

Fr John Lingard: pioneer of historical research

by PHILIPPA MARTYR

Largely unsung and unknown today — save in specialist historical circles — Father John Lingard was both a priest and an historian descended from old English Catholic families persecuted and impoverished during the Reformation. He is noteworthy as the first English scholar to rely thoroughly on original sources for a record of the years before and after the Reformation. Intensely eager to see the conversion of England, Lingard was convinced that this could only be accomplished by a reliable presentation of the facts. Many English Protestants were astonished to find such a temperate approach to controversial questions and recognised the high quality of his historical writing.

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Before considering the career of Fr John Lingard, the English priest/historian, and its significance, we need to examine the broader historical context — both of Church and state — in which English Catholic intellectuals of the time such as Fr Lingard were active.

A great deal has been written since the nineteenth century on the phenomena of religio-spiritual and intellectual growth and revival in the Victorian period. The spread of sciences, new philosophical speculations and the development of critical history all infused and promoted a questioning and consideration of man's spiritual nature across Christianity. Of the religious revival, the Evangelical and the Catholic movements were the twin forces behind the shaping of the Victorian religious outlook.

The intellectual developments reached out into the religious revival, and brought to light the need for Christianity to present a strong intellectual presence, not by altering fundamental principles, but by using the full benefits of new developments as a form of apologetic.

Historians frequently use 1845 as a starting-point for "revival history", this being the year in which many prominent converts, such as Newman, entered the Church. The pre-1840s period, however, is equally important: it is possible to trace a small but promising intellectual renaissance in the English Catholic community in this forty-year span, which subsequent historiography has tended to downplay. In English Catholic thought at the time, there appear to be three main forces at work:

Gallicanist sympathies which in turn influenced apologetics, a growing anti-rationalism, and the influence of Roman scholarship.

Gallicanism by this stage was becoming recognisable as a term meaning "the theological concept of the union of monarch and clergy to limit papal intervention within the kingdom." Its English expression of Cismontanism or Cisalpinism had exerted an influence in the Emancipation debate by showing willingness to accept government intervention (in the form of veto) in the appointment of Catholic bishops, and to limit the areas of papal authority in England.

Rationalism had a significant impact on Catholic intellectual culture — its contempt for medieval "barbarism", and thus for Catholicism, meant that even before the Romantic revolution in historical thinking of the 1820s and 1830s, English Catholic intellectuals had offered resistance and opposition to the rationalist trend. Catholic England's scholars were by no means lying dormant at this stage — almost fifty Catholic periodicals were produced between 1800 and 1850, including two of English Catholicism's longest-running journals, the *Dublin Review* (1836) and *The Tablet* (1840).

Catholic England also produced some fine scholars before the 1840s: Charles Butler, Charles Newsham, Thomas Eyre, and John Lingard are examples. The last of these is an excellent example of the native Old Catholic intellectual presence in England before 1840, and also of the dominant Gallican and anti-rationalist movement within it.

Unpublished documents

John Lingard was born in Winchester on 5 February 1771, and in 1782, entered the English College at Douai, France, to commence training for the priesthood. There he excelled in the humanities before beginning the study of theology. Narrowly escaping attacks by mobs at the time of the French Revolution, he returned to England in 1793 where he concluded his theological studies and was ordained. He then taught philosophy and, in 1805, wrote a series of letters which, after their publication in a periodical, were collected as *Catholic Loyalty Vindicated*. In 1806 the first edition of *The Antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon Church* appeared, a development of his informal lectures.

In the meantime, in 1817 Lingard had travelled to Rome as confidential agent for Bishop William Poynter and while there, he made use of unpublished documents in the Vatican Archives. Subsequently, in 1819, the first three volumes of his *History of England* — covering the period up to the death of Henry VII in 1509 — appeared, significantly from a Protestant publisher, Joseph Mawman. The *History*, consisting eventually of eight volumes, reached its completion in 1830.

Covering the period to 1688, it went through seven editions in English to 1883, and proved to be the most popular nineteenth century history of England in print before Richard Green's *Short History of the English People* appeared in 1874.

As each additional volume appeared the *History's* reputation increased, while Lingard continued to revise and improve the whole work. Most of the earnings' from this project and his other writings were directed towards the educating of students to the priesthood.

