

John Gordon

Cameron, it will be recalled, was nominated bishop in September 1797 and, some time after this, he ceased to be rector and was succeeded in that position by John Gordon, who had been vice-rector since 1776 and who, in 1780, had been considered by Geddes to be far too scrupulous to be rector.

He was the son of John Gordon and Jean Nairn and was born at Clashnore in Glenlivet on 18th May 1747.¹ There were several other children of the family, of whom at least two brothers (one, Robert, continued to live at Clashnore) and two sisters (Jean and Margaret, both in London) survived until adulthood.² He was already a pupil at Scalán, along with Alexander Cameron, when Geddes arrived to take charge in 1762. Both Gordon and Cameron left on 4th August 1764 and went to the Scots College in Rome. Cameron was ordained and recalled to Scotland a year earlier than expected but Gordon, who had been made *decano* or senior student,³ was ordained to the priesthood in the Lateran Basilica by Cardinal Marcantonio Colonna on 5th June 1773.⁴ He went to Scotland the following year, was two years in Aberdeen and then arrived in Valladolid in 1776 to be vice-rector.

The first intimations of his promotion to rector are in a letter from Bishop Hay to Gordon thanking him for accepting the post⁵ and in one from Gordon himself to Thomas Bagnall at the beginning of 1798, in which he says that, with great reluctance, he had consented to be rector.⁶ The nomination was formally approved by the **Cámara of Castile** on 28th November 1798 and by the king on

1. "The Surviving Registers of Scalán College," ed. William James Anderson, *The Innes Review*, vol. XIV (1963), p. 115.

2. Robert Gordon to John Gordon, 20th April 1798. (College archives 41/25.)

3. Gordon to John Geddes, 4th August 1778. (*Ibid.*, 61/19/3.)

4. *Ibid.*, 39/46.

5. 25th November 1797. (*Ibid.*, 61/19/6.)

6. 28th January 1798. (Columba House 8-J.)

27th January 1799.⁷ There was some resentment at home to the appointment. In Scotland, "they seem resolved not to understand the part I acted in your being named Rector and Mr. Cameron vice-rector," wrote Bishop Cameron,⁸ while Gordon himself broached the subject in a letter to Bagnall: "You'll know, I suppose, that some of my Highland friends took much amiss my nomination to be Rector here"; they alleged that Gordon was unfit for the position and in general felt that the Lowland District monopolised such appointments.⁹

Gordon's first years as rector were complicated by the presence and behaviour of Bishop Cameron, as has already been described. But even with the bishop gone, life continued to be abundantly supplied with difficulties and hardships. Through no fault of his own, his rectorate coincided with a period of extreme economic want for the college and concluded with events in Spain which made it imperative that the students should be withdrawn and taken back to Scotland.

From 1796 onwards, there are references in Gordon's letters to the increasing popularity of the French, to the growing desire to introduce the principles of the revolution into Spain and to the deteriorating economic condition of the country. When still vice-rector, he told Paul Macpherson: "I look upon the state of this kingdom as very precarious. The French principles gain ground daily..."¹⁰ Moreover, in that same year, Spain and Britain declared war on each other. By 1798 Gordon expected that Spain was by then so pro-French that a French army would enter the country any day. Such an army, in fact, numbering eight thousand men, passed through Valladolid early in 1801 on its way to Portugal and, on its return at the end of the year, was billeted in many of the religious houses of the city, including the Scots College.¹¹

During Gordon's first months as rector, the financial problems of the college became very acute indeed. The main reason for this was that the income from state sources, if drawn upon, was subject to a crippling tax, thirty per cent, forty and later fifty per cent or even more being deducted before it reached the beneficiaries. Bishop Cameron's letters from Salamanca are full of advice on this problem. He was strongly of the opinion that the pensions etc., should be left lying in the meantime, in the hope that the levy would, later on, be removed or reduced, and that, therefore, Gordon should try, somehow or other, to make ends meet by other means. Cameron suggested selling a large quantity of wine from the college vineyards in Boe-

7. Bishop Cameron, Madrid, to Gordon, 28th November 1798. (College archives 60/9/25a and 67/3.)

8. 5th December 1798. (Ibid., 60/9/27.)

9. 22nd December 1799. (Columba House 8-K.)

