

DISCIPLINED DISOBEDIENCE? WOMEN AND THE SURVIVAL OF CATHOLICISM IN THE NORTH YORK MOORS IN THE REIGN OF ELIZABETH I

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THE history of post-Reformation Catholicism in Yorkshire can be divided into two distinct periods: pre- and post-1570. Only in the aftermath of the 1569 Northern Rebellion did the Elizabethan government begin to implement fully the 1559 religious settlement in the north, and to take firm action against those who persistently flouted religious laws by continuing to practise the traditional religion of their forefathers. In the Northern Province, serious efforts to enforce conformity and to evangelize did not begin until the arrival of Edmund Grindal as Archbishop of York in 1571. He was joined a year later by the Puritan sympathizer Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon, as President of the Council of the North and together they spear-headed the region's first real evangelical challenge to traditional religion. 1571 also saw the enactment of the first real penal law against Catholics, although only in 1581 was the term 'recusant' coined. Grindal and Huntingdon formed a powerful team committed to Protestant evangelization and the eradication of Catholicism in the North, however, in Yorkshire, their mission was not entirely successful. The North Riding consistently returned high numbers of recusants in the Elizabethan period, and was home to some well-established Catholic communities. In the West and East Ridings recusancy was not so widespread, although religious conservatism persisted, and Catholicism remained a much more significant force across Yorkshire than elsewhere.¹

The rest of this essay will concentrate on the deanery of Cleveland. Situated in the far north-east of the North Riding, and covering an area roughly equivalent to the North York Moors, Cleveland was a notori-

¹ Hugh Aveling, *Northern Catholics* (London, 1966); idem, 'Post Reformation Catholicism in East Yorkshire 1558-1790', *East Yorkshire Local History Society* 11 (1960), 5-31; idem, 'The Catholic Recusants of the West Riding of Yorkshire 1558-1790', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society: Literary and Historical Section*, vol. 10, pt 6 (Leeds, 1963), 191-229.

ous stronghold of traditional religion in the late sixteenth century and, significantly, over half those convicted for recusancy in this region were women, mostly of below gentry status. Previous scholars have suggested the gentry, missionary priests, and the isolation of Cleveland from the ecclesiastical authorities at York as key factors behind the continuing strength of Catholicism in the region.² Christopher Haigh has claimed for southern England that an over-concentration by missionaries on gentry households led to an increasingly seigneurial faith with little appeal to those of lower social status,³ but my own research has demonstrated that in the North York Moors the religious disobedience of the non-gentry Catholic laity, and especially the women, was as vital in the preservation of traditional religion as that of the gentry.⁴ The numbers of female recusants revealed during the course of this research by the archbishop's visitation returns for Cleveland suggested that the recusant women of the area should now be studied in their own right. Other scholars have already demonstrated the importance of early modern women in religion, but the role of recusant women in general, and in North Yorkshire in particular, has not yet received the attention it deserves.⁵ Sarah Bastow's article on the Catholic Recusant women of Yorkshire establishes the importance of female Catholics in Elizabethan Yorkshire. However the brevity of this article, and Bastow's concentration almost wholly upon the women of the City of York and upon gentry women has left many unanswered questions about the role of female Catholic recusants in the county as a whole during this period.⁶ This neglect has led to an incomplete understanding of the techniques of religious discipline and resistance amongst historians of post-reformation Catholicism, which needs to be addressed. There are as yet no other regional studies of recusant women against which this account of the North York Moors can be compared, but the invisibility of female recusants in modern historiography conceals their contem-

² Ibid; and also B. W. Beckinsale, 'The Characteristics of the Tudor North', *Northern History* 4 (1969), 71–8; J. T. Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War*, University of London Historical Studies 25 (London, 1969), 169.

³ C. Haigh, *English Reformations* (Oxford, 1993), 266.

⁴ Emma Watson, 'A stiff-necked, wilful and obstinate people': the Catholic Laity in the North York Moors c.1559–1603', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 77 (2005), 181–204.

⁵ See, for example, Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1700* (London, 1993); Marie Rowlands, 'Recusant Women 1560–1640', in Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (London, 1985), 149–75.

⁶ Sarah Bastow, '“Worth Nothing but Very Wilful”: Catholic Recusant Women of Yorkshire 1536–1642', *Recusant History* 25 (2001), 591–603.

porary importance. Documentary evidence for women in Cleveland is scarce, but their disciplined role in maintaining Catholicism in the area, as revealed in the archbishop's visitation returns, and the willingness with which they flouted government attempts to impose religious uniformity, are too important to ignore, perhaps especially because it seems certain that the Elizabethan government was aware that women were often the main, if surreptitious, force behind the maintenance of Catholic households.

