

THOMAS SOUTHCOTT 1671-1748

PRESIDENT of the ENGLISH BENEDICTINES 1721-41
ABBOT OF VILLANOVA & ABBOT OF CISMAR 1717-48

Abbot Geoffrey Scott

ALEXANDER POPE KNEW THOMAS SOUTHCOTT, and he also had definite views about monks and their contribution to learning. As he wrote about contemporary collectors in Epistle IV to the Earl of Burlington in the *Moral Essays*

For Pembroke Statues, dirty Gods, and Coins;
Rare monkish manuscripts for Hearne alone,
And books for Mead and butterflies for Sloane’.

Thomas Southcott was born at Albery place, Surrey in 1671, the third son of Sir John Southcott and his wife, Elizabeth, the eldest daughter of Walter, 2nd Lord Aston. He was educated at St Gregory’s, Douai, around 1686 and was professed there in August 1688. During his years as Cellarer at Douai (1694-98), he took his D.D. at the university, based on a study of the first two books of the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX, which in the 18th-century formed the core of canon law studies at university. He may also have been at St Edmund’s, Paris at this time or later¹. He was sent onto the mission, and was stationed at Woburn Park, a Southcott property, in 1700, and was at Standon Lordship, the seat of his uncle, by 1705, when he was Secretary of General Chapter. During this time, he enjoyed an annuity from this family of £35. It was during this period that he advised the poet Alexander Pope about his health, which Dr Erskine-Hill has spoken of. He always forcibly denied his involvement in the translation of the Jansenist Pasquier Quesnel’s commentary on St John’s Gospel in *The New Testament with Moral Reflections*, 1709. At the 1710 General Chapter, he was made a Magister of Theology, and in 1713, a missionary Definitor. He was undoubtedly mixing by this time in influential aristocratic and literary circles. In 1712 he published his translation of Nicolas Boileau’s *Epistle to his gardiner* and in 1714, Barnaby Bernard Lintott reprinted in his *Miscellaneous Poems* more works of Southcott and some by Pope himself. In 1712, he was one of a group who persuaded the secular priest, John Savage, who had become the 5th Lord Rivers, to retract the oath of allegiance which he had taken to ensure his inheritance.

The Southcott family had been strongly royalist, and Thomas Southcott had become on the mission a member of a widely diffused Jacobite network. He is by far the most important Benedictine Jacobite and was to use his senior position as President-General to further the objectives of the legitimist cause. His key role is reflected in the two hundred letters to or from Southcott in the Stuart Papers in the Royal Archives at Windsor, a correspondence which begins in 1715, the year of the first Jacobite Rebellion, and shows him to be the principal revenue collector of the Jacobites in

¹ Copy of A&R ii 773, Luke Wadding, on St Clare, 1635, now at the London Oratory, inscribed ‘Bened. Ang. St. Ed. Parisiis. To T. Southcott’

England between 1715 and 1718. In June of 1714, a warrant had been issued against him. Known as Mr Scravenmor or 'the man in black', he was hopping between Paris and London during 1715 Rebellion, assuring Queen Mary of Modena and James III that he could collect funds from commercial interests and members of the aristocracy, such as the Duke of Norfolk, to finance the Swedish or Gyllenborg Plot planned in September 1716. With Bishop Atterbury of Rochester he managed to raise the enormous sum of £18,000 in only five months, and promised to collect £60,000 to secure Charles XII of Sweden's promise to land Swedish troops in England. Meanwhile, he was expanding his power base, being recommended to Propaganda in early 1715 as a suitable coadjutor to one of the vicars apostolic.

Throughout 1716, Southcott exaggerated the doleful conditions in England for the benefit of the Jacobite Court which had settled at Avignon in April. He had begun to use ciphers to preserve the confidentiality of his intelligence and managed to win the queen onto his side, suggesting he was of more use in England than as an ambassador to Vienna, which some Jacobite courtiers were recommending. 'Lesnard [Southcott] had great hopes of getting Orlando [money] from Bernard [England]', is a typical entry from one of the coded letters. Such Jacobite correspondence crossed the Channel in the pockets of monks who were, like the Edmundian, Father Francis Moore, were pressed into acting as Southcott's agents, and St Edmund's, Paris, became, it seems, a post office. James was not impressed by Southcott's suggestion of using coal ships for an invasion of England, and the monk soon began to develop a reputation for having 'airy notions, but he is zealous'. 'He meddles too much, though he is honest', 'he cannot keep confidence', 'Southcott's meddling is a great hindrance', are among the comments in the correspondence. 'Southcott is a great romancer', according to the Earl of Mar, 'He said James [III] was to marry Lady Petre, which horrified me'. By July 1717, we hear he had been 'dropped' from the Jacobite 'canal', though the same year, he had become Abbot of Cismar, a titular abbacy attached to Lamspring (Lamspringe), which allowed him a seat in General Chapter.

