

The Bruff Agitation

A BRIEF HISTORY

1897 - 1907

by
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I received your letter of the 3rd. inst., requesting to know the reason why the Christian Brothers were withdrawn from the Bruff schools. In the first place I desire to assure you that the Brothers were always kindly treated by the good people of the town and neighbourhood of Bruff, and that they will retain the kindness of the people in grateful recollection; moreover, that the Brothers always felt it a pleasure to labour for the education of the boys attending their schools in Bruff. In the second place I feel bound to say that I myself gave notice to the Bishop of the Diocese, Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, that I was obliged to withdraw the Brothers from Bruff in consequence of circumstances which caused the Brothers much trouble, circumstances too, over which they had no control, and which rendered it impossible for them to remain any longer in Bruff. In conclusion I beg to thank you for the kind manner in which you refer to the Brothers, during their many years - close on forty - in Bruff. Richard A. Maxwell, Superior General of the Christian Brothers to Edward T. Moran, Marino, Dublin, 5 November 1897.

They left Bruff of their own accord. They did not even pay me the courtesy of asking my opinion, but simply notified their decision to me. I consider it then, rather unreasonable to be asked now to invite them back. I was extremely sorry that they left Bruff. In my opinion, this is not a time to lessen the religious agencies for the education of the people. But in this case, I cannot take upon myself the responsibilities of the Christian Brothers' actions, and if this agitation which is being fomented is an attempt to intimidate the Parish Priest and punish him, or to prevent me from giving effect to the decision of the Holy See, I think the parties concerned will find that they are mistaken.

If the Brothers had consulted me before they left, I should have advised them to remain. Things have now gone so far that I do not think the good of the people or the interests of religion would be served by their return.

Edward Thomas, Bishop of Limerick to Michael Cusack, Mayor of Limerick, The Palace, Corbally, Limerick, 18 January 1898, extract taken from the 'Limerick Chronicle' which cites the full text of the letter.

We wish to state that it certainly was a curious method of increasing the religious agencies in the Parish of Bruff whose people were so well accustomed to them by forcing on the people of Bruff the National System of education in lieu of the good training of the Christian Brothers.

The People of Bruff ('The People's Reply') to Michael Cusack, Bruff, 24 January 1898.



Reasonably or unreasonably, Irish Roman Catholics generally, have taken, and still care to take their leadership from the Church. However, the events occurring in Bruff between 1897-1907, represent a striking exception to this trend. These years are now commonly and variously referred to as the era of the 'Bruff School Dispute', 'The Bruff School Case', or less euphemistically but perhaps more accurately as the 'Bruff Scandal' or 'Rebellion' - such attitudes being essentially determined by the significance one attaches to it. For convenience, the term 'agitation' rather than the more emotive 'scandal' will be used throughout this essay.

It appears to be one of the most common yet ironical attributes of small towns and villages, that despite innumerable conjectures, suppositions, and contradictory reports to which a particular incident gives rise, the truth is invariably and frequently distorted if not obscured. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in the notorious agitation years. A suspicious silence still reigns supreme over this whole era, even right down to the present day; and the cautious murmurings of the near contemporaries interviewed, doggedly professed the validity and correctness of their utterances above all others.

Among the townspeople of Bruff, the troubles themselves have commanded more attention than the actual causes, which they see as vague, ill-defined, and lying somewhere on the ecclesiastical side. The cause itself was simple, and may be attributed to the desire on the part of Rev. MacNamara, Parish Priest of Bruff, to establish and even impose if necessary, the national system of education on the people of Bruff. This may be said with sufficient certainty after tedious gleanings from the available source material, and any other probable causes were merely to satisfy this end. The generosity of the annual collection for the Brothers, and their relative immunity from the authority of the local clergy, was apparently resented by the Parish Priest and his associates, who initially tried (unsuccessfully) to 'oust the Brothers from the bandroom (an additional teaching room in the school yard) in an attempt to establish an alternative school. The national school system if established would have given the parish priest a greater degree of power and control over the Brothers, so we

can rightly interpret his motives as being an attempt to rule by command, which was very much in accordance with a familiar pattern in Irish Church history.

