

✠ *Lisbon* ✠

IN MANY WAYS, the choice of Lisbon was a good one. Since 1580, when the royal line of the House of Aviz had failed, Portugal had been ruled, in a federal arrangement known as the Iberian Union, by Syon's long-time patron, Philip II of Spain. The country was untainted by Protestant heresy or confessional conflict. Here in Europe's westernmost city the traumas of the last half century would be, quite literally, half a continent away.

Moreover, England and Portugal had been allies since the fourteenth century and, though the two nations were now at odds in the matter of religion, there remained a substantial English community in the Portuguese capital. More properly, there were several English-speaking communities. There was a significant number of English merchants, reflecting Lisbon's importance as a trading centre, originally for the import of goods from India, and now increasingly from the New World. There was, too, a community of English Catholic emigrés, both exiled priests and members of recusant families. The Jesuit, Robert Persons, had only recently left the city. He had been in Spain since 1588, and had founded seminaries at Valladolid and Seville. He was in Lisbon in 1591–2, laying the groundwork for a residence for English Jesuit priests in the city, which opened in 1594, the year Syon arrived. (The residence would in 1622 be superseded by the English College for the training of secular priests for the English mission.) There was already a seminary for Irish priests, founded a few years earlier, in 1590, and in 1639 they would be joined by a community of Irish Dominican sisters at the convent of Bom Sucesso ('Our Lady of Good Success') at Belém, just to the west of Lisbon at the entrance to the Tagus estuary.

And yet there was some irony in the timing of Syon's departure from Rouen. Just as they were leaving, the first wave of English monastic foundations was arriving on mainland Europe. A Benedictine convent

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Lisbon in 1598, from Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (Cologne: P. Gallaeum, 1572–1617). Wikimedia Commons.

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for Englishwomen was founded at Brussels in 1598; just over the French border the first continental foundation for English Benedictine monks was established at Douai Abbey in 1605. By the end of the century no fewer than twenty-one new convents for English nuns had been founded in continental Europe, and all of them could be found in a relatively small corner of northern France and Flanders, where they could benefit from regular communication and mutual support in matters both practical and spiritual. Syon's location some 2000 km to the south-west left it – not for the first (or last) time in its history – in isolation. What is more, soon after 1600 there began a revival of the Bridgettine order in the Netherlands, emanating from Syon's former hosts at Dendermonde, the convent of Maria Troon. Medieval foundations that had almost died out were restored and reinvigorated, while there were numerous new foundations of a new breed of single-sex Bridgettine monasteries, some for women only, some for men.

Still, Lisbon was welcoming. Robert Persons, who (as we have seen) had known the Syon community in Rouen and was a personal friend of the confessor general, Seth Foster, had written letters of introduction to the archbishop of Lisbon and the civic authorities to smooth their reception. King Philip sent 800 ducats, being the amount of their pension currently due, and with it they were able to pay off the master of the ship that had brought them from France. The city fathers provided an allowance of five ducats a day, and arranged for them to be lodged for the time being with the Franciscan nuns of Esperança in Mocambo (now known as Madragoa), a predominantly African district outside the western gates of the city. By the end of the year Philip had augmented their five ducats a day with an annual grant of seven hundred crowns for the next six years. And so, the community reflected, 'the weather-beaten bark of Syon was anchored in a Catholic country and better secured than it had ever been in our banishment', such that 'we expected sure peace and ease the rest of our lives, and that we had left all our troubles and vexations behind us'.¹

Needless to say, things were not so simple. Having spent some seventy years being harassed and pursued by Protestants of various hues, it was Syon's lot now to find itself on the wrong side of the Catholic authorities. Among the group that had come from Rouen

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was a novice, Dorothy Shelly. By spring 1595 she was ready to make her formal profession. The rule specified that the ceremony should be performed by the diocesan bishop, and so the archbishop of Lisbon, Miguel de Castro, was contacted and a date agreed: the ceremony would take place on 28 March. But when the day came, and the guests were assembled, the archbishop sent his apologies and failed to appear. When pressed for an explanation he gave a number of reasons for his reluctance: the convent and the Bridgettine order were unknown to him; the profession rite was not included in the Roman pontifical nor concordant with the Council of Trent; in such documents as he had been sent the abbey's diocesan was identified specifically as the bishop of London; he had no proof that they had really been in Rouen, or the other places claimed, and that they were not English spies. A year of negotiations ensued, in which numerous documents were exhibited and testimony taken from witnesses and supporters. The confessor general, Seth Foster, is said to have travelled the 600 km to Madrid on foot, in order to present the abbey's case to Philip II in person. Sir Francis Englefield, who had known the community in England and the Low Countries, and who was now living among the English Catholic exiles in Spain, gave evidence; and Robert Persons wrote from Rome. In the end, to break the deadlock, the community petitioned the Holy See, and in response, by a brief of 1596, Pope Clement VIII ratified the order and took Syon directly under papal protection. In future they would answer not to the archbishop of Lisbon, but to the papal representative in Portugal, the apostolic collector, who was also based in the city.²

