

THE BLACK FRIARS IN WALES¹

A WELL-KNOWN picture by Fra Angelico shows the meeting at Rome, in the year 1216, of St Francis and St Dominic. They were men of very different experience and temperament; yet they were one in heart; and between them they gave to Christianity a new form of apostolic ministry that still, over 700 years later, is operative in the world. Francis and Dominic were the founders of the friars. And a friar—the word simply means ‘brother’—a friar is one who combines elements of the earlier monasticism—its dedicatory vows, its communal life, its daily round of praise of God in church—with the manifold works of the pastoral ministry. For the friar, contemplation of divine things issues in activity outside his monastery: he is, as it were, both monk and missionary—‘revivalist’, if you like . . . Dominic was a Spaniard by birth; and in the south of France in the early years of the thirteenth century he was faced with the ravages of a doctrine that was both false in the abstract and vicious and anti-social in practice. Moved by intense compassion for those who erred in ignorance, he saw that what was wanted was intelligent presentation of the truths of Christian faith by men who lived really in accordance with those truths—a real ministry of the word and of example. And so he brought into being the Order of Preachers or Black Friars.

The new order spread rapidly, and special friaries were soon opened in university cities: for ignorance cannot be successfully fought by the ignorant, and from the first the Dominicans were a body of students as well as teachers. They came to England in 1221, their first house being, significantly enough, at Oxford. Sometime before 1247 the earliest house of Black Friars was established in Wales, at Haverfordwest. Its eventual site was at the end of Bridge Street. Four others followed, all before 1269, namely: at Rhuddlan, on the bank of the Clwyd, half a mile from the castle; at Cardiff, outside the north-west angle of the castle walls; at Bangor-in-Afron; and at Brecon.

There are notable remains of only one of these houses today. Beside the Usk, across the bridge, at Brecon stands the well-known Christ’s College, refounded there with the consent of King Henry

anyone is with impunity working the downfall (of the nation); all citizens indeed have the right to rebel when the intrigues of their government presage intolerable miseries. Enforced misery, civil corruption which will undermine the foundations of the state, anarchy which oppresses in the name of liberty, tyranny which for the sake of unbridled ambition violates every law and disrupts the even tenor of life—all these (provided the action will benefit the nation and mankind) are grounds which make a revolution lawful and justifiable’. M. Cordovani, *Diritti e doveri sociali secondo St Tommaso*, Roma, 1939, p. 18.

¹ A broadcast given on the Welsh service of the B.B.C., 23rd May, 1949.

VIII in 1541. Its modern buildings incorporate some parts of the medieval friary, and the present school chapel was the choir—all that is left—of the late thirteenth-century Preachers' church. It was dedicated in honour of St Nicholas; and I hope that the boys still observe the feast-day of the patron saint, as their young predecessors, and before them the Black Friars, used to do.

The Dominican house in what is now Glynne Road at Bangor also became a school; but its present representative, the Friars' School, now stands in a different part of the city.

At Rhuddlan there are some remains of the friary built into a farm, whose yard is the site of the former cloister garth. This farm is called Plas Newydd on the ordnance map, but is known locally as 'Abbey Farm'.

There is very little known about these five Dominican friaries and their inhabitants during the near 300 years of their existence. The references to friars in Welsh history and literature are mostly to those of other orders. When, for example, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth laid the body of his dead wife, Joan of England, beside the sea at Llanfaes in Anglesey, the friars he established there to pray for her repose were sons of St Francis, Grey Friars, *Brodyr llwydion*. Again, it was a grey friar to whom Dafydd ap Gwilym addressed his well-known defence of poetry and love-making when the Franciscan warned him about his wanton ways. But Dominicans would have spoken in this matter no differently from Franciscans; and I learn from Professor Tom Parry that there is an unpublished poem, attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym but probably wrongly, in which a black friar utters a similar warning—and the poet tells him to mind his own business. In another poem Dafydd ap Gwilym speaks more kindly of a Dominican who had reminded him of Morfudd's mortality, though likening the friar's hair to a 'bird's nest made of twigs'.

There are considerations—for instance, the dozen Dominican bishops with English names who occupied Welsh sees—which might suggest that the Dominican houses in Wales were predominantly foreign institutions. In fact, it does not seem to have been so. The names of a good many black friars have survived, and they are Welsh almost to a man. But the Welsh Dominicans figure hardly at all in the ecclesiastical history of their country, and this may be a good sign: for it may mean that from generation to generation they got on with their work quietly and effectively. But we do not know. The bard Siôn Kent, a priest, did not think so when he called 'the preaching friars' 'proud, greedy . . . harsh'; but then he was a man with a grievance. Henry VIII's visitor to receive the surrender of the friaries, Bishop Ingworth (himself a Dominican, of Kings

Langley), wrote to Latimer that he found the people of North Wales very fond of the friars and hoping for their restoration. But it must be admitted that the two most conspicuous names among the Welsh Dominicans are both of rather cantankerous persons.

