

Mungret College in 1915.

University College, Mungret, 1888 - 1908

by Patrick Kearney

In this article the author examines the setting up and provision of university type education at Mungret College, just two miles from the city of Limerick, between the years 1888 and 1908. With the establishment of the National University of Ireland in 1908, this period of higher education at Mungret came to an end. However, it is interesting to speculate what the Jesuits might have achieved at Mungret had their efforts to affiliate to the National University in 1908 been successful.

The reputation of Ireland in the field of higher education was first established in its monastic schools. Limerick appears to have been one of the first places in Ireland to attract the attention of the early Christian missionaries. Mungret Abbey was founded before the middle of the sixth century. St. Necessan was first abbot of Mungret;⁽¹⁾ and he died in 551, according to the Annals of the four Masters. Mungret, the ancient Mungrairit or Mungarat, was situated about two miles south-west of Limerick. Mungret monastery formed a seat of learning and a school of piety centuries before the ancient city of Limerick was founded as Kenney says: 'In the second stage the Hiberno-Norse towns of Dublin, Waterford and Limerick were founded, Dublin perhaps as early as 841, Waterford and Limerick not later than the first quarter of the tenth century'.⁽²⁾ Besides ministering to the spiritual needs of the people, the monks in the monastery trained the sons of the tribesmen who wished to enter the religious life. Further, they conducted an

advanced school of learning for whoever wished to attend from Ireland and other countries. The curriculum embraced not only Latin and the Irish language and literature but also Greek, while the theological and Biblical studies were very thorough.

It may be assumed that many students came from Britain and other European countries during the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries.⁽³⁾ The monastery was plundered at least on four occasions by the Northmen and subsequently in 1088 by the Irish chieftain Donal O'Loughlin. The last entry in the ancient annals of the Abbey of Mungret dated 1107 was, 'Mungairit plundered by Muretagh O'Brien'.⁽⁴⁾ Thus, it would seem, ended the career of the great Mungret school, a great centre of religion, civilization, enlightenment and learning. It was of the type of institution that was peculiarly Irish, a Celtic monastery, a seat of higher learning. Thus it helped to form that great cultural and intellectual reputation for this country during the seventh and eighth centuries, when Ireland could claim to be the university of the western world, where the light of classical learning was still permitted to shine undimmed.⁽⁵⁾

The decline of Mungret was but a single manifestation of a general stagnation and decay amongst all the great monastic schools of Ireland. The marauding attacks of the Danes and Northmen drove away the foreign pupils. The schools were often destroyed and the

monks murdered in these onslaughts. More than seven centuries were to pass before there was further activity in the field of higher education at Mungret.

The 'Colleges, Ireland, Bill' received royal assent on 31 July, 1845 and Belfast, Cork and Galway were confirmed as the seats of the three 'Queens Colleges', as they were then called. There was, however, Catholic opposition to these colleges and thus the Catholic University was established in Dublin and was opened in November, 1854, with John Henry Newman as its first Rector. It had no charter and therefore could not confer degrees.⁽⁶⁾ Newman was well qualified for the post of Rector. He was a Catholic, a recent convert; he was a scholar and he had experience of university life. He believed that a close connection between the university and the secondary schools would benefit the latter and help to raise their standards. An invitation was issued to existing schools to apply for affiliation to the university and Limerick's Diocesan Seminary, St. Munchin's, received affiliation in 1856.⁽⁷⁾

No period in the nineteenth century could have been less favourable for an establishment such as the Catholic University, since the country was still suffering from the effects of the great famine of 1847. However, the university did manage to exist on voluntary aid alone until the creation of the Royal University in 1879 and thereafter as a university college until the National University of Ireland was established in 1908. When the Royal University of Ireland was established, the Queen's University was