The abbey's immediate future had been secured, but the question of the conformity of its legislation and practices with the Council of Trent had been raised. The Council had met in twenty-five sessions between 1545 and 1563, and addressed not only the doctrinal and political challenges posed by Protestantism, but also the positive reform of the Roman Catholic Church and its institutions. The decisions of the Council were, however, not implemented immediately or uniformly across Europe. In France, the dogmatic decrees, reaffirming Catholic doctrine in the face of Protestant heresy, had been published in 1581, but the full range of the Council's disciplinary decrees was not ratified there until 1595, after the Syon community had left. The final session of the

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Council had turned to the matter of the reform of the religious orders, and its decrees had been supplemented subsequently by a number of further rulings and declarations. A rolling programme of reforming the religious orders in accordance with the Tridentine decrees was set in train, and by the end of the sixteenth century was making its effects felt across Europe.

For religious women, the key consequences of Trent were twofold. There was, first, a renewed emphasis on strict enclosure; and secondly, the authority of nuns and their abbesses was firmly subjugated to that of their male superiors, such as the diocesan bishop or confessor. While the first of these represented no great challenge to a Bridgettine community like Syon, the second was harder to reconcile with Bridget's vision for her order. Responsibility for bringing Syon into line with Tridentine expectations was entrusted by Pope Clement VIII to the collector for Portugal, Fabrizio Caracciolo. He deputed the work of revising the abbey's constitutional documents to Emmanuell Coelho, a doctor of divinity and legal advisor to the Inquisition in Lisbon. New versions of the rule and constitutions were drawn up, formally accepted by Seth Foster as confessor general, and signed by the abbess Elizabeth Preston and each member of the community, before being approved and given force of law by Caracciolo on 19 December 1607.

Foster's leading role in the process reflects a new emphasis on the confessor general in the revised documents. As 'conservator of the order' he was now answerable for all aspects of the community's observance; he, more than the abbess, was to be the 'public face' of the community, and he would play a much more significant role in the approval and profession of novices; while the abbess was still the head of the abbey, she was now expected to consult with the confessor general on many important decisions. From what we have seen of his character, it is doubtful whether Foster balked at the greater prominence the new legislation afforded him. The abbess's position was also weakened by a revision which saw her elected only for a three-year term; hitherto, abbesses had been appointed for life. (While this change accorded with a general move towards triennial elections brought in by a papal bull of 1583, it is worth noting that confessor general continued as a lifetime appointment.)

Vere libera sum.

Nihilminus, sed feruens amor christi.

Peto.

Ego soror Katherina Knyghtly facio professionem, et promitto obedientiam deo omnipotenti, et beate marie semper Virgini, beato Augustino, et beate Birgitte, et tibi Confessori generali (Vice illustrissimi domini collectoris) ex parte eorum, et tibi Abbatisse huius monasterii, et successoribus tuis, viuere sine proprio, et in obedientia, et castitate, secundum regulam sancti Augustini, et constitutiones sancte Birgitte, reformatas, vsque ad mortem.

I Syster Katherine Knyghtly do make my profession and do promysse obedyence to almyghty god and to blessed mary always Virgin to blessed saynt Austyn and blessed saynt Birgitte and to thee generall confessor (in steede of the popes Collectour) in their behalfe and to the Abbess of thys monastery and to thy successors. to lyue without property and in obedyence and chastite accordyng to saynt Austyns rule and the reformed constitucions of saynt Birgitte Vnto my deathe.

Assentior. 1612. 2 September

S Katherine Knightley

S. Anne Wyseman. Abbes

Profession of Sr Katherine Knightley, 2 September 1612.

Exeter University Library MS 389/2937.

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One further change that would have been felt acutely by the community every single day was the imposed discontinuation of the distinctive Bridgettine office. Henceforward, the nuns were to use the Roman Breviary, in the revised version completed and promulgated by Clement VIII in 1602.

