

O'Connell and Young Irelanders could have devoted less time to squabbling over political issues and more attention to the condition of the people.²⁷ It is easy to be wise after the event.

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THE STIGMA OF SOUPERISM

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AMONG THE CATALOGUE OF GRIEVANCES accumulated by the Catholic Irish during the catastrophic years between 1845 and 1852, few attracted such odium as the phenomenon known as 'souperism', or the alleged attempts of evangelical missionaries to use hunger as an instrument to win converts to the Protestant faith. The bitterness of the 'souper' legacy became so deeply rooted that, even as recently as the past decade, the topic was still capable of arousing passionate controversy. In 1985 the Abbey Theatre's production of Eoghan Harris' play *Souper Sullivan* was followed by a spate of letters to the editor of *The Irish Times* as well as newspaper and radio interviews in which the author was forced to defend his claims and opinions in a way that few playwrights have been called to do in modern times.

The chief source of the controversy over *Souper Sullivan* was the implied innocence of the protagonist, the Rev. William Allen Fisher of Kilmoe parish in west Cork. The account of the Rev. Fisher's record during the famine years had appeared originally in Desmond Bowen's study of religious conflict in nineteenth-century Ireland.¹ Harris' interpretation of the event strongly reflected many of Bowen's sympathies, in so far as the Rev. Fisher was portrayed as a beneficent pastor who ministered to the Catholic population after their priest had fled the district during the height of the Famine. This may well have been the case, and the Rev. Fisher would hardly have been a singular example of a Church of Ireland pastor doing his utmost to relieve the afflictions of famine victims. The fact remains that the area of west Cork in which Rev. Fisher lived and worked was one in which evangelical missionaries had been operating both

before and during the Famine, and his intentions, however benevolent, would have been associated by local people with this movement. What the audience did not see, in other words, what had been ignored completely in the play and dealt with in a cursory fashion in the book, was the vast institutional and ideological machinery that lay behind the drive to make Ireland a Protestant country. This included not only a massive system of private philanthropy which had been in operation since early in the century, but, more importantly, a fully developed political doctrine rooted in the belief that the source of Ireland's social and political problems was the Catholic religion, and that the country would never be prosperous and developed until Catholicism and all its influences were eradicated.

The question may be raised as to whether it is justified to describe anti-Catholicism as a political doctrine. If by 'political doctrine' we mean a developed idea or system of thought which is subscribed to by an intellectual and academic establishment and which professes a political agenda, then the anti-Catholicism of nineteenth-century Britain qualifies for the category as surely as the development of ideas on race which bore such remarkable fruit in the twentieth century.² British anti-Catholicism was as old as the Reformation, and was by no means a spent force in the eighteenth century, the scepticism and rationalism of the enlightenment notwithstanding.³ During the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, it received a new lease of life because of political events in Europe as well as more immediate developments in Ireland.

The ascendancy of ideas on the necessity of spreading the Protestant faith worldwide was a feature of the 1790s and early 1800s in Britain, and coincided with the growth of the country's great power status, both politically and commercially.⁴ This 'global imperative' was of particular significance in the case of Ireland, where the claims of the majority Catholic population posed an immediate and direct threat to the economic and political hegemony of the Protestant establishment. Following the Act of Union of 1800 it became an article of faith among evangelical Christians on both sides

of the Irish sea that if the Catholic Irish could be 'brought over' to the Protestant faith, that the problems which bedevilled Irish society such as economic backwardness, lack of respect for the law, and hatred of the Protestant establishment would be eradicated. The demand among the common people for education and literacy in English, which was then at an all time high, was seen as providing an ideal conduit through which the desired moral reformation could be effected. A large number of voluntary societies devoted to scriptural education and bible distribution thus made their appearance during the early 1800s, and their object of evangelising the native Irish in the reformed faith soon made a battleground of the educational arena. When the moral crusade was intensified in the aftermath of the victory over Napoleon in 1815 (an event interpreted by evangelicals as a providential sign of the divine favour enjoyed by the Protestant cause), Catholic leaders began to unite in opposition to the claims of what had come to be known as the 'New' or 'Second' reformation.

