

FAITH
AND
MARTYRDOM

THE HOLY HAND OF
SAINT EDMUND
ARROWSMITH

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and
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2013



Saint Edmund Arrowsmith
1585 - 1628

In Lancaster on the 28th August, 1628 Edmund Arrowsmith was executed in a most frightful manner by being hanged, drawn and quartered. He was canonised as one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales by Pope Paul VI on 25th October, 1970. His hand now rests in a chapel in the Catholic Church of St. Oswald and St. Edmund Arrowsmith, Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire. Our intention is to explore the background to these events.

It is difficult for us living in a secular age to appreciate the importance of religious belief and practice to our ancestors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Inability to practise one's religion in a manner pleasing to God could lead to the abandonment of hopes of heaven and doom a person to an eternity of damnation. Henry VIII's dispute and final break with Rome after 1533 left the nation as undeniably Christian but with great variations in opinion as to how live a Christian life. The separation, brought about in order to secure the Tudor dynasty, left large sections of the population with spiritual loyalty to the Pope. Others, also troublesome to those in authority, spurred on by the Reformation in Europe and ideas spread by the printing press, saw little need for bishops and the formal ecclesiastical structure so important to the monarch in maintaining political control. Rather than the various groups displaying Christian piety and benevolence, the spirit of the age was one of persecution and animosity. Catholics and Protestants both suffered martyrdom, the victims depending on which faction possessed royal power. With the accession of Elizabeth in 1558, the dominance of Protestantism may have seemed secure. Through the Act of Supremacy in 1558, and her adoption of the title "Supreme Governor of this realm...as well as in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal" Elizabeth substituted Royal for Papal authority in spiritual matters. The Act of Uniformity of the same year replaced the mass and other Roman exercises with a modified version of the Book of Common Prayer dating from the reign of Edward VI (1537-1553). Penalties were imposed on those who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy or attend services of the Established Church. Divisions were increased by the excommunication of Elizabeth by Pope Pius V in 1570 and the entry of Jesuits into the country with a mission to restore it to the true faith.

Since all Catholics were seen as potential traitors, harsher measures were brought in. It became High Treason to bring into the country Papal Bulls; to declare the Queen to be a heretic and for a priest to say mass. In 1585, the "Act Against Jesuits, Seminary Priests and other suchlike Disobedient Persons" made it High Treason for a priest to be within the Queen's dominions and a felony for anyone to receive or relieve a priest. Nearly all the martyrs in the following century were condemned under this Statute. In addition, fines, imprisonment or forfeiture of property could be imposed on those who brought into the country articles blessed by the Pope, who took refuge

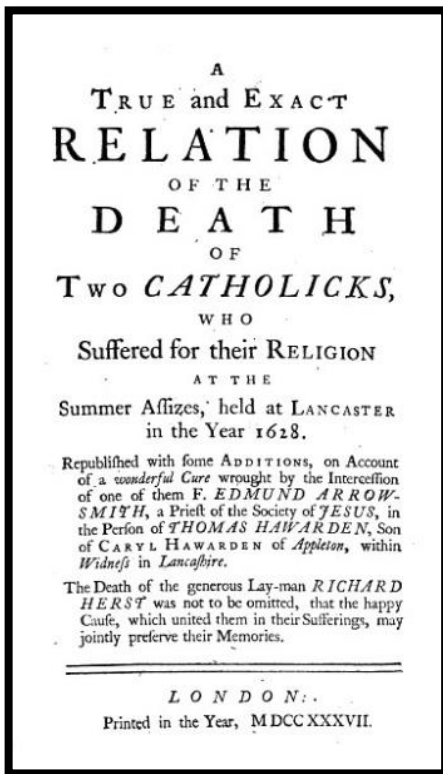
abroad, heard mass or sent children abroad to schools or seminaries. The Catholic population became increasingly estranged. The need for repression seemed to be reinforced by the plotting associated with Mary Queen of Scots and especially by the attempted invasion by the Armada in 1588.

During the reign of James I (1603-1625) religious divisions became even more pronounced. Extreme Protestants sought religious freedom abroad, as in the case of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620, and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 showed the continued threat of assassination and Catholic rebellion. All Elizabeth's measures were confirmed and a new Oath of Allegiance was given to all persons over the age of eighteen. Recusants, those refusing to attend services in the parish church, faced heavy fines and were prohibited from civil and military employment.

The above comments clearly are applicable to the country as a whole. For the Crown, problems were especially acute in Lancashire which was the strongest Catholic county in the country. Most of the landed gentry refused to attend the parish church and encouraged their tenants to do likewise, even if that meant paying recusancy fines of £20 a month, a crippling burden. Those following the old religion were encouraged by William Allen (1532-1594), born in the Fylde area and later to become a cardinal, who in 1568 founded the English College at Douai. Some Catholic landowning families sent their sons to Douai to be trained as priests and from about 1575 they began to trickle back into the county. Even the magistrates and the law officers of the county could not be relied on to conform to the new laws; some were reported to the Privy Council as being recusants. Attempts to serve writs sometimes failed, one royal official being forced to eat an indictment he was seeking to serve on a Catholic. The problems facing the Crown in Lancashire are manifested in a letter written by a magistrate, the Rev. Edward Fleetwoodde to Lord Walsingham in 1587. He says that at the Lancaster summer Assizes the Bench "employed themselves so thoroughly in the cause of religion that there ensued a most plentiful detection of six hundred recusants and a notification of one and twenty vagrant priests." The Lord Bishop of Chester in "A Summarie Information of the State of Lancashire" complains that the number of recusants is great and increases daily; on Sundays and holy days, as many people go to places "suspected in Religion" as to the parish church; "the Papists every where are grown so confident, that they contempne Magistrats and their authority tie". The Bishop concludes that "The people in moost partes of the countie...by remysse execution of the penalties imposed upon divers by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, do slide back from all duetyfull obedience to the utter contempt and neglect of Religion and the religious service of God."

religious pamphlets to spread their views. After the accession of James I, they tended to break away into non-conformist groups of the Presbyterian persuasion. "The Book of Sports", formally called "The Declaration of Sports", was an order issued by King James I for use in Lancashire to resolve a conflict on the subject of Sunday recreations. This had arisen between the Puritans and the gentry, many of whom were Roman Catholics. Permission was given for dancing, archery, leaping and vaulting, and for "having of May games, Whitsun ales and morris dances, and the setting up of May-poles and other sports therewith used, so as the same may be had in due and convenient time without impediment or neglect of divine service, and that women shall have leave to carry rushes to church for the decorating of it." On the other hand, "bear and bull-baiting, interludes and bowling" were not to be permitted on Sunday. In 1618 the King had ordered this Declaration to be read by all clergy from the pulpit but the opposition from amongst the Puritans was so great that the command was withdrawn.

