The British Isles: 
Recent Developments in the Writing of Church History

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In regard to the historiography of Christianity in the British Isles, it is necessary to begin by recalling that these islands contain two sovereign states, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; four nations, the formerly independent kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland and the Principality of Wales; and even four languages, the Welsh, Irish and Scots varieties of Gaelic or Celtic as well as the English language spoken by the great majority. The linguistic difference now affects only minorities, though the different national and regional dialects of English are fundamental to the self-identity of those who speak them, while the political divisions have important implications for the religious behaviour and affiliation of the people. Most English belong to the Church of England, which is closely linked with the English State and Crown and which derives its present form from Henry VIII's rejection of the authority of the Pope in the sixteenth century. The Queen of England is Supreme Governor of the Church of England as by law established and is in a sense a sacred person, anointed by holy oil at her coronation. She reigns by the grace of God,

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and the title bestowed on Henry VIII by Pope Leo X, Defender of the Faith, Fidei Defensor, F. D., is still engraved on every coin of the realm. The upper legislature, the House of Lords, contains a body of Anglican bishops, who are officially appointed by the Crown, on the advice of the Prime Minister, and even the legislation of the Church’s representative assembly, the General Synod, which has only existed in its present form since 1970, requires the approval of the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

The majority of the Scottish people are members of the officially Calvinist Presbyterian Church which also enjoys the position of a national Church; the Church’s annual General Assembly receives the Queen’s representative, the Lord High Commissioner, though in the Declaratory Articles of 1921 the British parliament recognised the Church’s complete independence from the State, a consequence of a long struggle by the more radical Presbyterians to preserve the Church’s religious authority, in the name of what they called the «Crown Rights of the Redeemer». There are no Presbyterian representatives in the House of Lords as there are Anglican bishops, nor does the Crown appoint Presbyterian ministers.

Wales is different again. The Welsh were conquered by England in the fourteenth century, and the Welsh Church was simply part of the Established Church of England. In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, a majority of the population seceded to the Protestant Nonconformist Churches, the largest the Calvinistic Methodist Church, and from the 1840s, these Nonconformists with their English allies began to campaign for the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales, an aim achieved in the Welsh Church Disestablishment Act of 1919. Unlike the English, or even the Scots, the Welsh have no official church establishment.

Last, a majority of the population of Ireland remained Roman Catholics from the time of the Reformation and never accepted the ministrations of the


State-supported Protestant Church of Ireland, which was united to the Church of England when the parliaments of England and Ireland were also united in 1800. Roman Catholics opposed to the union of the parliaments were also opposed to the State's support for the Church of Ireland, and in response to pressures both from the Irish and from Nonconformists and radicals in England, the Liberal administration of William Ewart Gladstone disestablished the Church of Ireland in 1869. In 1921, after five years of revolution and insurrection, the predominantly Roman Catholic population of the south achieved their independence from Great Britain, and by its 1937 Constitution, the new Irish State recognised the place of the Catholic Church in the life of the Irish people, though it also recognised by name the existence of the Protestant Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church and other Churches. Of course the Irish State claims no power over the Churches, and religious controversy in Ireland since 1970 has arisen over attempts to reduce the Catholic Church’s informal but considerable power over the Irish State.

These disparate Churches do, however, have certain characteristics in common. First, the Church of England, the Scots Presbyterian Church, the Welsh Nonconformist Churches and the Catholic Church in Ireland have all helped to create a sense of national identity in a majority of the population. Indeed in Scotland the General Assembly has sometimes been regarded as the parliament of Scotland since Scotland lost its secular parliament in 1707. In Wales and Ireland, the popular Churches have been in varying degree and measure the foci of opposition to British rule, while in Irish contexts, it has often been difficult to separate out the term Catholic from Irish, the loyalty to the Faith from the loyalty to the Fatherland.

