

Chapter 12

Alexander Cameron II: The College Reopened

Cameron's visit to Scotland produced the desired result and twelve boys, accompanied by two priests, were sent to Valladolid almost immediately. At least six of the boys were from Aquhorties and at least two of the others had been at the Highland seminary on Lismore. One of the two priests was William Wallace who had been a master at the college before the war and had led the students to Corunna and safety in 1808; he had spent the intervening eight years at Fetternear and at Stobhall in Perthshire. His companion, going to Valladolid for the first time, was John Cameron. The party of fourteen set sail from Aberdeen in the "Oak" on 7th November 1816. They had a very rough passage down the east coast of Britain and through the Channel, and had to take shelter from gales at Dungeness and again at Torbay and at Falmouth. From the first of these, John Cameron wrote to Bishop Cameron: "Our conveniences here are as great as we would have expected. Our Steward is somewhat negligent and dirty. We find great difficulty in keeping our clothes in any condition as our apartment has several times been visited by the waves."¹ Some months later, he recalled the voyage in a letter to John Forbes, Wallace's successor at Stobhall: "On one occasion the greatest number fell a praying to avert the danger and I found it convenient to have recourse to the sailors' remedy—a glass of grog."² One of the students, John Murdoch, candidly informed his father: "You will no doubt wish to know whether I was sea-sick. I was a little. I vomited once only: but my Stomach was in disorder for two days."³

From Falmouth to the Biscay coast, the weather was good and the voyage took only four or five days, but then contrary winds prevented their entering Bilbao harbour as intended. The ship therefore made for Santander, to the west, but bad piloting took them past that port unawares and they finally entered Gijón on 3rd December, seven days after leaving Falmouth. On 13th December, Alexander Cameron II wrote to Bishop Cameron from Valladolid that the newcomers had "presented themselves yesterday, in the yard, with fourteen *rozines* [hacks] *Asturianos*, conducted by two *Maragatos* [muleteers or travelling merchants from a district in western León], without giving me the smallest warning beforehand. They had a very quick passage, but could not make their way to Bilbao on account of the East winds; they were forced into Gijón, the only port to which they [had] no letters, but I am happy to say that all ranks, especially the B. Consul, the Bp. of Oviedo and the Canons of León shewed them every mark of attention; they were only seven days between this and Gijón, and notwithstanding the fatigues, they are all in high Spirits and enjoy good health."⁴

As well as their own personal belongings, they brought with them some ploughs and other agricultural implements from Scotland for use in the vineyards at Boecillo.

Alexander Cameron had said that the income which he hoped to have might be sufficient for the maintenance of ten boys at the most (he calculated the annual cost per boy to be around 4,000 *reals*) and he was thus rather annoyed when twelve appeared. However, in the event, they managed.

A few glimpses of life in the college, once more functioning as a community, are afforded by a letter from John Cameron to his friend, John Forbes, at Stobhall. Cameron himself (using Jacquier as a text) was continuing to teach philosophy to the three pupils he had had at Aquhorties, John Murdoch (later, a bishop), John Bremner and James McHattie. The other nine were being taught humanities under the tutelage of Wallace. "We retain here the good Aquhorties practice of declaiming. One of the Students declaims every day in his turn before the reading begins at Dinner. The Rector has just hired a musician to teach them music and they are to be initiated in all the Rubrics and ceremonies of High Mass—a knowledge of which, in some of the Missionaries at least, may now be supposed necessary."⁵

John Cameron hoped that the rector would be adamant and refuse to take any Spanish pupils, despite the many requests made.⁶ In fact, the new community seems to have been of a fairly insular frame of mind. "No attention is paid to Spanish amongst us and the dialect we speak is a mixture of English, Scotch, Spanish and Gaelic, in which the English and Scotch predominate considerably over the others ... As I am but an awkward dabbler in Spanish, I visit very little in the town and always in company with an interpreter. I have therefore yet made but very few Spanish acquaintances. I however attend very punctually at Sermons, processions and public *funciones* of that kind, which are very frequent."⁷

