AN ENQUIRY INTO THE FREQUENCY OF THE PAROCHIAL
REGISTRATION OF CATHOLICS IN A 17th CENTURY
WARWICKSHIRE PARISH

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late seventeenth century rural life in Warwickshire.

In 1632 at the Easter meeting of the Warwickshire Quarter Sessions,
one couple was presented for an offence which is likely to interest
demographic historians. "Lawrence Cowper of Rowington, blacksmith,
and his wife, indicted for not resorting to their parish church and for
not receiving the Sacrament nor baptizing their children lawfully."

Unfortunately the Quarter Sessions records give no further hint as to
the fate of this pair but, whether they were punished or not, they did
not alter their ways, because in the Rowington parish registers there
is no mention of them baptising a single child. Had the Warwickshire
J.Ps. pursued a campaign for the consistent registration of
christenings, historians today might have cause to be grateful for their
intolerance and officiousness. As it was, however, between 1625,
when the surviving Quarter Sessions records begin, and 1696, when
their publication ceases, only one similar case was presented from the
whole county, "for not baptizing a child which is about two years of
age." And the individual concerned proved equally recalcitrant.
Twenty years later he reappeared "for not repairing to church to hear
divine service for the space of one month last past."

Nevertheless, the haphazard persecution of these recusants continued
in Warwickshire from at least the 1620s to the 1690s, reaching one
peak in 1679-80 at the time of the Popish Plot and another in 1683-4.
It therefore provides the historian with an excellent opportunity to see
how often baptisms, marriages and burials in the families of some of
the Anglican church's proven opponents were recorded in its registers.
The parish which I chose for this task was Rowington, lying on the
old road from Warwick to Birmingham. Many Catholics lived there during the 17th century and it is also one of the few Warwickshire parishes whose registers were published by the Parish Register Society. They run from 1638, but also include the bishop's transcripts for most of the previous twenty years.

Edgbaston was another Warwickshire parish with a substantial Catholic population whose registers have also been published. But on closer inspection, the 17th century entries in the Parish register proved to be so fragmentary that they were of no possible use for my purpose.

 Altogether between 1627 and 1686, 106 recusants from Rowington were presented at the Quarter Sessions for not attending their Anglican church.

**TABLE A**

**Presentation of Rowington Recusants at the Quarter Sessions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>R</th>
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<th>Event</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1627</td>
<td>Ea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1683</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1632</td>
<td>Ea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>Ep</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1683</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1642</td>
<td>Ep</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>Ea</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648</td>
<td>Ep</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>P.R.</td>
<td>1680</td>
<td>Ea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1673</td>
<td>Ea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>P.R.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>1680</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1673</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>Ep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1674</td>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>P.R.</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>Ea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1674</td>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>P.R.</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>Tr</td>
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<tr>
<td>1686</td>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1686</td>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>N.C.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Of the twenty-two who appeared together in 1648, one had been presented previously and five were presented again later in the century. Then on twenty occasions between 1673 and 1686, 86 people from Rowington were presented for recusancy at Warwick a total of 315 times - 70 of them all at once at Trinity 1683. Now, according to the Compton Return, Rowington in 1676 contained 171 nonformists, 26 Papists and 4 Nonconformists, but clearly this was a highly optimistic overestimate of the strength of the Anglican church in the parish. And religious dissent was no recent phenomenon there either. Two lists of 1605-6, for instance, show that at the time of

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the Gunpowder Plot there were at least 60 recusants living in Rowington.

One cannot identify with certainty the religious persuasion of all the Rowington recusants presented at the Quarter Sessions, but from various sources it seems reasonable to conclude that about 90% were definitely Catholics. From 1659 some were recorded in the Catholic registers of St. Peter's Franciscan Mission at Birmingham, others were described at the Quarter Sessions as popish recusants or stood bail for known Catholics or were closely related to them. Furthermore, it seems likely that eight recusants with the same surname as several proven Catholics also shared their faith. Dubious though this decision may be, it was strengthened by the thought that the remaining eleven who had to be classified as likely non-Catholics almost certainly included some Catholic servants of the local Catholic gentry.

