

Chapter 13

John Cameron: The Madrid Property

The rectorate of John Cameron, the successor of Alexander Cameron II, lasted forty years—by far the longest of any rector in the history of the college. Beginning in 1833 and ending with his retirement in 1873, it spanned the regency of Ferdinand's widow, Queen Cristina, the long reign of their daughter, Queen Isabel, and the brief period during which Amadeo I, imported from Italy, was king of Spain. These forty years saw a long succession of different ministries in Madrid—moderates one year, radicals the next, absolutists the following, each accompanied by palace intrigues and scandals, and played out against a background of the Carlist dispute. Violence, bloodshed, repression, injustice were never far away. The clergy tended to sympathise with the Carlist cause and to side with the absolutist regimes, the result being that, when the radicals or extreme liberals were in power, anticlericalism was rampant; religious houses would be closed, their possessions declared confiscated and other harsh measures taken or at least threatened. This was the state of affairs, never utterly disastrous for the college but always difficult and full of menace, with which John Cameron had to contend throughout his long rectorate.

He had been born on 20th February 1791 at Tamenturn in the remote valley of Glengairn in west Aberdeenshire, where Lachlan McIntosh, the former Valladolid student, was missionary for more than sixty years. He made all his preparation for the priesthood at Aquhorties, which he entered on 2nd November 1803. He excelled in his knowledge of languages, being particularly proficient, it is said, in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Still too young for ordination when he had completed his studies, he was brought by Bishop Cameron to Edinburgh where, for a short period, he lodged with the bishop and attended classes in mathematics and chemistry at the university. Returning to Aquhorties, he was ordained by Bishop Cameron on 16th October 1814¹ and remained there as a teacher for a further two years before he led out to Spain, at the end of 1816, the group of a dozen boys with which the Valladolid college recommenced its active existence.

William Wallace was also with them, as a second professor, but proved to have little interest in teaching and did not return from a journey to Scotland in September 1818. Thus, from then until Alexander Cameron II's death in 1833, with the exception of three or four years between 1822 and 1826, John Cameron was the only master and had, of course, to do most of the teaching. The elder Cameron liked and trusted his young assistant. He is "*un mozo de mucho mérito, es laborioso y observante*", he wrote to Bishop Cameron²; and, some years later, writing to Bishop Paterson, he described John Cameron as "zealous, laborious, an agreeable companion; he has a good idea of the classics, a competent knowledge of Philosophy and Divinity."³ There is, in their correspondence to Scotland, no criticism of the one by the other.

When Alexander Cameron II died in September 1833, John Cameron assumed responsibility for the college. At that very time, Ferdinand VII died and his fourth wife, Cristina, became regent for the young Queen Isabel, not yet three years old. During this regency, which lasted until 1840 when Cristina abdicated and went to France, not only was the first Carlist war in progress most of the time, but the government in Madrid, throughout a series of ministries, pursued an anticlerical policy. The

Jesuits were expelled, many monasteries were closed, the property of religious was confiscated and there were many instances of priests and religious being attacked and even murdered by mobs.⁴ When Cameron, therefore, in the summer of 1836, received his nomination as rector from the vicars apostolic in Scotland, he chose not to present it to the queen-regent for her approval since, by so doing, he felt that he would be making an admission of the government's right to interfere in the affairs of the college as they were interfering in all religious communities of Spaniards.⁵ In fact, it was not until the year 1867, more than thirty years later, that John Cameron presented his letter of nomination and received the royal appointment in accordance with the college statutes.⁶

The biggest problem to confront Cameron from almost the start of his rectorate and which continued to exercise him until the end was the question of whether the college property in Madrid should be sold—or, rather, how it could be sold in such a way that the proceeds of the sale could be got to Scotland. That the property should be sold, the bishops had no doubt, partly because its need of repair gave little prospect of any worthwhile income from it, and partly because of the danger of expropriation. If the sale and transfer of money had been successfully achieved, as the bishops desired, there is little doubt that the college itself, deprived of its main source of income, would have been closed and amalgamated with Blairs.