It was into this troubled and divided world that Edmund Arrowsmith was born.



A number of narratives have been written over the years dealing with the life, trial and death of Saint Edmund. Two of particular note are the "Blessed Edmund Arrowsmith" by Francis Goldie S.J., published by the Catholic Truth Society in 1936 and "The Holy Hand" by the Very Rev. Canon Francis J. Ripley, prolific author and one-time parish priest of the church of St. Oswald and St. Edmund Arrowsmith, Ashton in Makerfield. The latter was produced in 1970 after the martyr's canonisation. The present authors, like the abovementioned, have drawn on a number of key documents. The main source is "A True and Exact Relation of the Death of Two Catholicks who Suffered for their Religion at Summer Assizes, held at Lancaster in the Year 1628.", a 1737 reprint of a 1630 account, thought to have been compiled by Father Cornelius Morphy

(or Murphy) S.J. (1696-1766). He supervised the work of the Jesuits in Lancashire between 1740 and 1748. "Memoirs of Missionary Priests and other Catholics of Both Sexes that have Suffered Death in England on Religious Accounts" by Bishop Challoner in 1741 summarises information from manuscripts held in various ecclesiastical archives. The monumental work "Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus" produced in 1875 by the academic Brother Henry Foley S.J. (1811-1891) makes reference to Challoner, the 1737 reprint and draws together most of the material on Saint Edmund. The total amount of source material is, however, limited and there may be doubts about its objectivity.

Edmund was born in Lancashire at Haydock, near Wigan in 1585. His baptismal name was probably Brian, but some sources indicate that it was Barnaby. He was the eldest child of Robert Arrowsmith, a yeoman farmer, and Margery Gerard. Both his paternal and maternal families were strongly Catholic. His paternal grandfather had been imprisoned for his faith and died in Salford goal. Margery was a member of an important Catholic Lancashire family based at Bryn Hall. Sir Thomas Gerard, Lord of the Manor of Ashton, had been committed to the Tower in 1571 and again in 1586, being released after three years. In 1590 he was reported as having "made show of conformity" but was "of evil affection" in religion. It is interesting to note that although his house is shown on Lord Burghley's 1590 map, it is not marked with a cross to indicate the location of a particularly troublesome Catholic sympathiser. He did order his brother Nicholas, Margery's father, to be carried by force to the parish church who then proceeded to disrupt the service. In old age Thomas was said to have "lived a lewd licentious life and fell from the profession of the Catholic faith" until near the end of his life in 1601. His successor, Thomas, was also "of evil affection" and his wife Cecily "a recusant and indicted thereof". The Gerards remained powerful and devoutly Catholic and were to support the King in the Civil War which started in 1642.

As a child, Brian saw his home raided by priest-searchers and his parents carried off temporarily to prison in Lancaster. His father went with a brother to France and Belgium to escape persecution and visited another brother, Dr. Edmund Arrowsmith at the English College, Douai. He died shortly after returning home. The widowed Margery was helped by a priest to care for her children. Documents describe the young Brian as being an extremely devout child during the time he attended the grammar school at Seneley Green, Ashton-in-Makerfield. At the age of twenty, after unsuccessful attempts, Brian managed to find a ship to take him to the Continent where he was admitted to the English College in Douai. There he was confirmed, taking the name of his uncle, Edmund, which he used thereafter. Illness forced him to

return home for a while but he went back to Douai where he was ordained priest in 1612 and was sent to minister in England in 1613.

These movements to and from England were in themselves illegal and hazardous. Ports were dangerous and officials had descriptions from spies of those attempting to return to these shores. In Elizabeth's "Proclamation against Jesuits", 1591 it was said:-

"And furthermore, because it is known and proved by common experience...that they do come into the same (realm) by secret creeks and landing places, disguised both in names and persons, some in apparel as soldiers, mariners or merchants, pretending that they have heretofore been taken prisoners and put into galleys and delivered. Some come as gentlemen with contrary names in comely apparel as though they had travelled to foreign countries for knowledge: and generally all, for the most part, are clothed like gentlemen in apparel, and many as gallants; yea in all colours, and with feathers and such like, disguising themselves; and many of them in their behaviour as ruffians, far off to be thought or suspected to be friars, priests, Jesuits or popish scholars."

Edmund worked as a priest for a period of about ten years in the area between Chorley and Preston, often assuming the surname Bradshaw or Rigby. Bishop Challoner quotes a document which states that Edmund was arrested in 1622, held in Lancaster and brought before the Bishop of Chester, Dr Bridgeman, with whom he debated the truth of the Catholic religion and papal authority. He was released, possibly because the king was attempting to pursue a marriage alliance with Spain and did not wish discussions to be affected by high-profile trials of priests. Challoner, quoting a manuscript in his possession, written by one of Edmund's "fellow-labourers", says that Edmund was admitted to The Society of Jesus in 1624. There is a record in the Society's archives of the admittance of Edmund Bradshaw, one of his known aliases.

