

6. Soup and souperism

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While the Society of Friends and other groups provided soup and relief in a spirit of Christian charity, irrespective of the religious denomination of the recipients and with no claims on their allegiance, a number of evangelical missionary groups made relief conditional on conversion to the Protestant faith. Among the most controversial proselytisers were Rev. Edward Nangle who established a missionary colony on Achill Island, Co. Mayo in 1831, and Rev. Alexander Dallas who established schools in Connemara during the Famine. They attracted some hundreds of converts, but their strident propaganda caused great resentment among the Catholic clergy. 'Souperism' remains an abiding image in popular folklore.

Views of a 'liberal' Protestant couple on the Achill mission.

We consider every conscientious accession to the Protestant faith as a contribution in aid of the well-being of the state and the prosperity of Ireland more especially; but such experiments as that at Achill will be made in vain. We have shown that here it has been a complete failure; the principles upon which it has been conducted have not been in accordance with the divine precept of 'charity', nor has the clergyman under whose control the settlement is placed been an example of that gentle, peace-loving, and persuasive zeal, that 'meek and unaffected grace', which should distinguish a humble follower of 'The Lord and Master'.

One word more and we dismiss this subject: it was impossible not to appreciate the magnanimity of the

poor, miserable, utterly destitute and absolutely starving inhabitants of Achill, who were at the time of our visit enduring privations at which humanity shudders, and to know that by walking a couple of miles and professing to change their religion they would have been instantly supplied with food, clothes and lodging. Yet these hungry thousands – for it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that nine-tenths of the population of this island were, in the month of July last, entirely without food – preferred patiently to endure their sufferings, rather than submit to what they considered a degradation... But we have deemed it our duty to submit the case fully to our readers, with a view, particularly, to invite the consideration of English subscribers to 'The Mission'.

(Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall, *Ireland: its scenery and character*, etc., London, 1841-3, vol.II, p.167-9.)



'The Protestant missionary settlement at Isle of Achill': A contemporary lithograph. (NLI 1493TA.)

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'Ballinaboy School [Co. Galway], near the monastery, 10th August, 1850', established by the Rev. Dallas. (NLI 2003TX, a sketch-book illustrating the work of Rev. Dallas and his followers.)

Letter of Father William Flannelly to Dr Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin.

Ballinakill, Clifden, Co. Galway, 6 April 1849.

My Lord,

I beg most respectfully to claim your lordship's indulgence for presuming to submit the following observations to your judgement. The enemies of the faith are now endeavouring by all means to proselytise the people, have money to no end, and apostate priests and laics are the instruments selected to conduct this impious crusade. It cannot be wondered if a starving people would be perverted in shoals, especially as they go from cabin to cabin, and when they find the inmates naked and starved to death, they proffer food, money and raiment, on the express condition of becoming members of their conventicles. Scurrilous tracts are scattered in thousands among the poor by those emissaries of discord, and they go so far as to send the Catholic clergyman a copy of those pamphlets through the post office.

They are in the habit of saying to the poor people, 'why not go to your priests and get money from them'; but they take care to conceal the fact that there was a period when the priests had both lands and money, and in trust for the poor of God; but

persecution unjustly transferred those Catholic treasures to others, who, instead of complying with the charitable intentions of the original donors, revel in the profligate enjoyment of their sacrilegious plunder.

Should the faithful have placed any charities at your grace's disposal, as there is now absolute necessity for external aid to carry on the ordinary duties of the mission, I presume to express the hope your grace will be so kind as to appropriate some portion of them to meet the extraordinary spiritual and temporal wants of this part of Connemara. In fact, I think the deplorable state of all Connemara should be brought under the notice of the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, in order, if possible, to check the wicked course of these evil men.

I can assure your grace that a mile of the public road cannot be travelled without meeting a dead body, as the poor are houseless and daily turned out of the poorhouse whenever they exhibit any symptoms of sickness. There is not a hut without fever and dysentery, the sure precursors of cholera, which I fear is the next ordeal through which the poor Irish must pass...

William Flannelly, Catholic Curate.

(Dublin Diocesan Archives, Murray Correspondence 121.)

