



Francis Oborn Edwards, S.J.
1922–2006

Frank Edwards who died on 15 September 2006 was one of the most prolific writers on Elizabethan and Jacobean history produced by the English (subsequently British) Province of the Society of Jesus since the end of the second world war. A consideration of the *oeuvres* he has left behind indicates how significant his contribution has been, embracing *The Dangerous Queen* (1964), *The Marvellous Chance* (1969), *Guy Fawkes: the Real Story of the Gunpowder Plot?* (1969), *The Gunpowder Plot: the Narrative of Oswald Tesimond alias Greenway* (1973), *The Elizabethan Jesuits* (1981) [a translation of the first six books of Henry More's *Historica Missionis Anglicanae Societatis Jesu*, St Omer, 1660], *The Jesuits in England from 1580 to the Present Day* (1985), *Robert Persons: the Biography of an Elizabethan Jesuit 1546–1610* (1995)—perhaps his most powerful book—and, more recently, *Plots and Plotters in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (2002) and *The Succession, Bye and Main Plots of 1601–1603* (2006). At the time of his death, a further Edwards *MS*, to complete the recent trilogy on the plots, awaits its publisher.

Recusant History marks Frank's passing by publishing an article he recently submitted to the journal and two book reviews completed in 2006. The journal is particularly grateful to Fr Thomas McCoog, S.J., for permitting the reproduction of the panegyric he preached at Farm Street at the Requiem Mass for Fr Edwards and for providing the excellent photograph of him from the Jesuit archives. The remaining articles in this number of *Recusant History* are representative of the historical periods, topics and fields of interest with which Frank was concerned at various times throughout his working life.

V. A. McClelland
(editor)

FRANCIS OBORN EDWARDS, S.J. (1922–2006)

[HOMILY PREACHED AT THE FUNERAL ON
25 SEPTEMBER 2006, BY REV. THOMAS M. McCOOG, S.J.,
ARCHIVIST OF THE BRITISH PROVINCE
OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS]

My introduction to Francis Edwards came with a warning—like a pack of cigarettes. But it was not the surgeon general who cautioned me but another American Jesuit, Dennis Linehan. I was a scholastic, visiting Farm Street for the first time in June of 1977, as I investigated British doctoral programmes in history. Before Father Linehan introduced me to Francis, he advised me to avoid certain subjects: the identity of the author of the Shakespearian plays, the Cecils, William and Robert, and, most important, the Gunpowder Plot! Anyone who believes that events from four centuries ago can no longer arouse emotions, never sat at dinner with Francis Edwards and Kempie Webb as the conversation inevitably turned to the plot! Each defended his position with passion and certainty.

Francis arrived at Farm Street in the summer of 1959. His initial assignment was twofold: to assist the province historian, Leo Hicks, and to oversee the archives. He was the first British Jesuit specifically named as archivist. He was a promising young man with genuine linguistic skills, historical interests, and organizational skills, a natural successor to Father Hicks who bequeathed to Francis a fondness for the fascinating Elizabethan Jesuit Robert Persons, and guided him into the murky world of spies, plots and *agents provocateurs*. His first historical work, *The Dangerous Queen*, on the Ridolphi Plot and Mary, Queen of Scots, appeared in 1964. Five years later, *Guy Fawkes: The Real Story of the Gunpowder Plot?* (London, 1969) set the course for his subsequent research and provided him with the sobriquet with which he was known at the Public Record Office: Gunpowder Edwards.