Thus the influence of these countries upon one another has greatly complicated their religious history. The Church of Ireland included some native Irish converts to Protestantism, but most of its supporters came as conquerors from England which, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had dispossessed the native Catholic landowning and professional classes. Again, the largest Protestant body in Ireland, the Presbyterian, is descended from Scots Presbyterian settlers «planted» in Ireland by the English Crown in place of the native Irish Catholics. They are principally responsible for the fact that two thirds of the province

of Ulster remained outside the newly independent Ireland in 1922. In Scotland, a minority of members of the State Church remained loyal to the Scottish Bishops when the Church readopted Presbyterianism in 1690. These Scots Episcopalian were reinforced by English immigrants and by the Anglicising influence on the Scottish upper classes during the nineteenth century. The English Presbyterian Church was re-created in the nineteenth century by Scottish immigrants into England. Last, in England, Scotland and Wales a minority of the population remained true to the ancient Catholic faith. They were concentrated under gentry leadership in particular places, as in western Lancashire and county Durham and Northumberland in England and in Banffshire and the western Highlands and islands in Scotland. But the strength of the Roman Catholic Church in Great Britain basically derives from the massive nineteenth-century immigration of Irish paupers into the major British cities, a presence reinforced by other immigrants from European countries in this century.

Thus modern British religion constitutes a complicated picture, made still more complicated by the «dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion». This has meant the existence of sharp denominational divisions among the Protestant Churches, and a long history of sectarian conflict and rivalry, itself providing historians with an enormous subject matter, quite apart from the much more fundamental conflict between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

It was in the seventeenth century that England became a nation with a hundred religions and only one sauce, through the rise of Protestant Dissent, or Nonconformity, to the State Church: or as the Catholic poet Dryden satirised them as the beasts of the forest, in his poem The Hind and the Panther: the Independent or Congregationalist Bear, the Presbyterian Wolf, the Quaker Hare, the Baptist Boar as well as the Anglican Panther and the pure unspotted Catholic Hind. Dryden attacked the Dissenting animals in verse:

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Oh happy Regions, Italy and Spain,
Which never did those monsters entertain!

These divisions were enhanced, first in the eighteenth century, by the «heart religion» of the Evangelical Revival, which under the leadership of John Wesley and George Whitefield produced the Wesleyan Arminian and Calvinist Methodist Churches; and then by the massive expansion of all forms of institutional Christianity in the nineteenth century.

The price of this expansion was, therefore, further division. After 1790, the Wesleyan Methodists suffered a number of splits, resulting in the creation of the Kilhamite New Connexion, the Primitive Methodists, the West Country Bryanite «Bible Christians» and the Wesleyan Reformers, while the Scots Presbyterian Church endured a number of major secessions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, generally over the state’s right to control the Church. The chief of these came in 1843, in the Scottish Disruption, when a third of the clergy and laity of the official Church established a Free Church, which duplicated the efforts of the official Church, while the reunion of some smaller seceder bodies to form the United Presbyterians in 1847 meant that there were three major Calvinist Presbyterian Churches in Victorian Scotland hotly competing with one another.

The main conflict in the nineteenth century, however, was the challenge to the position of the Established Church in England from radicals, Nonconformists and Roman Catholics, resulting in a partial measure of disestablishment of the Church with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which opened up parliament and most of the principal offices of state to non-Anglicans. The matter was made more complex by a thorough internal reform by the secular legislature of the Church’s worst abuses to ma-

ke it a pastorally more efficient institution, and the accompanying process of dismantling Anglican privilege was a very slow one, from the introduction of civil marriage and civil registration in 1836 and of civil divorce in 1857, to the gradual secularisation of the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge between the 1850s and 1870s, a process which still left the Church with a very considerable position within them. Thus the Anglican clergy retained possession well into this century of the Oxbridge Divinity Faculties, the Collegiate Deaneries and chaplaincies and chapels, while college chapel attendance remained compulsory for undergraduates. But the rise of the Liberal Party from the 1850s meant that in the second half of the nineteenth century, English politics was often polarised between Liberal Non-conformist chapelgoers and Conservative or Tory Anglican Churchmen, even though the greatest of the Liberal leaders, William Ewart Gladstone, was the most eminent devout and highminded layman in the Church of England's history.

