Introduction

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Cinderella state of this subject is epitomised in two works on sixteenth-century Irish history published in 1971. One came out as a study guide for sixth formers and undergraduates, providing commentary, sample documents, and references for further reading. It deals with the dissolution of the religious orders in three sentences of commentary, a reference to two compilations of documents, only one of which, published as far back as 1923, contains directly relevant material, and the citation of two general studies on the reformation in Ireland, both of which date from the early 1930s. Making due allowance for the pressure on space, and for the paucity of suitable material, the author must have done better had he considered the subject of real significance.[1]

The second study caters for a more erudite readership. It forms part of the guide to Irish historiography in the years between 1936 and 1970, compiled by the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences. The authors of the section dealing with studies of the sixteenth century drew attention to the neglect of ecclesiastical history in the period. Their own sin was all the greater, therefore, in failing to make any direct reference to the topic of the dissolution of the religious orders, even among the many neglected topics to which they drew attention.[2]

This is in sharp contrast to the treatment of the subject in England. Two full-scale works catering for university needs have been produced by authorities in the field in recent years. The most recent of these, appearing in 1971, provides a select bibliography of related specialist articles. It lists 20 monographs since

[1] G. Morton, *Elizabethan Ireland* (London 1971), p 16.
[2] T. W. Moody (ed), *Irish historiography 1936–70* (Dublin 1971), pp 23–42. E. M. Johnston, *Irish history: a select bibliography* (London 1969), does not mention the suppression of the religious houses either as an aspect of sixteenth-century history, though this is more excusable in a work attempting to comprehend the whole span of Irish history.

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David Knowles's magisterial study appeared in 1959, a tribute
to the interest his work generated.[1]

Indeed the years between have not been totally barren in Ireland
either. Fr Colmcille Conway has done much to elucidate the
history of his own Cistercian order in Ireland in the last seventy-five
years or so of its medieval existence. And Fr Canice Mooney
surveyed the history of the suppression of the orders generally
in Ireland in his study of the first impact of the reformation, as
part of the projected *History of Irish Catholicism*. However, greater
energy has been devoted to providing historical tools than to analy-
sis and interpretation. The former have greatly eased the burden
of research involved in such a vast topic, and, indeed, have rend-
ered it feasible to undertake the present study in borrowed time.
My indebtedness to the work of the Irish Manuscripts Commission
in the last quarter of a century, and to the labours of individual
scholars, will be evident in the course of the work. However a
special debt of gratitude must be acknowledged to two publica-
tions, viz. Newport B. White's reproduction of documents relating
to the valuation of the religious properties at the time of the
suppression, and Gwynn and Hadcock's compilation of information
on each of the medieval religious communities in Ireland.[2]

Apart from neglect, the most serious criticism of Irish historiog-
raphy regarding the suppression of the religious houses has been
the failure to recognise the significance of the episode in the
framework of sixteenth-century developments as a whole. Either
its negative force has been altogether exaggerated, or it has been
passed by with a nostalgic sigh as a cautionary tale of greater
antiquarian interest than historical relevance.[3] If this study
achieves nothing more I hope it will draw attention to possible
new horizons and stimulate others to explore them.

[1] D. Knowles, *The religious orders in England*, vol iii (Cambridge 1959). G. W. D.
Woodward, *The dissolution of the monasteries* (London 1966). J. Youings, *The dissolution
of the monasteries* (London 1971).

[2] M. Colmcille Ó Conbhuidhe, 'Decline and attempted reform of the Irish Cistercians',
Collect. Ord. Cist. Reform. xviii, 290–305; xix, 146–62, 371–84. Id, 'The suppression
of the Irish Cistercian Abbeys', *Citeaux*, x (1959), 44–61, 107–24, 199–211. Id, 'The
lands of St Mary's, Dublin, at the dissolution', *Reg. Novum*, iii (1), 94–107. Canice
Mooney, 'The first impact of the reformation', in *A history of Irish Catholicism*, ed
P. J. Corish (Dublin 1967), iii (II), 22–31. N. B. White (ed), *Extents of Irish monastic
possessions, 1540–1* (Dublin 1943). A. Gwynn and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval religious
houses in Ireland* (London 1970). Tribute should also be paid to the pioneering survey
of Dr P. Rogers in the 1930s, undertaken at a time when the documentation was
far less tractable than now, 'Henry VIII and the Irish monasteries', *Bonaventura*, i (2–4);
ii (1), 1937–8.   [3] See below, p 217.

