



## An Introduction to the Letters of Blessed Columba Marmion

Today, the practice of letter-writing, as understood by our Victorian ancestors, is almost a lost art, mainly because we now send most of our letters by email. We use short sentences, and often abbreviate words to an almost ridiculous extent. Thus we write *You* as *U*, or begin our letter with the word *Hi!* instead of *My dear John*. and, of course, there is the telephone, which has made instant communication a reality for even the youngest member of our family.

There is a noticeable element of impatience in our approach to letter-writing today. This was not the case in the age of Blessed Columba Marmion (1st April 1858 – 30th January 1923). People wrote then as if they had all the time in the world, in what one might call a *leisurely* style. They wrote with a good pen, on good note-paper and in good English or French, or whatever language they used. It was the only means available for communicating with an absent friend. A letter was precious, valuable thing. Many people kept letters they received, especially from a loved one, or from someone they regarded as special. It is thanks to this fact, that so many of the letters of Blessed Columba – more than 2.000 – have survived. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the majority of this letters have disappeared, having been lost or destroyed.

### The provenance of the Letters of Dom Marmion

One of the difficulties in putting together a collection of letters of this kind, is that so many of them have become dispersed, for they cover a wide geographical spectrum: Australia, Brazil, Palestine, Katanga, India, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Holland, Ireland, England and Belgium. Fortunately, when the Cause of the Beatification of Marmion was first introduced to Rome, the Vice-Postulator at the time (D. Gisbert Ghysens) set about gathering all the Marmion letters available at the time (1960). This was an essential part of the Process for Beatification, as required by the Roman authorities. These letters, many in the form



of typed copies, according to the accepted norms of the time, often omitted the names of persons, or only identified them by initials, and constituted part of what was called the *Positio super Scriptis* (A Study of Writings), published in Rome in 1973. At this time, a total of 1,730 letters, post-cards, notes, etc. were collected. Some were originals, others typed copies, which were deposited in the Archives of the Abbey of Maredsous. This repository of Letters formed the basis for the more complete edition produced at Maredsous on this 150st anniversary of Marmion birthday<sup>1</sup>.

From the editorial point of view, it would have been more convenient if all the original letters were kept in the Archives of the Abbey of Maredsous. However, this was not the case. We had to work from photocopies, typed copies, hand-written copies, as well as from original letters. The reason for this situation is quite obvious. Letters sent to Rome by Marmion have become part of the Vatican Archives, and cannot be removed from this vast historical repository<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, letters sent to Belgian or British government Ministers are kept in the Archives of the respective government Departments (Foreign Office, Prime Minister's Office, etc.). The same was found to be true of the Marmion letters sent to Cardinal Mercier and other church dignitaries.

It was also found that many religious houses had a similar regulation governing their archives. For example, three very important and extensive collections of Marmion's Letters are still retained in the archives of their respective convents:

1. Those addressed to Dame Cecile de Hemptinne, the Abbess of Maredret, a Benedictine convent near the Abbey of Maredsous. These were carefully kept by the addressee herself, and at present form part of the Archives of the Abbey of Maredret, in Belgium.

2. Letters addressed to Mother Peter Adèle Garnier, foundress of the Adorers of the Sacred Heart of Montmartre, Tyburn Convent,

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1. It is this same selection of letters which served as a basis for the book by Paul Lavalee: *Blessed Columba Marmion in the Intimacy of His Letters*, Éditions Sainte-Madeleine, Le Barroux, 2006.

2. We wish to thank the many Archivists who helped us find, or have given us copies of, this invaluable basic material. We have failed to put our hands on several letters sent by Marmion to Rome, and which may still be found in the Archives of the different Roman Congregations (of Rites, of Regulars, of Bishops).



London, England. Not only are all the original Marmion letters, written to Mother Garnier, preserved in the Archives of Tyburn Convent, but many of the original letters she wrote to him are likewise in the same repository<sup>1</sup>.

3. Letters addressed to Mother Berchmans Durrant, of the Canonesses of St. Augustine, Hayward's Heath (now Sayers Common), in East Sussex, England, are preserved in the archives of this convent. These are considered as precious community property, never to be alienated<sup>2</sup>.

