

## 'When they persecute you in one state, flee ye to another' Petition to Pope Pius the Ninth by potential Irish emigrants to Brazil

Introduced and edited by Oliver Marshall

A topic that has somehow been largely neglected by historians of the Irish Diaspora is that of onward, or third country, migration (Marshall 2005: 270, n. 7; 274, n. 8; 276, n. 50). During most of the nineteenth century North America was the main destination for Irish migrants with, of course, many of those heading across the Atlantic travelling via Liverpool. But with employment opportunities available closer to home, it is hardly surprising that many Irish migrants avoided the greater expense, time and hardship of an Atlantic crossing and instead sought work in the towns and cities of industrial England. But what remains entirely unknown is how many of these migrants hoped or expected that their stay in England would only be as long as needed to raise enough money for an onward passage to the United States or elsewhere nor what proportion were successful in re-migrating to third countries.

Conditions for Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century England were generally grim, with some of the worst experienced by the community in Wednesbury, in the industrial Midlands. With a population in 1861 of 22,000, Wednesbury was one of a string of 'horrid manufacturing towns' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 28 September 1867) linked together by chains of metal works and furnaces merging into virtually a single conurbation to form the



Blast Furnaces at Cradley, in the British Midlands Black Country  
(*Revolutionary Players*)

iron and coal producing district known as the 'Black Country'. The area - described by the American consul in Birmingham as 'black by day and red by night' (Burritt 1868: 3) - both impressed observers for the vast concentration of its heavy industries within a relatively small area, and also shocked for the environmental brutality that had been committed. 'The landscape, if landscape it can be called,' wrote an anonymous visitor in the 1860s, 'bristles with stunted towers capped with flame, and with tall chimneys vomiting forth clouds of black smoke, which literally roofs the whole region' (SPCK 1864: 12). The soil too was contaminated, long having been turned 'ink-black' by slurry and other waste, while the air was 'hot and stifling and poisoned with mephitic odours' (SPCK 1864: 12). Industrial noise was constant, often deafening, with an incessant bang and clang and roar and boom of ponderous hammers thundering without the pause of a single moment.

It was to this environment that Father George Montgomery entered in 1850 when he was sent to Wednesbury to establish a Roman Catholic mission. Born in Dublin in 1818, the son of a former Lord Mayor of Dublin, Montgomery grew up in wealthy, staunchly Protestant, family, an unlikely background for one who would spend much of his life serving a Catholic community in one of the harshest corners of industrial England. After taking Holy Orders in the Church of Ireland and then a period caring for parishes in Sligo and Dublin, Montgomery was one of many Anglican priests to convert to Roman Catholicism during the 1840s and 1850s. Admitted to Oscott College, a Catholic seminary in Birmingham, Montgomery was ordained as a priest in 1849. After a period of study in Rome, Montgomery

returned to England, lecturing to Catholics in Bilston, a south Staffordshire coal mining community, from where he was sent to neighbouring Wednesbury (Marshall 2005: 46).

During the 1840s, Wednesbury's approximately 3,000 Catholic (overwhelmingly Irish) residents had been left virtually ignored by church authorities. Due to the flood of immigrants to England fleeing the famine in Ireland, combined with an increase in self-confidence amongst English Catholics, the Roman Catholic Church was stretched beyond its capacity to meet the spiritual needs of a rapidly growing population. On arrival in Wednesbury, Montgomery immediately set about raising money for building work, with St. Mary's Church, positioned astride a hill-top overlooking the town, opening in 1852. Eager to win local trust, Montgomery saw himself as both the spiritual and moral protector of the town's Catholic - and specifically Irish Catholic - community. Shocked by what he considered to be the miserable and amoral state to which his parishioners had descended in England, Montgomery felt obliged, as a missionary priest, to play a central role in the community to which he had been sent to serve. One of his first campaigns was to bring a halt to the 'deadly melees' that were a regular feature of Wednesbury Irish life, the police having dismissed the community as too 'depraved' to make intervention worthwhile. Montgomery soon won considerable respect and affection from his parishioners and, financially forever in debt and surviving on the barest of necessities, he was admired, both locally and further a field, for living extremely modestly (*WWBA*, 18 March 1871; *WRCS*, 19 March 1871).