Looking for these recusants in the parish register is no straightforward matter. At the Quarter Sessions a few were recorded simply as 'wife' or 'widow'. In addition the Rowington registers suffer from several failings which prevent one from tracing some other recusants there. As one might expect, the registers do not exist for six years from 1656. When the vicar was restored to his living in 1662 after the Act of Uniformity, he did not return to his previous practice of registering at baptisms the mother's name as well as the father's. In the three months after his death in 1666 only one entry appears in the register, while the average per quarter is about nine entries. Similar obvious under-registration occurs in at least one year in four until the end of the century. Occasionally too one encounters entries like: "the of baptised July 19 1685". The new vicar recorded both parents at christenings for three years, but then the parish abandoned this practice once more from 1669 to 1698. Some names, therefore, appear too frequently for one to identify the individuals concerned with certainty. In Rowington six Thomas Shakespeares, for instance, were buried between 1669 and 1707 and William Shakespeare was equally common. In the fifty years before 1696 the parish laid him to rest at least 7 times.

And so for purposes of identification in the parish registers I have had to divide the Rowington recusants into five categories, with the following results:
Total number of those presented from Rowington at Q.S. for recusancy 1627-86 who appear in the parish registers

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probable*</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentifiable</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Some Examples of Probables and Possibles

Probables
Thomas Blythe presented 11 times 1679-85.
In Parish Register 3 sons of Thomas Blythe buried in 1688.
Thomas Blythe base son of Susan Blythe bapt. 1672.
Thomas Blythe buried 1686.

William Cowper presented 7 times 1679-85.
In the Parish Register Agnes daughter of
William Cowper buried 1684.
Three William Cwopers buried in 1692, 1710 and 1717.

Ann Shakespeare, spinster, presented once in 1683.
1693 Anne Shakespeare buried.

Possibles
William Saunders, labourer, presented 1683 once.
1684 William Saunders of Hycrosse buried.
(There were several other William Saunders in the parish
including one other recusant, a weaver, who had a
daughter buried).

Mary Reeve presented once in 1683.
1696 Mary wife of Thomas Reeve buried.

And so, excluding the six unidentifiable characters and regarding the
Possibles as 'Nees' and the Probables as 'Yeeses', the conclusion is
that about 3 in 5 of these recusants also appear in the parish registers.

I next looked for any significant differences between recusants
presented more or less frequently.
R.C. recusants presented:  
\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{3 to 12 times} & \text{once or twice} & \text{(Likely non-R.C. recusants)} \\
\text{Yes} & 27 & 19 & 4 \\
\text{Prob.} & 5 & 5 & 1 \\
\text{Poss.} & 2 & 3 & - \\
\text{No} & 3 & 25 & 6 \\
\hline
37 & 52 & 11 \\
\end{array}
\]

In simpler figures, over 6 in 7 of the recusants presented more than twice appear in the parish registers too, but only about 3 in 7 of those presented once or twice. When one remembers the likely turnover in population, the gaps in the registers and the extra difficulty in tracking women there it seems safe to conclude that few can have

C. Numbers of Women and Men presented at the Quarter Sessions

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{Women} & \text{Men} \\
\text{Once or twice} & 43 & 21 \\
\text{3 to 6 times} & 15 & 10 \\
\text{7 to 12 times} & 3 & 14 \\
\hline
61 & 45 \\
\end{array}
\]

N.B. (In the Birmingham Franciscan Register, Rowington, female entries outnumbered the male ones by two to one).

been omitted from them deliberately.

However, a closer examination soon dispels such a simple conclusion. The great majority of Catholic recusants are recorded only in the burial register.

Since the group of traceable non-Catholic recusants is so small and some may have been R.C.s. any way, there seems no point in considering them further. In the following analysis I have considered the 46 Popish recusants who definitely reappear in the parish registers together with the ten who probably do so.

All but two of these 56 Catholics are mentioned in the burial register, either in connection with their own death and/or that of a child or spouse. In addition 47 or 48 are recorded in the burial register alone. The doubt is over William Shakespeare. In 1683 there were
two Popish recusants with this name and one of them could have christened a son after himself in October 1682 only to bury him two months later. On the other hand there were more than two William Shakespeares in the parish.