I have argued elsewhere that it was this attempt at reformation that brought the Catholic hierarchy and clergy onto the political stage in the 1820s and united priests and people behind the popular campaign for emancipation organised by Daniel O'Connell and the Catholic Association. The astonishing success of the tactics of peaceful mass mobilisation devised by O'Connell thwarted every attempt of the government to suppress the movement, and emancipation was conceded in 1829 in the face of the threat of civil war.⁵ Two years later, the government made good its promise to act as a neutral force in the battle over education and introduced a national system of primary schools. Although funded from the public purse the national schools were managed by the clergy at the local level, which meant that in Catholic areas they were directly controlled by the priests.⁶ This put an abrupt end to the evangelicals' ambition to effect a reformation through exploiting the educational needs of Catholic schoolchildren.

If the prospect for a national reformation was a lost cause by the mid-1830s, how do we explain the new phase of

proselytism that began with the onset of the Famine in 1845-6? The consequences of the political and sectarian conflicts of the 1820s provide part of the answer. In response to the granting of emancipation and the government's decision to fund the national schools, the marriage between the intransigent ultra-Protestant political establishment and the promoters of the new reformation was cemented, and their anti-Catholic character became more, not less, intense. The years between 1828 and 1832 were ones of retrenchment and redefinition for the Irish evangelical movement generally, and certain trends began to take shape in this period that would bear fruit in the following decades. The most significant for our purposes was the trend towards the concentration of resources along the western seaboard. The impoverished condition of the western counties coupled with the continued dominance of Irish (as in Wales and Scotland, the use of the native language as an instrument of conversion had been in use in Ireland since early in the century) and, above all, the shortage of Catholic clerical manpower, all appeared to indicate that the area would be more conducive to evangelisation. Aligned with this shift westwards was the development of another novelty in the evangelical arsenal, the 'colony' or settlement which would function both as a refuge for converts and a base for missionary expansion. As part of this new offensive of the 1830s, and in response to what was seen as the government's endorsement of Catholic resurgence, an intensive propaganda campaign was simultaneously undertaken to alert the British public to the dangers that lay in store for the kingdom, and for the Protestants of Ireland in particular, from the threatened ascendancy of the Catholic establishment.'

The founding of the Protestant Colonisation Society in 1830 bore witness to the increasingly combative ambitions of the supporters of the evangelical crusade. Besides functioning as refuges for persecuted converts, the colonies were envisaged as economically self-sufficient communities which would demonstrate to the surrounding areas the benefits of the traditional Protestant virtues of cleanliness, industry, and good management. But their chief function was to operate as

missionary centres from which the surrounding areas could be evangelised. During the early 1830s a small number of colonies were established in places like Aughkeely, Co. Donegal, and Kilmcague, Co. Kildare where one hundred families were said to have been settled before the Famine.' It was the experiments at Dingle and Achill, however, begun in 1831 and 1834 respectively, that really attracted the attention of the public. These were large-scale operations that planted deep roots and made a considerable impact on their respective localities.

The people behind the founding of the colonies, the Rev. Edward Nangle in Achill and the Rev. Charles Gayer in Dingle were connected with the evangelical wing of the Church of Ireland, and in both cases the critical factor in getting operations underway was the co-operation they were able to draw on from local clergymen and landlords. In the case of Dingle, certainly, key local support was provided to the Rev. Gayer by the Protestant rector of Dingle, the Rev. Thomas Chute Goodman, a fluent native speaker whose family was held in the highest regard by local Catholics." The case of the Rev. Edward Nangle and the Achill Colony was even more striking, since Achill was part of the diocese currently presided over by the most staunch evangelical on the Episcopal bench of the Church of Ireland, the Rev. Power le Poer Trench of Tuam."

Substantial material benefits rewarded those who joined the colonies and converts were said to enjoy comfortable homes, rent-free land, regular salaries if they were teachers, and career opportunities for their children. There was a great deal of dispute over who actually inhabited the colonies and local people repeatedly stressed to visitors that the occupants were not locals but converts brought in from different parts of Ireland. What most angered local people was the abundance of money the colony organisers appeared to have had access to, which allowed them to purchase the best available land and to provide, through regular employment and education, opportunities for advancement that were pitifully scarce in rural Ireland." But people could take advantage of such opportunities only at the cost of complete

ostracisation by their former neighbours, which was effected through the use of 'exclusive dealing', an early form of the boycott in which local people would refuse to buy from or sell to converts.

