

**James Louis O'Donel in Newfoundland 1784-1807: The Establishment of the Roman Catholic Church. Raymond J. Lahey. Ed. Shannon Ryan & G. M. Story. - and - Gentlemen-Bishops and Faction Fighters: The Letters of Bishops O'Donel, Lambert, Scallan and Other Irish Missionaries. Ed. Cyril J. Byrne.**

William A. Kearns

---

Volume 1, Number 2, Fall 1985

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds1\\_2br02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds1_2br02)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Kearns, W. A. (1985). Review of [James Louis O'Donel in Newfoundland 1784-1807: The Establishment of the Roman Catholic Church. Raymond J. Lahey. Ed. Shannon Ryan & G. M. Story. - and - Gentlemen-Bishops and Faction Fighters: The Letters of Bishops O'Donel, Lambert, Scallan and Other Irish Missionaries. Ed. Cyril J. Byrne.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 1(2), 245-248.

*James Louis O'Donel in Newfoundland 1784-1807: The Establishment of the Roman Catholic Church.* Raymond J. Lahey. Ed. Shannon Ryan & G. M. Story. (Newfoundland Historical Society Pamphlet No. 8.) St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications Limited, 1984. 36 p. *Gentlemen-Bishops and Faction Fighters: The Letters of Bishops O Donel, Lambert, Scallan and Other Irish Missionaries.* Ed. Cyril J. Byrne. St. John's: Jesperson Press, 1984. xix, 376 p.

### WILLIAM A. KEARNS

The visit of John Paul II to St. John's and Flatrock and various other colourful events in 1984 were highlights of the official bicentennial of the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in Newfoundland. In the midst of such celebration little notice was given to two anniversary gifts: Raymond Lahey's concise and judicious account of Newfoundland's first bishop and Cyril Byrne's edition of letters relating to the formative years of Catholicism on the island. Lahey and Byrne deserve to be commended warmly for their contributions to Newfoundland historiography and to the history of Catholicism in North America.

Ignored by bicentennial celebrants (and by Lahey and Byrne as well) was the fact that the first organized Catholic parish in Newfoundland was not the one founded in St. John's in 1784 by an Irish Franciscan but, as Père Dominique de Saint-Denis records in his *L'église catholique au Canada* (6th ed., Montréal, 1956), the French Franciscan mission at Placentia which lasted from 1698 to 1713. Be that as it may, when Fr. James O Donel arrived in 1784, as superior of the new Newfoundland mission, he established the ecclesiastical institution which has continued to this day. Lahey's short pamphlet explores and assesses O Donel's accomplishments; Byrne's work, covering the same period and more, helps one understand how good a foundation O Donel laid.

Relaxation of penal codes against Catholics in the British Isles in the late 1770s and early 1780s brought a comparable relaxation of the policies of English authorities in Newfoundland towards adherents of the "popish" religion. In 1783, when Catholics in St. John's sought the governor's approval to build a chapel and invite a priest to serve their spiritual needs, their request, endorsed by leading Protestants, was granted. O Donel's appointment, first by the Vicar-Apostolic of London and then by the Holy See, followed.

Well-suited for the task of organizing his church in a land where the established Church of England had very real ties with the governing authority, O Donel was ever conscious of the need for good relations with the state and for discipline within his church. A loyal subject of the King

and a determined defender of his own prerogatives first as Prefect Apostolic and then, from 1796, as Bishop, O Donel was able to maintain a generally good rapport with the civil authorities, exert his authority over priests under his jurisdiction, and provide leadership for his flock. Not that he did all this without difficulty. One summer, for example, Prince William Henry (later King William IV) gave O Donel and one of his priests a decidedly hard time. Even more troublesome was a fellow priest who for four years posed a real threat to O Donel's leadership and to his relations with both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Factionalism within the Irish Catholic population also caused him much concern. And when United Irishmen and their sympathizers created consternation in the minds of many of the upper echelons of Newfoundland society O Donel thought it necessary "to bring the maddened scum of the People to cool reflection" and drive from their minds any ideas of revolutionary foolishness. This he seems to have done and the civil authorities were thankful. When O Donel retired to his native Ireland in 1807, his successor, Patrick Lambert, took control of a church whose continued existence appeared to be assured.

Like O Donel, Lambert was an Irish Franciscan as was his successor, Thomas Scallan. For the most part, these two bishops continued the policies inaugurated by O Donel. Their terms were still fraught with many of the problems of a young church in an emerging colonial society but each certainly profited from the fact that, as Lahey says, "O'Donel had secured a freedom for the Roman Catholic church to operate without restrictions" (31), for he had helped forge an "alliance . . . between the leadership of the church and the civil authorities which was destined to endure until the more political times of representative government" (28).