The constitutional history of this nineteenth-century conflict and of the erosion, but not abolition, of Anglican privilege, has been elucidated in the excellent two-volume ecclesiastical-political narrative by G. I. T. Machin. It is a major theme in the great two-volume work The Victorian Church, by the premier English church historian, Sir Owen Chadwick, who is also an Anglican priest. But much of Chadwick's work and of modern Anglican church historiography has been concerned with schools or parties of High, Low and Broad Church clergy and laymen. The Low Church movement is a partly inaccurate description of the Protestant Evangelical revival in the Church of England deriving from the activities of the «Clapham Sect» of William Wilberforce, the liberator of the slaves, and the Cambridge divine Charles Simeon. The Broad Churchmen trace their origins to the


seventeenth and eighteenth-century Latitudinarians who appealed to reason and religious toleration, and created a liberal tradition in Anglican theology, a tradition which has become a much more radical «Modernist» unbelief in this century (and is the theme of recent monographs by Stephenson and Clements). The history of Anglican liberalism and of liberal schools like the Oxford Noetics and the Cambridge idealists is part of a flourishing body of intellectual and biographical studies exploring the relations between nineteenth-century English philosophy, science and theology, and the forms of middle class doubt which were the product of an ethical unease with traditional Christian teaching, of Darwinism and of German Biblical criticism.

One moderate strand of Anglican liberalism coalesced in the late Victorian period with the High Church or Catholic-minded wing of the Church of England, which can be traced back to the Reformation, when the Church preserved much of its Catholic inheritance, including, crucially, the ancient three-fold ministerial order of bishop, priest and deacon. High Churchmen dominated the Church of England in the generation before 1830, but High Churchmanship increasingly turned after 1833 into an anti-Protestant movement under the direction of the Oxford Movement created by John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey and Richard Hurrell Froude. These new High Churchmen after 1833 tended to despise...
the achievements of their predecessors, and the historiography of the Oxford Movement followed them in emphasising the weaknesses of the Church of England in the generation before 1830 in clerical pluralism, absenteeism, inequality of income and inadequacy of pastoral provision for the new urban poor in the first nation in the world to undergo an Industrial Revolution. This historiographical attitude was exacerbated by a tendency to see eighteenth-century England as an «Enlightenment» society in which religion was marginal or weak. The All Souls, Oxford, historian Jonathan Clark has recently brought together a mass of recent research to argue that eighteenth-century England was an ancien régime based upon the threefold pillars of monarchy, aristocracy and Church, in which the dominant ideology was Trinitarian orthodoxy and subversion of the State took the form of a rejection of that ideology, as by Deists and Unitarians. The forthcoming work of Peter Nockles attempts a defence of the intellectual and spiritual life of the High Church school dominant in Church and State before 1830, so that recent Anglican historiography has seen something of a rehabilitation of the High Church tradition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Yet the principal figures of the Oxford Movement had the advantage of the glamour of their setting, the last days of the unreformed University of Oxford between 1833 and 1845, and in John Henry Newman, who became a Roman Catholic in 1845, they had an intellectual leader who is simply the greatest English theologian in modern history. Thus of the making of books about Newman and about his writings there is no end, though here I should mention the large research school on High Church themes at Oxford supervised until lately by Geoffrey Rowell, and one recent work as possessing an especial merit, David Newsome's study of Newman's relations with his arch-rival and fellow convert-Cardinal, Henry Edward Manning. Another preoccupation of High Anglican historiography has

31. See Virgin in note 16.
been the rise of ritualism. From the 1850s the followers of the movement attempted to introduce medieval or Roman Catholic ritual into Anglican churches to the horror both of an older generation of Protestant High Churchmen and of the rival Protestant Evangelicals and liberals. This conflict provoked riots in the churches, parliamentary commissions on religious worship and the imprisonment of five Anglo-Catholic clergy for ritual offences in defiance of the law.

The conflict between Catholic and Protestant within the Church of England has also spawned rival schools of Anglican Protestant and Anglo-Catholic historiography, in which the Protestant historians like Michael Hennell have tended until quite recently to concentrate on Wilberforce's generation before 1830, leaving the period after 1830 to High Church historians and most of the nineteenth-century history of Anglican Evangelical Protestantism unwept, unhonoured and unsung. The rise of the High Churchmen to a position of increasing influence over the Church of England, an influence which peaked between the wars, has meant that until quite recently Anglican church historians like Chadwick have generally belonged to the High Church school. It is notable that in spite of eclipse of Anglo-Catholicism and the new prominence of Anglican Protestantism in the past two decades, it has yet to produce an historian of the first rank. There are some good older Evangelical studies, like Eugene Stock's History of the Church Missionary Society, the greatest of the Evangelical voluntary associations, and some new Evangelical monographs, like John Wolffe's excellent work on the anti-Catholic «No Popery» societies and Donald Lewis's study of the London City Mission, and Lewis is editing a forthcoming dictionary of Evangelical biography. But most of the great institutions of Victorian Evangelicalism have still to find their historian, and the most notable historians of the wider Evangelical movements outside the Church of England of the past generation have been the Methodists Reg Ward.

