

One British Archive: The Treasures of Stonyhurst College Libraries

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Abstract This essay inaugurates One British Archive, a new series in the *Journal of British Studies*. This short essay describes the little-known archive, libraries, and museum of Stonyhurst College in England. Stonyhurst represents a continuation of the College of St Omers, a Catholic institution started in continental Europe in the sixteenth century, when Catholics were routinely prosecuted in England. This transnational quality of British expatriate communities in Europe is reflected in the collections. The modern preparatory school contains not only the records of St Omers but also the papers and books of numerous local families and school children that passed through its doors. The current archive, libraries, and museum are thus a treasure trove for anyone pursuing studies into Catholicism, book history, British education, and more.

A twenty-minute cab ride away from the Preston train station, on the edges of the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire, sits the remote Stonyhurst College. Today the college operates as a public (in the British sense) secondary school following the Jesuit tradition. However, Stonyhurst also possesses three historic libraries representing a treasure trove to any scholar of British Catholicism or book history.¹ These three libraries—the Arundell, the Bay, and the Square—contain the surviving remnants of the St Omers College libraries, the curated library of James Everard, the 10th Lord Arundell, alongside collections of books spanning the eighth through nineteenth centuries (see [figure 1](#)).

I initially encountered this unconventional archive while researching my doctoral thesis on Catholic print networks in late seventeenth-century England and Wales. I reached out to the curator of the college's museum collections and libraries, Dr. Jan Graffius, who welcomed my curiosity and helped me put together a research agenda, drawing on her deep knowledge of the libraries' contents beyond what appeared online. She also helped arrange accommodation at Theodore House, a renovated mill on the college grounds that provided ensuite lodging and breakfast each morning. With one week, a broad outline of the items I wanted to examine, and travel money gifted to me by the Russell Trust, I set out for the city of Preston and then Stonyhurst College.

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¹ "Historic Libraries," accessed 1 November, 2023, <https://www.stonyhurst.ac.uk/about-us/stonyhurst-college-historic-collections/historic-libraries>.



Figure 1—The Bay Library, Stonhurst College. Photo credit: Chelsea Reutcke.

To understand the collecting history of the college, one must look to the past of the institution itself. Stonhurst originated hundreds of years prior and across the English Channel as the College of St Omers.² Founded in 1593 by the Jesuit Robert Persons, St Omers comprised one of dozens of institutions established in continental Europe by English, Irish, and Scottish Catholic clergy fleeing religious persecution.³ One purpose was to train the next generation of clergy and recusant laymen to provide for the recusant population back in Britain and Ireland. They were also tasked with producing polemics to plead the case of their co-religionists, attack the state churches in England and, among the militant faction, prompt European powers to intervene to depose Elizabeth I from the throne. As a result of these twin aims of writing and education, books had always been central to the college, as

² While the town is Saint-Omer, the college's name is anglicized as St Omers.

³ See, in general, the contributions in Liam Chambers and Thomas O'Connor, eds., *Forming Catholic Communities: Irish, Scots and English College Networks in Europe, 1568–1918* (Leiden, 2017).

indeed they were to Jesuit institutions more broadly.⁴ Therefore, a premium was placed on collection and production, with St Omers even possessing its own press. The college's goals also tied it to prominent Catholic families back in England, who provided patronage in the form of funds and texts and sent their children to be educated at St Omers. The college relocated twice in the eighteenth century, including to Liège, before the French Revolution threatened to shut its doors for good. However, the endowment of lands from a former student, Thomas Weld, enabled the college, and what texts it could save, to resettle at its current location in 1794. Although its polemicist legacy has since halted, its book collecting habits have not.

As Stonyhurst is primarily an educational institution, as soon as you enter the school, you must be always accompanied, even outside of term time, as when I visited. Therefore, each morning, Dr. Graffius would greet me, walk me through the historic college, and take me to its gorgeous libraries. Dr. Graffius and her assistant worked alongside me, and we often shared our finds or daily tasks with each other. I worked principally in the Bay Library (figure 1), and from the curators, I learned about its past as the Jesuit instructors' common room. When I was not frantically copying down marginal notes or taking pictures for my records, I took tea breaks (with biscuits!) with the curators in a lovely sitting room or was taken on tours of the college exhibits. The college's top-quality cafeteria, where the desserts were dangerously delicious, hosted us at lunchtime. Outside of library hours, I took walks around the college grounds, including by the nineteenth-century gothic-revival church of St Peter's. The atmosphere was so welcoming and inclusive that I was further invited along to staff celebrations and was sent back to my accommodations with plenty of roast hog and trifle.

Dr. Graffius has published and promoted many of the famous and unique pieces within the Stonyhurst collection, from the official papers of the College of St Omers, to the college's schoolbooks and dramas, to the prayer book of Mary Stuart.⁵ Dr. Graffius also serves as an incredible guide for any scholar visiting the library. I initially sought out Stonyhurst College to investigate the Arundell Library, donated by Lord Arundell in the 1830s. In addition to being the patron of this library, Lord Arundell was also responsible for its collection and curation, seeking out texts at auctions and through sellers with the specific purpose of gifting it to St Omers and Stonyhurst (records of these transactions are also held by the college). The Arundell Library thus presents a fascinating case study for scholars of country libraries, collecting habits, gifting, and educational patronage.

However, the Stonyhurst collections also contain many texts that have yet to be fully catalogued, most of which existed for centuries as family collections. It was towards these hidden treasures that Dr. Graffius directed me when I first reached out to her. As part of the scope of my thesis, I was attempting to track down

⁴ See Maurice Whitehead, "The Strictest, Orderlyest, and Best Bredd in the World": Students at the English Jesuit College at Saint-Omer, 1593–1762," *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 93, no.1 (2017): 33–49; Michael J. Walsh, "The Publishing Policy of the English Jesuits at St Omer, 1608–1759," *Studies in Church History*, no. 17 (1981): 239–50.

