

FATHER SHANNON is the newly named president of the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul. The present article is based on his doctoral dissertation, which he has revised for publication by the Yale University Press. Under the title "Catholic Colonization on the Western Frontier," it is scheduled to appear in the spring of 1957.

# Catholic Boarding Schools

## on the WESTERN FRONTIER

JAMES P. SHANNON

TWELVE YEARS after Minnesota entered the Union and five years after the Civil War, the Red River trails were still the only major traces through western Minnesota. At this late date, in 1870, a huge triangle of fertile farm land, bounded roughly by imaginary lines connecting the present cities of St. Paul in Minnesota, Fargo in North Dakota, and Sioux City in Iowa, remained for the most part unsettled and uncultivated.

Then the trans-Mississippi railroads, delayed by the war, began building their lines

across the Great Plains to the boom towns of the Black Hills and toward the ports of the Pacific. One great hindrance to such expansion, however, was the scarcity of settlers in the Great Plains region. Gold in the Black Hills, wheat in the prairie states, and cattle from western grasslands might provide occasional pay loads for the railroads; but rail lines through unsettled regions could not pay their way. Nor could they wait for the normal process of settlement by gradual infiltration to reach the West. Hence the more enterprising lines, especially those financed by federal land grants, undertook to subsidize the settlement of rural colonies.<sup>1</sup>

In this work the Illinois Central and Northern Pacific railroads led the way. Both lines sought to promote wholesale settlement of their lands by inviting religious and other groups to migrate to the West in colonies. In Minnesota, the St. Paul and Pacific, the Winona and St. Peter, and the St. Paul and Sioux City railroads adopted the same plan after 1875, naming Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul to act as their land agent in charge of Catholic colonies along their routes.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1875 and 1885 Ireland settled more than four thousand Catholic families

<sup>1</sup> Harold F. Peterson, "Railroads and the Settlement of Minnesota, 1862-1880," 31; Joseph A. Corrigan, "The Catholic Industrial School of Minnesota," in *Acta et Dicta*, 7:3-25 (October, 1935); Louis M. Hacker and Benjamin B. Kendrick, *The United States since 1864*, 124 (New York, 1949). The first item is an unpublished master's thesis prepared in 1927; the Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

<sup>2</sup> Paul W. Gates, *The Illinois Central and Its Colonization Work*, 224-252 (Cambridge, 1934); James B. Hedges, "The Colonization Work of the Northern Pacific Railroad," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 13:311 (December, 1926); Humphrey Moynihan, "Archbishop Ireland's Colonies," in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:222 (October, 1934); *Northwestern Chronicle*, January 22, 1876; Winona and St. Peter Railroad, Minute Book, p. 384, in the office of the land commissioner of the Chicago and Northwestern Railway, Chicago. The *Northwestern Chronicle* was the official paper of the diocese of St. Paul from 1866 to 1900.

on the newly opened railroad lands and the homesteads of western Minnesota. His colonists claimed and occupied more than four hundred thousand acres of land in five counties, Swift, Big Stone, Lyon, Murray, and Nobles. Contrary to a popular and persistent legend, Ireland's colonies were for the most part highly successful. In one respect, however, they were a great disappointment to their founder and patron. He had hoped to establish a series of Catholic boarding academies in the settlements to educate the children of the colonists. He quickly learned that such institutions were premature and that Catholic farmers on the frontier had little time or sympathy for his elaborate educational program.

As a citizen, Ireland was convinced that the future of the nation depended on the caliber of education given to its youth. For survival, the democratic state needed a population thoroughly educated and capable of raising up a variety of public servants trained to meet the complexities of modern government, and an electorate able to recognize and choose such leaders at the polls. But as a priest he was equally certain that the Catholic school was the best agency for instructing children in the duties of religion and in habits of personal piety. He believed that "The Catholic school . . . is the most fruitful of all institutions for the preservation and perpetuation of the faith in this country."<sup>3</sup>

GIVEN THESE convictions, it is not surprising that as soon as his first colonies were firmly established Ireland embarked on an ambitious program of building Catholic boarding academies in western Minnesota. This phase of his colonization program began auspiciously with the aid of several religious teaching orders. The best-known and least successful of his educational projects was the Catholic Industrial School for boys at Clontarf in Swift County. It is more than likely that the original plan for this establishment came from Father James Nugent, a priest of the diocese of Liverpool

in England, who had organized a self-supporting industrial school for boys in that city.<sup>4</sup>

