

BISHOP O'DWYER

by John Rushe

Edward Thomas O'Dwyer was born in 1842 at Holy Cross, Co. Tipperary, where his father was an excise officer attached to a distillery there. In the early 1840s the family moved to Limerick City which the future bishop thereafter looked upon as home. Mrs. O'Dwyer, the bishop's mother, was Anne Quinlivan from Limerick where her people were engaged in the flour-milling and corn trade which was then one of the city's leading industries.* That the Quinlivans were prosperous is evident from the fact that one of O'Dwyer's uncles, Laurence Quinlivan, was Mayor of Limerick in 1850 (and later High Sheriff) when "to occupy the City Chair, a man had to be in a big way of business". (1) Another of Mrs. O'Dwyer's brothers was Father Michael Quinlivan who died in 1904 as parish priest of Kilkee. Mrs. O'Dwyer herself, a deeply religious woman, died in 1889 at which time she resided in Glentworth Street.

While the Quinlivans were highly respectable business people, they could scarcely match the thoroughbred lineage of the O'Dwyer's and Keating (e)s, ** the two notable Tipperary septs from the union of which sprang the bishop's father, John Keatinge-O'Dwyer (the double-barreled surname and superfluous 'e' is indicative of leanings sometimes found in wealthy - or pretentious - families). O'Dwyer's paternal grandmother was the daughter of General Richard Keatinge of Bansha Castle and sister of General Sir Henry Sheehy-Keatinge, K.C.B., Governor of Mauritius for 30 years, whose son, Sir Henry Keatinge, was, in 1887, a member of the Privy Council and late Solicitor General. The Keatinge estate was one of those visited by Arthur Young, who, in his **Tour of Ireland**, describes the owner as "a large cow-keeper".

On the O'Dwyers at least one book has been written; (2) they were the redoubtable sept of Kilnamanagh who had already given to the Church one illustrious prelate in the person of Dr. Edmund O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick in the troublous days of Cromwell. Edward's paternal grandfather was Morgan O'Dwyer, J.P., an extensive land owner and one of the first Catholic magistrates appointed after Emancipation. The O'Dwyers "hunted their own hounds on their own grounds", and so extensively involved was Morgan, "owner of many horses", in bringing the produce of the area to the markets in Cork that his business interests were likened to those of Bianconi. (3)

One of Morgan's sons was John Keatinge-O'Dwyer, the bishop's father, "one of the most brilliant students of the Irish College, Paris, and an elegant speaker", being styled "the silver tongue". It appears that having taken minor orders he forsook the seminary and became an excise officer. The death notice from which we quote also states that in early life John Keatinge-O'Dwyer had been "an active and earnest patriot, one of the Tithe Martyrs of 1832-3" for which activities "he suffered a protracted imprisonment in Clonmel Gaol". (4) Bishop O'Dwyer had at least two paternal uncles, one of whom, the Rev. Thomas Morgan O'Dwyer, after a brilliant career in Trinity College, Dublin, went to the College of **De Propaganda Fide** where he was a class fellow of the future Pope Leo XIII and returned to Ireland "the bearer of several gold medals". The other uncle was Roger Keatinge-O'Dwyer who declined an offer of the Governorship of Vancouver Island to stay on the family estate.

This summary of the O'Dwyer pedigree indicates the rather unusual background that sired a rather unusual man. And the relationship between the background and the man has been aptly summarised by a priest who knew him well, the late Monsignor Michael Moloney:-

at least as far removed from the status of working farmers as they were from the rank of solid planter ascendancy. They were not allowed to have a country; if their creed was tolerated it was a condition that they kept it a family secret. And so the well-to-do Catholics of that era must not be judged too harshly if at times they developed the failings of the irresponsible, and drifted into that half-picturesque, half-ridiculous herd of squireens that (parade) the pages of history. At their best they were attractive; wilful perhaps and quick-tempered, but generous and fearless too. These were the qualities that men saw in Dr. O'Dwyer, qualities raised to a new level by his personal distinction and nobility. (5)

