

Damien Burke, ed.

Irish Jesuit Chaplains in the First World War. Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2014.

Pp. 120. Pb, 14 euros.

With this well-illustrated volume, the Irish province of the Jesuits commemorates its chaplains on the centenary of the First World War. Scholarly attention to the role of chaplains is not a new phenomenon, nor limited to the Roman church or the conflicts of the twentieth century: the first Jesuit *missiones castrenses* go back to the sixteenth century. We do not have an overall synthesis concerning the Catholic chaplains in the United Kingdom, but there are studies dedicated to individual priests: *The Cross on the Sword: Catholic Chaplains in the Force*, ed. by Tom Johnston and James Hagerty (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1996) and T. Bowman's *The Irish Regiments in the Great War: Discipline and Morale* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

The story of the Irish chaplains is of particular importance, given the strained relations between the native Catholics of the island and the Protestant majority of the English mother-country, to say nothing of the hostility between Ulster and the rest of Ireland. In order to motivate the Irish Catholic soldiery, it was necessary to evoke the sufferings of the Roman church in Belgium overrun by Germany, or the current menace to France. There was also a faction among the Irish political leaders who thought that the participation in the conflict would advance the Home Rule, which had been shelved in 1914. It may be that the superiors of the Society, including the provincial Thomas V. Nolan, were of the same view. Indeed they succeeded in mobilizing a number of fathers. Nonetheless the battle for independence intensified with the Easter Rising of 1916, which had repercussions at the front, particularly where Catholics and Ulstermen were called on to fight side by side. Besides some Jesuit chaplains came from a nationalist *milieu*, or from families with members of Sinn Féin. Their loyalty to the Irish cause had to coexist with their ministry to the soldiers of His Majesty, giving rise to sentiments that the documents preserved in the Irish Jesuit Archives hint at obliquely. These consist of diaries (like those of Fr. John Delaney and Fr. Henry Gill), letters, memorabilia, and photographs (Fr. Frank Browne, who continued his mission in occupied Germany after the armistice, was to prove a skilled photographer). This volume sets Jesuit sources alongside other testimonies, such as Rudyard Kipling's *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (1923), written in memory of his son, a casualty of the war who had enlisted with that regiment.

The Jesuits among the Irish troops numbered thirty-two in all. Six of these served under the banner of the Australian Mission of the Irish Province. To these must be added the eleven Irish fathers who served with English regi-

ments. Seven were to die, either in the war itself or as a result of illness or wounds. The most famous of the chaplains was Fr. Willie Doyle (1873–1917), but no less significant was Fr. Browne. These, and nine other chaplains, are the subject of the essays collected here, penned by Steve Bellis, Damien Burke, Simon Carswell, and Graham Wilson as well as the Jesuits Paul Andrews, Hugh P. Duffy, Tom Layden, John Looby, Bernard J. McGuckian, Michael Head, Thomas Morrissey, Liam O'Connell, E.E. O'Donnell, and Oliver P. Rafferty. In his introduction, Rafferty emphasises that “whilst Catholic represented only 7% of military personnel, Catholic chaplains accounted for 22% of all chaplains” (10). In fact, there was a total of 651 Catholic chaplains in service, and of these the Irish Jesuits were a small minority. None the less, they were a significant presence: the value of Jesuits to the army had been established for centuries, and the choice of some fathers was often dictated by their knowledge of languages or on the basis of studies at Louvain or in the Netherlands. Many of them received no recognition from the British High Command, ever suspicious of “papists,” especially of Jesuits; but others were honored by the United Kingdom’s Catholic allies. The chaplains were expected to celebrate services, construct and maintain sandbag chapels, administer last rites, confess those in danger of death, console the troops and encourage them to pray, tend the wounded in the camp hospitals and keep the troops occupied in the long stretches of free time. Delaney organized football matches, Gill screened Pathé films, O'Mara managed to lead a group of soldiers on a pilgrimage to Lourdes in the last weeks of the war. Pastors of souls, the Jesuits were also capable of resolving practical problems: Gill got hold of a motorcycle and thanks to his scientific training invented a system for communicating over long distances. Seasonal rites continued to be celebrated under extreme conditions: as Morris wrote after the Christmas of 1916, the feast had been “by no means cheerless, even though the big guns all round were indulging in a more vigorous “strafe” than usual” (82). And even the occasional conversion was recorded. As Morris reported in 1917, he was just resigning himself to abandoning a pair of shoes to the deep mud when a soldier who had come to his aid announced a desire to become a Catholic: “I lost a gum-shoe but gained a soul” (83).

Thanks to the Jesuits’ witness we can get an inkling of real life in the trenches: the hunger when supplies were delayed, the hideous violence of bombs and nerve gas. Gill describes in his diary a young soldier engulfed by enemy fire: “his hands and face [are] a mass of blue phosphorous flame” (58). The chaplains also record some of the major battles, such as Ypres and the Somme, a time that Roche described as “absolutely beastly” (103). On the other hand, Roche was exultant at the arrival of the Americans, whose toughness impressed him and offered hope that the war would soon end and the Germans

be defeated (104). But the main protagonist is the mud: “the sea of mud, rather the ocean of mud,” as Browne wrote in 1917 (27). The volume also touches the problem of forced coexistence of different faiths in the trenches. The Jesuits confined their apostolate to their Catholic countrymen, and displayed a pronounced standoffishness towards the “heretic” Anglican and Methodist chaplains. Morris disdainfully rejected their proposal for a joint memorial service to commemorate the fallen in 1917.

“Initially, there seemed to be a reluctance on the part of Irish priests to volunteer” (10): a section of the clergy were even accused of sabotaging the war and the British Empire (94). For their part, the English officers made fun of the inability of the Irish to raise a decent potato crop, while their priests sprouted in abundance. None the less, this volume shows that we should not uncritically accept the myth that participation in the war was unpopular: indeed many Catholics and priests greeted the war with enthusiasm. While some chaplains found in it a solution to their private neuroses, like John Gwynn, who abhorred teaching young boys, others set off out of obedience to their order, rather than as volunteers. This was the case with O’Mara, son of an ardent nationalist, who served in a number of field hospitals, performing the office of registering the dead. Do we detect a degree of self-distancing from the war on the part of the Jesuit chaplains? Or did the uniform become a second skin to them, especially those who had volunteered? It is not easy to say. Delaney paints a tragic picture of the destruction of Belgium and laments that “the height of civilisation” had produced so much weaponry “utilised for the destruction of human kind” (36); Roche speaks with horror of what he had witnessed at Somme (103). Nonetheless, there does not seem to be any real disengagement on the priests’ part from the spirit of the war. Patriotism and faith were frequently conjoined, and Gill, at the end of hostilities, visited the birthplace of Joan of Arc to pay his respects to a saint who had herself taken up arms against the enemy. Finally, the essays allude to the political problems accompanying the chaplains’ re-entry into Ireland. In a time when “service in the British army was not appreciated” (107), a veil of silence seemed to fall over their experiences. This book will help to lift that veil.

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DOI 10.1163/22141332-00301005-26