

Comment

Godfrey Anstruther OP, 1903—1988

Writing in *The Tablet* about the English Dominican Godfrey Anstruther, who died on the 23 July at the age of 85, Bishop Foley said he was ‘perhaps the leading English Catholic historian of his time’. How can we measure the stature of historians? Greatness, like beauty, is something which we think we know when we see it, but is devilishly difficult to define.

To be a historian of any worth at all you must have a lively understanding of human beings, and Godfrey certainly had that. He was a nephew of the music hall star George Lupino, and when he was 13 he told the English Dominican Provincial, Bede Jarrett, that he could not make up his mind whether he should be a clown or a Dominican (‘Why not be both?’ came the answer). He had the astuteness of a good comedian, and all his life he could keep crowds of children enthralled and laughing as he spun his stories.

Historians must also, of course, be articulate. The great work of Godfrey’s life, *The Seminary Priests* (1968—77), is a dictionary, and gives you no idea how arresting he could be when writing narrative. He was the son of the Catholic journalist and controversialist, George Eliott Anstruther, and he was taught early about the power of words.

But a good historian is not just a *rapporteur*. You must have as well a massive capacity for taking pains—for storing carefully in your head or on your files vast quantities of seemingly disparate material, and patiently and intelligently sorting it. And it was in this way that Godfrey excelled. He was an extraordinarily patient man, and his boyhood training in mathematics and joinery taught him the virtues of accuracy and of working systematically.

And, to be a good historian, you must love the truth even when you do not like what it is telling you. Godfrey grew up very much a member of the church militant in rather unpropitious times for truth. Admittedly he was born in the shadow of the Dominicans’ London church on Haverstock Hill, and *Veritas* is a motto of the Dominicans, but he lived through the thick of the Roman counter-attack on ‘modernism’. Yet what is most impressive about his second book, *A Hundred Homeless Years* (1958), is its truthfulness. Godfrey was devoted to his Order, and especially to its English Province, and here is an account of the terrible century in the Province’s life following Elizabeth I’s accession. But precisely what makes it so moving is that it is predominantly an account not of heroic deeds but of human frailty, the sorts of things that families like to push under the mat.

What, though, is the final measure of a historian is the power of his judgment, of his ability to interpret his material, to put it into a wider context. Godfrey himself did not pretend this was his strongest point: he was

hesitant to call *A Hundred Homeless Years* 'a history', he called *The Seminary Priests* a work 'designed for the amateur'. He was a great man for detail, and sometimes the detail carried him away and obscured the picture. But it would be ridiculous to let his modesty blind us to the magnitude of his achievement. The four published volumes of his dictionary of the secular clergy of England and Wales from the death of Mary Tudor to the French Revolutionary Wars will remain an indispensable work for anybody investigating the life of the Catholic Church in England during the recusant period. And we can be sure that those violent centuries of Christian history are going to be of enduring interest, maybe just because we live in a very different Christian world. (Incidentally, a fifth volume will take the record up to the restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, it is hoped.)

Ironically, his life-work had its origins in a cigarette. When a student he was caught smoking out of hours, and, because of this, Bede Jarrett feared that Godfrey would not get voted for ordination. So he sent him to Louvain for his theological studies, and suggested that he should also learn there the principles of historical research.

It would, in fact, be a mistake to think that the work of his years in his Order's Historical Institute in Rome and of all the other hours he spent penetrating archives sums up his life. This is what he will be remembered for, but Godfrey, like most really good Dominicans, was a man of many parts. He taught mathematics, Greek and Latin at Laxton, the school which the English Dominicans used to run. He worked in the missions, in Grenada. He was an army chaplain during World War II, in North Africa and Italy. He ran parishes in Newcastle, Manchester and Woodchester. He had a fine pastoral sense, and won the trust and affection of throngs of young people. And in 1950 he was briefly Director of Blackfriars Publications.

He welcomed Vatican II and its changes, but he loved the traditional life of his Order and he saw this as what sustained all his activities. The closing words of *A Hundred Homeless Years* say something about him:

Once provided with a home: once the observances of the order had been established, and the brethren furnished with the normal helps and safeguards of religious life, there was no longer a string of apostates. ... It is interesting to speculate on how different our history might have been, if those few loyal brethren who went into exile to preserve their faith, and died in foreign priories scattered over Europe, had been gathered into a community, preferably at Douai, and had handed on unbroken a tradition not only of study and preaching, but of that liturgical prayer and religious observance which are the mainsprings of their apostolate.

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