

Medical and Mystical Opinion in British Catholicism: The Contentious Case of Teresa Higginson

I. Teresa Higginson and her Contemporaries

On Good Friday 1874, two years after the highly publicised case of Belgian stigmatic Louise Lateau and a year after Dr Imbert Gourbeyre brought out his encyclopaedic *Les Stigmatisées* (Paris, 1873), an English Catholic schoolteacher named Teresa Higginson was found lying on her bed in the northern English town of Wigan in the pose of a crucified victim, her hands and feet showing signs of having bled.¹ Higginson's roommate sent for the local Catholic priest, Fr Thomas Wells, who said that he 'did not know what was the matter for her' and told her to 'run for the doctor'.² Dr Hart, equally nonplussed, could only comment that the thirty-year-old woman seemed 'extremely weak'.³

It was not the first time that this particular teacher at St Mary's Catholic school in Wigan had brought attention to herself. A colleague who shared Teresa Higginson's room -- and, indeed, bed -- reported hearing strange shrieks, footsteps, knocking, the sound of a person attempting to speak while held by the throat, and 'a rushing noise as if animals were in the room'.⁴ Once, she went into their shared room to find the bed charred and smoking, as if someone had set it alight, and Teresa Higginson lying on the floor next to a broken holy water stoup and bottle.⁵

¹ Ryland's notes, Good Friday 1874, in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 78. The first few pages of the present chapter are taken largely from my recent article 'Mysticism in Bootle' as published in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 64 (April 2013), 335-356. Despite extensive searches, it has proved impossible to find the original collection of letters to, from and about Teresa Higginson, which was first published by O'Sullivan as *Teresa Higginson, the servant of God, school teacher* (London 1924). This was reprinted with additional letters by Cecil Kerr in 1927, and in an abridged version, as *Teresa Helena Higginson, school teacher and mystic*, in 1928. Selected letters were reissued, as a pamphlet, in Honnor, *Appreciations of Teresa Helena Higginson, school-teacher and mystic* (1986), and most recently in Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle* (Liverpool 2010). Published versions of Teresa Higginson's letters are the ones cited throughout the present chapter.

² Ryland's notes, Good Friday 1874 as reproduced in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson: Servant of God, the Spouse of the Crucified, 1844-1905* (1927), 78.

³ Ryland's notes in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 50, 78.

⁴ Ryland to Powell, 27 June 1880, in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 65-7.

⁵ Ryland to Powell, 27 June 1880, in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 65-7.

Although neither her priest nor her doctor could account for her strange behaviour, Teresa Higginson evidently had some fairly well developed ideas as to what was going on. As she later explained to a different, more sympathetic, priest than Fr Wells: ‘several times when I awoke I perceived a smell of something burning, and the house being filled with smoke and brimstone, I thought surely the house was on fire... other times I saw the whole bed and room full of flames and heard the crackling and I am afraid in this case I proved a coward, for I was frightened more than I can tell at first for there was no holy water: the Devil threw something against the bottle and broke it.’⁶ Although some later enthusiasts took Higginson’s alleged ‘wrangles’ with the Devil seriously, at the time Fr. Thomas Wells was less impressed. To Teresa Higginson’s explanation that whenever she tried to get up in the night to pray ‘the Devil used to beat and ill use the body and spit horrible filth upon me in the face and eyes’, the priest responded that he thought she ‘had a very fertile imagination.’⁷ When the teacher’s diabolical ‘wrangles’, so reminiscent of those reported by the *curé d’Ars*, continued, he reasoned with her as with a child: ‘Night time is the time to sleep and rest so that you may be able to do your work as duty requires.’⁸ When Higginson persisted in getting up throughout the night, Fr Wells eventually ‘commanded’ that she stay in bed for at least four hours at a stretch, and added that ‘if the will was really desirous of being entirely obedient he did not see how [she] could be so continually rising.’⁹ Only when this direct order had no effect did he change tack, humouring her and telling her to ‘tell the Devil he must not do it again’. Finally, presumably out of sheer weariness, Fr Wells -- who had the local Catholic school as well as the church to run -- pleaded with her to ‘ask our b.[lessed] Lord to change the temptation.’¹⁰

⁶ Higginson to Snow (20 June 1880), in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 61.

⁷ Higginson to Snow (20 June 1880), in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 60.

⁸ Higginson to Snow (20 June 1880), in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 60.

⁹ Higginson to Snow (20 June 1880), in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 60.

¹⁰ Higginson to Snow (20 June 1880), in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 61; 62.

The appearance of the ‘stigmata’, or the signs of Christ’s wounds, on Teresa Higginson’s prone body on the morning of Good Friday 1874 had not come entirely out of the blue. Throughout Holy Week, the schoolteacher had been acting out the drama of her own accompaniment of Jesus along the road to Calvary. Teresa’s variations on the Stations of the Cross, as she performed them at St Mary’s Church in Wigan, included groans, convulsions, low moans and the frequent recoiling as from invisible blows. Susan Ryland, her fellow-teacher, roommate and ‘only friend’, spoke to Father Wells about them, but he cautioned her not to get involved.¹¹ Another teacher, Miss Woodward, raised the matter with her confessor, Father Gradwell SJ. The Jesuit cautiously suggested that she ‘take notes of what occurred.’¹² Misses Woodland and Ryland accordingly took turns, for all the world like empirical experimenters, ‘to watch and [write] down exactly what they witnessed.’¹³ This consisted of seeing Teresa Higginson re-enact, in Church, the drama of Christ’s Passion. Although ostensibly cast in the role of witness, Teresa tended rather to upstage Christ as she begged an invisible Jesus to take the drink offered to him; to lean on her; to let her guide his feet; to think of his mother’s feelings. The pantomime, as recorded by the two teachers, was violent, with Teresa recoiling or crying out from invisible blows, begging Christ’s tormentors to ‘rend’ his clothes less roughly or to lay his body down more gently. The performance ended sensationally, with her body going ‘prostrate’ and ‘still as death’ as she continued to imitate Christ through his final agony on the cross.¹⁴

Although Teresa Higginson’s claims cut little ice with Fr Thomas Wells of St Mary’s, Wigan, within a few years she had found in nearby Bootle a confessor and spiritual director prepared to believe that the ‘visions’ and ‘pains’ she suffered in Holy Week 1874 were mystical ‘favours’ that presaged greater advances in the spiritual life. As Teresa Higginson explained to

¹¹ Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 72.

¹² Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 72.

¹³ Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 72.

¹⁴ Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 75.

her new ‘spiritual director’, Fr Edward Powell, in a series of letters sent to him from 1878, it was during the latter part of Lent 1874 that Jesus had ‘permitted [her] to feel some little of those most cruel torments which He... endured’ and ‘on the Friday morning in Passion Week [1874], my Lord and my God gave me the marks of His five Sacred Wounds, which I earnestly begged of Him to remove, but to give me an increase if possible of the pain.’¹⁵ During the whole of the following week, she further reported, ‘they bled, and Father Wells saw one of them on the Good Friday, after which that disappeared, the others having done so early in the morning; and on several occasions they have re-opened.’¹⁶ Teresa Higginson further explained that she had been granted the privilege of bilocation, actually engaging in missionary work in Africa (where she claimed unparalleled successes in gaining Catholic converts) at the precise moment that eyewitnesses said that she was seated at the dinner table in her lodgings in Wigan.¹⁷

Six years after receiving the stigmata, Teresa Higginson announced that she had been chosen as the ‘spouse of the crucified’ in a mystical union that intimately united her to Jesus, allowing her to bear some of the consequences of human sin through her own suffering and enabling her to act as a conduit between the natural and the supernatural worlds.¹⁸ Fresh visions gave her insight into, and then instructed her to spread, a hitherto unknown devotion to the ‘Sacred Head’ of Jesus.¹⁹ The novel devotion, which was evidently meant to complement and complete existing devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, stressed the importance of the divine wisdom in correcting the intellectual pretensions of Teresa Higginson’s own nineteenth century which, as she put it, too often set ‘its paltry human sciences against the eternal wisdom of God.’²⁰ Just as the Sacred Heart was understood to be the focal point for the contemplation of Christ’s

¹⁵ Higginson to [Powell], 24 July 1879, in O’Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 96.

¹⁶ Higginson to [Powell], 24 July 1879, in O’Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 96.

