

THE MOLONEYS OF KILTANON

BY KEVIN HANNAN

For a long time before France became a thorn in the side of England, the Irish had a natural and ingrained affinity with the Saxon's inveterate enemy, Spain, and when the power of that once powerful nation was broken on the tempestuous west coast of Ireland, France, which had become an even greater enemy of England's, became the Mecca for the persecuted and exiled Irish.

It has often been said that Catholicism in Ireland was preserved, not by the people's deep-rooted indoctrination and attachment to it, but by France, which had educated, ordained and consecrated bishops and priests during the height of the Penal Laws. Our budding doctors, too, had to leave the country, and some of our most famous practitioners qualified in Paris.

Among the most prominent of all the Irish clerics who came out of Paris in the seventeenth century were the O'Moloneys of Kiltanon, a quiet townland in East Clare, straddling the old road from Limerick to Galway. No less than three members of this family became bishops. This was a time when a bishop sometimes had to be master of disguise, a soldier, a spy, a plenipotentiary and a leader.

Though the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the most difficult for the Catholics of Ireland, the ordination of a bishop was sometimes fraught with a little more than the accustomed ill-feeling and animosity

which were usual on such occasions. The appointment of John O'Moloney, in 1624, was no exception.

The Diocese of Killaloe

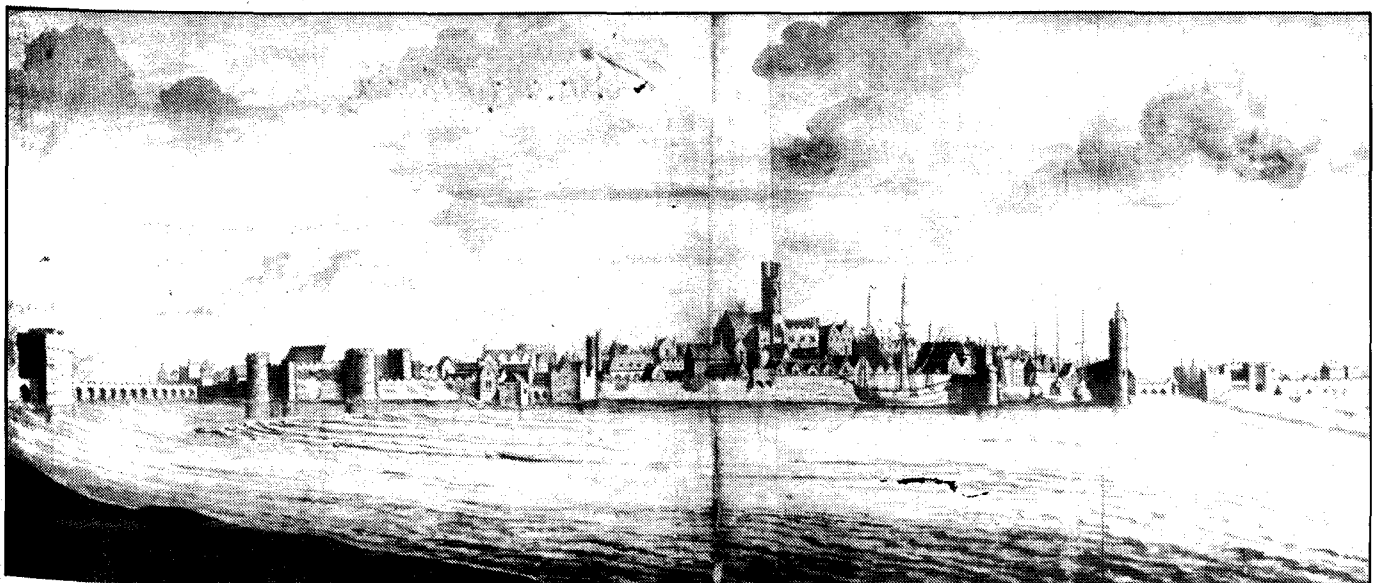
After the See of Killaloe was vacant for twenty years, a rare battle took place between the supporters of the favourite, Malachy O'Queely, and the rank outsider, John O'Moloney. This contest resulted in the appointment of the latter, by Pope Urban VIII, against all the odds. He was consecrated in Paris by the Bishop of Auxerre, assisted by two other bishops. When he returned to his long-neglected native diocese as its bishop, he encountered a rather hostile reception. His authority was resented by priests and people alike, almost all of whom were protagonists of O'Queely. But O'Moloney's toughness and resilience was too much for his opponents: he succeeded in asserting his authority, despite all the bitter feeling against him; but the more insidious among his opponents remained active behind the scenes. From time to time, complaints and accusations were sent to Rome. One of these allegations accused him of 'wasting his own and his people's money in all kinds of uncanonical enterprises.' He was also accused of setting up a luxurious household, and there was even a broad hint that he was keeping a

