

Chapter 9

Alexander Cameron I: Bishop of Maximianopolis

John Geddes had been an incurable invalid for several years when Bishop Hay decided to procure from Rome the appointment of another coadjutor. He would probably have proposed John Farquharson, the former principal at Douai, had he, Farquharson, not shown himself hostile to him. Paul Macpherson was also passed over because it was thought that, while not hostile, neither was he particularly friendly towards Hay. With the almost unanimous approval of the clergy, Hay therefore proposed to Propaganda the name of Alexander Cameron; adding those of John Gordon, the vice-rector, and Donald Stuart, the priest at Strathavon, lest Propaganda should refuse to nominate Cameron. The choice of Cameron may be thought curious, considering the years-long silences he had maintained and the state of his health; although knowledge of the latter was no doubt successfully concealed by the former. His nomination was proposed by Hay in July 1797 and the necessary Brief, which conferred on him the titular see of Maximianopolis, was issued by Propaganda in Rome on 19th September of the same year.

There then commenced a period of four and a half years, during which the new bishop's behaviour combined elements of the enigmatic and the bizarre. This is best exemplified in the fact that, although he was nominated a bishop in the autumn of 1797 and although he was urgently needed in Scotland, he did not return to his native land until the late summer of 1802, five years all but a month since his nomination. Little is known of the first of those five years. During it, John Gordon, the vice-rector, was appointed to succeed Cameron. Towards the end of July 1798, the latter set out for Madrid, from where, in the course of the next five or six months, he bombarded Gordon, in most uncharacteristic fashion, with a total of no fewer than thirty-eight letters. A great deal of this correspondence is taken up with accounts of his activities in Madrid and the visits he paid to various acquaintances, particularly the parents of Spanish boys in the college. He also has much advice to give to Gordon on these last and indeed on the office of rector which he had recently assumed. "Your great and just love of virtue, discipline and order makes you highly sensible to the least encroachments on them; and may, perhaps, irritate you so much as to conduct you or precipitate you or betray you into measures which may sometimes be premature, sometimes unnecessary, sometimes inexpedient and sometimes hurtful."¹ Nevertheless, "tho' I shall always be very free wt my opinion to yourself when you ask it or if I thought you stood in need of it, I shall never directly or indirectly, at least willingly and wittingly, encroach upon what I look upon as sacred, the exercise of your official duties. I should not even wish to influence them, for manifest reasons."²

In these letters, he also had some observations to make upon his own years as rector. It is surprising, after his many refusals to seek friends and his criticism of Geddes on that score, that he should confess: "One of my many capital errors was not cultivating the acquaintance and friendship of the superior class. A few visits a year; a few compliments when one meets them; a readiness to serve them when one can; being on one's guard, in all companies, not to injure their characters, and such like trifles, make and preserve friends; and there are occasions when friends are necessary, tho' the old proverb must never be lost sight of, '*al amigo y al caballo, no hay que cansarlo*'"³ He was also, on

one occasion in the letters, fairly frank about his relations with the students, presumably on the subject of his remoteness from them: “I am sorry there should have been complaints, either in Scotland or in Spain, of the treatment of the Collegians, either Scots or Spaniards; for I flattered myself that my principles of practice, in that regard, would protect me; it often occurred to me that I ought perhaps to take my chocolate in the refectory whilst the community supped, or sup as others did: but as it was well known I took nothing but chocolate—.”⁴

While in Madrid, he had his portrait painted at Gordon’s request.⁵ More important, he decided, shortly after he arrived in the capital, that, like Geddes, he would seek to be consecrated in Spain⁶ and, when an opportunity presented itself at short notice, he availed himself of it. He was made a bishop in Madrid on 28th October 1798 by Dr. Antonio de Tavira, Bishop of Salamanca,⁷ but further details of the ceremony are lacking; although on 27th October he informed Gordon that “next post you shall have an account of tomorrow’s work,”⁸ no such an account was given or, if it was, the letter is not in the college archives. All that is known is that the Bishop of Murcia lent him the necessary pontifical vestments (Cameron suggested to Gordon that the latter, in expressing thanks in the name of the college, might explain how useful it would be if the new bishop could keep them for his use in Scotland—and this Gordon did⁹); and that “Bringas’ [a colleague of Iruegas, the college administrator] little son, of three years of age, presented me a plain pectoral cross and Dⁿ Gaspar’s [i.e. Iruegas’] daughter, six months younger, a ring.”¹⁰ Cameron left Madrid in January 1799 and presumably returned to the college.

