

## Edward Thomas O'Dwyer and the Temperance Movement

# Bishop O'Dwyer

### PART THREE

**T**o cast further light on the unique personality of the Rev Edward Thomas O'Dwyer we shall allude to his involvement in the Temperance Society. By the time he was born in 1842 - when ironically his father's duties as an excise officer involved him with a large distillery at Holy Cross - the crusade led by the Rev. Theobald Mathew of Cork, the "greatest of all temperance missionaries", was at its height. In the years 1838-42 Father Mathew travelled throughout Ireland exciting intense enthusiasm everywhere he went. People flocked to him in millions to take the pledge. In 1841 the number of abstainers in Ireland was estimated to be 4,647,000 and in three years the consumption of spirits had fallen from 10,815,000 to 5,290,000 gallons. Perhaps this was not all due to Father Mathew, because great depression and distress prevailed at the time, but he nevertheless exercised extraordinary influence. On 3 December, 1839, the 'Apostle of Temperance' arrived in Limerick city to a scene of unprecedented excitement; the principal thoroughfare - George's Street then, O'Connell Street now - was crowded, so crowded that a pregnant woman was crushed to death; (1) in Mallow Street alone at least 10,000 knelt to take the pledge, while 700 who had arrived from Kilrush by boat found no room to disembark and were solemnly enrolled in the temperance movement in their boats. But by the time Theobald Mathew died in 1856 his cause had waned and alcoholism had grown again to be a widespread menace.

Church and laity strenuously fought against excessive drinking in sermons, lectures, pamphlets, pastorals, meetings and personal exhortation; and Father O'Dwyer was one of thousands to espouse the cause. He saw it as not alone ruinous to soul and body but ruinous as well to the material progress of Ireland. He himself never tasted alcohol. He loathed its malediction on the Irish race. His pastorals were, among other things, one long plea for sobriety. One of the popular stories told about Bishop O'Dwyer is that having given alms to a beggarwoman one day he watched her movements; and having noted her destination he followed her, relieved her of the drink which had been placed before her and deposited it publicly in a gully outside. (2) It is a story fully in keeping with his character. As a curate in St. Michael's parish, noting "the desolation and degradation" drink was causing, he procured a hall where young and old could "join for a few hours of innocent amusement", away from the public house. St. Michael's Temperance Hall, as it was called, became a "flourishing institution", managed by a group of young men whom O'Dwyer had inspired to a level of zeal not far below his own; as well as its indoor attractions, it had an outdoor athletic club; and Canon Begley could write fifty years later that it still "maintains its pristine vigour, and is likely to flourish into other times with a glow of health". (3)

Many have complimented O'Dwyer for his sterling work in the cause of temperance; yet his reputation in this field is perhaps best reflected through the mind of a twelve-year old schoolboy as he describes for his father an essay he had written for his teacher:-

"Father O'Dwyer was elected Bishop of Limerick by

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the Holy Father. He is not like a stranger coming to a strange people to govern them for he has hardly ever been out of the city. He has always been on popular terms with his fellow citizens. He has even established a temperance society which has prevented many men from becoming drunkards. Long may he reign." (4)

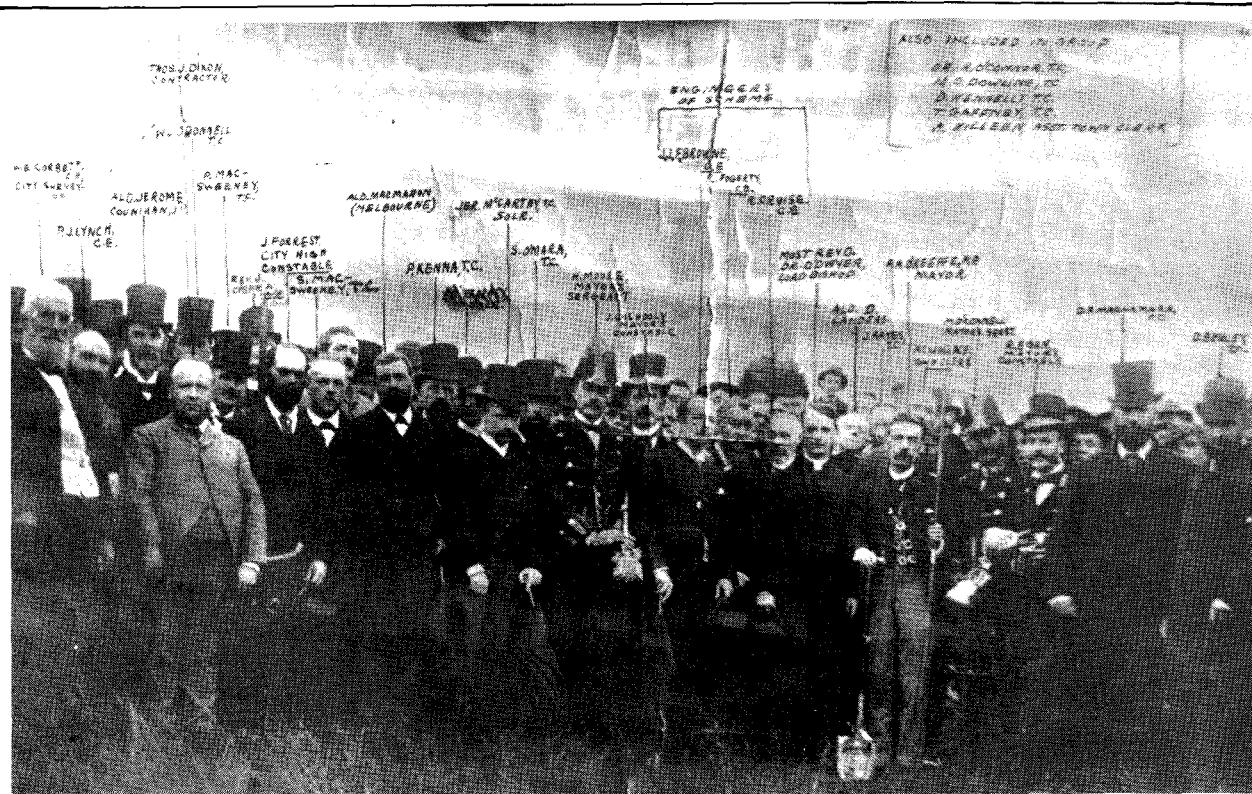
Father O'Dwyer went further than most temperance priests; he fought for stricter licensing laws e.g. the Sunday closing of public houses. He lobbied the Limerick M.P.s to press for such legislation in the House of Commons, and excoriated them for not doing so. A letter is extant from Mr. Gabbet, M.P., deferentially apologising to O'Dwyer for not voting for the Sunday Closing Bill, sheepishly explaining that, being new there, he was not very conversant with procedure on such parliamentary occasions and, anyway, he "thought that the publican vote should be kept on the right side".

