

Four Limerick Hedge-Schoolmasters

By ROBERT HERBERT

THE majority of contemporary accounts of our hedge-schoolmasters have belittled their efforts and attributed to them one or all of four grave vices: ignorance, immorality, disloyalty and poverty. Sir John Carr described them as miserable, breadless, and almost as ignorant as their own scholars. Edward Wakefield said they were usually recruited from persons originally intended for the priesthood but whose morals were so bad or whose laziness was so ingrained that they were rejected. The Rev. Robert Shaw complained of the principles of moral and civil order in their teaching, and even Carleton accused them of the insinuation of disloyal principles into the minds of the children.

Recently, while collating all the available material relating to the Limerick hedge-schools, I was struck by the abundance of evidence refuting the accusation of ignorance; by the same abundance of evidence in support of the statement that the masters were both poor and disloyal—disloyalty, of course, meaning the refusal to respect English law as administered in Ireland; and by the complete lack of any evidence of immorality.

In the following short sketches of four Limerick masters, three of whom taught in advanced schools, and one in the elementary school, we find that one had a continental reputation as a mathematician; another was famous in Dublin as a Gaelic scholar; another had a local reputation for his knowledge and love of the classics; and the fourth, the elementary teacher, was at least as well educated and as intelligent as the average primary

school-teacher of to-day. We find that two were United Irishmen; another was a strong sympathiser with the movement, and there is no evidence of the political views of the fourth. Finally, we find that one was so poor that he was buried by the charity of his pupils, and another left so little money to his family that it was necessary to make a public collection on their behalf. The absence of any positive evidence of immorality must surely suggest to the unbiassed mind that each of these four men led normally good Christian lives, for nothing is remembered or recorded so quickly against a person as any attempt on his part to break the moral code.

In regard, therefore, to these four imputed vices, it must be concluded that the first two are calumnies, grounded on nothing more substantial than the prejudiced minds of the writers. There remains "poverty", and "disloyalty". God would have forgiven the one, and most Irishmen would condone the other.

1—MICHAEL TIERNEY

The following description of Michael Tierney, an elementary schoolmaster of whom no other record exists, is taken from a rare little pamphlet entitled *Sketches of Old People and Old Times*, by Brian O'Neill. It was published in Limerick in 1832.

The author tells us first of his introduction, with his mother, to Mr. Tierney's academy, their ceremonious reception, the settling of the quarterly fee at 2/2 and so on. He describes the school building and the scholars it contained: "The gorsoons in flannel coats and petticoats, sitting on their *grugs*, the grown-up girls sitting on sods . . . whilst a ring of rocks and *smuthauns* supported the *scuds* and corduroy breeches of the senior disciples." He then gives a vivid portrayal of Mr. Tierney, who wrote on a slate across his knee "pieces which

FOUR LIMERICK HEDGE-SCHOOLMASTERS 47

Duncan and Doherty have not been able to excel", whose elocution was not the most refined but whose knowledge of grammar, mathematics and surveying was second to none. He was fond of using the stick, but was, withal, "uniformly paternal towards his pupils", and he had such a respect for learning that he frequently quoted the couplets :

" Learning makes a man and a cooper makes a can ",

or

" A man without learning and wearing fine clothes,
Is like a gold ring in a guinea-pig's nose."

Tierney seemed to adopt practical examples to illustrate all his problems in mathematics. On one occasion the following conversation took place in his school: " Suppose now, Micky, that you were at a fallow and that you had twelve roasted pratees, and that a gorsoon kem up and took eight of the pratees off you, how many would he leave after him?" " Four, sir." " In like manner, it is with this figure of twelve here above and this figure of eight here below; if you take eight ones out of twelve ones, only four ones will remain. But if the gorsoon gave you back the eight pratees again, along with the four, how many would remain?" " All of 'em, sir." " Good boy, Micky—of course, the twelve would remain sure enough. They'd be all just as they were before, and so now a mhic o, you may very well sit down for you've had a lesson in addition and subtraction out of me at the same time."

Another time, in order to explain to a particularly dense pupil the truth of the Euclidian axiom that the whole is greater than any part, Tierney took a potato, cut a piece off, and convinced his pupil simply and most effectively.

The author ends his description of the elementary school in a

eulogy on Tierney who was “ a poet, a patriot and a philosopher. . . . Though he condescended to humble expressions when conversing with us . . . I have heard him argue a political question for a whole hour against Father Tom himself, and the biggest boy in the school could not tell the meaning of every fifth word he spoke ”.

