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A CHAPLAIN IN WELLINGTON'S ARMY IN THE PENINSULA

FR. EDMUND WINSTANLEY

The soldiers on campaign in the Peninsular War received hardly any suitable religious support. General chaplains for troops were paid ten shillings a day 'but great difficulty was experienced in obtaining suitable clergymen prepared to accompany the army on active service. Some of them were extremely unimpressive like the Light Division chaplain Parker "with his tall, lank ungainly figure mounted on a starved, untrimmed, unfurnished horse... the least calculated of anyone I ever saw to excite devotion". (1) This wretched man was captured by the French when he failed to notice that the army had marched, but after keeping him for a couple of days, the French realised how useless he was, and sent him back to the British army minus his property and with a kick in the breeches...From 1810 Wellington attempted to organise brigade or divisional chaplains to perform regular services for the Peninsular army but few met with his approval...The paucity of spiritual comfort available to the army [is highlighted] when one realises that the Department [at the conclusion of the War] comprised only 37 clergymen and of these sixteen were with the Peninsula army. (2) These chaplains were of course all Anglicans. Roman Catholics and Nonconformists had no formal provision made for them at all. A few of the latter, however, became lay preachers themselves.

Although many of the army's Irish soldiers were Roman Catholics and although most of their campaigning was in Catholic countries, they seemed to have been concerned little with religion, as Wellington remarked, he had not seen a single act of worship performed by them except in making the sign of the cross to induce the local people to give them wine. (3)

It was in these inauspicious circumstances and when the Roman Catholic religion was still legally proscribed (for example, no Catholic could receive a commission in the army until after the

Catholic Relief Act of 1829) that the work of Fr. Edmund Winstanley at this time may be considered especially praiseworthy.

Edmund Winstanley was born into an old Lancashire Catholic family in 1772. After schooling at Ince Blundell on Merseyside, he was admitted in 1787 to the English College in Lisbon, a seminary founded in 17th century penal times to prepare priests for service in England. He was ordained priest in 1796 and was working in the College as Professor of Theology during the French occupation of Lisbon in November 1807.

The French under Marshal Junot invaded Lisbon on the very day of the departure of the royal family to Brazil. 'One of their first acts was to incarcerate the persons and confiscate the property of all British subjects...At the intercession of the Pope's Nuncio and other influential persons the property [of the English College], though nominally confiscated, was left in the administration of the Superiors and, both they and the Students were declared prisoners of war, they enjoyed the liberty of walking out in the city and had the second storey of the College and church and garden assigned for their use.

'The rest of the house was occupied by 280 soldiers, all new recruits and 12 veteran officers. The latter, though entirely destitute of religion, observed in general politeness towards all the members of the Community.' (4). There was one occasion, however, when 'a consequential little lieutenant' committed himself at table to the utter disregard of all politeness. 'At a banquet to which the French officers had invited the Superiors, the lieutenant, forgetting the consideration due to the guests, rose to propose the health of the Emperor Napoleon and called on the Englishmen to honour the toast, this, at first, Allen [one of the priests in the College] declined to do so, upon which the lieutenant observed "that he had not much reason to respect a country which had driven them forth to a foreign land." "Let it be so," rejoined Allen, "yet George the Third is our lawful King. I will drink your Emperor's health on condition that you drink George the Third's." All laughed heartily at the suggestion, there was much clapping of hands and the King's and the Emperor's healths

were drunk. Thus the whole [affair] passed off as a joke, which otherwise might have had serious results.' (5)

'The French continued in the College for nearly nine months, during which time four of the Students, with the tacit consent of their Superiors, made their escape by night to the English fleet which was cruising off the port and were conveyed home. The rest remained at the house and pursued, as far as circumstances permitted, their usual duties. To the honour of the corps quartered in the College it should be said that, at their departure, they scrupulously restored the articles that had been lent during their stay, the only deficit in the delivery being that of a single sheet.' (6)

When the French left Lisbon, the city became the headquarters of the British and Portuguese armies in the Peninsular. 'The heat of the climate and the hardships of the campaign contributed with the sword in thinning the ranks. Upwards of twenty hospitals were established in different parts of the city and they were all kept constantly filled by the sick and wounded that daily poured in from the army. As many of the regiments were exclusively composed of Catholics from Ireland, a most laborious and extensive mission was thus created. The task of administering the succours of religion to all these distressed objects was assigned to the Rev. Edmund Winstanley who for this purpose was retained by the College and unremittingly continued to exert himself in the discharge of these severe duties until the end of the war... Ever forgetful of himself...he assiduously attended upon the sick and by exhortation and instruction, publicly and privately sought to promote the spiritual interests of those in health' (7).

When Wellington and the army left Lisbon, Winstanley offered his services which were accepted. We have no record of his work and travels during the later stages of the war but we learn that he continued to reside in the College where he returned to regular duties after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. 'Nor is it on record that he received even thanks of the British Government for the years of devoted work which he unstintingly gave to the religious needs of

the Catholic troops who were heroically sacrificing their lives in defence of England' (8).

After his return to the 'Inglesinhos' as the English College was affectionately known by the people of Lisbon, Fr. Edmund Winstanley spent the rest of his long life there, his time 'divided between prayer, study and writing.' (9) In 1820 he was installed as President of the College, a post he held until his death in August 1852. He published four books on religious subjects and one on the capital called 'The Lisbon Guide' and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity by Pope Pius IX two years before he died. 'Above the medium stature, he was remarkable both for talent and for virtue, incapable of meanness, either in thought or act, and would have disdained to stoop to anything unworthy or ungenerous...Under a rugged and stern countenance he bore a kind heart and, if he possessed the power of inspiring fear, he knew how to conciliate the love and affection over those whom he ruled. Nor was he deficient in a sense of humour.' (10)

It is good to know that at least one clergyman gave himself so unstintingly to supply the spiritual needs of the British troops during the Peninsular War.

NOTES

1. Kincaid, Sir John. 'Adventures in the Rifle Brigade.' London 1830. Quoted by Haythornthwaite. P.123
2. Philip Haythornthwaite. 'The Armies of Wellington'. London 1994 p.123/4
3. Ibid. p.124
4. Canon Croft. 'Historical Account of Lisbon College'. London 1902. Pp. 112/3
5. Ibid. p.90
6. Ibid pp. 113/4
7. Ibid. p. 115
8. Ibid. pp. 131/2
9. Ibid. p. 132
10. Ibid. pp. 132/33

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This article is based on research done by Andrew Bull, a regular contributor and member of the British Historical Society Committee.