

Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion, a scholarly life* (Farnham: Ashgate)

In the decade after the death of Edmund Campion at Tyburn on 1 December 1581, his fellow Jesuit Robert Southwell composed extraordinary verses which were circulated in secret manuscript and censored print. One of them relates Christ's agony in the garden, to the suffering of one who would imitate him: the self-sacrifice of the pelican in blood, the renewal of the phoenix in fire. The butchery of the Elizabethan scaffold, the beating heart cast into the hangman's brazier, is transmuted in emblematic mysteries of compelling beauty:

He Pelican's he Phoenix fate doth prove,
Whome flames consume, whom streames enforce to die,
How burneth bloud, howe bleedeth burning love. . .

These allusions all circle obliquely around the loved and remembered figure who had died "a spectacle unto my lorde God, a spectacle unto his angels and unto you men." Seventy years after Campion's death, there was published at Prague – the city which had seen his brief but absolute triumphs as rhetorician, teacher and dramatist – the panegyric *Edmundus Campianus, coelesti lauro insignis*, which concludes with an image of baroque audacity: the flow of martyr's blood laps around the tortured body of the greatest scholar of his generation becomes the blazing scarlet of his last Doctor's gown.

Amongst the many strengths of Gerard Kilroy's scrupulously researched and finely written *Edmund Campion, a Scholarly Life* is the emphasis which he places on the friendship and affection which marked Campion's career and preserved his memory, and on the personal success which he attained even AT the moment in which the Elizabethan state had intended to annihilate his body and reputation, his execution. As Kilroy says, recording this last rhetorical and personal triumph:

The carefully drafted script of this state theatre of cruelty had failed so badly that the crowd was not convinced, courtiers were disenchanted, and the Queen herself disowned it.

This detail is telling, a reminder of the degree to which the England in which Campion lived his last year was labile and volatile, cruel in its very uncertainty – but yet more impressive is the steady accumulation of memorials and actions of remembrance which Dr Kilroy enumerates in the last chapter of this intellectual biography. Verses on Campion had an afterlife lasting three quarters of a century, hagiographic polemic circulated on the continent, and the reputation and standing of England was unquestionably diminished by it. The Northamptonshire squire Thomas Tresham endured fifteen years of imprisonment rather than admit that Campion had been in his house and commemorated their year of meeting in the stone of his Triangular Lodge at Rushton. Both William Byrd and the Prague *Kappellmeister* Phillippe de Monte wrote lamenting anthems: *Super flumina Babylonis, si non meminero tui*. As Kilroy says,

It is a good image of Campion's own life: his memory, concealed in the attics of remote English houses, was placed on altars in Prague. Lyons and Rome, and treasured in libraries and colleges across Europe, transcending the insularity that was gradually separating England from its continental cultural heritage.

This passage gives a crucial indication of the nature of Kilroy's project: this is an intellectual biography, a contribution to the intellectual history of England and of Europe. What emerges from this project with startling clarity is Campion's sheer standing as scholar and humanist, beginning with his London schooling and his thirteen years in an Oxford only slowly accommodating itself to the new religion and the intellectual isolation which came with it. The extended study of the tissue of discretions and evasions which enabled Campion's College, St John's to maintain a surprisingly conservative religious position is compelling, as is the account of the subsequent mass exodus on account of 'the alteration of religion' and the assessment of the overall situation in Oxford carefully nuanced:

Campion's was not a simple solitary choice between Catholic and Protestant (as it has always been presented since [his early biographer] Bombino) but part of a larger struggle between conflicting groups competing for ascendancy in a divided university.

And yet Campion's own oratorical contribution to the University's ceremonial welcome of Elizabeth, was polished and in every sense diplomatic in the highest degree – Kilroy observes that this is but one early triumph in the career of the

. . . rhetorical 'champion', from his childhood in Paul's Churchyard to the disputations in the Tower and his trial in Westminster Hall.

Kilroy produces a superb contemporary summary of those who were trying to live 'amongst the ruins' in and around the Oxford of Campion's day, and the hostility directed towards them as a people driven underground and into the shadows:

For amongst us an huge garrison, & mighty multitude dothe remaine, which coovertlye dothe encline unto papistrie, whoo in their obscure dens, dimme caves, secret closets, merck clowdie taverns, darcke mistie victualling howses both loorkinge hydinge and absenting them selves, are even on their ale benches, in the midst of their tippling jugges & quaffing pottes, great reasoners and talkers (a gods name) of devine matters & of thinges appending unto the same.

Soon enough Campion joined the number of those leaving Oxford for abroad, in his case for nine months in Ireland, 'which was to shape his life and determine his death' and in the course of which he composed his celebrated *History*. The book was completed in hiding in sympathetic Catholic houses, which must also have been the time of Campion's formal reconciliation to the Catholic Church, its preface signed off from the port of Drogheda in June 1571, as he made his escape towards the English College in Douai, and from thence to the first of his great walks, his pilgrimage to Rome.

