue to do so for the next two decades, at first for a few weeks and gradually as my academic obligations permitted, for a month and even on sabbatical for several months.

Over the years, I met many, perhaps most of the English friars, whether as faculty and students at Blackfriars or in my visits to priories and houses in England and Scotland. But my most memorable experiences of the English province came by way of my years at Oxford. There I met an amazing set of remarkable scholars, supporters, and fascinating and occasionally eccentric characters.

Among the many accomplished friars I met there, perhaps the prince of the lot was Gervase Mathew, a renowned University Lecturer in Byzantine Studies, a man of prodigious scholarship and, true to my confreres' predictions, almost as quirky as he was brilliant. He was also

gentle, generous, witty, and kind. His range of interests, in which he typically achieved mastery, was astonishingly broad, his publications dauntingly extensive in art, archeology, history, mystical theology, and medieval political thought.

Gervase and his brother, David, once the Archbishop of Africa ('Yes, all of it'.) were sometimes referred to as Tweedledum and Tweedledee because of their walks, arm-in-arm, through the streets of London and Oxford. But I remain especially grateful to Gervase for introducing me to the writings of that oddest of the Inklings, Charles Williams.

One evening at supper, several of us were discussing the Inklings, the literary lights who frequented the *Bird and Babe* where Gervase sometimes joined them, as well as in Lewis' rooms in Magdalen College.

'Charles Williams', he said to me in a conspiratorial whisper. 'He's the best of the lot'.

I knew nothing at the time of Williams or his work, but intrigued by such high praise from a great scholar in his own right, I soon delved as deeply as I could into Williams' fiction, poetry, criticism, reviews, and theological works. Williams had migrated to Oxford at the beginning of the Second World War because of his position as a senior editor at Oxford University Press, where he produced among other significant works the poetry of T. S. Eliot.

At Oxford he soon found himself in the company of Tolkien, Lewis, Owen Barfield, and Gervase Mathew himself, as well as the wider university community, to which he was hardly unknown. Gervase, I learned, was perhaps the last of his friends to see him before he went into hospital for surgery. 'Please pray for me', he had asked. But Williams was not to return, succumbing during surgery on May 15th, 1945, at the age of 59.

Another legendary friar was the scion of an old Quaker family that dabbled in the slave trade and was later known for military achievements. Giles Hibbert was large, brilliant, and in his way also quirky. He had constructed a miniature railroad in the priory cellar, which he proudly operated for me. It did not long survive although I later found remnants tucked here and there when I undertook the task of clearing some space to revive what had once been a workshop. Giles had himself tattooed with a steadily growing display of insects of all kinds. He was certainly ahead of his time as far as tattoos go, but his approach was distinctively and wondrously unique.

One-time regent of studies, and a gifted writer (he authored a commentary on the Gospel of John) and editor, Giles also had a way of shocking the public with spontaneous declarations of his political views (being a self-proclaimed Marxist among them, not to mention coming out as gay at a meeting at which a reporter of the *Oxford Times* happened to be present). He was no less renowned for preparing luscious if spicy curries when it was his turn on the rota to cook. In later years, I was able to visit him in Manchester and Sheffield, where he

was chaplain to the university and produced a series of booklets under the banner of Blackfriars Publications. He died in Cambridge in 2013 at the age of 84.

One of my best friends at Oxford and later was the irrepressible, talented, and deeply compassionate John Orme Mills. After several years serving in Rome as a correspondent and assistant to the Master of the Order, John came to Oxford in 1983 to edit *New Blackfriars*. His background in journalism was of immense value, but he was not the easiest of editors to work with, as I soon discovered. On the other hand, John was a delightful companion and we soon established a lasting friendship. After he moved to London, we liked to meet at a pub not far from the priory and St. Dominic's Church – was it *The Stag*? He seemed to be pretty well known there.

Among other shared interests, we shared a deep appreciation of the spirituality of Meister Eckhart. In later years, John was the founding editor of the *Eckhart Review* (now *Medieval Mystical Theology*), and was eventually elected chairman of the Eckhart Society, a position he held until his death in Cambridge in December, 2010.

Excursions

Over the next decade, well into the exciting if not exactly roaring '80s, I was able to visit most of the Dominican houses in England and Scotland except Hinckley, the first foundation after the Province was re-established in 1765 – Hawkesyard, Woodchester, Newcastle, Leicester, several of the smaller communities, and, of course, London. I made several trips to Cambridge, where I first met Kenelm Foster, that great Dante scholar, and reunited with Conrad Pepler who had directly and indirectly steered my path into the study of the English and Rhineland mystics of the fourteenth century. Shortly after arriving on time, I greeted Conrad, whom I had not seen for several years. He returned my welcome, then asked 'Um, who are you'?

