

Rev. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer And The Artisans'
Dwellings Company; The Election of 1874

BISHOP O'DWYER

by John Rushe

In addition to his work for temperance - which we have already described - Father O'Dwyer expanded much time and energy in helping to provide reasonable housing for the working classes, founding for this purpose the Artisan's Dwellings Company. To this campaign he brought his own brand of individuality - a missionary zeal punctuated on occasions by tactless exuberance, the overflow of burning passion in a quick-tempered soul. O'Dwyer could be refined and charming but once his will was bent to a certain point which he thought good, he cared not for courtesy or good manners in his efforts to reach that point; he would resort to any means - in action and word - short of offending the moral law; indeed his headstrong will seemed to blind him to the sensitivities of other people and this lack of courteousness - a surprising failing in a man of his breeding - sometimes injured his cause. Or could it be that he had in his make-up vestiges of the arrogance which was not unknown among the ascendancy class to which his ancestors belonged?

In April, 1881, as part of his campaign for better housing, he asked permission of the Limerick Harbour Board - the members of which were mostly wealthy merchants - to address them, which permission having been granted, he proceeded to give as fine an exhibition of blunt talking as the Harbour Board were ever likely to hear. He told them that with the possible exception of one of them, i.e. the Mayor, Dr. W.T. O'Sullivan, none of the members had "any adequate idea of the miserable way in which (their) workers' were housed. Their homes were really wretched and intolerable". And he went further by singling out one member for specific treatment:

"When he went to the house one morning of a poor working man in the employment of a merchant member of the Board present - his poor wife and children were

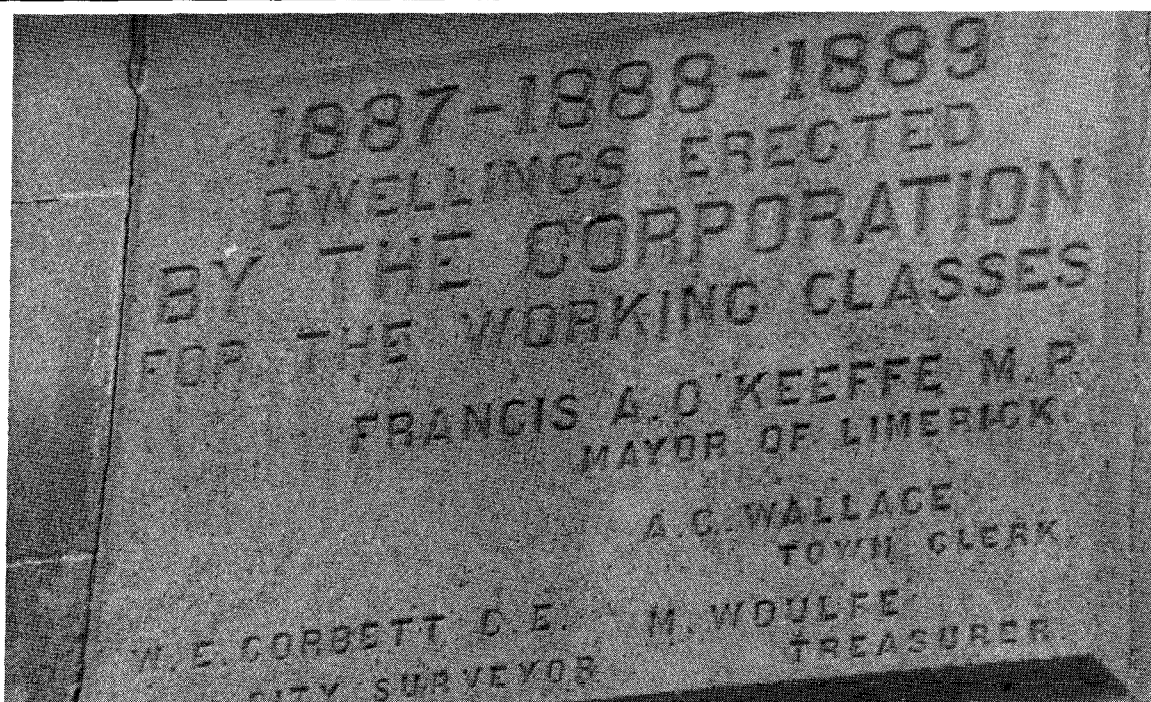
sitting crouched around a meagre fire, the roof was broken in and the snow was falling through. The poor children were trying to warm themselves as best they could in their rags and the poor wife was shivering and, her chin chattering, cried out to him, 'O, father, the cold is going through me'".