John Walsh \(^{45}\) and John Kent \(^{46}\), all of whom have recently retired, though there are a few first-rank younger scholars, like the Methodist David Hempton \(^{47}\) and the Baptist David Bebbington \(^{48}\).

The historiography of Protestantism has, however, also been influenced by the emergence of a body of social history foreshadowed by the Weber \(^{49}\) and Tawney \(^{50}\) theses on the relations between Protestantism and capitalism, and by the French historian Elie Halévy's argument that popular Methodism saved an industrialising England from social revolution \(^{51}\). The pioneering social historians E. R. Wickham \(^{52}\) and K. S. Inglis \(^{53}\) drew on the 1851 Religious Census and subsequent local censuses of church attendance and other statistical material to argue that the great religious revivals of the nineteenth century were predominantly middle class affairs, and that churchgoing was weakest among urban working class men. In the 1970s, studies by Alan Gilbert \(^{54}\) and Stephen Yeo \(^{55}\) tried to relate patterns of religious revival and subsequent decline to different periods of industrialism, and there are now a good number of local and national studies which add up to a coherent map of regular religious practice in Victorian England \(^{56}\).

This interest in the social history of the poor and of the «grass roots» experience of religion from below has extended beyond the examination of formal religious practice into a concern with religious and anti-religious belief outside the Churches, which one finds in such excellent books from the 1970s as Hugh

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49. Max WEBER (Talcott PARSONS translator), The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, New York, 1930.


McLeod's monograph on Victorian London and James Obelkevich's work on rural Lincolnshire. One finding from such studies is that the English working classes were very seldom antichristian even when they were anti-church. They were "unconscious secularists", who believed in God and in the example of Jesus, even when they belonged to the "rough" culture centred on the public house rather than to the "respectable" culture sustained by the Dissenting chapel. Antichristian "secularists" like George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh never translated their hostility to Christianity into enduring popular mass movements. Indeed some of the radical agitators of the 1840s and 1890s formed Chartist or Labour Churches, while the great new Victorian working class Church, the Salvation Army, founded by the former Methodist General William Booth, had an active social programme.

Thus radicalism was fed by Christian idealism. Certain denominations, like the Primitive Methodists of the County Durham coalfields, played a central part in the emergence of the trades unions and the Labour Party, which has been classically said to have owed more to Methodism than to Marx. The first Labour Party member of parliament, Keir Hardie, was hostile to mainstream Christianity but was himself a former Nonconformist Scottish lay preacher, while the British Communist Party never became a mass movement. Moreover even outside such admitted exceptions to the rule as the staunchly Nonconformist mining and fishing villages of Wales and Cornwall, recent studies suggest a higher degree of working class participation in church life, especially by women. As Thomas Laqueur defined them, the enormous Victorian Sunday Schools were popular working class institutions, while Jeffrey Cox's study of the south London borough of Lambeth in the 1890s described the extraordinary number of points, in the realms of education, charity and leisure, at which the Churches influenced working class neighbourhoods.

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as well as middle class ones. The power of religion is especially demonstrable in education. All schools were conducted by religious bodies before 1870. Their influence was weakened by the creation of the state-funded Board Schools after 1870, but these continued to teach Biblical Christianity, even while the Church of England actually strengthened its hold on middle class secondary education in its public schools, which were increasingly inspired by the ideals of a games playing imperial-minded «muscular Christianity». All in all, there is much to support Owen Chadwick's classic judgement that «Victorian England was religious».

