

Frederick Jones

John Bull's Other Ireland – Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland

Early in the nineteenth century Newfoundland was regarded as an awful warning of what Ireland might become. On 11th January 1841 *The Times* editorial was headed "Popish Priests in Ireland and Newfoundland" and described Newfoundland as already subject to enormities for which Roman Catholics in Ireland were merely plotting. Britain should beware as a "Popish Legislature" in Ireland would act in the same way as one already did in Newfoundland.

By the eighteen-nineties the situation had changed so radically that Newfoundland was being paraded as an example of how well and peacefully Ireland might develop. Writing in *Subjects of the Day* on "Home Rule in Newfoundland – a Parallel", W.B. Bowring, a rich merchant of Liberal sympathies, spoke of going to Newfoundland in 1853 to find St. John's "a miniature Belfast", with considerable religious, class, and national animosity. The loyalists were opposed to change and believed that responsible government would drive out capital, sever the British connection, and lead to the demise of Protestantism. They felt that Home Rule would mean "Mob rule associated with Rome Rule". By 1890, when he wrote, the army had left Newfoundland and sixty policemen sufficed to keep order, sectarian politics were dead, and none of the dreadful events predicted had happened. He attributed the beneficial change to responsible government and urged Britain to give home rule to Ireland.¹

Similarities between the two countries were apparent, and comparisons were often made. Methodist missionaries talked of the "Ireland of the Atlantic Provinces".² Visitors to Newfoundland felt themselves to be in Ireland. *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1873 published the impressions of one who was struck by the resemblance between St. John's and towns in Galway or Connemara. He believed that,

The Irish here, having been long almost the majority of the population, perpetuate all their peculiar characteristics, and even to some extent impregnate the rest of the population with them. Thus the Newfoundland accent is a distinctly Irish one....

...there is a general air of slovenliness which the Celtic race seems to have a speciality for imparting to any community in which they preponderate.³

Indeed Newfoundland and Ireland had much in common. Both were ruled by England and both were deeply divided by religion, class, and ethnic origin. Yet while during the nineteenth century events took a disastrous course in Ireland, in Newfoundland they worked, after a shock in 1861, to produce peace and compromise.

In 1860, in the course of his Dublin Lectures, Smith O'Brien declared that nowhere in the world was Irish Roman Catholic rule so well established as in Newfoundland. He was referring to the gaining of responsible government in 1855 and the election of a Liberal government dominated by Irish Roman Catholics. This came about as a consequence of a long period of evolution, and its fall was to lead to a divergence from the pattern of Ireland.

Newfoundland was ethnically mixed. The first white settlers, who completely annihilated the original Beothuk population, arrived as fishermen from the West Country and the Channel Isles in the sixteenth century. In spite of legal enactments to stop them and preserve the island as "a great ship moored near the Banks during the fishing season, for the convenience of English fishermen" they began to make their homes there. They were joined by Irishmen who had been taken on as extra hands when the fishing boats called at Waterford or Cork on the way to Newfoundland. Because of increasing distress in Ireland this trickle became a flood, and a considerable population built up. It spread around the coast in national and religious blocs so that some areas were Irish Roman Catholic and others West Country Protestant.

Acquired as a possession, Newfoundland became a colony against the wishes of the British who were therefore slow to give it a settled form of government. From the seventeenth century civil jurisdiction was given to the Mayors of the principal West Country towns and the "fishing admirals". These latter were the first fishermen to arrive in any Newfoundland Harbour at the beginning of the fishing season. In the early eighteenth century the first governor was appointed, but only in 1824 was settlement legalised and a nominated council allowed to assist in government.

When in 1833 parliamentary institutions were given to the island, consisting of a legislative council (or upper house) nominated by the governor, and a House of Assembly (or lower house) elected by the people, parties developed not on a political or socio-economic basis, but on sectarian religious lines.⁴

This situation arose because most of the merchants were Protestant and Conservative and engrossed patronage for Anglicans. The Roman Catholic Bishop, Anthony Fleming,⁵ an Irish Franciscan, took up the cause of Liberalism in order to forward the rights of his community. An able disciple of Daniel O'Connell, he combined skilful electioneering with boycott and excommunication. His struggle for patronage had some success when in 1843 he secured a system of Roman Catholic schools paid for by the state. But he obtained little power and few jobs for his co-religionists, and his task became more difficult as the Irish majority in the 1830's was decreased by emigration to the United States and the Canadian mainland. By the 1840's the two parties confronted one another. The Conservatives, dominated by Anglicans and enjoying the support of the Methodists, consisted of the greater number of the merchants and half the fishermen. They all came from the West Country or the Channel Isles. The Liberals, a tiny group of merchants, lawyers, and the rest of the fishermen, were of solidly Irish extraction and Roman Catholic religion.