brothel! One cannot avoid such a conclusion, when the complaint charged that women were constantly visiting the house. The bishop was able to refute these charges to the full satisfaction of the authorities in Rome. In the course of the rejection of the charges, he pointed out that the only woman to visit his house was his sister, the wife of Moilin MacBrody. As for the luxurious building, this was a kind of spartan monastic type structure, where the most extreme austerities were practiced. The building, the cost and maintenance of which was financed out of the bishop's considerable means, also accommodated the priests.

The Confederation

Moloney's remarkable characteristics came into bold relief during the Confederate war in Ireland. When the Duke of Ormond, the King's deputy in Ireland, succeeded in splitting the Confederacy and destroying its possible effectiveness, O'Moloney remained a staunch supporter of the Papal Nuncio, John Baptist Rinuccini. The victory of Ormond over the confused leaders of the movement was soon followed by the final body-blow – the arrival of Oliver Cromwell, and the atrocities in Drogheda and Wexford.

Failing foreign assistance, the practically leaderless country was doomed. The most that could be hoped for was the holding out of Limerick in the hope of intervention by the Duke of Lorraine. This notable had for long kept



A drawing of King's Island, Limerick, by Thomas Phillips, 1685.



the military forces of France on very active service, and in the hope of deflecting his unwelcome attentions, the French ministers had advised the Irish agents, one of whom was Nicholas French, Bishop of Feras, a close friend of O'Moloney, of the possibility of inveigling the Duke and his army to come to their assistance; but the fall of Limerick in 1651 erased this hope.

It is almost certain that O'Moloney was one of those who assembled at Jamestown to mobilize an army, for he was deputed to 'destroy Ormond at all costs'. While on a recruiting drive in his native county, he was surprised by Wogan, Ormond's colonel of horse. Ironically, it was Ormond who saved him from summary execution on this occasion. After a search of the bishop's baggage, £1,400 in solid gold was found wrapped up in woolsacks. This money was intended to pay the recruits, for what patriotism could induce young men to join an army during such a dangerous period without payment?

The discovery of this large sum on the bishop's person prompted Dr. Thomas Arthur - the Shylock of his age - to pen the following lampoon on O'Moloney:-

*A cool fourteen hundred the bishop had hoarded,
And in fleeces and woolsacks ingeniously stored it-
But alas for the beauty and charm of my story,
The wool had a smell, being sweaty and gory-
And the wolf smelt the blood of the sheep in the scrapings,
And bolted at once with the trifle of ha'pence.*

*'Twas the cursed greed of gold made the bishop to save so,
'Twas the cursed greed of food made the wolf misbehave so-
Had the bishop discharged his episcopal duty,
My Lord had no blame and the robber no booty.*

This was a scurrilous piece of work from the miserly doctor, who had previously successfully treated O'Moloney for gangrene, and charged a pound for the service. No doubt, he was infuriated at missing out on a considerable fee, which he certainly would have charged had he known of the bishop's great wealth. Thus the lampoon may well have been published in bitterness and frustration.

