

Connections: Maynooth- Missions- Wuhan - China

As Maynooth, along with the rest of the world emerges from the Covid pandemic I got to thinking about what Maynooth related items appeared in the Newspapers a 100 years ago. On searching the Irish Newspaper Archive I was surprised to find a Maynooth-China connection and not only that but a Maynooth-Wuhan connection also. The standout headlines in the newspapers both national and regional was that of the “**Maynooth Mission to China**” which was founded in St. Patrick’s College Maynooth in 1916 and by 1920 was well on its way with its missionary work in China.

The Society was founded through the inspiration of **Edward Galvin (1882-1956)**. He entered Maynooth College for his native Diocese of Cork, and was ordained in 1909. Unlike today, there was an oversupply of clergy for that diocese. His bishop suggested that Galvin offer his service in the United States, until such time as there would be an opening in Cork. Galvin went to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn in New York City, where he was assigned to Holy Rosary Parish.

While serving there, Galvin came to know John M. Fraser, a Canadian priest. Galvin shared with Fraser his interest serving in China. Galvin had read everything he could about that nation and asked to accompany Fraser back to China. On Fraser’s advice Galvin wrote to his bishop for permission to go to China which he received. Galvin departed for China on 25 February 1912.

Galvin and Fraser sailed from Vancouver for China on the RMS Empress of India (1890). He then began to serve in Zhejiang (then spelled Chekiang), where he spent the next four years. During that time, Galvin was appalled at the poverty and began to request help and assistance from his connections back in Ireland. He was joined in 1916 by two other priests, Frs. Patrick O’Reilly and Joseph O’Leary. They realised that an organised plan would be required to deal with the situation. Galvin returned to Ireland to establish a new missionary Society.

On his return journey in June 1916, he met with bishops and priests everywhere he went, presenting his proposal. He returned to Maynooth where he began to recruit among the seminarians there for his proposed society. A local Curate, Thomas Roynane, introduced Galvin to **John Blowick (1888-1972)**, who agreed to join the endeavour and was to prove an important contributor to the development of the Society as evidenced in the article transcription and brief biography below. Within two months of his arrival, Galvin had recruited five more priests, bringing the new Maynooth Mission to China to a total of eight members.

Galvin then presented his proposal to the Holy See, which gave its blessing. Galvin and Blowick spent 1917 laying the foundations for the society. Formal approval for the group, now named the Society of St. Columban, was given by Rome on 29 June 1918, and a new seminary was immediately founded in Ireland to train new members for the missions. Society grew to number 40 priests and 60 seminarians by 1920. Galvin then led the first band of the Society to open their mission in the Hanyang District, modern day Wuhan, China. He was named Apostolic Prefect of the Apostolic Prefecture of Hanyang in 1923 and later made the Apostolic Vicar of the promoted Apostolic Vicariate of Hanyang in 1927, with Galvin being consecrated as its titular bishop, it became a diocese under him in 1946, (suffragan of Hankou).

As they began their work, the missionaries encountered various calamities to which the region was subject, ranging from famines to flooding. They also soon found themselves in the middle of a civil war between the forces of the Guominjun Nationalist Army and the Chinese Communist Party, which lasted for the next three decades. This social instability allowed warlords to flourish and mission stations were routinely threatened by bandits. Supplies were often stolen enroute and mission workers were frequently kidnapped. On July 15, 1929, Communist Army bandits captured Columban Fr Timothy Leonard whom they then murdered. Others were taken captive and released, but one, Father Cornelius Tierney, died after three months of harsh captivity.

In the autumn of 1932, Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist republican troops began attacking the Communists. The Communists fell back on all fronts, and, once more, people could move about with relative safety. "The reign of terror," wrote one Columban, "far from weakening the appeal of the Catholic Church in this area, seems to have strengthened it." It was an extraordinary time as thousands expressed a sincere desire to enter the Church.

In 1933, the Holy See designated a new territory for the Columbans, and Fr Patrick Cleary was appointed in charge of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nancheng (in Nancheng County, south of Hanyang). The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 saw the Society challenged to care for both civilians and soldiers, as major outbreaks of Cholera swept the populace. This was soon followed by the outbreak of World War II when members of the Society from the Allies of World War II had to be repatriated or face house arrest. The war had just ended when it became clear that Communist forces under Mao Tse-tung would soon defeat the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek. In 1946, the Holy See entrusted a new mission, known as Huchow, to the Columban Fathers.

Three years later, the Communists took over this area, and, before long, they were in control of all of China. Several Columbans were jailed and eventually all the Columban priests and Sisters were expelled. Bishops Galvin and Cleary were expelled in 1952.

By 1954, every one of the 146 Columbans serving in China was expelled forever.

Blowick, John (1889–1972), missionary priest and theologian, was born 26 October 1888 in Belcarra, Co. Mayo, eldest son of John Blowick, farmer, and Honoria Blowick (née Madden). He had one sister and two younger brothers. John was educated at Westport CBS and at St Jarlath’s College, Tuam, Co. Galway, and subsequently trained as a priest in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth. He excelled in theology, took a first-class honours BA degree and was ordained in 1913.

Blowick himself raised funds and recruited personnel. He became superior-general (until 1924) and gained church authority to open a seminary, St Columban’s College, Dalgan Park, Shrulce, Co. Galway, in January 1918. In June 1918 it received its first members. The seminary remained at Shrulce until its relocation (1941) to Dalgan Park, Navan, Co. Meath.

John Blowick retired as director of the Maynooth Mission in 1947, just as the Chinese communists were on the verge of taking power. He taught theology in Navan for some years. John Blowick died 19 June 1972 at Dalgan Park, Navan, and was interred in the seminary grounds.

From 1929 onwards, the Society extended its mission to the Philippines (1929), Korea (1933), Burma (1936) and Japan (1948). Peru, Chile, Fiji (1950s). More recently Pakistan 1979.

The Society was active for many years in Australia, mainly in support of the mission to China.

The Columban Oral Archive is held at Maynooth University Library as is their periodical *The Far East*.

Susan Durack

Leinster Leader Feb 21, 1921 (transcribed)

The Holy See has granted the Maynooth Mission to China a vast district in China. Its population is much greater than that of Ireland, and its extent is quarter the extent of Ireland. Its chief city is Han Yang, which has a population of 600,000”

“On St. Patrick’s Day of this year (1921) 16 of the Maynooth Mission to China priests will leave Ireland for China”

“They will be obliged immediately to procure houses for themselves, for their catechists and assistants.... also building chapels and schools...

It will require £200 to send each priest to China.

All contributions and all gifts should be sent immediately, as we are now engaged in making our preparations for the voyage”

Address to Rev. John Blowick, St. Columban College, Dalgan Park, Galway.
Railway Station – Hollymount.

Source: Irish Newspaper Archive.

