

Chapter 17

David McDonald: Defeat and Capitulation

Fr. David wrote to Bishop Maguire, auxiliary in Glasgow, a rather alarming letter at the start of 1897, informing the hierarchy that he was in failing health—he was suffering from insomnia and listlessness, his spine seemed to be getting weak and he even dreaded a softening of the brain; he therefore suggested that, since his two assistants were still very young, the bishops send out a more mature priest who would be able to succeed him. For this task, he proposed the name of Fr. John Toner.¹ The following winter, Bishop Turner of Galloway paid a visit to Valladolid and, struck with the poor material circumstances of the college, launched a repair fund in his diocese when he got back to Scotland. He wrote a pastoral letter to explain the purpose of the appeal: “The fabric itself is good, the shell is ample, the building solidly substantial, but there is a sad lack of almost everything required for human comfort.”

Meanwhile, the rector’s letters to Scotland continued to be despondent and aggressive in tone: he might possibly be able to keep the students he had but, because of high prices and reduced income, he could not take any more for several years, unless the bishops themselves helped with their maintenance. “But of course Your Lordships would rather spend that money in maintaining them in some other college than this. For I hear that you will not allow anything to be done for it in your dioceses;” Bishop Turner’s efforts on behalf of Valladolid had only increased the others’ “virulence of opposition to the *colegio*.”²

In response to Fr. David’s request for a mature priest who might succeed him, the bishops in 1897 nominated Rev. Donald Easson, who had been ordained ten years previously. Easson, in fact, did not arrive until November 1898, having been engaged for some time on a fund-raising tour of Galloway for the college. Within four months of his arrival, he was dead, a victim of diphtheria.

The Galloway appeal had raised £320³ and, in 1899, the rector embarked on a series of major improvements in the college. The main bottom corridor had a cement floor installed, in place of the earlier red tiles; all the corridors were handsomely painted; the principal staircase was completely reconstructed; three baths with hot and cold water and five flush W.Cs. were installed; the students’ rooms were painted: the priests’ rooms were also redecorated and re-furnished.⁴ All of this not only used up all of the Galloway money but cost almost twice as much again.⁵ During his years as rector, Fr. David had bought Spanish government stock to a nominal value of £6,300 but worth now only ten per cent of that; nor was interest being paid on it, because of the exigencies of the war in Cuba. Further improvements (wooden floors in the students’ rooms, a new cooking stove and general renovation of the kitchen, and, at Boecillo, new windows and doors) were therefore postponed until 1900 and 1901.

In earlier years, of course, other improvements had been carried out at Valladolid and Boecillo. At the country house in 1881, a group of the students themselves, under the direction of one of their own number,⁶ had constructed wooden ceilings for the stairs and for some of the rooms, as well as installing new windows and doing other repairs. In the town college over the years, a dining room

for the priests had been constructed from a former pantry or store room (1886); five new wooden altar-tables, stations of the cross,⁷ and a copy, painted in Rome, of the picture of St. Margaret in the Scots College there, had been placed in the church (1888);⁸ piped running water had been installed (1889); the refectory had been refloored in wood and generally repaired (1890); electric light had been installed throughout the house, in place of the paraffin lamps⁹ (1896); and a new theatre constructed (1897). This last was inaugurated at Christmas of that year with a production of *Rip Van Winkle* (an opera), while the former theatre became the students' library and reading room.¹⁰

Apart from the newcomer of 1895, there had been no intake since 1894 so that, despite his straitened financial circumstances, Don David was becoming very anxious to have some new students. He was in debt because of high running expenses and the cost of the improvements he had done but, when twelve students were ordained priests in the college chapel in May 1899,¹¹ and two others went to Scotland for ordination, he had only seven students left. He expressed the hope that the bishops would therefore send some more, paying for their journeys and perhaps contributing also towards their maintenance in the college. In fact, no one was sent, the bishops deciding that the college should first recover financially and that the moratorium would allow the introduction of the practice of finishing the whole classics course in Blairs. The one recruit that year was the rector's own nephew, a man of twenty-five who had been working in a merchant's office in Liverpool. He was Donald Martin, the future Bishop of Argyll and the Isles.

The debts had all been paid off by the end of April 1900 but, about this time, the rector wrote to Bishop Smith of Dunkeld (who, since 1893, had been the hierarchy's representative for the national seminaries) to say that he had been told that he was suffering from a bad heart.¹² The first diagnosis (that he might die any time) was soon modified: he would be unable to do any more teaching but he could carry on as rector.¹³ His two assistants agreed that he could and should continue.¹⁴ The bishops' view, however, expressed in a letter of 17th May 1900, was that he should now lay down the burden of office and retire —an opinion which, of course, Fr. David took very badly. "I cannot at present write more, as the blow Your Lordships are inflicting on me is the most grievous affliction and profound humiliation, both private and public . . ." ¹⁵ A further letter from Valladolid soon followed: the bishops' call for his resignation was motivated not by his state of health (that was only a pretext), but because he had lost their confidence; he had "tried to follow their suggestions [regarding improvements] as far as I thought them feasible", but the bishops wanted more basic reforms in the college and they did not believe that he would carry them out.¹⁶

