

# The Glenroe Riots (1873-1874)

by Tim O'Connell

In 1865 Darby Buckley finally retired as parish priest of Glenroe.<sup>1</sup> He was about 85 years of age and his departure had been a long time coming. The Bishop of Limerick had appointed his successor a full twenty-one years earlier but Fr. Buckley had steadfastly held on to his position as PP with the bishop's appointee acting as 'Administrator'.

Fr. Buckley had been appointed to Glenroe in 1824<sup>2</sup> and had a very loyal following amongst his parishioners. The writings of Patrick Weston Joyce make several references to him in terms like 'saintly and active parish priest'. He recalled that Fr. Buckley frequently gave his sermons in Irish and his parishioners were devoted to him. He also refers to the fact that Buckley had a volatile temper when provoked.

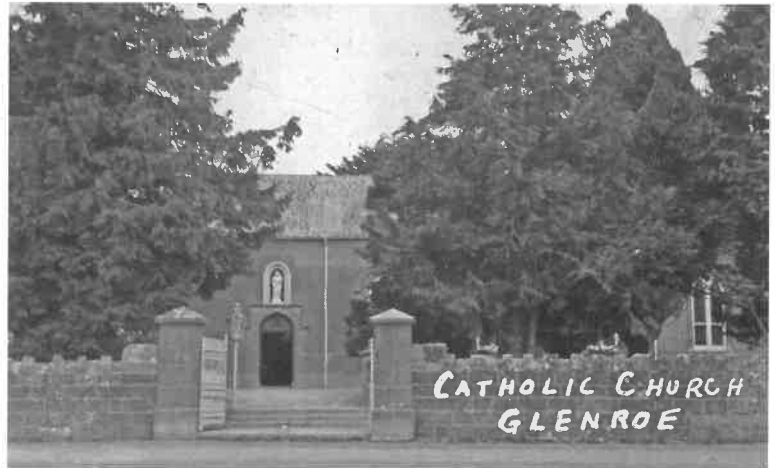
Buckley had become a landholder in 1827. He was on good terms with Richard Eaton, agent for the Wandesperde Estate and had introduced him to his future wife a Miss Catherine Bouchier. His reward was a farm in the townland of Ballinacourty.<sup>3</sup> He built a new house on the land named 'Victory Hall' to mark the recent passing of Catholic Emancipation.

After his retirement Fr. Buckley sold his lease to William Walsh. The Walshes were land agents who acted for the nearby Kingston Estate in Mitchelstown. Fr. Buckley stood for William at his baptism and Walsh's brother John was P.P. of Templeglantine, so relations were good. It was agreed Fr. Buckley would remain in his house for his lifetime and retain the grazing of a cow and a horse.

The arrangement went fine at first but around 1869 Fr. Buckley complained that Walsh's labourers were riding his horse and milking his cow. To mitigate this, Walsh gave back about four acres of land to Buckley for his lifetime.

The new parish priest appointed at the time of Fr. Buckley's retirement

Glenroe  
Roman Catholic  
Church exterior  
in the 1950s



Glenroe  
Roman Catholic  
Church interior  
in the 1950s



was Richard Power. He was residing temporarily in Ballinacourty House which had become vacant resulting from the dispossession of gentleman farmer Richard Bourke by the Court. Fr. Power had his eye on Fr. Buckley's house as a permanent priest's residence and certainly influenced the events that followed.

Walsh became aware of the priest's designs on his land and house and relations between him and Fr. Buckley worsened. Rather than taking a legal route, he took matters into his own hands in 1873. To establish ownership, he had a wooden house constructed on the property very close to Fr. Buckley's own house and had a haystack from his own part of the property moved nearby.

The erection of the wooden house infuriated Fr. Buckley and a notice signed

'DB', probably drawn up by Fr. Power, was placed on the pier of Glenroe churchyard with a heading 'Persecution in Glenroe'.

The notice was referred to in the *Cork Examiner* when the court case was reported:

An old clergyman on the brink of the grave, beloved, respected by his parishioners, half a century in Glenroe. When he came first to the parish people of Glenroe were no better than Heathens, nothing for them but faction-fighting and polygamy. That clergyman put all this down and made them walk in the way of the Lord. Being thus advanced in years he gave up the parish and lived there on a scanty subsistence. He never spared a pound but gave it always for charitable purposes. He also sold a part of his land to Walshs and held only four



Glenroe Church



Plaque commemorating Rev. Darby Buckley P.P.

acres to live on. The Walshs on taking the land thought he would not live at the time, but thanks be to God he has willed it otherwise. Their patience was at last worn out. They put up a house on the four acres to frighten him out and then Irish words signifying "Blind William" was used to get in. He can't afford to pay £16 for the house in Kilfinane any longer. Walsh is just as Victor Emmanuel was to the Pope. These Walshs also thought to overhold Pat Toomy's land and need not tell you what they have done to McClure, Kelly and Crowley. These Walshs are refugees from the western parts of England, from Brecknock, where they persecuted Christians. I entreat you all to pray for them. D.B.<sup>4</sup>

Constable McCrystal with other constables from Darragh RIC station saw the notice while on the way to Mass and began take notes. On seeing him transcribing the notice Fr. Power ordered them to leave the churchyard and refused them admission to the church.

