

Two Early Eighteenth Century Bishops of Killaloe

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This article deals with Eustace Browne and Terlagh MacMahon, bishops of Killaloe in the early 18th century when the penal laws were enforced very rigorously. Bishop Browne was particularly unfortunate as he was suspended by Rome and imprisoned by the Government at the same time.

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In the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, volume II (1940-41), pages 112-120, the late Canon John Clancy has a very valuable article entitled "The Episcopal Succession of Killaloe, A.D. 1616 to Modern Times". This has remained a standard work of reference as little has been written in the meantime on the 17th and 18th century bishops despite the fact that material from the various Roman archives has become much more readily available. In the present article it is proposed to deal with two little known early 18th century bishops, Eustace Browne and Terlagh MacMahon. The latter is not mentioned by Clancy. However, this is not surprising as he is not to be found either in W. Maziere Brady's pioneering work, *The Episcopal Succession in England, Scotland and Ireland, A.D. 1400 to 1875* (vol. II, Rome 1876), or in the more recent major reference work, *A Handbook of British Chronology* (2nd ed., 1961).

EUSTACE BROWNE, 1712-1724

John O'Molony II was appointed Bishop of Killaloe in May 1671. Eighteen years later, in January 1689, he was translated to Limerick but retained the administration of Killaloe until his death in September 1702. Like many other Irish dioceses in the early 18th century no appointment was made to Killaloe for some time. The penal laws were being rigorously enforced and communication between Rome and Ireland was extremely difficult. A letter dated 10 September 1711 from the nunciature in Brussels to the Congregation of Propaganda says that bishops and missionaries in Ireland were afraid to write and even when they did write the letters had to pass through so many hands that they were often intercepted.¹

On 5 January 1712 Eustace Browne, Vicar General of the diocese of Emly, was one of a number of candidates considered by the Congregation of Propaganda for appointment as bishops in Ireland. The 1704 registration list² shows that he was at that time parish priest of Emly. Aged sixty, he had been ordained in Portugal on 17 September 1672. Despite the fact that Propaganda was aware that he was almost seventy years old in 1712, it was decided to appoint him bishop of Killaloe and his brief of appointment was issued on 16 July 1712.³ Brady was confused about Browne's date of appointment as he wrote:⁴ "He

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¹*Propaganda Fide Archives, CP*, vol. 34A, 546r.

²The 1704 list was printed in the *Catholic Directory*, 1838, and the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, XII (April-Sept. 1876).

³*Vatican Secret Archives, Sec. Brev.*, vol. 2324, 16-26.

⁴Brady, *Episcopal Succession*, vol. II, p. 121.

was appointed by decree of Propaganda June 30, 1713, but seems to have had a previous appointment by Brief dated July 16, 1712." The 1713 date is repeated in Clancy and the *Handbook of British Chronology*. The most likely explanation is that a copy of the brief was made on this date.

Like almost all Irish bishops appointed between 1687 and 1765 Eustace Browne received nomination from one of the Stuarts, in this case James III, the Old Pretender. This privilege had been granted to James II and first exercised by him in 1687. In June of the following year he requested that John O'Molony II be transferred from Killaloe to Limerick and this request was acceded to in January 1689. Nevertheless O'Molony was one of the few Irish clerics who openly opposed the Stuart right of nomination, claiming that it could be used to appoint Englishmen to Irish sees and thereby extend English influence. Following the death of James II in 1701 it was not immediately clear whether the Roman authorities were prepared to allow a similar right of nomination to his son, James III, and for a time between 1709 and 1713 he was partially ignored.⁵ However, in the case of Eustace Browne in 1712 the royal nomination was accepted.⁶

Following the issuing of Browne's brief of appointment in July 1712 there was a delay of thirteen months before his consecration took place. This delay reflects the difficulty which Rome had in communicating with Ireland and also the harassment experienced by bishops and other clergy in early 18th century Ireland. A letter from the internuncio in Brussels to Rome, dated 3 November 1712, states that he had endeavoured to find out from Eustace Browne and Donogh McCarthy (appointed on the same date to Cork & Cloyne) whether they wished to have the original briefs of appointment sent on or whether copies would be adequate. When he received their replies he would act accordingly.⁷ Both were eventually consecrated on 16 August 1713 by Christopher Butler, Archbishop of Cashel, "in villa Domus fontis" (Springhouse in the Glen of Aherlow). At the time Butler was on the run after Dublin Castle had written to the High Sheriff of Tipperary in mid May ordering him to arrest the archbishop and Richard Piers, Bishop of Waterford, "and commit them to Gaole and their papers to be searched and sealed up".⁸ Against this background it is not surprising that eight months elapsed before Eustace Browne wrote to Rome on 12 April 1714 telling of his consecration and enclosing a copy of his episcopal oath.⁹

