

LEWIS, OWEN, or OWEN, LEWIS (1533 - 1594), bishop of Cassano, South Italy

Name: Owen Lewis
Date of birth: 1533
Date of death: 1594
Gender: Male
Occupation: bishop of Cassano,
Area of activity: Religion
Author: Emyr Gwynne Jones

Born 27 December 1533, son, according to **Humphrey Humphreys** (*Wood, Athenae Oxoniensis*, ed. Bliss, ii, col. 837 n.), of a free-holder living in the parish of Llanfeirion (now Llangadwaladr), Anglesey. He was educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford, of which he was elected a perpetual Fellow in 1554. He graduated B.C.L. 21 February 1558-9 but rather than conform to the new dispensation under Elizabeth I, left the University and fled to the Continent. He went to the newly founded university of Douai to get his doctorates in law and in divinity, and was appointed professor of ecclesiastical law. Shortly after this he was made a canon of Cambrai cathedral and later archdeacon of Hainault. He gave every help to Dr. William Allen, his friend from Oxford days, to establish, in 1568, the famous college for training priests for the English mission field. About 1574 Owen Lewis was sent to Rome on some legal business in which the chapter of Cambrai was interested. There, his ability and his industry attracted the favourable attention of the high Vatican officials and he was pressed to remain in Rome. He agreed and, before long, was appointed by Pope Gregory XIII 'referendarius utriusque signaturae' - an appointment which made him a man of considerable influence in the papal court. It is certain that Owen Lewis was one of those who induced Gregory to support Thomas Stukeley's raids on Ireland in 1578; he also played an important part in the establishment of the English College at Rome, and it was at his suggestion that **Morys Clynnog** was appointed warden. The troubles of that college's first year, when the English students rose against **Clynnog**, and demanded Jesuit governors, were a severe blow to Owen Lewis who, like the other Welsh exiles, had no love for the 'long-necked fraternity,' as they called the Jesuits. But while he was in this quandary, he was appointed vicar general to S. Carlo Borromeo, archbishop of Milan and one of the principal dignitaries of the Roman Catholic church. According to some authorities it was Borromeo himself who invited him to take up this post; but the papers left by Father Robert Parsons suggest that the Pope arranged the appointment in order to get Owen Lewis away from Rome and so ensure peace and quiet in the English College. Be that as it may, he arrived at Milan, 16 June 1580, where he spent the next four years doing important work for Borromeo. And in the archbishop's palace he enjoyed the company of his fellow-countryman, **Gruffydd Robert**, who was also one of Borromeo's 'family,' and acted as one of his confessors. **Gruffydd Robert** appears to have assisted him from time to time in his work as vicar general. In November 1584 Borromeo died, and two months afterwards Owen Lewis was back in Rome, where he spent the rest of his life, greatly respected in the Papal court. In 1586 we hear of him working exceedingly hard in the interests of Mary, queen of Scots, and trying to persuade the Pope to support her claims to the English throne. He loathed the Spaniards and the supporters of the king of Spain, including more particularly the Jesuits; Phillip II knew this perfectly well and it was certainly he who insisted that Owen Lewis should be appointed bishop of distant Cassano in 1588, with the object of getting him away from the Papal court. At the Pope's own request, however, he remained in Rome after his consecration as bishop. At that time the Armada was on the point of sailing against England and, had the attack succeeded, Owen Lewis's friends hoped that he would be appointed archbishop of York. But Dr. Allen was opposed to this and, considering that it would not be politic to keep the bishop of Cassano in Italy, suggested that he should be made bishop of S. Davids or Worcester - 'with some occupation to keep him in play at a distance from Rome and London.' All these expectations were, of course, frustrated but, when cardinal William Allen died in October 1594, the hopes of the Welsh Catholics were resuscitated. They hoped that Owen Lewis would succeed to the vacancy and it is certain that he himself hoped for the honour and that he was favoured by the Pope. But he died in Rome 14 October 1594 when on the point of being made one of the princes of the Church; he was buried within the walls of the English College. In August 1579 we hear of him appealing to cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto, a man of influence in the Church of Rome, to persuade the Pope to lend financial support to a plan for printing in Italy Welsh translations of Popish books. His intention was that these should be smuggled into Wales and there distributed with the object of counteracting the Protestant literature which, in his view, was corrupting the souls of his fellow-countrymen. It appears, however, that the Pope did not respond to this appeal and that nothing came of his plan.

Author

Emyr Gwynne Jones, (1911 - 1972)

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