It was a dangerous situation, a polarisation of society on religious grounds, with class and national origin adding an extra animosity,⁶ but fortunately it was transformed by three men: the new Roman Catholic Bishop, John Thomas Mullock,⁷ an able politician Philip Little,⁸ and an Anglican Bishop, Edward Feild.⁹

Mullock became bishop in 1850 after spending two years as Fleming's assistant. He was a vigorous, highly intelligent man, the eldest of the thirteen children of a wood carver, who had joined the Franciscan Order, studied in Spain and Rome, and spent almost twenty years as a pastor, preacher, and religious superior in Ireland. Personally kindly and hospitable, living in a "palace, fitted only for the residence of a plain, simple gentleman"¹⁰ with an "absence of wordly ostentation which commands unfeigned respect",¹¹ he yet had a keen sense of his position and the rights of his church. He wanted to develop Newfoundland by building roads, providing steam communication round the coasts, erecting schools, and cutting the amount of money

spent on what he regarded as demoralising poor relief. To Protestants he was a much more attractive figure than Fleming, who had thought purely in Irish terms and refused to take account of Newfoundland nationalism. Mullock soon became a real power behind the Liberals, ordering his clergy to act as election agents and himself vetting the list of candidates.

Like Mullock, Little was Irish, able, and a Liberal. A lawyer by profession, born in Prince Edward Island, he had come to Newfoundland in 1844. A shrewd man, with a keen grasp of political tactics, he realised that responsible government could only be achieved if the Conservatives could be divided and their mistakes exploited. He therefore adopted a strongly non-sectarian pose, emphasising the common interest of Methodists and Roman Catholics in winning patronage from the establishment, while retaining all the advantages of the superb electoral organization of the Roman Catholic church and its capacity to deliver a solid vote. He played on Anglican-Methodist differences while welding together all opponents of the ruling clique in the Liberal Party campaign for responsible government. Mullock liked and respected Little and gave all possible help.

Meanwhile the Anglican Bishop Edward Feild was hindering the Conservatives. He was a remarkable man who would have graced the episcopal bench in England. Clever, scholarly, of yeoman stock, educated at Rugby and Queen's College, Oxford, he had been a contemporary of Pusey and Keble and had adopted the same theological beliefs. He had become widely known in educational circles as a builder of schools and trainer of teachers. His activities first at Kidlington and then at English Bicknor had not only invigorated and reformed the parishes concerned but had attracted favourable comment from outsiders. In 1893 the National Society had appointed him to be its first inspector of schools and had entrusted him with the examination of the dioceses of Worcester and Salisbury. He had achieved such success in this task that he was offered the See of Newfoundland in 1844. A forthright and plainspoken individual, he did not hesitate to proclaim his High Church views in a diocese dominated by Low Churchmen. His efforts to build up a strong independent Anglican church, with a clergy loyal to himself and increasingly the products of his own theological college, worshipping in buildings designed according to the principles of the Gothic Revival, and

organising its own school system at public expense, infuriated Evangelical Anglicans and Methodists. The Methodists especially were angry because they lacked the resources to build their own schools and preferred to remain with the Anglicans in a state-subsidised system of Protestant schools. The Evangelicals disliked his schemes for making clergymen independent of the pew rents of rich parishioners, wanted Protestant as opposed to Anglican education, and abhorred anything that smacked of Tractarianism. Both were so alienated that they were ready to co-operate with Roman Catholic Liberals rather than endure political alliance with one they regarded as a Puseyite. So, unwittingly, Feild split the united Protestant front in support of the Conservatives.

The Liberals now had some Methodist and Anglican Evangelical support, they had the powerful adhesion of Bishop Mullock, who published a letter calling for responsible government which was inflammatory even by Irish or North American standards,¹² and they had aroused public opinion in favour of the existing schools system and responsible government. The Conservatives had no Roman Catholic support, and could be attacked as a sectarian party using anti-catholicism to retain their positions. Thus in 1855 the Liberals won responsible government with power and formed an administration with Little as premier.

