

LETTER II

[*New-York Weekly Register and Catholic Diary*, March 28, 1835]

St. John's, Newfoundland, Oct. 8, 1834.⁷

Very Rev. and dear Sir—In my last I gave you a rude sketch of the progress of religion in Newfoundland, particularly of the state of the mission from its establishment here to the present day, and have touched lightly on the subject of education. I have shown you the vast importance (to the interests of my poor people peculiarly) of the diffusion of a religious education amongst the females, and I have proved the sincerity of my convictions by the sacrifices I have made to introduce among them a community of Presentation Nuns—the first that ever crossed the Atlantic.

But I have hardly attempted to pourtray the marked success that has attended the exertions of those more than benevolent ladies, because I could not dwell upon their extraordinary exertions, without painfully recalling within me those anxious feelings of solicitude for their health, which the contemplation of their unheard-of labours never fails to excite. Surely it is only the Spirit of God that can nerve hearts so tender to bear untiringly the daily recurrence of the toils of a school—of a school, too, where there is nought to cheer, and much to dishearten—no hope of remuneration but in Heaven—no termination of labour but in death—no society but in the little ones of the humblest class of Christians—no pleasure but in the fulfilment of duties voluntarily assumed for the love of God. While the severance from friends, the relinquishment of country, abstraction from the world, and all the other mundane miseries that Religious love to meet, did they not form so many brilliant gems in the eternal crown promised to those

⁷ The published text of this letter was prefaced by the following communication from Father Spratt:

To the Editor of the Freeman:

Carmelite Convent, Dublin,
January 28, 1835.

My dear Sir,—In submitting the following most important letter to the public, through your valuable paper, I cannot express the gratification I feel on hearing that the former communication from the same respected source, which you and the other gentlemen of the press published, has created the most lively interest in favour of the Newfoundland mission. I have every reason to hope that the following, which contains such important details, will perfect the good work, and induce the humane and philanthropic of every communion to contribute to the promotion of religious knowledge in that part of the world, and relieve, not only from trying difficulties, a respected Bishop, but the wants of those priests and religious ladies who recently left their fathers' land to bring souls to Jesus Christ.

Being requested by Dr. Fleming himself, I will most cheerfully co-operate with the kind feelings so generally expressed, as to the best means of receiving the contributions of all classes, and beg to state that John Power, Esq., of Harcourt-street has, in the kindest manner agreed to act as treasurer. I trust that the editors and proprietors of all the other journals will, with their accustomed kindness, give insertion to the following.

I remain, dear Sir, your much obliged servant,

John Spratt.

who suffer for Jesus, could not fail to shake the constancy of the most ardent. But then to reflect that the education of nearly a thousand children is thrown entirely upon five individuals—five weak females, everyone of whom must of necessity pass the entire day in school—that should this incessant routine of toil impair the health, or weaken the constitution of anyone of them, the strength of the little community is exhausted, and I have no means of supplying the deficiency. I often think that an appeal to the Irish public would bring many a lady devoted to religion, and blessed with the means of doing good, to offer herself up as a volunteer in the sacred cause of purifying young hearts to adore the sacred heart of Jesus, and that the circumstances of change of country and clime, instead of being regarded as a barrier, would be hailed as an additional incentive, furnishing, as it does, another sacrifice, to enhance, to enrich the offering. Why do I dwell so long upon this topic? Because it absorbs, as I might say, every other; because, in my opinion, it is paramount to all others connected with the diffusion of religion, in a country where so many are, of necessity, cut off for months, aye, for years, perhaps, of communicating with the ministers of God.

