GODFREY MASSY
VICAR OF BRUFF

by Pius Browne

Perhaps he felt a moral obligation to fulfill his dead mother's dearest wishes. On 17 December 1826, Massy was ordained in the Cathedral of Limerick, the first of his many connections with the Treaty City. The examinations prior to his ordination were no mere scholastic formality, but Massy measured up to the task with apparent ease after an intensive and dedicated preparation.

The parish of Fedamore (8 miles north-west of Bruff) was his first pastoral charge. There was a very small number of active parishioners in this district, and his position there was not an enviable one. Confronted with tremendous difficulties, Massy persisted until he acquired the respect of Protestant and Catholic alike. His stay in Fedamore was not devoid of incident, and one episode especially stands out. On 26 March 1830, twenty cottier families were ordered out of their holdings and subsequently witnessed the destruction of them by the sheriff and his men. Tension and ill-feeling were rampant as a result of this callous act. Massy was extremely upset by these actions and immediately (and bravely) approached the evicted persons and persuaded them to go with him to the glebe house where they obtained a generous meal and shelter from the inclement weather conditions. He was instrumental in procuring employment for the able bodied men, and others were engaged by him in turf cutting for which they were handsomely paid. It was on the basis of these spontaneous, sensitive gestures that his meritorious reputation in the area was established. The Fedamore mission was possibly a testing ground for the young priest and his performance and commitment was noticed by his superiors. He was soon to be given a more responsible position, which would see the greater part of his potential realised.

The vicarage of Bruff was offered to Massy by Bishop Jebb "as a sphere of more influence and usefulness of labour". The revival of the Protestant religion had made little impact in the town of Bruff which was described as being in a state of "woeful spiritual destitution" by concerned Protestants. Bruff was also a poverty stricken town, having been severed from the sinecure parish of Killbreedy Minor. However, it still included Uregare and Manister. The welfare of Protestantism in Bruff was a task ready made for an enterprising and determined person such as Massy.

On Sunday 19 January 1831, Massy preached his farewell sermon at Fedamore before a packed church - contrasting markedly with his first sermon there. Many in the congregation "wept sore" to think that this was their beloved minister's last farewell. A Mrs Moloney of Ennis wrote that "I cannot describe the deep sorrow we felt at Rockstown, and I feel convinced each of his parishioners felt on his removal to Bruff." Affection and sorrow was also very evident among the Catholics. On the day Massy and his wife departed from Fedamore, the poor people (Catholics) ran to milles after his car praying that "the poor man's blessing might pursue him wherever he went". Thus began a new and, as we shall see, more significant phase in his spiritual calling.