Young O'Dwyer received his primary education in the Christian Brothers' Schools, Sexton Street, and part of his secondary education in Doon in the diocese of Cashel and Emly, where the future Bishop John Ryan of Limerick (1825-64) was then a Classics teacher. At a later date Dr. Ryan accepted O'Dwyer for his diocese. The future bishop spent his last secondary school year (1859-60) in the Jesuit Sacred Heart College, the Crescent, Limerick, which at the time had just opened its doors. In 1860, at the age of 18, he entered Maynooth College. Throughout his schooling at all levels he proved himself a diligent and able student; while with the Christian Brothers he won the highest award the school had on offer, the 'Gold Watch Prize', and in Maynooth he was consistently one of the leading trio in a class of extremely capable contemporaries, five of whom were later to occupy episcopal thrones. Also among his Maynooth classmates, although as a student he did not figure among the academic elite, was the distinguished scholar and writer in Irish, An tAthair Peadar O Laoghaire.

O'Dwyer must have been impressed with the teaching in Sexton Street as all through his life - despite the celebrated ructions in Bruff in the late 1890s - he remained an ardent admirer of the Christian Brothers; on the other hand, although he admired their educational prowess, he fell foul of at least one section of his other school mentors, the Jesuits, against whom he conducted a long-standing feud over their **modus operandi** of



John Ryan, Catholic Bishop of Limerick.

Dr. O'Dwyer's forbears, in fact, belonged to a class

Mungret College. As an item of historical interest, the Bishop won the "Battle of Bruff" but lost the "Battle of Mungret" - both of which major issues were referred to, and were decided upon in the highest ecclesiastical forum in Rome.

To complete a summary of his education: his academic career was cut short when half way in his fourth year Theology he was called out for early ordination which took place in St. John's Cathedral, Limerick, on 10 February, 1867, one month before the Fenian Rising. The Fenian Rising is mentioned as an appendage here but not without purpose, since it was an event that left its mark on O'Dwyer, a fact that commentators, who brand him - in all but his latest years - as a West British lackey of the Establishment, might bear in mind. Of O'Dwyer and the Fenians Monsignor Moloney wrote:

The Bishop kept all through life a kindly memory of the Fenian bands who had risen in hopeless daring in the Spring of his ordination year. Through all his years their generous gesture stirred a responsive chord in his own impetuous heart. (6)

In this assessment Mons. Moloney is in all probability correct: O'Dwyer was always a nationalist at heart, but he loathed violence as well as any policy which, in his eyes, contravened the moral law. His hidden nationalism erupted in 1916 when he, alone of the 31-member Hierarchy, condoned the Rising. But prior to 1916 he often found himself in a not uncommon dilemma i.e. that when one condemns the means to an end, e.g. the Plan of Campaign, one is accused of condemning the end itself.

After his ordination Father Edward O'Dwyer filled no less than eight curacies[•] in the space of seven years, a rather rapid turnover of assignments by normal pastoral standards. Could it be that even at this early stage his individuality was showing through and was proving unwelcome to the more settled clergy? At least this is the impression conveyed by Begley (p. 566) in relation to the shortness of his term in Rathkeale. But whatever about his early shiftings he found an environment to his liking - in Adare - his first fairly lengthy curacy under the genial Father John S. Flanagan, a former member of the Congregation of the Oratory and an intimate friend of the great John Henry Newman. It is interesting to speculate as to how far the "cultured and learned" Flanagan moulded O'Dwyer's intense veneration for the illustrious English convert. Flanagan, who was chaplain to the Catholic Lord Dunraven, was also on intimate terms of friendship with Aubrey de Vere, the poet of Curragh Chase and William Monsell (later Lord Emlly) of Tervoe - two aristocratic converts to Catholicism and, naturally, O'Dwyer was introduced to them and remained their firm friend thereafter. This friendship, it may be added, though no doubt stimulating to the young priest, may have been misconstrued to his disadvantage, as both de Vere and Monsell were confirmed Unionists even if genuinely sympathetic to the struggling peasantry. And in the Ireland of the time - though O'Dwyer had proclaimed himself a staunch Home Ruler - friendship with the aristocracy, even the Catholic aristocracy, was no passport to popularity.