Writing early in 1836 to Bishop Carruthers, Paterson's successor in the Eastern District, Cameron explained that in 1834, before conditions became so bad, there would have been a good chance of selling the Madrid property, but that, at that time, he had been unable to go to Madrid since he had no assistants in Valladolid. Moreover, he had no power of attorney to sell college property and therefore the bishops should send him the necessary authorisation and he would try to obtain the government's permission to sell.⁷ This power of attorney was duly sent on 27th June 1836;⁸ the bishops having sought and received the advice of Rev. Thomas Sherburne, the former pro-rector of the English College in Valladolid, that the Scots' Madrid property should be sold and the money invested in Britain.⁹ Bishop Kyle, Vicar Apostolic of the Northern District, went to London that same summer to try to enlist Lord Palmerston's aid in securing the Spanish government's consent to the sale.¹⁰ In accordance with instructions from Kyle, Cameron went to Madrid in September of that year and had the good offices of George William Frederick Villiers, the British Ambassador,¹¹ when he presented his petition at court. He had to leave Madrid before receiving an answer but already foresaw a further difficulty—the probability that, at that time, a good price would be almost impossible to achieve.¹²

Kyle, in the bishops' name, replied to Cameron and explained that, although there was no wish to close the college, they were most anxious that the Madrid property should not be lost through government seizure, in the same way as the Scottish property at Rome, Paris and Douai had been lost.¹³

In a letter to Bishop Scott of the Western District, written at the same time, however, Kyle expressed his opinion that Cameron was only pretending to co-operate and was, in fact, trying to block the sale; it seemed that the rector, who had been the first to propose the sale, now thought that he (Kyle) intended to make it the occasion for closing the Valladolid college. Such a closure, said Kyle, would be possible, though it would not be inevitable; but he admitted that he might have expressed himself badly to the rector and that, personally, he favoured the closure of the Spanish college; Cameron had become like other rectors who are "disposed to hang on to their superiority and

independence as long as a trace of the property of these colleges can be preserved and look on (as an insult) a proposal to save and secure part of that property by uniting it to a similar establishment where they would no longer be the great men that they are. To send their students home destitute, to be maintained by our domestic establishments as this very Spanish college did in 1808 cost them little, but to provide against similar catastrophes to join cordially with us in transferring to the establishment that must be their refuge in the hour of danger what they can detach from their own, exposed as they are to extermination, is what to them seems the last of evils . . . “¹⁴

Kyle justified his views the following month: if the sale and transfer gave us only half of the present Madrid income, we should be able to do better than Valladolid does now since we would have no journeys to pay for or extra masters to feed—“but will we ever get a foreign superior to think so?”¹⁵

Matters were taken a step further by Cameron’s letter to Scotland in February 1837. He had received a royal order acceding to the request to sell, but only on condition that the money be used to buy other property in Spain; either this, or the property might be mortgaged to raise funds to pay for necessary repairs to it.¹⁶ In a matter of such great importance for the future of the college, Cameron felt that it was the bishops who should assume the responsibility of making the decision; but he himself suggested that further efforts should be made to try to get the money to Scotland. He realised that, since this would involve the loss of the college’s main source of income, it meant the end of its existence but, though he venerated it, he thought the time had come to carry out the founder’s will in the spirit rather than in the letter since Spain was rapidly becoming what Scotland had been in Semple’s day. He advised, therefore, that secret preparations for departure should be begun at once.¹⁷

This letter was sent to Bishop Carruthers, who sent it on to Bishop Kyle, adding that he too thought that the Madrid property should be sold, even at a loss, and the students brought home. Kyle’s opinion was that, if a price could be obtained for Madrid which amounted to anything more than three times the annual rent, they should sell the property.¹⁸ At the end of 1837, however, Cameron was less sure that a sale under practically any circumstances was advisable. There had been only one prospective buyer so far, the property was no longer in any immediate danger since the recent expropriation of ecclesiastical property had come to an end; and so, all things considered, it was better to await the expected end of the war, when prices would be higher and a sale easier.¹⁹ So ended the first round of the bishops’ fight to have the Madrid property sold and the college brought home.