10. To Paul Macpherson, Rome, 1st August 1796. (Ibid., 8-H.)

11. Alexander Cameron II to Thomas Bagnall, 1st December 1801. (Ibid., 8-M.)

cillo, provided the price was reasonably good at the time.¹² It occurred to him that, if the necessary equipment could be acquired cheaply, "you might clear some money" by distilling the college wine and making brandy; "it loses indeed in quantity, but gains in quality by time, and it can be exported perhaps to very considerable advantage;"¹³ but he soon agreed with Gordon that the plan was too risky to justify the initial expense that would be involved.¹⁴

A few weeks later Cameron wrote: "Your pecuniary circumstances give me more uneasiness and make a deeper impression on my mind. If it were possible to stand it out for a year or two, I easily see you might find your way, by rigorous economy and good government: but I do not see, to conviction, what is best in the meantime. I should think, as you certainly do, selling your wine the first step."¹⁵ Another plan to raise money had been mooted: "You say you would rather lose sixty or even seventy per cent on the *vales* [the mode of payment of the Spanish income] than sell any of your furniture: *unusquisque in suo*—I think otherwise, and abound so much in my opinion that I should rather defend the Pope's primacy of jurisdiction—that occurred to me as the most delicate opinion as yet permitted to be defended in the schools—rather even than your economical opinion, the grounds of which I do not see."¹⁶ At this time, it is only fair to record, Cameron was showing a great deal of solicitude for the college's plight; he had offered Gordon the income from his own personal Spanish pension (presumably not paid in the highly taxed *vales*) and he generously accepted his share of blame for the situation: "Perhaps my making too free with palliatives, borrowing with one hand to pay with the other, may have conduced to bring us so low—but be it as it will, we must and shall, one way or other, have things set right for once; afterwards it will be easy keeping them so and past mistakes will turn to advantage."¹⁷

To add to poor Gordon's troubles, the college's Madrid administrator, D. Gaspar Antonio de Iruegas, took ill and died at this time (July 1799). Cameron had had no very high opinion of the efficiency and value of one "who I fear is in no good way of recovery: the College will lose very little when he dies."¹⁸ He advised Gordon against appointing his wife to succeed him, since the administrator had to collect rents, see to business in the *Cámara* of Castile and so on, tasks in which a woman would not be as successful as a man. Gordon did in fact offer the post to the widow, Da. María Tomasa de Ordoño,

12. 15th September 1798. (College archives 60/9/12.)

13. 17th August 1799. (Ibid., 60/10/11.)

14. 24th August 1799. (Ibid., 60/10/13.)

15. 14th September 1799. (Ibid., 60/10/18.)

16. 5th October 1799. (Ibid., 60/10/24.)

17. 10th August 1799. (Ibid., 60/11/6.)

18. To Gordon, 10th July 1799. (Ibid., 60/11/3.)

but she delayed so long in replying that he took the opportunity of handing over the college business to the firm of Iruegas and Sobrevilla: "I was too sick of her husband to want to have anything to do with her."¹⁹ The widow at last wrote, thanking Gordon for having appointed her, signifying her acceptance, etc., etc.²⁰ Gordon had then to extricate himself from that situation and there ensued a protracted and unfriendly correspondence between them, in which Gordon tried to get her to repay the 12,000 *reals* that her husband had owed to the college.²¹ Gordon even went to Madrid in the following summer to try to have the debt repaid.²² By that time, in fact since November 1799, the administration had been undertaken by the firm of Iruegas and Sobrevilla. Miguel and Gaspar Sobrevilla, former students in the college, were associated with the firm, but the college work was undertaken mostly by D. Francisco Antonio de Bringas.

