



Br Paul J. O'Connor, FSP (c. 1796-1878)

Introduction

Br Paul J. O'Connor (c. 1796-1878) was a Patrician Brother who is chiefly remembered for his work in Galway, where he was a founding member of the community in 1827, and served for long periods as Superior, principal or director of attached schools, and established a charitable organisation in 1830, known by various names, including the Orphans' Breakfast Institute, to provide breakfast and clothing to poor students. This article discusses his life and the Patrician Brothers in Galway during this time.

Early life and entry to the Patrician Brothers

Br Paul was born as James O'Connor at Rathornan, Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow, circa 1796 to Judith (died 3 January 1830) and John O'Connor (died 14 January 1839). He opened a school in Tullow, Co. Carlow, circa 1818, and presumably came to know the town's Patrician Brothers at this time. James O'Connor entered the congregation in 1823 and was professed in 1825 by Dr James Doyle (JKL), Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin (1819-1834), in the chapel of the Brigidine Sisters in Tullow.

Galway Male Free School

In 1826, the Patrician Brothers were invited to take over Galway Male Free School, which provided education to the least well-off sections of society. It had been established in 1790 at Back Street (now St Augustine Street). In 1824, the school moved to the former Lombard Street barracks, which had been purchased the previous year by Dr Edmund French, Warden of Galway (1812-1831), from the Government. The post of Warden of Galway was established following the granting of collegiate status in 1484 to St Nicholas Collegiate Church. The priests of the city formed a College of Vicars, the most senior of whom was called the Warden. A committee oversaw the school and managed its funds. The committee raised funds from holding charity sermons, annual subscriptions and occasional contributions, which had to pay all costs, including teachers' salaries.

Br Paul was selected to go to Galway by Dr Doyle. In December 1826, Br Paul walked from Tullow to Galway, where he resided for the remainder of his life. He then assisted in preparing the former military barracks for occupation as a monastery and took up residence there on 15 January 1827, accompanied by James Walsh, a postulant. Br Paul recorded the cash on hands that day as being 1 shilling. This was not the first filiation of Patrician Brothers in Co. Galway. Around 1817, Christopher Redington, Kilcornan, invited the congregation to establish a community and school for boys at Clarenbridge. When the Patrician Brothers left Clarenbridge in 1840, Br Francis J. Carty joined the Lombard Street community.

After the Brothers took over Galway Male Free School, it became known as the Monastery School, and was part of the national school system from its inception in 1831. Br Paul did not favour the school being part of this system as he considered that teachers belonging to a religious congregation might experience difficulty.