Its course of training, in addition to the regular academic subjects, offered instruction in various industrial arts. Boys committed or invited to the home could choose to learn a trade in its shoe factory, printing office, tailor shop, joiner's shop, or paper-bag factory. After several of his graduates had emigrated, Nugent heard reports of their success in Canada and the United States, and decided to sponsor an organized program of emigration for children. Times were hard in Liverpool, unemployment was widespread, and resources at the school were limited—so limited that on occasion it was necessary to send the boys to mass in relays because there were not enough Sunday suits to go around.<sup>5</sup>

Father Nugent made his first trip to America in 1870. On August 18, accompanied by twenty-four boys and girls, the former from his Refuge and the latter from his Night Shelter for girls, he sailed from Liverpool aboard the "Austria" for Montreal. He succeeded in placing each of the children in a private home or a school in Canada and then spent nine months lecturing in the Dominion and in the United States, "pleading the cause of Nobody's Children and their right to be welcomed" in America. After attending the Indianapolis Immigration Convention in November, 1870, the English priest toured several prairie states in the hope of establishing some kind of self-supporting agricultural school and home for children on the western farm lands.<sup>6</sup>

One of his lecture stops was St. Paul, where Nugent met Bishop Thomas L. Grace

<sup>3</sup> *Northwestern Chronicle*, September 4, 1896.

<sup>4</sup> Edward K. Bennett, *Father Nugent of Liverpool*, 79, 100 (Liverpool, 1949).

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *Father Nugent*, 82; *Rescue Notes*, 16 (Liverpool, 1905). The latter is a pamphlet issued on the occasion of Father Nugent's death. A copy is among the Ireland Papers in the archives of the St. Paul Seminary.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Father Nugent*, 95.

and Father Ireland for the first time. The idea of an industrial school impressed Grace, and on January 4, 1874, the Catholic Industrial School of Minnesota was established on a farm just outside St. Paul. The project was never a success. At no time did its students number more than twenty boys. In Liverpool, Nugent's wards had supported their school, and had even shown a small profit, by printing the *Liverpool Catholic Times* on their school presses. The St. Paul school, lacking such regular income, was in financial straits from its foundation. In 1877, after Ireland had become a bishop and opened the western colonies, the industrial school was moved to Clontarf in Swift County. Ireland reasoned, as Nugent had, that a school on a farm could support itself or at least produce its own food. He purchased a tract of two thousand acres from the St. Paul and Pacific Railway in 1879 and made it the site of the industrial school. To staff the institution and teach its classes, he secured three brothers from the Brooklyn monastery of the Order of St. Francis.<sup>7</sup>

The new advantages of supervision by a religious order and a rural location, however, were not enough to revive the project. Even with its own farm, the industrial school failed in Clontarf for the same reason that similar projects failed in other parts of the West—the lack of children who were in a position to live away from home or who wanted to do so. For the first few years the brothers kept busy building their own residence and harvesting their crops, “but there were no boys to be instructed.” Hence in 1884 Ireland secured a government contract for the school and agreed

that it would thereafter receive and educate each year sixty Indian children from reservations in Dakota Territory. The government paid a hundred dollars a year for each child. With an average enrollment of a hundred and thirty, the school received enough from the subsidy to meet its minimum financial obligations.

Everyone involved in its operation, however, was aware that the school was not fulfilling the hopes of its founder. Education of the Indians was a commendable project, but the obstacles to its progress were more numerous and more serious than the usual hazards involved in conducting schools. The Indian children went back to their respective reservations each summer and were absent from the school during the harvest season when they might have learned the skills necessary for successful farming. Many of them stayed at the school only one term. Few showed any interest in learning the industrial arts, which were supposed to be the basic curriculum of the school. Several of the brothers became discouraged with the work, and at one time Brother William Osbelt was left to administer the school alone. Furthermore, John P. O'Connor, Bishop Ireland's secretary in charge of directing the finances of the school, felt that Brother William was not capable of running it properly. Hence O'Connor took on more and more of Brother William's duties, and finally alienated the Franciscan entirely.<sup>8</sup>

In 1890, when Richard Scannell was named bishop of Omaha, he inherited two Catholic colonies established by his predecessor in Spalding and O'Connor, Nebraska. In the hope of transferring their teaching and school administration to the Nebraska settlements, the Franciscan brothers at Clontarf confided in Bishop Scannell, telling him that things were not going well in Minnesota. They complained that the winters were too cold, the brothers had become discouraged, there were too few students, and Bishop Ireland did not allow them to handle their own finances.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> James J. Reardon, *The Catholic Church in the Diocese of St. Paul*, 657, 674 (St. Paul, 1952); *Northwestern Chronicle*, February 22, 1879.

