WILLIAM WAWE AND HIS GANG, 1427

By R. A. GRIFFITHS

WILLIAM Wawe is immortalized in some verses composed about 1440 by an anonymous author (Vickers 1907, 394–95). They were written in honour of Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, probably at the abbey of St. Albans (Hammond 1969, 204):—

Yf heretike ought kouthe pike him fro
Yf Sharp or Wawe hadde of the lawe a feste
Yf right was fond in al this londe vnto
Hit to gouerne he doon the sterne unto.

Most other contemporary comments about this early-fifteenth-century Hampshire criminal are meagre and uninformative, and as such they reflect the nature of fifteenth-century chronicle-writing. City chronicles written in London include superficial notices of striking events, news or rumour, but these usually relate to great political matters or else occurrences of direct interest to the London citizens who read, commissioned or bought the completed chronicles. Less important happenings in other parts of the country which did not seem to the chroniclers to be of immediate relevance to the kingdom at large rarely rate a mention (Kingsford 1913, Ch. IV).

It is remarkable, therefore, that a version of the popular *Brut Chronicle,* which draws most of its fifteenth-century material from strictly London sources, should give prominence to a thief like William Wawe, whose criminal activities did not impinge upon London at all (Brie 1908, 441–42, 568). Certainly, not one among the newer tradition of London chronicles makes any reference to him. On the other hand, a short chronicle (Amundesham 1870–71, I, 11–12, 14, 17) composed by an anonymous author at St. Albans Abbey, the seat of distinguished chroniclers in the past, has survived, with a record in some detail of Wawe and his gang terrorizing parts of Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire in the 1420s. Not only was this chronicle (for comment see Kingsford 1913, 150–51) written in a locality which suffered directly from Wawe's activities, but St. Albans was intimately concerned with certain aspects of the affair; its chronicle therefore incorporates more detail than any other about the nature of the gang's crimes.

Of these two chronicles – the *Brut* and that produced at St. Albans – the former's interest in Wawe is, not surprisingly, confined to his last gruesome days spent in London: his appearance in the court of King's Bench at Westminster as a thief and an outlaw in 1427, his sentence to death, his transporting to Southwark and then, in a cart, standing and bound for all to see, through the city streets to Tyburn, where he was hanged on 3 July. Wawe's head was cut off and stuck, like many another, on London Bridge. Such was a Londoner's contact with the thief, to be faithfully reflected in the details available to a scrivener engaged in writing a continuation of the *Brut* Chronicle in the city. He was able to produce a public obituary notice of a criminal whose field of operations had been some distance from the capital and beyond the ken and interest of the chronicler and his expected readership. The only piece of information unrelated to London which the chronicler provides is the report that Wawe had been taken from sanctuary at Beaulieu Abbey (Hampshire) as a prelude to being brought to London (Brie 1908, 568).

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The St. Albans Chronicle provides a much fuller account of Wawe's career acquired at first hand, although it may not have been quite so well informed about his London execution and dated it to 16 July (Amundesham, I, 12). It describes something of the character of his gang, its activities and, therefore, of William Wawe's place in early-fifteenth-century criminal society. Several of the gang (so the chronicler noted) had been captured in the months before Wawe's own arrest at Beaulieu. One was seized at Barnet in Hertfordshire, not far to the south of St. Albans, round about 12 March 1427 and was imprisoned temporarily at the abbey while on his way to London. Another was taken at Watton, in Hertfordshire, on 30 March; he too was taken to St. Albans and then on to the house of William Flete, a Hertfordshire gentleman who was well known at the abbey and had recently been escheator of Hertfordshire and Essex, before being hanged in London on 8 May (Amundesham, I, 22–23, 64; *Cal. Pat. R., 1422–29,* 385, 391.) It is not surprising that the St. Albans writer should have carefully noted the fate of these accomplices of Wawe, for he doubtless witnessed their sojourn at his abbey. On the other hand, he was rather vague as to where Wawe himself was captured, probably because, unlike the other members of the gang, Wawe was not taken to London via St. Albans. The chronicler had evidently heard of a fracas at Sleaford in Lincolnshire and suggested that as the location; but he had also heard something about Wawe seeking sanctuary at Beaulieu, though the chronicler thought that this meant the small priory of Beaulieu in Bedfordshire and not the greater abbey in Hampshire. On this single matter – Wawe's capture – the local St. Albans writer was understandably imprecise. Of Wawe's crimes the chronicler was in no doubt, for a number of them were committed in the vicinity of St. Albans itself. Wawe appeared to him as a notorious robber of clerics, a despoiler of religious houses (for he had fallen upon Sopwell nunnery in Bedfordshire on 16 February 1427, and on the nuns of Burnham in Buckinghamshire on another occasion), and a plunderer of merchants. The gang's depredations remained clear in the chronicler's memory, for a few years later he recorded that one of Wawe's former associates, William Venables, was executed in London on 11 February 1430, and that another, Geoffrey Irish, a professional transcriber, died on 1 March 1431 (Amundesham, I, 47, 61). It was evidently a sizeable gang, by no means confined to ill-educated cut-throats, and stiffened with an Irish element. Wawe's alleged confessor, for example, was Robert, rector of Hedgerley, only four miles from the unfortunate Buckinghamshire priory of Burnham; he was examined before the Convocation of Canterbury in July 1428 as a suspected heretic, but despite an hour-long examination, during which Robert's replies were vague and scornful, nothing conclusive resulted (Jacob 1945, III, 188).

