**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

6TH of OCTOBER WILLIAM TYNDALE

------------------- BRUNO

9TH of OCTOBER ROBERT GROSSETESTE

10TH of OCTOBER THOMAS TRAHERNE

12TH of OCTOBER WILFRID

--------------------- ELIZABETH FRY

--------------------- EDITH CAVELL

This week there are no less than nine ‘saints’ to be celebrated, four of which are from the Anglo-Saxon period, and one, Denys, the Patron Saint of France, is someone we know next to nothing about.

Throughout the year various Anglo-Saxon saints occur, with strange names and a context that will be entirely unknown to anybody without an interest in history, and perhaps a matter of indifference to those of other cultural heritage.

For the latter group, what may forge a connection is that England, too, suffered raids, depredations and enslavement at the hands of the Danes, who stole what they wanted of English cultural heritage with total insensitivity to its value; and that, in 1066 England was invaded, colonised and culturally cleansed by French-speaking descendants of those same Danes, who then went on to create chaos in Southern Italy, and set up the equivalents of what we used to call ‘banana republics’ in the Near East during the crusades.

The fact that Scandinavia is nowadays a generous force for world peace illustrates another strange fact of history, born out by the peoples of Tibet and Switzerland among others, in which a period of marked bellicosity settles down in time to become an exemplar for the peaceful aspirations of the rest of us.

For those interested to discover the historical and cultural context in which these Anglo-Saxon saints appear, a good and readable introduction is Geoffrey Hindley’s ‘Brief History of the Anglo-Saxons, which covers the very considerable cultural achievements in the north, which was exported in the 8th century to the court of Charlemagne through Alcuin of York and others; the English mission to the German lands through Willibrord and Boniface, and the quite astonishing achievements of King Alfred, whose progeny not only united the country under one ruler, but fostered and encouraged literacy and learning in the native language instead of Latin. Additionally, one or two DVD’s exist covering the achievements of the Anglo-Saxons in the fields’ culture and the arts.

Virtually everything related to church history and saints before about 725 comes from Bede’s ‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People,’ which is, in itself, a work of genius: Bede’s writings, which were by no means confined to history, were respected all over Europe.

One of the principal figures in Bede turns out to be Wilfrid, whose special achievement was to support the Roman Church and the Benedictine Monastic Order against the practices of the Celtic tradition, which, in retrospect, may be seen as a very mixed blessing indeed, and it’s a happy fact that nowadays the best of Celtic spirituality has been brought back to life as part of our own broader understanding of the many ways in which God has enabled himself to be expressed and worshipped today.

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WILLIAM TYNDALE [1492-1536] is best known as the first translator of the Bible into English, which is, of course, not strictly true, although it is true that nine tenths of the New Testament in the ’ King James’ Bible – which was never actually ‘authorised’ – is Tyndale’s work.

The Venerable Bede had, in fact, translated some of the bible into Anglo-Saxon in the 7th century, and the famous pre-cursor of the reformation, John Wycliffe, had probably patronised, rather than himself translated what is known as the ‘Wycliffe ‘ Bible.

Now here’s a thing: there are various histories of the Bible, the most reliable of which is that by John Barton, and it’s very long and complicated, and goes back to before 600 BCE, with the discovery in the time of Josiah of the ‘Book of the Law;’ and if there is one thought to hold onto in all of this it’s that there is no such thing as an ‘innocent’ rendition of the Bible text: clearly you pay your money and take your pick according to which particular expression of Christian faith you take to expound ‘THE TRUTH.’ If we understand that ‘THE TRUTH’ exists infinitely above and beyond any of these translations, we can relieve ourselves of the thankless task of determining which Bible expresses it best, although it’s always worth being aware that if a translation has been made in the interest of one specific religious denomination it’s probably best left to those whose prejudices it is intended to reinforce. What the rest of us need and require is the most accurate rendition of the intentions of those who wrote it, not forgetting, of course, that one Bible may be better for private study than another which may sound better when read aloud in church.