Notwithstanding the constitutional uncertainties of these years, Syon was beginning to get itself established in Lisbon. Having spent its first five years in the city as guests of the Franciscans of Esperança, in 1599 the community was given the use of an adjoining property known as *Sítio de Mocambo* ('Mocambo Place'). It belonged to a Portuguese noblewoman, Izabella de Azevedo, widow of Luiz de Saa, who subsequently made the gift permanent, leaving them the site after her death in 1615. The abbey also benefited materially from the arrival of Leonor de Mendanha. The daughter and heiress of an important Portuguese noble family, she was in her twenties when she fled her mother and a projected marriage to join the Syon community in 1601, taking the name *Sr Bridget*. (She was one of very few Portuguese recruits to the monastery, which generally accepted only English postulants, a preference ratified soon afterwards by a charter of King Philip II.) Her family was initially hostile and resentful, but they were won over, and at her mother's death in 1616 the family estate passed to the community.

Building began, and the *Convento das Inglesinhas* (Convent of the Englishwomen), as it was known, began to take shape. Over the next twenty years, another fourteen choir nuns and six laysisters joined the community. Seth Foster recruited his nephew William Smith, who went on to succeed him as confessor general in 1628. His sister, Brigit, joined the nuns, as did their niece Mary Smith, who made her profession in 1643. As a dowry, Mary's father John Smith sent a shipload of wood, which was used in the building of the abbey church. The nuns later remembered it as 'a pretty composed, decent church'.³

Around the middle of the century the community weathered two major upheavals. The first was national. The dynastic union of the crowns of Spain and Portugal had lasted into its third generation, but during the reign of Philip IV of Spain (*Filipe III* of Portugal) tensions increased. On 1 December 1640 the Portuguese nobility staged a coup, stormed the Ribeira Palace in Lisbon, killed the secretary of state

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Miguel de Vasconcelos, and acclaimed John, duke of Braganza, as King João IV of Portugal. The body of de Vasconcelos was thrown from a palace window into the street, where it was encountered by Syon's confessor general, William Smith (who seems to have inherited his uncle Seth Foster's knack for finding himself in the midst of political events): 'the Confessor, being down in the town, see[ing] the governor lie in the street without any human company, thought to [have] laid his mantle over him, but a gentleman of his acquaintance immediately went up to him and said it was not safe for him to take any notice'. Smith was subsequently arrested and interrogated, but once the authorities were satisfied that he did not pose a threat he was soon released. Nonetheless, the community, being now cut off from the patronage of the Spanish crown, was anxious for its future. Smith went to the new king to ask his leave to journey into Spain to seek the restoration of the community's pension. João IV asked the amount of the pension, before retorting that 'he was a king as well as King Philip': he would pay the pension himself, and the convent would remain in Lisbon.⁴

The second crisis was a domestic affair. On 18 August 1651 a laysister in the convent bakehouse apparently put some 'ashes into a basket not thinking that there was any fire amongst them'. But she was mistaken, and before long the nuns were roused by the cries of the townspeople. 'The poor religious being much fretted and surprised as may be imagined run about bare foot'; attempts to rescue anything from the flames were beaten back by the force of the fire. The convent was gutted, and most of the contents destroyed. The nuns were forced to seek temporary accommodation elsewhere. They received several invitations, but decided to take refuge, as they had on their first arrival in Lisbon, with their neighbours, the Franciscan nuns at Esperança. 'What a doleful spectacle had the poor religious to look on as they passed the church and house quite burnt down in a very little time', they recalled; 'in one hour to two it was laid in ashes.'⁵ The fire had at least not reached the brothers' lodgings, so that they were able to remain, and soon afterwards the nuns rented some houses adjoining the Esperança convent, and set up a small chapel there for the brothers to minister to them. The accommodation was cramped and unhealthy, and there were tensions between the two communities, centring especially on Bridget de Mendanha, who by now had become abbess: some at Syon felt that

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she spent more of her time with her countrywomen from Esperança than she did with them.

Whatever the truth of that charge, the convent could not have been rebuilt so quickly without Abbess Mendanha. As a member of the Portuguese nobility, and a confidante of the regent, Queen Luisa, she was particularly well placed to solicit aristocratic patronage, while the brothers went out begging for charitable contributions from ordinary Portuguese. The foundation stone was laid on 2 December 1651, and the work was sufficiently complete for the nuns to return less than five years later, on 4 October 1656. Abbess Mendanha did not live to see that day, but shortly before her death in July 1655 she did manage to secure the future of another project. She was the driving force behind a new convent, founded as a daughter house of Syon, in the district of Marvila in the east of Lisbon. The Monastery of Our Lady of the Conception at Marvila (Mosteiro de Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Marvila) was a house for sixty Bridgettine nuns. As a counterpart to Syon's insistence on its English identity, and no doubt partly in response to Abbess Mendanha's own experiences, it would take only Portuguese women. The foundation charter was sealed in June 1655, and with a substantial endowment from the archdeacon of Lisbon, Fernão Cabral, the monastery opened in 1660, and continued successfully until its suppression in 1872. The chapel is now the parish church of St Augustine, Marvila.

