

Tyrrell, George

by Patrick Maume

Tyrrell, George (1861–1909), Jesuit priest and theologian, was born 6 February 1861 at 91 Dorset Street, Dublin, the third and youngest child of William Henry Tyrrell, journalist (who died six weeks before George's birth), and his second wife, Mary (née Chamney).

Background and early years Tyrrell's father was subeditor of the conservative *Dublin Evening Mail* and allegedly acted as editor in all but name; he was also Dublin correspondent of *The Times*. Robert Yelverton Tyrrell (qv), classics professor at TCD and celebrated wit, was George Tyrrell's first cousin; the diplomat Sir William Tyrrell (later Lord Tyrrell, who assisted Tyrrell after his excommunication) was a first cousin once removed. The Chamneys were a Wicklow protestant family, several of whom were ultra-loyalists during the 1798 rebellion, though Tyrrell's maternal grandfather, a solicitor, had Daniel O'Connell (qv) as a client. The Tyrrell children (two sons and a daughter) were brought up in genteel poverty. At one point in his early childhood George's mother had to work as a governess, boarding her younger children with a farming family in the midlands; later they moved between Dublin lodgings. A Calvinist aunt put further pressure on the children by insisting on their harsh indoctrination, and overruling the less rigorous evangelicalism of their mother. In the impecunious lower-middle-class world which they now inhabited, low-church protestantism was valued not only for its own sake but as a means of social differentiation from 'the religion of the helots'.

The young George was overshadowed by the academic brilliance of his elder brother, William (whose physical development was permanently impaired by a childhood accident). On the strength of his brother's performance, Tyrrell was admitted to Rathmines school (1870–78); he later reproached himself bitterly for his indifferent academic performance. After a period of religious scepticism Tyrrell was drawn, from 1876, into the high-church circle around William Maturin (qv) of Holy Trinity, Grangegorman. Maturin, son of the novelist C. R. Maturin (qv), was a controversial figure in the generally evangelical Church of Ireland because of his adoption of such practices as auricular confession and conducting the service in 'the eastward position' (that is, with the celebrant facing the altar rather than the congregation). There were regular disturbances in his church by ultra-protestant groups; Tyrrell states that on one such occasion an uncle of his had led the mob. Tyrrell's religious quest was intensified by his brother's openly expressed atheism and early death in August 1876. He was further influenced by contact with Robert Dolling (qv), a Dublin-based land agent and Christian socialist, who eventually became an anglo-catholic clergyman in the slums of London's East End. Dolling attached little theological importance to ritual, which he saw primarily as a means of attracting followers by bringing colour into the lives of the poor. Tyrrell, however,

had developed a fascination with catholicism (encouraged by the simple faith of the family's catholic landlady and driven by a certain innate perversity). These developments (which included going to confession in catholic churches), led to a breach with Maturin.

After a brief period as a schoolteacher in Wexford, Tyrrell left Ireland on 31 March 1879 to take up a position with a mission that Dolling ran in Southwark. His mother and sister remained in Ireland in reduced circumstances; they subsequently became catholics and moved to Germany. Mrs Tyrrell died of breast cancer in 1884. Some years later, when Tyrrell's sister was left a widow and in financial difficulty, he considered becoming a secular priest so that he could support her; instead, the Jesuits made her an allowance until her death in the mid 1890s. Tyrrell's persistent doubts about whether his vocation was the product of self-deception were accompanied by a guilty feeling that he had contributed to the sufferings of his mother and sister by wilfully abandoning them. Tyrrell never revisited Ireland after 1879, but continued to see himself – and be seen by others – as an Irishman with a certain degree of ambivalence. He spoke of himself as combining a sceptical German brain and an Irish heart, the latter predominating; he wrote of 'the priest-worshipping crowds of dear old Ireland' as embodying the sort of simple faith that could not survive confrontation with modernity. Tyrrell regularly wore shamrock on St Patrick's day, though when corresponding with Emily Lawless (qv) in 1905 he remarked that he was not doing so that year from exasperation at the behaviour of 'my country – the Peer Gynt among nations'. (This is probably a reference to the resignation as chief secretary for Ireland of George Wyndham (qv), with whom he was acquainted.)

