

May 2

## Fr HENRY TOWNSEND

30 November 1911 – 2 May 1976

Henry Townsend was born in South Africa and educated by the Marist Brothers in Johannesburg. He had no knowledge of the Jesuits before entering the Society in 1931. He did classics at Oxford (Campion Hall) and was ordained in 1945. It was a shock to him when he was appointed rector of St Aidan's three years later. It did not work out. It was not what he wanted to do that was the problem but how he was doing it. The community objected and he was taken off after three years. Fr Lachie Hughes thinks this affected his self-confidence from then on and Towney himself felt he was put on too early. It introduced an element of sadness in his life.



In 1953, after failing to do a biennium in Rome in philosophy and also failing to at Vatican radio, he moved to St George's where he taught Greek. He was asked to help with the Classics department in the new University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland just being set up and he built a good relationship between URN and the Society. It is not clear to this writer why he suddenly returned to England in 1969 and took up teaching philosophy – he was nearly 60 – at Heythrop (Epistemology and Ethics). Nigel Johnson remembers his graphic question, ‘How do you know Fr Copleston won't march into the class with an AK47 and mow you down?’ ‘He was competent rather than brilliant.’ (Fr John Russell).

‘You couldn't say Towney was burnt up on anything but he had deep convictions about racial injustice in Southern Africa’ (Fr John Coventry). In 1973 he devoted his full energy to African affairs, something he developed over time as he moved to a more liberal stance on the issues of subcontinent. He became deeply involved in the racial, economic, political and ecumenical questions. He had written a book in 1962, *As We Are One: The Christian in a Plural Society*, which Mambo Press was enthusiastic about. He also wrote a forceful essay about when the Church should speak out in politics at the time of UDI but Fr Edward Ennis and Fr Michael Geoghegan considered it inopportune. Victor Bourdillon, a lay Catholic in a white suburb, complained to the archbishop at length about him: ‘I cannot help feeling that Fr Townsend, with all his sincerity, lives in the clouds far removed from reality and has little contact with the African (sic), except in an academic sphere, or with the European laity and finds it hard to understand the

real difficulty with which the church laity are faced.’ In London, he worked closely with Catholic Institute for International Relations and former Jesuit, Roger Riddell, remembers a forceful comment on the Rhodesian situation of his published by the CIIR anonymously.

In 1975 he was barred from returning, to Rhodesia, the first English province Jesuit to be so treated. His life was marked by pain, disappointment and frustration but Henry was ‘proud to be a South African and was ready to correct the more blatant forms of ignorance or prejudice from both directions’ (Lachie). Lachie also felt Henry’s ‘relatively short appointments was a paradigm of his life.’ Maybe this was due, he continued, to his reservations about the value of the work he was doing. Misfortune dogged him. He carried a lifetime’s notes in a trunk when he returned to England but it was broken into before he left Salisbury and the papers were lost. With them went any hope of writing the book he had his eye on.

He was a mild and gentle man, smiling and friendly. ‘Externally’, wrote Coventry, ‘all his life every hair was in place, physically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. Nothing could be more out of character than that he should be knocked over by a car and killed while crossing Victoria St on the way to Clem Tiger’s funeral in Westminster Cathedral.’ But considering the list of trials, briefly chronicled in this account, it was perhaps the crowning misfortune in tune with all the others.