¹⁷ Higginson to [Powell], Feast of the Circumcision 1881, and 2 Jan. 1882, in O’Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 81-92 and in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 355-9.

¹⁸ Higginson to [Powell], 3 May 1880 in O’Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 129-132.

¹⁹ Higginson to [Powell], 22 June 1879, O’Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 73-78.

²⁰ Higginson to [Powell], 26 August 1879, O’Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 78-80.

mercy, compassion and suffering, so the Sacred Head was to be honoured as the seat of divine wisdom, infinite intelligence and the will of God.

Teresa Higginson was not alone in the 1870s and 1880s in claiming diabolical wrangles, bilocation, the stigmata or even mystical espousals: all of these distinctive phenomena from medieval lives of the saints experienced a sharp revival during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Controversies surrounding many contemporary cases involving alleged physical manifestations of mysticism, most of which were widely reported and discussed in medical and psychological as well as in theological and ecclesiastical journals and also in local Church newspapers, were becoming as well-known among Catholics in Britain as on the European continent.²¹

Clerical and lay Catholics living in rural Lancashire and the outskirts of Liverpool in the last quarter of the nineteenth century read and heard sensational reports of contemporary mystics and stigmatics living across the English Channel. They also knew that a rival, purportedly ‘scientific’, explanatory framework existed to account for mystical phenomena associated with allegedly suggestible Catholic women: the gendered category of ‘hysteria’. Susan Ryland, Teresa Higginson’s roommate, recalled how ‘during the early part of 1874, there was something in the paper about Louise Lateaux [*sic*] in France [*sic*] being in ecstasy every Friday and we passed the remark (I mean Miss Woodward and I) “That is nothing in this house. It is a daily occurrence here”, which it was at that time.’²² Another teacher remembered how there were days when Teresa Higginson “‘literally lived on the Holy Communion and poor Miss Ryland had to half carry her to the alter rails every day. I used to pity the latter, she was a real slave to her’”.²³ The same witness recalled how ‘one Good Friday when very prostrate and in bed, she spent the day

²¹ See Imbert-Gourbeyre, *Les Stigmatisées* (1873); Jacobi, *Die Stigmatisierten* (1923); Summers, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1950) and Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952), ed. J.H. Crehan.

²² Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 51; Heimann, ‘Higginson, Teresa Helena’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 27 (2004), 71-2.

²³ As reproduced in Thurston, ‘Hagiography: Past and Present’, *The Tablet* (20 November 1937), 684.

crying and craving the Holy Communion. Of course the confessor paid no attention to her that day but the next she received and was alright [sic] again on the Sunday. Some priests did not believe her and said it was all hysteria.²⁴

Misses Ryland and Woodward, Teresa Higginson's fellow-teachers and housemates, appeared to have accepted the supernatural and magical in their daily lives without difficulty, hardly blinking at the 'miraculous' appearance of new firewood, soap and a key as they went about their business. They mentioned with perfect nonchalance, for example, such claims as that Teresa Higginson could ignite or quench fires by making the sign of the cross over them. They were apparently unprepared to believe that she was mentally ill, leaving it to two local curates to describe her as 'mentally deficient' and 'not fit to be in church'.²⁵ Nor did they treat her as a saint. Although one might suppose that her re-enactment before their very eyes of scenes from well-thumbed Lives of the saints might have prompted some veneration, or at the very least excitement, they seem to have accepted this behaviour with complacency except when afraid for her physical safety. Fr Wells, on the other hand, was not only unimpressed by her mystical claims, but on at least one occasion drove her out of Church in front of everyone. When, claims that Teresa Higginson lived on communion wafers notwithstanding, she was discovered to be eating in secret, she was called a 'lying hypocrite'. Only later was it explained that she was sometimes 'impersonated' by the devil.

Although retrospectively held up as a model Catholic schoolteacher, Teresa Higginson's behaviour was generally considered by her peers to be deviant. In 1876, she was sacked from a teaching job at St Alban's, Liscard. In 1879, she was forced to leave a Jesuit mission school in Sabden, near Clitheroe, 'on account of illness'.²⁶ In 1877 or 1878 a fellow-lodger accused her of stealing £100; although the money mysteriously reappeared after the police were called, the other

²⁴ As reproduced in Thurston, 'Hagiography: Past and Present', *The Tablet* (20 November 1937), 684.

²⁵ Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 183.

²⁶ Lea to Higginson (1879) in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 89.

residents demanded that she move out.²⁷ Further accusations in 1879, this time of drunkenness and unseemly behaviour, led to an enquiry being launched by Bishop O'Reilly of Liverpool. He eventually revealed his judgement on the matter by ordering Fr Edward Powell, the first priest to be sympathetic to her mystical claims, to stop acting as Teresa Higginson's spiritual director.²⁸ Fr Hall, a Benedictine who was brought in to advise the bishop, pronounced Fr Powell to have been 'duped' by a combination of what he termed 'hysteria' and 'delusion'.²⁹

Fr. Edward Powell, although removed as parish priest of St Alexander's Bootle in 1883, nevertheless continued to take an interest in Teresa Higginson's case, and wrote to Fr Bertrand Wilberforce, a Dominican, for an 'expert' opinion on the supernatural experiences that she continued to report. When Fr Bertrand Wilberforce, a Dominican father steeped in the literature of Catholic mysticism and the theology of St Thomas Aquinas, responded to Fr Edward Powell's request for a second opinion on the soul in his care, it was to endorse Teresa Higginson's claims as exactly matching the experiences of a number of canonised saints of the Church.

Acknowledging that her devotion to the Sacred Head of Jesus might 'in a certain sense... be called a *new* devotion' he nevertheless judged it to be theologically sound since, as he pointed out, it bore 'a striking analogy to the devotion in honour of the Sacred Heart' and could be defended on the same grounds.³⁰ Above all, it seemed to meet the more stringent qualification of being a particularly fitting devotion, both in itself and in the timing of its revelation. As Wilberforce argued:

There is a particular fitness in this devotion to the age in which we live. In order to suit a particular time, a devotion ought to meet the special dangers of the day, supplying an antidote to prevalent spiritual diseases. Now the spirit of this age is evidently one of

²⁷ Higginson to Powell (1879) in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 86-7, 94.

²⁸ Higginson to Powell (1879) in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 92.

²⁹ Powell to [John Placid] Hall (Sept. 1883) in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 169-70.

³⁰ Wilberforce to Powell (9 Nov. 1882), Appendix A in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 345-6.

spiritual rebellion. The human mind intoxicated by modern scientific discoveries is inclined to cast off all restraint and to refuse any longer to remain subject to the sweet yoke of Faith. Rationalism, pure and simple, is the prevailing spirit of the day.³¹

Wilberforce, while admitting that it might be both ‘presumptuous’ and ‘delicate’ to pronounce on the character of a soul of a person he had never met, nevertheless found it difficult to moderate his enthusiasm. ‘Everything’, as he put it, ‘that has come to my knowledge, through her letters and accounts given to me by her confessor of her acts and dispositions’ all ‘lead me to conclude, not only that she is in a high degree of holiness, but also that her mind is wonderfully illuminated by the Light of God.’³² Systematically combing through Teresa Higginson’s letters for evidence of the four traditional virtues associated with sanctity – humility, patience, obedience and mortification – Wilberforce found that she passed all tests with flying colours. In judging Teresa Higginson’s humility, he was particularly impressed that ‘she thoroughly despises herself, is truly anxious to be despised by others, is free from that self-will which would make her desirous to guide herself instead of submitting to others’ and has a ‘fear of delusion, yet with confidence in God: is anxious that divine favours should remain hidden, yet mentions them with simplicity under obedience.’³³ Her patience under what he saw as ‘the pressure of extreme mental and bodily suffering’ Wilberforce found ‘heroic’, particularly as she not only ‘endure[d] these things without repining, but display[ed] an ardent thirst for more numerous and more painful afflictions, in order to unite her soul to Christ crucified.’³⁴ The testimony of Teresa Higginson’s confessor, Fr Edward Powell, that his penitent was immediately willing to cease performing ‘any penance or exercise without agitation of mind when commanded’ to do so satisfied Fr Wilberforce that she met the requirements of obedience, while her evident self-loathing and

³¹ Wilberforce to Powell (9 Nov. 1882), Appendix A in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 348.

