

**The Priest and the Parson of Hartlepool:
Protestant-Catholic Conflict in a Nineteenth-Century Industrial Town**

‘In former times, mid war an' strife,
The French invasion threatened life,
An' all was armed to the knife,
The Fishermen hung the Monkey O!

The Fishermen wi' courage high,
Seized on the Monkey for a spy,
"Hang him" says yen, says another, "He'll die!"
They did, and they hung the Monkey O!¹

This music hall song, written in dialect by Edward Corvan in 1862, tells the story of a legend that has subsequently defined, perhaps even subsumed, the identity of Hartlepool, a town on the North Sea coast of North East England. Yet the legend of the ‘Hartlepool Monkey’, hanged by the fishermen of Hartlepool during the Napoleonic Wars in the belief that it was a French spy,² is also a useful metaphor for the treatment of Catholics in the immediate years after Catholic emancipation. It is likely that the first Catholic priest of Hartlepool, Fr William Knight, was not unaware of the story of the ‘Hartlepool Monkey’ when he recalled, at a Catholic soiree in Sunderland in 1860, his first entry into the town on horseback 26 years earlier:

‘On entering the town, he (Knight) observed a crowd of people assembled, and though he never imagined for a moment that they were waiting of him, yet he was soon made sensible of it. An old woman advanced, and, taking the horse by the bridle, she stared at him a short time. Then turning to her companions, in evident

¹ Norman Corvan, *The Fishermen Hung the Monkey, O!*, in *Allan's Illustrated Edition of Tyneside Songs and Readings, with Lives, Portraits and Autographs of the Writers, and Notes on the Songs* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Thomas & George Allen, 1891), pp. 419-21.

² For a more detailed study of the legend of the Hartlepool monkey, see Paul Screaton, *Who Hung the Monkey?* (Wolviston: Printability, 1991).

disappointment and disgust, she exclaimed, 'Oh! – he's nowt but any other man'. (Laughter) He verily believed they expected to see him enter the town on four legs, with long ears, and a tail of his own (Loud laughter)'.³

This article will examine Hartlepool as a case study for Protestant-Catholic conflict during the nineteenth century, demonstrating the way in which hostility towards the Catholic Church in a provincial town could, on occasion, be encouraged as much by the activities of the Catholics themselves as by the long-standing enmity of Protestants towards Popery. Although anti-Catholicism, an important element of national identity long after Catholic emancipation in 1829,⁴ provided the major impetus for religious division, it was the actions of Knight in responding to the provocation of Protestant ministers, particularly the Anglican minister, the Revd Robert Taylor, which helped to make Hartlepool a hitherto unknown centre for sectarian conflict from the early 1830s until the late 1860s. As will be shown, the unique political, social and religious factors present in the town provided the necessary conditions for ensuring a favourable reception towards sectarian conflict. Nevertheless, that this conflict failed to outlive Knight and Taylor, has wider implications for understanding the importance of individual personalities in creating and sustaining religious prejudice.

Historians have long since recognised the role of Catholics in religious controversy. Walter Arnstein, John Wolffe, and Denis Paz, have shown how Catholics were not simply passive victims of prejudice and could be, on occasion, forerunners in generating sectarian tension.⁵

³ *Darlington and Stockton Times*, 27 October 1860.

⁴ Mary J. Hickman, *Religion, Class and Identity: The State, the Catholic Church and the Education of the Irish in Britain* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1995), p. 43.

⁵ Walter L. Arnstein, *Protestant Versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr Newdegate and the Nuns* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982); John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in England, 1829-60*

Paz in particular has demonstrated the role of Roman Catholic militancy in the English localities, albeit through a series of isolated examples. Judith Champ's research on Fr Thomas McDonnell's activities in Birmingham in the 1830s also illustrates the new-found readiness of Catholic priests to involve themselves in controversial questions during this period.⁶ More often than not, however, historians of religious sectarianism, notably in Liverpool, Glasgow and the Lancashire provincial towns, have viewed anti-Catholicism simply as a catalyst for tensions between English and Irish immigrants.⁷ This presents a skewed and often superficial image of sectarian conflict which only appears worthy of examination if the result was large-scale ethnic violence. It will be argued here that Hartlepool offers an example of the development of a broader religious AND ethnic conflict in a close-knit but growing industrial conurbation over a 34 year period, shedding light on the existence of a less 'controlled' and, as a consequence, peculiarly rabid form of sectarianism in which Catholic as well as Protestant militants were key players.

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁶ McDonnell's aggressive assertiveness has obvious parallels with Knight of Hartlepool, although the former's involvement in radical causes, particularly Irish nationalism, tended to be more of a source of consternation within his own Church rather than a vehicle for local Protestant-Catholic animosity. Judith F. Champ, 'Priesthood and Politics in the Nineteenth Century: The Turbulent Career of Thomas McDonnell', *Recusant History* 18 (1986), 289–303.

⁷ See in particular, Frank Neal, *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Tom Gallagher, *Glasgow: The Uneasy Peace: Religious Tension in Modern Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); P. Millward, 'The Stockport riots of 1852: a study of anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley, eds. *The Irish in the Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 207-24; and W. J. Lowe, *The Irish in Mid-Victorian Lancashire: The Shaping of a Working-Class Community* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

As Denis Paz has argued, it is only possible to gain an understanding of the mechanics of religious sectarianism at the regional level by examining specific factors unique to a particular locality.⁸ This is particularly evident in the case of Hartlepool. In the early nineteenth century, the town seemed, to many contemporaries, a distant relic of past glories. Indeed, the former soldier and antiquarian, Sir Cuthbert Sharp, could have been writing Hartlepool's obituary when he published his history of the town in 1816, lamenting that 'the commerce of Hartlepool had gradually declined, and at present, excepting in the article of fish, it is confined to the occasional exportation of flour to the neighbouring sea-ports'.⁹ The lack of an industrial infrastructure at this time resulted in no significant transport network to the town, thereby heightening its sense of isolation. Indeed, on his arrival in Hartlepool in 1834, Knight himself noted that the town was 'small, dirty and irregularly built' and that 'there is not a single conveyance either to or from the place, and the roads intolerably bad'.¹⁰

By the 1830s, however, there were signs of the beginnings of an industrial revolution which would transform Hartlepool (more spectacularly evident in the neighbouring town of West Hartlepool) into one of the largest shipbuilding capitals in the world by the end of the century. As early as 1832, the Hartlepool Dock and Railway Company had obtained an Act

⁸ Paz, *Popular anti-Catholicism*, 21.

