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# *Temperance in Tipperary: Father Mathew and Archbishop Slattery, 1839-1854*

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By John F. Quinn

For almost a decade Father Theobald Mathew, a Tipperary-born friar, mesmerized the people of Ireland and had a sizable following in England, Scotland and the United States as well. Beginning in 1838, all of Ireland seemed to be abuzz over what Daniel O'Connell called Mathew's "mighty moral miracle".<sup>1</sup> Mathew's "miracle" was temperance: by the early 1840s he had administered lifelong total abstinence pledges to more than 5,000,000 Irishmen, women and children.<sup>2</sup> Visitors to Ireland in the early 1840s all told the same startling story: fewer Irish were drinking, arrests were decreasing, and pubs and distilleries were shutting down all over the country.<sup>3</sup>

By the late 1840s, however, Mathew was sick and deeply in debt, and the temperance movement was disintegrating rapidly. While a host of factors – including the onset of the Famine in 1845 – helped to doom Mathew's crusade, opposition from some members of the catholic hierarchy must be counted as a key reason for the campaign's ultimate failure. The two most outspoken nationalist prelates, Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam and Bishop William Higgins of Ardagh, disliked him for political reasons and criticized him openly. While troubled by their hostility, Mathew was most upset by the discreet opposition of his own archbishop, Dr. Michael Slattery of Cashel. Mathew considered Slattery an ally and was deeply disappointed when he learned that Slattery too distrusted him.

Theobald Mathew was born into a prominent Tipperary family in 1790. Lord Francis Mathew – known as the Earl of Llandaff after 1797 – lived in splendour on a 2,000-acre estate in Thomastown. The day to day management of the property he entrusted to James Mathew, one of his Catholic cousins. Theobald was the fourth of twelve children that James and his wife Anne raised at Thomastown.

Theobald enjoyed a seemingly idyllic childhood at the Thomastown mansion. There was no quarrelling among the religiously mixed Mathews. Indeed, the Protestant Mathews were so well disposed to Catholicism that when Theobald expressed an interest in the priesthood, Lady Elizabeth Mathew – the Earl's daughter – volunteered to pay for his seminary training.

Theobald enrolled at Maynooth College in 1807 but soon faced expulsion for having thrown a small party for several of his fellow seminarians. Withdrawing before the school officials had a chance to expel him, Mathew was then admitted to the Capuchin friars, who were small in size and eager for new recruits.<sup>4</sup> After five years of formation at the Capuchins' Church Street Friary in Dublin, Mathew was ordained to the priesthood in 1813 by Daniel Murray, the coadjutor bishop of Dublin.

After a brief stint in Kilkenny Mathew was sent to Cork, where he would remain until his retirement in the early 1850s. For more than twenty years Mathew ministered to the poor of Cork; over time he became one of the city's best loved priests. Still he would probably never have gained much fame outside his own Cork neighbourhood if he had not made the decision to join the temperance movement in April 1838.

Several temperance societies had been established in Ireland in 1829, but they had not



achieved much success among Catholics. Many Catholics saw temperance as a Protestant crusade – the preserve of Quakers, Unitarians and Ulster Presbyterians. By 1837 the leading teetotalers of Cork recognized that if they were going to reach the Catholic masses they would need to recruit a priest to lead their organization. Father Mathew seemed to be the logical choice. After some pleading, Mathew – who had had no previous experience in the temperance movement – agreed to take the total abstinence pledge before taking the reins of the Cork Total Abstinence Society (CTAS).

Virtually from the moment that Mathew signed on, temperance caught fire. By the end of 1838 Mathew's society had 6,000 members, which made it the largest temperance organization in Ireland or England.<sup>5</sup> By August 1839 the CTAS claimed 24,000 members – a four-fold increase in just seven months.<sup>6</sup> With people coming from increasing distances to take the pledge from him in Cork, Mathew decided that it would be easier for everyone if he were to do the travelling.

In September 1839 he made a brief visit to Cahir and Golden in co. Tipperary, adding 7,000 people to the CTAS rolls.<sup>7</sup> Two months later he undertook a longer and better publicized trip to Limerick. To the surprise of everyone – including Mathew himself – more than 120,000 people took the pledge at his hands over three days.<sup>8</sup> Mathew had only brought 2,000 temperance medals with him from Cork, so he had not had the faintest idea of the size of the crowds he would encounter in Limerick.