Bishop Maguire, meanwhile, had given it as his opinion that further urging Fr. David to retire was a waste of time; he was not going to retire voluntarily, they could not force him, and any attempt would only lead to more unpleasantness; the bishops, however, should consider an appeal to Rome or even the calling home of the Valladolid students and professors, leaving the rector on his own.¹⁷ The hierarchy met and resolved:

"The Bishops, after considering the recent correspondence between the Rector of Valladolid and the Bishop of Dunkeld, directed intimation to be made to the Rector that they have no intention of taking any step to remove him, but that they still think it desirable that he should resign."

To which McDonald responded in his most stubborn manner:

"I hereby acknowledge receipt of your note, containing the minute of the Bishops at their Blairs meeting. As no reason, despite of my repeated request, is assigned for their desire to dismiss me, I do not think it would be reasonable, under present or similar circumstances, to comply with their wish, as I think my doing so would compromise my character, despite of the highly laudatory terms they were so condescending to express as to my abilities, devotion, etc. etc."¹⁸

The bishops' complaints about Fr. David were summarised by Bishop Smith. now Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh: they found him a difficult person with whom to work; the improvements necessary for the students' well-being had been grudgingly made; educational proposals (viz., to bring in Spanish teachers or to send the students to outside institutions), though supported by several who knew the situation, were rejected out of hand; he was too old to cope with the financial difficulties; in previous years his complaints had been accompanied by threats of resignation but now, when resignation was suggested, he refused absolutely; and, since he made no secret of his quarrel with the bishops, he was not imbuing his students with due respect for the wishes of authority.¹⁹

Bishop Maguire wrote to the rector, assuring him that, were he to resign, he must not think that he would have to leave Valladolid;²⁰ but he replied that, since his resignation at present would in reality be forced, not voluntary, this would be most embarrassing for his successor; besides he was still able to take his nephew for two classes a day in philosophy, and "it seems to me and others who know me, that neither mentally nor physically am I quite unfit for my position."²¹ The same letter, .and one to Edinburgh in the same month, contain pathetic requests for more students; all but one of the existing community were due to leave in the following year and he could take twelve new boys; nor was there any need to send another professor.²² The following year the same offer was renewed—he could take twelve students if the bishops gave him some pecuniary assistance but, if they did not want to do so, he could still take ten.²³

But the writing was on the wall and capitulation was drawing inexorably closer. Six students left for Scotland at the start of July 1902. Fr. Macmaster, whom McDonald had regarded as his right hand man and great friend,²⁴ went the same day and he was left with Fr. Steven and Donald Martin.

Fr. David had the custom of writing an annual letter to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda and it was this habit that finally brought about the end of his rectorate. Archbishop Smith had been in correspondence several times with Cardinal Ledochowski and had given him a full summary of the bishops' complaints against the rector. The cardinal was also in fairly frequent correspondence in 1902 with the latter and was acting as a type of intermediary, receiving the views and opinions of each side. In his letters to Propaganda, Don David's main point was that the Scottish bishops had not even told him why they were dissatisfied with him. He could only guess that the reasons might be that he sent them too little information about the college, that he refused to send the students to classes outside, or that he was too lenient with them.

In the end, it was the cardinal who received Fr. David's reluctant agreement to resign his office but to remain in Valladolid as *rector emeritus*; he was willing to end his days in humiliation if the cardinal persisted in his request; "Whatever the decision may be, I will submit." Ledochowski died and was succeeded by Cardinal Gotti, who asked him to make the sacrifice for the good of the college; and it was to him that David McDonald sent a formal letter of resignation on 17th January 1903.

To Archbishop Smith, in Edinburgh, he wrote on 11th February:

“I have received today a letter from the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda in which he accepts of my resignation of my rectorship . . . it seems to me that more should not be required of me than to put my resignation in your hands, as I do by the present letter.”²⁵

This received a brief acknowledgement, dated 15th February. Discussion about the choice of a successor began immediately, the royal appointment was made on 9th June 1903,²⁶ and the following October the new superiors arrived to take over—the rector on the 12th, the vice-rector three days later, accompanied by ten students. Don David’s last entry in the college accounts book (in which there is clear evidence of a deterioration in his book-keeping ability from about 1897 on) shows the extent of his bitterness: “The old rector ceased to be rector because of the resentment of the Scottish bishops against him for defending his own rights and those of the college.”²⁷