Of the other eight Popish recusants one couple, Clement and Dorothy Lucas, had a daughter baptised eleven years before they were presented and then buried less than a month later. The Anglican registers mention no more of their children, although according to the Franciscan registers in Birmingham they had three more baptised in the same decade.

Another couple, Clement Petty (presented 1679) and Compton his wife (presented 1679 & 1683), had six children baptised in the parish register from 1666 - the last two in 1676 and 1684 - and none of them were buried as infants. On the other hand Mary Ragg, whose last child was baptised in 1645, was reconciled to the Catholic faith by the Franciscan Mission in Birmingham in 1660, buried her husband in 1666, but was not presented at the Quarter Sessions until 1680.

Mary Bird, who was presented once in 1683, had three children baptised by the Anglicans in 1682, 1683 and 1685 (and the second one buried in 1684). Her husband Job was buried in 1717 and Mary six years later as a widow. The Franciscan Register also discloses that her maiden name was Shakespeare and that she married Job Bird in Rowington in 1680. Job was almost certainly an R.C. but since he was not indicted at the Quarter Sessions, he seems to have either abandoned or denied his faith under pressure. However, in 1679 he had forfeited £250 of bonds as surety for four prominent Catholics, two of whom were William and Elizabeth Shakespeare, his future parents-in-law.

Margery Cowper's story was similar, but not so detailed. Her marriage to Thomas Cowper in 1635 is recorded in the Anglican register and so are the baptisms of four of their children between 1636 and 1645. Then three years later Thomas Cowper the elder, blacksmith, and Margery, the wife of Thomas Cowper, the younger, yeoman, were presented at the Quarter Sessions. This presumably indicates that Margery's husband had abandoned his faith and so accounts for her appearance in the parish register. Finally, Mary Williams married a 'foreigner' from five miles away who was not presented at the Quarter Sessions. Since their wedding took place in the parish church four years after her own presentation, this may also have been some kind of 'mixed' marriage.
Unless the behaviour of Rowington's Catholics was quite untypical, this study indicates several conclusions. In the 17th century the Anglicans often recorded the burial of Catholic dead, but not their marriages. As for christenings, in Rowington Catholic parents did not have their infants baptised in the Anglican church unless they were sickly and likely to die young or unless the husband was a noticeably less ardent adherent of the Catholic faith than his wife. (Since Compton Petty was presented twice and her husband once, one can just fit them into this pattern, especially since the church wardens also presented her twice for recusancy to the Bishop of Worcester in 1673–4 without her husband). L. Bradley asserted in his Glossary (p.19) that "Roman Catholics ... did not, as a rule, appear in the Anglican registers." My conclusion supports this statement as far as baptisms and marriages are concerned, but not for burials.

This is confirmed by another look at the Franciscan Register of St. Peter's Birmingham. There from 1662 eight deaths were recorded for Rowington, of which six appeared in the parish register. Of the four weddings recorded by the Catholics in the same period, only one reappears in the other register and since the Anglicans dated it seven months later than the Franciscans, presumably it records a second ceremony. As for Catholic baptisms, eleven are recorded between 1662 and 1692, including the three Lucas children, but none of these are repeated in the official register.

The Birmingham register also contains lists of those who were reconciled to the Catholic faith and of those admitted to the Confraternity of St. Francis and altogether 75 people from Rowington are referred to there 88 times. 79 of these references occur between 1659 and 1674, six from 1678 to 1685 and the remaining three in 1692, by when the Birmingham mission had lost touch with Rowington. Sixteen of these 75 Catholics were also presented at the Quarter Sessions and another dozen had not yet reached the age of 16, so that we are left with the evidence for the existence of over 47 more 'adult' R.Cs. in Rowington from 1659 to 1685. And an extra 25 names can be added to them from two more sources - the lists of those who refused to take the oath of Abjuration in 1655–6 and of those whom the church wardens presented as popish recusants to the Bishop of Worcester in 1673–4.