Between 1713 and 1721 we have no information about Browne apart from a few letters he wrote to the internuncio at Brussels which tell us very little about his work in the diocese of Killaloe. In April 1714 he stated his intention of restoring the chapter of canons which had become defunct. In order to make a start in this direction he had appointed Denis Crowe (Mac en Croc), a doctor of theology of Paris, Dean of the diocese and now sought Roman approval for his action.¹⁰ Browne's name appears on two other documents which went to Rome in June 1714. In one of them he backed the petition of thirteen priests from his former diocese, Emly, that Thomas Grace, parish priest of Tipperary, be appointed bishop.¹¹ And in the other he petitioned that Bonaventure Oliver Fitzgerald, O.F.M., be

⁵Cathaldus Giblin, O.F.M., "Irish Exiles in Catholic Europe", pp. 47-52, in Patrick J. Corish (ed.) *A History of Irish Catholicism*, vol. IV.3, Dublin 1971.

⁶*Vatican Secret Archive, Sec. Brev.*, vol. 2324, 16-26.

⁷Propaganda Fide Archives, CP, vol. 34B, 295r.

⁸W. P. Burke, *The Irish Priests in the Penal Times, 1660-1760*, Waterford 1914, p. 351.

⁹Propaganda Fide Archives, CP, vol. 34B, 180r-181v.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, SC (Ireland), vol. 7 (1708-18), 360r.

¹¹*Ibid.*, CP, vol. 85, 97r & v.

appointed to the see of Limerick, vacant since 1702.¹² Both petitions were unsuccessful. Emly diocese was formally united with Cashel in 1718, while Limerick remained vacant until the appointment of Cornelius O'Keeffe in 1720.

In 1721, Eustace Browne, by now in his late seventies, was reported to Rome by the Archbishop of Cashel for irregularities in ordaining candidates to the priesthood and as a result in the following year he was suspended from his episcopal functions by the Holy Office. Clancy's article mentions the suspension but I first became aware of the reason when I read page 34 of John Brady & Patrick J. Corish, "The Church under the Penal Code".¹³ Here the matter is mentioned in the general context of bishops who had ordained ill-prepared or unworthy candidates. However, when I got the opportunity of investigating the relevant documentation in the archives of Propaganda I discovered that what happened in Browne's case was quite different and was an extremely sad story.

In September 1721 the internuncio in Brussels reported to Rome on a communication he had received from the Archbishop of Cashel. The archbishop stated that one of his suffragan bishops had performed ordinations to the priesthood in an irregular manner. Although the name of the bishop was not given to the internuncio it becomes quite clear subsequently that Eustace Browne was the person involved. Instead of carrying out the usual ceremonies himself the bishop had got a priest to celebrate mass and the same priest had read the words of ordination from the Pontifical, which the bishop had repeated after him. This had happened because the bishop, an elderly man, was blind, a bit senile and unable to carry out his episcopal functions as prescribed. He had also infringed canon law by conferring all sacred orders on the same day. In reporting to Rome the internuncio sought instructions about what should be done. When the Archbishop of Cashel had made it clear to the bishop in question that there had been a serious breach of canon law, he had expressed regret for what he had done and sought absolution. Having considered the report from Brussels in December 1721 Propaganda decided to refer the matter to the Holy Office, which was the Roman congregation with competence to deal with problems of this kind.¹⁴

The Holy Office took a very hard line and suspended Bishop Browne from the exercise of his orders as priest and bishop. Then, to crown his troubles, shortly afterwards he was arrested by the civil authorities and imprisoned. On 13 August 1723 the internuncio in Brussels reported to Rome on the very bad state of the Church in Killaloe diocese following the suspension and imprisonment of its bishop. However, the internuncio was also of the opinion that even if the bishop was in a position to resume his duties this would not solve the problems of the diocese. Browne was suffering from the effects of senility, physically and mentally, and was also blind. Furthermore, because of the many irregularities ("disordini") practised by him he was almost universally despised by his flock and an object of laughter rather than of sympathy. Unfortunately no indication is given as to what these irregularities might be apart from the manner in which Browne carried out ordinations. The internuncio was not in favour of appointing a coadjutor as any increase in the number of bishops would antagonise the Government. There was also the difficulty of finding a suitable person among the Killaloe clergy. The alternative was to give the administration of the diocese to the Archbishop of Cashel who could appoint two or more vicars to act on his behalf. Propaganda favoured this second proposal and its recommendation was accepted by the Pope on 4 October 1723.¹⁵ Clancy and the *Handbook of British*

¹²*Ibid.*, 99v.