Early in his priesthood, also, O'Dwyer befriended Isaac Butt, the "ablest member of the Irish Bar", Liberal-Conservative M.P. for Limerick City, defending counsel for the Fenian leaders and founder/leader of the Home Rule Association. That O'Dwyer's support for Home Rule was genuine is borne out by the fact that in 1870 he stood on the same platform as Butt - Butt, the Protestant son of a Protestant clergyman.[□] And, apparently, the leader of the Home Rule movement held the young curate in high regard; indeed Father O'Dwyer became one of Butt's closest confidants as is evident from their correspondence. In January, 1878, when Butt's leadership of the Home Rule Party was being challenged by Parnell, he pressed O'Dwyer to attend a conference in Dublin at which a vote of confidence in Butt was pending:

"Circumstances may arise in which a speech from you would be of the greatest value" he wrote, "The result of the Conference will determine a great deal of the national cause".

It is of interest to add that O'Dwyer attended this conference - which proved to be a stormy one - with Butt, O'Dwyer and John Redmond the principals on one side, and Parnell and Biggar, the obstructionists, the spokesmen for the other side. Amid several uproars there were calls for Butt and O'Dwyer, the latter of whom - despite efforts to prevent him - succeeded in getting a hearing and made a rousing speech on behalf of Butt (and John Redmond). (7) This is a little known aspect of the evolution of O'Dwyer's political thinking: in the 1870s, while still a junior clergyman, he was in the national forefront of the Home Rule movement. Further evidence that Butt esteemed the personal friendship of O'Dwyer is evident from a letter which may be described as his valediction, which, in failing health and shortly before his death, he wrote to the curate:

I have perfect faith in Ireland's destiny and in the Providence that guards it, and if it be his will that I should not do the things my foolish heart had thought he intended one to do I must be content, even if I do not live to see them done by anyone else.

It was not mere coincidence that Butt, de Vere and Monsell - like others of O'Dwyer's influential friends - had one thing in common: they were sterling advocates of denominational education at Primary, Secondary and University level - and O'Dwyer, when he was ordained a bishop, became perhaps the most denominationally-minded member of a conservative Hierarchy, especially in the matter of education. All along he fought tooth and nail for Catholic schools for Catholic children at all levels, but here a distinction must be made between denominationalism and bigotry.

Although an ultra denominationalist, O'Dwyer was no bigot: what he fought for on behalf of Catholics he would willingly concede to Protestants as well, i.e. Protestant schools; as a matter of fact, although an ultramontane Catholic, he respected other non-Catholics who held deeply religious convictions of their own; this he proved in a most practical way when he and two of his priests attended the funeral of Dr. Graves, the Protestant bishop of Limerick - an unprecedented ecumenical gesture at the time on the part of a Roman Catholic prelate. (To be continued).

* The author has been told that Quinlivan's grain stores were in Upper William Street, beyond the junction to Gerald Griffin Street, on the left hand side.

** The Keating(e)s were of the same family as Geoffrey Keating, the noted 17th century historian.

• His complete pastoral assignments, as a curate, were: St. Patrick's (Limerick City), Spring, 1867; Rathkeale, Summer, 1867; Cappagh, Autumn, 1867; Bruff, February, 1868; St. Patrick's (Limerick City), November, 1868; Adare, 1870; New-castlewest, 1872; Shanagolden, 1874; St. Michael's (Limerick City), 1874-1886; Part-time Principal of the Diocesan College, Hartstonge Street, 1880-81.

□ Butt's father served for some time in Adare, hence the Limerick connection. Butt himself was born and buried in Co. Donegal.

REFERENCES

- (1) **Reminiscences of Old Limerick.** (Limerick City Library) by E.H. Bennis.
- (2) **The O'Dwyer's of Kilnamanagh** by Sir Michael O'Dwyer (John Murray, London).
- (3) **The Diocese of Limerick** by John Archdeacon Begley, page 563.
- (4) **Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator**, 20 Feb., 1872.
- (5) **Limerick Leader**, 21 Nov., 1942.
- (6) *Ibid.*
- (7) **Limerick Chronicle**, 17 Jan., 1878.