The Passion Paintings of Edith Cavell in History and Context

The paintings of the *Passion of Edith Cavell* by Brian Whelan for Norwich Cathedral are a contemporary contribution to a significant genre of religious art, *historia*, or series of narrative illustrations of Biblical stories and the lives of the saints, carved in stone and wood or painted on wood or in manuscripts from the fourth century AD. In the mediaeval Church, *historia* alongside the written Scriptures and hagiographies played a key role in communicating the faith to literate and illiterate believers alike. As a tradition of art, *historia* long antedates carvings and paintings for the similarly narrative devotion of the Stations of the Cross, which were first known in Europe in the mid-fifteenth century.

The tradition of East Anglian narrative painting and illumination has had a profound impact on the painting of Brian Whelan, particularly evident in his sequence of paintings on the life and martyrdom of King Edmund of East Anglia (see Tim Holt Wilson and Brian Whelan, *King Edmund, Saint and Martyr: a Casket of Wonders* (Roseberry Crest, 2008)) and his Brentwood Cross at Brentwood Cathedral, Essex, with images from the life of St Helena. The *Passion of Edith Cavell* breaks new ground in applying this tradition to the life and death of a woman of the twentieth century generally regarded as a patriotic martyr but whose Christian witness is not widely recognised. Whelan’s paintings rescue Edith Cavell from the limbo of formal photography and patriotic propaganda and reveal a life lived in imitation of Christ.

Narrative Art in Norwich Cathedral

The paintings will be installed in Norwich Cathedral, where the mediaeval narrative art tradition both flourished and survives richly, chiefly in the hundreds of historiated roof bosses, the most extensive such achievement anywhere in the world. Within the cloisters there is a cycle of 102 bosses on the Book of the Revelation to John and in the nave more than 250 bosses on the Biblical history of the world, from the Creation to the Last Judgment. Elsewhere in the cloister and in the church there are smaller sequences on Christ’s Passion, St Basil and Julian the Apostate, St Christopher, the martyrdom of St Thomas of Canterbury, the life and miracles of the Virgin, St John the Baptist, and the childhood and early ministry of Christ. In addition, the ‘Despenser’ Retable is among the most remarkable surviving mediaeval English altarpieces, and the only one with narrative scenes from Christ’s Passion and Resurrection. Other narrative sequences were lost to iconoclasm during the Reformation and the Civil War.

In addition to these treasures, the Cathedral retains intact its original pilgrimage path in the form of its Norman annular semi-crypt and confessio, the chamber for the relics of a venerated saint below the apsidal bishop’s throne. While the original relics (thought to be those of SS. Felix and/or Fursey, the apostles of East Anglia) are lost, the ambulatory
leading to the *confessio* is also adjacent to the door leading to Edith Cavell’s grave. Thus the Norman arcade in the easternmost part of the apse provides an historically resonant setting for the paintings of the passion of Edith Cavell.

Although these paintings are an appropriate response to the historic, architectural, and artistic context of the Cathedral, their primary significance is devotional in the same way their mediaeval precedents were – to encourage those who see them to recognise Edith’s own devotion to and imitation of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to be inspired by her witness and to be moved to compunction and faith by it.

*Edith Cavell a Martyr?*

Such a presentation may prove problematic for some because Edith Cavell is not a canonised saint. Since the Reformation, the Church of England has had no formal process of canonising new saints even though it has retained the liturgical calendar of the Western Church. Nevertheless it has added to the calendar commemorations of holy men and women from its own and other traditions, and Edith Cavell is among these, on 12 October, the day of her execution. It might be said that the Church of England has reverted to an older form of the identification of saints, by their being recognised and revered as such over time by their own communities and thus commending them to recognition by the wider Church.

The nature of Edith’s witness and the claim that she is a martyr should be examined in the context of both the early Church and of her own twentieth century, which has seen more Christian martyrdoms than any other period in history. A martyr is literally a witness: in the case of a Christian martyr, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself in the Gospel according to Mark points to the way in which his followers will have a share in his own suffering and death: ‘Take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and … you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them…. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. … And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved’ (Mark 13. 9-13). What the martyr says and does is not in his own strength but in union with Christ and sustained by his Spirit.

