

# Monsignor Michael Williams (1922–2016)

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Monsignor Michael Williams was a distinguished theologian and historian and the greatest single benefactor that the Catholic Record Society has ever had. He served on its Council from 1991 to 2000 and in 2006 he gave it £125,000 as a restricted fund, the income from which was to be used to encourage the study of historical links between England and Wales and other European countries by means of grants towards travel and other research expenses. His own long list of publications included histories of the English Colleges in Rome (1979, 2008) and Valladolid (1986), and for thirteen years (1953–66) he taught theology at the English College in Lisbon. So scholars assisted by his fund will be continuing work to which he had himself made notable contributions.

Michael Edward Williams was born on 10 August 1922 in Handsworth in Birmingham. At the age of eleven he was sent to Cotton College in the moorlands of Staffordshire, where a few years before (1922–9), his uncle, Thomas Leighton Williams, had been an outstandingly successful headmaster, before being appointed archbishop of Birmingham in 1929. Earlier in his career, the archbishop had read history at Cambridge and been Master of St Edmund's House there and Principal of St Charles' House at Oxford, as well as joint editor, with Canon Edwin Burton, of two volumes (10–11) of the publications of the Catholic Record Society. So the young Michael became aware of recusant history sooner than most children do. Having decided to be a priest, he was a strong candidate for the English College in Rome (the *Venerabile*): he had already been to Rome during the Holy Year of 1933, as well as (four times) to Lourdes. But with the collapse of France in May 1940, and the entry of Italy into the war, the College had to be hastily evacuated to St Mary's Hall in Lancashire, where it remained for the next six academic years, until the autumn of 1946. So Williams's account of this 'exile' in his *History* of the College is autobiographical, though, as he remarked there, 'continuity [was] preserved, since those who joined the College during the first year in England were now [in 1946] going out for their last year in Rome'. He was ordained in Rome on 19 July 1947 and

afterwards stayed on to do a doctorate (*summa cum laude*) on the Trinitarian theology of Gilbert de la Porrée. After returning to England in 1950, he served in a Birmingham parish for three years and was then offered a choice between joining the Catholic Missionary Society under Fr George Patrick Dwyer (another alumnus of the Venerable) or teaching theology in Lisbon. He chose Lisbon, where he remained for the next thirteen years, until the end of 1966. By then Dwyer had become archbishop of Birmingham, and therefore Williams's diocesan, but still had an interest in the projected Trinity and All Saints College in his former diocese of Leeds. He invited Williams to become head of theology there, a post which he held for the next twenty-one years, until his retirement in 1987. In addition to theology, he also taught courses on cinema and was a member of juries at film festivals in St Sebastian, Berlin, Venice and Figuera da Foz. After 1987 he remained active as lecturer and author until 2005, when he moved from Leeds to Aston Hall in Staffordshire, the archdiocesan home for retired priests. He died on 1 February 2016 and was buried at Oscott College on 25 February.

Apart from his books and the summary of his doctoral thesis in *Analecta Gregoriana* 56 (1951), Williams published more than a hundred articles. Although space does not allow a full listing here (one is available from Oscott), there should at least be some indication of their dates and of where they can be found. He began, while at Lisbon, with three contributions to *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology* (1962) and eighteen to the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (1967). He ended, after retirement, with twenty new or revised contributions to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). In between, there were, among others, eight articles in the *Catholic Gazette* (1970-75); six in *New Blackfriars* (1975-1994); eleven in *Recusant History* (1984-2003); four in *The Month* (1987-91); and three in *Cine & Media* (1995). Among his varied contributions to symposia are: 'St Teresa, Doctor of the Church', in *Teresa de Jesus and her World* (ed. Margaret A. Rees, Leeds, 1981); 'Os Inglesinhos de Lisboa', in *Actas do Colóquio Comemorativo do VI Centenário do Tratado de Windsor* (Faculdade de Letras do Porto, 1988); 'Images of Martyrdom in Paintings at the English College, Valladolid', in *Leeds Papers on Symbol and Image in the Iberian Arts* (ed. Margaret A. Rees, Leeds, 1994); 'O Testamento de Infanta D. Isabel Maria' in *Actas do Quinto Congresso Associação Internacional de Lusitanistas* 3 (1998); and 'Seminaries and Priestly Formation,' in *From Without the Flaminian Gate* (ed. V. Alan McClelland & Michael Hodgetts, 1999). For him, theology, history and art went together, and the strength of his writing is in the interpenetration of these elements and his easy familiarity with all of them. But he was also willing to take on humbler but still necessary chores: among his other publications are the indexes to Nos. 1-12 of *Catholic Archives*, which he and Robin Gard compiled in 1993.

It is usual to end an obituary with the subject's funeral, but in this case that would not be appropriate. By his writings over half a century Williams altered our perspective on English Catholics since the Reformation, and the scholars supported by his fund will continue to do so. According to the original constitution of the Catholic Record Society (1904), its objects were 'the transcribing, printing, indexing and distributing to its members the Catholic registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths and other old records of the faith, chiefly personal and genealogical, since the Reformation in England and Wales'. From the start the Society sat somewhat loose to that rather limited concept and published other sorts of record, including the Douay College Diaries almost immediately and later on documents from the Royal English College, Valladolid, the Venerable and the English College, Lisbon. As early as the 1919 annual meeting, Cardinal Gasquet observed that 'many' items in the Vatican Archives and Library 'would form interesting and valuable records for the Society'. But, although such material has been used in *Recusant History*/*British Catholic History*, little seems to have come of the hint that there might be volumes devoted to it, nor of Anstruther's listing of the papers of the Cardinal Protectors in his introduction to *The Seminary Priests: I* (1968). In 2017 the Society will issue Dr Caroline Bowden's edition of the chronicles of the English convent at Bruges (1629-1794), and last year Dr Katharine Keats-Rohan published her *English Catholic Nuns in Exile, 1600-1800: A Biographical Register (Prosopographica et Genealogica 15, Oxford, 2015)*. But, even in an age of scans and electronic transmission, that there have not been more such works is at least partly due to the cost of travel and accommodation for scholars working on the Continent, which is precisely what the Williams Fund exists to provide. Generations of researchers and readers will owe a debt of gratitude to him.

*Requiescat in pace*