While Tyrrell retained a lifelong respect for Dolling, he was increasingly annoyed by what he saw as the 'unhealthy' air of play-acting and pretence surrounding anglo-catholic ritualism, in contrast to the vulgar but unselfconscious rituals and devotions of Rome. (Tyrrell's dislike of ritualism may have been linked to the homosexual element within the ritualist subculture. He revealed in correspondence with André Raffalovich that he himself experienced persistent homosexual urges well into the 1890s; indeed a close friend and fellow ritualist at Rathmines school ended by falling into 'complete moral chaos'.) Encouraged by catholic apologetics of a type that he later considered naively emotional, on 18 May 1879 Tyrrell formally converted to Roman catholicism, having formed the intention of becoming a Jesuit.

Jesuit and writer After a brief trial period teaching in Cyprus and Malta, Tyrrell entered the Jesuit novitiate at Roehampton in September 1880. He was dismayed to discover that most of his fellow novices had been recruited directly from school rather than as adults. Two years at Roehampton under a rigorist novice master were followed by three years' study of philosophy at St Mary's Hall, Stonyhurst, Lancashire. Here he was exposed to the contemporary Thomist revival. Leo XIII's call to recover the original thought of Aquinas caused controversy among the Jesuits, who preferred to study the saint through the commentaries of Counter-

Reformation Jesuits such as Suarez. Tyrrell sided with the revivalists, which led to accusations that he was taking an unacceptably 'Dominican' approach; this attitude made him impatient with the tendency of religious orders to treat a particular philosophical approach as a matter of loyalty rather than the subject of a search after truth.

In 1885 Tyrrell returned to Malta to teach, remaining there until 1888; he read the works of John Henry Newman (qv) intensively and began to review books for the Jesuit journal, the *Month*. He then studied theology at St Beuno's College in north Wales, in preparation for his ordination, which took place on 20 September 1891. After a brief period spent in parish work, he returned to Manresa House at Roehampton in October 1892 for a final year of study. In 1893–4 he worked in the parish of St Helen's, Lancashire; some of his friends thought this time of pastoral ministry among the poor was the happiest of his life. In 1894–6 he taught philosophy at St Mary's Hall, arousing controversy by his use of Dominican commentators and (a more ominous sign) his view that Aquinas should be studied as a classic author rather than a final authority. In December 1896 Tyrrell was transferred to the Jesuit house at Farm Street, London. He took his final vows on 2 February 1898, thus fulfilling a contract that he now saw as based on credulity but still regarded as binding. In later life he expressed the opinion that religious orders should maintain their existence only during the lifetime of the founder and his contemporaries. He continued to admire Ignatius and Aquinas but believed their true greatness lay not in specific beliefs but in a willingness to draw on the thought and experience of their day to revitalise the church.

Tyrrell rapidly acquired a reputation as a writer for the *Month* (primarily on devotional topics) and spiritual counsellor for those troubled with intellectual doubts. He was invited to join the prestigious discussion club the Synthetic Society, and despite tensions with his fellow Jesuits was praised for his ability to address the intellectual elite of the day and be taken seriously. Meanwhile, Tyrrell grew increasingly concerned that the triumphalist-rationalist approach of contemporary catholic theology overlooked the personal concerns of his penitents and correspondents while asserting greater certainty than it could sustain, and that the focus on converting protestants and asserting Roman authority against anglicanism failed to address the problems posed by modernity for all religious believers. Maude Petre (1863–1942), a wealthy member of a lay order of women, who was to develop an intense platonic relationship with Tyrrell, becoming his collaborator and literary executor, recalled that the effectiveness of his devotional writing lay in the fact that he wrote not as a lawgiver but as someone who shared believers' concerns and participated in their journey.

Modernist views Tyrrell drew from the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola the view that religion must engage the passions before reaching the intellect, and in time formulated the idea that religious experience was primary and theology a secondary rationalisation of the essentially undefinable. This belief developed into a rejection of

the contemporary tendency to treat bishops and clergy – and, ultimately, the pope alone – as the active teachers of the church, and reducing the laity to passivity and second-class membership. He held that God was equally accessible to every soul, once writing that if only a select few were to be saved he preferred to be damned with the multitude. Influenced by Matthew Arnold's *Literature and dogma*, he went on to reject 'anthropomorphic' and 'external' concepts of God, believing instead that God was manifested through the moral sense of every individual, and this linked all people into one body.

