

Reviews

FRIAR IN THE WILDERNESS: EDWARD DOMINIC FENWICK OP by Loretta Pettit O.P., *Project OPUS*, Chicago, 1994, pp. 40, \$ 10.00.

Born in 1768 on a large plantation in Maryland, Edward Fenwick belonged to a wealthy Catholic family who educated their sons at home until they were old enough to go to Jesuit colleges in Europe. The Society was suppressed by the Holy See in 1773. His uncle, only eleven years older than himself, had therefore been sent to the college conducted by the exiled English Dominican friars at Bornhem in Belgium. In 1784, with his parents both dead, Edward sailed for Europe in an American vessel (his father fought against the British in 1776). His uncle had already joined the Dominicans and was teaching at Bornhem soon after Edward's arrival. He was to return to Maryland in 1800 to serve in various Jesuit parishes until his early death in 1815. In 1788 Edward himself joined the Order, being ordained in 1793. The French revolutionary wars forced the Dominicans to leave Bornhem for a time. Fenwick served in various ministerial capacities in the south of England until 1803 when he initiated a plan to establish a Dominican community and college in Maryland. He was encouraged by the Master of the Order and by Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore. Three English-born friars were assigned to accompany him. His hopes of inaugurating Dominican life in Maryland, however, were soon dashed. A number of Maryland Catholics had migrated to Kentucky, which was where Carroll wanted the Dominicans to go. In 1805 the four friars travelled 700 miles by wagon across the Allegheny Mountains to their new base in the still wild and undeveloped Blue Grass territory. Fenwick had expected to found a filial house of the English province but, with the continuing wars in Europe, and surely with Roman prudence about the relationship between the former colonies and the imperial power (although Petit does not suggest that), it seemed better to the Master of the Order simply to inaugurate 'the Province of St Joseph in North America'. Six young men joined in 1809; in 1822, as Fenwick had hoped from the start, a community of Dominican women was established.

By that time he had moved from Kentucky to Ohio. In 1821 the new diocese of Cincinnati was created and, much to his dismay, Fenwick was named as the first bishop. Of the three English-born friars one had a breakdown and returned to England in 1815; the second, Samuel Thomas Wilson, the Prior Provincial, was a good teacher but refused to preach; and the third was 'a troubled and hypercritical man who suffered from alcoholism'. Wilson was one of the four who travelled to Cincinnati with Fenwick, on another epic journey, this time having to swim the Kentucky river. But the party now included an Irishman, a Belgian, both young, as

well as the irrepressible Father Hill, an officer in the British army who sold his commission on becoming a Catholic, bought a house at Bornhem, parted amicably from his wife some years later, and joined the Order in Rome, impressing the authorities so much by his style that, by papal dispensation, he was ordained priest in less than a year.

In 1823 Fenwick went to Rome, hoping to be allowed to resign. He got little in Rome but his stay in France on the way home was more fruitful. He visited England briefly. When he got back to Cincinnati he found that Wilson had died; the alcoholic friar, as the eldest of the group, had installed himself as Provincial; and Hill, without consulting anybody, had arranged for an episcopal residence to be built which overshadowed the humble frame church and encumbered the diocese with a large debt. Unperturbed, Fenwick built a proper cathedral with the money from France. By this time work on the Ohio Canal had brought an influx of Irish labourers whose families greatly strengthened the local Catholic community. Fenwick persuaded several women's congregations to work in his diocese and was particularly pleased when four Dominican Sisters came to open a school. As everywhere else, the spread of the Catholic faith in the early 19th century depended almost entirely on women. Much of Fenwick's own ministry was among the native Americans, many of whom were already Catholics, in the vast area of what is now Michigan and Wisconsin. In 1830 he was delighted to accompany the daughter of a French Canadian fur trader and a Menominee Indian to join the Dominican Sisters at Somerset, Ohio. In 1828 the Bishop had to accept the office of Vicar General of the Dominican friars.

Fenwick died of cholera at Wooster, Ohio, in 1832, attended only by an old friend who had taken it upon herself to see him safely home after a visit to Michigan. The diocese was divided, as he had long wanted, and his nephew succeeded him as Provincial. That it took three men to succeed him is some measure of how overburdened he was. But he had more than three lives. Fourteen years of freedom on a slave-owning estate in Maryland, including the upheaval of Independence; twenty years in introverted and deeply unexciting English Dominican cloisters, displaced by the effects of the French Revolution; nearly twenty years, riding thousands of miles on horseback and often sleeping rough, as a missionary in the frontier communities of Kentucky; and finally a decade as a bishop, perhaps happiest on his visits to the encampments of the native American peoples around the Great Lake - it needs a film to tell the story of Edward Fenwick's life. Wooster, Ohio, was the home of Arthur O. Lovejoy, who wrote *The Great Chain of Being* (1936). Fenwick's remains, however, have been twice reburied, most recently in 1916. One must hope that Loretta Petit's attractively written and produced memoir will prompt somebody to write a fullscale biography.

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