The source of the most bitter controversy associated with the colonies, however, was their capacity to provide material relief in times of dearth, a practice interpreted by critics as preying on the vulnerability of the starving and destitute. This was not a new phenomenon. At the height of the 'Second Reformation' in 1826-7 when mass conversions were being reported on the Farnham Estate in Co. Cavan, it was repeatedly charged that conversions took place because of the hardship and privation brought about by a localised economic depression." The dispensing of relief, therefore, whether public or private, was second only to education as a weapon in the battle for the minds and hearts of the Irish poor. Following the passage of the emancipation bill, priests at the local level became increasingly combative in their efforts to prevent Protestants from dominating local committees entrusted with relief funds, particularly in areas where evangelical missions were entrenched." To what degree were they justified in their fears? It was certainly an outbreak of famine and cholera that first attracted the attentions of the Rev. Edward Nangle to west Mayo in 1831. And it was during the same crisis in Dingle that the baneful term 'souper' first entered popular usage. It was said to have originated when a benevolent lady set up a soup kitchen and the local priest forbade his parishioners to have anything to do with it, referring to the dispensers of relief as 'Soupers'."

By the 1840s the colonies at Achill and Dingle were permanent fixtures on the western landscape, with cottages, schools, dispensaries, and even, in the case of Achill, a hotel to accommodate tourists. Besides whatever advantages they brought to these remote districts in the form of employment and tourism, their presence heightened controversy of every kind. Seldom a month went by without reports in the local press of bible readers and preachers being attacked, or of persons being fined or bound to the peace because of sectarian incidents. Major law cases ensued when cases were

taken against journalists and newspaper proprietors for allegedly libellous accounts of what was going on in the colonies. The evangelical press in Britain carried frequent accounts of the persecution suffered by converts because of exclusive dealing and the violence instigated against evangelical missionaries by the priests. Publicity and notoriety of this kind ensured that the colonies were a source of fascination for foreign visitors who came to observe what benefits the light of the Bible was bringing to the benighted inhabitants of the west of Ireland. Among the famous visitors to have left accounts of their visits to Achill, for example, were the travel writers Mr and Mrs Samuel Carter Hall, and the American philanthropist Mrs Asenath Nicholson.

As a result of the work underway at the colonies, the phenomenon of 'souperism' or the doling out of material advantages in exchange for the transfer of denominational allegiance was already a familiar one on the eve of the Famine. Shortly after the onset of the potato blight and the threat of widespread starvation in 1845-6, however, a new wave of proselytism was unleashed which involved a more explicit and intense campaign of evangelisation and the founding of a new organisation, the Society for the Irish Church Missions, which focused specifically on Connemara. What set the new operation apart from those already underway in the west was that fact that it was organised and funded from Britain. In terms of its choice of location and objectives, and the support and co-operation received from local clergymen and landlords, however, it actually differed little from what was going on in Dingle and Achill.

The choice of Connemara as a centre for the work of the Irish Church Missions was no accident. A remote and unknown region until the turn of the century, it had only recently been opened to the influences of the modern world. The years of the Napoleonic wars brought great prosperity to the area, however, and evidence of rapid modernisation could be seen in the appearance of new estates, roads, and villages, and even a 'capital' town in Clifden. Estate owners that might have scorned the bleak and impoverished west in the eighteenth century now rushed to take up residence in

the currently fashionable romantic periphery, often equipped with the latest ideas on developing the rural economy and more often accompanied by wives even more ardently committed to the philosophy of improvement." The Blakes of Renvyle, the D'Arcys of Clifden Castle, and the Martins of Ballinahinch, for example, all fall into this category. As early as 1824 the record of the Protestant gentry in Connemara was such that the area was described in the liberal *Dublin Evening Post* as being 'infected with the most virulent description of the biblical mania'."

