

Comment:

Father Patrick Primrose OP

Philip Thomas Howard (see July/August 1994 and this issue) died in Rome on 17 June 1694 as a Cardinal. His remains lie in Santa Maria sopra Minerva. He was named Vicar General of the English Dominicans in 1661. Patrick Primrose, Vicar General of the Scottish Dominicans since 1650, died soon after being released from prison in Banff early in 1671. His remains lie in an unmarked grave a few miles west of Huntly.

When he was a young man, there was a Primrose family making its way in Edinburgh. Alison Primrose, for example, married George Heriot, who paid for the school that bears his name. Her brother Archibald, of an age with Patrick, fought with Montrose against the Covenanters. Captured in 1645 after Philiphaugh, tried and condemned for treason, he was released and rejoined the Royalist army. His estates were sequestrated during the Protectorate, but at the Restoration he became a Lord of Session in Edinburgh with the style of Lord Carrington. He died in 1679, in his early sixties. His son, another Archibald, escaped trial for opposing James II at the intervention of the young Duke of Berwick, the King's son by Arabella Churchill, a soldier of fortune like Primrose himself, brought up in France, educated by the Jesuits, who was to become the greatest general on the Catholic side in Europe. This Primrose strongly supported the union of the parliaments, becoming Earl of Rosebery in 1703, thus founding the dynasty that was to become so prominent on the British Imperial scene, as well as on the Turf.

Patrick Primrose, about whose origins we know nothing, gave two books to the University of Edinburgh in 1631. One, printed in Paris in 1549, is by the prolific jurist Tiraqueau, better remembered for helping Rabelais to transfer from the Franciscans to the Benedictines. It bears the signature of John Marjoribanks, presumably a previous owner, perhaps to be identified with John Marjoribanks of Ratho, listed in 1635 as owning a house in Edinburgh. The other, printed in Louvain in 1571, is the famous defence of papal supremacy by the English controversialist Nicholas Sanders, a priest who was to die of starvation in 1581 after nearly two years on the run from Queen Elizabeth's troops in Ireland. It contains a good deal of information about the sufferings of English Catholics. Why did young Primrose have these books? Had he always been a Catholic? How well off was a student to own such books? Why did he give them away? He never graduated — but presumably felt some gratitude to the University? There is not a scribble or underlining in either of them. Perhaps no one has ever read them.

The Irish Dominicans were entrusted with the Scottish province in 1629. Primrose required a dispensation in 1650 to hold the office of Vicar General on the grounds that he had not been twelve years professed. He must have entered the Order not earlier than 1638. Assigned to the

Minerva in 1649, he is said to belong to the Irish province — but to be 'natione Scotus'. Presumably he spent his first years in the Order in an Irish Dominican house on the Continent. Was he taught by Fr J.B. Hackett, the Irish Dominican who influenced Philip Howard (aged 16) to join the Order at Cremona in 1645?

On becoming Vicar General, Primrose moved to Paris, where he tried to place Scottish recruits in various provinces, not very successfully. In 1655, however, he was active as a priest in the Lothians — a dangerous time, with the country under military rule. He must have known some of the Dominicans killed in Ireland by Cromwell's soldiers. But with the return of Charles II and his marriage in 1662 to Catherine of Braganza, the Dominicans came into favour. Howard became chaplain to the Queen. Primrose was appointed to the same office, no doubt in anticipation of an eventual royal visit to Edinburgh. In 1666, at Howard's instigation, he was promoted to Master in Sacred Theology, dispensed from the examination until a convenient time. He was translating a life of Rose of Lima, the recently beatified Dominican recluse to whom the Queen was devoted. But we have no idea whether he ever visited London, nor indeed if he ever met Howard.

Their destinies were certainly very different. By the mid 1660s Patrick Primrose was ministering to Catholic sympathizers in central Aberdeenshire and upper Banffshire. By August 1670 his activities had come to the notice of the Privy Council in Edinburgh — he had been saying Mass in a chapel 'in the house of Kinnairdie in the paroch of Aberchardour within the shyre of Banff'. In September the Sheriff of Banff was instructed to keep him in gaol until he could be tried. In December the Privy Council decided that, since he was one of the Queen's servants, he should be freed on condition that he left Scotland for good. Too sick to travel, he was given until 5 February to leave the country, but he died before he could do so.

In March 1672 the Sheriff of Aberdeen was instructed by the Privy Council to demolish the 'superstitious monument' placed over his grave. The Irish Dominicans, at their chapter held later that year at Mullingar, prayed for the repose of his soul. Something must have reached Lord Carrington's ears in Edinburgh about the Privy Council's difficulties with 'Mr Patrick Primrose'.

Three years after Howard's death his niece, the Duchess of Gordon, left her husband and his great Renaissance palace at Huntly, to retire to a convent in Flanders. Did she ever visit Father Primrose's grave? She certainly left money to the English Dominicans to restore the Scottish province, but it was lost in 1720 when the 'Mississippi scheme' failed. John Law, the financier behind the disastrous scheme, was born in Edinburgh a few weeks after Fr Patrick Primrose died. The ironies of history are inexhaustible.

F.K.