Syon itself now entered on a period of stability. The restoration of the monarchy in England following the Civil War and interregnum meant that lines of communication between the abbey and the English Catholic community could be reopened. Indeed, when a couple of years later, in 1662, the new King Charles II married Catherine of Braganza, daughter of João IV, links between England and Portugal were as close as they had been at any time since the Bridgettines arrived in Lisbon. The daughters of English Catholic families started to arrive as postulants once more, bringing with them dowries to contribute to monastery funds.

And then, in 1697, gold was found in large quantities in the colony of Brazil, and the discovery ushered in a new age of Portuguese prosperity, and lavish development of the capital. Syon was already in the midst of some ambitious building projects of its own. First came the

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infirmarium, built in 1683. Supervision of the work was entrusted to Sr Ursula Sutton, 'who was very dextrous in the forwarding of buildings for the community's comfort, and by what I have heard from all that knew her, above the common reach of women in those matters'. She was subsequently elected abbess and served three terms. During her abbacy a cistern was built in the centre of the cloister to supply the community with fresh water. It was completed in 1696 and may still be seen in the quadrangle, surrounded by the blue-and-white tiled arcading of the cloister. She was also responsible for the porches and grate house, and the verandahs. The latter caused some controversy. The project was expensive, and to fund the work Abbess Sutton sold off the books from the brethren's library (the last of the brothers having died a few years previously, as we shall see). There was also nervousness among the nuns over some demolition that needed to take place before construction could start, though Abbess Sutton had an answer for that. 'On one day when the community was all in the refectory at dinner, she set all her workmen to work in taking down those places which were in the way to make the verandahs square and handsome, and when the sisters came from dinner they wondered much at what she had done and in so little time'. Clearly another in the long line of strong women to have had the governance of Syon. The Lisbon annalist continues, 'I have often heard say and by several that knew her, that she was always after the workmen both late and early; neither could a piece of timber or stone be out of its place but she would immediately gather it up and put it by till it was wanted'.⁶

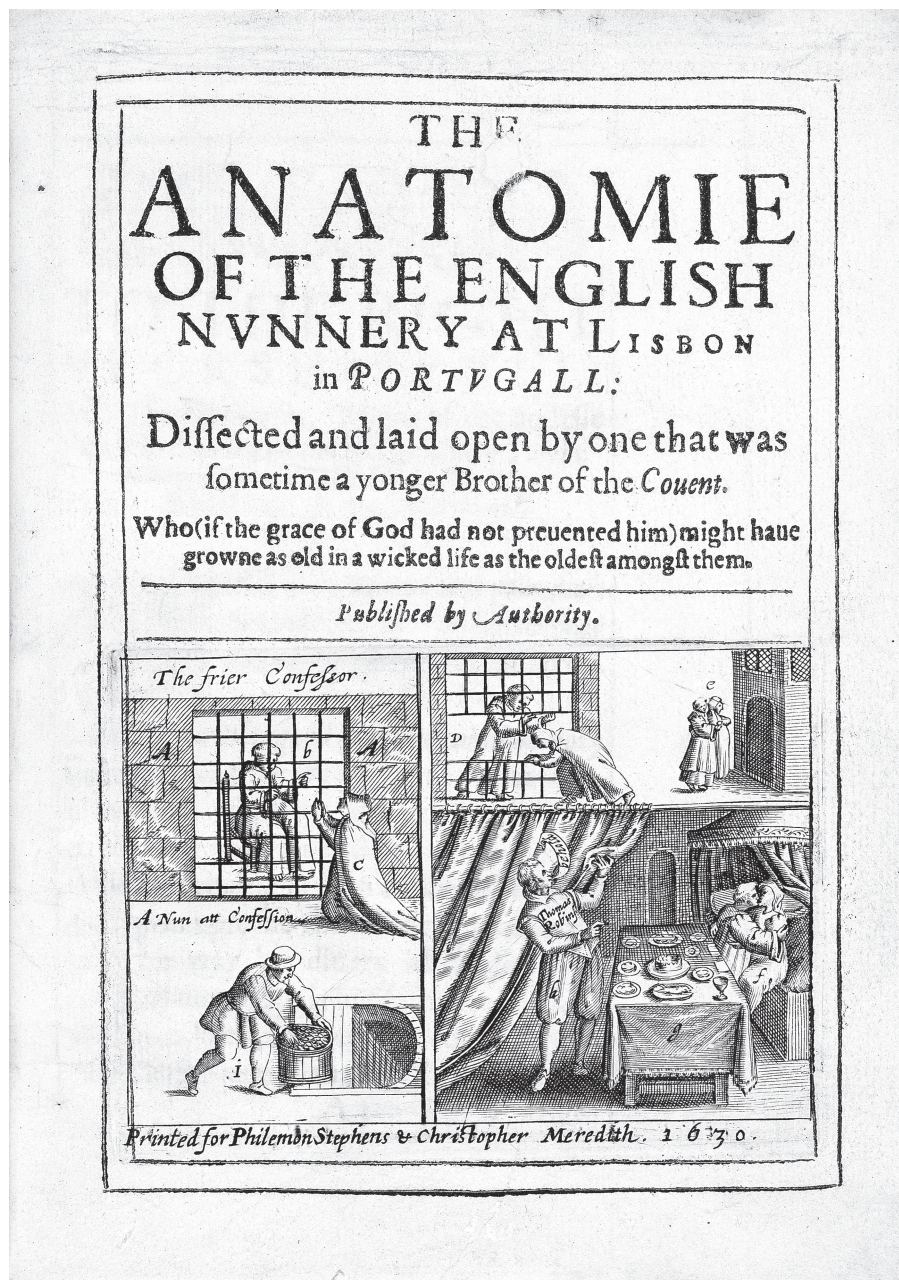
Work was done on the church, too, around this time. In 1707 a report described it as an impressive church of large size, with two side chapels on each side of the nave. The vaulted ceiling was lined with tiles and the walls were painted with brutesques – exuberant representations of animal and plant life that are a feature of the Portuguese baroque – as well as a Transit of the Virgin. Four large oil paintings depicting scenes from St Bridget's revelations had recently arrived, paid for by a bequest to Sr Mary Yard. The furnishings included a carved and gilded altarpiece and, in the upper choir, an image of the Virgin and Child that was reputed to have miraculous powers.⁷ The church and some of the convent buildings, including the cloister with its cistern, may still be seen, in an imaginative renovation by the architect Gonalo Byrne

