

Introduction

A Province 'so Curiously Ignored'

A century has passed since two books offered an overview of the English Dominican Province from its foundation by Gilbert de Fresnay in 1221 until their publication in 1921.¹ No comparable history of this body of friars belonging to the international Order of Preachers has appeared since. Even then the author of one, Fr Bede Jarrett OP (cl. 1898, d. 1934), confessed that 'it will be immediately apparent to any real student of history how very cursory a survey' he had conducted. His heavy duties as Prior Provincial (the friar charged with overall direction of Province) demanded his full attention, but he wished that another would 'compile a more detailed and more accurate account of this English Province . . . up to now so curiously ignored'.²

Jarrett's desire for a fuller history and the ignorance of others with respect to the English Dominican friars share common roots. The suppression of religious life during the Henrician Reformation destroyed much documentary and material evidence of the huge medieval Province, as did the later Scottish Reformation.³ The geographically and numerically much smaller English Province that was revived in the late seventeenth century suffered near-extinction in the mid-nineteenth century. While more documents survive from this second period, especially from its later years, the nature of the English mission hindered the collection and preservation of personal papers. The threat of persecution necessitated discretion in what was recorded and how. Fr James Darbyshire kept a journal from 1726 to 1756 written in Flemish on loose

¹ Bede Jarrett OP, *The English Dominicans* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1921); Bede Jarrett OP et al., *The English Dominican Province (1221–1921)* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1921).

² Jarrett, *English Dominicans*, xi.

³ The small number of extant liturgical manuscripts, for example, especially those for the Mass, is noted by Nigel Morgan, 'The liturgical manuscripts of the English Dominicans, ca. 1250–ca. 1530', in *ACEDP*, 370–408, at 370.

2 Introduction: A Province ‘so Curiously Ignored’

sheets of paper with additional pictograms that would have meant nothing to prying eyes on the Devon estate where he spent many years.⁴ The century-long growth of the Province from 1851 presents a different challenge – to write one history rather than several, as the Province’s overseas missions in the Caribbean and Southern Africa evolved in partial isolation from the mission in the British Isles, though they also strongly impacted on that mission. The dislocations which left Jarrett and earlier friars eager to re-connect with their past have hindered historians. Nevertheless, the present author was led by his own curiosity and ignorance to see what could be done to meet Jarrett’s wish with the advent of 2021, the octo-centenary of the friars’ arrival in England.

A new history cannot simply furnish an addendum for the decades since the publication of the books which appeared in 1921, decades during which the Province developed in ways profoundly marked by Fr Bede’s work as Provincial from 1916 to 1932. Nor is it simply a matter of drawing on recent research into particular periods, topics, or individuals, though there is a heavy debt to others to be acknowledged in the pages ahead. Jarrett desired a ‘more detailed and more accurate account’, where accuracy requires not just further descriptive details, but also fresh analysis and interpretation. Previous narratives of how an English Dominican Province was made, and re-made, have been shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by perspectives that now require critical reflection. For example, Fr Charles Raymund Palmer OP (cl. 1855, d. 1900), whose speech impediment frustrated any preaching ministry, conducted exhaustive research (Plate 1), but published studies restricted largely to individual houses. So, where earlier studies focussed predominantly upon the Dominican friars in England and Wales, and to a lesser degree, if at all, upon their presence in Scotland and Ireland, this study concerns itself with the Province’s history as a whole, which included the Irish and Scottish houses until their incorporation in two separate provinces. The Scottish province was not established until 1481, but was considered to have lapsed after the Protestant reformation of the late sixteenth century. In Ireland, a complex development occurred after the Anglo-Norman colonisation stalled in the fourteenth century, and as convents of Observant reform became attached to Observant congregations. Though the Irish houses were formed into a

⁴ Alick Cameron (ed.), *The Journal of the Rev James Dominic Darbyshire, O.P., A Worker-Priest of the 18th Century*, South Western Catholic History XVI (Downside Abbey, 1998), 1.