⁹ Sir Cuthbert Sharpe, *History of Hartlepool*. . .being a re-print of the original work, published in 1816, with a Supplemental history, to 1851, inclusive (Hartlepool, 1851), p. 198.

¹⁰ The correspondence between Knight and Lisbon College is part of the Lisbon College Archive housed at Ushaw College. Lisbon Correspondence: William Knight to Edmund Winstanley, 3 February 1834, Ushaw College Library, LC1196.

of Parliament to authorise the building of a railway line and docks. This was further encouraged by the construction of a train line from Hartlepool to the growing number of South Durham pits. The industrialist Christopher Tennant realised very early on the importance of Hartlepool as a seaport for this purpose and was instrumental in the opening of the Victoria Dock in 1841. By the following year, the town was shipping more coal than any other port in the north of England.¹¹ It is likely that this period of rapid industrial growth would have had a profound psychological effect on the inhabitants of Hartlepool, who were predominantly English fishermen facing the transformation of their sleepy town which, until recently, had been cut off from the rest of the world. More pertinently, the work also necessitated the need for the importation of thousands of Irish navvies who toiled alongside English labourers in excavation and embankment work.¹² The possibilities for serious disorder between the English and Irish workers were already apparent as early as February 1833 when a serious riot took place, in which “the English party searched the town and drove out every Irishmen they could find”. One Irishman was killed and another had his leg broken.¹³ In April of the following year, hostilities again broke out, resulting in a riot so serious that it was felt necessary to call out a cavalry regiment to quell the disturbances.¹⁴

¹¹ N. McCord, & D. J. Rowe, ‘Industrialisation and Urban Growth in North-East England’, *International Review of Social History* 22, 1 (1977), p. 35.

¹² R. J. Cooter, *When Paddy Met Geordie: The Irish in County Durham and Newcastle, 1840-1880* (Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, 2005), 116.

¹³ Thomas Richmond, *The Local Records of Stockton and of the Neighbourhood* (London: Marlborough & Co., 1868), 165

¹⁴ *Durham County Advertiser*, 12 April 1834.

The situation was further exacerbated by local political tensions in the late 1830s which led to Hartlepool gaining an unwanted reputation as one of the most lawless towns in the country.

The local gentry of the early nineteenth century viewed Hartlepool as little more than a romantic health resort and few were interested enough to involve themselves in municipal politics. When the mayoral election of Dr William Hazlewood was challenged by the High Court in 1834 on the basis that there were too few aldermen to have elected him, the eventual judgement effectively nullified the borough's Charter. There followed, as the author of the supplement to the revised edition of Sharp's work put it, 'a period of disorganisation and misrule unequalled in any town in the kingdom of any similar pretensions – no resident magistrate – no control – no police – the township constables, incompetent and inefficient, are literally objects of ridicule'.¹⁵ This lasted for seven years and contributed to the perception of Hartlepool as a frontier town with a frontier mentality, where prejudices, sectarian or otherwise, could remain unchecked without the rule of law for protection. This was certainly the contemporary perception, as the previous writer noted darkly that 'the whole town lay at the mercy of the lawless labourers employed in excavating the docks'.¹⁶ It was not until 1841 that the Hartlepool Borough was re-established by a new charter, with William Vollum being appointed the first mayor under the new regime.¹⁷

At first glance, the prospects for Catholicism were not very encouraging. Hartlepool certainly had an eventful religious history, dating as far back as the town's founder, Hieu, who, in 640 AD had established a monastery for men and women. A number of other monasteries and

¹⁵ Sharpe, *History of Hartlepool* (supplement), 68-9.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 69.

priorities were founded during the medieval period, notably the monastery of Gisburn founded by Robert de Brus in 1129.¹⁸ Following the Reformation, Hartlepool became a stronghold of Catholic recusancy, so much so that when the town was considered for parliamentary representation in 1620, it was rejected on the basis ‘that it was much given to Popery’.¹⁹ From the middle of the eighteenth century, the Catholics at Hartlepool were attended to by the chaplain at Hardwick Hall but, by the early nineteenth century, their number had declined significantly – in 1831 only twenty were present in a population of 1,330.²⁰ Indeed, the population of Hartlepool was at this stage, according to Knight, composed almost entirely of irreligious ‘fisher folk’ and a ‘dissolute, disorderly, and drunken set’ of Irish Catholics.²¹ In a letter written the following month to Charles de Clerc, vice-president of Lisbon College, he was particularly scornful of the fishermen:

‘(They) seldom or never left the place to see what was going on in other parts of the world. They were not only considerably ignorant in matters of Religion but as much so in other things. The only article of faith they seem to have learnt . . . was a detestation of the Papists, whom they regarded and firmly believed to be a set of swindlers and impostors’.²²

¹⁸ Sharpe, *History of Hartlepool*, 108.

¹⁹ William Page, ed. *The Victoria History of the County of Durham*, Vol. 3 (London: Victoria County History, 1928), 354.

²⁰ Leo Gooch, *Persecution without Martyrdom: The Catholics of North-East England in the Age of the Vicars Apostolic, 1688-1850* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013), 305.

²¹ Knight to Winstanley, 3 February 1834.

²² Knight to Charles Le Clerc, 12 April 1834, LC/C1202.