As archivist, Francis established the basic order and organization that we follow still. He saved nearly everything, fearful that he would throw out something that would prove important for future historians. He took very seriously his rôle as protector of the province's historical documents. As a student I watched with amazement as we progressed from one locked drawer to another until we finally opened the one that contained the key for the cupboard that held the desired document! Few historians knew the important non-English archives as well as Francis. Sabbaticals and vacations were spent in archives, transcribing documents and collecting microfilms. Both at Farm Street and elsewhere he assisted

scholars and students with advice and encouragement, often gently dissuading them from pursuing subjects within his perceived sphere of interest. His interest and concern gained him many friends from across the confessional and political spectrum. He played vibrant rôles in the Royal Stuart Society, the Catholic Stage Guild, the Society for Court Studies, the Catholic Archives Society, the Catholic Record Society, and the Ecclesiastical History Society, the annual conferences of the last two being fixed points in his calendar. He helped in various parishes: for years he regularly celebrated Mass on Friday in the City at St Mary Abchurch. He was the first Jesuit since the Victorian John Morris to be elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. He was also elected Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Armed with his slide projector, he gave courses on church history and general lectures on various subjects. He appeared frequently on television and radio, anywhere with anyone to debate Cecils, the plots, and the authorship of Shakespeare. For one programme, Francis Edwards accompanied the Elizabethan William Weston, well at least his skull, to the Tower of London for the first time since his exile in 1603. In 1993, Francis identified the ghost haunting Coutts's bank in the Strand as Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, the subject of Francis's *The Marvellous Chance* (London, 1969). What a publicity *coup*! How many of us can get ghosts to plug our books! Or, as Francis expressed it, 'I do not know of any other historian who has had a visitor from the other side to confirm his thesis.' But, he continued, 'I do not expect Academe generally to be much impressed by this latest contribution to the debate. But is it too much to ask that, ghosts or no ghosts, there be a quiet reappraisal of our national mythology, with an admission that this is often what we have been given for history?' Today's reading from Wisdom (4:7–15) warns us how our understanding may be warped and how treachery may seduce our souls. And our understanding of Elizabethan history is warped and in need of reform and reappraisal. Historical scholarship, Francis consistently argued, reveals the Machiavellian machinations of Elizabethan ministers, especially the Cecils, in their pursuit of power. The good things thrown into the shade by evil, must be rescued. The innocence of Mary, Queen of Scots, the Duke of Norfolk, and numerous Catholic priests and laity must be demonstrated to prevent further corruption of simple hearts.

'With God on our side,' the author of the epistle to the Romans asks, 'who can be against us?' (8:31–39). There were many against Francis. They dismissed Francis's monographs as confessional history, but few addressed his arguments or refuted his evidence. Some criticisms verged on the *ad hominem*. 'These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of Him who loved us.' Did Francis triumph? As a man, yes, even though his historical arguments may have not. Francis never reacted to any of his critics with anything less than respect and kindness, always taking seriously their arguments in his later arguments and revisions.

In 1989, Francis joined the staff of Farm Street after three unhappy years as director of the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus. Whether writing for the parish newsletter, preparing couples for marriage, or attending deanery meetings, he did everything with his customary efficiency, dedication, and devotion. The presence of many parishioners testify to their affection for him. In the midst of these activities, he prepared a thorough, multi-volume investigation of the plots and conspiracies allegedly concocted by Catholics in early modern England, his *magnum opus*. The first two volumes appeared; the third, the final word of, perhaps, the last 'No Plotter' is a completed manuscript.

In the thirty years since my inauspicious introduction, our paths crossed often as colleagues, as critics, as archivists, as members of the same community. We did not always agree but we respected each other. Illness prevented him from playing a major rôle in the different events surrounding the 400th anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot. We joked how I had become his theatrical understudy. In this context, he asked me about my interpretation of the Plot. Still mindful of the initial warning, I replied that I tried to stay away from such quagmires. Would that I had, was his reaction.

My respect for Francis increased significantly as I observed his equanimity as he underwent treatment for cancer. Rarely did he bring up the subject. If he did, he was optimistic. He believed the treatment would work; but if it did not, he did not complain. He was not angry or bitter. He did not allow his heart to be troubled. Many in the community and in the parish could echo these sentiments. The imminent prospect of death revealed the depth of Francis's faith. To the edification of many he faced his mortality as a Christian should. Thomas may not have known where Jesus was going, but Francis did. Jesus was 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:1–6). Where Jesus had gone, Francis was ready to follow. The Lord did let his servant depart in peace and in peace may he rest.