³² Wilberforce to Powell (9 Nov. 1882), Appendix A in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 349.

³³ Wilberforce to Powell (9 Nov. 1882), Appendix A in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 350.

³⁴ Wilberforce to Powell (9 Nov. 1882), Appendix A in Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, 350.

pattern of self-harm suggested to him an exemplary ‘mortification’ of the senses and the successful extinction of self-will.

In 1883, Fr (later Canon) Alfred Snow took over from Fr Edward Powell as Teresa Higginson’s ‘spiritual director’. Snow proved to be not only a sympathetic confidant and confessor but also an enthusiastic champion who sought actively to ‘prepare’ her to receive the ‘mystical espousals’, the closest possible union of the soul with God. In 1887, after several moves, changes of job and a number of undiagnosed illnesses, and having already claimed to have received miraculous communions and had a vision in which Jesus gave her a ring of thorns and a cross as a token of his betrothal, Teresa Higginson’s experiences duly culminated in the final mystical union of ‘espousals’, which purportedly took place in her lodgings at 53 Lowergate, Clitheroe.

As Teresa Higginson later explained to Fr Alfred Snow, on the night of 23 October 1887 ‘my divine Spouse spoke to my soul, and said He would now fulfil the promise He had made to me so often and present me to the adorable Trinity and unite Himself to me in the presence of the whole court of heaven.’ He then said:

‘Arise, my beloved, that I may glorify the triune God in unity and espouse thee in their adorable presence.’ And turning then to His blessed Mother, He gave me to her as her daughter, and Mary, taking hold of my hand, gave it to Jesus, and He withdrew the ring that he had before placed upon it and then replaced it on the same finger, saying ‘I espouse thee in the name and in the presence of the uncreated Trinity and in the presence of My Immaculate Mother, and I give you to her as a daughter and My spouse for ever.’ I was wrapped in the Essence of the eternal Godhead and I heard and saw things which it is not given to man to utter.³⁵

³⁵ Kerr, *Teresa Helena Higginson*, abridged edition, 53-54.

Snow's reply to Teresa fully endorsed her supernatural claims. 'I praise and thank our dear Lord exceedingly for His great goodness in bestowing this unspeakable favour upon you,' he wrote, 'and I rejoice with you and congratulate you with all my heart upon your marriage with the Lamb, for that is the name of the degree of union to which in His goodness He has now raised you, and it is the highest union to which any soul can attain upon earth'.³⁶

Snow then arranged for Teresa Higginson to go to his sister's Convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Edinburgh so that she could fulfil her desire to spread the Devotion to the Sacred Head to Scotland. Teresa ended up spending 12 years in and around Edinburgh, where she set up a makeshift shrine to the Sacred Head and was later claimed by some nuns to have exhibited the stigmata and received miraculous communions. Others, however, recalled how her repeated attempts to open a box by making the sign of the cross over it finally led an impatient nun to send her to fetch the key instead. Although Teresa remained a Tertiary of St Francis until her death, she never entered the order of the Sisters of Mercy.³⁷

That Teresa Higginson's revelations were doctrinally compatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church, that she appeared always to submit to authority, and that her pronounced desire to suffer seemed to indicate genuine hatred of self, all made the case for her beatification impossible to reject out of hand. On paper at least, she appeared to meet the traditional criteria for sanctity. But what really seemed to persuade Wilberforce of her sanctity was her detailed knowledge of the mystical life, knowledge that he did not believe could have come her way except by direct experience. 'The person has read no books of mystical theology, even the ordinary spiritual books common among the faithful', he wrote in wonderment, 'yet she described most accurately and in most striking terms how a vision which is neither imaginary nor even intellectual is infused by the action of the Holy Spirit in the centre of the soul itself. It is

³⁶ Snow to Higginson (no date) in Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle* (2010),165.

³⁷ Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle*, 171.

impossible to avoid the impression that she is speaking from personal experience.’³⁸ Elsewhere, he stressed that ‘the theological way in which this simple and unlearned person [sic] explains the doctrine of the Trinity and Incarnation and speaks of devotion to the Sacred Head is a decided indication of superior illumination.’ Aware of the existence of an alternative discourse in which Higginson’s revelations might be seen as symptoms of ‘hysteria’, and acknowledging that ‘visions are certainly to be more cautiously received in the case of a woman,’ Wilberforce nevertheless concluded that ‘this soul has had diabolical visions and has detected them.’³⁹ For Wilberforce found it utterly implausible that a person ‘unlearned, [who] has read no books [sic], and has lived ever secluded [sic]’ could have ‘invented herself a devotion so admirably suited to the times in which we live’.⁴⁰ To paint Teresa Higginson – who in fact lived on the outskirts of the bustling metropolis of Liverpool and was employed to teach Catholic doctrine to schoolchildren – as ‘secluded’ and ‘unlearned’ was inaccurate: but it helped to give Teresa Higginson credibility as a saint by bracketing her with other purportedly ‘simple’, ‘rural’ and ‘untutored’ female mystics, among others the rising star Bernadette of Lourdes. To Wilberforce, what persuaded was Teresa Higginson’s doctrinal precision and apparently close correspondence to the pattern of the saints. The more extravagantly medieval her behaviour and doctrinally precise her language, the more fittingly she could be seen to represent a touchstone of eternal Catholic truth in the midst of nineteenth-century modernity and scepticism, a timely sign that Catholic obedience and simplicity of faith were worth more than all the science and erudition in the world.

II. Interlude

³⁸ Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle*, 351.

³⁹ Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle*, 353.

⁴⁰ Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle*, 352.

For nearly fifteen years after Teresa Higginson's death in 1905, her 'holy life and many virtues' seemed, in the words of Teresa Higginson's first hagiographer, to have been forgotten'. Even her 'friends and acquaintances', we are told, 'remained silent, not even feeling inclined to talk about her'.⁴¹ In 1922, however, Alfred Snow died. His correspondence with Teresa Higginson passed to the Benedictine monk Adalbert O'Sullivan, who in 1924 published a 'memoir', including a selection of letters, as *Teresa Higginson, the Servant of God, School Teacher*. This first hagiographical sketch set out Teresa Higginson's claims to mystical visions and revelations, together with her devotion to the 'Sacred Head' of Jesus. It took Teresa Higginson's mystical espousals, stigmata and miraculous communions as factually accurate and endorsed her claims to bilocation. It also wrote with confidence of Teresa Higginson's 'proven efficacy', after death, in interceding for 'some pious souls in their needs'.⁴² The Benedictine monk, who clearly believed Teresa Higginson to be a saint, sought above all to promote her as 'a Divine gift to her country, a practical example, showing to others in what real sanctity consists, how it ought to be aimed at and how it can be attained by all.'⁴³

A second hagiography of this 'servant of God' was brought out in 1927 by Lady Anne Cecil, the daughter of the 7th Marquess of Lothian and Lady Anne Fitzalan-Howard, this time in the form of a conventional Victorian 'Life and Letters'.⁴⁴ Lady Kerr had met Teresa Higginson, remembered as an old lady in black who gave out holy pictures, when she was a child. She embarked on the biography partly because she was intrigued by her mother Anne's description of watching Teresa Higginson pray, apparently glowing and in a state of rapture, at St Catherine's Convent in Edinburgh.⁴⁵ The book sold well and an abridged version followed in 1928. Lady Kerr's biography quickly captured the imagination of local Catholics, both Irish and English,

⁴¹ O'Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 12.

⁴² O'Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 13.

⁴³ O'Sullivan, *Teresa Higginson*, 158.

⁴⁴ *Catholic Herald* (15 August 1941), 7.