The Irish navvies were in no position to defend the cause of Catholicity, having ‘never been to their duties for many years, and who made a regular monthly practice when they received their wages to edify the towns by scenes of drunkenness and fighting’.²³

Nevertheless, there was nothing inevitable about the way in which Hartlepool developed the unusually rabid sectarian culture where, in the disorderly atmosphere of the late 1830s, the seeds of a sustained period of religious conflict were sown. For this, attention needs to be directed towards individual personalities and the respective conduct of Hartlepool’s religious leaders. The Catholic priest of the town, Fr Knight, was educated at the English College in Lisbon, one of the oldest surviving of the continental seminaries whose purpose had been to train priests for the English missions during the recusancy period.²⁴ His education at Lisbon during the late 1820s and early 1830s must be seen within the broader context of an increase in the development of an evangelistic worldview which was characteristic of all denominations during the early nineteenth century and which was in direct contrast to the relatively harmonious relationship that, with the exception of the Gordon Riots, characterised Protestant-Catholic exchanges in the late eighteenth century.²⁵ Certainly the vicars apostolic themselves were keen to encourage this new-found zealotry in the training of priests. Declaring their satisfaction in a pastoral letter at the ‘well regulated zeal for the vindication of truth and the protection of the oppressed’ evident in recently ordained priests, they urged the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For a history of Lisbon College see Canon Croft, *Historical Account of Lisbon College* (Barnet: St. Andrew’s Street Press, 1902).

²⁵ For an example of the effects of this transformation in Manchester and Salford, see Gerald Connolly, ‘The Transubstantiation of Myth: Towards a New Popular History of Nineteenth-Century Catholicism in England’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35.1 (1984), 78-104.

‘necessity of training up in our seminaries a strong body of learned men, who, whether they enter the sacred ministry or follow secular pursuits, may, by their superior education, be duly qualified to become the champions of truth’.²⁶ Knight personified this vision. He was a model student at Lisbon, combining academic ability with a love of music.²⁷ He was also imbued with an evangelistic fervour that was not content simply with ministering to his flock but sought actively to convert the non-Catholic inhabitants of Hartlepool through any means necessary. In this he was opposed by a number of Protestant ministers, notably the Anglican clergyman, the Revd Robert Taylor. Taylor, like Knight, was a recent arrival in Hartlepool. As a zealous Low Churchman, his attitude towards Catholicism was equally uncompromising and confrontational.²⁸ Indeed, Knight’s early letters to his former president, Edmund Winstanley, often read like dispatches from a warzone, detailing the progress of his mission amidst the almost ceaseless attacks of his Protestant enemies.

When Knight arrived in the town in March 1834, he found that both the Revd Mr Taylor, alongside the local Methodist minister, the Revd T.M. Fitzgerald, had failed to make any inroads into improving the religious conduct of the population. Much to their chagrin, Knight’s efforts proved to be far more successful. He was fortunate that Mr Wells, a Protestant layman with a Catholic wife, was so infuriated with the lack of success of the Protestant ministers that he was willing to finance the building of a Catholic chapel and see ‘whether the Catholic Religion will do any good where all others have failed’ among the

²⁶ Vicariates Apostolic of England, *Monita et Statuta* (London 1838).

²⁷ Thomas A. Dunne, *The Catholic Church in Hartlepool* [(1920)], 4.

²⁸ The Revd Robert Taylor was the incumbent of St. Hilda’s from 1834 until his death in 1867.

disorderly and irreligious population.²⁹ Knight's methods of attracting converts, which included preaching three times a week during Lent and the introduction of singing and music into his church, proved immensely popular. Indeed, the chapel originally built by Wells with a view to accommodating twice the number of Catholics then present in Hartlepool was soon too small even for this purpose.³⁰

Knight observed that his methods were quickly becoming a cause of anxiety to the Protestant ministers of the town. As early as his first letter to Winstanley, he reported being 'pelted with mud and another time pushed by a body of Ranters off the footpath up to his ankles in mud'.³¹ Indeed, it was not long before a vicious anti-Catholic campaign was launched which, he observed, 'only served to cut their own throats'.³² Indeed, Knight informed Winstanley of two further events which helped 'to entirely change the face of things in our favour'. The first concerned the conversion of the Revd Mr Fitzgerald's sister. The woman, who is unnamed in Knight's correspondence, had originally been sent undercover by her brother to report on the services in the Catholic Church. Learning that she had been taken ill, Knight forced himself into the house of the Methodist minister in an attempt to speak to her - so determined was Knight that even Fitzgerald's threat of shooting him with a gun did little to deter his entry. The priest, however, found the door to the woman's room bolted and so left disappointed. Nevertheless, he believed that the incident created a deep impression on the woman and, following her recovery, she became a fervent Catholic, even using her influence to assist

²⁹ Knight to Winstanley, 3 February 1834.

³⁰ Knight to Le Clerc, 12 April 1834.

³¹ Knight to Winstanley, 3 February 1834.

³² Ibid.

Knight in converting another of the minister's sisters. Knight also gave the woman additional lessons of instruction to help her to combat the religious arguments of her brother and the Methodists.³³

The second event described by Knight was as damaging to the Revd Robert Taylor and the Anglican Church as the first had been to the Revd Mr Fitzgerald and the Methodists. On finding a baby daughter of a respectable Protestant lady on the verge of death, Dr Jackson, a Catholic who had been called to the scene, 'baptised' the baby. The baby died shortly afterwards but the Revd Mr Taylor refused to give the baby a Christian burial on the grounds that it had been 'baptised' a Catholic. The matter reached the bishop of Durham, the staunchly anti-Catholic William van Mildert, whose response was indicative of his own prejudices against the Catholic Church. 'Whatever might be the customs of the Romish Church', the bishop argued, 'such a thing as lay baptism was not allowed in the Prot. Church and, considering the Doctor's baptism as an unwarrantable assumption of power', he refused to authorise the officiating clergyman to bury the child. The archbishop of York was asked to intervene but his reply failed to resolve the situation. Knight appealed to Taylor but this only provoked an angry response to the effect 'that we might all be damned to Hell but he would not bury the Child for any man upon earth'. After much pressure from the town authorities, however, Taylor was forced to change his mind and bury the baby who had, by this stage, been dead for fifteen days.³⁴