Another difficulty, in acquiring the originals of Marmion letters, is the legal injunction, which states that letters sent to any particular person automatically becomes the property of the addressee. In some cases, it has been possible to come to an arrangement with those who possessed Marmion letters, to have them deposited in the Archives of the Abbey of Maredsous. However, in other cases, this has not been possible, for different reasons. For example, the present owner of a series of Marmion letters is the grand-daughter of the original addressee. She considers the letters of religious or sentimental value, and part of her family inheritance, to be passed on, intact, to her own children.

### **Letters which have disappeared or been destroyed**

It is necessary to indicate another factor in this saga of Marmion letters. Marmion had written a great number of letters to his favourite sister, Rosie, Mother Peter Marmion, who spent most of her life in the Convent of Mercy, Clonakilty, Co. Cork, Ireland. Just before her death, in 1930, she decided, as an act of sacrifice or self-denial, to burn all her brother's letters. These would have provided us with invaluable personal information, as she was Marmion's confidante throughout his life. We must surmise that Mother Peter

1. The Cause for the Beatification of Mother Garnier has been introduced to Rome, Already, before his death, the Sisters of Tyburn Convent wrote to Marmion, asking him to send them any letters which he possessed, written by her to him. This was one evident case, in which Marmion did not destroy letters received from his spiritual daughters, probably because much of this correspondence was connected with the setting up of the Tyburn convent, and affiliating it to the Benedictine Confederation. These letters had a special, almost official, value in Marmion's mind.
2. In the three above cases, photocopies of the Marmion letters have been made readily available to us.



was not the only person to destroy such letters. In any case letters are fragile things, which can inadvertently be lost, or suffer from exposure to dampness, etc. We know that the letters which Marmion wrote to Dr. Mostyn, the Bishop of Menevia, Wales, were destroyed in a bombing raid on Cardiff during the Second World War. We may never know how many Marmion letters disappeared through such accidents.

Another example of a collection of Marmion letters, which may still be hidden away in some archives, either in England or France, are those addressed to Violet Susman (1882-1950), a South African Jewess, converted to Catholicism by Marmion in 1907. Marmion corresponded with her between 1914-1922, when she lived in Ramsgate and London. We know that she had them kept safely in her room in London, before she went to live in France in 1922. She later went to Japan<sup>1</sup>. Was this collection of letters destroyed during the war of 1940-45, when Violet was taken prisoner by the Japanese?

### **Non-existing or Lost Letters**

Throughout his life, Dom Marmion maintained a relationship with many people. It has come as quite a surprise, that their names do not appear among the recipients of his letters in the collection published this year. All our researches have been in vain. We list below some of these persons, suggesting the possible reasons for the absence of any trace of correspondence from Marmion to them.

1. Aelred Carlyle, Abbot of Caldey (1874-1955). His lengthy sojourn in Vancouver, Canada, after he left Caldey in 1921, and his return to England at the end of his life (in 1955), as a Benedictine oblate of Prinknash, may explain the possible destruction of his correspondence. The Archives of Maredsous shows 4 letters from Dom Aelred to Dom Marmion.

2. Mère Marie-Joseph, o.s.b., the Marquise de Bizien du Lezard (1874-1936). Having left the community of the Rue Monsieur (Paris) in 1914, she remained thereafter in Ireland. However, we have failed to trace any of Marmion's letters to her, either in Ireland

1. Violet Susman returned to England after the war (1945), and spent the last five years of her life in London and Dover. Dom Gerard Francois, a monk of Maredsous, visited her in Dover in July 1949.



or in Limon, where the community of Rue Monsieur were later transferred. Some letters from Mère Marie-Joseph to Dom Marmion are kept in the Archives of Maredsous.

3. Dom Pie de Hemptinne, o.s.b. (1880-1907). He was a monk of Maredsous, a disciple of Marmion, who died at the early age of 27. There is no trace of any correspondence to or from Marmion, either in Maredsous or in the archives of the de Hemptinne family

4. Dom Adelbert Gresnicht, o.s.b. (1877-1956); a monk of Maredsous and artist, who worked for many years in Monte Cassino, then on the Catholic University of Peking, and finally in San Paolo and New York. One can understand how this great traveller did not keep his correspondence, which would have been an encumbrance to his movements. The Archives of Maredsous shows various letters and documents sent by Dom Adelbert to Dom Marmion.

5. Dom Hubert Casier, o.s.b. (1854-1919); a monk of Maredsous, who held several responsible positions in Maredsous, notably that of Rector of the Abbey school. He kept none of Marmion's letters.