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They did maintain their pressure on Cameron from time to time, but he was easily able to fend off their efforts. In 1842, for example, “our situation in regard to prospects and income has not changed since last year. The Government has completed the spoliation of the Church, but its decrees have not been applied to us. With the immense mass of ecclesiastical property in the market, it would be absurd to attempt a sale of ours. In this persuasion I have remained quiet.”²⁰ In 1850, in a letter to Bishop Murdoch, who had followed Bishop Scott as Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, he replied to a request that he had received the previous year from the bishops that he sell the Madrid houses and send the money home. He did not oppose the decision, although noting that three of the four (there was a coadjutor in the Eastern District) were antagonistic to the Spanish college, but he explained that he could not carry out the order since the Spanish government would undoubtedly

renew its proviso of 1836 that the money must not leave the country. He suggested that the bishops might like to try to arrange to have the money smuggled out of Spain, but pointed out that there would be certain risks attendant on this procedure.²¹

Murdoch's letters throughout the 1850s continued to stress the bishops' confidence in Cameron and to urge him to sell the Madrid property if at all possible, even although it was realised that this would also mean the end of Valladolid.²² A "consideration" of 3,000 *reals* (about £30) had to be given in May 1856 to dissuade an investigator from denouncing the houses to the authorities as included in the latest decrees confiscating ecclesiastical property.²³ Cameron wrote again to Murdoch at the end of that year to say that, if peace continued, he planned to go to Madrid the following April in order to put the houses on sale; once they were sold, he proposed to sell the Boecillo properties since, without the Madrid rents, the college could not continue to exist.²⁴

Whether the bishops were right or wrong in their desire to sell the Madrid property and so, in effect, bring the existence of the college to a close, they were naturally exasperated by what they considered Cameron's delaying tactics and the lack of progress achieved. Kyle was particularly incensed—as the years passed, ministry followed ministry in Spain, relations with Great Britain became worse and the difficulties preventing a sale in Madrid seemed to be increasing. The rector's latest excuse for inaction was that the documents which showed that the mortgages of the seventeenth century had later been redeemed could not be found. (Kyle has later to admit that these documents had been in his own possession all the time.²⁵) "In a word," he added, "I have no expectation that Valladolid will be ever on any other footing than it is during the present Rector's reign. He has fairly defeated us."²⁶

At about this same time, John Cowie, the vice-rector, admitted that his superior was not over-enthusiastic in his efforts to sell the property. "He seems to have had and to have some sort of a vague velleity to do something or other."²⁷

In these circumstances, the time seemed to have come for more drastic action on the part of the bishops, so Murdoch, being a former student of the college and *persona grata* there, decided to go to Spain on behalf of his brother-bishops, to effect the sale. Accompanied by William Gordon, another former student and, at the time, priest in Greenock, he was in Spain from the end of May until the end of August of 1859. He found the rector not at all enthusiastic "but he cannot but be sensible that something must be done... There is no alternative then: we must sell and we must sell by public roup. We are taking the necessary steps—and I assure you they are not few—for that purpose. About three weeks must elapse, I foresee, before the sale can come off"²⁸ He added that there was no possibility of exporting the money legally from Spain, while any attempt to smuggle it would be both dishonourable and dangerous; it seemed advisable, therefore, to invest in Spanish government stock at three per cent. This would have the further, and important, advantage of allowing the college in Valladolid to remain in existence.

