

Alexander Cameron II: The Years of Solitude

The college was without students for eight years, from late in 1808 until the end of 1816. For all except the first years of this period (i.e., after John Gordon's departure for France in 1809 and Alexander McKenzie's departure in 1811), the only Scotsman who remained in the college and provided a link between the past and the future was Alexander Cameron II.

He was the nephew of Alexander Cameron I, rector and later vicar apostolic, and had been born near Braemar about the year 1767. After almost two years at Scalán, he arrived in Valladolid as a student on 11th February 1780. He was one of the quartet, "very sprightly yet very innocent," who had been "forwarded" from Oporto after having landed at Vigo. Geddes' agent in Oporto reported that "Alex^r Cameron having, in his Journey from Vigo hither, fallen from his beast, hurted some of the tendons of his left arm, 480 *reis* were paid to a Surgeon to set it to right. This allso [*sic*] caused a delay, as the lad could ill travel till his arm was become well, wch it now is."¹

His uncle, writing to Bishop Hay in 1782, had not been particularly impressed by the newcomer: "Cameron seems to have no great turn for studying the art of pleasing; if he does not amend, he will never be an agreeable companion; but he applies very well to his studies and makes tolerable progress tho' his talents be nothing more than common."² He was one of the students to show off his linguistic attainments in 1785³ and, in 1787, his uncle's assessment was much more favourable than it had been five years earlier: "Cameron, who has all along distinguished himself by his application and his progress too... inherited the amiable disposition of Ja. Robb" [a student who died].⁴

1. Thomas Delany, Oporto, to Bishop Geddes, 31st January 1780. (College archives 51/5/7).

2. 12th July 1782. (Columba House 6-N.)

3. See chapter 8, fn. 34.

4. Alexander Cameron I to Bishop Geddes, 18th October 1787. (*Ibid.*, 7-K.)

After ordination, he returned to Scotland in the summer of 1793 and spent five years there, first as chaplain at Drummond Castle in Perthshire and then as priest in Edinburgh. During this time, Bishop Chisholm asked Bishop Hay if Cameron, one of the latter's subjects in the Lowland District but also a Gaelic speaker, might be allowed to become superior of the little seminary of the Highland District at Samalaman. Hay, however, did not accede to the request.⁵ In 1798, Cameron was sent back to Valladolid to become vice-rector in succession to John Gordon, now rector. He sailed from Portsmouth to Bilbao in the Swedish ship "Maria."⁶

With the students gone and Gordon dead, it fell to Cameron to protect the interests, and the very existence, of the college during the time of the French occupation and the years that followed Wellington's campaigns and eventual victory. Valladolid remained in the grip of the French until the middle of 1812 and, during these years, we know very little of the fortunes of the college. A number of young Spanish scholars remained there, at least for some years.⁷ The building next door to the Scots College (i.e., the "new part" of the college of S. Ambrosio) was now a hospital and, from the winter of 1808-09, some of its employees were lodged in the Scots College. A proposal that the latter, too, should become a military hospital did not materialise but, early in 1810, an order was issued instructing Cameron to billet as many officers as the college could accommodate.⁸

Communications with Scotland by letter were very difficult but, at least in 1810 and 1811, one or two letters from Cameron reached his uncle. Much of the college's Madrid property was unlet and, of the tenants who were there, most were in the habit of not paying rent.⁹ The Spanish pensions and other sources of income were producing nothing because of the chaotic conditions in the peninsula and Cameron was managing to make ends meet only by the sale of the Boecillo wine. He himself had been in poor health for several years, suffering particularly from stomach trouble.¹⁰ This had been so severe and painful that, for a long time, he could not say Mass or his breviary, and even reading or writing was beyond him.¹¹ The college building was in very poor shape due to the presence of the soldiers, but fortunately it had not been affected by a decree of August 1809, in virtue of which religious houses in Spain were closed and their goods confiscated. Indeed, Cameron acknowledged that,

5. "Glenlivetensis", art. "The Highland Seminaries", *St. Peter's College Magazine*, Cardross, vol. XX, no. 79 (December 1952), p. 120.