The source of the infection complained about in the *Dublin Evening Post* could be traced to the influence of 'improving' landlords' wives like Martha Louisa Blake of Renvyle, whose dispute with the local priest over the setting up of a school on her husband's estate had eventually ended up in the papers. The wives of John D'Arcy and Richard Martin similarly occupied themselves with education and philanthropy and introduced the schools of the Kildare Place Society and the London Hibernian Society to Clifden and Ballinahinch. What allowed or perhaps inspired these women to pursue their ambition to the degree they did was the support of local Church of Ireland clergymen sympathetic to the cause, and the prevalence of such clergymen in Connemara from the 1820s on was due directly to the influence of Archbishop Trench, who made it a policy to fill whatever clerical offices fell vacant in the Tuam diocese with men committed to spreading the reformation among the Catholic population. The joining of Killala and Achonry to the Tuam diocese in 1835 expanded the area of his influence in this regard, and his legacy was further strengthened when, on his death in 1839, he was succeeded by the Rev. Thomas Plunket, a churchman even more passionately and single-mindedly committed to the reformation crusade."

By 1836 the results of Archbishop Trench's policy could be seen to good effect in Connemara in the work of three of his protégés, Rev. Anthony Thomas of Ballinakill, Rev. Mark A. Foster, and Rev. Brabazon Ellis. In 1836 these men, along with James and Hyacinth D'Arcy, the sons of John D'Arcy of Clifden Castle, and Colonel A. Thomson of Salruck, estab-

lished the Connemara Christian Committee to advance the work of reformation. By 1839 there were plans underway to develop a colony. The trustees were already in possession of land to build a church and school, as well as houses for teachers and clergymen, and had been offered a lease of an additional 500 acres for further development." By this stage, also, it is clear that they had attracted the attention and support of interested parties in Dublin. At a meeting of the Society for the Conversion of the Jews in Dublin in 1839, the Rev. Thomas was introduced to the Rev. Alexander Dallas, an English clergyman whose name would become synonymous with Connemara and the Society for the Irish Church Missions."

The Rev. Alexander Dallas was rector of Wonston in Hampshire, and a subscriber to the particular strain of evangelical thought known as pre-millennialism. In brief, the adherents of this doctrine carried their literal interpretation of the Bible to the extreme that they believed the events of human history were to occur according to divine providence, and furthermore that the sequence of their occurrence was outlined in a coded form in the scriptures, particularly the Book of Revelation. The millenium would occur after certain conditions had been fulfilled, and foremost among these conditions were the conversion of the Jews and the heathens, and the destruction of the 'Anti-Christ' of the *Book of Revelation*, which was understood to be the Roman Catholic Church. The growth of this strain of religious thought had been on the increase since the 1790s, when the world-shaking events of the French revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon provided abundant material for interpreters of 'signs of the times'. The vigorous revival of European Catholicism in the post-Napoleonic period, the resurgence of Irish Catholicism which fuelled the popular campaign for emancipation, the growth of political liberalism and the rise of the Tractarian movement in Britain during the 1830s were all prophetically interpreted as heralding the coming apocalypse."

The most important theologian of pre-millennialism in Britain was the Rev. Edward Bickersteth of the Church M's-

sionary Society, also resident in Wonston and a close friend of Alexander Dallas. Bickersteth had clearly been influenced in his thinking by men like Mortimer O'Sullivan and Robert McGhee who were products of the combative and embattled world of Irish Protestantism, and who had stridently and successfully carried their anti-Catholic polemics to Britain in the early and mid-1830s. In 1836 the Rev. Bickersteth had explicitly identified the Catholic church as the 'Babylon' of the *Book of Revelation*, and a clear convergence began to develop between the theology of English pre-millennialist evangelicals and the politics-driven anti-Catholicism of their Irish counterparts.² The consequence was a united effort to contain the threat of Catholicism, and particularly to undo the legislative measures which not only had granted political freedom, but were actually fostering the 'growth of popery' by providing public funds for the endowment of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth. What the pre-millennialists sought was nothing less than the complete extirpation of Catholic influence from any part of public life in Britain or Ireland, and the eradication of Catholicism as the religion of the majority population in Ireland on grounds that it was the cause of political subversion as well as economic backwardness.