<sup>8</sup> See especially O'Connor to Brother William, August 16, 1887, December 29, 1888, in diocesan letter books, 1887-88, p. 24, 84, 1888-89, p. 45-48, St. Paul Chancery Archives; Reardon, *Catholic Church in St. Paul*, 675.

<sup>9</sup> Brother Joseph to Father A. M. Colaneri, January 23, 1895, Omaha Chancery Archives.

Bishop Scannell of course would have welcomed the brothers to his frontier diocese, but he did not wish to appear to be drawing them away from Ireland's diocese. By indirection, Father A. M. Colaneri, chancellor of the diocese of Omaha, subtly expressed this observation in his replies to the brothers. Before the Franciscans could carry out their plans for transfer, in 1892 Congress cut the federal appropriations available as tuition for Indian children attending "contract schools" outside reservations. The school at Clontarf was such an institution; hence it lost part of its means of support. At the same time, however, Congress greatly increased the funds provided for all government-owned schools. The federal government offered to use some of these funds to purchase the site and buildings of the Clontarf school, and Bishop Ireland agreed to sell. The Franciscan brothers went to other missions or back to their monastery in Brooklyn, which most of them had missed keenly during their years in the West, and Ireland was relieved of an educational project which had never matched his expectations.<sup>10</sup>

A SECOND and more enduring industrial school was established in the Minnesota Catholic colonies in 1879 by Father Martin McDonnell, an Irish-born priest from Batavia, New York. In the East, he had been active in founding orphan asylums for homeless and indigent Catholic children. The number of children in need of such charity was growing at this time, and the financial resources available for helping them were so limited that in 1878 McDonnell decided to investigate the merits of Ireland's colonies in the West. Following the system outlined by Nugent, McDonnell planned to buy enough land to support his school by the sale of the farm crops raised; and in the end he was one of the few school promoters who was able to make this plan work. Through Bishop Ireland, he bought from the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company five thousand acres in

Murray County near the colony of Avoca. On this tract he platted the village of Iona, which he named for the sixth-century abbey of the Irish St. Columba. He also purchased for his school a large frame building originally erected by an enterprising settler for use as a combination hotel and general store.<sup>11</sup>

Probably in the spring of 1879, with his two brothers and five orphan children, McDonnell arrived in Iona and opened a boarding academy which he called the Sacred Heart Industrial School. His brothers, Michael and Patrick McDonnell, who took over the management of the farm, were able to support the school and the orphanage with the income from their crops. Unlike those who established the Clontarf school, McDonnell had no religious order to help him at Iona. In fact, the foundation was destined to be very much a one-man undertaking, limited in time and in effectiveness to the period of its founder's active years—1878 to 1910. During this span he served as pastor, schoolteacher, civil magistrate, postmaster, general storekeeper, banker, and mayor of the village. The size of his farm made it unnecessary to seek federal aid or an Indian contract to keep the industrial school going.<sup>12</sup>

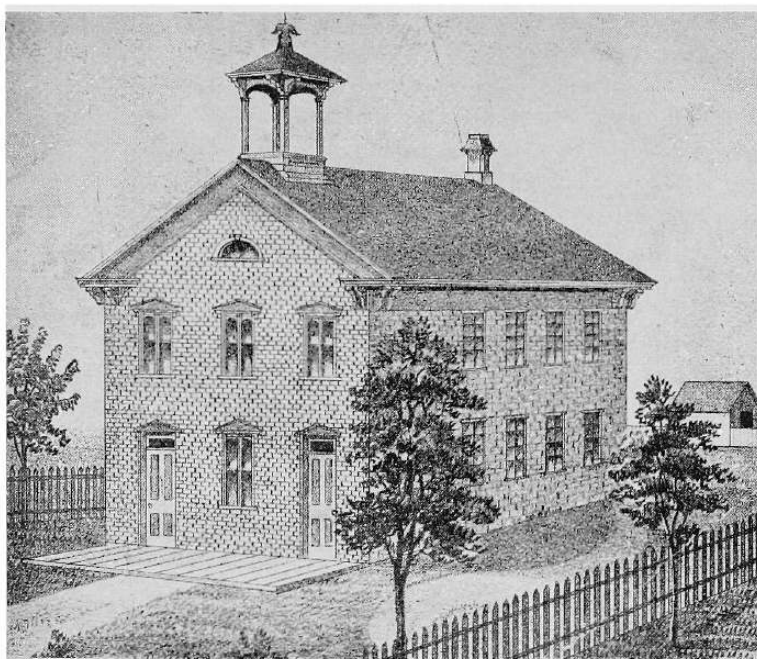
The priest and his brothers trained the boys who attended their school in farm work, especially in the care of cattle, poultry, and bees. As each boy graduated, McDonnell gave him a one-acre homesite and urged him to secure a farm in the neighborhood. Many of his charges took this ad-