Lahey's pamphlet is a well-documented study of O Donel's years in Newfoundland with sufficient additional information to place those years and O Donel in historical perspective. It is written in good clear style with appropriate quotations from original sources to give the reader a sense of the period. There are few points about which one could quibble, but if quibble one may: why does Lahey imply that O Donel had nothing to do with the petition for his consecration as bishop (23) when surely he must have known and approved of what was going on? It may be strictly true that "O'Donel probably never recognized the significant contribution that he made as the central figure in the establishment of the Roman Catholic church in his adopted land" (32), but he certainly wanted credit—and a pension—for what he did see as his contribution and this he clearly indicated in a letter to Governor Gower on 11 October 1805 (noted elsewhere by Lahey and printed in Byrne 224-26).

Byrne's work brings together in a decidedly useful volume more than one hundred letters, nearly half of which are from the hand of O Donel, about one third from Lambert and Scallan, and the remainder almost exclusively

from other clergymen. All this correspondence has been carefully collected and edited, for the most part, with great skill and good judgement. There is a twenty-eight page introduction but none of the long digressive essays which often detract from editorial projects such as this. Each section is preceded by a brief summary, each letter by a citation and short head-note, and near the end of the book are nearly one hundred biographical sketches of correspondents and persons mentioned in the letters, all of which tend to shed light on the letters without making them disjointed and cumbersome to follow.

Inevitably in any edition of letters mistakes have a way of creeping in undetected and Byrne's work is no exception. Some examples: the citation for the letter which begins on page 80 gives the date of 16 January 1789 but at the end of that letter (85) the date is 16 November 1789; on page 109 a 1790 letter has the year 1970; on page 249 there is no letter following the citation and head-note for one; and the infamous John Power mentioned on pages 323, 325, 331, and 334 is not the same John Power noted on page 215, although the Index entry would so indicate. One wonders why "the dreadful [sic]," as Byrne calls it in his editorial note, was not inserted following the obviously erroneous "39 years" on page 308, and why the translation of the Latin phrase *fides est indivisibilis* in the head-note on page 184 instead of being simply "faith is indivisible" is convoluted almost beyond recognition. Finally the editor does not differentiate between the use of — to indicate such a mark in the original source and the use of the same mark to show the omission of one or more syllables or words in the edited version. Shortcomings aside, in making these letters available to students of Newfoundland history, Byrne has performed a valuable service. He whets the appetite for more (but he does not indicate how many more never reached the printed page).

While both Lahey and Byrne clearly admire O Donel (and Byrne has a good opinion of Lambert and Scallan as well), neither writes in a reverential or hagiographical vein; rather their writing displays a sound understanding of historical method. That Byrne chose to call O Donel, Lambert and Scallan "Gentlemen-Bishops" indicates that all three came from backgrounds several cuts above that of their poor fishermen followers. This identification as gentlemen is further proven in the bishops' attitudes towards those of both higher and lower status. On this point, it would have been helpful to see some discussion, in either Lahey or Byrne, of the seeming contradiction with the Franciscan ideal and some notice of the Irish Franciscan tradition of providing bishops for the church.

The two works indeed have much to offer. Taken together they present interesting facets of the social, political, and ecclesiastical history of Newfoundland. But their worth does not stop there for one also is able to gain insights of the British Empire at work, of Ireland and England, of Quebec

and Nova Scotia, of papal bureaucracy, and even a few glimpses of the United States. One is able to look at a growing Roman Catholic Church in a colony which, despite its many years under British rule, was only on the verge of acquiring some of the political institutions long since part of colonial life elsewhere in British North America. One is able to appreciate the importance of the Irish element in that period of Newfoundland's development and the role played by Irish bishops and priests in the integration of immigrants into colonial life. For these reasons and more, it is fitting to end this review with "thank you very much," but in words which would have been understood by most of those Irish men and women who made Newfoundland the most Irish part of North America by the early years of the nineteenth century: *Go raibh míle maith agibh a Raimoinn agus Cyril!*

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

*Leaving Early—A Study of Student Retention in Newfoundland and Labrador.* (Study prepared by a committee drawn from several educational organizations.) St. John's: n.p., 1984. 126 p.

### PATRICIA A. THORNTON

This profoundly disturbing report, released last November, should be compulsory reading for all parents, teachers and statutory bodies concerned with education in this province. The study traces, as far as possible, all high school students born in the province in 1963 who did not die, leave the province, or transfer from one school system to another, and who should, therefore, have graduated between 1980 and 1982. Despite the untraceable students numbering approximately four thousand and the further eighteen hundred excluded from the study for the reasons stated above, the results are nevertheless beyond dispute. Based upon the sample of 7672 students, then, only 51% of the 13,500 born in 1963 graduated and at least 33%—some five thousand students—dropped out. By any criteria this represents a shocking wastage of human potential, but especially when—as the report goes on to show—the prospects for these drop-outs are so bleak: 70% were unemployed; one in three had not worked in the last year; 75% had worked less than twenty-one weeks and half of these had had no work at all. By contrast, those who completed high school had a considerably better record of employment and especially of long-term employment. The prospect for female drop-outs was particularly dismal: their employment record was considerably worse than that of their male counterparts, many were on social assistance, and a large number were unwed mothers.