The Priests and People of Killaloe Diocese - After Cromwell: A Review Article

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The reader who first becomes acquainted with the scholarly activity of Ignatius Murphy through *The Diocese of Killaloe*, will have an essentially different perspective on its three magisterial volumes from those who were privileged to know the author in his lifetime, and who were familiar with his previous writings. To the former, all that is visible is a finely crafted work of academic scholarship, standing entirely on its own, whereas the latter is able to recognise in it also the natural culmination of a lifetime of research on the history of the diocese which the author served all his working life.

Ignatius Murphy's career began with a master's thesis at Maynooth in the early nineteenth-sixties on the Great Famine in Kilkee, his native parish. Ordained a priest of Killaloe diocese, his research interest naturally gravitated towards matters ecclesiastical, and virtually all of his subsequent scholarly output balanced this twin pre-occupation with local and Church history. For years, virtually each issue of *The North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, *The Other Clare* and *Dal gCais* contained important contributions by Ignatius Murphy on a variety of different topics. He also contributed innumerable pieces to parish magazines, ecclesiastical journals and commemorative volumes. Appearing in such a wide range of publications, his output would sorely test a bibliographer's skills: of themselves, the articles he published in the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* (listed on pages 136-137 after his obituary in the 1993-1994 issue) constitute an impressive œuvre.

At the same time, Msgr. Murphy was also a central figure in the emergence of a strong indigenous scholarship in Clare through his association with the Shannon-based local studies movement which led to the first appearance of *The Other Clare* in 1977. He was to contribute many articles to that journal over the years, including his celebrated piece on Captain Kennedy and the Kilrush Workhouse Union during the Great Famine. Anyone familiar with all this scholarly endeavour will clearly recognise in it the beginnings of a process which led eventually to the writing of *The Diocese of Killaloe*.

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By 1984, in the intervals permitted by his heavy work schedule with the diocese, Ignatius Murphy had put together a typescript entitled ‘The Priests of Killaloe Diocese, 1700-1900’. The rather narrow focus of this early draft may perhaps be explained by the daunting prospect of undertaking of a full history of a diocese as extensive as Killaloe, which extends from Loop Head in West Clare over much of North Tipperary and into Offaly. Whether or not this was the case, when Ignatius showed the typescript to a friend, Canon Reuben Butler, the latter immediately recognised its importance, and the consultation had the effect of sending the former back to his desk in order to expand and re-edit the work for publication. The finished work appeared in three volumes, over a number of years. The first volume, dealing with the eighteenth century was published in 1991, followed a year later by a second. The third volume appeared in 1995, two years after the author’s death.

Although in the published volumes the priests of Killaloe diocese remain centre stage, the work as a whole was broadened into a general history of the Catholic Church in Killaloe between the end of the seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries. Only the third volume, sadly incomplete, bears the template of his original conception.

Each of the three volumes deals with a particular stage of the development of the diocesan Church, and their dust-jackets feature portraits of important episcopal personalities in each period. These are Michael MacMahon (1765-1807), his successor, James O’Shaughnessy (1807-1827) and Michael Flannery (1862-1904). The neat symmetry of the fortuitous survival of these three splendid portraits (housed in St. Flannan’s College), is only a little spoiled by the recent identification of the MacMahon portrait as a modern painting, the work of Margaret Crilly, wife of the stained glass artist, Harry Clarke. The use of these portraits as cover illustrations is also slightly misleading, in that none of the three bishops was necessarily the guiding spirit of the diocesan Church in his respective era. Indeed, although Ignatius Murphy never states it explicitly, the work as a whole strongly inclines towards a contrary conclusion. The formation of the modern post-Penal diocese was a very complex process, subject to a wide diversity of internal and external influences, and its bishops were more often than not mere conduits of changing policy at Rome, and their behaviour influenced more by their own personal and local circumstances than by their sense of mission.

