



BOOKS FOR EVERYONE

Literary Editor:
Jim Cramer

The "Brothers"—fount of Nationalism

FAITH AND FATHERLAND — The Christian Brothers and the development of Irish Nationalism 1838-1921, by Barry Coldrey. (Gill and MacMillan. £27.50.)

IT is very easy to praise this unusual and fascinating book highly. It is not at all so easy to review it adequately. The main reason why it can be classed an "unusual" book, is that while it is all about the Irish Christian Brothers, it does not deal with the primary reason for their existence, i.e. the Christian education of boys, especially the sons of the not-so-rich, but rather about the side effect of their teaching and their work among us. It is a topic which has for years been hinted at, whispered about, skirted around. Here now is the candid, honest-to-God, four-square facing up to the subject, absolutely without triumphalism and equally without guilt or apology.

To what extent if you did a love of Ireland, engendered by the Brothers in their young charges, lead to a hatred of England or English rule, or to an acceptance of violence as the only means to national independence? That is the main question faced in this book, but it is not by any means the only one, all sorts of side issues being met, and many byways being traversed.

The author is Brother Barry Coldrey of the Australian province of the Brothers. It would be wrong to say that he is remote from the problem; his contacts, research and frequent visits to Ireland ensured that he was very familiar with his subject. The requirements of objectivity and impartiality probably made him the ideal man to undertake this task.

One of the reasons why the book is difficult to review is that its readership (a large one, we hope) will include so many diverse strands of opinion as to what they hope the book will prove. Some extremists will feel the Brothers "never went far enough," the usual critics of the Brothers will look for some confession that their view of history was slanted; the moderates will be well divided in their viewpoints as to whether certain lines of action in given circumstances were justified or not. This reviewer hopes that the majority of readers will come to the conclusion, having read the book, that what the Brothers always aimed at was the restoration (ir-ghrá) based on Christianity; that there were occasions in Irish history when a recourse to arms was justified and that love of Ireland did not require a hatred of any other country or people, but of injustice and wrong.

This reviewer and Br. Coldrey have at least one thing in common, we have both been frequent pilgrims to the unique historical museum cum library at O'Connell Schools, North Richmond St., Dublin, which the late revered Brother W. P. Allen built up so lovingly over so many years. The spirit of that museum permeates the pages of this book — with perhaps one important qualification. Brother Allen was an historian, so he naturally featured those who had genuinely worked for Ireland according to their lights in constitutional movements — Catholic Emancipation (one could scarcely exclude Dan in the O'Connell Schools!), Repeal, Home Rule etc. But there was no hiding his special love for the men goaded into insurrection. They undoubtedly claimed their rights in his displays and in his heart. There are places in Br. Coldrey's

book where he is a little weak in recognising the distinction between events which were "nationalist" from the Home Rule point of view and those which were avowedly separatist. In that distinction lay much of what worried ultra-conservative superiors and their executives throughout much of the period covered by the book.

THE NORTH MON

The North Monastery figures prominently. We must forgive Br. Coldrey one small slip where he fails to realise that the "Peacock Lane schools" and the North Monastery are one and the same!

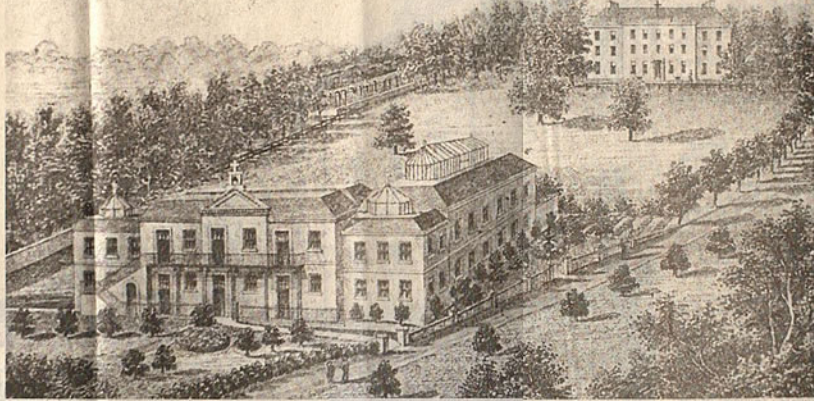
It was during the period when Br. Michael Paul Riordan of Cork was second Superior-General of the Institute and had established national headquarters in the North Monastery that the Brothers' distinctive Irish-orientated readers began to appear. Riordan had a most talented set of helpers under him, including several fluent in "Celtic" (the Irish language). These reading-books told Irish boys, possibly for the first time, all about the Red Branch Knights, the Fianna, the ancient kings such as Conor MacNessa, Cormac Mac Airt, Niall of the Nine Hostages. Very far from being "seditious," they were nevertheless far removed from the "happy English child" cult of the national system of education. And the Mon soon advanced to more Irish-Ireland stances — although the authorities there were far from being prepared to tolerate a Fenian Brother in '87 — a Br. Vincent Houlihan who, a pioneer photographer, was using his chemical darkroom for the manufacture of grenades for the Fenians! The superior, Br. Bernard Duggan was horrified. Br. Houlihan, not surprisingly, ended his days in America!

Jumping to the present century there were times when the North Mon was accused of being "Socinian" and pro-British. The accuser was none other than J. J. Walsh, chairman of the Cork County Board G.A.A. A fierce controversy waxed loud and long over the fact that the Mon fielded a rugby team. (Incidentally this reviewer's father was a member of it — and went on to be a lifelong and uncompromising G.A.A. man).

Br. Coldrey devotes much space to the famous North Mon centenary pageant of 1911 and claims that it made a big impact on nationalist Cork. We are reminded of a most interesting event. Part of the pageant, some time after its closure, was re-enacted in Cork railway station as a welcome to Kuno Meyer and An t-Athar Padar O'Leary when they arrived to receive the freedom of the city in recognition of their work for the Irish language.

And so the pages turn. The Gaelic League, the G.A.A., the Volunteers, all had their repercussions in the Institute of Christian Brothers. Most of those who fought in 1916 were ex-pupils of the Brothers. Br. Coldrey might well have devoted more space to the lay teachers who taught in the Brothers' schools. Their influence was often greater than that of the Brothers labouring in the same classrooms.

What the author has done is to produce an unusual and thought-provoking work covering a hitherto uncharted voyage through modern Irish history. Most readers should be pleased. Some will feel that the main question has been left to the judgment of the readers themselves.



The North Monastery (Our Lady's Mount) as it was in the last century, when it was the national headquarters of the Christian Brothers.

If I conclude this review on a personal note my excuse is that I feel all my own experience (and I have a good memory) bears out the principal contentions of the author. I was a "Christian Brothers' Boy" from 1927 to 1938. The Brothers who taught me — Ennis, Terry, Buckley, Casey, Brennan, McCarthy, Lawlor, O'Connor, Laffan, Moynihan — were all men such as figure in the pages of this book. They all loved Ireland. All except one, who had been abroad, loved the Irish language. Never once did I hear a word from any of them which encouraged hatred or violence. Of course, my vivid memory of them is that they were so busy trying to stuff knowledge into our heads they had little time for propagating "opinions." And I can say that while they were "tough" teachers, there wasn't a cruel man, let alone a sadist, among them. All are gone to their reward except one, Brother Brennan, up in Mullingar. Two or three of them were great men at handling the leather — following which we couldn't handle anything for an hour or more! They taught us to love our native land, but they influenced us primarily by the example of their own lives — austere and aloof perhaps, but always unselfish and dedicated.

WALTER McGRATH