The visitation returns provide the most extensive record of lay Catholic non-conformity, although, being designed for administrative use by diocesan authorities, they are not a comprehensive testimony of religious belief. However, they offer a valuable glimpse into religious practice in Cleveland, and of the lengths to which parishioners would go to avoid participating in official services; they are also one of few records that name women independently of men. Individuals presented were called before the ecclesiastical courts, but Aveling has demonstrated that few of those charged with recusancy in Cleveland ever appeared,⁷ and across Yorkshire conservative parochial officials would have been reluctant to impose strict compliance when dealing with non-conformity. Social harmony was important and many local authorities were reluctant to jeopardize this, especially where Catholics lived amicably alongside their conformist neighbours. Surviving presentments are probably only a small percentage of actual cases, with only the most persistent offenders presented, and churchwardens may have exercised a selective blindness towards recusants to ensure that leading members of communities were not presented whilst they still had an important secular role to play. This may account for the preponderance of women presented: churchwardens had to demonstrate to central authority that they were acting against Catholics, but at the same time wanted to preserve the stability of their communities.⁸ Nevertheless, the very fact that there were so many female recusants must indicate the importance of their role in resisting the Established Church.

Churchwardens may also have deliberately presented the poorest recusants in their parishes. Poverty was an accepted reason for non-

⁷ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, 147.

⁸ W. J. Sheils, 'Household, Age and Gender among Jacobean Yorkshire Recusants', in Marie B. Rowlands, ed., *English Catholics of Parish and Town 1558-1788*, Catholic Record Society Publications, Monograph 5 (London, 1999) [hereafter: *CRSP*], 131-52, suggested this for the early seventeenth century, but the same can be argued for the later sixteenth.

attendance at church, and poor recusants largely went unpunished, given their inability to pay the required fines. Again this may explain the predominance of women. Cleveland was a poor region, and women were often amongst the poorest of the poor. It is also vital to consider the importance of community solidarity, which may account for the way in which parishioners can be seen dropping in and out of the visitation returns, suggesting that the returns themselves reveal more about the system of presentment for religious misdemeanours than they do about the pattern of Catholic non-conformity. Differences in religious belief and practice probably mattered little to people in the small moorland communities, which might explain why the Catholic communities here, although always a numerical minority, were allowed to thrive. Indeed the fluidity of categorization and a lack of any real concept of 'the Other' before the late 1580s may have meant Catholic householders in this region were not regarded as different by their conformist neighbours, and any presentments were as likely to have been for an obdurate failure to perform public duty as for religious beliefs.

Prior to the reign of Elizabeth the effect of Tudor religious change in Cleveland was slight. The impoverished benefices were unattractive to educated Protestant ministers, and the flooding of the clerical market by the dissolution of the monasteries ensured a constant stream of conservative priests into vacant livings into the 1560s and beyond. Parishioners in Cleveland rarely presented their clergy for failing to preach or use prescribed service books. Perhaps non-compliance with the requirements of the Elizabethan prayer book was of little importance to them, or, as shown by Duffy for the parish of Morebath in Devon, it could simply indicate acquiescence with the religious settlement.⁹ However, the numbers accused of recusancy, non-communication and non-attendance at church grew continuously throughout Elizabeth's reign, prompting Cecil's principal informant to call the area a 'Bishopric of Papists'.¹⁰ Perhaps this growth was the result of changing government policies and more determined efforts against Catholics, but the numbers nonetheless reflect the presence of substantial Catholic communities.

⁹ Eamon Duffy, *Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, (New Haven, CT, 2001), 170–1.

¹⁰ Jack Binns, 'Sir Hugh Cholmley of Whitby 1600–1657: His Life and Works', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 1990, 50.

