



Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England

Robert Persons's Jesuit Polemic, 1580–1610

Victor Houlston

ASHGATE e-BOOK

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Early Roman Portrait of Father Robert Persons. Sketch by Charles Weld (c. 1857), at Stonyhurst College, from an original in Rome. Reproduced by permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire.

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Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu

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Series Editor's Preface

The still-usual emphasis on medieval (or Catholic) and reformation (or Protestant) religious history has meant neglect of the middle ground, both chronological and ideological. As a result, continuities between the middle ages and early modern Europe have been overlooked in favor of emphasis on radical discontinuities. Further, especially in the later period, the identification of 'reformation' with various kinds of Protestantism means that the vitality and creativity of the established church, whether in its Roman or local manifestations, has been left out of account. In the last few years, an upsurge of interest in the history of traditional (or catholic) religion makes these inadequacies in received scholarship even more glaring and in need of systematic correction. The series will attempt this by covering all varieties of religious behavior, broadly interpreted, not just (or even especially) traditional institutional and doctrinal church history. It will to the maximum degree possible be interdisciplinary, comparative and global, as well as non-confessional. The goal is to understand religion, primarily of the 'Catholic' variety, as a broadly human phenomenon, rather than as a privileged mode of access to superhuman realms, even implicitly.

The period covered, 1300–1700, embraces the moment which saw an almost complete transformation of the place of religion in the life of Europeans, whether considered as a system of beliefs, as an institution, or as a set of social and cultural practices. In 1300, vast numbers of Europeans, from the pope down, fully expected Jesus's return and the beginning of His reign on earth. By 1700, very few Europeans, of whatever level of education, would have subscribed to such chiliastic beliefs. Pierre Bayle's notorious sarcasms about signs and portents are not idiosyncratic. Likewise, in 1300 the vast majority of Europeans probably regarded the pope as their spiritual head; the institution he headed was probably the most tightly integrated and effective bureaucracy in Europe. Most Europeans were at least nominally Christian, and the pope had at least nominal knowledge of that fact. The papacy, as an institution, played a central role in high politics, and the clergy in general formed an integral part of most governments, whether central or local. By 1700, Europe was divided into a myriad of different religious allegiances, and even those areas officially subordinate to the pope were both more nominally Catholic in belief (despite colossal efforts at imposing uniformity) and also in allegiance than they had been four hundred years earlier. The pope had become only one political factor, and not one of the first rank. The clergy, for its part, had virtually disappeared from secular governments as well as losing much of its local authority. The stage was set for the Enlightenment.

Thomas F. Mayer,
Augustana College

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Preface

I first became conscious of the importance of Robert Persons as a formative influence on English Catholicism when I was editing a Latin playlet from the seminary that he founded in St Omer in 1593. His name seemed to crop up everywhere I looked. Although compelling books had been written about most of the other leading Elizabethan Jesuits: Campion, Garnet, Weston and Southwell, Persons seemed to have been left out. There turned out to be good reason for this. He was not so self-evidently or unambiguously a hero as the other figures, and his career spanned so many countries, his multilingual correspondence scattered throughout Europe in so many archives, that a thorough biography would be a life's work. Not for nothing was he dubbed, unkindly, 'Polypragman Persons' – referring to the kind of meddling busybody Plato contrasts with the just citizen in book IV of *The Republic*.

My incipient interest in Persons led me to the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St Louis where, as I soon discovered, they were working on the lengthy manuscript of Francis Edwards's biography. There at least was a reliable guide to the correspondence and the chronology. Envisaging an old-fashioned 'Life and Works', I started at the beginning of his public writing career, which coincided with the English mission of 1580–81. It then became clear to me that there was a need for a reliable critical edition of *The Christian Directory*, so my energies were diverted into that course until my edition was published in 1998. As I worked my way systematically through the published works, I found myself drawn into several ventures of the British Academy John Foxe Project, because of Persons's rejoinder to Foxe in *A Treatise of Three Conversions*. Meanwhile, in 1998 Michael Carrafiello published his monograph, *Robert Parsons and English Catholicism, 1580–1610*. At first sight his work might seem to preempt my study but it has a more political focus and I challenge several of his conclusions. In attending successive meetings of the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, I found that interest in Persons was growing. People wanted to know more about this enigmatic and powerful figure. I hope this book will do something to meet that need.