Southcott went to ground for two years. In 1720, he was present at the profession of his Stafford relation as a Blue Nun in Paris, and earlier, in the summer of 1719, the antiquarian, Thomas Hearne, had met him in Oxford, masquerading under another *alias*, 'Mr Wadsworth'. Hearne viewed him as 'a Man of great Sense and Prudence, and [said] that he hath an excellent secular Head... 'tis probably that, if he lives, he may be President again, he having acted very Wisely in the Office. He hath been many times with K. J. III and directed him the true Method of Passports'. The mention of the President-General reminds us that 1720 was an extremely difficult time for the Congregation which was split down the middle into a party which supported President Lawrence Fenwick and English Catholic approaches to the Hanoverian government, and another group who were of the same mind as Southcott and had Jacobite sympathies. Southcott, now known as 'Jormin' urged the king to reduce Fenwick's influence in Rome.

In August 1721, Southcott's efforts were crowned with success when he was elected President-General in the General Chapter at Douai. He had to begin the arduous task of bringing about stability to the Congregation. His friends, including the king, gathered

round him, offering support in his new office, and he appointed an ally, Alban Dawney, as procurator to manage his affairs in Rome. Only slowly did the schismatics surrender, but Southcott was fortified by being invited back into the highest Jacobite espionage network, presumably because of the influence he now enjoyed as President. ‘Lesnard’, his original cipher, had now become ‘Lizard’. During 1722, Southcott acted as a conduit for information from England, sent to the Stuart Court in Rome, though, despite his communicating information about the 1722 Layer Plot to James, there is no hint of his involvement in it.

It was during this time that we are introduced in his correspondence for the first time to his great friend, the Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay, disciple of Fenelon and a major figure in Scottish Jacobite Freemasonry, whose undoubted talents Southcott recognised. Southcott believed Ramsay’s work on Fenelon was the answer to Gallicanism, Jansenism and any attempt at reunion with the Church of England. He made sure the king had a copy of a work which, Southcott believed, would bring ‘the erring back to evangelical simplicity’. Ramsay was a frequent visitor at St Edmund’s, Paris, and his novel, *The Travels of Cyrus*, modelled on Fenelon’s *Telemaque*, was much in vogue. In 1722 also, we hear for the first time that James III was attempting to persuade the Holy See to provide Southcott with a benefice, for services rendered. In England, he translated the traditional rivalry between the Benedictines and the Vicars Apostolic into terms of Catholic Jacobites and Catholic Hanoverians. He thanked the cardinal protector, Gualterio, in 1722 for his help to the monks, and told him of the burdens he was carrying because of the Congregation’s debts resulting from the South Sea Bubble, and from difficult brethren. He had therefore, he said, ‘put the convents in order and the missionaries have been told to do spiritual exercises’.

Fears of a bill which would penalise the English Catholics, by imposing a double land tax on them, consumed much of Southcott’s time in 1723. He was able to appeal to the Propaganda and France to put pressure on the English government, hinting the cardinals might consider that the secular clergy and bishops favoured Gallicanism and Jansenism, while the Benedictines subscribed to *Unigenitus*. He had the support of a wide circle of influential friends who petitioned the Holy See to grant him a benefice. He had himself begun to hint that the appointment of a Benedictine as coadjutor to the John Leyburn, the London Vicar Apostolic, would solve all the problems besetting English Catholicism. Not surprisingly, therefore, he now became known as ‘General’ or ‘our Generalissimo’ Southcott to friends and foes. For events of 1724, the clutch of Southcott letters once held in the archives at Arras was, unfortunately, destroyed in the First World War, but the loss is partly made good by Southcott’s surviving jocular correspondence at this time with John Hay, perhaps the king’s closest adviser, who became Earl of Inverness in 1725. Here is a sample, dated 21 February 1724, Southcott to Hay: ‘I am heartily glad about what you say about poor rogue Ramsey, and you shall make a football of my noddle if you don’t find all true that ever I said about him. Had you judged otherwise, I would have sett all the Ladys of Paris upon yr. Back, and besides I would have employed some of my emissaries at Rome to have got you into the Inquisition. What a fine blaze a fagot and Mr Hay bound up together would have made!’

In August 1725, General Chapter met at Douai and Southcott was re-elected President-General. There, he made an impassioned plea, in the light of the Fenwick schism, for policies which would forge tighter unity within the Congregation. He was now a favourite candidate for the Northern District, following the death of Bishop George Witham in April, but the following year, conceded the office to another regular, the Dominican, Thomas Williams, whom he had turned to support. Once secure again as President, however, he began afresh to send intelligence of the state of England and Europe to the Jacobite court while coaxing Rome to use diplomatic levers to aid English Catholics. His failure to secure a bishopric made him even more determined to take a wealthy benefice, an objective which had already been the subject of many letters in the previous few years. So it was, in 1728 that Louis XV appointed him, 'a refugee in France' as abbot of St Andrew's Abbey, Villa Nova or Villeneuve, in Avignon, founded in the 6th century. The grant was confirmed by the Grand Council in Paris on 30 April 1729.

