

The Pioneer Association Cullen in Cork

Fr James A. Cullen, Founder

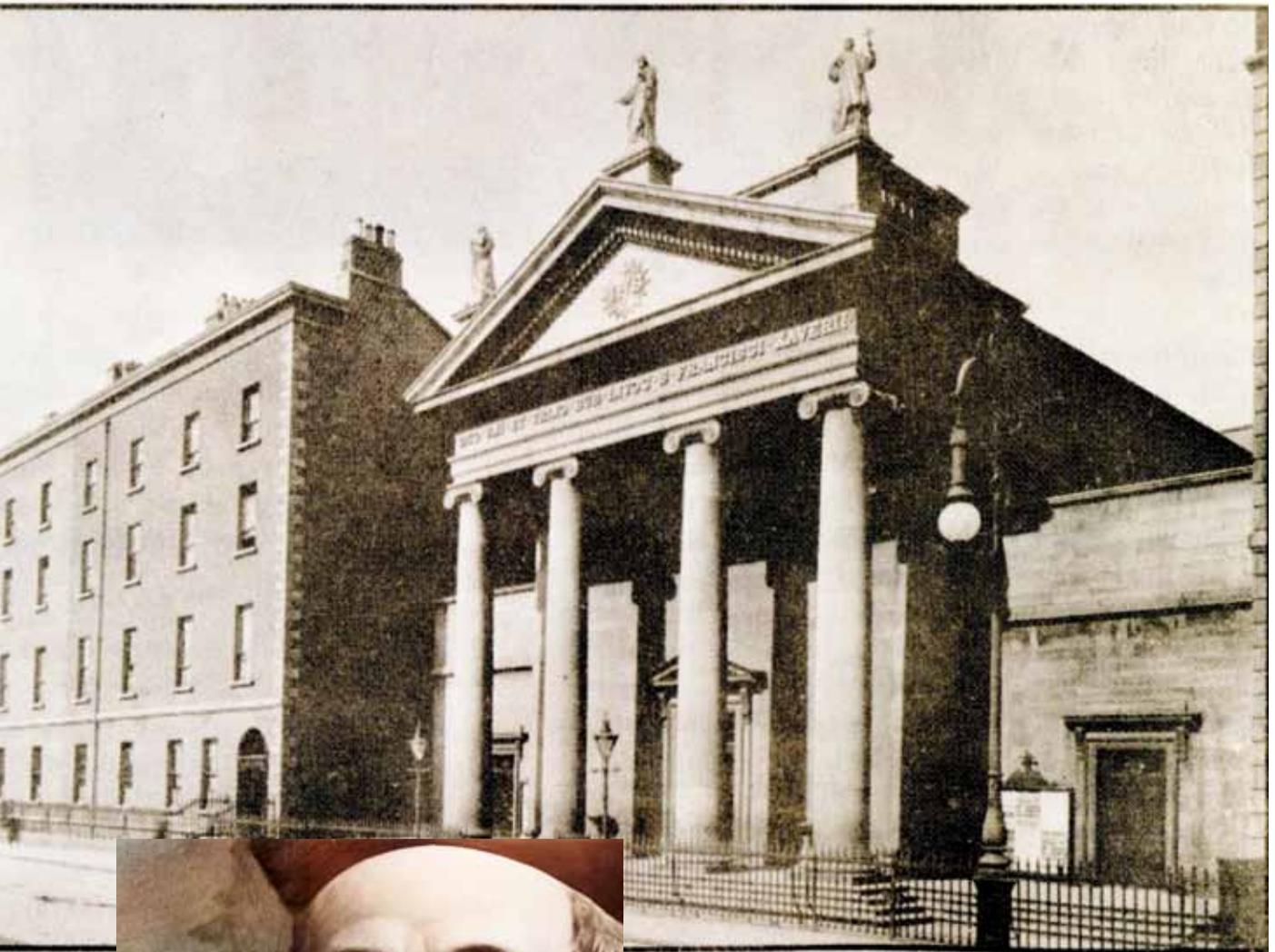
A century ago this year, before an immense audience in the City Hall, Cork, FR JAMES ALOYSIUS CULLEN, S.J. (1841-1921) spoke at some considerable length about what prompted him to found the Pioneer Association and the steps he took to ensure its survival. When he spoke that night in 1911, the Association had already become an established institution in Irish life and his was a household name around the country. Universally regarded as the most successful promoter of sobriety of his time he was considered a 'new Fr Mathew', the original Apostle of Temperance. Fr Cullen didn't know that the Titanic would sink the following year; that World War I was imminent; the Home Rule bill would not be implemented; Dublin would be in flames five years later and Ireland would be traumatised by a War of Independence and an ensuing Civil War. His language is redolent of the nineteenth century but the message is profoundly relevant to our day. We feature the first instalment of his talk, which must rank as the most authoritative ever given on the subject.



