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Daniel O'Connell  
and the Irony  
of John Henry  
Newman's  
Conversion

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# Daniel O’Connell and the Irony of John Henry Newman’s Conversion

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## THE ACT(S) OF UNION

To suggest that there has been a consistent and contentious relationship between Ireland and England for centuries would certainly be a tautology. One of the most interesting and politically challenging periods occurred between the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries.

In the west, the French and American Revolutions, unrest in some British colonies, crises in European nations and problematic international politics made for interesting times. The British paid little attention to Ireland at this time; the British had control of the island, but not the heart of the inhabitants. Irish lands, George Trevelyan writes, were “... given to a garrison of (British) landlords”.<sup>1</sup> At the time, under British rule, Ireland was, for all intents and purposes, deprived of economic, political, social, legal and even religious power in their own country. Henry Weisser notes, “To British statesmen locked in a bitter struggle with Napoleonic Europe, Ireland was a source of fear and frustration, a tumultuous and potentially dangerous island. It was vulnerable to a French invasion and therefore had to be governed even more closely.”<sup>2</sup>

At this time, for a number of reasons, one of them certainly being to appease the Irish and distract them from the idea of rebellion, some of the fiercer parts of the Penal laws were abrogated.<sup>3</sup>

William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806) became Prime Minister

- 1 Trevelyan, George Macaulay. *British History in the Nineteenth Century and After*. New York: Harper and Row (Harper Torchbook Edition), 1966, pg. 99
- 2 Weisser, Henry. *Ireland: Travel, Culture, Society, Politics and History*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990. pg. 274.
- 3 Trevelyan. Op.cit. pg. 99. Trevelyan writes that these fiercer parts of the Penal Laws “... became obsolete and were repealed. But the Protestant Ascendancy remained unimpaired. The gates of political power were still closed on the Catholic.”

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in 1783 at the age of 24. Being a politically wise administrator, he was cool to the idea of using military force against the Irish and was sympathetic to the idea of Catholic Emancipation. His plan was to unite the Parliaments of Ireland (which was under the control of the Protestant Ascendency) and of England. This engendered the Act of Union in 1801.<sup>4</sup> After the '98 rising, Pitt's answer to the problems was this unified parliament accompanied by Catholic Emancipation.<sup>5</sup>

The idea was problematic because Catholics were no better off being able to "sit" but not vote in Parliament. Pitt also underestimated the caustic anti-Catholic sentiment of George III.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the underhand deceptions that made the Act of Union possible almost guaranteed it would fail in the goal which Pitt had intended for it.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of Daniel O'Connell in the history of the Irish nation need not be repeated here. As a lawyer and M.P. he advocated at every turn the cause and hope for Irish Emancipation. He was a man of moderation prepared to come to terms with England inside the bounds of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> With his education and cooperative spirit, he was a man to be reckoned with.<sup>9</sup>

### JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

In the year 1840, if anyone would seem to be representative of all things English, of the political convictions of the country and a defender of the Established Church, it would appear to be John Henry Newman: Oxford educated scholar, Oxford Don, and Vicar of St. Mary the Virgin. The words "seem" and "appear" are used intentionally because those who knew Newman best (in 1840) knew that in the process of calling for reform in the English

4 In reality, they were the "Acts" of Union, because both the Irish and the English Parliaments had to pass formal legislation.

5 This would allow Catholics to "sit" (but not vote) in Parliament; it permitted the commutation of tithes, and allowed payments to the Irish priests.

6 Trevelyan. Op.cit. "It never occurred (to Pitt) to find out in advance whether he would be in a position to redeem this pledge ... (and) He never consulted George III beforehand ... when he found, too late, that his master was violently opposed to Catholic Emancipation," pg. 103.

7 Turner, Edward Raymond. *Ireland and England in the Past and at Present*. New York: Century Publishing, 1919. "... the Union in Ireland was caused largely by intimidation and coercive persuasion; and in the Irish Parliament by bribery, wholesale and plain." pg. 110

8 Trevelyan, Op. cit. pg. 100. Trevelyan also later suggests: "Though compelled to adopt methods of agitation, O'Connell was a man of peace and order." pg. 104.

9 Ibid. Regarding O'Connell and terms of reconciliation, he writes: "He proposed to extort them, not by sporadic violence, which was the usual resort of each village when left to itself, but by organizing the national will through a machinery which he himself devised (The Catholic Association, 1823)." pg. 218.

Church, his sentiments and theological leanings seemed to be bent more and more toward those of the Papists. Especially the ideas recorded in *Tract XC* had those close to him wondering if he were not a closet Roman.