In my last I spoke of difficulties to be met by missionaries in this country, nay, I intended to have devoted the entire of this letter to that subject; but here I find I have already encroached so far upon my space, as to leave scarce any for the entertainment of a question to the due consideration of which, a volume would scarce be sufficient. I should therefore pass by the political difficulties we had to meet, for these, thank Heaven, under the enlightened policy of the day, are rapidly passing away. I shall not advert to the MARRIAGE DUES⁸ exacted from Catholic bishops and Catholic priests, for all marriages solemnised by them in the exercise of their ministry, by our governors, until I came into the administration of this see—because, by a single act of firmness, I broke down, and for ever, the unjust impost. I shall pass the demand of the Protestant rectors to “BURIAL FEES”⁹ for each Catholic burial, always enforced before my time, because

⁸ The published text carries the following editorial footnote:

The Governor of Newfoundland required a return of all marriages celebrated by Catholic priests, with a fee of fourteen pence, currency, for each. A few weeks after the elevation of Dr. Fleming to the See, he was waited on by the proper officers for the usual return, and the fees which were now somewhat in arrear. The return was made, but Dr. Fleming peremptorily refused to pay the fees, and the demand was not repeated.

⁹ The published text carries the following editorial footnote:

The Protestant rector required a return of the burials of Catholics, and the sum of twelve and sixpence, as the burial fees for every individual, even of those buried in the Catholic burial ground.—This was scrupulously exacted during the administration of Dr. O'Donel, the first bishop of the island, down to the last hour of Dr. Scallan, the immediate predecessor of Dr. Fleming; and as poverty could not even claim an exemption from the rector's fee, scarce a week ever passed without witnessing the heartsickening exhibition of a party (friends to the deceased) collecting pence from door to door, to meet this cruel impost; but a prompt refusal upon the accession of Dr. Fleming, prevented the repetition of the demand.

I laughed at the claim, and it sunk to the dust. I shall pass all these, and content myself, as time and space hurry me on, with showing you, by a short narration of the sufferings I endured upon my visitation of the northern district of the island this summer, that if the priests of Newfoundland win not for themselves a high reward, 'tis not because they pass "their days upon roses or their nights on down." And first, of my outfit upon entering on this arduous undertaking.

I had long felt anxious to gratify my people in the dreary regions of the north, by the fulfilment of that great duty of the Christian prelate, which obliges him, "at convenient seasons," to visit his flock, particularly as before me no prelate ever attempted, or dared attempt an enterprise so hazardous, because the general state of the mission forbade them to risk lives at that time so valuable—and what "season" can be "convenient" for a distant visitation in a country without a mile of road; a country that is, during two-thirds of the year, covered with snow?

The Protestant bishop of Nova Scotia claims a right to look after Protestant interests in this island, and undertakes a "visitation." A British man-of-war is ordered to convey him. He reclines upon his ottoman in the "marine palace of an ocean king." Does he wish to land? The well-manned barge, obedient, waits his nod, and he sweeps through the deep because British tars are his servants! Does he ask to dine? The table groans with viands and the choicest wines, for his "sea stock" was put in by merry England!

When I formed my resolution to visit my poor people in the northern district, I was obliged to accept the kind offer made me by the master, of a gratuitous passage on board a small return fishing schooner, bound for Tilting Harbour, in the island of Fogo. We sailed from St. John's on the 20th of last June, laden gunwale deep with necessary supplies for the summer's fishers, and I was obliged to go accompanied by only one clergyman, Rev. Mr. Dalton,¹⁰ and without a single domestic, while the vessel was literally crowded with men and women, who were hired for the prosecution of the fishery. Our course being partly along shore, and the wind pretty favourable, we reached our destined port in forty-eight hours.

The island of Fogo is a barren rock of about one hundred miles in circumference, at the entrance of Green Bay, and only inhabited because the sea around was considered good fishing ground, having for its capital the Harbour of Fogo. Tilting Harbour on the southern eastern extremity, is the second principle town and contains about five hundred inhabitants, and besides this, there are many little villages containing from twenty to fifty, or one hundred and fifty inhabitants each, of which the principle are Jobat's Arm, and another, the entrance to which is called Herringneck, and

¹⁰ The Rev. Charles Dalton was an Irish Franciscan who answered the appeal of Bishop Fleming for missionaries. He arrived in Newfoundland in 1831 and was assigned to Harbor Grace where he remained for thirty years. He built the nave of the subsequent Cathedral of Harbor Grace. His nephew, Father Charles Dalton, became the first Bishop of Harbor Grace (Howley, *op. cit.*, 266).

the island gives name to a district returning a member to our Newfoundland House of Assembly.

