Jesuits by the Tigris
Men for Others in Baghdad

by
Joseph F. MacDonnell, S.J.
First Edition

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This book is dedicated
to the long-suffering and noble people of Iraq
who have endured wars that they did not seek
deprivations that they did not expect
and sorrow that they did not deserve.
May God deliver them from their suffering.
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Preface

Why do hundreds of middle aged Iraqis spend long weekends every two years with post middle age American Jesuits in order to celebrate two schools from which Jesuits were dismissed 25 years ago? Why have two and a half decades not dimmed memories of activities and routines of everyday school life? Why has the hostility between Iraq and the United States not weakened the bonds of friendship between these Iraqi students and their American teachers - not even frayed them? First time visitors to these reunions find the excitement, the enjoyment and the camaraderie of both parties beyond belief. This book is an attempt to explain this latter phenomenon as well as to respond to an alumni request for a record of the Jesuit Baghdad adventure which they can pass on to their children.

During the past 25 years it has often been proposed that someone record and celebrate this very Ignatian enterprise where men of faith, armed with little more than trust in God, overcame great obstacles to build a successful and joyous sign of faith and dedication, and one of the great works of the New England Jesuit Province. Alumni wanted some means to explain to their children the extraordinarily close bond between alumni and Jesuits. At these gatherings they discuss how they can pass on to their own children the system of values they have received. They appreciate the fact that the quality of their lives has been enriched. Their compassion for others has deepened and they value the spiritual dimension of life. A major concern of these men and women, who are now American citizens, is how to serve others.

My plan has been to document the extraordinary successes of the Jesuits and their Iraqi colleagues as they introduced to the Baghdad community a variety of intellectual, spiritual and social benefits. My story treats neither of church politics nor of secular politics partly because I have neither expertise nor interest in either: it was none of our concern. The Jesuits deliberately avoided such involvement from the beginning because it would interfere with their commitment to education. It is curious that none of the numerous books recently published on Iraq mention the two Jesuit schools in spite of their many prominent graduates. Among other things it certainly demonstrates that the Jesuits were considered neither political nor even politically relevant.

The Jesuits, themselves, were sensitive to the needs of the Iraqi churches and offered a great deal of pastoral assistance outside of their classrooms. Their primary reason for being
educators in Iraq was to help rejuvenate the native church. The Jesuits intended to strengthen the Christians in the practice of their faith in a Muslim world; they welcomed Muslim students also - it would have been unthinkable not to. In this educational setting these Christians and Muslims got to know one another intimately. In this context also the Christians developed a patriotism and pride in a society of which they were a part.

My sources include letters and documents from the New England Jesuit archives (file #510) at Campion Center in Weston, Mass. as well as the memories of Jesuits and alumni who have generously sent me their evaluations and recollections. After introducing Baghdadis and Jesuits, this story divides naturally into three periods punctuated by four events;

- the arrival of the Jesuits in 1932,
- the start of World War II in 1941,
- the start of the Republic in 1958 and
- the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1969.

Then follows a description of the many Baghdad College programs, the Al-Hikma story, some of the interesting characters of both schools, the expulsion and finally a splendid and proud heritage, our alumni.

Of enormous help in this enterprise was Ramzi Hermiz who often read and reread my manuscript and offered countless insightful suggestions. He was the Baghdad College valedictorian in 1948 and completed his education on academic scholarships at both Yale and Princeton. He advanced in engineering with many inventions and patents to executive positions. In a similar way Fr. Ryan from his perspective as a teacher at Baghdad College and former dean of Al-Hikma offered many valuable corrections and detailed suggestions. Fr. Donohue, the Superior of the Jesuits who was at the center of the storm during the expulsion and is still involved in scholarly work in the Middle East, offered sage advice, precise details as well as valuable data which the archives lacked. It would be impossible to find a more observant, efficient, prompt and cheerful proof-reader than Joan Hanlon. Also contributing their encouragement and support were: Dave Nona, Premjit Talwar, Tahir Bazirgan and Wael Hindo. Invaluable also was the technical advice of Walter Kempski and also the president of NUAD, Louis J. Stephen, brother of Najib Yusuf Stephan who belonged to that elite group of 107 young men who entered Baghdad College in its very first class in 1932.

Joseph F. MacDonnell, S.J.
Fairfield University
4 May, 1994

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Introduction

"If you have not seen Baghdad, you have not seen the world," So runs a sentence from Medieval Arabic literature, underlining the splendor and opulence that was Baghdad’s. City of Caliphs and Turkish mercenaries; center of learning and locus of intrigue, Baghdad still maintains a charm distinct among oriental cities. For 37 years the city fascinated and held a group of New England Jesuits who came, not to see the world nor to imbibe the mysteries of the East, but to aid in the education of Iraqi youth. The Jesuits came suddenly in 1932 at the request of the Chaldean Patriarch and they left as suddenly in September 1969 when the Iraqi Government found them no longer desirable. But they left behind them their modest monument - a secondary school, a university, some thousands of graduates, a handful of Iraqi Jesuits and a wealth of good will and love. To be uprooted so quickly and curtly without explanation or excuse is not easy. Several of the sixty Jesuits expelled in 1968-1969 had spent over 20 years in Baghdad and had thought of nothing save living, working and dying in Baghdad. By simple decree those plans were voided.