'It's Richard', I responded, a bit crestfallen.

'Oh, of course', he laughed, peering a little more closely. 'I have recently had cataract surgery, and I hardly recognize people now that I can see clearly. But I remember your voice'.

I also made the acquaintance of two of the priory's more notable supporters and frequent worshippers, Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, who, like Cornelius Ernst, Herbert, Fergus Kerr, and more recently, Brian Davies, have done so much to develop what has been called 'Analytic Thomism', in the wake of the formidable, enigmatic Ludwig Wittgenstein.

To many visitors to the United Kingdom, however, England means London, possibly a side visit to Stratford-upon-Avon and perhaps to Oxford and Cambridge. But London is no more England than Dublin

is Ireland or New York is the USA. Nor is Oxford's Blackfriars the English province of the Dominican Order. It required several years for that truly to sink in, and for that I owe a great debt of gratitude to a very great Dominican.

Sr Assunta

For decades, the English province had cultivated connections with the congregations of Dominican sisters. During the '70s, the friars established especially impressive working relationships with the 'Bushey Sisters', the Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena of Newcastle, Natal, South Africa to be precise, whose motherhouse is located in Bushey in Hertfordshire on the outskirts of London, and the Stone Dominican sisters whose motherhouse is in Staffordshire. The friars also provided chaplains to the cloistered nuns of St. Dominic's Priory at Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight, where I was to see Cornelius Ernst for the final time shortly before his untimely death in 1977.

Sr Assunta Kirwan of the Bushey congregation proved to be a creative and supportive collaborator when she assumed the management of the Dominican Conferences in 1988. She had been Warden of Spode House, the Dominican retreat and conference center in Staffordshire, working with Fr Conrad Pepler from 1982 until its closure in 1988. She subsequently joined the faculty of Blackfriars, where she taught Greek and scripture studies in addition to directing the Conferences and supervising the postulants who studied at Blackfriars and lived at Tackley Place, not far distant, where she was the superior.

I first met Assunta at Spode House, when I arrived just too late to attend a study program on Meister Eckhart with Pepler, Fergus Kerr, and Ursula Fleming, who would go on with Pepler's encouragement to found the Eckhart Society. Assunta remembered me and had me enlisted by 1990 to present conferences at sites throughout the Midlands, which for the next six years gave me access to parts of England and the acquaintance of friars, sisters, and lay Dominicans I would not have otherwise enjoyed. Assunta usually accompanied me on these journeys, always by train. Needless to say, she was a delightful traveling companion, always remembering to bring along some fruit, drinks, and better sandwiches than the grub served on the trains.

One of the most enjoyable encounters with the friars, sisters, and lay Dominicans of the larger Dominican community that Assunta organized were the annual New Year's Conferences at All Saints Pastoral Center in St Albans. These were a wonderfully heady mixture of talks, discussions, worship, and the required New Year's Eve party that ushered in the New Year. True to form, Assunta talked me into addressing the annual gathering twice.

In 1993, Assunta was unsurprisingly elected Prioress General of the Bushey congregation, distinguishing herself further by writing and speaking widely before her sudden and untimely death in 1997. She was one of the most admirable Dominicans I ever met.

Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Anthony Ross

My first venture into Scotland was in order to pursue a research goal at the Glasgow Public Library in 1976, access to the *Glasgow Herald* accounts of the Gifford Lectures given in 1938 by William Ernest Hocking, the subject of my doctoral dissertation. The microfilmed copies were the only known source, as the onset of World War Two had interrupted the publication of the lectures. Fortunately, the *Herald* printed them each day in more or less complete form.

I traveled to Glasgow with Jerry O'Leary, a fellow friar from Chicago, aided by a rental car which gave us the opportunity to visit the chaplaincy on George Square in Edinburgh. That led to further adventures, largely because of the presence in Edinburgh at the time of one of the most engaging and resourceful and splendid Dominicans I ever met, Anthony Ross – journalist, historian, scholar, social organizer, eventual Rector of the University of Edinburgh, and superior of the English province.

The house the Dominicans occupied on George Square was located near the heart of the university, a great aid to their ministry as chaplains. For a few years in the nineteenth century, it had been home to Sir Walter Scott. The bed in the room I was assigned high up in the third floor may well have dated from that era. I half-expected to find drafts of *Ivanhoe* beneath the lumpy mattress.