<sup>10</sup> See letters from Father Colaneri to Brother Joseph, filed with items relating to "Miscellaneous Diocesan History, 1876-90," in the Omaha Chancery Archives; Sister Mary Evangela Henthorne, *The Irish Catholic Colonization Association of the United States*, 186 (Champaign, Illinois, 1932); Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Reports*, 1892, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Northwestern Chronicle*, February 22, 1879; Reardon, *Catholic Church in St. Paul*, 674; Thomas J. Jenkins, *Six Seasons on Our Prairies*, 41 (Louisville, 1884).

<sup>12</sup> The account of the Iona school in this and the paragraphs that follow is based on Reardon, *Catholic Church in St. Paul*, 674.

*A typical  
western Minnesota  
schoolhouse  
of the 1870s*



FROM ANDREAS' ATLAS, P. 171

vice, and thus a colony of Catholic farmers grew up about Iona.

In addition to educating orphans, who numbered about twenty-five each year, the school served as a parochial day school for the children living near Iona. In its nearly three decades of existence, only eighty orphan children passed through its classrooms. And with the passage of time its role as an orphanage became less important and its position as the parish school gradually grew more significant. In 1889 the diocese of Winona was cut off from that of St. Paul, and thereafter the Iona school fell within the jurisdiction of the Winona diocese, which in 1902 erected a new building for the school. Both the industrial school and orphanage were discontinued, however, when Father McDonnell retired in 1910. The building has since housed a convent and a parochial grade and high school for the parish of St. Columba at Iona.

THAT IRELAND overestimated the eagerness of the scattered colonists in his diocese to procure for their children the refinements of boarding school education was

clearly demonstrated at Avoca in Murray County after 1882. In that year he prevailed upon the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus to send seven nuns to open a convent school there. They were members of an English community whose mother house in the United States is at Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania. It was then in its early years and several of its members were of English birth. Father Thomas J. Jenkins, who met the sisters on their arrival in Avoca, noted in his journal: "There is remarkable refinement combined with veriest industry in these ladies of this Anglo-American Congregation. Their notable Anglicisms are pretty." The Bishop's choice of this religious community to staff the new school reflected his desire to introduce into the western settlements some of the cultural refinement that was so often sacrificed on a new frontier.<sup>13</sup>

Ireland, who had high hopes for this

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins, *Six Seasons on Our Prairies*, 51; William Gorman, "History of Saint Rose of Lima Parish," 13. The latter is an unpublished manuscript in the parish archives at Avoca.

foundation, purchased a spacious resort hotel near Lime Lake and converted it into what he called the Academy of the Holy Child. He intended that it should become the novitiate for a large body of teaching sisters who would encourage religious vocations and multiply Catholic schools in the West. From the very beginning, however, the community faced unusual hardships. The settlers' farms were so widely scattered that it was difficult for them to send their children to the school each day. Even those who could do so were unwilling to enroll their children as resident students. The bishop made frequent trips to the new school and offered the sisters every encouragement. After several such trips, however, he was distressed to find "such a small number of children attending." When he finally realized that the school was nearly bankrupt, in 1884 he fell back on the plan tried at Clontarf and signed a contract with the office of Indian Affairs. Under its terms the school agreed to accept annually fifty Indian girls "who would be instructed in the rudiments of English and taught the ordinary manners and customs of civilized life, as well as the truths and practices of the Catholic religion." The fee was to be eighty-five dollars a year for each girl.<sup>14</sup>

In September, 1884, thirteen bewildered Sioux girls arrived at Avoca. A few months later they were angered and their teachers were delighted by the arrival of several Chippewa girls. The nuns were not aware that the two tribes were on unfriendly terms and were shocked to discover that the girls of both groups felt in duty bound to continue their tribal feud within the school. Old settlers still living near the Avoca colony site recall occasions on which a hunt was organized to find and take back to the school Indian girls who had decided to return to their reservations.