⁵ Jan Graffius, "The Stuart Relics in the Stonyhurst Collections." *British Catholic History* 31, no. 2 (2012): 147–69; Jan Graffius, "'Bullworks against the Furie of Heresie': Identity, Education, and Mission in the English Jesuit College of St Omers," in Chambers and O'Connor, *Forming Catholic Communities*, 93–115.

copies of Catholic books produced in the late seventeenth century either in England or for English audiences, in the hopes of finding a marginal note or ownership mark. Thus far, my forays at the larger institutions like the British Library, National Library of Scotland, and National Archives at Kew had yielded little success. The copies held at these locations were predominantly in pristine condition, which was in line with the collecting conventions of the previous centuries. These copies thus shed little light on ownership, readership, or the ways individuals may have engaged with such texts. The difficulty with studying a clandestine trade (Catholic books) and group (recusants and church papists) was that they were often only identifiable when prosecuted. However, the fate of most prosecuted books was destruction, from demasking (printing over the text to obscure the original message), fire, or sheer overuse.

Stonyhurst's Finch-Haydock book collection therefore represented a remarkable find: four-plus shelves of books, from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, purchased or possessed by Lancashire recusant families, middling and gentry, who had ties to continental colleges. More to the point, they were almost all annotated in one manner or another. More than half featured numerous names scrawled throughout (some appearing to be practices in name writing), while later published texts included detailed lists of family births and deaths. Several books (many overlapping with the above) also featured religious or animal drawings (see [figure 2](#)) or more obscure scribbles. Earlier texts, which often remained more anonymous in terms of ownership/readership, still contained meditations on faith or (my personal



Figure 2—Drawing of a peacock ('paco' / 'pacoce') on flyleaf of *Pub Ovidii Nasonis Heroidum Epistolae*. (London, 1671). [Ovid's *Heroides*] This page also includes drawings of a horse and the names of John and William Carter. Photo Credit: Chelsea Reutcke.

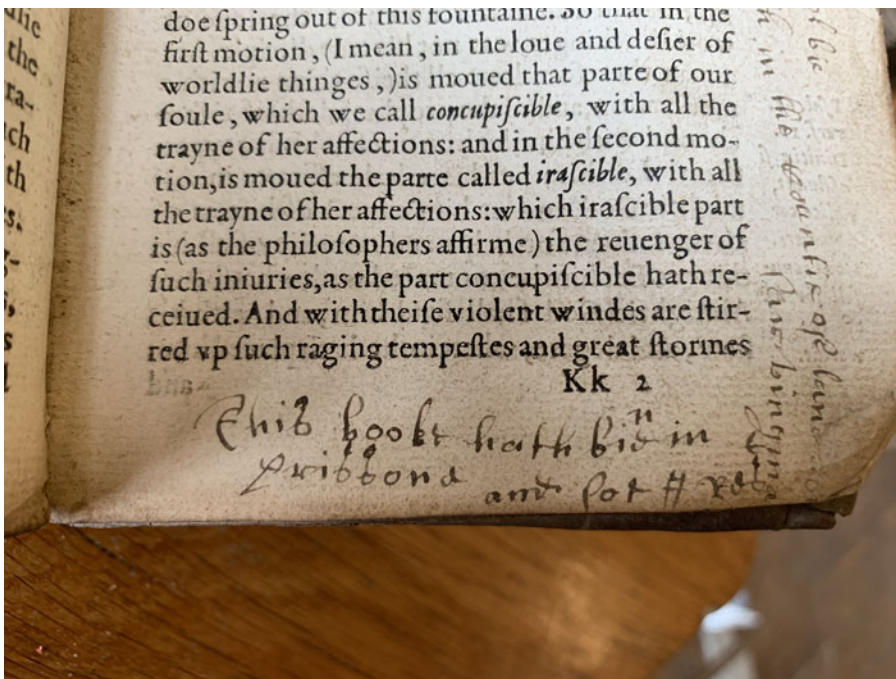


Figure 3—Marginal note, “This booke hath bine in prissone,” in Luis de Granada, *A Memoriall of a Christian Life*, trans. Richard Hopkins (Rouen, 1586), Kk2r. Other marginal notes include the names of Thomas, Ann, and Elizabeth Turner; William, Bartholomew, and Brother Robert Crossey; and Thomas Tolbie. Photo Credit: Chelsea Reutcke.

favorite) comments on the journey of the physical book (“this booke hath bine in prissone” [see figure 3]). Many still bore their original bindings and cataloguing system. They also illustrated marriages and friendships between local families as ownership marks shifted to reveal who had inherited certain books. Beyond this treasure trove, and again highlighting one of the delights of researching at Stonyhurst, Dr. Graffius then dug out for me the records of this collection’s donation from the family in question in the 1930s, which also contained genealogical sketches and anecdotes.

In contrast to the rare surviving catalogues of Catholic libraries, the Stonyhurst libraries, archive, and museum provide the opportunity to see a recusant collection in its tangible context on shelves as well as to see the variety of texts of different sizes and genres that had been intentionally gathered. It provides access to the reading and collecting habits of non-elites and to how reader engagement shifted over the centuries as Catholicism became less prosecuted. The Stonyhurst collections open up the literary world of late seventeenth-century Catholics: a domain of polemics and educational material, of devotional and political texts, of books both definitively Catholic and cross-confessional, of texts printed at home and abroad. Ultimately, the archive helps make that which was previously clandestine public.⁶

⁶ To visit the Stonyhurst libraries, archive, and museum, contact Dr. Graffius at j.graffius@stonyhurst.ac.uk.