The 1582 presentment of Jane Burton, wife of Robert Burton of Egton, was the first for actual recusancy in the Cleveland returns,¹¹ and subsequently the numbers of female recusants in the visitations are consistently higher than those of men. Parishes with significant recusant communities invariably had a higher proportion of women, and often only women were named in parishes where numbers presented were small. In addition the recusant rolls of the 1590s and Edward Peacock's 1604 list of recusants both name more women than men in all social classes.¹² Even missionary priests recognized that recusancy was more common amongst women than men. John Mush, best known for his biography of Margaret Clitherow, told colleagues in London that the gentlemen in Yorkshire had 'fallen off from the priests, but the gentlewomen stood steadfastly to them',¹³ and Thomas Clarke, a frequent visitor to the household of George Tocketts of Guisborough, admitted that Tockett's wife and household had not attended the parish church, although George himself appears to have done so.¹⁴

Although it is possible that Catholicism was deliberately overlooked amongst certain members of the community, it is also probable that in Cleveland as elsewhere many male heads of household conformed to the Established Church sufficiently to avoid prosecution, whilst their wives maintained a Catholic household. Some, such as Roger Radcliffe of Lythe, were particularly successful in keeping their Catholicism hidden from the authorities. In 1572 Thomas Gargrave, then vice-president of the Council of the North, drew up a list of the religion of all Yorkshire gentlemen.¹⁵ Amongst others, Gargrave listed Radcliffe as Protestant, yet his household was one of the most notorious centres of Catholicism in the area. Several members of the Radcliffe family, and many of their neighbours, appeared repeatedly in the visitation returns for Lythe, and their manor at Ugthorpe became an important mass

¹¹ York, Borthwick Institute [hereafter: Borthwick], V1 582, fol. 234r. Jane Burton is not named in 1582, only listed as Robert's wife, but she appears repeatedly under her own name in subsequent visitation returns.

¹² *Recusant Roll 1 (1592-1593)*, ed. M. M. C. Calthrop, *CRSP* 18 (1916), 84-102; *Recusant Roll 2 (1593-1594)*, ed. Hugh Bowler, *CRSP* 57 (1965), 199-222; *Recusant Roll 3 (1594-1595) and Recusant Roll 4 (1595-1596)*, ed. Hugh Bowler, *CRSP* 61 (1970), 113-27, 245-55; Edward Peacock, *A List of the Roman Catholics in the County of York in 1604* (London, 1872), 89-110.

¹³ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, 95-6.

¹⁴ M. A. E. Green, *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth 1591-1594* (London, 1867), 305. George Tocketts does not appear in any visitation returns.

¹⁵ See J. J. Cartwright, *Chapters in the History of Yorkshire* (Wakefield, 1872), 66-72 for Gargrave's list.

centre.¹⁶ However, Roger was a substantial figure in the local community and held considerable social power. He may thus have been exempted from prosecution in order to maintain his public role, despite the evidence that his wife and household were actively encouraging and facilitating the survival of Catholicism. Had there been a strong Protestant presence in Lythe it is unlikely that Radcliffe would have escaped prosecution, but his social standing meant the authorities relied on him to keep order in the area. Had he been indicted for recusancy, an important source of local social control would have been lost. There were no such qualms about prosecuting female recusants. Women could not exercise social control and their presentments would enable local authorities to demonstrate that they were acting against recusancy; hence Katherine Radcliffe frequently appeared in the visitation returns, although her husband did not.

Mary Harding, a relative of Radcliffe's living at Hunt House in Goathland, was also a known Catholic, and her home became a refuge for Catholics in the area. Mary employed several poor villagers, some of whom, in particular Dorothy and James Crosby, were persistent recusants,¹⁷ and this may be significant in explaining why Mary herself appears to have escaped prosecution. Goathland was a poor, sparsely populated parish and, had Mary been unable to employ poorer residents, the burden of providing relief would have probably fallen upon the other parishioners. This tacit permission to continue practising her faith enabled Mary to establish Hunt House as an important calling point on the North York Moors mass circuit, but also allowed her to offer a measure of protection to other Catholics in the area, and to use her connections to build a role in a disciplined network of religious disobedience.

Several other mass centres existed in the region, notably at the former Grosmont priory, which was leased by the Hodgesons from the Cholmleys of Whitby. It is impossible to tell whether John Hodgeson or his wife Jane took the commanding role in inviting priests to the priory; their whole family appears repeatedly in the visitations.¹⁸ Hodgeson's nearest neighbours, the Salvins of Newbiggin Manor in

¹⁶ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, 160; W. J. Sheils, 'Catholics and their Neighbours in a Rural Community: Egton Chapelry 1590-1780', *Northern History* 34 (1998), 109-33, at 111.

¹⁷ Alice Hollings, *Goathland: the Story of a Moorland Village* (Whitby, 1971), 16; York, Borthwick, V1595-6 (CB3), fol. 145v; V1600 (CB.1B), fol. 231v.

