

Tierney, Mark

by Felix M. Larkin

Tierney, Mark (1925–2011), Benedictine monk and historian, was born Gerald Francis Tierney in Dublin on 10 January 1925, fourth child among five sons and one daughter of Gerald Tierney (1885–1938), gynaecologist, and Marie Tierney (née Blanche). His mother was the elder daughter of Alfred Blanche (1874–1950), French consul-general in Ireland (1918–30) and afterwards French minister in Bogotá, Columbia. According to R. M. Smyllie (qv), writing as 'Nichevo', Marie Blanche and her sister, Kitty, had been 'reckoned the prettiest girls in town ... [with] that indefinable quality known as *chic* which still seems to be a monopoly of French women' (*Ir. Times*, 7 October 1950). Marie died in 1931 of injuries sustained in a car accident in Dublin.

Tierney was educated at the Catholic University School in Dublin, at the monastery school at Glenstal, Co. Limerick, and at UCD (BA, 1950; MA, 1965). He entered the Benedictine community at Glenstal on leaving school, made his profession of vows there in 1945 and was ordained priest in 1954. He then taught in the school at Glenstal for many years.

Mark was his name in religion, and it was as 'Mark Tierney' that he published his books and other writings. He wrote with an élan uncommon among historians, and in a tone that was sometimes ironic and even irreverent. Thus, his biography of Archbishop Croke (qv) of Cashel (1976) is not a pious evocation of an eminent ecclesiastic, but rather emphasises Croke's very worldly ambitions and the role he accordingly carved out for himself in Irish public life; it is far from hagiographical. Likewise, in a newspaper column on the occasion of the beatification of Columba Marmion (qv), he mischievously drew attention to the fact that 'the number of Irish saints (those canonised) or beati (those beatified) have been few and far between' (*Ir. Times*, 29 August 2000).

The publication of his biography of Archbishop Croke crowned many years of work by Tierney in compiling a calendar of the Croke and other papers in the Cashel Diocesan Archives. This was pioneering work. No comparable public or church records referring to relatively recent times had been made accessible in this way before in Ireland, and it was done with the full support of the then archbishop of Cashel, Thomas Morris (qv). Tierney had a strong commitment to the preservation and proper ordering of archival material, and was adept in his use of archival sources in his writings. His Croke biography was well-received (Professor John A. Murphy opined that he had 'rarely seen a work so richly, closely and meticulously documented' (*Furrow*, 332)), and he later accepted numerous invitations to speak about Croke – many of which emanated from the GAA, Croke having been its first patron.

He also wrote *The story of Muintir na Tíre, 1931–2001* (2004), *Glenstal Abbey: a historical guide* (1980, sixth edition 2018), and a history of the districts of Murroe and Boher, Co. Limerick (1966). He published many articles in scholarly and local history journals, and he contributed the entry on John Francis Sweetman (qv) – a controversial fellow Benedictine and headmaster of the Mount St Benedict school in Co. Wexford – to the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009). His non-history writings included *Holy Week: a commentary* (1958) and *The Council and the Mass* (1965).

His greatest achievement as a historian was, however, his school textbooks: *The birth of modern Ireland* (1969, co-written with Dr Margaret MacCurtain), *Europe and the world, 1300–1763* (1970), *Modern Ireland, 1850–1950* (1972), *Modern Ireland since 1850* (1978), *Europe since 1870* (1985) and *Ireland since 1870* (1988). These were used by a generation or more of Irish children, and underpinned a long-overdue modernisation of the secondary school history curriculum. Incorporating the fruits of decades of research in the universities, these books helped shift the popular understanding of history out of the realm of prejudice, myth and patriotic oversimplification. Perhaps in consequence of Tierney's part-French ancestry, they emphasised that events in Irish history should always be seen in relation to what was happening at the same time in Europe and the wider world.

Tierney wrote about the poor quality of earlier Irish school history books in an article published in *Oideas*, the Department of Education's quarterly journal, in 1974. He posed the question whether 'some of the responsibility for the hatred and mistrust in Northern Ireland can be put on the shoulders of history teachers and textbook authors' (37), and observed: 'Too much history is taught with a deep-rooted insularity, carrying with it ignorance of other peoples ... This narrow approach hardly serves historical truth and certainly does not contribute to a spirit of open-mindedness and ecumenism' (34–5).

Tierney's last years were devoted to the cause for canonisation of Columba Marmion, the Irish priest who in 1909 had become abbot of the monastery of Maredsous at Denée, near Namur, Belgium; monks from Maredsous had established the monastic community at Glenstal in 1927. He was a vice-postulator for the cause of Abbot Marmion, and was present when Pope John Paul II beatified Marmion in Rome in 2000. He published a biography of Marmion in 1994, and a shorter version of it in 2000 to coincide with Marmion's beatification. Like Tierney, Marmion had an Irish father and a French mother, which may partly account for Tierney's empathy with him. He was working on the Marmion archives in Maredsous Abbey, when he became ill and died there on 31 December 2011. His body was cremated in Belgium, and his ashes were later interred in the monks' cemetery at Glenstal.

Mark Tierney was a larger-than-life figure, a gregarious man, an indefatigable conversationalist and a generous scholar. In spite of the Benedictine vow of stability, he loved travel and his work took him all over the world. He had an exceptional

talent for friendship, reflecting the Benedictine hallmark practice of hospitality. He described Abbot Marmion as 'at all times a happy monk' (*Dom Columba Marmion* (1994), 273), and the same can be said of Mark Tierney.

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NLI, Correspondence and papers relating to miscellaneous matters in Ireland, mainly despatches from M. Alfred Blanche, French Consul-General in Dublin (p. 7502); *Ir. Times*, 6 Oct. 1931; 5, 7 Oct. 1950; 8 Jan. 1977; 26, 29 Aug. 2000; 2 Jan. 2012; Mark Tierney, 'A calendar of the papers of Michael Slattery, archbishop of Cashel, 1834–57', MA thesis, NUI (UCD, 1965); Mark Tierney, 'History teaching and bias', *Oideas: iris na Roinne Oideachais*, xii (Spring, 1974), 34–7; Mark Tierney, *Croke of Cashel: the life of Archbishop Thomas William Croke, 1823–1902* (1976); John A. Murphy, 'Review of Croke of Cashel', *The Furrow*, xxviii, no. 5 (May 1977), 331–2; Mark Tierney, *Dom Columba Marmion: a biography* (1994); Felix M. Larkin, 'Mark Tierney OSB: an appreciation', *History Ireland*, xx, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2012), 6; private information