From June until the end of October that year, he was in Salamanca. He had been asked to go there to make an official visitation of the Irish College where, not for the first time in recent years, things were going badly and trouble had erupted between superiors and students. During these months, another avalanche of letters, thirty of them, descended upon Gordon. A proposal was made, sometime later, which Cameron passed on to Gordon for his observations, that he, Cameron, should have himself appointed to make an official visitation of the English and Scots Colleges also, a suggestion which Gordon firmly rejected as being “wholly out of the question... You can find employment in Spain as yet for some time without visiting either College ... and give your friends an opportunity of executing in your behalf whatever beneficent plans they may have in view.”¹¹

Cameron carried out many of the episcopal duties of his old friend, the Bishop of Valladolid who, for some years, had been “a perfect trunk”¹² and who in fact died on 27th February 1801. At the time of Cameron’s consecration, the suggestion had been made that, having been nominated a bishop by Rome, he might be given a Spanish see by the king. Cameron, though not expressing his own preference, discounted the possibility: “...Friends there [in Valladolid] do ill to wish his Majesty gave me one of the vacant mitres: were it to rain mitres, I assure you none would stick upon my head, for many valid reasons—I do not mean the mitres would have any reason not to stick upon my head as well as another’s, but that I know, though thousands fall from heaven—that is, from the Royal palace—not one would fall to my share.”¹³

There is reason to suspect that he would not have been averse to accepting the see of Valladolid itself, if the invalid bishop had resigned or died,¹⁴ but any hope of that was ended by the appointment, when the bishop did die, of a Spaniard, Dr. D. Juan Antonio Hernández Pérez de Larrea, as the new bishop. Though Cameron was not given a see by the king, the latter did award

him, as Geddes had also been given, an annual pension for life. In Cameron's case, it was of 15,000 *reals*, 9,000 from the see of Seville and 6,000 from that of Malaga.¹⁵

In spite of the many letters that he had been receiving from his predecessor, Gordon was unhappy and somewhat bitter about the relationship that existed between them and very critical of the latter's interminable delay before setting off for Scotland. At the end of 1799 and therefore about midway through the period of this delay, he wrote to Thomas Bagnall, the former master and now priest in charge at Kirkconnel: "It will seem strange to you but it is literally true that I know as little of the College affairs as I did when you were here. Hitherto I have had no access to the Rector's room or College papers. I have got no accounts from my predecessor, nor has he ever spoken to me of any. I suppose there will be just grounds for this mysterious procedure, as it is that of a mitred gentleman... I foresee that I shall be involved in numberless difficulties on account of the debts contracted by my predecessor and the confusion in which, I fear, he will leave affairs, as well as on account of the times..."¹⁶

Gordon's letter was in reply to one in which Bagnall had said that the priests in Scotland were astonished at Cameron's delay in returning to the country, that Bishop Hay was mystified¹⁷ and that his conduct in this respect and in not answering letters betokened such indolence and laziness that he would be as well remaining in Spain. On this, Gordon commented that Bishop Cameron's plans about going to Scotland "are a mystery even to his most intimate friends. Hitherto I see no preparations for his journey and he could have left this a twelvemonth ago with the same facility as today."¹⁸

