

Henry Edward Dormer

The Servant of God

HENRY EDWARD DORMER: A LONDON “SAINT”?

On the north wall of the west transept of our Cathedral is a marble plaque dedicated to Henry Edward Dormer. Its inscription from Wisdom, chapter 4, reads; “He was taken away lest wickedness should alter his understanding or deceit beguile his soul. Being made perfect, in a short space he fulfilled a long life” It is intriguing that this unusual tribute was erected by his brother officers in the 60th Regiment of Foot stationed in London, Canada West, in 1866.

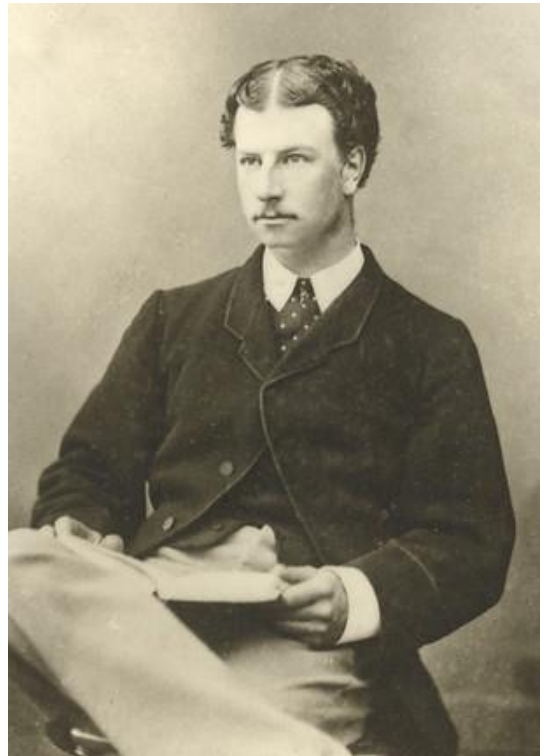
Henry Edward Dormer’s life, though short, provides us with an example of “faith in action”. He was the son of Joseph, the 11th Lord Dormer. His family had been raised to the English peerage in 1515, and was unusual in that it had remained Catholic, campaigning for emancipation until that was finally granted to Catholics in 1829. A happy, sensitive boy with delicate health, Dormer spent his childhood at the family home, Grove Park, in Warwickshire. He spent two years at St. Mary’s College, Oscott, but ill health necessitated him continuing his education with private tutors in London, Belgium and Germany. Although he was not noted as a scholar, Dormer liked the study of music and history. Both students and instructors noted his “gentleness and suavity of manner”, that he was “high spirited, but always charitable and disposed to be religious”, and remembered his refusing to follow the tradition of bullying new students.

In 1862, Dormer followed the family tradition, and began studies to enter the army. At this time his sister entered the convent of St. Dominic in Stone, which drew him closer to the Dominicans and encouraged him to consider his own religious calling. In 1863, however, he gained a commission in the 60th Regiment (Rifles) at Winchester, and entered enthusiastically into army life. One senior officer commented: “a smarter and more promising officer I never saw”. He became physically strong, an expert horseman who loved the hunt, and attracted a wide circle of friends.

Dormer’s regiment was posted to London, Canada West, in response to the threat of invasion by Fenians from the United States. When he arrived in January 1866, London was a small outpost of the British Empire, and strong drink was a common outlet for soldiers posted here. Dormer entered a new phase of his life in which his spiritual growth was remarkable. He had visited his sister in her Dominican convent before his departure to Canada, and later described his increased attraction to a religious vocation.

“I have had a kind of resolution in my mind to abandon the world and join a religious order.”

In London, Dormer became attached to St. Peter’s parish, which was then staffed by two Irish Dominican priests. The city itself had no attraction for him, and he wrote: “I am afraid there is not much exaggeration in the abusive account everyone gives to this place.” But he quickly immersed himself in the life of his new parish, and became an honour guard for the Blessed Sacrament when it was carried through the streets to the sick. He spent his free time visiting the ill and the lonely, or in prayer in church. Father McGrath noted that most nights Dormer paid homage to the Blessed Sacrament at St. Peter’s, often staying until dawn. He fasted three days a week, and disposed of his earthly belongings, including a gold watch, in order to support the poor.



