

## IX

### THE FRENCH EXILED CLERGY IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND

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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION had many side effects which are often neglected in studies of the wider implications of its European impact. One of these was its influence on the development of the Roman Catholic Church, not only in France itself, but also in England. The increasingly anti-clerical and nationalistic slant of the revolutionary authorities forced English Catholic religious communities and colleges in France and the Netherlands to risk a return to England from whose religious restrictions Catholic Europe had, once, appeared a haven. These communities slowly re-established themselves on English soil; they included the ancestors of the great institutions of the Catholic North—Ampleforth, Stonyhurst and Ushaw—which have had so profound an influence on the development of the Catholic minority in the region.

At the same time as the English Catholics made their return from exile, a group of French Catholic clergy also sought refuge in England. In the quarter century after the outbreak of revolution, at one time or another, more than five thousand priests received England's protection.<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as these 'émigré' clergy—exiled for their adherence to a traditional polity—were welcomed by the English (or at least the government) as supporters of a monarchic constitution, and a state church, they assisted in the growth of toleration towards Catholicism, and helped, too, in the acceptance of English Catholic communities in the crucial years of readjustment to English life. Their more personal contribution to English society in general, and English Catholic life in particular, is more difficult to measure; an exile's life is, by necessity, circumspect; especially in the North, where their arrival was gradual and their numbers widely distributed.

A few 'émigré' clergy had seen the warning signal of disaster as early as 1789 and had made their way to England. The great exodus, however, began in 1792 when it became clear to many French Priests that the Civil Constitution of the clergy marked a complete break with the French church of the *Ancien Régime*. The majority of the exiled clergy of 1792 went to the south of England, but some moved northwards from the beginning. These included a group who had come via Scotland which had provided a particularly warm welcome to the French.<sup>2</sup> A larger number arrived in the North in 1794-5. The Channel Islands and the Southern ports were becoming too actively involved in the war against revolutionary France to cope with the emigrés. The northern ports were overwhelmed with displaced priests; on one day, 5 October 1796, 295 clergy were landed at Shields.<sup>3</sup>

The large influx of exiles was not met by a totally unprepared population. The

plight of the distressed clergy had led to the formation, all over the country, of relief committees for the emigrants and for the collection of funds. Although this work was centred in London, under direct government supervision, with John Wilmot, M.P. for Coventry, previously commissioner for the American loyalists, as its administrator,<sup>4</sup> there were local outlets for collecting and distributing cash. Liaison was established with the French through the exiled Bishop of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, the formidable Jean François de la Marche, who had a network of local paymasters in his charge, responsible through him to the British government.<sup>5</sup> One of the bishop's chief associates was Dorothy Silburn who became known, it is said, as 'the mother of the French clergy'.<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Silburn, a widow, was a Durham woman.<sup>7</sup>

Locally there was much self-generated activity from both church and state. It was, perhaps, to be expected that the Roman Catholic authorities would act to give support to their co-religionists; Bishop William Gibson, Vicar Apostolic of the Northern District, appealed to his flock for money and prayers in a pastoral letter of 5 April 1793.<sup>8</sup> More surprisingly the Established Church was very active in emigrant relief. This was, partly, because the Church of England, as a body, feared the danger of sharing the same fate as its French counterpart and, partly, because the church was the traditional purveyor of charity. Church leaders were most generous in giving money and practical help. The Archbishop of York presented £50 to the exile relief fund on 1 October 1792,<sup>9</sup> while the Bishop of Carlisle presented £20 on 19 January 1793,<sup>10</sup> and the Bishop of Durham, Shute Barrington, a second subscription of £100 on 4 March 1793.<sup>11</sup> Barrington, normally no lover of Catholics, was prepared to offer personal hospitality in Durham Castle to the emigrants.<sup>12</sup> The Bishop's benevolence was shared by the Dean and Chapter of Durham who gave contributions for the relief of the French clergy of more than £50 in each of the years 1792, 1794 and 1797.<sup>13</sup>

