



CATHOLIC RECORD SOCIETY

British Catholic History

Conference Review 2019

Helen Kilburn

This year the Catholic Record Society's annual conference was hosted at the Bar Convent in York. As England's oldest living convent, founded in 1686 and still occupied by Mary Ward's Congregation of Jesus, it is a material example of what many speakers identified as defining features of the post-Reformation Catholic experience in the British Isles: shifting identity, memory, adaptation, and evolution. The CRS itself has undergone significant change in the last two years, which has now begun to bear fruit. Unlike previous years, the 2019 conference was non-residential; this enabled a much higher attendance of delegates overall, but especially of doctoral students, early-career researchers and scholars from outside the British Isles. The conference also saw the unveiling of the new CRS website, which will soon host the online repository of the entire and highly valuable *Catholic Record Society Record Series* (London, 1905 onwards).

Keynote speakers included early-career, mid-career, and well-established academics. **Katie McKeogh** (Oxford) opened the conference with a paper that brought to light new archival material which demonstrated that in the early-modern period recusant antiquarians actively solicited, curated, shared, and commented upon printed and manuscript-published English histories. Her research revealed that English Catholic antiquarians and their networks were integral to the contest to shape English culture and national history in the period before the Restoration in 1660. Dr McKeogh explained that the antiquarians' influence was so important that even Protestants appropriated their work, in order to craft their own English history which glorified the Reformation. This revelation thus invites historians to reflect on "whose history" is remembered, even when that history at first appears to be one which is typically Whig and Protestant.

The idea of memory was central to the keynote presented by **Bill Sheils** (York), whose paper offered a survey of the fate of two monastic sites in the parish of Coxwold in North Yorkshire following the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-1541). Professor Sheils made a strong case that Catholic practice in Coxwold demonstrated neither unbroken continuity from the pre-Reformation era nor a Tridentine revolution as John Bossy and Christopher Haigh debated. Rather, Byland Abbey and Newburgh Priory were already in decline by the point of their closure yet both remained central to parish life, demonstrated by the fact that former

residents continued to live in the vicinity even after their dissolution. As a result, the Tridentine missions that arrived in the second half of the sixteenth century were seeded and cultivated in a landscape and community that retained the memory of monasticism in the parish, but repurposed the physical remains of Byland Abbey and Newburgh Priory to meet new religious and political needs throughout the Tudor and Stuart regimes.

Adam Morton (Newcastle) presented a *longue durée* history of attitudes towards recusant Catholics in the British Isles between c.1520 and 1900. Dr Morton's critical framework distinguished between anti-Catholicism and anti-Popery, and latent versus dormant prejudice. He argued that anti-Catholicism was often peculiar to specific circumstances, which were either linked to geography, time period, or sociopolitical change. As a result, anti-Catholic arguments in the seventeenth century were dormant by the nineteenth. By contrast, anti-Popery was a latent and powerful spectre that was malleable and imagined, but which had stable features defined by ideas of foreignness and treachery. For historians of the post-Reformation British and Irish Catholic community and its diaspora, Dr Morton's intervention is important and one which historians will be unable to ignore; it better articulates the 'messy' nature of the Catholic experience in the British Isles in this period, when individuals could simultaneously engage in cross-confessional co-operation yet still be affected by anti-Popish alienation.

Dom Alban Hood (Douai Abbey) explored the often-overlooked work of Bishop Cuthbert Hedley (1837-1915). Hedley's reflections on the compatibility of Roman Catholic doctrine with Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* of 1859 prompted fierce debate amongst Catholic theologians, who were challenged by the reality that by the end of the nineteenth century Darwin's theory was widely accepted by the laity. Theologians opposed to Hedley publicly denounced him; Salvatore Brandi SJ (1852-1915) did so in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, and even falsely suggested that Hedley had been censored by the Holy See. Fr Hood argued that, ironically, this meant that in the contest to prove conformity to Catholic doctrine and the Church, the authority of the Holy See was assumed and deployed by Brandi without the former's consent. Importantly, the damage to Hedley's reputation was substantial. Unlike the American clergyman John Augustine Zahm (1851-1921), who also advanced a thesis that Catholic doctrine was not antithetical to the theory of evolution, and with whom Hedley engaged in debate, Hedley remains a forgotten figure. Fr Hood suggested that he should now be remembered.