⁴⁵ Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle*, 327-8.

from Merseyside, Lancashire and Edinburgh, where Teresa had spent most of her life; and created a stir among Catholic schoolteachers, who could equally claim Teresa as one of their own, a patron saint advertising the holiness of their professional calling. Miss Catherine Collins, for example, the headmistress of St George's Roman Catholic village school in Maghull, was – perhaps as early as 1928 and certainly no later than 1931 – already a firm believer in Teresa's 'authenticity as a mystic'. Margaret Griffith, too, the head teacher at a Convent school in Surrey, but who originated from Wigan and was a convert, similarly 'used sometimes to mention, with awe, Teresa Higginson'. A former pupil remembered how firmly she had 'believed that Teresa was a chosen soul (chosen to suffer for the sins of the world)'.⁴⁶

The excitement generated by Teresa Higginson's growing reputation came, at least in part, as a result of the comparative rarity in Victorian Britain of the mystical phenomena she claimed to have experienced, particularly the stigmata.⁴⁷ With her diverse claims to diabolical wrangles, holy ecstasies, miraculous communions, bilocation, invisible supernatural missionary work, visions, stigmata and mystical espousals, Teresa Higginson held the potential to achieve the combined devotional pull of St Francis of Assisi, Bernadette of Lourdes, the *curé d'Ars*, Louise Lateau, Teresa of Avila, St Margaret Mary Alacoque, and many other canonized saints besides. As the daughter of a 'cradle Catholic' and a Catholic convert who was born in Wales, but who was closely associated with Lancashire, Liverpool and Edinburgh, she could be seen to span the United Kingdom and bridge the gap between old Catholics and new while simultaneously linking Catholics of Irish, Welsh, English and Scottish origins. She was able to appeal simultaneously to Irish, convert and Old Catholic girls and ladies, yet could also be seen

⁴⁶ Unpublished letter from Florence Julien to the author (12 March 1990), ff.1;3.

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Girling, a stigmatic of Protestant background, was a notable exception. See M. Heimann, 'Mary Ann Girling', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 22 (2004), 347-8 and J. Rose, 'The Woman who Claimed to be Christ: The Millennial Belief of Mary Ann Girling and her Disciples, 1860-1886' (unpublished DPhil dissertation Oxford 2008).

to represent a hardworking, underpaid and rapidly expanding army of female Catholic schoolteachers at a time of perceived crisis in Catholic education.⁴⁸

III. The Cause for Teresa Higginson's Beatification

The cause for Teresa Higginson's beatification was introduced in 1927 by Archbishop Frederick William Keating of Liverpool. As John Davies has found, it was vigorously promoted in pages of Liverpool's *The Cathedral Record* and in *The Harvest* in the nearby diocese of Salford. Both local Catholic newspapers included many accounts of 'miracles' attributed to Teresa Higginson's intercession and gave plenty of space to the enthusiastic promotion of her cause by local clergy, both secular and religious.⁴⁹ In 1933, Fr Frederick Kershaw, the Ushaw-educated editor of *The Harvest*, brought out the pamphlet *Teresa Helena Higginson: A Short Account of her Life and Letters* at the explicit request of the Salford Teachers' Guild.⁵⁰

The case for Teresa Higginson's beatification was formally presented to the Sacred Congregation of Rites in Rome on 7 December 1933, accompanied by a flurry of pamphlets, hagiographies and devotional tracts, together with continued favourable local Lancashire and Liverpool press in the pages of the *Harvest* and *Cathedral Record*. Most significantly, the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland brought out a 20-page version of Cecil Kerr's *Life* that bore an imprimatur and appeared to imply official Church approval of her sanctity. A Dutch translation of Cecil Kerr's 'official biography' of the 'spouse of the crucified' was published simultaneously in The Hague and Antwerp in the same year and a French edition followed a year and a half later.⁵¹ The cause seemed set to spread in much the same way that the reputation of contemporary

⁴⁸ On the crisis in Catholic education see, for example, Tenbus, *English Catholics and the Education of the Poor*, 89-117.

⁴⁹ Davies, 'Traditional Religion, Popular Piety, or Base Superstition?', *Recusant History* 23 (1996-7), 125.

⁵⁰ F.W. Kershaw, *Teresa Helena Higginson: A Short Account of her Life and Letters* (London, 1933).

⁵¹ *Teresa Helena Higginson: de bruid van den gekruisigde 1844-1905* (The Hague and Antwerp, Pax, 1933); *Thérèse-Hélène Higginson, servante de Dieu épouse du crucifié; ou, La merveilleuse d'une institutrice libre anglaise*, tr. Victor Bilée (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1935).

French, German, Italian and Belgian mystics had spread. Exact contemporary St Gemma Galgani, for example, who received the stigmata a decade later than Teresa Higginson but died three years before her, was declared venerable in 1931, blessed in 1933, and finally canonized in 1940.

On 8 June 1935, the *Catholic Herald* reported that ‘preliminary investigations in connection with the Cause for the Canonization of Teresa Higginson Committee’ had concluded with a pilgrimage, organised by the Liverpool Archdiocesan Catholic Teachers’ Teresa Higginson Committee, of around 500 people to her graveside at St Winifrede’s Church in Neston. Petitions for the cause of Teresa Higginson’s beatification were by then claimed to have ‘exceeded 100,000’ and to been received ‘from nearly every country in the world.’⁵² By November 1936, ‘an inaugural meeting consisting mainly of teachers’, was held in the Bishop of Liverpool’s Cathedral Hall and the Principal of St Mary’s College ‘spoke of the great honour that it would be to the Catholic body of teachers if the first person to be raised to the altars of the Church since the Reformation should be one of their own profession – “a Teacher Saint.”’⁵³

The Irish Catholic Truth Society pamphlet brought the story of Teresa Higginson within reach of anyone who looked through the information leaflets, prayer-cards and requests for donations to be found at the back of any parish church. One Anglican clergyman was so shocked to find that an organisation calling itself ‘the Catholic Truth Society’ would countenance such claptrap that he wrote in to *The Modern Churchman* in May 1936 to declare it ‘clear that this woman was a pathological case and, like so many religious neurotics, the victim of hallucinations’. While he conceded that Teresa Higginson might have faithfully imitated ‘the experiences of the saints’, what she spouted was not ‘spiritual wisdom’ but ‘trash worthy of a spiritualistic séance.’ The ‘Higginson pamphlet’, he concluded disdainfully, ‘is the type of

⁵² *The Catholic Herald* (8 June 1935), p. 15.

⁵³ “‘A Teacher Saint’”, *The Catholic Herald* (27 November 1936), 14.

literature considered quite suitable by the Jesuits in Manchester as spiritual pabulum for the faithful. The stuff is nonsense, but the right kind of nonsense, and the Jesuit Fathers collect the public's tuppences by retailing it at the Church of the Holy Name'.⁵⁴

Publicity surrounding the cause for Teresa Higginson's beatification, which included increasingly extravagant claims of miraculous intercessions, matched a parallel French campaign for devotions to the 'Holy Face' that caused considerable embarrassment to those French Catholic clergy who were seeking to distance themselves from reliance on the physical manifestations of mysticism.⁵⁵ Indeed, one of Teresa Higginson's greatest champions proved to be Mère Guélin, foundress of the Servants of Jesus-Wisdom at Cagnotte in the Landes district of France and editor of the bi-monthly devotional bulletin *Sagesse*. Guélin made many references to Teresa Higginson in her devotional writings, dedicated a pamphlet to her, and sought to spread the Devotion to the Sacred Head. This sort of thing was every bit as embarrassing to self-consciously enlightened members of the English Catholic community as to their 'rationalist' French counterparts.

In March 1937, two damning French Catholic accounts of Teresa Higginson were reprinted in *The Clergy Review*, the 'progressive' new journal for Catholic priests that had been founded in 1931. The first negative remark came through a review of a special volume of *Études Carmélitaines* dedicated to 'the pressing problem of stigmatization' which discussed it from 'every angle, historical, physiological, psychological, psychiatric and theological' and which included a dismissive footnote about Teresa Higginson.⁵⁶ The second, more focussed critique,

⁵⁴ Hardwick in *The Modern Churchman* (May 1936), as reproduced in Whittington-Egan, *The Devil in Bootle*, 259-260.

⁵⁵ *Études Carmélitaines* under the editorship of Bruno de Jésus-Marie, as Agnès Desmazières has found, was at the forefront of a new movement to promote a distinctive Catholic psychology in answer to atheistic alternatives. See Agnès Desmazières, *L'Inconscient au paradis: Comment les catholiques ont reçu la psychanalyse (1920-1965)* (Paris, 2011), pp. 64-66. Some influential contemporary English Catholic clergy and laity similarly sought to promote Catholic solidarity among medics, first through the Catholic Medical Guild. In 1935, as discussed below in the text, a new Catholic Psychological Society was set up.

