

Augustinians' Long And Glorious Association With Limerick

(SPECIALLY CONTRIBUTED)

CROMWELL was no friend of the Irish. Still less did he look with a kindly eye on the Irish clergy. The Augustinians were to feel the brunt of his wrath in many different parts of Ireland—a report to Rome in 1656 told of 14 Augustinians martyred, and a further 40 imprisoned or exiled. The Augustinians at Limerick also suffered, if not from Cromwell himself, at least from his Roundheads.

Cromwell had landed at Ringsend, near Dublin, in August, 1649, with Bible in one hand and sword in the other. A quick march northwards, Drogheda was stormed, its soldiers and inhabitants put to the sword. Among those captured was the Augustinian Prior, Peter Taaffe, brother of Viscount Taaffe, whose army was crushed at the battle of Knocknamoos, Co. Cork. It was here that Taaffe's crack troopers, the Antrim Highlanders, under their heroic captain, Alastair "Colkitt" MacDonnell, had gone down in glory before the might of "Morrrough the Burner." Cromwell himself, when writing to the English House of Commons from Drogheda, 17th September, 1649, told that when he discovered his prisoner was both an Augustinian and a brother of Viscount Taaffe, "that did not save him." The comment was an unpleasant augury for Augustinians elsewhere. Father Peter Taaffe was the first Augustinian martyred by the Puritans.

CROMWELL'S CAMPAIGN TURNED SOUTH

Cromwell turned south on a lightning campaign, through Leinster and Munster. The Augustinians were scattered from Kilkenny, Callan, New Ross, Dungarvan and Fethard. But his armies were brought to a sudden standstill before two cities—Waterford and Limerick. These two names are linked in Irish history for their gallant defence against the Cromwellians. They are also linked by their Augustinian history. Limerick has to thank Waterford (and, indeed, Cork and Kerry also) for the arrival of the Augustinians in the city. This brings our story back to the peaceful days of Charles I.

In 1629 the Augustinians had no permanent house in Limerick City. But Limerick-born Augustinians at Adare and elsewhere were anxious to establish themselves in their native city. In this they had the support of the Bishop, Richard Arthur. The Augustinian Provincial at this time was a Kerry man, Morish O'Connell, a member of that same Ballycarbery family which two centuries later was to give us Daniel O'Connell, the "Liberator" of Catholic Ireland.

Morish O'Connell had a further reason for seeking a house at Limerick. The Augustinians in Limerick wanted a permanent connection with their brethren in Munster, and a rest-house for their missionaries travelling from one province to the other. In those days there was a considerable number of Augustinians from West Cork and Kerry. They wanted a friary at Limerick because such a well populated city of fervent Catholicism gave much opportunity for priestly work. During the seventeenth century apparently Limerick, not Dublin, was the Mecca for Cork and Kerry people!

PETITION TO HOLY SEE.

In 1629 Father Morish O'Connell went to Rome, to petition the Holy See for a transfer to his Order of the ancient and deserted monastery of Limerick's Canons Regular, known as Holy Cross—a petition which, subject to certain remote conditions, was granted. Through the good offices of the Augustinian Bishop of Waterford, Most Rev. Dr. Patrick Comerford, and of the far famed Franciscan, Luke Wadding—both of them from Waterford City—Pope Urban VIII gave his approval and blessing to an Augustinian foundation in Limerick City.

But even then there were difficulties to overcome. The ancient monastery and church of Holy Cross (also known as St. Mary's) just as other religious properties in Ireland had been confiscated by the English government during the suppression of the monasteries in the previous century. A Protestant parson was in possession of Holy Cross and it was only as late as 1646 that he was ejected, when the Augustinians assumed full charge of the historic old buildings. But their stay was to be short.

Between 1632 and 1646 the Augustinians worked in the City,

living in temporary lodgings, celebrating Mass in makeshift buildings. After the city had declared for the Confederate rebels, and Limerick Castle had been taken in summer, 1642, the Augustinians appeared publicly in their religious habits.

"NO SURRENDER."

During the exciting events which closed with the surrender of Limerick to the Cromwellians in October, 1651, the Augustinians were continually associated with the fortunes of the city. Special mention should be made of the prior, Father Maurice Lacy. During the month of June, 1648, two armies were besieging Limerick and the citizens themselves were divided on the question of resistance. Father Lacy was one of those who with the bishop wrote to the Papal Nuncio, Rinuccini, affirming their determination to continue a policy of "No Surrender."

Then Cromwell had come to Ireland. His armed might had secured him towns like Drogheda and Wexford. The terror of his name opened the gates of towns such as Cashel and New Ross. But neither his might nor his name won him Waterford, where the soul of the defence was the Augustinian Bishop, Patrick Comerford. Cromwell, with his armies held before Waterford, had not time to march on Limerick before his return to England in May, 1650. His successor, Ireton, found only three cities foolhardy enough to defy him—Waterford, Limerick and Galway. If these were reduced Ireland was at Cromwell's feet.

PLAGUE AND FAMINE HELPED IRETON.

By August, 1650, Waterford, blockaded by sea, beleaguered by land, short of food and gunpowder, was forced to surrender on honourable terms. The Augustinian Bishop was allowed to betake himself to France, where he died in exile. Ireton sent forward a force to reduce Limerick in September, 1650. But without success. He himself arrived during the summer of 1651, and having devastated Thomond and Connaught, turned on Limerick. A five months siege followed, with plague and famine acting as allies for Ireton. The citizens became divided whether or not surrender was the wiser course. The Augustinian Prior again was one of those who maintained a policy of "No Surrender." But even the citizens of Limerick found there was a limit to their endurance.

On 27th October, 1651, Limerick, like Waterford, surrendered on honourable terms. And there was grim satisfaction in the city when the plague claimed Ireton within a fortnight of his victory. The Augustinian Prior and his Community were not among those who had been black-listed by Ireton for special attention. Nevertheless, the Augustinians were driven from the city, their church and monastery occupied. Spain, France and the Low Countries gladly received them and their fellow-Augustinians from elsewhere in Ireland.

DEFIANT MOTTO.

But the defiant motto of the Augustinians on leaving Limerick was "We will return." And return they did. Nor Cromwell, nor William of Orange, nor the bleak century of the Penal Days succeeded in breaking the Augustinian connection with Limerick. The attitude of Prior Lacy and his friars during the Sieges of 1648 and 1651 was symbolic of the unwavering Augustinian service to the City of the Broken Treaty.

[The Editorial Committee of the Siege Centenary celebrations thank the writer for his excellent paper on the origins of the Augustinian connexion with Limerick City. The Order is now in continuous residence here for three and a quarter centuries, if their compulsory absence (in common with other religious groups) after the expulsion of 1698 is excluded. But they returned in 1731 and did yeoman service in St. Mary's Parish during the dark Penal night. Frequently an Augustinian was called from his monastery to take over parochial duties in St. Mary's Parish, so great was the penury of priests in the mid-eighteenth century Limerick. But the days of Creagh Lane Chapel have passed and the present Celtic Romanesque church built on the exact spot of their 1822 chapel is a splendid monument to the energy and zeal of this ancient Order.]