Divisions between Catholics and Protestants have been a feature of English history since the Reformation. Even into the industrial nineteenth century, age-old theological disagreements were the cause of religious and cultural conflicts. *The Old Enemies* asks why these ancient divisions were so deep, why they continued into the nineteenth century, and how novelists and poets, theologians and preachers, historians and essayists reinterpreted the religious debates. Michael Wheeler, a leading authority on the literature and theology of the period, explains how each side misunderstood the other's deeply held beliefs about history, authority, doctrine and spirituality, and, conversely, how these theological conflicts were a source of inspiration and creativity in the arts. This wide-ranging, well-illustrated study sheds much new light on nineteenth-century history, literature and religion.

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THE OLD ENEMIES

Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture

MICHAEL WHEELER
To the Warden and staff of
St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden,
the scholar’s haven
Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.
My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

James 3.9–10

We live in a country which for three hundred years has been pervaded by a spirit of opposition to the Catholic Church. Everything round about us is full of antagonism to the Faith. The whole literature of this country is written by those who, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes consciously, assume an attitude of hostility to it.

Cardinal Manning

This is the supreme quarrel of all . . . This is not a dispute between sects and kingdoms; it is a conflict within a man’s own nature – nay, between the noblest parts of man’s nature arrayed against each other. On the one side obedience and faith, on the other, freedom and the reason.

Joseph Henry Shorthouse
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Preface

Like so many literary projects, this one started life in a secondhand bookshop. During the 1990s, when scouring Carnforth Bookshop, near Lancaster, I came across a collection of twenty-four pamphlets entitled ‘The Roman Catholic Question, 1850–1851’. Bound in with these pamphlets were a number of others, including a discourse by Nicholas Wiseman on the Gorham controversy, Sir Robert Peel’s maiden speech on ‘Papal Aggression’, Gladstone’s speech on the Ecclesiastical Titles Assumption Bill, Bishop Phillpott’s pastoral letter to the clergy of the diocese of Exeter, and William Dodsworth’s tract on Anglicanism. It struck me immediately that the huge subject of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in nineteenth-century England would be worth exploring in depth, when time allowed.

Five years later, having left the University of Lancaster, and then Chawton House Library and the University of Southampton, I was able to write virtually full-time. On reviewing the ‘Catholic question’ in the mid-nineteenth century, it turned out that historians such as Arnstein, Chadwick, Norman and Paz had been active in the field, but that no literary critic had written a wide-ranging study on the subject and thus brought out its wider cultural implications. Three literary studies were later published during the writing of this book: Michael E. Schiefelbein’s The Lure of Babylon: Seven Protestant Novelists and Britain’s Roman Catholic Renewal (2001) and Ian Ker’s The Catholic Revival in English Literature: Newman, Hopkins, Bellow, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh, 1845–1936 (2003) both focus upon particular writers, and Susan M. Griffin’s Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (2004) examines the ways in which anti-Catholic themes are used by American and British novelists, many of them long forgotten, as a medium of general cultural critique.

The more I looked at the subject, the clearer it became that the divisions between the old enemies were both caused and exacerbated by a series of misreadings, and that the focus of my study should be upon the relationship
between spirituality and language, between the doctrinal and devotional content of Catholic and Protestant traditions and the tropes and symbols which are open to different readings and misreadings by friends and foes of each tradition.

To most English people today, the phrase ‘Catholic and Protestant’ evokes the ‘troubles’ over there in Northern Ireland and football matches between Celtic and Rangers up there in Scotland. Yet ‘Catholic and Protestant’ has a long history in England over which each succeeding generation has fought. In 1569, during the Catholic ‘Rising of the North’, Thomas Percy and his companions celebrated the Mass and burned copies of the Bible and the official Protestant prayer book. In 1969, leading English Catholics were writing articles about ‘dialogue’ and ‘convergence’ with Anglicanism: old enemies were becoming new friends. In the intervening four hundred years, England’s holy wars were repeated again and again, in the political sphere and in the domains of theology and ecclesiastical history, literature and criticism, painting and architecture. Yet the religion over which these battles raged is based upon a message of love, of peace and of hope.