⁵⁶ J. Cartmell, 'Notes on Recent Work. Ascetical and Mystical Theology', *The Clergy Review* 13 (March 1937), 96.

came in a review of the 1935 French edition of Cecil Kerr's 'official' biography of Teresa Higginson. This rejected the case for the English stigmatic's beatification with the damning indictment that all evidence rested on 'a woman's testimony' and, moreover, one with a 'sickly' character.⁵⁷ According to the report in *The Clergy Review*, Teresa Higginson's education 'predisposed her to become mystical' whereas 'her phenomena, which she herself first observed, were seen by others because they were psychically dominated; the atmosphere around her was pregnant with hallucinations.'⁵⁸ Particularly disturbing, in *The Clergy Review*'s estimation, was 'the excuse offered by Teresa when certain accusations were made against her that the devil had personated her'. Neither her claims to stigmata nor to 'prolonged fast', it noted, had been 'rigorously checked' by independent witnesses. Finally, although the 'detailed findings' of the episcopal enquiry that had looked into her case were not known, the bishop had ultimately found against her. It seemed especially telling that the 'two priests who took part in the enquiry ceased to believe in the phenomena' once all the available evidence was brought to light.⁵⁹

In May 1937, the archbishops and bishops of Scotland threw their weight behind the northern schoolteachers and Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, directly petitioning Rome for the beatification of Teresa Higginson on the grounds that since she had spent 'nearly 12 years with us and was fond of our country' (i.e. Scotland, as opposed to the United Kingdom), the Archbishop and Bishops of Scotland were bound to do all they could 'to promote her cause'.⁶⁰ This marked the beginning of a veritable battle between Teresa Higginson's North Country champions and her equally tenacious London detractors that was fought out in the pages of *The Tablet* between May 1937 and April 1938. The cause was an appropriate one for *The Tablet*: the urbane English

⁵⁷ M. Claeys Bouúaert, 'C. Kerr, *Theresia Helena Higginson ou la vie merveilleuse d'une institutrice libre anglaise*, tr par V. Billé,' *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 63, no. 9 (Nov. 1936), p. 1088. The Kerr biography was published in French in 1935. The special issue was published in Paris by Desclée de Brouwer et Cie.

⁵⁸ J. Cartmell, 'Notes on Recent Work. Ascetical and Mystical Theology', *The Clergy Review* 13 (March 1937), 97.
⁵⁹ *The Clergy Review* (March 1937), 97.

⁶⁰ For the final, typed petition, see 'In Causa Beatificationis et Canonizationis Teresiae Helenae Higginson' (Archbishop Joseph Andrews to the Holy Father, 1 May 1937), Scottish Catholic Archives, Edinburgh, diocese of Dunkeld, DG/14/19/1; for the handwritten English version, headed 'Rough Translation', see DD/15/30/6.

Catholic weekly, previously controlled by successive archbishops of Westminster, had in 1935 been taken over by a group of English Catholic laymen who sought to cater for a cultured Catholic elite as part of their broader mission to integrate Catholics into respectable English society. In 1936 they appointed as editor Douglas Woodruff, an eminent journalist at *The Times* and a Catholic who was married to Lord Acton's granddaughter. Woodruff, who was described at his funeral as 'the Chesterbelloc' of the post-war Church and 'a great Christian gentleman', turned *The Tablet* into a platform for Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Ronald Knox, Martin D'Arcy, Christopher Dawson and many other Catholic novelists and intellectuals.⁶¹

In the same year that *The Tablet* was being revamped, a 'group of medical psychologists, clergy and others' met together at Heythrop College to form a new 'Catholic Psychological Society' whose stated aim was to publicize, lecture and otherwise inform Catholics about the new branch of medicine.⁶² Having already expended considerable ink in seeking to discredit the Victorian vogue for spiritualism, self-consciously rational Catholic apologists sought to subject mystical claims to medical scrutiny. 'All that glitters is not gold,' declared the neurologist F.M.R. Walshe, pointedly signing himself as a 'Catholic doctor' in a letter to *The Tablet* published on 8 May 1937. The case of Teresa Higginson, he pleaded, needed to be investigated from a 'psychopathological point of view' since, as a 'Catholic doctor' with knowledge of 'the field of nervous disorders', he could see that 'the obviously medical elements in the story, the mysterious illnesses, the swoons and trances, the romancing as to wounds said to have been caused by practices of mortification, and the alleged agonies of pain' were all 'the constituents, clear and unequivocal, of an hysterical illness, nor [was] there any available medical alternative interpretation thereof.'⁶³ That Dr Walshe's intervention was not dictated by disinterested medical

⁶¹ Archbishop Derek Worlock, 'Requiem address for Douglas Woodruff', *The Tablet* (18 March 1978), 36.

⁶² Anon., 'A Catholic Psychological Society', *The Tablet* (30 Nov 1935), 23; Anon., 'The Catholic Medical Guild', *The Tablet* (26 Oct 1935), 18.

⁶³ Walshe, 'Teresa Higginson', *The Tablet* (8 May 1937), 169, 666.

curiosity alone, but also intended to contain the spread of what he considered to be inappropriate expressions of sanctity, can be discerned by his dry comment that ‘Lives such as hers are more commonly recorded abroad than in this country, whose spirituality is perhaps more characteristically expressed by the lives of SS. John Fisher and Thomas More than by the bizarre career of this North Country school teacher.’⁶⁴

The sense that the extravagant claims made by and about Teresa Higginson could only bring Catholicism into disrepute, as a credulous set of superstitions, was echoed by other correspondents writing in *The Tablet* who were working hard to move Catholicism out of the ‘ghetto’ into mainstream, middle-class English life. So-called traditional ‘recusant’ or ‘Old Catholic’ Catholicism in England and Scotland prided itself on its sobriety, steadfastness and discretion. In matters of taste, it was supposed to be at the other end of the spectrum from the emotive revivalism spread by religious orders such as the Passionists, Redemptorists, Brompton Oratorians and St Vincent de Paul Society. The elephant in the room was the ‘vulgar piety’ of stereotypical Irish Catholic working-class immigrants, whose supposed tendency towards ‘superstition’ was not only the bane of many English Catholic clergy, but felt by some socially respectable Catholics to make their religion ridiculous in the eyes of non-Catholics.⁶⁵

The 1930s was an important period of growth in respectability for the English Catholic community. Campion Hall in Oxford and the nearby Jesuit College at Heythrop were establishing themselves, and Jesuit confessors – most notably the Harrow and Oxford-educated Jesuit Cyril Charles (C.C.) Martindale, himself a convert to Catholicism – were proving skilled at attracting converts of the calibre of Graham Greene, Muriel Spark and Evelyn Waugh. A distinctive blend of light-hearted wit, love of logic, and underlying moral earnestness could be felt in the works of English Catholics as various as G.K. Chesterton and Ronald Knox. Catholic Social Action was

⁶⁴ Walshe, ‘Teresa Higginson’, *The Tablet* (8 May 1937), 169, 665.

⁶⁵ S. Gilley, ‘Vulgar Piety and the Brompton Oratory’, *Durham University Journal* 43 (1981), 15-21.

also booming, and the Catholic Workers' College, later renamed Plater College, making its way in Oxford. At the same time that George Orwell was writing his *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Catholicism was managing to recruit from both sides of an increasingly bitter class war, from the political Left as well as the political Right. To those who wished to see English Catholics fully integrated into the Anglican-dominated establishment, the cause for Teresa Higginson's beatification could hardly have come at a more awkward time.

In mid-October 1937, at the height of the *Tablet* dispute, over 700 people turned up to a rally in Clapham in 'support' of Teresa Higginson that was organised by the London Teachers Committee. The rally boasted 11 parish rectors and 2 provincials and was favourably covered by the *Catholic Herald*.⁶⁶ The prominent Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston, whose reputation for scepticism made him the ideal investigator of bogus claims of the supernatural and paranormal, and whose interests stretched to poltergeists, spiritualists and mediums as well as to mystics,⁶⁷ sprang into action. Unearthing passages from letters that had been omitted in Cecil Kerr's *Life*, and which shed less flattering light on Teresa Higginson, Thurston presented her as a demanding neurotic and attention-seeking drain on her fellow-teachers. The Farm Street scholar not only cast doubt on Cecil Kerr's reliability and integrity as a biographer, but claimed to see in Teresa Higginson 'that strong egotism which is so integral a part of the symptom-complex of hysteria: a symptom-complex which figures so largely and so intimately in the life of Miss Higginson, and lends this life so pathological a complexion in the eyes of any informed and critical reader.'⁶⁸ Although medicalized terms and unflattering testimonies might hurt the innocent piety of Higginson's many 'North Country' champions, Thurston insisted that 'nothing less than a fastidious regard for accuracy and candour' was due to the 'trusting audiences' of hagiographies,

⁶⁶ *Catholic Herald* (15 October 1937), accessed 04/09/2013 at <http://archive.catholicerald.co.uk/article/15th-october-1937/1...> The Provincials were of the Oblates of St Charles and the Salesians.