These epic walks (there was to be another one in 1580) are the punctuations of Campion's life and we can know nothing about them, as no personal writings or letters survive to enlighten us. We can only know that he walked across Europe to Rome, alone and relying only on the network of hospitality offered to pilgrims, at the two crises of his life, on his way to his entry into the Society of Jesus and on his way to receive the order which would send him to England and his death. We know only skeletons of routes – from Douai to Rome, from Prague to Rome – but these walks are important. The perfect man of his time, the lucid and disciplined Christian humanist, was also a walker whose contemplations and resignations were achieved in trans-European journeys on the scale of Patrick Leigh Fermor's twentieth century walk across a Europe darkening towards war.

One of the revelations of Gerard Kilroy's book is the long and beautifully documented chapter on the one period of stability and intellectual peace in Campion's life, his time in Prague, which is given (with meditated, ironic mischief) the title which Waugh applied to the Oxford episode of *Brideshead Revisited: Et in Arcadia Ego*. Campion's Oxford had been a spoiled and divided paradise, but in Prague, he flourished, was loved and admired by his students, and praised and appreciated by a court which cultivated the arts and sciences. Here he wrote much of his poetry and his great dramatic work, the *Ambrosianus*, a particularly subtle and accomplished example of that Jesuit historical drama which bears an analogical relation to contemporary affairs. The Prague chapter is vital to the understanding of the whole narrative of the English mission which comes after it, in that it demonstrates the sheer intellectual calibre of Campion, his eminence amongst his contemporaries.

The latter chapters of the book are all the more harrowing, when Campion's attainments in the arts of peace are borne in mind. This is not only if one contemplates this exemplary scholar hunted, on the run, captured, tortured and eventually executed; but if one considers his move from an ordered court of baroque Europe into an England grown violently incoherent with suspicion and religious division. He went into a warzone where his every action or rumoured action was news and treason, having professed endlessly to his superiors that he had no wish to "meddle" – the word recurs – with the toxic politics surrounding the excommunication of Elizabeth by the bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, nor with the ambiguities of its suspension in England "for the time being."

Campion went forth into the midst of his enemies but potential death-blows had already been struck at him by his exiled co-religionists. The driven figure of Cardinal Allen,

. . . failed to see that he was placing the missionary priests in an impossible situation when he sent them to work for the catholic cause by spiritual means, while at the same time he was attempting to overthrow the Protestant regime by force.

The impossibility of the Campion mission was assured by the actions in Ireland of Allen's associate, the intransigent Dr Nicholas Sander and his spectacularly injudicious invasion of Ireland which began in July 1579, when his Spanish fleet dropped anchor in the bay of Dingle in the far south-west of Ireland. Their presence escalated hostilities in Ireland, complicated beyond hope the situation of the missionary priests in England, and ended in torture and massacre when finally the insurgents surrendered to the English forces in November 1580.

It is difficult to do justice to the meticulous research with which Gerard Kilroy has traced Campion's movements under cover in England, the composition and printing of works of controversy, beautiful in their phrasing, deadly in their accuracy. Inevitably, eventually Campion lingered too long in one place and was betrayed by the mentally-unstable George Elyot, an apostate Catholic who yet came to beg Campion's forgiveness in the Tower. The catalogue of horrors which inevitably follows is treated by Kilroy with admirable restraint and humanity. But his even-handed narrative cannot conceal the sheer horror of the desperately dangerous and damaged human beings, the sadists, psychopaths and rapists, who the Elizabethan state was prepared to use as their instruments, their special agents, their torturers.

Through the cells of the Tower, the torture chambers, the disputations, the show-trial in Westminster Hall and onto Tyburn, a kind of counterpoint emerges in Kilroy's narrative: Campion sings the *cantus firmus* of Christian Humanism, continuous and consistent, he has come to bring reconciliation and explicitly refuses to involve himself in politics. He disputes by the rules of the academy, deprived of books and references, but he goes on calmly with what might be called (in allusion to Geoffrey Hill) 'the absolute consistency of Edmund Campion' while around him the Elizabethan state, disordered and out of joint, argues, rages and falls into ever less coherent discords. A secret meeting with the Queen offers him an archbishopric if he will conform; he is tortured so that he can neither stand nor lift his arms; he is brought forth to dispute on religion. His consistency is silenced only by the hangman's rope.

Kilroy's biography deliberately invites parallels in conclusion: the execution by Mexican firing squad of the Blessed Miguel Pro SJ – a figure of the decade before Greene's *Power and the Glory*, and of Waugh's eloquent, if deeply partisan, *Edmund Campion*, published in 1935. The royalties on Waugh's book were donated to Campion Hall in Oxford, where they financed Charles Mahoney's exquisite murals in Lutyens' Lady Chapel. Kilroy points out in our own time the parallels with the assassination of the Archbishop of El Salvador, the Blessed Oscar Romero who, like Campion, lived a life of absolute integrity and courage in a world lost in violence and destruction.