

# Crooked Lines

*God writes straight on crooked lines*

Br Thomas Cooney

Br. Christian Moe of Melbourne takes the aphorism attributed to St. Augustine as the title of his booklet published in early 2007. It commemorates the centenary of the arrival of the De La Salle Brothers in Australia, with the main party composed of 7 Frenchmen and 5 Irishmen. It offers a fresh and fascinating account of ambiguity in action. The French Superiors of the time were hoping to found a new Province in Australia with Brothers exiled from Nantes, while the head of the England/Ireland Province was responding to requests from Bishops in Australia for Irish Brothers to help in providing Catholic schools. The French Brothers in the party soon began to find that they were unwelcome, and they eventually moved on "to fresh woods and pastures new" in Asia and elsewhere.

## **1. Waterford College and the England/Ireland Province**

According to Br. Christian's account, what interested the Australian Bishops was the fact that Irish Brothers were qualified teachers, certificated by the National Training College at Waterford which had begun to function in 1891. The College project had emerged from the need to provide adequate training for the growing numbers of young Brothers. It included lay students as well, as a condition of its registration insisted on by A.J. Balfour, Secretary of State for Ireland. The first intake comprised 24 Scholastics and 40 laymen, indicating that from the outset the Brothers were being formed within an "open" system – unlike their counterparts in France. That point will have some relevance when we come to consider the Nantes plantation made here in England, a year or so after the abortive attempt in Australia.

Considering that the De La Salle Brothers arrived in Ireland only in 1880, it is clear that their mission had quickly prospered in terms of entrants to the Novitiate at Castletown, which opened in 1881. The original plan had been for the Novitiate to be established in Liverpool, not Ireland, but the Vicar General for the diocese there had somehow sought to link any such permission to obtaining the services of Br. Potamian, probably the leading Catholic science teacher of the day. This would have entailed his leaving Clapham for teaching duties in St. Edward's College, which also served as the diocesan seminary. As a Congregation of Pontifical Right we have always taken a dim view of outside interference in internal affairs, and our predecessors were no different - they went elsewhere.

It worked out rather well for them. After a struggle for equality of treatment for Catholics, Balfour

agreed in 1890 that all Training Colleges in Ireland would henceforth receive grants to cover their certified expenditure. In effect, the training of the young Brothers was subsidised. The British Government seems to have been concerned not only with the need for certificated teachers in Ireland but also overseas in the Empire at large. As a result, when the call for Brothers first came from Australia, Br. Anthony Jerome, the Irish Provincial of the day, could report that, in the three preceding years 1902-04 alone, more than 30 Brothers had been sent overseas. Some historians reckon that, thanks to the work of such missionaries, the biggest beneficiary of the British Empire turned out to be the Roman Catholic Church. It is certainly interesting to think that, to some extent, this was also helped on its way at taxpayers' expense.

Br. Christian's description of the importance of Waterford Training College stirred memories of a separate question involving Tooting College. The opening of the one coincided with the closure of the other. Were they in any way linked? It seems worth exploring.

My interest in Tooting was rekindled in the early 1980s after a guided tour of the surviving premises, known as St. Benedict's Hospital, courtesy of the Hospital Engineer, an Old Boy of Birkfield. The visit revealed the potential of Br. Potamian's buildings, and brought back the memory of the view expressed by Br. Gregory White during my PGCE course in Hopwood Hall, 1954-55: 'If Tooting College had been allowed to survive until after 1902, when the Balfour Education Act in England led to the creation of County Grammar Schools, it could have provided a ready-made Catholic counterpart in South London. Why, then, the sudden loss of interest in Paris in what might have developed into the leading Catholic secondary school in London?' It would seem to me that the answer lies in the perceived need to provide financing for the construction of the new buildings in Waterford. Waterford was to be the nemesis of Tooting.

It need not have been the case, but the fact is that the Waterford foundation offers an early example of the failure the Superiors in Paris to understand British Government policies and practice. In 1891 the Training College had commenced operation in Newtown House as a temporary measure, pending construction of the new buildings. The Board of National Education had made it clear that there would be no capital grant from the Government, unlike the case of the Maynooth Seminary a generation before. Br. John Towey, *Irish De La Salle Brothers in Christian*

*Education*, describes the Superiors' wish to provide the capital for the new college in terms of their determination to preserve its autonomy, as if it would have been compromised by any other course.