One of his pupils wrote a poem in his praise which contained the verses :

“ In grammar refined, his well-burnished mind,
Leaves others behind—in science also—
The devil a one that he dreads in astrology,
Likewise chronology and the use of the globes.
As for mensuration, there’s none in this nation,
Of high or low station, can equal him too ;
And the Muses nine, do kindly combine,
To give him their rhyme—and that is his due.”

2—RICHARD MACELLIGOTT

Richard Pierce MacElligott, Celtic scholar, revolutionary and hedge-schoolmaster, was born in Limerick in the year 1756. He was descended on one side from the MacElligotts of Kerry, a branch of the O’Sullivans, and on the other from the de Lacy Evans of the County Limerick.

MacElligott taught school in Limerick City. In 1796 he was at Peter’s Cell, which he describes as a “ retirement peculiarly favourable to study ”. From 1809 or earlier, until his death, his school was situated in Crosby Row, under the shade of St. Mary’s Cathedral and overlooking the harbour of Limerick. His terms for scholars were four guineas a year for day boys and thirty guineas for boarders.

One of MacElligott’s advertisements began : “ When ponder-

ous polysyllables promulgate professional powers. . . .” In another he claims: “Richard MacElligott, observing with regret, the many years devoted to the Greek and Latin languages, and the very inadequate proficiency; and ever ambitious of a distinguished superiority in his pupils, has through much labour these years past, completed a plan which reduces the Greek and Latin languages to the level of the tenderest capacities, and conveys a more accurate and extensive knowledge of them, than can be acquired by any student of ever such attention and abilities in double the time through the Common Course, which, when instructed in this plan, his pupils shall go through with the greatest expedition, facility and ease.” How diplomatic he was with his “tenderest capacities”! He continues: “Penmanship so universally professed, and so little known, is taught in his school in the most correct, genuine and masterly style; together with such other branches of school education: arithmetic, book-keeping, Euclid, algebra, etc., as any of his pupils may have particular occasion for.” And, Celtic scholar though he was, he concludes: “MacElligott shall, in addition to the above, teach the English grammatically, and so that the entire language can be acquired by any boy of moderate talents and attention, with ease and accuracy, in one year.”

After this magnificent self-puff, we get a shock to find him, in another advertisement, expressing his abhorrence of the annual advertisements in which the Limerick schoolmasters indulged—or, perhaps it was a more effective form of advertisement: “Richard MacElligott, Classical and English Teacher, reluctantly enrolls himself in the *Dramatis Personæ* of the *Pedagogue Pantomime* of 1793; confident that his past exertions secure him the attachment of his friends; and that the public are not such dupes as to mistake anniversary advertisements for professional abilities.”

The Griffin family were near neighbours of MacElligott in Crosby Row, and Gerald Griffin was his most famous pupil. In the first edition of the life of the latter by his brother, the following description is given of our eccentric schoolmaster: "One day at a large and respectable school in this city, an odd-looking, half-clad figure, barefooted and bareheaded, flung himself into the room after the manner of a tumbling boy, moved towards the master, walking on his hands, and presently, springing to his feet, stood upright before him. It was Richard MacElligott. (Unlike Dr. Griffin's MacElligott's English would have left us in no doubt as to who actually was walking on his hands.) 'What do you want?' said the master. 'Employment,' said the boy, 'I don't like my father's trade and I'm sick of it.' 'What can you do?' said the master. 'I can write,' said the other. He sat down, took a pen and wrote a hand so exquisite that it could scarcely be distinguished from an engraving. He was immediately engaged as writing-master to the school, and was soon induced by one of the more advanced scholars to learn classics, to which, as well as the other studies necessary to a teacher, he devoted himself with so much energy, and made such progress, that he soon had the proud satisfaction of raising himself from the humble condition I have described to that of a most respectable classical teacher in the city."

Dr. Griffin proceeds: "My mother went to school with the boys on the first day of entrance. 'Mr. MacElligott,' said she, 'you will oblige me very much by paying particular attention to the boys' pronunciation, and making them perfect in their reading.' He looked at her in astonishment. 'Madam,' said he, abruptly, 'you had better take your children home. I can have nothing to do with them!' 'Perhaps, Mrs. Griffin,' said he, after a pause, 'you are not aware that there are only three persons in Ireland who know how to read. The Bishop of

Killaloe, the Earl of Clare, and your humble servant. Reading, madam, is a natural gift, not an acquirement. If you choose to expect impossibilities, you had better take your children home.' ”

There were several similar stories in this patronisingly humorous vein about MacElligott and, as a result, the Rev. Jonathan Furlong, a Celtic scholar and another of MacElligott's famous pupils, published a pamphlet in London, protesting against these ridiculous descriptions of such a great scholar. Griffin withdrew them in the second edition of his brother's life, and inserted an adulatory paragraph in their stead.