Tension continued to rise when Walsh moved into the wooden house. His pregnant wife moved in with him briefly but found conditions there intolerable and returned to their former house in Kilfinane. Around 11 November 1873 Walsh's herdsman, John Condon became gravely ill with pneumonia. He was so bad that on 12 November he received the last rites from Fr. Power P.P.

The following day (13 November) a mob, of at least 100 people, formed and proceeded to Walsh's house armed with hatchets and farm implements. On arrival they set about demolishing the offending

structure and shockingly moved the dying Condon still in his bed and placed him in a field where he remained for about two hours exposed to the elements.

Fr. Buckley who was around 90 at this stage directed the men demolishing the house and told them that he would be personally responsible for their actions. Meanwhile Walsh who had been working in a nearby field with a boy labourer Edmond Sheehy returned and he [Walsh] was assaulted by John Casey one of the rioters. The police also arrived but felt powerless to intervene because they were vastly outnumbered by the mob.

The house and the haystack were demolished and dumped over the ditch into Walsh's property. When their task was just about completed Fr. Power arrived on site passing Condon, still in the field, on his way in and proceeded to make a speech to the crowd thanking them for their help and telling them they could be proud of their action pulling down the house. He asked a farmer named Michael McDonnell to witness him taking possession of the property from Fr. Buckley and the two entered Fr. Buckley's house to the cheers of the assembled crowd.

On 18 November, the house of Walsh's employee Thomas Hackett was attacked and burned. Hackett had constructed the wooden house. On the same date Condon died in his own house. He was just 30 years of age and the father of one daughter. An inquest into his death followed after which the two priests and a number of the rioters were charged with accelerating his death and organizing a riot. The Condon charge was later

dropped.

Public sympathy was mainly with the priests and rioters and against Walsh. In early 1874 several acknowledgements of thanks for contributions to the 'Glenroe Defence Fund' were published. The contributions were coming from other parishes in Limerick and adjacent parishes in North Cork.<sup>5</sup> Later, during jury selection at the trial, anybody who contributed to this fund was asked to withdraw.

The case was tried before Limerick Assizes in March 1874. Those charged, including the two priests Buckley and Power, were called, but there was much confusion because Darby Buckley did not appear. The defence team pleaded that he was ill and not well enough to appear and pointed to him being over 90 years of age. The judge allowed the case to proceed without him.

The defence argued that Walsh was in fact a trespasser. Edmond Sheehy, Walsh's young labourer was kept in protective custody overnight in William Street police station ahead of his testimony.<sup>6</sup> Several witnesses testified as to the 1869 arrangement granting Buckley the four acres. It was argued that the primitive conditions in the wooden house caused Condon's death and Walsh's injury was described as a mere 'lick on the head'.<sup>7</sup>

The Bishop of Limerick, Dr Butler was present for the summing up by Judge Barry which took almost two hours. His presence probably had an intimidating effect on the jury. The judge was highly critical of Fr. Power, particularly his placing of the notice in the churchyard

and suggested that Power was the originator of the notice and not Buckley. He effectively left Fr. Power off the hook by pointing out that only those present during the demolition and the assault on Walsh could be considered to have rioted. He described as vexatious Walsh's action of building the house so close to Fr. Darby Buckley's. He was not overly critical of Fr. Buckley and pointed to his age and testaments of Fr. Buckley's charitable character from many people including clergymen of other religions. The questions put to the Jury were:

1. Was the field the property of Rev. Mr. Buckley?
2. Was the wooden house pulled down in a riotous manner?
3. Did Fr. Power incite, procure, or take part in the riot?
4. Did any and which of the other traversers take part in the riot?

After long deliberation, the jury could only agree on the first point, the field belonged to Fr. Buckley. They were discharged and the case was brought back for trial again on 25 and 26 March.<sup>8</sup> On this occasion the jury acquitted Fr. Power and found the others guilty but recommended them to the mercy of the court.

