Rice, Edmund Ignatius

by Dáire Keogh

Rice, Edmund Ignatius (1766–1844), religious and educator, was born 1 June 1766 at Westcourt, Callan, Co. Kilkenny, the fourth of seven sons of Robert Rice, a farmer, and his wife, Margaret Tierney. Edmund’s education began at a local hedge school; he subsequently transferred to a school in Kilkenny before being apprenticed in 1779 to his uncle, a prosperous merchant at Waterford. He amassed a fortune in the lucrative provisioning trade of the city, and in 1785 he married Mary Elliott, the daughter of a local tanner. Their only child, Mary, was mentally handicapped and Rice suffered additional heartbreak with the death of his wife in 1789.

This tragedy clearly affected Rice’s life. While he continued in trade and was an active member of the catholic committee in the city, his priorities were radically changed. From this point he became increasingly involved in pious and charitable pursuits; he assisted in the foundation of the Trinitarian Orphan Society (1793) and the Society for the Relief of Distressed Roomkeepers (1794). He joined religious confraternities and devoted considerable attention to the plight of prisoners. His endeavours became more focused in 1797 when, in response to a controversial pastoral of Bishop Thomas Hussey (qv) of Waterford and Lismore, he embraced the cause of catholic education. In 1802 he established a religious community of laymen who set out to do for the neglected poor boys of Waterford what Nano Nagle (qv) had done for poor girls in Cork. His community was the genesis of both the Presentation Brothers and the Irish Christian Brothers. Rice’s ‘monks’ followed a variation of the Presentation rule, and his school curriculum was a pragmatic combination of best practice of the time overlaid by an uncompromisingly catholic emphasis. By the time of his death in 1844, the Christian Brothers ran forty-three schools, including six in England.

Rice was pivotal in the revival of Irish catholicism following the severe dislocation of the penal era. Among the urban poor the Brothers made a landmark contribution in widening the social base of the institutional church. Through their teaching and catechetical instruction they introduced the poor to the new forms of devotion which became the hallmark of nineteenth-century catholicism. This effort brought a previously marginalised class within the ranks of the institutional church, which in time became the backbone of the emerging catholic Ireland. The Brothers also played a determined role in the catholic response to the proselytising efforts of the protestant Second Reformation in the country. Rice’s Brothers assisted in the moulding of a distinctively catholic urban working class, by promoting literacy alongside piety and instilling in their pupils the middle-class virtues of personal discipline, hard work, and sobriety.
Rice collaborated closely with other Catholic leaders of his age. His congregation was central to the success of Theobald Mathew's (qv) temperance movement. In 1828, at the height of the emancipation campaign, Rice invited Daniel O'Connell (qv) to lay the foundation stone of the Brothers' model school at North Richmond Street, Dublin. This 'monster meeting' attracted an attendance of 100,000, before which O'Connell hailed Rice as the 'patriarch of the monks of the west'. During the Repeal campaign, too, the Brothers frequently hosted the Liberator; reflecting on their efforts, O'Connell declared that 'education to be suited to this country must be Catholic and Irish in its tone, having as its motto Faith and Fatherland' (*National Press*, 12 Mar. 1892). Rice's uncompromising adherence to these principles was not without difficulty; it led to a predictably acrimonious relationship with the secular national board and his eventual withdrawal of the Brothers' schools from the system (1836). Rejection of the national board imposed serious financial burdens on the Christian Brothers which were relieved only by the bounties provided by the Intermediate Education Act (1878). Withdrawal also served to alienate many friends and benefactors, including Archbishop Daniel Murray (qv) of Dublin, who was a commissioner of national education. But the bishops gradually adopted Rice's stance. After 1838 they became increasingly hostile to the national board, and the Brothers' schools, with their acclaimed textbooks, were recognised as a bulwark against non-denominational education. For similar reasons, the Brothers became closely associated with Irish nationalism. In 1892 the MP William O'Brien (qv) observed that 'the Christian Brothers system was regarded in Ireland as the really national system' (Normoyle, *A tree is planted*, 214).

The 1830s brought a rapid deterioration in Rice's health; financial difficulties frustrated his plans, and the plight of the three Dublin foundations was particularly acute. Rice resigned as superior general of his congregation in 1838, but fraught relations with his successor, Br Paul Riordan, blighted his latter years. He died 29 August 1844 at Mount Sion, Waterford. Rice was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1996.

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