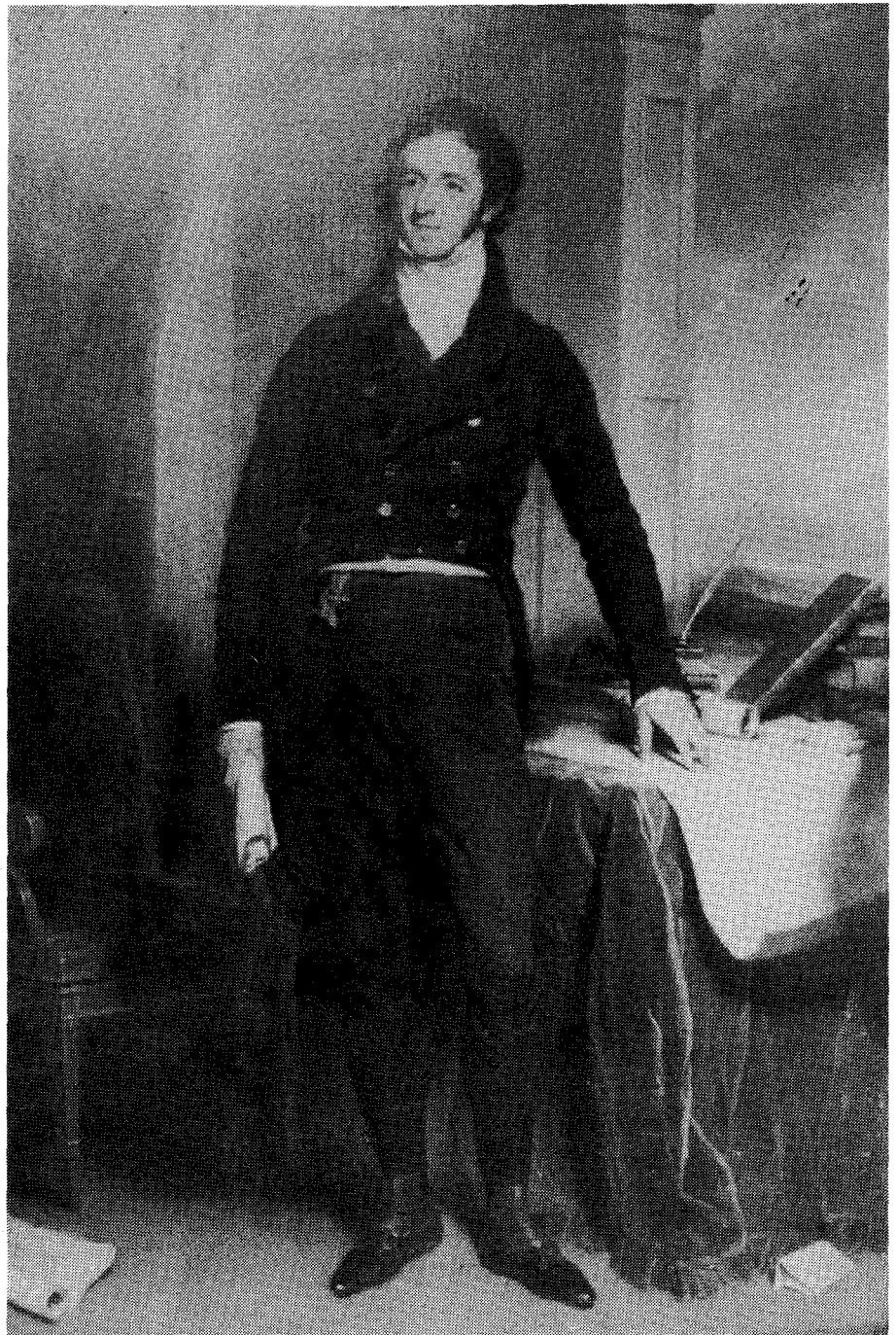
dissolved. The Royal University was an examining institution only; it had power to examine and confer degrees in all the usual faculties, with the exception of theology. It could not require candidates for its degrees, except in the case of medicine, to reside in or to attend lectures at any college or other place of education.⁽⁸⁾ It was under the terms of the Royal University that Mungret College or, more specifically, that division of it known subsequently as University College, Mungret, developed. Its growth and success was of such an order that it was able to seek affiliation, at a later date, to the National University of Ireland, it could then have achieved for Limerick in 1908 a link with the National University of Ireland as a Recognised College. As will appear, it had by then a very strong case for such recognition.

It is interesting to note how a college came to be built in the Termon lands of the old monastery of Mungret. It is true to observe that the old ivy-clad ruins, the rich meadows, wooded hills and lordly river formed the ideal setting. After the partial famine in Ireland of 1825, large sums of money were raised in England for the relief of the people, under a special system called the Reproductive Loan Fund. This fund was distributed without interest through some of the larger towns in Ireland. In 1852 the loan was called in, and the county of Limerick had to return some £4,079. However, the Hon. Thomas Spring Rice (Lord Monteagle) was influential in getting a private Bill through Parliament (11 and 12 Vic. chap. 115),⁽⁹⁾ authorising that the debt of Limerick to the Reproductive Loan Fund should be vested in trustees appointed by the Lord Lieutenant for the establishment of an Agricultural School and Model Farm in the county of Limerick. Thus the trustees bought, in 1852, 71 acres, 3 roods of land in Mungret.