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Assuming the events described above were factually correct (and there is nothing to corroborate them), it would be easy to see how the behaviour of the Protestant ministers, combined with the innovative services being introduced by Knight in his own church, would have increased both the popularity of the Catholic Church among the local population and the indignation of the Protestant extremists against it. The first incident in particular highlights Knight's belligerent, almost aggressive, evangelistic zeal and he continued to remain on the offensive, raising subscriptions to enlarge his Church to accommodate the growing Catholic population and to install a choir stall and new organ. The organ and choir were, as Knight suggested, 'long a thing never heard in this town (that) will attract immense numbers'.³⁵ A year later, Knight reported that his new congregation was 'prospering more than I ever could have had any hopes it would'. This he put down to attempts by Protestants to step up their campaign against him by distributing anti-Catholic tracts. These tracts were, Knight argued, 'so evidently absurd and false, that the most illiterate can see that they are only a desperate effort to support a bad cause'. By this stage, Knight had a very respectable choir and his Lenten services were well attended 'by persons of all disciplines and creeds'.³⁶ Indeed, he reported a further ten converts in the Easter Communion and, in 1836, his catechetical classes had encouraged a further 25 converts. This occurred in spite of the continuation of an incessant campaign to denigrate the Catholic Church by the 'Protestant parsons', whose efforts 'are universally of such a violent nature and so full of gross misrepresentation'.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Knight to Winstanley, 11 March 1835, LC/C1240.

³⁷ Knight to Winstanley, 10 April 1836, LC/C1281.

So far, Knight could claim quite legitimately that he was simply building up his mission and that the reaction of the Protestant ministers was motivated by jealousy in response to his undoubted success. His deliberately provocative appearance at a church rate meeting in April 1838, however, is less easily explained. Until the abolition of compulsory payments in 1868, church rates were a constant bone of contention for the Anglican minister and his parishioners.³⁸ Church rate meetings were therefore notoriously hot-headed affairs but the meeting in Hartlepool was particularly volatile because of the audacity of Knight's decision not only to attend the meeting but to use it as a platform to harangue the Revd Mr Taylor.³⁹ So angered was Taylor by Knight's impudence that he wrote a report of the meeting for the *Newcastle Journal*, subsequently printed for circulation, in which he attempted to show how Knight had been completely wrong-footed by another Protestant, Mr Wells, the original benefactor of the Catholic chapel. According to the report, Knight, whom Taylor believed had been sent by the Radicals of the town to affect the outcome of the rate, had arrived at the meeting ready to deliver a speech. Wells shouted at him: 'Mr Knight, we do not get property in our Church so easily as you do in yours. We have nothing but what we get honestly'. Taylor suggested that this produced a strange effect on 'the poor-piano playing priest' who could only 'shake and quiver like the string of his famous instrument, whilst sending forth its inharmonious notes to charm the wily songstresses of Hartlepool'. The result of the meeting,

³⁸ For an analysis of church rate disputes in the nineteenth century, see J. P. Ellens, *Religious Routes to Gladstonian Liberalism: The Church Rate Conflict in England and Wales* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

³⁹ Fr. McDonnell of Birmingham was also involved in church rate politics. See Champ, 'Priesthood and Politics', 292-3.

in which an increase in the church rate was rejected, led to an angry exchange between the two ministers as the meeting drew to a close.⁴⁰

In a commentary on the article, however, 'A Catholic Layman' disputed Taylor's claim that Mr Wells had silenced Knight. Indeed, according to the commentator, quite the opposite had occurred, with Knight asking Wells to prove his assertion. Wells was described in this account as so affected by Knight's response that he even felt the need to apologise to the Catholic priest for his outburst the following day. 'The Public', the writer proclaimed, 'will therefore easily judge which of the two must have quivered the most'.⁴¹ Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no doubt that Wells was far from happy with Knight's conduct. A letter from the Revd Thomas Slater to Bishop Briggs, dated 14 April 1838, recalls that the sum of £250 was paid to John Wells 'in consideration of all claims he might have upon the Chapel, land, house, etc., at Hartlepool',⁴² suggesting that Wells felt the need to withdraw his former generosity towards the Catholic Church after this incident. It was clear that Taylor's anti-Catholic conduct was also causing consternation, so much so that he was even at loggerheads with his own parishioners. In a letter to Winstanley, Knight suggested that the church rate meeting had such an effect on Taylor that he attacked his own parishioners in the local newspaper. The feeling in the town in response was so great that Taylor was even forced to hire two bodyguards as protection following physical threats of violence made against him by

⁴⁰ Newcastle Journal, *Church Rate Conflict at Hartlepool* (Newcastle: Newcastle Journal, 1838).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Quoted in Bernard C. Sharratt, *The Catholic Church in Hartlepool and West Hartlepool* (Glasgow 1965), 6.

his parishioners. 'From all this', Knight argued, 'you will see in what low estimation the established Church is here'.⁴³

The unusually high level of sectarian tension in Hartlepool encouraged Taylor to make overtures to the British Reformation Society, a national organisation founded in 1827 with auxiliaries and mission stations throughout the country. As the historian John Wolffe has shown, its purpose was to disseminate the principles of the Reformation through lectures and public debates between its Protestant agents and local Catholic apologists.⁴⁴ In Hartlepool, a mission station had existed since the foundation of the Society but Taylor wished to encourage a higher level of involvement by establishing an auxiliary. This was in response to a petition appearing in the *Gateshead Observer* in February 1840, sent by twenty Protestants to Knight, asking for a series of lectures to be delivered on the doctrines and principles of the Catholic religion because they had been 'on frequent occasions, disgusted by the evidently exaggerated (anti-Catholic) statements, which they had heard in church and other places of worship'. Knight dutifully obliged, making it his mission in these lectures to demonstrate the ways in which the Protestant Church had 'shamefully' misrepresented Catholic doctrine.⁴⁵

In response, Taylor asked the Revd Brabazon Ellis, an Irish Protestant agent working for the Protestant Reformation Society, to deliver a lecture at the Wesleyan chapel in Hartlepool on the subject of idolatry, the handbill of which was headed 'No Peace With Rome!!!' Not to be outdone, Knight issued a similar handbill (entitled 'Peace With All Men') announcing a

⁴³Letter from Knight to Winstanley, 14 May 1838, LC/C1346.

⁴⁴Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 153.