Foley describes how the Jesuits organised their perilous activities in England. The country was divided into twelve "districts" or "colleges". The Lancashire District was that of St. Aloysius and was one of the first three formed in 1622. The priests were known as "Factors" (an archaic expression referring to commercial agents), the Superiors were "Head Factors", the District was "Mrs. Lancashire" and the Pope "Mr. Abraham". Edmund may have been one of about twenty Jesuits serving in the county.

The nature of the challenge facing these men is described in the "Modus Vivendi Hominium Societatis" (The Way of Life of Men of the Society), 1616 by Father Henry

More. They lived in constant fear of capture and gruesome death. Much depended on the precise nature of the area in which they operated. In a high risk area they would be accommodated by a Catholic family but spend their time in attics, away from servants and visitors; their room furnished with an altar, table and bed. Not all Catholic servants could be trusted. A priest would be on his own for a great part of the time but would have to risk going out to minister to the local Catholic population. People had to know where there was a priest but such knowledge had to be shared with great care. Those serving a wider area would have to travel between safe houses, spending a little time in each. The most fortunate were there under the protection of a powerful person in a predominantly Catholic area.

After his arrest in 1622 the authorities were aware that Edmund was operating in the southern parts of the county. He travelled with his mass vestments, altar frontal, and chalice veil, then required for the valid celebration of the Eucharist. His peddler's trunk of wood, covered with horsehair with its vestments stash, was walled up in a Lancashire cottage and only discovered in the 1880s and the contents labelled as "fancy dress". When discovered it showed a lady's hat covering the vestments, obviously a ruse to distract attention from the illegal Catholic ritual garments. The trunk contained several chasubles, the outer vestment of the priest, with matching maniples, the small piece of fabric over the arm, and stoles, a long piece of fabric worn around the neck. Arrowsmith also had a rosary bracelet, thus allowing less conspicuous prayer aides than rosary beads. He was to meet his fate by the betrayal of one of his flock.

His capture took place in Brindle, to the north of Preston, where he was accustomed to minister to the Holden family. A son had married a non-Catholic girl, possibly his cousin, who afterwards said that she wished to become a Catholic. Edmund applied for a dispensation to regularise the marriage but he also told the couple that they should live apart until the marriage was validated. This they refused to do. Infuriated by the priest's conduct, it is alleged that the boy's mother sent word to the local magistrate, Captain Rawsthorn, to say that the priest could be found at her house and should be arrested. Being unwilling to do this, the Captain instructed the father to remove Edmund to a place of safety. This was done but Edmund returned too soon and encountered the Captain who was forced to make an arrest. Some accounts refer to an attempted escape by Edmund which failed when his horse refused to jump a fence. He was marched to the Boar's Head Inn, locked up and his money spent on ale. He was then transported to Lancaster and committed to the common jail for refusing to take the Oaths of Supremacy and Allegiance and "upon vehement suspicion that he was priest and Jesuit, a notorious seducer of His

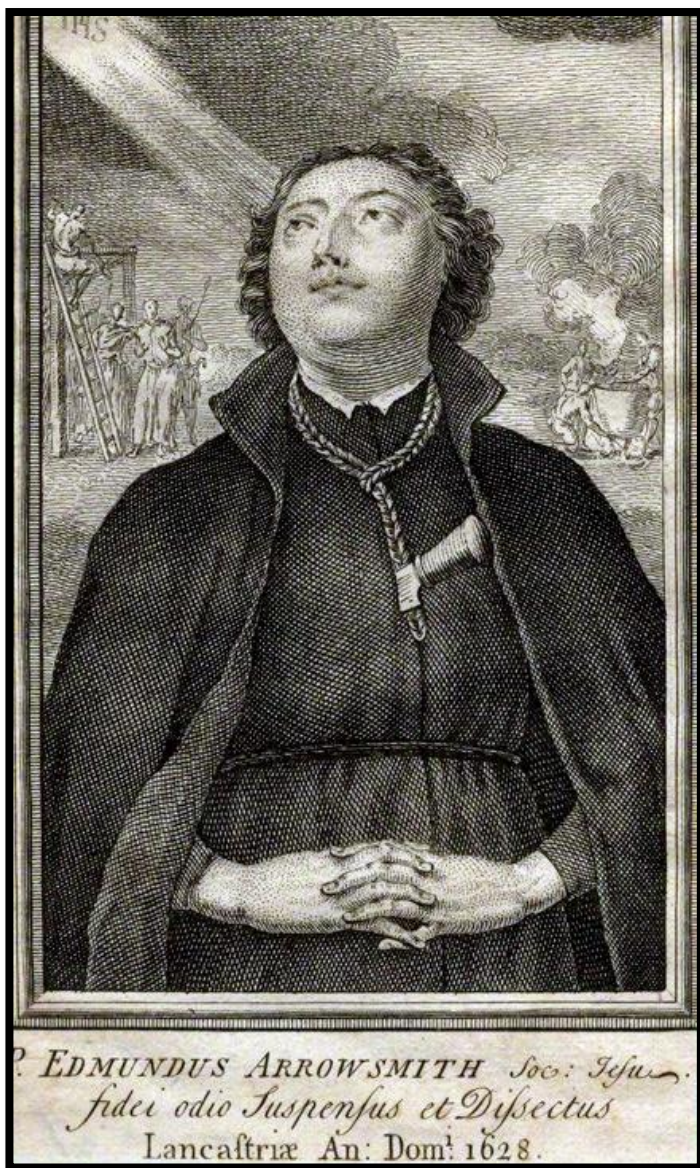
Majesty's subjects from their allegiance and from the established religion of the kingdom."

He was arrested shortly before the Assizes were due to commence and charged under the name of Rigby, another of his aliases. According to Foley, an order had been issued requiring a more strict enforcement of the penal laws. The unpopularity of the king following his marriage to the Catholic Henrietta Maria in 1625 may have brought about the new severity. The judge of the northern circuit appointed to hear the trial was Sir Henry Yelverton, a Puritan. A letter of Rev. William Harte of Douai College, addressed to Mr. Thomas Blackloe in Rome, dated 27th December, 1628 states that while in London the judge had been told that he did not have the courage to hang a priest. Possibly his reaction to this comment explains in part his aggressive conduct towards the prisoner during the trial and after sentence.

