

JOHN ROBERTS OF MERIONETH

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BORN at Trawsfynydd, a remote lake-side village in North Wales, in the year 1577, John Roberts was, in the words of T. P. Ellis, 'heir of a thousand years of Welsh history and Welsh Catholicism'. The awareness of historical continuity displayed by the martyr at his death sprang, no doubt, from the impressions made upon the child John, not only by the stories he must have heard of the kings and princes of whom he was a direct descendant, of the saints who had sprung from the same line as himself, but also from the history implicit in the countryside around him, from the nearby and ruined abbey, and from the desecrated altars of the parish church. The history of Trawsfynydd, a village bearing one of the Welsh names for the cross, embodies in itself the whole history of Wales. Here before the days of the Roman invasion, Celtic works of art were known and treasured, here bricks were baked for the use of the Roman legions, here part of the Roman army of occupation camped, and here, if it be true that Christianity was first brought to Wales by Christian members of the Roman legions, some of the first Welsh converts to the universal and Catholic Church were to be found.

Trawsfynydd, so closely connected with earthly warfare, birthplace of a great warrior of Christ, had been for long concerned with the battles of the cross, for it lies near to a small Cistercian abbey founded in 1198 by Maredudd and Gryffydd, sons of Cynan ap Owain, from whom John Roberts was himself descended. One of the poorest of the religious houses in Great Britain, Cymmer Abbey had been dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536, between thirty and forty years before John Roberts' birth. Seeing the utter desolation of this house, surely the boy would contrast it with all that he had heard of the work and worship of the monks. Seeing the abandoned altar of his parish church, must he not have decided that God was better loved and served in the days of the old religion? Doubtless the dispossessed priest, possibly a monk of Cymmer, who was his tutor would have found many a way of driving home this lesson.

To understand something of the early life of John Roberts we

must know something of the history of Welsh Catholicism, and first we should remember that when St Augustine first planted the cross at Canterbury, Wales was already a Christian country and her people were possessors of a high degree of culture. The end of the Roman occupation saw the rise of Celtic monachism and the erection of numerous religious settlements founded on the model given by St Martin of Tours. In these communities countless saints, the great St Patrick among them, were given a thorough knowledge of the classics, an up-to-date knowledge of agricultural methods, and a thorough grounding in theology and in the spiritual life. After the Norman conquest the great continental religious orders infiltrated into Wales, to be followed in their turn by the preaching friars. It is said that the people liked nothing better than travelling many miles to hear the friars preach. Pilgrimages to Bardsey, Isle of Saints, to one or other of the numerous shrines of our Lady and to St Winifrede's well were popular expressions of devotion. In the words of a modern writer: 'Wales remained explicitly Catholic and devotedly Roman until the accession to the English throne of the Welsh Tudor dynasty'.

The reformation which brought not only the loss of faith but the loss of many material benefits to the people of England, brought complete desolation to the intellectual, cultural and social life of the Welsh and utter destruction to their spiritual life. Not only were they deprived of the faith that they loved so dearly that they clung to it for at least a hundred years after it had been finally abandoned in England, but they lost the spiritual leadership of their Welsh-speaking clergy. The benefits of a service in the vernacular must have seemed few to a Welsh-speaking congregation when the language used was English, of which the greater number of them had no knowledge. Wales, too remote and too poor to attract the zealous among the reformers, became an easy prey for those who sought to enrich themselves with the endowments of the Church. It was a sad day for Wales when a Tudor mounted the English throne, for at the decree of amalgamation of Wales and England in 1535, the lay leaders of the people, descendants of the ancient princes, flocked to take up their rightful places beside their Tudor king. Forgetting their faith, forgetting their national history, they seemed only too anxious to jump on the bandwagon of temporal

prosperity. Soon, like the ancient families of Ireland who ranged themselves on the side of the ascendancy, they would forget their mother tongue as well as the ways of thought and the customs in which they were reared, for the sake of fame and fortune.

John Roberts, born of a father who conformed to the new religion of necessity rather than choice, in whose veins ran the blood of the greatest princes of Wales, brought up as a Protestant, might well have chosen to follow the example of so many of his contemporaries. Little is known of his immediate family but it is evident that they were neither impoverished nor lacking in the connections required to obtain his advancement. We are told that he received a good education at home, and in the year 1596 he was sent to Oxford to complete his studies. To a young man gifted with intelligence and a ready wit the years spent at St John's College must have been a period of delight; there must have been so much to study, so much to discuss, and so many young men eager to argue about all the problems of the strange new age. To name but two of them, Leander Jones, friend of John Roberts and a future Benedictine, shared rooms with William Laud, the future archbishop, and it is not hard to imagine the arguments that would arise between these three men. Surely the future convert must have heard a moving apologia for the new state Church, put out by one who really loved it. It seems a little strange that John Roberts left Oxford at the end of two years; possibly funds were running low, or perhaps he was restless and had decided already on his course. In any case, he entered Furnival's Inn to study law in 1598 and found himself in an environment considered at the time to be 'an hotbed of Popery'. Not only did he meet many Welsh students there; he was taught law by a Welshman, a convert-to-be, and a leading Benedictine, Fr Augustine Baker, O.S.B.