He took possession of the benefice in May 1730, but remained an absentee abbot. Suitably, all that survives intact after the French Revolution's depredation is the abbatial lodging. This abbey was the benefice procured for Southcott by Alexander Pope and many diplomatic allies of Southcott. The costs of bulls for the benefice were so prohibitive, however, that Southcott was reduced to asking James III for a loan, noting that he had worked fifteen years in the royal service and had never once asked such a favour. James was sent wine from Avignon for doing this good turn. Southcott would use his power as abbot to appoint to other benefices attached to this monastery, and it sharpened his attention regarding benefices held by English Benedictines. For when Bernard Quayne, Vicar of Cambrai, died there in September 1731, Southcott, then himself at Cambrai, told the prior of Quayne's house, St Laurence's, that he already had another Dieulouard monk ready as a candidate for presentation to Quayne's benefice which was worth five hundred livres per annum. Mention of this makes us realise that in addition to his consuming involvement with the Jacobites, Southcott continued to be heavily involved in the affairs of the Congregation. In 1734 and in 1738, for instance, we find him petitioning Propaganda for financial aid for St Gregory's school at Douai.

In May 1728, Southcott had been determined to refurbish the mortuary chapel of King James II at St Edmund's, Paris. Six years later, in 1734, he had become James III's procurator in Paris concerned to further the cause of his father, James II's, beatification. By July 1734, he had composed an abridgement of the king's life and was collecting witnesses, though James III insisted on secrecy so as not to worry Rome. For cheapness' sake, Southcott lived at St Edmund's, and killed two birds with one stone by conducting the Community visitation at the same time. The burial of the Duke of Berwick in the crypt of St Edmund's chapel in November 1734, noted by Southcott, encouraged him in the king's cause, but funds seem to have run out and the attempt was abandoned by 1740, Southcott having been re-elected as President in 1737 despite some reluctance on his part.

Southcott had reached his seventieth year in 1740, and he began to go blind which forced him to dictate his letters. When Sir Marmaduke Constable called on him, he found him 'fatt and faire, but grows old and has bad sight'. He lived largely at Cambrai,

as Vicar to the nuns, where he grew ‘whimsical upon his blindness’. At Cambrai, he gave spiritual ferverinos to the nuns, entertained various guests, such as Sir Marmaduke Constable, Lady Canning and the Montagues, on behalf of the nuns, and built three houses for the community and its guests, as well as soliciting friends ‘to buy them a little organ’. His Visitation address to the Cambrai nuns was typical: avoidance of irregular hours and talking with novices and pensioners, and no gossiping. The king still wrote to him, telling him in 1740 how pleased he was with Southcott’s appointment of Procurator in Rome, Bernard Wythie, and that he guessed it was much easier to manage the English Benedictine Congregation than political affairs. Southcott’s energy was unabated. He twisted the king’s arm to ensure that his secretary, Lawrence York, become coadjutor to Bishop Matthew Prichard in the Western District²: ‘It is and always has been my fixed opinion that to preserve peace in the mission, it is absolutely necessary to continue things on the present footing of having two Regular and two Secular priests... [York] has been prior of our house at Douay and also of our house at Paris, and has at present one of the chief posts amongst us, living in our house at the Bath where he is exceeding agreeable to all the chief of both Protestant and Catholick nobility...He preaches in a publick chappel...instructs every day...His principles as to the Church and Y[our] M[ajesty] are as sound as my own...Lord Inverness...may have enough interest with our Cardinal to get him made coadjutor to my abbey...It would be the making of our house at Douay for which I have long laboured to little purpose...’.

Southcott resigned as President at the 1741 Chapter, telling the fathers that he was worn out with infirmities and could no longer preside. Growing whimsical in his blindness did not deter him from nagging the king to find a canonry at Cambrai for Lawrence York, recently appointed coadjutor. He kept his affectionate friends. In 1743 Sir Edward Gascoigne took the Abbe de St. Andre, as Southcott was known, out in his coach for a wine-tasting session to toast the king’s health. He continued to decline gently, and on 24 October 1748, he died aged 78 at Cambrai following a paralytic stroke, ‘a saint if ever I knew one’, commented Sir Marmaduke Constable, and the nuns, out of deep respect, had his obit bill printed. His nephew, John Paul Stafford, reported to the king³ that his uncle had left him a coveted portrait of James III by M. Lebel (Alexis-Simon Belle) painted when he was in Lorraine (1713-16). This portrait now hangs in the British Embassy in Paris. Bringing the old monk’s story full circle. Stafford related⁴ that he had found among Southcott’s papers an account of his uncle’s cure from a dangerous illness at the intercession of King James II. He had been carried to the king’s tomb and made his devotions for three days, rubbing his face against the wood of the case, and had recovered. Perhaps it was in gratitude for this favour that Thomas Southcott was so zealous a Jacobite throughout his life.

² which he did in August 1741

³ Letter of February 1748

⁴ RA SP 295/59, 1748, 30 November