But it is not my intention to give you a geographical description of the country; and therefore, pursuing my tour, I must inform you that at Tilting Harbour I remained four days to recruit after the disagreement of my very uncomfortable voyage, and during my stay I confirmed no fewer than three hundred and four persons, being nearly the entire population.

From Tilting Harbour I sailed on board a small fishing boat for Fortune Harbour, situated at the northern extremity of Green Bay, intending there to begin, as it is the most remote inhabited part of the British portion of Newfoundland, and the next to the French shore. But the bay is exceedingly open and generally tempestuous, and as the passage across is not less than from fifty to sixty miles, we could not have much confidence in our little craft, and were obliged, after beating about for a day, to put into Jobat's Arm in distress, where we continued until the next day, and having been obliged to send back the boat that conveyed us so far, we were kindly accommodated with a boat and crew by Mr. Henry Stark, and sailed next morning, but not until I had offered the holy sacrifice, and administered confirmation to ninety-eight individuals—but finding after a day and a night that a rough sea, and contrary winds, and threatening weather, promised us a longer passage than we anticipated, and seeing that it was only by this boat, and the exertions of the two men who worked her under him, that poor Stark supported his helpless family, I was most anxious to get into some port, where I might have an opportunity of releasing them and procuring a fresh crew, but the worthy fellows felt hurt at the proposition, and when, in the course of the morning after, we were put into the Harbour of Fogo in distress, they exulted at my disappointment when they found I could not procure another boat.

We sailed from Fogo in a few hours after, determined to struggle on, but again, towards the next evening (the eve of the festival of St. Peter and Paul), were driven into Herringneck, where we enjoyed the humble, though cordial hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Kent, and where, for the first time since we left the comfortable residence of Mr. Burk, of Tilting Harbour, we indulged in the luxury of a bed—and thus were we, for four days, beaten about at every side of the island of Fogo, and it was not until the evening of the fifth we entered Fortune Harbour.

Here were we, then, in an open boat, without the least shelter from the inclemency of the weather—a boat, taken at once from the fishery, covered with the slime of fish, now rendered putrid from the action of the sun—after inhaling that putrescence for five days, and being in distress for provisions, at length permitted to land in our destined port, and here we released our poor men and their boat, after so long an absence from those avocations, which their families were to look to for support; and as it happened to have proved, I believe, the only good week of the fishery in that quarter, their sacrifice for our accomodation must have been very great indeed, and is to me, even now, a cause of heart-felt regret.

And now who can define my feelings on entering this wild district, there to commence the toils of my visitation, at a distance, in the most direct way, of near four hundred miles from my residence, but increased, in my devious and perilous course, upwards of six hundred; or who pourtray my gratitude to God for inspiring me with fortitude, as He had blessed me with health and spirits, to embark in an undertaking so hazardous?

I found about forty families, comprising the entire population of this harbour, principally Irish, or the descendants of Irish settlers, and never shall I forget the burst of affections, of exultation with which we were received among them.

It was evening on the first of July when we slowly approached the high and commanding shores of the north west-side of Green Bay, and weary as we were, our limbs crippled from constant sitting—our heavy eye-lids closed from want of sleep—our spirits depressed and our crew at length exhausted with exertion—yet, subdued as we were, we could not refrain from admiring the sublimity of the prospect before us—the majesty of the mountains crowned by eternal frosts as the setting sun poured its “liquid light” through the foliage. We were becalmed as we stood before the narrow inlet, and our crew were unable to row our craft in. We were perceived from the shore, and curiosity to ascertain who were the strangers, brought out a boat to see us; upon learning who we were they returned and in a little time after skiffs (for there is not a single sail boat in the entire harbour) came out to tow us in, and we entered amid the acclamations of all, men, women, and children; all had left their employments, and the evening was devoted to festivity, and closed with thanksgiving to Heaven for imparting to them (who, in the memory of man, had been only twice visited by a clergyman) so great a blessing.

