

Story of a brief investigation into a short-lived venture.

De La Salle Brothers in St. Boniface's College, Plymouth.

Brother James Connolly FSC

The following is an abridged version of an essay on the three years the de La Salle brothers worked in Plymouth in the early nineteen hundreds. It is based on information sent me by Brother Malachy of the Irish Christian brothers, Mr. Kavanagh, present headmaster of St. Boniface's College, Plymouth, Brother Francis Ricousse, archivist of the de La Salle Brothers in France and Brother Alain Houry, archivist of the de La Salle Brothers in Rome.

The article is divided into two parts and will be published in two different issues of Lasallians.

PART ONE

St. Boniface's College was founded by the bishop of Plymouth in 1900, then in 1911 the de La Salle Brothers were invited to manage it. Basilian Fathers had run a school nearby since 1880, and when they left the diocese took its name St. Boniface's College for their newer foundation. The de La Salle brothers ran the school for just three years, 1911 to 1914.

According to documents sent to Brother Francis Ricousse by Brother Alain Houry, "Rome archivist"

"It was in 1911 that eleven de La Salle brothers, ten of the district of Quimper and one Irish de La Salle Brother took charge of St. Boniface's College, 23 Wyndham Square, Plymouth, Devonshire. It was a school founded by the clergy in 1900. By 31 December 1911, the first year of the de La Salle Brothers' management, the school had 80 students of whom 30 were boarders, all grouped into two French and four English classes. After 31 December 1914 there is no further mention of the school in the De La Salle Brothers' archives.

When our brothers left Plymouth in 1914, the diocese again took over the management of the school. The beautifully handwritten history in Rome of our Plymouth venture ends as follows:

The house was closed and the Bishop asked the help of lay people to take over from the

brothers. As the staffing was not complete, the Superior General was asked to allow some brothers to remain behind to help in the take-over. The Superior's answer was that two brothers could remain, but not beyond 25 December 1914.

The same document adds:

The headmaster, Doctor Davies, was too frequently absent and had to be replaced after a few weeks. It was then that the Bishop first asked the Irish Christian Brothers to take over the school.

The "*Educational Record 1938*" of the Irish Christian Brothers indicates that it was in 1916, that Dr. Burton, Bishop of Clifton and Dr. Keily, Bishop of Plymouth, called on the Irish Christian Brothers in their school in Bristol to discuss transferring the management of St. Boniface's to them. Following that visit, there was correspondence between Bishop John Keily of Plymouth and Brother Stanislaus Roche headmaster of the Irish Christian Brother school in Bristol. There was therefore a two year gap between the de La Salles' leaving and the Bishop's first contacting the Irish Christian Brothers.

Mgr Keily's letter is quoted in The Christian Brothers' "*Educational Record 1938*", sent to me by Brother Malachy, archivist of the Irish Christian Brothers, at the request of the present headmaster of St. Boniface's College, Mr. D. Kavanagh, former Irish Christian Brother. It reads as follows:

Dear Brother Superior,

I have a great favour to ask of you. At Plymouth I am holding together St Boniface's College, which is being worked by Secular Priests. Some years ago I put it under the management of French Christian Brothers, and although the personnel of the masters was very pleasing to me, all sorts of foreign boys were brought over and the regime became impossible. They saw it and left.

Now I am sure a little sense could give us in Plymouth a Secondary School of 120 boys.....Dear Brother Superior try to

help me, for we are hard put to it sometimes in England.

Yours faithfully in Xt. + JOHN KEILY.

From the above letter it is clear that the de La Salle brothers had been running the school not only for local boys, but were accepting foreigners, which was not the plan of the bishop. They realised this was not what the bishop wanted, so that was one of the reasons why they left. In fact in 1911, the Brothers brought with them from their school in Brest, 23 French boys. to join the 37 English boys still in the school. Ten Spanish boys also arrived.

When the De La Salle brothers left in 1914, some clergy and lay persons took over the management of St. Boniface's. After two years however, the bishop was thinking of alternative staffing as can be seen from the letter quoted above. Irish Christian Brother Roche informed Dr. Keily that he would consider the proposal. After consultation with his colleagues however, Brother Roche had to let the bishop know that it was impossible to send brothers that year, nor could he give assurances as to when they might be available. To that the bishop replied:

I am sorry to have bothered you with my anxieties and must thank you for trying to help me. As our case is urgent and as you are committed to your own necessities, we must let the matter drop altogether. My regard for your community makes it all the more a matter of regret.