6. College archives 22/9/7.

7. *Ibid.*, 39/77 a.

8. *Ibid.*, 39/78. Cf. *ibid.*, 34/18.

9. Iruegas & Sobrevilla, Administrators, to Cameron, 20th January 1813. (*Ibid.*, 60/8/13.)

10. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 30th March and 21st July 1811. (Columba House 9-Q.)

11. *Id.* to *id.*, 30th November 1815. (*Ibid.*, 10-I.)

not only had he been free from interference, but also that "we owe many favours to the French officials."¹²

The twelve months from mid-1812 until mid-1813 were a period of stirring events in Valladolid and district as Wellington pushed northwards, into and beyond the city, was thrown back again, and finally out-manoeuvred the French and forced them from central Spain.

At the start of this period, in July 1812, the French, having received reinforcements, gave battle at Salamanca to the advancing allies and were roundly defeated. They retreated northwards, crossing the Duero between Boecillo and Herrera, a village a mile or two upstream, and evacuated Valladolid, which Wellington and his armies entered on 30th July 1812. What followed is narrated by Cameron in a letter to his uncle. The letter is undated but was written in the following year (1813) and was sent through the British Consul in Corunna who despatched it to Britain on 18th September.¹³

When Wellington reached Valladolid, he was received with great enthusiasm and, that very same day, many of the leading citizens were presented to him, among them Alexander Cameron.

"He invited me to dine at his head quarters in Boecillo whither he was just returning: the day was extremely hot. I met the highlanders encamped on both sides of the Duero. On reaching Boecillo, I found it full of general officers and head quarters in the College. Your apartment was occupied by His Lordship and the other rooms by his brilliant staff, composed of the Prince of Orange and numbers of the prime nobility. I took the liberty next morning at breakfast to congratulate myself and the College on having such illustrious guests and mentioned the pleasure you would feel on learning that the house you had built had been so highly honoured."

That day, 31st July, Wellington left for Madrid. With the situation having become militarily impossible for them there, the French and King Joseph fled and Wellington entered the capital in triumph on 12th August. Early the following month, he travelled north again and rejoined his army at the Duero. The French returned to the attack "and on 6th of Sept^r Lord W. had his head quarters a second time in the College [i.e., in Boecillo]; the whole army passed by the cellars and plunged into the Duero in front of El Abrojo but the artillery could not follow..."¹⁴ The French did not resist

12. *Id.* to *id.*, 7th May 1810; in Spanish. (Preshome archives.)

13. Columba House 10-D.

14. *Ibid.* The same letter mentions that the house at Boecillo "was turned into a bakehouse by the French and successively occupied by the different troops of both armies", but "it was not materially damaged". In a manuscript sketch of his uncle's life, Cameron says that Wellington had his headquarters in the house on three separate occasions in 1812. (College archives 22/16/7.)

for long, but retreated to Burgos, whither Wellington pursued them and where they had decided to make a stand.

It took Wellington a month to capture Burgos but, in October and November, all his advances of the summer were lost and he had to fall back the whole way to Ciudad Rodrigo, near the Portuguese border, abandoning Burgos, Valladolid and Salamanca in the process.¹⁵ In Valladolid prolonged rejoicing, ecclesiastical as well as civic, had greeted the proclamation in the city of the new Constitution, enacted in Cadiz by the Cortes in March 1811; but all that came to an end with the reappearance of the French troops. "The principal inhabitants are just now flying," wrote Cameron as Valladolid awaited the French; "as for me, I am determined to stand to my post, happen what will."¹⁶ The months that followed, and during which the city was occupied, were bitter ones: prices rose steeply, the incidence of crime was very marked, several churches and houses were looted, and a number of patriots executed. King Joseph spent the months of April and May 1813 in Valladolid and his stay was marked, as had been two previous visits in 1811, by a programme of receptions and official celebrations and merry-making.

By now, Wellington was advancing again but, instead of moving north-eastwards as he had done in 1812, he went due north to Braganza in Portugal, then turned east, entered Spain and took León. As a result, the French found themselves out-manoeuvred and out-flanked and had to withdraw all their forces northwards to Burgos to prevent their being cut off by Wellington's drive eastwards from León. The French troops left Valladolid for the last time on 4th June.