As will become apparent, the agitation represents a chain of events from which few involved emerged with credit, and lesser still unscathed. It was a period that witnessed an unrelenting and independent resistance by the people of Bruff, and some strange actions and reactions on the part of the clergy and hierarchy. Although this brief exposition is primarily historical, and must thus be viewed from a historical viewpoint, an in depth analysis entails an unavoidable entry into the uncertain spheres of folklore and psychology. The last named was to leave a curious yet interesting inheritance. Much of what took place was largely self-explanatory, making it unnecessary to get sidetracked by lesser details. Undoubtedly, a considerable series of questions will arise, but many of the answers will not be so readily forthcoming.

"The Christian Brothers left Bruff on Friday week without intimating to anybody the cause of their departure, and the schools have remained closed since". (1)

This report heralded the rather tame initiation of what was to develop into a seemingly endless saga, which gathered increasing momentum as time progressed, and took on an unequivocally rigid aspect, deviating from what was originally a malleable situation, until finally the stage was reached where the unrest seemed to keep going of its own volition.

Their sudden departure prompted many meetings, deputations and angry letters, all of which achieved nothing of significance, as their return was never a real likelihood. Slowly at first did this realisation begin to register; the Brothers were gone, and they might not be returning. On 11 January 1898, the first major public demonstration took place in the town of Bruff, where it was resolved unanimously that:

"The people of Bruff require the return of the Christian Brothers for the religious education of our children. As these schools were built by the parishioners for the education of our children, we are determined that they will never be used to another purpose. While we sincerely appreciate the zeal with which the Bishop of Limerick is urging the claims of the people of Ireland for the endowment of a National University, we regret that inconsistency to which his Lordship has committed himself by the removal from Bruff of the Christian Brothers..." (2)

One week later came Dr. O'Dwyer's first public statement relating to the agitation, allegedly inspired by some statements made at an earlier meeting

of Limerick Corporation. (3) This letter - which cannot be quoted in full in the present context - in essence stated that the Brothers left of their own accord, and any possible difficulties they might have had to endure, were strictly in the areas of ecclesiastical law. This document represented a somewhat tendentious argument, being characteristically effusive while simultaneously remaining vague and deceptive.

On 24 January the publication of what was known as the 'People's Reply' began to circulate. This letter spiritedly repudiated O'Dwyer's assertions and stressed particularly that if the Bishop of Limerick had initially been more receptive to their overtures, the whole unsavoury business might have easily been avoided, and an acceptable solution arrived at.

Almost a month later, at the Sunday Mass, Rev. MacNamara spoke as follows:

"Dear Brethren, I have now a most painful announcement to make to you since this morning. Having not got my letters before coming to Church, I discovered on returning after Mass that I was in receipt of one from His Lordship ... which directs me to announce ... that I am to hold no Stations as he considers it would be only mockery to administer the Sacraments to you owing to the sinful conduct of which you have been guilty in the past few months ... There will be no ashes blessed for the people on Ash Wednesday, and there will be no Mass in the Church in the mornings in the coming week, and there will be no evening devotions during Lent. I hope you will not continue with the attitude that you have up to the present assumed". (4)

This vindictive policy was ineffective, and the people of Bruff were indifferent to, if not scornful of, the threats of eternal damnation being flung at them. Such was the futility of denying the Sacraments, that it was completely abandoned in February of the following year, which undoubtedly raised a question mark as to the quality of religious leadership in the diocese of Limerick. On 25 March the Christian Brothers' Defence Fund was established and a lengthy appeal for funds was circulated. This appeal was not too unsuccessful judging by the grant total accumulated (20 June) which amounted to £129-3-0d. The next occurrence on the side of the clergy was perhaps in reaction to this show of strength. At first Mass on Ascension Thursday, MacNamara once more took the opportunity of addressing his congregation on the folly of their actions as he interpreted them:

"I now advise you to give up this agitation which it is useless for you to carry on. I often feel inclined to speak to you on the subject, but I do not, as my language is conveyed outside, and

what I say is misrepresented. Is there any man foolish enough to think that your Bishop will come here and say 'I am sorry for what I have done'? The Bishop will not do so nor will the monks come back to Bruff. So under these circumstances ... I would entreat you to give up this agitation." (5)

The reaction in Bruff was again one of contemptuous indifference; the townspeople remained firm in their convictions, and at a large meeting it was resolved that "nothing will satisfy our demands until the Brothers are restored".