This preoccupation among scholars with the social dimension of religion has also led to comment on the predominantly middle and upper class social origins and attitudes of the Anglican clergy as by Ravitch and Soloway and more recently by Russell and Haig, and to analyses of the Church's social policies, including both a self-congratulatory line of Anglican writing on Christian Socialism and Edward Norman's critical insistence in a major monograph published in 1976 that Anglican clerical social and political opinion was a light religionisation of the secular ideology of the lay Anglican elite. Roger Anstey and Boyd Hil-

Hilton also takes seriously the division of Evangelicalism over the pre- and post-millennial understanding of Christ’s Second Coming. Beyond Anglicanism, however, Protestantism has been fissiparous, and the result of its division has been a bewildering richness, especially in England, with scores of influential minor denominations, from the rich Unitarians, a liberal offshoot from Presbyterianism founded by an Anglican cleric, Theophilus Lindsey, in 1774, to the premillennial Catholic Apostolic Church, effectively established in 1832 under the inspiration of a former Presbyterian cleric, Edward Irving. The Catholic Apostolics believed so firmly in the imminent Second Coming that they would not reappoint successors to their college of founding Apostles, so that while the Church still exists, its ministry has died out. Like another nineteenth-century millennial sect, the Plymouth Brethren, founded in 1827 by a former Church of Ireland cleric John Nelson Darby, the Irvingites had an international outreach, though the Darbyites suffered a characteristic division between the «Exclusive» and more liberal «Open Brethren». Other bodies, like the «Magic Methodists», the Sandemanians and the Inghamites, had a more local influence. The Irvingites and Exclusives are secretive and do not encourage historical enquiry, while the very provinciality and lack of sophistication of some smaller Protestant Churches means that they have few or no records and will never be properly studied. The consequences of the creation of so many different Protestant Churches have, however, also included the proliferation of records and archives and of historical societies to study them. Thus the Quaker Society of Friends, a tiny radical Protestant sect founded by George Fox in the seventeenth century, has an archive whose excellence is in almost inverse proportion to its numbers, while the Methodists lived up to their reputation for «method» from the first in keeping excellent membership records. The reunion by 1932 of most of the Churches belonging to the sundered branches of Methodism

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has meant that most of the varied strands in Methodism are now represented in the records retained by the John Rylands Library in Manchester. The union of the bulk of two of the major Protestant Churches, the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, to form the United Reformed Church has also meant the coalescence of their historiographical efforts in a single society and journal. I should make a special mention of the importance for historians of Nonconformity of the George Williams Library in London.

As a rich and powerful institution, the Church of England could until a generation ago afford to be its own record keeper, as every diocese had its own registry and archive and every parish church a set of registers which were the only form of registration for births, marriages and deaths until the introduction of civil registration in 1836. In fact, over the past forty years, these records have usually been transferred either to the care of the professional archivists of the County Record Offices of the County Councils or to a form of joint custodianship between the Church and a neighbouring university as at Cambridge and Durham. The records of the monasteries were usually dispersed at the Reformation, but given the immunity of England from foreign invasion and civil war since the seventeenth century, most ecclesiastical records have survived. They cover everything from the secular jurisdictions of the Bishops of Durham and Ely through the documents relating to the large landholdings of the Church to the records of episcopal and archidiaconal visitations. The largest purely ecclesiastical archive is held by the Lambeth Palace Library, and it is a mark of Anglican unselfconsciousness about the Church’s priceless inheritance that it was only in 1991 that it was felt necessary to found a separate Church of England Record Society.

Roman Catholic records are generally in a less happy condition. A number of dioceses and a few seminaries like Ushaw College have excellent archives which are well catalogued, but the archivist is usually a hard-worked priest with another job who can only come in to the archive on one or two days a week. Until a few years ago, the Archdiocese of Westminster was alone in employing a full-time lay archivist, who was unfortunately given early retirement and replaced by a cleric. Some religious orders, especially the great Benedictine Abbeys of Ampleforth and Downside, have excellent archives and libraries, but the Roman Catholic religious orders have undergone a massive decline in the past two decades, and the general situation is much more patchy. The best monastic histories and historians have also

been Benedictine, like Dom Aidan Bellenger, the author of a monograph and thirty-four published articles on the French émigré clergy 79.