More than two more years passed, Gordon had still not been allowed access to the college papers and archives¹⁹ and Cameron at last felt it necessary to offer some explanation of his continued presence in Spain: "The real and only causes of my not having left Spain before now were 1° the war, during which I solicited a passport repeatedly and was formally refused by the premier who was the only person who could give me one; 2° I was fairly laid up about eighteen months ago by a complication of evils, the least alarming to me tho' the most painful was a rheumatism...; 3° want of money—a real want for some time; 4° the state of affairs here [in the college or the country?]; 5° the advice of all my friends who knew the circumstances and the something more than advice of all my protectors"²⁰ He added that his long silence was due to his constant hopes of being able to write to say that he was on his way. Even the bishop himself may have felt that this multiple explanation hardly proved the need for a delay which was now well into its fifth year and so, a month or so later, he at last left for home.

Gordon recounted to Bagnall the manner of his going:—

"Mr. Cameron set out for Great Britain on the first current without taking leave of his friends or acquainting them of his departure. Everything was carried on with such secrecy that I knew nothing of his journey till an hour after he had left the College... You will easily judge my situation when the veil was removed and I came to know that my predecessor was on his road for Burgos. I can easily forgive injuries but alas I cannot help feeling them! .. Our having lived so long with the Bishop has given us an opportunity of knowing his foibles more than others and it could serve no good purpose to publish the spots we may have observed in his character."²¹

The bishop's departure would seem to have had all the appearances of someone in a great hurry to begin an urgent journey.

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After having spent some weeks in Paris where he took ill, Cameron got to London on 9th August 1802 and finally to Edinburgh on 22nd.

Bishop Hay had been in failing health for some time and his memory had become very poor so that, even in 1801, he had asked Rome for permission to resign. This request was refused, but despite his mystification at Cameron's long delay he must have welcomed his arrival when at last it took place. Hay was alarmed and annoyed the following year when it was rumoured that Cameron was contemplating acceptance of an offer of the chief chaplaincy in the Spanish church in London, but his coadjutor was able to reassure him that he had refused the offer and that, even if he had taken it, he would have appointed a substitute to perform the duties involved. Hay was finally allowed to retire in 1805; on 24th August, he handed over his powers to Cameron who, three weeks later, was at the seminary of the Highland District at Lismore, where he ordained to the episcopate his former pupil and colleague, Aeneas Chisholm, the first student of the college in Spain to become a bishop.

Cameron made Edinburgh his headquarters and took a great deal of interest in the building of St. Mary's church there (for which Gordon, in Spain, sent a donation of nearly £200 in 1804).²² The other special object of his solicitude was the seminary at Aquhorties, founded by Bishop Hay in 1799 as a replacement for Scalan.

Any warmth of friendship that had existed between Cameron and Gordon when both were in Valladolid had in all probability gone cold when the bishop finally left Spain, but the two continued for a while to correspond at irregular intervals. Within a few years, however, Gordon's letters complain that it is months, then years, since he heard from Cameron, that he is unable to collect Cameron's Spanish pension until he receives the annual *fe de vida* or certificate that he is still alive, and that the scientific instruments which Cameron undertook to procure in Britain for the university of Valladolid and for which he was given a large sum of money, have not been sent.²³

For the last twelve years of his life, Bishop Cameron had the assistance of a coadjutor, Alexander Paterson, whom he himself consecrated in Paisley on the feast of the Assumption, 1816. Earlier that year, he had been in Spain, peace being now restored to Europe. He arrived in Valladolid on 21st March and spent two months in the college, discussing with his nephew and namesake plans for reopening and for sending a party of students from Scotland.²⁴ On 28th May, just before leaving, he signed a will, leaving all his effects in Spain (including the Boecillo property) to his nephew, John Gordon being already dead.²⁵

After several years of failing health, he caught a chill in January 1828, which soon worsened. He died in Edinburgh on 7th February of that year, shortly before midnight, and was buried in St. Mary's church.

Notes for Chapter 9

1. 6th October 1798. (College archives 60/9/16.)

2. 1st December 1798. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/26.)
3. 10th November 1798. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/23.)
4. 5th December 1798. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/27.)
5. Cameron to John Gordon, 17th October 1798. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/17.)