When the liberal government decided to increase the Maynooth endowment in 1845, it appeared that the very rulers of the country were actively countenancing the triumph of the Anti-Christ. Evangelicals of every stripe united to oppose the plan and public opinion was consumed with the 'subject on which society appears to have gone mad', as Harriet Martineau described it. Given the disposition of pre-millennialist evangelicals like Dallas and Bickersteth to attach prophetic import to current events, it is small wonder that they interpreted the news coming out of Ireland in 1846 as yet another emphatic sign of divine providence in England's hour of peril. To this way of thinking, the Famine was nothing less than a punishment sent by God to chastise a sinful people.³ The duty of the pre-millennial evangelical in this instance was clear: it was to use the opportunity to help fulfil God's plan for the universe by making Ireland part of

his kingdom governed by the true religion of the Bible, on the one hand, and on the other to secure eternal salvation for the souls of the afflicted by wrenching them from the grasp of Rome before they finally abandoned the world.

Dallas' connections in Connemara and his ambitions to sponsor a mission there were already in existence when the first news about the failure of the potato began to break in the autumn of 1845. A gift of £3,000 from an English supporter allowed him to proceed with his plans, the first step of which was to use the new postal service to distribute 90,000 copies of a tract entitled *A Voice From Heaven to Ireland* in January, 1846. Similar tracts with titles such as *Irishmen's Rights* and *The Food of Man* were distributed in the same manner in the following months. After a visit to Ireland in August of the same year, he returned to Wonston and wrote letters to the *Morning Herald* calling for the setting up of a 'Special Fund for the Spiritual Exigencies of Ireland'. As funds accumulated in response to this appeal a committee was set up headed by the Duke of Manchester with Dallas and the Rev. Bickersteth as honorary secretaries.⁴ These funds provided the financial backing for the missionary crusade that Dallas was now set to embark upon.

Dallas began his operations in Connemara in the district of Castlekerke near Oughterard where the usual combination of support from clergymen and a landlord's wife helped get him started. The urgency of his crusade was obvious from the beginning. As he wanted to get as many missionaries into the field as possible there was no time to develop colonies or settlements; instead his strategy revolved around the spread of 'mission stations' manned by individual clergymen or preachers entrusted with funds to advance the work of education and evangelisation. With the influence of landlords like Lord Roden and the Duke of Manchester behind him, the Rev. Dallas was in a particularly strong position to appeal for the support of the diocesan superior. Obliging Bishop Thomas Plunket ordained two Irish-speaking converts, the Rev. J. B. O'Callaghan who had been in training for some time in Wonston, and the Rev. Roderick Ryder, a former Catholic priest. O'Callaghan shortly had a

string of mission stations around Lough Corrib and into the mountains at Cornamona and Kilmilkin. Roderick Ryder was despatched back to his former parish of Rooveagh on the Errismore peninsula about ten miles south-west of Clifden. Between the work of these convert evangelists and resident gentry and clergymen like the D'Arcys and Rev. Thomas Connemara was soon saturated with mission stations, schools, tract distributors and scripture readers, all funded from money raised in England by Dallas and Blekenstall. In the Clifden area alone in 1848, for example, there were mission stations at Errislannon and Errismore, Ballyconree and Ballinakill, and Sallerna and Rossadillisk near Cleggan, and in many of these locations Protestant service was available every Sunday.

Most of the evidence concerning the proselytism of the famine years suggest that the new offensive began to gain serious momentum in the spring of 1848. The speed with which Dallas had organised the Connemara missions created a momentum that spread all over Connaught and even farther afield, to the extent that the Rev. Edward Bickersteth was now devoting his entire fundraising efforts to the missionary cause in Ireland. The infusion of money to set up schools and pay the salaries of teachers and bible readers had an immediate effect on an area that was one of the worst hit in the country in terms of the effects of the Famine. So successful was the first year of the campaign that a new organisation, the Society for the Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics, was established in March, 1849. By 1850 the number of Protestant congregations in the area was such that the supporters of the mission were describing it as the breakthrough that evangelicals had been awaiting for decades. In explaining the rapid progress made in such a short period, it was claimed that the effects of the Famine had finally made people realise the errors of the Roman Catholic faith, and their disillusionment had finally served to break the traditional bonds with the priesthood.

