When confronted with the task of investigating the nature of the impulse which gave rise to the modern Irish missionary movement we are presented with a problem of source material. The archival holdings of the various missionary institutes largely consist of the official correspondence between the missionary superiors and their European headquarters and also records of dealings with Propaganda Fide in Rome and the European funding agencies. Few personal diaries are found and even fewer files of personal correspondence. In the absence of such testimony the best source for ascertaining the reasons why the movement flourished is the series of magazines and periodicals published by the missionary institutes. It is true to say that this literature has been primarily concerned with promoting the missionary ideal and in attracting the active involvement of readers in the missionary movement. And although instances of ‘technical’ articles, dealing with the methods and techniques of evangelisation are to be found, such material invariably has a promotional context. There can be no doubt this promotional literature was highly successful. By 1935 Ireland had approximately 2,000 missionaries in Africa and Asia, in contrast to a figure of under 200 at the turn of the century. The rapid growth of the movement is perhaps best represented by the number of new institutes founded specifically for missionary work. The Maynooth Mission to China (Columban Fathers), St Patrick’s Missionary Society, the Columban Sisters, the Holy Rosary Sisters

1 The phrase “modern Irish missionary movement” refers to the apostolate to non-Christian peoples and not to the missions to the Irish diasporas in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and England. The latter were essentially chaplaincy missions to the emigrant Irish.

2 In this study the term ‘institute’ denotes any of three types of religious organisation, namely ‘orders,’ ‘congregations,’ or ‘societies.’

3 Response to questionnaire circulated among congregations engaged in missionary work between 1900-1935 (dated 20 September 1976).
and the Medical Missionaries of Mary were all founded within a period of three decades. Also significant was the new orientation of existing religious institutes towards pagan missionary activity. What had occurred in continental Europe between 1830-1900, happened in Ireland between 1916-1946.

But a survey of the nature of the appeal as presented in the missionary magazines cannot be the starting point for this study. In order for the material which was published from 1914 onwards to make its impact it was first necessary that Irish Catholic opinion should be primed, that there should be at least a general acceptance of the missionary ideal and a residual interest in the work of missions.

There is a fairly general belief that this preparatory work was easily and swiftly accomplished. But nothing could be further from the truth. An examination of the period 1850-1910 reveals that up to the closing decades of the 19th century, the Irish Church—clergy and laity—was not only not mission-orientated, but was positively hostile to missions. These were identified with France which had shocked Catholic Ireland during the revolutionary era and in the latter half of the 19th century seemed to be drifting more and more into godlessness. It was commonly felt that Frenchmen were to be kept at a distance and it did not particularly matter whether they were Freemasons or Catholics. The latter were under suspicion since many of the errors which Pius IX had condemned in his celebrated Syllabus of Errors of 1864 had originated in France and the reaction to Renan's Life of Jesus and other continuing manifestations of 'modernism' showed that the French Catholic ambience still remained suspect. It followed that the missionary endeavour of French Catholics was also to be distrusted.

And yet by 1910 attitudes in Ireland had altered and for the first time since the 11th century an interest in missions to non-Christians had been aroused. The credit for this must go primarily to two French societies which in different ways infiltrated Ireland and against very considerable opposition finally succeeded in making the ideal of missions acceptable.

The missionary Congregation du Saint Esprit (C.S.Sp.) came to Ireland in 1859. Possessing expertise in the field of education as well as an excellent reputation for religious orthodoxy, they were invited by Dr Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin, to provide desperately needed

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