After his Limerick triumph Mathew became the talk of Ireland. The leading Dublin newspapers, the *Freeman's Journal*, the *Dublin Evening Post* and the *Dublin Evening Mail* began to follow him closely and even the *London Times* started to cover him. Daniel O'Connell was thrilled by Mathew's accomplishments and searched for a way to link his nationalist campaign to the temperance movement.<sup>9</sup> Several prominent English politicians, including Whig leader Lord John Russell, began to champion Mathew's cause as well.

## Mathew and the Bishops

Most of the Catholic hierarchy was similarly enthusiastic. Several bishops wrote to Mathew and asked him to visit their dioceses and stay in their residences. Among Mathew's supporters were Daniel Murray of Dublin,<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Foran of Waterford, John Ryan of Limerick, John Cantwell of Meath, William Kinsella of Ossory, Thomas Coen of Clonfert and George Browne of Galway.

A few bishops were lukewarm about Mathew's campaign. For example, John Murphy, Bishop of Cork, had little enthusiasm for teetotalism. Murphy's perspective, however, was probably influenced by his relatives, who controlled one of Ireland's largest breweries. Another ambivalent prelate was William Crolly, the Archbishop of Armagh. Crolly claimed to favour temperance, but let Mathew know that he did not want him visiting his archdiocese.<sup>11</sup> Catholics were a minority in Crolly's portion of Ulster and the archbishop feared that a visit from Mathew might stir up religious tensions.

At first only two bishops, MacHale and Higgins, were openly hostile to Mathew. By 1840 both had informed Mathew that he was not needed in their dioceses and that they would administer the pledge themselves to any interested persons living in their jurisdictions. Higgins and MacHale had two serious objections to Mathew: they were under the impression that he was making large sums of money by selling temperance medals; and they were angry that Mathew's society was nonsectarian.



Father Joseph Burke, a teetotaler under MacHale's jurisdiction in co. Mayo, wrote to Mathew in September 1840 explaining the two bishops' rationale for opposing him:

Of course you are aware that Doctor Higgins has been giving the pledge in his own diocese and has designed to distribute medals and cards purely Catholic so that the [P]rotestants who are very edifying members of our society cannot wear them; our Bishop [MacHale]...has adopted the same plan. The motive is as I have heard the other day from Dr. MacHale, *the great sums of money* brought by you out of the country to the serious injury of the people....The Bishop seems to think that he will be able to amass large sums of money for the cathedral by the temperance movement, but the people will have no other medals than those with your name...upon them.<sup>17</sup>

The following year MacHale escalated his campaign against Mathew. In August he denounced Mathew from the pulpit of Tuam Cathedral and announced to the teetotalers of the archdiocese that he was dispensing them from the lifelong pledges that they had taken from Mathew. Upon hearing of MacHale's actions Mathew wrote anxiously to Rome seeking redress. In a letter to Paul Cullen, the rector of the Irish College in Rome, Mathew summarized the archbishop's comments about him:

After a long tirade in Irish against the [temperance] society he said that I was a vagabond Friar, that I went about with a *woman*, that she sold medals for me, charging a shilling for bits of Birmingham pewter which cost only a few pence, and that we spent the money drinking brandy and water, laughing at the poor dupes whom we robbed.<sup>15</sup>

Cullen endeavoured to reassure Mathew in his reply, informing him that the Pope, Gregory XVI, fully endorsed his campaign. At the same time he made it clear that no one in Rome was intending to admonish the formidable Archbishop of Tuam. Instead, Cullen advised him to "bear every insult with patience and wait until heaven would show the justness of [your] cause". He concluded his letter by warning Mathew that he should not "entertain sentiments too liberal towards Protestants in matters of religion".<sup>14</sup>

## Mathew and Slattery

Mathew's own archbishop, Michael Slattery, shared some of MacHale's views on religion and politics. Although a graduate of Trinity College Dublin rather than Maynooth, Slattery subscribed to the Catholic nationalist viewpoint held by many Maynooth-educated priests. Like MacHale, he supported O'Connell's campaign to Repeal the Act of Union and had little enthusiasm for ecumenical activities.<sup>15</sup> Unlike MacHale, however, Slattery always expressed his views in carefully measured language.