The very first account of a Christian martyrdom, of St Stephen, deliberately draws out the links between his and Jesus’ deaths, from his being accused of preaching against the Temple (Acts 6.13) to his death with words of forgiveness on his lips (Acts 7.60). From the first, to be a baptized Christian was to share in the death and risen life of Christ (Rom. 6.1-4). Christian life is a process of divinization or *theosis* – growing into the life of God, what St Peter describes as our being ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1.4). The early Christian martyr St Ignatius of Antioch (c. 117) pleads in advance with the
Christians of Rome not to rescue him from the mouths of the lions: ‘He who died for us is all that I seek; He who rose again for us is my whole desire. The pangs of birth are upon me; ... do not shut me out from life, do not wish me to be stillborn. ... Leave me to imitate the Passion of my God’ (Ign. Rom. 6). This imitation of Christ, following the graceful and patient pattern of his life and death, became a hallmark of both narrative and pictorial hagiography.

As with Ignatius, so with those others who walked the way of martyrdom in the early Church. The emphasis on the cross-shaped character of discipleship may well be related to the battle of orthodox Christians against forms of Gnostic Christianity of the second century that denied both the reality of the Incarnation and the suffering of Christ. Ignatius, Polycarp, Felicity, Perpetua understood true discipleship as following literally in the way of Jesus.

In the early Church, the martyr had to die at the hands of unbelievers as a result of their odio fidei, or opposition to the Christian faith. This has become a problematic expectation in recent times when faithful Christians have often died at the hands of other Christians, whether of other or the same denominations. When at the end of the second millennium the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey commissioned ten statues of ‘martyrs of the twentieth century’ to stand in niches on the west front of the Abbey, they gave careful consideration to the character of martyrdom in the modern era, linking it to a radical commitment to the life and values of the Kingdom of God. ‘Christians are now threatened and attacked, not because they profess the Christian religion, but because they show solidarity with those whose rights, dignity and livelihood are diminished by an uncaring or dictatorial regime.’ These qualities are evident in Edith Cavell’s unwavering commitment to the healing and protection of all those in any kind of need, heedless of the rules of a military regime and the threat to her own safety.

However, if the political circumstances of the twentieth century have occasioned some rethinking of the qualities of the martyr, the continuities with the early traditions remain even stronger. ‘The stories that Christians tell of martyrdom in each age are often found to bear striking comparison with each other. The construction of martyrdom narratives is often intricate, emphasizing the dignity of the martyrs, their proclamation, and their power to convert even those who persecuted them. In many of them, an important moment of decision arises, and it is resolved when the prospective martyr takes, not the road to safety, but its alternative, knowing that death awaits.’ What was true of Jesus himself when he ‘turned his face toward Jerusalem’, and of St Paul, St Thomas Becket, St Edmund Campion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, Oscar Romero, was equally true of Edith Cavell. They did not seek

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1 This was written in 1998, before the recent spate of persecutions of Christians by fundamentalist Muslims.
out death, but they were prepared to accept it as the consequence of making that decision to follow Christ into danger.

Characteristics of Pictorial Lives of Saints

In the establishment of conventions of mediaeval historia, the writings of St Gregory the Great played a formative role. In his letter to Serenus of Marseilles, his Pastoral Care, and especially his Dialogues, Gregory argued that hagiography must be directed to a living audience rather than address established canons or notions of theological perfection. ‘A saint’s Life is effective only when its audience is moved.’ The most important structure of such a life is the narrative repetition of the Life of Christ, itself the perfect pattern of Christian discipleship. Gregory was careful, however, to insist that the virtues of the saint are not his own, but Christ’s. As St Paul says, ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2.20). Thus St Gregory speaks of saints being recognised by their living by Grace, by the one true Life that is Christ’s: ‘The man of god, Benedict, had the spirit of the one true God, who, by the grace of our redemption, has filled the hearts of his elect servants; of whom St. John says: He was the true light, that enlightens every man coming into the world (John 1.9). Of whom, again, we find it written: Of his fulness we have all received (John 1.16)’ (Gregory, Dialogues II, 8).