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THE HENRICIAN REFORMATION AND THE SUPPRESSION POLICY

It seems desirable, before launching upon a detailed examination of this aspect of Henry VIII's religious policy, to set it in the context of the religious policy as a whole. Chronologically the suppression campaign in England coincided with the stabilising phase of the king's ecclesiastical revolution. Because of the close association in time the suppression policy has always been treated as an aspect of this new and revolutionary ecclesiastical programme. The closeness of the association had harmful consequences because the emotive power of each tended to be exacerbated thereby, and to bog down the study of both in polemical histrionics. The polemical controversies were not without their productive consequences. But too much time was spent poking among the ruins for martyrs' bones or clinging parasites.[1]

It is a useful antidote to such partisanship to recall that the first moves against the religious houses in England in the reign of Henry VIII pre-date the period of the reformation. The first large-scale project for the dissolution of English monasteries took place between 1524 and 1529 while the king was still as good a papist as any man in the kingdom, and a better one than many Catholic intellectuals like Sir Thomas More. It is instructive to recall also that the project had papal benediction and was devised and carried through not by the king but by Thomas Wolsey, a member of the college of cardinals, the pope's legate *a latere*, a devoted, if undevout, son of the Church, and an aspirant to the Petrine cathedra. The immediate purpose of the scheme was to finance a new college at Oxford for the advance of learning and piety, and the glory of Cardinal Wolsey.

It must be added that there was no intrinsic link between the English reformation and the suppression of the religious houses, as if the one necessarily called forth the other. Obviously the doctrine of royal supremacy was not incompatible with the theological basis of the religious life. There was no jurisdictional anomaly either, though most writers seem to suppose that there was. The nationalisation of the jurisdictional machinery of the regular clergy

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[1] The classic example is Cardinal Gasquet and his adversaries. Knowles, *Cardinal Gasquet as a historian* (London 1957), pp 19–25. Cf. G. G. Coulton, *Sectarian history* (Cambridge 1937), pp 5–8; G. Baskerville, *The English monks and the suppression of the monasteries* (London 1937), passim.

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was no less feasible than the nationalisation of its secular counterpart. Indeed in the first three years of the reformed Church's existence the crown seemed to envisage the continuance of the regular clergy. The outline of a new jurisdictional framework for the religious appeared, and where opposition to the new order manifested itself the government showed reluctance to proceed to radical measures, trying to meet the situation in the case of the Franciscan Observants by integrating them with their more pliant conventual brethren.[1]

Nevertheless the fact that the ecclesiastical revolution placed the religious orders under the ultimate control of the crown decisively affected their subsequent fate. It would later be argued in England, and, as we shall see, in Ireland too, that the *potestas jurisdictionis* conceded to the king as head of the Church did not bring with it a right to dispose of the Church's temporal possessions. But that it made the crown the ultimate arbiter of the destiny of the religious orders could not be denied. This inevitably altered the context in which the future of the religious was discussed. Different values were invoked in a national setting, more especially since the perspective of the most influential policy makers was secular not ecclesiastical.

No doubt the process of dissolution put in train by Wolsey with the cooperation of the papacy would have continued irrespective of the reformation. There were excellent reasons, religious, and more broadly social, why it should have done so. However, such a process of suppression would have differed, in scale and in the manner of reallocating the properties, from what actually occurred. The royal supremacy made it all too easy for the king to dictate policy to the supreme head, and to leave the Church an easy prey for exploitation by the state. The royal supremacy need not have precipitated the destruction of the religious orders. Nevertheless that destruction took place in virtue of it and, it can be said with absolute certainty, would not have taken place without it. In that sense the suppression of the monasteries is an aspect of the history of the English reformation.[2]

[1] See my 'George Browne, archbishop of Dublin', *Jn. Eccl. Hist.* xxi (Oct. 1970), 307–8. Youings, *Dissolution*, p 33.
[2] Youings, *Dissolution*, pp 25–8.

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE SUPPRESSION POLICY IN ENGLAND

The close analyses of recent scholarship emphasise the discontinuity rather than the continuity in the evolution of the suppression policy in England. Probably it will never be possible to show that no sinister master-plan lurked in the teeming brain of Thomas Cromwell, and the speed with which each phase merged into the next gives the impression of a preordained scheme working out stage by stage to an inexorable conclusion. But it seems to be the case that the final extinction of the religious life in England evolved in a piecemeal fashion, each progression apparently an unantici-pated response to a new situation. We shall see that this view finds support in the evolution of the suppression policy in Ireland.

In the first phase in England in 1534 and 1535 a small number of closures occurred, arising out of the series of visitations set on foot by the crown to administer the oath of submission to the royal supremacy, to take the spiritual temperature of the reli-gious after the fashion of the traditional religious general visitation, and to provide a detailed account of the monastic revenues. These closures involved some half-dozen communities, impoverished spiritually and economically, who responded to the prospect of more demanding supervision by going into voluntary liquidation. Undoubtedly they did so with the ready approval of the crown and even with the connivance of highly placed administrators who coveted their properties. But the closures took place in a random and tentative manner and there was considerable official doubt about the security of the crown's title to the properties, even though only houses where it might claim the rights of founder were concerned.