My first encounter with Anthony was unusual. As we had the use of a car, a relative luxury lacking in most Dominican communities of the time, I was asked if we could collect Anthony from the hospital where he had undergone surgical treatment for cancer. He was forbidden, as a result, to observe a rule few Scots would have tolerated: to avoid alcohol in all its forms for some time. Not surprisingly, when we had bundled Anthony safely into the car, he cheerfully noted that there was a fine pub not far from the priory.

Well-known for his ministry to the homeless, his scholarly achievements, and civil accomplishments, Anthony had established several therapeutic communities in the city. Shortly after we collected him at the hospital, Anthony invited us to accompany him to two of the communities he had founded for young people down on their luck and in need of psychological and financial support. In the first one we visited, he was suddenly set upon by a young fellow who tackled him from behind. Although only recently released from hospital, Anthony put him down after a brief, friendly struggle. Later I learned that Anthony, like

Plato, had once been a wrestler, something not unknown to his young beneficiaries.

Like Plato, he was broad but not tall. When I returned to Edinburgh several years after our first meeting I was happy to see him in good health and excellent spirits. ‘But you’ve shrunk!’ I protested.

He laughed and doubted that was the case. But in my imagination over the years he had grown to a towering height and was even more robust. Such is the role memory plays in enlarging our impressions of great men (while places seem to shrink). And Anthony was a great man.

One of the last times I saw him was in 1979, just after he had been elected Rector of the university by the students and staff, the first Catholic to be so honored since the position was created in 1858. I was unable to attend his installation, so he invited me to his office where he donned his splendid black silk gown with its brilliant crimson velvet sleeves, trimmed with glimmering gold lace. His trencher was also black silk velvet, adorned with a gold button and tassel. He made an impressive figure and I was certainly impressed.

In 1982, Anthony was elected provincial, but suffered a severe stroke six months later, which left him speechless for a time. By then he had already signed me up to join a project he had in mind, ministering to the spiritual needs of the Catholic drillers, many of them Polish, who had flocked to England and Scotland following the discovery of natural gas off the northeast coast. It was not to be. Although he characteristically pressed on to finish his term of office despite serious complications from the stroke, he never fully recovered and died in 1993. I saw him one more time before his death but, as with Herbert, Assunta, Giles, and other friends, I was unable to attend his funeral as I had returned to the US for the academic term. Anthony was surely one of Scotland’s greatest Dominicans and, I am grateful to add, my good friend. But like the others, perhaps because I was absent from their funerals, they live on in my memory – vital, inspiring, fully engaged and highly effective in their ministries, and larger than life.

I was also privileged to meet Bede Bailey in Edinburgh, the provincial archivist at the time, who gave me a tour of the irreplaceably precious books and papers stored at the time in frighteningly damp but mercifully cold back rooms on the lower floor – now safely housed in more appropriate quarters at Douai Abbey. Bede was the last living link to Bede Jarrett, who re-established the Dominicans in Edinburgh and Oxford in the 1920s. I would meet him for a last visit at the friars’ residence in Carisbrooke, where Cornelius Ernst had found refuge. Cornelius died in 1977 and Bede in 2014, at the age of 97. The monastery was closed in 1989.

Among other notable Dominicans of that great, pre-war generation, I met Herbert’s old novice master Columba Ryan in London, where I

came to know several other venerable friars and where, eventually, my friend, John Orme Mills, arrived after his years in Oxford.

The Brothers

During my stays in England, I came to know and admire a number of cooperator brothers in Oxford and elsewhere, whose contributions to the communities and the province were manifold – among them Vincent Cook, the blind brother who faithfully prepared the vegetables for the evening meal for years, Ken Foskett, Reginald Ryan, Gerard Grant, Andrew McManus, and one of my favorite friar friends from the years I lived at Blackfriars and subsequent visits, the legendary Welshman, Kevin Lloyd.

Like many of his generation (Kevin was born in 1913), he had vivid memories of the harrowing years of the Second World War. I especially remember his account of the bombing of Coventry, the flames of which could be seen as far away as Rhyll. No visit to Blackfriars would have been complete without a session with this avid reader and raconteur.

Kevin, it turned out, had a deep interest in medieval and Tudor history, especially historical novels of the times. He introduced me to the Brother Cadfael detective stories of Ellis Peters, the pen name of Edith Pargeter, who also wrote under her own name, as well as works by Paul Doherty and other acclaimed medieval mystery writers. But the most significant contribution he made to my knowledge of medieval English history was a small book that detailed the thwarted rescue of Edward II from Berkeley Castle in 1327 by a band of supporters organized by two Dominicans, Thomas and Robert Dunhead, and their brother, Stephen.

