

THE BENEDICTINES OF DOUAI

MR REDMOND ON THEIR EXPULSION

The confiscation of the property of the English Benedictines of Douai by the French Government was the subject of a debate in the Imperial Parliament on July 23. The question was raised by Mr. John Redmond, who, after reminding the House that it was always the boast of the British Government that it had an arm long enough and strong enough to protect British subjects throughout the world, went on to say:—Now I am quite aware of the fact that it is not competent for me on this occasion to discuss the policy which the French Government has been pursuing with reference to these Orders in France. Whatever our individual ideas upon that subject may be, and however strongly some of us may believe that that policy is a disgrace to Christendom, at the same time it would not be in order for me to enter upon a discussion of that kind at this moment. The point I desire to raise is a very narrow and a very simple one, and does not call in question the general policy of the French Government with reference to the expulsion of these Orders from France. The history of the Benedictine establishment at Douai is a most interesting one. The foundation dates back to the seventeenth century. It was established entirely by

English Money and by Englishmen,

and it has devoted itself entirely to the education of English youths, and, as I understand, it has not been possible for this institution either to have French priests amongst them or to educate a French boy. The property of the institution was always recognised by the French Government as English property. It is very interesting to remember that at the time of the great Revolution, when the National Assembly in Paris ordered the suppression of all similar religious institutions throughout the country, a special exception was made in the case of Douai on the distinct ground that it was British property. But shortly afterwards, when war broke out between France and this country, the property was seized by the French Government because it was British property. The National Convention decreed the arrest of British subjects and the confiscation of their property, and under that order the monks of Douai were arrested and sent to gaol and their property confiscated. But after a while, when Napoleon came upon the scene, a better frame of mind sprang up in France. Investigations whether this property should be given back were set on foot. Some of it could not be returned because it was destroyed. Other parts of it were intact and could be restored. What happened was this, that a sum of money amounting, I believe, to something like £300,000 was given by the French Government to the English Government as compensation for that portion of the property which had been ruined and destroyed, and the British Government, when it came to the distribution of the money to their subjects, held that because this property had been used for Catholic purposes—that being before the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed—they could not restore it, and they did not restore it, and, I believe, from that day to this it has remained in their hands. But I only mention that incidentally, because that is not at all the property I am speaking of now. I put the question whether they ought not to get a share of that £300,000 aside altogether. I am not dealing with the property which was destroyed at the time of the Revolution and which remained intact and which was given back to them, I think, in the year 1818. From that day to this this institution remained there with the enjoyment of its property, and nobody suggested that it was anything else than British property, and the Government themselves do not deny that it is essentially British property. When the Law was passed in France for the suppression of collegiate institutions of this kind everybody thought that by reason of the past history of the institution the new Law would not apply to it at all, and the monks of Douai were informed by the British representative in France that in their opinion

They Would be Perfectly Safe,

but notwithstanding that, to make assurance doubly sure, they sent in a petition for authorisation. Their petition for authorisation was never even examined. The examination was refused, and they were told that at the end of two or three months they would have to leave their college, and when the time was up, to their intense surprise, not only were they forced to leave, but an official of the Government walked in and seized their entire property. Their country house and grounds, their college buildings, their chapels, their library of 20,000 books, even their personal property was seized and they were turned out with the clothes on their backs and their breviaries. Every penny of this property was British property invested by British subjects for British purposes,

and every penny of it was confiscated. That seems an extraordinary state of things, and one would have thought that the British Government was strong enough and willing enough to prevent it. I believe during the last 30 years large sums of money have been spent upon this college. Every penny of it was English money. A well-known English gentleman, a Mr. Ward, well-known probably to many members of this House, a most benevolent and charitable man, built a new wing and spent £10,000 of his own money on it, and took up his residence there, and, will it be believed, that although he never transferred this wing in any way to the Benedictines, and thought it was, therefore, his own property, he has been turned out of it and his property there, which cost £10,000, is gone, and even his own private property—his furniture, his books—he had the greatest difficulty in retaining. It seems inconceivable. The complaint which the Douai Benedictines make is not about their expulsion. They were there, in a sense, I agree, as guests of the French nation, enjoying French hospitality on French soil. If France wished to withdraw that hospitality and put them out of the country that is a matter for France. We have no right to complain, although we know such conduct is a reproach to the civilisation of the 20th century. What I am complaining of here is

The Monstrous, Barefaced, Open Robbery

of the private property of these English gentlemen, who devoted their lives and all their English money to the education of English students. Surely the boast has always been of the British Government that they can defend the property as well as the lives of their fellow-subjects in all parts of the world. The Benedictines naturally appealed to the Government, and Abbot Gasquet, the head of the Order in England, entered into communication with Lord Lansdowne upon the subject. I will read some extracts from the correspondence to show the attitude taken up by the Foreign Office on this matter. Abbot Gasquet wrote on the 19th of April from Douai:—'We have been repeatedly assured by the authorities of this town, including the Mayor and the Deputies to the Chamber, that the laws lately passed in regard to the French religious corporations would not be found to affect our position as a wholly English establishment. Beyond this, the English ambassador in Paris declared most positively that even if our college should be closed by an application of the laws there could be in our case nothing in the way of confiscation of goods nor any taking possession of our movables with a view to a compulsory sale of what was unquestionably the property of English subjects. I was astonished, therefore, to find on my arrival here yesterday, that not only had a decree been received directing that this establishment should be closed within three months, but that a "liquidator" had been appointed and had commenced his work of sequestering our goods and compiling an inventory with a view to their being sold.' He enclosed with that letter to Lord Lansdowne a memorandum setting forth the history of the college, and showing how the foundation was made from purely English money. Here is the answer Abbot Gasquet received from the Foreign Office: 'I am to inform you that the Benedictine college at Douai, being situate in France, is governed by the laws of that country, and not by the laws of England. His Majesty's ambassador in Paris took every step which was possible in the interests of the English bodies in France during the consideration of the Associations Bill in the Chamber of Deputies, but it is beyond the power of his Majesty's Government to interfere to protect the community at Douai from the operation of the law of the country in which their establishment is situate.' Abbot Gasquet replied to that letter on the 5th of May as follows:—'I made no appeal to you to use the influence and authority of the British Government to enable us to stay in France in opposition to the law closing similar establishments. My appeal was as Englishmen for

The Protection of Our Property

—all of which is undoubtedly English—from the confiscation by the French Government, which not only threatens it, but which has already begun.' Lord Lansdowne replied to that letter to say: 'His Majesty's ambassador at Paris is fully aware of the circumstances of the case, and has done what is possible to obtain considerate treatment for the English Benedictines, but his Majesty's Government have no locus standi for further intervention. The points raised in your letter will, however, be carefully examined in consultation with Sir Edmond Monson and the law officers of the Crown.' They had no locus standi in Venezuela? It is always the boast of the English Government that they have locus standi where robbery and oppression are meted out to their subjects. Then came the final letter from Abbot Gasquet, in which he stated: 'The question I raised was a claim for compensation for the confiscation of British property by the application of the new French laws. It is not a question of law, for, as I understand, no question of law arises as to a claim for compensation made by