

Heroic Catholic Women of England, 1586-1642



Execution at Tyburn by William Hogarth

by Anne Barbeau Gardiner

In the pages of Bishop Richard Challoner's *Memoirs of Missionary Priests*,¹ we find the stories of numerous women who were outstanding for their heroic witness to the Catholic faith. Some of them were mothers who gave encouragement to their priest-sons when these came to be executed for the faith. Other women gave shelter to hunted priests or provided a place where Mass could be offered, and for these splendid acts of charity were stripped of their possessions and cast into filthy prisons like criminals. Yet others gave priests encouragement by visiting them in prison or by accompanying them during their martyrdom. A few women were themselves executed, but most who were arrested suffered the slower martyrdom of imprisonment for life. The reason Catholic priests were hunted down was that, as Dom Bede Camm put it, "In 1585 the wicked Queen who had usurped the Throne of these Kingdoms caused a law to be passed by her servile Parliament which made it high treason for a British subject to be ordained abroad (it was impossible in England) and

return to the country."² For a woman to aid such a "traitor" was a felony, also a capital crime.

Challoner records little about some of these women, but enough to lift the heart and animate the soul. For example, he tells of the mother of the priest John Body, executed at Andover on November 2, 1583. This mother, hearing of her son's martyrdom "made a great feast upon that occasion," inviting her neighbors over to celebrate as if it had been his wedding. With the like supernatural joy, the mother of William Hartley stood faithfully by her son when he was put to death at Tyburn, the Calvary of England, on



Bishop Challoner

October 5th, 1588. An eyewitness reported that she was "looking on" when he was hanged and quartered, "rejoicing exceedingly that she had brought forth a son to glorify God by such a death." Tyburn Tree stood at the junction of three main roads, which today are named Edgware, Oxford Street, and Bayswater. In 1571, a triangular

gallows stood at that spot facing in three directions, able to hang at least twenty-four persons at once.

All we know about another brave Catholic woman is that when the priest Richard Leigh and several other Catholics were martyred at Tyburn on August 30, 1588, she exhorted them to constancy and then, forcing her way toward them through the crowd, knelt and asked their blessing. She was immediately arrested. Similarly, when the priests Robert Dalby and John Amias suffered at York on March 16, 1589, yet another stalwart lady pushed her way through the crowd and, arriving at the spot where their bodies were being cut apart, “fell down upon her knees” with “her hands joined.” The angry mob shouted “an idolatress!” and she was driven away, perhaps to prison. What she was witnessing on her knees was the penalty for high treason then meted out to Catholic priests for their priesthood, a penalty that involved several steps: first the priest was drawn on a hurdle to the gallows and hanged by the neck, but cut down alive; next his bowels were taken out and burned in his sight; then his heart was cut out, presented to the people as “the heart of a traitor,” and thrown in a fire; finally he was beheaded and his body divided into four parts, which were boiled and placed in gibbets on the gates of the city.

Catholic women risked being arrested not only for assisting a priest in any way, but also for taking up relics at his execution.

Even so, women still managed to take up first-class relics. When the priest Saint Edmund Gennings and his assistant, the layman Saint Swithun Wells were put to death in front of Wells’s house (these two are among the 40 martyrs of England and Wales who were canonized in 1970³), “a devout woman” managed to get possession of Genning’s thumb when he was quartered. She later left England and became a nun.

A widow in Oxford was arrested for harboring the priests Blessed George Nichols and Blessed Richard Yaxley (two of the 85 martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1987⁴). When these two priests were condemned and sentenced to be hanged and quartered on July 5, 1589, she too was condemned, but her sentence was to lose all her goods and be imprisoned for the rest of her life. In response, the “good widow” expressed “joy, only regretting that she was not to die with her ghostly fathers.” It was not unusual for a Catholic woman to express a desire

for martyrdom, especially when she saw the priest she had assisted or her husband condemned to die and herself relegated to prison. Yet perpetual imprisonment in a filthy jail was the usual way that undaunted Catholic laymen and women suffered in those years. When Blessed Thomas Atkinson entered York prison in 1616 before being put to death, he found there eighty Catholics who had been condemned for their religion to the loss of all their goods and life imprisonment.

She was “looking on” when he was hanged and quartered, “rejoicing exceedingly that she had brought forth a son to glorify God by such a death.”



Martyr being drawn and quartered.

At the trial of the priest Roger Diconson, who was hanged and quartered at Winchester on July 7, 1591, “seven maiden gentlewomen, of good families” were condemned with him for having received him “into their houses to say Mass for them.” But the judge, after he had sentenced these seven ladies to death, gave them a reprieve and ordered them back to prison. At this the women “all burst into tears” and asked that “they might die with their ghostly father and pastor,” for they were sure that God, “who had given them the grace to do what they had done,” would enable them to suffer death “for the holy Catholic Faith.”