In spite of MacElligott's peculiar pedagogic proclivities, he was one of the most eminent Celtic scholars of his day. When the Gaelic Society of Dublin was formed in 1806, he was elected an honorary member on merit—perhaps the only one to be so elected—and contributed the first paper to their one and only volume of transactions. In it, he discusses the difficulties likely to be met with by the Society in their proposed new dictionary and grammar, shows a thorough knowledge of the Manx and Scottish dialects, and at least some acquaintance with Latin, Greek, German, Hebrew and Persian. He also gives a very interesting though short list of Irish slang terms or jargon in use among the stonemasons of the South and, finally, he suggests improvements in the spelling and orthography of Irish.

MacElligott also wrote an Irish grammar which remained in manuscript. O'Donovan used this extensively and praises MacElligott highly for his scholarship; and even as late as 1883, when Celtic scholarship had progressed so far, the Rev. J. J. O'Carroll in the *Gaelic Journal*, refers to MacElligott's “wide-spread Irish culture”.

Like many of the hedge-schoolmasters, MacElligott was a United Irishman. With 186 others he was arrested in 1798 and

lodged in Limerick Gaol. Ten of these were executed on the New Bridge and forty were transported. He wrote from gaol : “ What shall I suffer walking up and down this dismal place from light to light, with no companion but a man who, three times flogged, lies dying in a corner, a still-breathing corpse ; and legions of rats of all ages, which have forgotten the timidity of their species and lord it here with hereditary sway :

“ Hail, solitude, all gloomy horrors, hail !
 For truth has led me to thy dismal shrine.
 In her bright face all earthly glories pale ;
 Thy darkest den is filled with light divine.
 What shall I suffer? after this—nothing.

“ There were three happy fellows on every lamp on the bridge, as I was crossing here ; the lantern hoops were breaking so I must wait till some kind friend drops off. They nearly took up all the little footpath, and the toes of some of them were touching it.

“ As I passed, I thought what a splendid and economical plan it was for lamp-lighting for, by its piercing rays, the whole earth could see into the dark hearts of a distant people, and follow its each individual to the world’s ends while he carries one grain of pride. In the glory of such bright eternal light, who would not wish to hang? Not typhus! Not smallpox! No!—No!”

MacElligott was, however, reprieved, and with George Hargrove, owner of the *Limerick Herald*, and Robert Ross, he was allowed out on a bail of £2,000, later reduced to £200.

He was twice married, first to Miss Loftus, by whom he had three sons and four daughters, and in 1797 to Mary, daughter to Captain William Craig of the 2nd Foot Regiment from Cork,

by whom he had two more sons and two more daughters. Broken up in health and embittered by his political experiences, he died after a short illness on Saturday, 18th of April, 1818. He left a large family in a very destitute condition, and a public collection was made on their behalf.

3—T. M. O'BRIEN

For this sketch of O'Brien we have to rely mainly on the two principal authorities already used, viz., *The Life of Gerald Griffin* and *Sketches of Old Times and Old People*. The former describes him as "one who was passionately devoted to the ancient poets, and showed a highly cultivated taste in their study . . . one of the first classical teachers in the city".

O'Neill entered, at the age of seventeen, "the Academy of Mr. O'Brien, a classical teacher of great celebrity, who came about two years before (c. 1783) to enlighten our neighbourhood". The school contained about 160 scholars from all parts of the kingdom, all of different ages, sizes, classes and prices. "Their progress was known by their class, and their county by their *Irish* or their frieze, for each countryman had a cut and colour of coat entirely peculiar to himself. Pupils paid what they could, and if they could pay nothing, O'Brien still taught them, while the neighbours supported them, 'more majorum.'"

He had been educated for the priesthood, but family misfortunes had prevented his ordination. He was so humble that many strangers could not distinguish which was the master and which the pupils. "His coat was always of frieze, but as a mark of something professional, it was always black, or something like black. In other parts of dress he was extremely careless, but he always wore silver buckles and a *queue* as long as a pump handle. He was anything but a man to keep up appearance, being more anxious to keep a *quid* in his mouth than

a knot in his cravat. When spoken to about the coarseness of his coat, he would reply 'toga defendere frigus, etc. . . .' In fact for every circumstance he would bring down a quotation, and when he could use one in support of an action, he was as well satisfied as if he did it by Act of Parliament.

