

FITZGERALD, MICHAEL CORNELIUS JOHN (1927-2007), a friar of the Carmelite Order, priest, philosopher and poet

Name: Michael Cornelius John Fitzgerald

Date of birth: 1927

Date of death: 2007

Parent: Martha Helena FitzGerald (née O'Sullivan)

Parent: Michael FitzGerald

Gender: Male

Occupation: a friar of the Carmelite Order, priest, philosopher and poet

Area of activity: Poetry; Religion

Author: Iestyn Daniel

John FitzGerald was born on 3 February 1927 at Ludlow in Shropshire, a son of Michael FitzGerald (1889-1949) and Martha Helena O'Sullivan (1896-1978) who moved to live in England in 1922 following the disbanding of the Royal Irish Constabulary of which the father was a member. Christened Michael Cornelius, he was the third of four children, the names of the others being (in order of age) Gerald Joseph (Father Gregory O. Carm.), Bridget Cecilia (Sister Bridget Mary of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary), and Mary Catherine (Mrs Pryer).

The interest of the two brothers in the Carmelite Order was inspired by the influence of their uncle, Conleth FitzGerald, Provincial Superior of the Irish Carmelites and a man of high standing in the Vatican, and in 1940, when 13 years old and following the example of his elder brother Gregory, FitzGerald was sent to St Mary's College, Aberystwyth (now home to the Welsh Books Council under its old name of Castell Brychan), a seminary charged also with care of the parish. The College was re-established in 1936, in the same building as an earlier Catholic college of the same name (which had been relocated there from Holywell, remaining empty for a while), by members of the Irish Carmelite Province under the leadership of Father Malachy Lynch at the invitation of the new bishop of Menevia, **Michael McGrath** (who had also been parish priest at Aberystwyth previously), in a bid to restore the old Catholic faith to a country whose Nonconformity was, as he and others saw it, rapidly losing its hold. However, by a stroke of fortune FitzGerald also encountered there as his Welsh teacher none less than **Saunders Lewis**, who instilled in him a deep love of the language, literature and traditions of Wales, so that he became convinced that he should, as happened, pursue his vocation in Wales.

In 1942 he went to the Carmelite friary in Kinsale, in the south of Ireland, to join the order, adopting the religious name John (after his patron saint, the great Spanish mystic John of the Cross), and from then until 1948 he was a novice in Ireland, taking his first vows as friar in 1943. While there, he went to University College, Dublin, where he continued his Welsh education under **Professor John Lloyd-Jones**. However, the Professor advised him to switch to Greek and Latin, which he accordingly did at the end of the first year (Welsh may not have been his strongest subject at the time), and in 1946 he graduated with a first class degree in Classics. He nonetheless kept up his Welsh by borrowing books from **Lloyd-Jones**, and when he returned to Wales in 1956, members of the Cylch Catholig were astonished at his mastery of the language when he led their sacred Triduum, preaching in good Welsh in spite of his lack of experience in the Welsh pulpit. Having decided to remain in the Order, he proceeded to the Jesuit College at Milltown, Dublin, to study theology for four years, and in 1951 he was ordained priest. Following that, he rose to higher levels of study when he spent a year reading theology at Rome (1952-3) and then two years reading Classics at Christ College, Cambridge (1954-5), where he obtained a first class Honours degree. He also met many Welsh speakers there in Cymdeithas y Mabinogi, enjoying their company.

In 1956 he returned to Wales, where he remained for the rest of his life, going first to St Mary's College at Tre-gib, Llandeilo, originally a secondary boarding school opened by the Carmelites in 1947 but relocated in 1958 to Cheltenham, England, owing to a shortage of boys in Wales to pay the full fees. At the time there was some talk that the FitzGerald brothers too would soon be going to England, but, mainly under Gregory's leadership, their determination to remain in Wales was unyielding. Fortunately, Tre-gib's role was changed and it now became a study centre for the Carmelites of Wales and England, with John FitzGerald, after a period of teaching schoolboys, being appointed prior and director of studies instructing novices in philosophy, but also acting as parish priest to Llandeilo. In 1964 he became chaplain to Catholic students at University College Aberystwyth. In 1970 he was appointed lecturer in the Philosophy Department, where he taught chiefly through the medium of Welsh, till his retirement in 1993 when he became chaplain for a second time to the students, succeeding his brother Gregory in this capacity. From 2002 he combined the office of chaplain with that of prior of his community until the departure of the Carmelites from Aberystwyth in 2004 to take care of the parish of Llanelli where he remained prior. There, until his death in 2007, in a large parish, he had to shoulder a heavier pastoral burden than ever before.