What he does not describe is the manner in which this came about and the frustration felt by the Provincial, Br. Justin McMahon, who had been brought back from the U.S. to handle the project. The Mother House Archives hold Br. Justin's letters to the Assistant Superior General, Br. Aimarus, from which the following extracts are taken:-

- 11/12/1890: "The Government is ready to lend £20,000 to be repaid by annuities over 35 years at 5%" – which indicates that soft Treasury loans for approved projects existed at this early date (cf. Section 105 loans to cover Governors' liabilities in Aided schools).
- 26/12/1890: "The Government will find us the money to build."
- 30/12/1890: No security required for the loan; the student-body would comprise 100 Scholastics and 30 externs.
- 26/03/1891: "The money is voted – all granted. Thank God."

But then came disappointment:-

- 08/04/1891: There would be no grant because the existing buildings were not acceptable. "If the Régime had had more faith in our success and had advanced the money for the buildings, we would have been reported as having permanent buildings in course of erection, the plans and cost of which would have been submitted and approved."

Since no start had been made on the new buildings, there was then effectively no alternative to the Superiors funding their full cost without a Treasury loan; they had lost the opportunity. Construction began in 1892 and was completed just in time for the official opening in 1894. Towe reports that the site, building and equipment had cost the Institute £35,722. Did the Superiors recoup their outlay by selling Tooting College and its 15-acre site in 1895? Battersby reports that the £40,000 realized by its sale was all swallowed up in the payment of debts. Yes, but which ones?

To date, I have not been able to "follow the money" in order to confirm the theory with absolute certainty. Time did not permit me to explore the matter more fully in the Archives when in Rome in October 2007. However, I was surprised to discover that already in January 1889, within a few months of the school's opening and with no apparent interest in building up student-numbers, the Tooting site was advertised for sale. The Mother House Archives contain both the press cutting and the first protests. Coupled with the transfer of leading Brothers (including Potamian) from Tooting to Waterford from 1893 to 1895, an impression is given that the sale of Tooting may not

just have been a matter of cutting losses in the running costs, the line adopted by Br. Clair Battersby (*Brother Potamian*, the two 1955 Centenary books *St. Joseph's College* and *The De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain*, and *History of the Institute (Vol.2)*. The decision seems to have been already taken.

Br. Potamian's magnificent construction in Tooting was demolished in the mid-1980s, and only the statues of the royal beasts which stood either side of the central steps have survived. The lion and the unicorn now grace the main entrance of nearby St. George's Hospital. (The buildings of the earlier foundation in Clapham still survive: 49 High St. as office premises, and the former boarding accommodation at the back as gentrified apartments.)

Waterford, by contrast, still stands today, having prospered as a Training College until 1938. And when in 1912 a third-year Diploma course was developed, with academic input by University College Dublin, property in Ely Place was purchased to provide a hostel which was considered part of the Waterford College. Although originally intended primarily for lay-students on the Diploma course, it also developed into a House of Studies for Brothers preparing for full University degrees.

When Ireland won its independence in 1922, there were evidently implications for the England/Ireland Province. Br. John Towe records the far-reaching decision made by the Irish Provincial, Br. Benedict Feore, at a Council meeting in 1923:

"Owing to the increased number of applications for the services of our Brothers across the waters, our chief field of labour for the future will be England."

He was as good as his word: within a period of 18 months schools were opened in Cardiff, Sheffield and Salford, adding to those already in existence. But obtaining recognised certification for future young Brothers to teach in Britain and its overseas territories meant finding an alternative to Waterford.

Following the practice of the Province, the solution adopted was outward-looking. When in 1925 St. Mary's College moved from its historic site in Hammersmith to Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, the Province purchased a nearby residence as a Hostel for its Brothers. In addition to the two-year Certificate course, the College also provided a longer course leading to external degrees at London University. Finally in 1942, as a further alternative to Ely Place, a House of Studies was opened at Cambridge for those who were able to gain entry to its Colleges. When, following the General Chapter of 1946 the England/Ireland Province was divided into its two constituent parts, the new Province of England (sic) had a full formation programme already in place.

**(To follow: 2. The Nantes Brothers in England and the subsequent London Province)**