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Review of
On the Mission in Missouri & Fifty Years Ago: A Memoir

by: Pioneer Priest John J. Hogan
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If Charles Dickens hadn't published A TALE OF TWO CITIES in 1859 I would have been tempted to title the republication of Bishop Hogan's two narratives A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES. That is what they are. ON THE MISSION IN MISSOURI is John Hogan's first-hand account of his life as a missionary priest in the United States specifically and successfully embedding the Catholic Church in the northwest corner of our nation's 24th state in the mid 1800s. His much shorter book, FIFTY YEARS AGO: A MEMOIR nostalgically recalls his childhood and teenage years in County Limerick, Ireland. I would suggest that the MEMOIR be read before ON THE MISSION if only to savor a classic validation of the old adage that "the child is father of the man." John Hogan was first and foremost an outdoors man. His obvious affection for the sights, sounds and seasons of the Limerick countryside eased his transition into the vast untamed landscapes he encountered in the Show Me state. His ability to ride uncooperative farm donkeys while astride but facing backwards – "an undergraduate in assmanship," he called it – adequately prepared him for the days he spent on horseback visiting his far flung embryonic parishes and isolated Catholic families living at great distances from even the smallest towns. His well-rounded education, classical and mathematical, bolstered by a solid grasp of a number of languages, provided him with

a solid foundation for the formal study of theology and the practical tasks of teaching the faith, purchasing land and building churches including two cathedrals still in use today. Above all else, as his family, largely because of their Catholicism, were the constant victims of an oppressive regime he developed a vocal antipathy to racial, political and religious injustice, a stance not always guaranteed to win a popularity contest in his adopted state over a century ago.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, A MEMOIR provides a well-recollected description of the various, by our standards, somewhat primitive schools he attended which, nonetheless, for the motivated student were extremely successful. Although County Limerick fared better than many other sections of Ireland during the years of the Great Famine, predominately during the 1840s, John Hogan deplored the terrible tragedies it produced and was not shy in attributing to the government of the day a malevolent negligence in their totally inadequate response to the sufferings of the starving masses.

Coincidentally, John Hogan was born in 1829, the same year the noted Irish parliamentarian, Daniel O'Connell achieved his greatest triumph popularly known in Britain's House of Commons as Catholic Emancipation. Daniel O'Connell was his hero and he proudly associated himself with the REPEAL MOVEMENT designed to win back some measure of Home Rule for Ireland. History records that this latter goal was not attained during the lifetimes of either O'Connell or Hogan. The MEMOIR concludes with a detailed account of his 39 day transatlantic crossing from Liverpool to New Orleans on the American clipper ship BERLIN. This was immediately followed by

his eight day Mississippi River voyage on board the steamship Missouri from which he disembarked the day after Christmas, 1948, in St. Louis, the city he termed his “foreordained place.”

We must now fast forward to 1857, the year Father Hogan eventually received permission from a reluctant Archbishop Kenrick to resign his parish and go ON THE MISSION IN MISSOURI. Traveling by riverboat, on the newly-constructed railroads, but mostly on horseback, in summer’s heat and winter’s ice, like seeking the proverbial needle in the haystack, he searches for those Catholics who have fled the cities into the wilderness to establish a more wholesome life for themselves and their families. He encounters joy and genuine hospitality along with suspicion and outright opposition. He is arrested for preaching without a government permit. His imaginative response to the needs of the impoverished immigrants embodied in the settlement known as the Irish Wilderness was another victim of the ravages of the Civil War. He came close to being involved in the infamous Centralia Massacre, an incident, if one be needed, to stimulate his condemnation of warmongering as opposed to the peace and harmony a civilized society needs and deserves.

There are many who regret that Bishop Hogan did not write a book detailing his episcopal experiences as the founder of the dioceses of St. Joseph in 1868 and Kansas City in 1880. In particular historians would like to know more about his role in the First Vatican Council (1869-70) which is synonymous with the definition of papal infallibility. Maybe, being one of the newest and youngest of the 48 U.S. bishops attending

the Council, Bishop Hogan was content to maintain a low profile.

In this regard, however, we are indebted to Crystal Payton, the editor of his two books. She provides us with an extensive preface and a carefully researched and well-crafted editor's introduction to each of the bishop's works. It is as close to a full biography of the bishop as we are likely to enjoy. Judiciously culling archival material from the Dioceses of St. Louis and Kansas City-St. Joseph, coupled with her own knowledge of nineteenth century Missouri, she provides the bishop's two narratives with a continuity and a context which is second to none. Capping this achievement she also adds a multi-page chronology of John Hogan's almost 84 years of living, 61 years of priesthood and nearly 43 years as a bishop. The two books provide food for mind and soul: Crystal Payton's commentaries turn them into an epicurean delight.

Bishop Hogan directed that there be no sermon at his funeral Mass, and it must have pained his friend, Archbishop (and later Cardinal) Glennon of St. Louis, noted for his oratorical skills, to observe this stricture but he did. In many ways his brief comments on the sad occasion really said it all:

This request of Bishop Hogan will be faithfully carried out. He directed wisely for there is no necessity for a funeral sermon. The souls he saved, the friends he made, the dioceses over which he presided, the cathedrals he built, the priests he ordained, the words he spoke, the life he lived speak more eloquently than words put together in a sermon. He has gone to the Great Silence and silence on our part can be

tribute. Though he commanded silence, we can join in prayers for him; we can do this within his request.

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