An official certificate was easily obtained to show that royal permission for a sale or mortgage had been granted in 1836²⁹ but, a month later, Murdoch had to report that other delays had arisen which, on this occasion, were not caused by the rector; the latter in fact seemed anxious to have the sale completed, though he felt that summer was not a propitious time since most prospective buyers would have fled from Madrid and its heat.³⁰ Bishop Murdoch left Valladolid without having achieved success in his mission but he wrote to Cameron to say that the other bishops agreed with what he

had done in Spain and that it was a mistake to think that they wanted to see an end of the Valladolid college. He himself foresaw that the government might insist on investment of the money in useless funds, and added candidly and surprisingly:

“For my part I will not break my heart if you find that a sale cannot, from one cause or another, be effected. I will be quite satisfied that you order the necessary repairs. As you have now a good trustworthy agent, things will go on well. If you have money, and I believe you have, for both pieces of work, I think you should make the repairs of San Ambrosio simultaneously.”³¹

The reference to the administrator is due to the fact that Don Juan de Garaigorta, who had held the post since 1832 and who lived in one of the college’s flats, had got into financial difficulties and had disappeared the previous year, 1858. This occurred in June, while Cameron was on a visit to the capital. As Garaigorta had omitted to render any accounts for some years, the amount of college money with which he absconded was never found out. His whereabouts were not discovered and, as he left many creditors, all that the college got was the surety which every administrator had to give, when entering upon his duties. As his successor, Cameron had secured the services of D. Manuel García Manso and he continued in the position until he died in 1864.

The last word on Bishop Murdoch’s mission belongs to John Cameron. He wrote to him the following May and apologised for his long delay explaining that he had been waiting, day after day, pen in hand, ready to send news of the result of the application that Murdoch had made, asking if the royal order of 1836 (which consented to a sale) were still in force. Cameron goes on to explain that he had heard that the government were planning to issue an order allowing the sale, but with the new proviso that the price received be invested in the Public or National Debt. Since this was tantamount to losing the money for ever, he had sent word to the college’s administrator in Madrid to forget the whole business and to begin patching up the property!³²

The matter of the college’s houses in Madrid again came into prominence later on in the 1860s, the administrator by then being D. Mariano García Manso, who succeeded to the post when his brother died. After a revolution in 1854, a liberal constitution had been enacted in Spain in January 1855 and one of the decrees of the new regime had declared all ecclesiastical property forfeit. This decree was applied to the college property in October 1866 and the lawsuit which the college began against the decision had an unfavourable outcome in 1868. However, Cameron went to Madrid and, enlisting the good offices of the Cardinal Archbishop of Valladolid,³³ of the nuncio, and even of the queen herself (to whom he sent a petition through one of her favourite ladies in waiting), he managed to stay the execution of the order just as the property was on the point of being sold and then to have the order cancelled. “We have just now obtained a royal decree exempting our Madrid house from disamortization.”³⁴ Though the property was now safe from confiscation, he had already told Bishop Kyle in 1867 that it was no good trying to sell it, since prices were low; rebuilding was impossible since the funds were inadequate and therefore he proposed merely to try to keep it in good repair.³⁵

Bishop Kyle, his old adversary, died early in 1869 but, later that year, Bishop Strain of the Eastern District once more officially raised the possibility of selling the Madrid houses and getting the money to Scotland.³⁶ The rector’s reply was that the time was ripe for another attempt to obtain government permission to sell and to use the money received in any way the bishops chose. The following year, he wrote to Archbishop Eyre, recently arrived in Glasgow, to say that every effort should be made to sell the Madrid property since, because of yet another new constitution, it was

once more in great danger of confiscation.³⁷ Six weeks later, he was even more explicit: a definite offer of £16,000 had been made for the houses and, although he thought them worth £20,000, he recommended acceptance; this would be followed by a sale of the Boecillo house and vineyards, which would realise very little, and removal from Spain.³⁸ These proposals were supported by the advice that was received from the Archbishop of Westminster: "I cannot doubt the prudence of selling and transferring your College to Scotland. The reasons for foreign Colleges are gone: those for home Colleges in greater force than ever."³⁹ And, from Aberdeen, Bishop Macdonald's opinion was that the sale should be made; had they not all agreed, while in Rome, that "neither Spain as a country nor the system of education pursued there and which it seems impossible to alter, offered advantages which could not be equally if not better secured elsewhere?"⁴⁰ Consequently, the bishops authorised Cameron to sell for £16,000, provided the money were paid in Scotland.⁴¹ But, in fact, nothing was done; the Madrid houses remained unsold and the college continued to exist in Valladolid.