Times continued to be very hard for Gordon and the college. Gold and silver were scarce and the paper money that was in use automatically lost about twenty per cent of its face value.²³ This of course affected everyone and, in each of the three summers from 1800 to 1802, the crops were a failure because of a continuing drought.²⁴ Although many of the sources from which the college normally received its income were paying nothing in these years, Gordon managed to eke out what money there was from the house rents in Madrid (in fact he succeeded in getting these raised when he was in the capital in 1803), the sale of the Boecillo wine and the fees of the Spanish students, so that the financial ruin which, at one time, seemed imminent, was kept at bay.²⁵

The year 1804 saw Spain in the direst straits of poverty. Prices were very high and misery, poverty and illness rife. Many villages were abandoned as people went to the cities in a last hope of avoiding starvation. It was not unusual for poor unfortunates to be found dead or dying in the streets. "Mr. Gordon has been scampering this month past among the mountains of Santander, endeavouring to find carts to send flour, wheat etc. to this famished city."²⁶ Fortunately, conditions improved the following year, there was a good harvest and food prices were lower. The benefit was felt in the college also, even although the state pensions etc. were not available. **But by that time, the strained and tense relations between Spain and Britain had once more broken into a state of declared war. The stage had been set for the joint Franco-Spanish military bid to take over Portugal and all the ensuing dramatic events which were**

19. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 11th September 1799. (Ibid., 61/19/4.)

20. 18th September 1799. (Ibid., 61/4/1.)

21. Ibid., 61/4/2-8.

22. Ibid., 61/4/9.

23. Gordon to Paul Macpherson, 28th September 1802. (Columba House 8-P.)

24. Alexander Cameron II to Bishop Cameron, 26th November 1802. (Ibid., 8-O.)

25. Gordon to Thomas Bagnall, 7th February 1802. (Ibid., 8-P.)

26. Alexander Cameron II to Bishop Cameron, 20th April 1804. (Ibid., 9-B.)

to lead to the overthrow of Charles IV and the War of Independence; but that lay in the future. For the time being, the English (and therefore the Scots) were not the most popular people in Spain.²⁷

It has already been mentioned that the fees of the "visitants," i.e., the Spanish boys who lived and were taught in the college, constituted an important source of income during Gordon's rectorate.²⁸ During Bishop Cameron's months of writing fever, he more than once mounted his hobby-horse, as he called it, that as far as possible Spanish boys should not be admitted; yet he not only had to confess that on occasions he had gone against his principles on the matter (in fact, he had accepted eleven), but he also recommended that Gordon take "a rich orphan, nephew of Dn. Pedro Caballos Guerra, envoy extraordinary for Naples."²⁹ Gordon, for his part, did not refuse to have a certain number of Spaniards in the college but he felt that Cameron had tended to spoil and pamper them, whereas he should have made them subject to the same discipline as the Scots. The number of applicants from among the better Spanish families kept increasing and William Fraser, ordained and ready to go home, had to be kept for a while to help with their tuition (until the bishops demanded his return). In 1804 there were as many as fourteen Spanish boys in the college, although the names of the later ones are now lost.³⁰

But while the numbers of Spaniards increased, the college was not in such a healthy condition as regards Scots students. In 1798 six were ordained, five of whom left for Scotland and one, William Wallace, remained in the college.³¹ There were thus three priests on the staff: John Gordon, the rector; Alexander Cameron II, who had returned as vice-rector; and Wallace, who was mainly occupied teaching English and French to the young Spaniards. Outside teachers came to the college each day to give lessons in drawing, writing and music to the latter.³² From 1798 to July 1800, there were three Scots students and from then until October 1803 there were only two.³³ At the end of that month, seven arrived from Scotland via Portugal. Although Gordon had informed Bishop Cameron that he could

27. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 24th July 1805. (Ibid., 9-E.)

28. In 1803, he was charging each of them 3,600 *reals* per annum. (Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 29th April 1803. Ibid., 8-R.)

29. 28th November 1798. (College archives 60/9/25a.)

30. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 20th October 1804. (Columba House 9-B.)

31. The five travelled via Madrid and Lisbon but were delayed for three weeks at Badajoz awaiting passports for Portugal. They eventually arrived in Scotland penniless, ill and practically in tatters. (Bishop Hay to Gordon, 3rd November 1798. College archives 61/19/7.)

32. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 31st January 1807. (Columba House, unclassified.)