At this time, the rector probably put into effect a change in the domestic arrangements which he had planned. He was of the opinion that nearly all the male cooks in Spain were idle, blasphemous, drunken and dirty and therefore he had proposed to introduce the custom of employing two women, instead of men as hitherto. This would have the added advantage that they could also do the college laundry work. But he assured his uncle that all necessary precautions would be taken: the women would be over forty and all means of passage between the kitchen and the rest of the college would be walled up, leaving only a *torno* (as used in convents of enclosed nuns) through which the food might be passed.⁸

At the beginning of September 1818, one of the students, Robert Garden, died and, later in the same month, two of the others had to return to Scotland because of ill-health. William Wallace accompanied them, mainly because one of the two, Robert Millar, was suffering from religious insanity and Cameron wanted to ensure that he left Spain and did not run wild all over the country.⁹ When the rector wrote to his uncle, he said that, although the rents and revenues were still not being paid properly, he was not in debt and could take replacements for the four losses but, "at all events, let no Millars come among them; we are completely tired of *Santos*."¹⁰ He further agreed that it might be a good plan to send the Valladolid students in their final year before ordination to some other seminary, such as St.-Sulpice in Paris, where they might learn more than could be taught in the college at Valladolid; this, despite his earlier reluctance, due to the fact that the senior students taught the younger boys and also the Spaniards who had been admitted to the college.¹¹

William Wallace duly conducted the two sick students to Britain but, although the intention was for him to return soon afterwards to Valladolid, he never in fact did go back. Perhaps Cameron was not unduly upset, since he had already, before Wallace's departure, informed his uncle that, rather than teach, Wallace dedicated most of his time to the Boecillo estates; if he had been a bore before, he was now an utter bore and he (Cameron) would have no objection if he were recalled to Scotland.¹² A few years later, he, remembered Wallace as a man of "superlative slowness and nervousness."¹³

In these years following the end of the war in Spain, there was trouble between the rector and the *ayuntamiento* of Boecillo. The main issue concerned the high taxation imposed on the rector's vineyards by the village authorities; he was being made to continue to pay the iniquitous rates that the French had imposed, despite the fact that, for several years past, the harvest had been only about one-third of what it should have been.¹⁴ What seems to have occurred was that the village had been ordered to pay a government levy of nearly 7,000 *reals* at once, otherwise troops would be sent there; a hurriedly called meeting of the *ayuntamiento* apportioned this levy among the local inhabitants and landowners, Cameron's share being fixed at 960 *reals*. It was against this that he protested, adding the accusation that the members of the *ayuntamiento* had ensured that their own taxes and those of their friends were fixed at a very low rate.¹⁵ Relations continued to be very bad, particularly with Alonso Gil, the *alcalde* or mayor. The latter, under threat of legal proceedings, forced Cameron to pay for a watchman for his vineyards, even those which were new and therefore still unproductive¹⁶; the rector accused Gil and two of his friends of fraudulently making money from their official positions¹⁷ and denounced him to the Tribunal in Valladolid because he had allowed herds of goats (especially his own) to graze on the rector's vineyards and cause a great deal of damage; the goats had been in the vineyards even during the grape harvest, although it was forbidden to allow them there until two days after the harvest ended (two days during which the poor of the village were allowed to gather the grapes that had not been harvested).¹⁸ In June 1819, Cameron delightedly informed Wallace that, after several court hearings, he had triumphed and that Gil and his associates had been removed from office, to the general satisfaction of the villagers.¹⁹

It was at this time that Cameron finished the chapel which adjoins the Boecillo house²⁰ and constructed the "*Fuente del Rector*" a short distance below the house.²¹ Water had been seeping into the *bodegas* belonging to the college and others, and this measure put an end to that. It also provided (and still provides) the college with an abundant supply of good water which, until 1953, when a pump was installed, was carried up to the house in containers borne by a donkey.

In 1819, the three senior boys, by now studying theology (they used Collet's *Institutiones Theologicae* as their text) had been joined in their classes by three Irish Capuchins who came to the college twice a day since there was a shortage of professors in their own house.²² The eight students of the college were all well and happy, reported John Murdoch, but "I cannot boast to you of the progress that any of us has made in learning Spanish .. Our communication with the Spaniards is very little."²³ The scholastic year was spent in close study and, in October, the community went to Boecillo for a month's change and relaxation.