It was in the same year of 1598 that the future martyr set out on a continental tour which had the appearance of being a pleasure trip. It seems possible, however, that there was a more serious end in view, for it was not long before John Roberts was received into the Church in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. It is not unheard of for modern converts to complain of the loneliness that is attendant upon their submission to the Church, but however painful this may be, it cannot be so great a trial as the fear of torture, penury and painful death, fear which all the

converts of the reformation era had to face. True, some of them might purchase safety at the cost of exile, but that was not a way of life that appealed to men of spirit. Loving God they loved their country also; and finding salvation within the Church they lost no time in enlisting in one or other of her regiments, desiring above all things to fight the battles of our Lord in the land from which he and his Mother had been expelled. Thus it was that John Roberts made his way first to the Jesuit College in Bordeaux and then to St Alban's, the Society's Seminary in Valladolid, where he humbly begged to be admitted into this college. There he found many Welshmen all filled with the same longing as himself. God had a place for him in another regiment, however, and he was destined to live, to work and to suffer martyrdom not as a Jesuit but as a member of the English Benedictine Congregation.

It was in May 1599 that John Roberts was admitted to the monastery of S. Benedito de Valladolid where he was followed in October of the same year by Leander Jones. At their profession in Compostella in 1600 it must have seemed to the two Welshmen that they had turned their backs on Britain for evermore. Perhaps they had decided that by constant prayer and penance, by their repeated offering of the liturgy in reparation for their countrymen who no longer adored the divine majesty, they would win more souls for his Church than if they took their place in the visible battlefield. Whether or not that was the case, we can be sure that by choosing to be known as Brother John of Merioneth the newly professed monk showed clearly that his native land was not forgotten. A first-hand account of the English mission, given by a priest who had laboured there, fired Brother John and a companion to seek permission to go to England. This permission, sought for by their religious superior, was granted by the pope in March 1602, but it was not till a year later that John Roberts landed at Shoreham and made his way to London.

Arrested almost immediately after his arrival, Fr Roberts was soon released but sentenced to perpetual banishment. No danger, however, could keep him away from his mission for long and when he heard of the terrible plague that had broken out in the city in 1603 he was as anxious to enter London as the majority of people were to escape from the plague-ridden city. Soon he was at work again ministering to the bodies as well as to the souls

of its citizens, and finding Christ, as his rule ordained, in the persons of the sick for whom he cared. Arrested again in the following year and kept in chains in the Gatehouse Prison for seven months, he still brought converts to the Church. Receiving his freedom eventually through the good offices of the French ambassador, John Roberts returned to Douay, where together with four other Welshmen he occupied himself in finding funds for the endowment of St Gregory's College there. Was this part of his work perhaps a greater penance to him than those which were attendant on his work in London?

It was another outbreak of the plague in the year 1610 that caused Fr John to take his final trip across the Channel. Working with his usual devotion and success for the conversion of the people of London, arrested as he was saying the last gospel of the advent mass, he was dragged through the streets in his vestments to Newgate prison where he was confined for the short time that remained to him before his death. It was during his trial and at his execution that he showed how clearly he was aware of the historical aspect of his mission. A member of the order to which the apostle of England, St Augustine, had belonged, wearing the same habit, commissioned by the pope as St Augustine had been commissioned, and preaching the same faith, Blessed John Roberts lived, worked and died in the shelter of the one true Church where alone salvation is to be found. 'If I deceive', he told his judges, 'then were our ancestors deceived by Blessed Augustine, the apostle of the English, who was sent by the pope of Rome, St Gregory the Great, and who converted this country from error to the Christian and Roman Catholic faith . . . I am sent here by the apostolic see that sent him here before me.'

December 8th, the feast of our Lady's Conception, was said by him to be of all the days of his life the happiest and most joyful, for it was on that day that he was taken back to court to hear sentence of death for high treason passed upon him. The following day, after hanging until he was dead, because the crowd loved him too well to allow him to be cut down and disembowelled while still alive, he entered at last into the joy of his Lord.