University of the Witwatersrand
May, 2006

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Acknowledgements

It is a great pleasure to express my gratitude to those who have so generously given me their encouragement and assistance over the period that I have devoted to reading and thinking about Robert Persons. Through the good offices of John Gouws of Rhodes University, the late Guy Butler provided the initial impetus by passing on to me his notes towards an edition of 'Breuis dialogismus', the playlet from St Omer that launched my academic interest in the early English Jesuits. I made several visits to the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St Louis, where the director, John Padberg, SJ, gave me unfailing friendship and support. Thomas M. McCoog, SJ, archivist of the British Province of the Society of Jesus and editor of the publications of the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome, kept me alert to material he was uncovering and processing. The seminar on 'Early Modern English Religious History' at the Institute for Historical Research at London University proved a useful stimulus, and there I was particularly fortunate to meet Michael Questier and Thomas Freeman. Several conversations with Michael Questier helped to nuance my understanding of the cross-currents in Elizabethan Catholicism. Tom Freeman invited me to participate in various activities of the British Academy John Foxe Project, and I need to pay tribute to his extraordinary care in reading and commenting on my work.

I have been privileged to be able to reside at Campion Hall, Oxford, on several occasions during the writing of this book, at the invitation initially of the then Master, Joseph Munitiz, SJ, and latterly of Gerard J. Hughes, SJ, who will be Master for only a few more months now. I am deeply grateful for their hospitality and the opportunity to share in the life of a Jesuit community. The useful conversations I have had there are too numerous to recall, but I received particular help from Graham Pugin, SJ, Michael Suarez, SJ, M. Antoni J. Üçerler, SJ and William Wizeman, SJ. T. Frank Kennedy, SJ, who was delivering the D'Arcy Lectures in 2004, gave me some fascinating information about Persons's interest in music. Other friends and colleagues whose help I would like to acknowledge are: David Attwell, Jacques Berthoud, Brian Cheadle, Timothy Clarke, Pier Paolo Frassinelli, Ann Hutchinson, Eugenie Isserow, Arlene Oseman, Alison Shell, Timothy Trengove-Jones, Merle Williams and Anthony Woodward.

No one who has spent time in Duke Humfrey's Library in Oxford can fail to enjoy the friendly support of Jeanne-Pierre Mialon, Russell Edwards and Alan Carter, to whom I am much indebted. I should also like to record my gratitude to Mgr Adrian Toffolo, former Rector of the Venerable English College in Rome, Christine Butler, archivist at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Christine Y. Ferdinand (fellow librarian) and Sally Speir (librarian) at Magdalen College, Oxford, Wiktor Gramatowski, SJ, former archivist at the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, and Dr I. Massabó Ricci, director of the State Archives in Turin, for permission to consult and quote from manuscripts in their custody.

The late Albert J. Loomie, SJ, kindly gave me permission to quote from his unpublished dissertation 'Spain and the English Catholic Exiles' (London University, 1957). The cover illustration is reproduced by permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, through the good offices of the curator, Jan Graffius.

The University of the Witwatersrand, where I teach, has been generous in granting me sabbatical leave and research funding to pursue this project. I have also received several substantial research grants from the National Research Foundation of South Africa, which I acknowledge with gratitude. I should also like to register my thanks to Tom Mayer, who accepted the work for the series 'Catholic Christendom', and to Tom Gray, the commissioning editor for Ashgate Publishing.

Material from several articles I have published over the years has been adapted in the course of preparing this book. 'The Fabrication of the Myth of Father Parsons' (*Recusant History* 22 [1994]: 141–51) and 'The Polemical *Gravitas* of Robert Persons' (*Recusant History* 22 [1995]: 291–305) inform the argument of Chapters 1 and 8 respectively. Chapter 3 includes a revised version of 'The Lord Treasurer and the Jesuit: Robert Persons's Satirical *Responsio* to the 1591 Proclamation' (*Sixteenth Century Journal* 32 [2001]: 383–401), and Chapter 4 a revision of 'The Hare and the Drum: Robert Persons's Writings on the English Succession, 1593–96' (*Renaissance Studies* 14 [2000]: 233–48). Parts of Chapter 5 are closely related to my essay 'Robert Persons's Comfortable History of England', in *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, c. 1400–1700*, ed. Thomas S. Freeman and Thomas F. Mayer (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2007). Chapter 6 is an adaptation of 'Baffling the Blatant Beast: Robert Persons's Anti-Appellant Rhetoric, 1601–2' (*Catholic Historical Review* 90 [2004]: 439–55). I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to use this material in this form.