The Irish character of the Wawe gang appears more sharply in the official record of the legal proceedings taken against Wawe in April 1427 (PRO, K.B. 9/222/2/50; K.B. 27/664, rex, Easter, m.15). At an enquiry held on the bishop of Winchester's estates at Hook at Overton (Hampshire) on 28 April 1427, it was stated that 'Wawe' was but a pseudonym, and that other names used by the criminal were 'Irish' and 'Barre'; he was said to have originated from Deane in Hampshire, where his father, variously called Theobald Barre or John Ireland, was a hermit. Wawe, therefore, seems to have been one of that Irish community living in England which was noted for its lawlessness and regularly engaged in criminal activities in the early-fifteenth century. Parliament frequently took steps to deal with the Irish – even to the point in 1422 of ordering the deportation of those who had no visible means of support or occupation (*Rot. Parl.,* IV, 190–91, 254–55).

Wawe's own criminal career was of long-standing, as the court of King's Bench realized

when he was presented before it on 27 May 1427. On 25 March 1419, when he was living at Northcott in Middlesex, he had stolen three horses at Finchley and was condemned as a common thief. He escaped from the Marshalsea prison in London and continued his criminal career as an outlaw during the next eight years (PRO, K.B. 27/664, rex, Easter, m.15; Nicolas 1834–37, III, 256–59). By 1427 his reputation was that of a thief and highwayman, a despoiler of churches, a traitor, murderer, heretic and rebel. On 12 March the king's Council heard complaints about his attacks on the royal highway and his robbing of churches and nunneries in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. A reward of £100 was offered for his capture, dead or alive, and no one was permitted to give him food, drink or lodging. During the two months before Wawe's eventual capture, his gang turned its attention to the Deane area of Hampshire, attacking and robbing clergy with the same ferocity they had exhibited further north. A servant of the war-captain, Sir John Radcliffe, was recruited to their ranks, and so too was a Worcestershire man, Richard Bykenel, who incidentally continued his outrages in Middlesex well after Wawe was apprehended. They were aided around Beaulieu by local lawbreakers for about a month in March 1427 and Wawe's father also gave them shelter (PRO, K.B. 9/222/2/50; 224 m.112, 120). It is this southern sector of the gang's activities which confirms that it was Beaulieu Abbey in Hampshire, rather than the Bedfordshire priory, which offered its leader eventual sanctuary.