In this respect there exists a modern translation of the Old Testament intended for Jewish readers, by Robert Alter, which was made directly from the Hebrew; accessible, and with informative commentaries, but which is also intended to be read aloud as well as studied in private, and is to be thoroughly recommended.

Between 1466 and 1522 there were no less than 22 translations of the Bible into German; into Italian in 1471; Dutch in 1477; Spanish in 1478; Czech around the same time, and Catalan in 1492. With the persecution of the Lollards in C15 England, all that was left was Jerome’s Latin ‘Vulgate.’

By 1520, however, 156 editions of the Vulgate had been published across Europe, thanks to the invention of printing in the previous century, so that it can be assumed that, in England, any parish priest with even the pretence to education would have had one.

Diarmaid MacCulloch, whose outlook is very Protestant, suggests that the pre-reformation church in England was already in trouble, since even before Henry’s quarrel with the Pope ordinations were in decline, but that by the time of his martyrdom in 1536 he estimates that some sixteen thousand copies of Tyndale’s Bible translations had reached England.

The work of Erasmus broke entirely new ground in 1516, by translating the New Testament directly from the Greek into Latin; moreover he largely ignored the mediaeval commentators and went back to those of the first five Christian centuries, and in particular to Origen. Tyndale shared this standpoint, but his work only went as far as the New Testament and the Pentateuch.

Diarmaid MacCulloch writes:

‘Behind all these English Bibles there loomed a single early translator of genius, William Tyndale. The English he created could hardly be bettered; indeed, the translators of the KJB did not try very hard to do so, except where, in accordance with the brief which King James gave them, they felt that it needed to sound more like the parish church than the alehouse.

Tyndale had not worked on the Psalms, so it was Giles Coverdale who translated them, which he did to such good effect that it is his version that is employed in the Book of Common Prayer, rather than that from the KJB.

Diarmaid MacCulloch observed that, being brought up in the Forest of Dean, Tyndale would have been fascinated by the hubbub of different languages in the market place – English in its dialects, and Welsh, and that language came to fascinate him. He studied at what is now Magdalen College, and Cambridge, which was becoming radicalised by the new Lutheran doctrines.

He was an admirer of Luther’s work in Wittenberg, where he visited during his time abroad, and drew generously on the introductions Luther wrote to his own German translations, but when he came to working on the Torah, Tyndale and Luther differed widely in their views of their application, Luther tending rather to dismiss them as having relevance only to ‘the law, whereas Tyndale saw them as having more value.

Tyndale worked from Erasmus’ translations from the Greek for the New Testament, but on moving to the Torah, was delighted to discover that the affinity between Hebrew and English was greater than that between Hebrew and Greek.

It is a tragedy that Thomas Moore, himself a martyr of the reformation, found what he read as some implied heresies in Tyndale’s translations that drove him to pursue and prosecute him obsessively, when he himself, together with the archconservative Bishop John Fisher, would have been perfectly willing to sanction a translation of the Bible into English, had the rest of the bishops been in agreement.

As it was, Moore suborned an agent to travel abroad and make friends with Tyndale and gain his confidence. Tyndale was of a very saintly disposition, but well aware that he was a wanted man in England, and was usually content to stay at home working. Having won his trust, Moore’s agent took Tyndale to a venue pre-arranged with the emperor’s men, where he was arrested, taken to Brussels, and, a year later, strangled and burnt at the stake.

Nearly a century later the boot was on the other foot: the composer Peter Phillips, a Catholic refugee in the Netherlands, was hounded by Elizabeth I’s agents and tried there.

Such was his character that Phillips himself acted as translator for his accuser in court, because the latter was unable to speak the language. In this case, the judge would tolerate no illegal interference in his own jurisdiction, and released Phillips to continue producing fine keyboard music, and compositions for the Latin liturgy.

When we rightly condemn the ‘dirty tricks’ of foreign governments carrying out assassinations within our jurisdiction, it’s worth bearing in mind that nothing is new, but to have gone as far as Moore went to entrap and judicially murder such a man as Tyndale leaves a very stubborn stain on the name and reputation of somebody most people regard as a saint and a cultural ikon.