As the Wednesbury mission became secure, Montgomery concentrated his attention on education and emigration, expounding his views of these subjects in *The Rev. G. Montgomery's Register*. [1] Published on an occasional basis from August 1867 and circulated both within the parish and to friends beyond, the four-page newsheet featured a mix of local church news, passionate declarations concerning the position in England of poor Catholics and extracts from letters that he had received from former parishioners emigrants living in the United States. Montgomery was convinced that the British state was utterly untrustworthy and was possessed with an irreconcilable hatred of the Catholic religion. Certain that the state's recent interest in subsidising Catholic schools was to exert control through financial means, Montgomery called for self-reliance, urging priests and laity to establish and maintain schools on a strictly independent basis, setting an example with the Wednesbury mission school. But while education remained a major concern, it was to emigration that Montgomery dedicated much of his energy.

Soon after taking up his position in Wednesbury, Montgomery began receiving letters from Irish former residents of the town who had emigrated to the United States, hundreds of whom had settled in New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. These letters frequently contained paid passages for emigrants' friends and relations who had been left behind in Wednesbury, a fact that caused Montgomery to observe that his mission was in effect serving as a depot for United States-bound emigrants. Recognizing this reality, Montgomery felt justified in directly intervening in the migration process, taking it upon himself to investigate possible new destinations and to enter into negotiations with their agents. Indeed, given the conditions that prevailed in Wednesbury, not only did he feel that it was appropriate to assist his parishioners to emigrate, he felt that it was his duty to do so, declaring: 'We hear our divine Saviour saying, *'When they persecute you in one state, flee ye to another,'* and we look whither we may flee to obey this precept' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 6, 19 October 1867).

Montgomery argued that if the Irish were to remain in England, it was vital that they improve their position economically as 'without temporal prosperity - speaking of the run of mankind, and taking people in masses - there can be no *spiritual* prosperity' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 28 September 1867). He felt, however, even a modest standard of living in England was an unrealistic goal, with the best that he might achieve would be 'to dress the wounds of the perishing wayfarer' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 28 September 1867). For there to be a hope of eternal salvation, Montgomery concluded that the Irish must escape England, to be 'conveyed to a place where [they] may be thoroughly taken care of' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 28 September 1867). Acknowledging, however, the Church's ambivalent attitude with regard to emigration from Ireland itself, Montgomery was at pains to point out that the situation of the Irish in England was entirely different:

I am not disturbing a people who are at home contented and settled, but I am trying to direct their migrations people who are on the move in search of a home. To my view the Irish in England, considered as a body, are like the traveller in the Gospel, who lay in the way 'stripped and wounded and half dead'. The poor people are wounded with five grievous wounds. They are suffering compulsory and extreme poverty; they are strangers in the land; they are expatriated strangers, who have neither country nor home; their progeny is becoming extinct in the cities and great towns of England; and their children are apostatising from the Catholic faith (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 28 September 1867).

Montgomery first considered an Oregon settlement scheme, and in 1853 he unsuccessfully sought funds to visit the United States where he hoped to find wealthy Irish-American patrons willing to finance agricultural settlements in the western territory. Of his motives behind this plan, Montgomery later recalled, 'it seemed to me a pity that the expatriated Catholic peasants of Ireland should die out in the English towns - a miserable proletarian population without religion or patriotism.' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 31 August 1867). Although he believed that the spiritual condition of Catholics in the United States was slightly better than was the case of those in England, he lamented the danger to faith and morals that Catholics continuously faced in both of these Protestant-dominated countries. Considering the negative influences in both England and the United States, Montgomery was keen to encourage migration to a Catholic country, one where the Irish would enjoy protection, security of faith and morals, impossible, agreed Henry Formby, a fellow Catholic priest and admirer of Montgomery, either in England or in 'the mixed and often godless society of the United States' (Formby 1871: 10-11).

Rejecting the United States, Montgomery instead looked towards South America as a possible destination for the Irish poor in England. How exactly he became such a fervent proponent of Brazil is not entirely clear but he was clearly attracted by the Brazilian government's land colonisation programmes that sought to encourage independent family farms. Montgomery maintained that agriculture, rather than manufacturing or industry, was the more 'eligible' way of life, and was convinced that 'as God had given the earth to the children of men', it was the necessary work of both 'enlightened statesmanship' and 'Christian Charity' to assist families of destitute workers to migrate overseas where they could take possession of uninhabited fertile lands that were awaiting exploitation (Formby 1871: 11-14). Montgomery himself recorded that he began to seriously consider the practical possibility of Brazil as a destination for emigrants from the British Isles in 1866 after reading an article in the *Standard* (6 April 1866), a London newspaper. 'In no latitude,' the article extolled, 'can there be discovered greater national wealth. The surface is enormous, the soil exuberant, the seaports are magnificent, the navigable rivers unparalleled, the mines inexhaustible; and yet Brazil pines for people.' With such a country apparently yearning for immigrants, Montgomery entered into correspondence with the article's author, said to be an Englishman who had lived in Brazil for fifteen years. Encouraged by all that he heard, Montgomery went on to canvass the opinions of others who had first-hand experience of the country. Amongst these was Joseph Lazenby, an Irish Jesuit at the Colégio do Santissimo Salvador in Desterro, the capital of Santa Catarina, who told him of an apparently successful agricultural colony in the southern province largely inhabited by Irish men and families from New York. Having satisfied himself that Brazil (and in particular Santa Catarina) was 'a fit place for the settlement of poor Catholics astray in England' (*RMR*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 28 September 1867), with support growing for the emigration scheme - with some going so far as to believe that Brazil offered the best hope of an Irish cultural renaissance, with the Irish language being the future language of the settlement (*UN*, 15 February 1868) - Montgomery began to take practical measures to assist his parishioners to emigrate.