Introduction: A Province 'so Curiously Ignored'

3

distinct province in 1484, this decision was soon reversed, and the final separation came only in 1536.⁵

Enclosed Dominican nuns feature alongside the friars for much of the Province's history. In the late medieval period there was a nunnery at Dartford in Kent. From the mid-seventeenth until the early twentieth century, there was again just one nunnery. This community was located at Brussels until the late eighteenth century; it then moved several times within England before settling in 1863 at Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight. For four decades in the twentieth century, a daughter house also existed at Headington on the outskirts of Oxford. The friars served the nuns as chaplains and confessors, as retreat givers, and as visitators charged with the oversight of the nuns' self-government, and in the course of so doing affirmed their own Dominican identity. The nuns, however, were not merely recipients of the friars' ministrations. They often belonged to the same family networks as their male religious counterparts; a few were active in Jacobite politics; and they acted at times as bankers for the friars.

Lay men and women, some of whom were Lay Dominicans (also referred to as 'tertiaries' or members of the 'Third Order'), have played significant roles in the Province's history. Often friends of individual friars, their support for the Province has been crucial though not always simply positive. Patrons from different social classes have shaped as well as enabled the friars' apostolic mission, yet this role has often been overlooked or downplayed. In the early twentieth century, the artists centred at Ditchling in Sussex – especially Eric Gill, Hilary Pepler, and David Jones – were influenced by the Thomist theology of Fr Vincent McNabb OP. They collaborated with the friars in promoting a distributist critique of industrialism and laissez-faire capitalism. Gill even gave the English Province a certain iconographic style.

Approaching the Province's history in an inclusive way has advantages which can be seen when we turn to the individual chapters of the book. Chapter 1 studies how the thirteenth-century friars and their patrons created a multinational corporation, when to focus on one part of the story in isolation would obscure the pattern, speed, and causes of growth. If the foundation in Oxford was almost certainly predetermined by the friars, the location of many subsequent foundations was dependent on their Anglo-Norman or Anglo-Irish patrons with the necessary support of the crown. A significant proportion of the early foundations were in Ireland. Likewise, to consider the appointment of friars as bishops only

⁵ T. Flynn, *The Irish Dominicans 1536–1641* (Blackrock: FCP, 1993), 5, 8–10.

4 Introduction: A Province ‘so Curiously Ignored’

to English dioceses would obscure the role played by Dominican bishops for both English and Scottish crowns in extending or consolidating royal powers in border areas, and for the Welsh prince Llywelyn ap Gruffyd by Bishop Anian (or Einion) of Nannau, in negotiating with the English Kings Henry III and Edward I, as well as with his own brothers.⁶ Dominican friars played a significant role in what J. A. Watt termed the ‘anglicization of the Irish Church’, and in the later stages of the ‘Gregorian reforms’ (changes in the conduct expected of clerics, and in the part played by secular rulers in Church affairs).⁷

Most publications on English Dominican history to date have concerned themselves with the medieval Province in its heyday: no less than eight of the ten chapters in Jarrett’s *The English Dominicans* covered the three centuries before the Province’s suppression by the crown in 1538. The American historian Fr William Hinnebusch OP concerned himself primarily with the Province’s development before the Black Death.⁸ Chapter 2 studies the medieval Province between the Black Death and the re-suppression of the Province on the accession of Queen Elizabeth I. The chapter focuses on the challenges which the Dominicans faced from opponents to the mendicants among monastic and secular authors, as well as from opponents to religious life more generally such as the later Wycliff and the Lollards. For some, the Order’s achievements were also its downfall. *Piers the Plowman’s Crede*, a satire written at the close of the fourteenth century, presents an obese Dominican friar ‘with a face as fat as a full bladder [bladder]’ seated on his refectory bench and puffed up with pride in the Order’s men of learning and its many bishops.⁹ Inclusion of these negative characterisations, or charges, permits the historian to demonstrate the resilience of the Province, its accepted place first within the English, Anglo-Irish, and Scottish religious and political establishments, as well as its value to Irish leaders beyond the declining sphere of Anglo-Irish

⁶ Ruth C. Easterling, ‘Anian of Nanneu, OFP’, *Journal of the Flintshire Historical Society*, v (1915), 9–30 at 12 and 19.

