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ENGLAND AND WALES

Newman Lecture 2011: Frank Cottrell Boyce

A footling little parson: The greatest of English prose writers

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In Meditations and Devotions, John Henry Newman wrote ...

“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next ...”

That's a prayer, by the way. It's not Newman talking about himself. It's something anyone can say. “I have my Mission. I may never know it.”

But that idea that you can be nourished by a very strong sense of purpose and of your own significance, while at the same time not knowing what that purpose or significance is - that you can take the point of things on trust - that's a very powerful theme in Newman's life. It's what allowed him to fulfil so many different roles and to endure so many failures. It's a piece of wisdom that he plucked right out of the heart of disaster.

It's just over a year since the Pope came and beatified Newman. So I'm going to ask, what was Newman's definite service? If he ever does become a saint - what might he be patron saint of?

When he was a young man Newman used to date his correspondence by writing the saint's day at the top of the page. Not everyone liked that. An irate bishop wrote back with “The Palace, Washing Day” at the top of his. Theological debate within the Church of England was nerve-jangling tense at this point. When the young Reverend Gorham was offered the parish of Bramford Speke in Exeter, his bishop cross-examined him about the nature of Baptismal grace - for **thirty-eight** hours. When the then Reverend Henry Manning moved the high backed pews out of the nave of his church and replaced them with open benches - that was enough to tell everyone he was a wrong 'un. It was only a matter of time before he moved to Rome. Which of course he did and became Cardinal. When the rumours began to circulate that Newman might become a Catholic, Cardinal Wiseman sent a priest - Father Smith - down to Newman's hideout at Littlemore to see if it was true. Newman was busy trying to build a kind of oratory, he was working in the garden. Everything said that he was settled where he was. But Father Smith came back convinced that he would convert any day. Why? Because at one point during the evening Newman left the room and changed his black trousers for a grey pair. That was the giveaway. I have no idea why.

When he was still in black trousers, Newman commissioned and edited a book of *Lives of the English Saints*. This included the stories of St. Bega - one of whose miracles was to make it snow everywhere except on lands belonging to her monastery. It also included St. Neot - patron saint of fish, whose once lit a fire with an icicle. There are saints here who changed bandits into wolves, saints who floated around the Irish Sea on self-propelled altar stones. And St. Cuthbert who was so careful to avoid sexual temptation that if he ever did have a conversation with his female opposite number - St. Ebba - he would make sure he spent that night praying, up to his neck in cold water.

These hagiographies were actually worse than grey trousers.

“Persons who invent such tales” said one contemporary reviewer, “cast very grave and just suspicions on the purity of their own minds.”

Saints can get you into trouble. Our primary school outing was to Holywell - the Lourdes of Wales - where Sister Paul shared with us the life of St. Winifred - beheaded by Caradog for being a Christian, her head

bounced one and a half miles down the A55 all the way to Trefynnon, singing praise to God as it went. When it stopped bouncing a miraculous spring bubbled up and the ground opened and swallowed Caradog. Sister went on to say that we should all be aspiring to be saints, and I thought – *nah*. Of course I didn't know then about St. Pyr - patron saint of Caldy Island - a small and blameless portfolio at least. He was abbot of the island until that fateful night in the year 520 when, he is said to have got blind drunk, fell down a well, broke his neck and was canonised due to some kind of administrative error. Altogether a more likely and appealing path to sainthood. Inspired by the trip I think my class teacher Sr. Paul decided to tell us a little bit about the saint of the day every day. Thus unleashing a slew of awkward questions "Sister, when you say virgin martyr, what exactly is that? When you say self-castration..." She soon dropped the idea.

I've tried to figure out why Newman - so intellectual, so gracious, so English - was so drawn to this stuff. In 1836 he made a trip to Italy with Froude - who had gone there for his health. And he came home through Sicily - it was on that journey that he wrote *Lead Kindly Light*. Even now Catholicism is different in Naples. I tried to make a film there - it never came off - but I well remember going to the Christening of a nine year old boy and asking his dad - a doctor - why they had waited so long. "Well Baptism is an exorcism," he said, "and some of the demons they cast out are lucky demons. You want to hold onto them." I was there the night Naples won La Liga (the football champions league) and someone wrote above the entrance to the great cemetery of Saint Januarius - a huge necropolis and popular picnic destination – you don't know what you're missing. And someone wrote underneath - what makes you think we are missing it?