I remained there three days, during which time there was a total cessation from business, so anxious were the poor people to show us every attention; and the unaffected pain we felt at parting was considerably enhanced by the honest effusion of unsophisticated sorrow that burst from all, and the tear that trembled on the eye-lid, or rolled along the furrowed cheek of the weather beaten fishermen.

In the entire island I have not met a people so well instructed in their religion, or among whom reigns so much virtue, or a place where vice is so little known—and all this good, under God, to be attributed to the virtues of three families. The fathers of these excellent families assemble the entire population alternately at their houses on Sundays and holidays, where public prayer is offered, and a spiritual lecture read; and on the evenings of Lent and Advent, the Rosary and a lecture, while the mid hours of the Sabbath throughout the year, are devoted by Mrs. Power, that truly Christian matron, in instructing the children of her neighbors to walk in the paths of religion and morality—in training their infant lips to lisp the praises of Him Who thus raises even in “the desert” lights, to guide to happiness eternal. This excellent woman is a German, and received her education from a community of nuns in her native country.

O, how my bosom did throb with emotion upon witnessing the fruits, the extraordinary fruits resulting from the pious example and religious instruction of one good woman—when I reflected that in a few years, by the instrumentality of my little convent of St. John's, in every harbour and in every creek, and in every cove in the island, would be found mothers diffusing around them, like Mrs. Power, the blessings that Heaven had so abundantly imparted to them—and how did it confirm the confidence I entertained that that invaluable institution, poor as it now is, must flourish, destined, as it is, by God for the regeneration of a people! I met these good people in joy and parted from them in pain. I said before that in the entire harbour there is not one sail-boat, and therefore I must of necessity commence my wanderings home in a small skiff, which they call here a "punt". It is something like your jolly-boats, or rather whale boats, but not as seaworthy; and in this giddy bark, built to contain from two to three quintals, or a hundred weight of fish, and now sunk to the gunwale, by the addition to the crew, consisting of four persons, of us two men—in this confined thing, where, when crippled with long sitting, we could not extend our limbs, nor dare stand erect for fear of upsetting the skiff, we pulled off to cross the extensive and turbulent waters of Green Bay.

This magnificent Bay comprehends several smaller bays, each of which, in itself, would be considered too large to cross in a tolerably sized sail fishing boat. We could not, of course, be expected to feel quite secure in our little craft. However, as it was my intention to visit the harbours and creeks along the shore, we continued to coast along until the evening of the first day, when we put into a place called Ship-Run, inhabited by only two families, where I exchanged a couple of hands for a younger and fresher pair, and having passed the night there, sailed in the morning for Morton's Harbour.¹¹ Here, on our arrival I first began to feel fatigued, and when I at first essayed to use my limbs, they refused to sustain my body; but as I could not secure a fresh crew, I was forced to press forward to Fogo, because between these two harbours there was no place in which I could hope to get a boat or crew. But I can not pass here without adverting to the warm hospitality exhibited toward us by Mr. Taylor, an honest Protestant settler. He lives a little outside Morton's Harbour, and upon hearing of our arrival, he at once came down to press us to refresh ourselves at his house. He said we looked fatigued, and that he had comfortable beds and abundant means of recruiting us, amid our hardships, and offered us that strongest of all inducements, a "hearty welcome," urging expressly, and with marked kindness, that if he had a palace at his disposal, he should feel happy at offering it for our use—and our only regret at leaving the harbour was, in our inability to gratify his wishes; but I shall ever retain the memory of his kindness, and if it ever again be my fate to visit that coast, I shall not pass without testifying to him the sense I entertain of his sterling worth.

¹¹ The published text carries the following footnote:

Dr. Fleming met in this harbour one of the native American Indians, and promised to return next June to meet the several Indian tribes of that coast at the river exploits.