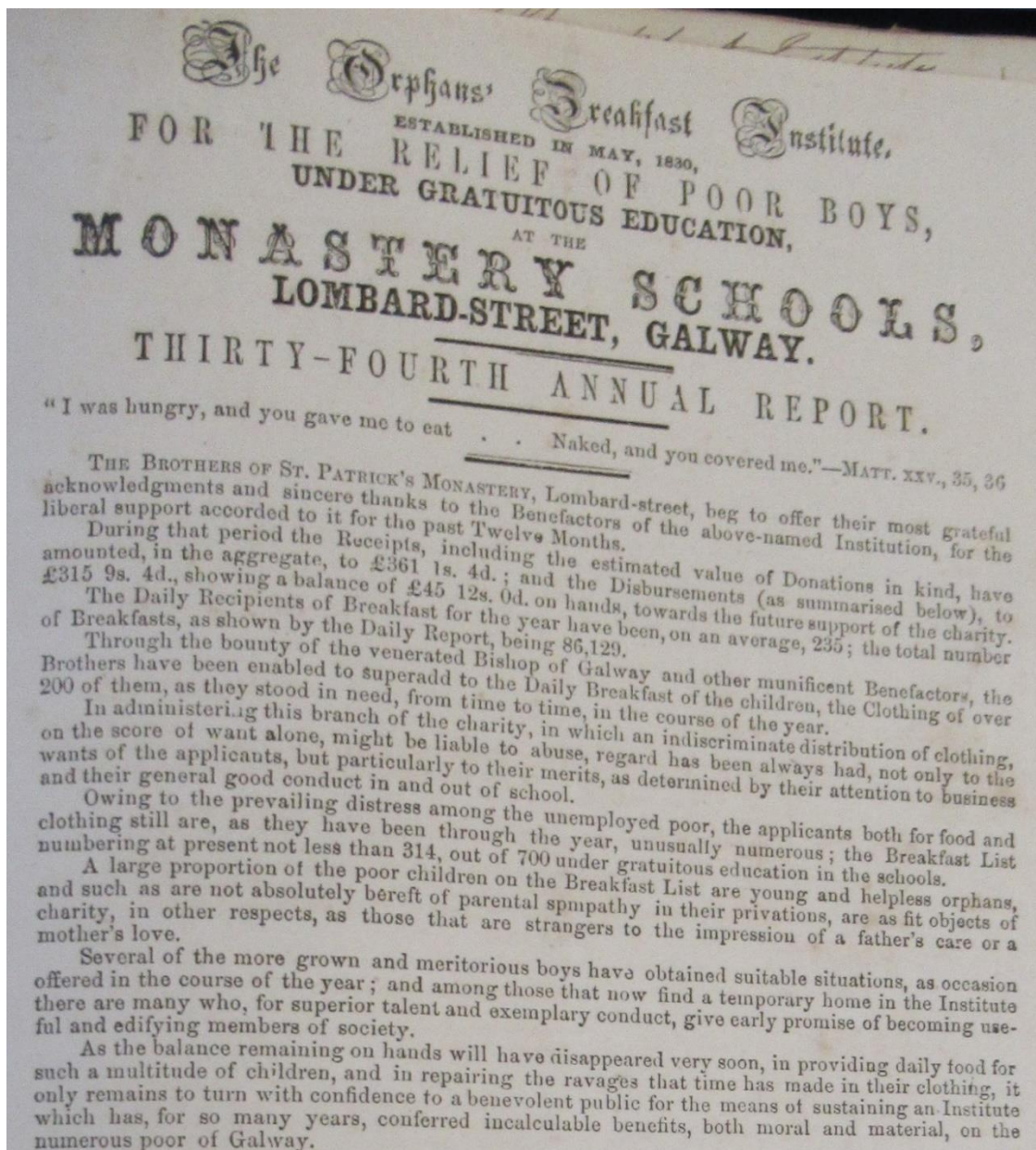


Galway Monastery National School

As principal, Br Paul addressed letters and pamphlets to parents and children on the benefits of education. The curriculum varied depending on the age of the students but might be described as comprising reading, writing, arithmetic and catechism, and older students additionally studied English grammar, book-keeping, navigation, use of the globes, algebra and geometry. The school was housed in two rooms, each around 100 feet by 30 feet. By 1835, enrolment was 500-600 students. As enrolment was high, the Lancastrian System whereby teachers were assisted by pupil-monitors who taught younger students was in use. Lay assistant teachers were employed at intervals as well. By the mid-1840s, just prior to the Great Famine, enrolment was around 1,100. By 1851, enrolment had declined due to the combined effects of the Great Famine and the opening of a new national school in the Claddagh. For the remainder of Br Paul's life, enrolment was around 600-700. Monastery National School closed in 1954 and students transferred to the newly-built St Patrick's National School where they were joined by students from another Patrician-run school on Nuns' Island. In addition to their work in the school, the Brothers also provided public religious instruction in the parish chapel on Sundays.

Orphans' Breakfast Institute

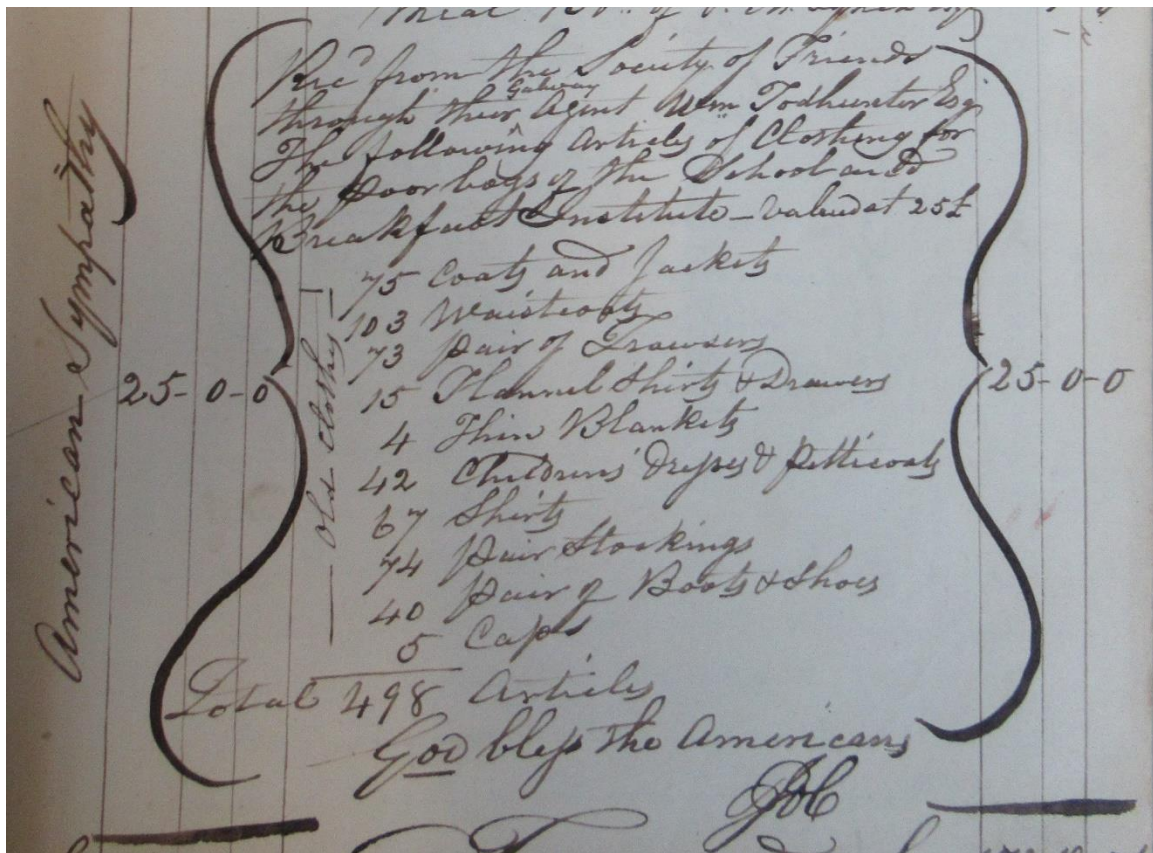
Many students of Monastery National School came from an impoverished background, which impacted their attendance and learning. In 1830, Br Paul established a charity, known by several names, including the Orphans' or Poor Boys' Breakfast Institute, to provide breakfast and clothing to them. The Breakfast Institute endured until well into the twentieth century. Br Paul undertook a house-to-house canvass for funds beginning on 12 April 1830 and a little over a dozen boys were served breakfast for the first time on 3 May 1830. Breakfast consisted of oatmeal stirabout, seasoned with molasses. Later, Indian meal, or sometimes rice, was served. By 1835, breakfast was provided to around 150 children daily. The numbers fed peaked during the Famine when around 1,000 boys were fed daily. By the mid-1870s when Br Paul gave up his post as secretary and treasurer, fewer boys were being supported by the Breakfast Institute, but it still fed around 130 boys each morning.