Massy's optimism about Bruff quickly waned when he saw what his future there was going to entail. A dilapidated church with broken panes of glass, an abundance of cobwebs and an overall air of decrepitude, told their own story of neglect.
at the opposite end of the town, and its general air of opulence, must have added greatly to his despair. Being a resolute and
courageous man he remained unperturbed by these enormous
difficulties. An entry in one of his notebooks - "If God be with us
who can be against us?" - reflects well the strength of his con-
victions. Massy was always armed with quotations from various
sources which he used whenever an opportunity presented it-
self.
Six years after this auspicious beginning a completely dif-
f erent situation could be observed. In 1837 there were 360 per-
sons in the congregation at the Protestant Church, of whom 83
were regular communicants. There was a flourishing Sunday
School with 100 children attending, 80 of them being Catholic.
"He (Massy) was the only one," the old clerk remarked, "who
could read the Church service with a clear conscience for, of
them all, he alone could truly address the congregation as
Dearly Beloved children." Massy, quite clearly, could do no
wrong in the eyes of his admiring clerk. Even so, the shrewd
and calculated methods which the vicar employed to effect
these improved conditions are of interest.
He devoted a page of his memorandum to each Protestant
family in the parish. The children of mixed marriages were
registered. Each Sunday he wrote down on a poster (displayed
prominently) the name of every absentee - a subtle form of
moral coercion perhaps. He re-arranged the services of the
school master Russel, and after some difficulty obtained, with
the permission of Thomas Lloyd, High Sheriff of Limerick, a
couple of rooms in Bruff Courthouse for a school. These rooms
in no way represented the ideal context for learning, and Russel
often complained that "it was hard to keep them in repair as the
fourth十分ion of a barrack." Any untidy children were gently and
tactfully rebuked by Massy during his weekly examination. This
was in keeping with his belief that cleanliness was next to
Godliness. In a little over five years, Massy could reflect with
satisfaction on the changes that he had brought about. His
campaign to convert the town of Bruff to Protestantism was
well off the ground, and the future looked brighter than for
many years past.
It was commonly believed among Protestants that with a
dermined effort and a little encouragement, the Catholics might
be enticed to conform to the Protestant religion. Massy saw a
potentially large Protestant population in Bruff. To realise this
potential much of his hopes rested upon the Scriptural educa-
tion of the rising generation. Indeed, he was often known to
speak about "sowing the seed of a glorious harvest in the
Reformation of Ireland." He gradually addressed the groups of
members, and holding on to those who did attend, the Church and
vicarage were made more agreeably comfortable. Massy's
vicarage was open to all, and those who cared to visit him were
not "dosed with religion". The latter policy contributed in no
small way to winning over to his ministry the gentry of the
parish and the families of English officers.
His ingenious handling of the Bruff beggars is worthy of
mention. Such was their cunning that every time that the vicar
ventured out he was sure to be besieged by them "for some
relief in his power at all at all". Massy set little store by money
as is evident from his comprehensive generosity. "So with
money", he rationalised, "store it up and it infects your moral
atmosphere and destroys your spiritual health... lay it out in
acts of charity, and acts of pious disposition. The vicar's
share in the blessings which it scatters abroad". However,
when he learned that his generosity was being squandered in
vice he assembled the beggars and offered to divide all the help
they were entitled to equally among his patients.
Massy's first Sunday in Bruff was humiliating with only 6
people attending a church that was capable of holding 400 in
comfort. Meanwhile the flourishing and overflowing attendance
shall feel the rough side of my tongue, and Mary Gammell near
isic1 threatened in vain." This declaration would seem to in-
dicate that most of the beggars may have been women. This list
began with 103 names, but soon dwindled to 35.

A mail coach - a Bianconi car - daily passed through Bruff at
this time and the passengers had to contend with the relentless
appeals of the mendicants. The coachmen often continued to
delay a little - to give the poor craythurs a fair offer at the
passengers' who seldom passed through Bruff without leaving
offerings to the poor. No sooner had they departed Bruff than
they again encountered similar circumstances at nearby
Grange. Speaking about the beggars of Bruff, Russel alluded to
the fact that their numbers "went beyond counting on the Fair
Green". Of course, a Fair Day would have attracted the mendi-
cants elements from the neighbouring towns, being the mainstay
of Prisons as part of his endeavour to improve the sanitary con-
ditions in the prison.

Despite the difficulties which the Tithe agitation imposed on
him, Massy refused to accept any aid from the Clergy Relief
Fund and depended mainly on the benevolence of his own
family. About this time also, he turned down an offer of service
to the West Indies in medicine brought the local dispensary to
his constant attention. Dr Raleigh invariably grumbled about his
generosity in giving out prescriptions - "this extravagant outlay
of medicine, which ought to hold for ages in such a place as
Bruff". The Bridewell (local jail) was also the subject of his
attention and he described it as being "a dismal and dark den of
misery". He made numerous petitions to the Irish Parliament,
implored with Palmer the Inspector General of Prisons as part of his endeavour to improve the sanitary con-
ditions in the prison.

The Limerick Protestant Orphan Society was founded for the
support of poor children deprived of their parents during the re-
cent cholera outbreak. Speaking at a meeting of this society in
August 1840, Massy accompanied a deputation through the
vicinity, but 2,000 Protestants of all denominations banded
almost every town and village in the county to obtain
funds. He tried to incite a pleasant rivalry among the different
individual towns. Almost inevitably, this approach had the desired
effect and many generous contributions were forthcoming.