Another woman likewise condemned to die but reprieved, was Alice, the wife of Swithun Wells. On November 7, 1591, Saint Edmund Gennings, Saint Polidore Pladen, and Saint Eustace White were celebrating Mass for a number of Catholics in her house. The priest-catchers broke down the door and arrested everyone present. The

three priests were tried and condemned for high treason, while the rest were found guilty of felony. But just when she was supposed to be executed, Alice Wells was sent back to prison by the sheriff, a reprieve that might have given “great joy to another” but to her was a great affliction. She “lamented to see herself left behind, and not suffered to bear her husband and ghostly father company in so glorious a death.” Indeed she endured “a longer and more lingering martyrdom in prison,” for she lived a “close prisoner” for another decade in Newgate, dying only in 1602.

Similarly, two Catholic women Ann Tesse and Bridget Maskew were condemned in 1596 to be burned alive for persuading someone to be reconciled to the Church of Rome. They were reprieved, but remained in prison for seven years until the death of Queen Elizabeth. Similarly, a widow named Eleanor Hunt was imprisoned in York Castle in 1599 for having given shelter to the priest Christopher

Wharton, whom she hardly knew before he was arrested in her house. Condemned to death for felony, she refused to save her life by going to a Protestant service, but was later reprieved and sent to prison for life.

At times, Catholic women might offer encouragement where it was not needed, as in the case of Blessed Robert Grissold, an uneducated servant and a man so timorous by nature that he had once fainted when his thumb was pierced by an awl. Yet he was “bold” in his faith, and though he had several opportunities to escape after being arrested in the company of the priest Blessed John Sugar, he chose to stay and suffer death with this holy man a year later, on July 16, 1604.

In prison, a Catholic woman mourned his fate, but Grissold told her not to come in tears “into the bridegroom’s chamber,” at which a wiser Catholic woman exclaimed, “well said, friend Robert, for it is nothing to suffer death for so good a cause.” Later on, before the gates of Warwick (the place of their execution), a Catholic woman tried to step in front of Grissold to prevent him from seeing Father Sugar being cut into pieces, but he told her to stand away, because “I thank God the sight doth nothing terrify me.”

Saint Margaret Clitherow and Saint Margaret Ward, Martyrs

Not all Catholic women who were arrested and found guilty received a life sentence. Three of them won the glorious crown of martyrdom. Saint Margaret Clitherow was crushed to death in York on March 25, 1586, for having harbored priests. She refused to plead for the sake of charity, for she wanted to limit the blame for her death to a single judge by avoiding a trial. She would not make a jury, her servants, her neighbors and her children accessory to her death. On hearing her death sentence, she rejoiced, saying “My cause is God’s, and it is a great comfort to me to die in His quarrel.” An account of her life and death was written by her spiritual director John Mush, who was also sentenced to death, but died of natural causes in 1617.⁵

Saint Margaret Ward was hanged on Tyburn Tree on

August 30, 1588. Her story is closely entwined with that of the priest she rescued, Richard Watson. Unable to endure his sufferings in Bridewell prison, Father Watson had consented to go a single time to a Protestant church and for this compliance he was set at liberty. However, he could not endure the “torments of his mind” and went to confession to an imprisoned priest. He then returned to the



The Forty Martyr-Saints of England and Wales by Daphne Pollen

When Blessed Thomas Atkinson entered York prison in 1616 before being put to death, he found there eighty Catholics who had been condemned for their religion to the loss of all their goods and life imprisonment.

Protestant church and declared publicly that he had done wrong in going there. For this he was arrested again, put in a dungeon, and barraged continually with threats and promises to make him conform to the state religion, “at least outwardly.” Other Catholics were afraid to come near him, but Margaret Ward got permission to bring him

provisions from time to time. After a while, Father Watson told her he might escape if he had a long enough cord. She brought him the cord hidden under some bread and appointed two Catholic watermen to wait for him between 2 and 3 AM. But the priest doubled the cord so that it was not long enough and so broke his right arm and leg in the fall. In spite of this, the water-

men rescued him and concealed him till he was cured. For having helped this priest escape from prison, Margaret Ward was arrested, shackled, hung up by her hands, and scourged. At her trial eight days later, she declared that “she never in her life had done anything which she less repented, than of the delivering that innocent lamb from the hands of those bloody wolves.” Offered life and liberty if she would ask pardon and “go to church,” she flatly refused, saying she would lay down “many” lives, if she had them, “rather than betray her conscience.” So she hanged on Tyburn Tree. One of the brave Catholic watermen who had rescued Father Watson and exchanged clothing with him, an Irishman named John Roche, also suffered there.