Cameron was appointed a member of the deputation which carried the city's official congratulations and thanks to Wellington when the victorious general spent a short while in Ampudia, a village about twenty miles to the north of Valladolid. There, says Cameron, "I had a long conference with him."¹⁷

* * *

During the years of war and French occupation, the college property did not suffer any serious damage but the billeting of troops there meant that many of the furnishings were destroyed and all of the bed linen needed to be renewed. In 1814, once the French

15. Cameron heard of the defeat which Wellington sustained at Burgos, he tells us, while he was at Boecillo gathering the few grapes that had been left after the passage of the armies. (Columba House 10-D.)

16. To Bishop Cameron, 27th October 1812. (Preshome archives.)

On a poignant personal note, he adds: "No one has had the charity to let me know if they [his parents] be dead, which I take for granted, considering their great age and infirmities; but I should like to know when and how they died".

17. Columba House 10-D.

troops had gone, Cameron described the college in Valladolid as reduced to tatters.¹⁸ He had had to spend more than 100,000 *reals* merely to keep the college in existence.¹⁹ Much of this sum may have been needed for the "exactions" of which he speaks in another letter.²⁰ The pensions etc. were not being paid and very little, if any, rent money was coming from the college's property in Madrid.²¹ All the same, one had to be very grateful that the college had even survived at all, as most of the religious houses had been left in ruins. He had contrived, moreover, to preserve the vestments, plate and most valuable documents of the archives by secreting them in the church steeple of the village of Aldeamayor and, later, burying them in a stable at Boecillo.²²

The period after the liberation of Spain from the French and the restoration of Ferdinand VII was a very difficult one economically for the country and for the college also, yet, as early as June 1814, Cameron was writing to Scotland, suggesting that it was time to begin thinking of reopening the college and bringing out priests and students from Scotland.²³ He had been in Madrid in April and May and hoped that soon the property there, even after expenses, would be producing 40,000 *reals* a year for the college. The houses had been repaired at a cost of 15,000 *reals*. The pension on the bishopric of Cadiz, a very important source of income, had not been paid since 1806 and was now 80,000 *reals* in arrears; there was no hope of the sum ever being paid, but the pension itself was extended in 1815 for another twenty years.²⁴ Other sources of income had not been paid for an even longer period. The Cortes had proposed that those who ought to have benefited from such sources should be indemnified from the income and goods of religious houses which had been confiscated, but Cameron thanked God that the king had vetoed the scheme, as he could not in conscience have accepted such compensation. While in Madrid, he had had the support of the British Ambassador when he approached the court with a petition that the college should be given the equivalent of its former income from one or more of the many benefices at that time vacant—but there was no immediate response.²⁵ However, later that year, the king gave the college revenues of almost 3,000 *reals* per annum from benefices in the monastery of Monte Aragon and in three parishes,

18. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 20th June 1814, (Ibid., 10-F.)

19. Id. to id., 31st May 1815. (Ibid., 10-I.)

20. Id. to id., — September 1813. (Ibid., 10-D.)

21. One tenant, O'Connor by name, owed the college 70,000 *reals* in house rent in 1814. (Id. to id., 20th June 1814. Ibid., 10-F.)

22. Id. to id., 31st May 1815. (Ibid., 10-I.)

When all ecclesiastical vessels were confiscated, he had had enough presence of mind to surrender one chalice and thus save the other five that the college possessed.