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opened in 2005, at the University of Lisbon's School of Economics and Management (ISEG).

If the convent buildings were taking solid and impressive shape, the make-up of the community they housed was changing. In 1607 Syon's revised constitutions were signed by Abbess Elizabeth Preston and nineteen sisters, and five brothers headed by the confessor general Seth Foster. The number of nuns, though never reaching the totals seen before the dissolution and exile, remained fairly constant at around twenty throughout the community's two centuries in Lisbon, maintained by a steady supply of postulants from England. It proved harder, however, to recruit brethren. In the new-look spiritual landscape of the seventeenth century, Catholic Englishmen could follow a scholarly vocation at the English University at Douai or enter one of the monasteries in exile, join the new order of Jesuits, or train as secular priests, to pursue an active role in the English mission. In such a context the distinctive charism of the Bridgettine brotherhood was not, perhaps, of obvious appeal or contemporary relevance.

We have already seen that Seth Foster persuaded his nephew William Smith to join him at Syon, before going on to succeed him as confessor general in 1628. Another recruit from this period was less of a success. Thomas Robinson was – at least by his own account, published in 1622 – a young seaman who, finding himself in Lisbon, made the acquaintance of Foster. The latter, by various 'subtle and wily fetches', persuaded him to remain, hoping (says Robinson) to have him as a brother of the house. What follows is a thoroughly scurrilous account of life in the monastery, in which Foster is the arch-villain, regularly enjoying rich food, raucous entertainments and the sexual favours of the nuns, whose poverty is a sham and their chastity non-existent. 'If I should repeat all their unchaste practices', Robinson confides, 'I should make the Christian reader blush at them: or if I should tell of all the obscene bawdry which I have seen, I might recount as many irreligious pranks as would fill a great volume.' In subsequent editions the work was provided with a frontispiece illustration, accompanied by some explanatory verses. On one side a nun is shown kneeling at the grate making her confession to the 'friar confessor'. On the other, the brother is opening the grate to let the nun climb through, and the



Robinson's *Anatomie of the English Nunnery*
(London: George Purslowe, 1630), frontispiece.

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two are walking together arm in arm. In the frame below, Robinson himself pulls a curtain aside to reveal a table laid with a banquet, and the brother and nun embracing on a bed.

Thus have they reason England to deride,
They do indeed fair chastity profess,
Obedience, poverty, and seem no less:
But God doth know, and Robinson can tell,
All is beastly falsehood in this cell.