Tyrrell's first book, *Nova et vetera* (1897), brought him into contact with the mystical writer Baron Friederich von Hügel and through him with a network of European liberal catholic scholars, some of whom (such as the French biblical scholar Alfred Loisy and the Jesuit Henri Bremond) were to become leading members of the inchoate movement known as 'modernism', while others (such as Newman's biographer Wilfrid Ward) ultimately took a more deferential attitude to authority and are known as 'liberal catholics'. (It is debated how far these two positions can be clearly distinguished from each other. Tyrrell saw himself as preserving Newman's method rather than being limited by his conclusions.) As Tyrrell learned German and became more aware of the latest trends in philosophy and biblical scholarship, he formulated views out of step with orthodox catholic teaching. He ultimately came to adopt the Kantian view of unreasoned submission to external authority (whether the hierarchy, the Bible, or Jesus) as immoral, coupled with a Hegelian historicist belief in progress – namely that every dogmatic formulation is inevitably expressed in terms of its own age and can only preserve its 'spirit' if reinterpreted in the light of a new era. He believed that his opponents caused unnecessary anguish by ignorant and 'materialistic' reliance on formularies, which were fatally vulnerable to scientific and historical research and slighted the source of faith in the human soul. At the same time he rejected protestant individualism: he believed that catholicism had maintained the concept of collective identity and, by its conservatism, had preserved certain underappreciated aspects of Jesus's message until they could be more fully understood.

Tyrrell held that the church authorities need not immediately adopt modernist views (indeed, these might scandalise the dwindling numbers of 'simple faithful') but should allow them to work like leaven until general enlightenment was attained. This led to accusations of hypocrisy and charges that he favoured teaching one set of 'truths' to the multitude and another to initiates (albeit that the former would ultimately be incorporated in the latter). In December 1898 Tyrrell published an article on hell in the liberal *Weekly Register*. 'A perverted devotion' contrasts the sadistically literalistic preaching of a Redemptorist with the rationalisations of a Jesuit on the same subject, arguing that both were open to the same objections and that the Jesuit stance shared the most offensive features of the Redemptorist; he concludes by saying that the matter is beyond human comprehension and that somehow God will vindicate both mercy and justice. The article was passed by the English Jesuit censors but fell foul of the Roman authorities; after various exchanges between

Tyrrell, his provincial, and the Jesuit general, Tyrrell was informally banned from giving retreats, his ability to publish was restricted, and he was transferred to the remote Jesuit house at Richmond, Yorkshire.

Excommunication and death During 1900–01 Tyrrell composed a partial autobiography as a series of letters to Maude Petre; it was published after his death as the first volume of his *Life*. This is a profoundly anguished document; Tyrrell had come to see his vocation to the Jesuits as ‘dust and ashes’, and was driven by his characteristic fear of self-delusion and a desire to keep Petre from idealising him. He was also goaded by a joint pastoral of the English bishops (1900) on liberal catholicism, which he accused of reducing the laity to ‘brainless, passive’ sheep ‘to be led, fed, fenced and slain for the profit of the shepherd for whose benefit solely they exist’. At Richmond he continued to offer advice to correspondents and to maintain links with modernists elsewhere. He evaded ecclesiastical censorship by publishing some books under various pseudonyms or in the names of friends, while having others privately printed and circulated; one of these was *Oil and wine* (1902; published for general circulation, 1907), whose title implicitly presents Tyrrell as the Good Samaritan treating the wounds of sufferers neglected by contemporary priests and Levites. These tactics appealed to his love of irony, which also found an outlet in writing articles that might be seen as hyper-orthodox but were really intended to develop his opponents’ views to logical absurdity. (When asked to write an article for a series on ‘The book which has influenced me most’, Tyrrell praised *Alice in Wonderland*.) These tactics naturally led to accusations of insincerity and deviousness. At the same time, Tyrrell could be bluntly outspoken. From viewing his opponents as wilfully blind to the traumas of modernity he began to regard them as personally corrupt and motivated by power lust. He told a correspondent that while he regarded Pius X as personally sincere in his anti-modernist purge, it was nonsensical to call someone ‘good’ if they mistook evil for good. Tyrrell established extensive contacts with Italian modernists, who published extracts from his writings in their journals.