Edmund was not allowed to justify his faith in argument and he resisted answering clearly questions as to whether or not he was a priest, possibly to give protection to those who may have been subsequently accused of sheltering him. A key role was played in encouraging Yelverton by William Leigh, a celebrated preacher and Puritan Rector of Standish. Then in his late seventies, he had been a tutor to the eldest son of James I and had sat on the trial of several recusants and priests. He may have been present at the questioning of Edmund by the Bishop of Chester in 1622. This time there was to be no mercy. After an irregular trial, on the judge's direction, the jury found Edmund guilty of being a priest, a Jesuit and a persuader in religion and therefore guilty of High Treason. The judge pronounced the sentence:-

"You shall go from hence to the Place from whence you came; from thence you shall be drawn to the Place of Execution upon a Hurdle; you shall be hanged by the Neck, till you be half dead; your Members shall be cut off before your Face, and thrown into the Fire; where likewise your Bowels shall be burnt; your Head shall be cut off, and set upon a Stake or Pole and your Quarters shall be set upon the four Corners of Castle; and so the Lord have Mercy upon you."

Edmund's reaction was to bow his head and thank Providence for this extraordinary Blessing. He was loaded with heavy leg irons, known as the Widows' Mite, and, on the judge's direction taken to the worst cell in the castle. Unusually, the date of execution was brought forward and it was timed for lunchtime on 28th August, in the hope that this would reduce the numbers present at the spectacle. Only with great difficulty was someone found who was prepared to be the executioner. A military deserter, under the sentence of death, agreed to do the deed for forty shillings, the victim's clothes and liberty.



P. EDMUNDUS ARROWSMITH Soc: Jesu.
fidei odio Suspensus et Dissectus
Lancastriæ An: Dom! 1628.

It is said that when Edmund was being taken through the Castle yard, a fellow priest John Southworth, now canonised, showed himself at a window. When Edmund saw him he raised his hand asking for an absolution. While being transported to the place of execution he was guarded by the Sheriff's men who, nevertheless, allowed him to

be molested by some Protestant clergy. The place of execution was crowded, the Protestants hoping to see him waiver and the Catholics confident in his virtue and constancy. The judge, Sir Henry Yelverton, is said to have watched the spectacle from a distance through a telescope.

Edmund prayed for the king and the kingdom and died a constant Roman Catholic. He said "Nothing grieves me so much as the England which I pray God soon to convert." The Rev. Leigh, described as "the limping Justice-Parson" offered him the chance to save his life by conforming and relying on the King's mercy:- "Take the Oath of Allegiance and your life will be granted. You will live if you will conform to the Protestant Religion." This he refused to do. His last words were "Bone Jesu" – "Good Jesus". With a noose around his neck he was thrown off a ladder, the 1737 document continues:-

"he was cut down, dismembered, bowelled, quartered; his Heart torn out; that and his Privities burnt. His Head was also cut off; the Head and Quarters were boiled in the Caldron; the Blood with Sand, and Earth scraped up, and cast into the Fire, Lastly, his Head, agreeable to the Sentence, was set upon a Pole, among the Pinnacles of the Castle; and his Quarters hanged on four several Corners thereof."

The same text also refers to the conduct of the judge immediately after the execution. It is said that the judge had received a present of venison and, as he was examining this, the four quarters of the martyr were brought in for his inspection. The judge, handling the mortal remains, made comparison with the meat which had been given to him. The text goes on to state that the judge:-

"the next Day, leaving the Town, he turned his Horse, and making him prance, in a vain-glorious Boast of his Injustice, he looked toward the Martyr's Head; which he not thinking placed high enough, ordered it to be raised six Yards above the Pinnacles of the Castle, Vain and senseless Efforts of impotent Malice!"

The judge was to die in January of the following year from some sort of seizure, allegedly shouting just before death "The dog Arrowsmith has killed me!"

How then did the martyr's hand come to be obtained and venerated for generations? It appears that, immediately after the execution, strenuous attempts were made by the authorities to deprive local Catholics of the opportunity to dip pieces of cloth into his blood. A letter to the Privy Council suggests that the executioner's knife and martyr's clothes came into the possession of a devout Catholic, Sir Cuthbert Clifton (1586-1634), of Lytham Hall, Lancashire.



Sir Cuthbert Clifton

Foley quotes in full an important document which explains how sections of Edmund's body were obtained by the Faithful. It is headed:-

A letter from Henry Holmes, endorsed by Thomas Thornburgh and John Rigmaden, addressed to Mr. Thomas Metcalfe, November 5, 1629, attesting relics of Father Arrowsmith. Rigmaden was the Keeper of Lancaster Castle.

"Worthy Sir, - My duty remembered; for the certainty of these things which I did deliver you at your being at Lancaster I will affirm to be true, for the hair and the pieces of the ribs I did take myself at the going up of the plumbers to see the leads, when they were to mend them, and the handkerchief was dipped in his blood, at the time of his quarters coming back from the execution to the Castle, by me likewise with my own hands. You know the handkerchief was your own which you gave me at

your departure, and for the piece of the quarter, both I and some others had taken part of it for our friends, which Mr. Southworth can witness, and that which I gave you, John Rigmaden, our keeper, gave me leave to take, and to bring the rest that I gave unto you again, which I did promise, and you desiring all, I did excuse myself to him, and I sewed it up with my own hands, and so did deliver it to my daughter, who brought it you, which you did acknowledge at your coming up to the Castle. All these were the relics of Mr. Arrowsmith who was executed here at Lancaster the 25{8} of August, 1628, upon the statute of persuasions. I did deliver this to you in July, 1629.....

Henry Holme”

Presumably, Edmund’s right hand was part of the remains the removal of which the letter describes. It is not known how the hand came into the possession of the Gerards of Bryn but their family connection makes it very probable that they would wish to gain this relic.