⁴⁵*Gateshead Observer*, 1 February 1840.

sermon on Christian charity which, according to Ellis, purported to address the issue of ‘Protestants who impugn and PROTEST against her doctrines, “calumniat(ing)” and “persecute(ing)” her’.⁴⁶ Ellis challenged Knight to a debate at the Wesleyan chapel, ordering him to ‘give to me and others a statement of your Church’s doctrine, in repudiation of the charges brought against her, and which we cannot but believe to be well founded of IDOLATRY AND PERSECUTION’. Knight, however, refused. Among many reasons he advanced for his refusal, subsequently published in a short pamphlet, he claimed that ‘such discussions are frequently the cause of positive immorality, by sowing the seeds of religious prejudice and animosity, and thus producing dissension and discord, where before there was peace, harmony and good-will’.⁴⁷ In this action at least, Knight showed a considerable degree of self-restraint.

This altercation between Knight and Ellis had generated a great deal of interest in the town and a public meeting was set up to establish a British Reformation Society auxiliary. The speakers at the meeting, who were mostly Anglican and Wesleyan ministers and laymen, addressed the principal anti-Catholics of the town with, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Revd Robert Taylor foremost amongst them. Taylor’s speech described the recent history of religious conflict from the Protestant point of view and can therefore be viewed as a useful counterbalance to Knight’s rather one-sided description of events in his letters to Lisbon College. While Taylor accepted his role in distributing religious tracts among the Protestants of Hartlepool, he accused Knight and ‘his housekeeper’ of causing much anger in the town by

⁴⁶ William Knight, *A Sermon on True Christian Charity, Preached in the Catholic Chapel, Hartlepool, March, 8th. 1840* (Hartlepool, 1840).

⁴⁷ *The Rev. W. Knight’s Reply to the Rev. Brabazon Ellis. To Which is Prefixed the Rev. B. Ellis’s Letter Itself* (Hartlepool, 1840).

thrusting anti-Protestant tracts into the hands of everyone, whether Protestant or Catholic. Knight had also allegedly told Taylor in a private exchange that he was attempting to acquire possession of his Anglican church which, Knight argued, had been stolen from him by the Church of England during the Reformation. There seems to have been no exaggeration in Knight's earlier claim of a dispute between Taylor and his parishioners. Indeed, the Anglican minister conceded in his speech that he had his differences with his parishioners, but also accused Knight of taking full advantage of this in making 'more division among them' in order to 'have it all his (Knight's) own way'. Taylor also used his sermon to launch into a diatribe against the Catholic Church, which included a rather outrageous assertion that the subsoil in the gardens of convents was actually "composed of the bones of infants".⁴⁸ That this assertion was met with no response from the audience suggests that it was widely believed. Other speakers, including the Revd Philip Hardcastle of Stockton, Mr Johnson Worthy (a joiner) and the Revd Brabazon Ellis himself, expanded upon other doctrinal issues. After four and a half hours the meeting was concluded with the decision to form the auxiliary.⁴⁹

In spite of the enthusiasm for the establishment of this auxiliary, the British Reformation Society did not appear to play a major role in sectarian conflict in the town after 1840. Nevertheless, theological controversy between Taylor and Knight continued well into the

⁴⁸ This statement was probably influenced by Maria Monk's 'revelations' of convent life in *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk: or, the Hidden Secrets of a Nun's Life in a Convent Exposed* (1836). This was a sensationalist anti-Catholic work widely circulated in Britain and America during this period.

⁴⁹ British Reformation Society, *Full Report of the Proceedings of a Public Meeting Held in the Wesleyan Chapel, Hartlepool, on Monday Evening, March 9th, 1840, to Establish an Auxiliary in Aid of the British Reformation Society* (Sunderland, 1840).

decade. In 1847, Taylor published a volume entitled *Pagan and Popish Priestcraft Identified and Exposed, and Popery Proved to be Satan's Systemised Opposition to the Work of Redemption*. In this volume, he attempted to show how the Catholic Church had its origins in paganism and Satanism. He was particularly scathing of the duties associated with priesthood - perhaps reflecting the anti-sacerdotal culture in Hartlepool generally - as well as the celebration of Mass, which he described as a '*pantomimic* representation of all Christ's labouring and sufferings from the commencement of the Last Supper to his death upon the cross, and his ascension into Heaven'. He also suggested that the circular shape of the wafer presented to the communicant was, in fact, an old pagan symbol representing 'Satan's cypher'.⁵⁰ In response, Knight published a pamphlet attacking Taylor's decision to print such a vitriolic volume which was deliberately designed to incite hatred.⁵¹

This sectarian and, in particular, anti-sacerdotal culture was also reflected in the political arena during the 1840s. In May 1841, a controversial public meeting was held in the Town Hall to protest against the continuation of a parliamentary grant to the Catholic seminary of Maynooth, County Kildare. As John Wolffe has shown, the anti-Maynooth agitation at this time was mainly the preserve of extremist Protestant groups, notably the Protestant Association,⁵² suggesting that the existence of a local auxiliary of the society was present in Hartlepool and actively involved in organising the meeting. According to a report of the meeting in the *Penny Protestant Operative*, an organ established by the Protestant Operative

⁵⁰ Robert Taylor, *Pagan and Popish Priestcraft Identified and Exposed, and Popery Proved to be Satan's Systemized Opposition to the Work of Redemption* (London, 1847).

⁵¹ William Knight, *A Few Remarks on the Rev. R. Taylor's Recent Publication, Entitled "Pagan and Popish Priestcraft, &c."* (Hartlepool, 1847), 5.

⁵² Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, p. 100.