The supporters of the supposedly non-sectarian party were, however, soon disillusioned as it betrayed the hopes not only of Protestants but also of Mullock. Little embarked on a programme of reform, building light-houses, erecting schools, and making roads, but he also engrossed almost all patronage in the hands of Roman Catholics, especially favoured the Roman Catholic Church by allowing it to use public money for a seminary, and, greatly to the disgust of Bishop Mullock, used road fund money and poor relief funds to bribe voters.¹³ By 1859 Little had resigned to become a judge, and his party, under John Kent, a demagogue whom Mullock viewed without cordiality, had almost exhausted its political credit. A narrow scrape in an election left it weakened but unrepentant. In 1860 it tried the patience of its most influential supporter too far by abandoning a scheme to provide direct steam communication between St. John's and the outports because it wanted to save money for use as political bribes.

Mullock exploded into action. In a fiery letter to the press he denounced the Liberals for "legalised robbery" as "a party who take

care of themselves, but do nothing for the people".¹⁴ Kent was frightened and took immediate steps to introduce a reform of the system of poor relief in order to mollify Mullock. After dramatic scenes in the debating chamber, with members of the government slanging each other and a mob interrupting the proceedings by an anti-reform demonstration, Kent admitted failure.

At this juncture the Anglican Bishop joined in the fray with a published letter complaining about lack of law and order, intimidation at elections, and bribery and corruption.¹⁵ The Liberals counter-attacked, hoping that in a religious press war poor relief would be forgotten, and an atmosphere of sectarian strife developed.

Nor was this all, as a member of the government insulted the Governor, Sir Alexander Bannerman, who had been hoping for some time to find a propitious moment to dismiss them. Seeing them falling out among themselves and losing the support of their bishop, Bannerman seized his opportunity, got rid of the Liberals, and asked Hugh Hoyles, an Anglican Conservative who had once been an ally of Bishop Feild but now was in high favour with the Methodists, to form a new administration.

Hoyles invited men of all religious persuasions to join his government but, while Anglicans and Methodists gladly did so, only one rich Roman Catholic merchant could be prevailed upon to accept. It was a minority administration and the Liberals harried it unmercifully. Hoyles therefore went to the country to seek a majority.

Bitter confusion resulted. Feild gave vocal support to the Conservatives.¹⁶ Kent and the main body of the Liberals, profiting by Mullock's fury at Feild's intervention and promising a reform of the poor relief system to get his active support, lashed out at the Governor, the Conservatives, and the Anglican bishop. Mullock spoke out with such vehemence,¹⁷ declaring that good catholics must be Liberals and that good catholics must obey the clergy, that any Methodist or Anglican Evangelical supporters of the Liberals flocked to Hoyles. His attitude also forced those Liberals who wanted to keep the corrupt poor relief system to resist clerical domination. They ran as independent Liberals without the blessing of the bishop.

Hoyles survived, but only just. After a fierce election in which the turbulence in Harbour Grace, the second town of Newfoundland, was so great that no poll could be held, and conflicts in Harbour Main, a

small outpost, resulted in a man being killed and four candidates declared elected for two seats, the government secured a tiny majority. Should the House of Assembly declare Kent the Liberal to be the rightful members for Harbour Main then the Liberals would regain power.

Mullock wittingly stoked the fires of sectarian animosity. In a sermon in his cathedral the Roman Catholic Bishop compared the victim at Harbour Main to Christ because he had died as a martyr in the cause of duty. On the day before the House of Assembly met he warned his flock of a "war of extermination" against them and urged them to beware of Protestants arming.¹⁸ Public opinion was so inflamed that when the Assembly did meet a riot broke out with the intention of seating the disputed Liberal contenders for Harbour Main. The army was called out, for several hours it tried to quell the uproar in the streets of St. John's, stones were thrown, shots were fired, and several men were killed. The soldiers shot in self defence, after enduring hours of insult, attacks, and the looting of Protestant property. Only then, when the attempt to coerce the Assembly had clearly failed, did the bells of the Roman Catholic cathedral summon the faithful. Mullock, in full pontificals, exposed for the veneration of the quietened rioters the Blessed Sacrament and exacted from them a promise of good behaviour.¹⁹ Never was his power more clearly demonstrated. Never was it more evident that he could have exercised it to better effect.