33. It was during this low ebb in the college's fortunes that Paul Macpherson in Rome put forward the suggestion of amalgamating, in Rome, the two remaining Scottish seminaries abroad; (at the time, the college in Rome had no students at all). But despite the difficulties he had experienced, Gordon was not enthusiastic and told Macpherson that the plan was impracticable because "the present policy of this country would never allow us to send our rents to a foreign kingdom." (28th September 1802. Ibid., 8-P.)

accept a group of boys from Scotland,³⁴ they came without warning and completely unexpectedly. Gordon remonstrated with the bishop about this and about the total lack of information concerning them.³⁵ Within a year of the arrival of the group, the two older Scots students had gone. Gordon gave Bishop Cameron a brief, general assessment of those who remained, the group which had come out in 1803: "My lads on the whole behave well. The generality of Scots seem to have poor talents and are far from making that progress that might be expected from the care that is taken of them and the time they have been here."³⁶ At the beginning of 1807, Gordon was willing to receive another few students, but he also asked for another master, particularly as, at that time, the students of the English College were receiving their tuition in the Scots College, they having no masters of their own.³⁷ Neither master nor students were sent.

The country house that Cameron had built and that was, in fact, his own personal property began to be used regularly and successfully in Gordon's time. The custom was to begin the "long" holiday there in late September; it lasted about a month. From Madrid in August 1798, Cameron had given Gordon his advice about the life the students ought to lead in Boecillo: "I think there should be fixt hours for rising, short prayers, Mass, breakfast, dinner, being within doors at night, supper, evening prayers and going to bed—with some little study on weekdays and Christian doctrine on holy days—all combined so as to leave the most time to and the greatest liberty in decent amusement. I would not have fewer than three to go out together and not to lose sight of one another, nor to go into any house, nor have any unnecessary conversations or business with any one but their companions. If all wished to go out together to dine on cold meat or little preparation, without any Spaniard or Frenchman, I should be indulgent in giving them the whole day; but averse to their proposing walks which might fatigue or overheat them."³⁸ The following year, 1799, the students of the English College spent a fortnight at Boecillo as guests of the Scots.³⁹

Gordon seems to have become involved in trying to settle some quarrelling among various families of the village of Boecillo, which is less than a mile distant from the Scots' country house. In 1804 the rector was most anxiously looking forward to the construction of a new bridge over the Duero, the old one having collapsed in the floods of 1788; the engineer in charge of the work was lodged in the country house.⁴⁰ Gordon had an unfortunate experience in 1807 when

34. 17th January and 29th April 1803. (Ibid., 8-R.)

35. 11th January 1804. (Ibid., 9-B.)

36. 24th July 1805. (Ibid., 9-E.)

37. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 31st January 1807. (Ibid., unclassified.)

38. 18th August 1798. (College archives 60/9/6.)

39. Ibid., 22/21.

40. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 11th January and 12th August 1804. (Columba House 9-B.)

he bought two large vineyards from the Canon Penitentiary of Palencia, only to find, in spite of previous assurances to the contrary, that the land was burdened with a *censo* or debt, in favour of a group of lawyers in Palencia; the rector thus had to abandon the land since the arrears he would have had to pay were greater than its value.⁴¹

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John Gordon gives every indication of having been a shy and lonely person and one whom life did not treat altogether kindly. He was of a scrupulous nature and, although he accepted the situation realistically and humbly, he must have felt it when Alexander Cameron, his classmate in Scalan and Rome, was brought out to be his superior in 1780. Cameron's treatment of him when he, Gordon, was appointed rector and especially the way in which Cameron left Valladolid must have been even more hurtful. Only when Cameron had gone was he able to act fully and properly as rector and to get access to the college papers and the rector's quarters.⁴² The troubled times with which he had to contend have already been described. Even relations with his vice-rector seem also to have been somewhat difficult. "I continue to have the burden of everything regarding our temporal concerns and a certain person you know [Alexander Cameron II] seems by principle, inclination or God knows what to avoid every kind of interference in every thing of this nature. It is certainly much more agreeable to read and study in a room than to watch over servants, examine how matters go on in the kitchen, see that nothing be wanting in the house and the like."⁴³ The same complaint occurs, three or four years later, in Gordon's last extant letter: Cameron is vice-rector in name only, because he takes nothing to do with the running of the house; "he is in robust health, eats well and sleeps even better."⁴⁴

During Gordon's rectorship, there was none of the socialising with or cultivation of the great that Geddes had sought, none of the self-assured independence of Cameron. "My great study is to live quiet and gain as many friends as possible to the College. I make no recourse to court and ask no favour; I want to live as much as possible without being taken notice of by those in power."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, a few months after writing this, Gordon was in Madrid. He spent about four months there, during which, as well as seeing to the property and income of the college and managing to have

41. College archives 26/1/20.

42. "I have metamorphosed your room entirely", he wrote to Bishop Cameron, 16th July 1802. (Columba House 8-P.)

