

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

Mine is a disappointingly common name. Men have trodden the boards of history playing a variety of roles, from North American colonial politicians to Hollywood actors, murderers to major league baseball players, all claiming the name ‘Thomas Neal’. Nonetheless, I was delighted to discover that I am not the first to have an association with New College. Beginning with a handful of references in documents kept in the college archives (where he is identified as ‘Nele’ or ‘Nelle’), it has been possible to reconstruct the extraordinary life and career of this priest-scholar.¹

Thomas Neal (=Neale) was born at Yate, Gloucestershire in or around 1519. He bore the same name as his father, who was evidently a man of considerable wealth and position: in his will he left land at Barkley, Fryen Closes, Wickwar, and Yate. Neal’s mother, Elizabeth, was the sister of Alexander Belsire, then fellow of New College. It was perhaps through this maternal uncle that Neal proceeded to Winchester College as a scholar at the age of twelve in 1531. On 19 June 1538 he was admitted a probationer at New College; he was admitted to the degree of BD in June 1540 and, according to the founder’s statutes then still in use, automatically became a fellow. He graduated BA on 16 May 1542 and MA on 11 July 1546. During his time at New College, Neal must have become acquainted with figures such as John Harpsfield (BA 1537, MA 1541), the first Regius Professor of Greek (c. 1541–45) and a leading voice in the opposition to Protestantism. One can well imagine the common room abuzz with the political and religious debates of the time which, as we shall see, were to have a profound effect on the young scholar.

While Neal’s fellowship at New College did not require him to teach, his academic ability was recognised by the founder of St John’s College, Sir Thomas White (1492–1567), who provided him with an annual pension of £10 for teaching undergraduates. One of his pupils during this period was Bernard Gilpin (1517–83), who was to become a leading voice in the Protestant Reformation. Neal was readmitted to the fellowship of New College on 11 July 1546, although no reason is given.

The precise chronology of Neal’s movements in the late 1540s is a little unclear. Evidently, he spent some time in Paris, perhaps studying and preparing for the priesthood at the university. Given that he was ordained a priest during these years, it is tempting to speculate that his move to Paris followed, and perhaps even resulted from, the death of Henry VIII and the onslaught of radical Protestantism under Edward VI and the Somerset Protectorate. With Mary I’s accession to the throne in July 1553, it was safe for Neal to return to England. The new queen immediately reinstated Edmund Bonner (c. 1500–69) as Bishop of London (having been deposed in favour of the Protestant Nicholas Ridley in 1550), and Neal was appointed his chaplain.

Bishop Bonner was, at best, a complex character. Although initially enthusiastic for Henry VIII’s schism from Rome as a matter of political expediency, it seems he never accepted the theological innovations of the Protestant religion. Following the death of King Henry in 1547, Bonner distanced himself from the rebels and was committed to Fleet Prison. On Mary’s ascent to the throne in 1553, Bonner was restored to the bishopric of London, and vigorously set about restoring Catholicism to the capital. Bonner laid out his programme for the practical reconstruction of the Church in his articles for the visitation of 1554. It was a monumental task, encompassing church furnishings (including, crucially, rebuilding the stone altars), vestments, artwork, liturgical books and manuals, music, and educational and catechetical programmes.²

It was during this period of restoration that Neal served as Bonner’s chaplain. It is not clear what part Neal played in the events of those years, but he must surely have been involved in the project to restore Catholicism to England. Countless registers and records from parishes across England tell of the extraordinary speed with which the most essential parts of the restoration were accomplished; but they also tell of the great personal and financial burdens it placed on those

¹ I would like to thank Jennifer Thorp for her assistance in preparing this article.

² See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 543–6.

