

DRYDEN'S DOMINICAN SON

Father Thomas (Sir Erasmus Henry) Dryden, O.P.

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ACCORDING to Edmond Malone,¹ the poet's most considerable biographer, Dryden's family after being long established at Staffhill in Cumberland migrated south about the middle of the sixteenth century and settled in Northamptonshire, where the then head of the family, John Driden,² married the daughter and heiress of Sir John Cope, through whom he became possessed of the estates and manor of Canons Ashby which had been seized from the Austin Canons by Henry VIII some twenty years before. His eldest son Erasmus, who was created a baronet by James I in 1619, had three sons, of whom Erasmus the youngest became the father of the poet born in 1631. As this Erasmus had thirteen other children to provide for, it is not surprising to read that on his death in 1654 he left John but a small patrimony, although he was the eldest child. This was the inconsiderable property of Blakesley, about three and a half miles from Canons Ashby, reckoned as bringing in an annual sum of £60, of which a portion had to be paid by John to his widowed mother, so that he had to look elsewhere for a living. Already at Cambridge he had shown ability in literature, and now he embarked seriously upon the career of a poet and dramatist with such success that before he had completed his thirtieth year he was already accepted as a writer of eminence and had even attracted the notice of the newly restored Stuart king, Charles II.

In the literary and social circles in which he moved he met Robert and Edward Howard, sons of Thomas, Earl of Berkshire, both of whom were interested in poetry and drama and became his close friends, and through them he made the acquaintance of their sister, Lady Elizabeth Howard, Berkshire's eldest daughter. They were married on December 1st, 1663, with the full consent of the bride's family. Later writers would have us believe that the marriage was regarded as a very unequal match from a social

¹ Edmond Malone's *Life and Works of John Dryden*, was published in 4 vols. in 1800.

² It was the poet who changed the spelling of the name to Dryden.

standpoint, but that does not seem to have been the fact. John was an intimate friend of his wife's brothers and a welcome visitor to their family circle; he himself was of good birth and held a respectable place in society; and he was earning a fair income from his writings, which added to his merits in the eyes of a not very wealthy nobleman with a numerous family.

Considered therefore from a worldly point of view, the match was by no means an unequal one. Nor was it merely a marriage of convenience, as some of the poet's jealous rivals tried after his death to maintain, for we know that John's affection for his wife and children was very strong, and the family ideally united. Professor Saintsbury completely exposed the falsity of the many slanderous charges made by his enemies, not only against the poet but also against his wife, and showed that the only shadow that fell across their wedded life was the premature senile decay that overtook Lady Dryden shortly after she had reached her sixtieth year.³ Three sons were born to them: Charles in 1666, John in 1667 or 1668, and Erasmus Henry on May 2nd, 1669, a year before his father was created Poet Laureate. The elder boys were educated at Westminster School, but Erasmus Henry was sent to the Charterhouse on the nomination of Lord Shaftesbury, who as governor of that school had this nomination in his gift. It was an act of generosity all the more unexpected because the poet in his recently published satire, *Absalom and Achitophel*, had pilloried that nobleman for his conduct as Lord Chancellor. This was in 1681, and four years later Erasmus was elected to University College, Oxford, but never went there as his mother had already become a Catholic with her second son John, and Charles soon followed. Their father entered the Church about two years later, in 1687 or perhaps early in 1688, and brought Erasmus Henry with him. The youngest son was therefore sent to complete his studies at Douai, and then, manifesting a vocation to the priesthood, was received as a student into the English College in Rome through the good offices of his kinsman Cardinal Howard, who was Protector of that establishment. This was in October 1690, but in the following spring, perhaps not uninfluenced by the fact that the Cardinal was himself an English Dominican, he obtained permission to withdraw from the English College in order to enter the Dominican Order, which he did at Florence, receiving

3 G. Saintsbury. *Dryden* in 'English Men of Letters Series', 1881.

the habit there as a member of the English Province. After his ordination in 1694 he successfully underwent the examination for the lectorate in theology, and then returned to Rome to become a member of the community at SS. John and Paul, which house had been given to his English brethren by Pope Clement X in 1676. In Rome he was able to share the companionship of his two brothers Charles and John, both of whom were in the papal service, the elder as a chamberlain and the younger as his deputy.

