

## *The Story*

In the summer of 1307 an inquiry opened in London to investigate whether Thomas de Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford, who had died twenty-five years earlier, could rightly be regarded as a saint. Three commissioners, entrusted with the task by Pope Clement V, had been empowered to hear testimony about the bishop's life, the general reputation he enjoyed, and—something crucial for a favorable outcome to a canonization process—the miracles he had performed after death.

Among the first witnesses to be heard were the aristocratic lady Mary de Briouze, her stepson William de Briouze, and a chaplain of the de Briouze family, all giving evidence about the same miracle. This concerned a Welshman, William Cragh, who had been hanged for homicide on the orders of William de Briouze senior, the deceased husband of Mary de Briouze and father of William junior. It was claimed that he had been miraculously resuscitated through the intercession of Thomas de Cantilupe. This event had taken place, according to Lady Mary de Briouze, about fifteen years earlier, though she was uncertain of the exact day and month, but believed it was in winter. Her stepson was more precise: William Cragh had been captured between Michaelmas and All Saints' Day next, eighteen years ago. The chaplain offered a third dating: "The events about which he had given evidence took place sixteen years ago." Such minor vagaries of memory are not unusual; in the medieval period they would have been far more common than today, when we experience the constant hammering home of past dates by documents such as birth

## 2 *Chapter 1*

certificates and passports and the reiteration of current dates in newspapers and news broadcasts.

Rather than bemoan the differences among the three testimonies, we should welcome them as small indications of the different emphases and concerns of the different witnesses, pointers to the way individual perception and memory had been shaped. Perhaps it is possible to discover why Lady Mary remembered the event taking place in winter about fifteen years earlier, while her stepson pinpointed it between 29 September and 1 November eighteen years earlier, which would date it to October 1289. Discrepancy between the testimonies of different witnesses was also a central interest of the commissioners in charge of the canonization inquiry. A canonization process was a “process,” that is, a trial, and the active interrogation of witnesses was part of the tradition of church courts at this time. Moreover, a detailed written record was kept of all the proceedings, so that the commissioners could easily refer back to what earlier witnesses had said. They were as likely to notice inconsistencies in testimony as the most careful historian sifting through these records.

Lady Mary’s story began with a simple narrative: once, a notorious Welsh brigand, William Cragh, had been captured in her husband’s lordship of Gower and had been hanged at Swansea along with another robber. He had hung on the gallows so long that everyone present judged him to be dead, and he had voided his bowels and bladder—a usual sign of death. Afterwards he had been taken down and carried off, slung across a wheel, to the chapel of Saint John the Baptist. All this, Lady Mary said, she had heard from others, for she had not seen any of it herself.

In the next part of her testimony she revealed her own personal interest in the case. Before the hanging she had asked her husband to spare the two robbers and hand them over to her. He had refused. Later, when a report was brought that the other robber was already dead, Lady Mary had asked again, requesting that she at least be given William Cragh, whom she believed to be still alive. Her husband had delayed granting her this, and eventually a report came that William Cragh was dead on the gallows; then finally her husband, in the words of the notaries

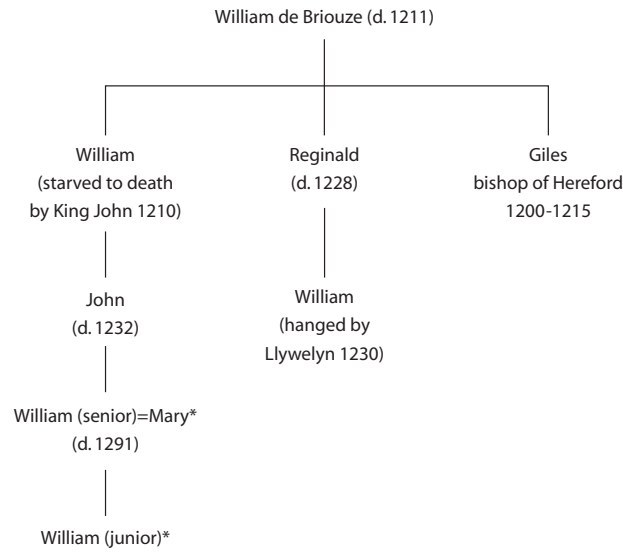
*The Story* 3

jotting down her testimony, “granted him to the said lady, such as he was, and ordered him to be taken down from the gallows.”