The small refractory group of Franciscan Observants, Carthu-sians, and Brigittine nuns, whose communities were broken up in the same period, do not fall within this category. Here the government showed considerable reluctance to take drastic action, and expended a considerable amount of time and effort in per-suading them to conform to the royal supremacy. Finally it was decided to break up the communities. Some of the most recalcitrant were imprisoned, but for the most part the properties were not confiscated, being absorbed with most of the personnel into more amenable groups.

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There was, therefore, no systematic or extensive suppression policy up to 1536. Nevertheless what occurred paved the way for such a scheme. These dissolutions differed from Wolsey's scheme, and from anything that had taken place in the medieval period, in two important respects. They took place on the authority of the crown alone without any reference to Rome. Secondly, the result was to transfer a substantial amount of property from the ecclesiastical to the lay estate. The secularisation of monastic property had begun.[1]

The second phase was announced, after much deliberation and prevarication, in the act for the dissolution of the lesser monasteries, introduced in parliament in March 1536. This phase is distinguished from what had gone before in that it was extensive in scope, and systematic in approach. It is distinguished from the later phase in that, though extensive and systematic, it was not total, nor anywhere nearly so. On the basis of information compiled in the earlier visitations, the crown alleged that many of the smaller monasteries were no longer viable, and that therefore all monasteries with revenues of less that £200 per annum were to be dissolved, the displaced religious being used to fill up the vacant places in the larger monasteries. There was an alternative of opting out into secular life but, apart from superiors, without any financial support from the crown.

It is not necessary to be cynical about the reformatory protestations made by the crown in justifying this scheme. At face value the act was designed to give effect to a process of administrative engineering, whereby much-needed retrenchment of the monastic establishment would take place, producing a more compact structure and more viable individual units. There was no anomaly about the application of a financial rather than a religious criterion, since the overall purpose was retrenchment. This is not to deny that the crown was unmindful of what it stood to gain by the scheme.[2]

The last phase of total suppression, extending also to the friars, was not clearly launched until the autumn of 1538. But the way had been prepared over the previous twelve months. A number

[1] On the early stages of suppression and secularisation see ibid., pp 25–31. The classic account of the dispersal of the Observant communities is in Knowles, *Religious Orders*, iii, 206–11. However, Knowles is mistaken in associating Thomas Legh instead of Rowland Lee with Bedyll in the enterprise.

[2] Youings, *Dissolution*, pp 40–53.

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of isolated dissolutions suggested how legal and administrative difficulties, which could be anticipated in a project of general suppression, might be overcome. By the summer of 1537 the government had hit on a formula of 'induced surrender' which seemed to provide a sustainable title to the possessions of dissolved monasteries not already covered by statutory legislation. By the end of the year it had discovered that the prospect of a pension for all was a very effective encouragement to communities to surrender voluntarily. Two further developments sealed the fate of the religious houses. One was the increasing alarm of the monks themselves, and the readiness of speculators to exploit it. In view of the spate of panic leasing and misappropriation, quite apparent from the beginning of 1538, the crown had to determine its own policy quickly or else lose much of the booty. What probably clinched the fatal decision was the threat of an invasion by the emperor and the French king in mid 1538, increasing the government's desperation for money. In the early autumn government agents were systematically working their way through the country dissolving all monastic communities. By the end of 1539 the structure of the medieval religious life in England had been almost completely dismantled.[1]

[1] Ibid, pp 63–78.

I

The religious orders in Ireland on the eve of suppression

THE FRIARS

a. The Observant movement

One feature in particular distinguished the condition of the reli-
gious orders in Ireland on the eve of suppression from the condition
of the English regulars. That is a vigorous and widespread move-
ment of reform among the mendicant orders. The fifteenth-
century Observant reform on the continent developed into an
elitist movement in England where it was represented by only
seven communities, all of them Franciscan. In Ireland, in contrast,
the reform pervaded three of the four mendicant orders, the Augu-
stinians, the Dominicans, and the Franciscans. Even the remaining
one, the Carmelites, was not altogether unaffected.