This, presumably, is the portrait still in the college's possession.

6. Id. to id., 18th August 1798. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/6.)
7. *Ibid.*, 22/23/1: A Brief Sketch of the Life of the Right Revd. Alexander Cameron D. D., Bishop of Maximianopolis and Vicar Apostolic of the Lowland District in Scotland, by the Revd. Alexander Cameron (manuscript), p. 32.
8. *Ibid.*, 60/9/19.
9. John Gordon to D. Pedro Joaquín, Bishop of Murcia, 11th November 1798. (*Ibid.*, 61/18/61.)
10. Cameron to John Gordon, 27th October 1798. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/19).
11. John Gordon to Cameron, 11th September 1799. (*Ibid.*, 61/19/4.)
12. Alexander Cameron II to Thomas Bagnall, 1st December 1801. (Columba House 8-M.)

Bishop Cameron is said to have administered confirmation almost daily and holy orders with great frequency. "The condescension with which the candidates ... were received and immediately served induced them to flock to him from the most distant dioceses." (College archives 22/16/7: Sketch of the Life of Bishop Cameron, by Alexander Cameron II). At least one student of the English College in Valladolid, Thomas Smith, availed himself of Cameron's new powers and affability and was ordained priest by him on 5th July 1801. (*Registers of the English College at Valladolid*, p. 217.)

He was also commissioned by the Bishop of Calahorra to degrade a Capuchin friar who had been condemned to death. (29th January 1801. College archives 49/9.)

13. To John Gordon, 16th January 1799. (*Ibid.*, 60/9/37.)

Cf. Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, bk. 1, chap. 8: "Replicó Sancho Panza ... 'aunque lloviese Dios reinos sobre la tierra, ninguno asentaría bien sobre la cabeza de Mari Gutiérrez...'".

14. "I am aware of what has recently occurred in the episcopal palace in Valladolid and am anxious to see if the Cámara can be induced to give the government of the diocese to our Most Reverend Cameron, a matter in which the first steps have already been taken. But I am afraid that those people in Valladolid will have things settled beforehand. Certainly the latest post brought neither the resignation nor a request for the nomination of a successor... Anyway, we shall have done all we can to get what we want." (Francisco Antonio de Bringas, college administrator in Madrid, to John Gordon, 13th December 1800. College archives 61/6/21.) "The latest events can only be prejudicial to your plans since we have now lost one of those people who would have been able to have been of assistance to us with the members of the Cámara; but we shall continue our efforts nevertheless, so that, even if we do not achieve what we want to, it will not be for lack of trying." (Id. to id., 20th December 1800. *Ibid.*, 61/6/22.)

15. *Ibid.*, 27/2.

16. 22nd December 1799. (Columba House 8-K.)

17. As early as the end of 1798, Hay had written to John Gordon: "I must own that it would have been very agreeable to have heard from him now and then." (3rd November 1798. College archives 61/19/7.)

18. 22nd December 1799. (Columba House 8-K.)

19. John Gordon to Thomas Bagnall, 7th February 1802. (*Ibid.*, 8-P.)

20. To Paul Macpherson, Rome, 5th February 1802 (*Ibid.*, 8-O.)

21. 19th May 1802. (*Ibid.*, 8-P.)

22. John Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 18th March 1804. (*Ibid.*, 9-B.)

23. E.g., id. to id., 18th March 1804, 24th July 1805, 17th September 1806. (*Ibid.*, 9-B, 9-B, 9-E.)

In fact, Cameron despatched the instruments, valued at about £800 but uninsured, by a vessel that was captured by the French. (Alexander Cameron II to Bishop Kyle, Aberdeen, 4th May 1829; Preshome archives, Cf. also college archives 22/6/5.5a.8.)

24. College archives 22/16/8: Sketch of the Life of Bishop Cameron, by Alexander Cameron II. 25. *Ibid.*, 27/2.