

Begley's Diocese of Limerick: A Review Article

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Rev. John Begley, *THE DIOCESE OF LIMERICK*, vol. I (Ancient and Mediaeval), pp. xxiv + 468 [1906]; vol. II (Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries), pp. xii + 569 [1927]; vol. III (From 1691 to the Present time), pp. xii + 651 [1938]. Reprinted O'Brien-Toomey, Limerick 1993; ISBN 0-9522568-0-0 (Set of three volumes). Price: £120.00

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No comprehensive history of the Catholic Church in Ireland has yet been written. Some important work has been done over the past ten years on selected aspects of the organisation and operation of the institution, particularly for the nineteenth century. Yet the basic detailed research at local level, on which any general synthesis must be based, remains incomplete. This lacuna is especially severe in the case of diocesan history. The exemplary modern study of Killaloe diocese, by the late Fr. Ignatius Murphy, has not been matched by similar work elsewhere. For most Irish dioceses we still rely on the labours of previous generations of scholars, many of whom were priests whose researches had to be fitted in between the demands of busy pastoral ministries. The quality of these works inevitably varies, but even those which are still of value today leave much to be desired in terms of modern, objective historical analyses.

In the absence of any such study on the diocese of Limerick, the reprinting of Begley's three volume history is to be welcomed for making available to a wider public this useful, but hitherto scarce and correspondingly expensive, work. It also provides the opportunity for a full review in this *Journal* of the entire opus. The first volume [1906] was warmly reviewed in the 1907 *Journal of the Limerick Field Club*; volume 2 [1927] could not be acknowledged as the renamed *North Munster Archaeological Society* and its *Journal* had both ceased to exist in 1919. Dermot Gleeson, himself the co-author of the first history of Killaloe diocese, generously praised volume 3 [1938] in the fourth issue of the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, in 1939.

The Rev. James Begley was a native of the diocese of Limerick. Born in the parish of Monegay in 1861, he was ordained in Maynooth in 1887. After a brief stint in Scotland, he was appointed curate in Tournafulla, the first of various postings in his native diocese. His interest in local history was stimulated in this rural parish, with its strong sense of the past and its associations with Limerick's most notable saint, Ita. It was here, also, that he formed a friendship which was to be critical in his role as historian of the diocese. Michael McEnery, a native of Ballintubber, a townland in the nearby parish of Killeedy, worked in the Public Record Office in Dublin. In the course of the next forty years he was to locate and supply much of the valuable source material used in the history. The full indebtedness of Begley to McEnery needs to be emphasised. He not alone provided the rural-based priest with a ready access to documents lodged in Dublin but was in effect a research assistant constantly looking for and copying manuscripts relevant to the undertaking his friend was engaged in. Many of these records were transcribed and delivered to Begley before 1922, when the originals were destroyed in the attack on the Four Courts during the Civil War. They

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included a great deal of non-ecclesiastical material, and this had an important effect on the nature of the completed work. Unlike most diocesan histories, there is a very strong concentration on the general history of Ireland as well as on the secular affairs of the city and county. In the second volume, for example, only two of the eight chapters are devoted specifically to the catholic church in the diocese: five chapters survey the general historical events and personalities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as they affected Limerick, and there is a separate chapter for the Protestant dimension.

In his first volume, Begley discusses the topography, place-names and early legends of the area which was later to comprise the diocese. Judged by the standards of scholarship of its time, and making due allowance for a somewhat uncritical and indiscriminate acceptance of all source material at face value, it is still a useful guide. His discussion on the introduction of Christianity stands up rather less well to modern scrutiny. The fiction of St. Patrick's journey through Co. Limerick is detailed, with total reliance placed on the now discredited Tripartite Life. It is interesting to note that Begley opts for the year 493 as the more probable date for Patrick's death, though he avoids discussing the controversies regarding the saint's mission in Ireland. In his treatment of the monastic foundations and early saints of the area, Mungret is given pride of place with a good description of the fabric of the monastery. He usefully lists all the annalistic references to the site, consisting largely of the obituaries of its abbots and a chronicle of the numerous wars in which it was involved. He also includes a version of the popular and much elaborated 'wise women of Mungret' story. Discussion of St. Senan and Inis Cathaigh is included on the basis of the claim of the monastery to jurisdiction over the area of Hy Fidhgente, largely co-extensive with the later diocese of Limerick. The modern view that much hagiography was written to justify territorial claims is anticipated by Begley in his perceptive comment on the so-called prophecy of St. Patrick, as recorded in the Tripartite Life, that Senan would be Bishop of Hy Fidhgente. He notes that the purpose of this later interpolation was to support the expansionist ambition of Inis Cathaigh. Saint Ita and Killeedy are given generous coverage, not surprisingly given the author's location in the adjoining parish as he was writing. Among the other early Irish saints featured are Brendan, Pulcherius, and Cummin Foda, included on the basis of their reputed links with Ita, and St. Molua who is associated with both Ardagh and Emlygreennan. The regurgitation of much pious nonsense mars this section somewhat.

