

English Benedictine Congregation History Commission – Symposium 2001  
**ENGLISH BENEDICTINE REFORMERS  
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

DOM THEODORE BAILY AND DOM CHRISTOPHER BATLEY

Dom Aidan Bellenger

I WAS RECENTLY REVIEWING a continuation of the Dominican obituaries produced by the English Province<sup>1</sup>. Comparing the names of those memorialised with those of the contributors to various Blackfriars publications and with the lists of those who had given service to the province as superiors I discovered many missing names - ‘the disappeared’ as I would refer to them. If we look at our own communities we will often think of those who left and pursued a new career outside the cloister. In the great diversity of individual monastic histories some have lost their faith or found a wife. Others, and it is with two of these that this paper is concerned, have transferred their stability to another monastic community outside the English Congregation, finding even Cuthbert Butler’s ideal Benedictine Abbey not ‘primitive’ enough.<sup>2</sup>

The reception of the Anglican Benedictines of Caldey into the Roman Catholic Church in 1913 under the close watch of Cuthbert Butler, John Chapman and Bede Camm of Downside brought the primitive observance face to face with the reforming EBC. For some the lure of Caldey was too great and in its early Catholic Benedictine incarnation (before the Benedictines moved to Prinknash in 1928 and the island was settled by the Cistercians) it attracted at least two Downside juniors to its ranks. Both were interesting characters, and both had firm views on monastic reform.

THEODORE BAILY

Dom Theodore Baily (1898-1966) is probably the better known of the two. A Londoner, he was educated at Dulwich College and entered the Downside novitiate at sixteen being clothed as Theodore (his baptismal name was Harold) and making his profession the following year. He transferred to Caldey in 1920 and was ordained priest in 1927. While retaining an affection for Downside and especially for his Novice Master, Dom Wilfrid Corney, he was to remain within the Caldey *familia* moving to Prinknash with his confrères and spending nearly twenty years at the community’s annex at Farnborough where he resided from 1947 until his death.<sup>3</sup>

His was a spiritual and withdrawn disposition and there was nowhere he liked to be better than the two-roomed cottage hermitage at Caldey known as Sambuca. His interests encompassed the English mystics

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<sup>1</sup> S. F. Gaine, *Obituary Notices of the English Dominicans from 1952 to 1996*, Oxford, 2000, reviewed in *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000) 302-303.

<sup>2</sup> For Butler’s ‘ideal’ monastery see *Benedictine Monachism*, London, 1924 edn., chapter 22, ‘A Benedictine Abbey in the Twentieth Century’, pp. 368-83.

<sup>3</sup> See *Pax* 318 (1967), pp. 38-42 for an obituary of Baily.

and the spirituality of the East. Dom Bede Griffiths, also resident at Prinknash and Farnborough and a younger contemporary of Baily's looked to the Far East; Baily's milieu was rather Eastern Christianity. This was reflected in the artistic work which engaged his energy and imagination<sup>4</sup>; his paintings are suffused with an iconic Byzantine style. He was on friendly terms with Eric Gill and had spent some time with Maurice Denis at his Ateliers d'Art Sacré. In his pursuit of a solitary and artistic vocation he resembled Dom Hubert Van Zeller (1905-84) of Downside who remained, uneasily, in the Downside conventus throughout his life. Christopher Batley, the second of the Downside migrants to Caldey, attempted (and for a while led) a monastic foundation in Hampshire. I was in correspondence with Dom Hildebrand Flint (of Prinknash) in the late 1980's about this monk, and more recently via Dom Augustine Holmes of Pluscarden with Dom Drostan Nunan of Pluscarden who was with Batley from 1948 to 1957 with the exception of two years from 1952-4. I am grateful to all three for what information I could glean.