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 Kimbi in Haggäum, 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. 13. A copy of Neal's texts was made around the time of his death, c. 1590: 'Chronographia sive Origo Collegiorum Oxoniensis Academiae, una cum descriptione eorundem, ad serenissimam Elisabetham Angliæ, Franciæ, Hyberniæ reginam scripta 1566,' in Miles Windsor, *Academiæ Quæ Aliquando Fuere Et Hodie Sunt in Europa, Catalogus & Enumeratio Brevis* (London: Georgius Bishop & Radulphus Newberie, 1590), pp. 42–8. In the eighteenth century a copy was made by Henry Dodwell and Thomas Hearne, *Henrici Dodwelli De Parma equestri Woodwardiana dissertatio. Accedit Thomæ Neli Dialogus inter Reginam Elizabetham & Robertum Dudleium, comitem Leycestriæ & Academia Oxoniensis Cancellarium, in quo de Academia adificiis agitur*, ed. Thomas Hearne (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1713). The text was subsequently reproduced from Hearne's version in John Nichols, *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1788; repr. 1823); *Elizabethan Oxford: Reprints of Rare Tracts*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford: Printed for the Oxford Historical Society at the Clarendon Press, 1887), pp. 151–68. A complete facsimile of the original manuscript was first published in 1882: *Collegiorum Scholarumque Publicarum Academiae Oxoniensis, topographica delineatio* (Oxford: Jul. Guggenheim, 1882). A modern facsimile, with a detailed scholarly study of the sources and context, was published fourteen years ago and is heartily recommended: *Queen Elizabeth's Book of Oxford*, ed. Louise Durning (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2006).

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 fequitur satis ampla frequens’q₃ studentu~
 Turba, novi cœtus nomen adepta diu.
 Turribus hæc altis toto mitat æthere, raris
 Dottrimæ gemmus vitis onusta fuis.
 Condidit hant Præful Guilielmus, in vrbe Wykama
 Proles ter fausto fydere nata, Wykam.

Capit sub Richardo secundo per Guilielmu~ de Wykeham episcopum Wintoniensẽ. Anno dni~ 1375.

The queen interrupts at regular intervals, or asks questions of her guide. The dialogue ends at Christ Church where Neal himself is introduced, presents the gift to the queen, and to deliver the Hebrew oration with which the manuscript concludes. In the dedicatory letter, Neal was apparently anxious to emphasise the novelty of the gift, asking the queen for her indulgence for ‘these first attempts at a new undertaking’ (‘dabis tamen (ut spero) veniam primis hisce conatibus in re nova’). The manuscript was indeed a new type of object and lay in the vanguard of British topography.

Like many of the greatest figures of the period, including the Queen’s favourites St Edmund Campion (1540–81) and William Byrd (1543–1623), Neal appears to have been ‘always continuing constant to the Roman perswasion’.⁷ Indeed, his adherence to traditional Christianity may have been the reason he resigned his professorship in 1569. Anthony Wood was surely correct when he wrote of Neal: ‘his Religion being more Catholick than Protestant’, and ‘always dreading of being called into Question for his seldom frequenting the [Anglican] Church, and receiving the Sacrament’, he retired to the village of Cassington, about five miles north-west of Oxford.⁸ There is no evidence to suggest how Neal spent the next twenty years; presumably, he continued his studies and continued to offer Mass privately, perhaps even in the village’s twelfth-century church of St Peter. In 1590, shortly before his death (although neither the date nor the place of burial is known), Neal erected an epitaph over what had been the Lady Altar. It can still be seen there today, and reads:⁹

⁶ f. 8r. ‘The next to follow is full enough and packed with a crowd / of students, which for a long time has acquired the name of a new group. / This college shines throughout the sky with its high towers, laden / with the rare jewels of learning for those who live within. / Bishop William Wykeham founded this place, offspring born under / a thrice-blessed star in Wykeham’s city. *Established under Richard II by William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, in the year of Our Lord, 1375.*’ Translation by Sarah Knight, from *Queen Elizabeth’s Book of Oxford*, ed. Durning, p. 85.

⁷ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England . . . first printed in 1662*, ed. by John Nichols, 2 vols. (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1811), vol. 1, p. 384.