From the very first chapters of the first volume, The Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century, this complexity emerges strongly in the description given by the author of the diocesan Church during the period when the Penal Laws were in full force. In a preliminary discussion of the fortunes of the Church in the seventeenth century, for example, we are reminded that many of the standard later images of Penal Law persecutions, especially the tradition of the Mass Rock, relate in fact to the earlier Cromwellian period. Similarly, in a discussion of the various legal disabilities affecting land tenure by Catholics, their education and their pursuit of certain professions, the author is at pains to emphasize how little difference these made to the lives of most Catholics, who were too poor to possess any rights of which they could be deprived. For them the greatest affliction was the withholding of the consolation of their professed religion.

Yet at the same time, the traditional picture of a State-proscribed Church, with a clergy and hierarchy who, apart from a number of registered priests, were relentlessly pursued, emerges intact in Murphy’s account, as does the view of a church organisation whose fugitive
nature is well captured in a letter by one early eighteenth-century bishop to Rome in 1714 in which he describes his location as being 'in loco refugii nostri' - 'the place of our refuge'.

This particular bishop was the ailing and aged Eustace Browne, about as unfortunate a prelate as can be imagined, who had to contend with harshly unsympathetic superiors as much as with a hostile State. Suspended from his functions for some unspecified irregularities, he was arrested shortly after by the civil authorities, and died while in prison. Browne's travails as bishop were shared by many of his successors, especially the pitable and forever wandering Sylvester Lloyd, who toiled in very poor health for many years before being forced to travel abroad in search of a cure for an eye ailment.

The hardship endured by its prelates reflected the wider difficulties experienced by the clergy and laity, and in succeeding chapters, the author fleshes out the familiar details of life in Penal times with observations on priest-hunting, the gradual disappearance, by emigration or conformity, of the Catholic gentry, and the activities of the Franciscans who functioned in the absence of a diocesan clergy. One of the most enduring legacies of this period in the Church's history was the extraordinary range of popular devotions which emerged and flourished during this period in the absence of regular pastoral attention. These included the customs and rituals attaching to wakes and funerals, the 'rounds' made at holy wells, 'station' masses, etc. In addition to this there was a blossoming of devotional poetry in Irish, much of it of exquisite beauty. From the important chapter in which Msgr. Murphy discusses all these matters, there emerges a vivid impression of an abiding and intense spirituality among the laity.

Far too honest a scholar to dwell solely on the difficulties encountered by clergy and laity and their fortitude in enduring persecution, the author devotes much painstaking attention to the negative aspects of the situation. These include the steady flow of converts to the Church of Ireland, mainly for the sake of opportunity, and the 'suicidal' squabbling between the secular clergy and the Franciscans on whom much pastoral work in the parishes depended. There was also the defection of clergy to Protestantism, the reluctance of episcopal nominees to accept appointment to such a remote diocese as Killaloe, the absenteeism of many who did, and the preference of a large number of clerical students to remain in their more comfortable continental situations rather than face lives of deprivation and poverty among their people at home.

To return to the diocesan bishops, none of the six incumbents at Killaloe in the first half of the eighteenth century was able in the climate of the times to adequately carry out his assigned duties. Few indeed were able to reside long enough in the diocese to do so, and it was only in 1765, with the appointment of Michael Peter MacMahon, that permanently resident bishops came to be the norm. MacMahon was the first incumbent at Killaloe who was able to preside over its affairs for any length of time without fear of the intermittent bouts of civil repression which had been commonplace earlier.

Although Murphy could perhaps have made more of the significance of MacMahon's appointment in this regard, he does emphasize that it coincided with a change in the relationship of the Catholic Church in Ireland to the State, leading to the gradual easing of the Penal Laws. As described by Murphy, MacMahon was a typical example of the 'gentleman bishops' favoured by Rome in its appointments to Irish sees. Descended from an old Gaelic Clare family, he had an independent income and was well-connected with the exiled Irish community on the continent. Significantly, he was the last Killaloe bishop whose
appointment was vetted by a Stewart pretender before the Church abandoned the Jacobites for a more pragmatic allegiance to the increasingly lenient Hanovers. MacMahon himself took the Oath of Allegiance, with some reluctance, in 1778, but when successive Relief Acts saw the dismantling of most of the Penal Code in the space of fifteen years, his initial doubts evaporated. In 1799, he signed a resolution supporting the proposed Union between Ireland and Great Britain, believing, like most of the Irish bishops, that complete emancipation would follow. The achievement of MacMahon’s long episcopate (he was 97 when he died in 1805), was to preside over the diocesan church in the crucial years of its emergence from repression to tolerance and near-respectability.