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[1] The first issue (Vol. 1, No. 1) of *The Rev. G. Montgomery's Register* is dated 31 August 1867. The only known surviving copies of the newsheet are held by the Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives, St. Chad's Cathedral (ref. P303/6/2). The last issue in the collection is Vol. 1, No. 13, dated 4 July 1868; issue No. 7 is missing.

## References

- Burritt, Elihu, *Walks in the Black Country and its Green Border-land* (London: Sampson, Low, Son, and Marston, 1868).
- Formby, Henry, *A Voice from the Grave: Being the Funeral Discourse of the Rev. George Montgomery* (London: Burns, Oates, and Company, 1871).
- Marshall, Oliver, *English, Irish and Irish-American Pioneer Settlers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Centre for Brazilian Studies, University of Oxford, 2005).
- RMR - *The Rev. Montgomery's Register* (Wednesbury).
- SPCK - Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *Birmingham and the Black Country* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1864).
- *The Standard* (London).
- WRCS - *The Weekly Register & Catholic Standard* (London).
- WWBA - *The Wednesbury and West Country Advertiser* (Wednesbury).

### The petition

Addressed to Pope Pius the Ninth, the petition reproduced below was published in *The Rev. G. Montgomery's Register* on 19 October 1867 (Vol. 1, No. 6). [2] In his introduction, Montgomery explained that only men whose 'upright and unblemished character' he felt able to vouch for personally and with confidence did he permit to sign the petition. Clearly written by Montgomery, the priest claimed that he read the entire text to all who were invited to sign the petition, explaining the contents to every individual until he was certain that it was fully understood (most of those committing their names to the petition would have been illiterate). All told, the ninety-six signatories - 'all heads of families' - would have represented several hundred potential emigrants, although it is unknown how many in fact proceeded to Brazil.

The petition vividly describes the poverty, insecurity, religious and ethnic strife prevalent in Wednesbury, conditions that offered a fertile recruitment ground for agents seeking emigrants for distant parts of the world that were invariably portrayed as a mirror image of the place being left behind. Montgomery imagined that he would be assisting tens of thousand of people to emigrate to Brazil and, with the blessing of the Bishop of Birmingham, organised the first party of 339 men, women and children who set off from Wednesbury on 3 February 1868. Although most members of the party arrived safely in Rio de Janeiro on 22 April 1868 and were soon transferred to agricultural colonies in the south of the country (mainly Príncipe Dom Pedro in Santa Catarina, but also to Cananéia in São Paulo), the scheme rapidly collapsed, along with the health of Montgomery, who died on 7 March 1871, unable to realise his own dream of travelling to Brazil (Marshall 2005: 63-87).

[2] The petition was first reproduced as Appendix 1 in Oliver Marshall, *English, Irish and Irish-American Pioneer Settlers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Centre for Brazilian Studies, University of Oxford, 2005).

### *The Humble Memorial & Petition of Certain Irish Catholics who Sojourn in England, to Our Apostolic Lord, His Holiness Pope Pius the Ninth.*

We are fathers, heads of families, natives of Ireland; who, pressed by poverty, have left the land of our birth, and sojourn in England. We support ourselves by manual labour, for most part of the rudest sort, and depend for employment chiefly on the great manufacturing industry of this country. When the trade of England languishes, there is little or no need of our services, and we are frequently altogether deprived of employment for many weeks together. In short, our temporal condition is entirely at the disposal of

persons who have no relation to us but that of employers, who, so far as we are concerned, using their money only to make more money, hire us to work, or dismiss us to idleness, as their interests require.