Naples has fifty patron saints who exist in competition with each other. You can get holy pictures which - on closer inspection - turn out to be St. Rita kicking St. Janarius up the backside. When Etna erupts, villages in the way of the lava will try to use a statue of their patron to keep it at bay, but they'll have bigger more serious saints as back up further down the slope - like troop carriers in a riot.

In the Apologia Newman says he didn't go to any services or spend much time with Catholics in Italy but in one of the appendices he talks about going to see the liquefaction of the blood of St. Janarius. This is a big event in Naples. Humphrey Davy went to see it around the same time as Newman. It's an extraordinary thing - the priest will open the reliquary and if the blood doesn't liquefy, he'll pray about it but often in a fairly beligerent and threatening ranting manner. Sometimes it doesn't work, but if it doesn't, then there are other liquefactions you can visit - the blood of St. John the Baptist does it, as does the blood of St. Pantaleon and St. Patrizia - though apparently that only half liquefies.

This must have been amazing for Newman. His life had been Ealing, Oxford and then ... this. It was his first encounter with religion as popular culture.

Because that's what saints have been in Europe for the last two thousand years. Objects of reverence and prayer and instruction - yes. Of course. But also popular culture. I think of the popular saints of Europe as forerunners of the cinema. Like the movies, their stories are full of sensation, blood and nudity. Like the movies, they are massively inventive on the surface, but extremely conventional underneath. And like the movies, this is a visual tradition. The stories are transmitted through statues, paintings and, well, cakes (more in a moment), not through books.

If you want evidence of how visual it is, look at St. Agatha of Catania. St. Agatha (third century) was subjected to all kinds of humiliations and tortures for her faith, including the amputation of her breasts. She is therefore shown in art nonchalantly holding a tray with a pair of breasts on it, as if to say, "Am I bothered?" The extent to which hagiography has been a visual and not a verbal tradition can be seen in the fact that - as a result of bad visual grammar and some anatomically sloppy statues - she is the patron saint of cakes on trays and on her feast, in Catania, you can buy these little cakes which are delicious but which are very, very mammary. They have a cherry on the top. Ealing. Oxford. Then that ...

The images of saints contain symbolic shorthand which, if you know how to read them, tell you all you need to know. Most famously, I suppose, St Nicholas of Myra is shown with three balls, representing the bags of money he used to drop down chimneys. St Katharine of Alexandria is shown leaning on a big wooden wheel, because that's how they tried to kill her (the wheel exploded and killed everyone else instead). These images are condensed narratives and if you know your way around the genre and convention, you can usually read them. In other words they're like movie trailers.

I once wrote a book and made a movie about saints myself. It was called Millions and it was partly about a little

boy who could see and talk to a whole variety of saints - Clare of Assisi, St. Francis. And lots of people were very charmed by this aspect of it - especially the director, Danny Boyle. But when he and I had meetings with executives and potential funders, they would always end up worrying about this. They'd say, "This business of seeing saints - doesn't the child need to move on from that before the end? Doesn't he need to get closure on that aspect of his life?" Now obviously I didn't think so. I thought the child was in a pretty good place there. I talk to St. Anthony every time I lose my car keys. The idea that I'd actually be able to see and hear him say, "When did you last have them?" Why would I want to move on from that? But that was the first time in my working life that I realised that my differences with the World weren't just ethical or cultural. My whole reality was different. I've had a similar thing recently working on a film script about St. Paul when - bless him - one of the producers said to me, "This scene on the Road to Damascus - that comes really out of the blue - like a Deus ex Machina. Couldn't we set that up a bit?"

