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Italy as the ‘European India’: British orientalism, cultural imperialism, and anti-Catholicism, c. 1850–1870

As a Protestant Dean, to protest is my right:
As an Irishman born, I’ve a mission to fight:
As a preacher of peace, I bid all hold their tongue,
And list, while my curse at the Papists is flung…
I take it for granted, you know
My view of the Papists, expressed long ago…
That Papists are tricksters, and traitors, and thieves:
That none of them ever says what he believes:
That their faith makes the Irish to cheat, lie, and steal,
And be blackguards – as sure as my name is McNeile.
That the seven deadly sins are summed up in a priest:
That the clerical tonsure’s the mark of the beast:
That their Pope is the red Babylonian fye-fye:
His tiara a fool’s cap, his cross-keys a lie:
That their preaching and teaching lead straight to the pit:
That in devilish conclave their canonists sit,
Forging fetters for Protestants – soul, head and heel,
And fashioning faggots to roast.¹

The Reverend Dr Hugh McNeile, the author of the verses above, was an Irish-born, Calvinist Anglican of Scottish descent. He was known for his exceptional oratorical abilities, for his fierce anti-Catholicism and for his yet stronger anti-Tractarianism and anti-Anglo-Catholicism. A premillennial, McNeile had been a vocal opponent of the Catholic emancipation of 1829.² Ever since, his anti-Catholic speeches attracted vast crowds, and his compelling style of utterance, combined with a commanding presence, convinced many of the soundness of his spiritual crusade against Catholicism. A man not only of great skills, but also
of deep faith and spirituality, his views were perceived as extreme and contentious among the upper circles of politics and of the Church of England, which resulted in the slow progress of his career (he became Dean of Ripon only when he was 70 years old). This notwithstanding, he was extremely popular among the lower classes, and his sermons are a good proxy to understand how English Protestant opinion perceived Catholicism in the late Victorian era, in particular after the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy.3

The re-establishment took place on 29 September 1850, when Pope Pius IX published a bull, *Universalis Ecclesiae*, with which he appointed the Archbishop of Westminster and twelve bishops. The following day Nicholas Wiseman was made cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pontiff’s decision, together with the enthusiasm and openness with which Wiseman accepted and welcomed his appointment to the archbishopric, prompted an outraged reaction from the British public opinion, press, and establishment. Wiseman’s publication of his letter *Ex Porta Flaminia*, written in a somewhat hyperbolic and boastful tone, made things even worse4. *The Times* labelled it a ‘mongrel document, which reads like a cross between an Imperial rescript and a sermon addressed to the victims of an *auto-da-fé*’,5 and stated their preoccupation with the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy as a threat to the Church of England and to the country’s Protestantism, the ‘palladium of freedom of thought, of action, and of government’.6

Until then, the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, had been relatively undisturbed by the idea of having a Catholic hierarchy in the country. In August 1848 he answered a question from Sir Robert Inglis, Member of Parliament for Oxford, declaring that he was not opposed to the idea of Wiseman calling himself Archbishop of Westminster; and in 1849 he reiterated his conviction to the Earl of Shrewsbury, saying that he would not object to Catholic bishops taking the names of English towns.7 When Wiseman left for Rome on 16 August 1850, he told Russell that he would be made a cardinal, to which Russell raised no objections and, in fact, charged Wiseman with a diplomatic mission at the Vatican on behalf of the British government.8 Russell had almost believed that the restoration of the hierarchy would pass for the most part unacknowledged in Britain. However, when he realised that this was not at all the case, surprised by the public’s strong reaction, he adapted his stance accordingly.

For three weeks after the publication of the Papal bull in *The Times*, Russell did not say much publicly about it; he rather sent private letters to Palmerston, the Queen and the Bishop of London, in which he