

Background

*Some of the land that Fairfield Nature Reserve now occupies, was once owned by Aldliffe Hall which was built in the 16th century by the Daltons – a prominent Catholic family. Between 1626 and 1685, eight unmarried Dalton sisters lived in the house, and it eventually became known as the Hall of the Catholic Virgins. It was a well-established safe haven for Catholics to worship especially during the turbulent years of the Civil War and the Commonwealth when Catholic families were persecuted and had much of their land confiscated. But many of the sisters survived the political hardship, and in 1674, the remaining two, Catherine and Eleanor, had a stone erected to celebrate their faith and virginal status. The stone has survived several moves and can be seen today on display in Lancaster’s Cathedral. **November 2015***

The Catholic Virgins

Mandy Bannon

There, it is signed. The writing looks jagged and feeble, drying on the parchment. The joints of my fingers ache now the autumn damp has set in. I place the quill in the ink well and try to unfurl my fingers. This hand is unfamiliar. The knuckles bulge and the skin hangs like an ill-fitting glove, splattered with spots, the colour of meadow mushrooms.

My nephew’s face is serious, but he forces a smile and says something I cannot hear. I try to copy his expression, but my mouth feels contorted and when I go to speak, strange sounds emerge. I turn my face to the window, but the view has faded with my eyesight. I used to love looking out across our land: the fields changing with the seasons. Brown earth turning to green shoots, fading into a yellow wave of oats, before returning to earth again. Only the Castle and Priory remain steadfast fixtures on the horizon.

One of my first memories is of Mother standing in the garden looking across to the Castle: - a flag is flying from the battlements. A hare runs across Sowerholme field as Mother puts her hand to her mouth and sobs. She drops to her knees and makes the sign of the cross.

“May the Father, Son and Holy Ghost have mercy on his soul,” she says, making me and my sisters kneel with her on the stony ground. “Let us pray for the souls of our departed brethren and all the martyrs who defend the Old Faith, Amen.”

How many souls we prayed for, I’ll never know. The souls of executed priests, the souls of Catholic friends and even the souls of those unprotected by our faith, like the poor wretches hanged for witchcraft. We prayed for them all. And later we would pray for our own.

My dear brother Robert. There he is, two or three years old, playing at the foot of the gnarled black poplar, scooping its fluffy seedheads into his hands. “This is a cloud for my

baby sister so she can ride to Heaven,” he says, then blows the downy ball into the air. Many years later, when he is taken from us so cruelly, fighting for King Charles, I pray that *his* soul flies as comfortably to Our Lord. How proud, Mother and Father would have been. Raising the troop at his own expense; recruiting young farmlads of Aldcliffe and Thurnham. Riding all the way to Newbury and fighting with such valour.

Two brothers and *nine* sisters. I miss them all. It feels unfair to be the last, but someone has to be, and God has chosen me. The Priest has given me the last rites twice already. It is almost embarrassing. I am running out of things to confess. But I always have the vice of envy to fall back on. Envy of my sisters who were educated at the French convent, envy of my brothers fighting for our rightful King, envy of sister Jane who married and was the only one of us to bear children. Envy of those whose lives moved on, however briefly. But mother wanted me to stay with her. Our beautiful mother, selfless and devout.

“You’re the sensible one, Catherine,” she would say. “How like your father you are. Dependable and practical.” So how could I possibly put my wishes above hers? Thank the Lord she and Father were both spared the horror of the Civil War and Cromwell’s so-called Commonwealth; the loss of our brothers and the loss of our land.

Years blur, like a sea fret creeping up the Lune. But certain things loom out of the mist. The first time I met Thomas Markham on the lane, following the theft of our acres. It is the end of September but there is still heat in the sun and my eyes hurt from squinting against it. Markham stops me on the lane and keeps me talking. Moans about his tenants. The audacity of the man to complain to *me* about the responsibilities of being a landowner! He is on his horse and I try moving so I can look him in the eye, but the sun is too strong. I do not think he has changed. His silhouette retains its chiselled sharpness, and his voice has the same gravel catch in it as he’s had since he was a young man. I blush to think how my sisters and I once thought him handsome.

I remember his father, John Markham. A quiet man with a ready smile and strong principles. How my sisters and I loved visiting his farm. One winter when the Lune froze over and the North field that always floods turned to ice, the Markhams let us and the other village children skate on it. I feel the mittened clench of my sisters’ hands, one each side. Lurching as the uncertain ground slips from my feet, but rescued each time by the steadying arms of my siblings. All of us squealing with glee as the ice hisses beneath the metal blades of our pattens.