As the years passed, Cameron continued to plead with his uncle to answer his letters. Problems arose in Spain, decisions were required from Scotland, but utter silence reigned; "the most charitable way of accounting for this silence is to suppose that my letter has been mislaid."²⁴

* * *

Ferdinand VII, the national hero of 1808, had been released from French custody in 1814 and restored to the Spanish throne but, contrary to the hopes and expectations of the liberal-minded and politically conscious intellectuals, had imposed an absolutist regime on the country, after the pattern of earlier monarchs. Opposition built up to his policy and increased in extent and strength, free masonry playing a considerable part in the underground movement. The inevitable revolution occurred at the start of 1820 and had a quick and easy triumph, since, in March of the same year,

the king agreed to swear his adherence to the constitution which the Cortes, sitting in Cadiz, had enacted in 1812. For three years Spain was ruled by a liberal government which, as well as introducing many enlightened measures, had a pronounced anticlerical character and enacted several laws which amounted to a persecution of priests and religious. Many religious houses were closed, their inmates dispersed and their goods confiscated: the clergy who were considered hostile to the new regime were arrested and punished.

Cameron, though anxious, did not, however, see any need for panic.

“The late changes have not affected hitherto our establishment, but may affect it very materially, by depriving us of a considerable part of our income, if all tythes are done away with, as is very currently reported. Whatever may happen, I shall endeavour to stick close by the house and strain every sinew to preserve our property. I don’t think that I can be exposed to greater dangers than I experienced in the late invasions.”²⁵

In 1821 he reported that the country was in a terrible state with imprisonment, crime and violence the order of the day.²⁶ During these years of the liberal revolution, a new feature appeared in the national life: the institution, in cities all over the country, of political societies or clubs which provided an outlet for the expression, usually in a highly rhetorical fashion, of the most irresponsible and extreme radical and anticlerical ideas. Cameron himself was one of the principal objects of the speeches made in the Valladolid clubs. He was accused of being a spy and of having an evil influence in the city. “When a general massacre of the regular and secular clergy was resolved on in the clubs, they agreed that it should commence by the death of the Rector of the Scotch.”²⁷ “It was unanimously agreed on that the butchery should begin here *con el Rector de Escoceses*, as the worst of men... I expected every night to be dragged to a dungeon, where some of my friends were already lodged, exposed to be assassinated, or to be led out to a scaffold.”²⁸

The liberals were not united among themselves and there was much dissension between moderates and extremists. Their hold on the country was further weakened by the activities of many guerilla bands who were fighting for the restoration of the absolutist regime. By 1823, with Spain in a state of virtual civil war, France intervened and sent an army to occupy the country and to free the king from his reluctant alliance with the liberals. The intervention was speedily successful in achieving its aims, not only because of the factions among the liberals and the disordered state of the country, but also because the ordinary non-intellectual Spaniards had little interest in, or enthusiasm for, the liberal cause and were relieved to see the end of the revolutionary regime.

Conditions improved for the church, of course, and for the college also. But the rector seemed, from his correspondence, to be a man almost broken by the ordeals through which he had passed. “It was with infinite reluctance, and only in obedience to the will of Bishop Hay, that I consented to come to Spain in 1798, because I had a presentiment of the endless train of evils I had to suffer.”²⁹ “I have had more to suffer than all my predecessors put together, since the foundation of the College.”³⁰

Cameron’s troubles were not merely of a personal nature; the economic state of the college also gave rise to great anxiety. The revenues from ecclesiastical sources were, of course, stopped during the period that began in 1820.³¹ Moreover, the property in Madrid was in a ruinous condition, yet only the minimum of repairs could be attempted, due to shortage of funds and the ever—present danger of confiscation. Don Francisco Antonio de Bringas, the administrator, had a stroke and died in

February 1822, just at the time that Cameron had heard that a lineal descendant of Colonel Semple, the Countess of Fertois, was making enquiries regarding the Madrid houses and that it was suspected that she intended to claim that they belonged to her.³² Nothing further is heard of this threat but, in 1828, necessary repairs to the exterior of the house had still not been done and Cameron raised the possibility of a loan of £1,000 from Scotland, with the Madrid building being mortgaged as security—a suggestion that was not taken up.