A very useful feature of Begley's work is his inclusion of detailed descriptions of medieval buildings, much of it apparently based on his own observations, which helps us see the extent of the destruction and loss, either accidental or deliberate, during this century. Strangely, he does not provide such an account for Killeedy, which he would have known particularly well, and which would be of interest in the light of the rather regrettable modernisation which has occurred at the site since his time. His work also sheds valuable light on the location of, and practices at, Holy Wells throughout the diocese. His detailed listing of the patterns, visits, rounds, traditional prayers and superstitions associated with this rapidly disappearing aspect of our history, is now an important source for this subject.

Begley has an interesting theory regarding the Ardagh Chalice. He argues that its concealment in the ringfort in which it was discovered in 1868 took place in the eighteenth century. This suggestion is based on a wooden cross, in Begley's possession, which was reputedly found with the chalice and other treasures. This cross (Vol. III p. 201) had the figures 727 cut into it by what he describes as a later and ruder artist and he arbitrarily regards this as the date 1727. On this basis he suggests that the Ardagh Hoard was hidden in 1740. He paints a dramatic, though less than convincing, picture of severe penal law enforcement in that year leading to a hasty burial of the objects. He also mentions a persistent

local tradition of buried treasure near the fort, prior to the discovery, as further evidence to support his theory. Presumably this is based on the notion that such a tradition would have survived for a century but not for a millennium. He neglects to acknowledge that numerous forts and other ancient sites had similar traditions attached to them without any basis to such stories. His account of the Viking period reflects the general view of the time, with the Scandinavians presented as virulently pagan, anti-Christian Danes wreaking havoc on an island of saints and scholars. His account depends heavily on Todd's edition of the 12th century O'Brien propaganda work *The War of the Gaedhill with the Gaill*. However he does acknowledge that Brian Boru's success depended on alliances with the Vikings and that they played an important role in church reform once they had adopted Christianity. Even making due allowances for the state of historical knowledge at the time he wrote, it is still difficult to justify the opening sentence of his chapter on the medieval religious foundations: "Mungret, Killeedy and the other religious houses sank beneath the wave of Danish vandalism never to rise again." His treatment of these later medieval abbeys and friaries combines comment on the degree of destruction of their fabric with the comprehensive historical references to them that he had assembled.

Begley concludes the first volume with a special chapter devoted to Scattery Island. He provides a valuable compendium of references to ecclesiastical and secular affairs, ranging from its inclusion in a 1201 listing of Limerick diocesan property to early nineteenth century correspondence relating to the lengthy dispute between the bishops of Limerick and Killaloe about jurisdiction over the island. This is largely a transcription of original sources arranged chronologically, but it concludes with a nicely veiled assertion of Limerick's rights. This statement of loyalty to the interests of his diocese was favourably commented upon by Bishop Jeremiah Newman in his survey of the history of the quarrel in the 1992 issue of this *Journal* where, in characteristically forthright terms, he refused to concede that Scattery, even in its uninhabited state, has been forever lost to Limerick. This long-standing and somewhat petty example of Episcopal power-mongering was notable for its obsession with property rights and control, rather than concern for the spiritual welfare and convenience of the islanders.

The second volume did not appear for a further 21 years and this delay was explained in the author's preface by his meticulous search for material. Without any false modesty the Canon, as he had by now become, proclaimed that every book and Ms likely to throw light on the subject has been consulted by him. He saw the history of the diocese in the period from 1500 to 1691 as being in miniature a history of Ireland and therein, it may be argued, lies its main weakness. Of the four chapters devoted to the 16th century, only one relates to the diocese in this crucial century of the Reformation. The others survey the political and administrative history of Ireland and its particular impact on Limerick. There is a strong concentration on the Desmonds who are presented as the noble heroes of the story and neither the vacillation and ambiguous behaviour of the 15th Earl nor the betrayal of Bishop O'Hely and Fr. O'Rourke by Eleanor, his Countess, is in any way criticised. His treatment of the seventeenth century follows the same pattern, with two of the four chapters summarising the politics of the period as it affected the county and city. There is no attempt to integrate the general history with the ecclesiastical with a resultant strange impression that somehow they did not interact in any way. The comprehensive nature of Begley's research is shown by the inclusion of a lengthy, informative and balanced discussion of the affairs of the Church of Ireland. The final chapter on the Catholic Church is very much a summary of the general situation in Ireland with somewhat sketchy local details and references.