One thing led to another and I found myself plowing through histories that might shed light on these friars, including the fascinating if detailed sixth chapter of Bede Jarrett's *The English Dominicans*, 'The Royal Confessors' (regrettably omitted from the later edition by Walter Gumbley). I came away with a growing appreciation of the powerful connections between the English Dominicans and the English kings of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Along the way, I became fascinated by the greatest Dominican historian of the period, Nicholas Trevet, the chronicler of the Plantagenets, who was not only a contemporary of Meister Eckhart, but undoubtedly resident at the same time as the great German mystic at St Jacques in Paris. But all that is grist for another mill.

Kevin was for several years the porter at Blackfriars. As kind as he was sharp-witted, he used to prepare sandwiches for the tramps, most of them Irish, who resorted to the priory for handouts as they made their way through the Midlands. But one day, Kevin was assaulted by one of them, which all but ended the practice. One day, however, Kevin

spotted his assailant on the street and, in his friar's habit, pursued him with a broom handle to the applause of amused pedestrians.

Kevin died in 2005 and shares a grave at Wolvercote cemetery with another great friend, Gareth Moore, who died far too young in 2002. Gareth and I were friends for years. I fondly recall him as a gifted pianist and deeply thoughtful scholar, whose few books on philosophy and theology were well-received. We often spent long evenings listening to recordings of Mahler symphonies and the lesser-known works of Richard Strauss. His range of musical interests was phenomenal and he put them to good use in conducting weekend retreats based on Bach's *Mass in B minor* and other classic works. (He was at various times also student master, community bursar, and computer-meister). He is greatly missed.

The Regulars

I would be remiss here if I didn't advert to the wider circle of friends attracted to our communities, all of whom merit greater consideration. But this is not the book it ought to be, only a series of tableaux. I could not, however, leave out Peter Hebblethwaite, Adrian Hastings, Maureen Pemberton, Toni Lacey, Ann Thirkell-Smith, and the generous band of doorkeepers at Blackfriars whose welcoming presence contributed greatly to our community life, among them Barbara Hastings, Bronac Holden, Eileen Balance, Mary Todd, Anna Baidoun, Bob Hughes, and Tony Rudkin.

The McCabe Legacy

If there is a hero to this story, it would likely have to be Herbert, who reminded me greatly of my grandfather – lovable, irascible, witty, and fond of what the Irish call 'the drink'. He was a long-standing comrade of the great Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, whom he had befriended in Northern Ireland when they were much younger. Seamus would visit Herbert at Blackfriars, where I was privileged to bump into him now and then. Customarily, they would spend a rollicking night at the King's Arms, and return late to the priory singing revolutionary songs. Eventually his wife, Marie, encouraged Heaney to distance himself from Herbert, so the story goes, to reduce the notoriety that might follow on a night of boisterous bonhomie at the King's Arms. But Heaney would be on hand to recite a poem at Herbert's funeral in that sad summer of 2001.

Although a brilliant scholar and a superb preacher, Herbert was fastidious about going into print, although he published several well-received books over the years. It is thanks to Brian Davies, Herbert's

literary executor, and now successor as editor of *New Blackfriars*, that the depth of his insight, his compassion, and spirituality have been revealed in a collection of his sermons and many other writings. But I remember Herbert, first of all, as my Vergil that sullen August afternoon so long ago, my friend and sometime critic, and my benefactor.

One day when I was in residence at Blackfriars, Herbert asked me if I had an Aran sweater. I told him that I did, but it was in Ireland. ‘Well now, you have two’, he declared, endowing me with his venerable, much-loved, and fairly bulky Aran sweater. He had taken very good care of it over the years, not washing it in sand, but hand-washing it and carefully drying it on a rack on the corridor just outside his room. I still have it and whenever I put it on come a chilly day in Wicklow, I breathe a prayer for the soul of my old chum as he might have put it. (When Herbert called someone ‘chum’, however, it usually meant they were in for a drubbing as I sometimes was. We did have our moments of disagreement, but then, so did everyone else. Herbert was a great one for argument.)

Herbert’s annual birthday parties in early August were modestly joyous occasions, which I was delighted to be able to attend for several years. Herbert died on 28 June 2001. He also died in April, 2000, when in surgery for some repair work following a near-fatal fall in the stairwell at Blackfriars a few nights earlier. He was resuscitated, but later insisted that he merited two obituaries since he would have had in fact died twice.