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St BRUNO [of COLOGNE] could be described as the Saint’s Saint; living eventually in such humility that he almost gets under the radar, and founding a monastic order that earned the admiration of everybody, including St Bernard himself, but which, with the help of lay brothers to attend to their daily requirements, lived and studied so quietly and with such austerity that comparatively few people, however they respected the order, found the courage or conviction to join them.

Bruno was born in about 1030 at Cologne, to one of the principal families of the city. He studied theology in Rheims, a famous centre of learning, and distinguished himself. In or around 1055 he was ordained priest and made a canon.

In 1057 the Bishop of Rheims appointed Bruno principal of the cathedral school, in succession to some famous predecessors, whose prestige he maintained illustriously, finding himself in charge of the education and all such institutions in the diocese. Bruno became known as a philosopher and theologian, and his pupils included several future bishops and abbots, including the man who would become Pope Urban II.

In 1075 Bruno was appointed Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Rheims, which involved him in daily administration; but when his mentor, the bishop, died, he was succeeded by Manassas, an aristocrat and a simoniac without the least inclination to serve the church, and when Bruno and his clergy had him suspended, Manassas’ retainers pulled down the houses of his accusers; confiscated their goods and sold off their benefices and even appealed to the Pope. In 1080, however, the suspension was confirmed and a subsequent riot compelled Manassas to seek refuge with the Holy Roman Emperor, who was at loggerheads with the Pope.

At this point Bruno, following a vow he and two friends had made (both also Canons of Rheims) placed himself and his companion under the direction of Robert of Solesne, who, in 1075 had left the Benedictines of Cluny, and settled at Seches-Fontaine, and, sometime later founded the Cistercian Order, which didn’t, however, meet the needs and aspirations of Bruno and his friends.

After a short stay with Robert the little, company went to the Bishop of Grenoble, who allocated them a lonely place in the lower Alps in the Dauphine, which became known as ‘La Grande Chartreuse.’

When Bruno’s former pupil became Pope Urban II in 1088, and resolved to pursue the reform agenda of his predecessor Gregory VII, he called his former master to act as his close counsellor in the Vatican in 1090, but little is known as to what Bruno actually did there. Shortly afterwards differences with the Emperor came to a head, and Henry arrived at Rome intending to install another Pope, so that Urban, Bruno and the Curia had to evacuate to the south.

The Pope then wished to create Bruno Archbishop of Reggio-Calabria, but he deferred in favour of another of his former pupils, intending to return to La Chartreuse, but the Pope wished to retain him in Italy, so he set up another community with some of his former friends who had joined him, in Calabria itself, where he died in 1101.

At Bruno’s death a servant of the order was dispatched around Europe with a parchment tied round his neck, to collect messages of tribute and condolence, and such was the respect in which Bruno had been held that there were 170 witnesses, rather more than have been found on other such surviving manuscripts for other people.

The Carthusian ethos goes back to the Egyptian desert, where hermits lived in separate cells, but close enough to be able to lend one another support when necessary.

Characteristic of the humility of the man is the fact that very few of his own writings exist, apart from a letter to Raoul, one of the original friends from Rheims who had vowed to become a monk. Another letter, this time from the last famous Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable to Guibert, affirm the eremitic life as being the most effective ambience for the cultivation of the contemplative life:

‘For here it is given to the strong ones to retreat into themselves as much as they wish and to dwell within themselves, to cultivate insistently the shoots of virtues and to feed in joy on the fruits of Paradise. Here one searches out that eye whose calm gaze wounds the bridegroom with love and by whose purity God is beheld. Here laborious leisure is celebrated, and one is at rest in peaceful activity. Here God rewards his athletes for the effort of the struggle with the long-desired prize, that peace which the world does not know, and joy in the Holy Spirit.’

As the peroration to this letter to his friend Raoul, Bruno concludes:

‘What is so just and so useful; what is so ingrained in human nature, and so agreeable as to love the good, and what is so good as God? Indeed, what is good other than God alone? And so the holy soul, experiencing in part the incomparable grace splendour and beauty of this good, burns with love’s flame and says ”My soul has thirsted for the strong living God; When will I come and appear before God’s face?’