In these years, Cameron was seldom satisfied with the size of the community he governed. As well as frequently expressing the need for another master to be sent, he complained about the number of students he had been given—sometimes he asked for more and did not receive them; oftener he was angry because the bishops sent him more than he could cope with, financially. In 1825, he said that he could manage to take eight new students;³³ when nine were sent, he was most indignant, claiming that all he could possibly manage was six or, at the most, seven, since, in the meantime, James McHattie had been recalled to Scotland. “This College has been cruelly sacrificed and the most effectual means adopted to embitter the last stages of my life.”³⁴

His relations with the bishops in Scotland degenerated, due partly to the foregoing, partly to what he considered the gross disloyalty of Bishop Paterson, the coadjutor of the Lowland District, to his aging uncle, Bishop Cameron,³⁵ and partly to suggestions that the bishops thought that he was not taking proper care of the students. Of the sixteen or seventeen who had gone to the college between 1816 when it reopened, and 1821, one had died in Valladolid and six had had to return home in ill-health, several of these dying soon after arrival in Scotland. But Cameron hotly rejected allegations that he was not allowing the students sufficient recreation.³⁶ The real reason for the trouble was that the bishops insisted on sending to such a hard climate boys who were physically malformed. Such specimens would not withstand the extremes of cold and heat to which Valladolid was subject.

A student at the college from 1826 to 1834, Alexander Grant, later emigrated to Canada and, in a series of letters written to the college from Montreal when he was an old man, he recalls life in Valladolid when he was a boy.³⁷ Alexander Cameron he remembered as a venerable old gentleman, kindly and saintly, beloved by all and especially by the poor of the city. On Sundays and Thursdays, before going out for a walk, the students had to present themselves at his room to be inspected. On one occasion at Boecillo, Angus Gillis, a student, accidentally set the heath on fire and the blaze was with difficulty got under control. Cameron sent for Gillis and “for once in his life looked serious” and scolded him a bit; then he asked Gillis, who was going to Valladolid the next day in order to put the new wine into its casks, what was the first thing he had to do on arrival at the college there. The rector also supplied the answer: set the house on fire—which, in fact, Gulls very nearly succeeded in doing when he allowed a pot of pitch to catch fire in the kitchen.

The same Angus Gillis agreed to change rooms with Grant since the latter thought his room haunted and Gillis boasted his lack of fear. The other students decided to play a trick on Gillis so, long after night prayers, they crept along to his room carrying a cock, a sheep and two cats with cans tied to their tails. They planned to release the menagerie in Gillis’ room but he had heard of the scheme and the first to enter the room received the contents of a chamber pot over his head. The plotters fled, leaving behind the animals and an infernal din.

Grant, as a student in the college, knew “next to nothing of the *colegiales* of the older time, saving the names of a few, written here and there on the walls of the corridors and *azotea*” [open gallery].

But he himself and his companions were “a band of brothers”, with never a cross word among them. Nonetheless, Grant complained, there were only four students in the college during his last few years there and as the other three were highlanders, they normally spoke Gaelic among themselves. Grant was therefore left much on his own and he passed the time being taught singing by the vice-rector and learning to play the flute; but most of all, he mended old clocks.

There was very little communication with the students of the English college at this time. The English accused Cameron of discouraging all contact between the colleges,³⁸ but his version was that, when the English College was reopened in 1820, the two communities used to meet frequently at the English riverside estate until the English accused the Scots boys of stealing fruit from the trees. Cameron, to avoid trouble, forbade the estate to his students but they themselves, protesting their innocence, went further. “An angry letter [was] penned.., taking leave of them [the English students] for ever.”³⁹ In fact, Cameron recalled some years later that “. . . it was judged proper by the Superiors of both Colleges to prohibit all communication between the Scotch and English Students, on account of the natural aversion that they bore each other.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, visits were, or had been, exchanged occasionally at the country houses. This would be between 20th September and 28th October, a period deliberately chosen for the long vacation so that the students would not be exposed to the summer heats. (In addition to the sojourn at Boecillo, the boys were given a week off classes at Easter and again at Christmas—during which the traditional card game of *cucus* was played—and three days at Shrovetide and Pentecost, as well as having the big festivals and each Sunday and Thursday comparatively free.)⁴¹