There was one aspect of his Englishness that was unequivocally clear: he found the ideas and the politics of Daniel O'Connell reprehensible and he was not hesitant to make these feelings known. It is unlikely Newman ever met O'Connell (though he did attend Mass for him upon his death).<sup>10</sup>

At the time, Newman was aware some things had to change in English – Irish relations but he clearly referred to O'Connell as a “Bully.”<sup>11</sup> To add to his dismay, in a letter to James Mozely, he notes that he had, in a way, an admirer in O'Connell in that “O'Connell has patronized the *Tracts*.”<sup>12</sup> In another letter, this one to John Keble, he writes in fear that there may be more Englishmen than he had expected contemplating crossing the Tiber. He feared there were symptoms among English Roman Catholics “... to break the alliance of O'Connell and the Dissenters.”<sup>13</sup> A few days later Keble, hoping to temper his Roman leanings, responded to Newman: “I say such counter action will come of itself if you honestly express your feelings; and among these your dread of too much encouraging Rome; and I imagine her present practice in other matters besides her fraternization with O'Connell, is quite such as to warn the sort of people whose sympathies you are most apt to awaken.”<sup>14</sup>

10 Charles Stephen Dessain, ed. *John Henry Newman, Letters and Diaries*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1962, vol. XII. He writes to John Bowden (Trinity Sunday, May 30/47): “I have just been at Solemn Mass for O'Connell” (d. 15 May, 1847, at Genoa), pg. 85. He continues: “31 May 1847 went (I, Dalgairns and Coffin) to the <officium.> High Mass and Sermon at St. Agatha for O'Connell (de defunctis).”

11 Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall, SJ, eds. *John Henry Newman. Letters and Diaries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, v. II. He wrote to Harriet Newman 16 March 1829: “That Emancipation is necessary now, I think is pretty clear, because the intelligence of the country will have it. Almost all who have weight by their talent or station prefer, of the alternatives left to us, concession to an Irish war. But that the anti-Catholic party, who by far have the majority of numbers, should have been betrayed by its friends suddenly craftily, and that the government have been bullied by Mr. O'Connell into concession is most deplorable.” pg. 132.

12 Gerard Tracey, ed., *John Henry Newman. Letters and Diaries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, vol. VI. JHN to James Mozely, Oriel College, Aug. 2, 1838, pg. 276.

13 Gerard Tracey, ed., *John Henry Newman. Letters and Diaries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, vol. VII. Newman wrote to John Keble (26 October, 1840): “And moreover, if, as is not unlikely, we have in process of time heretical bishops or teachers among us ... and if again, what there are at this moment symptoms of, there be a movement in the English Roman Catholics to break the alliance of O'Connell and Exeter Hall, strong temptations will be placed in the way of individuals, already imbued with a tone of thought congenial to Rome, to join her communion.” pg. 417.

14 *Ibid.* Pg. 432.

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Newman makes another reference to O'Connell and "his party" (by "party" is meant "those involved with Daniel O'Connell and the Radicals and Dissenters in political maneuvering").<sup>15</sup> In one of his letters, regarding O'Connell and his "party" Newman writes: "What Hildebrand did by faith and holiness, they do by political intrigue. The great object is to pull down the English Church. They join with those who are *further* from them in creed to oppose those who are nearer to them. Never can I think such ways in the footsteps of Christ."<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Nicholas Wiseman, in late August, 1835, had planned to visit Newman at Oxford.<sup>17</sup> Of the visit Newman wrote: "... I do not anticipate any great satisfaction from getting intimate with him. The Romanists seem so heartily to take up the cause of such vile persons as O'Connell, Hume etc. ..." <sup>18</sup> In anticipation of Wiseman's visit, an *avant courier*, a Rev. John Maguire, a Roman Catholic priest, had come to visit Newman. Of him, Newman writes: "We had some talk. It is quite painful to see how they are hand in glove with O'Connell and Co."<sup>19</sup> In addition, Newman writes of this Fr. Maguire to Hurrell Froude: "What disgusted us in Mr. M. was his defending not only Mr. O'Connell but Hume – in fact, I suppose, he does not see the difference between the dog and the hog – and we are but dogs in his eyes."<sup>20</sup>

### NEWMAN AND HIS *APOLOGIA*

Students of John Henry Newman are aware that his pursuit of reclaiming the independence of the English Church from the British government, his attempts to trace it through apostolical foundations, and his defense of it based on his patristic studies was a work in progress; in sum, a development. So too, as his *Apologia*

15 Ibid. pg. 202, fn. #6.

16 Gerard Tracey, ed., *John Henry Newman. Letters and Diaries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. vol. VIII. JHN to Henry Bloxam, 23 February, 1841. Pg. 42.

17 Ibid. Fn. #2. pg. 195. Newman had received a letter from Wiseman whom Newman knew had a relationship with O'Connell. Regarding O'Connell, Wiseman wrote to Newman: "I am anxious, as a peace-maker to communicate this information respecting Mr. O'Connell, because I think it may tend to remove some of the strong feeling regarding him which I know to exist against him." He continues "... what I know of him I believe him to be sincere and fervent in his religious feelings, though sadly misguided in his political career [sic]". He further writes: "I have therefore sincerely deplored the view which Mr. O'Connell has taken both of foreign and domestic politics – though I believe him to have been driven on by circumstances, till he has almost lost his self-control."

18 Thomas Gornall, SJ, ed., *John Henry Newman. Letters and Diaries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. vol. V, Pg. 124.

19 Ibid. pg. 114.

20 Ibid. pp. 119-120.

testifies, his embrace of the Church of Rome was a process of development.