All through the early years of the agitation a considerable correspondence both for and against the Brothers was addressed to the provincial newspapers. Figuring prominently in all of these arguments were the letters of the curate in Bruff, Rev. Robert Ambrose (known locally and somewhat pejoratively as 'Bob' or 'Rev. Bobby'). Writing in one of his more vilifying moods - which at times seemed to be his natural state - to the editor of the **Limerick Leader**, he referred to

"... the Bruff wretches, an insignificant minority of the lowest stratum of society, who have been utterly corrupted and demoralised ... have been able to do little mischief ... thank God and his Blessed Providence that watches over our stricken motherland, when deeds of infamy will be exposed in the light of healthy public opinion ... Please bear in mind that you have got fair and honourable notice of something very rotten in the state of Bruff". (6)

This extract is fairly representative of Ambrose's sentiments on the dispute, and might well account for the deep-rooted hatred of him in Bruff.

The major highlight of the agitation in 1898 was the libel case of Thomas Bowman v Jeremiah Buckley. Bowman, who had a brief and un auspicious spell teaching in Bruff as a replacement for the Brothers, was literally driven from the town "and had to run for his life". (7)

He filed a suit against Buckley, the proprietor of the **Limerick Leader**, over an article which branded him as 'An Emergencyman' and 'A Grabber'. Like all the court cases emanating from the dispute, this litigation might at first sight be considered as merely incidental, but in fact these cases constitute an essential element of this story, revealing additional information on the agitation, and portraying clearly the popular reaction in Bruff.

In this well documented case, the Bishop of Limerick and a number of the Brothers as well as prominent Bruff people were called on to testify. (8) Buckley's plea of 'fair comment' was defeated, and "a very moderate and small verdict" of £40 damages was found for the plaintiff. In his summary,



The Convent, Bruff.

Justice O'Brien observed:

"When the plaintiff went to the town of Bruff he found the place in a condition like Belfast or like Manila (Laughter); he found it in a state of siege. The streets were lined with police, and the police were also in the hotel where he stayed. The school had to be closed, and the plaintiff was guarded by police and could not even get a vehicle out of the place ... The children have been deprived of their education during the long time that the school has been closed, and if legal sanction is given to anything like this, it is probable that it would result in many other persons besides the children being deprived of the same kind of education." (9)

Between July and September 1899, a rumour was increasingly being heard around Bruff that a new national teacher was to be appointed for the much neglected children of the town. This development evoked heated commentary in the **Limerick Leader** which claimed that the people should at least be consulted on the matter. "Why should the Christian Brothers," it argued, "be cast aside for a system of so called National Education, and why should such a repulsive system be foisted upon the people?" On 11 August the Bruff Christian Brothers' Restoration Committee adamantly refused any support for this venture:

"The people of Bruff," they declared, "are firmly resolved that Saint Patrick's Monastery shall never be used by any other teacher or teaching body, save that for which it was originally intended, namely the Irish Order of Christian Brothers." (10)

Musgrave's arrival provoked considerable controversy, with much rioting and disturbance. When he began teaching only two pupils arrived, Liam and Sean Wall. Their daily jour-

ney from Bruff Hill where they lived, to the Monastery, necessitated heavy police reinforcements for their protection. Scenes of utter chaos occurred daily at Crawford's Lane, where the celebrated fighting women proved to be more than a handful for the police. An unusual feature of these disturbances was the blowing of warning whistles, acknowledging the arrival of the contingent from Bruff Hill. The by now customary round of court cases followed in the wake of these disturbances, and on one court day, "a well known local personality and athlete, Tom Fitzgerald, approached Musgrave on his way to court, and flattened him ... sending his hat reeling in the mud".