One of them was Einion, who left his home at Nannau, below Moel Offrwn, just north of Dolgelly, to become a black friar at Rhuddlan; in 1268 he was made bishop of Llanelyw, which in English we call Saint Asaph, a see he occupied for nearly a quarter of a century. He was a faithful supporter of Llywelyn Fawr and worked on his behalf. He defied Archbishop Peckham of Canterbury when ordered to excommunicate Llywelyn, and instead he excommunicated the English troops whom he accused of burning down his cathedral; and he went to law with most of his neighbours, including St Thomas of Hereford. The other prominent Welsh Dominican was Thomas Waleys, a biblical commentator of considerable ability; but his career was abroad. He rushed into endless theological disputes with the Franciscan order and with the Pope, John XXII; landed himself in jail at Avignon in 1333; and seems to have ended his days a suffragan to the bishop of London. It is worth adding that an earlier bishop of Saint Asaph, Friar Huw (said to have been a son of Edynfed Fyehan), received episcopal consecration, at the same time as the great Grosseteste of Lincoln, from the hands of St Edmund Rich of Canterbury; and that the last Roman Catholic bishop of Rochester was a Dominican from Bangor, Morys Gruffydd. The Welshman who 'makes good' in England is an old phenomenon.

At the dissolution of the religious houses by King Henry VIII all the Welsh Dominican friars came to an end in 1538; 2 friars signed the act of surrender at Bangor, 4 at Haverfordwest, 6 at Rhuddlan, 7 at Cardiff, 10 at Brecon. During the 250 years that followed the ecclesiastical settlement under Queen Elizabeth the Catholic pastoral clergy and the English branches of the religious order had their training colleges on the Continent, from whence missionaries were sent to work, often at the cost of their lives, in England and Wales.

But the Dominicans did not take a leading part in this; and whereas at this time Welshmen were numerous and influential among the exiled pastoral clergy, and among the ancient Benedictines and newly-founded Jesuits, there is little evidence of Welsh activity among the Black Friars. But on January 17th, 1680, a Dominican, Father David Joseph Kemeys, born in Monmouth of the Kemeys of Cefn Mabley, was arraigned for his priesthood at the Old Bailey. He was so ill that the trial was postponed; and ten days later Kemeys died in Newgate jail. He was one of the victims of the Titus Oates scare. And in 1687 the provincial superior of the English

Black Friars abroad was one Dominic Gwilym. Twenty-eight years before Gwilym's appointment, in 1659, these friars had established at Bornhem, in Flanders, a boys' school, which at the French Revolution was transferred to Carshalton, in Surrey. This seems irrelevant to my subject; but I will show in a moment that it is not.

Even after the Protestant Reformation got under way in Wales, which it was slow in doing, Catholicism long persisted here and there; and even today there are places where the Catholic cause has unbroken continuity with pre-Reformation times. Such, for example, are Holywell, Brecon, Monmouth and Abergavenny; and records show that till well into the nineteenth century these Catholics were mostly Welsh and to a large extent Welsh-speaking. They were specially numerous in north Monmouthshire, due in part to the influence of such families as the Powells of Perthir and that senior branch of the great Herbert clan called Jones of Treowen, who in 1660 moved their headquarters to their ancient estate of Llanarth, between Raglan and Abergavenny.

The present mansion of Llanarth Court was built about 1770; and on July 27th, 1799, Master John Jones, heir of Llanarth, Treowen and Penllywn, left his home there to be educated at the school conducted by the Black Friars at Carshalton, which I mentioned just now. Could that boy, Master John Jones, revisit Llanarth Court today, he would find his old home occupied by Dominican friars, successors of those who taught him in England 150 years ago. And not only that: he would find as well that those friars are teaching boys there. For that Carshalton school, now at Laxton in Northamptonshire, still flourishes; and on September 29th, 1948, through the generosity of John Jones's great-grand-daughter, it was able to open a junior branch at Llanarth Court.

And so, after 400 years, the preaching friars of St Dominic have returned to Wales; to a place whose history goes back to the days of Iddon ab Ynyr of Gwent and St Teilo in the sixth century; where the ancient Catholic worship has never been interrupted; to a house whose owners have always retained their Welshness and, in alliance with their kinsfolk at Llanover, had a part in the Welsh revival of last century.

When the present Catholic church at Llanarth was built in 1750 it was then made exteriorly to look like a barn, to avoid unwelcome attention. When I went into it the other day the congregation was singing. The words they sang were Latin words, from a hymn of that Dominican, St Thomas Aquinas; but the tune was Llansannan.

The coincidence of place, words and music seemed nicely appropriate.

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