My dear Pioneer friends – it would be difficult for me to exaggerate the pleasure which it gives me to meet you tonight, or to express my gratitude adequately, for the invitation you have given me to address this great temperance demonstration. I need hardly add that this privilege is greatly increased by the interest which, in common with you, I attach to the public expression of the people of Cork on this question, so vitally important to the Irish nation. And I take it that few amongst us will not recognise that a meeting of such proportions as this is all the more pressing at this present juncture of our history, when we stand at the parting of the ways; and after centuries of struggle we are allowed to begin to shape, according to our own views, the destiny of our country.

Largely on the solution of the problem which we

are here tonight to discuss will, I believe, depend the future of Ireland, for if Ireland be sober Ireland shall be free, but if Ireland elects at this eventful stage of her history still to hug the chains which so long have fettered her freedom, and still refuse to employ the unimpeded use of the splendid facilities with which Providence has so liberally endowed her children, then, in vain, shall we possess the blessings of Home Rule, in vain shall we have our own Parliament in College Green, in vain shall the flag of Erin float over a people, degraded and demoralised by intemperance. I think I do not err when I say that a large and growing section of the Irish people are convinced that the future of our nation will be mainly determined by the attitude which the country now takes on this momentous question, involving, as it unquestionably does, its life or its death



Left: Fr Cullen

*Above: An old print
of Gardiner Street
Church*

knell. Speaking for myself, it was not today or yesterday that I arrived at this unalterable conviction, for it has been the growth of many years of observation and experience. While still a young priest, now more than forty years ago, I saw that the curse, as well as the ruin, of Ireland was strong drink.

The cause which has led up to the woeful habit of confirmed national intemperance, I was not able then to determine, for Irish history, viewed from a social standpoint, was scarcely known in those sad, far-off days. Our enemies generally affirmed that such vices were of our own making, while natural virtue we had to learn from the victorious stranger. True, people who thought more kindly of us considered our intemperance was largely due to the despair of a weaker nation crushed by a strong one which had,

doubtlessly, plundered her of her liberty, her lands, her language and her parliament. We remember that it was also tried but, thank God, unsuccessfully, to stamp out her religion, as may be seen still even in our day in the alienated or ruined churches, the dismantled shrines and monasteries of Ireland. Other social economists regarded this Irish drink habit as the inevitable outcome of our Celtic character. "We were a drinking, fighting, happy-go-lucky people," they said. "A lovable, sociable, good-natured, intelligent people, admirably fitted to be the servants or slaves of the Saxon conqueror, admirably suited to live in, but not to own, the fair islands that gave us birth."

Whatever may have been the explanation of our drinking customs, this sad picture of a nation's folly was shrouded in still deeper gloom at the time by the fact

that a few years previously one that seemed raised by Providence to be a saviour to his country had appeared, and the radiance of his advent was, as of a sun in the East, filling the sky with light and making the heart of Ireland throb, as it had not throbbed for centuries, with new life and hope! That saviour of his country was Fr Mathew, and his adopted home was Cork.