Nowadays at least I know I'm trying to tell a different story. And maybe what we see in the saints is people who really live a different physics. We use the word saint casually as shorthand to mean people who are very good. We use the word casually about good mothers and health workers. But when we look at their lives, they are often rambunctious, difficult, crazy. Simon Stylites on top of his column. Cuthbert up to his neck in water. They can be an embarrassment. But they are people who are also buzzing with a different energy, who stand under a different light.

Newman didn't stand up to his neck in water.

Didn't live on top of a column.

Did he have that strange energy?

He did. Lytton Strachey described him as "*a creature of emotion and memory, a dreamer whose secret spirit dwelt apart in delectable mountains, an artist whose subtle senses caught, like a shower in the sunshine, the impalpable rainbow of the immaterial world. In other times, under other skies, he might have helped to mix the lapis lazuli of Fra Angelico.*"

And where that energy expressed itself was in the writing. Some writers write because they've got something to say, or to report, and once they've filed that report, they stop.

Others write because that's what they do. It's pathological. It's how they relate to the World.

These are not always the best writers. Shakespeare was definitely in the former category. Newman was in the second. They say he prayed with a pen in his hand. Me too. I write wherever I am. I wrote most of this talk in the back of a camper van, criss-crossing the South of England to publicise my new book. The camper van had a set of brightly coloured inflatable wings. I wanted to be a writer from childhood and I had fairly strong ideas about what a writer's life would look like. It involved a beach hut on the Gulf of Mexico, a lot of fishing and a little light gun running - for just causes. And visits from a series of beautiful, troubled women. Every now and then I would be called upon to answer the great political or existential questions of the day. At no point did I imagine trundling round the M25 in a winged camper van, stopping to answer such questions as, "In your life so far, Frank, how many words have you writ?"

And, "Frank, have you ever ate a nettle?"

Newman too had strong ideas about where writing would take him - it would keep him safely cloistered in his beloved Oxford. And he was fairly sure about that definite purpose - he was going to reconnect the Anglican Church with its Roman roots - and maybe even possibly reconcile those two churches. It didn't work out like that. After years of agonising he became a Roman Catholic and that meant saying goodbye to his friends, his living and hardest of all, to Oxford. This is what he wrote about leaving Trinity ...

"...there used to be much snapdragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman's rooms there and I had for years taken it as the emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University.

On the morning of the 23rd I left the Observatory. I have never seen Oxford since, excepting its spires, as they are seen from the railway."

That's a brilliant, heart-stopping paragraph. I love the detail of the snapdragons. I love the way he smuggles in that epic, medieval atmosphere - emblem, perpetual, and that "even unto" and I love the way he puts the

boot in to all of that with that blunt “the railway”. You can see there why Joyce said that no one had ever written prose to compare with Newman’s.

So where was that railway taking him? Far away from anything he’d planned. He’d moved from the Anglican Communion - in which he’d been so revered - and become a Catholic. But he’d not really found a role or a home for himself in the Catholic Church. He had a fairly troubled relationship with his Cardinal - Manning. Almost every project he took up failed. He’d taken on *The Rambler* magazine but had to stop after two editions. He’d tried to build a caring, Catholic community at the Oratory in Birmingham but had only succeeded in isolating himself and making himself an object of suspicion. He was old, ill, weary, disappointed. I’ll quote some more of that prayer I opened with ...

“If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about ...”

Sickness, perplexity, sorrow. He was already suffering from all these things when - on New Years Eve 1863 - he opened the January edition of *Macmillan’s Magazine* and found a book review by Charles Kingsley in which he calls Newman a liar. “But truth,” says Kingsley, “has never been a virtue with the Roman clergy.” Newman asked for a retraction from Kingsley and got one but it was worse than the original statement.

So Newman began to write. He wrote the *Apologia*. He wrote it - and rewrote it - for twenty hours a day, barely pausing to eat, for seven weeks. He wrote to horrendous deadlines because the book came out in weekly installments. Its readership growing week by week until by the time it was finished, it was a sensation that completely transformed the status of Newman and the Catholic Church in England. At last he’d found his definite purpose.

I often feel sorry for Kingsley when I think about this. He made one sarcastic remark and the next thing he knew one of the greatest minds of the nineteenth century was devoting itself almost entirely to demolishing him for weeks on end.

