

Newman, John Henry

by Colin Barr

Newman, John Henry (1801–90), cardinal, theologian, and educationist, was born 21 February 1801 at 80 Old Broad Street, London, the first of the six children of his banker father, John Newman (d. 1824), and Huguenot-descended mother, Jemima Fourdrinier (d. 1836). He attended Ealing School before entering Trinity College, Oxford, in 1817. While still at school, and under the combined influence of his father's financial failure and an evangelical schoolmaster, Newman underwent the first of the conversion experiences that would mark his life. Although the Calvinist edge of the conversion did not last, the religious seriousness did.

At Oxford, Newman proved a studious, shy student, who was tipped to achieve high academic honours. His dramatic examination failure in 1820 – an outright fail in mathematics and a humiliating fourth in classics – came as an unpleasant shock, even if it was brought on by overwork, not incapacity. But he redeemed this set-back on 12 April 1822 when he was elected fellow of Oriel College (then intellectually the leading Oxford college) after a competitive examination. At Oriel, Newman quickly came under the influence of Richard Whately (qv), the future Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin.

Newman was ordained a deacon in the Church of England on 13 June 1824 and priest on 29 May 1825. On 20 January 1826 he was appointed a tutor at Oriel. He threw himself into his duties, but was frustrated when his attempts to reform the tutorial system to make it both more academic and more amenable to charismatic teaching were blocked. His first sustained attention to Irish affairs came in 1833, when he was appalled by a parliamentary bill to suppress ten Church of Ireland sees. Newman's concern was less for Ireland than for the possibility that Irish lessons might be applied to the Church of England; the series of Tracts for the Times (which began to appear on 9 September 1833) and indeed the entire Oxford Movement can be read as a reaction against state interference in the affairs of the established church, whether English or Irish.

During the 1830s Newman built up a reputation for scholarship, personal holiness, and polemical aggression. He enjoyed a prominent position (from 14 March 1828) as vicar of St Mary's, the university church, where his sermons became famous for both style and content. In 1841 Newman's strained attempt in *Tract 90* to prove the catholicity of the anglican Thirty-Nine Articles resulted in his censure by the university authorities. By 1843 he had retreated from university life; he resigned St Mary's in that year, and his Oriel fellowship in October 1845. On 9 October 1845 he was received into the Roman catholic church. After a period at Oscott College, an English seminary, Newman went to Rome to study for the catholic priesthood. He was ordained priest on 30 May 1847. He joined the Congregation of the Oratory,

and became the founding superior of the community in England. The location of the first oratory in Birmingham brought Newman into contact with the immigrant Irish there; he was particularly unimpressed with their poor hygiene, a characteristic that he associated with Irishness, not poverty.

Newman's attention was drawn to Ireland itself in April 1851, when his advice on catholic higher education was solicited by Archbishop Paul Cullen (qv) of Armagh. Cullen intended to open a catholic university in Dublin, and, although he did not at first make Newman aware of the fact, desired Newman as its first rector. While sympathetic to the project, Newman was hesitant to accept Cullen's eventual offer, not least because he did not wish to leave Birmingham. He did, however, agree to join two Irishmen in creating a blueprint for the proposed institution. He travelled to Ireland on 30 September 1851, and met his colleagues at Thurles, Co. Tipperary. They produced a report within three days. On his way back to England, Newman visited Cullen in Drogheda, where he probably accepted a renewed offer of the rectorship of the Catholic University. The appointment was confirmed by the university's committee on 12 November 1851.

Before he could begin to build the university, Newman had first to convince the Irish catholic middle classes that one was necessary. He framed his attempt as a series of lectures given in Dublin between 10 May and 7 June 1852. These five talks were printed, together with a further five, under the title *Discourses on the scope and nature of university education addressed to the catholics of Dublin* (1852). The bulk of these lectures were later combined with occasional pieces from the *Catholic University Gazette* to form what is perhaps Newman's most enduring work, *The idea of a university defined and illustrated* (1873).

The educational vision that Newman articulated drew on a number of different sources. Unsurprisingly Oxford was one, but the example of the Catholic University at Louvain in Belgium was at least as strong. Specifically Irish concerns were also addressed in Newman's discourses. As the primary competition for the new university was the three secular Queen's Colleges, Newman went to some trouble to describe and defend a specifically catholic education that included theology. Although Newman's choice of topic and emphasis was no doubt conditioned in part by Irish needs, he had a long record of opposing religiously 'mixed' education, and his Dublin discourses fit neatly into his existing educational philosophy.

Newman was now the head of an institution that did not yet actually exist, and which enjoyed the less than full support of even the catholic hierarchy. Moreover, as an Englishman he was distrusted by many who were at least theoretically in favour of the university; Archbishop John MacHale (qv) of Tuam, although he appears initially to have supported Newman's appointment, proved an early and persistent opponent. It was a difficult position, and Newman further complicated it. His habitual loyalty to friends was problematic in an Irish context, as those friends were usually English. Despite warnings from Cullen and others, he insisted on his right in practice

to appoint to the faculty whom he saw fit; as he told an English friend, 'don't suppose that Irishmen are to be put about me' (Newman to T. W. Allies, 27 Apr. 1852, *Letters and diaries*, xv). A plurality of the first academic appointments went to Englishmen, leaving the Irish a minority in an institution largely funded by domestic charity. Unsurprisingly, this bred resentment.

