

St. Nicholas Owen (ca. 1561–1606)

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ST. NICHOLAS Owen was a Jesuit lay brother famed for creating and building “priest holes” in England for priests who were secretly ministering to Catholics at end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹

Background

Legend and reconstructed history suggest that he was born into a recusant family in Oxford about 1561. *Recusants* were Catholics who refused to conform to the Anglican Church—which had become more Protestant during the reigns of King Edward VI (1547–1553) and his half-sister, Queen Elizabeth (1558–1603), with a short period between 1553 and 1558 during which yet another half-sister, Queen Mary, attempted to restore Catholicism in the kingdom.

Nicholas’s father is thought to have been a carpenter, and among Nicholas’s siblings very likely were brothers John and Walter, who became secret Catholic priests, and another brother, Henry who clandestinely printed and distributed Catholic literature.

As was common with most Jesuits in England and America, Nicholas often operated under an assumed name. We have no knowledge of his physical features; but, since his alias was “Little John,” people surmise that he was very short—or perhaps very tall, since the name might have been a joke. He also was known as “little Michael,” and as “Andrews” or “Draper.” It is known that he suffered from a hernia and also bad legs—a life-long legacy after falling from a horse.

At some point, Nicholas was secretly admitted to the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), although there is no record of his formally making novitiate or taking vows. However, at that time in various parts of the world, Jesuit superiors could aggregate someone into the Society without the customary formation.

He first appears on record as an attendant to the Jesuit martyr, St. Edmond Campion (1540–1581), whom he championed, and was imprisoned with him in the Tower of London in 1581. At that time, it was an act of high treason to be a Catholic priest in England, with the attached punishment of being publicly hanged, drawn, and quartered. There was also a very high bounty for turning in a Catholic priest, especially if he were a Jesuit: five hundred silver coins for a Jesuit priest, and three hundred for a Jesuit brother.

¹ Material from the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Jesuits* and Bernard Bassett, *The English Jesuits* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

Mission

In 1586, Nicholas entered the service of Fr. Henry Garnet, a Jesuit priest ministering in England. Often, the Jesuits were disguised as merchants or representatives of other governments and needed to have servants to prove their importance. In addition, since he was a noted carpenter, mason, and architect, Nicholas was missioned to construct hiding places in English Catholic manor houses to help priests elude priest hunters, or pursuivants. His ingenuity was amazing, often having to break through thick stonework in the process, as he was able to devise numerous hiding places. The places varied greatly, and many of which are still being found today as renovations are done in Tudor homes. And so, while



Engraving of the torture of Nicholas Owen by Melchior Küsel (German, 1626–1684).

during the day he posed as a traveling carpenter, by night he crafted the places, so deftly that the occupants of the homes did not hear him or know of his work.

On the other hand, priest hunters took their job very seriously, sometimes searching a house for days or even weeks. They would move furniture, lift floorboards, bang the walls for sounds of a hollow cavity, and plunge their swords between cracks and crevices. They counted windows from the outside and inside and measured the height of ceilings and the length of walls, all in the hope of detecting hidden chambers. In order

to stay one step ahead of them, Nicholas had to devise increasingly cunning hiding places. For instance, he would build a false wall and then put another false wall in front of it so that when the priest hunters tapped and found the wall hollow and tore it down, they would discover an empty hiding place, never supposing that the real hiding place was in another wall behind that one.

Nicholas also used sewage drains, false chimney flues, fake attics, and underfloor areas as hiding places. Often, he would build in a hole to be used as a toilet and construct a side chamber so the priest would slide down the toilet into the hiding place. Sometimes, into the walls would be drilled minute holes through which straws could be placed so priests, who might have to hide there for days or even weeks, could be fed secretly. Priests could then survive in these sanctuaries along with their altar vessels and other related objects.

The priest holes were usually tiny, with no room to stand up or move around. During a raid the priest would have to stay as still and silent as possible, for days at a time if necessary. Food and drink would be scarce and sanitation non-existent. Sometimes, a priest would die in a priest hole from starvation or from lack of oxygen. Meanwhile the priest-hunters would be measuring the footprint of the house from the outside and the inside to see if the measurements tallied, counting the windows outside and again from the inside, tapping on the walls to see if they were hollow, and tearing up floorboards to search underneath.

Arrests and Death

In 1594, Nicholas was captured and confined to prison, during which time he refused to divulge names of Catholics or their priests. Fortunately, the authorities did not realize his importance, and a Catholic gentlemen of means managed to bribe the guards to release Nicholas. It is also suspected that he engineered the escape of Father Garnet from the Tower of London in 1597.

Nicholas finally was captured once and for all, in the winter of 1606 at Hinlip Hall, near Worcester, when the pursuivants surrounded the house. While Nicholas and his companion survived for five days on one apple, starvation forced them out. Father Garnet was captured in the same raid, and Nicholas attempted to portray himself as the priest in order to save Garnet, but this failed. Father Garnet eventually was executed, and in the savage pattern of the town, his skin was used to bind a book.

At the time Nicholas's arrest, the secretary of state, Lord Cecil, wrote, "it is incredible how great was the joy caused by his arrest . . . knowing the great skill of Nicholas in constructing hiding places, and the innumerable quantity of dark holes which he had schemed for hiding priests all through England." Not only the secretary of state, but also Wade, the keeper of the tower, appreciated the importance of the disclosures that Nicholas might be forced to make. After being committed to the Marshalsea prison, he was removed to the tower. When under torture he refused to confess or name others, he was garroted and forced to endure even more extreme methods. Despite his rupture, which legally exempted him from the traditional rack, he was placed on the Topcliffe rack, dangling from a wall with both wrists held fast in iron gauntlets, with his body hanging. Topcliffe, a notorious sadist, was the chief pursuivant, who maintained a torture museum of model devices for his home amusement.



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Engraving of the torture of Nicholas Owen by Gaspar Bouttats (Flemish, 1640–1695).

In order to prolong the punishment, the rack master strapped a circular plate of iron to Nicholas's stomach to prevent the aggravation of pre-existent conditions. Nevertheless, he refused to confess, at which point the authorities lost patience and increased the severity of the torture, such that, while on the rack, his entrails burst. Nicholas survived in agony for some time, but then died literally broken apart. This placed his persecutors in an awkward position, as they had tortured him illegally and had murdered him before extracting a confession. To save face, they announced that the prisoner had committed suicide; but few believed this, and John Gerard wrote an apologia proving the lie.

Legacy

Regarding the effect that Nicholas had, the Jesuit Fr. John Gerard (1564–1637) wrote:

I verily think no man can be said to have done more good of all those that labored in the English vineyard [technical term for the ministries of Jesuits]. For first, he was the immediate occasion of saving many hundreds of persons, both ecclesiastical and secular, and of the estates also of these seculars, which had been lost and forfeited many times over if the priests had been taken in their houses.

For example, once, in 1591, all the Jesuits in England were at Baddesley Clinton, northwest of the town of Warwick in Warwickshire, to renew their vows. Fr. Robert Southwell (1561–1595) was about to vest for Mass when the authorities arrived. Vestments, sacred vessels, and books all had to be stowed away, and the mistress of the house had to engage the police until the priests were able to hide and escape. Fortunately, Nicholas had constructed a safe shelter by diverting the sewage system and adapting a drain.

Nicholas was beatified by Pope Pius IX on December 15, 1929, and canonized by Pope Saint Paul VI on October 25, 1970. Catholic stage magicians, who practice Gospel magic, take Nicholas as their patron saint.