⁶⁷ Heimann, 'Herbert Henry Charles Thurston', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 728-9.

⁶⁸ Thurston, 'Hagiography: Past and Present', *The Tablet* (20 November 1937), 684.

all the more so since ‘a cause that goes to Rome from this country carries with it, in a sense, the good name of English Catholicism.’⁶⁹

Champions of the cause for Teresa Higginson’s beatification quickly came forward to defend her reputation. One letter to *The Tablet*, signed ‘Teacher’s Friend’, claimed to see in Thurston’s letter ‘an undercurrent of envy’ and asked sarcastically whether St Peter, ‘a tough old fisherman’ yet who was said in the Gospel to have ‘wept bitterly’ ought similarly to be ‘considered an egoist, indulging in a symptom-complex of hysteria? Nevertheless he has been canonized. I wonder how St Mary Magdalen and St Monica got away with it?’⁷⁰ Thomas S. Kelly, the brother of the priest at St Alexander’s, Bootle, argued that although it might ‘be difficult to prove that these incidents of bilocation occurred’ it would be ‘equally difficult to prove that they did not.’⁷¹ A ‘psychologist’, he crushingly concluded, is ‘of course, quite at liberty to look upon the mystic experiences of Teresa as “mental aberrations”’, but would need to reconcile allegations of mental illness with ‘her life-long reputation for perfect truthfulness and remarkable commonsense [sic].’⁷² ‘Simplicity’ of faith, argued another defender, was a surer guide than ‘modern scepticism’ to discerning holiness.⁷³

The stakes were rising. The normally harmless, even commendable, ‘simple piety’ of uneducated Catholics, including many Irish-born Liverpool, Birmingham, London and Lancashire Catholics, was beginning to seem less benign to the English Catholic intelligentsia archetypically represented by the Jesuits of Farm Street in London. ‘Let us remember’, warned Thurston, that if Teresa Higginson ‘should be beatified, she will be the first English non-martyr to be raised to the altars of the Church for more than six hundred years. Such an event is likely to

⁶⁹ Thurston, ‘Hagiography: Past and Present’, *The Tablet* (20 November 1937), 684.

⁷⁰ Teacher’s friend, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 170 (11 December 1937)170, 803.

⁷¹ Kelly, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 170 (25 December 1937), 886.

⁷² Thomas S. Kelly, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 170 (25 December 1937), 886.

⁷³ ‘A Colonial Reader’, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 170 (11 December 1937), 803.

attract a certain amount of notice even in the Anglican and secular Press.⁷⁴ Is it too much, he asked, ‘that if our ideals of holiness are to be subjected to the criticism of our non-Catholic fellow countrymen, we should like to be represented by a type of sanctity somewhat less extravagant than that revealed in the story of Teresa Higginson?’⁷⁵ An alarmed English Catholic laywoman was similarly ‘filled with dismay’ at the thought ‘that Teresa Higginson, a pious woman no doubt, but exhibiting every symptom of neurotic disorder, should be presented to the world as the nearest approach to the ideal of sanctity which England has produced in six hundred years.’⁷⁶

The problem was not just that Teresa Higginson was peculiar and might have been mad. According to J.S. Cammack, SJ, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Heythrop College, one of the most serious contemporary dangers to faith consisted in taking purely ‘physiological and materialistic factors as an adequate explanation of mental deviations in character.’⁷⁷ Teresa Higginson’s champions were, in his view ‘confusing essential sanctity and the accidental phenomena which may accompany it’.⁷⁸ Even, as he put it, ‘if it were proved that the startling mystical phenomena in Teresa’s life were due to some form of hysteria’ this would be ‘no obstacle to her beatification if it were proved that her life showed the exercise of the theological and moral virtues in an heroic degree.’⁷⁹ C.C. Martindale, S.J., agreed, pointing out that ‘words like “neurotic”, “hysterical” have not yet found a definition in which all agree: but none of them (I think) need connote anything “moral” at all. We can, then, imagine a neurotic, anaemic, or hysterical saint.’⁸⁰ The problem that the Jesuits had identified was this: sanctity did not depend on extravagant mystical phenomena; but it did depend on heroic virtue. ‘There is, I suppose there *can* be, no evidence for any of Miss Higginson’s strange experiences save her *ipsa dixi*’,

⁷⁴ Thurston, ‘Beatification’, *The Tablet* 171 (15 January 1938), 73.

⁷⁵ Thurston, ‘Beatification’, *The Tablet* 171 (15 January 1938), 73.

⁷⁶ M. Catherine Ashburnham ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The Tablet* 171 (29 January 1938), 151.

⁷⁷ J.S. Cammack, *Moral Problems of Mental Defect*. See also book review by F. Emory Lyon in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 30 (1940), 976-8.

⁷⁸ J.S. Cammack, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (22 January 1938), 118.

⁷⁹ Cammack, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (22 January 1938), 118.

⁸⁰ C.C. Martindale, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (22 January 1938), 119.

Martindale considered; ‘nor is there evidence that her director (the first thing that an ecstatic seeks), though able to discern virtue, was skilled too in abnormal psychology (unconscious fraud included).’⁸¹ All the more rigorously must the public be safeguarded ‘from thinking for a moment that her virtue, however heroic, consisted in, even issued into, or maybe had anything at all to do with, those experiences, alleged by her, which are bound so seriously to disconcert so many.’⁸² An Italian professor of dogmatic theology riposted that this seemed to mean that ‘God is acceptable only when He presents Himself dressed in the fashion of a gentleman according to current tests’.⁸³

As one side in the debate continued to play the supernaturalist card, the other resorted increasingly to that of scientific authority. ‘As doctors’, declared Dr Walshe, ‘we are vividly aware, to a degree impossible to a non-medical student’ that ‘the manifestations of a psychoneurosis may assume the outward expressions of sanctity and produce a caricature of it.’⁸⁴ It was not, he declared pointedly, ‘the critics’ of Teresa Higginson who were ‘the mystagogues’.⁸⁵ Stigmatics, ‘with the honourable exception of St Francis of Assisi’, were generally ‘hysterics’ and ‘psychologically ill liars’ who ‘simulated nonexistent symptoms.’⁸⁶ Dr Letitia Fairfield of Gray’s Inn, seizing upon the ‘important admission’ that ‘no medical opinion’ had been sought by those engaged in the canonization process,⁸⁷ wondered how the Commission could possibly ‘know the facts really *were* facts unless they went beyond mere “collection”, a

⁸¹ Martindale, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (22 January 1938), 119.

⁸² Martindale, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (22 January 1938), 119.

⁸³ E. Campana, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (22 January 1938), 121.

⁸⁴ Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (29 January 1938), 150.

⁸⁵ Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (29 January 1938), 150.

⁸⁶ Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (29 January 1938), 150.

⁸⁷ L. Fairfield, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (12 February 1938), 213.

task for which a mixed tribunal of solicitors' clerks and shorthand typists would have been adequate.'⁸⁸ The point did not, she insisted, turn on whether or not "preternatural happenings are essential to sanctity" (which no one maintains), but that on a medical view, Teresa's neurotic mentality caused her to allege that such happenings had occurred when, in fact, they had not.'⁸⁹ There had already, she judged, been 'a terrifying assumption' in much of *The Tablet* correspondence that 'allegations of fraud, injustice and dishonesty directed against a candidate for beatification are "trivial"'. For her own part, the barrister wished 'very respectfully' to submit 'that the present state of her Cause is an affront to reason and a peril to the Faith.'⁹⁰ Walshe concluded his own diatribe by welcoming the 'encouragement' given in an address on psychology 'recently delivered by His Grace the Archbishop of Liverpool, in which he urged Catholics no longer to stand aside from the use of the knowledge provided by modern advances in psychology.'⁹¹

Although there were some obvious regional, gender, social and economic dimensions to the split between Teresa Higginson's promoters and detractors, such divisions were by no means absolute and do not tell the whole story. When Thurston tried to pass off the movement for Higginson's beatification as limited to 'Catholic schoolteachers as a body', the 'people of Bootle' and 'a considerable number of good Lancashire folk' who were 'very keen about her' and 'would like to have a canonized Saint of their very own',⁹² there was not enough space to print all the outraged responses.⁹³ From Heythrop, where 'about seventy people, just over a third' of the College's male members, signed a petition in Teresa Higginson's favour, J.S. Cammack argued that although 'a clinical picture of a typical psycho-neurotic' could 'be constructed', this could

⁸⁸ Fairfield, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (12 February 1938), 213-214.