The most convincing evidence of the true picture of conditions in the west at this time, the sufferings inflicted by disease and starvation as well as the workings of evangelical

missionaries, comes, not surprisingly, from the letters of Catholic priests pleading for help from the relief committee organised by Dr Daniel Murray, the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. It would be hard to draw a more intense picture of horror than that described by priests writing from remote districts of west Galway and Mayo in 1848 and 1849. The combined effects of starvation, disease, and mass evictions had reduced the west to a charnel house of death during these years. In one letter after another to the Archbishop's relief fund came accounts of the starving and the diseased wandering about like walking skeletons, 'without indoor or outdoor relief' as one correspondent noted. Priests described the levelling of cottages by the hundred and deaths by the thousand in their individual parishes. Several letters from the most stricken areas described the operations of proselytising agencies with money and food in abundance for distribution in schools or at Sunday service. Consider the evidence of a Fr Flannelly of Ballinakill (near Clifden) in 1849, for example, who admitted that 'not a mile of the public road can be travelled without seeing a dead body, as the poor are homeless and if they show any sign of sickness are thrown out of the poorhouses'. Fever and dysentery, he claimed, 'the sure precursors of cholera' were in every hut and cabin and there was no medical aid to be had in such a wild and extensive district. Half a pound of Indian meal per household per day was the sole food of the poor, and though men were offering to work a whole day for two pints of meal, there was no work to be had. In the midst of this situation Fr Flannelly said that proselytisers accompanied by apostate priests and lay people were going from cabin to cabin 'proffering food and money and clothing to the naked and starving on condition of their becoming members of their conventicles'.

Echoing the opinion of Bishop Doyle of Kildare and Leighlin at the height of the Second Reformation in the 1820s, Fr Flannelly considered this situation more injurious and oppressive than the penal laws of the previous century. While this opinion enjoyed a wide consensus among fellow clerics in other parts of the west, few of them denied the

claims of evangelical missionaries that their schools were full, and their Sunday services well attended. A Fr Gallagher of Achill, for example, admitted that 'poverty has compelled the greatest number of the population to send their children to Nangle's proselytising villainous schools; he has at this moment one thousand children of the Catholics of the parish attending ... and so he can, for they have no other refuge. They are dying of hunger, and rather than die, they have submitted ...'" To the north of Achill, Fr Martin Hart of Ballycastle spoke of how his parishioners 'once honest and religious, are now the reverse', and that proselytising societies 'with plenty of meal and money, have their agents busy in the area, trying to win the people from the faith, and when they give say, "I am not now fit to be their priest".'" What survived in the popular memory about the proselytising activities of the worst years of the famine corroborates the contemporary evidence of the priests. An elderly resident of Clifden interviewed by Stephen Gwynn in the early years of the twentieth century, for example, recalled how the expression 'Silver Monday' was used in Clifden to describe the shilling that was given out at the D'Arcy dower house at Glenown to those who had attended service at the Church of Ireland the day before. 'I saw them myself,' the old man recounted, 'blue with hunger in their houses and they had to go.'"

As there was no shortage of people willing to attend service or send their children to proselytising schools, neither did there appear to be a want of employees willing to work as bible readers, teachers, and tract distributors. A nun from the Presentation Convent in Galway, for example, spoke of the 600 pupils that were being prepared by proselytising agents in the national school in Rahoon to supply the workhouses of Connaught." Similarly, the Presbyterian missionary, Edward Dill, in describing conditions in the west at this time referred to 'applications from the daughters of gentlemen, couched in terms enough to make the heart bleed, begging to be made teachers in our industrial schools at £20 a year'.⁷ It was not only starving peasants, apparently, who relied on funds raised by missionary agencies during

these terrible years.

