



For the Union and the Catholic Church: Four Converts in the Civil War

Max Longley

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On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at the Appomatox Courthouse, putting into motion the cessation of a vicious war which devastated the lives of nearly 750,000 Americans over a period of four years.

Max Longley's *For the Union and the Catholic Church: Four Converts in the Civil War*, published 150 years later, is a timely recollection of the lives of four men and their families who embraced Catholicism at a time of bitter and passionate civil upheaval whose rifts reverberated throughout the western world during the long mid-nineteenth century. Longley selected the lives of the brothers William and Sylvester Rosecrans, along with James Healy and Orestes Brownson, to serve as distant mirrors whose reflections have withstood the test of time, revealing each man's staunch defense of values deeply contemplated and rigorously articulated in their best efforts to stand and act on principle, putting at risk their personal lives, reputations, and fortunes in defense of the common good.

Longley's narrative opens on the fields of Gettysburg on July 2, 1863, where the Irish Brigade is stationed for manoeuvres at the battlefield of Wheatfield. Later that month, draft riots broke out in New York. This juxtaposition of interests sets the stage for entering

into the perilous world of the Catholic soldier serving on Civil War battlegrounds.. Father James Healy, Union officer Major General William S. Rosecrans; his brother Sylvester Rosecrans, auxiliary bishop of Cincinnati; and Orestes Brownson, editor of *Brownson's Quarterly Review* are masterfully introduced within a narrative which immerses the reader into the crosscurrents of dissent regarding slavery, abolition, states-rights, free trade, conscription, religious tolerance, and the terms of Reconstruction. Longley gives careful attention to the ongoing dialogue between church hierarchy and the laity worldwide regarding the critical circumstances dividing the American nation.

The lives of the eponymous four converts present unique sets of circumstances from which to engage the reader in a thoughtful recreation of events and actions taking place during the Civil War. It was not an easy time to self-identify as Catholic. Written from each man's intimate conversion to the faith as a starting point, Longley develops a complex narrative written not to defend any one faith tradition, but to highlight the clash of social, economic, and political values during the tumultuous 1860s from the personal perspective of each character. Moreover, he sets his narrative in a global context, using the biographical narratives to explain the competing agendas of

national self-interest and the tactics of religion and politics in a time of dire suffering and need.

Longley's characters had entered the Catholic Church during the 1840s, a time of rapid demographic change in the United States. The Treaty of Paris (1763) marked the end of the Seven Years' War and the beginning of Great Britain's rise to empire. New France welcomed Catholic immigrants and protected their status and influence in their colonies. As a result of the treaty, the eastern flank of Louisiana, a New France colony in America, was ceded to Great Britain with the promise that all Catholics would remain free to practice their faith.

The Treaty of 1763 altered the face of the United States. French Louisiana was ceded to Spain, and then recovered by the secret Treaty of Ildefonso in 1800; France sold the Lower Louisiana territory to the United States in 1803. That same year the U.S. recognized the state of Ohio, formerly the Northwest Territory. The States of Louisiana, Mississippi, Indiana, Illinois, Alabama, Maine, Missouri, Arkansas, Michigan, Florida, Texas, Iowa, and Minnesota followed in succession, absorbing the traditional British American communities of the Atlantic seaboard into a rapidly expanding commercial enterprise whose patterns of engagement with global markets are felt to the present day.

Longley also brings into the picture the Great Famine, or *an Gorta Mór* (1845 to 1852) which devastated the Irish mainland through starvation and disease. It is estimated that 1.5 million people perished and another 2.5 million were subjected to extreme poverty and homelessness. During the 1840s, nearly one-half of all immigrants to America were from Ireland; by 1930 nearly 4.5 million Irish natives, nearly one-half the total population of Ireland, had been assimilated into American life. During roughly the same period of Irish immigration, nearly 1.5 million Germans immigrated to the United States due to political and economic turmoil following the Industrial Revolution. Longley explores how anti-Catholic sentiment, born in a sea-tide of immigration, complicated the national debate regarding slavery and abolition. Divided by religious sectarianism and the ethos of northern and southern self-interest, the formation of conscience was an intensely personal search for each of the characters brought to life in this collection of biographies.

Of particular interest to Catholic scholars is the range of attitudes towards the war and slavery that rippled throughout the ecclesia. The papacy of Blessed Pope Pius X (1846-1878) was complicated by the fall of the Papal States during the rise of the Kingdom of Italy, a political upheaval which echoed the divisions of North and South on the American battleground, casting a long shadow of suspicion and distrust over Catholic interests worldwide.

Long the stepchild among professional historians, biography has enjoyed a resurgence of interest among scholars who recognize the biographer's skill at interpreting a set or series of events through the experience of those who lived the moment. Longley's craft as a storyteller is the product of careful research and meticulous attention to the details of the lives of his characters and those they influenced. His work is extensively annotated and includes a comprehensive bibliography.

To bring Longley's historical analysis into contemporary perspective, it is worth noting that, in present-day America, Catholics hold 163 seats in Congress, representing 30 percent of representatives, and this Congress welcomed representatives from the Buddhist and Hindu denominations. Just as was the case 150 years ago, religious beliefs and practices will continue to have an enduring and hard-won influence on American values and politics.

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