Altogether, therefore, about 165 Roman Catholics aged 16 or more can be traced living in Rowington for some time between 1648 and 1686. Since seventy of them were not presented at the Quarter
Sessions, it is clear that the number of presentations alone is no reliable guide to the strength of Catholicism in one area. Some at least of the less ardent Catholics were always likely to escape. In addition presentation depended upon the decisions of the parochial officers. In 1689, for instance, the constables of Rowington and 13 other parishes were themselves presented for not presenting their popish recusants.

Furthermore, Edgbaston had a much higher proportion of traceable Catholics who escaped presentation at the Quarter Sessions than Rowington. In all 50 Catholics from Edgbaston were presented between 1679 and 1689, but another 180 can be detected in the Franciscan Register in the thirty years from 1670 to 1699. In part this is explained by the fact that Edgbaston is so much nearer to Birmingham than Rowington and that the Franciscan Mission moved to Edgbaston after King James II was deposed in 1688, but other factors could also have contributed. Edgbaston, for instance, might have had a faster turnover of population or there might, perhaps, have been greater ardour among the Rowington Catholics or greater keenness to persecute them among their parish officers.

Now, it is unlikely that more than one Warwickshire parish in twenty was as strongly Catholic as these two, but one cannot be sure because the Compton Return is such an inadequate source for Rowington, while no figures from it survive for Edgbaston. In addition it recorded for example, 200 conformists, 13 Papists and 10 Non-conformists for Brailes in south Warwickshire, but a total of 69 Catholics and 23 Quakers from there were presented at the Quarter Sessions in 1679-81 alone. For this reason one cannot help but wonder by how much the Compton Return underestimated the extent of religious nonconformity elsewhere, in particular perhaps the non-Catholic dissenters for whose existence it is much more difficult to obtain comprehensive evidence and so to examine their influence on the reliability of parish registers.

This study has also left some doubt about the accuracy of some ascriptions of status and occupation in the Quarter Sessions. One Rowington yeoman, for example, who lost £150 of bonds in 1679, was described as a husbandman at Easter 1680 and a labourer at the following Michaelmas. From this one would have deduced that persecution had dragged him down very rapidly, if only he had not reappeared as a yeoman again in 1684. And several other recusants from both Rowington and Edgbaston were similarly described in quick
succession as at least two of labourer, husbandman and yeoman without any apparent reason. Could this perhaps indicate that for contemporaries there was a much greater overlap between these categories than historians normally recognise?

But above all this examination of Rowington recusants seems to reinforce every warning that D.E.C. Eversley, Dr. Wrigley and others have issued to local historians about the failings that they may find in their parish registers. Despite the inclusion of so many Catholic burials, the Rowington registers make no mention of well over 80 Catholics whom one knows were living in the parish at the time. If anyone, therefore, tried to use these registers as a source to discover the extent of geographic mobility, they would not prove to be very reliable.

How many Anglicans were omitted as well? Not only is the Rowington register flawed with a six year gap and obvious under-registration in about one year in four, but it is also not uncommon to find parents baptising two children with the same Christian name at an interval of a few years, without apparently burying the elder one in between.

My doubts about the reliability of these registers for many demographic purposes (but fortunately not my own,) are reinforced by the marriage/baptism and burial/baptism ratios which they yield. For the period 1641-1700 a marriage/baptism ratio of 1: 9.5 for Rowington seems impossibly high. So does a burial/baptism ratio of 1: 1.22, especially when one remembers that the baptisms are deflated by the prevalence of Catholics. And the total number of entries in the register for the 1690s does not show the huge increase from the 1640s that one would expect from such a ratio, but a small decline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total entries in Rowington registers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar/bapt ratio 1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bur/bapt ratio 1:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Unless one postulates massive migration from Rowington to Birmingham, for which I know of no other evidence, these figures do not support the generally accepted theory that burials were, on the whole, less under-registered than baptisms – quite the reverse. Nor do they accord any better with J.T. Krause’s claim (in Population in History p.383) that registration of baptisms improved significantly at the end of the 17th century. Indeed, it seems nearer the truth to suggest that parochial registration in Rowington had "virtually collapsed" at least a century before Krause argues that it first happened nationally. In how many other parishes (like Edgbaston) was this also true?