

Brother Edwin Bannon: Educator and Scholar

The Prelude (1917- 1930)

[Br. David Scarpa.](#)

Extracts from the opening chapter of a book to be published in 2009.

The First World War had still a year to run when Victor Bannon was born at 132 Harris Street in Bradford on 5th October 1917. The wool town of Bradford, like every other city, town and village in England, had lost many in this dreadful war.

Victor's parents, Mary and Thomas were of Irish descent, but born in Bradford. Mary Manogue was the only daughter in her family among six sons. She married Thomas Bannon, a tailor by trade, when she was about 18 years of age. Their first four children were boys; Tom, the eldest, became a joiner, Jack an electrician and Vincent and Terry worked in the wool mills. Sadly the next five babies died in childbirth. Then there were two more boys, Jim, and two years later, Victor the youngest. Mrs. Mildred Auty described her grandmother as 'Such a lovely person by nature' who played her role in keeping all the family together as a very caring mother. Mildred notes that Mary was a very clever woman all her life, although without much schooling.

Victor attended St. Mary's Infants School in Bradford run by the Sisters of the Cross and Passion. In 1924, at the age of seven, Victor joined his older brother Jim as a pupil of the De La Salle Brothers at St. Mary's Boys' School in Bradford. Br. Michael McGrath had been appointed that year as Director and Headmaster, Br. Gelasius Lewis, another McGrath had been teaching at the school since 1914 and there were probably about six other Brothers teaching at St. Mary's at that time.

I am grateful to Br. Ignatius Martin for a touching account of the origins of this school. In 1900, the year John Baptist de La Salle was canonized, Canon Simpson, Parish Priest of St. Mary's, after much effort, received a promise that De La Salle Brothers would staff his parish school. Canon Simpson persuaded the children of the parish to pray before a life-sized statue of St. De La Salle in the church every Sunday after the Children's Mass¹.

Their prayers were answered. A community of six De La Salle Brothers opened an Elementary School in Bradford in 1900 with an intake of 340 boys. In the founding Community was Br. Lewis Benedict Feore who became Director in 1905 and remained

in this position until 1914. Br. Benedict was a remarkable man who later became Provincial of the Anglo-Irish Province and was awarded an OBE in 1948 in recognition of his work in education.

St. Mary's catered for children who were destined, for the most part, to become mill workers or factory hands, and therefore, training in manual labour was an important function of the school. His Majesty's Inspectors of Schools visited St. Mary's between 4th and 13th July 1923, the year before Victor Bannon became a pupil there. The subjects taught included Arithmetic, Composition, Poetry, History and Geography, Music, Science and Drawing. The inspectors judged these subjects to be taught in a 'fairly satisfactory' way. During the six years that Victor was a pupil at St. Mary's more than twelve of his teachers were Brothers. The Director of the Community and Head of St. Mary's school was Br. Thomas McGrath, Br. Lewis Gallagher taught Victor the full range of subjects in Standards I and II and possibly Br. Leonard Tuohy in Standards IV and V and Br. Baldwin in Standard VI.

In June 1925, Cardinal Bourne visited Bradford as part of the centenary celebrations for St. Mary's parish. He visited the school and addressed the boys, expressing his great pleasure in the work being done, not just for the boys in school but also for former pupils.

There was, at this time, a wave of enthusiasm in favour of technical instruction in an endeavour to apply the principles of Froebel and Pestalozzi. The *Slójd* principles figured prominently in the syllabus of many schools, fostering a somewhat idealistic concept of manual work and emphasizing the importance of training the hand and eye to develop creativity. It is, therefore, not surprising to find a Brother in charge of a special wood-work centre at St. Mary's. Br. Baldwin Henry Fitzpatrick arrived with Br. Benedict in 1900 from Manchester and gained some fame as the great woodwork teacher in charge of the Centre. The boys worked at these courses for three years in their school programme¹. Similar courses were also offered to adults in evening classes.

Br. Baldwin became Director of the Bradford Community in 1933. He retired to Inglewood, Kintbury in September 1945 and died there at the age of 79 in

¹Martin, I., 2001. The coming of the Brothers to Yorkshire -2, The Bradford Community: 1900, *De La Salle Great Britain*,

¹Battersby W.J., 1954. *The De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain*, Burns & Oates, London, p.81.

1948, a few months before Bro. Edwin arrived in Kintbury as a founder member of the St. Cassian's Juniorate teaching community.

