

# *The English Pope*

by GEORGE F. TULL

Probably few people realise that in an English Cathedral lie the mortal remains of the father of a Pope. Robert de Camera (of the Chamber), father of Nicholas Breakspear, with the consent of his wife, became a monk of St Alban's Abbey at a mature age and having "ended his days in edifying holiness" (c.1154), was buried in the Chapter House there. In 1978 he was reburied with eleven abbots and three other monks more suitably in the chancel of the Abbey, now Cathedral, church, a place of honour.

His son Nicholas Breakspear was born c.1100 in what was then the hamlet of Bedmond, in the parish of Abbots Langley and the Cashio Hundred of Hertfordshire. An historic farmhouse perpetuates the name Breakspear's, a surname which has survived in the county. We cannot see the font where he was baptised. since the present Church at Abbots Langley dates from a later century. Not much is known of the early part of his life: no stories of youthful pieties or mystical presentiments to single him out from his fellows, indeed nothing to suggest that he was other than an ordinary down to earth countryman with no special skills. Poverty was no stranger to the Breakspear household. The man who was to rise to the highest position in the Church, the only English Pope, began life as a servitor and whilst a boy begged his bread at the gate of St Alban's Abbey, not many miles from his home; which makes his later progress seem all the more remarkable. He did not become a monk there, but was destined to find his vocation elsewhere and not as a Benedictine. William of Newburgh (1136-1208) told how Nicholas "was lifted, it were, from the dust, to sit in the midst of princes and to occupy the throne of apostolical glory". The circumstances which led to this providential change of fortune might have embittered a lesser man; but throughout his life adversities strengthened his character and sharpened his resolve.

The world-weary Robert, having settled into the ordered monastic life, had hoped that his son might join him at the Abbey, but this hope was not fulfilled. William of Newburgh wrote that. "when grown, the son, being too poor to pay for his education, frequented this monastery for his daily subsistence". Whether this referred to some work done for the monks in return for his food is not clear, but it seems likely. When the time came for a decision to be made with regard to his future, paternal influence was no help. The Abbot did not accept Nicholas as a postulant. but bade him have patience and continue his education until he was better prepared to be a monk. This decision annoyed Robert who, evidently feeling disgraced by his son, upbraided him for laziness and drove him from the Abbey. We know nothing of the mother's feelings in the matter. "Left to himself and urged

by hard necessity to attempt something", he decided to travel for purposes of study. This was the turning point in his life, since here he had achieved nothing. Had he been allowed to follow in his father's footsteps he would probably have spent the rest of his life as a monk undistinguished. One among many, perhaps overshadowed by his father, and in all probability we should have known nothing of him, unless he had become an outstanding Abbot. One thing seems certain from our knowledge of his character, that he would not have sought any higher position.

The untravelled young man crossed the Channel and studied in France under a celebrated Irish professor, Marianus for whom he conceived a great affection. Like many another, Nicholas lived for some time as a wandering scholar, acquiring knowledge and developing his character, before entering the Canons Regular at their monastery of St Rufus, near Avignon. After a period as a lay brother, he was ordained priest and later elected Prior and in 1137 Abbot of the community. William of Newburgh gives us a positive and favourable picture: "As he was elegant in person, pleasant in countenance, prudent in speech and of ready obedience, he gained the favour of all and for many years was the most exact observer of regular discipline. As he was of excellent abilities and fluent in speech, he attained by frequent and unremitting study, to great science (knowledge) and eloquence. . . ." All excellent qualities for the leader of a religious community, which should have prospered. At St Rufus all was not smooth going however. The Englishman's zeal for strict discipline eventually led to revolt among the brethren and an attempt to defame his character. Abbot Nicholas has to appear before Pope Eugenius III in Rome. This second rejection, far from being a setback, was yet another important step in his life for he not only cleared himself, but won the esteem of the Pope. who retained him in Rome and in 1146 appointed him to the prestigious post of Cardinal Bishop of Albano, a small diocese in the Alban Hills south of Rome. Now in his forties, he was being prepared for other, far ranging work. outside the cloister: the work of an apostle.

Cardinal Breakspear was sent by Pope Eugenius as his legate to Scandinavia, to negotiate an ecclesiastical reorganisation of the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. no light matter in those troubled times. As the conversion of Norway and Sweden had been largely due to missionaries from England (including such unfamiliar names as St Siegfried. his relative St Eskil and St Ulfrid), the Pope felt that Nicholas as an Englishman would be welcome there. Accordingly the Cardinal left Rome about March 1152 and on the way northward, returned to his native land, this time to be received with honour as a special visitor. There is reason to believe that both his parents were still living, so it may be presumed that he saw them during his visit. From England he sailed across to Norway, where he found the whole country in a state of confusion. Much careful diplomacy was needed. "There never came a foreigner to Norway whom all men respected so highly, or who could govern the people so well as he did", wrote the

Icelandic historian Snorri Sturleson. His mission took about two years to complete and was so successful that he was hailed as "the Apostle of the North". He founded the episcopal see of Drontheim (now Trondheim) in Norway and consecrated several bishops for those countries. When he eventually went back to Rome, he left behind him "peace for kingdoms, laws for barbarians, quiet for monasteries, order for churches, discipline for the clergy and a people acceptable to God doers of good works" (Boso).