William de Briouze was from a family used to violence. His distant ancestor and namesake was one of the companions of William the Conqueror and had acquired, as part of the loot of England, the lordship of Bramber in Sussex. Later generations had added new conquests in Wales. William’s great-grandfather, another namesake, had risen to dizzying heights under the patronage of King John (Gower had been one of John’s gifts) but had then fallen foul of the king. This William had been dispossessed and driven into exile, while his wife and eldest son (yet another William) had been imprisoned and starved to death by the king in 1210. The family had regained its lands but their path had not been easy. Quarrels within the family had coincided with the rise of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, one of the great Welsh leaders of the thirteenth century. In 1230 he had hanged the head of the de Briouze family, supposedly “After he had been caught in the prince’s chamber with the prince’s wife.” Another branch managed to keep hold of Bramber and Gower. The William who hanged the Welshman William Cragh was the grandson of the de Briouze starved to death in King John’s dungeons.

William de Briouze senior’s son, William junior, who had succeeded him in 1291, did not regard William Cragh in the same way as did his stepmother. While she had described the Welshman as a “notorious brigand” for whom she had interceded with her husband, her stepson presented the situation differently: “Eighteen years ago between the feast of Saint Michael next and the feast of All Saints’ he had been guarding the land of his father, in which there was at that time war between the Welsh and the lord Edward, the present king of England. . . . It happened at this time that a certain malefactor, who was one of the rebels against the lord king in that war, William Cragh by name, a native of Gower, was captured by the men guarding his and his father’s land.” Suddenly politics has made an appearance. The “notorious brigand” of Lady Mary’s testimony is now a Welsh rebel against Edward I. The “war” referred to by William de Briouze junior is, in all likelihood, the rebellion of Rhys ap Mare-

#### 4 Chapter 1



\*the witnesses in the canonization process of 1307

Fig. 1 Simplified family tree of the de Briouze family in the thirteenth century.

dudd, a descendant of the ancient line of the princes of Deheubarth (southwest Wales) and lord of the land of Ystrad Tywi, which bordered Gower to the north. He had been an active collaborator of the English king, Edward I, during the final annexation of Wales in 1282–83, but had found the postwar settlement not to his liking. In the summer of 1287 he went into rebellion and, although his lands were occupied by Edward's vastly superior forces and the rebellion was virtually crushed by January 1288, Rhys ap Maredudd was not captured until the spring of 1292, when he was betrayed and executed. William de Briouze junior seems to have been referring to that period when the revolt was no longer a threat but its leader was still at large.

The testimony of William de Briouze junior to the papal commissioners in the canonization process adds considerable detail to the account of the hanging. He named the other Welsh-

*The Story* 5

man hanged alongside William Cragh as “another malefactor” called Trahaearn ap Hywel. The two men were hanged early in the morning on the gallows “about half an English league” from the de Briouze castle at Swansea. In the early afternoon, after the household had eaten, a report came that the central beam of the gallows had collapsed. The gallows were obviously visible from the castle because William de Briouze senior, his son, and many of his household were able to look out from the hall of the castle and see this. The two hanged men had fallen to the ground, but both were reported to be already dead. William de Briouze commanded that Trahaearn be buried but William Cragh, “because he was a very famous and public malefactor,” was strung up again and hung on the gallows until sunset.

