

SOME TENDENCIES IN IRELAND TODAY

THE EARL OF WICKLOW

DURING the last five years, Ireland has probably had more visitors from overseas than at any time in her history, and we who are Irish (like most citizens of small countries, we tend to be self-conscious) often wonder what impression they take away with them. Do they just see Ireland as a land of steaks and bacon and eggs, with slow trains and reckless car-drivers, or have they tried to find out what is going on, and indeed whether anything noteworthy *is* going on? Do they wonder whether this ancient but youthful country, which in the political sense came of age only a few years ago, is living a life and producing a culture of its own, is, in brief, making a contribution to Christian civilisation?

The Catholic visitor to this country is more likely to study these questions, for he knows that this small island has for many centuries been a stalwart outpost of Christianity on the Atlantic seaboard, that its inhabitants have withstood harsh persecution for their faith, and that not only in the Dark Ages but in our own darker age, Ireland has sent its Christian emigrants and missionaries far and wide, so that, as Father Philip Hughes has pointed out in his *History of the Catholic Church*, one third of the Catholic episcopate now have Irish names. There are indeed certain things which the Catholic visitor is likely to notice, the genuine devotion of our people, the crowded Masses (on weekdays as well as Sunday), the large numbers at prayer during the other hours of the day, and the salutes to the churches, for one may often see a whole bus load of passengers removing their hats or blessing themselves when passing a church or a cemetery; he may also notice that, while our religion is strong on the point of individual piety, as regards the Liturgy there is a marked weakness. He may also notice that whereas we make much of our patriots and successful politicians (are we sometimes apt to forge: that enough is as good as a feast?), our martyrs, with the exception of Blessed Oliver Plunket, are sadly neglected; in this matter English Catholics put us to shame.

But there are other items in our national life which even the

Catholic visitor may miss, and which may be worth studying; in writing of them may I say that, having been a wanderer from my native land who returned five years ago, I may perhaps be able to consider it with some objectivity? As I have become acclimatised once more in my own country, I think the thing that has struck me most forcibly is that there is at this time an unusually vigorous and indeed eager young generation growing up in Ireland, especially in the towns, to which, unfortunately, the drift from the land still continues. Irish people tend to marry late, and often not to marry at all, but once married their unions are usually fruitful, so this may be why there seem to be so many young people about in our country. The fact remains, however, that they seem to be unusually vigorous young people. In Dublin, for instance, even the main shopping streets often have many children on the pavements, who have emerged from the poor streets which are never far away, and take no small interest in the way of the world.

When, nearly a century ago, Newman tried to found a Catholic university in Ireland, one of his chief difficulties, apart from the attitude of the hierarchy, was that there were so few young Catholics who required, or were suitable for, university education. What would he say today? When he gave his great lectures in Dublin, he seemed to have a certain prophetic insight that while he might fail to achieve his object during his lifetime, the day would come when men would build successfully on the foundations which he had laid. How right he was; although the three lay colleges of the National University, in Dublin, Cork and Galway, are in theory neutral as regards religion, in practice they are almost entirely staffed, and mainly attended, by Catholics, and their problem today is, not to find enough Catholic students, but to find enough accommodation to provide for the ever-increasing crowd of young people who are knocking at their doors.

It has been my privilege and great pleasure to see a certain amount of this younger generation during these last years, and the thing which strikes me increasingly is their vitality, both spiritual and mental; one becomes conscious of a great surge of the national life in the younger generation, which is, I am afraid, in most cases, ignored by their elders, who are all too ready to go on hammering away at the old political quarrels, which

should have been forgotten twenty years ago, boring their juniors and neglecting matters of greater moment. They forget that a remarkable crowd of younger men and women is coming to maturity, who are asking questions, and have clear logical minds, which tend to commonsense and to cynicism rather than to 'poetry' and 'genius', and who, though they may not always be conscious of it, are looking for some form of direction which will satisfy their reason and not appeal merely to nationalist prejudices. These young people are not rebels, except in the sense that all young people are rebels, and it is true that they have their full share of that most healthy unruliness which must have been characteristic of the medieval universities, but they are fully conscious that they must face the future while considerable numbers of their elders seem to be gazing wistfully, and at times cantankerously, at the national history of the past.

