

Crooked Lines

God writes straight on crooked lines

Part 2a: The Nantes Brothers in England and the subsequent London Province

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The Australian experience recounted by Br. Christian was also a reminder of the problem facing the Superiors since 1904. When the French National Assembly approved the Association Laws forbidding religious congregations to teach within France or its dependencies, it triggered an exodus of teaching Brothers. With some 10,500 Brothers in town and village schools across the length and breadth of France, the desperate issue was where to place all the exiles. It gives some perspective to the plantations made in England in 1908 in London and Southsea (Nantes), and Plymouth (Quimper), and incidentally to the arrival of their Novitiates in Dover and the Channel Islands. If the French Brothers had had no chance of proving their competence in Australia, how did their counterparts fare in England? In his Memoirs *The Nantes Brothers in England (WW II)* and *Heyday of Teaching Brothers (London District 1945-1958)*, Br. Damian has celebrated the Nantes achievement. However, it came at a price which should be identified: a closed system of training, and no clear sense of mission. It took more than half a century to adapt to the new surroundings, and some of the effects are still with us today.

My interest in the issue was awoken in summer 1958 when staying among the Nantes Brothers in France, improving my fluency in French before proceeding to further studies in Rome. After lunch one day in Le Loquidy we went to the retirement home in La Place du Croisic, where I was invited to meet 'le Frère Jules'. I was taken to the room of a frail 95 year-old Brother and was staggered by the realisation that he was Julius, the first Nantes Director at Beulah Hill half a century before and subsequently Provincial from 1918. Potamian, Julius, Gilbert and Dunn had been the names of the Houses at St. Joseph's when I was a boy there. Up to that meeting the name Julius had for me represented pre-history, like Potamian.

The Nantes Brothers arrived in London in 1908 when, after a four-year stay in the United States, the Poitiers Community led by Br. Julius was offered a home by the Community of St. Joseph's

College. The Director, Br. Attale, had previously served at Clapham, Tooting (as Director) and Waterford (as Bursar). He had returned to St. Joseph's College, and nursed it through its rebirth at Trinity Road (1895), Denmark Hill (1897) and finally Beulah Hill (1903). But within 12 months of the arrival of the Poitiers Community, this French Brother and his mainly Irish Community had their recent foundation taken from under them. Previously decapitated by the transfers to the new Waterford Training College in the mid-1890s, the resident Community on Beulah Hill was thus finally dispossessed in 1909.

Judging by the resulting rancour, the action seems to have been heavy-handed. The theory survived for decades that the newcomers had criticised the resident Community for irregularities and lack of fervour, but there is nothing in the records to support this. It seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the record written by Br. Attale in 1895, bemoaning the closure of Tooting but acknowledging some Community responsibility therein. It was a sort of collective *mea culpa*, and included a cross-reference to a similar situation in 1863 when the Clapham foundation came close to collapse. By contrast, the chronicler after the take-over in 1909 made no judgements, apart from registering a glowing tribute to Br. Attale (cf. my article in the London District Monthly Circular, June 1972).

Even so, the new arrivals in London, Southsea, Plymouth and the Channel Islands, had minimal relations with the existing Province for some decades. Both training and mission suffered in consequence, but unfortunately this seems to have been beyond their understanding.

a) Professional Training

It may be as well to start with a specific case, the first Brother I encountered when entering Beulah Hill for the summer term in 1944 a month before my 10th birthday. I had begun elementary school a day or so after the declaration of war in September 1939, and my early schooling was disrupted by two periods of evacuation. By contrast, my seven years

at Beulah Hill were a happy period of stability. The *esprit de corps* of the large group of Brothers taught me the important lesson that the strength of a Community is greater than the sum of the strengths of its individual members. The principle was reinforced for me especially in my first and last teaching Communities, Birkfield 1955-58 and Bethlehem 1987-97, both of them small Communities in difficult circumstances. Something similar must have been true for the Brothers during the war years.

For that first school term in 1944, shortened by the arrival of V1 flying-bombs a week after D-Day, my Form Master was Br. Austin (later Fr. Frank) Parkinson, then in his first year of teaching. He was my sponsor when I took the Religious Habit, and I revere his memory. He, too, had had his formation disrupted by the war: he was a refugee from the Guernsey Juniorate in 1940, and there was no Nantes Novitiate to go to. It had been moved from Dover back to France in September 1939, unfortunately for the four English Novices in that year's group – in June 1940 they were interned for the duration.