In its first year £197,17.3d. was collected and 51 orphans were rescued from
starvation. After another successful meeting in Limerick, Massy
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Sixty pounds was collected initially and they intended to follow
these favourable beginnings "in a business like manner . . .
never interrupting their exertions . . . till every little orphan
should be able to dwell safely under its shelter, no man making
him afraid". At the annual report of 1839 Massy referred to
the great utility and most satisfactory working of this
benevolent institution . . . so recently thought of yet so mature
in its operations". His enthusiastic efforts enabled the society to
reach a state of self-sufficiency.

Massy visited Kerry in his comprehensive if inconsistent study of the
diocese of Limerick, relates to us an incident that occurred in
1839, which is a fair indication of Massy's unrelenting dislike of
the Catholic Church. (3) It concerned a Miss Todd and her
Protestant companions who went to St. Michael's Church in
Limerick to observe the ceremonies taking place there. Father
Raleigh entered the church and noticing a group of ladies
gathered in the alcove near the sanctuary, approached them
and requested that they be seated. Miss Toddy (Miss Todd)
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and it was only after the persuasion of one of her companions
that she knelt on the supposedly sullied floor. A scene was thus
avoided, but the young lady did not quickly forget the slight
that she believed she had been subjected to.

When Massy visited Limerick a few days later he heard the
story from a friend of Miss Toddy's who thought it was all rather
amusing. Massy, however, interpreted the incident in a different
light, seeing it as an unjust imposition on the part of Father
Raleigh. He proceeded to have an affidavit drawn up with the
assistance of Mr Dartnell, editor of the Protestant Standard.
The affidavit when appearing in print, depicted the incident in an
incredibly distorted manner, stating that the priest had
assaulted Miss Toddy. Raleigh proceeded against Dartnell and
the case was to be tried at the Cork Assizes in July 1839. Before the litigation went any further, the dignitaries of both
Churches came to an acceptable settlement, whereby
Massy and Dartnell both had to apologise for the unwarranted
attack on Father Raleigh. Massy's over-reaction brought him
to disavour, particularly in the city of Limerick. A few days
later the citizens of Limerick felt prompted to enter the Rev.
Massy and his associates into a grave error, but evidently he did not learn from this humiliation.

"Menauragh (mo naire) the people of Kerry to be believing the
time of Limerick in anything connected with humanity and
Christianity". Massy's response has not been recorded. His visit
to Kerry was viewed with some trepidation for it was almost
"an absurdity to address a few dozens of paupers and children
which were all that might be calculated on". However, the out-
come served to invalidate these forbodings and in the report of
1841, Massy was able to declare to the Limerick Society
that he was glad for having "the distinguished privilege of ex-
tending its blessings over the three important counties in which
the humbler members of the household of faith stand most in
need of them in Ireland".

On 16 May 1841. Mr. Kelly the Catholic High Sheriff of the
County refused the use of the Courthouse at Bruff for a meeting of the Orphan Society because of its being for an exclusively
sectarian purpose". Upon learning of this refusal Massy went to
the nearest nobleman Lord Guillamore, whereupon the latter
offered his own mansion for the meeting and also offered to
take the chair. The meeting itself was one of the largest held in
the Bruff district, with twenty-five carriages drawn up outside
the doors of Rockbarton House. Thirty-five pounds was collec-
ted by the Rev. Mr. McGaughey.

Lord Guillamore, on taking the chair, said that he had always
regarded the occasions of his presiding at the Bruff meetings
amongst the happiest events in his life. Continuing in this ex-
travagant mood, Guillamore added his regret that a friend (the
High Sheriff?) whom he had considered "the most liberal of
men, should have confined his liberality to one party, and that
though it was true that this society was exclusively Protestant -
and might have had classes for an exclusively Protestant
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Massy was undeterred in the pursuit of his objectives. Once more he directed his attention to the clergy of Bruff. Their superior position at the head of the local Catholic population was readily apparent to him, and he now attempted - not for the first time - to discredit the parish priest in the eyes of the people in order to strengthen the likelihood of enticing them over to the Church of Ireland persuasion. Thus began his controversial conflict with Dr Cussen, the parish priest of Bruff.