⁸⁹ Fairfield, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (12 February 1938), 214.

⁹⁰ Fairfield, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (12 February 1938), 214.

⁹¹ Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (29 January 1938), 150.

⁹² Thurston, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (29 January 1938), 151.

⁹³ Anon., Letters to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (5 February 1938), 174.

only be done ‘by ignoring the contrary indications, selecting the unfavourable facts and interpreting them without using the criteria of mystical and ascetical theology.’⁹⁴ Even if Dr Walshe were capable of explaining ‘how a complete hysteric could suddenly become, and remain, normal without some form of psychic compensation’ or could ‘construct a perfectly coherent explanation of a very tricky point in theology’,⁹⁵ the question might nevertheless remain debatable ‘in view of the well-known differences between the various schools of psychological medicine.’⁹⁶ Most of all, the Jesuit scholar objected to ‘the chiding tone’ adopted by those who wished to discredit the Cause, pointing out that ‘the opponents of this case are not naughty children airing their unorthodox views and “presumably in good faith,” but experts who genuinely believe that they have a solid case to be exposed for the good of the Church.’⁹⁷

In the face of strong opposition, even from within his own Society of Jesus, to what was criticized as materialist reductionism, Thurston moved away from psychology to textual criticism. He noted that the Irish Catholic Truth Society pamphlet had omitted to include ‘all reference to “the curse pronounced against those who shall hinder and despise this devotion (to the Sacred Head)”’ who Teresa Higginson had claimed would be ““as an egg that is thrown to the wall; they shall be shattered and become as nought and shall be dried and wither as grass on the house-top.”’ Nor, he observed, had the Irish Catholic Truth Society pamphlet included mention of the visits that Teresa claimed to her confessor to have ‘been paying for four years together to the tribe of Ja-am-pu-da in Africa, her body presumably remaining the while in Lancashire.’⁹⁸ Higginson’s so-called ‘bilocations’, jibed another critic, were ‘low grade’ even as products of the

⁹⁴ Cammack, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (5 February 1938), 171, 174.

⁹⁵ Cammack, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (5 February 1938), 174.

⁹⁶ Cammack, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (5 February 1938), 174.

⁹⁷ Cammack, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (5 February 1938), 174.

⁹⁸ Fairfield, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (12 February 1938), 214.

imagination: ‘our school children, were they asked to imagine themselves missionaries among blacks, would produce something better than this.’⁹⁹

Walshe followed Thurston’s move from neurology to character assassination. Although Teresa Higginson had indeed been a schoolteacher ‘it cannot be said she was a model one’ since she was ‘thoroughly undependable’, ‘frequently absent’, ‘forced others to be absent also’ and was a ‘hindrance to her colleagues.’¹⁰⁰ Fellow teacher Miss Woodward, for example, remembered how annoying it had been to have to put up with Teresa Higginson’s constant demands for attention: “I used to think she ought to exert her will more and not be such a burden on poor Miss Ryland, who got quite worn out, and of course, while she was attending and waiting on her (Miss H.) She was absent from her own school which was then left solely to me: consequently we got into disrepute with the Inspector and I thought this unfair to Miss Ryland.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, a ‘lady who deputized for Teresa at Cudleigh’ recalled how Higginson used frequently ‘to whip the children’ and how the report from the Religious Inspector was ‘so bad that Fr. Dowsett told me he stuck it in the fire’ since the children ‘just knew scarce anything of their catechism.’ Teresa Higginson, Walshe concluded, was a teacher whom no Catholic school manager would today dare to employ.¹⁰²

By this point, Thomas Kelley of Wallasey could stand no more. Declaring *The Tablet* correspondence to have ‘gone far enough’, he accused the editor of having ‘permitted correspondents to sniff at an accepted candidate for Church honours’ and to brand her as a liar and a fraud’ as well as to allow ‘critics to sneer at the friends of Teresa, both living and dead’.¹⁰³ The ‘opinions of untrained minds illumined by faith’, he retorted, were ‘worth immeasurably more than those of trained minds blinded by prejudice or hampered by the exigencies of a

⁹⁹ A Vice-Postulator, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (19 February 1938), 247.

¹⁰⁰ Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (26 February 1938), 277.

¹⁰¹ As reproduced in H. Thurston, ‘Hagiography: Past and Present’, *The Tablet* 170, (20 November 1937), 683. This less flattering portion of an otherwise positive letter was not included in Cecil Kerr’s biography.

¹⁰² Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (26 February 1938), 277.

¹⁰³ Thomas S. Kelly, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (19 February 1938), 247.

superiority complex.’¹⁰⁴ Were ‘nothing more important than the merits of Teresa Higginson’ at stake, replied Dr Walshe, Wallasey’s pleas to stop the barrage of criticism of the North Country teacher would be valid: what was ‘at issue’, however, was ‘of fundamental importance to English Catholicism: namely, a sound and sane standard of spiritual values’.¹⁰⁵

Two distinct discourses emerged from *The Tablet* correspondence, each offering a rival vision of how a self-consciously Catholic minority ought to present itself to the surrounding predominantly Protestant, and secularising, world. From one point of view, promoted mainly from Liverpool and Lancashire (where Teresa had the potential to be seen as a local saint), and also by Catholic schoolteachers (the vast majority of whom were women), the cause for her beatification was tied up with a sense, not just of local patriotism, but also of the need to engage intensely with the mystical traditions of Catholic hagiography and to embrace all that made Catholicism distinctive. Letters written by those who favoured Teresa Higginson’s cause tended to be written in explicitly Catholic hagiographical language and to spill over with religious revivalist emotion, gushing with gratitude for her intercession or pointing out her theological virtues in stock religious phrases. They reeked, in short, of the Catholic ghetto.

The timeliness of Teresa Higginson’s call to abandon reliance on human intellect and lean instead on the ‘Sacred Head’ as the ‘seat of divine wisdom’ was frequently reiterated by Teresa Higginson’s advocates, as was the need for a patron saint of Catholic teachers. Our home-grown English Catholic saints, Higginson’s supporters seemed to be saying, are just as mystical, miraculous and flamboyant as any to be found in medieval or contemporary Italy, France or Belgium; furthermore, our faith is more pure and authentic, because more humble, faithful and heartfelt, than that of coolly superior English intellectuals. There was a professional and class, as well as a devotional, dimension to this Catholic revivalist ethos, as working-class and lower-

¹⁰⁴ Thomas S. Kelly, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* (19 February 1938), 249.

¹⁰⁵ Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (26 February 1938), 278.

middle-class teachers made populist appeals and drew on the methods of the modern pressure-group to gather signatures for petitions and organise mass rallies for the cause. Teresa Higginson's lay supporters further organised tours and pilgrimages to the places she had lived and taught, and to the graveyard where she lay buried; distributed prayer-cards for her cause to be victorious and set up shrines and devotions to the Sacred Head wherever they could. Those that opposed Teresa Higginson's beatification were deeply embarrassed by the oddity of schoolteacher and her new-fangled devotion, the extravagance of the claims made for her and the credulity which was apparently expected from her biographers and supporters. Above all, they were concerned about the poor impression her case would make on their non-Catholic countrymen, returning them to ridicule and suspicion – to the ghetto -- just as they were coming to be accepted in polite society.