Prayer for Private Devotion

Enflamed by the Eucharist, while yet a soldier, Henry Edward Dormer ministered to the sick, the poor and the needy, and has left us an example of heroic virtue worthy of imitation. May he intercede for all those, who like him, aspire to the priesthood and for all the faithful of the Diocese of London. If it be your will, may his sanctity be recognized by the Church, so that his name might be remembered at your altars. Keep us steadfast in our witness to you and to the gospel preached by your Son Jesus, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

Those who obtain favours through the intercession of Henry Edward Dormer are asked to notify the Diocese of London.

In accordance with the decrees of Pope Urban VIII, we declare that there is no intention of anticipating in any way the judgement of the Church, and that this prayer is not intended for public use.

Yet Dormer did not withdraw from the world: he enjoyed being part of it. Despite “his notable gentleness” he was a favourite of the men in his regiment, who organized a bazaar at St. Peter’s to raise funds to defray the church’s debt. In small notebooks, he wrote guides for his conduct: “Trust in Almighty God, resist thinking what others say or think. Remember that so surely as you are faithful to God, as surely you will have to encounter contempt. In all occupations and exercises turn a deaf ear to the praise and derision of others. In all you do and say let your thoughts be ‘Is it right? Is it noble?’ Never let ‘What will others say? What will they think?’ enter your mind.”

Gradually Dormer resolved to become a priest, concluding that an army career was not his vocation. After corresponding with spiritual advisors in Canada and England, he decided to enter the Dominicans, and on Sept. 24, 1866, he applied for admission to that order.

But God had other plans. On the day after sending his application, Dormer fell ill, having contracted typhoid fever from one of the sick he had visited with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He weakened quickly, and expired on October 2 at his residence at 77 Kent Street. Among his papers was a partially completed letter addressed to his father, in which he wrote: “My doubts are all cleared up and I now see clearly that it has pleased God to bless me with a true vocation.” At his death, Dormer left an estate of \$13.95, and debts of \$70.00, \$10 of which had been spent on oranges for the poor. Although he had been in London for only eight months, his funeral was one of the largest seen in that city to date. Word had spread quickly that “the Saint is dead.” His funeral Mass was held at St. Peter’s, and his body was buried with full military honours. His memorial can be found in the southwest corner of St. Peter’s Cemetery.

Father Byrne, the priest who gave Dormer Extreme Unction, wrote to his parents: “In all the sincerity of my soul, I believe, my dear Lord and Lady, that you have brought into the world, and reared to manhood, a great saint. His conduct and example among the Catholic people of London, rich and poor, from the time of his arrival until the hour of his death, was an opening of the heavens – it was the appearance of an angelic soul.” A London woman recalled, “He will be dreadfully missed by the poor. He especially sought out the aged men and women who had no children and were lonely.”

Two years after his death, a Biographical memoir of the hon. Henry Edward Dormer was published. [A digital copy can be read here.](#)

Local interest in his sanctity persisted after his death. In 1922, Bishop Fallon initiated an investigation into this phenomenon, and the Knights of Columbus Fourth Degree Dormer Assembly was established in London. A card containing a prayer of intercession through him is available in the Narthex of our Cathedral. But while Dormer was widely acknowledged by those who knew him to be a person of exceptional virtue, his name is still not familiar to many today, even within our church and diocese. But he has not been totally forgotten. The little notebooks in which he wrote his personal reflections on the spiritual life are kept in our Diocesan Archives, and are being edited. In 2008, Peter J. Adams produced a video-recording, “The Saint is Dead”, based on Dormer’s life, and that filmmaker then donated his considerable Dormer archive to the library at King’s University College. In the summer of 2016, a house of discernment for vocations was established by the Diocese of London and named after him.

The marble memorial plaque to Henry Edward Dormer had originally been erected in the church that our cathedral replaced in 1885. When the first St. Peter’s was torn down, the memorial was lost, only to be discovered in 1975 as a paving stone in a north London driveway. It was then carefully restored and mounted in the west transept of St. Peter’s Cathedral. One hundred and fifty-one years after Dormer’s death it may be difficult for us to relate to the life he led here when London was a much smaller, rougher city. Perhaps the words of John Henry Cardinal Newman, a friend of the Dormer family, can guide us to further understand his spiritual vocation: “Learn to do thy part and leave the rest to heaven.”

From the files of Cathedral Connections

[Pages from the notebook of Henry Edward Dormer](#)