You might think it strange that Newman produced a masterpiece in such shocking conditions and for such petty reasons. We think of masterpieces as things produced in optimum circumstances after lots of consideration. But there’s a great tradition of works of genius that were just dashed off. It presumably includes the entire Works of Shakespeare - he never blotted a line. And I think there’s a physics to this ... when we are at our most vulnerable that we’re most open to what’s greater than ourselves - whether you call that Art or the Holy Spirit.

Mostly when we write - especially when we write films by the way - we plan, we discuss, we submit proposals, or treatments or outlines. We hold onto the side of the boat. But every now and then we just have to hurl ourselves into the storm. And when we do ... not knowing the definite purpose but trusting that there is one ...

And when we do that, sometimes we come back with things that were not known, even to the writer. Or especially to the writer. This is why so many writers best works contradict their own professed views. Evelyn Waugh – a terrible, petty snob who somehow produced work that completely takes apart the class system. Philip Pullman - campaigning atheist - whose book *Northern Lights* contains the most engaging, convincing description of the human soul I’ve ever come across. Shakespeare - whose portrayal of Shylock torpedoes the play he appears in. You’ll often hear novelists say that the characters just took over.

And this is exactly what happened to Newman. Until the *Apologia* his reputation was of a bit of a bruiser - a controversialist who could really hand it out - the master of sarcasm - but despite the frenzy and sweat in which it was written - the book itself is calm. Serene in fact. And spacious and generous.

Because maybe the most surprising - and maybe the most relevant - thing about the book is his attitude to his past opinions. This was dangerous ground for him because he had changed a lot. In 1824 he preached a sermon that “proved” the Pope was the antichrist. And was very specific about it. The first Papal Antichrist was Gregory in 600. This is why people distrusted him and why Kingsley called him a liar - because he’d moved so far he seemed unstable. In the *Apologia* he goes through all these stages as necessary steps on a journey. So instead of the traditional St. Augustine conversion story - I was this but now I’m this - it’s something much more fluid. It relives the whole journey. Old Anglican colleagues came to his aid in the writing of it. It owes as

much to John Bunyan as it does to St. Augustine. "To live is to change," he says, "and to be perfect is to have changed often." It seems to me Newman sat down to write a book that was polemical and dogmatic but by grace produced something that was generous and tolerant - he sat down to write conclusions but produced something that is animated by a sense of the importance of flux and restlessness.

So whose patron would Newman be? I'd like to claim him for writers, of course. Because we have our mission though we may not know what it is. We commit ourselves to something without knowing how it's going to turn out - but isn't that also true of parents, of cooks, or teachers, of anyone who starts any project that seems to be failing but which they keep going? Maybe he should be the patron saint of anyone who keeps going in spite of doubt and failure? The patron saint of anyone who can marry strong belief with a toleration of others?

There is an ecology in the World of Knowing things. An Ecology that is often forgotten or undermined. Intellectual rigour can only thrive if our other means of apprehension - imagination, faith, emotion, pleasure - are all at work too. These are all intertwined and when we try to unravel them, we lose. In the current face off between fundamentalist science and fundamentalist religion, for instance, one group has switched off their intellect, the other their sense of wonder.

We think in stories. Before you can build a rocket to go to the Moon, you have to dream of being able to do so. Before you can sail across the Atlantic to America you have to dream of Hy Brazil or the Happy Isles. Think of what an important part of your mental equipment the story of The Ugly Duckling is, or Frankenstein, Cinderella or the Prodigal Son. These stories are like scientific discoveries - they name something that exists in the world but which we couldn't see clearly - or feel clearly - until we were told the story.

The truly creative act - I'm speaking about writing because it's what I know but it's also true of parenting, teaching, evangelising, engaging with others - is a kind a scientific experiment in which all our different ways of knowing are fully engaged. It's a voyage of discovery. Every voyage of discovery has to begin with the possibility of failure. Almost every discovery made in the history of thought was not quite the discovery that the discoverer was hoping for. You have your definite purpose. You may not know what it is. But you do have your definite purpose.