The solution adopted for the 1940 and 1941 groups was to send them to the Castletown Novitiate in Ireland (at last the Bretons showed some trust in the Celts?), and Br. Austin began his Postulancy there in December 1940, a fortnight before his 16th birthday. Unfortunately, this first period of sharing with the England/Ireland District ended when these Nantes groups were recalled in turn to England on completion of their Novitiate. After some brief studies at Balcombe from February 1942, Br. Austin was put into the classroom in September 1943 still aged 18. By contrast, the other Castletown Novices of the same year (Br. Alban McCourt among them) were at that date entering either Training College at Strawberry Hill or University in Cambridge.

Lack of any professional training meant that those joining the Nantes Brothers were academically unformed and educationally out of touch. Whereas the majority of young men joining the original Province in England were products of the Brothers' own Grammar schools, the Nantes Province drew two-thirds of its recruits from outside its schools. That so many of them rose gradually to University degree level by dint of out-of-hours studying is a tribute to their dedication, but the process was essentially (as Dickens's Mr. Weller described it) "the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties". Br. Austin, for exam-

ple, took until 1954 to obtain his external London degree, the same year as myself. To put it bluntly, the Nantes system failed a complete generation, their young Englishmen who joined the Order in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

It was only in 1953 that the first such group was sent to Training College at De La Salle, Hopwood Hall, a full 60 years after the start made at Waterford. The decision for this initiative was taken by Br. Simon, the French Visitor of the London Province. This new Province was formed in 1945 from the Nantes foundations in England (Beulah Hill, Southsea and Ipswich) and the Quimper school in Jersey, with the addition of Malta which until World War II had been part of the Algiers Province. The latter arrangement was no longer appropriate in 1945, and the Superiors in Rome were also aware that the British Government was planning to provide two Training Colleges for Malta. The one for men was made the responsibility of the London Province.

1953 also marked a new liaison with the Irish Province, in that three of their missionary Scholastics (including Br. Columba Gleeson) joined the first London group in Hopwood Hall. This probably helped to cover the running costs of the student-Community, since the only other income was the College salary of its Director, Br. Michael Sherry. A full merger followed in 1958 when the English Province ended its connection with Strawberry Hill and moved to Hopwood Hall, with Br. Maximus as Director of students from all three Provinces.

Br. Simon was likewise responsible for the decision to raise the age of Novitiate entry from 16 to 18, building on the move from Assington Hall to Dogmersfield Park in 1956. In this he was ahead of the other two Provinces, England and Ireland. The intention was that the more able students would first take a General degree externally and then proceed to Hopwood Hall for the post-graduate course in Education, a pattern that had already been proved possible by four Brothers. The Dogmersfield degree course was well implemented, and the Sciences were added to the Arts in 1957. Ministry recognition was obtained in 1959 as a College of Further Education. Dogmersfield could now claim grants from Local Education Authorities both for tuition and its students likewise for maintenance. This at last solved the financial problem which affected previous formation programmes – Assington Hall (1946-1956), for example, had never had its own bank account.

Regrettably, the Dogmersfield degree programme was a retrograde step away from Honours degrees obtained in normal Universities, mainly because those advising the Provincial were themselves products of the closed system they now sought to prolong. Moreover, the postgraduate year in Education was no longer possible at Hopwood Hall after 1961, when the B.Ed. degrees courses replaced the former Teachers Certificate. Fresh vision was required.

It was supplied by Br. Richard Allen who, shortly after 5 years on the staff of the Malta Training College, became Director of Dogmersfield in 1962. As a starting-point, two or three students were entered on to an Honours degree course, but by private study. On becoming Provincial in 1964, Br.

Richard promptly opened a House of Studies in Oxford. He also succeeded in placing the Dogmersfield graduates of that year on to the P.G.C.E. course at King's College, London, thereby restoring the element of professional training.

In a word, it took nearly 60 years from the arrival of the first Nantes Brothers to achieve a full programme of formation. And in 1965 the two Provinces of England and London combined their Novitiates and Scholasticates, possibly 50 years later than would have fully benefited the educational work in their home country. Unfortunately, in accordance with Parkinson's second law, a proper system finally emerged at the precise moment when the number of new entrants went into sharp decline.

(To follow: 2b Educational Mission)