When we are dismissed or suspended from employment, we must leave our families, and wander about "looking for work"; or live in a half-naked, half-famished state, getting miserably in debt; or, breaking up such homes as we have, we must seek shelter in *Poorhouses*.

If we travel about looking for work, we are in danger of departing far from our neighbourhood of priest and altar, and thus of seeming, like Cain, "to go out from the face of the Lord, and dwell as fugitives on the earth." If we enter the poor-houses, we go to imprisonment, to forceful companionship with persons not Catholics, who may be hateful to us; we must submit to the yoke of rules which are oppressive, because they were not framed with our consent; and too often are not administered with kindness, but are, in some instances, repugnant to the laws of the Catholic Church; and are, at best, but regulations for the orderly dispensing of relief, grudgingly and of necessity given to the poor. How dreadful the thought that we might die in these places, or that our young children may be immured to them to grow up listless, faithless parish paupers, having in after-life to struggle for a place in the lowest grade of the social scale, though we had hoped to rear our children to be in all respects better off in this life than we ourselves have been!

We are told by some persons that we are improvident, and that in prosperous seasons we might lay up something for the time of distress. Some of us do indeed strive to provide for periods of want, by reserving a portion of our earning as contributions to a fund out of which we may receive some aid when sickness or any bodily accident befalls us. But we cannot do this and provide for the times when we are out of work; and many of us have helpless children to support, and aged parents, and other necessitous relatives, whom we must aid. It is but seldom that we commit any wasteful excess; and if we are not duly economical, perhaps it is because we have not had the good fortune to be taught how to be so. Do our best, we suffer that extreme and compulsory poverty against which we are taught by the Holy Scriptures to pray.

To the evil of our extreme poverty there is added this other, - that we are strangers in the land, disliked by the people amongst whom we live, because of our nationality, because of our religion, and because we are in competition with them for employment. During the hours of our work, we have to associate with persons who assail us with blasphemy against the most sacred doctrines of the Catholic religion, with defamation of the clergy and female religious persons, and with obscene discourse. We know also that those around us attribute our poverty, our faults, our follies, and our crimes to the influence of the Catholic faith. This terrible storm of persecution, of calumny, is sufficient to overwhelm persons more steadfast than we are; and we tremble when we think of the effect which it has on our children. At all times this tempest is felt by the poor Irish in England, but just now - excited by the fraud and malice of certain fanatics and apostates - it rages with fury against us. So we, who are sociably inclined, are forced to keep aloof as much as possible from the people of the land, lest we be terrified or seduced from our attachment to the faith.

We must complain, too, that the conditions under which we live, as mere labourers in the places where we get employment, and only as a minority of the general population, prevent us from separating ourselves and our children from the neighbourhood and companionship of certain Catholics - our countrymen too - who openly and constantly violate divine and human laws; persons who neglect all religious duties, and abandon themselves to drunkenness, and the squalor and shameful habits consequent upon irreligion and intemperance. In the places where most of us reside, there are many such Catholics; but there is not one Catholic employer, nor one who occupies high social position, - not one to afford us patronage.

Another evil in the natural order which afflicts us is, that our children, who are born and grow up in England, must grow up without patriotism; for we cannot teach them to love a country which has departed from the Church and is hostile to it, and which used its power for many ages to oppress our native land, and to extinguish in it the light of faith. We continually hear our fellow-Catholics - the English - proclaiming their love of their country, and their great loyalty to its Government, though that

Government is alien to the Church, and treats the Vicar of God with contempt; and account it hard that we should be called on and expect to think and speak like English Catholics. The mere fact that we came to this country to labour for a living, and that poverty compels us to remain in it, is not sufficient to make us love it, nor cause us to teach our children to love it.

We do *not* complain that the cost to us of the maintenance of our religion is, in proportion to our means, very considerable; but we complain that, except in our churches, - which we cannot frequent daily, - we scarcely see or hear anything to remind us that that the Catholic religion exists; and we complain that we, an illiterate people, have not the moral and religious support which, in the conversation and usages of every-day life, is afforded in other lands of similar social conditions to our own. By continual contradictions and blasphemies and ridicule directed against Catholic doctrines and practices, we are indeed reminded of the religion we profess. But if these things do not detach us, natives of Ireland, from the Church, they tend not a little to cause the crowning evil of our present state; that is, a too well-grounded fear that our children, or our children's children, will apostatise. We have seen many children, born in England of Irish-Catholic parents, make shipwreck of faith and morality; and some of our clergy confidently assert that the children of Irish in Great Britain who fall away from the faith far exceed in number the natives of the land who are converted to the Catholic Church.