The Curse

On Sunday 4 November 1899, Father Tierney of the Redemptorists, Limerick, to the great surprise of the people, made an unannounced arrival in Bruff to preach on "the unfortunate disturbance ... and to save the souls of the people of Bruff from Hell!" This tirade sparked off severe shouting in the church - "In the name of the Lord", the priest implored, "send your children to school" - ("To have them educated under a Godless system"). The tone of his sermon became increasingly emotional, and he concluded by telling or perhaps more correctly warning the congregation:

"If this agitation continues ... I or those who are listening to me might not live to see it, but your children will live to see it; **the green grass will grow over where you inhabit at present.**" (11)

Leaving the church after Mass, Tierney was confronted by a man who accused him of being "Dr. O'Dwyer's big gun". Ambrose, the curate, was accompanying the visiting priest, and replied that "it would take the Boers to

fight the people of Bruff".

Possibly one of the most well known and exaggerated features of the agitation was the so called curse, which local tradition still persistently attributes to Dr. O'Dwyer. The current writer's investigations have revealed that only the utterances of Father Tierney, just quoted, are in any way related to what might be termed a curse. The bishop may well have issued a similar statement (there is also the likelihood that Tierney may have been following the prelate's guidelines in this matter) but it seems not to have been recorded. Tradition in Bruff might likely have confused and obscured the origin of the curse, which as we shall see, was to have a very real manifestation, if in a highly unusual way.

The events of 4 November are recalled as follows in the **Chronicle** of the Redemptorist order. It provides an interesting and significant contrast in observations.

"Rev. Father Tierney went to Bruff accompanied by Rev. Father Walsh in order to preach on the Bruff Scandal. They were treated with respect by the people but were given to understand that their coming was not welcome. Rev. Tierney preached after the last mass. After the beginning of it some men left the Church, and during it he was several times interrupted by a woman, and a man also shouted out: "We want the Christian Brothers". Rev. Tierney was called by the people "The Bishop's Big Gun", in allusion to the Boer War". (12)

Two days after the unrest at the church, O'Dwyer wrote his second significant letter relating to the agitation. This was a markedly different statement from the first letter, and revealed some of the possible causes and other related facts of the "deplorable case", as he called it. Once again many ecclesiastical matters were referred to such as whether the Brothers were entitled to have the Blessed Sacrament in the Monastery when the community amounted to three and not the required four. The bishop was also apparently shocked by the sight of a nun and a brother engaged in preparing the altar for mass at the convent next door, where the Brothers daily attended Mass.

"I was celebrating Mass in the Convent chapel," O'Dwyer wrote, "and when making my preparation, I looked up, and to my astonishment, I saw a Christian Brother and one of the nuns engaged at the same time in arranging the altar. I never saw anything more unbecoming in all my life. On making enquiries I was informed that the Christian Brothers heard Mass daily and frequently answered Mass in the Nun's chapel, which was centred in the centre of the house, and there was no separation whatever between them and the

nuns and the young lady boarders. I then directed the Parish Priest to stop them hearing Mass." (13)

In connection with this occurrence, there is an adamant element in local tradition which still insists that it was in consequence of some misdemeanours between the Brothers and Nuns that resulted in the departure of the order. The ostensible reasons this tradition argues, are not consistent with what actually happened. In this type of situation, and under such circumstances, the popularity of such an assertion (notwithstanding its possible veracity) was almost inevitable, and was bound to have many adherents. This mentality may in part be attributed to the bishop's initial tantalising silence on the Brother's withdrawal.

Many of the months of 1899 and 1900 were speckled with a host of minor court cases stemming from the disturbances. Father Ambrose was involved in three such cases - versus local residents Mulcahy, Butler, and Cremins, and he was charged with vicious assault. Mulcahy was allegedly pushed into the gutter.

"The man swept dust into my face when I was passing" - Ambrose.

"He drove me out onto the flags and it is well he did not break my neck" - Mulcahy.

These cases which were probably intendedly farcical were treated accordingly by the magistrates.