The "Educational Record 1938" continues:

This closed the business just then, and the Presentation Brothers were invited to carry on the school.

By 1925 however the school buildings in Wyndham Square had become too small and were also in need of repairs beyond the financial means of the Presentation Brothers, so once again a request was received from the diocese by the Irish Christian Brothers to take over the school. After long discussions as to financial arrangements, the transfer of the school to Beaconsfield House was arranged, the Sisters of Nazareth foregoing a prior interest in that building. Finally the Irish Christian Brothers did take over the school in 1931 and it remains under their trusteeship to this day.

I was interested in finding out details of how the De La Salle Brothers actually ran St. Boniface's. This was a personal interest principally, as mentioned

above, and I did not intend going deeply into the history of the part we played. I have relied on material sent me by archivist friends. However, I have not been sent any correspondence between the bishop and the brothers concerning the French brothers' take-over. A note appended by Brother Alain Houry, Rome archivist, to the list of brothers of each of the three Plymouth years, says:

We have three files (NH 153) on Plymouth with a plan of the establishment, the prospectus of the school for 1911, the financial accounts of 1912 and several letters (mostly to or from Brother Visitor and the bishop of Plymouth)

Letters therefore between the superiors of the De La Salle Brothers and the Bishop are available for inspection and would doubtless shed light on negotiations for the brothers to take over and later for them to leave St. Boniface's College. Even without those letters, we know how the Institute could suddenly supply a staff of eleven brothers for the bishop's school. The 1904 Law of France forbidding members of religious orders to run schools left many French brothers without work. As at that time, there were over ten thousand brothers in France, many of them left their country immediately whilst others awaited the opportunity to leave it when an opening elsewhere became available. Of the eleven brothers involved in "our" Plymouth's first year, several had spent four years in America and therefore knew English. Others had followed English courses in France. All had been members of the de La Salle College Saint Louis in Brest, closed by government order in 1907. That school belonged to the brothers's district of Quimper, whereas in 1908, it was French brothers from the neighbouring district of Nantes who had founded St. John's College, Southsea. The Nantans founded a school; the Quimperians took over the administration of a school already in existence. Further factors are mentioned as to why the De La Salles decided to leave the school after just three years. The hand-written notes on the 1913-14 school year say:

Towards the end of that year war broke out between France and Germany. At first England hesitated: Would John Bull declare war or would he remain neutral, protected by his natural rampart, the sea? At the end of the week we learnt that England would join France to fight against the common enemy. The brothers of St. Boniface were all French

so it was not long before they had crossed the Channel to enroll with their compatriots to defend their threatened frontier.

Some indication that events might have been fraught with feeling is seen by the fact that the Brother Superior General did not himself answer the bishop when the latter asked that some brothers be allowed to stay on until the new staff settled in. Brother Superior simply had a message given to his Lordship that two brothers could stay on, but only for the first school term of 1914. (*Le Supérieur General fit repondre*).

Why did the Superior General and not the Brother Visitor of Quimper have an answer sent to the bishop or answer himself? In addition to the war factor the bishop was not keen on there being a large group of foreigners (mostly French and some Spaniards), in his school, which he also considered a minor seminary for young aspirants to the priesthood, who later would continue their studies in Douai, Ostend, Lisbon and Valladolid. An almost complete staff and administration of non-native-

English-speaking brothers might also have been considered a disadvantage. It is true that an Irish Brother James John (Timothy Joseph O'Sullivan) is mentioned as joining the French group from Quimper, but he seems to have gone back after the first year to one of the schools founded by the Irish De La Salles in the north of England, though in 1913 another Irishman, Brother Dotto Sylvestre (Michael McGrath) joined the staff. When the De La Salles left Plymouth, Brother Clotaire Raymond went to Beulah Hill which was not a school of his district, Quimper, but of the District of Nantes. Brother Marcel went to Jersey at a later stage when in 1927 Edouard and he "founded" an English school in the Island. Some tension of the time is hinted at politely by the bishop, when, as quoted above, he wrote:

Some years ago I put it under the management of French Christian Brothers, and although the personnel of the masters was very pleasing to me, all sorts of foreign boys were brought over and the regime became impossible. They saw it and left.

To be concluded next month

St Boniface's RC College

A Specialist Maths & Science comprehensive school for boys in the City of Plymouth