Local collections also elicited a generous response. The people of Liverpool, for example, gave £67. 4s 0d to the fund in 1793,<sup>14</sup> in which year a collection in Hull made £40. 19s 0d.<sup>15</sup> The corporation of Doncaster "taking into consideration the distressed situation of the poor French clergy who have been obliged, through self preservation, to emigrate from their own country on account of the murders committed and other unhappy disturbances there subsisting and to fly for protection to this happy island . . . ordered that the sum of 40 guineas be paid . . . towards their relief."<sup>16</sup> Such collections were supplemented by the work of local committees. A committee, headed by Sir Matthew Ridley, of Blagdon, in Northumberland, in October 1796, appealed in the pages of "The Morning Advertiser" for subscriptions and possible lodgings<sup>17</sup> which, with other appeals, led to such initiatives as the provision of some colliery cottages for the clergy, "Frenchmen's Row", at Heddon-on-the-Wall, which gave accommodation to almost forty priests.<sup>18</sup>

The need to provide lodgings and money reflected the dire poverty of the majority of the exiles. As recipients of state-backed charity the French clergy were marked as separate from their fellow Catholics, and this was to contribute to their lack of impact on the Catholic community. Their separateness was encouraged, too, by their great attachment to the past. Although they were widely distributed in the North—

groups or individuals receiving government aid existed at or near Berwick, Beverley, Boroughbridge, Catterick, Darlington, Driffeld, Howden, Hull, Market Weighton, Newcastle, Penrith, Pocklington, Pontefract, Richmond, Ripon, Scarborough, Selby, Sunderland, Tadcaster, Thorne, Wansford, Wetherby and York<sup>19</sup> amongst other places—the “émigrés” tended to stay in groups determined by diocese, or region, of origin. Thus among the 150 to 200 priests resident at Sunderland in 1796 some 125 were from the diocese of Coutances in Normandy,<sup>20</sup> and in Berwick, with over 100 priests, there was a Breton predominance,<sup>21</sup> which was further emphasized by the employment of the Abbé Laennec, formerly Vicar General of Treguier, as Berwick paymaster and agent of the Bishop of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, himself a Breton.<sup>22</sup> Within their groups the majority of the exiled priests lived a quiet, withdrawn life, but some, by circumstance or inclination, led a more active existence.

Many Catholic missions in the North, rural and urban, had a French priest serving them at some time after 1789. In Cumbria Abbé Danneville celebrated the sacraments at Corby Castle, near Carlisle, in 1810–11.<sup>23</sup> In Northumbria Abbé Robert Vergy was at Alnwick from 1802 to 1812,<sup>24</sup> while at Stockton Abbé Tardy, one of the best known of the exiles through his dictionary,<sup>25</sup> and guide book to London,<sup>26</sup> and Abbé le Cronier were the resident Catholic clergy for several years.<sup>27</sup> In Yorkshire Abbé Delalonde was serving Danby in 1794<sup>28</sup> and was also at Leyburn.<sup>29</sup> In York itself a number of French priests resided at the Bar Convent where they had an influence on both community and congregation.<sup>30</sup> In Lancashire Abbé Bachelier, resident at Lancaster,<sup>31</sup> ministered at Hornby from 1793 to 1799.<sup>32</sup>

Many of these examples, only a few of the possible ones, had only a passing influence on the northern missions. There were, however, several French clergy who became popular—if sometimes eccentric—local figures. In the eccentric category leading personalities are Le Roux of Burghwallis and Fidèle of Pocklington who are vividly described in the memoirs of Barbara Charlton and William Bernard Ullathorne.