Guibert describes the diet, extreme poverty, and liturgical simplicity of the small community of 13 members, the ‘Parvus numerus [=small number]’ which became traditional among Carthusians. He also notes that: ‘although they subject themselves to complete poverty they are accumulating a very rich library: the less their store of worldly goods, the more they toil laboriously for that food which does not perish but endures forever.’

Bernard McGinn writes:

‘Liturgical minimalism, severe asceticism isolation in individual cells, save for a minimum of community services and a mode of life that, by its employment of lay brothers was admirably suited to shield the hermits from the world, whether in isolated situations, or even, as later, in urban environments, contributed to the special flavour of the Carthusian life. It is no wonder that this quintessence of the monastic ideal of the middle ages received the admiration of monks from every side – Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, Peter the Venerable … William testifies to the reputation of the Carthusians as contemplatives par excellence in the famous ‘Golden Letter’ that he wrote to his friends at the Charterhouse of Mon Dieu near Rheims;

‘Your profession is the highest, surpassing the heavens and equal to that of the angels … It is for others to serve God; for you to adhere to him; it is for others to believe God, to know him, to love him, and to reverence him; it is for you to taste him, to understand him, to have acquaintance of him, to enjoy him.’

Many such orders grew up around this time, but only the Cistercian and Carthusians lasted past the end of the middle ages, and Bruno and his order seem often to be passed over by the text books.

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ROBERT GROSSETESTE [1175-1253] – his name translates as ‘Big head!’ but perhaps ‘two brains’ would be more appropriate. He was a reforming Bishop of Lincoln, a philosopher of note, mathematician and scientist.

He studied at Oxford and Paris, and held several teaching posts, but after a serious illness he returned to Oxford, where he taught at the Franciscan House of Studies and served as the chancellor of the university before being created Bishop of Lincoln.

In the 1230’s, already around the age of 60, Robert chose to learn Greek, with the assistance of some of his fellow scholars; wishing, perhaps, in the first instance, to read the New Testament in the original. Amazingly, he mastered the language sufficiently to be able to translate classics such as Aristotle’s ‘Nicomachean Ethics, ’and consulted commentaries on such works from Byzantine times.

Most of the greatest mediaeval philosophers worked in the second half of C13,

His theology was quite original, focussing on God as light, proceeding from the common parlance in which philosophical truth is so often discerned through the analogy of sight: ‘I see ... I observe … etc’ so that light becomes the essential prerequisite for the perception of truth. If God is light, knowledge is vision, and hence the mediaeval theory of divine illumination, based on Augustine’s idea taken over from Plato that knowledge can only come from God.

The opposite, however, comes from Aristotle, who maintains that knowledge, rather than coming top-down, actually proceeds bottom-up through experience.

The two theories contrast: the Augustinian would encourage the individual to open themselves up in order to receive knowledge, whereas the Aristotelian would prefer us to go out into the world to investigate. But Robert, while agreeing that knowledge comes from God, asserts that in our fallen state we can’t just know things in God’s light, instead of which we must engage in laborious empirical study to make up for our weaknesses.

Robert read a good deal of his science in Latin translations from Arabic, but constructs a cosmology of light which involves some very original mathematics.

There is an account of his theories in ‘History of Philosophy without any gaps,’ which is to be recommended as a resource regardless of these articles.

He became Bishop of Lincoln in 1235, then the largest of all the English Dioceses, which he visited conscientiously straight away, and experienced fierce opposition in his vigorous efforts to reform, from his dean and chapter in the cathedral, who saw themselves as beyond his jurisdiction. The affair was settled in 1245 when the Pope issued a bill giving the bishop full power over the chapter. Robert attended the Council of Lyons that year, and travelled to Rome a few years later.

Here is part of Robert’s ‘Memorial‘ addressed and delivered to Pope Innocent IV before the Papal Court of Lyons on 13th of May 1250 concerning abuses affecting the life of the Church of England:

‘What is the cause of this hopeless fall of the church? Unquestionably the diminution in the number of good shepherds of souls, the increase of wicked shepherds, and the circumscription of pastoral authority and power. Bad pastors are everywhere the cause of unbelief, division, heresy and vice. It is they who scatter the flock of Christ, who lay waste the vineyard of the Lord, and desecrate the Earth. No wonder, for they preach not the Gospel of Christ with that living word which comes forth from living zeal for the salvation of souls, and is confirmed by an example worthy of Jesus Christ.