They leased the property in 1853 to the Commissioners of National Education for 61 years for the purpose of establishing and conducting an Agricultural School and Model Farm. The Commissioners, accordingly, aided by the Board of Works and a contribution from the trustees, erected extensive collegiate and farm buildings. The school was opened in 1858 under the auspices of the National Board.⁽¹⁰⁾

However, the school was unsuccessful. It failed to attract an adequate number of students and by 1877 there were only six pupils in the school. The trustees then asked the Commissioners of National Education to open at Mungret a school for the purposes of general education. This the Commissioners refused to do, and on the following year they surrendered the lease, handing over the farm building to the trustees.

The trustees were bound under the terms of the Bill to use the buildings as an Agricultural School. However, by a local Act (42 and 43 Vic., cap. CXX)⁽¹¹⁾ they were enabled to use the school for any educational purposes they thought fit. The



Portrait of Thomas Spring Rice by Sir Martin Archer Shee, commissioned by the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, and hung in 1822.

trustees now leased the place to the Rev. Joseph Bourke, who was then President of the Catholic Diocesan Seminary of Limerick. The lease was for twenty-one years, determinable at any time upon a year's notice. Under the circumstances, Mungret College, as it has since been called, was opened on 23 September, 1880. Fr. Bourke was enabled to carry out the conditions of the lease while conducting the college as the Diocesan Seminary. This proved most unsuccessful and the college was closed after a year and the lease once more surrendered to the trustees.

The buildings and lands were then acquired by the Jesuit Fathers in 1882 and Dr. Butler, the Bishop of Limerick, agreed to entrust the charge of his Diocesan Seminary to them. The Jesuit's lease was similar to that previously held by Fr.

Bourke, but the terms now was for five hundred years, and the annual rent was £70.⁽¹²⁾ There were two divisions in the college – the seminary, as it was called, and the Apostolic School. A lay school later developed from the seminary and was, 'to all intents and purposes an ordinary Catholic lay college, in which, however, a considerable number of the pupils intend ultimately to become priests'.⁽¹³⁾ The prospectus for the Apostolic School, 1907, states that 'only those candidates are admitted who give sufficient guarantee of a vocation to the Priesthood and who wish to work in the foreign Missions'. It further says that: 'the scholastic curriculum begins with Grammar and ends up with Philosophy. It gives access to the B.A. degree, and in some cases to the M.A. degree of the Royal University of Ireland.'⁽¹⁴⁾ From the

foundation of the College, the studies were arranged in connection with the Royal University.

However, the life of the college as the Diocesan Seminary was short lived, for in 1886 Dr. Butler died and the new Bishop of Limerick, Most Rev. Edward T. O'Dwyer, D.D., who replaced him, brought about a change. He wished to have his students educated in his Cathedral City, under his own immediate supervision.⁽¹⁵⁾ Mungret College was some two miles distant from the city. However, lay students and students of the Apostolic School occupied different quarters and were under different systems of supervision. The lay school of University College, Mungret, as it was titled, flourished between 1888 and 1908. In its first year it had twenty-five students and the number rose to eighty during the following year.⁽¹⁶⁾ The college accommodation at the time could allow for no more.