⁷ J. A. Watt, *The Church and the Two Nations in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), ix.

⁸ William A. Hinnebusch, *Studies in Thirteenth Century English Dominican History*, Oxford DPhil thesis (unpubl.), 2 vols. (1939); Hinnebusch, *EEFP*; Hinnebusch, ‘Diplomatic activities of the English Dominicans in the thirteenth century’, *The Catholic Historical Review*, XXVIII, 3 (October, 1942), 309–39; Hinnebusch, ‘The personnel of the early English Dominican Province’, *The Catholic Historical Review*, XXIX, 3 (January, 1943), 326–46; Hinnebusch, ‘The domestic economy of the early English Dominicans’, *The Catholic Historical Review*, XXX, 3 (October 1944), 247–70.

⁹ *Piers the Plowman’s Crede*, ed. James M. Dean, *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), ll. 219–67, 14–16.

Introduction: A Province 'so Curiously Ignored'

5

control. The chapter affirms the friars' broader and continued acceptance by the nobility and townsfolk as revealed in benefactions and burials.

Despite the Province's resilience in the later Middle Ages, it suddenly collapsed in the final stages of the Henrician Reformation. Only a very small number of Dominican friars are known to have voiced opposition to Henry VIII's denial of papal authority. A few were active in suppressing religious life and in establishing a new church polity. Many, cut adrift with no pension, were granted licences to serve as parochial ministers, though it is difficult to follow their subsequent careers. Some friars made their way abroad, but few reappeared in the brief period when Mary Tudor and Cardinal Pole re-established Catholic faith and order. The final part of Chapter 2 considers what best explains this relative silence and sudden collapse. It considers how the crown took control of the Province's internal leadership, and cut off mendicants more generally from the sources of income that had previously sustained them. I ask whether the friars' closeness to court and throne in previous centuries diminished their readiness to challenge royal authority, but suggest that we make more of their embedded status in the fabric of Tudor civic life, which for the most part refused to countenance rebellion except in the North and South-West.

Chapter 3 covers the period during which the English Province quickly ceased to have an institutional existence and was long numbered among the 'ruined' provinces (*provinciae desolatae*). The period stretches from the accession of Elizabeth I to the 1650s when Philip Thomas Howard initiated the restoration of the Province. Englishmen became Dominican friars abroad during these decades and some ministered in England (sometimes alongside Irish and Scots friars). A few friars such as Fr Thomas Middleton (d. 1662) manifested a heroic fidelity to that mission; others, such as Fr Thomas Gage, were notorious apostates. Though indebted to the scholarship of Fr Godfrey Anstruther OP (cl. 1920, d. 1988), a fresh analysis of the evidence tells against his characterisation of the period as *One Hundred Homeless Years* (the title of his 1958 study). It also tells against the wish of Fr Walter Gumbley OP (cl. 1906, d. 1968), author of the *Obituary Notices of the English Dominicans from 1555 to 1952*, to claim a strong continuity between friars in this period and the restored English Province of the late seventeenth century onwards.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover the period from the mid-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century from different perspectives. The first considers the Province's life on the continent. The second examines the friars' mission in England. This approach differs from the biographical approach of

6 Introduction: A Province ‘so Curiously Ignored’

previous studies which focussed largely on the better known individuals such as Cardinal Philip Howard (cl. 1645, d. 1694) or Fr Matthew Thomas Norton (cl. 1753, d. 1800), and which have tended towards hagiography. Thus, rather than give a full biography of Howard, these chapters consider his role as re-founder of the Province, and include only those aspects of his career at the royal and papal courts which bear on that role. Chapter 4 examines Howard’s acquisition of European properties, their rationale or function, and relative importance. This reveals the previously underestimated importance of the College at Louvain in the lives of many friars. Attention to little-studied archival documents reveals the challenges faced by the members of the Bornhem priory, whether from competing visions of the observant life, from sickness, from its patrons, or from financial hardship. It also reveals the growing importance of the school at Bornhem as a source of vocations, and the importance of lay patrons in keeping the restored province afloat financially in its European setting.