A Religious Sister, the grandniece of Br. Baldwin asked Br. Joseph Hendron if he could find some information on her great-uncle whom she never really knew because she was only a small girl when he died. Br. Joseph approached Br. Edwin, whom he knew to have been Br. Baldwin's student at St. Mary's Bradford in the 1920s. Br. Joseph regrets now that he did not keep a copy of the piece that Edwin wrote for her about his woodwork teacher. It was so typical of Edwin's appreciation of a person. Br. Joseph does remember the part where Edwin expresses his consternation as a young boy, to be called out of Br. Baldwin's class by the Director and to be considered worthy to be asked if he had ever thought of becoming a Brother. Edwin never lost that esteem and reverence for his vocation as a De La Salle Brother and the honour he felt in being called to it.

In a letter to Br. Joseph Hendron in February 1998, Edwin wrote of his school days:

Your letter to hand this morning and what a pleasing surprise it brought telling me that you had recently met a grandniece of Brother Baldwin, a towering hero of my boyhood, a De La Salle Brother whose very presence and ways made me long to be a De La Salle Brother myself, from the moment when, aged 7, I entered St. Mary's Primary School, East Parade, Bradford, where he was teaching. I have always thought that it was a kindly gesture of Providence, and not a mere coincidence that it was during one of Brother Baldwin's lessons that, five years later (when I was therefore a fledgling of not quite 13) Brother Michael McGrath, the Headmaster entered the room, had a word with Brother Baldwin (who smiled the smile of someone in the know) and called me out of the room. Immediately outside the door Brother Michael said to me, "Would you like to become a De La Salle Brother?" I couldn't believe my ears. I had never voiced such a dream, in school or out, not even at home, because I had never dared even to think that such a possibility was within even sighting distance for me. "Ooh, yes Brother!" was my reply when I had got my breath back.

In a letter to John Muir, the elderly Br. Edwin again recalls his schooldays and gives us another glimpse into the character of the young Victor Bannon:

I mentioned Yeames's *When did you last see your father?* and Poynter's *Faithful unto death*. I knew the former was in the Walker and was pleased to hear from you last evening that so is the latter. I expect neither is deemed very

great art nowadays but as I mentioned, I associate both with my quite early boyhood. When I transferred, at the age of 7, from St. Mary's Infants School, Bradford (Sisters of the Cross and Passion), to the senior department (De La Salle Brothers), believe it or not (for it is very *mirabile dictum* – God bless whatever enlightened FSC was responsible!) those very humble classroom walls were adorned with very good pictures!!! Two of them made a particularly strong impression on my seven-year-old gaze. I could (if my memory is not flattering me) even then sense the Yeames picture represented an invasion into the innocence of two children; and the Poynter, not surprisingly, appealed to the idealism of my own innocence. I have never lost sight of my memory of those two "story" pictures, but never expected to see the originals of both. And now, thanks to you, I am to have that happy rounding off experience.

This extract reveals something of the sensitivity of the young boy and the deep impression made on his youthful mind of the poignant incidents recorded in the pictures that remained with him into old age. He brought those impressions to mind with a fondness and excitement at the prospect of seeing the original paintings in the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery.

Victor Bannon's school days in Bradford were coming to an end and the significant step that would shape the rest of his life was soon to take place. Br. Albeus Leo, the Director of Vocations, had a chat with Victor about what was entailed in training to become a Brother. Assured of Victor's suitability to begin the Junior Novitiate, Br. Albeus then met with Thomas and Mary, Victor's parents, who agreed that their youngest son should leave home and begin his preparation to become a De La Salle Brother. At the age of 13, in the summer of 1930, Victor took the long journey south to begin his Junior Novitiate in the Berkshire countryside at Inglewood in Kintbury. It was the first step in his life's journey as a Brother of the Christian Schools.

As the train pulled out of Leeds station Victor had already made friends with his companion on the journey, Patrick Cluderay, not just to Kintbury but throughout most of his religious life. This other 13 year old Yorkshire schoolboy would become Br. Hilary. In a tribute to his life-long friend¹, Edwin remembers his mother, hugging Mrs. Cluderay, a much younger woman, weeping on the platform as they waved goodbye to their sons. Patrick tried to cheer up Victor by singing *Happy days are here again*, during the journey south, and Victor tried to smile through his tears.

¹Bannon, E., 1991. "We have been friends together": A Tribute to Brother Hilary, *De La Salle Great Britain*, 4, 6, 154-157.