And the sad thing is that so much of this splendid, promising young humanity will have to go to other lands for a living, instead of helping to build the new Catholic Ireland; a journey which will in most cases be one of necessity rather than desire. It is not the aim of this article to try to explain all the causes of that constant emigration which for more than a hundred years has been such a disconcerting feature in Irish life. But it is reassuring that recent Governments seem to be aware of the danger, and to be taking measures to provide better chances of employment so as to stem the tide. The problem is, however, still acute, and I do not think it can be put down merely to the supposed wandering qualities of the Celt.

It would, I think, be fairly true to say that the young emigrants from our country fall into three main categories, the largest consisting of young men and women belonging to the farming and labouring classes; then there is an annual exodus of recently qualified doctors and nurses, and also a remarkably large number of young priests and nuns. The last group has been definitely on the increase during the last twenty years—more of them later.

The reason for the migration of the first group is obvious, namely the prospect of high wages and the fact that the farms on which they were born cannot support the whole family, which is rarely a small one. A more disquieting reason is that daily life in large tracts of our country-side and in many of our small towns is desperately dull for young people. Splendid efforts to

improve matters have been made by the movement known as *Muintir na Tíre*, which owes its birth to a Tipperary parish priest, but an enormous amount remains to be done, if serious attempts are to be made to persuade the young not to go away. A very hopeful sign of the times is the steady growth of the amateur dramatic movement, which is to be found all over the Republic and is also very strong in the Six Counties. There is an enthusiastic interest in this, and dramatic festivals are now held regularly in most of the county towns. Irish people love acting, for which they have a natural talent, and they thoroughly enjoy a good play, however much their criticisms may tear it to shreds.

May one not say that not only the third, but also the second group, are instances of vocation? The number of nurses and medical students in Ireland is phenomenally large in proportion to the population, and this seems to be causing the authorities some concern. A considerable number of the doctors have to emigrate because there is not enough work for them, while the nurses are attracted by better pay, and, I fear, in most cases, better conditions than we offer them. I have talked to numerous medical students who would prefer, if they could, to remain at home, and I have met nurses in England who would like to return—not from any dislike of England, but from the natural desire of human beings to live in their own land. Would it be fanciful or sentimental to suggest that the strong bias of the Irish towards the medical profession is due to the ever-present Catholic background to life in this country, urging the young to follow the highest lay vocation?

This element among our emigrants must, I think, be of real value to the Church, as all our medical students are given a good grounding in medical ethics, which forms part of their course, and the instruction is given on strictly Catholic lines. Now that so many non-Christian ideas have seeped into the minds of the medical profession, this constant renewal of young Catholic blood must surely be beneficial, for, though there are lapses, a high proportion of this group is staunchly Catholic.

It is sometimes said over here that priests are our chief export, and it is true that the majority of our clerical students, of whom there are large numbers, are destined for overseas, whether in the various parts of the English-speaking world (to train whom there are several thriving colleges), or in the foreign mission-field.

There has been a marked expansion in Irish missionary activity, during the last thirty years, in which the religious orders have played a prominent part, and Maynooth has also given birth to two missionary societies, one for work in tropical Africa, the other in China and the far East; both of these now have independent houses.

The most striking developments, however, have probably been in the religious orders for women, and several extremely modern missionary congregations have been founded during this period, all of which specialise in medical work. One might say that a revolution has taken place, without anyone being fully aware of it, for they are now busy training midwives and gynaecologists, a form of medical work which thirty years ago was forbidden to members of religious orders. (Readers of Dr Heenan's life of Cardinal Hinsley will remember the stratagem which the latter employed to try to get round this difficulty when he was in Africa.) Two of these congregations have produced very remarkable films to illustrate their work, *Visitation* and *Out of the Darkness*, and each of them has a shot of the sisters operating in their theatre, in one case performing a Caesarean operation.

Such, I believe, are a few of the tendencies at work among the young Irish people of today; and it may well be that our diaspora are after all serving some special purpose in the scheme of divine Providence, and are giving the best that Ireland has to give to the world outside it.