With the help of the government subsidy, the school was able to continue operating. The extant correspondence between the sisters and their mother house indicates that they were happy in their life of prayer

and sacrifice, and quite prepared to continue their work among the Indian children. Hence it came as a great surprise to them when Bishop Ireland announced in 1890 that he had another mission for them and wanted the Sisters of St. Joseph to take over the academy in Avoca. In 1893 the federal government cancelled the academy's Indian contract. Deprived of its chief means of support, the school fell on difficult times. From 1903 to 1905 it remained closed. After a costly fire on February 12, 1910, which leveled the entire building, the sisters withdrew and the school was never rebuilt.

ONE OTHER attempt to found a boarding school for girls was made in the Graceville colony of Big Stone County, on the western border of Minnesota, in 1886. The initiative for this foundation was supplied by the Sisters of St. Joseph. The first buildings were erected with separate accommodations for white and Indian girls—the latter from the near-by Sisseton reservation in Dakota Territory. Under the terms of another government contract, it was specified that the school would receive a hundred and fifty dollars a year for each of twenty-five Indian girls to be sent from the reservation. In 1896 the act of Congress which defined "the settled policy of the Government to hereafter make no appropriation whatever for education in any sectarian school" terminated the government contract with the Graceville Convent of Our Lady. Two years later, fire, the scourge of prairie life, broke out in the school and burned it to the ground. It was rebuilt by the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1900 and it has continued to serve since as the parochial elementary and high school for the Graceville parish. The best index of its influence on Catholic life in Minnesota is to be found in the fact that five of its students have been ordained priests and forty-

<sup>14</sup> This account of the Avoca academy is based on that given in Gorman, "Saint Rose of Lima Parish," 14-16.

three have become sisters in the congregation of St. Joseph of Carondelet.<sup>15</sup>

IN THE FIVE counties of western Minnesota originally settled by Bishop Ireland's colonists there is today an extensive system of elementary and secondary Catholic schools. Graceville, Currie, Iona, Adrian, Marshall, and Lismore—all original colony settlements or offshoots from them—now have both Catholic grade and high schools. In addition, Ghent, Minneota, Fulda, Benson, and St. Kilian have parochial grade schools. It is important to recall, however, that most of these schools were established after 1900.<sup>16</sup>

If means of transportation in Ireland's day had been comparable to modern facilities, he might have had some success in establishing parochial day schools. It is abundantly clear, however, that the western parents of his day never favored sending their children to boarding schools and probably looked with some disfavor on schools of every kind. Children above the age of infancy were an essential part of the labor force on western farms. Many parents doubtless were firmly convinced that education was an unnecessary luxury for families engaged in the hard work of breaking prairie sod and building up productive farms.

The attitude of western frontier farmers toward education has been described by one pioneer in his memoirs as follows: "Our parents believed that primary schools taught much that children need not learn until later. That we might escape this forcing process we were taught at home during our early years, and thus we lived naturally for some time before being impounded with the other children of the town." Speaking

of education in Minnesota in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a Minnesota historian, William W. Folwell, noted that legislators always "assumed that without question all parents and guardians would appreciate the policy [of free education] and would give their children the full benefit of it, without exhortation, certainly without compulsion." The same author concludes, however, with the remark that, "Experience and statistics at length showed that assumption to be too liberal." Even after the turn of the century the Minnesota superintendent of public instruction could report to the legislature that "large numbers of rural and village children were out of school more than half of the time."<sup>17</sup>

Thus Ireland's difficulties in maintaining Catholic boarding academies were not exclusively Catholic problems nor were they limited to the western counties. They were merely one phase of the general educational effort in an era that antedated by a full generation the widely accepted regulations on compulsory education to which we have since become accustomed. Even with the help of such sanctions, however, it is unlikely that Ireland's plan for boarding schools would fare any better today, considering the expense of the undertaking and the traditional attitude of rural dwellers toward such schools. Although he did finally succeed in establishing in the St. Paul diocese a system of Catholic schools, from the elementary to the collegiate level, comparable to that of any other diocese in the United States, Ireland's dream of self-supporting convents and boarding academies on large tracts of western lands never materialized.

<sup>15</sup> Reardon, *Catholic Church in St. Paul*, 676; interview with Sister Grace Aurelia Greene of the congregation of St. Joseph in St. Paul, the first girl from Graceville to enter a religious order.

<sup>16</sup> Reardon, *Catholic Church in St. Paul*, 628.

<sup>17</sup> Seth K. Humphrey, *Following the Prairie Frontier*, 55 (Minneapolis, 1931); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:162, 164 (St. Paul, 1930).

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