We are painfully conscious of the evils which afflict us; we groan and look up to God; we groan as a people persecuted, - persecuted by the pressure of poverty, which has made us exiles, which keeps us always strangers, and often wanderers, in a land where we are degraded, insulted, calumniated, importunately tempted to vice and heresy, plunged in tribulation, "*pressed out of measure above our strength, so that we are weary even of life.*"

What shall we do? Some of our friends tell us to be pious, to be patient, and hope for better times in this land. But our sense of the evils which encompass us is too keen to allow us to be tranquil. Speaking with others similarly placed as ourselves, we say, - doubtless the prelates and pastors and missionary clergy of the Church in England do for us what they can, labouring for us zealously, patiently, and with tender compassion. But we cannot help hearing that these, our loved and honoured friends, say, or hint, that we cannot remain in the land, and refuse to become English; that we are a wayward and troublesome people; that the number and greatness of our necessities far exceed their means to relieve them adequately; and that we seem to be a doomed race, that rapidly tends to extinction. We cannot help hearing that these things are said of us by our friends, and we hang our heads in shame and sorrow; but we despair not. We refuse to be absorbed in the English nation; we shrink from the prospect of the extinction of our race; we shudder with horror at the idea of our children becoming apostates, and deriding the faith and the birth-place of their fathers; and we look with dread and dismay upon the land in which an enormous proportion of our people, old and young, are numbered as paupers and criminals.

We confess that all that has come upon us has happened by the permission and the just judgement of God. We hear our divine Saviour saying, "*When they persecute you in one state, flee ye to another,*" and we look whither we may flee to obey this precept, follow this counsel, or avail ourselves of this permission - whichever it may be in our regard. To the United States of America many of our kindred and friends have recently gone, and there they are, in comparison with us, in temporal prosperity, and religiously they are better circumstanced than we are. We look wistfully after them. We cannot follow them; we contemplate our misery sojourning here, but we despair not of ourselves. We have cried to the divine Jesus for mercy, to our Lady for help, to the Vicar of God for his blessing; and the brightness of hope has illuminated our path. Our hope is that we may be received into the empire of Brazil, where such persons as we are, are wanted and would be welcomed; there to find a home - a dwelling-place whence we cannot be expelled at the mere will of others - and means to be on our own lands constantly employed, and no longer the sport of the fluctuations of trade; there to find a people the vast majority of whom are Catholics - a sovereign who recognises the divine Jesus in the Sacrament of the altar, and who bows before mysteries which are here made the butt of the unbelieving of scoff and ridicule; there to find a Government Catholic by law.

Signed,

Thomas MacGeoghegan, John Shannahan, William Farrell, Miles Kirby, John Kirby, John Connolly, John Gallagher, Patrick Kavanah, Martin Morrin, Patrick Swift, Edward Baxter, Mathew Burns, John Hopkins, Michael Lee, Thomas Walsh, Timothy Holahan, William Fitzgerald, John A. Slater, Patrick Madican, Stephen Collins, John Brennan, Patrick Lyndon, Peter Costello, John Grady, Patrick Biggins, Patrick Joyce, Martin M'Tighe, Michael Jordon, Patrick Lynch, Thomas Clark, John Driscoll, Michael Mylott, Patrick Butler, Michael Walsh, Hugh Brady, David Harris, John Joyce, Martin Cohen, John Brannigan, Patick O'Brien, John Byrne, Patrick Cuningham, Thomas Connell, John Walsh, Patrick Connelly, Patrick Kenny, Michael Corless, John M'Donald, Martin Flaherty, John Carroll, John Cavanah, Timothy Kelly, Patrick Hegarty, James Craddock, James O'Neal, Thomas Cavanah, Jerimiah Monghan, Roger Loyden, Martin Moran, John M'Grath, Patrick Shereden, Patrick Grelly, Patrick Hopkins, Patrick Joyce, Anthony Nolan, Michael M'Farlin, Thomas Walsh, Michael Colleran, Thomas Morrin, Patrick Walsh, Michael Gilmore, Patrick M'Farlin, Patrick Cregan, Patrick Geraghty, John Flaherty, Patrick Jennings, John Cuningham, John Naughton, Michael Varley, Martin Tracy, John M'Donough, John Flynn, John Brannigan, John Burns, James Grimes, John Cavanagh, Thomas Ronan, John Halloran, Luke Joyce, William Feehan, Patrick Jennings, Martin Collins, James Shannahan, Patrick Kelly, Charles Connor.