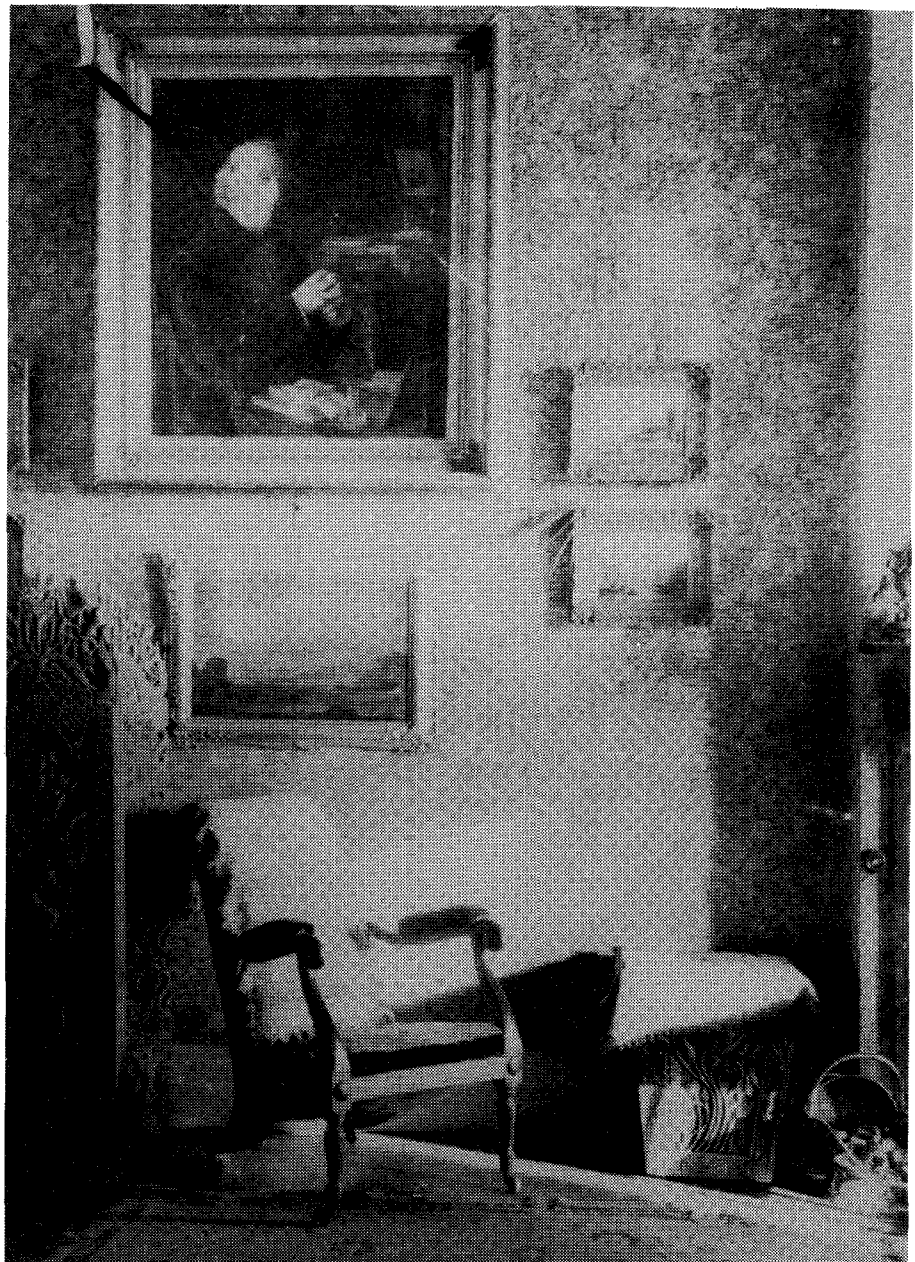
In the Prospectus for University College Mungret, 1907, it is stated:

In the higher classes the course of studies is specially arranged to prepare the students for the Matriculation and other Examinations in Arts, required for the degree of B.A., in the Royal University. In these Examinations, Mungret has always taken a high place among the colleges of Ireland. A large number of the students have obtained Honours and Exhibitions.⁽¹⁷⁾

There was also a Preparatory School attached to the lay school where younger or less advanced boys received a grounding in Classics, Irish, French, English, and Mathematics. In 1907 pupils from these junior classes competed for the first time in the Intermediate. It was this Preparatory School which hampered Mungret's claim for University recognition at a later date.

During the last years of the life of the old Royal University, the total numbers of passes secured in the University Examinations (First Arts, Second Arts, and B.A.), from Mungret, Magee, Cork and Galway were: Galway, 351; Mungret, 225; Cork, 199; Magee, 198. Of these totals the actual number of degrees awarded were: Galway, 72; Mungret, 44; Cork, 41; Magee, 38. In addition, on two occasions, in 1888 and 1908, Mungret gained more distinctions in the Examinations of the University than either Queen's College, Cork, or Queen's College, Galway.⁽¹⁸⁾ Indeed, the success of Mungret prompted Lord Emly to speak in glowing terms of the college at the public conferring of degrees of the Royal University on 31 October, 1888.⁽¹⁹⁾ He was presiding on this occasion in his capacity as Vice-Chancellor.