Paul Shaw presented on the archive of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, focusing especially on the *Mother Magdalen Taylor Letters Project*, which he leads. Frances Margaret Taylor (1832-1900), a Roman Catholic convert from Anglicanism, was heavily influenced by her acquaintance with the Anglican Holy Cross (Park Village) Sisters and her experience working as a nurse during the Crimean War (1853-1856). She was the author of *Eastern Hospitals and English Nurses* (1856) and *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* (1867), and founder and editor of *The Month* (1864-5); as Mother Magdalen of the Sacred Heart she founded the Poor Servants of the Mother of God in 1872. Shaw explained that in her lifetime Mother Magdalen maintained correspondence with distinguished clerics and lay Catholics such as Henry Edward Manning, and the novelist and philanthropist Lady Georgiana Fullerton; her letters to her sisters clearly demonstrate her personal care and affection for those in her care. The *Letters Project* is striking because the sisters of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, Shaw explained, had initiated the project in order to commemorate their founding member and to create a resource that could better connect the living sisters to their order's past. The project has parallels with research conducted by other speakers at this conference, but also

belongs to the tradition of memory-creation amongst female religious orders identified in research conducted by James Kelly, Jaime Goodrich, and Caroline Bowden.

Eilish Gregory (UCL) presented the final keynote of the conference. Drawing on research to be published in her forthcoming monograph, Dr Gregory argued that petitions against sequestration of property presented by recusant Catholics between 1642 and 1727 were formulaic, though this formula reflected changes in political regimes. She argued that most petitioners focused on the distinction between religious and political loyalty by emphasising that they were subject to religious persecution, or that their sequestration would deny a legitimate heir their property in spite of the latter's innocence. Often the petitioners were able to make these arguments with the help and support of local Protestants, particularly lawyers and office holders. The contrasts with Adam Morton's paper on anti-Popery were stark. Through her paper Dr Gregory demonstrated that Catholics of high social status such as the Kennett, Radclyffe, and Derwentwater families could thus sometimes avoid sequestration and suspicion of political disloyalty.

Among panel speakers, **Daniel Virgili** (Queen Mary) presented a social history of food and the feast of St Thomas of Canterbury at the English College of Rome in 1569; **Helen Kilburn** (Manchester) explored the ideology of English Catholic slaveholding in seventeenth-century Maryland and its connections to English Catholic exile in Counter-Reformation Europe; **Dame Scholastica Jacob** presented her work on the Benedictine nuns who returned to the British Isles from the continent that once offered them sanctuary as refugees of the French Revolution; and **Rose Luminiello** (Aberdeen) spoke about the diaspora of Irish religious women educated at St. Brigid's Missionary College (1880-1914) throughout the British Empire as its agents, participants, and beneficiaries. The relationships between national, religious, and even racial identities were prevalent themes in these papers, though the impact of travel on Catholic diasporas was dominant. **Joanne Myers** (Gettysburg College, PA) and **Shaun Blanchard** (Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University, LA) presented respective papers on Vincent Eyre's experience of the Penal Laws (1744-1801) and the contest between Cisalpinism and Ultramontaniam in England (170-1800), which were well-received by delegates.

The papers at this year's conference demonstrated that both the Reformation and subsequent Catholic regeneration and evolution are embedded in the history of the British Isles, the British Empire, and Europe. The Catholic Record Society goes from strength to strength: it continues to fund and support the work of early-career scholars, while remaining a platform for distinguished scholars in British and Irish Catholic studies. In these disciplines its publications are foremost in the British Isles, and attract increasing attention abroad. Research disseminated at its annual conference continues to be at the frontier of scholarship in its field.

Dr Helen Kilburn is an early-career researcher at the University of Manchester. She is a historian of the modern Atlantic, focusing on the influence of the Reformation on the socio-cultural development of slave societies in the British Americas with a particular interest in recusancy.