"That", he added, "was only one out of hundreds of cases of the poor working men of the city in the employment of gentlemen who constituted that Board". (1)

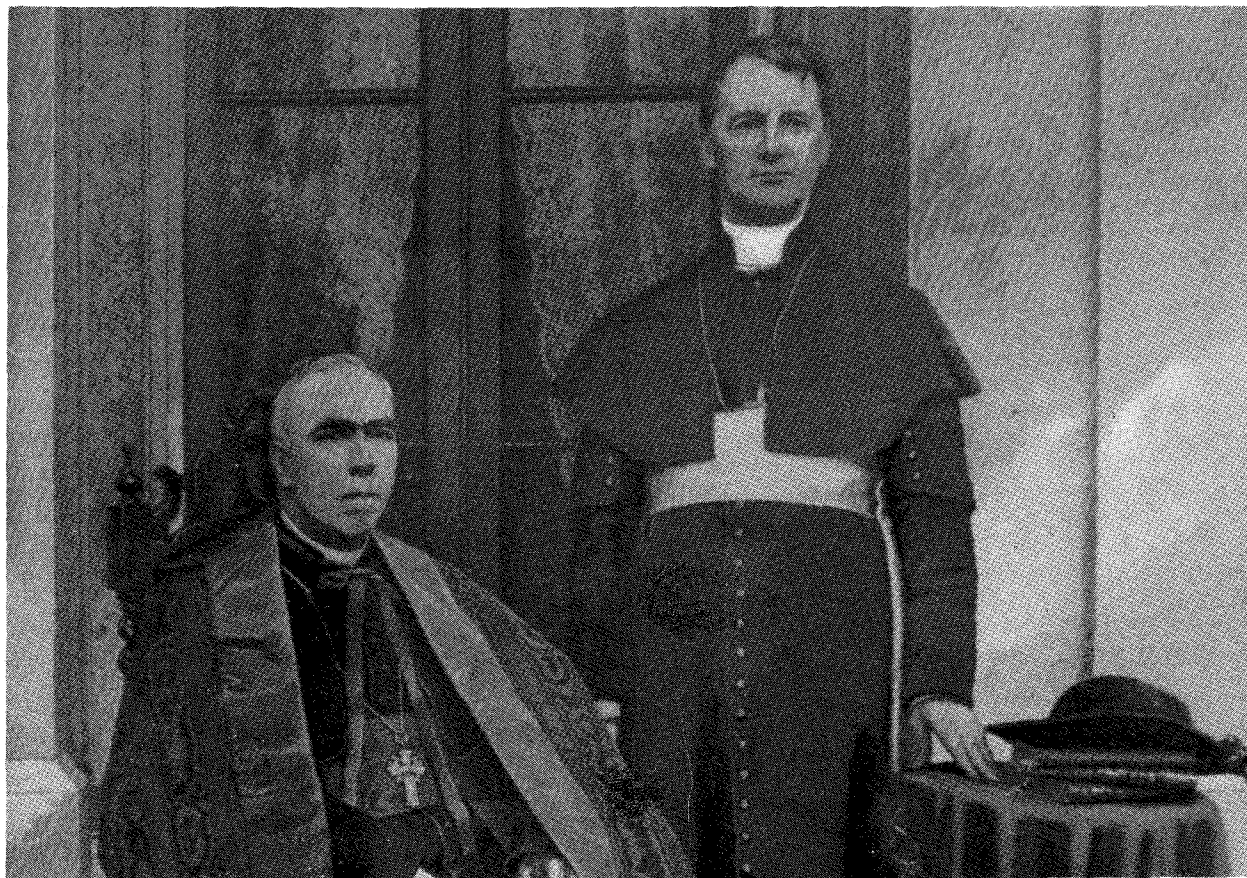
Then he proceeded to lecture them and quoted the section of the Act which, in his opinion, empowered the Harbour Board to erect labourers' dwellings. Naturally the reaction was hostile: wealthy men do not like to be reminded, especially in such unequivocal terms, of the misery of their workers; and when the crusading priest withdrew the offended parties vigorously decried his manner of approach. In this episode, even though O'Dwyer was profoundly moved by the cause he was serving - "his heart was wrung with sorrow to see the poor creatures in their wretched hovels" - to disparage men publicly to their face was tactless in the extreme. Next day he apologised in the **Limerick Chronicle**:

"I should consider it a great misfortune if by mistaken zeal I should have weakened the force of my own advocacy", he wrote, and explained

that he had no intention of rebuking the members of the Harbour Board whose generosity and genuine desire to promote the wellbeing of the people he was well aware. Yet in his heart O'Dwyer was unrepentant, as the last



The memorial stone of the Limerick Corporation's houses at the Sandmall.



Dr. O'Dwyer and Cardinal Logue; from a painting by Henry O'Shea.

paragraph of his letter shows:-

"A master is not a mere task-master, and his workman is not as a beast of burden. They are both men - made in the image of the same God, and are bound to love one another. And to take the lowest view of it, surely an employer ought to wish to have his men in good health, sober and decent. On the same principle that a man makes a stable comfortable for his horse, that he may get work out of him, low as the view is, he ought to make a fairly decent home for his men, to keep them in health, to withdraw them from the public house and to give them that self respect, which is a strong stimulant of honesty and energy". (2)

At the time of these deliberations, 1880-81, the wages of many workmen in Limerick, some of them with large families, were 30 shillings a week (3). Largely through the strivings of Father O'Dwyer and his Artisans' Dwellings Company, hundreds of them were supplied with comfortable homes; but the problem was a daunting one, so daunting that 30 years after O'Dwyer had taken Limerick Harbour Board to task - in 1910 - the percentage of the population living in overcrowded conditions in Limerick City was 31.7. (4).

As his *contretemps* with the Limerick Harbour Board would indicate, O'Dwyer's judgement in civic affairs was not always sound, as was further proved in the 1874 election which followed William Monsell's elevation to the peerage. Canon Begley relates that in preparation for this election Bishop Butler and some priests held a meeting and selected as their candidate John J. Kelly of Rockstown Castle, "a young gentleman of good social position", who had recently joined the Home Rule Association. "During the debate," writes Begley, "a young boyish-looking priest stood up to speak on behalf of Mr. Kelly and as he progressed the older clergy

became very attentive and applauded his remarks". This priest was O'Dwyer, and probably no great harm would have accrued to his reputation had he ended his contribution there. To oppose Kelly, the Farmers' Club, "an intelligent body of men who understood the needs of the county", selected William Henry O'Sullivan, a shop-keeper from Kilmallock - "a plain blunt man" in contrast to the "polished" Kelly, who was supported "by the elite and clergy". During the campaign the indiscreet O'Dwyer lost no opportunity to advance Kelly's interests "by voice and pen and was very clear in sizing up the distinction between the rival candidates, with a piquancy that roused bitter feelings among the people" who, adds Begley, "were sorely disappointed at the attitude he assumed, which lowered him somewhat in their esteem" (5).

The plain, blunt man won the election, and whether his political indiscretions prompted it or not, O'Dwyer, who was then a curate in Newcastlewest, was transferred to Shanagolden shortly afterwards, a change which few priests would regard as promotion. But O'Dwyer was O'Dwyer: time decreed that his faults would be largely subordinated to other aspects of his character, and 42 years later, as Bishop of the diocese, he called at the home of W.H. O'Sullivan, ex-M.P., in Kilmallock, having attended a memorial mass there for the dead of the 1916 Rebellion, whose cause he alone among the Hierarchy had defended.

REFERENCES

1. *Limerick Chronicle*, 5 April, 1881.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ency. Brit. (1911)* Vol. 13, N. 820.
5. *The Diocese of Limerick*, Vol. II Mv. 567/8/9, by John Canon Begley.