43. To Bishop Cameron, 26th June 1803. (Ibid., 8-R.)

44. To Bishop Cameron, 31st January 1807; written in Spanish. By contrast, Wallace is described as having no appetite, in poor health, unable to say Mass often and, in consequence, very depressed. (Ibid., unclassified.)

45. Gordon to Paul Macpherson, 28th September 1802. (Ibid., 8-P.)

the house rents raised, he secured a donation of 6,000 *reals* from the Archbishop of Toledo for the new church Cameron was building in Edinburgh.⁴⁶ While in Madrid, he also received formal approval of the agreement he had reached with the priest in charge of St. Stephen's parish church next door to the college, whereby the students' right to make their Easter duties in the college and the rector's right to officiate at the funeral of any who died were recognised.⁴⁷

Towards the end of his rectorate, his relations with the local bishop became very exacerbated. He was "one of the most consummate villains that breathes," according to Gordon,⁴⁸ and very hostile to the college. It seems that the Bishop of Palencia had been conferring orders on the Scots students as needed, and Gordon feared that the Bishop of Valladolid might even withdraw the Scots priests' faculties to hear their students' confessions. He therefore asked Paul Macpherson to try to get the necessary faculties directly from Rome, but the latter counselled against this since Rome seldom interfered with a bishop's behaviour and it was more prudent not to make any fuss.⁴⁹

But by now, greater worries were just over the horizon. Spain was becoming more and more a satellite of Napoleon and, in October 1807, a secret agreement was signed at Fontainebleau that allowed the French armies to enter Spain in large numbers. Ostensibly the pretext was to allow both countries jointly to annex Portugal, but in reality the agreement meant that Spain would become French-occupied territory. To make matters worse and add to the confusion, Charles IV had his son and the heir to the throne, Ferdinand, the Prince of Asturias, arrested on grounds of plotting against him and his prime minister, Manuel Godoy, the so-called "Prince of Peace." Early in 1808, the whole country realised how it had been duped by the French and there began a series of popular risings against the armies of occupation, sparked off by that of the Second of May in Madrid. Ferdinand was regarded as the hero, Charles and Godoy as their country's betrayers. Charles had abdicated and, although in Madrid his son had been proclaimed king as Ferdinand VII in March, Napoleon removed Charles, his wife, Ferdinand and Godoy across the border to Bayonne and had his own brother exchange his kingdom of Naples for that of Spain. Joseph Bonaparte was proclaimed king in the capital on 18th June 1808 but, by then, the whole country was in rebellion and the situation was more or less out of hand.

"You know that I am a Spaniard," wrote Cameron, the vice-rector, to his uncle; "judge then of the excruciating anguish of mind

46. College archives 61/18/40. This is perhaps the same money as was already mentioned. (Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 18th March 1804; Columba House 9-B.)

47. Gordon to Bishop Cameron, 17th February 1803. (Ibid., 8-R.)

48. To Paul Macpherson, 19th August 1806. (Ibid., 9-E.)

49. 1st October 1806. (College archives 61/19/11a.)

I have endured these four months." Despite the cruelties of the Second of May, "the people, by a divine impulse, without any previous communication, got up, all over the kingdom, in a mass."⁵⁰ Cameron was very enthusiastically pro-Spanish and, at this period, when writing to his uncle, signed himself "*El Fanático*."

In Valladolid, Ferdinand had been proclaimed king on 3rd June amid great popular enthusiasm and, in the consequent euphoria, a motley army of five thousand men went out to the village of Cabezón, a few miles north of the city, to give battle to a French force of twice their numbers advancing on Valladolid. The inexperienced Spaniards were routed, many of the citizens fled from the city, and the French entered on 12th June. By the end of the month, the authorities, civic and ecclesiastic, had been made to swear allegiance to King Joseph Napoleon I. In October, with French troops absent, word reached Valladolid that Ferdinand VII had been re-proclaimed king at Aranjuez and a government under the leadership of Count Floridablanca established. The rejoicing, official and otherwise, with which this news was greeted, was short-lived since, on 13th November, French troops re-entered the city on their way south to quell the trouble in Madrid. Great numbers of the townspeople, especially religious, again fled from Valladolid. There is a reference, in a letter from Cameron to the authorities,⁵¹ to the college having been sacked or looted that day.