Association which was a branch of the Protestant Association aimed primarily at the working classes, Fr Knight had ordered his flock, mostly Irish labourers, to attend this meeting and cause as much of a disturbance as possible. The Hall was crammed to the point of suffocation. Unsurprisingly, the principal speakers included Protestant ministers and other anti-Catholic laymen of the town. The Revd Robert Taylor moved the first resolution. According to the newspaper, Taylor used it as an opportunity to deliver a history lesson on the subject of Popery generally:

‘The Revd gentlemen traced the monster Popery from its very origin in the lowest abyss of the infernal regions, through all the workings of Satan; in idolatry throughout the heathen world, till the advent of Christ; and then most ably and satisfactorily showed how the great fatherism of ancient Rome passed into the great fatherism of Popery of modern Rome’.⁵³

The Revd Lewis Paige, curate of Hartlepool and native of Ireland, was also given the opportunity to show how Popery was a blight wherever it was encouraged. His speech was frequently interrupted by ‘Papists and Chartists’. Matters came to a head when a local Chartist leader who had, according to the reporter, been ‘brought to the meeting by the Papists to convert it into a Chartist debate’, cried for the petition to be seized and ‘a regular row was attempted’ between the fishermen on the one hand and the Catholics and Chartists on the other. Nevertheless, ‘notwithstanding the exertions of their priest’, the Catholics left the Hall quietly.⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that, although there was a modest anti-Maynooth

⁵³ Protestant Association, *Penny Protestant Operative*, 1 May 1841, 39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

petitioning campaign nationwide during this period, Hartlepool seems to have been one of only a few towns in the country to hold a public meeting on the subject.⁵⁵

In 1845, the question of Maynooth again received parliamentary attention when the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, attempted to introduce a bill to both increase the grant and make it recurrent without the need for annual parliamentary votes.⁵⁶ The Protestant Association was once again involved in organising the agitation which proved to be far more popular than four years earlier. The opposition to the bill was particularly large because it allowed Anglicans, whose opposition was based on the measure as abhorrent to the ‘Protestant Constitution’ of Great Britain, to join forces with Voluntarist Dissenters, who opposed all religious endowments.⁵⁷ They made uneasy bedfellows as attempts to unite them under a shared Protestant heritage often ended in disarray, most notably at a disastrous conference of the Central Anti-Maynooth Committee in April 1845, from which many Congregationalists and Baptists walked out.⁵⁸ Regional meetings reflected this division, many adopting either a Voluntarist or Anglican stance, or attempting to combine the differing stances, usually with limited success.

⁵⁵ The historian John Wolffe has noted that the anti-Maynooth campaign of 1839-41 resulted in a low number of signatures on petitions which was indicative either “the product of individual effort or the protest of a particular congregation”, Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 100.

⁵⁶ D. A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests and Politics: Sir Robert Peel’s Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1841-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 224.

⁵⁷ Edward Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), 40.

⁵⁸ Richard Brown, *Church and State in Modern Britain: 1700-1850* (London: Routledge, 1991), 277

The meeting at Hartlepool was probably organised by the Dissenting ministers of the town – the Revd S. Lewins (Independent) and Revd J. Douglas (Presbyterian) were notable speakers for example – because the Anglican ministers were notable by their absence. The gathering was described as a ‘public meeting’ and included a number of laymen on the platform, while the mayor of the town, William Manners, chaired the meeting. Knight was, unsurprisingly, also present to defend ‘his church from the charge of persecution and idolatry which he maintained had been brought against it by the preceding speakers’. The report of the meeting noted that there was a great deal of disruption during Knight’s speech.⁵⁹ Anti-Maynooth feeling in Hartlepool seemed to be a common feature in the 1840s and early 1850s.. Indeed, it is interesting to note that as late as 1855, and long after a revived anti-Maynooth campaign in 1852 had run its course, Hartlepool was still one of the few places sending petitions to Parliament on the matter.⁶⁰

The sectarian conflict of the late 1830s/early 1840s was revived in Hartlepool following the restoration of the hierarchy in October 1850. Pope Pius IX’s bull, supplemented by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman’s ill-advised polemic in which he spoke of ‘Catholic’ England being ‘restored to its orbit in the ecclesiastical firmament from which its light had long vanished’, caused a storm of anti-Catholic indignation, with many speakers and writers denouncing it as an attempt by the pontiff to usurp Queen Victoria’s right to nominate bishops.⁶¹ The political agitation lasted less than a year but Protestant-Catholic relations remained sour until the mid-

⁵⁹ *Sunderland Herald*, 19 April 1845.

⁶⁰ *Durham Chronicle*, 8 June 1855.

⁶¹ The Papal Aggression episode has been extensively researched. See, for example, R. J. Klaus, *The Pope, the Protestants, and the Irish: Papal Aggression and Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987).

1850s. In Hartlepool, the agitation was given a local impetus by Cardinal Wiseman's decision to preach in August 1851 at the opening of the new Catholic Church, dedicated to St Mary's.⁶² The weeks leading up to Wiseman's visit saw Protestant-Catholic relations reach breaking point. In July 1851, Charles Larkin, who styled himself as a 'Champion of Catholicism', delivered a lecture in the Town Hall, in which he deliberately provoked the Protestant section of the audience by describing them as 'poor, creeping, benighted creatures, crawling in the dark through that book they call the *bible*'. This led to a rush against the lecturer in which both Larkin and Fr Knight, who happened to be present, barely managed to escape without serious injury.⁶³ In response, the lecturer A. H. Lamb was invited to the town to defend the Protestant cause. In his lecture, which was subsequently published, he denounced the priest's role in the confessional:

'By its means . . . the priest is made one with Satan. Operating in the very origin of the will, he can vitiate the purest mind . . . It seems a doubt whether Satan ever brought his ancient system of Paganism to such a state of maturity as his priesthood, in the counterfeit system of the Christian church, have brought his system of auricular confession'.⁶⁴

The encouragement of Lamb's lecturers led to a 'Boyne Day' riot among the Irish Catholic and English Protestant navvies, resulting in smashed windows and broken heads. This persuaded the Rt. Hon. George Grey, M.P. for South Durham, to enter into correspondence with the Mayor expressing his fear that Wiseman's appearance might become the scene for further violence. The Chief Constable assured a Watch Committee meeting that the army

⁶² The church was the first in the north of England to have a peal of bells. Sharpe, *History of Hartlepool* (Supplement), 104.

⁶³ *Sunderland News*, 19 July 1851.