The government stood firm and won a secure majority while its non-sectarian policies became increasingly attractive to Roman Catholic Liberals who were becoming more and more exasperated by their political prelate. His unsuccessful attempts to obtain the recall of the Governor, the violence of the language in his newspaper, and his failure to win elections for the candidates whom he favoured, revealed him as a liability. His opposite number, Feild, had retired from politics after a rebuke from the Colonial Office, but Mullock carried on. In early 1862 anger at his loss of influence led him to go too far. The killers of the Harbour Main man, who lived in a tiny fishing village called Cat's Cove, had been tried and found guilty of manslaughter. At their own request the jury had been composed of Protestants. They had been imprisoned, but in response to a petition signed by Kent and most of the prominent Roman Catholic laymen of St. John's, the Governor exercised his prerogative and ordered their release after less than a year. Great joy

greeted their return home, flags were flown, guns fired, and a party held. But Bishop Mullock condemned them. They were "murderers", Cat's Cove was "branded with the curse of Cain" and should be punished. For twelve months the church would be closed and no masses said, or sacraments administered.²⁰

This was too much for moderate men, and all except a small rump of the Liberals were alienated by this blatant misuse of spiritual power for political ends. The richer members of the party began to gravitate towards the Conservatives where, except for religion, they had always naturally belonged. The politics of class and conviction began to displace the politics of religion.

This process was energetically forwarded by Hoyles who began to share patronage according to denominational numerical strength. By May 1865, under his successor, political power was shared in the same way. By 1875 education was adapted to the pattern.²¹ Feild and the Methodists, like the Roman Catholics, were each given their own state-subsidised schools system. All power and patronage were shared among the religious communities and much of the heat taken out of politics.

After the major explosion of the early 1860's secular issues predominated and comparative peace was restored. Men divided upon whether Newfoundland should join the Canadian Confederation, and new alignments became possible. Roman Catholics could be Conservatives, Protestants could be Liberals, and, except on educational issues, bishops kept fairly quiet.

The polarised society which had so alarmed outside observers earlier in the century had broken up. Feild had split the Protestants, while Little and Mullock had built up Roman Catholic and Methodist collaboration. The shake-up of the 1860's had led to even wider co-operation and the comparative disassociation of religion from politics. It could never be the same again. Religion in Newfoundland, unlike in Northern Ireland today, could in the long run no longer serve as a cloak for political action.

FOOTNOTES

1. 3 Part X (London, 1890), pp. 104-109.
2. Methodist Missionary Society, N.A. Box 20E, Milligan to Society, 28 Jan 1875.
3. Vol. 114 (London, 1873), pp. 53-74.

4. D.W. Prowse, *History of Newfoundland* (London, 1896); A.H. McLintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland, 1783-1832* (London, 1941); G.E. Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland 1832-64* (Toronto, 1966).
5. M.F. Howley, *Ecclesiastical History of Newfoundland* (Boston, 1887), pp. 255 onwards; John P. Greene, "The Influence of Religion in the Politics of Newfoundland, 1850-1861" (unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University, 1970), p. 10.
6. Bowring, pp. 107-108.
7. *Newfoundlander*, 31 Mar 1869, Obituary; E.P. Roche, "The Rt. Revd. J.T. Mullock", *Centenary Souvenir Book* (St. John's, 1955).
8. E.A. Wells, "The Struggle for Responsible Government in Newfoundland, 1846-1855" (unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University, 1966), p. 33.
9. F. Jones, "Bishop Feild, a Study in Politics and Religion in 19th Century Newfoundland" (unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1972).
10. R.B. McCrea, *Lost Amid the Fogs - Sketches of Life in Newfoundland* (London, 1869), pp. 115-116.
11. *Ibid.*
12. W.S. McNutt, *The Atlantic Provinces - The Emergence of Colonial Society, 1712-1857* (London, 1965), p. 254.
13. Greene, pp. 123-129, Tables XIV, XV.
14. Prowse, p. 486, n. 1.
15. Feild to Editor of *Telegraph*, 9 Feb 1861, *Public Ledger*, 15 Feb. 1861.
16. Feild to Editor of *Telegraph*, 16 Apr 1861, *Public Ledger*, 19 Apr 1861.
17. C.O. 194/165, Bannerman to Newcastle, 16 May 1861, Enc. i.
18. *Ibid.*; *The Record*, 18 May 1861, Report of Sermon, 10 May 1861.
19. Prowse, pp. 488-490; Gunn, pp. 164-165; C.O. 194/165, Bannerman to Newcastle, 17 May 1861.
20. C.O. 194/168, Bannerman to Newcastle, 28 Feb 1862, with encs.
21. F. Jones, "Religion, Education and Politics in Newfoundland, 1836-1875", *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, Dec. 1970, pp. 70-73.