If there were people who succumbed to the salaries and food provided by proselytising agencies, there were others like the parishioners of Fr Michael Enwright of Castletownhere in west Cork, who were 'not yielding an inch, except when driven to it.'" But this was a rare voice, and the vast majority of the letters relating to this subject in the Murray papers claim that people were driven by starvation to 'take the soup' as the saying had it. From the evidence it appears that the years 1848-50 were those in which conversions occurred, but even the most supportive among those who investigated the phenomenon suggest that the numbers involved never amounted to more than several hundred in areas where missionary activity was most intense, as opposed to the wholesale capitulation of entire communities that was being heralded in the evangelical press. In 1852 John Forbes was told by a 'respectable local Catholic' of Clifden that three to four hundred adults had been converted in the town and the adjoining parishes of Omev and Ballindoon, an area listed on the census of the previous year as having a population of almost 11,000." In his study of the Kilmoe parish of west Cork, where missionary agencies had been as active as they had been in Mayo, Galway, and Kerry during the Famine and indeed before, Fr Patrick Hickey, basing his evidence on the 1861 census, has estimated that there had been an absolute increase of 492 Protestants resident in the parish since 1834." If the conversions were not at the floodtide level the apologists liked to claim, neither were they figments of the evangelical imagination as hostile Catholic critics like Archbishop MacHale of Tuam repeatedly observed.

After about 1850 when it appeared that the crisis years were finally at an end and the full scope of what the evangelicals had attempted in the west became obvious, there was a predictable backlash from the Catholic hierarchy and clergy. It was all the more intense because of the simultaneous uproar in England over the 'Papal Aggression' episode associated with the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill and the efforts of the papacy to re-establish the Catholic hierarchy in

Britain. What was happening in the west of Ireland was now seen as crucial to the great struggle between the forces of light and the 'Anti-Christ' of Popery, and the battle literally shifted to Connemara in 1851 with the arrival of Henry Wilberforce to head up the Catholic Defence Association and expose the fraudulent claims of the proselytisers. As the youngest son of William Wilberforce, the famous philanthropist and founding father of English evangelicalism, Henry Wilberforce was an unlikely candidate to end up in such a situation. His conversion to Catholicism as a result of his involvement in the Oxford movement speaks volumes about the seriousness with which religion was viewed in the hey-day of Victorian Britain. Wilberforce set up his base of operations in Oughterard and made a point of investigating the colonies and the charges of bribery and intimidation associated with the evangelical missionary crusade. His condemnation of the entire movement was visceral; the granting of land and work to converts he dismissed as 'a demoralising system of wholesale bribery'. "He went further and charged that intimidation was regularly employed by agents and landlords who used their economic power to force parents to send children to evangelical schools, and to prevent the granting of sites for national schools on their estates."

Valuable though it may have been in terms of the authors' family background and nationality, the evidence of Henry Wilberforce was hardly needed once the Catholic bishops began to take action to thwart the advances of the missions in the west. Outspoken bishops like John MacHale of Tuam and Edward Maginn of Derry did not hesitate to use the language of extermination to describe what had been attempted, and this attitude was quickly conveyed to the world of popular opinion by nationalist newspapers, especially the *Freeman's Journal*. When the returns of the 1851 census revealed that the population had declined by a million and three quarters the *Freeman's Journal* did not flinch from associating those who would eliminate Catholicism with the extermination of Catholics through hunger."

Ridicule as much as outrage was the weapon of choice

that the *Freeman* wielded with deadly force against those whose stock in trade was the conversion of Catholics. In October of 1851 the paper carried an extensive account of a ceremony which took place in the Protestant church at Dromkeen, Co. Tipperary, where Bishop Robert Daly of Cashel confirmed a church full of converts assembled by a local clergyman, the Rev. Darby. The converts, it appeared, had shown up for the occasion as they had been promised new clothing in return. They received the clothing and went through with the ceremony as agreed. The following Sunday, however, they appeared at Mass at the Catholic chapel situated nearby (sporting the new clothes naturally) and publicly claimed that hunger and cold was what made them engage in the fraud. The Rev. Darby set about taking legal action against the individuals involved with the intent of getting the clothes back, but the 'converts' would have none of it as they claimed they had fulfilled their part of the bargain and were entitled to their reward!"