The pamphlet, entitled *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon*, sold well: a second edition was printed just a year later, in 1623, and it was issued again in 1630, 1637 and 1662. It belongs recognisably to a subgenre of anti-Catholic scaremongering that was popular in the seventeenth century, and especially in the early 1620s when a projected marriage between the future Charles I and the Spanish infanta seemed to presage an opening up of Anglo-Catholic relations. Robinson's prefatory address to the reader underlines the intention: 'if thou be not already addicted too much to Popery, thou mayst peradventure find a preservative against it'.

A copy of the pamphlet reached Syon soon after its publication, and in December 1622 someone from the community – most likely Foster himself – drafted a response. It is a raw and somewhat self-righteous document, characterised by a sense of wounded pride and embarrassed resentment at having been so easily taken in. It begins by discrediting the author – who, in this account, was a fugitive pirate who had imposed himself on the brethren under false pretences – before proceeding to a point-by-point refutation of the *Anatomy's* catalogue of 'lies and slanders'. The effect of the response is not necessarily as its author intended: by taking every one of the *Anatomy's* charges so seriously, he risked lending some credence to them, when a flat dismissal or disdainful silence might have been a better strategy. It was never published, which seems the right decision.

Libels like the *Anatomy*, of course, preached to the converted, stoking pre-existent anti-Catholic sentiment; it is unlikely that any potential Bridgettine brother's vocation was shaken by reading such slanderous material. The trouble was that the number of such vocations was dwindling. In 1672–3, when James Jenifer, captain of the Navy yacht

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Suadadoes visited, there were twenty-eight sisters but the number of brothers had reduced to three. The captain found them to be 'three honest good fellows . . . whose happiness in living so pleasantly would almost prevail with one to turn Catholic.'⁸ But unfortunately not enough of his compatriots concurred. There was never more than a handful of brothers, nor enough to perform divine office in the choir as Bridget had envisaged, and as had been practised in England. The community had to apply for leave to send brothers to England on a recruitment drive in 1634 and 1652. By the second half of the century, the situation was becoming critical. No brother of Syon was professed after 1663, when John Mark, a former Jesuit, joined the community, and he, in the event, did not stay: the Syon annalist reports that 'by some misunderstanding betwixt him and the abbess or some in the community he got leave of the nuncio and went from hence', returning to secular life.⁹ When George Griffin was elected as the seventeenth confessor general in 1686, he was aged about sixty-five. There were two other priests, Jerome Blount and Robert Carlton, and two laybrothers, Laurence Mason and Peter Hall. The laybrothers both died in 1692, Carlton in 1693 and Blount in 1694. Griffin himself died on 24 June 1695, and with his death the Syon brethren came to an end.

The nuns, however, still needed the services of an English-speaking priest to say mass and administer the sacraments, and also, given the rebalancing of the roles of the abbess and confessor general in the 1607 constitutions, to take the lead in practical matters and relations with the outside world. Over the next twenty years or so the abbess engaged a succession of priests to provide spiritual services. One obvious source was the English College in Lisbon, but the College itself was struggling during this time, and its president grew exasperated at what he saw as 'poaching': 'These women are running mad for fathers', he exclaimed in 1714, 'and none will be fit for them but these that are brought up upon our cost and charges.'¹⁰ Clearly it would be necessary to look elsewhere. The abbess wrote to the English Benedictine Congregation in Paris, and in 1717 they agreed to provide Syon with two monks, a chaplain-confessor and a procurator or administrator. Augustine Sulyard served as procurator until 1768, accompanied for the first eight years by Bernard Quayneo. Both men were warmly appreciated by the community; indeed, 'had two gentlemen been sought for there would

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not have been found two more proper to govern both spiritual and temporals than these two fathers was.¹¹ Three other chaplains served successively alongside Sulyard until 1768, when the Benedictines, who were becoming over-stretched, pulled out of the arrangement. Now the English College stepped back into the breach, and the sacraments were administered by priests from the College, while its president seems to have acted, at least informally, as an adviser in temporal matters during the community's remaining time in Portugal.

Holding pride of place in the Museu Nacional do Azulejo (the National Tile Museum) in Lisbon is a panorama of the city viewed from the River Tagus. Composed of 1300 blue and white painted tiles, it is a little over 1 m high and almost 23 m long. It is a product of the early eighteenth century, the golden age of Portuguese *azulejos*, and a breathtaking work of art in its own right. But more than that, it is to baroque Lisbon what the Bayeux Tapestry is to Anglo-Saxon England: a monument, in the culture's most distinctive medium, to that culture's own passing. And, just as Anglo-Saxon England came to a violent end at Hastings, so the confident splendour of early eighteenth-century Lisbon ended abruptly in disaster. And the Syon community found itself in the middle of it.