It was removed from Bryn to Ashton, a seat of the Gerards, and to the priest's house in Ashton where it remained until it was placed in the church of St. Oswald, founded by the Sir William Gerard in 1822. In 1932, the then parish priest of St. Oswald's, James O'Meara, wrote to the Archbishop of Liverpool, asking him to authenticate the relic. He states:-

“There is no existing documentary evidence of the authenticity of this relic, but it would seem that there is sufficient proof of its authenticity and identity from the antiquity of the veneration paid to this relic to permit Your Grace to give it your approbation....”

In a letter dated July 8th, 1934, Archbishop Downey gave his approval for the hand to be exposed for public veneration, following the guidelines contained in the encyclical of Pope Pius X, “Pascendi Dominici Gregis”, 1907, which condemned Modernism.

The veneration of the Holy Hand did not arise just because it was a relic of a Catholic martyr but also because it was believed to have remarkable curative properties. The 1739 pamphlet dealing with the life and death of Edmund also gives “A True and Exact Relation of the Wonderful Cure of THOMAS HAWARDEN” which occurred in 1735. This twelve year old lad suffered from a variety of severe medical problems. His mother arranged for the Hand to be brought to the family home in Widnes and she stroked it over the back of her child. He, who had been unable to stir from his bed, was able to stand upright. The boy made a complete recovery. This story was vouched for by several neighbours, including those who were Protestants. It is significant that even by this date, people were aware that “many great cures had been effected by means of the hand of Father Arrowsmith.”

In 1786 Mary Fletcher wrote an attestation of “a wonderful cure”. Born in 1719, from the age of fifteen she had suffered lameness and later broke out in boils and blotches. By 1749 she was suffering from a slow fever, convulsions and hysteric fits with continued pain and vomiting. By 1767, her doctor, Ralph Thickness, declared her past all relief from any human assistance. Then, having read of the account of the wonderful cure wrought by the intercession of the martyr Edmund Arrowsmith and the touch of his holy hand in the case of Thomas Hawarden, she sought the same opportunity. On 20th November, 1768, the holy hand was brought to the house where she was. Praying and asking for the support of Holy Father Arrowsmith, her sister made the sign of the cross on her back. In less than six minutes her condition was much improved and she gradually regained her health. She writes of the immense blessing she has received from the merciful and all powerful hand of God. This document was certified to be true by a number of witnesses.



A
TRUE and EXACT
RELATION
OF THE
WONDERFUL CURE
OF
THOMAS HAWARDEN,
SON OF CARYL HAWARDEN of *Appleton*
within *Widnes*, in LANCASHIRE.



*I*N the Beginning of June 1735,
THOMAS HAWARDEN a
Child above twelve Years old,
who, till that Time, had en-
joy'd good Health, was taken
with a slow Heſtick Fever,
attended with an aguiſh and intermittent Diſorder,
and Pains in his Legs, and Joints, which grew
and increaſed till the Middle of the next following
Auguſt; when he became ſo weak, that he was
unable to walk without Crutches, which he uſed
about

about a Week or ten Days, when (the Distemper still increasing) they were of no further Service to him; and from that Time it was necessary to carry him, as often as he was removed to or from Bed, or otherways, he having lost all Strength of his Legs, Thighs, and Feet, and in all the lower Parts of his Body; in so much, that he was not able to move either of his Legs, or put them into any Posture without the Help of his Hands: Complaining at the same time, of a great Pain in his Back, and in discharging his Urine, which continued, off and on, till the Time of his wondrous Recovery.

About the Month of October following, he was seized with a sort of Fainting or Convulsion Fits, which continued with very quick Returns, particularly about the Full, and Change of the Moon, till his Cure. These Fits so affected his Senses, and Memory, that he was almost deprived of both, more especially his Eye-Sight, so that he was scarce able to read above two or three Lines, or to remember any thing.

In the Month of November after, he was taken with the Small Pox, which he had very violently, together with his old Disorder; and, it was thought, with Danger of his Life: But he got well through the Small Pox. The other Disorder still continued, by which he was so impaired in his Flesh, and became so very low and weak, that his Parents, and those who visited him, thought him in a Consumption not to be recover'd; because all the Time of his Illness he spit very much, especially after he was recover'd of the Small Pox.

In

In the mean time several Apothecaries were consulted, and the Opinion of an eminent Physician taken upon the Boy's Case, who apprehended the Pain in his Back, and in Discharging his Urine, to proceed from an Ulcer in his Kidneys; and the Fainting or Convulsion Fits, with the above Loss of his Memory, and Senses, to be occasion'd by a Stroke of a Palsy, for which proper Physick was prescribed: But he was not to be prevail'd upon to take much of it; and what he took had no Effect.

The poor Boy continued in this low and languishing Condition, till the twenty fifth of October 1736, when his Parents, having often heard, that many, and great Cures (by the Blessing of Almighty GOD) had been effected by Means of a Hand of F. ARROWSMITH a holy Man, and Priest of the Society of JESUS, who suffered on Account of his Religion, and as a Priest, in the Year of our Lord 1628; which Hand has been carefully preserved ever since: Mrs. Hawarden the Boy's Mother, believing that her Child might receive Benefit from the said Hand, as others had done before, procured the said Hand to be brought: And on Monday Morning, the said twenty fifth of October, the Boy sitting by the Fire-Side in the House, she took the Hand, which was wrapt up in Linen Cloth, and laid in a Box; and, stripping up the Cloth, brought it towards the Boy, who looking back at his Mother, and seeing her hold the Hand, of which he had no Notice, was a little surpris'd at first, and asked his Mother, what she was about, or what she intended to do with him,