6. Dom Odilon Golenvaux, o.s.b. (1876-1950); a monk of Maredsous, Instructor of the Lay-Brothers, has not kept any Marmion letters.

7. Abbé Joseph Moreau (1858-1926); fellow-student of Joseph Marmion in Rome (1879-1881); it was in order to visit him that Marmion passed by Maredsous in 1881, and decided to enter there as a monk. After his novitiate in Maredsous, Moreau went first to Canada, then to the Belgian Congo and finally to Brazil, where he died. None of Marmion's letters to him have been found.

### **The Style of his Letters**

Marmion, because of his varied interests, found himself dealing with a wide variety of subjects and themes in his letters. He seems to have adopted a different style – and, indeed, a different attitude – according to each situation. Thus, when writing letters of spiritual direction to religious men and women, he adopts a serious, and often lengthy, style, and freely quotes passages from Scripture, in Latin. In many of his letters dealing with liturgical matters, he adopts an expansive style, writing with obvious enthusiasm, if not



authority. This is especially so when dealing with the Divine Office of the Church. When writing to his monks, either as Prior in Louvain, or Abbot of Maredsous, dealing with day-to-day problems, he adopts a paternalistic (though not a patronising) attitude and style, showing a deep understanding of human nature. In dealing with non-Catholics, v.g. the Monks of Caldey, he adopts a very conciliatory style, showing both tact and diplomacy, as well as offering encouragement and kindness.

One of his biggest challenges came, when he had to deal with what is called “The Katanga Affair”, i.e. the question of a monastic foundation in the Belgian Congo. This called for the adoption of an official style of letter, especially when writing to government ministers. He soon mastered this particular style, showing considerable acumen and ingenuity. Likewise, in his dealings with Vatican officials, especially Cardinal Gasparri, over the Occupation of Dormition Abbey by the monks of Maredsous, he wrote in what might be called the *diplomatic style*.

Sometimes he found it difficult to get his ideas across clearly. When writing to the Desclee family – the founders of the Abbey of Maredsous – he adopted a respectful style, though at the same time gave evidence of the affectionate side of his nature, which was reciprocated by the Desclee. When coping with the complicated paper-work involved in setting up the Belgian Congregation, he showed another side of his character, by mastering detail and minutiae. Finally, when dealing with the German (Beuronese) abbots after the war, Marmion showed great breadth of view, combined with charity and understanding.

All in all, when reading this collection of letters, we come across many different persons and events. However, Marmion, the author of the letters, remains the same, his distinctive personality manifests itself in a variety of ways. The letters are, indeed, nothing more than a literary self-portrait.

### **His hand-writing**

It is a well-known fact that people often reveal themselves in their letters, not just in *what* they write, but also in their *hand-writing*. Marmion’s letters have been studied by two hand-writing



experts, called *graphologists*, who have some up with some interesting facts or suggestions. First of all, they state that Marmion had a facility for expressing himself in a convincing way, with energy and vitality. Secondly, he never imposes himself on his addressees, but manages to get through to them by his human warmth. Thirdly, he could enter into the problems of others, without being over- judgmental or critical. Fourthly, he appears to have been a good listener, and a careful reader of the letters addressed to him. Many of his letters were written in reply to questions put to him. His pen was as ready to coin a happy phrase, as his ear was to listen to human problems. Finally, Marmion's letters reflect his personality. They show that he was an idealist and an optimist, a man of deep faith, someone imbued with an immense enthusiasm for the things of God, who possessed an open heart and a high intelligence.

### **His correspondents**

In order to obtain a satisfactory understanding of any correspondence, it is necessary to have seen both sides, i.e. the letters of the addressee, as well as those of the writer. One of the difficulties in getting a complete understanding of the Marmion correspondence, is that he destroyed a great number of the letters he received. This is particularly true of the so-called spiritual letters, in which his correspondents poured out their problems and confidences to him. He considered these to be letters of “conscience”, *for his eyes only*, as sacred and secret as the confessional. However, he kept all official and important in-coming letters, as well as those from his monks. For some unknown reason, he failed to keep the letters he received from close friends, such as Patrick Vincent Dwyer<sup>1</sup>, the Bishop of Maitland, and also those from his immediate family.

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1. Many of the letters written by Marmion to P.V. Dwyer were sent to Maredsous from the diocese of Maitland. However, they had been torn up by someone and apparently confined for some time to a waste-paper basket. It has been possible to paste most of them together, but others were damaged beyond repair. We have, therefore, omitted publishing some five or six letters of Marmion to P. V. Dwyer, written, it would seem, between 1902-1904, of which we only possess fragments.