We sailed now once more for Fogo, and with excessive exertion reached that port, after a passage of four-and-twenty hours (the wind heading us the entire way;) but on night coming on I implored the crew to get ashore, that we might renew the circulation of the blood in our long contracted limbs, and we accordingly did go ashore, and lighting a fire we lay along side of it on the rocks and slept till morning—the soundest and most refreshing sleep we ever in our lives enjoyed.

But I have exhausted your patience and my paper.—Suffice it to say that in the course of our short summer, I accomplished a journey of at least more than twelve hundred miles, visiting forty-six harbours in my circuit through Green Bay, Bona Vista Bay, Trinity Bay and Conception Bay—that I administered the sacrament of Confirmation upwards of three thousand persons—of Penance and Eucharist to more than that number. For the greater part of the time I knew not the luxury of a bed, while for days and nights together I had not an opportunity of reclining even on the thwart of the boat; I had not been able for days to take off my clothes; I seldom met with better fare than a hard sea biscuit and a little fish, sometimes a bit of fat pork out of the pickle, while I had not an opportunity of indulging myself in my exhaustion with a single glass of wine—no variety of food whatever, except when the men would land on some desolate rocky island, and robbing the seafowl of their eggs strike a fire and roast them on the rocks, while at the same time the stench of the boat from bilge water, mixed with putrid fish, so affected my stomach as to induce a severe bilious attack, which developed itself upon my return. Add to this, that I have only painted our hardships by sea; but if I described our wanderings by land, crossing pathless promontories, and winding around bays, through forests and morasses, frequently when bathed in perspiration and fainting with exhaustion under a burning sun, obliged to plunge into a river to wade across, and then unable to change until our clothes had dried on our backs—our shoes worn from our feet, and our clothes in tatters, torn by the thick underwood; you may form some idea of the difficulties of our mission.

But why should I close this without acknowledging the warmth of feeling exhibited to us, in Kings-Cove, by Mr. Mullowney, of Cork, a gentleman truly worthy of representing John Macbraire, Esq., of Tweedhill, in Berwickshire, son of the late warm-hearted James Macbraire, Esq., the most opulent merchant of this country and one of the most benevolent founders of the “Benevolent Irish Society,” always remarkable for the munificence for his donations to the poor, and his kindness to the Catholic clergy.

Mr. Mullowney, Mr. Macbraire’s agent, received us with all that cordiality which marks his character, and tried every means in his power, indeed with considerable success, to alleviate our sufferings. Here we enjoyed comforts that those only can appreciate, who have passed days and nights together ever sitting in one spot, and in one posture, without daring to move, and even then, only varying by snatching a hasty repose stretched at the bottom of a fishing boat, or upon the bare surface of a hard rock. We did enjoy the kindness of Mr. Mullowney, but yet not

alone in his hospitality, but when we were forced to move for another harbour, he had a boat prepared for our reception, the master and crew of which were directed not to leave us until we had finished our tour; and in compliance with his injunctions, they brought us to the several harbours in the Trinity Bay, we intended to visit, and at length returned to Kings-Cove, after bringing us to Bay-de-Berds, in Conception Bay, where, after having made a visitation of the different harbours, we closed our wearisome wanderings for the season. While speaking of Mr. Muldowney, I must not omit to acknowledge the polite attentions of Mr. Drawbridge of Greens-pond, the respectable agent of Mr. Garland, of the house of George B. Robinson, Brooking, Garland, and Co., who received us with the warmest hospitality.

I have now, my dear Sir, given you a tolerable idea of the state of religion in this island. I have shown you the rapid advancement of the missions, the number of ecclesiastics increased fourfold. I have enabled you to form some conception of the best importance, not indeed to religion alone, but to the best interests of society in general, of our own yet feeble community of nuns, and would to God that I could with equal facility induce a few more pious ladies, zealous for the propagation of the faith, on whom Heaven has bestowed the means of doing good, to offer themselves to assist in the sacred cause of the poor, that by immolating themselves here on the altar of charity, they may participate in the never-fading glories of those who win the prize of immortality.