John Bossy’s magisterial study, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850*, contains almost nothing on the Dominicans other than the briefest mention of Cardinal Howard.¹⁰ That omission accurately reflects the relative insignificance of the friars for the wider English mission. Analysis in Chapter 4 of the Bornhem profession book and obituaries indicates that the Province rarely numbered more than thirty-five during the eighteenth century and sometimes fell under thirty, only a proportion of whom served on the English mission. Nonetheless, Bossy’s book reflects a gap in the scholarship which Chapter 5 redresses. The chapter demonstrates the persistent challenge before the early nineteenth century of securing financially sustainable residences for Dominican missionaries, and of organising their mission, though it shows the good relations which most enjoyed with their patrons, who in several cases became significant benefactors to the wider Province and longer-term mission. However, the chapter also underscores the weak position of missionaries who fell out with their patrons. Then, as the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, and vocations fell, the challenge switched from finding missions to finding (i) suitable as well as sufficient missionaries for the swelling urban congregations, and (ii) the difficulties of funding the new churches and schools which had to be built. Demand for help outstripped the resources of the

¹⁰ John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975).

Introduction: A Province 'so Curiously Ignored'

7

recusant and convert aristocracy, when the urban missions themselves were largely populated by the very poorest in society.

Little study has yet been done on the English Dominican friars and enclosed nuns from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Recent scholarship has focussed on the Dominican apostolic sisters, and on famous individuals such as Fr Robert Suffield (cl. 1860, left the Order in 1870). Chapter 6 underscores the crucial role played in the revival of the Province by the Master-General Fr Vincent Jandel and his promotion of strict Observance in the noviciate priory at Woodchester, which benefitted from his provision of friars from other provinces, especially from Ireland. Study of the factors which shaped the growth of the Province between 1850 and 1916 highlights the appeal of what was achieved at Woodchester, the readiness of certain bishops to establish new urban parishes run by the friars, and the role of benefactors who promised their assistance to the nuns as well as to the friars. However, the strict monastic observance which attracted recruits is also seen to constrain the friars' ability to integrate the different calls upon their time.

Chapter 7 outlines first the re-shaping of an expanding English Province during the first four decades of the twentieth century, both in the British Isles (where houses were founded at the university centres of Oxford, Edinburgh, and Cambridge), and in the newly opened missions in the Caribbean and Southern Africa, while the Province as a whole developed a much stronger publishing apostolate. The chapter examines the leading role played in this by Jarrett as Provincial, and by Vincent McNabb (cl. 1885, d. 1943), a fiery orator and prolific author. However, Jarrett's achievements are shown to have strained severely the Province's manpower and finances. Two world wars also strained the Province, not only through the provision of military chaplains, but also by the wave-like pattern of first diminished and then growing numbers of vocations which rippled through the Province, especially as many men subsequently left the Order. An analysis of these 'leavers' (often absent from traditional histories and obituaries), and in particular a study of those who entered as lay brothers, indicates the energy they brought to one or two houses; however, it also highlights the energy committed to their formation, which bore relatively little fruit. The second part of the chapter shows the limited extent to which Jarrett's vision for the Province was carried forward by his successors, and the cost of that policy: the Province's inability to choose between a parish-based mission and non-parochial ministry, together with the shortage of able friars, resulted in the long-term failure of the Priory and parish of St Sebastian's at Pendleton in Manchester. That failure casts a

8 Introduction: A Province ‘so Curiously Ignored’

shadow on the better-known achievements of the friars in the English Catholic Church of the pre-Conciliar era.

Vatican II spurred multiple developments in the Catholic Church of the late twentieth century, among which were profound changes in how religious orders or congregations conduct themselves, both within their communities and in any external mission. Chapter 8 reveals first the pain and confusion which many friars experienced as much changed in their daily liturgy and community life: different generations had to negotiate different expectations of fraternity; they witnessed the loss of many ordained and professed friars, together with a sharp decline in the number of applicants to serve as lay brothers, and a gentler decline in applicants to serve as ordained friars. Some of the most dramatic changes came from 1968 onwards, when many friars transfiliated to the new South African vicariate, and when the General Chapter at River Forest, Chicago, promulgated new constitutions to regulate the friars’ life and mission. One by one, once-crowded priories were closed and parishes handed over to the dioceses. The English Dominican nuns likewise experienced a fall in vocations until it became necessary to close their convents at Headington in Oxford (in 1967) and at Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight (in 1989).