Catholics are, however, well-served by the Catholic Records Society and by the historical periodical Recusant History and an annual conference for its study, though until the Second World War, the best Catholic historical writing had been the work of one family, the children of the convert-philosopher W. G. Ward: Wilfrid Ward, the biographer of Cardinals Wiseman and Newman and of his father 80; and Bernard Ward, the Bishop of Brentwood, who wrote a detailed and still-standard seven-volume history of English Catholicism between 1780 and 1850 81. The Wards could be perfectly frank about the divisions within nineteenth-century English Catholicism, especially between «Liberal» and «Ultramontane» Catholics, after the spectacular «revelations» in E. S. Purcell’s biography of Cardinal Manning 82. There is an excellent recent life of Cardinal Wiseman by Richard Schiefen 83, but some of the major advances in Catholic historiography have come not from ecclesiastical history per se as through the new kind of social history, alive to the possibilities suggested by statistical method. English Catholic social history came of age with John Bossy’s English Catholic Community, published in 1975, which presents an arresting and polemical argument about the native, lay-dominated, non-or barely episcopal, missionary and dissenting character of the English Catholic Church before it was transformed by Wiseman’s Ultramontane clericalism from 1840 84. Bossy’s work has been supplemented by local and national histories of Irish Catholicism in England. The very existence of distinct Irish «communities» in any meaningful sense has been questioned by some social historians of the Irish immigration, using the new tools of historical demography, but

there are recent studies like Gerard Connolly’s and Steven Fielding’s theses on Catholicism in Manchester which are as much a contribution to a general social as to a confessional history.

Yet the bulk of recent church historical writing shows a return to more ecclesiastical themes, and the writing of a definitely ecclesiastical or religious history is encouraged by the Ecclesiastical History Society with its two major publications, the Journal of Ecclesiastical History and the annual volume Studies in Church History, containing the papers presented to the two conferences of the Society held in winter and summer, on a major theme covering the whole history of the Church suggested by the eminent scholar who holds office as the Society’s President for the year. Many of the contributors to the Journal and to the Studies are teachers in the thirty-two Departments of Theology or Religious Studies in Great Britain, some of them in the old polytechnics which have recently become universities, and including the four traditionally prestigious Divinity Faculties in the ancient Scottish Universities and a number of departments of religion and theology in the University of Wales. A few posts in Oxford, Cambridge and Durham are still restricted to the Anglican clergy, but the only historian’s post which still has this restriction is the chair in ecclesiastical history at Oxford, now under review for secularisation. On the other hand, there are only two chairs specifically for ecclesiastical history, at Oxford and Cambridge, and two which have been suspended because of cutbacks in university funding, at Manchester and King’s College, London. Two of the four Scottish professorships of ecclesiastical history have also recently disappeared. There are some teaching posts in the declining world of the Anglican and Catholic seminaries and Nonconformist training colleges, which are now usually affiliated as colleges to universities and increasingly have the right to offer university degrees themselves.

Yet a majority of church historians are lay people. Thus my own Department in Durham contains a Reformation historian, two modern church historians and two patristic scholars who have historical interests, only one of whom is a clergyman, beside a body of teachers of the Old and New Testament, Systematic

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Theology and philosophy of religion. Church historians are also sometimes to be found in ordinary secular Departments of History, though possibly in diminishing numbers. A few work in other Departments, like my distinguished deceased colleague, Louis Allen, Reader in the Durham Department of French, a scholar of both Japanese and Portuguese, principally famous for his books on the Second World War in the Pacific. Louis has left me to edit a quarter-million word manuscript on the relations between the Victorian High Churchmen and their French Catholic contemporaries. Yet such a range of interests as Louis Allen’s is increasingly rare in academia, and our profession is ageing. Indeed when I think of my contemporaries who did research with me at Cambridge who were appointed to university lectureships, Eamon Duffy at Cambridge, Hugh McLeod at Birmingham, Edward Royle at York, Stewart Mews at Lancaster and James Obelkevich at Warwick, I realise that we are now pushing fifty. The reductions in university funding since the early 1980s mean that some very good younger people who have done research have simply not been given academic posts.

Yet ours is a generation which has made a major difference to our knowledge of church history in recent centuries. The study of religious statistics especially has meant the emergence of a quantitative picture of English religion and of the patterns of its growth and decline in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The general picture is summarised in the volume edited by Gilbert, Currie and Horsley. Thus we know that the fastest period of expansion of the English and Welsh Nonconformist Churches was between 1790 and 1850, and that their membership figures reached an absolute peak around 1906 and despite short-lived recoveries, have been in overall decline ever since. The Church of England suffered an increasing crisis in its actively participating membership relative to population growth during the first period of the great expansion of the industrial cities, but underwent a massive recovery in the half century between 1830 and 1880, and though there was some weakening of its position in London by 1900, it was still in a very healthy condition until its decline set in with the First World War. The study of Catholic statistics indicates a substantial «leakage» or «seepage» of Irish

90. See note 57.
91. See note 59.
92. See note 46.
93. See notes 58 and 105.
immigrants from the faith, but Catholic congregations continued to expand through
the century at a time when other Churches were generally declining, and Catholic
decline only set in around the time of the Second Vatican Council. Because the
Catholic decline began later than that of the other Churches, the Roman Catholic
Church, which is still losing members, is nonetheless the best-attended Church in
England, and as regular Catholic church attendance remains high among Catholics
in Scotland and Ireland, the odd consequence is that it is Catholics and not Protes-
tants who now constitute the majority of the regularly worshipping congregations
of these islands.