Slattery also differed strongly with MacHale on Mathew and the temperance campaign. Although more conservative doctrinally than Mathew, Slattery did not allow those disagreements to colour his view of Mathew's crusade. While barred from MacHale's and Higgins' dioceses, Mathew visited co. Tipperary more than a dozen times between 1839 and 1844 and came to Thurles (where Slattery resided) at least twice. Each time Slattery had warmly welcomed him. Indeed, in 1844 Mathew visited Thurles at Slattery's express invitation. He spent three days there, pledging 10,000 adults and children.<sup>16</sup>

In 1845, after six years of tremendous growth, Mathew's crusade was suddenly starting to falter. Whiskey sales, which had dropped by more than 50% from 1838 to 1843, were rising again.<sup>17</sup> Fewer people were enrolling in Mathew's society and reports of pledgebreaking were becoming more widespread. Worse yet, Mathew had gotten himself deeply in debt. Travelling



constantly and giving away temperance medals and money to members of his society had left him in debt for £7,000.

If the temperance movement were to be made solvent, Mathew and his supporters would have to raise between £10,000 and £15,000. Mathew needed £7,000 immediately to pay his creditors in England and several thousand more so that he could use the interest generated each year to fund his temperance tours. A host of dignitaries in Ireland and England quickly came together to rescue Mathew. By the end of 1845 £8,300 had been raised – the bulk coming from English supporters – and forwarded to him. Mathew was grateful for the help, but a little disappointed that his Irish supporters had not offered more assistance.<sup>18</sup> The £8,300 had solved his most pressing difficulties, but had not been enough to assure him of financial security.

As Mathew was settling his debts, a much more serious crisis was unfolding: the potato crop – upon which most Irish tenant farmers depended for their subsistence – had been hit by a mysterious fungus in the southeastern counties. Recognizing the dangers posed by the blight, England's Tory prime minister, Robert Peel, acted promptly to help the Irish. He had large quantities of Indian corn imported into Ireland to take the place of potatoes in farmers' diets. He also established and subsidized public works projects; thousands of farmers were put to work building roads, bridges and piers. In June 1846 he arranged the repeal of the Corn Laws, arguing that free trade would help ease the Irish tenant farmers' plight. In dismantling the Corn Laws, though, Peel had antagonized a sizable bloc of protectionist-oriented Tories. Feeling betrayed, dozens of Tories joined with the Whigs to oust him from power.

Replacing Peel as prime minister was the Whig leader John Russell. A dogmatic defender of laissez-faire economics, Russell immediately started scaling back on Peel's Irish relief measures. Russell and his chief economic advisor, Charles Trevelyan, were convinced that the market would solve the problems of scarcity caused by the famine. In the autumn of 1846 Russell and Trevelyan had a chance to test their theories when the blight reappeared in a more virulent form. Although virtually all of the crop was lost, Russell refused to modify his policies. No Indian corn was brought in and no government moneys were made available for public works.

As the blight worsened, Mathew spent more and more of his time feeding the poor who had flocked into Cork from the surrounding villages. In August 1846 he set up a soup kitchen in Cork and began writing to philanthropists in England and the United States to inform them of the gravity of Ireland's plight.

### **A Mitre for Mathew?**

In the spring of 1847 Mathew and the temperance movement received a sudden boost. In May the Bishop of Cork, John Murphy, died and the parish priests of the diocese convened to elect a successor. The clergy chose Mathew to head their list of three candidates. Their recommendation was published in the newspapers and congratulations started to flow in to Mathew from friends and well-wishers throughout Ireland and England.<sup>19</sup>

A couple of weeks later Mathew was again in the newspaper headlines when Prime Minister Russell announced that he would receive a £300 annual pension from the British government. Russell hoped that the pension would solve Mathew's financial problems once and for all and enable him to continue his temperance work. Mathew had been hoping for a larger grant, but accepted Russell's offer nevertheless.