## Adapting his manner of writing to the personality of his Correspondents.

The letters presented in the French reference Edition we have prepared, cover a wide period of time, from his days in Rome as a clerical student (1881), to the final days of his life in the Abbey of Maredsous (1923). In many cases, they provide us with information relating to his personal life – health, fears, joys, hopes, etc. – which we do not get elsewhere. The majority of his letters were written in French, the language spoken in that part of Belgium, where he lived as monk and abbot for much of his adult life. Some three hundred letters were written in English. These latter have been translated into French, with a note to the effect that the originals were in English.

Readers of Marmion’s letters will notice his ability to write in a pleasant and easy style. He was a natural communicator. It could be said that he spent most of his life making contact with people, either by means of his pen, or by preaching. He believed that he had a special mission in life: to bring God to people, and to bring people to God. This was an essential part of his vocation as monk and priest. It was the driving force behind his entire life, and comes through in many of his letters. Over the years he developed the mind of an *apostle*, totally absorbed in working for the “salvation of souls”<sup>1</sup>.

Many of the letters show an astonishing element of *familiarity* with his correspondents. They are often a kind of private conversation or intimate chat, rather than a formal letter. This can partly be explained by the fact that he was Irish, but it is also a clear indication that he had an affectionate side to his personality. One of his favourite devices was to give his correspondent a pet-name. Thus his great friend, and former fellow-student in the seminary in Dublin, P.V. Dwyer, is nearly always addressed as “My dear Junk”<sup>2</sup>. He called one of his spiritual daughters “Mon cher paon” (My dear

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1. See the letter of 29 April 1881, to Abbot Salvado, in which Marmion already says: “God has given me an intense desire to labour for the salvation of souls”.

2. Whenever Dwyer, an Australian wanted a slice of bread he asked for a “junk of bread”, hence his nick-name. The accepted use of this expression was a “chunk” of bread.



Peacock)<sup>1</sup> and another “My dear Mousie”<sup>2</sup>, and so on. The most famous use of a pet-name was that of “Thecla”, when writing to Sister Marie-Joseph van Aerden, of the Carmelite convent in Louvain, signing himself “Paul”<sup>3</sup>. Such devices were signs of affection, as well as of trust.

Marmion’s correspondents covered a wide range of people. Some received only one letter, while others received very frequent letters.

As far as we know, only once did he have a problem in relation to his letter-writing. This occurred in 1902, when he was Prior of the Abbey of Mont Cesar (Kaizersberg) in Louvain – a post he held from 1899 to 1909. For some years he had been the spiritual director of Dame Cecile de Hemptinne, the Abbess of Maredret. In the spring of 1902, letters were exchanged almost weekly between Marmion and the Abbess of Maredret. Dom Robert de Kerchove, the Abbot of Mont Cesar, either became suspicious of this frequent exchange of letters, or thought that Marmion was wasting his time on trivial letters to Maredret. There is no evidence that, up to this point, Abbot Robert had read any of the letters in question. What is certain is that he called Marmion to his room and told him that from then on, he, the abbot, would censor all the correspondence between Marmion and Dame Cecile de Hemptinne. Marmion had no other choice but to obey, and cease writing to the Abbess of Maredret. There is no doubt that it caused them considerable embarrassment and inconvenience. This trial lasted for four months, after which time Abbot Robert lifted his embargo<sup>4</sup>.

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1. Laure Attout.

2. Evelyn Bax, an English lady.

3. After the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

4. It seems that Dame Cecile wrote to her brother, Abbot Primate de Hemptinne, complaining of the situation. The latter then apparently put pressure on Abbot Robert de Kerchove, who eventually relented. The letters in question had, in fact, been Notes on the Rule of St. Benedict, which Marmion sent to the Abbess on a weekly basis. Marmion remained, from 1900 onwards, the preferred preacher of the annual retreat to the Benedictines of Maredret. Notes, taken down by one of the sisters during his conferences, formed the principal source for his spiritual writings.



### **Preference shown to the monks of Maredsous and to the superiors of his Congregation**

It should be noted that the great majority of the letters which we possess of Dom Marmion are addressed to the monks of Maredsous, whose Abbot he was from 1909 to 1923. They are written first of all to his Priors, to whom he sometimes wrote on a daily basis, when he was absent from Maredsous. In addition, he wrote to those monks, who found themselves living outside the monasteries for various reasons, such as those who were in German prisons between 1914-1918.

