

Ronan, William

by David Murphy

Ronan, William (1825–1907), Jesuit priest and Crimean war chaplain, was born 13 July 1825 in the parish of Clonduff, near Newry, Co. Down, son of Patrick Ronan, farmer. His mother's maiden name was Rooney. He was educated at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, and was ordained priest in 1848, entering the Society of Jesus in November 1850. Completing his noviciate at Dromore, Co. Down, he studied philosophy at Saint-Acheul, near Amiens, France, and went to Laval (November 1852) to study theology. In 1854 he joined the Jesuit community at St Francis Xavier's in Gardiner St., Dublin. At the end of 1854 he was appointed to serve as a chaplain with the army in the Crimea. This was the first occasion since the reign of James II (qv) that catholic chaplains had been given official status in the British army, and Ronan (along with fellow Jesuit Patrick Duffy and some Irish diocesan priests) travelled to the Crimea at the end of 1854. Specifically instructed to look after the welfare of the Irish Sisters of Mercy working in the hospital at Scutari, he arrived in January 1855 and immediately clashed with Florence Nightingale, who was in charge of the hospital. He disagreed with the way the Irish nuns were employed and also found them living in unsuitable conditions. Following negotiations with Nightingale, the conditions for the Irish nuns improved. He outlined his initial impressions of the Scutari hospital in a letter (preserved in the Dublin Diocesan Archive) to his superior in Dublin, Fr Robert Curtis, SJ. While in the Crimea he occasionally found some Irish secular priests to be hostile towards the Jesuits and experienced particular difficulties with one priest, Fr Michael Cuffe.

Returning to Ireland at the end of 1855 in bad health, he initially worked as a missionary. A noted preacher and retreat-giver, he toured the towns and cities of Ireland before being appointed superior of the Galway Jesuit community. He took his final vows in February 1865. In 1880 he became rector of Limerick and founded the Irish Apostolic School, which transferred (1882) to Mungret College. He then travelled to the USA on a fund-raising tour and raised over £10,000 (1884). In 1887 he worked as a missionary again before joining (1893) the Gardiner St. community, of which he was made superior in July 1895. His later years were overshadowed by controversy, as he was accused of an improper relationship with a wealthy widow, Mrs Doyle. He denied these accusations but spent some time abroad, living first in Jersey and then in the south of France. In 1901 he returned to Mungret and remained at the college until his death. On 9 December 1907 he was visited by Gen. the Rt Hon. Sir William Butler (qv), who was recording the accounts of men who had served in various military campaigns of the nineteenth century, including the Crimean war. At the end of his interview, Ronan remarked 'I pray hard that He may take me at any moment. I am quite willing to go but I say that I am ready to stay too, if He has any more work for me to do here' (cited in Murphy, *War Correspondent*,

45). The next day, 10 December 1907, he suffered a stroke and died. He was buried in the college cemetery at Mungret.

There is a substantial collection of his papers in the Irish Jesuit archives in Dublin. There are further letters in the papers of Cardinal Paul Cullen (qv) in the Dublin diocesan archives.

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Fr William Ronan, SJ, files in Irish Jesuit Archives, Dublin; *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Dec. 1907; Evelyn Bolster, *The Irish Sisters of Mercy in the Crimean war* (1964); Louis McRedmond, *To the greater glory: a history of the Irish Jesuits* (1991); Tom Johnstone and James Hagerty, *The cross on the sword: catholic chaplains in the forces* (1996); David Murphy, 'Irish Jesuit chaplains in the Crimean war', *War Correspondent*, xvii, no. 1 (Apr. 1999), 42–6; id., *Ireland and the Crimean war* (2002); Thomas J. Morrissey, *William Ronan, SJ: war chaplain, missionary, founder of Mungret College* (2002)