Wawe was extracted from the abbey against his will, and this violation of sanctuary gave him hope that perhaps he might be able to regain his freedom by argument in the court of King's Bench (PRO, K.B. 27/664, rex, Easter, m.15). The arresting officer was one of England's more prominent soldier-administrators, Sir John Radcliffe who had been seneschal of Gascony since 1423 and was now in England preparing for an expedition to northern France in aid of the duke of Bedford; on 20 March 1427 he was commissioned to arrest Wawe and bring him before King Henry VI's Council (PRO, E.403/678 m.20; Devon 1837, 398–99). The St. Albans chronicler correctly noted that Radcliffe was the captor, and he may have been chosen partly because one of his servants was in Wawe's gang; on 7 May 1427 he was paid expenses for travelling to Beaulieu (Amundesham, I, 12; PRO, E.403/681 m.1). Wawe was arraigned before Richard Wyot, the steward of Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester, at the bishop's court at Hook at Overton in Hampshire on 28 April. The offences with which he was indicted extended far beyond the felonies known to the St. Albans chronicler. A society fearful of the challenge of lollardy and all too eager to regard religious deviation as part of a more general threat to society (Aston 1960), found it easy to accuse Wawe and his friends of heresy as well as treason and murder. Actual evidence for his heretical beliefs is well-nigh non-existent (PRO, K.B. 9/222/2/50; Devon 1837, 398–99; Nicolas 1834–37, III, 268–69; *Cal. Pat. R., 1422–29,* 422).

The indictment was passed on to the court of King's Bench at Westminster; meanwhile, Wawe fled to Beaulieu Abbey for sanctuary on 2 May. Sir John Radcliffe was directed to seize him there and hold him in custody, and this he did on 14 May. Wawe was tranferred to the Tower of London pending trial (*Cal. Pat. R.,* 1422–29, 422; PRO, K.B. 27/664, rex, Easter, m.15). The hearing at Westminster, which opened a fortnight later, revolved not around Wawe's criminal activities, for these had merited and incurred outlawry in Henry V's reign, but rather around the privilege of sanctuary and its alleged violation by Radcliffe (Bellamy 1973, 106–14). The abbot of Beaulieu had already been instructed to produce verification of the liberties and franchises under which Wawe had been given shelter; he came to the court armed with charters dating from King John's reign in

order to prove that his monastery and one of its buildings, Gameshouse, in which Wawe took refuge from 2 to 14 May 1427, enjoyed rights of sanctuary. According to Wawe, Sir John Radcliffe had taken him out of Gameshouse by force, even though he had been listed in the register of sanctuarymen which Beaulieu, in common with other monasteries, kept up to date. But the Crown's attorney was determined not to lose Wawe now that the government was at last within an ace of securing him: he denied that Radcliffe had used force, and that Gameshouse was a privileged refuge; he stressed rather that Wawe was a notorious and convicted thief with a well known record and should therefore be denied privilege of sanctuary. This argument, and above all that of expediency, carried the day and William Wawe was duly hanged.

To judge by the poetic encomium of the duke of Gloucester, Humphrey was a vigorous hounder of heretics and lawbreakers, among whom William Wawe was prominent. He was protector and defender of the realm after his elder brother, the duke of Bedford, returned to France in March 1427, and he had a special devotion to St. Albans Abbey, in whose vaults his body was in due time interred. (Vickers 1907, *passim*). He had already dealt swift justice to at least one of the Wawe gang in March 1427, and he was probably fully aware of the gang's activities after staying at the abbey and visiting Sopwell Priory the following month (Vickers 1907, 194). It is possible that now, in April and May, he played an active part in ensuring Wawe's condemnation to death at Tyburn. It is noteworthy that in suppressing Wawe and his men, the duke and a servant of his bitterest political rival, Bishop Beaufort, worked successfully together.

The Wawe gang was a band of marauders drawn from southern England and active in at least two separate areas; perhaps driven from the vicinity of St. Albans, they moved southwards to Wawe's own home countryside. In their attacks on people and property, they exhibited the common inclinations of the thief and also the anti-clericalism (though hardly the heresy) of their day without the chivalry which might have discouraged them from descending on nunneries. It is ironic that Wawe saw his last slim chance of escaping death in championing the sanctuary rights of the religious orders he had desecrated. Part-Irish in its personnel, the gang represented a particularly lawless sector of the community which accordingly received harsh treatment from government and Parliament alike.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations

PRO — Public Record Office, London.

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Cal. Pat. R. — *Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office,* London, HMSO, 1901–

E.403 — Exchequer, Issue Rolls.

K.B.9 — King's Bench, Ancient Indictments.

K.B.27 — King's Bench, Plea Rolls.

Rot.Parl. — *Rotuli Parliamentorum,* 6v., London, 1767.

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