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One cannot but be affected by the personal tragedy of David McDonald. The man who had been most reluctant to go to Valladolid in 1865 and who was very unhappy at the start had, after forty years, become so attached to the college that it was now his whole life. Perhaps, at seventy-one, he was too old, too set in outmoded ways; perhaps the college needed a younger man to direct it; perhaps the investments he had made in the years of comparative affluence had been unwisely chosen. But the whole sorry business had a much more important cause than any of these —there was an absence of personal contact, a breakdown in relations between the bishops on the one hand and the rector on the other. He resented what seemed to him selfishness on the part of the bishops, their lack of interest in the college, their instructions sent to him in ignorance of the situation as it existed in Valladolid. But he, open, candid, generous, opposed to all hypocrisy and pretence, must accept some of the blame for his almost complete lack of tact. His letters to the bishops were dictatorial, intemperate, abusive, and it is no wonder that their patience finally ran out. A cynic would point out that John Cameron was rector for forty years and then, at the age of eighty-two, retired gracefully, not because he always observed the bishops’ wishes, but because he did not defy them openly; whereas David McDonald paid the penalty of his tactlessness. But then, he probably regarded tact as another word for hypocrisy.

His last years were spent in tranquillity. Cardinal Gotti’s reply to his annual letter to Propaganda in 1904 brought notice of a coming mark of papal appreciation²⁸ and, by brief of 3rd May of that year, he was made a domestic prelate.²⁹ In 1905 he paid his last visit to Scotland and spent some time in Barra with his old “right hand man”, Fr. Macmaster, and his newly ordained nephew, Fr. Martin. Until he left for Scotland, he had been teaching theology to the senior students. He mixed more freely with the students in these declining years and was a much loved figure as he sat for long periods, chatting with them. His former pupils, now priests in Scotland, sent him an address of filial congratulations and a gift of one hundred guineas on the occasion of his sacerdotal golden jubilee in March 1906. The anniversary was celebrated in the college itself by productions of *Warlock of the Glen* (a melodrama) and *Handy Andy* (a farce) and, during the evening, the college orchestra performed in his honour a composition named after him: the *Marcha Davidica*.

In December 1907, he suffered a stroke which left him physically incapacitated. For a while, he still managed to move slowly about the bottom corridor; but gradually he came to be confined to his

rooms (he continued to occupy the rector's quarters, even in retirement) and one of the older students had to sleep on a couch outside the bedroom to attend to his needs during the night.

In the early summer of 1909, it was clear that his state of health was further deteriorating, his heart being weak and his stomach (due, it was said, to cancer) finding it difficult to retain food. He went to Boecillo as usual at the beginning of September, but had to return to the town on 15th because of his condition and, a few days later, at 6.30 am, on 19th September 1909, he died.³⁰

He had fulfilled the promise he had made to the Cardinal of Propaganda at the moment of defeat:

“When the new rector has been legally appointed by royal *cédula*, then I shall retire into obscurity, trusting that God will judge me differently.”

Who but God would dare to judge him? Would even God dare to condemn?

Notes for Chapter 17

1. To Bishop Maguire, 11th January 1897. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)
2. To Bishop — . 15th May 1898. (St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, G 9.)
3. 10,000 pesetas, because the exchange rate had now fallen.
4. College archives A/16.
5. Ibid., A/16.
6. Donald McPherson, “a very clever carpenter, builder and painter,” according to the rector. (Ibid., A/15.)
7. These were presented to Boecillo parish church in 1956.
8. In this year, there was also an improvement of a different kind in Boecillo—the custom of reserving the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel of the country house was introduced.
9. The paraffin lamps were themselves an earlier improvement on small portable oil lamps.
10. Between the two world wars, the latter was a music room but, since 1953, it has been used as a classroom; the hall above the kitchen which, for generations, was the classroom is now the students' common or recreation room.
11. One of the new priests was Patrick McDaniel, whom the bishops agreed to nominate as a professor in place of Fr. Easson. But McDaniel was most reluctant to take up the appointment and it was therefore cancelled.
12. 11th March 1900. (St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, G 9.)
13. To Bishop Smith, Dunkeld, 29th March and 20th May 1900. (Ibid., G 9.)
14. William Macmaster to Bishop Smith, Dunkeld, 25th June 1900. (Ibid., G 9.)
15. To id. (?), 25th June 1900. (Ibid., G 9.)
16. To id. (?), 12th July 1900. (Ibid., G 9.)
17. To Bishop Smith, 30th June 1900. (Ibid., G 9.)
- 18 To id., 23rd July 1900. (Ibid, G 9.)
19. 5th June 1901. (Ibid., G 9.)

20. 6th July 1901. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)
21. 11th July 1901. (Ibid., loc. cit.)
22. To Archbishop Smith, 4th July 1901. (St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, G 9.)
23. To id., 24th April 1902. (Ibid., G 9.)
24. To Bishop Maguire, 2nd July 1899. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)
25. St. Andrews and Edinburgh archives, G 9.
26. College archives 67/16.
27. Ibid., A/16.
28. Ibid., 67/13.
29. Ibid., 67/14.
30. James Humble to Canon John Ritchie, Secretary, Archdiocese of Glasgow, 22nd September 1909. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)