

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

**Shakespeare's Jesuit Cousin:  
The Life of Robert Southwell, Poet and Martyr  
by Christopher Devlin**

Review Author: Fernando S. David

*Philippine Studies* vol. 6, no. 1 (1958): 131–133

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

problem of economic growth and offers policy solutions. Chapter VII reviews recent technical and economic aid to Burma and suggests briefly the objectives of such aid in the future.

FRANCISCO ARANETA

## SHAKESPEARE'S JESUIT COUSIN

### THE LIFE OF ROBERT SOUTHWELL, POET AND MARTYR.

By Christopher Devlin. New York. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. 1956. Pp. x, 367.

THIS introduction of Southwell (1561-1595) to a greater public prominence is opportune. Southwell is a neglected man, somewhat as his fellow-Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins was a neglected poet a decade or two ago.

Although Southwell was not a prolific writer (his main pre-occupation being, in his own words, "to minister the Sacraments to those that seemed willing to receive them") his writings were regarded by his contemporaries as highly competent. Present-day critics rate them no less. His prose was understandably apologetic in nature, aimed at refuting anti-Catholic charges and false doctrinal tenets, or at giving spiritual advice to harrassed Catholics. Even here his control of the period's elegant diction is indisputable.

It is as a poet however that Southwell lays permanent claim to literary fame. There is in Southwell's verses that classic care of the Sonneteers, that vivid imagery characteristic of Crashaw and Marvell, and a resonance which is Miltonic. Edmund Bolton, his contemporary, wrote of his poem as "never-to-be-forgotten, the English whereof as it is most proper, so the sharpness and Light of Wit is very rare in them." To have written Southwell's *Burning Babe*, Ben Jonson said he would have destroyed many of his own poems. It is, as Devlin points out, a poem with the still-life color of a medieval emblem, yet flashing out with a living vision which perhaps suggested Shakespeare's "And pity like a naked new-born babe/Striding the blast..."

Southwell's connection with other Elizabethan writers is to be noted. Southwell literally rubbed elbows with the earlier

"tribe of Ben," and his influence within that circle is as important as his verse. It was an influence both literary and religious. His poems as well as his prose were quarries which the long line of metaphysical poets seemed to have worked upon. But while they proved to be inspiring, historical testimony indicates that they converted men (especially the so-called University Wits—Greene, Nashe, Lodge, Marlowe, Daniel, Drayton) "to repentance and the life of the spirit." Though this change of heart lasted only temporarily for some, it signalled a change of theme for all. Marlowe switched from atheistic pieces to morality plays, and Shakespeare with his *The Rape of Lucrece* began to depart from the pure eroticism of *Venus and Adonis* to tangle with more spiritual issues.

That Southwell's relationship with Shakespeare was more than just professional rests on very great probability. Blood ties appear to have existed between the two. Devlin devotes an entire chapter to the matter. The documentary argument is based on a dedication which Southwell wrote for a collection of his poetry, ten editions of which were to be printed in the five years after his death. The dedication begins, "To my worthy good cousin, Master W. S.," and it is signed, "Your loving cousin, R. S." The content tells us that W. S. "was a devotee of poetry and perhaps of the stage," and he is humorously chided for urging Southwell to present his verses to the public. Then, more seriously, Southwell says "it is time that poets ceased to abuse their talents and remembered their noble ancestry" for "Christ Himself by making a hymn the conclusion of His Last Supper and the prologue to the first pageant of His Passion, gave... to all men a pattern to know the true use of this measured and footed style." Furthermore, Southwell hopes that his own efforts may induce some finer poet to prove "how well verse and virtue suit together."

To confirm the suggestion that Master W. S. was William Shakespeare, Devlin argues that Southwell was acquainted with writers less likely than Shakespeare to have known him, that Southwell was in direct contact with the literary patrons Lord Mountjoy and Southampton of whom the latter was Shakespeare's employer, and that a study of the *Lucrece* which Shakespeare was then beginning after the *Venus and Adonis* reveals its allegorical character of the violation of a soul by sin and its marked similarities to *St. Peter's Complaint*, Southwell's longest (132 six-line stanzas) poem. Certainty may never be had on this point, but it is worth-

while to realize that the world may owe part of Tarquinus, Macbeth, Hamlet and Othello to a hunted priest.

This living a fugitive's life is the other aspect of Southwell's personality. Coming from a noble family traditionally Catholic, Southwell fled England at the start of Elizabeth's reign, and at seventeen joined the Society of Jesus. After several years of studies and teaching, he went back to work for England's return to Catholicism. There followed nine years of strenuous but well-planned missionary activity in and about a London swarming with informers and pursuivants. Finally apprehended, he was subjected to various torments, one of which was to be hung up from the wrists against a wall, with the toes barely touching the ground, a torture as excruciating as a crucifixion yet leaving no external injury, something that fore-shadowed the methods of Communist brain-washing. Southwell proved intractable, and two years were allowed to elapse before his trial.

The trial is a triumph both for Southwell and the book that describes it. Before a tribunal with a predetermined sentence, in the presence of the sympathetic populace, leaning against a bar to keep upright, Southwell strikes out in brilliant defense of of his patriotism and his Faith. But it is as a poet, not as a dialectician, that Southwell scores what is perhaps his neatest hit. Asked by his chief jailer, who had "hoped to find a poet in the torture-chamber instead of a Spartan," to show the marks of torture, Southwell turns on him saying, "Ask a woman to show her throes." And at the gallows, death too becomes glory for onlookers and for Southwell, who often said, "Whether we live, or whether we die, we are Christ's."

FERNANDO S. DAVID

## SOCIOLOGY FOR FRESHMEN

**SOCIOLOGY: A TEXT WITH ADAPTED READINGS.** By Leonard Broom and Philip Selznick. Evanston, Illinois. Row, Peterson and Company. 1955. Pp. xviii, 660. \$6.50.

IN an earlier review this book was praised by Robin Williams as being "In thoughtfulness, sophistication, and solidity of content... the best introductory text... yet encountered." While not willing