Many years ago, back in 1932, a handful of American Jesuits sailed the seas to Beirut and bused across the desert to Baghdad. They came to Baghdad in answer to this request from the Patriarch of the Chaldeans and the other bishops of Baghdad who wanted a secondary school for their Christian boys. At first Baghdad was a strange city for the Jesuits. The language, the dress, the customs created that aura of mystery which surrounds the cities of the East. The covered bazaar, crowded and dimly lit, with its brocades and spices and peculiar smells was in sharp contrast to the broad pavements and glassed store fronts they had known. But they settled in and got down to work. Before long they became familiar to the silent scrutiny of the Baghdadis. Baghdad College and its robed faculty became part of the landscape of Baghdad. Faculty and students increased and Baghdad College sired a University, Al-Hikma. Five Jesuits lived and died in Baghdad and were buried under the date palms. Five Iraqi boys became Jesuits and all seemed well. Then came the shock and horror of war breeding humiliation and hatred. That war of 1967 which was supposed to solve the problems of the area only increased them and spawned new ones. The world took sides after so many years of wordy neutrality, and the Jesuit College and University which had seemed to blend into the surroundings so well, now became a foreign element in the eyes of some Iraqis. The years of devotion, service and proven sympathy could not negate the origins of the Jesuits.
And so the Jesuits were sent off as quietly as they had come.

The operation started like so many other Jesuit overseas enterprises: a few men rich in interest, devotion and hope but poor in finances set out to do what they could to help the church in Iraq, convinced that the generosity of American Catholics would provide. Fr. Edward Madaras acquired a second-hand mimeograph machine before setting sail for the East and started publishing Al-Baghdadi - while still on the high seas. The interest created by the Al-Baghdadi, a very popular periodical chronicled by Fr. Madaras, and the continual work of the Jesuit Mission Office in Boston provided the funds to start and continue Baghdad College.

From a beginning of 107 students and 9 faculty (4 Jesuits and 5 Iraqis) Baghdad College grew to an enrollment of over 1,000 students with a faculty of thirty-three Jesuits and thirty-one Iraqi laymen. The growth was not easy and painless. The centuries of antagonism between Islam and Christianity and the long hostility between East and West had left scars on the Iraqis. They were justifiably suspicious of these Western priests. Iraq whose population is 95% Muslim was struggling to gain its footing in the modern world. In 1932 the League of Nations had recognized the independence of Iraq, but the problems of developing its resources and creating modern institutions weighed heavily on Iraqi administrators. Although some Iraqis were a bit suspicious, all Iraqis were enormously hospitable and tolerant. If one had patience he could prove himself.

Quietly the Jesuits went about their business of educating Christian Iraqi boys and the Muslims who were interested in coming. There was never any attempt to convert Muslims - that was not the purpose of the Jesuits coming to Baghdad. Slowly this became apparent to the Baghdadis and dissipated their fears and suspicions. There was a low period early in World War II when alienation from the Allied Powers and nascent nationalism made the future of Baghdad College look very bleak, but the impending threat turned into an impetus for growth when some key Muslims in the Ministry of Education reevaluated their judgment about Baghdad College and the Jesuits and brought their sons to enroll at the College. The enrollment increased steadily and the donations of anonymous benefactors and thousands of friends of Jesuits enabled the school plant to keep pace with the added numbers of students.

From the early days Baghdad College followed the program prescribed for secondary schools by the Iraq Government. There was no desire on the part of the Jesuits to transfer American programs of study to Iraq. In the framework of the Iraqi program the Jesuits offered their students a distinct advantage - bilingualism in Arabic and English. The students studied science
and mathematics in English and in Arabic. Thus they were prepared to take the final government exams in Arabic and also to pursue further scientific study in Baghdad University through the medium of English. Also several were judged competent by the government to study abroad in the U.S.A. and Great Britain.

From evidence available and from the response of Baghdad University Professors the Jesuits judged that they were making a substantial contribution to education in Iraq during a crucial period in its development. Several graduates went into medicine and engineering - the two most critical and needed professions in the developing world. Very few went into politics. The Jesuits never considered themselves purveyors of political ideology and deliberately refrained from entering into the complexities of Iraqi politics and from currying favor of any political faction. This neutral stance was an asset for 37 years.

The Jesuits on request had made various attempts to aid primary schools, but all came to naught. Their main effort remained concentrated on secondary education until the early 50's when requests from interested people pushed the Jesuits to study the possibility of opening a university in Baghdad. An affirmative decision was made and with government approval and encouragement, Al-Hikma University was begun in September 1956 with offerings in engineering and business administration. Later an arts college was added when the university went co-educational. In the 12 years of its existence Al-Hikma University grew to an enrollment of 700 students and established a favorable reputation. In the Fall of 1968 there were 25 Jesuits and 53 laymen on the faculty.