The Old Enemies asks why these ancient divisions are so deep, why they continued into the industrial age, and how the writers of that age – novelists and poets, historians and essayists, theologians and pamphleteers – reinterpreted them. The book thus creates a Victorian viewing platform from which the reader can see the history of ‘Catholic and Protestant’ in England, from the distant past to the present, from a new perspective.

In many ways, anti-Catholicism can be described as the hatred of one patriarchal institution by another. This book also examines the contribution that English women – Catholic and Protestant – have made to these debates. It considers the ways in which Catholics and Protestants have fought over history – especially the history of the early Church and the Reformation – and over the vexed question of authority, for Catholics grounded upon the rock of St Peter, for Protestants upon the rock of the ‘Scriptures’. It discusses the tension in Protestantism between an ingrained sense of repulsion from Catholicism, with its ‘unnatural’ celibate priests, monks and nuns, its ‘superstitions’ and its ‘idolatrous’ foreign forms of worship, and an attraction – often at an unconscious level – to Catholicism’s apparent unity, its claim to be the true Church, its Marian theology, its doctrine of purgatory as an intermediate state between earthly and heavenly existence, and above all its access to divine ‘mystery’, made real in the Mass. In terms of ecclesiastical history, these conflicts and tensions can be explained as the result of mutual misunderstanding and prejudice, and of passionate belief in what each side regards as an exclusive saving truth. In terms of cultural
Preface

history, the same conflicts and tensions are often to be found close to the source of the creative energy behind literature and the arts.

The Church of England is both Protestant and part of the ‘Catholic and Apostolic Church’. Within Anglicanism I would describe myself as a Catholic, and within the Catholic wing of the Church of England a Modern Catholic – all very arcane to those outside Anglicanism’s big tent. I write as an Anglican who is sympathetic towards the Roman Catholic Church. Today, as in the nineteenth century, ‘Catholic’ Anglicans do not like being called ‘Protestants’. For the sake of concision, however, I use the term ‘Protestant’ in this book to mean all Anglicans and Protestant Dissenters taken together. Similarly, ‘Catholic’ means Roman Catholic, unless the context clearly indicates Anglo-Catholicism.

In exploring a wide field over a number of years, I have been supported by some remarkable people. My wife Viv was unfailingly supportive, especially when the going got rough. Three generous friends read all or part of the book, and special thanks are due to Michael Alexander, Olivia Thompson and Chris Walsh. Andrew Brown of Cambridge University Press encouraged me to write the book, and his colleague Linda Bree has been an excellent editor. Thanks, too, to all those who helped to get the book from computer to press, including Susan Beer, Alison Powell and Maartje Scheltens. I have also enjoyed and benefited from conversations with Graham Beck, Lida Kindersley, the late Linda Murray, Stephen Prickett and Trevor Robinson.

What started in a secondhand bookshop came to maturity in the British Library and at St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden. I am particularly grateful to The British Academy, which awarded me a travel grant, and to the staff of the Rare Books and Music Reading Room in the British Library. Also to the archival staff of Arundel Castle; St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden and its Warden, Peter Francis, and Librarian, Patricia Williams, to whom the book is dedicated; the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, where I was a Visiting Fellow in February 2004, and its Director, Professor Stephen Prickett, and his staff; the University of Southampton Library; the Morley Library of Winchester Cathedral, and the curator, John Hardacre; and the Thorold and Lyttelton Library of the Diocese of Winchester.


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Note on referencing

Footnotes give short references to publications described more fully in the Bibliography. In the main text, when quoting from novels that are in print and readily available, chapter numbers only (with book or part numbers where appropriate) are given. The particular edition quoted is, however, listed in the Bibliography (Primary texts).