

ABSTRACT

‘Crosland the Recusante his books and pictures’, distributing Catholic texts in Jacobean England

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In the early seventeenth century, religious literature for the English Catholic community was distributed in secret, an activity much better suited to itinerant traders than to mainstream booksellers. Not surprisingly the documentary evidence of pedlars selling literature to the recusant community is very sparse. This case study of a Catholic pedlar, Richard Crosland, apprehended in Leicester in 1604, is based on the detailed account of his interrogation and correspondence preserved in the Borough Records of Leicester.

Unusually, the list of books and devotional articles in Crosland’s pack has survived. Two of the books are English translations of Spanish devotional texts: *A Memorial of a Christian Life*, by the Dominican Luis de Granada, *The Contempt of the World and the Vanities Thereof*, by the Franciscan Diego de Estella, which, in addition to being an exceptionally popular work of Catholic spirituality, was also published in a ‘reformed’ edition for English Protestants in 1608. There were also two ‘Manuals of Prayers’, eighteen gilded pictures, sixteen printed pictures, rosaries, crucifixes and other devotional items.

This study of the Crosland case suggests some conclusions about the underground trade in Catholic texts. The books in Crosland’s possession are discussed and, as far as possible, identified. The supplier of the books, Edward Cavell, a London merchant, has not been traced but his connection to the Spanish Ambassador may be significant, as the embassy and its chapel formed a focal point for English Catholics. Crosland stated that his intention was to deliver his wares to Skinner’s house. This has been tentatively identified as Rowington Hall, home of the recusant Skinner family, in northern Warwickshire, an area of strong Catholicism, including the Throckmorton family at Coughton Court, Henry Ferrers and the Vaux sisters, with their Jesuit friends, at Baddesley Clinton.

A second case is also discussed briefly. In 1616, Richard Jeffrey, the King’s chaplain, travelling through Leicester on his way from London to York, met with Widow Stanley, an elderly recusant woman imprisoned in the town. He reported that she was ‘trained, traded and traveled... under the style and habite of a pilgyrme passing as a foote post frome place to place attended with A mayde servant carryinge messages tokens petitions bookes letters pictures medales Crusifixes reliques etc to dispose...’. Although the evidence for this case is less detailed, it is very interesting to note that Widow Stanley was carrying letters and messages as well as books and devotional items. This suggests that pedlars formed part of a vital underground communication network for the Catholic community of Jacobean England, as well as supplying devotional texts and artefacts, which were of great importance when priests and the sacraments were available only intermittently, if at all, to those who held to the old religion.

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