Within a few months of the Cardinal's return. Pope Anastasius IV (the successor to Eugenius) died and in consequence. Nicholas sat in conclave with his fellow Cardinals in St Peter's on 4th December 1154, to elect a new Pope. Here once again the unexpected happened, inaugurating the final phase of his life. Not by the usual process of election, but by unanimous acclamation, he was made Pope (against his will), choosing to take the name Adrian IV. His Coronation took place on the following day, Sunday 5th December. Anastasius IV, during his less than five months rule as Pope, had gained for himself the title of "Father of the Poor"; Adrian was no less beloved by the people. Six months later, on 18th June 1155, Pope Adrian crowned Frederick I, nicknamed Barbarossa as Emperor, an action he must have deeply regretted when Frederick showed himself a ruthless despot. There was soon to be much trouble between Pope and Emperor, a not unusual state of affairs. Life would certainly have been more secure for the Pope and those around him if Frederick had been less ambitious and over-reaching.

Humanly very conscious of the heavy burden laid upon him. Pope Adrian confided to his close friend John of Salisbury (c.1115-80) that thorny was the throne of Peter and so full of the sharpest spikes was his mantle that it would lacerate the stoutest shoulders. Further, that from the time he had left the cloister) and had reluctantly mounted the ladder which brought him to the papacy, he had never found that a higher position had added the smallest degree of peace and happiness to that which he had in the lower position. His words are memorable: "The Lord has long since placed me between the hammer and the anvil, and now He must Himself support the burden He has placed upon me. for I cannot carry it". However reluctant his acceptance. he had accepted as his particular duty and would see it through with courage and dedication.

Writers agree that his character was without reproach. Famous as a preacher. renowned for his fine voice, Adrian seems to have been a worthy Pope with a resolute character. The noted Church historian Fr Philip Hughes called him "a solemn, austere figure. a simpleminded reformer who had already made a name as the second founder of Norway's Christianity". His nephew, Boso Breakspear (died c.1178) was his secretary and Governor of the Castel Sant Angelo in Rome. In the reticence of Boso as his biographer writing directly of what he saw and heard, we have proof of the forgiving nature of the Pope. who seemingly never spoke of the

unkind treatment he had received either from his father in England. or from the Canons in Provence: but having become Pope, thought only of granting favours to his former monastic brethren. He was well disposed to the Orders of the Knights Templar and the Hospitallers. In two Roman churches, San Silvestro in Capite and the Lateran Basilica, Pope Adrian reorganised the Guild of Doorkeepers, who took care of the church buildings.

With patience and at constant risk to his own safety, he attempted to restore law and order to various parts of Italy torn by internecine strife. We need not dwell on all these peacemaking efforts. The historical scene is somewhat confusing. He did not revisit England as Pope; he hardly had time, nor would it have been advisable to absent himself then.

Yet in the midst of many tribulations, he did not forget St Alban's and the increasing importance of the Abbey. Although the relics of St Alban the Martyr had been translated into a new Shrine on 2nd August 1129, the canopy over it was not completely finished until c.1166. thus the work was in progress intermittently throughout the rest of Pope Adrian's life. The chronicle of the monastery described him as "a religious man and born in the territory of St Alban's". Certainly he had reason to be interested in the Abbey he had always known and was not in a position to be generous to it. The opportunity arose when Robert of Gorham. the 18th Abbot of St Alban's, visited the Pope in 1155. It is recorded that his gifts to the Abbey included some relics of the Martyrs of the Theban Legion, a beautiful silk cloth sent to him by the Emperor, valuable sandals and a ring and a goblet for use in the refectory (according to the Abbey chronicler of a later date, Matthew Paris reporting what he had been told). An annual procession was ordered to be made to St Alban's by clergy and laymen of the county; the Abbey and its dependent cells were declared exempt from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Lincoln whose vast diocese then stretched this far; the Abbot was not only authorised to wear a mitre and other pontifical ornaments, but ranked first among the mitred abbots in Parliament. These donations and privileges bear witness to his devotion and his gentle forgiving nature since they were made "chiefly in memory of his father".

His own demise was sudden. Pope Adrian died, reputedly of quinsy — or some say angina, at a summer residence of the Popes in Anagni. in the country, away from the heat of Rome on the evening of 1st September 1159. After less than five years in the Chair of Peter, he was still not an old man by our reckoning. Brought back to Rome, he was buried on 4th September in the Crypt of St Peter's in a third century sarcophagus of red granite, with a plain inscription added: HADRIANUS PAPA 1111. There his body still rests, far from his native county. Sadly, after his death, his widowed mother's old age was spent in pain, perhaps somewhat consoled by the memory of that illustrious son.

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