And what is the cause of this evil? I tremble to speak of it, and yet I dare not keep silent. The cause and source of it is that the Curia itself! Not only because it fails to put a stop to these evils as it can and should, but still more, because by its dispensations, provisions and collations, it appoints evil shepherds, thinking only of the income it yields for a person, and for the sake of it, handing over many thousands of souls to eternal death. And all this comes from him who is the representative of Christ! He who so sacrifices the pastoral office is a persecutor of Christ in his members. And since the doings of the Curia are a lesson to the world, such a manner of appointment to the cure of souls, on its part, teaches and encourages those who exercise the rights of patrons to make pastoral appointments of a similar nature, as a return for services rendered to themselves or to please those in power, and thus destroy the sheep of Christ.

The cure of souls consists not only in the dispensation of the sacraments, in singing of the hours, and reading of Masses, but in the true teaching of the word of life, in rebuking and correcting vice; besides all this, in feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, housing the strangers, visiting the sick and prisoners, especially those who are the parish priest’s own parishioners. By such deeds of charity, a priest will instruct his people in the holy exercises of daily life.’

The end of the evils of which I speak is not the up-building but the destruction of the church.

That’s telling it like it is to power!

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Like most of the metaphysical poets of C17 – John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan – THOMAS TRAHERNE [1636-74] was in holy orders. In his short life he lived through the whole gamut of 17-century upheavals; the civil war, the execution of Charles I, the commonwealth, the protectorate and the restoration.

Born in Hereford, the son of a shoemaker, Thomas studied at Oxford in 1653-6, and went on to receive a Doctor’s degree in 1661. Brasenose College was a hotbed of puritanism, and its principal had been recommended by Cromwell as having ‘zeal for the reformation.’

In 1557 Thomas was presented to the living at Credenhill, a village near Hereford by the Commissioners of Approbation for public preachers, because during the ‘commonwealth’ there were no bishops. At the restoration in 1660, however, ordination became possible, and Thomas was ordained deacon and priest by the Bishop of Oxford, Robert skinner, who was rector of a small village nearby, where he had been conducting ordinations in secret throughout the entire commonwealth.

Although Thomas retained the living at Credenhill until his death, there was little enough work in such a tiny village, and at some point he was taken on as private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, a lawyer who became, in turn, Master of the Common Plea, the highest post in criminal law, and Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, which, however, he lost in 1672 when he fell out of favour with Charles II. He had disapproved of various court activities – not altogether surprising - but the breach came when Bridgeman refused to affix the seal to Charles’s declaration of indulgence, which freed nonconformists and recusants from punishments for non-attendance, but which, in reality, was intended as a step towards the emancipation of Catholics.

Bridgeman retired to his house at Teddington, where he died in 1674, with Thomas dying there only months later in October. He was buried under the reading desk at St Mary’s Teddington.

The one work of Traherne’s that was published in his lifetime would hardly have afforded his readers a clue as to his enormous poetic and mystical gifts a treatise on ‘Roman forgeries,’ including the so-called ‘donation of Constantine.’

The gradual and piecemeal discovery of his spiritual and poetic writings reads like the plot of a novel, the last work definitely attributable to him having been salvaged from a rubbish heap as recently as 1997; and manuscripts turning up in the most unlikely places.

Several of his works have been published in new editions recently, by far the best known being his ‘Centuries of Meditation,’ a series of four groups of 100 meditations each, with the beginnings of a fifth, which are still in print and available at Audible: they were intended for a friend, who gave him the notebook that contains them.

The poet Elizabeth Jennings sees in Traherne’s work a strong resemblance with the spirituality of Mother Julian but adds: ‘Traherne’s contribution [to the mystic experience] is an open-hearted accessibility and a joyously complete transcription of his own knowledge of God. … That, seeing the beauty and goodness of God he might be united to it for evermore.’

