

New College of Magic and Wizardry: A Second Note on the 1566/7 Visitation*

New College Chapel, Friday 20 September 1566: 'On this day and place Peter Hampden, a good and distinguished man of noble birth, personally came before Master George Acworth, [who] was sitting judicially in judgement [*iudicialiter et pro tribunali sedente*]. He presented to the same Lord Judge the letters of commission of the foresaid Reverend Father [the Bishop of Winchester, Robert Horne], which were addressed to him, and he beseeched him to proceed according to their power, form and effect. The Lord reverently examined and received these from the hands of the said Peter Hampden because of the honour of so great a commitment and because of the reverence and obedience owed to His person [Bishop Horne]. The same Master George Acworth accepted and took on him the burden of the foresaid commission and he decreed that we are to proceed according to their tenor and effect. He gave them to me, the before mentioned Robert Knaplock notary public and foresaid registrar, to read out publicly'.¹

Thus began the 1566/1567 Visitation of New College by a representative of its Visitor, Robert Horne, a Protestant exile under Mary and Elizabeth's appointment as Bishop of Winchester. We can only speculate what the warden, fellows and scholars made of the commission read out to them by Knaplock 'in a high and intelligible voice'.² Perhaps, it made this group of cryptocatholics think of the Spanish Inquisition. Certainly, Acworth was to oblige each and every one of them 'to speak and declare the plain and bare truth according to requirements of your statutes'.³ Coming as it did two weeks after Queen Elizabeth's visit to Oxford the commission also took the airs of a wholesale royal visitation and it left some members of the College feeling terrified.⁴ The reaction of former members, which I studied in a previous New College Note, is easier to gauge. Thomas Stapleton raged publicly against Horne's violations of the laws of God and grammar.⁵ Stapleton was one of many famous Catholic scholars produced by the College in the early and mid-sixteenth century. The same list also features Nicholas Sanders (the author of *The Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*), Owen Lewis (later an assistant to Carlo Borromeo,

Reginald Pole, Mary Tudor's Archbishop of Canterbury). Elizabeth's accession led a number of Catholics, Stapleton among them, to flee to the continent. Others were expelled, but Bishop Horne, as a committed evangelical, still watched the College with a wary eye. Acworth and his colleagues were sent to root out a nest of cryptopapists. In the process these men were to uncover two practising magicians as well.

The 1566/67 Visitation has long, by common consent, been regarded as 'one of the most minutely recorded events in the history of the College'.⁶ Knaplock, the notary public, was a diligent scribe and recorded the religious and moral failings of the warden and fellows in minute detail. The Visitation is, however, also one of the least well-known events in College history. Its principal aim was to persuade all members to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. This proved to a long-drawn out process, yet after much hand-wringing only two fellows refused and were expelled. One of these, John Munden (or Mundryn), became a Jesuit missionary and was executed at Tyburn in 1582.⁷ In the process, the commissioners visited the College three times in the course of nearly a year. Their first visit began, as already noted, on 20 September 1566 and lasted for at least one week (the end date is not recorded). Acworth returned on 18 March the following year and stayed until the 21st.⁸ Finally, Horne's representatives returned on 2 September for a final inspection. The Visitation wrapped up at 1 pm the next day with a final speech by Acworth, still 'seated judicially in judgement', the Warden, Subwarden, and other fellows, scholars and ministers of the said College came forth, each and every one of whom Lord [Acworth] warned and vehemently exhorted in a Latin oration . . . to desist from papistry and all idolatry and henceforth to properly cling to Sacred Scripture'.⁹

Though clearly focussed on uprooting popery the commissioners also confronted the College's many moral failings. Perhaps the most serious charge on this front was levelled against Warden Thomas White (or Whyte), one of only two Oxford men who (barely) survived Elizabeth's accession as head of house.¹⁰ The arrival of the commissioners prompted a substantial part of the fellowship to line up against him. Among the many accusations made was the claim that:

a certain maid [*puella*] who served you [White] in the rectory at Stanton St John had become pregnant several years ago and died after having taken medication to procure an abortion. A widely spread report [or rumour; *fama*] on this matter rouses the gravest suspicion of unchastity against you.¹¹

White, doubtless one of the most unsavoury wardens in College history, reported that the girl had become pregnant by 'a certain Richard', his cook and manservant. Once he learned of her

⁶ Hastings Rashdall and Robert S. Rait, *New College: University of Oxford College Histories*

condition, he evicted her

Then Hopkins came forth who confessed to [possessing] a book with written conjurations, which he said he obtained from Lord Fisher, who stepping forth admitted to having had a book of this sort from a certain Master Beale, a Master of Arts from Christ Church, Oxford. Lord [Acworth] warned both to be present here [in chapel] the next day between eight and nine in the morning.²⁴

Master Beale, the purveyor of magical books, can only have been William Beale (or Bele), who was a student of Christ Church from 1559 to 1572 and had obtained his MA in 1565 or 1566. Little else is known about him.²⁵ More interesting and an altogether different figure from Hopkins was John Fisher. He was probably a few years older and certainly more senior than Hopkins, having arrived at New on 2 October 1562 and already taken his BA.²⁶ He also caused Acworth considerably more inconvenience. When the judge had attempted to expel absent members that fateful afternoon, Fisher had interjected that 'other fellows were detained in town on business' which forced the judge to delay making good on his threats once again.²⁷ In fact, Fisher had posed a problem from the start. Perhaps not surprising for a man who shared his name with a Catholic martyr, he roundly admitted during the first session to possessing and reading a substantial number of prohibited Catholic books.²⁸ A few days later he was accused of laughing during a church service and of 'drink[ing] up all the wine in mockery of the Holy Supper'.²⁹ When Fisher denied these charges and produced witnesses [*compurgatores*] Acworth refused to postpone their swearing in 'to avoid perjury'.³⁰ It is not odd that such a contrarian man dabbled in magic.

The story of Thomas Hopkins, John Fisher, and their book of spells is part of a much larger story. Witchcraft intersected with academic life in numerous ways. In Germany, the *Carolina*, the Imperial code promulgated by Charles V mandated that courts consult the law faculty of a nearby university in difficult witchcraft cases. Thousands of such legal opinions survive.³¹ Less attention has paid to the ways in which witchcraft was discussed and even practised within Europe's universities at the time but their importance received some recognition.³² Keith Thomas already noticed the subject's widespread and diverse academic appeal. Writing at the tail end of the 1960s he observed that magic 'seems to have been the equivalent of drug-taking today as the fashionable temptation for undergraduates'

had signed them.³⁴ The infamous *Malleus maleficarum* (1486) reported how during a bout of competitive beer drinking one cursing student got carried away by the devil.³⁵ The Bordeaux lawyer Pierre de Lancre reported how students got suspicious when one of their own, a boy aged about 14, wrote a poem 'as good as or better than Vergil'. When the rumour circulated that he had made a pact with the devil, 'this perfection and excellence ceased soon afterwards'.³⁶ (One wonders why.)

How, then, did things end for our two amateur magicians? Hopkins was warned that 'henceforth he should apply his mind more diligently to letters, and he should not in any way use the magical art or support it in future'.³⁷ He was threatened with punishment (*sub poena*) if he did not obey. Hopkins remained at New College until 1568. Whether or not he ended up taking a degree is unclear. If he did, he was probably the 'Thomas Hopkins, BA' whom Robert Horne ordained in 1572 as a curate at Nursling in Hampshire. In 1584, this Thomas Hopkins became