Such is the skeleton history of the Jesuits in Baghdad. They were not missionaries in the classical sense of the term. They preached rarely and they proselytized not at all. They faced no threat of natives on the war path and none could console themselves by counting their converts. Baghdad was referred to by some as a fruitless waste of men and money; others called it a mission of faith to underline the lack of concrete consolations and accomplishments. But these were the judgments of "outsiders," people who had not experienced the myriad fascinations of Baghdad and Baghdadis. They had no knowledge of the impact Jesuits made on students as well as their families, Muslim as well as Christian.

In addition to the impact on their charges, Jesuits also impacted Baghdad society. The opportunities provided to make contributions in education were many and the response of the Jesuits was praiseworthy. The development of an English program especially geared to Arabic speaking students was one instance; a course in religion tailored to Iraqi Christians was another.
the case of Fr. Guay who turned a side interest in architecture to a full-time occupation is the most fascinating of all. He designed and executed most all of the buildings. The two Jesuit campuses - low cost, functional architecture reflecting the periods of Iraqi history from Babylon up through the Muslim period. The Jesuit impact certainly went beyond the walls of the two schools.

It is hard for a foreigner to blend fully into a different culture but the attempt was made and was appreciated. Fr. Richard McCarthy became one of the well-known Arabic preachers in the Christian community and established a reputation for his education in Muslim theology among the learned men in Iraq.

Even apart from these singular examples there was a general satisfaction among all the Jesuits from the work they were engaged in, from the rapport with both Muslims and Christians, from the many little helps they were able to offer to so many, and from the experience of learning from a very different culture. Perhaps it can all be summed up by the fact that the Iraqis are a happy, hospitable and unsophisticated people, frank, warm and forthright in expressing appreciation as well as disapproval.

Working in Baghdad did not require some fierce determination rooted in totally supernatural motives. It was enjoyable to work in Baghdad. But there were problems, springing mostly from the limits which come from being a foreigner. The Jesuits could serve the Christian poor, but the Muslim poor were beyond their reach. The Jesuits tried to foster social responsibility but had to beware of entering into the area of politics.

From the beginning there was strong hope that before too many years there would be Iraqi boys in training to be Jesuits. They would complete the process begun and the Society of Jesus would become an integral part of the Iraqi scene. Vocations were numerous, but only a few had the stamina and persistence to overcome parental opposition and social pressures to follow through on their original desire.

Also the desire to help the Church directly become a reality when the Jesuits assumed responsibility for the Chaldean Minor Seminary in 1964. The Jesuits could complement the work of training priests done for nearly a century by the French Dominicans. At the same time Jesuits were becoming involved in the direction and training of Iraqi Sisters. These new ramifications and work with Iraqi Christian youth which had been going on for some time in conjunction with the Carmelites seemed to auger well for the future of the Church and for Muslim-Christian relations.

The Jesuits had overcome in part their foreign origin and had identified with the church in Iraq and with the Iraqi educational
system. But there was always the awareness that at anytime the Jesuits might be asked to leave. They were guests of the Iraqi Government. Each year they had to renew their permits for residence in Iraq, and every wave of anti-American feeling which blew across the Middle East was a threat to their continued existence.

The revolution of 1958 and each succeeding revolution was a crisis of sorts. Each succeeding government studied the question of "foreign" schools; each time Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University were judged beneficial to the country and their work went on - until the traumatic crisis of June 1967 when the Israelis took over Arab territory and displaced more Palestinian refugees. The wave of anti-American feeling reached new intensity because of the United States stance in the area and it became clear that the continued presence of American Jesuits was more tenuous than ever. For a time it seemed that the Jesuits would weather this crisis as they had others in the past. School and work went on for another year until a new revolution brought to power a socialist government more interested in controlling all private education. The government decreed that it would administer Al-Hikma while the Jesuits continued to teach. The Jesuits accepted the proposal and attempted to work in the new framework for a few months until an extremist element in the government decreed their expulsion from Iraq in November 1968. A year later the American Jesuits at Baghdad College were ordered to leave by the same group.

The expulsion was a disappointment and a shock of sorts, but it was not unexpected, it was always a possibility during each of the 37 years the Jesuits worked in Iraq. All things are passing and the usefulness of the American Jesuit contribution to Iraq was nearing its end. It is difficult for a foreigner to play an active role in the process of politicization and nationalization now gripping so many of the developing countries. Without regretting the past or prejudging the future, the Jesuits think the time has come for new forms and different accents.

Reflecting on their work over the past 37 years, the Jesuits feel it was all very worthwhile and they are grateful to the many benefactors who made that work possible. It was an investment of men and money in the process of human development. The yield has been great if one measures results, not in financial terms, but in terms of human growth and love and understanding.

John J. Donohue, S.J.
CEMAM (Center for the Study of the Modern Arab World)
4 May, 1994: St. Joseph's University in Beirut