Ridicule of this kind no doubt provided for public entertainment, but ridicule and verbal condemnation were minor weapons in the Catholic arsenal when it came to preventing further inroads by the evangelicals in the 1850s. In fact the counter-attack of the Catholic Church, once it got underway in the west, bore all the hallmarks of a religious blitzkrieg: an initial bombardment in the form of episcopal tours in which massive numbers received the sacrament of confirmation, followed by parish missions organised by the Vincentian and Redemptorist preaching orders, and finally the founding of permanent establishment in the form of convents and monasteries in the larger towns of the west and sometimes even in villages. The combined impact of this 'counter-reformation' on the western counties has never received the attention it deserves, but Emmet Larkin's research on the role of parish missions in enshrining the 'devotional revolution' at the local level in the latter half of the nineteenth century gives some indication of the significance of what might justifiably be called an Irish counter-reformation."

The effects of the proselytising campaign of the late

1840s and early 1850s on the Church of Ireland is more difficult to estimate. Unquestionably the reputation of the established church suffered because of the ambitions of evangelical sympathisers on the episcopal bench like Thomas Plunket of Tuam and Robert Daly of Cashel. It was the opinion of one observer in the west in 1854 that 'the Protestant establishment has been more fatally damaged by the soup system than by all the attacks of Catholics and Radicals put together.' Nevertheless, when the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland was finally effected in 1869, it was more a consequence of events in the political world than the particular anti-Protestant animus dredged up by the evangelical crusade.

Surprisingly, given the bitterness of the famine years and the strength of the Catholic backlash in the 1850s, the evangelical crusade does not appear to have damaged relations between Protestants and Catholics in the west of Ireland. While the Irish Church Missions and the Achill and Dingle colonies were still operating in the late 1850s and into the 1860s the reports of court cases were still full of local sectarian incidents involving violence against converts and bible readers. Yet the more permanent and constructive features introduced by the evangelicals often succeeded in winning the respect and admiration of Catholics. It is quite clear from the evidence of contemporaries that ordinary people were capable of differentiating between genuinely charitable evangelical Christians and the bitterness of sectarian prejudice. The career of Dr Neason Adams of Achill is a case in point. Adams was a medical doctor who had joined the Rev. Nangle's colony soon after its foundation and spent his whole life ministering to the health needs of the local people, for which he was held in great esteem locally. Similarly, the couple who ran the Ballyconree Orphanage near Clifden in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Dr and Mrs Purkis, were held in high regard both as neighbours and philanthropists; a former resident of the village who clearly remembered them described them in the most positive terms as 'lovely Protestant people'.⁶ The account of Allannah Heather of her youth in the

Errislannon Peninsula outside Clifden clearly indicates that the most staunch evangelical principles of her two aunts, Jane and Edith, did not prevent them from having the warmest regard for their Catholic neighbours, a regard that was certainly returned in kind.⁷ When Stephen Gwynn visited Connemara in 1909 he was told by a Protestant clergyman that whatever sectarian violence had occurred in connection with conversions and 'souperism' that 'no Protestant was ever persecuted in Connemara as a Protestant.'

The most damaging legacy of the evangelical crusade in the west was the poisoning of relations between the Catholic clergy and those Protestants, whether clerical or lay, who sought to involve themselves in improving social conditions. The work of philanthropists like James Ellis and James Hack Tuke was looked upon with suspicion by Catholic bishops, fearful that Protestant involvement in schemes like the setting up of light industry or assisted emigration in the west betokened an effort to usurp the authority of the Catholic clergy or to clear the countryside of Catholics. As a consequence of the proselytising missions, subversion was everywhere suspected, and was equally resorted to as a means of retaliation. When the estate that had been developed by James Ellis at Letterfrack came on the market in 1882 (with the express provision of the current owner, a virulent anti-Catholic, that it not fall into Catholic hands) it was purchased by an agent acting for the Archbishop of Tuam. It was then entrusted to the Christian Brothers of Artane to be developed as an industrial school.⁸ What had been a showcase of Quaker philanthropy in the mid-nineteenth century, situated in the midst of the most glorious scenery of north Connemara, was thus transformed into an institution whose very name struck terror into the hearts of Irish children in the twentieth century and which occupies a place of its own in the literature of modern Ireland. The fate of Letterfrack is a fitting metaphor for the contribution of men like Alexander Dallas and Edward Nangle to the progress of events in the west of Ireland: in their attempts to destroy what they saw as Catholic tyranny they virtually brought it into creation. In the very recent past Letterfrack has undergone yet another