Some time between 9.30 and ten o'clock on Saturday 1 November, the feast of All Saints, 1755, the nuns of Syon had finished their breakfast (tea and bread and butter) and Sr Catherine Witham (known as Kitty) was doing the washing up. Suddenly she heard a sound 'like the rattling of coaches' and 'the things before me danced up and down upon the table'. Her account, in a letter written to her mother almost two months later, is still full of breathless immediacy. She continues:

I looked about me and see the walls a-shaking, and a-falling down, then I up and took to my heels, with 'Jesus' in my mouth, and to the choir I ran thinking to be safe there, but there was no entrance but all falling round us, and the lime and dust so thick there was no seeing. I met with some of the good nuns. They cried 'Oh run to the low garden'. I ask where the rest was. They said 'There', so (blessed be his holy name) we all met together, and run no further; neither had we any thoughts of running away further. We was all as glad to see one another alive and well as can be expressed.



Ruins of Lisbon as appeared immediately after the Earthquake and Fire of the 1st November 1755.
Etching and engraving, after 1757. © Trustees of the British Museum.

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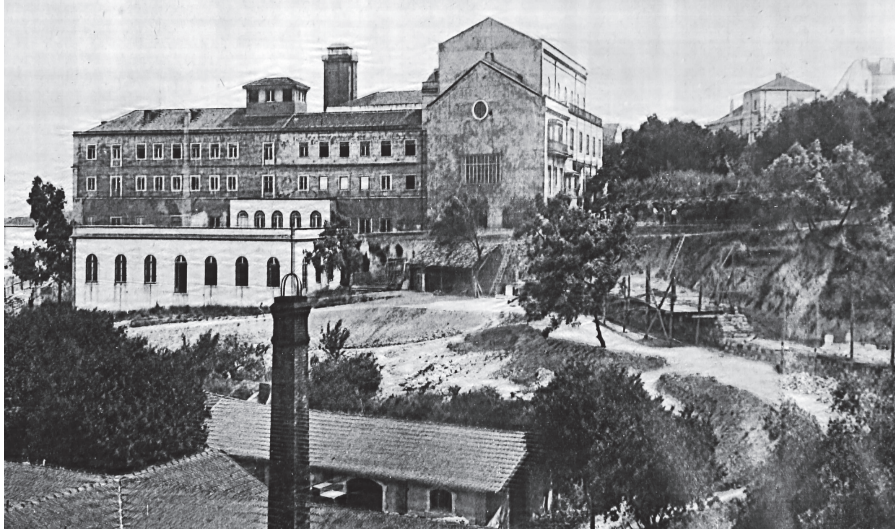
Sr Catherine and her sisters were caught up in the Lisbon earthquake, an event whose scale, and effect on the contemporary European imagination, have earned it the title of 'the first modern disaster'. The quake is thought to have measured in the region of 9.0 on the Richter Scale, about the same as the Tōhoku earthquake that took place off the east coast of Japan in 2011. Many of Lisbon's buildings collapsed immediately, killing some occupants, and trapping others in the rubble. Debris blocked the narrow streets, preventing survivors from escaping. Those who could get through ran to the city's public squares, and above all to the waterfront, where the boats moored on the river and the open spaces of the quayside seemed to offer a place of safety from the falling masonry. But, around thirty minutes after the initial quake, the first of three huge waves at least ten metres high came up the Tagus and smashed into the city, destroying the quay and sweeping away many of the people gathered there. Indeed the tsunami caused devastation along the Portuguese and north African coasts, and abnormally high waves were recorded from Cornwall to the Caribbean. And then there were the fires. They started with domestic fires and candles in destroyed or abandoned houses and, fanned by a brisk north-easterly wind, quickly spread and merged, until much of the city was in flames. People trapped by rubble burned to death, and those huddled with their salvaged belongings in the squares fell victim to what became an inferno. The fire burned out of control for the best part of a week.

