The Disappearance of the Effigy of Bishop Cornelius O’Dea

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Despite surviving the destruction during the Reformation period and that of the Cromwellians, the fine alabaster effigy of Bishop Cornelius O’Dea (1400-1426), formally in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick, has disappeared for at least two centuries. The cause of its eventual destruction and disappearance is here suggested, based on a description made on a visit to the Cathedral in 1732.

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St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick, has for some years now being undergoing extensive renovation; it is opportune therefore to attempt to solve one of the great mysteries of the cathedral, namely the disappearance of the effigy of the renowned Cornelius O’Dea, Bishop of Limerick, 1400-1426. His effigy survived at least up until 1681, when it was drawn by the travel writer Thomas Dyneley. Dyneley’s drawing (Illus. 1) shows the bishop mitred and recumbent in full robes upon a raised marble platform1. However, the effigy, perhaps one of the finest ecclesiastical monuments of medieval Ireland, had disappeared long before the advent of the nineteenth century and, despite much subsequent speculation regarding its whereabouts2, has never been traced.

The mystery is largely solved by the account of the antiquarian, John Loveday, who visited St. Mary’s Cathedral in June of 1732. Loveday, of Caversham in Oxfordshire, was a graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford (B.A. 1731, M.A. 1734). He came to Ireland in the Summer of 1732. Landing in Dublin, he travelled through Kildare, Carlow and Kilkenny before passing on to Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Tipperary. He was keenly interested in matters antiquarian and has left many valuable accounts of ancient monuments at church-sites. He was particularly impressed by the Dominican Priory at Kilmallock, declaring that it was a noble ruin and exceeded any building he had yet seen in Ireland. On Loveday’s visit to St. Mary’s, Bishop O’Dea’s effigy could still be seen lying by the south wall of the chancel. Loveday observed it closely as he noticed that the inscription of the tombchest was much later than the effigy on top. This was because, Donough O’Brien, fourth Earl of Thomond, had re-inscribed the tomb when he had the monument moved to the south side of the chancel in 1621. O’Brien moved the tomb perhaps to act as a counterbalance to his own monument, which was then being built opposite on the north side of the chancel.

Loveday reported that the effigy was gradually being cut away by the people as a protection against the bloody flux. Bloody flux was the common term for various gastrointestinal infections, chiefly bacillary dysentery, which spread during lean summers in

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1National Library of Ireland, Ms 392, f. 133.
Illus. 1. Thomas Dyneley's drawing of the tomb of Bishop Cornelius O'lea in St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick, 1681 (by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Ireland)
Ireland and was usually associated with the consumption of contaminated food and polluted drinking water. The poor were particularly vulnerable to these infections and large numbers were swept away during recurring epidemics. In the famine of 1741 tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of people lost their lives in Munster alone through the scourge of dysentery. Clearly if the effigy was perceived to have had miraculous curative powers, pieces of the monument would have been in great demand and it is unlikely that it could have survived beyond the intense pandemics of 1740-41.

When Richard Pococke, Church of Ireland bishop of Ossory, visited St Mary’s cathedral in 1752, he reported that a magnificent tomb of black marble, erected to the Earl of Thomond, adorned the choir but he made no reference to the effigy of Bishop O’Dea as clearly it had disappeared by then.\(^4\)

That curative powers were attributed to Bishop O’Dea, some three hundred years after his death, is an indication of the very high esteem in which he was held by the citizens of Limerick. However, notwithstanding the bishop’s reputation, it seems extraordinary that his effigy, one of the very few to have survived the Cromwellian destruction, should have been allowed to perish in such a fashion. Loveday’s account is as follows:

Sunday 18 (June 1732). Limerick is encompassed by the Shannon, the chief river of Ireland, which divides its stream and embraces it. The city is divided into 2 parts, the English and the Irish town. The walls seem to be of different ages; on part of them [is] a very fine and exceedingly wide walk; great vessels, says Boate\(^5\) may come up to the very walls. Limerick chiefly consists of one street, of no great width and is for the most part stone building. St. Munchin’s and St. John’s [are] the only churches besides the cathedral. In the chancel of the former, which was heretofore the cathedral, found by St. Munchin, the first bishop of Limerick, is a monument for Bishop Smith’s lady\(^6\) just south of the altar; the bishop was buried here since, but as yet there is no epitaph for him. Smith built a house hard by, which Bishop Burscough\(^7\), his immediate successor, rents of his executors, for the palace has these many years been leased out and is now the sign of the 3 Tuns. St. Mary’s, the cathedral, is a large ancient pile, its pillars large and inelegant as usual here. In the choir are galleries and pews, the pulpit standing at the upper end before the altar. North of the altar is a very large and stately monument, erected for an earl of Thomond and his lady, his effigy defaced. Opposite to it on the south side is the recumbent effigy on a raised tomb (which is of much later date and has an inscription on it) of Bishop Cornelius O’Dea, who resigned his bishopric in 1426 and died in 1434. It is alabaster and the people are continually cutting of it for the bloody flux. The hymns only were chanted here, both M[orning] and E[vening]. A parish sit in the choir, whose church stood where the hospital is now. The dean will not suffer them to contribute anything towards the repair of the cathedral. Mr. Bendon\(^8\), the present dean, his revenue near £400 per annum; the bishop’s £1800 per annum. In the vestry which is also used for a chapter house, is a Latin inscription in old Irish capitals inserted in the wall and there are other

\(^{5}\)John McVeagh (ed.), *Richard Pococke’s Irish Tours*. Dublin 1995, p.96
\(^{7}\)Thomas Smyth, Bishop of Limerick, 1695-1725.
\(^{8}\)William Burscough, Bishop of Limerick 1725-1755.
\(^{9}\)Thomas Bindon son of David Bindon of Clonoe, M.P. for Ennis 1713-27. Before becoming Dean of Limerick, Thomas was a fellow of Trinity College Dublin. He ran a classical academy in Limerick where students were prepared for university. He was a brother of the portrait painter Francis Bindon.

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gravestones. No monument for any bishop, but the above mentioned, though Ware informs us that more were buried here. The bishop of Limerick has also the title of Ardflert and Aghadoe. The vicars choral have no houses but others have built upon their ground and pay them ground rent. There is no library here now. The barracks are at the ruined castle.10

From Limerick Loveday proceeded to Cashel where he found only the choir of the cathedral roofed and in repair. The church was not used for services ‘above twice a year’. The stalls were plain and the place not as well kept as might be expected. In the southern arch was the recumbent effigy of Bishop Miler Magrath, who died in 1622. There was a monument to another bishop in the northern transept but the inscription had been chiselled out. Also to be seen was a stone with the figure of a religious cut on it, his hands joined in a religious posture. To the south of the cathedral lay a stone on which was a defaced figure of St Patrick. This presumably was St Patrick’s cross which still stands to the south of the Cathedral.11

Loveday spent most of his life in ‘studious retirement’. He wrote several papers including “Observations Upon Shrines”, which was published in Archaeologia in 1754. He died at Caversham in 1789.

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9Sir James Ware, De Hibernia et Antiquitatibus e jus Disquisitiones, London 1654.
10Taken from: J.E.T. Loveday (ed.), Diary of a Tour in 1732 through parts of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland made by John Loveday of Caversham, Edinburgh 1890, pp. 42-43. Spelling and punctuation have been normalised.