It was around this time that Gordon decided that the safety of the Scots students demanded their being sent home. Letters from the college in Valladolid are very few and far between after 1806 and it is difficult to know exactly what happened. It is clear that Gordon and Cameron remained behind to try to safeguard the college and its interests in Spain, that Alexander McKenzie, one of the students, also stayed, while Wallace and the other four students set out, perhaps on 22nd November. They reached Falmouth at the end of December, having been fortunate enough to find a British warship at Corunna.⁵² The group, as it made its way from Valladolid to Corunna, was taking the same road that, a month or so later, would be followed by the retreating army of Sir John Moore. The decision of the French to pursue Moore meant that their armies were prevented from undertaking the conquest of Andalusia and Portugal which they had hoped to achieve; on the other hand and despite guerilla activity and the establishment of local patriotic *juntas*,

50. 31st August 1808. (Columba House, unclassified.)

51. College archives 39/78.

52. William Wallace, from Falmouth, to Bishop Cameron, 29th December 1808. (Columba House 9-L.)

It is said that William Wallace on this occasion brought back to Scotland the celebrated "Fetternear Banner" which had been taken to Spain at some unknown earlier date. (Cf. David McRoberts, "The Fetternear Banner," *The Innes Review*, vol. VII (1956), pp. 69-86; and vol. VIII (1957), pp. 69-70.)

northern Spain remained, on the whole, firmly occupied by the French during the years 1809-11 (i.e., until Wellington's campaign of 1812).

Valladolid, in mid-December 1808, was occupied for a period of ten days by British troops (part of the force which had landed in Portugal in August to lend assistance to the Spaniards), but on 26th of that month the French were back and, in fact, remained in possession until the summer of 1812. Napoleon himself visited the city from 6th to 17th January 1809 and during these years several religious houses, including the college, were requisitioned for use as French barracks and military hospitals.

Among the French priests who had received asylum in the college in 1795 had been Jean-Pierre Jeze, archpriest of Castelnau in the diocese of Auch,⁵³ and, although it is not certain when Gordon left Valladolid after the departure of his students in November 1808,⁵⁴ he did arrive at the house of Canon Jeze's brother in Montréjeau (Hte.-Garonne) on 13th November of the following year.⁵⁵ According to Cameron, the vice-rector, he was ill for a period of fifteen months, an illness caused by worry as much as anything else, and had gone to France "to take the waters."⁵⁶ He made his will on 5th February 1810,⁵⁷ leaving, among other bequests, a watch to Canon Jeze, some handkerchiefs to one of the college servants, some clothes to various persons, and 2,500 *reals* to the poor of Valladolid. Furthermore, "I hope that my executors will have the Masses said that they think convenient for my soul—I leave this to their prudence." The will is written by another person because of Gordon's weakness and is in two parts: he never signed the second section since he had hoped to remember some item which, conscientious to the last, he thought he had forgotten and against which he donated, as a precaution, another 2,000 *reals* to the poor.

He died in M. Jeze's house on 15th February of that same year, 1810, in obscurity, far not only from his native land but even from his adopted home where he had lived and worked for thirty-three years.⁵⁸

53. Archiepiscopal archives, Toledo, room I, T. II, centre left, 1^o, 497-3, c.

54. Possibly in July 1809 when he was given a medical certificate to allow him to travel to Santander to take the waters. (College archives 43/4.)

55. *Ibid.*, 30/15: the expenses incurred by Gordon while with M. Jeze.

56. To Bishop Cameron, 16th April and 7th May 1810. (Preshome archives.)

57. College archives 27/1.

58. *Ibid.*, 30/15.

The Innes Review, vol. XV (1964), p. 90, gives the date of death as 16th February, but the date mentioned by the Valladolid document seems more likely. It is confirmed in a letter from Alexander Cameron II to Bishop Cameron, 30th March 1811. (Columba House 9.Q.)