He was particularly anxious to keep in touch with his superiors, especially the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order, as well as the Archabbot of Beuron. If there are few letters addressed to the Lay-Brothers of his community, this does not mean he was lacking in concern for their situation (see the letters of 30 November 1913, 30 May and 17 June 1910 and 18 June 1922). When he became Abbot of Maredsous, there were 66 professed choir-monks and 54 professed lay-brothers. Since the reform of the Trappists by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the existence of lay-brothers had become common in every form of monastic life. The Benedictine restoration in the second half of the nineteenth century, as constituted by the Beuronese Congregation (of which Maredsous formed part until 1920), had adopted this tradition, despite the difference in the status of the two categories of monks within the same community, an attitude which seems strange to us today: perpetual, instead of solemn, vows; recitation of a simplified liturgical office, without participation in the prayer of the choir-monks; the wearing of an obligatory beard; meals of a different quality to that of the “Fathers”; dormitories instead of cells; difference in dress or habit (the brothers had a simple cape, not a cowl); no common participation in recreations or “long walks” with the choir-monks; no voting rights in Chapter, etc. The lay-brothers hardly ever left the monastery. In this situation, one can understand why there are so few letters addressed by Dom Marmion to the lay-brothers of Maredsous (see, however, the letter to Brother Joseph Arickx of 17 April 1918). Nevertheless, Marmion tried to improve the life-style of the brothers in several ways, such as encouraging them to form



an orchestra, and acquiring an assortment of instruments for them. (“The lay-brothers played with their new instruments, and it was not too bad”. See letter to Dom Bonaventure Sodar, 17 June 1910).

### **The faults of a normal man**

The tone of these letters to his monks is usually fatherly and affectionate. However, there are a few exceptions, when he seems to show annoyance and even anger, as well as impatience. One example of this, is the letter to Dom Victor Le Jeune, early December 1914: “Your letter has given me great pain; it is useless for you to write me long explanations, as I will not read them. Either you submit to my teaching, or I will have to consider you as no longer a member of my community”.

It is true, that Dom Victor was a difficult character, and had openly become a conscientious objector – refusing later to do any military service, and thus becoming *persona non grata* with the Belgian authorities after war!

While we cannot excuse Dom Marmion for his apparent loss of face vis-à-vis Dom Victor, one may explain his attitude in the light of his many anxieties and responsibilities at this troubled time of war and post-war. The same may be said of the way he treated several monks during the so-called “Edermine crisis”, with particular reference to Dom Bonaventure Sodar and Dom Hilaire Duesberg. One could perhaps say that Marmion was guilty of rushing on judgment in such cases in the midst of a complex and unusual situation.

From this point of view, these letters show us Dom Marmion as a “normal and ordinary” man, with all his faults and strength. This in no way diminishes his search for sanctity, and, in fact, brings him even closer to ourselves. He may seem at times to lack discretion, or at least show some naivety (notably in regard to his possible elevation to the episcopate, or in his relationship with Queen Elizabeth of the Belgians), or again in the pouring of his feelings, and exaggerating his health problems. But these obvious weaknesses are largely compensated by the discovery of a solid spirituality, new and open for his time: simplicity and spontaneity in



prayer, freedom in the exercise of charity, flexibility in spiritual direction, truth in expressing one's affections, etc.

### **His correspondence as a gift of himself to others**

One might be led to think that Marmion was a typical product of the Victorian age, in his addiction to letter-writing<sup>1</sup>. For him, letter-writing was as much a duty, as a necessity. Although his life spanned two centuries, he remained very much rooted in the nineteenth century. Thus he never learnt to use a type-writer, and we have no evidence that he used a telephone either<sup>2</sup>. He certainly never drove a motor-car. Right up to the end, he wrote all his letters himself, in a firm hand. It must have been a time-consuming occupation, which led him sometimes to burn the midnight oil. But it was one of his greatest joys in life. He never seems to have become tired of this particular means of giving himself to others.

Fr. Mark Tierney, O.S.B.

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1. One thinks immediately of Cardinal Newman, whose correspondence runs to over thirty volumes.

2. The first telephone linking Maredsous to the external world was put in the Abbey school in 1909, the year Dom Marmion was elected Abbot of Maredsous!