

## Bishop Ullathorne

Down in the crypt of St Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham is what, to the casual eye, looks like a medieval tomb. It can't be, of course; the church itself was only erected in the 1830s. All the same, the man whose marble effigy graces this monument might well have imagined he was living in a new Middle Ages.

William Bernard Ullathorne was the first (Catholic) Bishop of Birmingham, enthroned in the first new English cathedral to be built since the Reformation. The theological clock had been turned back in spectacular style.

The lives of bishops, particularly from 19th Century onwards, can look a little dull to the outsider, more a matter of administration and man management than the careers of their medieval predecessors, who juggled the politics of the court with the demands of war.

The life of Bishop Ullathorne, however, was far from uneventful and sedentary. Flick through the Australian National Biography, and there he is, and his early years were spent plying the shipping lanes of the Baltic and the Mediterranean as a cabin boy. This was a man, if you'll excuse the pun, whose career stretched from sea to shining sea.

Nor was Ullathorne the kind of mild-mannered and self-effacing of churchman you might expect of a Catholic priest. Born in Yorkshire, the kind of rough-and-ready directness of the Dalesman was never trained out of him. When in 1865 Ullathorne was tipped to be the next Archbishop of Westminster, it was feared that he would be dropping his h's all over London. The job went to more politely spoken Henry Manning instead.

Born in Yorkshire in 1806, the son of a grocer, it was when the family moved to Scarborough that William took to a career on the high seas. A brief stop at the Russian port of Memel, however, when he wandered into a church during mass, redirected his course in life. William enlisted at the Benedictine college at Downside, near Bath, and took holy orders soon after.

This was in 1831, just two years after the Emancipation Act, and a new era for English Catholics was dawning. But it was not only England that needed new priests. Another old boy from Downside, Father William Morris, had just been appointed Vicar Apostolic of Mauritius, which included the island of Australia in its vast domain. He saw Ullathorne as the ideal candidate to be vicar-general of the colony.

On the surface this looked like the perfect job. The whole of Down Under as one's fiefdom, and a boss who lived 4,000 miles away. But Australia was not the land of opportunity it was later to become. It was still largely a penal colony, and the conditions under which the convicts lived was grim, even if they survived the gruelling five-month crossing.

Ullathorne lent a kind and priestly ear to his new flock - most of whom were Irish - and found much to distress him. He regularly crossed swords with the colonial administration over the state of the penal settlements, and over the merits of

transportation itself. “The Very Reverend Agitator General”, they nicknamed him, and “Monsignor Ego Solus”.

Yet Ullathorne probably did as much as anyone, both in his time in Australia and before the select committee, when he was back home, to bring an end to the transportation system, and to create a bishopric for the colony. On the whole, however, it was probably not politic to appoint him to the position, and he would have refused it anyway.

Few clerics other than Ullathorne would have had the stamina and the sea legs to cope with immense amount of travelling that his post in Australia involved. He was back in England in 1836, and again in 1840, and was obliged to visit Rome as well. A single round-trip home took up the best part of a year.

That journey back to England was to be his last long-distance voyage. Exhausted by almost a decade spent in the southern hemisphere, Ullathorne at last elected to settle down in Blighty.

First he was sent to Coventry (in the literal sense), where he pioneered a Catholic alternative to the racy secularism of the city’s annual Lady Godiva procession. Ullathorne’s version featured the Virgin Mary instead, and she kept her clothes on.

The Catholic dioceses were still in process of organization in England, and Ullathorne was next appointed to the central district, and then, in 1850, created first Bishop of Birmingham. It was a post he held for 38 years, the longest serving of all the Catholic bishops.

The life of a bishop in Birmingham was a far cry from the Australian Outback, but it was not devoid of excitement. A total of 67 new churches were consecrated under his direction, as well as more than 200 schools. Ullathorne even underwent a brief spell in prison as a major shareholder of the collapsed Monmouthshire & Glamorgan Bank.

Given that William always yearned for the monastic life, time in the cells suited him down to the ground.

William Ullathorne died at Oscott in March 1889, just a few months before his great friend and fellow Birmingham Catholic, John Henry Newman. The tomb in St Chad’s is not only not medieval, it’s not a tomb either. The good bishop lies buried in an even finer one at Stone in Staffordshire.