The personal animus felt by the lord of Gower toward William Cragh is mentioned on other occasions. One of the standard questions that commissioners in canonization proceedings asked was whether an apparent miracle could have been effected either by trickery or by natural causes. In the case of a hanged man surviving, it was obvious to wonder whether deception, bribery, or connivance might have been involved. When this was put to him, William de Briouze junior was adamant. He thought this possibility could be ruled out “since his father and he himself and their officials and servants hated William Cragh because he was the worst of malefactors and he had perpetrated many wicked deeds in their land, killing men and robbing and burning, and he was a man of great strength.” The point was reiterated by the chaplain, William of Codineston, who also thought fraud or deceit impossible, “because the lord de Briouze and his justices, officials, and servants hated William Cragh very much and rejoiced greatly at his hanging and death and the servants and justices were present at the hanging.”

Even if the collaboration of the executioners could be dismissed as a possibility, it was still vital to establish that William Cragh had in fact been dead—it was no miracle to revive a living man. Lady Mary had mentioned the fact that he had voided his bowels and bladder but this was hearsay, not firsthand evidence. Nor could the chaplain, William of Codineston, offer a first-

6 *Chapter 1*

hand account, “for he had not wished to follow the malefactors when they were led out of the town of Swansea to be hanged, on account of his priestly office.” He had heard, however, that William Cragh was still breathing when the gallows had collapsed. After he had been strung up again and hung for a while, the rope had broken. The two hanged men had then been carried to the chapel of Saint John, though whether on a wheel, as Lady Mary had said, the chaplain did not know. However, he had heard that some people had said that while Trahaearn’s body was cold, William Cragh’s was still warm, although others considered him dead.

The most vivid account, if that is the right word, of William Cragh’s body after the hanging comes from William de Briouze junior. He had seen the hanging only from a distance, but after William Cragh’s friends and kinsfolk had, “through his father’s grace,” carried him off—he did not know whether on a wheel or by some other method—to the house of a burgess of Swansea—whose name he did not remember—the young lord went down from the castle with some companions to see the corpse. He must have found it a gratifying sight. The body lay within the house by the main door, stretched out on the ground “in the way that a dead man lies.” The passage of eighteen years (if that span is correct) had not dimmed the image:

His whole face was black and in parts bloody or stained with blood. His eyes had come out of their sockets and hung outside the eyelids and the sockets were filled with blood. His mouth, neck, and throat and the parts around them, and also his nostrils, were filled with blood, so that it was impossible in the natural course of things for him to breathe air through his nostrils or through his mouth or through his throat . . . his tongue hung out of his mouth, the length of a man’s finger, and it was completely black and swollen and as thick with the blood sticking to it that it seemed the size of a man’s two fists together.

Having viewed William Cragh’s body in this state, William de Briouze returned to the castle and told his stepmother, the Lady Mary, about what he had seen. She responded with compassion:

*The Story* 7

“This man has been hanged twice and has suffered a great penalty. Let us pray to God and Saint Thomas de Cantilupe that he give him life and, if he give him life, we will conduct him to Saint Thomas,” meaning by this that he would be taken to Thomas de Cantilupe’s tomb in Hereford Cathedral to give thanks. William de Briouze reported his stepmother’s words literally in the vernacular French used by the upper class of the time (*Prium deu et seint Thomas de Cantelup qe luy donne vie et si il luy donne vie, nous le amenerons a lavant dit seint Thomas*). Lady Mary was clearly persevering in her attempt to save William Cragh’s life, despite the obstinacy of her husband and the seeming hopelessness of the situation. Her own testimony agrees with that of her stepson: “She had frequently heard tell before this that God worked miracles through Saint Thomas de Cantilupe, to whom the lady said she had a special devotion; along with her ladies-in-waiting and also with the men who were there at the time, with devotion and on bended knee, she asked Saint Thomas de Cantilupe to ask God to restore life to William who had been hanged.” They added the Lord’s Prayer and the Ave Maria.