In 1843 a movement began in Mayo to curtail the dues of the clergy. Massy was quick to discern in this movement an opportunity of disparaging his long time adversary Dr Cussen. He procured a copy of the Mayo notices and was seen to post them on the church door in Bruff. Having seen his calculations back-fired and only served to bring Massy a severe chancery from the Dean. Massy was now held to be the villain of the piece, and to extricate himself from this predicament was forced to fabricate the story that the document had been sent to him by a concerned Catholic, who thought it desirable to bring the matter under the notice of the "poor deluded Popish wretches of Bruff".

This action aroused a considerable amount of controversy and a 'paper war' ensued involving both religions, which did neither party any credit. Massy regarded the whole business as a "triumph of genuine Protestantism", though he does not elaborate on, or forward any justification for, such a dogmatic assertion. He did remark that he was not impressed by the "merchandise of souls" which is a genre of pamphlet during the Tithe War I showed no vindictive spirit against the Roman priests here, but co-operated with them in charitable duties, so far as I found such cooperation practicable and useful to the poor". Despite his cleverly constructed arguments, Massy knew that the consequences of his misconstructions could not be immediately undone. For the following six months he maintained a low profile, and it was a very reticent man that timely made his way home from his church. However, on his return to his favourite hobby horse. Indeed, he never took pains to disguise his opinion of the Catholic priests as was again evident in the early months of 1844 when he asked a gentleman who had been excessive in his praise of a Catholic priest's conciliatory conduct "Did you try him by going against the plush?"

The year 1841 saw the establishment of another proselytising agent namely, the Limerick Diocesan Irish Society. This society was founded by Rev George G. Gubbins and Rev George Maxwell. Their first report revealed some interesting figures. Upwards of 150,000 Catholics spoke the Irish language, and 900 of them received the scriptures through this agency. We are not told whether Irish was spoken as an everyday language. During its initial existence this society provided a complete Adelaide House, as it was to be called. The author of Massy's memoir goes to great lengths to emphasise the magnitude of this journey by telling us that "the Popish agitation during the previous seven years. This is a most important undertaking for advancing God's glory by preserving the poor Protestants in the faith of Christ". This particular appeal: yielded a return of £240.

For the next five years much of his time was spent in trying to obtain a suitable site for the proposed school. Lord Carbery of Bruff reluctantly offered a site telling Massy that his "picture of the state of things in Bruff is not very inviting". Again Massy showed great intuition by obtaining the Queen Dowager's permission to give her name to the new building. This added a certain amount of popularity to the project, and gave it a greater legitimacy, which it was hoped would add to the contributions. Carbery also acknowledged that: "we are shamefully behind the sister island, even in things which we might equal them, for soap and water and sweeping brushes do not cost much. He thus contributed extra finances to meet these particular requirements.

So enthusiastic was Massy about his project that the first stone was laid on 1 August 1843, the day after he got possession of the site. On 13 October he toured England for funds to complete Adelaide House, as it was to be called. The author of Massy's memoir goes to great lengths to emphasise the significance of this journey by telling us that "the Popish agitation for repeal of the Union had rendered every Irish claim very unpopular in England". There is a certain amount of truth in this argument but Massy has attributed it to a greater importance than it really merits. The fact that the school opened within twelve months of this tour would seem to indicate that he encountered no outstanding difficulties in collecting funds.

Massy, as part of his propaganda had made it well known that he was personally liable to the builder for the completion of the house, and was prepared to sell his treasured books to meet the debt. "Every one of my books," he promised, "shall be sold rather than suffer poor people to want God's word". Such a situation never arose.

On 10 July 1844 the school was opened. The total cost of the project amounted to £802-18-5d. Carbery, apparently reconciled with the outcome of the project, mightily praised the queen dowager's generosity and said that she had raised every Irish claim very unpopular in England. There was a certain amount of truth in this argument but Massy has attributed it to a greater importance than it really merits. The fact that the school opened within twelve months of this tour would seem to indicate that he encountered no outstanding difficulties in collecting funds.