⁶⁴ A. H. Lamb, *Popery Opposed to the Laws of Nature and Revelation* (London, 1854), 11.

would be on hand to act if necessary.⁶⁵ Wiseman was also clearly nervous about his forthcoming visit to Hartlepool. In making arrangements for his visit, he urged Knight to ensure that ‘nothing will be done to attract attention beyond what our business requires’. He also confided that many of his friends had advised him against going such was the bitterness prevailing in the town.⁶⁶ In the event, both Grey and Wiseman need not have worried as the event passed off peacefully.

The atmosphere of the 1850s also saw anti-Catholic energies redirected towards Fr Knight himself. It was reported in the *Bulwark* that Knight had complained to the Hartlepool magistrates of receiving regular verbal abuse and his sister had even been assaulted while riding because of her connection to the priest. Knight blamed the Durham Evangelical, the Revd George Fox, whose anti-Catholic sermons had been stoking the flames of sectarian discord.⁶⁷ In 1857, accusations were levelled in a court case against Knight for the alleged seduction of a solicitor’s daughter, resulting in the solicitor assaulting the priest.⁶⁸ There is certainly evidence to suggest that Knight’s own activities were far from dampening the anti-Catholic mood. In April 1852, for example, the Catholic newspaper, the *Tablet*, praised Knight for delivering anti-Protestant orations every Sunday for the last three months.⁶⁹ Similarly in December 1854, the anti-Catholic newspaper, the *Bulwark*, reported that Knight

⁶⁵ Teesside Archives, Hartlepool Watch Committee Constables' Book, 20 August 1851.

⁶⁶ Letter from Nicholas Wiseman to William Knight, quoted in Gooch, *Persecution Without Martyrdom*, 307.

⁶⁷ *Bulwark*, December 1854.

⁶⁸ *Sunderland Herald*, 2 October 1857.

⁶⁹ *Tablet*, 17 April 1852.

had been causing much annoyance in the town by ringing the bells of the Catholic Church to drown out the sermon of the Anglican clergyman.⁷⁰

The early 1850s also saw a renewed effort by Anglican and other denominational missionary societies in targeting and converting the poorer Roman Catholics of Hartlepool and other large towns and cities. Brian Harrison has argued that missionary societies saw conversion to Protestantism as a necessary step in alleviating poverty and ignorance, particularly as poverty was viewed largely as a result of moral failure.⁷¹ As previously shown, rapid industrialisation in Hartlepool and the surrounding areas had encouraged the immigration of large numbers of Irish Catholics, many of whom lived in appalling conditions and were largely non-practising in their religion. The activities of Protestant evangelical organisations may have been more modest in Hartlepool than in the larger towns and cities such as Newcastle and London, but they were just as zealous in targeting the Catholic population. A branch of the Church of England Missions to the Roman Catholics was established in Hartlepool, whose aim was to preach controversial sermons and hold discussion classes with the aim of encouraging the spread of true religious knowledge among Catholics. The Anglican minister, the Rev. Lewis Paige, was a notable supporter of the organisation and regularly used sermons in his church to promote it.⁷² The British Reformation Society, as we have seen, had a presence in the town as early as 1827 and lectures by the Society were still being delivered in the Town Hall in 1855.⁷³ By far the most popular society was the Hartlepool Town Mission founded in 1848. A branch of this missionary organisation existed in all of the major towns and cities with the

⁷⁰ *Bulwark*, December 1854.

⁷¹ Brian Harrison, 'Philanthropy and the Victorians', *Victorian Studies* 9.4 (June 1966), 356.

⁷² *British Protestant*, (May 1853), 69.

⁷³ *Sunderland Herald*, 29 June 1849.

most notable being the London City Mission.⁷⁴ The Town Mission's alleged non-sectarian policy allowed it to attract a broader base of support than the more narrowly anti-Catholic societies whose subscriber list, as Brian Dickey has noted, tended to attract only Anglican Evangelicals.⁷⁵ An extract from the report of the Hartlepool missionary gives an indication of the extent of his activities in the town:

‘He has paid during the year 20,527 visits to about 950 families. Of these visits, 942 have been to sick, aged, and dying persons, of whom 40 have died. In connexion with these visits, religious tracts have been lent and kept in regular circulation, and in addition to the number lent, 2,069 have been given away. During the year, 230 meetings have been held for scripture-reading and preaching – 70 of which have been in the open air’.⁷⁶

That the Town Missions avoided the temptation to target the Catholics, many of whom were Irish, seems unlikely. At a meeting of the Hartlepool Town Mission in 1853, the Rev. Mr. Douglass urged the attendees to target ‘intemperance, Popery and infidelity’ and another speaker, a Mr Adam, suggested that the audience needed to ‘give more attention to the subject of Popery’. Indeed, it is telling that once the Protestant-Catholic tensions of the early 1850s had subsided, evangelical societies of this nature tended to disband.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ For an analysis of the activities of the London City Mission, see Sheridan Gilley, ‘Protestant London, No Popery and the Irish Poor, 1830-1860: Part I’, *Recusant History* 10 (1970), 210-23 and Sheridan Gilley, ‘Protestant London, No Popery and the Irish Poor, 1850-1860: Part II’, *Recusant History* 11 (1971), 27-40.

⁷⁵ Brian Dickey, “‘Going About and Doing Good’: Evangelicals and Poverty, c.1815-1870’ in John Wolffe, ed. *Evangelical Faith and Public Zeal: Evangelicals and Society in Britain 1780-1980*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995), 42.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Sharpe, *History of Hartlepool* (Supplement), 114.

⁷⁷ This reflects the national trend. Gilley, ‘Protestant London’, 28.