Nonetheless, Chapter 8 also establishes the ultimately successful effort made by key friars such as Frs Ian Hislop (cl. 1937, d. 1974) and Fergus Kerr (cl. 1956) to reconfigure the Province on a viable footing through a long process of fraternal dialogue and conversation in the 1960s and 1970s. It also acknowledges the major contribution which friars such as Frs Conrad Pepler (cl. 1927, d. 1993), Thomas Gilby (cl. 1919, d. 1975), Laurence Bright (cl. 1947, d. 1979), Herbert McCabe (cl. 1949, d. 2001), and Kerr made to the wider Church in disseminating the teachings of the Vatican Council and renewing a Thomist philosophical theology, through the events held at the Spode Conference Centre at Hawkesyard, through their publications, including *New Blackfriars* and a new edition of the *Summa Theologiae* in English and Latin, as well as what was offered to the many parishioners and others who attended Mass at Dominican houses.

The final part of Chapter 8 concerns the Province’s recent history from the 1980s until the present day. It deliberately offers a cursory account of events, the full import of which will only become clear with the passage of time. Office holders in the Province since 2000 (Provincials, Provincial Bursars, Regents, etc.) will find an account of significant developments in which they had a hand, but not an acknowledgement or assessment of their contribution to them. Nonetheless, analysis of vocations, and the current age-profile of the Province’s members, gives grounds for believing

Introduction: A Province 'so Curiously Ignored'

9

that the Province has a sustainable future, though its size may dip further. The buildings in which the friars live have been rendered at various points fit for purpose, or at least significantly improved. A broad and evolving consensus has been reached concerning the style of liturgical and wider community life within the houses. Confidence has been restored in the religious and intellectual formation of the next generation of friars.

Finally, we should recognise what is not included in this history. Jarrett once had suddenly to remove someone from the Oxford community. He observed to the Prior that 'the world knows perhaps our ideals; fortunately it doesn't know the queer corners of our life'.¹¹ An historian may not pass off the ideals as the reality. However, she or he should also keep a certain discretion, especially with regard to those individuals whose history is still in the making.

To aid the reader, I have adopted the following practices. In this Introduction, and from Chapter 3 onwards, I give in parentheses the year when a friar of the Province was clothed in the habit as a novice and their year of death. In Chapters 6–8, these dates are sometimes replaced by those when someone was affiliated to the English Province (formally became a member of the Province, having previously belonged to a different one in the Order), or when they transfiliated (left to become a member of a different province), or left the Order. Outside this introduction, I do not normally give the postnominals 'OP' used here to indicate the Dominican identity of key historians.

With respect to a friar's names, I have generally followed the spelling of Walter Gumbley and Simon Gaine in their *Obituaries*. Where two Christian names are given, the second is normally the name in religion, while the first is the baptismal name. Where one Christian name is given, it is usually the religious name given in the obituary rolls of the Province. There are exceptions, however: (i) in Chapter 5 the work of certain friars as missionaries makes it more sensible to use the name they employed in letters and so forth (e.g., Fr Henry Chappell, not Francis Xavier Chappell); (ii) in the late twentieth century the use of religious names was increasingly dropped after Vatican II, until in the twenty-first century the practice of choosing a religious name at clothing or profession for daily use was adopted by some but not others. In Chapters 7 and 8, I give the Christian name by which friars became commonly known in the Order with a religious name in parentheses if used at the time in question.

¹¹ Letter, 21 January 1929, Jarrett to A. Elrington, EDA, V, BJ 1.

10 Introduction: A Province ‘so Curiously Ignored’

Much has necessarily been omitted that others may think worthy of inclusion. Some may judge that significant patterns have been underappreciated or missed. I hope the book will at least encourage them to write further and better histories. We should no longer be content with a curious ignorance, and recognise how often, with what difficulty and effort, but also with what success, the English Province has been re-fashioned in the service of the Church and her Gospel.