Whatever would Father think of Markham’s son turning us in, running cap in hand to the Parliamentarians, denouncing our Popish ways, so he can claim two thirds of our land for

himself? *Sequestered* they called it in the Courts, from the Latin for safekeeping. As if we couldn't be trusted. It was so unjust. Everyone knew what we were; that priests gave Mass at Aldcliffe Hall. We'd never hidden our faith. We were proud of our Roman beliefs. We paid our fines to forfeit our attendance in Church.

Those years following our dear King's execution were the hardest. We knew not what Cromwell had planned for our kin. When his Roundheads took the Castle, we kept our heads down. There were just seven of us sisters by then, and without menfolk of our own, we had only our priests and faith to protect us. Some of our hands had stayed on and worked the fields. We had enough to feed ourselves and pay our few servants. The seasons kept turning. The oxen kept ploughing. The sun still shone and the rain still fell during the Commonwealth years. And then there was August 12th 1651.

Jenny Flitcroft runs in to tell us the news. All seven of us leave what we're doing, dropping our prayer books and cross-stitch samplers. Jack gets the pony and trap ready as quick as he can. Under the clapping of our iron-shod pony, there's the murmur of buzzing creatures and a dragonfly darts across our path. I am glad of my bonnet and I loosen the shawl from my shoulders. When we reach the square, it is thick with crowds, noise and the smell of ripe horse dung. In front of Market Cross are Cavaliers wearing red tunics, many mounted, many more standing to attention, their upright pikes glinting in the sun. Behind them on the steps of the Cross we can just make out the figure of Prince Charles. When he turns, his profile looks like it's been traced from an old coin. He is his father's son. He wears a long dark wig and a red splash of cloth across his shoulders. Another man stands next to him, speaking to the crowd. We cannot hear the words, but as he raises the arm of Charles, a roar goes up.

"What's happening?" Dorothea asks.

A man in front of the cart turns and shouts to us. "They've proclaimed Charlie King!"

We stand up in the trap and hug each other. And that's when I hear it first. A stocky man in a blood-stained butcher's apron turns to us, raises his hat and shouts, "Here's to our Catholic Virgins!" Whistling and cheering follow. And I'm thinking, "Yes, that's what we are. We may be women past the bloom of youth, but we are proud to be Catholic Virgins." It's nine more years until Charles is restored to the throne and we'll be free from Cromwell's tyranny, but in that one moment, in Market Cross, we feel God's love as bright as the midday sun.

The light is dimming. I hear the creak of footsteps across my chamber floor.

"Miss Catherine," Jenny whispers, "would you like a sip of watered wine?"

I think about it. The cool goblet against my lips, the sharp tang of fermented grape in my mouth. The blood of Christ. But I can muster no enthusiasm.

“A morsel of food perhaps?” she continues. “I’ve made some lovely stew. Your nephew brought us a brace of rabbits and I’ve added some carrots and rosemary from the garden.”

I nod to please her. Anything to be left in peace. So Robert has visited. Did he see me? I do not know. I confuse him with the priest. Eleanor would enjoy the rabbit stew, and I try and call out to Jenny, but then I remember Eleanor is dead.

For a while there were just the two of us. Two old women living their last years in the way we always had - with our faith and humility. So Eleanor’s idea came as a surprise. It is a Sunday and Father Quinn’s saying Mass with us in the chapel. The Latin is as soothing as the sound of Lucy Brook in summer. We take the bread and wine. The sun shines through the stained glass and Eleanor holds my hand in hers.

“How blessed we are, Catherine,” she says. “To have reached this age, to have survived these years of tumult and still be faithful and pure in the eyes of our Lord.”

The Priest nods, says Amen and bids us farewell. We remain kneeling at the altar. Eleanor looks at me and her eyes are bright.

“He came to me in a dream,” she says. “The Lord wants us to create a lasting symbol of our intent.”

“Go, on,” I say.

“We must erect a stone declaring our faith and purity in body and spirit.”

With the sun streaming on her lined face, I am reminded of my mother.

“Where is the stone, now?” I wonder. I imagine the tablet in front of me, set in the wall above the wash stand, like a small headstone, the letters carved simply by the mason’s apprentice. And what were the words? Some defiant message about our virginity and faith, I think. I hear Eleanor’s soft voice as if she is reading from the Bible.

“Catholicae Virgines nos sumus: mutare vel tempore spernimus.” I try and remember the translation. It lacks the comfort and rhythm of our beloved Latin, but the message is clear: Catholic Virgins are we: we scorn to change with the times.”

The darkness of the room draws me in. I smile and close my eyes.