¹⁸ York, Borthwick, V1586, fol. 116r; V1590-1/CB1, fol. 199r; V1594, fol. 133r; V1595-6/CB3, fol. 148r; V1600/CB.1B, fol. 233v.

Egton, another Mass House, and the Smiths of nearby Bridge House were also habitual recusants, and it was the women of both families who appeared most frequently in the visitations. The number of mass centres in the relatively small geographic area of the North York Moors indicates both the establishment of a structured network of resistance, and largely harmonious relations between Catholics and their conformist neighbours. In Egton, the Catholic community grew to become the largest in the area, and work by Bill Sheils has demonstrated that Catholics and conformists here lived together and inter-married with little sign of conflict.¹⁹ These safe houses were vital not only for the provision of Catholic priests in the local communities, but also for the dispersal of these priests across the north of England. It is probably no accident that the long, isolated Cleveland coastline became a favoured landing point for the Catholic Mission, as did West Sussex, which was similarly isolated from the centres of ecclesiastical control.

Traditionally the household was the woman's domain, and as Catholicism became more and more a household religion the importance of women in maintaining the old faith steadily increased, albeit with the collusion of their husbands. Women's responsibility for household routines meant that they arranged for the attendance and concealment of priests and mass equipment, often when their husbands were away. Thomas Clarke stated that Margaret Cholmley received him at Whitby 'during her husband's absence';²⁰ such practice must have been common amongst Catholic families, and it is likely that the men knew of it and deliberately absented themselves when the priests were due to attend. Women also organized their household's religious education. This was particularly important in gentry households, and the pattern of the Puritan godly household revealed in Lady Margaret Hoby's diary was mirrored in many Catholic homes.²¹ Devotional tracts were printed for both faiths, and women of the same social status followed similar patterns of piety whatever their beliefs.²² Although access to Catholic priests was relatively easy in Cleveland, most women were unable to rely upon a regular clerical presence in their households. Many therefore had little choice but to provide religious education

¹⁹ Sheils, 'Catholics and their Neighbours', 115, 119.

²⁰ Green, *CSPD 1591–1594*, 305.

²¹ Joanna Moody, *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady: the Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599–1605* (Stroud, 2001).

²² Crawford, *Women and Religion*, 75–80.

themselves, using printed devotional works such as Robert Persons's *The First Booke of the Christian Exercise* (1582). In doing so they demonstrated further conscious disobedience to state injunctions. Although it became increasingly common for the children of recusants to be educated abroad, in reality few could afford this, and the high risks meant eldest sons were rarely sent.²³ Evidence that Catholic women were a key factor in the education of their children can be found amongst reports that almost a quarter of students at the English college at Rome said directly that their mothers had influenced their vocation, and perhaps more importantly that this was often against the wishes of their Protestant fathers.²⁴

Women were ideally placed to instil Catholic beliefs into their households, and it may have been the recognition of this which led to the 1591 laws permitting the punishment of married recusant women in their own right. Despite this, many wives, such as Lady Babthorpe of Osgodby, continued to practise Catholicism. Lady Babthorpe regularly sheltered priests, had seven of her eight children baptized in the Catholic faith, and successfully prevented all of them from attending church, despite her husband being under a bond of £4,000 to ensure their presence.²⁵ Several Cleveland families had children baptized as Catholics, once more exercising active resistance to the state that required considerable organization and relied heavily upon the discretion of friends and neighbours. A number of presentments occur in the visitations for failure to baptize children into the Established Church, and some parents, such as Elizabeth and Robert Simpson of Egton, and Jane and William Philips of Danby, reappear repeatedly, suggesting that few presentments resulted in any serious punishment.²⁶ The Simpsons and the Philips were prominent members of their communities, which may explain why little action was taken against them, but both must have relied upon strong social bonds with conformist neighbours.

²³ Foreign education became illegal from 1585 and there was a danger that heirs might renounce their rights for the priesthood. However some Catholics, such as the Meynells of North Kilvington, still ensured that their children received a Catholic education. Hugh Aveling, ed., 'Recusancy Papers of the Meynell Family', *CRSP* 56 (London, 1964), xv, xvii. There is only one visitation presentment for the employment of a Catholic schoolmaster: York, Borthwick, V1595-6/CB3, fols 148v-149r.

²⁴ Crawford, *Women and Religion*, 61.

²⁵ Christine Newman, 'The Role of Women in Early Yorkshire Recusancy: a Reappraisal', *Northern Catholic History* 30 (1989), 6-16, at 10.

