

Limerick's bishop, the 1916 Rising and a clash with the general

PROFESSOR JOHN HORGAN

WHO were the two Limerick priests whom Bishop Edward O'Dwyer saved from the wrath of General Sir John Maxwell, the British commander who signed the orders for the execution of the 1916 leaders?

The tangled web of religion and politics in Ireland in the second decade of the 20th century raises many questions and some of them, like this, still remain unanswered.

Maxwell's campaign against the Limerick priests began on May 6, 1916, when the centre of Dublin was still a smoking ruin. On that date he wrote to O'Dwyer:

"There are two priests in your diocese, the Rev. Father ---, of ---, Co. Limerick, and the Rev. Father ---, of ---, Co. Limerick, whose presence in that neighbourhood I consider to be a dangerous menace



Bishop Edward O'Dwyer

to the peace and safety of the Realm, and had these priests been laymen they would already have been placed under arrest. In this case I would be glad if your lordship could obviate the necessity for such action by moving these priests to such employment as will deny their having intercourse with the people, and inform you of your decision."



General Sir John Maxwell

Maxwell probably already knew that O'Dwyer was unlikely to be a pushover. The episcopate of O'Dwyer, who was now aged 70, and had been Bishop of Limerick for 30 years, had long been punctuated by controversy. He disagreed publicly with some of his fellow bishops on a number of issues, most notably on the Plan of Campaign

and boycotting because - ironically in the light what his attitude became in 1916-17 - he feared that they would lead to violence, even to murder.

The correspondence initiated by General Maxwell ended in a stand-off. O'Dwyer replied (through his secretary) to the general from Abbey View, Kilmallock, that he would not inflict such "very severe punishment" on his priests "except on a definite charge, supported by evidence".

Maxwell consulted his files, and provided O'Dwyer with reports that one of the priests concerned had been recorded as attending a meeting addressed by Pearse, and as blessing the colours of the Volunteers on another occasion.

The second priest, he charged, "was said to have been active with a certain E. Blythe, organising Irish Volunteers", had appealed to young men of

the GAA to join the Irish Volunteers, and was "said to have been present at an Irish volunteer meeting at -----when a certain John McDermott [i.e. Sean Mac Diarmada] delivered inflammatory and seditious speeches." All the occasions he noted were prior to the Rising.

O'Dwyer replied that both men were "excellent priests, who hold strong Nationalist views, but I do not know that they have violated any law, civil or ecclesiastical."

Rejecting what he described as Maxwell's "appeal to help in the furtherance of your work as military dictator of Ireland", he continued: "Even if action of that kind was not outside my province, the events of the past few weeks would make it impossible for me to have any part in proceedings which I regard as wantonly cruel and oppressive."

"Altogether", he added, "your regime has been one of the worst and blackest chapters in the history of this country."

Then - no doubt with his tongue firmly ensconced in his cheek - he signed off: "I have the honour to be, sir, your obedient servant."

Later that year, in September, he was conferred

with the Freedom of the City of Limerick, and in his acceptance speech he made no secret of where his sympathies now lay: "Sinn Fein is, in my judgment," he said, "the true principle, and alliance with English politicians is the alliance of the lamb and the wolf; and it is at this point precisely that I differ from the present national leaders and believe that they have led, and are leading the National Cause to disaster."

O'Dwyer's speech would have helped significantly in drawing support away from Redmond's Irish party, already weakened by Unionist intransigence and British vacillation. However, although the Sinn Fein policy of the withdrawal of the nationalist Irish MPs from Westminster was one with which O'Dwyer wholeheartedly agreed, he could not possibly have foreseen that this would have led, more or less directly, to a military campaign against the Crown in the War of Independence and, even more tragically, the civil war that followed the establishment of the Free State in 1922.

If his previous opposition to the Plan of Campaign, and even to boycotting, is a guide,

at the end of the day he could have been as unhappy about the violence unleashed by the war of independence in 1919 as he had been about the violence at the end of the nineteenth century. We will never know, because he died less than a year after the date of this speech, on August 19, 1917.

In the circumstances, is it wise to assume that he was an unconditional supporter of armed Irish republicanism? In the meantime, some of the questions outlined above remain, alongside others. Did bishops more in sympathy with John Redmond's Irish party at Westminster, discipline, at Maxwell's behest, other priests who supported the Irish Volunteers? It is clear that O'Dwyer was not the only bishop to whom he wrote after the Rising.

It is undoubtedly time for a scholarly study of the sometimes confused and confusing attitudes of the Irish hierarchy and clergy generally to the great upheavals of 1916-1923.

Professor John Horgan is the author of several major books on Irish history and society, including biographies of Sean Lemass and Mary Robinson.