IV. Rejection

The case for Teresa Higginson's beatification was formally refused by Rome on 7 December 1938. The Catholic Church's stamp of approval was removed from both the Irish Catholic Truth Society pamphlet, which was withdrawn from circulation, and from her cherished 'Devotion to the Sacred Head'. A radio talk by a Catholic priest from Dublin on the 'Life of Teresa Higginson' was nevertheless broadcast, first in Irish and then in English, fourteen months later, by which point England was at war with Germany (and Ireland was not).¹⁰⁶ This radio talk was peppered with references to Teresa Higginson's likeness to saints Thérèse of Lisieux, the *Curé d'Ars* and Teresa of Avila, as well as to her association with well-known revivalist priests such as Father Faber, Fr. Ignatius Spencer and Venerable Dominic Barberi. It further included the names of many local 'witnesses', still living, who could attest to her supposed 'gentleness, her kindness

¹⁰⁶ The talk, entitled 'Teresa Helena Higginson', was broadcast from Dublin by Michael O'Mullin on Radio Eireann on 4 March 1940. It was advertised in the *Catholic Herald* (1 March 1940).

and her wonderful religious teaching.¹⁰⁷ The broadcast asserted that Teresa Higginson had ‘gained her Teaching Certificate in a miraculous way’, gained a ‘share’ in Christ’s sufferings and ‘even the Sacred Stigmata’, and, ‘like St John Vianney (the Curé of Ars)’, been ‘tormented by the devil’. It reproduced the claims that ‘Our Lord frequently gave Himself to her in Holy Communion’, that she ‘wrote inspired letters on the great Truths of our Church’ and that she found ‘the closest union with God possible to a soul on earth’ through Mystical Marriage. Only the claims to bilocation in order to undertake secret missionary work in Africa for the Ja-am-pu-da tribe appear to have been quietly omitted.

By January 1945, the activities of a ‘Teresa Higginson Association’ led by Edward Lonsdale of Standish, Wigan and Lawrence Harvey of Neston, Cheshire, had become of sufficient concern to the Archbishop of Liverpool for him to declare the association ‘inexpedient’ and to insist that its leaflets be withdrawn and lectures on the ‘Life of Teresa Higginson’ cease.¹⁰⁸ Concern at the ‘increased activities of these people and of their colleagues’ led the Archbishop to bring the case to his superior’s attention a month later.¹⁰⁹ The activity appears to have been successfully suppressed, since by 1951 it was left to a lone individual, Mrs Bridget McVey, *née* McClusky of Dalkeith, to write a confused letter to the Pope that included claims of ‘first class evidence’ for ‘Teresa Higginson the Lancashire stigmatist’ on the strength of her own ‘bilocation’ and visions.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Scottish Catholic Archives, DE/142/Saints-Causes and Pilgrimages/52: Higginson, Michael O’Mullin, ‘Teresa Helena Higginson’ (unpublished transcript of talk broadcast by Radio Eireann, 4 March 1940), f. 4. Locals who helped O’Mullin during his ‘first visit to Neston’ in October 1937 included: Mrs Brennan of Exeter Road; Fr Horner of St Alexander’s, Bootle; Mr. Annesley, ‘who had been to Teresa’s grave too’; Miss Flaherty of Burton Road, ‘a lady well known to all pilgrims to Neston’. During his second visit, in October 1938, Mrs Helen Lonsdale of Wigan told him ‘wonderful stories of Teresa’ and ‘showed me several letters written by her’; he also spent two evenings ‘with Mr Garnett, the lifelong friend of Teresa Higginson’ and Miss Arkwright ‘whose work for Teresa is known and appreciated from Alaska through America and Europe to Australia and New Zealand’.

¹⁰⁸ Scottish Catholic Archives, unpublished letter from Archbishop of Liverpool to Edward Lonsdale, Teresa Higginson Association (11 January 1945), DG/9/10/2.

¹⁰⁹ Scottish Catholic Archives, unpublished letter from Archbishop of Liverpool to Edward Lonsdale, Teresa Higginson Association (27 February 1945), DG/9/10/2.

¹¹⁰ Scottish Catholic Archives, unpublished letter from B. McVey (McClusky) to the Holy Father (2 October 1951), ED 24/14/1.

The secular, psychologically-minded mood of Britain in the ‘swinging’ 1960s and 1970s proved a relatively barren period for the cause of Teresa Higginson, as for other Catholic stigmatics and mystics; but the return to conservative values, local patriotism and religious revivalism from the 1980s, together with a parallel rise of popular interest in alternative spiritualities, the paranormal and the occult, changed the religious climate in unexpected ways. A couple of local Catholics from Neston, Tony and Gladys Moreton, began to style themselves as Teresa Higginson’s ‘world wide promoters’ and renewed the publishing of pamphlets, prayer-cards and leaflets in the 1980s. The Moretons also advertised such events as ‘private’ pilgrimages to be held ‘in thanksgiving’ for the Sacred Head; prayers to be said at Teresa Higginson’s graveside; and books – most notably Ann Pitts and Sr Mary Dolores’ *Teresa Helena Higginson: Servant of God* (Neston, 1986) -- to be published to further the cause. They even arranged for her ‘relics’ to be put on display at St Alexander’s Church in Bootle.

Margaret Rainford, writing from Ormskirk, Lancashire, in 2009, claimed Teresa Higginson’s life to have been ‘a testimony of fidelity and holiness’. Declaring her beatification to have been ‘temporarily blocked, not rejected outright’, she hinted that ‘a striking miracle would certainly move things to be reconsidered’ and help to revive her as ‘an example for all teachers.’¹¹¹ Thanks to the popular rise of the Internet in Britain from the 1990s, the Moretons’ message was picked up by various blogs and websites, and new hagiographies, such as those published by Michael Hutchings in 2000 and Richard Whittington-Egan in 2010, continue to keep the ‘cause’ alive. Typing ‘Teresa Higginson’ into a search engine like Google currently (in 2014) calls forth some 271,000 references.

V. Conclusion

¹¹¹ Margaret M. Rainford, Letter to the Editor, *Catholic Herald* (19 June 2009), 13.

The public dispute over Teresa Higginson that emerged in the British Catholic community between the two world wars appears to have had many of the hallmarks of more celebrated clashes between self-conscious secularizers and traditional Christians that took place across the European continent. This time, however, the argument was, so to speak, kept within the Catholic family, largely turning over the question as to how far English Catholicism ought to admit the reductionist language of the newly emerging discipline of psychology into the realm of religious experience. The extent to which English Catholic professionals, including clergy, came to use medical language that was characteristic of anticlerical attacks in the francophone world is striking. Rather than draw on discourses of rationality, empiricism and neurology to discredit the supernatural, however, English Catholics did so principally to protect the good name and reputation of their Church and their Faith in what was perceived to be a predominantly Protestant and increasingly secular-minded world. Dr Walshe, like other influential English Catholic professionals, vowed to ‘fight’, for as long as necessary, for the cause of ‘rational religion as against miraculism, for faith as against credulity.’¹¹²

The cause for the beatification of Teresa Higginson forced Catholics in Britain to think hard about the nature of their faith and to take sides in what were sometimes presented as two rival approaches to Catholic truth, one ostensibly more coolly intellectual and the other supposedly more emotional and credulous. Although often presented by historians as simple dichotomies based on social class, ethnicity or gender, modern English, Scottish and Irish Catholic attitudes towards the miraculous appear in practice to have been far more individual. The cause for the beatification of Teresa Higginson touched a Catholic nerve. The physical manifestations of mysticism that she presented to the Catholic world could be taken as either a ‘sign’ of supernatural favour or as a ‘symptom’ of neurological complaint. In England, self-consciously progressive Catholics succeeded in persuading the Vatican to declare her case

¹¹² Walshe, Letter to the Editor, *The Tablet* 171 (26 February 1938), 278.

inexpedient. But the divisions that her case exposed within the Catholic community in Britain proved to be resilient. Local Catholic support for the cause of Teresa Higginson has not entirely disappeared, even today. Nor, more than a century after Teresa Higginson's death, has it adopted the 'rational' discourse favoured by those prominent English Catholic clerics and laypeople who managed to block the Cause in 1938. Not only do a small but energetic group of Liverpool and Lancashire Catholics continue to hope that the 'local saint' from the Wirral may one day be canonized and English Catholic teachers gain their special patron: they also accept the 'testimony' for diabolical wrangles, mystical union and stigmata far more readily than did Teresa Higginson's Victorian Catholic contemporaries.

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Glasgow, 25 September 2014

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