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Alexander Pope's Ancestry & Catholicism

by Anthony Beckles Willson (23/02/2011)

Pope's paternal family were settled in Hampshire: his great-grandfather, Richard, probably son of Richard a prosperous blacksmith, had been the proprietor of the Angel Inn in Andover and a prominent citizen in the town.

His grandfather, Alexander (1599-1645/6), had entered the church after Oriel College and Gloucester Hall (now Worcester College), Oxford. He was ordained Deacon in 1621, appointed rector of Thruxton in 1631, prebend at Middleton in 1633 and of Itchen Abbats; near Winchester in 1639.

Pope's father, also Alexander, was born posthumously and christened (in the Anglican faith) at Andover on 22 April 1646. There were three other children: Dorothy, Mary and William, and probably collateral relations living in the county. A Roger Pope is noted as the father of yet another Alexander, born in 1672 at Andover. However, Pope preferred to suggest a nobler ancestry than this: a connection with the Oxfordshire Earls of Downe whose family name was Pope and:

“Of gentle blood (part shed in honour's cause,
while yet in Britain honour had applause)
Each parent sprung –“ (An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot, 388/9)

The Downe connection is unlikely, depending at least partly on an incorrect statement by Joseph Warton, that a younger son of the third earl was Pope's paternal grandfather. This Irish title had lapsed with the death of the 4th earl in 1661, there being no surviving male heirs. Pope also added a footnote to An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot, stating that his father “was of a gentleman's family in Oxfordshire the head of which was the Earl of Downe.” However, there is no known connection between the Oxfordshire and the Hampshire Popes.

Pope's mother was, perhaps, of gentler birth than his father. Edith Turner (baptised 18 June 1643, died 7 June-1733) was Alexander's second wife. Her father, William Turner (1597-1665) was of a family long settled in York, and Edith was the fourteenth of at least sixteen children. The Turners were prominent there, where they were Freemen of the City, office holders, Lords of the Manor of Towthorpe and moving freely among the society of York. Their genealogy has been traced as far back as 1485.

In 1640 or 1641 William Turner moved his family to Worsbrough, near Barnsley, 50 miles south of York, and Edith was born there. The reason for the move is unknown but could be attributed to the growing threat of civil war. York was Royalist, under siege by Parliamentarians in 1644, to whom the city fell after the battle of Marston Moor. Alternatively, William may have been sensitive to the possibility of a further outbreak of Bubonic Plague. In 1604 this had led to the death of 3500 out of 10,000 in the city, Alexander Pope's Ancestry and Catholicism

including several of his siblings. There was a further outbreak in 1631 and a sojourn in the country for his large family might have seemed to be a prudent move.

In about 1645 they moved to Birthwaite Hall, Kexborough, 4 miles north of Barnsley. They may have remained here until the Restoration, returning to the city after 1660, where William died in 1665. Birthwaite Hall was at that time owned by the Burdett family, being held in trust for Francis, the infant heir, by Robert Rockley, Lord of the manor of Worsbrough, living at Rockley Old Hall (which, like Birthwaite Hall stands today). Francis Burdett later married Robert Rockley's daughter Elizabeth. Robert was a Royalist; in 1642 he co-signed a Warrant supporting Sir Francis Wortley of the neighbouring parish of Cawthorne, in the Royal cause.

Alexander's first wife, Magdalen, is a shadowy figure: no details of her maiden name or her birth have ever been produced. Nor is there any known record of the marriage. She died in 1679, leaving a son, also Alexander who died young in 1682 and a daughter, also Magdalen. Her funeral and burial took place on 12 August at the Parish Church of St Benet Fink, in the City of London, where they were living.

Pope's Roman Catholicism

Though born to Catholic parents, Pope himself can be regarded as having been a "closet" Catholic. In a letter to Henry Cromwell dated 10 April 1710 (the day after Easter Sunday) he described himself as an "Occasional Conformist", one who took the sacrament just sufficiently often to avoid any of the prescribed penalties as a Recusant. This was while he was still living at Binfield with his parents, who had just observed Holy Week with particular devotion:

"I had written to you sooner, but that I made some Scruple of sending Profane Things to You in Holy Week. Besides Our Family would have been Scandalised to see me write, who take it for granted I write nothing but ungodly Verses; and they say here so many Pray'rs, that I can make but few Poems: for in this point of Praying, I am an Occasional Conformist."