Father Dryden remained at SS. John and Paul for three years, 1694 to 1697, at the end of which period the house was surrendered back by the Fathers to the Holy See, because its unhealthy site had taken too severe a toll of their young men, three dying in early youth and three more becoming chronic invalids. It is not unlikely that Father Dryden's subsequent ill-health and comparatively early death were due in some measure to his sojourn here. When the house was given up, the community was divided between the two English Dominican establishments in Belgium, the Priory of Holy Cross at Bornhem and the College of St Thomas in Louvain, and Father Dryden was sent to teach at Bornhem, where he was made sub-prior although he was only twenty-eight years of age. He held this important office until December 1700, when he was appointed to mission work in England. Where he was stationed it is not easy to decide. Gillow states that he worked in Northamptonshire, and Brig. T. B. Trappes-Lomax further suggests that he made Blakesley his headquarters, for on the death of his father in May 1700 (whilst he himself was still abroad) that property has passed to his mother, who removed to it from London almost immediately. There she was cared for by her eldest son Charles, who had left Rome in 1698 to attend to his father's affairs when the great poet had fallen sick.⁴ No proof is given by Gillow for his statement, which may have been deduced from the known fact of Father Dryden's residence at Canons Ashby after May 1710, but Father Palmer says that he worked in London after his return to England. If that were the case, he most probably attached himself to one or other of the embassy chapels where alone Catholics could assist

⁴ Gillow's *Biographical Dictionary of English Catholics*, s.v. *Dryden*; *Centenary Souvenir of the Diocese of Northampton*, 1950, p. 27.

at Mass unmolested.⁵ He certainly was working in London in 1709, for in December Father Worthington, the Provincial, summoned him and the other missionaries dwelling in London to meet him in council that he might place before them the results of his recent visitation of all the Dominican stations in England, about a dozen in all, and consult with him on the affairs of the Province.⁶ These London fathers were five in number, and they agreed to his suggestion that he should appoint a number of titular priors, almost certainly with a view to providing a body of priests qualified to form a Provincial Chapter against such a time as the Roman authorities should grant permission for these assemblies to meet once more. None so far had been held since the Reformation, but the Provincials, who were still nominated immediately by the Master General, had been seeking this licence for some time, but without success. It was not until 1730 that permission was eventually granted. Father Dryden, in accordance with Father Worthington's plan, was instituted titular prior of Saint Bartholomew's in Smithfield, the last house to house a Dominican community with full religious life. This had been established in 1555 by Queen Mary I, but was closed in 1559, almost immediately on Elizabeth's accession.

During these ten years of missionary labour in England Father Dryden lost both his brothers by early deaths, John succumbing to an attack of pleurisy in Rome in January 1701, and Charles being drowned whilst swimming across the Thames at Datchet on August 7th, 1704. He also had to bear the sad trial of seeing his mother lapse into a state of complete mental imbecility soon after her husband's death, and of finding himself slowly falling a victim to consumption. On May 22nd, 1708, his cousin, Sir John Dryden, the fourth baronet, died leaving him possessed of the empty title, for the estates went to his Protestant relatives who took advantage of the recently passed law of William III barring Catholics from inheriting land in order to seize the large Dryden estates (valued at £2,000 a year). No existing law could however prevent his succeeding to the headship of the family, and his kinsmen allowed him to reside in the family mansion at Canons Ashby and saluted him as Sir Erasmus Henry. He seems to have gone there some

⁵ Fr Raymond Palmer, O.P. *Life of Cardinal Howard*, pp. 175-177, London, 1867; *Obituary Notices of Friar-Preachers of the English Province*, p. 8. London, 1884.