“Abbé Louis le Roux”, we learn from Barbara Charlton’s “Recollections of a Northumbrian Lady”, “came as chaplain to Burghwallis in 1828, having been formerly “Vicaire de Courbevoye” near Paris, and after that officiating priest to the nuns at Bodney. His English was all but unintelligible. Once, when giving religious instruction to a great big fellow, one of Lady Radcliffe’s postilion boys, he admonished him in the words “Wash and you will be shaved”, whereupon the youth put a hand to his chin and looked very puzzled”.<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Charlton also recollects the story of a night-time wedding service conducted by the abbé, an octogenarian, who appeared “in a dirty old snuff-coloured dressing-gown and slippers, surmounted by a white night-cap sticking up a foot and a half above his head”. He looked, not surprisingly, “bewildered.”<sup>34</sup>

William Bernard Ullathorne, a monk of Downside, in Somerset, a missionary among the Australian convicts and later Catholic Bishop of Birmingham, and a “confidant” of Cardinal Newman, was born at Pocklington in 1806. “The priest was the Abbé Fidèle, a venerable French emigrant, long remembered there and at York for his piety, simplicity and charity. He used to kneel long before the altar, in a Welsh

or worsted wig at his prayers until Miss Constable, the patroness of the mission, arrived in the vestry, which was also his parlour and dining-room; then, he went there himself to rest, took off his wig, powdered his head, and came in rested for Mass".<sup>35</sup> Ullathorne was "told at a later period that he (Fidèle) had four written sermons, and that when he had read the first line of his discourse the little flock knew all the rest by heart".<sup>36</sup>

These anecdotes—affectionate as well as amused—reflect the practical difficulties of, particularly, the elderly clergy "in terra alienigenarum", and go some way to explaining why their influence was not proportionate to their numbers. A priest unable to communicate with his flock, even in an age before the vernacular liturgy, restricted his pastoral usefulness. In a society where social mobility was limited the stranger, and especially the foreigner, had to cope not only with a loss of social status but also with a continuous suspicion from his new neighbours which would rarely lead to a complete acceptance. Nevertheless the circumstances which created the "milieu" of the anecdotes should not hide from view the considerable impact made by a select few of the "émigrés" who were able to overcome their restrictions. The French priests were particularly useful to the Catholic authorities in areas where there was no Catholic priest but where there was a Catholic population. Amongst these were Foucher, of Hull; Gilbert, of Whitby; and Gérardot, of Liverpool.

Pierre François Foucher, Vicar General of Aix, was, like Fidèle, at Pocklington for several years, before going to Hull in 1798.<sup>37</sup> He opened a chapel there in 1799 and among its early visitors was his erstwhile superior, the Archbishop of Aix, Boisgelin.<sup>38</sup> Foucher left the chapel in 1820 to take up an appointment in France as canon and Vicar General of St. Diez.<sup>39</sup> He had put much of his own savings into the mission. "He lived five years at his expense, before there was any income, and together with what he has at different times sunk in the building, he has expended about £2,000 of his own money to maintain himself, since he first came to Hull".<sup>40</sup> Foucher, who arrived in England in 1790 among the earliest of the exiles,<sup>41</sup> was, clearly, a man of substance, who had been able, by early exile, to avoid confiscation of his property; his subsequent benefaction and ministry was a crucial factor in the revival of Hull Catholicism.<sup>42</sup>

Nicolas, or Nicholas (as he was generally known in England), Gilbert was to Whitby what Foucher was to Hull. Nicolas-Alain Gilbert was born at Saint-Malo, in 1762, and ordained priest in 1785.<sup>43</sup> Before the revolution he had been, for a short time, a member of the French Foreign Missions Society, as well as an active diocesan priest.<sup>44</sup> He mastered, his obituarist noted, the English language perfectly<sup>45</sup> and was at various places in the North—including Callally Castle in Northumberland<sup>46</sup>—before settling at Whitby in 1794.<sup>47</sup> At Whitby he built a chapel and a priest's house for what was, at the time of his departure in 1816, "a comparatively numerous and flourishing congregation".<sup>48</sup> He became a well known apologist writing several controversial works as well as compiling a book of hymns.<sup>49</sup> He was "a man of great dignity of bearing, who told dreadful narrations of his escape from the guillotine".<sup>50</sup> When he returned to his native land his activity continued—as the leader of a group of missionaries preaching retreats in the dechristianized France of the post-revolution

period—and his work was recognized by his appointment as an honorary canon of Rennes before his sudden death on 25 September 1821.<sup>51</sup>