I have written thus far in a spirit of candour, because with you I felt I had not to apprehend the charge of egotism, and I have forborne from commentary from want of space; but you, my dear Sir, will not fail to draw those deductions that true religion will inspire, nor scan my pages with the supercilious frown of the critic, and I have enbosomed myself in a spirit of friendship, convinced that the feeling will be responded to with sincerity.

And now let me, before I close, congratulate you. Let me congratulate the Irish hierarchy—the Irish priesthood—the Irish people, upon the elevation of that luminary of the Irish church Dr. MacHale,¹² the scholar, the patriot and the priest, to the archdiocese of Tuam, a dignity due not less to his exalted virtues, than to his deep learning.

I cannot refrain either from taking this opportunity of requesting you will have the goodness to present my affectionate regards to Mr. O'Connell.¹³ I trust you will inform me that his health continues unimpaired by

¹² The Most Rev. John MacHale, who in 1834 had been named Archbishop of Tuam, in Ireland. A vigorous Irish patriot, he wrote and labored incessantly throughout his long episcopate to promote the national aspirations and economic welfare of the Irish people. His biography may be found in the book of Bernard O'Reilly, *John MacHale, Archbishop of Tuam, His Life and Correspondence* (2 vols., New York, 1890).

¹³ Daniel O'Connell, Irish statesman, popularly known as "the Liberator." A leading figure in the struggle for Catholic Emancipation in the British Isles, he also advocated the repeal of the legislative union of Ireland with England and the abrogation of the iniquitous economic and social legislation then prevailing in Ireland. He died at

his unparalleled exertions, and that our beloved country may yet hope to assert her liberty through the instrumentality of the man whose undeviating solicitude for her welfare has been well proved by a long and arduous struggle of three and thirty years, marked by an honesty and single heartedness unknown in the annals of history.

With respectful compliments to the gentlemen of your community, I have the pleasure to subscribe myself your much obliged and very faithful friend,

✱ Michael Anthony Fleming,
Bishop of Carpasieu, V.A. of Newfoundland, &c.

The Very Rev. John Spratt, S.T.M.

LETTER III

[*New-York Weekly Register and Catholic Diary*, September 17, 1836]

59, Conduit-st. London, July 28, 1836.

Very Reverend and Very Dear Sir—It is now so long since I have had the pleasure of addressing you, that I almost fear an apology is due for the delay, particularly as since my last I have had the gratification of receiving your kind communication, not only from our beloved country, but also from the “Eternal City,” the citadel of the Christian world.

Your kind and valuable gift, too, to my poor people of books, betraying, as it did, so much thoughtfulness for the wants of the poor, and anxious solicitude for the establishment in their hearts of the kingdom of Him who assures us that even a cup of cold water given to the least of them for His sake “shall not pass without a reward,” imposed upon me a ten-fold obligation to reply; but I know well that you seek not a return in terms of compliment—that reward you aspire to is not to be found in the sterile interchange of phrases demanded to etiquette, and, therefore, it was that for your kindness and attention, your flattering notice of my former communications, and charitable donation to my poor flock, I contented myself with paying you the sincere, though silent, tribute of gratitude, and pouring forth my humble but ardent aspirations to the Most High for your temporal and eternal happiness.

In good truth, during the past year my duties were of that pressing [nature] as precluded, not indeed the *possibility*, but the *propriety*, of devoting much time to answer the calls of friendship in the way of sustaining my part in an epistolary correspondence, and it is very probable that the most agreeable amends that I can now make for past omissions is to give you a succinct account of my manner of discharging those duties, and particularly of my visitation of the western part of the southern portion of this

Genoa, Italy, May 15, 1847. For the biography of O’Connell, see Michael MacDonagh, *Life of Daniel O’Connell* (St. Louis, 1905), and Robert Dunlop, *Daniel O’Connell and the Revival of National Life in Ireland* (New York and London, 1900).