It was at Binfield that, following the Popes' arrival in about 1700, the churchwardens noted for the May 1701 Visitation: "We present as Reputed Papists in our parish Allixander Poope gent and his wife". Their son, just 13 at the time, did not feature, though he later wrote of his father and himself:

And me, the Muses help'd to undergo it;
Convict a Papist He, and I a Poet
(Imitations of Horace, Epistle 2, ii.66–7)

Edith was probably Catholic from childhood, though she was baptised in the Anglican faith at Worsboough near Barnsley: William (1597-1665), her father had inherited from a reputedly Catholic uncle and, according to Sherburn, Edith's ten living sisters were of evenly mixed faith, described by an elderly relative as the five wise and five foolish virgins. It was one of these, Elizabeth, who is believed to have taught Pope to read.

Pope's father was not born to Catholicism: his father was an Anglican clergyman and his aunt, Mary, married another, the Reverend Ambrose Stavely, vicar of Pangbourne. His mother was the daughter of the Reverend William Pyne who held the parish of Micheldever during the Commonwealth, perhaps with difficulty. When his first wife died, Alexander's children, Alexander (d1682) and Magdalen were sent to live with the Anglican Stavelys at Pangbourne.

So it seems likely that Pope's father only adopted Catholicism later in life, and this may have been through the influence either of his first wife, Magdalen, or of Edith Turner.* No parish record of their marriages has been found, although in the case of Edith it must have been later than June 1684, in which month she was named, as a beneficiary in her maiden name, in a will.

Canon Law of the Church of England required that marriage be celebrated by an Anglican clergyman, whether inside church or out. This requirement was sometimes honoured in the breach, which may suggest that they entered into what was then known as a common law marriage, a practice existing until 1754 (An Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriage). It is likely that they would have employed the services of a priest: it was in the reign of James II, England still enjoying a brief period of tolerance of Catholicism. The repressive legislation maintained by William III in 1688 was soon to be reinforced, as Pope wrote in 1736:

“And certain Laws, by Sufferers thought unjust,
Deny'd all Posts of Profit or of Trust:
Hopes after Hopes of pious Papists fail'd
While mighty William's thundering arm prevail'd” (Imitations of Horace, Epistle 2, ii, 60-3)

The Act of Toleration of 1689 ("An Act for Exempting their Majestyes Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of certaine Lawes") released Dissenters from control and exclusion, but not Catholics (or Unitarians), who were tainted by the support of James II and described as “papist recusants”. The Act reaffirmed the provisions of earlier Acts, passed by Queen Elizabeth, James I and Charles II whereby, for instance, “....all persons, having no lawful or reasonable excuse to be absent, are required to resort to their parish church or chapel, or some usual place where the common prayer shall be used, upon pain or punishment by the censures of the church, and also upon pain that every person so offending shall forfeit for every such offence twelve pence”, and much else.

When Edith died, in June 1733, she was buried in the churchyard of St Mary's, Twickenham discretely, by night, as was customary for the interment of a catholic.

When Pope died he, like his mother, was buried at St Mary's by his request in his will. His burial, inside the church was surely in daytime rather than by night and probably attended by many friends. He left instructions for the monument to his parents that he had been permitted to erect in the church to be completed by the addition of his own name. This was carried out and his age was included, given as 57. He was, in fact 56. The ages of his

parents are also incorrect: his father was 71, not 75, and his mother 89 or 90, not 93. He does not appear to have been very good at family history.

The Grotto, originally beneath Pope's Villa, contains icons of the catholic faith which engage the attention of visitors. Embedded in the ceiling of the entrance gallery there is a stone carved in the shape of the crown of thorns, with sockets from which the original metal spikes have fallen. Facing this, is stone a shield depicting the five wounds of Christ: hands, feet and heart. It seems unlikely that Pope would have used his grotto for such a public statement of faith, although the possibility cannot be excluded.

What is more certain is that the full-length statue, standing in a shrine, in the left hand chamber is a later addition, described in 1888 as a statue of the Virgin Mary, at which time it was matched in the other chamber by a statue of Jesus Christ. The statue, today occupying this position, is of the apostle, James the Great, patron saint of Spain and of travellers. In 1888 it stood at the left hand end of the transverse corridor, facing a bust of Pope. Jesus Christ has gone.

The Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829 finally ended discrimination against Roman Catholics and Catholicism, and so these images probably arrived after that date.

* It has been suggested that a sojourn in Lisbon led to his adoption of the catholic faith. However, there is no record that he ever visited Portugal.

Some sources:

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