List of Abbreviations

- ABSI *Archivum Britannicum Societatis Iesu*
(Archives of the British Province of the Society of Jesus,
London)
- ARCR I A.F. Allison and D.M. Rogers, *The Contemporary Printed Literature of the English Counter-Reformation between 1558 and 1640*, vol. I: *Works in Languages other than English* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1989)
- ARCR II A.F. Allison and D.M. Rogers, *The Contemporary Printed Literature of the English Counter-Reformation between 1558 and 1640*, vol. II: *Works in English* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994)
- ARSI *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu* (General Archives of the Society of Jesus, Rome)
- CRS Publications of the Catholic Record Society (London, 1905 etc.)
- CSP Domestic *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series 1547–1625*, ed. R. Lemon and M.A.E. Green (11 vols; London: HMSO, 1856–72)
- CSP Spanish *Calendar of Letters and State Papers Relating to English Affairs Preserved Principally in the Archives of Simancas*, ed. Martin A.S. Hume (4 vols; London: HMSO, 1892–99)

For Arlene, the promise of good

The Legend of Father Parsons

Robert Persons, son of a Somerset yeoman, was one of the most brilliant talents in early modern England. His achievements were considerable in themselves: superior of the Jesuit English mission of 1580–81, which marked the turning-point in Catholic resistance; founder of seminaries at Valladolid, Seville and St Omer, which played such a large part in keeping English Catholicism alive; tireless leader of the English Jesuits in exile, maintaining a crucial correspondence with priests on the ground in England; author of some thirty books in English and Latin, several of which rank as masterpieces of English Reformation controversy; rector of the English College, Rome; consultant to the papacy on English and Northern European affairs. Many thought he would be created a cardinal. His stature arguably equals that of Reginald Pole or William Allen.

Although Persons is not as well known today as, say, Walter Raleigh, Francis Bacon, Edward Coke, William and Robert Cecil, Richard Hooker, William Camden or Edmund Campion, he can no longer justifiably be called a neglected figure. Perhaps the most compelling account of his career, and certainly the most lively, is that given by A.L. Rowse in his collection of lives entitled *Eminent Elizabethans*.¹ Rowse found Persons both fascinating and repellent, and, in a famous incident gleefully recalled by A.N. Wilson, reproached C.S. Lewis for ignoring Persons's claims as a writer of Elizabethan prose.² Like many historians, Rowse spells the name 'Parsons': the original *Dictionary of National Biography* listed him under this spelling; not surprisingly, since the entry was written by T.G. Law, a rather hostile commentator. Most of Persons's opponents during his lifetime used the 'Parsons' spelling, and they were followed in the main by both Catholic and Protestant writers of succeeding generations. The spelling 'Persons' prevails in the correspondence and in the printed works of Persons and his associates, and I have adopted it at the risk of appearing too much the advocate.

In the last two or three decades, Persons has attracted increasing attention from church historians. John Bossy has owned to admiring his realistic view of the English mission, and has burrowed into the correspondence in hopes of finding the clue to the 'Heart of Robert Persons'.³ Persons's name is prominent in recent studies of martyrology, political theory, recusant rhetoric and Catholic

¹ A.L. Rowse, *Eminent Elizabethans* (London, 1983), pp. 41–74.

² A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (London, 1990), p. 244; cf. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century: Excluding Drama* (London, 1954), pp. 438–41.

³ John Bossy, 'The Heart of Robert Persons', in Thomas M. McCoog, SJ (ed.), *The Reckoned Expense: Edmund Campion and the Early English Jesuits* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1996), pp. 141–58.

loyalism.⁴ All the same, as a figure who was a formidable presence in English affairs in the period 1580–1610, he has not intruded on the consciousness of many non-specialists. This is a pity, because not only was his an extraordinary life in itself, but we will not understand the cross-currents of English religion, politics and literature in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries without coming to terms with his career. In this study I shall chiefly be concerned with his literary output, because it has not before now received the extensive treatment it deserves. This was only one part of his very busy and multi-faceted programme, but my purpose is to show that the writing was truly integrated into his wider missionary vocation.

Robert Persons's life was seldom free of conflict and controversy.⁵ His early life culminated in expulsion from Oxford University; his missionary activities involved him in political manoeuvres which antagonized fellow Jesuits, Catholic clerics and lay people, and the English authorities; and his writings aroused such hostility that several deliberate polemical campaigns were mounted against him.

He was born on 24 June 1546, at Nether Stowey, Somerset, to Henry and Christina Persons, the sixth of eleven children. He attended the local grammar school at Stogursey and went on to the Free School at Taunton. There he learnt his first lesson in resolution. He ran away from school, offended by the way the master treated him, only to be admonished by his mother, who took the master's side. A change of heart ensued. The parish priest of Nether Stowey, John Hayward, then took an interest in his studies, which led him to St Mary's Hall, Oxford, and finally to Balliol College.