What we have related so far, however, does not convey that uniqueness in O'Dwyer's temperament to which we have referred - his aggressive style. For this we turn to the **Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator** for a report of a meeting held in Limerick Courthouse on 13 November, 1877, surely one of the liveliest gatherings ever held there, in which our subject played the leading role as only he could play it. We use paraphrase and transcript to describe the event.

The meeting was convened to discuss a resolution, backed by the Protestant and Catholic bishops and clergy, calling on "the Legislature to pass into law next Session a bill to close public houses on Sundays uniformly throughout Ireland". The Mayor, James Spaight, J.P., presided; Dean Bunbury and Archdeacon Hare represented the Protestant community; a large gathering of clergy and magistrates occupied seats on the bench; also there in force were the publicans led by the Secretary of the Vintners' Association from Dublin, while the body of the Courthouse "was thronged by members of the working classes".

The stage was set for a rowdy session and Father O'Dwyer, the spokesman for the resolution, was well aware of this. In his opening remarks he pleaded for reasoned argument, not for clamour, but he was soon in conflict with the Mayor: he accused him of inviting the many publicans present to the meeting; which accusation the Mayor denied. He alleged that the meeting was rigged in favour of the publicans and asserted that had "the temperance people" known this "they could have got a far more respectable crowd along". The report continues:-

"Father O'Dwyer - 'Hundreds and thousands would have been here to express opinions on this question (disorder) ... He would say this before the Mayor's face what he said behind his back (loud cheers). He would not support the Sunday closing if he were not convinced it would benefit the people' (hear,



A youthful Dr O'Dwyer at the turning of the sod at the Charleville Water Works, on September 5, 1888.

hear).

Mr. Godsel - 'No, no; all we want is justice' (great confusion which lasted some time)'.

At this juncture the Mayor appealed for order and asked the audience to let Father O'Dwyer continue.

"Father O'Dwyer again attempted to speak, but was prevented by the noise. Mr. Godsel remarked that the Rev. gentleman was a humbug. 'We must get fair play'".

It was then that O'Dwyer's militant qualities came to the fore.

"Father O'Dwyer said he would stand here till night if he would not be allowed to proceed (cheers). If the Mayor had to leave by 1.30 he would have to call on him to appoint a substitute (cries of 'order' and 'put him out')".

O'Dwyer proceeded to explain why he was present at the meeting and vividly described the "horror and misery" caused by excessive drinking which he had witnessed in St. Michael's parish. "He had put his hand to the plough and would not look back till the men of Limerick were saved from evil ..... he saw people of the city reduced to the lowest depths of degradation in that court" - a broadside that so angered the publicans that one of whom retorted:

"Will you confine yourself to facts?" (Sensation)."

As the tension mounted so did O'Dwyer's resolution until he truly acted like a "little fighting cock". (6)

"Father O'Dwyer took off his coat amidst enthusiastic cheering, and said - 'Sunday closing would not be an effectual cure for drunkenness, but would break its back' (laughter). The Rev. speaker referred at length to the evidence given before a Committee of the House of Commons on the Sun-

day Closing Bill (cries of 'Shut up', etc.). Father O'Dwyer - 'Will you vote for yourselves and sobriety, or will you vote for whiskey interests? (confusion). That is the issue' ... A voice - 'Shut up'. At this juncture a very disgraceful scene occurred, and a man in the crowd pointed a stick at the speaker".

But O'Dwyer was undeterred and eventually carried the day when an amendment to his resolution was lost, after several people had been prevented from speaking by the uproar which continued until the meeting broke up at 3.30 p.m. This was but one of his many hard experiences in his crusade for temperance. He was a tough fighter, as this meeting proved and such encounters trained him to withstand - if training in his case were necessary - the many conflicts that the years would bring. It was true for the late Dean Punch when he said, "The man was afraid of nothing". (7)

#### REFERENCES

1. **Dublin Review**, No. XLVIII, Oct., 1890, M. 375. According to this article, 150,000 people took the pledge in Limerick at this time.
2. Related to author by Martin Moloney, Nicholas Street. Martin, now in his 80s, owned a taxi and "often drove the Bishop in his later years; he gave up the horse".
3. **The Diocese of Limerick**, Vol. II, N. 569, by John Canon Begley.
4. Lavelle, Patricia, **James O'Mara**, N. 13. (The boy, James, was writing to his father, Stephen O'Mara, M.P., who was then in London).
5. **LRTV**, 14 Nov. 1877.
6. Ward, Maisie, **Insurrection versus Resurrection**, N. 53.
7. Related to author.