In his style and presentation of English history, Lingard demonstrates the prevalent manner of Catholic scholarship — he gives, for example, no indication that he is a priest on the title page, and professes emphatically to be writing an impartial history. But in a curious turnaround, his *History* by its very impartiality is a Catholic apologetic, and Lingard's desire for impartiality is a reflection of the Catholic political and intellectual situation in the Emancipation era.

The Catholic position in the early nineteenth century, politically speaking, was that of a minority body, allied to the Whig-Radical-Dissenting political grouping, and seeking religious and political freedom. This alliance encouraged Old Catholic intellectuals to present their arguments in 'liberal' and 'reasonable' form — the argumentative advantage in this being that it presented Catholics as enlightened and tolerant, and their opposition as prejudiced and bigoted.

Lingard himself argues that one of his chief duties as an historian is: "to weigh with care the value of the authorities on which I rely, and to watch with jealousy the secret workings of my own personal feelings and prepossessions. Such vigilance is a matter of necessity to every writer of history ... Otherwise, he will be continually tempted to make an unfair use of the privilege of the historian; he will sacrifice the interests of truth to the interests of party, national, or religious, or political.(J Lingard, *History of England*, vol 1, 6th edition, London: Charles Dolman, 1854, p 6).

Historical truth

In the *History*, Lingard faces the task of convincing Protestants of the fundamental truths of the Catholic faith, while maintaining an unbiased presentation of historical truth. He possesses little sense of "preaching to the converted" (in a very literal' sense), and aims his work more at influencing Protestants than placating his Ultramontane opposition. In a letter of 18 December 1819, Lingard wrote: "... my only chance of being read by Protestants depends upon my having the reputation of a temperate writer. The good to be done is by writing a book which Protestants will read." (Lingard to Kirke, in Haile, Bonney, *Life and Letters of John Lingard, 1771-1851*, London: 1912, pp 166-67).

Lingard's *History* is also an apt demonstration of the advantages a Catholic historian of the time had, in terms of impartiality. Lingard's religion had to a large extent isolated him from the mainstream nationalism which surrounded Protestant historians, as well as from the growing "providentialist" concept of history.

Lingard's strength of argument, however, continued to be popular, and the influence of Protestant animosity for Catholic apologetic also led him to develop a keen critical judgement. He was devoted to absolute accuracy and detail and the *History* was a groundbreaking work in its use of primary sources. Lingard made extensive use of Vatican archives and French, Italian, Spanish and English dispatches, document collections and state papers — the first British historian to do so. The peripheral nature of English Catholicism put him in a position of "outside observer" to much of *English* intellectual culture, and this is reflected in his historical works. Despite this distancing effect, however, Lingard maintained an active interest in politics all his life and was a noted pamphleteer.

In other ways, John Lingard is a good example of the pre-1840s Catholic intellectual culture. He detested rationalism's contempt for Catholicism, and this was a further impetus to writing the *History*, at a time when British historical investigation was dominated by what Macaulay called "philosophical history." Lingard was not, however, a Romantic, the variety that later overturned rationalism as the dominant historical philosophy.

Lingard was above all a Cisalpinist, a product of what can be called "English Anglo-Gallican Catholicism". It is this blend which gives the Old Catholic intellectual presence its distinct nature. How much this influenced Lingard's theology is open to question, but a man capable of writing *Hail, Queen of Heaven* must have had something in his favour.

Lingard's popularity as an historian had its day, but his contribution to historical method came at a critical point in British intellectual history. That he was also a Catholic priest, in a turbulent time for: the Church in England, makes that contribution all the more interesting. From 1811 until his death in 1851 Lingard spent most of his life in the village of Homby near Lancaster, where he devoted himself to his study and writing. A quiet, gentle man, he was well liked by the residents.

Fortunately Lingard's achievements received fitting recognition from the highest level in his own lifetime. In 1821 Pope Pius VII honoured Lingard with a triple doctorate — in theology, canon law and civil law — and a few years later Leo XII conferred upon him a gold medal generally only given to cardinals and princes.

There is even strong evidence that he was made a cardinal *in petto* ("in the breast") in 1826. This meant that the pope could have announced the appointment publicly at some future time. That honour was ultimately bestowed by Leo XIII in 1879 on an outstanding Catholic intellectual, John Henry Newman. Published by:

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