The accused were committed to Limerick Prison overnight on 25 March, including Fr. Power who was released after his acquittal. The others were released again some days later pending legal argument about how the charge was framed.<sup>9</sup>

In April, Fr. Power was charged, at Kilfinane Petty Sessions, with 'employing a multitude to commit a breach of the peace'. It was stated that he had attempted to move his furniture into the house and he was bound over by the court.<sup>10</sup> Walsh was carrying a revolver for protection at this stage and his workmen had run away in fear of their lives, but no blows were struck during the confrontation.

The trial came up again at the Limerick Summer Assizes in August 1874 under Judge Lawson. The two priests were called again with a different list of rioters in the dock. At this point the British press were also covering the story. Buckley again failed to appear but the judge halted proceedings until he was brought to the



Memorial stone to the memory of Rev. Richard Power P.P.

court from Mount St. Alphonsus, where he was staying with the Redemptorists. The same evidence was presented and the jury again failed to come to a verdict.

The judge ordered those charged to appear before him the following morning. The six men released in March were sent back to Limerick Jail for three months with a fine of £50 each. John Casey got six months for striking Walsh.<sup>11</sup>

Further skirmishes followed in this affair. In October 1874, the house of a Mr. Canty near Bruff was attacked because he was a relative of Walsh.<sup>12</sup> In June 1875, Walsh and Fr. Power were in court again with Walsh accusing the priest of assaulting him with an umbrella. Walsh had attempted to drive the priest's cattle off the land but the PP argued successfully that he held legal possession for one year.<sup>13</sup>

During the winter of 1874-75 there was a campaign to get the five 'Glenroe Traversers' released<sup>14</sup> because it was felt that they were being unjustly punished for the actions of the mob. Although not stated publicly, Fr. Power, who was most culpable of all and who incited the riot, got away without punishment, except for one night in prison. The men all remained in jail until January 1875, implying that no fines were paid, including the unfortunate

McDonnell who was asked by Fr. Power to act as a witness.

In 1875 Fr. Buckley and 52 people implicated in the incident pleaded guilty to riot at Limerick Assizes after which they were discharged by the court. In 1876, the Wandesforde Estate successfully evicted the priests and gave possession to Walsh. The priests appear to have accepted the verdict as there is no report of them being physically removed. Surprisingly Fr. Power died before the much older Fr. Buckley in December of that year. It appears that Fr. Buckley died shortly after, but I was unable to locate a death certificate for him.<sup>15</sup> In 1877 the comment 'dead and possession reverts to Walsh' was written in the Valuation Office land revision book.<sup>16</sup>

Fr. Power is commemorated on a plaque on the wall of Glenroe church where he is buried and Fr Buckley's name appears in a stone above the main door of the church, which he built in 1834.

#### Sources

1. *The Nation*, 23 October, 1865 'Catholic Intelligence'.
2. *Freeman's Journal*, 8 May, 1824.
3. *Limerick Reporter*, 17 July, 1840. 'Rev D Buckley V Wandesforde'.
4. *Cork Examiner*, 7 March, 1874. 'County Limerick Spring Assizes, Friday'.
5. *Cork Examiner*, 26 February, 1874. 'Thanks' Acknowledgement from Rev D. Curtin CC Glenroe.
6. *Freeman's Journal*, 9 March 1874. 'The Kilfinane Case'.
7. *Cork Examiner*, 9 March, 1874. 'Limerick Spring Assizes, County Crown Court, Friday (Judge Barry)'.
8. *Freeman's Journal*, 27 March 1874 'The Kilfinane Outrage'.
9. Limerick Prison Register; available at: [www.findmypast.ie](http://www.findmypast.ie)
10. *Cork Constitution*, 2 May, 1874 'The Kilfinane Riots'.
11. *The Nation*, 25 July, 1874.
12. *Cork Examiner*, 7 October, 1874 'Outrage near Bruff'.
13. *Nenagh Guardian*, 16 June, 1875.
14. *Freeman's Journal* 19 November, 1874 'The Glenroe Prisoners. Representations by Limerick MP's Synan & O'Sullivan'.
15. There was a mosaic square in the tiled floor of Glenroe church which is believed to mark Fr. Buckley's grave. The area was carpeted and concealed during modernisation work some years ago.
16. Valuation Office – Land Revision Book for DED of Darragh (1868-1879).

**Tim O'Connell** is a native of Glenroe, County Limerick, where he spent his formative years. After secondary school at St. Clement's College he worked in the Merchant Navy as a Radio Officer. For the last 30 years he has lived in Limerick, working in the computer industry (Wang and Dell). He studied 'History of the Family' at UL and holds a Diploma in Genealogy from U.C.C. This story was discovered while collecting material for his dissertation.