Syon, at the western edge of the city, escaped the fire and tsunami, but aftershocks continued for several days. The nuns slept in the garden, at first under a pear tree covered with a blanket, later in a makeshift shelter made of wood. The convent itself was in ruins. Sr Catherine wrote:

Out of five and thirty cells we have not one that we can lie in, till they are repaired. The church door has never been open nor mass said in it since. 'Tis so full of rubbish as also the choir and refectory and the kitchen entirely down, so we must do as well as we can till it pleases almighty God to send us a fortune.¹²

As for the rest of the city, 'Them that has seen Lisbon before this dreadful calamity and to see it now would be greatly shocked: the city is nothing but a heap of stones.'¹³

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Above. Convento das Inglesinhas, Lisbon, from the north.
From [Manoel] Graíña, *Histoire du Collège de Campolide et de la Résidence des Jésuites à Lisbonne* (Lisbon: A Editora Limitada, 1914), after p. 180.

Below. The cloisters, Quelhas Building (formerly Convento das Inglesinhas),
Lisbon School of Economics and Management (ISEG), Lisbon.
Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Perry.



Lisbon

Modern estimates put the death toll from the Lisbon earthquake in the region of 15,000. (More were killed up and down western Portugal, and there were especially heavy casualties in Morocco, too.) Reconstruction began swiftly, however, under the energetic supervision of the prime minister Sebastião Jose de Carvalho e Melo, better known by his later title, marquis of Pombal. Pombal was a leading figure in the Portuguese enlightenment, and took the opportunity to rebuild Lisbon on rationally ordered and earthquake-resistant principles. But his efforts were concentrated in the *baixa* or downtown area of the city, and he was no friend of the religious orders (he had the Jesuits expelled from Portugal in 1759): Syon would have to fend for itself. With no prospect of alms from the stricken citizens of Lisbon, the community looked homeward for assistance. In May 1756 a petition was prepared and printed for distribution in England:

We the underwritten, and company, having on the first of November last suffered such irreparable losses and damages by the dreadful earthquake and fire which destroyed this house and other parts of the kingdom, that we have neither house nor sanctuary left us wherein to retire; nor even the necessaries of life; it being out of the power of our friends and benefactors here to relieve us, they having all undergone the same misfortune and disaster . . .

they see no alternative but to plead for assistance from England, that 'we may for the present subsist under our deplorable misfortunes, and in time retrieve so much of our losses as to be able to continue always to pray for the prosperity and conservation of all our benefactors.'¹⁴

The petition had its desired effect, and the rebuilding of the convent was able to proceed quite quickly, in a plain architectural style without baroque embellishment. Not much more than five years after the earthquake they were visited by Joseph Baretti, the Italian-born English travel writer and member of the circle of Boswell and Johnson. There were twenty or so nuns who, he reports, welcomed all English-speaking visitors (whether Catholic or Protestant), and plied them with 'chocolate, cakes, and sweet-meats'. (Indeed, Baretti seems to have been impressed – because he repeats the reference – by 'that chocolate so plentifully distributed at their parlatory to their incessant visitors.') This was a community apparently at ease with itself and in its surroundings:

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Nuns in all countries are soft and obliging speakers, but these are certainly the softest and most obliging that ever fell in my way. Never was I told in a year so many pretty and tender words as this morning in half an hour. . . . In short, not a syllable issued out at their lips but what was dictated by modesty and meekness, humility and benevolence; and I will positively see them as often as I can while I can stay here.¹⁵



Notes

- ¹. *Wanderings*, ch. 54, 55.
- ². Since 1580 Portugal had not had a nuncio (or papal ambassador) of its own. Instead, the papacy was represented by the apostolic collector, who ranked below the nuncio to the Spanish court in Madrid. After 1640 (when Portugal asserted its independence from Spain) there was again a nuncio to Portugal, and he assumed responsibility for the convent.
- ³. 'Lisbon Annals', p. 14.
- ⁴. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- ⁵. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–7.
- ⁶. See *ibid.*, pp. 95–101.
- ⁷. <http://www.monumentos.pt>, and John Rory Fletcher, *The Story of the English Bridgettines of Syon Abbey* (South Brent: Syon Abbey, 1933), p. 127.
- ⁸. *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth, Volume III*, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 15th Report, Appendix I (London: HMSO, 1896), p. 24.
- ⁹. 'Lisbon Annals', p. 85.
- ¹⁰. Simon Johnson, *The English College at Lisbon. Volume 1: From Reformation to Toleration* (Bath: Downside Abbey Press, 2014), pp. 342–3.
- ¹¹. 'Lisbon Annals', p. 152.
- ¹². *A fortune*: a turn for the better, an improvement in fortunes.
- ¹³. *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800. Volume 3: Life Writing I*, ed. Nicky Hallett (London, Pickering & Chatto, 2012), pp. 309–10.
- ¹⁴. Aungier, *History and Antiquities*, p. *101.
- ¹⁵. *A Journey from London to Genoa* (London: T. Davies, 1770), pp. 193–5.