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The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Maynooth across Four Centuries

November 2020

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Maynooth College celebrates its two hundredth and twenty fifth anniversary this year. While not necessarily the occasion for major celebrations and while not, perhaps, meriting a commemorative stamp, it does still bear celebrating even in a modest way. With the coming of the nationwide lockdown in March, it was soon realised that the celebrations would be very modest! Before that came an idea for a book of recollections.¹

Considerable scholarship exists in the form of books, articles and ephemera on the history of the college, led by Healy's *Centenary History* and Corish's *Maynooth College*. There is even a good shelfful of memoirs and reminiscences from various staff members over the years. The purpose of the forthcoming book is to combine some of the memories of past staff and students, both lay and clerical to complement those already in print. Neil Kevin, professor of English in the 1930s and author of *I Remember Maynooth* wrote:

‘Maynooth College begins to be old. One of the signs of age, a failing memory begins to be noticeable. Already clues are missing, and when conversation turns to reminiscence, there are doubts and gaps ... what is lacking to us is not a historian, but a diarist who would have written for us between the lines of history – and not one diarist, but a sequence of them.’²

Denis Meehan, author of *Window on Maynooth* in 1949 give this rationale for his publication,

‘Its institutional history bears retelling, in brief, if only to give point to the talk about houses, which is to follow; or to bring to the notice of people generally some hard facts about Maynooth history, which ought to be well known, but are not.’³

1 John-Paul Sheridan and Salvador Ryan (editors), *We Remember Maynooth*, Messenger Publications, 2020

2 Kevin, Neil *I Remember Maynooth* (Dublin: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1945), 202.

3 Meehan, Denis *Window on Maynooth* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds 1949), 14.

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Both these books were written around the time of the college's 150th anniversary and the sentiments of both are just as relevant at this 225th anniversary. The history of Maynooth bears retelling and repositioning and adding the chapters lived out since the previous accounts and to offer a new sequence of diarists. Even since its bicentennial, enormous change has happened. Maynooth is a different to the place it was a brief twenty-five years ago.

In the dying years of the eighteenth century, by the *Maynooth College Act 1795* (35 Geo. 3 c. 21), the Royal College of St. Patrick was founded. That it ever came into existence was due to the trojan efforts of the Irish hierarchy, Thomas Hussey, its first president, the Crown authorities and members of the aristocracy in Ireland. This is summed up eloquently in an address of welcome to the Lord Lieutenant, Earl of Mulgrave, read by Dr. Carew, Professor of Theology, in December 19th, 1835 which was the 40th anniversary of the foundation.

‘Founded amidst difficulties – assailed in its progress by prejudice and calumny – struggling with inadequate resources to supply the spiritual wants of a numerous people, the College of Maynooth has pursued with undeviating consistency its arduous career, strong in conscious integrity of purpose, a stranger to the acrimony alike of religious and political strife, its sole ambition has been to train up learned and zealous pastors, who might teach the people the great duties of piety to God, allegiance to the sovereign, peace and concord among men. If our institution cannot compete with other establishments in wealth or extrinsic advantages, it can, like the Roman matron, point with honourable pride to the genius and virtues of her children’.⁴

The reasons for its foundation are well documented: the gradual decline in the Penal Laws; the respite of the Catholic Relief Acts of 1791 and 1793; the diminishing of the Continental colleges across Europe; the sense of distrust that the Crown had in priests being educated in the predominately revolutionary climate of Europe.

The college opened its doors in 1795 to thirty seminarians and ten professors. The latter were led by Thomas Hussey, former chaplain to the Spanish Embassy in London and rector of St James, Spanish Place. He had been a Spanish diplomat and was a friend of both Edmund Burke and Doctor Johnson while in London. Meehan quotes a letter from Burke to Hussey in 1795 on the foundation of the college: ‘if that business is completed as it ought to be, and as it

4 Manuscript Records of the College I, 371 and given as an introductory quotation in Meehan, *opera cit.*

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will be, if the hands of the jobbers are kept out of it, I expect more good to come of it than from anything else that has happened in our days.⁵ Hussey would remain as president for only two years and would be appointed Bishop of Waterford in 1797.

Among the first professors were emigres from France among whom were both Irish and French clergy. The tradition has always been suggested that they brought their academic dress with them from the Sorbonne, which is what gives the Maynooth toga its particular design. Some of their portraits can be seen in Pugin Hall, and while the Sorbonne toga might not be very much in evidence two (Darré and Anglade) sport a very curious conical hat known as a *barette*.