FitzGerald was very active throughout his life, both as pastor and as academic. His academic interests and commitments fell into three areas - philosophy, translation of the Roman Catholic liturgy, and composing poetry, all through the medium of Welsh. The quality of his work was consistently high in each of these, and as a member of the translating panel of *Y Beibl Cymraeg Newydd* he made a substantial and important contribution. His chief philosophical interests were the Pre-Socratics, Aristotle, St Anselm, and Descartes, and he translated some of their major works, such as the '*Proslogion*' of St Anselm (1982), the '*Discourse on Method*' and '*Meditations on First Philosophy*' of Descartes (1982), and the '*Nicomachean Ethics*' of Aristotle (1988), his most distinguished achievement in philosophical translation. His style was occasionally somewhat eccentric in these but always very accurate and clear.

Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), because of the change from Latin to the vernacular as the liturgical medium of expression, there arose a demand for translations into Welsh as well, and thanks to the work of John FitzGerald and others the basic liturgy of the Catholic Church's public worship, together with the forms of the sacraments, were provided in this language. Then, in 1988, a milestone was reached with the publication of *Llyfr Offeren y Sul* edited and translated by FitzGerald jointly with Patrick Donovan, a work which replaced the booklets and pamphlets on which Welsh congregations had depended for years. He also translated a substantial portion of the daily readings but died before being able to complete and publish the result.

As with **Saunders Lewis**, the sum of the poetry produced by 'Ieuan Hir' (his chosen bardic name) was small but brilliant. *Cadwyn Cenedl* appeared in 1969 and was followed in 2006 by *Grawn Gwirionedd*, a complete collection of his poems which very deservedly earned a place on the 'Book of the Year' list. They are a medley, in free and strict metres and vers libre, on religious, classical, social, and other themes, including some translations, which reflect the author's wide interests and experiences in economical and polished language, backed by a thorough acquaintance with Welsh literature.

To FitzGerald's intellectual activity should also be added his editorship of *Y Cylchgrawn Catholig* on behalf of the Cylch Catholig from 1993 to 2003, a publication to which he contributed more than anyone through theological and philosophical articles and translations of short extracts, and his interest in languages. He knew about a dozen modern languages, either wholly or partly, including the notoriously difficult Basque language - and there was mention that he had preached in it as well! Another of his interests - in this case outside of Wales - was The Christian Philosophy Conference, an annual, informal meeting held in Chelsea or Guildford, of which FitzGerald was also a founding member.

As pastor, he was active in many ways, chiefly by being a genuinely dedicated priest who knew his flock, serving them in their various needs. He would frequent the meetings of the Cylch Catholig, often acting as vice-chairman, and also its tent on the field of the National Eisteddfod every year where he was a familiar face. Beyond the Catholic Church, he represented her, as commentator, explainer, or defender, to Welsh audiences on radio and television and in the press, but with independence of mind. He was a committed ecumenist, careful and calm in manner, who knew many clergymen of other denominations, enjoying their company and befriending them as well as receiving invitations to preach in their places of worship.

In person and personality, he was very tall and handsome, extrovert, gentle, friendly, and obliging, possessing a deep and gracious charisma which attracted people. He shared his exceptionally wide learning and interests generously with everyone. His way of treating and explaining topics was very cerebral, and he would not touch on the more practical aspects of the spiritual life. He was in fact a more complex character than he appeared, with a more ambiguous identity, but it was his virtues which made the greatest impression.

John FitzGerald died on 28 November 2007 in Glangwili Hospital, Carmarthen, following surgery for stomach pains which had troubled him for years, and was buried at Aylesford Priory, Kent, on 7 December 2007. He was a man who enriched the religious, cultural, and intellectual life of Welsh Wales by introducing new streams of thought and sharing with her his cheerful personality in the humble and open spirit of the gospel.

Author

Sources

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- M. B. Kiely, *Our Lady of the Angels and St. Winefride's: A Brief Chronicle of Church and Parish* (Faversham 1974)
- Meic Stephens, 'Fr John FitzGerald: Carmelite priest and poet', *The Independent*, 11/12/2007
- The British Province of Carmelite Friars, 'Fr. John FitzGerald, O.Carm.', November/December 2008
- information from his sister, Mrs Mary Pryer
- Personal knowledge
- Some photographs of John FitzGerald and members of his family are in NLW, Photograph Book 4766B

Additional Links

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