or

or the Hand, or Words to that Effect. His Mother came up and told him; it was the holy Hand, the Hand of a Saint or Martyr, praying in Heaven for him, and that she hoped it would do him good. The Boy immediately, and as well as he could, unbuttoned his Cloaths: His Grandmother helped him to hold up his Cloaths. There were present besides Sarah Crofs an ancient Woman and a Neighbour, three Children his Sisters, and a Youth, who brought the Hand in a Box, about eighteen Years of Age. Mrs. Hawarden then applied the Back-part of the Hand to her Child's Back, and stroaking it down on each Side of the Back-Bone, and then a cross, she said, Sweet JESUS CHRIST give a Blessing to it, and may it do him good; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; which being done, the Boy, the same Instant, said, he believed it had done him good: The Mother replied; I doubt, thou dost but think so, still stroaking, and making the Sign of the Cross with the Martyr's Hand upon his Back, repeating the same or like Words; which she had scarce Time to do twice, before the Boy declared, that he was sure it had done him good, and that he could stand. Hereupon he immediately rose from his Seat; began to button his Cloaths; and standing upright, refused the Help of his Grandmother, who offer'd to lay hold of him, lest he should fall.

Mrs. Hawarden surprised with the Miracle, and returning God Thanks for this great Blessing, carried the holy Hand to a Room adjoining, where two Protestant Tailors were at Work, and desired them

them to come and see what had happened. They both came, and were astonished to see the Boy walking about the House, whom they had both seen Lame, not a Quarter of an Hour before. All the Neighbourhood were equally surpris'd, and flock'd into the House in great Numbers, upon the Report of this wonderful Cure. From that Time the Boy has daily grown, and increased in Strength and Health, being quite free from all his Pains, and his Disorder, his Eye-Sight and Memory restor'd, to the great Glory and Honour of Almighty GOD, adorning the Crown of Martyrdom in his Servant by this wonderful Sign, to the unexpressible Joy of the Child's Parents, the Edification of the Faithful, and Admiration of all the Country thereabouts.

After the Child rose, and walk'd about, as above, his Mother asked him, what he thought of the Hand, before she touch'd him with it: He answer'd, that he believ'd it wou'd do him good, and that immediately upon the first Touch of the Hand, he felt something give a Shoot or sudden Motion from his Back to the end of his Toes.

N. B. The Truth of this Account is fully proved by a great Number of Persons in the Neighbourhood, who know the Child and the Condition he was in both before and after the Cure, both Protestants and Catholicks. The Attestations of some of them to this wonderful Cure are as follow.

A T-

A T T E S T A T I O N S

Of unquestionable Witnesses, faithfully transcribed from the ORIGINAL.

I.

We, whose Names are Subscribed, do hereby Certify and Attest the Truth of the above written *Relation*, being present at the Cure.

Witness our HAND.

This Attestation was Subscribed to by four Persons.

II.

We, whose Names are Subscribed, do Certify and Attest the Truth of his *Lamenefs*, and *Cure*, having seen him, almost every Day, during his Illness, and *Lamenefs*, and immediately after his Cure.

Witness our HAND.

This Attestation was Subscribed to by thirteen Witnesses, of whom eight were Catholics, and five Protestants.

III.

We, whose Names are Subscribed, do Certify and Attest the Truth of his *Lamenefs* and *Cure*, being in the next Room, and having seen him not a quarter of an Hour before his Cure.

Witness our HAND.

This Attestation was witnessed by two Persons, both Protestants.

T H E

However, not everyone was convinced. In 1829 John Roby wrote "Traditions of Lancashire" which contained a chapter entitled "The Dead Man's Hand". He criticises the accounts of the execution of Father Arrowsmith and the cures brought about by the Holy Hand. He writes:-

"Having been found guilty of a rape, in all probability this story of his martyrdom and miraculous attestation to the truth of the cause for which he suffered was contrived for the purpose of preventing the scandal that might have come upon the Church through the delinquency of an unworthy member".

The present authors have not been able to find any record of a charge of rape. Much doubt must be attached to this story since Roby writes that "the priest was said to have been put to death for his religion in the time of William III", an error of over seventy years. The comments are, however, indicative of anti-Catholic sentiment at the time. He does, however, go on to discuss the alleged miracles:-

"What a strange and appalling history would be that of superstition.....And yet neither good nor evil is unmixed. The connection between material and immaterial, between mind and matter, so operates that sometimes and in proportion to the strength of the impression, a change is wrought by the mere control of the mind over bodily functions...We do not question the effects thereby produced but totally, unhesitatingly deny their cause..."

A further "wonderful cure" was reported in 1832 affecting Mary Selby from the convent school of St. Mary, York. She had lost the use of one arm for many months and no flesh remained on it. Medical treatment did not help. Miss Selby was convinced that application of the linen which had touched Father Arrowsmith's Holy Hand would bring a cure. The house prayed to the martyr for nine days and on the last day she approached the altar rails where the chaplain applied the linen to the withered arm. Instantly it was restored to strength and flexibility, with the flesh returned.

Many such events were reported during the nineteenth century yet still the criticism continued as seen in "Lancashire Folk-lore: Illustrative of the Superstitious Beliefs and Practices, Local Customs and Usages of the People of the County Palatine." J Harland and T. T. Wilkinson 1867.

"The hand of the martyr, having been cut off after his death, was brought to Bryn Hall [amongst his maternal relatives], where it was preserved as a precious relic, and by the application of which numerous miraculous cures are said to have been effected. "The holy hand" was removed from Bryn to Garswood [in Ashton, a seat of the Gerards], and subsequently to the priest's house at Ashton-in-Makerfield, where it still remains.