Jean Baptiste Antoine Gerardot, born in 1753 at Chateau-Thierry, became rector of Blesmes near Paris.<sup>52</sup> He lived out his exile in Liverpool where he established the mission of St. Anthony's, in a developing part of the city previously without a resident priest.<sup>53</sup> Like Gilbert he was a versatile character and his activities went far beyond those of an ordinary parish priest. His chief contribution was to education. After some years of free-lance teaching he opened an educational establishment which seems to have been a variety of night school.<sup>54</sup> His practical experience gave authority to his publications which included, in 1798, his "Instructive Amusements upon that Useful Branch of Education the French Language", which M. J. Moore-Rinvoluceri, in her study of the Catholic contribution to Liverpool education during this period, sees as an important addition to the writing on the "play-way" method of teaching.<sup>55</sup>

Many of the exiles, sometimes less adept than Gerardot, made their contribution to education. Local guides often reveal French tutors for hire during this period. Thus, in Broster's "Directory of Chester" for 1795 there is an advertisement for a Mr. de St. Marie, a French master, in Eastgate Street.<sup>56</sup> The advertisement is not carried in the 1797 directory.<sup>57</sup> Surviving records suggest educational work to be a normal supplement to government relief. Abbé Bachelier, of Lancaster, for example, improved his income by teaching French.<sup>58</sup> At times, too, French exiles received employment in established schools. Abbé Pierre Chévallard acted as a French assistant at Appleby Grammar School from 1797 to 1802.<sup>59</sup>

One notable emigrant, in Lancashire, who also made a mark in the educational world, was Patrick Everard.<sup>60</sup> An Irishman, born in 1753, he was ordained priest at Salamanca, in 1783.<sup>61</sup> Like many of his countrymen he pursued his career abroad and he became rector of the Irish College and a Vicar General, at Bordeaux.<sup>62</sup> In the first part of his exile the doctor (of divinity) came into the circle of Edmund Burke who was impressed by his "courtly manners and conversational powers".<sup>63</sup> He spent most of his English exile at Ulverston, in Lancashire, where he built a chapel and founded a school.<sup>64</sup> It was an interesting place:

"The annual pension paid by the pupils ranged from £200 to £400, and the young gentlemen, some twenty in number, kept their own horses and dogs. They followed the hounds, dined, danced, and went to card parties at the houses of the neighbouring county families, and were accompanied by the great doctor himself on such occasions."<sup>65</sup>

The school prospered, despite (or perhaps because of) its gentlemanly atmosphere, and in 1810 Everard's distinction was honoured by his appointment as President of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, whose early staff was chiefly recruited from the suppressed theological faculties of France.<sup>66</sup> His tenure of that office was brief and he returned to Ulverston for a second term in 1813, to leave finally in 1815, when he was consecrated coadjutor to Archbishop Bray of Cashel.<sup>67</sup> He succeeded to the see in 1820, but died three months later.<sup>68</sup>

Archbishop Everard was a man whose career, although deflected from its original course by the French Revolution, progressed and reached a distinguished conclusion.

Other exiles were not so lucky; their careers were cut short, their vocations frustrated. Most of those exiled to England in the 1790's died in their country of adoption. Theirs was, largely, a melancholy lot. Their presence, however, in the years of revolutionary upheaval after 1789 was of twofold importance. They were a constant reminder—to both the enemies and friends of revolution—that the events in France were all too near, and that what happened in France yesterday could happen in England tomorrow. They were, too, in a limited way, factors in the gradual revival of Roman Catholicism in England. Their impact should not be allowed to be forgotten.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Archives of the Archbishop of Westminster, Bishop Douglass' Diary, 11 March 1797, has a numerical breakdown of the exiles based on official figures.

<sup>2</sup> See J. McGloin, "Some Refugee French Clerics and Laymen in Scotland, 1789–1814", *Innes Review* XVI (1965), 27–55.

<sup>3</sup> J. Sykes (ed), *Local Records* i (Newcastle, 1866), p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> D. T. J. Bellenger, "John Wilmot and the Emigrant Relief Committee", *Worcestershire Recusant* XXXV (1980), 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> L. Kerbiriou, *Jean Francois de la Marche* (Quimper, 1924).