23. Id. to id., 10th June 1814. (Ibid., 10-F.)

24. College archives 11/93.

25. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 31st May 1815. (Columba House 10-I.)

one in Toledo, a second in Cuenca and the third in Cordoba.²⁶ At about this time, Cameron also bought more vineyards in Boecillo—he acquired them relatively cheaply and thought the move a worthwhile investment as most of the existing vineyards were already old when bought by Alexander Cameron I.²⁷

Cameron had been acting rector since 1810 but had never been officially appointed. This was not surprising since, for something approaching ten years, from 1806 until 1815, he did not receive a single letter from Bishop Cameron, the person in Scotland to whom he directed his letters and the one who could have taken measures to have him appointed rector. Alexander Cameron II's letters during these years are full of complaints about his uncle's silence. In 1813, it was seven years since he had had a letter.²⁸ The following year, he had to remind the bishop that, as well as not having written to Valladolid, he had not repaid a loan of 18,000 *reals* sent him by the Madrid administrator on the security of his Spanish pension, whose payment had been held up by, *inter alia*, the bishop's not having sent a certificate testifying that he was still alive!²⁹ Eventually, at the end of 1815, Cameron was able to thank his uncle for the favour of a letter.³⁰ At the time, Bishop Cameron was on a visit to Paris but, although Alexander Cameron II hoped to go there to meet his uncle, his request for a passport was refused by the Spanish authorities.

By now, Cameron was in much improved health and, despite the high prices prevailing (he reckoned it would cost 4,000 *reals* per annum for each student),³¹ he became more and more insistent that students (and masters) should be sent. Only thus would the billetings cease³² and the Jesuits, about to be reinstated in Spain, be prevented from regaining the college, with the Scots being amalgamated with the English College. "If the six or eight lads I prayed you to send are not already on their way, for God's sake let them proceed on immediately."³³ He had, in an earlier letter, voiced his opinion about the type of person to be sent: "As the future prosperity of this house will, in a great measure, depend on the choice of Superiors and

26. Id. to id., 30th November 1815. (Ibid., 10-I. Cf. college archives 23/14-18 and 60/8/16.)

27. Id. to id., 31st May 1815. (Columba House 10-I.)

28. Id. to id., — September 1813. (Ibid., 10-D.)

29. Id. to id., 20th June 1814. (Ibid., 10-F.)

30. Id. to id., 30th November 1815. (Ibid., 10-I.)

31. Id. to id., 31st May 1815. (Ibid., 10-I.)

32. At this time, some army officers, with their families and numerous servants of both sexes, were billeted in the college and Cameron appealed, twice to the *ayuntamiento* of Valladolid and finally to the king himself, for their removal. (College archives 39/78 and 41/47: cf. *ibid.*, 34/19.)

33. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 30th November 1815. (Columba House 10-I.) There was a move in 1820 to restore the non-Scots "new part" of the college of St. Ambrose (then an infantry barracks) to the Jesuits (college archives 22/6/10 and 30/17) but the plan was successfully resisted by D. Carlos O'Donnell, Captain General of Old Castile (*ibid.*, 30/18.19). The Scots College was not directly affected.

Students sent to people it anew, I hope they will be such as to renew the golden days of Alma Mater in learning and piety."³⁴

Although he had been refused a passport to visit his uncle in Paris, Cameron wrote to try to persuade him to come to Spain, where he might be successful in procuring a passport to allow his nephew to visit Scotland; in that case, the business of reopening the college could be satisfactorily discussed with the bishops concerned.³⁵ Bishop Cameron did indeed go to Spain in the spring of 1816 and, while there, he signed the will by which he left all his property in the country to his nephew. At the same time, the latter received his royal nomination to the rectorate.³⁶ No details of this visit remain, nor is much known of the subsequent visit which Alexander Cameron II, accompanied by D. Francisco Antonio de Bringas, the Madrid administrator, and his son Francisco³⁷ made to Scotland in the summer of the same year. They reached London from Paris in mid-July and the two older men left London on the return journey on 24th September. (The son remained in Edinburgh with Bishop Cameron until August of the following year.) Cameron got back to Valladolid on 17th November, "safely, but with a severe rheumatism."³⁸

34. Id. to id., 31st May 1815. (Columba House 10-1.)

35. 12th January 1816. (Ibid., 10-L.)

36. College archives 67/4.

37. Cf. *ibid.*, 62/5/67.

38. Cameron to Bishop Cameron, 24th November 1816. (Columba House 10-L.) Ten years later, the bishop was still trying to recover over £300 which he claimed the son owed him for expenses incurred during his year in Scotland. (College archives 62/5/67.)