Thus the narratives of martyrs and other saints, whether written or in pictures, seek to reveal the Spirit of the Saviour in the life of the saint and take special care to identify the saint’s acts and words with those of Christ. The Church is, after all, the Body of Christ, and Gregory expects its members to be organically connected to Him: ‘As the breast is joined to the head, so the apostles are joined to the redeemer. As the arms are joined to the breast, so the martyrs are joined to the apostles. As the hands are joined to the arms, so the pastors and doctors are joined through good works to the martyrs’ (Gregory, In Ezechielem I, 6, 9, cited in Hahn, p. 40). Observers will therefore expect the deeds of saints to follow as nearly as possible that of the Saviour as evidence of their fidelity to the pattern of their lives.

The pictorial historia should be seen not as simply illustrating a textual story but as another version of the story that interprets it in a different medium. St Gregory himself noted the difference between text and picture: in the Moralia in Job he observes that words are understood in sequence but that the visual is encompassed in a single glance that illumines the mind4. A single image of a saint can encompass both an historic event and the place of that event in the life of eternity. Sight can bring the image to impinge

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2 Ibid. 47.
directly on the human heart, leading to spiritual action. As Gregory says in his *Pastoral Care*, ‘It is also well said that [the images] were painted, because, when the images of external things are drawn into consciousness, what is revolved in the mind by thinking in pictured imagery, is, as it were, portrayed on the heart’ (*Pastoral Care* II, 10).

The mediaeval predecessors of the *Passion of Edith Cavell* were guided by these Gregorian precepts. The East Anglian Passions of St Edmund the Martyr and of SS. Alban and Amphibalus assume that the saint’s life is a narrative repetition of the *Life of Christ*. The Passion of William of Norwich went so far as to insist that the boy had been crucified by the Jews. If the saint is genuine, he carries with him the ‘spirit of the Saviour’. Hagiographers took care to identify the acts and miracles performed by their subjects with those of Jesus. Modern observers may therefore dismiss these narratives because they are not ‘realistic’ or historically ‘accurate’. (Much that is in the Bible is also dismissed on these same grounds.) To insist on this kind of accuracy, however, is to misunderstand the genre and its purpose. Written and pictorial *historia* intends to reveal the spiritual and metaphysical reality rather than the physical reality of these lives, to point to a much greater reality than can be conveyed by what is now commonly regarded as ‘real’.

The paintings of the *Passion of Edith Cavell* are thus inspired by these conventions of mediaeval *historia*, but also bring them to life for contemporary audiences. The narrative tries to be faithful to what we know of the chronology of Edith Cavell’s life, and the style of the paintings reflects the Expressionist style that was influential in Europe in the early twentieth century. The narrative closely follows the pattern of Christ’s Passion at least in part because Edith Cavell had promised, like other martyrs, to follow Christ wherever he led her, even to the cross. She set her face toward ‘Jerusalem’ to do the dangerous work to which God had called her, she helped save the lives of many, she was betrayed, tried, and executed. She did so with the Bible and Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* in her hand and on her heart, conscious of seeking to walk with him to her own Golgotha. By God’s grace Christ’s life manifestly lives in her.

The paintings are not snapshots or even a reconstruction of events according to the pictorial conventions of our own day, to show what ‘really happened’ in a materialist sense. Whelan’s paintings share an important characteristic of Orthodox iconography: they translate Edith Cavell’s life into the mode of eternity. We see the Communion of Saints made visible when Thomas a Kempis stands at Edith Cavell’s shoulder when she reads his *Imitation of Christ*. We see realised Jesus’ promise ‘I am with you always, to the close of the age’ (Matt. 28.20) when Christ crucified rises before her eyes from that reading and from the chalice at Communion. We see Edith Cavell’s chronological life simultaneously penetrated and illuminated by the divine *kairos*.