This invocation of the saint was a crucial step in the transformation of an amazing escape from death into a miracle. If the witnesses had simply established that William Cragh had been restored to life, the mechanism and, more important, the meaning of the event would have been left obscure. Lady Mary’s appeal to a specific, named saint, to whom she had a special devotion, and whose reputation for miracle working was already established, was one act, among others to be discussed shortly, that made it possible to construe William Cragh’s escape from death by hanging as a miracle of Thomas de Cantilupe and hence a piece of evidence supporting the case that he was a saint. Sentence had been passed long ago on the Welsh “malefactor”; a verdict was yet to be given on Thomas de Cantilupe.

By the year 1307 (during which the hearings took place) the inquisitorial technique of the church courts had become meticulous, searching, and often pedantic. We have already seen how Lady Mary’s introduction of the wheel on which William Cragh was supposedly carried from the gallows meant that both

8 *Chapter 1*

William de Briouze junior and the chaplain William of Codineston had to answer questions about this, perhaps with some bemusement. Lady Mary's invocation of Thomas de Cantilupe was likewise subject to intense scrutiny. When she uttered her prayer, the commissioners wanted to know, did she believe and have faith and hope that God would, through the merits of Saint Thomas, hear her prayer? Lady Mary replied, perhaps rather sharply, yes, because otherwise she would not have asked.

She answered in a similar vein that those who prayed with her believed that their prayers would be answered and that, at the time they uttered those prayers, they believed that William Cragh was truly dead. Asked the names of those who prayed with her, she said that one of them was a lady-in-waiting of hers called Elena de la Chambre, from the diocese of Saint Davids (in which Swansea was situated) but she could not remember the names of the others present. The invocation had taken place in Lady Mary's chamber in the castle of Swansea.

The distinction between the lady's chamber, where she waited with her ladies for news from outside, and the hall, from which William de Briouze senior and junior could see the gallows, emerges clearly from these narratives. Perhaps more striking is Lady Mary's inability to remember the names of her ladies-in-waiting (although, as we shall see, she could recall more than just Elena) or other retainers. It would be premature to attribute this to a high turnover among attendants, individual forgetfulness, or haughty disdain for those more lowly than herself—all explanations that spring to mind.

Lady Mary's next step brings us to one of the more remarkable practices involved in the veneration of the saints in the medieval period: "measuring to the saint." When the help of a saint was sought on behalf of victims of sickness or calamity, a thread or cord might be taken and used to measure the length (and sometimes also the breadth) of the body. The "measuring" implied a promise that, if there were a miraculous cure, a candle the length of the cord or thread used would be made for the saint. The ailing individual would be measured "to" a particular saint, thus entrusting him or her to the saint's care.



*The Story* 9

This is exactly the practice that Lady Mary employed in the aftermath of her prayer to Thomas de Cantilupe. She sent a lady-in-waiting—not Elena de la Chambre but Sunchild,<sup>4</sup> thus another named attendant—to measure William according to the English custom” (the implication of these words is that the Welsh did things differently). Sunchild returned, reporting that she had done so. Lady Mary did not know whether Sunchild was still alive nor where she might be but her stepson was better informed; he knew that the lady was “now dead.” Moreover, he added that as well as measuring William Cragh “to Saint Thomas,” she had also “bent a silver penny over his head according to the custom of England,” this being another distinctive way of making a vow to a saint and entrusting someone to him or her.

That the case of William Cragh had thus been put in the hands of Saint Thomas de Cantilupe was as clear as possible: through explicit invocation, through measuring to the saint, through bending a votive penny. It was now the saint’s turn to act. He did not disappoint his devotees: “After he had been measured, William Cragh remained in the same state until around the middle of the night, and then began to breathe in and out and to move a leg” (according to the testimony of William de Briouze); “After he had been measured, not immediately but after an hour or so, William moved his tongue a little and after another space of time moved a foot and afterwards gradually began to recover strength in his limbs” (according to the testimony of the chaplain William of Codineston).