The second volume, *The Diocese of Killaloe, 1800-1850*, begins with an account of the diocesan Church during the episcopate of Bishop MacMahon’s successor, his co-adjutor, James O’Shaughnessy. O’Shaughnessy’s appointment heralded yet another fundamental change in direction for the Church in Killaloe, which in a short time came to differ as much from that of his predecessor as did their personalities from each other. Where MacMahon had been timid and conformist, O’Shaughnessy was assertive and independent-minded. Where MacMahon’s Church had gratefully returned loyalty for official favour, that of O’Shaughnessy’s era demanded concession and recognition as long withheld rights. So rapid were the changes in the political climate in the early years of the nineteenth century that O’Shaughnessy and his priests were able to participate openly and assertively in the religious issues of the day, particularly against the perceived threat from Protestant evangelicism, and in the drive for Emancipation. As bishop of a diocesan Church which no longer feared to draw attention to itself, O’Shaughnessy drove around in a carriage the doors of which were emblazoned with the symbol of a mitre.

By the 1820s, priests from Maynooth were gradually replacing the older men who had been ordained on the continent, their strong nationalist leanings confuting the theory behind the establishment of the national seminary in 1795 that home-educated priests would somehow be more tractable to authority. Over several chapters in the second volume, Murphy follows the activities of these priests, in both their pastoral and political roles, through the development of parochial institutions, the building of schools and chapels, the arrival of orders of religious, and also the rôle of the priests during the horrors of the Great Famine. One feature, which again is perhaps understated by Murphy, is that the struggles and travails of the period seem to have produced a particularly able and energetic generation of these diocesan priests, among them Malachy Duggan, Michael Comyn, Thomas McInerney, John Kenyon and Nicholas Power.

Inevitably there were abuses and scandals, perhaps the most flagrant being the nepotism practiced by Bishop O’Shaughnessy who appointed no less than five of his near relatives to important parishes, and in so doing caused seething discontent among the diocesan clergy. Even more unedifying was the ‘schism’ which festered at Birr for most of the 1830s. In this bizarre episode, which arose out of a dispute over the curacy of the parish, two local priests, cousins Michael and William Crotty, with the support of a substantial body of the parishioners, defied their bishop for many years. Murphy devotes an entire chapter to the controversy, furnishing for the first time a comprehensive account of the entire affair, in which physical confrontations alternated with court cases and excommunications. The schism only came to an end after local support for the Crotty’s evaporated when Michael Crotty decided to embrace the Presbyterian faith!
Even though he is unsparing in his delineation of episcopal and clerical scandal, Murphy makes the point that neither O'Shaughnessy's nepotism nor the Birr schism were typical, and that controversies in general were surprisingly infrequent in a diocesan organisation which was still in a state of flux and transition. Murphy does not try to account for this relative absence of controversy, but among the significant factors the generally high quality of the priesthood must surely figure, as well as the fact that the pressing realities and crises of the day left little time either for abuse or internal strife.

The greatest crisis faced by the diocesan Church in these years, one which relegated all other issues to insignificance was, of course, the Great Famine, which is examined by the author in another chapter. Murphy's account adds greatly to our knowledge not only of the pastoral and relief involvement of the parish clergy, but of the situation in general in the localities, something which has as yet hardly been touched upon by Famine historians.