A notable event in the history of the college took place in 1828 when Ferdinand VII and Maria Amalia of Saxony, his third wife, paid a visit. They spent a week in Valladolid in July, in the course of which they visited many of the institutions in the city. The community was given very little warning of the impending visit and had no time to make proper preparations or compose formal addresses of welcome. The vice-rector describes the event:

“On Sunday the 27th July of this present year, I had the honour to be nearly an hour in close confab. with Majesty itself, with King Ferdinand VII. The same space of time the Rector was in close attendance upon our most virtuous and modest Queen. . . They were shown the reliquary, the chapel, refectory, Rector’s room, library, one of the Collegians’ rooms, and mine. All was condescension, affability and good humour. . . At parting, all the College was admitted to kiss the royal hands.”⁴²

For the royal visit, the steps in front of the high altar in the chapel were covered by a large silk carpet which Philip IV had presented to the founder two hundred years earlier.⁴³

About this time, Cameron was engaged in writing a short life of Bishop Hay, which he published in Valladolid in 1829 and a copy of which he sent to Bishop Paterson.⁴⁴

The rector repeated his request several times to the bishops that they send no further students in the meantime, since the need to do repairs in Madrid became ever more urgent. This problem was further complicated in the years 1831 and 1832 when Don Francisco Bringas, who had spent a year in Scotland with Bishop Cameron and who by now was the head of Iruegas Brothers (the firm which, since 1820, had been the college’s Madrid administrators), was arrested and imprisoned in March 1831 because of his well-known liberal political views. Don Miguel de Sobrevilla, the *ex-colegial* of

Alexander Cameron's time, who had retired from the firm through ill health, returned to work when his relative was arrested; but he died suddenly on 28th January 1832. With his death, the firm of Iruegas Bros. was dissolved and, after a few months, a relative, Don Juan de Garaigorta y Lecanda, who had worked for the firm and was familiar with the college's affairs, assumed the administration of the property in Madrid.

Cameron made his plea (about not sending students) for the last time in a letter to Bishop Kyle early in 1833, mentioning that another anticlerical revolution appeared very likely.⁴⁵ In the event, a group of six students, the first to arrive since 1826, made its appearance on 11th September of that year. Less than three weeks later, Ferdinand was dead, leaving Maria Cristina, his fourth wife, to ally herself with the liberals and usher in a period of great difficulty and suffering for the church in Spain. But life had already drawn to its close for Alexander Cameron, who for years had kept a coffin at the foot of his bed.⁴⁶ On 19th September he was in fine spirits, having heard that his old pupil, John Murdoch, had been made a bishop; but the following morning he was found by Tomasa, the housekeeper, lying dead on the floor of his bedroom.

Alexander Cameron, the first student in Valladolid to become rector of the college, lived during a time of great upheaval and violent change. When the college reopened after the Peninsular War, it was not long before the confident prospect of peace and tranquillity became a reality of difficulty, menace and even persecution. When his end came, he died alone and unobserved, perhaps not entirely unfitting for one who, alone and unaided for almost eight years, had, by his solitary presence, kept the college in existence.

Notes for Chapter 12

1. 13th November 1816. (Columba House 10-L.)
2. 10th May 1817. (Ibid., 10-O.)
3. 23rd December 1816. (Preshome archives.)
4. Columba House 10-L.
5. 10th May 1817. (Ibid., 10-O.)
6. At least one was admitted the following year, 1817, the son of a friend of Miguel de Sobrevilla, himself, of course, an ex-collegian. (College archives 62/1/9.14.) And, late in 1819, there were three, with others expected. (John Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 7th November 1819. Columba House 10-R.) At one time between 1820 and 1822, there were seven. (College archives 22/21.)
7. John Cameron to John Forbes, Stobhall, 10th May 1817. (Columba House 10-O.)
8. 31st May 1815. (Ibid., 10-I.)
9. Cameron to William Wallace, 10th November 1818. (Ibid., unclassified.)
10. 20th May 1819. (Ibid., 10-R.) No students, in fact, were sent until 1820.
11. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 22nd May 1818. (Ibid., unclassified.)
12. Id. (Ibid.)
13. To Bishop Paterson, 14th June 1822. (Ibid., unclassified.)