More than two years elapsed between Newman's successful Dublin discourses and the opening of the Catholic University of Ireland. The delay was caused by a combination of factors, including Newman's trial for criminal libel against Giacinto Achilli, a former Dominican priest, and also by domestic Irish concerns which Newman neither fully understood nor appreciated. Newman was frustrated by what he perceived as the slow pace of preparations and Archbishop Cullen's lack of communication. That frustration was exacerbated by a proposal, made in late 1853 by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, the archbishop of Westminster, that Newman be appointed bishop *in partibus infidelium* with special responsibility for the Catholic University of Ireland. Such a mark of papal favour would both advance the project and give Newman the public recognition of his status that he believed necessary to his success in Ireland. The plan failed when Cullen secretly used his influence in Rome to block the appointment on the grounds that as an English bishop in charge of an Irish institution Newman would be further exposed to nationally minded criticism.

It was not until May 1854 that the Irish catholic hierarchy formally approved the statutes of the university, though Newman had already spent much of the year in Ireland and made a number of provisional appointments to the faculty. On 1 June 1854 the first issue of the *Catholic University Gazette* appeared. On 4 June Newman was installed as rector at a high mass in Dublin. The university formally opened on 3 November with some thirty-eight students, a number of whom were foreigners drawn to enrol by Newman's name.

By the time the university finally opened, Newman was obviously frustrated with Ireland. He distrusted Cullen (although he did not know of the archbishop's role in the embarrassingly public failure of his episcopal nomination) and failed to understand the realities of Irish politics. His friendship with the English-born Irish nationalist Frederick Lucas (qv), the proprietor of *The Tablet* and a persistent critic of Cullen, did much to sour his relationship with his primary patron. Moreover, Newman insisted on a large and expensive faculty. Although the Catholic University had enjoyed good financial support at first, by 1854 little new money was coming in and it ran an operating deficit during Newman's tenure. To Cullen (who expressed his views privately) and other Irish critics (who made theirs public), Newman was trying to create an Irish Oxford for foreign aristocrats at the expense of the Irish poor, whose donations funded the enterprise. Newman, by contrast, believed himself to be trying to build an intellectually dynamic, academically respectable Catholic University for the English-speaking world. In Dublin he tried to re-create Oxford not so much as it was but rather as he had always wished it to be, with a focus on charismatic

teaching, academic rigour, and an all-pervading catholic ethos. However, without a government charter and thus the ability to grant degrees, the university failed to attract many students, though the medical school that Newman opened in November 1855 proved an immediate and enduring success.

By late 1856 it was clear that Newman wished to return to England. From the beginning, he had found it difficult to reconcile his responsibilities as superior of the Birmingham Oratory and rector of the Catholic University; he preferred Birmingham, and spent as many as seven months a year away from Dublin. As an English friend noted, Newman never seemed entirely at home in Ireland. In his private letters he indulged in some derogatory, but fairly typical mid-Victorian remarks about the Irish, including not infrequent references to 'Paddies'. Despite that, he always tried to keep in view what he perceived to be Irish interests in the new university. In April 1857 he announced to the Irish bishops his intention to resign at the end of that year. Although frustrated by Newman, Cullen and his allies in the hierarchy had no ready alternative and sought to change his mind. In return for his continued service as rector, Newman extracted a number of concessions, including the purchase of the university church, which until that time he had funded himself, and official toleration of his part-time residence in Dublin. Nevertheless he remained in his post for little more than another year, slightly over a month of which was spent in Ireland. He formally resigned on 12 November 1858.

Despite the endurance of *The idea of a university*, Newman's time in Ireland cannot be considered a success and he did not see it as one. With the exception of the medical school, the Catholic University never prospered, and each year of Newman's rectorship saw a decline in enrolments. Without students, and with an increasingly parlous financial situation, Newman was unable to build his model university. Although the Catholic University of Ireland stuttered on after Newman's departure, it ceased to exist as a university in any meaningful sense by the mid-1860s. It is ironic that the institution for which an acknowledged classic of educational philosophy was written proved a failure. Newman placed the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Archbishop Cullen. The posthumous publication of Newman's *Letters and diaries* (1961), as well as his *Autobiographical writings* (1957), helped to establish this interpretation as the dominant one for many years. In reality, a number of factors led to Newman's departure and the university's demise, including some of Newman's own making.

Although after his departure from Dublin he never again took a direct part in Irish affairs, Newman did keep an interested eye on Ireland and the Irish catholic church. His voluminous correspondence, both his published letters and those held in manuscript at Birmingham, is illuminating on Irish events, during and after his tenure in Dublin. Near the end of his life Newman was prepared (albeit privately) to speculate that it might not be a sin for an Irishman to be a rebel, on the grounds that the Irish had never recognised English sovereignty over the island. To a homesick Gerard Manley Hopkins (qv) in Dublin, Newman wrote in 1887: 'If I were

an Irishman, I should be (in heart) a rebel.' He followed up the sentiment with a remark that might be taken to encapsulate his life-long relationship with Ireland: 'the Irish character and tastes is [sic] very different from the English' (Newman to Hopkins, 3 Mar. 1887, *Letters and diaries*, xxxi).

After Ireland, Newman lived quietly but productively at Birmingham. He published the *Apologia pro vita sua* in 1864, *An essay in aid of a grammar of assent* in 1870, and *Letter to the duke of Norfolk*, his response to W. E. Gladstone's attack on the civic loyalty of English catholics, in 1875. In 1877 he was elected an honorary fellow of Trinity College, Oxford. Newman was created cardinal by Leo XIII on 12 May 1879. He died 11 August 1890 of pneumonia at the Birmingham Oratory, and was buried at the oratory's country house at Rednal, near Birmingham.

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