No aspect of Irish life was left unchanged by the cataclysmic years of the Great Famine, and its passing precipitated the diocesan Church into the third phase of its development since Penal times. In this period, addressed in the third volume of Murphy's history, The Diocese of Killaloe, 1850-1904, the institutional Church achieved a level of influence over the lives of the faithful that was unprecedented, and which is difficult for the modern observer to imagine. Beginning with the minutiae of the Synod of Thurles in 1850, which placed the final capstone to its organizational structure, the author takes us through the succession of landmarks on the road to the unchallenged position of authority exercised by the Church at the turn of the century. A crucial aspect of this progressive movement of consolidation, which began even as the Thurles Synod was still in session, was the mobilization of Church resources to counteract the renewed activity of Protestant 'evangelicals' during the early 1850s. Among a population still reeling in the aftermath of the Famine, the anti-evangelical campaign saturated the localities with teams of Jesuit and Redemptorist missionaries, and in a very short space of time introduced teaching orders of nuns and brothers to all but the smallest towns and villages.

After the evangelical campaign had spent itself, the religious remained in the localities, permanent outposts of the new Catholic theological orthodoxy which emerged from the Thurles Synod. No longer necessary for anti-evangelical warfare, the missions continued at a diminished volume of fervour, their role now to spread and police the new Romanising trends in public displays of religious practice, as well as private devotion. The chapter in which Murphy describes this aspect of the post-Famine Church shows how popular religious practice was channelled away from the old and often unruly insular practices attached to patterns, stations and wakes, into orderly religious processions, formal confraternities and sodalities.

If these trends are familiar fare to the student of the 'devotional revolution' in Catholic religious practice, Murphy adds many interesting observations, as well as insightful local illustrations from the different parishes of Killaloe, which together greatly enrich our understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. He also emphasises a factor which is often ignored in discussion of the rapid transformation of religious life in Ireland in the period, that is the radical shift in the proportion of clergy to laity. Although the number of priests in Killaloe diocese rose very slowly between 1841 (127) and 1901 (143), waves of Famine and post-Famine emigration had more than halved the population in the meantime. The gradual disappearance of former 'official' figures of authority, i.e. landlords and Protestant clergy,
meant that the increased visibility of Catholic devotional displays had little opposition, leading to an ever-pervasive religious atmosphere among the laity and in society in general.

Far from resisting this transformation of religious practice and the extension of Catholic values into more and more areas of life, all sections of Catholic society in Killaloe appear to have embraced the devotional revolution unquestioningly, rejoicing indeed in the new and triumphalist semi-official status of their Church. More than ever, congregations saw their priests as natural leadership figures, despite the fact that the emergence of a secular leadership saw a noticeable diminution of clerical participation in electoral politics. Catholic priests played a central role in the different phases of the Land War, often despite the disapproval of their bishops who inevitably were much more distant from the day-to-day struggles of the people. Murphy cites instances where Church bells were rung by priests to alert communities to imminent evictions, and where on occasion priests were arrested for this activity. Some priests became partisan to an extraordinary degree, one example being that of Fr. Little of Sixmilebridge, who went so far as to chain himself to fifty of his parishioners at an eviction during the Plan of Campaign. This dramatic act had the effect of forcing the landlord to negotiate, and ultimately led to a resolution of the issue.

On the other hand, priests were never fully able to control the political views of the laity, as is instanced by a certain lingering popular regard for the Fenians, and the fact that in the sorry aftermath of the O’Shea divorce case, even the most trenchant clerical denunciations did not stifle support for Parnellite candidates in many constituencies, most notably in the County Clare portion of the diocese.

By the end of the nineteenth century the Church in Killaloe had come full circle from its Penal antecedents. It had now come to be part of a Catholic establishment in Ireland, and priests and bishops were objects of enormous respect, amounting at times almost to veneration. Lines of authority and administrative structures were so well entrenched that they seemed to have been there forever. This sense of establishment was realised so rapidly and so fully that the diocese easily weathered the thirty year mental illness of one prelate, Michael Flannery, and the precarious health of two of his co-adjutors. The ultimate act in the apotheosis of the Church in Killaloe was the reconstitution of the diocesan chapter of canons by Flannery’s successor, Thomas McRedmond, in 1904.