In the 19th century the college expanded to such a degree that most of that century was one long building project. Initially wings were added on either side of Stoyte House, the original college building. With the eventual financial legacy of Lord Dunboyne, the Establishment named in his memory was founded and the house that bears his name was built. New House and Humanity House were also built in this period which led to the layout of St Joseph's Square. Rhetoric House and Logic House were completed to provide for the Junior Division of the Seminary. The work of three great architects made their mark in this century. Firstly, Pugin and his overall plan for the college⁶ which included the demolishing of Stoyte House. He had designed a quad of buildings on the west side of St. Joseph's Square, to include a chapel and an aula. The constraint of funds led to only three sides being completed. Charles Russell (president 1857-80) was anxious to bring the project to completion with a chapel on the north side of the quad and it would be the lot of JJ McCarthy to design the College Chapel as we see it today. McCarthy, first professor of Ecclesiastical Architecture at the Catholic University was responsible for an extensive portfolio of churches and cathedrals around Ireland. He had finished the work on Pugin's Killarney cathedral and also worked on the cathedrals at Monaghan and Thurles. Monaghan cathedral remained incomplete at his death and the task went to William Hague, who was the architect employed by Maynooth to undertake the interior decoration of the college chapel. McCarthy was also responsible for the Senior Infirmary and Hague designed the Aula Maxima.

It would be towards the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century that Maynooth would see, not only, a great expansion in its numbers but also a change in its governance and

5 Meehan, *ibid.* 13.

6 The plan can be seen in Healy's *Centenary History* and Meehan's *Window on Maynooth*.

its academic affiliation. In the mid-19th century, with the passing of the Maynooth College Act of 1845, the Crown relinquished its supervisory role in the management of the college and it became the responsibility of the Trustees. It was subsequently disendowed, at the same time as the Church of Ireland was disestablished, and the Trustees were members of the Catholic Hierarchy. The college became a constituent college of the newly established Catholic University of Ireland in 1876 and it was granted the status of a Pontifical University in 1896. It could now award pontifical degrees at both graduate and undergraduate level and this would have a lasting effect on the Dunboyne Establishment. In 1910 the college became a recognised college of the National University of Ireland, a status that it would maintain for the next nearly ninety years. In the 1960's the college saw the arrival of the first members of religious orders and lay students. With the division that was established prior to the college's bicentennial, and the appointment of Professor W.J. Smyth as Master, the writing was on the wall for the total separation of the ecclesiastical from the secular. Maynooth was to be the subject of a third piece of government legislation when the 1997 Universities Act established the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (now called Maynooth University) as a constituent university of the NUI.

Maynooth saw the arrival of Catholic Emancipation and welcomed Daniel O'Connell. It was affected by the Famine and by the various periods of civil unrest and revolution in Ireland. Very early on students were expelled for being members of the United Irishmen. One former student went on to take part in the rebellion and was subsequently executed. Meehan quotes the statement of the Trustees who had met 1802 to discuss this crisis:

‘The Trustees behold with the deepest concern the spirit of insubordination and disorder which had of late pervaded almost the whole of the students of this College, a spirit so opposite to the true principles of religion, so disgraceful to those who have manifested it and in its consequences so ruinous to the establishment.’⁷

Controversy attached itself to the college with the settling of the estates of the twelfth Baron Dunboyne, John Butler (1731–1800) and the eventual bequest to the college. This year also marks the 175th anniversary of the Maynooth College Act of 1845, which provided for the increased annual grant for the maintenance of the college and a further grant which facilitated the building of some of Pugin's design. This piece of legislation led to the holding

7 Meehan, *ibid.* 160.

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of the anti-Maynooth Conference in London and a committee to fight against the passing of the bill. The name of Maynooth and the attendant bill became the lodestone for anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain at that time. It is hard to imagine that Maynooth would cause the resignation of a politician as eminent as William Gladstone.

Staff and students have excelled in a variety of fields and areas of expertise, from the famous induction coil of Professor Nicholas Callen to the Mars mission of Professor Susan McKenna-Lawlor. Thomas Hussey had been an accomplished diplomat before his time at Maynooth and Geraldine Byrne Nason has been an accomplished diplomat since her time at Maynooth in the 1970s.

Maynooth has welcomed countless visitors in all its years – among them four saints: Paul VI came when a Cardinal and John-Paul II came during the visit of 1979; both St. Theresa of Calcutta and St. John Henry Newman were welcomed to the college, the latter having been on familiar terms with Charles Russell, whom he credited as having the most influence on his conversion to Catholicism. Royalty also visited; most memorably the Empress of Austria on two occasions, King George V and Queen Mary in 1911, and King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain in 1986 which led one member of the academic staff to tell the king that he had been a pallbearer at the funeral of the king's grandfather, Alfonso XIII in Rome in 1941. The great and the good have been warmly greeted at the President's Arch. Still more are the people who turn up every day to walk around the grounds, visit the chapel, among whom are the descendants of Irish people at home and abroad who contributed financially to the college over its history.

Friendship. Saint Teresa also likens the relationship between God and humanity in terms of friendship: “*Contemplative prayer is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us*”. She is not the first writer to use this image: Alfred of Rievaulx, a monk who lived in Yorkshire in the 12th century, wrote a work entitled *Spiritual Friendship*, for example. But arguably, Teresa's phrasing is the more striking since it seems to go to the very heart of the matter and is very much in line with Jesus' words in John's gospel.

– MATTHEW BETTS, ed., *God in the Time of Covid-19* (Kent: Carmelite Charitable Trust) p. 26.