Although I was about to fly back to Chicago for a provincial assembly on his return from hospital but before leaving I was able to visit him in his room at the priory. I found him, incredibly, rather frail and none too well. As we parted, he cautioned me as he shook hands not to grip too hard because he was by then ‘feeling a bit fragile’.

Herbert’s actual death was nevertheless unexpected when it occurred. He had gone into hospital to have some pins removed from the broken ribs he sustained when he tripped and fell down the stairwell. I heard that he succumbed to acute peritonitis. I was unable to attend his funeral, which by accounts was the kind of send-off Herbert would have enjoyed. The homily was preached by his old friend (and novice-master) Fr Columba Ryan, Seamus Heaney read his poem, and Herbert’s brother sang a revolutionary song. With his passing, a special epoch in the story of the English province came to an end. At least for me.

The ‘90s and After: On the Faculty

In a moment of what I think was probably sheer desperation in 1993, the regent at the time, Brian Davies, invited me to join the Blackfriars faculty as tutor and lecturer, especially given the increasing number

of American students from Providence College and University of San Francisco coming to study for a term. I had a tenured position on the graduate faculty of Loyola University Chicago, but it proved possible to work out an arrangement whereby I could teach two terms at Oxford and one plus the summer session at Loyola each year, thanks to our much longer semester system. I was assigned to the English Province for the following four years.

Blackfriars became more officially connected with the university when, as I recall, in 1994 Brian simply walked over to the university offices and signed a paper making it a Permanent Private Hall, something that had not been considered a pressing necessity. But it opened important new possibilities for the school and has certainly led to significant changes. (In addition to his many other accomplishments, Brian is presently Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, as well as a well-known author, and, as noted, now the editor of *New Blackfriars*.)

My regular stays at Blackfriars ended in 1997 when regulations in the university shifted and Blackfriars, now securely ensconced as a permanent private hall, fell into line, reducing the number of tutors and lectors needed. I still visit when time, work, and age permit, but much less frequently now. By the end of the '90s, some of the charm had worn thin as the economic situation improved. The scruffiness and self-reliance I had come to cherish, or at least respect, gave way to improvements – more carpet, a regular cook, and expanded access by external students, mainly Americans, among other developments, all undoubtedly to the good.

Visiting where work or pleasure required or permitted, I have maintained contact with a number of old friends, whose number has, I'm sorry to say, significantly declined in recent times as age and illness took their toll. The youngsters I met on their entry to the Order back in the '70s and '80s now sport greying hair, grizzled beards, and some expanding waistlines. I have yet to meet many of the younger friars. But the spirit of the English province clearly endures as the next generations succeed those remarkable men and women of the '60s and '70s whom I had grown to respect and admire who themselves stood on the shoulders of giants in my estimation – Conrad Pepler, Jonathan Fleetwood (who as provincial welcomed me warmly to England), Gervase Mathew, Kenelm Foster, Cornelius Ernst, Herbert McCabe, Giles Hibbert, Anthony Ross, Sr Assunta Kirwan, Kevin Lloyd, Osmund Lewry, and Gareth Moore unforgettably among them.

I would be remiss not to mention living friars as well, although cautiously. The medieval custom of not doing so has its very definite merits. Among them, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Fergus Kerr, Robert Ombres, Brian Davies, Richard Finn, and, of course, Timothy Radcliffe. I apologize for a host of many omissions.

The splendid eccentricity of some of the friars of the mid-twentieth century has given way to a calmer, more regular character. But if perhaps not as colourful, the English province is as robust, tough-minded, clear-headed, engaged, and resourceful as it has ever been. Blackfriars Oxford has prospered significantly, institutionally and materially. One has to be of a certain age to recall those Christmas vigils spent shivering in the unheated chapel, when heavy coats and blankets were the order of the day among the congregation. But the chapel was always filled.

A very welcome new furnace and heating system were installed years ago, the walls steadied, roof leaks fixed, and the gardens beautifully preserved. Judicious leadership has expanded the academic contributions of Blackfriars Hall to the Church and the world, especially the creation of two research facilities, the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice and the Aquinas Institute. Undergraduate and graduate educational opportunities have increased proportionately.

Eight hundred years have witnessed the sometimes spectacular rise, fall, and restoration of the English province. Digging into the history of the Dominicans in books by Bede Jarrett, Walter Gumbley, and William Hinnebusch, the celebrated American Dominican historian, led me to the realization that outstanding preachers, teachers, royal chaplains, as well as a few rogues and mischief-makers like the Dunhead brothers, while engaging and often inspiring, are not confined to past ages. It is, you might say, the tradition. The next eight centuries will no doubt be just as memorable.

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