

Chapter 18

John Woods

The year 1903 marks the end of an era in the history of the college. Fr. David McDonald, though he continued to live in the college, was in retirement; the one professor (Fr. Anselm Steven) who was there when the new rector and vice-rector arrived left a few months later; and the only student of the time, Donald Martin, was recalled to Scotland within two years. At this time also, we enter a period which is still within living memory, yet, strangely, it is one of the least documented of all. For the years from 1903 until 1909, there is a great dearth of records, letters and even account books, from which information about the period might be gathered.

As soon as Fr. David's letter of capitulation was received in February 1903, correspondence began among the bishops to make the choice of a successor. Within a month the selection had been made—Canon John Woods—although Bishop Turner of Galloway (which was the new rector's diocese) considered that he was not “sufficiently broadminded to see that the old Spanish methods should be set aside, and he is at times very slow in his movements.”¹ However, his suggestion of Canon John Ritchie, the Glasgow archdiocesan secretary and a non-Spaniard, was not taken up.

John Woods was born in Dalbeattie on 26th September 1855, went as a boy to Blairs College in July 1868 and to Valladolid on 9th June, four years later. The end of his student days coincided with the period just after the death of Rector Cowie and, since David McDonald did not yet have the power which rectors until 1914 had of presenting students for orders without dimissorial letters from their bishops, he was sent home as a deacon. On 22nd June 1879, a week or two after his arrival in Scotland, he was ordained a priest in the cathedral at Dumfries by Bishop McLachlan. He spent a few years as an assistant at Kilmarnock and then was given charge first of Newton Stewart, then of Irvine and finally, in 1897, of St. Joseph's, Kilmarnock.

Woods' royal appointment as rector was made on 9th June 1903,² while he was still in Scotland engaged on his first duty as rector—the search, on the bishops' invitation, for a vice-rector. Of the first three whom he suggested, the bishops were agreeable to two, but both of these (one was Fr. Joseph McHardy) declined the appointment.³ In September, Woods, at that time residing in Motherwell with Canon John Taylor, his former classmate in Valladolid, suggested five other names to the bishops but, a few days later, he gave more definite news: he had spoken to one of the five, Fr. James Humble, priest in charge at Newmains, nearby, and he was agreeable.⁴ This business settled, the new rector set off for Spain and arrived at Valladolid on 12th October, followed three days later by Fr. Humble and ten students.

The Scottish bishops did not neglect to make it clear to Canon Woods that there had to be changes in the college. Before he left for Spain, a meeting of the hierarchy instructed him that he should be guided by several “leading principles” which included the following:

“The system of education should be altered . . . The teaching should be done by externs, if possible In connection with the English College, so that the students of both Colleges should be brought together.

“The Rector should look into the sanitary condition of the College, and report to the Bishops thereanent.

“The Rector should see that proper arrangements are made to meet the case of any sickness arising . . .

“He should see that the food and the cooking are suited to the constitution and habits of the students . . .

“He should see that the clothing of the students is suited to the variations of temperature . . .

“To avoid the risk of overheating and of sudden chills, due discretion with regard to games should be insisted on . . .”⁵

A party of thirteen boys arrived in October 1905, the idea being that they should finish in Spain the classics course they had begun in Blairs.⁶ For a short time thereafter the college had twenty students on its roll. But three of the newcomers, who were involved in a “discontented movement”, left the following year,⁷ and, of the other 1905 arrivals, two were sent to the Rome college and, all the rest, eight in all, were transferred to St. Peter’s, Bearsden. For a few years, therefore, the college was regarded as little more than a minor seminary. Respectable numbers were restored by intakes of nine in 1907⁸ and three in 1908.

Despite the bishops’ hopes, all the teaching continued to be done in the college for the first two years of Woods’ rectorate, Fr. David taking the theology course while the rector and vice-rector were responsible for the lower classes. With the increased numbers in 1905-06, the new students received their instruction in the English College by courtesy of the professors there but, by 1907, all the teaching was again done in the college, the rector giving the philosophy or theology classes as required and the vice-rector teaching classics to the younger students.

In 1897 and completely unexpectedly, Don David McDonald had received the first news that the college had been left a legacy in Madrid by John Martin, a native of Perthshire. There ensued, over the next decade, a series of letters between the rector and the indefatigable priest who administered the legacy, Don Salvador Nacher. Always optimistic, he assured the rector several times that the money was on the point of being paid. Finally, in 1907, after ten or eleven years of negotiations and two lawsuits, it was. The college received one fourth of the total estate which by now was worth only £1,500.⁹

During his time as rector, Canon Woods restored the house at Boecillo, which had been rented as a residence during the winter of 1903-04 by the rich eccentric, Squire Granville Ward. It was during Woods’ rectorate that the exterior was covered by white plaster, giving the house the very prominent and somewhat Andalusian appearance that it still retains today.

Canon Woods’ rectorate was destined to be short and relatively unremarkable. He was a kindly man, well-liked by the students, but of a very reserved disposition. Unfortunately he had such a serious

nervous breakdown that, from the middle of February 1909, he was unable to carry out his duties and, on 14th April, he had to return to Scotland in the care of two priests. He had been rector for only six years. Once back in Scotland, he made a good recovery and was able to resume parochial duties. He was in Maybole from 1909 until 1915 and then spent the last seventeen years of his life as parish priest of St. Margaret's, Ayr. At the end of 1931, he went to reside for a while with the Alexian Brothers in Warrenpoint, Co. Down, and it was there that he died on 8th January 1932. His body was brought back to Ayr, where it received burial.

Notes for Chapter 18

1. To Archbishop Smith, 22nd February 1903. (St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, G 10.)

2. College archives 67/16.

3. Bishop MacFarlane, Dunkeld, to (?) Archbishop Smith, 29th July and 14th September 1903. (St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, G 10.)

4. To Archbishop Smith (?), 19th September 1903. (Ibid., G 10.)

5. College archives 67/18.

6. This, despite the fact that, five or six years earlier, a desire that students should complete their classics course in Blairs had been given as a reason for not sending any to Valladolid.

7. Woods to Canon John Ritchie, Glasgow, 18th December 1906. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)

8. This group, which travelled by sea from Liverpool to Corunna, still had three years of its classics course to complete when sent to Valladolid.

9. College archives 31/2.

In addition, the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh received, for necessitous priests, one eighth of the legacy (something under £200),