Eleven years later the trilogy was completed and in the preface he confidently anticipated that this would be the most interesting of the volumes for the reader. Sadly this proved not to

be the case. Sales of this volume were very poor, and Begley was left to meet the printing costs from his own resources, leading to the auction and dispersal of his fine library. This is a sad comment on the Limerick of the 1930s and particularly on its clergy whose combined purchasing power alone would have avoided such a humiliation being visited on the elderly priest, then archdeacon of the diocese, who had devoted so much of his life to this endeavour. The book is basically divided into eighteenth and nineteenth century sections, though the latter includes brief biographies of the bishops up to the time of publication. As with the earlier volumes, it is secular history which predominates, with just single chapters devoted to the Catholic and Protestant Churches in each century. The latter deals exclusively with the Church of Ireland: none of the other Protestant denominations are mentioned while references to John Wesley or to the Palatines are included in the civil sections.

All the major national landmarks of this eventful period are covered, any local angle is highlighted, and there are copious sidelights on people, places and occurrences relating to the city and county. Anyone in search of information on the Badgers' Club of Limerick, the great O'Baggot of Ballingarry, the abduction of Honora Gould, the murder of Major Going, the financial problems of Lord Muskerry or, what is delicately termed, the oriental proclivities of the Knight of Glin, will find fascinating detail on these and myriad other aspects of Limerick life in that period.

In ecclesiastical affairs the account of the selection of a successor to Bishop Butler in 1886 serves as an instructive reminder that the passing of time does not always lead to progress and improvement. Bishop Butler died on 3rd February 1886 and exactly one month later the Archbishop of Cashel summoned all the parish priests of the diocese to a meeting in St. John's Cathedral where they voted for his successor. A curate of St. Michael's parish, Rev. Edward O'Dwyer, despite his lack of office or administrative experience, received most votes. Subsequently the bishops of the province of Cashel sent reports to Rome on the merits of the chosen candidate and of the two runners up in the election, the results of which were made public. By May the Pope had accepted the choice of the priests and appointed O'Dwyer. Begley pertinently observes that Rome was expeditious in those days and also notes that this was the last occasion on which there was such transparency in Episcopal selection.

The extensive appendices to each volume are an extremely valuable compilation of source material either unavailable today or not easily accessible to researchers outside of Dublin. In this regard, Begley's work has a value quite apart from the main narrative. For many researchers in local history or in ecclesiastical affairs generally, these appendices are now the most useful feature of the work. Begley deserves credit for his discriminating selection from the source material of items of particular interest and utility for other researchers or for those of his readers interested in reading original documents. The award of a honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland in 1939, two years before his death, was a well deserved acknowledgement of his very considerable achievement.

Begley's work can certainly be criticised on a number of grounds. The arrangement of his material is somewhat haphazard. His designation of chapters varies from the thematic to the chronological to a hybrid of both, while within this basic structure there is a serious lack of consistency in his presentation. This arbitrary approach, allied to the relatively poor index, makes the volumes difficult to use as works of reference. The services of a good editor, which presumably he did not have, would have remedied this deficiency and might also have ameliorated his occasionally tortured prose. In his writing on ecclesiastical matters, in particular, he makes few concessions to the general reader, as instanced by the reference to the church of Kilmurray which is listed as having a rector, in lay tenure the chapter, and in

ecclesiastical tenure the precentor, who presents the vicar. One can sympathise with Bishop Newman's father, a close friend of Begley, who reportedly found it easier to memorise entire sections rather than try to understand them!

While Begley provides a very comprehensive and at times colourful chronicle of the affairs of the diocese, he generally fails to make any critical or intellectual analysis of this material. He offers no original or challenging insights arising from his long and painstaking study of the sources. The facts, in true Rankean style, are expected to speak for themselves. He also fails to discuss how the major events and personalities of the period were perceived, received, rejected or modified within the diocese. There is no discussion of the remarkable influence of Cardinal Newman and the Oxford Movement on prominent Limerick priests and laity, or the notable conversions it effected. While Begley avoided the pitfalls of seeing the local as merely a microcosm of the national, he fails to see that his work could have tested the hypotheses and generalities presented in general surveys.

John O'Brien and Tom Toomey are to be congratulated for their initiative in taking on this reprinting venture. It is handsomely produced in numbered, matching sets. It has a short preface by Bishop Newman to add to that of Bishop O'Dwyer in the first volume; both of these, in their way, shed interesting light on Episcopal views of history and are already historical sources in their own right. The value of the reprint would have been enhanced had it been possible to include a new index. As pre-publication sales seem to indicate that this will be quickly sold out, perhaps any further reprint edition might remedy this deficiency.