"O'Brien, having the authors in his head, scarcely ever handled a book, but, walking up and down the floor, chewing tobacco and blowing his nose at intervals, would correct the expressions of the translators or expound the significance that might lie concealed in the sentence. In the beginning of a lesson he would sit on his chair, but, entering soon into the spirit of the author, he used regularly rise after the first five minutes to perambulate and expound.

"It was a constant rule with the master that the boys should speak Latin, and write exercises every day. This was the system by which those sound classical scholars, who have been respected in all countries, have been formed. . . . The scholars made by O'Brien and such men as O'Brien could speak and write Latin, aye, and Greek, with as much facility and correctness as they could speak Irish. . . . I recollect when the scholars made by Kennedy, Cantillon, Buckley and O'Brien used keep up a regular correspondence, meet at the fairs, and buy pigs from each other without ever using a word but Latin."

O'Brien, like Tierney, was beloved by his pupils. Although he died in harness, he left no money and was buried by the "justice or charity of his pupils". A poor scholar, educated by his kindness, wrote the following lines to his memory :

‘ With sad esteem I weep and stay
To turn the veil of death away,
That hangs in darkening gloom,
Round genius bright and merit pure,

That lived unpaid and died obscure,
In poor O'Brien's tomb.
His form uncouth, to art unknown,
Adorned with honest smiles alone,
Was rude and unrefined ;
His manners rough no notice claimed ;
Unless through speech there sometimes gleamed
A meteor from his mind.
But rich and mighty was the store
Of varied, yet unpolished lore,
Piled in his memory ;
And none so learned yet was found,
To spread his mental treasures round,
As willingly as he. . . ."

4—JAMES BAGGOTT

The last of the quartet is the Great O'Baggott of Ballingarry. Descended from the Norman family who gave their name to Baggotstown, County Limerick, Baggott was born a short distance away, at Ballingarry in the year 1771. He was born, lived, taught, and died in the same small town, little larger than a village, and yet his fame as a mathematician spread to Dublin, London and even Paris.

In 1805 he advertised in the Dublin papers, so it may be presumed that he occasionally got pupils even from the metropolis : "Baggott having lately purchased a supply of curious mathematical and astronomical instruments, presumes, by the aid of such auxiliaries, his pupils will find both pleasure and profit in the pursuit of their studies, being thereby at once enabled to combine those truths established by theory, with the solid advantages deriving from practice." He amused himself by sending

the solutions to the mathematical problems which were set in the annuals of the day.

It is recorded on good authority that once when Colonel Odell, Member of Parliament for Limerick and one of the Lords of the Treasury, was in Paris, La Place the eminent scientist, asked him if he knew his friend, O'Baggott, the great mathematician—hence his nickname, The Great O'Baggott.

Baggott was a United Irishman and Lord Edward stayed at his school during his tour of the revolutionary centres before the '98 Rising. He was also engaged in the Emmet Rising of 1803, and a spy kept Dublin Castle informed of his movements and told of a plan, devised by Baggott, for the capture of Limerick City. The authorities waited till the eve of its proposed execution and then arrested all the ringleaders. General Payne wrote of him: "I think taking up Baggott would, at least, confound the projects of the Rebels. He is such a cunning fellow, I do not think we could make out anything against him, but it would be a great object to have him out of mischief, as I am convinced he is the head of all which is carrying on in this country. . . . He can neither be bribed nor frightened. . . ."

He died in Ballingarry, in 1806 at the early age of 35. Five years later Watty Cox published an elegy written on him by Martin O'Farrell, "Philomath" of Limerick:—

"O, Science mourn, thy favourite is no more;
Alas! he's numbered with the silent dead.
Hibernia's genius will his loss deplore
Whom he to fame's exalted temple led.

By nature blessed with an exploring thought,
His brows were decked from the Newtownian bower;
The deep arcana of fair science sought,
And gleaned her fields of every golden flower.

FOUR LIMERICK HEDGE-SCHOOLMASTERS 57

No more we'll hear his learned tongue divine
Expound the pages of close mystery ;
Nor e'er behold his dazzling reason shine
On the dark mazes of philosophy. . . ."

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