²⁶ York, Borthwick, V1594, fols 133r, 136v; V1586, fol. 120r; V1590-1/CB1, fol. 199v; V1595-6/CB3, fols 148r, 150r; V1600/CB.1B, fols 233v, 234r, 237r, 242r, 248v.

Elizabeth Chapman of Fylingdales also appears to have exerted a strong religious influence over her family, and was not put off by increased government persecution. Elizabeth was presented for recusancy in each visitation from 1586 to 1600, but by 1600 her husband, son and daughters also appear. It seems that Elizabeth took a leading role in the religious education of her children, and either persuaded her husband to stop conforming, or converted him from a genuine Protestant belief, although it is also possible that his role in the Fylingdales community was such that existing Catholic beliefs had previously been ignored.²⁷

By 1560 Fylingdales, along with much of the rest of the Liberty of Whitby Strand, was held by Richard Cholmley. Contemporaries recognized Richard as a Catholic, and largely through the efforts of his second wife Katherine Clifford, Lady Scrope, and his daughter-in-law Margaret Babthorpe, the Cholmley home became a sanctuary for Catholic priests and Whitby developed a substantial recusant community. Katherine and Margaret were notorious recusants, and although Lady Katherine was too elderly and too well connected to be severely punished, Margaret was jailed for several months in 1593, along with her sister-in-law Katherine Dutton, Katherine Radcliffe of Ugthorpe and the wives of several other Yorkshire gentlemen.²⁸ Only a year earlier, in 1592, Katherine Dutton, a daughter of Henry Cholmley, married her husband Richard in a secret Roman ceremony in the private chapel of the Ingleby family at Ripley in the West Riding.²⁹ The Ingleby home was also used as a dispersal point for priests, and was some distance inland from Whitby. The Duttons were not alone, other Catholics were also prepared to travel to be married according to Roman tradition, emphasizing the strength of their belief, and the extent of their communication with other Catholics. Such communication was vital to ensure the survival of post-reformation Catholicism throughout England, but networks did not just exist between gentry families. Groups of travelling players such as that based at Egton in the 1590s played a crucial role in transmitting information and messages amongst Catholics of all social levels. Even Lord Sheffield, a member of the Council of the North and a notorious prosecutor of recusants, who had inherited the Mulgrave estate from the Radcliffes, was married by a

²⁷ York, Borthwick, V1586, fol. 108v; V1590-1/CB1, fols 164r, 184r; V1594, fol. 139r; V1595-6/CB3, fol. 153v; V1600/CB.1B, fol. 235v.

²⁸ Binns, *Cholmley*, 42, 44, 48; Rowlands, 'Recusant Women', 154.

²⁹ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, 149.

priest to his Catholic wife in 1581. Despite his activities against Catholics, Sheffield was still suspected of papistry as late as 1598.³⁰ That year also saw the death of Katherine Clifford, after which Henry and Margaret Cholmley conformed to the Established Religion. Continued persecution and mounting financial difficulties doubtless contributed to this, but committed Protestant preachers were emerging in the area by this time, and perhaps their conformity would have occurred earlier without Lady Scrope's obstinate recusancy. Margaret disappears from ecclesiastical court records after this, but Henry seems to have become a zealous Protestant. In 1604, as JP for Whitby, he personally presented twenty-three recusants, a 'retainer of recusants', a private baptism and three cases of secret marriage before the Council.³¹ The Elizabethan government hoped to eliminate Catholicism by removing the influence of families such as the Cholmleys, and like their European counterparts they worked to mobilize noble and gentry landowners as both agents and enforcers of religious change.³² In areas where gentry support was vital for the maintenance of traditional religion they were reasonably successful. In the North York Moors, however, recusant communities were able to exist without the direct support of the gentry. The spread of recusancy in Whitby Strand was not halted by the conformity of the previously Catholic Cholmleys after 1598. Nor did the arrival of anti-Catholic government agents Sir Thomas Hoby at Hackness and Lord Sheffield at Mulgrave in the mid-1590s encourage their neighbours to conform. The importance of gentlemen and their wives in the preservation of Catholicism must not be underestimated, but scholars ought now to pay more attention to their socially subordinate neighbours and their womenfolk.

Though visitation returns are the most revealing source for lay religion in Cleveland, further valuable insights into the diverse religious beliefs of women can also be provided by wills. Few survive for Cleveland women and the majority of those are neutral, but a few are more revealing. As late as 1596, Agnes Whitby of Lythe bequeathed her soul

³⁰ Ibid., 130; John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community* (London, 1975), 136; Crawford, *Women and Religion*, 61.