Persons spent ten years at Oxford, from 1564 to 1574, trying to make up his mind about religion. In his day, one of the most prominent figures there was the Protestant John Rainolds, whose brilliant lectures on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* almost certainly influenced Persons's thinking about the nature of argumentation.⁶ Anthony Kenny avers that he read Calvin with Thomas Hyde,

⁴ See Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the Catholic Community, 1535–1603* (Aldershot, 2002); Peter Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of the Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge, 1982); Michael L. Carrafiello, *Robert Parsons and English Catholicism, 1580–1610* (Selinsgrove, 1998); Ceri Sullivan, *Dismembered Rhetoric: English Recusant Writing, 1580–1603* (Madison/Teaneck, 1995); John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558–1689* (Harlow, 2000); Ginevra Crosignani, 'De aedeundis ecclesiis Protestantium': Thomas Wright, *Robert Parsons, S.J., e il dibattito sul conformismo occasionale nell'Inghilterra dell'età moderna* (Rome, 2004); Thomas M. McCoog, SJ, *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England 1541–1588: 'Our Way of Proceeding?'* (Leiden, 1996).

⁵ The standard account is by Francis Edwards, SJ, *Robert Persons: The Biography of an Elizabethan Jesuit, 1546–1610* (St Louis, 1995); see also his more general study, *The Jesuits in England: From 1580 to the Present Day* (Tunbridge Wells, 1985), pp. 17–54. See also L. Hicks, SJ (introd.), *Letters and Memorials of Father Robert Persons, S.J.: Vol. I (to 1988)*, CRS, 39 (London, 1942); Federico Eguiluz, *Robert Persons 'El Architrador'* (Madrid, 1990); and Bernard Basset, SJ, *The English Jesuits: From Campion to Martindale* (London, 1967), pp. 55–96.

⁶ See below, Chapter 5, p. 106.

and he had an early reputation as a Calvinist.⁷ But he was soon associating with Edmund Campion, who tried to help him to avoid taking the Oath of Supremacy. He did in fact take the oath, on obtaining his first degree on 31 May 1568,⁸ and the inner conflict would presumably have informed his response, much later in life, to the Jacobean oath of 1606. He was so affected by the deprivation of another fellow of Balliol, Richard Garnet, in 1570 that he withdrew for a while to Somerset and London. His reputation now changed to one of 'backwardness in religion'. It is not an uncommon story: he was a lively, independent thinker who was attracted to the more defined theological positions: first Calvinism, then Catholicism. His own family was undecided: one of his brothers became a Protestant clergyman and another Catholic. His father was later converted to Rome by the missionary martyr Alexander Briant, his mother became part of the recusant underground, ending her days at White Webbs, and his niece Mary was one of the founding sisters of a convent in Brussels.⁹ From such a background of family and education it is not difficult to understand Robert Persons's own blend of combativeness and sympathy: throughout his career he showed an understanding of the conflicting pressures experienced by so many of his contemporaries caught between the old religion and the new.

In November 1569 he became a fellow of Balliol College, and successively enjoyed the offices of bursar and dean, as well as lecturing in rhetoric. It was as dean that he found himself under such suspicion from the master, Adam Squire, and the majority of the foundation that he felt obliged to resign his fellowship on 13 February 1574. Given leave to stay until Easter, he provoked further hostility by trying to enforce the Lenten fast, and was (according to tradition) expelled from the college with the bells of St Mary Magdalen ringing backwards, as for a fire, in the street outside.¹⁰ The rights and wrongs of the expulsion are still somewhat obscure. The charge was of irregularity with the accounts during his term as bursar, but the evidence is unconvincing and it seems certain that the real cause was animosity: professional rivalry, personal pique and religious tension. Persons was an able scholar and renowned tutor. There may have been some jealousy of his popularity with his pupils, and indeed it was while he was in London as the guest of the family of a pupil, James Hawley, that his colleagues intensified the pressure to have him removed. He was also, by all accounts, a strong and determined man, a stickler for discipline, and it appears that one of the fellows, Christopher Bagshaw, resented a beating. His evident leaning towards the Catholic religion must also have been a cause of estrangement.

⁷ Anthony Kenny, 'Reform and Reaction in Elizabethan Balliol, 1559–1588', in John Prest (ed.), *Balliol Studies* (London, 1982), pp. 17–51.

⁸ 'Father Persons' Autobiography', ed. J.H. Pollen, SJ, in *Miscellanea II*, CRS, 2 (London, 1906), pp. 12–47 (p. 19).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–22; see also Robert Persons, *A Briefe Apologie, or Defence of the Catholike Ecclesiastical Hierarchie* (Antwerp, 1601), fols 193–7, henceforth referred to as *A Defence of the Catholike Ecclesiastical Hierarchie*.