However, the Royal University was not accepted as a satisfactory solution to the university question in Ireland as far as Catholic and Presbyterians were concerned. They had the example of Trinity College before them with its endowments, its prestige and its tradition, while they had merely an examining body



Portrait of Aubrey de Vere in his study at Curragh Chase.

which had power to confer degrees. Dr. O'Dwyer took an active interest in the university question and played an increasingly important part in the campaign. He spoke publicly on this question as early as November, 1886. Many important Limerick people supported him, among them was Aubrey de Vere,⁽²⁰⁾ the poet, who resided at Curragh Chase in County Limerick. His (de Vere's) opinion was to be respected, since he was highly esteemed by Newman who, at an earlier date, had appointed him Professor of Political and Social Science in the Catholic University.⁽²¹⁾ He himself had been educated at Trinity College and was a convert to Catholicism. In a letter to Dr. O'Dwyer he said:

I agree most strongly with what you said the other day at Adare respecting the Catholic University College. It certainly should be separated from the Queen's Colleges, and united with the Dublin University, receiving endowments and buildings fully equal to those possessed by

Trinity College at present after a few years the Catholic University College ought of course to be developed into a Catholic University.⁽²²⁾

Aubrey de Vere gave constant support during the following years to Dr. O'Dwyer and the Catholic campaign.

Dr. O'Dwyer campaigned vigorously. He wrote articles and letters for the papers and for some educational magazines. He explained and outlined the bishop's position in detail in the publication the *Nineteenth Century* for January, 1898.⁽²³⁾ In a later pamphlet, published in 1901, he said, 'unless you so constitute university education in Ireland as to make it truly acceptable to Catholics you can never make it democratic or popular'.⁽²⁴⁾ Dr. O'Dwyer was one of the outstanding witnesses before the Robertson Commission. He pressed for a university as acceptable to Catholics as Trinity College was to Protestants. He stated the Catholic ideal thus:



A recent picture of Mungret College.

Our ideal of education is that religion and secular knowledge cannot be separated, and that at the time between, say, eighteen years of age and twenty five years of age, when every thinking young man is turning over in his mind the fundamental questions of life – questions that are at the bedrock of all belief – that it is necessary for him to be brought up in surroundings that will be congenial to his faith and favourable to the growth of it.⁽²⁵⁾

Sir Horace Plunkett wrote to Dr. O'Dwyer from his office at the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction and expressed agreement with him on the main issues involved in the university question. He felt that they should 'be in consultation as to any steps which we may jointly take in overcoming the political obstacles which seem to stand in the way of the concession of our common demand'.⁽²⁶⁾

It is clear, then, that Dr. O'Dwyer had an abiding interest in the whole question of university education for Catholics, an interest which spanned more than twenty years. He again stressed the injustice of the Catholic position at local level in a Pastoral Letter in 1906, and drew public attention to the inactivity of the Government when he said that 'a gross wrong sits lightly upon them'.⁽²⁷⁾ It is then a cause of some regret that he did not press the claim of Mungret College or its sub-division, University College, Mungret, in the demand for university connection. With a record definitely successful in higher level education, it is little wonder that the authorities in Mungret claimed affiliation to the new university when it emerged.

In 1908, Mr. Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, introduced a Bill proposing to establish two universities, one in Dublin and one in Belfast (The National University of Ireland and Queen's University). Before the Second Reading of the University Bill for Ireland during May, 1908, the authorities of Mungret began to act. They sought some form of affiliation to the new university, pointing out their involvement in university type education during the previous twenty-five years in support of their position. Their Rector wrote: 'we claim therefore that we have

vested rights that should be respected in the framing of a New University Bill.'⁽²⁸⁾

However, the new Bill did not incorporate the type of procedure envisaged by the Rector. They pursued the matter further and in December, 1910, the Rector wrote to Dr. Windle, President, University College Cork, seeking his support. He gave an account of the success of the college during the previous years and continued: 'the position of Mungret College as the only one in Munster of a University standing, except the University College, Cork naturally suggests affiliation with the latter'.⁽²⁹⁾ Two statutory commissions were set up by the act, one for Dublin and one for Belfast and Dr. Windle was one of the Dublin commissioners. He was, therefore peculiarly well qualified to advise. He himself favoured residence and instruction in a college as a necessary condition for graduation.⁽³⁰⁾

