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The Church of Ireland and Its Prayer Book

MICHAEL DEWAR

I have on my shelves a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer according to the use of the United Church of England and Ireland*. The title dates it between 1801 and 1870, the period of the Establishment of this United Church.

Sublime Liturgy

I also have, and until two years ago, it was in constant use, *The Book of Common Prayer according to the use of the Church of Ireland*. Revised after Disestablishment and Disendowment in 1878, its most recent full revision was in 1926. It may be regarded to all intents and purposes as a *non-doctrinal* revision of 1662. It is enriched with special services for such occasions as Thanksgiving for the Blessings of Harvest, which had not been thought of three hundred years ago. There are other liturgical treasures in this Irish 'Use', such as Prayers for the Bereaved, for Absent Friends, for Unity. There are also State Prayers, which differ on either side of the Border so that no conflict of political loyalties is involved. One of the greatest glories of Morning Prayer in Ireland is the Cantic *Urbs Fortitudinis* ('We have a strong city', based on Isaiah XXVI:v.1). These revisions and enrichments were drawn up in the first quarter of this century, before our ecclesiastical experts had lost the art of producing what George Borrow called 'sublime liturgy' in the Cranmerian style.

One 'Use'

This 'Use', and 'none other', went round the world in November 1987 from the Cathedral of St. Macartin, Enniskillen, in the Border Diocese of Clogher. This tragically postponed Remembrance Day Service gave the outside world, Anglican and otherwise, some idea of the dignity and simplicity of the Irish Prayer Book.

Irish Church Luminaries

This is the branch of the Anglican Communion which gave the Church Universal James Usher, John Bramhall and Jeremy Taylor, in the seventeenth century; William King, Jonathan Swift and George Berkeley in the eighteenth century; and in the nineteenth century such luminaries as Chenevix Trench, Provost George Salmon of Trinity College, Dublin, and above all, William Alexander.

The twentieth century still saw him on the Throne of St. Patrick, 'the only man living to be thrown out of the House of Lords', as he loved to call himself.

This century has also seen the philosopher Charles D'Arcy, J. A. F. Gregg, 'Father' of many Lambeth Conferences, William Shaw Kerr, scholarly controversialist, and George Otto Simms, still the greatest living authority on the Book of Kells. These men were all made in the mould of the Book of Common Prayer. It would be invidious to write of their successors today, except to say that the contributions of the Irish Episcopate to Lambeth 1988 were among the most creditable and credible.

Irish Church Homogeneity

Contrary to popular belief about the Church of Ireland, once dismissed as 'a survival of mid-Victorian Anglicanism', all shades of opinion exist within its broad folds from 'Derry Quay to Bantry Bay'. Its position as a minority Church (about a quarter in the North and five per cent in the South)¹ tends to avoid 'party' differences. This is so especially since most of its clergy were, and are, graduates of Trinity College, Dublin; and, or, products of its Divinity School and now of its Theological College.

But above all its homogeneity has been due to its loyalty to the Prayer Book, as well as to the Canons (paper ones!) and Constitutions, bound up with it, which enabled it to be a unifying force, an unpartitioned church in a politically partitioned country.

'Catholick and Apostolick': 'Protestant and Reformed'

The Canons were drawn up, and the Prayer Book revised in the 1870s, at a time of Evangelical strength. Thus its Preamble declares it to be a *Reformed and Protestant Church*. Charles I and William Laud would not have been ashamed of these terms. It also declares it to be *The Ancient, Catholick and Apostolick Church of Ireland*.

Some Talk of Alexander

Neither would William Alexander nor his poetess wife, Cecil Frances, children of the Oxford Movement, who numbered Gladstone as well as Keble among their friends, have been ashamed of them. They lived to forgive, though not to forget, the great High Churchman's Disestablishment of their beloved Church.