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May, 1849, the Limerick Protestant Young Men’s Association (LPYMA) presented Massy with a silver salver and £250 in recognition of his “valuable services”. The response to this gesture was vintage Massy -

“I hate the praise of man, when Satan failed to ensnare my soul by the fear of man in 1843 he tried to spread a net for my feet by the praise of man in 1849”. Around this time his sight began to fail him, along with other deteriorating ailments. These hindrances did not deter him from making another visit to England in 1850. His school of orphans was a constant source of delight for him and he gloried in seeing “our little witnesses for Christ. Every time they carry their Bibles and prayer books openly through the streets of Bruff, fills me with fresh hope that the Gospel shall yet be preached in its Romish chapel”. At Adelaide School there was now 83 Protestants and 140 Catholics all receiving Scriptural education, and food was provided for those in need of one.

In 1851 the Prebend of Tullabracky (1½ miles north west of Bruff) became vacant and Massy was the popular choice to fill this position. Again he refused, stating that he would rather be a humble minister in Bruff than Prime Minister of England. He had already planned to build a new church at Bruff, and contrived with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to raise £300. Ill-health caught up with him however, and he died in 1852 after a severe bout of dropsy and asthma. “May the love of the supporters of the Limerick Protestant Society never wax cold,” was his final sentiment regarding the society he had served so well. Massy was buried in the south aisle of St. Mary’s Cathedral in Limerick under a simple marble stone fittingly inscribed - “the Orphan’s friend lies below”.

Though it is not my intention to justify Massy’s behaviour, it seems fair to say that he has been given a very unfavourable ‘press’ by both local tradition and historian alike. One must assume that many of these distorted portrayals have emanated from a biased sectarian background. Archdeacon Begley’s treatment of Massy is rather specious, emphasising his proselytising efforts. However, when looked at in context, this adaption by the priest-historian of an unnecessary moralising attitude is understandable. One feels that Begley was very selective (even defensive) in what he elicited from Massy’s memoirs, thereby endorsing his particular viewpoint.

On reading his memoirs - which are at times blatantly biased - his great humanity is much in evidence, and indeed transcends all else. Massy was a man of strong and deep convictions, and lived very much by them. Underlying most of his actions and policies was the belief that Protestantism was best. His last letter dispels any doubt as to this total commitment to the Church of Ireland.

This letter was written on 20 October 1852 from the Crescent, Limerick and addressed to a “Dear Friend”. This message contained barely two lines, but the sentiment therein adequately summarises Massy. He wrote as follows:

“Who knows our Dear Father may hold my soul in life till I see Popery drummed out of Ireland.”

Further testimony to the sincerity of his efforts are embodied in the statement that he never passed by a priest’s house without praying for his conversion.

In a sense Massy’s grandiose plans died with him. Perhaps his ambitions were unrealistic, though they were certainly consistent with his fanatical devotion. With the passing ages, Adelaide House suffered declining fortunes losing popularity, and eventually (ironically?) passed into Catholic hands. The full title of the Queen Dowager to whom Adelaide House was dedicated ran thus - Queen Dowager Amelia Adelaide Louisa Theresa Carolina. She died in 1849.

The Massy coat of arms.

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The Massy Family Papers. (Dublin) Limited edition. Available at the Limerick City Library.
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NOTES

(1) Rev. Dawson Massy, ‘Footprints of a Faithful Shepherd’ - The Memoirs of Godfrey Massy B.A., Vicar of Bruff and Hon. Sec. of the L.P.O.S. (1855). The subsequent quotes in this essay are from this source except where otherwise stated.
(2) See, A History of Bruff and District, II, pp. 180-183, for an assessment of the cholera epidemic to which Massy referred.
(4) Whether with the disturbances at Bruff in the late 18th century were in any way associated with the United Irishmen movement is discussed in A History of Bruff and District, I, pp. 139-156.
(5) See, A History of Bruff and District, I, p. 173, for O’Connell’s visit to Bruff and the tumultuous welcome that he was given.
(6) The full title of the Queen Dowager to whom Adelaide House was dedicated ran thus - Queen Dowager Amelia Adelaide Louisa Theresa Carolina. She died in 1849.
(7) This building is to this day called Adelaide House, and is one of the finest buildings in the Bruff district. It is owned by the Barry family. See, A History of Bruff and District, II, pp. 304, 306, 319, for reproductions of contemporary sketches of the Church of Ireland, Bruff, the vicarage, and Adelaide House.