Paul Batley (1896-1971), Christopher was his religious name, was a convert probably as a young naval officer (he was received into the church of Plymouth Cathedral in 1914, and was midshipman at the Dardanelles in 1915). He first tried his vocation at Farnborough (then a Solesmes foundation) but came to Downside where he was professed on 22 October 1922. He moved to Caldey in 1925 and was clothed again on 11 July 1926 (again using the religious name Christopher) finally taking his solemn vows in 1931. A skilled carpenter and a tall muscular figure he was cellarer in the period 15 July 1928 to 25 April 1930 covering the move to Prinknash and later in charge of the Prinknash farm. Batley floated the refectory tables from Caldey to Tenby during the move of 1928, lashing them somehow to the small boat which was and is used for these crossings<sup>5</sup>. Something of the activity of this period is captured in the W. Heath Robinson (1892-1944) sketches of the Prinknash rebuilding (the artist's son was a member of the community) and vivid word pictures of the vigorous Batley survive from this period. One is from the pen of Bede Jarrett (1881-1934), the Dominican, in a letter to Hubert Van Zeller:

Dom Christopher Batley - whom I have seen at the New Caldey, looking magnificent, without an inch of superfluous flesh or an ounce, with his low-cut habit or rather smock, his chain of silver showing round his neck, his determined mouth while as cellarer he directs the rebuilding of the house and sets Theodore Baily to nail lathes on to the ceiling and marshals the 10 lay brothers to hoist steel girders and chivvies the Sub-prior-and-Novice Master out of the way into the fields to say his prayers and keep quiet and not interfere, a veritable S. Bernard indeed, new born, comely, attractive, with eyes like a sailor's, far seeing and impersonal, and the vigour of human energy and a blazing soul in corpore sano. Lord, what a sentence! I feel quite exhausted<sup>6</sup>.

*Reminiscences of Prinknash farming* contains the following:

Dom Christopher Batley, had decided to keep two or three cows just to provide the community with milk. He had very definite views on how cows should be kept - they should always be out of doors so no milking shed was needed and they were to be milked in the field. Happily he did the milking himself and soon found out that

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<sup>4</sup> 'Works to be seen at Beda College (Rome), Quarr Abbey, Farnborough Abbey, churches at Hay Lane and Frinton, private chapel at Rodmarton, etc'. (*Catholic Who's Who* 1952, p. 14). Many of the small icons painted for Prinknash monks survive. A full inventory of his works would be of interest.

<sup>5</sup> Information provided by David Farmer letter to Dom Aidan Bellenger, 29 October 2001 (Author's files).

<sup>6</sup> Letter of Bede Jarrett to Hubert Van Zeller, 22 December 1928, in B. Bailey, A. Bellenger and S. Tugwell ed. *Letters of Bede Jarrett* (Bath, 1989), p. 138. The Sub-Prior and Novice Master was Dom Benedict Stuart (1880-1963), born in Scotland and educated at Stonyhurst, professed at Fort Augustus in 1901 and later transferring to Prinknash where he was prior from 1928-38. He was resident at Farnborough, like Baily, from its re-foundation as a priory of Prinknash until his death.

to go out with bucket and milking stool and sit yourself under the cow's udder was not very good practice. Nevertheless he was not going to be beaten, and procured a large crate which had been used to import a motor car. He fitted this with skids so that it could be moved easily about the field and left the ends open so that the animal could enter at one end and leave by the other, being kept in during milking by a chain across each end. All went well for a time, but there came the day when Brownie was in the crate and her new calf outside began to bellow for its dam. Brownie gave one heave and careered down the field with the shed which was demolished in the process leaving the milker on his back, bathed in milk! That was the end of the experiment of milking in the fields. The old shed which is still in The Park became the milking shed for two or three years<sup>7</sup>.

He had been tonsured in 1927 and given minor orders but had a strong conviction that he should remain a non-cleric and, if possible, found a community of lay monks, not too dissimilar perhaps to the described by 'David Maudsley' in *The Solitaries of the Sambuca* (1914)<sup>8</sup>. He was to go far beyond Cistercian monasticism in his search for monastic perfection although in 1928 a review in *Pax* showed his interest in the Cistercian movement<sup>9</sup>. He approached the Abbot General of the then Cassinese Congregation in 1945 and a decision arrived in 1947 telling him that he must give up the idea or leave the monastery. He was duly dispensed in 1947 when he spent some time at Ramsgate.

At first his scheme went well. He and three others began a new community at Farnham in March 1948 and moved to Berehill Farm, Andover, in Hampshire, as 'Greymonks' with the approval of Bishop King of Portsmouth in December of the same year. A manifesto of the time which I reproduce here in full presented the community's ideals.