There is a delightful story of Archbishop E.W. Benson of Canterbury's visit to Armagh Cathedral, only a fortnight before his death in Hawarden Parish Church as Gladstone's guest. Bowing to his host the English Primate said: 'The successor of St. Augustine greets the successor of St. Patrick', thus conceding one hundred and fifty years' seniority to the Irish Church.

Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter

But Cecil Frances had died the year before her husband's translation from Derry, and St. Columb's Cathedral within its historic walls contains many memorials of her.² The Baptistery has stained glass windows illustrating her children's hymns, which were written to expound the Church's Catechism and explain the Church's Year. Such were 'The golden gates are lifted up' (Ascension), 'Jesus calls us' (St. Andrew's Tide), and above all 'There is a green hill', and 'Once in Royal David's City'. Once silencing a crying child with a verse from this last, the 'Chrysostom of Armagh' knew that his late wife's hymns would be sung long after his eloquent sermons were forgotten.

Their daughter tells how in his retirement in South Devon he was visited by a Roman Catholic priest and a Presbyterian minister from Ireland. *The minister never doubted for a moment that he was an Anglican High Churchman, and the priest never doubted for a moment but that he was a decided Protestant.* That is the secret of the Church of Ireland.

In a land where the old terms, especially in the South of Ireland, 'Protestant', 'Catholic', and 'Dissenter', are still used, Protestant *per se* invariably means *Churchman*.

An Undivided Church

In a very 'Irish' way, although the vast number of its clergy and people are in Northern Ireland where they form nearly a quarter of the population, only the two north-eastern Dioceses of Connor (108, 249) and of Down and Dromore (92, 760) are wholly in Northern Ireland. They have their Cathedrals at Lisburn (thanks to Jeremy Taylor!), Downpatrick (where St. Patrick is buried), and Dromore (shades of Thomas Percy of the *Reliques*). Their Bishops share the Cathedral of St. Anne in Belfast, where both Dioceses meet. Thus four Bishops have their sees partly, and six wholly in the Irish Republic with Church of Ireland populations ranging from 34,000 in the Archdiocese of Dublin to 2,768 in the Diocese of Tuam.

The General Synod meets annually in Dublin, though in 1985 it met in Belfast, and the National Cathedral of St. Patrick is the common property of the whole Church of Ireland. Select Vestries and Diocesan Synods are elected annually, and the Episcopal Electoral College triennially. The Primate of All Ireland is elected by the Bishops from among their number, who seldom make a mistake. Such is the democracy of *Ecclesia Hibernica*, whose laity still draw their strength from the Prayer Book, and who exercise more influence in Select Vestries than their opposite numbers in English Parochial Church Councils.

'A Paper Wall of Partition'

Occasionally in a bantering way Ulster Presbyterians have been heard to chaff their neighbours by saying that 'there is only a paper

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wall of partition between you and the Roman Catholic Church'. The standard answer to this is, and always has been: 'Yes, indeed and that "paper wall" is the *Book of Common Prayer*'.

It was that 'paper wall', that 'one use', that brought one Englishman, born and bred, to seek Irish Orders and to serve in the Irish Church, *as of choice*, nearly forty years ago. He has never regretted that choice. He heard the winds of liturgical chaos already blowing in the land of his birth, where they have now reached gale proportions. This is not yet so in Ireland, which is still some generations behind England in its churchgoing habits. Long may this continue!

From a Hymn for St. Columb's Day (June 9th):

In the roll-call of God's sons
Sounding sweet and solemn,
Name we, 'mid His chosen ones,
Ulster's own St. Columb.
Creeds he taught barbaric Men
Are our children saying,
Prayers he prayed in danger then
Daily we are praying.
C.F. Alexander (1818–1895)

MICHAEL DEWAR has served all his Irish Ministry in the Diocese of Down and Dromore, where he was an Examining Chaplain in Church History, and was elected to a Canonry of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

NOTES

- 1 These figures are less certain than they were in 1971. The 1981 census was interfered with by the Irish Republican Army.
- 2 It has been 'under fire' in both 1688–89 and in 1988–89.