¹³This is volume IV.2 of *A History of Irish Catholicism*.

¹⁴Propaganda Fide Archives, Acta, vol. 91 (1721) 447r-448r.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 93 (1723), 511v-513r.

Chronology misinterpret this decision, dating the suspension of Browne from this time. It is clear from the letter of the internuncio in August 1723 that he had been suspended in the previous year.

No further information is available about what happened to Eustace Browne. However, we know that he died shortly afterwards, probably in the first half of 1724. He was certainly dead some time before 25 November 1724 when James III proposed Terlagh MacMahon to the Pope for the vacant see of Killaloe.¹⁶

TERLAGH (TERENCE) MACMAHON, 1724-1728

Terlagh MacMahon could be described as a 'lost' bishop of Killaloe until re-discovered in recent times by Ritzler and Sefrin and included in their list for Killaloe diocese in volume V of the monumental *Hierarchia Catholica Medii et Recentioris Aevi*.¹⁷ Brady, whose work was the basic source for all subsequent lists for many years, somehow missed him out and this omission is repeated in Clancy and the *Handbook of British Chronology*. The failure of the 1961 edition of the *Handbook* to include him is surprising as Ritzler and Sefrin's relevant volume had appeared in 1952. The first reference work, to my knowledge, in Ireland or Britain to incorporate the findings in *Hierarchia Catholica* V has been the recently published (1984) volume IX of *A New History of Ireland* (Oxford, Clarendon Press). A few years ago, when I wrote on "The Penal Laws against Religion in County Clare in the 18th Century"¹⁸ I relied on Clancy and the *Handbook of British Chronology* and, as a result, also omitted reference to Terlagh MacMahon.

The 1704 registration list tells us that Terlagh MacMahon was thirty-eight years old at that time (born c.1666) and had been ordained in France in 1698. He began his priestly life in Ireland at an extremely difficult time for the Church as the first major piece of penal legislation, "An Act for banishing all papists exercising any ecclesiastical jurisdiction and all regulars of the popish clergy out of the kingdom", had been passed in 1697 and resulted in very many of those affected by the act leaving Ireland before the deadline of 1 May 1698. In 1704 MacMahon was living in Clenagh, not far from where Shannon Airport now stands, and the parishes for which he registered—Kilmaleery, Kilfiddane and Kildysart—were on both sides of the Fergus Estuary, reflecting a high degree of movement to and fro on the river. When a review was made of the 1704 registrations in March 1715 MacMahon was still working in the same parishes.¹⁹

On 25 November 1724 Terence (Terlagh) MacMahon was proposed by James III for the bishopric of Killaloe. Three weeks later, on 16 December 1724, MacMahon's brief of appointment was issued. The brief gives us no information about the new bishop apart from mentioning that he exercised the office of vicar. This indicates that he was probably one of the priests appointed by the Archbishop of Cashel to act on his behalf in the diocese. A note attached to the copy of the brief in the Vatican Archives refers to a mistake in the new bishop's name, to which attention had been drawn by James III. This mistake, which gave him the name Marzo Mahon instead of MacMahon, has been corrected in the copy where it is obvious that something had been rubbed out and the correct name inserted.

Unfortunately no further information has come to light about Terlagh MacMahon. His successor, Sylvester Lloyd, O.F.M.,²⁰ was appointed on 25 September 1728 so that MacMahon probably died earlier that year, aged about sixty-two.

¹⁶Vatican Secret Archive, Sec. Brev., vol. 2630, 9r-11r.

¹⁷P. Remigius Ritzler & P. Perminius Sefrin, *Hierarchia Catholica Medii et Recentioris Aevi*, vol. V, 1667-1730, Patavii MCMLII.

¹⁸*The Other Clare*, 7(1983), 43-50.

¹⁹Burke, *op. cit.* (fn. 8), p. 405.

²⁰For Bishop Sylvester Lloyd see next volume (1987) of this *Journal*.