Notes for Chapter 13

1. College archives 49/16.
2. 22nd May 1818. (Preshome archives.)
3. 14th January 1822. (Columba House, unclassified.)
4. The college, at the end of 1835, gave asylum to two members of a religious order whose house had been closed. They paid for their board and lodging out of the small government pension that they were allocated but, when this stopped early in 1837, Cameron allowed one of them, because he was old, to remain on for a number of years, paying what he could. (College archives A/ 14; John Cowie to Donald Carmichael, Blairs, 11th September 1845: Columba House, unclassified.)
5. John Cameron to Bishop Carruthers, 14th November 1836. (Ibid., unclassified.)
6. College archives 67/7.
7. 9th April 1836. (Preshome archives.)
8. College archives 67/6.
9. Thomas Sherburne to Bishop Scott, 12th March 1836. (Argyll archives.)
10. Bishop Kyle to Bishop Scott, 14th June 1836. (Ibid.) Bishop Carruthers to Bishop Scott, 15th July 1836. (Ibid.)
11. As the Earl of Clarendon, Villiers became British Foreign Secretary in the 1850s.
12. Cameron to Bishop Carruthers, 14th November 1836. (Columba House, unclassified.)
13. 16th December 1836. (College archives 63/6/20.)
14. 18th December 1836. (Argyll archives.)
15. To Bishop Scott, 5th January 1837. (Ibid.)
16. College archives 22/24/3.
17. 7th February 1837. (Columba House, unclassified.)
18. To Bishop Scott, 8th April 1837. (Argyll archives.)

19. Cameron to Bishop Kyle, 2nd November 1837. (Columba House, unclassified.)
20. Bishop Carruthers to Bishop Scott, quoting a letter of John Cameron of 19th February 1842. (Argyll archives.)
21. 29th April 1850. (Ibid.)
22. College archives 64/1.
23. Ibid., A/15.
24. 14th November 1856. (Argyll archives.)
25. To Bishop Murdoch, 9th November 1858. (Ibid.)
26. To id., 9th and 16th August 1858. (Ibid.)
27. Rough draft of letter to John Macpherson, V. G., Eastern District, 1858. (College archives 64/6/6.)
28. To Bishop Kyle, from Madrid, 11th June 1859. (Preshome archives.)
29. College archives 30/22.
30. To Bishop Kyle, 11th July 1859. (Preshome archives.)
31. To Cameron, 19th October 1859. (College archives 6411/7.)
32. 22nd May 1860. (Argyll archives.)
33. Cf. college archives 22/24/5.
34. The royal order of 13th May 1868 is in college archives 30/27 with a copy in archives of Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, file G 11. Cf. also college archives 22/24/6-10 and 59/3, and Cameron to Bishop Strain, 14th June 1868 (St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, C 7, p. 212) and to Alexander Munro, Glasgow, 5th May 1873 (archives of Arch diocese of Glasgow, box "Clerical Education, Spanish College").
35. Cameron to Bishop Kyle, 27th November 1867. (Preshome archives.)
36. 18th July 1869. (College archives 64j1/30.)
37. 23rd June 1870. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)
38. To Archbishop Eyre, 6th August 1870. (Ibid.)
39. Archbishop Manning to Archbishop Eyre, 29th August 1870. (Ibid.)
40. To Archbishop Eyre, — September 1870. (Ibid.)
41. Rev. Angus MacFarlane, Archbishop Eyre's secretary, to Cameron, 6th September 1870. (College archives 64/1/28.)