The final four years of the Bruff agitation are not distinguished by any new major developments or riotous occurrences, and the issue is conspicuously absent in the newspapers of those years. Most of the major events seem to have been crammed into the first six years. It seems fair to say that initially the agitation had possibly been over-exposed in the newspapers, and that as time progressed without a solution, the apathy derived from this over familiarity precluded any sustained publicity. The **Limerick Leader** achieved what it had set out to do and largely attained the popularity that it thereafter commanded. This is not to undermine or denigrate the sincere and honest principles of certain **Limerick Leader** employees, most notably Edward T. Moran.

In 1907 a request came from Propaganda to end the row, and that the establishment of some religious order be permitted. That same year there was a further letter from the bishop to Rome that a reconciliation had been made, and a satisfactory solution to both sides had been reached. A mission shortly thereafter brought the ten year dispute to a welcome end.

CONCLUSION

It now seems scarcely comprehensible that such a dispute should have been allowed to continue for so long, but in

this respect, we should not overlook the dogged adherence to uncompromising principles by key persons on both sides. In the end it was the school children of these years who suffered the greatest injury, and many of them emerged from this period with no formal elementary education, a loss which surely hindered in later life. Neither were there any real victors in the dispute, and compromise was the inevitable and only solution. The Christian Brothers were gone from Bruff forever, but the De La Salle order which succeeded them, developed in time an equally affectionate rapport with the townspeople.

The alleged curse has acquired an unusual niche in the popular recollection of the agitation, and still remains for many people, the highlight of those turbulent years. Though its significance has been grossly over-emphasised, it is not without importance. It appears as a remarkable coincidence (?) that most of the families involved in the dispute have subsequently suffered declining fortunes, and many are now gone from the area. The unabated decline of Bruff since the school dispute has also been attributed to this 'phenomenon'. To the unacquainted outsider this must seem fatuous and even ludicrous, as it does to those that look to more tangible and conventional reasons rather than any Christlike contrivances. Nevertheless the curse remains a valid entity for the simple reason that it has created and nurtured a seemingly irrevocable climate of failure, and therefore must be considered in any appraisal of 20th century Bruff. There are many questions that must go unanswered, for instance, the role that the local police played. Their position was never clearly defined. There was also the customary informing element in Bruff during the dispute and again, mere acknowledgement of the fact seems adequate.

Is it far-fetched to view the agitation as an expression or manifestation of an innate or latent anti-clericalism in the town of Bruff? With the existing evidence, one could make the most outrageous assertions and justify them. However, it should not be the goal of the historian at any level to impart easy moral value judgements, however tempting the material at hand.

The most obvious conclusion that one can draw from all of this is that the Bruff agitation represents a chain of events that might have been avoided and certainly need not have been allowed to continue for its protracted duration. There have been similar agitations or disputes elsewhere in the country, but few can have commanded so much publicised controversy as the Bruff episode.

The agitation could possibly never happen again, in Bruff at any rate, as the almost totally unacknowledged departure of the De La Salle order in re-

cent years strongly illustrates. A new generation had evolved in Bruff, with different concepts, values and outlooks; people from a changing background, who perceived the era of 1897-1907 as an aberration on both sides, with little present day significance.

REFERENCES

- (1) **Limerick Chronicle**, 9 November 1897.
- (2) **Limerick Leader**, undated clipping.
- (3) See, *A History of Bruff and District*, III, pp. 458-460, for the complete text of this letter.
- (4) Rev. MacNamara's sermon 23 February 1898, quoted in **Limerick Leader**.
- (5) **Limerick Leader**, 1898.
- (6) **Limerick Leader**, 30 December 1898.
- (7) **Manuscript 1799**, Irish Folklore Department, University College, Dublin.
- (8) This court case is given comprehensive treatment in **A History of Bruff and District**, III, pp. 476-482.
- (9) **Limerick Leader**.
- (10) **Limerick Leader**.
- (11) **Limerick Leader**, 7 November 1899.
- (12) **Redemptorist Chronicle, 1868-1911**, 4 November 1899. This private chronicle was kindly made available to me by Rev. Kavanagh, Redemptorists, Limerick.
- (13) **Limerick Leader**, 16 November 1899.

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- The following local people were also interviewed:- Tommy Hannon, Patrick Browne, Richard Fitzgerald, Patrick Linehan.