³¹ A. G. Dickens, 'The Extent and Character of Recusancy in Yorkshire, 1604', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 37 (1948–51), 24–49, at 25.

³² Joseph Patrouch, *A Negotiated Settlement: the Counter-Reformation in Upper Austria under the Habsburgs* (Boston, 2000) is a good illustration of the way in which local landowners could be used to aid authorities in implementing religious change, and of the resistance they could offer.

to God, Jesus Christ, and 'all the blessed company of heaven'.³³ Following a traditional belief that the prayers of widows and the poor were especially efficacious for the soul, Agnes also bequeathed money to the poor widows of Lythe. The legal requirements of the late sixteenth-century dictated that prayer was not explicitly mentioned, but Agnes demonstrated considerable obstinacy in setting forth her divergent beliefs so clearly. Women, particularly widows and the elderly, were an important part of the Catholic network, and Agnes probably believed them most likely to remember her after her death. Later still, in 1602, Margaret Robson of Robin Hood's Bay in Fylingdales also bequeathed her soul to God, Christ and 'all the Holy Company of Heaven' though her bequests were entirely secular.³⁴ Whoever was responsible for composing these preambles, no Protestant would have agreed to the inclusion of Catholic saints in their will, and other evidence shows that Agnes was presented as a recusant in the visitations of 1590 to 1591, and that Lythe and Fylingdales had thriving Catholic communities with numerous female recusants.³⁵

Similar sentiments can be found in other women's wills across the period, all in parishes which returned high numbers of recusants during Elizabeth's reign.³⁶ It must be noted that there are also a very small number of women's wills from Elizabethan Cleveland which have overtly Protestant preambles, but few of these are particularly explicit, and all are from parishes with few or no recusants.³⁷ The small numbers of extant women's wills from Elizabethan Cleveland are insufficient to build a definitive pattern of women's religious beliefs in the area, and the neutral form of the majority gives little or no indication of personal faith, whilst confirming that will preambles alone are insufficient guides to religious belief. However, the proportion of women continuing to use Catholic language, particularly in parishes with high numbers of known recusants, can only serve to emphasize the traditional nature of religious beliefs in the North York Moors, and to demonstrate the importance of women's willingness to defy the state in order to maintain those beliefs.

³³ York, Borthwick, Prob. Reg. 26, fol. 321v.

³⁴ York, Borthwick, Prob. Reg. 28, fols 590v–591r.

³⁵ York, Borthwick, V1590–1/CB1 fol. 190r; Fylingdales and Lythe each returned 40 female recusants in the Elizabethan visitations.

³⁶ York, Borthwick, Prob. Reg. 18, fols 101v and 183r; PR 19, fol. 351v; PR 21, fol. 316r.

³⁷ York, Borthwick, Prob. Reg. 27, fols 460v–461r.

Catholicism in Cleveland remained a statistical minority, but it successfully resisted all attempts by the Elizabethan government to crush it, and by 1603 it could be suggested that there were scarcely more convinced Protestants than Catholics in the area. The people of the North York Moors were particularly well positioned to gain maximum benefit from the English Catholic mission, and made the most of the resources available to them. Many made a conscious decision to reject the Established Church, and the growing number of names occurring in the visitation returns suggests that new converts were continually being made, in some cases building up religious communities that remain today. Undoubtedly the arrival of the missionary priests from the 1580s was critical to the survival of Catholicism, but without the determination of the Catholic laity, and particularly the women, the priests would have had little to work with. Sarah Bastow argued that it was women who made Catholicism a 'living religion in an age where it was in danger of dying a quiet death',³⁸ and the unobtrusive and disciplined work of the women of Cleveland in support of the Catholic faith suggests that here at least this was true. The women of the moorland communities worked together to resist the state; the coherent and disciplined nature of that resistance, coupled with the relative religious toleration exercised by individual communities which gave these women the space and time within which to create and build up the vital cross-class networks, made it all the more effective and enabled the establishment of a continuing recusant tradition in the area which survived into the eighteenth century and beyond. Although the role of women seems to have become less significant in later years, without the disciplined resistance of recusant women under Elizabeth it seems unlikely that such a strong foundation of Catholicism could have been established in the North York Moors.

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³⁸ Bastow, '“Worth Nothing but Very Wilful”', 599.