

Cleary, Henry William

by Rory Sweetman

Cleary, Henry William (1859–1929), catholic bishop of Auckland, was born 15 January 1859 at Oulart, Co. Wexford; he was baptised William Henry. His catholic father, Robert Cleary, a farmer, came from the neighbouring county of Wicklow and settled in Wexford after marrying Susan Wall, a convert from the Church of Ireland. Despite a weak constitution Cleary had a brilliant scholastic career before entering St Patrick's College, Maynooth, in 1878 to train for the priesthood. Two years later he was sent to study in Rome at the papal seminary, where academic success was achieved at the price of a breakdown in his health. This pattern was repeated in 1884 during his brief period at the Saint Sulpice seminary in Paris.

Cleary was ordained in Ireland on 11 January 1885 and began his priestly career at the House of Missions, Enniscorthy. Parish work followed, then an appointment as professor of languages at St Peter's College, Wexford. Continuing health problems prompted Cleary to move to Australia in late 1888 on what was intended to be a temporary mission. He spent ten years working strenuously in the back blocks of Victoria, remote rural settlements, at the same time publishing refutations of anti-catholic propaganda as a journalist. He also wrote a book, *The Orange society* (Melbourne, 1897), which so impressed Michael Verdon, bishop of Dunedin, New Zealand, that in January 1898 he persuaded Cleary to become editor of the catholic weekly, the *New Zealand Tablet*.

As editor of the sole catholic organ in New Zealand, Cleary was well placed to further the church's policy of gradualism and integration. He believed that catholic rights would best be won by educating public opinion through moderate exposition and defence of catholic beliefs. He was allowed generous space in the columns of the secular press for what he described privately as 'missionary work' on a host of issues. Catholic views on gambling, mixed marriage, prohibition, and sabbatarianism were carefully explained. Cleary refuted accusations of catholic over-representation in the New Zealand public service by publishing statistical surveys of employment by religion in the railway department and the post office.

Cleary was awarded a doctorate of divinity by the pope in 1908. In 1910 he undertook a lengthy tour of South America with the intention of establishing catholic news agencies. While there he was selected to succeed Michael Lenihan as bishop of Auckland. He was consecrated in Ireland on 21 August 1910. Cleary recognised that interdenominational harmony was essential to furthering the interests of his church, whose adherents made up only a seventh of the dominion's population. Most of the catholic clergy were strong supporters of Irish nationalism, and Cleary displayed a delicate touch in explaining these views to his colonial audience. As editor of the *Tablet* he exercised a discreet censorship on the Irish issue, avoiding

anything that would give offence. With the enthusiastic participation of protestant Irish clergy, he orchestrated the centenary commemoration of the Irish rebellion of 1798. He refused to support fund-raising tours by Irish nationalists until after the Parnell split was healed, but he then oversaw the visits of successful delegations in 1906–7, 1911, and 1914. A compilation of his articles in defence of his native land was published in 1909 under the title *An impeached nation*.

Cleary's determination to present the loyal face of New Zealand catholicism was best seen during the first world war. He spent three months as a chaplain in the Flanders trenches during the severe winter of 1916–17. Serving near the front lines, he displayed a bravery bordering on foolhardiness, while making sure that his exploits were well advertised in the colonial press. On his return to New Zealand in October 1917 Cleary was shocked by the extent and ferocity of sectarian conflict raging over the issues of papal neutrality in the war, the conscription of religious teachers, and the campaign for state aid for catholic schools. The *New Zealand Tablet*, under its fiery Irish editor, Dr James Kelly (qv) (1877–1939), had adopted an aggressive stance, particularly over Ireland. Cleary became a relentless opponent of the new policy. In July 1918 he founded a rival catholic paper, *The Month*, in which he reconciled support for Irish national rights with effusive professions of loyalty to empire.

By refusing to allow the advocacy of Sinn Féin in his diocese and attempting to curb Kelly's uncritical commitment to Irish politics, Cleary sacrificed his reputation as a patriotic Irishman. He banned the use of provocative Irish flags, emblems, and mottoes in his diocese. While defending Sinn Féin violence as a justifiable response to outrageous behaviour by British forces in Ireland, Cleary preferred that his clergy pray for Ireland rather than fight for her. He also opposed the identification of his church with any political party, whether in Ireland or New Zealand. Although he resisted a series of post-war legislative measures calculated to harm catholic interests, Cleary kept up friendly correspondence with several prominent Reform Party politicians, including the Ulster-born prime minister William Massey (qv). His war service and his personal sacrifices during the influenza pandemic of 1918 were recognised in June 1919 by his being made an OBE .

Photographs of Henry Cleary suggest a man of mild scholarly disposition. He was, nevertheless, determined and resolute, with a lively sense of adventure – he used cars and aeroplanes at an early date to travel his diocese. He died 9 December 1929 at Auckland and was accorded a huge funeral. The effusive press accounts of his career betray signs of inspiration from the material he had been in the habit of supplying to journalists. Warm tributes from the leaders of other denominations testified to his success in reducing sectarian tensions and in beginning to bring the catholic church firmly into the mainstream of New Zealand life.

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Obituary, *The Month* (Dec. 1929), 1–47; obituary, *New Zealand Herald*, 10 Dec. 1929, 13; Richard P. Davis, *Irish issues in New Zealand politics, 1868–1922* (1974); E. R. Simmons, *In cruce salus* (Auckland, 1982)

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