Saint Anne Line

Another heroic Catholic woman, Saint Anne Line suffered at Tyburn, on February 27, 1601, three years after Saint Margaret Ward. At the time Mrs. Line was a widow inclined to “drosy” who also suffered from headaches.

Many years earlier she had told Blessed William Thomson of her “holy envy” of Catholic priests who were being martyred for their religion. When Father Thomson was sentenced to die at Tyburn on April 18, 1586, at age 26, he promised to pray for her that she too might obtain “the like happiness.” She had a vision some time afterwards of our Lord in the Sacrament inviting her to follow him and carry the cross, “which seemed to promise her this martyrdom.”

One day when Mass was starting in her home, the priest-catchers broke in. While the priest at the altar (the Jesuit Francis Page) escaped, Mrs. Line was arrested and tried at the Old Bailey. Too ill to walk, she had to be carried to her trial in a chair. Although the evidence against her was weak, she was still found guilty and condemned to hang at Tyburn for harboring priests. At the gallows a Protestant minister declared the cause of her being there, saying that she had been a “common receiver of many priests.” Anne Line gave him this ardent reply, “I wish with all my soul that where I have entertained one, I could have entertained a thousand.”

She was hanged a few minutes before Blessed Roger Filcock, S.J., and Father Mark Barkworth arrived on a hurdle for their own execution. Father Barkworth reverently kissed the edge of her robe and her hand as she hung on the gallows and exclaimed, “Ah, Sister, thou hast got the start of us, but we will follow thee as quickly as we may.”⁶

Of course, not all women behaved admirably at the time. The Jesuit Francis Page who narrowly escaped from Saint Anne Line’s house in 1601 was betrayed by a woman who for a time had “professed herself a Catholic,” but who then made her living by betraying priests. She happened to see Father Page on the street and called out that she wanted to speak to him. He pretended not to hear, ran into the first open house, shut the door behind him, and asked the owner, a Protestant, to let him out by the back way. But she knocked loudly, crying “A traitor, a traitor, a seminary priest!” Thus a mob gathered and Father Page was arrested and taken to the same judge who had condemned Anne Line. Father Page was executed on April 20, 1602

Stabat Mater

One of the outstanding women in Challoner’s *Memoirs* is Elizabeth Willoughby, who was not only an eyewitness of the martyrdom of a priest she knew, but a great support to him throughout his last ordeal. The priest was Hugh Green, who had been raised a Protestant and educated at Cambridge before he sailed to Douay in 1610, at age 26, to become a priest. In 1642 he was boarding a ship bound for France when he was arrested. He was leaving the country in obedience to a proclamation banishing priests, but he was a few days past the deadline. For this technicality he was put to death as a traitor in Dorchester, on August 19, 1642, at age 57.

Elizabeth Willoughby was present with a friend, to whose memory she appeals, for fear that she might “add or take away” anything from the history of Father Green’s martyrdom. She recounts how on that same day two women died on the gallows just ahead of the priest. They had sent him a request the night before that he might absolve them after they had confessed their sinful life on the gallows. Father Green performed this faithfully, and the two women turned towards him as they were dying. When he mounted the gallows, the priest in turn received an absolution from a disguised Jesuit who had come on horseback for this very purpose. Elizabeth blesses God for the “magnanimity” of this Jesuit who risked his life by being present in the midst of a hostile mob that would have shown him no mercy had he been discovered. Before mounting the ladder, Father Green gave



Saint Margaret Ward in St. Etheldreda’s London

Margaret Ward was arrested, shackled, hung up by her hands, and scourged. At her trial eight days later, she declared that “she never in her life had done anything which she less repented, than of the delivering that innocent lamb from the hands of those bloody wolves.”

away his crucifix, *agnus dei*, rosary, and book of litanies to the half-dozen Catholic women present, among whom was Elizabeth Willoughby. After he climbed the ladder and gave his last speech, in which he spoke of “one God, one Faith, one Baptism, one Church,” he gave his benediction to Elizabeth and some other Catholic women, who fell on their knees as he made the Sign of the Cross over them.

Father Green was hanged and then cut down so fast that he “came to his perfect senses” and sat up on

the floor of the gallows. Then some men pulled him down by the rope around his neck, and the inexperienced barber began the butchery – the disemboweling and the removal of the heart. The wide-awake victim crossed himself and kept

saying “Jesu, Jesu, Mercy.” Elizabeth declares that she, “although unworthy,” was a witness of this, for her hand “was on his forehead.” The other Catholic women had been driven away from the spot, but Elizabeth stood by the priest in his agony for an entire half-hour. She says she “never left him until his head was severed.” The unskilled executioner kept raking inside the martyr’s body with his knife, trying to find the heart and cutting off part of the liver instead. Even at this point, the dying priest was conscious: he “called on Jesus, and his forehead sweat, then was it cold, and presently again it burned; his eyes, nose, and mouth, run over with blood and water.” Elizabeth marveled at Father Green’s patience, for when he could no longer say the name of Jesus, his lips still moved in prayer.

