

2 July

Fr FRANCIS WILLIAM REA 30 June 1908 – 2 July 1980



Willie Rea, even Pussy Rea, was born in Montreal. His family had settled in Canada after the Napoleonic wars and there is even now a small town called Reaborough in Ontario. His English mother wanted him brought up in England so at an early age he crossed the Atlantic and started school at Beaumont, moving later to Stonyhurst. Always an avid student, after he joined the Society in 1926, he was chosen to proceed to Campion Hall, Oxford, where he duly got a First in history.

He is remembered as a lively man in community always ready to talk and given to ‘spluttering in anger’ (Bernard Basset) at something, or person, he disliked. Oliver Cromwell was one of his hates. After ordination in 1942, he went back to Stonyhurst and after a few years back to Beaumont, always teaching history, coaching rugby and running debating societies.

In 1958 he sailed for Africa and is credited with raising the academic standards of St George’s and the new University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in his chosen subject. He taught himself to read Portuguese and did research in Lisbon on the Jesuits in the 16th and following centuries. He wrote a thesis on *The Economics of the Zambezi Mission* which was accepted by London University as a PhD in 1974 and also wrote a history, *The Catholic Church and Zimbabwe* for the centenary year, 1979, with Anthony Dachs.

He also learnt Shona and was responsible for building the church in Dzivarasekwa where he celebrated Mass and preached.

He struggled with the changes in the Church and the Society in the 1970s, viewing some of them with suspicion. He was also cautious towards political change. ‘To him black nationalism seemed impatient and black power exclusive and threatening, but he always retained the respect of his students.’