Windle's reply, though sympathetic, was not encouraging. It would appear from his letter that he had received a deputation from Mungret College some days before he replied. He said:

I have now looked as carefully as I can into the question which we discussed the other day and I must say that I see no way through it except as I stated then, the setting up of a perfectly distinct and independent institution. Of course you will understand that I am not a lawyer and I can only give my opinion as a layman, but as a layman quite conversant with the construction of the various documents as intended by those who drew them up.⁽³¹⁾

Thus he held out no hope for Mungret under their present circumstances, stating 'that a recognised College may not be an Institution in which any secondary teaching is given'. Indeed, he quoted the relevant section of the Act to support his view:

Nothing in this section shall prevent provision being made by the charter of the new universities under which the university may give to matriculated students of the university, who are pursuing a course of study of a university type approved by the governing body of the university in any recognised college in Ireland under teachers recognised by

the governing body for the purpose, the benefit of any privileges of matriculated students of the university who are pursuing a course of study at the university, including the right to obtaining a university degree, subject to any conditions or limitations contained in the charter of statutes of the university; Provided that the university shall not give privileges under the provision to students in any college or institution in Ireland which prepares students for intermediate or other school examinations, or gives education of an intermediate or secondary kind.⁽³²⁾

It was probable also, in Windle's view, that the Governing Body of University College Cork would object to any lay college of a university type in any part of the province. He stated: 'they would certainly disapprove of anything which might tend to set up a Lay Recognised College either in Limerick or elsewhere in Munster'.⁽³³⁾ He did mention the possibility of their acquiring a site in Cork and establishing 'a direct and local connection' with University College Cork (for their clerical students).

However, this opportunity was not availed of by the Limerick Jesuits. In fact, Mungret College sought no further to establish a link with the National University of Ireland. The change of the university department at Mungret was gradual. Mungret students were allowed to present themselves for the B.A. degree of the National University until the summer of 1912.⁽³⁴⁾ This arrangement had been arrived at in order to accommodate students who had matriculated in the now extinct Royal University.

However, the authorities at Mungret did explore the possibility of having the students of their Apostolic School sit for the B.A. examinations of London University. With this in mind, Fr. Cahill, Director of the Apostolic School, wrote to Rev. Michael Maher, S.J., for advice. Fr. Maher was a scholar of some considerable standing, who was at that time in the Jesuit College at Stoneyhurst, Lancashire. Fr. Cahill stated: 'it would be an immense advantage for the working of the Apostolic School to be enabled to secure for the students the means of obtaining an ordinary university degree while at the



Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer.

From a painting by Sean Keating.

same time doing their professional ecclesiastical studies'.⁽³⁵⁾ However, there was a problem, as Fr. Cahill pointed out; the courses of study for the B.A. Degree did not suit their ecclesiastical students. They were prepared to petition London University on this point. Fr. Maher's reply was not very hopeful of success in this direction. He said: 'I confess the more I have reflected on the present London, B.A. Syllabus the less hopeful I feel as to the prospect of enducing any substantial reform on the direction you desire'.⁽³⁶⁾

Fr. Cahill appears to have taken the advice of Fr. Maher and did not proceed further in the matter. In August, 1914, Rev. T.V. Nolan, the new Jesuit Provincial, received information from P.A. Dowling (Royal College of Science for Ireland), concerning the requirements for registration as Matriculated students of London University and an estimate of expenses connected with the holding of External Examinations in Mungret College.⁽³⁷⁾ He passed this information on to Fr. Cahill but there was no further action on this matter.

The university period having now ended, Mungret became less a house of higher studies and more a college preparatory to the universities. In retrospect it might be said that, with a more determined commitment on the part of the people of Limerick, Mungret could perhaps have achieved 'recognised' status. Certainly this college would appear to have had a claim similar to that of Magee College, Derry, which was given recognition by the University of Dublin after 1908. It would not have been unreasonable had Mungret been accorded a similar facility.

Limerick, would certainly have profited had Mungret⁽³⁸⁾ been able to maintain its university link. A seat of higher learning in the city after 1908, although initially restricted to offering courses in the faculty of Arts, would have been of a very great

educational benefit and could have formed the nucleus of a more comprehensive college of higher learning.