One of his principal themes is the innocence of childhood, not solely for its own sake but because of his conviction of our need to return to it in order to gain the kingdom. Another aspect of childhood innocence becomes an analogy for human life before the ‘fall.’ What strikes the reader with the most force is his portrayal of the sheer wonder of early childhood:

‘Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I when I was a child. All appeared new and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. I was a little stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded by innumerable joys. I was entertained like an angel with the works of God in their splendour and glory, I saw all in the peace of Eden: Heaven and earth did sing my creator’s praises, and could not make more melody to Adam than to me. All time was eternity and a perpetual Sabbath. Is it not strange, that an infant should be heir of the whole world, and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold?

The corn was orient and immortal wheat which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates, transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The people! What reverend and venerable creatures did the aged seem! Immortal cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling angels, and maids, strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street and playing were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die; all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places.

He goes on in subsequent meditations to lament how he sadly lost this sense of wonder when the troubles of the world were born in upon him.

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ELIZABETH FRY [1780-1845] married her husband Joseph Fry, a London merchant and a Quaker, at the age of 20, and was admitted as a minister in the Society of Friends in 1811 and became a noted preacher. It was only as a Quaker minister that Elizabeth was allowed to travel without her husband, a crucial state of affairs when in 1816 – already the mother of nine children - she began to exercise her ministry among the women she encountered at Newgate prison.

At first Elizabeth found three hundred women thrown together with their children and toddlers – some under sentence of death, and other still on remand – cooking, eating together; struggling and fighting. She eventually got them to agree to set up a school for the children, but in a tradition that has stood the test of time until today, the authorities told her this would be impossible because there was no space available. At this the women united in support of Elizabeth and vacated a cell where schooling could take place, once they elected an educated young woman as teacher.

Elizabeth held prayer meetings, at which condemned prisoners would be deliberately seated beside her in the front row. She would comfort these right up to the time of their execution, and you may imagine the toll such a ministry must have taken on her emotions.

As her fame grew, politicians and even nobles would visit Newgate to witness Elizabeth’s ministry, finding it hard to face the women whom their peers had condemned to be hanged. In 1818 she was asked to give evidence before a committee on penal reform, a singular honour for a woman. Her evident faith won hearts and minds, and as her ministry grew Elizabeth travelled all over Europe in the cause of prison reform, while another of her interests was improving the terrible lot of women convicts to be transported, who were routinely sexually abused on the hulks during their voyage.

But it was not only prison reform that preoccupied her; she would visit lunatic asylums and set up night shelters and homes for discharged prisoners. She became a pioneer in nurse training; some of her ‘nurse sisters’ accompanied Florence Nightingale to Scutari.

Like the majority of these evangelistic social reformers, Elizabeth could be assertive and over-bearing in her cause, but it’s rather difficult to see how she could have been different in the social milieu in which she felt compelled to move.

There is an excellent book, ‘The fatal shore,’ by Robert Hughes, that covers the period of Elizabeth Fry’s life and ministry, and which goes into greater detail about the penal laws, their application, and about conditions both on the transport ships and life after arrival in Australia. There is also an account of efforts to bring about some very enlightened prison reform, resisted, as ever, by the same constituency of lazy and disinterested politicians whom Elizabeth would have recognised, and many of whom she may have known.

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EDITH CAVELL [1865-1915] was born into a clergy family, and after some time as a governess, trained as a nurse and from 1907 worked for the Red Cross in Belgium. At the outbreak of World War 1 she refused repatriation, and nursed the wounded on both sides.

She began to involve herself in smuggling British soldiers from Belgium into Holland and was arrested. She protected those with whom she had been working and was sentenced to death and faced a firing squad calmly, forgiving her executioners.

The evening before her death she wrote a short and, perhaps, rather stern letter to her nurses, and it must be said that she comes across as one of the tough old matrons, whilst protesting that she loved ‘her girls’ more than they might have realised; nevertheless she showed exemplary bravery both in life and death, for which she is justly famed and respected.