   A definitive history of this most significant religious movement
in late medieval Ireland has yet to be written, though a number
of preliminary studies have been made.[1] Taking root in the
western districts of Ireland in the second half of the fifteenth
century the reform spread eastwards. In the first half of the six-
teenth century it advanced steadily in the areas under the crown's
jurisdiction. Though observantism had not achieved total domi-
nance by the time of the reformation it was strongly entrenched
and still expanding. By then it had been introduced in 40 Franciscan
houses, representing two-thirds of the total Franciscan establish-
ment.[2] Among the Augustinians progress was less spectacular.
Only eight of the twenty-two communities were explicitly
Observant by the reformation period. But unlike the Franciscan

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[1] On the English Observants see Knowles, *Religious orders*, iii, 206–11. On the Irish
Observant movement see Martin, 'The Irish Augustinian reform', in J. Watt *et al*
(eds), *Medieval Studies* (Dublin 1961), pp 230–64. Id, 'The Observant movement in
Ireland', *Ir. Cath. Comm. Proc.* (1960), 10–16. J. Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*
(Dublin 1972), pp 193–202.

[2] These figures are based on the tables provided in Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious
houses*, pp 220, 240–1, 295.

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movement observantism among the Augustinians remained within the jurisdictional framework of the conventual communities, and its influence was undoubtedly more widespread throughout the order than these figures would suggest. For instance, Richard Nangle, an Observant, was instrumental in establishing a new conventual foundation at Galway at the beginning of the century, and continued to be a strongly influential member of the community there, though the house was not explicitly Observant. When the reformation was introduced in Ireland in the 1530s Nangle was provincial of the Augustinians and prior of their Dublin community.[1] Similarly, though only eight of the 38 Dominican communities were explicitly Observant by the time of the reformation the movement was obviously widely influential in the province. When the Irish Dominicans first established an independent province in 1484 they elected an Observant as provincial, and his active promotion of reform is reflected in the introduction of the regular observance at six centres in the next twenty years. By contrast evidence for a movement of reform among the Irish Carmelites is nebulous – a stained glass window has survived from one of their houses, with an inscription relating to Blessed John Soreth, the Carmelite general from 1452 to 1471. He was the most notable of the Carmelite reformers, and the window must indicate at least awareness and approbation of what he stood for.[2]

In accounting for the wide appeal of the Observant movement in Ireland the question of the influence of ecclesiastical politics arises. Historical circumstances imposed a racialist pattern on the jurisdictional framework of mendicantism in Ireland. The English provincial held ultimate authority and the Irish major superior as vicar provincial was subordinate to him. But hegemony in the vice-province was held by the Anglo-Irish from amongst whom the vicar provincial was traditionally chosen. This system of overlordship caused heartfelt resentment in Ireland, most intensely among the Gaelic at the bottom of the pyramid. The Observant movement provided a means of getting out from under. Adoption of the Observant rule drew the community into a new jurisdictional network which freed the Irish communities

[1] On Nangle see Martin, 'Irish Aug. reform', pp 260–4.
[2] O'Dwyer, 'The Carmelites in pre-reformation Ireland', *Ir. Eccl. Rec.* cx (Dec. 1968), 359.

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from control of the English province, and the Gaelic communities from the hegemony of the Anglo-Irish.[1]

No doubt such considerations enhanced the popularity of observantism and must be borne in mind when accounting for its growth. But it is clear that the appeal of the movement was primarily spiritual not political. The political implications had meaning only for already existing communities. A crop of new foundations, at a time when growth had long since ceased in England, testifies to spiritual vitality. In the eighty years before the Henrician dissolutions eight new Observant houses were established in Ireland by the Franciscans, and there were five new communities of conventuals. In the same period among the Augustinians there were three new foundations, either explicitly Observant or inspired by the movement. The Dominicans had five new foundations. The Carmelites, among whom there is least evidence of Observant influence, come at the bottom of the list with two foundations, one of which was an attempted revival.[2] Furthermore the spread of the Observant reform through the crown territories from the end of the fifteenth century, despite any politico-cultural bias it may have attained because of its origins and early development among the native Irish, indicates the predominance of its spiritual appeal. By the 1530s fourteen Franciscan communities in the Anglo-Irish areas were Observant, and the Dominicans and Augustinians had five each.

A more eloquent testimony than statistics to the spiritual power of the Observant movement is provided by the testimony of contemporaries. Again a comparison with England reveals a striking difference in attitude, with significant implications for the state of mendicantism in the two countries on the eve of the reformation. The popular image of the friar reflected in England at this period is that of a mundane, quaint, and rather ridiculous character: the Friar Tuck of Robin Hood, and the friar of the Canterbury Tales; the butt of Erasmus's jibe; and indeed of the English members of the Irish council, who taunted the former English Augustinian, George Browne, with being a 'poll-shorn knave friar'.[3]

In Ireland, however, the friar was typed as an Observant, a man exemplary both in personal sanctity and pastoral devotion.

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[1] Martin, 'Irish Aug. reform', pp 233–6, 242–6.
[2] Gwynn and Hadcock, cit, pp 286, 291.
[3] *S.P. Henry III*, p 208.