Although the theologians who drafted the anti-modernist syllabus *Lamentabili* and the anti-modernist encyclical *Pascendi* (1907) do not appear to have been aware of Tyrrell, he identified some of the condemned propositions as deriving from his work through Italian sources. Italian acquaintances spoke of him as possessing a congenital lust for battle – the ‘furia irlandese’. In September 1905 Tyrrell applied to leave the Jesuit order while remaining a priest. Negotiations were complicated by the appearance of extracts from his privately circulated ‘Letter to a university professor of anthropology’ in an Italian newspaper and his refusal to disavow its sentiments after admitting authorship. On 19 February 1906, at the direct behest of the pope, he was formally expelled from the Jesuit order. Maude Petre settled a small income on him and he moved to Storrington in Sussex. Every catholic priest must have faculties from a diocesan bishop or religious order if he is lawfully to celebrate the sacraments; Tyrrell's expulsion from the Jesuits meant that he could no longer say mass (though he could receive communion) unless he found a bishop willing

to accept him as a diocesan priest. At one point he applied to Archbishop William Walsh (qv) of Dublin for faculties, having heard that a priest who left a religious order automatically reverted to the diocese of his birth (in fact this rule had been abolished some time previously). Negotiations with Archbishop Mercier of Malines broke down when Tyrrell interpreted a demand for restrictions on his correspondence – intended to refer to letters for publication – as meaning that all his private correspondence, including advice to penitents, was to be scrutinised by censors.

Tyrrell was finally excommunicated in October 1907 after publishing in *The Times* of London an uncompromising two-part rebuttal of *Pascendi* on its appearance in September 1907. Mercier denounced him by name in a pastoral on modernism; Tyrrell responded with *Mediaevalism* (1908), in which he avowed himself a modernist and accused the catholic authorities of failing to meet the pastoral needs of the day through authoritarianism and obscurantism, suggesting for good measure that they were personally corrupt and dishonest. He added that the progress of history would vindicate the modernists. His last book, *Christianity at the crossroads* (1909), argues that catholicism will be transcended (or replaced) by a future church, which will be as far beyond it as the preaching of Jesus lay beyond the ‘legalism’ of the Sanhedrin. (Tyrrell liked to compare the modernists to Jesus and the apostles, who had been ‘excommunicated by lawful ecclesiastical authority’ for refusing to pretend that the new wine of the Spirit could be accommodated in the old wineskins of the law.)

Although Tyrrell expressed nostalgia for anglicanism and established contacts with the Dutch-based Old Catholic church, he continued to believe that his vocation lay with catholicism and that to revert to anglicanism or set up a new splinter group would be a retrograde step. He died 15 July 1909 at Mulberry House, Storrington, Sussex, of Bright's disease, having received the last rites under circumstances of some confusion. After Petre publicly proclaimed that he had not recanted his views, he was refused catholic burial, and was buried 21 July in the churchyard of the parish church at Storrington.

Tyrrell remains a controversial figure. He had a keener awareness of many of the pastoral problems of modernity than his official critics, yet his faith in the definitiveness of textual scholarship and the inevitability of moral progress appear distinctly late Victorian. Some commentators see the repudiation of neo-scholastic ‘manual theology’ and of extreme Roman centralisation at the second Vatican council as his vindication; others regard his views as leading (whatever his intentions) to uncontrollable subjectivism and the repudiation of the whole Christian tradition through a relativist historicism. He can be seen as a touchstone for many of the divisions within catholicism (and Christianity) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Autobiography and life of George Tyrrell, ed. M. D. Petre (1912); *George Tyrrell's letters*, ed. M. D. Petre (1920); J. L. May, *Father Tyrrell and the modernist movement* (London, 1932); J. Ratte, *Three modernists: Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell, William L. Sullivan* (1968); Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and immanence: a study in catholic modernism and integralism* (1980); *Letters from a 'modernist': the correspondence of George Tyrrell to Wilfrid Ward*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver (1981); Nicholas Sagovsky, *On God's side: a life of George Tyrrell* (1990) (incl. bibliography and list of archives); 'Petre, Maude Dominica', *ODNB*; 'Tyrrell, George', *ODNB*

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