In his *Apologia* he refers to a profound, perhaps a life-changing event in that process. Dr. Nicholas Wiseman penned an article in the August 1836 edition of the *Dublin Review* that was, as he writes, "... put in my hands by friends who were more favorable to the cause of Rome than I was myself".<sup>21</sup> The title of the article was *The Anglican Claim of Apostolical Succession*, and addressed, among other issues, the Donatist heresy.<sup>22</sup>

"At first," Newman notes, "I didn't see much in it. But a Protestant friend pointed out the palmary words of St. Augustine *Securus judicat orbis terrarum*." Newman writes: "They were words that went beyond the occasion of the Donatists: they applied to that of the Monophysites. They gave a cogency to the article which had escaped me at first." He continues: "What a light was thrown upon every controversy in the Church."<sup>23</sup> It was by reading these words in the *Dublin Review* that Newman saw himself as a Monophysite. Newman makes clear what a profound impact these words had upon him: "For a mere sentence the words of St. Augustine struck me with a power which I had never felt from any words before." He continues, "By these great words of the ancient Father . . . the theory of the *Via Media* was absolutely pulverized."<sup>24</sup> Though the power of the words faded for a while ("as a shadow"), they changed him irreversibly and thus, one might argue, they may have had a profound effect upon, and were no small motivation for, his conversion to Rome.

#### O'CONNELL, WISEMAN AND THE *DUBLIN REVIEW*

Inspired by an Irish lawyer in London, Michael Quin, Nicholas Wiseman was concerned about reaching out to both Catholics and Tractarians. "Wiseman's aim in founding the *Dublin Review* was 'to depict for English Catholics themselves and for an inquiring age the "genius of Christianity in its Catholic form'."<sup>25</sup> Beginning in 1836, along with Daniel O'Connell, Wiseman and Quin founded the *Dublin Review*. Wiseman hoped "... the new review might stir the enthusiasm of the faithful for their own religion, and draw them from their years of isolation into renewed and vital contact

21 Middleton, D., *Newman at Oxford: His Religious Development*. London: Oxford U. Press, 1950. pg. 159. Mr. Robert Williams is identified as the friend who put the Wiseman article in Newman's hands.

22 *The Dublin Review*, vii (30 August, 1836), pp. 139-80.

23 Ian Ker, ed., *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, London: Penguin Books, 1994. pp. 115-6.

24 *Ibid.* pg. 118.

25 Schiefen, Richard J. *Nicholas Wiseman and the Transformation of English Catholicism*. Shepherdstown, W. VA.: Patmos Press, 1984, pg. 69.

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with the papacy; to the more general audience of non-Catholics and especially to the Tractarians ...”<sup>26</sup> Immediately Wiseman brought on Quin as editor, but far more important for our purposes, he brought on Daniel O’Connell as patron, co-proprietor, and financial sustainer, for without O’Connell’s financial backing, there would be no *Dublin Review*. It was Wiseman’s intention to avoid addressing politics for “... in doing so I might interfere or have weight in Irish affairs, which certainly I have no wish or intention to burn my fingers with ...”<sup>27</sup> Wiseman, “... while boldly associating with Daniel O’Connell in founding the *Dublin Review* ... insisted that the journal not be used to promote the political views of the great Irish leader ...”<sup>28</sup>

From the beginning, with no capital to invest, it was O’Connell who fronted the money and kept the *Dublin Review* financially viable, especially for its first few years of publication. O’Connell was the financial savior while he referred to Wiseman in all matters financial and theological.<sup>29</sup> Newman, for his part, was quite aware of O’Connell’s part in the *Dublin Review*.<sup>30</sup>

It was in the *Dublin Review* that Wiseman wrote and Newman read the article on St. Augustine that made such a profound impact on Newman’s thinking and perhaps his eventual conversion. Thus the irony remains that were it not for O’Connell, whom Newman despised and found so reprehensible, there would be no *Dublin Review* – and with no *Dublin Review*, there would be no article by Wiseman. Is it safe to suggest that there would never have been a conversion to the Church of Rome by Newman unless it was (albeit indirectly) made possible by Daniel O’Connell? Perhaps we will learn the answer in the Kingdom yet to come.

26 Walter Haughton, ed., *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, vol. II, pg. 11.

27 Schiefen, Richard J., Op. cit., pg. 163.

28 Ibid.

29 Altholz, Josef L. “Early Proprietorship of the *Dublin Review*”. *Victorian Periodical Review*, 1990, Vo. 23, issue 2, pg. 55.

30 Thomas Gornall, SJ, *John Henry Newman. Letters and Diaries*. Vol. V. In a letter of JHN to Thomas Dyke Acland, Oriel College, dated 17 April, 1836, Newman writes: “Dr. Wiseman has just begun what he calls the ‘*Dublin Review*,’ under the auspices of himself and O’Connell. Really, if one wished a practical direction to one’s behavior towards Romanism, thus surely would seem a sufficient one. As no one can suppose that O’Connell is to *write* for the *Review*, it is plainly but his name which is put forward ...” pg. 290.