Taking a British pension would prove to be the greatest mistake of Mathew's career. Mathew was accepting money from Russell in the midst of the famine when anti-English – and



specifically anti-Russell – sentiments were at an unprecedented height. This decision alienated thousands of Irishmen and women from Mathew and further undermined the temperance movement. It also turned key prelates – including Slattery – against him and endangered his bid for the bishopric of Cork.

In late June the bishops of the Cashel province met to consider the parish priests' recommendation for the Cork see. At the meeting the bishops took an unusual step: Slattery and a majority of the other bishops decided to send a letter to Rome recommending that the parish priests' second choice, Father William Delany, be appointed bishop in lieu of Mathew. Writing to Cullen, Slattery said that Mathew's appointment would jeopardize the Church's independence.<sup>20</sup> He was clearly alluding to Mathew's decision to accept the British pension.

Bishop Higgins also wrote to Cullen about the Cork appointment even though his diocese was not in the Cashel province. He sharply criticized Mathew and warned Cullen not to recommend his appointment:

How will we persuade the poor people that a pension can be bad when Fr Mathew, with the Cork crozier in one hand, receives his government bribe with the other! He will be in all the secrets of the ministry – will be a check and spy in our deliberations...[S]hould he be appointed I must look upon the event...as a national disgrace and a national calamity.<sup>21</sup>

Mathew, aware of the bishops' recommendation, sent one of his fellow Capuchins to Rome to plead his case with Cullen. He armed his confrere with an urgent note: "The appointment is a matter of life or death for me and the Temperance cause in Ireland."<sup>22</sup>

Cullen must have faced a dilemma. He knew Mathew personally and liked him, but at the same time he probably disapproved of Mathew's decision to accept a British pension. In the end Cullen sided with Slattery; Delany was appointed Bishop of Cork in July and consecrated in August.

In public, Mathew claimed that he did not mind having been passed over and that it was probably all for the best. Privately, however, he was much more forthright about the intense pain he was experiencing. Writing to Maurice Lenihan, the well-known Tipperary journalist and a fellow teetotaler, Mathew described the treatment he had received from Slattery and the other bishops:

You are aware of the manner in which I have been treated by your bishop Dr Kennedy who came to Cork breathing vengeance against me, and by the Archbishop and the new bishop of Cloyne Dr. Walshe [sic].<sup>23</sup> The Archbishop also signed against me, and in favour of the Rev. Mr. Delany, the names of Dr. Foran and Doctor French<sup>24</sup> who were absent and knew not who were the candidates. The Archbishop acted with great treachery, pretending the warmest friendship, dining at my table and then stabbing me in the dark.<sup>25</sup>

After losing out on the Cork bishopric, Mathew's fortunes and those of the temperance movement deteriorated rapidly. In 1848 he suffered what would prove to be the first of several strokes. The following year he had recovered enough to visit the United States. He spent more than two years in America, giving the pledge to thousands of Irish emigrants and trying to encourage those who had enrolled in the movement back in Ireland to persevere. The tour turned out to be Mathew's last great achievement: he claimed to have administered the pledge to 600,000 people during his two years in America.<sup>26</sup> The trip sapped him of most of his remaining strength, however.

In 1852, shortly after returning to Ireland, Mathew determined to make one final effort to obtain a bishopric. Convinced that Ireland's damp climate was detrimental to his health, he again wrote to Cullen asking for his help in becoming a bishop in one of the Caribbean



islands.<sup>27</sup> Cullen politely demurred, telling him that such a position would be too stressful for a man in his weakened condition.