The very high level of Catholic religious practice in Ireland, over 80% of
the population, and the centrality of religion to the continuing problem of Northern
Ireland, has meant that in Ireland religious history is inseparable from secular historiography. On the other hand, historians have recognised that these very high levels of Irish Catholic religious practice, in contrast to much of the rest of western Europe, require an explanation. The idea that Irish Catholics had always been so faithful was rudely shaken by Professor David Miller’s demonstration that before the Famine of 1846-49, Sunday attendance at Mass in some rural areas may have been less than 40% of the population. This was followed by an equally important article by the most prolific of Irish ecclesiastical historians, Emmet Larkin, arguing that the religious fidelity of modern Irish Catholics derived from a «Devotional Revolution» sponsored by the Ultramontane Cardinal Archbishop of Dublin Paul Cullen from the middle years of the nineteenth century. The proliferation of Italianate devotions to the Blessed Sacrament and the Virgin and saints, and the introduction of the full splendour of Roman ritual in beautifully decorated new shrine churches, transformed a «folkloric» Catholicism hitherto built around prayer in the home, on Mass «stations» in houses, and on the «pattern» or pilgrimage to the local holy well and saint in a sacred rural landscape, into a new kind of church-based religion centred on attendance at weekly Mass. This church-centred devotion, in Latin or English, with a wealth of new aids from prayerbooks and holy cards to statues, vestments, banners and incense, also filled the cultural vacuum left by

95. There is a splendid bibliographical guide in Sean Connolly’s Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, Dundalk, 1985. As mentioned in the text, the doyen of historians of Irish Catholicism is Fr Patrick J. CORISH, editor of A History of Irish Catholicism, Dublin, 1967-1972, 6 vols. See also his The Irish Catholic Experience: Historical Survey and Patrick J. CORISH (ed), Radicals, Rebels and Establishments, Belfast, 1983.


the devastation wrought by the Famine on the traditional Irish language and culture. Cullen’s revolution was in discipline as well as devotion, and Larkin—and after him Sean Connolly—have stressed the pastoral inadequacies and poor discipline of the pre-Famine clergy, whose numbers were not keeping up with a rapidly growing population until the Famine. But during the Famine, more than a million people died and more than a million people emigrated, beginning a process of depopulation which transformed a worsening ratio of priests and religious to people into an improving one. Those who died or emigrated were predominantly the poorest, among whom regular religious practice was weakest, and this development strengthened the social, spiritual and political dominance in Irish life of the better-off class of farmers, especially in the east, whose religious practice was already good and who provided the lion’s share of vocations to the clergy.

Larkin’s argument has been not so much refuted as refined. Desmond Keenan has argued that the survival and revival in the eighteenth century of the Catholic diocesan and parochial structure meant that Irish Catholicism was in a better condition before 1840 than Larkin allowed, and it certainly seems true that the Irish Church had replaced many of its humbler chapels with fine new buildings boasting the whole range of Counter-Reformation devotions before the return to Ireland in 1850 of Paul Cullen. The «Devotional Revolution» belongs to an earlier period than 1840 in urban and parts of eastern Ireland. Yet it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the Irish became the «most practising» Catholics in the world. For Joseph Lee, Cullen was a «moderniser», the great builder of the Catholic poor schools system, and indeed it was through improving levels of literacy and standards of living as well as the Catholic Church’s campaign against the casual violence, drunkenness and ritualised obscenity common at Irish weddings and wakes, that Ireland in large measure adopted the puritanical Victorian values of neighbouring Protestant Britain.

