New Blackfriars

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Comment: *The Shapcote Translation*

The revival of interest in Saint Thomas Aquinas is thriving, measured by the flood of publications. Now the translation by Fathers of the English Dominican Province of the *Summa Theologica* has come back into its own, as the standard version, not least because it is out of copyright. A complete and unabridged edition has recently become available on Kindle: published by Coyote Canyon Press it costs £0.70 including VAT and free wireless delivery via Amazon Whispernet. The same text is reprinted in a new 10-volume paperback edition, published by Forgotten Books, costing about £100.

It's the translation in 21 volumes by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, advertised in 1922 at 12 shillings each (Burns Oates & Washbourne Limited). Individual volumes and even complete sets may easily be found in second-hand bookshops, many no doubt sold off during the post Vatican II years when Thomism went into decline, while seminary and convent libraries cleared space for more 'relevant' literature (or closed altogether).

This literal translation by 'Fathers of the English Dominican Province' was done solely and entirely by one man: Father Laurence Shapcote (1864–1947). His father was an Anglican priest, Edward Gifford Shapcote (1827–1886), a Cambridge graduate, who went to South Africa as a missionary in 1864, a few months before his wife Emily Mary Steward gave birth. Born in 1828 she composed a number of hymns, such as 'Heavenly Father, from Thy Throne', 'Jesus Holy Undefiled', and 'Dearest Lord I Cry to Thee'. Soon after her son's birth she became a Catholic as her husband did also when they returned to England. After some years as a private tutor he became sub editor of *The Tablet.* He died in 1886; Mrs Shapcote died at Stoneham, in Devon, in 1909.

Brought back to England as a two year old, the future Dominican was brought up in Hampstead. He went to school with the Benedictines at Ramsgate. He was clothed as a novice in the Toulouse Province in 1880, aged just 17: his allegedly delicate health meant that his mother wanted him to live in the south of France. Anticlerical laws, however, soon compelled the Toulouse Dominicans to leave for Spain, and in 1884 he transfiliated to the English Province. As all bright students were in those days he was sent in due course to study with the Dominicans in Louvain. He returned to teach in the study house then at Hawkesyard, Staffordshire — a qualified exponent of

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the *Summa* could teach everything, dogma, morals, natural theology, metaphysics, and so on, — everything except Scripture, already regarded as a specialism.

In 1901 Fr Laurence was elected Prior of the major parish house in Newcastle on Tyne, then Provincial in 1902 (aged 38). He was re-elected in 1906 but, having been observed kissing a woman (his niece) he was 'removed' a year later, and sent to 'do penance' at San Clemente, the lrish Dominican house in Rome. By autumn 1908 he was back teaching at Hawkesyard. Elected Prior there in 1913, he was almost at once elected Prior at the Leicester house, another centre city parish. In 1916, however, Fr Bede Jarrett was elected Provincial: the Vicar Apostolic of the Transvaal had asked for English Dominicans to undertake missionary work, and, among the many initiatives undertaken by the new Provincial, Fr Laurence was sent to South Africa, sailing in 1917, despite the danger from German submarines. There he was to spend the rest of his life, mostly on his own, in Boksburg, Newcastle and Stellenbosch, until 1946, when he returned to England. He died in SS John and Elizabeth Hospital in 1947.

In 1910 the Province decided to have the *Summa* translated. Fr Laurence brought out the first volumes before he left England, but the bulk of the work was done in South Africa. In addition he also translated the *Summa Contra Gentes* (4 volumes, 1923 –1929), and the *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia* (3 volumes, 1932–34).

This translation of the *Summa* is 'literal'. In this respect it is of course quite different from the translation edited in some 60 volumes by Fr Thomas Gilby (1964–1972): with the Latin facing the English, and with extensive notes, the translators were encouraged not to transliterate but to restate the Latin in idiomatic English. In a way, for students who have no Latin, the Shapcote translation gives a better idea, more of the feel, of the original, even though it does not make conversation with St Thomas so easy.

Laurence Shapcote never wrote anything: there is no way of telling what his own 'Thomism' was. It is a century since he started work. He did not respond to suggestions that he should unmask his anonymity. Readers who are thankful for this literal translation would surely be all the more grateful if they knew that it was done by Laurence Shapcote alone, in very austere conditions, on the Rand and in Natal, doggedly translating his way through the major works of St Thomas.

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