<sup>6</sup> B. Ward, *The Dawn of the Catholic Revival in England 1781–1803* ii (1909), p. 6. [She is described as "mère" of the French clergy on the inscription on her monument in the churchyard at Roscoff in Brittany.]

<sup>7</sup> B. Ward, *Catholic London a Century Ago* (1905), p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Leeds Diocesan Archives, Northern District Papers, Gibson.

<sup>9</sup> P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice), T(reasury Papers) 93, 8, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> G. Townsend (ed), *The Theological Works of the First Viscount Barrington* i (1828), p. XLIX.

<sup>13</sup> Records of the Dean and Chapter of Durham, Audit Books, BV, fol. 175, BVI, fols. 16, 57.

<sup>14</sup> PRO T93, 25.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> W. Hardy (ed.), *A Calendar to the Records of*

*the Borough of Doncaster IV: Courtiers of the Corporation* (Doncaster, 1902), p. 259.

<sup>17</sup> D. Milburn, *A History of Ushaw College* (Ushaw, 1964), p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> D. T. J. Bellenger, "The French Exiled Clergy in the North East" *Northern Catholic History* II (1980), p. 21, where the row of cottages is illustrated.

<sup>19</sup> PRO T93, 44.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 256–9.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 255–6.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Scottish Catholic Archives, Edinburgh, Blair's Letters 120, Danneville to Bishop Cameron, 5 November 1810.

<sup>24</sup> A. Chadwick, *St Mary's Alnwick Centenary History* (Alnwick, 1963).

<sup>25</sup> T. Richmond, *The Local Records of Stockton and the Neighbourhood* (Stockton, 1868), p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Tardy, *Manuel du Voyageur à Londres* (1800).

<sup>27</sup> Richmond, p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> C(atholic) R(ecords) S(ociety), (Annual Volume) IV, p. 252.

<sup>29</sup> CRS XIII, p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> H. J. Coleridge, *St. Mary's Convent, Micklegate Bar, York* (1887), pp. 275–6.

<sup>31</sup> CRS IV, p. 323.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> L. E. O. Charlton (ed.), *The Recollections of a Northumbrian Lady 1815–66, being the Memoirs of Barbara Charlton (nee Tasburgh)* (1949), p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> W. B. Ullathorne, *From Cabin-boy to Archbishop* (1943), p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

- <sup>37</sup> J. O. Payne, *Old Catholic Missions* (1889), p. 69.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>39</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> B. W. Kelley, *Historical Notes on English Catholic Missions* (1907), p. 222.
- <sup>43</sup> *L'Ami (de la Religion et du Roi)* xxx (Paris, 1822), p. 153.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Catholic Miscellany and Monthly Repository of Information* i (1822), p. 18. This is a translation of the obituary in *L'Ami*.
- <sup>45</sup> *L'Ami*, p. 154.
- <sup>46</sup> *CRS VII*, p. 321.
- <sup>47</sup> *L'Ami*, p. 154.
- <sup>48</sup> *Catholic Miscellany*, p. 18.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> Ullathorne, p. 4.
- <sup>51</sup> *Catholic Miscellany*, p. 18.
- <sup>52</sup> M. J. Moore-Rinvulcri, "The Catholic Con-tribution to Liverpool Education in the Eighteenth Century", *The Dublin Review* 228 (1954), p. 287.
- <sup>53</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 288.
- <sup>56</sup> Broster, *Directory of Chester* (Chester, 1795).
- <sup>57</sup> Broster, 1797.
- <sup>58</sup> *CRS IV*, p. 323.
- <sup>59</sup> E. Hinchcliffe, *Appleby Grammar School* (Appleby, 1974), p. 139.
- <sup>60</sup> *CRS XX*, pp. 10–11.
- <sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>64</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>65</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>66</sup> J. Healy, *Maynooth College. Its Centenary History*. (Dublin, 1895), pp. 190–202.
- <sup>67</sup> *CRS XX*, p. 11.
- <sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