⁸ Anthony Wood, *Athenæ Oxoniensis* (London: Printed for Tho. Bennet, 1691), vol. 1, col. 220.

⁹ ‘Here lies tongueless a man who used many languages and was the official reader of Hebrew. But what help is there in Greek, what in Hebrew, what in the Latin language? If his skill in languages ever gave succour to others, that alone gives him protection now. You, therefore, whom the tongue of Thomas Neale used to help him, help him, voiceless

Epitaphium Thomae Neli professo-
ris olim Hebraici publici in Acade-
mia Oxoniensi

Hic iacet elinguis qui linguis pluribus olim
Usus, Hebraismi publica lingua fuit.
Graeca quid hic? quid Hebraea iuvat? quid lingua Latina?
Si qua alios iuuit, nunc ea sola iuvat.
Vos ergo Thomae Neli quos lingua iuvabat,
Elinguem lingua (quaeso) iuvate pia.
Subscriptio ipsi authoris
Hos egomet versus posuit mihi sanus, ut esset
Hinc praevisa mihi mortis imago meae.

[Representation of Neal's body in a shroud.]

Etiam si occiderit me
In ipsum tamen sperabo. Job, ca. 13.
Anno. Domini. 1590. aetatis vero meae. 71.

Neal achieved many things in his life. He was likely one of the few scholars of his day who could read both the Old and New Testaments in their original languages; he published several notable works; he advanced knowledge and understanding of the medieval rabbis in the generation preceding the Douay-Rheims Bible (1582) and the King James Bible (1611); and, perhaps most impressively of all, he remained faithful to his vocation as a Catholic priest in the most turbulent and dangerous times.

Thomas Neal
Director of Music
New College School

as he now is, with your holy tongue. Subscription of the author himself: While still healthy, I placed these verses here for myself, so that an image of my death might thereby be seen by me in advance. Even if he kills me, I shall still put my hope in him. Job. c. 13. A.D. 1590, my 71st year.' Translation by Gerard Kilroy, from his *Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), p. 50.

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* (Warrington, 1906), pp. 16–20. The following books and articles have helped add flesh to these bones.

- Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 542–46, *et passim*.
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- Christian Gottlieb Jöcher, *Compendiöses Gelehrten-Lexicon [...]* (Leipzig, 1726), p. 273.
- G. Lloyd Jones, 'Neal [Neale], Thomas', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/19818>>.
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- Thomas Frederick Kirby, *Winchester Scholars: A List of the Wardens, Fellows, and Scholars of Saint Mary College of Winchester, near Winchester, commonly called Winchester College* (London: Henry Frowde; Winchester: P. and G. Wells, 1888), p. 117.
- William Poole, 'Early Oxford Hebraism and the King James Translators (1586–1617): The View from New College,' in *Labourers in the Vineyard of the Lord: Scholarship and the Making of the King James Version of the Bible*, ed. Mordechai Feingold (Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 59–81.

APPENDIX:

EXTRACT FROM WARDEN SEWELL'S REGISTER OF NEW COLLEGE FELLOWS, 1379–1860
NEW COLLEGE ARCHIVES, OXFORD, NCA 3968, f. 116

On being appointed Reg. Prof. of Hebrew, he [Thomas Neal] entered himself a commoner at Hart Hall [Hertford College], and built little lodgings opposite thereunto, joining to the West End of New Coll. Cloister, wherein he lived several years; but his religion being more Catholic than Protestant he left Oxon; and being of a timorous nature and always dreading his being called into question for his seldom frequenting the Church and receiving the Sacrament he retired to an obscure village called Cassington, about 4 m[iles] from Oxon. Where purchasing a house at the end thereof, next to E[y]nsham he spent the remainder of his days in study & devotion. As he was accounted by many an eminent Theologist [sic] & Linguist, so by some a tolerable Philosopher, Poet & Geographer. When he died or was buried is not clear, but probably not long before Sept 1590 in which year he put up a monument for himself, with an inscription on it, in Cassington Church, being then 71 years of age.