There is no need, in this his own city, to dwell on his marvellous history or recount his triumphs. Under the magic influence of his personality, Ireland, like another Samson, rose in her might, burst her drink bonds, and led by Daniel O'Connell, began to breathe again the breath of liberty. But alas! This radiant vision was all too bright to last. The glory of Tabor was to be succeeded by the night of Calvary! And so, in Ireland, to the triumphs of Fr Mathew's apostolate succeeded the black famine years of '46 and '47, leaving hundreds of thousands to die by the roadsides of the fruitful land of which they had been plundered. The crowbar brigade and the emigrant ship so fully completed the awful work of Erin's devastation that in the darkest night of Erin's sorrow only some faint notes of her muffled harp told of a nation's agony. All this terrible tragedy I had dimly recognised in these by-gone days of forty years ago, but, thank God, even then I never wavered in the hope that brighter days would come for Ireland, and that the pendulum which had so long and so sadly swung backwards would, when God's own hour had struck, once more swing forward to herald hope and prosperity for Ireland.

In addition, I felt that the glorious example of Fr Mathew was too precious an inheritance for a young Irish priest to lose sight of, and that, however feeble or inadequate he might be, still he might try at least to tread in the footsteps of the great temperance leader and continue his work for that land and that race which Father Mathew had loved, and so practically laboured for down to his latest breath.

Inspired by thoughts such as these, I ventured from the very outset of my priesthood to grapple with the vice of intemperance, but I quickly found that my struggle was a deadly one with a modern Goliath, and undertaken by me, who was a poor substitute for David, as I possessed neither his skill, nor his sling, nor the fatal stone with which he slew the giant Philistine. Fortunately, for me at this time, while still a priest on the secular mission in County Wexford, I had for my bishop one to whom Ireland will be ever deeply indebted for the resuscitation and marvellous assistance which he gave to the temperance cause; I allude to the Most Reverend Dr Furlong, then Bishop

of Ferns. It was this remarkable prelate who first began to administer the Total Abstinence Pledge to children at their Confirmation who, unaided by civil law, established Sunday and Holy Day closing of public houses throughout his whole diocese, and transferred public fairs and markets from Holy Days to week days. Everybody knows that this beneficent legislation still flourishes in the County Wexford and bears abundant fruit in the visible comfort and prosperity of its people. And here, I will crave your indulgence to allow me, passingly, to advert to the very conspicuous part which the County Wexford has long sustained in the temperance campaign. In New Ross in the year 1829, ten years before the advent of Fr Mathew, the Rev. George Carr, a Protestant clergyman, started a temperance pledge movement against the use of alcohol, many years afterwards we have seen what splendid work Dr Furlong achieved in the temperance movement. Bishop Warren, his saintly successor, himself an ardent temperance advocate, publicly took the Total Abstinence Pledge in the pulpit of his own Cathedral in Enniscorthy, and thus initiated and carried on a most successful Total Abstinence Crusade, which has left a deep and lasting impress on the whole diocese of Ferns. The Anti-Treating League, which has so powerfully helped to eradicate the silly and deplorable habit of 'treating', was founded by Fr Rossiter, Superior of the Missionaries of Enniscorthy, while Fr Columbus Maher and, still later, Fr Nicholas Murphy, both distinguished Capuchin Fathers and both closely identified with the glorious Capuchin temperance work in Church Street, Dublin, are descendants of the men of '98.

For some years I toiled beside Bishop Furlong and Bishop Warren in this great conflict, but the experience of these years convinced me that no large measure of success could be achieved by the methods we had followed. True, an enormous work had been done; one county, at least, in Ireland, had been thoroughly wakened from the torpor of drink, and the foundations of a great edifice of social reform had been laid.

On every side the pledge was taken by thousands, but on the other hand, the pledge-breaking was considerable, and to me it was most disheartening.

TO BE CONTINUED

In the next issue, we record Fr Cullen's fascinating account of how he founded a movement that still thrives over a century later - The Pioneers.