Extract from the Breakfast Institute's Annual Report, 1863-1864. These reports outline activities, income and expenditure.

The Breakfast Institute benefited from private subscriptions from both Ireland and abroad, and during the Famine received support from several institutions. The Breakfast Institute's accounts show that meal to the value of £80 was received from a Government Depot. Later in 1847, William Todhunter, a relief agent for the Society of Friends visited, and 498 articles of clothing were donated to the Breakfast Institute. In 1847-1848, the British Association for Relief of Distress in

Ireland supplied food, and in March 1848, the same Association sent 200 suits made from corduroy.



Extract from the accounts of the Breakfast Institute, 1847.

Aloysian Society

Br Paul established the Aloysian Society (called after its patron, St Aloysius Gongaza) on 12 June 1830. It was intended as a support for its members, who were taken from senior boys in the school and young unmarried men, and to continue the spiritual formation provided at school. Management of the Society was in the hands of a President, Secretary, Treasurer and Executive Council, taken from the membership, and Br Paul took the role of Guardian, offering guidance to members. The Society had regular meetings, which ended with a lecture by Br Paul on spiritual matters. With the growth of church sodalities, the Society declined and ceased to exist around 1905.

St Joseph's Seminary

In January 1863, the Patrician Brothers opened a fee-paying intermediate school for boys on Nuns' Island called St Joseph's Seminary (today, it is called St Joseph's Patrician College). It was known as 'the bishop's school' as it was established at the behest and with the support of Dr John MacEvilly, Bishop of Galway (1857-1881), and is known informally as the 'Bish.' Dr MacEvilly was keen to have a Catholic school aimed at the middle classes. He viewed a nearby Model School as a threat to students' religious faith, and a large number of Catholic children were withdrawn on foot of a pastoral letter issued by the Bishop.



St Joseph's Patrician College

Br Paul did not teach at St Joseph's, instead retaining his post at Lombard Street, but served as director of the new school. The curriculum was classical, literary and scientific. Interestingly for the time, the Irish language was on the curriculum. The Initiatory English Department was the Seminary's lower school and the minimum enrolment age was 7.



Br Paul was succeeded in all positions of authority by Br John P. Lynch, who wrote a biography (published anonymously in 1887) of Br Paul.

The community at Galway remained small during Br Paul's lifetime. When an invitation was received by the Patrician Brothers from Baltimore, United States, to establish a filiation there, the congregation sent three Brothers in August 1846, including Br Augustine Murphy from Galway. In 1836, he had been the first Brother professed in Galway. Another prominent community member was Br Anthony Mogue Redmond, originally from Camolin, Co. Wexford. He served as Superior for periods during the 1830s-1840s.

Br Paul's importance within the congregation may be inferred from the fact that he was entrusted with drafting a revised congregational Rule in 1846. It was finally approved by the Bishops of Galway and Kildare & Leighlin by September 1857.

Later life and death

By 1867, Br Paul's eyesight was deteriorating; he was treated successfully by Sir William Wilde in Dublin. Even after Br Paul vacated the office of Superior in February 1869, he continued to spend considerable time among the children in the school.

Br Paul died at Lombard Street on 17 April 1878 and was buried at Kingston House, Galway, which had been purchased shortly before, with the intention of establishing a novitiate there. A Celtic cross marks Br Paul's grave. It carries the

following inscription, 'This Cross was erected by the people of Galway and by his affectionate pupils in America, Australia and other distant lands as a memorial of their love for one who devoted his life to the glory of God in the work of education and in the service of the Poor.'

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