She says that she too suffered an agony as she stood there holding his forehead: “Methought my heart was pulled out of my body to see him in such cruel pains, lifting up his eyes to heaven, and not yet dead: Then I could no longer hold, but cried, *Out upon them that did so torment him.*” At this cry, another woman went to the sheriff, her uncle’s steward, fell on her knees before him, and begged that Father Green might be put “out of his pain.” The sheriff immediately ordered the beheading of the priest. But the horrors were not over.

After the body was divided into quarters, Elizabeth asked if the parts could be buried, but the mob roared that “Papists” must not have his quarters. It was a frightening moment, for Elizabeth says that “if we should have offered to carry them away, they would have thrown both the body and us into the fire,” for they were “many thousands.” A Protestant woman agreed to take the shroud which the Catholic women had brought and arrange for Father Green’s quarters to be wrapped in it and buried near the gallows. But even she, a Protestant, suffered “affronts from the ungodly multitude; who from ten o’clock in the morning, till four in the afternoon, stayed on the hill and sported themselves at football with his head and put sticks in his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.” Later when this fit was over, Father Green’s head was allowed to be buried near his body. On reading this account, one cannot help but be astonished at the supernatural fortitude of Elizabeth Willoughby, a lady who stood undaunted in the midst of grave danger and pandemonium until all of the holy martyr’s remains could be reverently buried.

Those Protestants who suffered under Mary Tudor have been remembered in British history, while those who suffered for the Catholic faith for a century and a half have been virtually forgotten. For further information about the many heroic Catholic women who suffered in the sixteenth

She recounts how on that same day two women died on the gallows just ahead of the priest. They had sent him a request the night before that he might absolve them after they had confessed their sinful life on the gallows.

and seventeenth centuries, please refer to Father Roland Connelly’s excellent work, entitled *Women of the Catholic Resistance in England, 1540-1680* (Edinburgh, Cambridge, Durham, USA, Pentland Press Ltd, 1997). It contains the biographies of 57 real heroines.

There is a convent at Tyburn, near Marble Arch, where the relics of many English Catholic martyrs may be venerated (see www.tyburnconvent.org.uk). Saint

Henry Walpole, later to be a martyr himself, wrote an inspiring poem about martyrdom while he was still a student at Grays’ Inn in 1581. He wrote the poem after witnessing the hanging and quartering of Saint Edmund Campion, but these lines may be applied to all the men and women who shed their blood for the Catholic faith in England from the 1530s to the 1680s:

*His hurdle draws us with him to the cross;
His speeches there provoke us for to die;
His death doth say, this life is but a loss;
His martyr’d blood from heaven to us doth cry;
His first and last and all conspire in this,
To show the way that leadeth us to bliss.⁷ ❖*

Notes

1. The full title is *Memoirs of Missionary Priests as well Secular as Regular; and of other Catholics of both sexes, that have suffered death in England on religious accounts, from the year of our Lord 1577 to 1684, gathered partly from the printed accounts of their lives and sufferings published by contemporary authors in divers languages and partly from manuscript relations kept in the archives and records of the English Colleges and Convents abroad, and oftentimes penned by eyewitnesses of their deaths.* (In two parts, 1741-1742). This book is forthcoming in paperback from TAN Publishers.
2. Dom Bede Camm, *The Good Fruit of Tyburn Tree* (London: Sands & Co., 1929), 12.
3. See *Forty martyrs of England and Wales, Canonised by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on 25 October 1970*, compiled by James Walsh, SJ, Vice-Postulator for the Cause of the English Martyrs (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1997; first published 1972), 19-20.
4. See [Father] Roland Connelly, *The Eighty-Five Martyrs* (Great Wakering, Essex: McCrimmons Publishing Co Ltd, 1987), 45-46. The stories of all those who are called “Blessed” in this article are found in this little book.
5. I wrote quite a long account of her martyrdom in *Latin Mass* (Winter 2004), pp. 76-77, when I reviewed Margaret Monro’s stirring biography, *Saint Margaret Clitherow c. 1553-1586 “The Pearl of York”* (TAN Books, 2003).
6. *The Good Fruit of Tyburn Tree*, 52.
7. “An Epitaph on the life and death of the most famous clerk and vertuous priest Edmund Campian, and reverend father of the meeke societie of the blessed name of Jesus” (1581). This is stanza 29 of a 30-stanza poem published and introduced by A[ugustus] J[essopp], a 19th century Anglican clergyman connected to the Walpole family.



Dr. Anne Barbeau Gardiner is Professor Emerita, Department of English, John Jay College, CUNY.