Larkin is also the author of a massive narrative history of the Irish Catholic Church which now runs from 1850 to 1891, and is constructed out of a mosaic from the ecclesiastical archives of letters between the bishops and with the authorities in Rome. Larkin plans to complete the series with further volumes taking the story back to 1780 and forward to 1918. His books have been getting bigger and

bigger — one required a specially designed spine — as their range has expanded beyond his originally overnarrow attention to what the bishops said to other bishops.

Yet his subject matter has always extended far beyond the ecclesiastical, as it also covers the vexed issue of the involvement of the Catholic clergy in secular politics. This involvement was initiated by laymen, above all by the Irish Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, the subject of a recent model biography by Oliver MacDonagh 102. O'Connell's fusion of the loyalties to Faith and Fatherland in the work of his Catholic Association survived to overcome the barriers between them raised by ecclesiastical opposition to the revolutionary nationalist tradition, deriving from the rebellions of 1798, 1848 and 1867 103. Cullen's crusade against the Fenian movement earned him a special place in revolutionary demonology, even though his opposition to Fenian priests like Father Patrick Lavelle took the ostensible form of removing the clergy from politics. The latest writing about Cullen shows him more sympathy, while works like Theo Hoppen's magnificent study of nineteenth-century Irish electoral politics place the issue of clerical direction or intimidation of voters at the polls in its complex historical setting 104. There has also been careful study of the manner in which the nationalist archbishops Croke and Walsh forged a new alliance between nationalism and the Church in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Equally adroit was the Church's accommodation with the revived revolutionary tradition, when a small minority, led by the devoutly Catholic Patrick Pearse, deployed Catholic symbolism in defence of armed rebellion in the Easter Rising against British rule in 1916 105.

Yet in other ways Catholic nationalism is under attack. The study of eighteenth-century Ireland has always been heavily dominated by the historiography of the imperial and aristocratic culture of the Anglo-Irish, which suggested that Irish Catholics could be happily described as the victims of colonialism, but it is only lately that Sean Connolly has seriously questioned the severity of Catholic suffering under the Penal Laws, in part on the grounds that the Catholic mass of the population were no more severely repressed than the subject people of any other

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ancien régime dominated by a monarchy, aristocracy and established Church. Historians now disagree whether the Penal Laws were intended to convert the Catholic majority to Protestantism or to leave them Catholic and entrench the authority of the Protestant minority by excluding Catholics from all positions of power, property and privilege. Again, much had been made by Catholic nationalists of the decline of Catholic landowning in the eighteenth century under the impact of the Penal Laws. Recent study, however, by Louis Cullen, shows the subtle manner in which some fairly nominal Protestants held land on behalf of largely Catholic families, as well as the gradual recovery of the Irish Catholic Church, which confronted piecemeal and sporadic rather than sustained persecution, and even under persecution, was strong enough to retain the allegiance of the great majority of the Irish people.

These are matters of debate among lay historians like Connolly and his critic Tom Bartlett. The doyen of Irish Catholic historiography is Fr Patrick Corish, and there are other fine clerical historians like Donal Kerr, who has just retired from the celebrated chair in ecclesiastical history at Maynooth and has written a magnificent monograph on Sir Robert Peel's administration in Ireland. Yet there are not all that many purely church historians for such a Catholic country. There are no local record offices as in England, and records tended to be concentrated in Dublin, where the writing of Irish history was made both easier and more difficult by the destruction by shelling of the national archives housed in the Four Courts during the fighting of the Civil War in 1922. Dublin has an archdiocesan archive, but the diocesan archive in Galway was only opened in 1989.

If Catholic historiography leaves much to be desired, the same should be said for Irish Protestantism. Desmond Bowen has studied the nineteenth-century Protestant crusades in Ireland to convert Catholics. Otherwise Finlay Holmes's excellent study of the great anti-Catholic Presbyterian orator Henry Cooke and

109. See note 95 above.
112. Finlay Holmes, Henry Cooke, Belfast, 1981.
the monograph by David Hempton and Myrtle Hill on Evangelicalism in the Northern Irish Churches, which gives special attention to Irish Methodism, shine like good deeds in the prevailing darkness, and much Protestant historiography is still confessional. The historians of conflict between Catholic and Protestant are at least as well served by Frank Neal’s and Tom Gallagher’s studies of such conflict in Liverpool and Glasgow as by any equivalent study of Belfast. Perhaps the owl of Minerva only takes its flight when the shadows fall and the battle fades into history. In Ireland, the battle still continues.

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