All witnesses agreed that the hanged man’s recovery was gradual. The chaplain said William Cragh was infirm for “eight or ten days.” William de Briouze junior visited him in the burgess’s house in Swansea on the fourth day after his recovery and found him lying in bed, with much improvement in the state of his tongue, eyes, and throat, but still unable to speak or see. For some time the convalescent could not swallow solid food but only soup and broth, which Lady Mary prepared for him in her quarters in Swansea Castle.

At this point we can introduce some evidence from a new voice, that of William Cragh himself; for although both William

## 10 Chapter 1

de Briouze and the chaplain reported at the hearings in 1307 that he had died two or three years earlier, the Welshman's statements at the time of the hanging were recounted by all three witnesses—Lady Mary, her step-son, and the chaplain. So far William Cragh has been encountered as a “notorious brigand,” in the words of Lady Mary and the chaplain, or, as William de Briouze put it, a Welsh rebel, or through his prolonged and grotesque physical sufferings on the gallows. Now it is possible to hear, if only at second hand, his views on the situation.

Perhaps most instructive is the picture painted by the chaplain, William of Codineston. He tells how William Cragh, after he had recovered his health, came before Lord William de Briouze senior and Lady Mary his wife in the chamber of the castle of Swansea (the chaplain William himself being present) and there explained that, while he was being led to the gallows, he had prayed to Saint Thomas de Cantilupe to intercede with God to save him from hanging. He said all this, reported the chaplain, “with great fear and apprehension, for he wondered whether he would be hanged again.”

He need not have worried. Cragh's invocation of Thomas de Cantilupe, to whom Lady Mary, as we have heard, had a special devotion, was effective enough to defuse, or at least silence, the deep hatred that William de Briouze felt towards the Welshman. William Cragh's story, as reported by all three witnesses, actually involved something more elaborate than the simple invocation of Saint Thomas de Cantilupe on his way to the gallows, for he also claimed that, while he was hanging, there appeared a bishop, clad in white garments, who helped him, either by supporting his feet (as Lady Mary and the chaplain reported) or by replacing his tongue in his mouth (as William de Briouze junior said). What is most remarkable about these reports is that all agreed that William Cragh did not himself claim that the visionary bishop who helped him on the gallows was Thomas de Cantilupe. If this is true, it is possible that the story of his invocation of the saint on the way to be hanged is a retrospective invention, and that Thomas de Cantilupe's first intervention in these events was, in fact, when Lady Mary first thought of invoking him. William

*The Story 11*

Cragh did, after all, have very good reasons for accepting the interpretation of his remarkable survival as a miracle of Saint Thomas. He had no wish to face William de Briouze's justice yet again.

Every miracle story must end with proper thanks to the saint responsible. Once it had been generally accepted that William Cragh's remarkable survival was to be understood as a miracle of Thomas de Cantilupe, a journey to the saint's tomb in Hereford Cathedral was a necessity. William de Briouze senior went, with what emotions we do not know; his wife Lady Mary went, presumably with complex feelings of satisfaction; and William de Briouze junior went, all on horseback; while William Cragh, the noose from the gallows around his neck, accompanied them on foot. It took three days to reach Hereford and when they arrived the canons of the cathedral were informed of the miracle. Bells were rung, the *Te Deum* sung, and William de Briouze senior commissioned a wax model of a man hanging from a gallows, which, along with William Cragh's noose, was presented at the saint's tomb. In a final submissive gesture, William Cragh promised to go off to the Holy Land. "After that," testified Lady Mary, "she did not see him." William de Briouze junior and the chaplain had a different story; yes, he had vowed to go to the Holy Land but had in fact returned to Wales. William de Briouze junior reported that "he saw him afterwards in his land for ten years or more on many occasions and finally William Cragh died in his land of natural causes about two years ago."