A number of factors make it difficult to make a critical evaluation of the three volumes of The Diocese of Killaloe. Firstly it is ‘official’ Church history, and diocesan history at that, which might be seen to be an obsolete genre, belonging to a former era of apologist and amateur clerical writers. In modern times, no other historian has attempted a similar work for any Irish diocese, which has left critical opinion without any yardstick of comparison, and partly explains why The Diocese of Killaloe has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

Another problem relates to Murphy’s use of source material, the paucity of which necessarily makes the writing of diocesan history such a difficult task. In this connection, one reviewer has taken Murphy to task (in the eighteenth century volume) for his use of a very limited range of sources. In fact, however, a careful reading of all three volumes shows that Murphy has made a virtue of necessity in his use of the surviving evidence, compensating for the absence of any substantial internal diocesan archive material by intelligent and exhaustive use of sources as diverse as the Propaganda archive in the Vatican archives, and the local
newspapers of Clare and Tipperary. Murphy's familiarity with the Vatican archives is impressive, the depth of his knowledge of the newspaper material and his control over it is little short of awesome, and if at intervals one discerns where wide gaps in documentary evidence have been papered over, one has to recognise the insurmountable difficulties with which he has had to contend in this regard.

The most problematical aspect of any evaluation of *The Diocese of Killaloe*, of course, relates to the unfinished state of the third volume. The author first became seriously ill when revising an early draft, and despite a determined attempt to continue the work, he was soon unable to continue. It must have taken the diocesan committee which had overseen the publication of the first two volumes much consideration before it was decided to publish the third one also. Overall, their wisdom in so doing cannot be doubted, and even as one reads through the chapters which would have been reshaped and pared down had their author lived, the passages whose ideas remain undeveloped, and those which rest on unattributed or secondary sources, one cannot but be impressed by the range and scope of the topics which are addressed. At the very least, the third volume furnishes historians of nineteenth century Ireland with a very extensive data base of invaluable information on Killaloe diocese in this crucial half century of its history.

As with any great scholarly work, flaws can be discerned in the three volumes of the *Diocese of Killaloe*, many of them minor, some more serious. The author is often content to allow a whole host of marshalled facts of a particular episode speak for themselves, without attempting any overall conclusion. Although this narrative approach generates a style of writing which is simple, engaging and vivid, rising often to elegance, one is frequently left with the expectation of fuller explanation and analysis. Furthermore, even allowing for the incomplete state of the third volume, over the entire work the author often finds himself unable to resist the temptation of giving us full details of episodes which relate more properly to the larger 'secular' history of the different parts of the diocese merely because they are interesting.

These tendencies are best exemplified in the Famine chapter, where Murphy gives an overall history of that cataclysm, and without any attempt at a general assessment of how well the diocesan Church rose to the challenge of its ministry during these years of horrendous suffering and mass mortality. Finally, despite the rigorousness of Ignatius Murphy's scholarship, the work is written very much from the Catholic point of view, and we are sometimes left without a balancing perspective from non-Catholic sources.

It is presumptuous of any historian to identify shortcomings in the work of another, especially where the achievement is so much greater than any to which he himself may ever aspire. In the case of *The Diocese of Killaloe*, the presumption is an enormous one, in that its three volumes represent a great scholarly achievement indeed, and a major contribution to the ecclesiastical history of Ireland, and to Irish historical studies generally. *The Diocese of Killaloe* is a monumental accomplishment, a definitive account that will probably not be superseded in the foreseeable future, nor perhaps, emulated for any other diocese. Its 1,388 pages comprise a vast panoramic survey of the dynamic transformation of the Catholic Church in Killaloe in the two centuries after the Penal Laws. *The Diocese of Killaloe* will stand for a very long time as the legacy of a great churchman and scholar, though whether it will breathe new life into the genre of diocesan history remains to be seen.