

James Anthony Froude and Ireland: A Historiographical Controversy of the Nineteenth Century

Few Victorian politicians or intellectuals knew Ireland at first hand as well as James Anthony Froude, yet none were denounced more bitterly for ignorance of things Irish than he. His association with Ireland began in 1840, when fresh from Oxford he accepted a post as tutor in the family of an Irish clergyman. The Reverend William Cleaver of Delgany, County Wicklow, son of a former archbishop of Dublin, was an evangelical whom the young tutor described as 'nearer to the type of christian saint' than any other person of any creed that he had ever met. Froude later claimed that this first contact with Ireland together with his reading of Carlyle had helped him to break away from the spell of Newman and the Oxford Movement. It had brought home to him a realization of all that was best in Protestantism, and the experience contributed to the formation of his views on Ireland and on Irish history.¹

In 1845 Froude was back in Ireland having agreed to do research on a life of Saint Patrick for Newman's series *English and Irish Saints*. He found, however, that it was impossible to separate the truth from 'the wilderness of nonsense', and became convinced that the Patrick of legend was not a single, double or even quadruple star. 'Patricius was a title, not an individual, and the glory of converting the island to Christianity was the work not of one saint but of many'. 'St Patrick might be a myth', he wrote, 'the living Ireland was a reality'.² Froude offered himself without success for a professorship in one of the Queen's Colleges and in 1848 he was again in Ireland during the insurrection. As a '48 intellectual and liberal he wrote: 'I have hopes of these young Paddies after all. I think they will have a fight for it',³ meaning, however, against the landlords.

1 Froude's autobiographical notes dealing with his visit to Ireland are given in W. H. Dunn, *James Anthony Froude: a Biography 1818-1856* (Oxford 1961), pp. 63-71.

2 Dunn, *James Anthony Froude*, p. 86.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 123.