Although he never reached the West Indies, Mathew did get to a warmer clime before his death. In 1854 he was able to visit the Madeira islands for a year. The trip was made possible by donations from Slattery – who was ailing as well at this time<sup>28</sup> – and several Tipperary priests. Before leaving for the islands, Mathew wrote Slattery a cordial letter thanking him for his kindness.<sup>29</sup> While all undoubtedly had not been forgotten or forgiven, perhaps a partial reconciliation had been effected. Mathew died in 1856, shortly after returning from the islands, and Slattery's death followed two months later.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted in *Nation*, January 28, 1843.
2. Writing in 1844 to an English journalist, Mathew remarked: "You have not over-rated the number when you state that five millions and a half have taken the pledge. This includes females and children". Mathew to James Grant, December 6, 1844, Mathew Papers, Church Street Friary, 8: 729 (hereafter "MPCSF"). Mathew's biographers and the newspapers of the time accepted these figures as well.
3. See, for example, S. C. Hall and A. M. Hall, *Ireland, Its Scenery, Character, etc.* 3 vols. (London, 1841-1843); Johann G. Kohl, *Travels in Ireland* (London, 1944); and James Grant, *Impressions of Ireland and the Irish*, 2 vols. (London, 1844).
4. For the difficulties faced by religious orders at this time, see Hugh Fenning, O.P., *The Undoing of the Friars of Ireland: A Study of the Novitiate Question in the Eighteenth Century* (Louvain, 1972).
5. M. J. Quin, "The Temperance Movement in Ireland", in *Dublin Review* 8 (May 1840): 469.
6. *Dublin Weekly Herald*, August 3, 1839.
7. *Dublin Weekly Herald*, September 28, 1839.
8. The *London Times* claimed that 120,000 people pledged, while the pro-Mathew *Dublin Evening Post* (*DEP*) reported that 200,000 had enrolled. *Times*, December 17, 1839; *DEP*, December 5, 1839.
9. See Lawrence McCaffrey, *Daniel O'Connell and the Repeal Year* (Lexington, KY, 1966), 22-23.
10. Murray had become Archbishop in 1823.
11. For Crolly's teetotal sympathies, see *DEP*, February 29, 1840.
12. Rev. Joseph Burke to Mathew, September 5, 1840, MPCSF, 2: 196.
13. Mathew to Cullen, September 20, 1841, Irish College Correspondence Transcripts, Philadelphia Archdiocese Archives, 159 (hereafter "ICCT").
14. Cullen to Mathew, October 10, 1841, quoted in Peadar Mac Suibhne, *Paul Cullen and His Contemporaries*, 5 vols. (Naas, 1961-1977), II, 9-10.
15. For Slattery's Repeal sympathies, see Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist: Daniel O'Connell, 1830-1847* (London, 1989), 222.
16. *Freeman's Journal*, December 5, 1844.
17. Colm Kerrigan, "The Social Impact of the Irish Temperance Movement", in *Irish Economic and Social History* 14 (1987): 24-25.
18. Writing to his friend James Haughton, Mathew remarked: "I'm justified in saying that the teetotalers of Ireland have not upheld me – have not contributed for my relief half of what I expended for their happiness". (1845), MPCSF, 17: 1602.
19. For example, Father James Quinlivan, an English supporter, told Mathew of the "joy I experienced at seeing your name stand at the head of the 'trio', ... of those sent to Rome". June 15, 1847, MPCSF, 4: 353.
20. Slattery to Cullen, June 25, 1847, quoted in Fr. Augustine, OFM, Cap., *The Footprints of Father Mathew* (Dublin, 1947), 443-444.
21. Higgins to Cullen, June 30, 1847, quoted in Desmond Bowen, *Paul Cardinal Cullen and the Shaping of Modern Irish Catholicism* (Dublin, 1983), 83.



22. Mathew to Cullen (June) 1847, ICCT, 166.
23. Patrick Kennedy was Bishop of Killaloe and David Walsh was Bishop of Cloyne and Ross.
24. Edmund French was Bishop of Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora.
25. Mathew to Lenihan, July 8, 1847, MPCSF, 12: 1169.
26. Patrick Rogers, *Father Theobald Mathew* (Dublin, 1943), 140.
27. Mathew to Cullen, October 1, 1852, Cullen Papers, Dublin Diocesan Archibes, 325/4, 130.
28. Slattery was already seriously ill in 1850. When planning a national synod in 1850, Archbishop Cullen decided to hold it in Thurles because he knew that Slattery was too sick to travel. See Emmet Larkin, *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980), 8.
29. Mathew to Slattery, July 3, 1854, Slattery Papers, microfilm copy, National Library of Ireland.