While the relic remained at Garswood, it was under the care of the Gerards' family-chaplain for the time being, and a fee was charged for its application to all who were able to pay, and this money was bestowed in charity on the needy or distressed. It is believed that no fee is now charged. The late Sir John Gerard had no faith in its efficacy, and many ludicrous anecdotes are current in the neighbourhood of pilgrims having been rather roughly handled by some of his servants, who were as incredulous as himself; - such as getting a good beating with a wooden hand (used for stretching gloves), and other heavy weapons; so that the patients rapidly retraced their steps, without having had the application of the "holy hand." The applicants usually provide themselves with a quantity of calico or flannel, which the priest of St. Oswald's, Ashton, causes to come in contact with the "dead hand;" the cloth is then applied to the part affected. Many instances are recorded of persons coming upon crutches or with sticks, having been suddenly so far restored as to be able to leave behind them these helps, as memorials, and return home, walking and leaping; praising the priest for his charity; the holy hand, for being the means of obtaining a cure; and God for giving such power to the dead hand. Persons have been known to come from Ireland, and other distant parts, to be cured. Some of these return home with a large piece of the cloth which has been in contact with the hand. This they tear into shreds, and dispose of them to the credulous neighbours who have not the means of undertaking so long a pilgrimage. About four years ago (writes our informant), I saw a poor maniac being dragged along by two or three of her relatives, and howling most piteously. I asked what they were going to do with her, when one of them (apparently her mother) replied: "And sure enough, master, we're taking her to the priest, to be rubbed with the holy hand, that the devil may leave her." A short time afterwards I saw them returning, but the rubbing had not been effectual. A policeman assisted to remove the struggling maniac to a neighbouring house, till a conveyance could be got to take her to Newton Bridge railway station."

Pure superstition or not, the Holy Hand continued to attract those seeking aid in their suffering. In his book "The Holy Hand", Canon Francis Ripley records that in the late 1860s Bishop Grant had seen the last surviving witness of a miracle concerning an old man who had taken his son on a cart to Ashton. The boy was totally helpless until touched by the Holy Hand. Then he stood up and walked home. In this case, since the priest was not at home, the housekeeper had taken the Hand out to the cart.

Father Goldie S.J., writing in the late nineteenth century said "The mere numbers of those who visit Ashton-in-Makerfield attest to the power of the martyr, and remind us of the Old Testament wonder when, at the touch of the bones of Elisha the dead man sprung into life." Kings xiii. 21.

The local newspaper, the Wigan Observer, of April 21st, 1923 ran an article describing a constant stream of pilgrims "From several places in Canada and the States linen and requests for the touch of the hand are received"... People sought its power for cancer of the stomach, a punctured lung, strange growths on the palms of hands, recovery of sight and healing of a tongue.

"The Tablet" of 7th July, 1934 reports:-

"A ceremony which is to take place tomorrow at Ashton-in-Makerfield will give joy to all of us who delight to honour the English Martyrs. For a great many years past the Lancashire town has preserved, as a priceless relic, a hand of Blessed Edmund Arrowsmith, S.J. There is no need to dwell upon that fact; the fame of the Holy Hand is widely spread. In the new church of St. Oswald, opened a few years ago, the Martyr has now a beautiful apsidal shrine and reliquary, which the Archbishop of Liverpool will bless at tomorrow's evening service. Ashton-in-Makerfield is no remote centre, but a place easily get-at-able both by road and rail, and Catholics in any part of West Lancashire have henceforth a further ground for venerating the relic – that of viewing the lovely setting in which the Holy Hand is now exposed."

A more modern incident is the case of Charles Coyne who lived at 25, Rocky Lane, Liverpool. He was suffering from terminal cancer of the left lung. On Monday September 11th, 1961 Canon Ripley records that he was blessed at his home by the Holy Hand brought by Dr. Bernard Forshaw, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at St. Joseph's College, Upholland. He was well enough to return to work three weeks later. When he died in 1976 from thrombosis, a post-mortem examination showed evidence of cancer in the left lung which had been cured.

In 1970, Canon Ripley referred to a number of letters received which show how alive was devotion to St. Edmund. One dated July 27th, 1970 stated "I am enclosing a piece of linen with the request that you will bless it with the Holy Hand of Blessed Edmund Arrowsmith. As a boy of ten years my own father was cured of serious eye trouble by the touch of the Holy Hand...." A second is dated August 19th, 1970 "I bring my mentally handicapped daughter on an annual visit and have done for the past eight years. At three years of age she was unable to walk unaided but after her first visit to St. Oswald's she walked alone the following day...." On 28th August, 1970, the anniversary of St. Edmund's martyrdom, a lady walking with the aid of a stick came to venerate the Holy Hand. She had been certified a cripple four years ago due to muscular dystrophy. On September 1st, his feast day, she telephoned to say that she could walk without her stick...."



Canon Ripley wrote:-

“These stories are told simply for what they are worth as facts. Those who told them believe that they have received favours through St. Edmund’s intercession. Nobody claims that all these favours are miracles, proved to be beyond natural powers and accepted by the Church as such.”

It was at this time that Michael Peyton, one of the present authors, was himself blessed with the Holy Hand while carrying out parochial visiting under the direction of Canon Ripley as part of his theological training. The Canon was in post as parish priest between 1970 and 1991. After working in London for the Catholic Missionary Society of England and Wales he had become Superior of that body in 1957, a post held by Cardinal Heenan in 1947.

1970 was, however, to be a momentous time in the story of Edmund Arrowsmith as described in an article in L’Osservatore Romano, 29th October 1970, written by Paolo Molinari S.J.. As Jesuit Postulator General he researches the lives of candidates for beatitude and canonisation. He explained that on May 18th 1970, the Holy Father in the Consistory asked the opinion of Cardinals, Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops, and Abbots about the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, of whom Edmund Arrowsmith was one. There was a unanimous answer in favour of canonisation. Pope Paul VI said:-

“We greatly rejoice that unanimously you have asked that these blessed Martyrs of England and Wales be canonised; this is also our desire. It is our intention to enrol them among the saints and to declare them worthy of the honours that the Church attributes to those holy persons who have obtained their heavenly reward. With God’s help, we will do this on the twenty-fifth day of October this year in the Vatican Basilica.”

