

Thomas Neal (c. 1519] c. 1590): Catholic, Priest, Scholar

Mine is a disappointingly common name. M

clergy and churchwardens tasked with restoring their local church building. As the Bishop of London's right-hand man, we can well imagine Neal working frantically to communicate and coordinate the work of restoration in the diocese of London.

Not content with restoring the Catholic faith to England, however, the London authorities began their persecution of religious dissidents in 1555 (for which the Protestant propagandist John Foxe dubbed the bishop 'Bloody Bonner'). It is unfair to speculate on Neal's opinion on these events, but it is interesting that shortly after events in London took a more serious and bloody turn, Neal was appointed rector of the beautiful thirteenth-century church of St Mary at Thenford, Northamptonshire (just four miles east of Banbury). To this day, the east window of the north aisle contains a few fragments of early fifteenth-century stained glass depicting St Christopher, St Anne, and the Blessed Virgin Mary; it is not difficult to imagine Neal glancing up at these images, perhaps even praying before them, as he offered Mass and tended his flock.

Evidently Neal maintained his academic interests during this period of his life. The New College registers testify that he was admitted BTh on 23 July 1556, and the following year he published a translation of the commentary on the Hebrew prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi by Rabbi David Kimhi (1160–1235). The book was issued at Paris and dedicated to the Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500–1558).³ In the dedication, dated 1 March 1556, Neal praises the Cardinal for his work in restoring Catholicism in England. He also notes that work on the book was undertaken at the instigation of his friend, Jean Mercier (c. 1510–70), who was Professor of Hebrew at the Collège Royal in Paris.

Neal returned to Oxford in 1559, on his appointment as Regius Professor of Hebrew, a post he was to hold for the following ten years. Again, it is tempting to speculate that this move was prompted by the regime change, Elizabeth I having acceded the throne just a few months previously. Neal had a difficult start to his return to Oxford: it took two letters from the Privy Council to persuade the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church to pay his salary. Perhaps it was for this reason that Neal entered Hart Hall (now Hertford College) and built new lodgings for himself adjoining the west end cloisters of New College. The house, which no longer stands, came to be known as 'Neal's House'.

Most references to Neal in recent literature concern the prominent role he played in Elizabeth's six-day visit to Oxford in 1566. He authored a detailed record of the occasion, which formed the basis of Richard Stephens's *A brief rehearsal [sic] of all such things as were done in the University of Oxford during the Queen's Majesty's abode there*. According to Wood, Neal also presented the queen with 'a book of all the prophets translated out of the Hebrew by him and a little book of Latin verses'.⁴ This latter item refers to what has become known as 'Queen Elizabeth's Book of Oxford'.⁵

³ *Commentarii Rabbi Davidis Kimhi in Haggæum, Zachariam, et Malachiam prophetes ex Hebraico idiomate in Latinum sermonem traducti* (Paris: 1557), Bodleian Library, Oxford, Broxb. 31.12; Byw. F 2.17 (1); Tanner 296 (3).

⁴ British Library, London, MS. Royal 2 D. xxi.

⁵ *Collegiorum scholarumque publicarum academiae Oxoniensis topographica delineatio* (1566)—Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Bodl

Under the title, *Collegiorum scholarumque publicarum academiae Oxoniensis topographica delineatio*, the manuscript volume is a representation of the university and its buildings in beautiful miniature drawings by John Bereblock (*b.* 1532, *fl.* 1558–72), a fellow of Exeter College, and poetic verse by Neal. Their presentation to the monarch is recorded in several contemporary accounts, one of which describes the queen receiving the volume ‘as if she had never before received a greater or better gift’ (*‘istoque illius dono magnopere commovetur, nec antea unquam visa est ullum munus majus meliusve accepisse’*). On the frontispiece Bereblock drew a tree, representing Hebrew Learning, under which Neal’s poem praises Elizabeth for continuing her father’s patronage of the Regius Professorship in Hebrew. There follows a long dedicatory epistle, penned by Neal, to the queen, in which he extolls her learning and virtue. Following a brief imagined dialogue between Elizabeth and the Chancellor, the tour begins at Woodstock. Neal’s authorial voice guides the queen through Bereblock’s drawings, pausing at each college to recall the founder. Of New College, for example, Neal writes:⁶

Proxima mox equitur atis ampla frequensq₃ studentu-
Turba, novi cœtus nomen adepta diu.
Turribus hæc altis toto mitat æthere, raris
Dottrimæ gemmus vitis onusta uis.
Condidit hanc Præul Guilielmus, in vrbe Wykama
Proles ter fausto ydere nata, Wykam.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the purposes of this short biographical sketch, I have relied primarily on the accounts of Neal's life given in Warden Sewell's manuscript register (see APPENDIX) and Anthony Wood's *Athenæ Oxoniensis* (London: Printed for Tho. Bennet, 1691), vol. 1, cols. 219–21. I have also made a careful selection from the material and narrative presented in John Alexander Neale's *Charters and Records of Neales of Berkeley, Yate, and Corsham* (