14. College archives 29/16.

15. *Ibid.*, 28/22-24.42.

16. *Ibid.*, 28/34.

17. *Ibid.*, 29/21.

18. *Ibid.*, 28/44.

19. 3rd June 1819. (Columba House, unclassified.)

Alonso Gil figures once more in the correspondence from Valladolid when, in 1831, John Cameron informed a friend that the *ex-alcalde* of Boecillo had been in prison for a year. (To James McHattie, newly arrived in Ratisbon, 4th August 1831. *Ibid.*, unclassified.)

20. Cameron to William Wallace, 10th November 1818. (*Ibid.*, unclassified.)

21. College archives 28/47.

22. John Bremner to George Mathison, Auchinhalrig, 16th August 1819. (Columba House 10-R.)

23. To George Mathison, 14th June 1819. (*Ibid.*, 10-S.)

24. Cameron to Bishop Paterson, Edinburgh, 18th August 1820. (*Ibid.*, 10-T.)

25. *Id.* to *id.* (*Ibid.*, 10-T.)

26. To Bishop Cameron, 24th May 1821. (*Ibid.*, unclassified.)

27. Cameron to Bishop Paterson (in Paris), 6th February 1824. (*Ibid.*, unclassified.)

28. *Id.* to James Kyle, Aquhorties, 29th March 1824. (Preshome archives.)

29. *Id.* to *id.* (*Ibid.*)

30. To Bishop Paterson (in Paris), 6th February 1824. (Columba House, unclassified.)

31. Cf., e.g., college archives 39/100; 23)19.27, re non-payment of Monte Aragón pension for the years 1825, 1827 and 1832.

32. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 22nd March 1822. (Columba House, unclassified.)

33. To James Kyie, Aquhorties, 25th August 1825. (*Ibid.*, unclassified.)

34. To Bishop Paterson, 22nd September 1826. (Preshome archives.)

35. Bishop Cameron died in 1828 but had been in ill health for some years before that and, in 1825, Paterson had been granted by Rome full authority in the Lowland District: by legitimate means according to some, since Cameron had made it clear that he intended to retire; by taking it upon himself to say that Cameron had retired, according to others, including the rector, who composed several memoranda on the subject. (Cf. college archives 22/15.16 (1.11) and 22/23 (1.12).) Moreover, it was in 1827 that the old Highland and Lowland Districts were abolished and the country divided into three new Districts: Eastern, Western and Northern; a change that Paterson had proposed without Cameron's knowledge and consent.

36. To James McHattie, Aquhorties, 12th November 1827. (Columba House, unclassified.)

37. Archives of the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles. Many of the letters are reproduced in early issues of *The Ambrosian*.

38. E. g., Thomas Sherburne, former pro-rector, to Bishop Scott, 12th March 1836. (Argyll archives.)

39. College archives 22/21.

40. Ibid. 19/126: Memorandum against possible amalgamation of the colleges.

41. Cameron to James McHattie, Aquhorties, 12th November 1827. (Columba House, unclassified.)

It is said that Bishop Hay, while a student in Rome, had learned the game of *cucus* and had later introduced it to Scalan. From there it spread to the other Scottish seminaries. It was played in Valladolid right up to the temporary closure of the college in 1937.

42. To James McHattie, Paisley, 15th October 1828. (Preshome archives.)

43. Alexander G. Grant, Montreal, to David McDonald, Valladolid, 24th July 1889. (Argyll archives.)

44. *A Short Account of the Right Rev. George Hay, D. D., Bishop of Daulis and Vicar Apostolic of the Lowland District in Scotland*. (18 pages). An abridged version of this work appears in *The Catholic Directory for Scotland*, 1842.

45. 17th February 1833. (Columba House, unclassified.)

46. Alexander G. Grant, Montreal, to David McDonald, Valladolid, 11th July 1890. (Argyll archives.)