CHAPTER 3

James VI and I, the Scottish Jesuit, and the Polish Pasquils

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The present-day town of Braniewo, situated on the Polish side of the border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, was the site of a fierce rearguard action by German forces at the end of World War II. Little or nothing has survived from the devastation of that time to remind the visitor that Braniewo was once, as Braunsberg, the cradle of the Baltic Counter-Reformation and the site of one of the most important Jesuit educational establishments in Northern Europe.1

Braniewo and the Baltic Counter-Reformation

In the late Middle Ages, Braniewo, then a minor Baltic port, formed part of a territory disputed between the Polish Crown and the Teutonic Knights. In 1529 Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a canon of the diocesan cathedral of Frauenburg (Frombork), negotiated its cession to the Kingdom of Poland as a fief administered by the Bishop of Warmia (Ermland). By the mid-sixteenth century Warmia was almost entirely surrounded by hostile territory: Prussia to the east, and beyond it the still largely unevangelised Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where Socinianism, or Arianism, as it was termed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was adopted by the powerful magnate dynasty of the Radziwiłłs; to the west, Pomerania, Danzig and the Hansa towns; to the north, across the Baltic, Lutheran Sweden.

The appointment of Stanislaus Hosius (1504–1579) to the see of Warmia in 1551 marked the beginning of a Catholic counter-offensive.2 Hosius read recent English history as a cautionary tale for Poland. As a young student at Padua he had been a friend of Reginald Pole (1500–1558), and his contacts at the Council of Trent with William Allen (1532–1594) and Nicholas Sander (1530–1581) had

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2 For a general account of the Polish Counter-Reformation, see Ambroise Jobert, De Luther à Mohila: La Pologne dans la crise de la chrétienté, 1517–1648 (Paris: Institut d’Études Slaves, 1974).
brought him up to date with more recent developments. In the 1560s there were disquieting parallels to be drawn between Poland and England. Poland had a king, Sigismund II August (1520–1572), whose wife had failed to bear him a son, and who might be tempted to follow the example of Henry VIII (1491–1547). Many of the Polish magnate families saw the Reformation as a means of breaking the power of the Church, and as oligarchs they regarded papal claims to supreme authority with suspicion.

Hosius’ priority was education, clerical education along the lines established at Trent, and the education of youth, in order to secure the loyalty of the Polish nobility. For his educational task force he turned to the corps d’élite of the Counter-Reformation, the Society of Jesus. Braniewo, strategically situated midway between Gdańsk (Danzig) and Königsberg, and easily accessible from Scandinavia, was selected as the beachhead. A pioneer community of ten Jesuits arrived there in 1564 and opened a secondary school the following year. Other units followed in quick succession: a residence for young nobles, a domus pauperum, a diocesan seminary, a Jesuit novitiate, and a pontifical college for Scandinavian students. Braniewo was intended to be for young Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Finns what Douai was for young Englishmen: a seedbed for the recovery of Northern Europe. The Jesuit community was correspondingly international in character, including a Bavarian, a Dutchman, an Italian and a Scotsman, later joined by an Englishman, Adam Brock (1542–1605), a graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford. The internationalism of this and other early Jesuit colleges was one of the features which attracted prospective parents and pupils throughout Europe.3

It is the Scot, Robert Abercromby (1536–1613), who will concern us here. He was born in 1536 at Murthly, in the parish of Little Dunkeld, Perthshire. After graduating in the humanities from the University of St Andrews in 1558, he was one of a group of students loyal to the old religion who migrated to Louvain in 1562, two years after the establishment of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.4 He entered the Society of Jesus at Rome in 1563 and after only one year was recommended to Hosius for the Braniewo foundation. Juan Alfonso

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