

## The Christian Brothers: in historical perspective

Faith and Fatherland  
by Barry M. Coldrey  
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Reviewed by Peter Westmore

From humble beginnings in Ireland in 1802, the Christian Brothers have spread to the four corners of the globe, and in the process, become one of the most important religious congregations involved in the education of young Catholics throughout the English-speaking world.

In Australia, Christian Brothers' schools played an important part in the development of the Catholic education system. Arguably, without the Christian Brothers and the Josephites, it would have been impossible for the Catholic Bishops of Australia to establish the Catholic education system in the 19th century, after the colonial governments withdrew financial support for independent schools, and attempted to establish a single system, based on the three principles of free, compulsory and secular education.

The establishment of a large and viable Catholic education system was the sine qua non for the fight for educational justice in Australia, which ultimately achieved success in the 1960s.

Barry Coldrey, the author of *Faith and Fatherland*, is both an Australian and a Christian Brother. In this important book, he shows why the Christian Brothers had a decisive influence on the growth of Irish nationalism in the late 19th century, and in the process, raises issues which are of great importance for Australians today.

The Christian Brothers were established by Edmund Ignatius Rice, a prosperous merchant from Waterford, in response to the pressing need to establish a school for the free education of impoverished Irish children. At the time, the Catholic Church was persecuted, and Catholics were denied entry into the civil service, the universities, and many businesses. The only boys' schools in Waterford at the time were run by Protestants.

Rice had assisted the Presentation nuns establish a school for the education of young girls in 1798, and the success of this venture persuaded him to open a school for boys in Waterford in 1802.

The men whom Rice attracted to join him in teaching the children were mature men, well educated, and generally well off. Their experience in the world

produced a spirit of innovation, which underpinned their commitment to excellence in education, strong faith and a self-confident sense of national identity.

The new work flourished. Within seven years, Edmund Rice had attracted eight others to join him in the work, and he had established two other schools in the Waterford diocese.

By 1831, there were 45 Brothers, by 1845, 105, and by the end of the century, almost 1000 Christian Brothers, not just in Ireland, but in many parts of the British Empire and the United States.

The Christian Brothers' novitiates provided a rigorous system of teacher training, in both secular and religious subjects, and even after induction into the community, Brothers spent years in further study.

The system of education was the most advanced then available. At the primary level, on which the Brothers first concentrated, children were first taught spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic, and then advanced to English grammar, book keeping, navigation, drawing, geometry, history and geography. Each class had over 100 pupils.

### Educational atmosphere

All this took place in the context of a strongly religious atmosphere. The Brothers wore a distinctive religious habit, the day began and ended with prayers, and on the hour, classes paused for prayer. Religious education was a formal part of the curriculum.

The Christian Brothers' schools quickly acquired a formidable reputation, and they were commended in evidence before the various Parliamentary Commissions into Education in Ireland.

However, the most powerful endorsement of the schools came from Church of England clergy in Ireland. The Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Waterford, the Rev. R.H. Ryland, wrote in 1824, "The schools established by Edmund Rice, Esq. . . among a distressed and unemployed population . . . have been of incalculable benefit; they have already impressed upon the lower classes a character which hitherto was unknown to them; and in the number of intelligent and respectable tradesmen, clerks and servants which they send forth, bear the most unquestionable testimony to the public services of Edmund Rice."

The Reverend G. Dwyer told the 1825 Commission on Irish Education, "I would say the most perfect schools I have ever seen in my life were the [Brothers'] schools in Mill Street in Dublin and the schools in Cork; the most extraordinary progress I ever saw made by children . . ."

## FAITH AND FATHERLAND

The Christian Brothers and the Development of Irish Nationalism 1838-1921



Barry Coldrey

The establishment of a Board of National Education in 1831 to take over existing schools and make them non-denominational, but subsidised by the state, led to conflict between church and state over the direction of Irish education, which was later echoed in Australia.

Almost alone among the church schools, the Christian Brothers stayed outside the National Schools system, as it required the removal of religious objects from classrooms, the absence of prayers during school hours, and the use of textbooks on history and scripture which were incompatible with Catholic teaching. The Brothers wrote their own textbooks, emphasising a distinctly Irish culture, language, history and geography, and Ireland's deep attachment to the Catholic faith, in contrast to the Anglocentric, imperial and non-denominational books used in the National Schools.

The Christian Brothers schools educated hundreds of thousands of young men as patriotic Irishmen and laid the groundwork for the growth of an articulate national movement in the late 19th century. The Home Rule movement drew many of its leaders from alumni of the Brothers' schools, and many of those who lost their lives in the Easter 1916 Uprising had been Brothers' boys.

The Irish church-state conflict over education decisively influenced the Catholic response to the establishment of a free, secular and compulsory system in the Australian colonies. This was not surprising as most of the clergy in Australia were Irish born, as were the Bishops.

Barry Coldrey's book is an extremely well documented work of scholarship, which captures the spirit which drove the Christian Brothers to embark on their massive undertaking.