The 1860s were years of relative quietude in Protestant-Catholic relations nationally but anti-Catholic feeling remained in Hartlepool where the fruits of early sectarian conflict were still very much present. The tensions between Taylor and Knight may have dissipated somewhat but other zealots in the town seemed more than happy to take over. Benjamin T. Ord, for example, the editor of the Conservative and Evangelical *Hartlepool Free Press*, used his newspaper to voice his own prejudices against the Catholic Church. Indeed, Ord seemed to have a personal vendetta against the Church and, in particular, the Catholic priesthood, publishing two unashamedly anti-sacerdotal pamphlets in the mid-1860s.⁷⁸ In the second pamphlet, Ord accused the late Catholic priest, Fr Thomas Wilkinson, former librarian at the Catholic seminary of Ushaw College, of coercing a dying member of his family to give up her fortune to the priest in her will in 1844. Ord printed the letters he had written to William Hogarth (bishop of Hexham and Newcastle), Cardinal Wiseman, and even the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, about the matter but received no redress for his grievances.⁷⁹

The local workhouse in Hartlepool also became a regular scene of sectarian bickering throughout the 1860s. This was set against the backdrop of a national campaign by the Protestant Alliance to organise a petition against a new proposal for a permanent Roman Catholic chaplain in all workhouses.⁸⁰ In 1861, the Revd Lewis Paige continued his campaign of incessant anti-Catholicism by attempting to prevent Fr Knight's curate and Roman Catholic chaplain, Revd Eugene Harival, from ministering to the Irish Catholics in the workhouse. This followed a confrontation between the two, in which Paige had addressed the

⁷⁸ B. T. Ord, *The Beginning of the End and A Blue Book: or, an Exposition of the Manner in which the Priesthood Plunder and Devour their Flocks* (Hartlepool, 1865).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism*, 189.

master of the workhouse, in full view of Harival, complaining that ‘this man has no right to come here, unless he is especially sent for, and he has no right to see anyone but the person who sends for him; I am the chaplain of this house and it is the law of the land’.⁸¹ Harival had accused Paige of refusing to take his hat off in his presence, causing an angry rebuke from the Protestant minister:

‘What! Submission by a gentleman and a clergyman of England’s Church, to a priest of the Church of Rome: a church which contains doctrines more false, more impure, more dangerous, more devilish, than are contained in the Shasters of Hindooism, or in the books of Confucius, or the Koran of Mahomet!’.⁸²

The 1860s also saw a renewal of sectarian tensions between the English and Irish immigrants of the town encouraged by the lecturing tour of the ultra-Protestant and anti-Catholic rabble-rouser, Patrick Flynn. Flynn’s tour of Hartlepool in 1868 should be viewed within the broader context of the anti-Fenian panic increasing the animosity against the Irish community substantially. A protégé of William Murphy, whose lecturing tours of the Midlands and Lancashire had generated serious riots,⁸³ Flynn had gained similar notoriety locally with serious disturbances at Darlington, Stockton and particularly West Hartlepool, where his decision to preach ‘under the broad canopy of heaven’ resulted in a riot to rival Murphy’s tour further south. When Flynn reached Hartlepool, his reputation had clearly preceded him. A crowd of over 1,000 people listened to his lecture on the Town Moor. The content of Flynn’s oration was designed to appeal to the more vulgar aspects of popular anti-Catholicism, in which he described priests as ‘debauchers of women and Catholic women as corrupted by priests’, as well as describing Queen Isabella of Spain as ‘the kept mistress of

⁸¹ *Hartlepool Free Press*, 30 November 1861.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Walter L. Arnstein, ‘The Murphy riots: a Victorian dilemma’, *Victorian Studies* 19.1 (1975), 51-73.

the Pope'. Many of the audience were not content to remain passive observers under Flynn's harangues. They pelted the lecturer with stones and there were regular clashes between Flynn's supporters and the Irish Catholics. It was only through a strong police presence that more serious disturbances were prevented.⁸⁴

After 1870, the sectarian tensions of the mid-Victorian period diminished significantly and there were no further outbreaks of hostility between Catholics and Protestants in the town. This clearly reflected the national trend where only in exceptional places did Protestant-Catholic conflict remain an issue. What is surprising in the case of Hartlepool was just how rapid conflict dissipated given the tensions of the mid-Victorian period. Indeed, when Knight died in 1872, no obituary mentioned the long-standing prejudice which he had been exposed to and, to a certain extent at least, he had helped to generate.⁸⁵ Furthermore, subsequent printed parish histories of Hartlepool and the Catholic Church in this region make no reference to any unusual animosity between Protestants and Catholics in the town, suggesting a conscious attempt to ignore this unseemly aspect of Hartlepool's history.⁸⁶ This was in part due to the later Protestant and Catholic ministers encouraging a level of toleration which was not apparent earlier in the century and reflecting a more conciliatory and ecumenical age.

⁸⁴ For an examination of the Flynn Riots, see Jonathan Bush, "*Papists*" and *Prejudice: Popular Anti-Catholicism and Anglo-Irish Conflict in the North East of England, 1845-70* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 212-222.

⁸⁵ See the obituary in the *Tablet*, 21 March 1874.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Sharratt, *The Catholic Church in Hartlepool and West Hartlepool*; Dunne, *The Catholic Church in Hartlepool*.

In conclusion, Hartlepool is an important case study for highlighting the sectarian culture of a developing industrial town during the nineteenth century. Although perhaps not on the scale of Liverpool or Glasgow, it could be legitimately argued that the ferocity of religious conflict over such a sustained period makes it comparable, and in all probability surpasses, the culture of anti-Catholicism in other smaller industrial towns in Lancashire and elsewhere. Unlike the situation in these areas, where anti-Catholicism was synonymous with anti-Irish hostility, Protestant-Catholic conflict in Hartlepool was sustained largely by the activities of religious ministers, against the backdrop of unique cultural, political and social tensions, in which Irish immigrants were only one factor in a peculiarly volatile mix. This study therefore demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in the years following emancipation and how conflict between the two groups was sustained over the *longue durée* outside the established centres. Further research on Protestant-Catholic sectarianism in the provincial towns of Victorian Britain, perhaps adopting a comparative approach with the developing frontier towns of antebellum America, would only enhance our understanding of the dynamics of conflict in places where the power of religious extremists held great sway within rapidly industrialising societies.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ For a transnational comparative study, see John Wolffe, 'A Transatlantic Perspective: Protestantism and National Identities in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain and the United States', in Ian McBride and Tony Claydon, eds. *Protestantism and National Identity in Britain and Ireland, c.1650-c.1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 291–309.