NOTES

1. Edward A. Cahill S.J., 'The Monastery of Mungret', *Mungret Annual*, 1907. pp. 7-22.
2. James F. Kenney. *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland, Ecclesiastical*, Dublin, Irish University Press, 1966, p. 7.
3. Cahill, art. cit., p. 15.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
5. James Johnston Auchmuty, *Irish Education*, Dublin, 1937, p. 19.
6. Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick, its History and Antiquities*, Limerick 1866, p. 524. The Catholics of Limerick gave earnest support to the Catholic University. 'The question of a Charter to the Catholic University was introduced into the Corporation by Mr. Maurice Lenihan, who proposed the adoption of a memorial to the Lord Lieutenant in its favour, which passed unanimously, every Protestant in the Council supporting it by his vote. A deputation from the Corporation proceeded to Dublin on the 24th March, 1862, where they were entertained at a banquet by Monsignore Woodlock, Rector of the Catholic University, the Catholic Lord Archbishop of Dublin being one of the guests. On the following day, by appointment, the deputation, who were joined by the Mayor, proceeded in their robes to present the memorial to his Excellency the Earl of Carlisle, who, however, gave anything but a favourable reply'.
7. F. McGrath; *Newman's University, Idea and Reality*, Dublin, 1951. p. 373.
8. P.J. Dowling, *A History of Irish Education*, Cork, 1971, p. 171.
9. T.V. Nolan, S.J., 'The Beginnings of Mungret College', *Mungret Annual*, 1907, pp. 23-43.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

14. Prospectus, Apostolic School of the Sacred Heart, 1907, (Mungret College Archives).
15. J. Begley. *The Diocese of Limerick*, 3 Vole., Dublin, 1938, Vol. 3, p. 571.
16. Nolan, art. cit., p. 34. It is interesting to note that University College (84, 85, 86, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin) came under the care of the Jesuits in 1883, as McKenna says: 'an agreement was in fact come to with Father Delany as representing the Jesuit Order, and that on October 26, 1883, the articles were signed in virtue of which the management of the College (retaining the name it had enjoyed for the past year of "University College") was passed over to the Jesuits'.
(A page of Irish History: Story of University College, Dublin, Dublin, 1930, p. 63).
17. Prospectus, University College, Mungret, 1907, (Mungret College Archives).
18. The University Examinations, *Mungret Annual*, 1907, pp. 88, 9.
19. Freeman's Journal, 1 Nov., 1888.
20. Aubrey de Vere was son of Sir Aubrey de Vere, who was Chairman of the Limerick meeting on 5 Jan., 1839, at which a demand for a Provincial College for Limerick was made.
21. McGrath, *Newman's University*, p. 161.
22. De Vere to O'Dwyer, 29 Nov., 1886, (L.D.A., Dr. E.T. O'Dwyer papers).
23. F. McGrath, *A History of Irish Catholicism*, V. Dublin, 1971, p. 122.
24. E.T. O'Dwyer, *A University for Catholics*, Dublin, 1901, p. 25.
25. Royal Commission on University Education in Ireland, First Report, (K.I. Bailey, *Trinity College, Dublin*, 1947, p. 16).
26. Plunkett to O'Dwyer, 1 July, 1902, (Dr. E.T. O'Dwyer papers).
27. *Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of Limerick*, p. 11.
28. Letter from T.V. Nolan S.J., Rector, (typed carbon-copy, 10 May, 1908. It is not clear to whom it was written but apparently to a person of influence in the matter. The final paragraph of the letter read:
The position we claim of being the only College in Munster at least, of a University type excepting Queen's College at Cork. Furthermore the recognition of our College as an affiliated College of Cork would confer a benefit on the City and County of Limerick.
29. Nolan to Windle, 5 Dec. 1910, (Mungret College Archives).
30. M. Taylor, *Sir Bertram Windle*, London, 1932, p. 160.
31. Windle to Nolan, 12 Jan. 1911, (Mungret College Archives).
32. Irish Universities Act, 1908, 2 - (4).
33. Windle to Nolan 12 Jan. 1911. (Mungret College Archives).
34. *Mungret Annual*, 1974, p. 20.
35. Maher to Cahill, 13 May 1912, (Mungret College Archives).
36. Maher to Cahill, undated. (*Ibid.*).
37. Dowling to Nolan, 25 Aug. 1914, (*Ibid.*).
38. The Jesuit Order withdrew from Mungret in 1974. The college and lands were offered for sale and in this way the long tradition of learning associated with the site of Mungret was brought to an end.