#### Laymonk Brotherhood

The basic idea of a monk's life is a desire to get nearer to God. It is a first invitation to cultivate that supernatural life of the soul which will only reach its fullness in heaven. As a first step towards this there is an impulse to flee the company of one's fellow men. Monastic life is an organised way of life intended to satisfy that invitation and help man to gain mastery of himself, become pliable to God's Will and attain that intimacy with Him which his soul longs for.

Today all Benedictine monks are priests and in their work differ little from priests of other orders. Originally and essentially monks are not priests; St Benedict himself was not. The monk just comes to the monastery to give himself to God. The priest, on the other hand, receives from God powers which are to be used for the benefit of his neighbour. There are in some monasteries lay brothers who live with the monks, but they are not monks, take no part in choir, do not enjoy the same rights and have little opportunity for reading or study. It is only possible to become a monk if one is able to do the studies for the priesthood.

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<sup>7</sup> *Pax* 358 (1984), pp. 279-80.

<sup>8</sup> D. Maudsley, *The Solitaries of the Sambuca*, with a prefatory note by Montgomery Carmichael, London, 1914, p. 28, contains the following words: 'There is no Order here'. He replied, 'Fourteen solitaries, each in his little cottage, live in these woods, which are my property. We are bound by no vows or rules: each man leads in his own way the solitary life. We have a priest as Chaplain and Spiritual Director, just as Jesuits of long ago did for they were all laymen. I came here to be quite alone; but it was God's will that others should follow me, and that I should be deprived of the greatest of all treasures, perfect solitude.' I suspect Maudsley is a *nom de plume* and would be grateful to find out more about Montgomery Carmichael and the *Sambuca* connection.

<sup>9</sup> *Pax* 86 (1928), pp. 45-50. Review of Ailbe Luddy's biography, by C. Batley under the title 'A New Life of St Bernard.'

In order to offer full monastic life to those who cannot attain to the priesthood, a brotherhood of Lay Choir Monks, that is monks in vows but not in orders has been established near Andover, living according to the Rule of St Benedict. No special work such as teaching or nursing is done. The brotherhood's chief task in God's service is the solemn chanting of the Divine Office in choir and its chief means of support is by working its own land and other work necessary to be self-supporting. All monks are of one standing and share fully in both spiritual and temporal duties. It is open to all who are in search of God in a life of prayer away from the rush of the modern world, who are prepared to devote two or three hours a day to singing God's praise in choir or to work with their hands. Enough Latin intelligently to take part in the Divine Office will have to be learned before profession. Previous knowledge (though desirable) is not essential if there is an ability to learn. Each monk has two hours a day for such reading as may develop his personal life of prayer and enable him to give his best in God's service. It is a life well balanced so as to make use of all man's faculties, physical and emotional in right proportion so that he may give himself to God with the fullness of his being<sup>10</sup>.

Despite its high hopes 'Greymonks' remained an ideal with little practical support and the only other community member who remained with Batley throughout was Dom Drostan Nunan. Two former monks were eventually ordained: Charles MacMahon and Bernard Lang, the latter in residence from February to August 1952<sup>11</sup>. Batley wrote to Nunan in 1959 from Prinknash when he returned as an intern oblate (with the name Paul) that despite its failure 'if I had the time over again I would only do just the same'<sup>12</sup>. By this stage, having been tossed by his bull in 1952, Batley could only walk with two sticks. Batley left Prinknash, following a visitation in May 1961, and found his way to the fraternité de la Vierge des Pauvres, Ponteux-les-Forges, Bowicos, Mimizan, France, where he died on 10 April 1971<sup>13</sup>. (13)

Batley's radical monasticism was interesting in its emphasis on the 'lay' spirit and, although never able to flourish, attempted to come to terms with the continuing conflict between the monastic ideal and the status given by priesthood and the clerical state. Prinknash had pioneered the concept of the unordained choir monk; Batley wanted to move towards a completely lay monastery.

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<sup>10</sup> Pluscarden Abbey Archives, D. Drostan Nunan, Typed manifesto by Dom Christopher Batley (1948).

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Dom Aidan Bellenger from Dom Hildebrand Flint, 18 November 1989 (Author's files).

<sup>12</sup> Pluscarden Abbey Archives, Batley and Nunan, Ash Wednesday 1959.

<sup>13</sup> Biographical details on Batley mainly from typed sheet of information provided in 1989 by Dom Hildebrand Flint.