⁶ From Father Worthington's MS account of his itinerary through England, 1707-10. (Provincial Archives, St Dominic's Priory, London.)

time in the summer, but his illness now rapidly increased so that he was continually in the care of the doctor until his death at the end of the year. Towards the middle of November he managed to get word of his state to the Provincial, Father Thomas Worthington, who immediately left London and came to Canons Ashby, where he found Father Dryden in the last stages of his illness and gave him 'all the blessings and privileges of the Order at the close of life'. Father Dryden assured him he had already received the last Sacraments from a neighbouring priest and warned the Provincial not to delay long at the hall, for he feared treachery on part of his relatives who might inform the authorities of Father Worthington's priesthood.

His death took place on December 3rd, 1710, and on the morrow his body was laid to rest in the family vault in the old church once used by the Austin Canons. In a contemporary document drawn up at Bornhem and preserved in the archives of the Province we read: '3 Xbris 1710. There died of phthisis in the County of Northampton the Very Reverend Father Thomas Dryden, in the 42nd year of his age, the 19th of his religious profession, the 17th of his priesthood.'⁷

It is interesting to note as a commentary on Catholic life in penal days that Father Dryden's priesthood was neither known to, nor even suspected by, many with whom he came in contact, and was stoutly denied by such writers as Malone who stated that 'Sir Erasmus Henry Dryden was not a minister of religion but a Captain in the Pope's guards'—a statement deduced no doubt from a document he quotes, in which the priest's uncle Erasmus, brother to the poet, calls him 'Captain Dryden'. This particular military title was not infrequently assumed by Catholic priests as a disguise. Father Thomas Gwillim, who died as Provincial in 1688, resided as 'Captain Gwillim in St Alban's Street next to the Surgeon's Arms', although he had no military claim to that rank. Father Edward Bing a few years later also found this military style a good cover for his work as Provincial. This priest, the last Dominican to be condemned to death for his priesthood, in 1697, had his sentence reduced from death to perpetual exile and he arrived at Bornhem in Flanders about the same time that Father Dryden was assigned there from SS. John and Paul in

⁷ *Memoriale Fratrum Ordinis Praedicatorum Conventus Bornhemensis*. (Archives of St Dominic's, London.)

Rome. Bing had some claim on his assumed rank, having served in Cromwell's army as an officer and later had been a lieutenant in Charles II's body-guard. Father Martin Russell, another contemporary of Father Dryden, went as 'Captain Russell' on the strength of his having been unofficial chaplain to the troops of the infamous Colonel Kirke in Tangier. Father Dryden, however, had no more right than Father Gwillim to the captaincy attributed to him, but the fact that his brothers had both entered the papal service, albeit in a civil capacity, had evidently thrown dust in the eyes of prying enemies, and served well to disguise his priesthood. It is not altogether improbable that even his uncle Erasmus was ignorant of his priestly character. All that another member of his family knew twelve years after his death was that, like his brothers, he died unmarried. This was Mrs Creed, who, in the inscription she caused to be inscribed on her monument to the great poet in Titchmarsh parish church, wrote:

*His sons were all fine, ingenious, accomplished
gentlemen: they died in their youth unmarried:
Sir Erasmus Henry, the youngest lived
till the antient honour of the family
descended on him.*

Malone, presumably not aware that the penal laws had deprived Father Dryden of his inheritance, and consequently not able to account for the fact that his expenses were paid by his Protestant uncle, drew the conclusion that he was in a mental state that prevented him from attending to his own monetary affairs. 'He was', says the writer, 'in a state of imbecility derived perhaps from his mother who became insane after the poet's death.' It was careless of Sir Leslie Stephen not to have sifted this story more carefully before repeating it as a fact in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

It is pleasant to reflect that, after his life of self-sacrifice and suffering, this tragic victim of vindictive penal laws was laid to rest in a spot once consecrated to the service of the most holy Sacrament of the Altar whose careful guardian he had been for seventeen years of his life, and then, to quote the touching words of Father Palmer, 'went to receive, it must be hoped, the hundred-fold for what he had lost, in the everlasting inheritance which neither cruel penal laws can reach nor grasping relatives debar'.