This event had been preceded by long years of research and the study of a voluminous collection of documents involving at various times forty Cardinals of the Roman Curia. As early as 1642, the first steps were taken towards canonisation but the process was suspended, partly because of the opposition likely to be faced in the wider community. The Cause to prove their martyrdom and the existence of their cult was presented only in second half of nineteenth century. The Cause of two hundred and fifty four martyrs was introduced in 1886 by Leo XIII with more added later. By 1910 Dom Bede Camm in “Forgotten Shrines” felt able to write:-

“Englishmen of all creeds have grown more sympathetic of late, as they have come to know something of the true story of that long persecution which made their Catholic fellow countrymen outlaws in their own land, and turned their most treasured religious convictions into crime against the State. We are beginning to understand the extraordinary loyalty of these Recusants, so faithful to the sovereign who persecuted them just because they were so true to the religion of their fathers.”

Paolo Molinari’s article goes on to say that in 1929, Pope Pius XI beatified one hundred and thirty six victims of persecution, including Edmund Arrowsmith. They were among those cleared by the Promoter of the Faith, popularly known as the Devil’s Advocate. John Fisher and Thomas More were canonised in 1935. The Hierarchy of England and Wales then promoted the canonisation of a limited group of the martyrs. After patient work, the list of forty martyrs was presented to the Holy See on December 1st, 1960. The selection was based on achieving a spread of social status, religious rank, geographical location and the extent of popular devotion. The list again included the Blessed Edmund Arrowsmith.

The Catholic Herald noted an increase in number of visitors to the sacred relic since the Hierarchy had petitioned for Edmund’s canonisation. It was agreed that the group would form one Cause. Much work continued to gather evidence. As a result of the intensification of the devotion of the faithful and their prayers, a good many events took place which looked like miracles. Sufficient data were collected about them to induce the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal William Godfrey, to send a description of twenty four seemingly miraculous cases to the Sacred Congregation. Two special cases selected with one in particular standing out. This was the cure of a young mother affected with a malignant tumour in the left scapula, a cure which the Medical Council had judged gradual, perfect, constant and unaccountable on the natural plane. Pope Paul VI confirmed that this cure had been brought about by God at the intercession of the Forty Blessed Martyrs of England and Wales and on the strength of this one miracle he gave permission for the whole group to be recognised as saints.

Despite the pressure for canonisation in November 1969, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Ramsey, expressed his apprehension that the canonisation might rekindle the animosity and polemics detrimental to the ecumenical spirit that had characterised the efforts of the Churches. This concern was shared by the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal John Carmel Heenan (elevated to the cardinalate in 1965). From 1961, the Hierarchy had attempted to made it clear that there was no intention to stir up bad feelings and quarrels from the past. Cardinal Willebrands gave an important address on ecumenism in the Anglican cathedral in Liverpool on 21st

January, 1970, an event disrupted by followers of the Rev. Ian Paisley shouting “No Popery!”. The Pope expressed his belief in the need to recognise these martyrs at a time of materialism and when Christian religion was exposed to violent persecution in various parts of the world. The canonisation ceremony took place on the 25th October, 1970. Edmund Arrowsmith had thereby become a saint.



Cardinal Heenan had attended the English College in Rome. There great emphasis had been placed on loyalty to the Holy See. He believed that centuries of persecution had given the heirs of the English recusants an insight into the Catholic Church not shared by Catholics in other countries.

In a pastoral letter on Trinity Sunday 1970, he wrote:-

“People may ask you:- What is the point of canonising the Blessed English Martyrs?...The object of canonisation is to help not the martyrs but ourselves. Their example is just what we need at the present time. These men and women gave their lives to defend the truths of the Catholic faith and the authority of the Vicar of Christ.”

The Catholic Herald of 31st August 2001 quotes the words of Mgr. John Allen to pilgrims at the Church of St. Oswald and St. Edmund Arrowsmith “English Catholics must recapture the fervour of the martyrs if they are to live their faith in a world that is indifferent to God and to morality. We must recapture that single-minded devotion of St. Edmund Arrowsmith, and his fidelity to the Holy Mass. He lived for Holy Mother Church and we must fan the flame into a fire.”

Those taking part on the annual pilgrimage to the church to mark the anniversary of Saint Edmund’s martyrdom are following a long tradition. The Council of Trent (1563) defended invoking the prayers of the saints, and venerating their relics and burial places:-

“The sacred bodies of the holy martyrs and of the other saints living with Christ, which have been living members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, and which are destined to be raised and glorified by Him unto life eternal, should also be venerated by the faithful. Through them, many benefits are granted to men by God.”



In 1896, a Decree issued by the Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics stated:-

“Ancient relics are to retain the veneration they have always enjoyed except when in individual instances there are clear arguments that they are false and superstitious”. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which changed so many of the traditional practices of the Church, restated the importance of relics:-
“according to its tradition, the Church venerates the saints and honours their authentic relics.”

Following his canonisation, Edmund Arrowsmith's Holy Hand is now regarded as a relic of the First Class, being part of the body of a saint. It is to be seen by pilgrims through the glass door of a tabernacle beneath the statue of the Blessed Virgin in the chapel of the Holy Mother of God and the English Martyrs. It is still exposed for public veneration each Sunday. The Parish Priest, former Professor of Liturgy at St. Joseph's College, Upholland, Father Brian Newns, has been quoted in the Catholic Herald as saying "People still come to venerate the hand today and to be blessed by it and people have told me they have recovered with this blessing."

Ancient religious executions, martyrdom and the veneration of relics remain controversial issues. Some will still share the view expressed by Edward Baines in his "History, Directory and Gazetteer of the County Palatine of Lancaster", 1825 when he uses the expression "superstition and folly" when discussing the hand cut from the body of Edmund Arrowsmith "to work miracles". Even within the Catholic Church there some who are uncomfortable with the concept of venerating relics. Baines goes on to write "the spirit of persecution and animosity which disgraced the 16th and 17th centuries has given place to an enlightened toleration, and it is probable that the time is not far distant when toleration itself will be absorbed in a system of equal rights and privileges." That day has come for the Christian denominations, at least in Britain.

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