Ormond returned a small part of the money to the bishop, who then set off for Limerick through a country 'swarming with cut-throats and deserters from all parties'. Four bishops had taken up their positions in Limerick before it was invested by Ireton: Terence Albert O'Brien, Bishop of Emyl; Dr. O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick; Archbishop Walsh and Dr. O'Moloney. Their main task was to keep up the morale of the garrison and



The porch of Kiltanon House, Co. Clare, the home of the Moloney family.

citizens. They stuck doggedly to their task, despite offers of life, liberty and wealth from General Ireton. Half way through the long siege the treasury dried up, but O'Moloney came up with another fortune and paid the garrison. Obviously, Ormond had overlooked a larger sum hidden away in something less conspicuous than woolsacks.

The four bishops in Limerick during the capitulation were among those exempted from pardon. O'Brien was hanged, drawn and quartered, and had his head spiked on Baal's Bridge; Walsh and O'Dwyer escaped in disguise. O'Moloney was saved from the ignominy of the scaffold: he died a hero's death from typhus contracted from one of the plague-stricken patients he so fearlessly treated.

John O'Moloney II

His nephew, another John O'Moloney (let us call him John O'Moloney II), was no less an intrepid and colourful character. He was born in Kiltanon in 1617. His mother, Anne McMahan, was said to be a relative of Maire Ruadh McNamara. John went to Paris in 1642 and became a doctor of divinity there. Seventeen years

after his arrival in Paris, he was elected procurator of that part of the university known as the Nation d'Allemagne. It has been said that his 'high intellectual attainments and nobility of character marked him as the most notable Irishman in the France of his day, and won the esteem of the leading statesmen and churchmen of that country'.

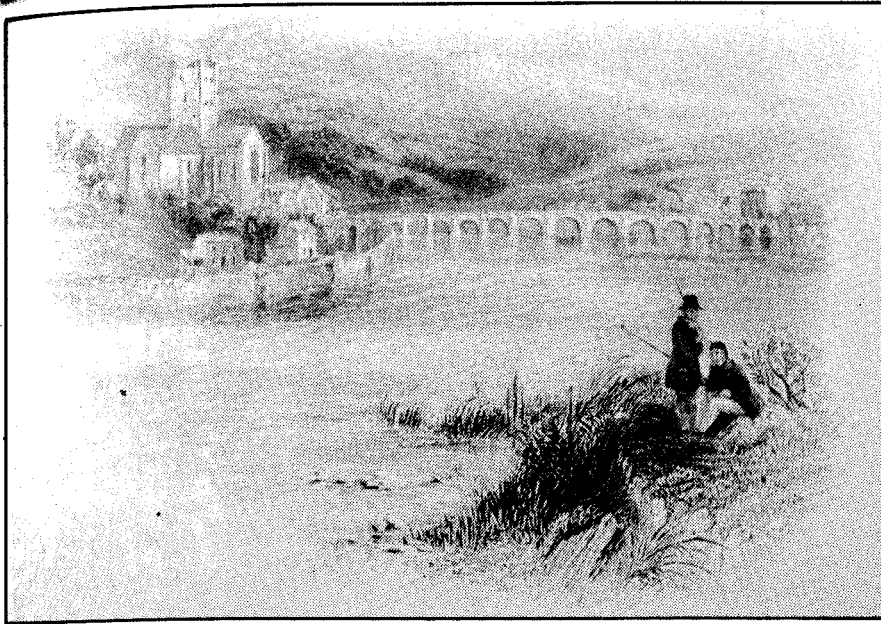
He was consecrated bishop of his native diocese of Killaloe in 1671 and, in 1690, at the very height of the Williamite war in Ireland, he was appointed to the See of Limerick on the nomination of James II, though the clergy and gentry of the diocese had petitioned the Vatican on behalf of their own candidate, Dr. James Stritch. This was a cunning move by the king, for by this time O'Moloney had consolidated his position as the most influential Irishman in France, and without the assistance of the French, James knew that all was lost.

O'Moloney had looked after the affairs of the Limerick diocese during the long illness of Dr. Dowley, and for the four years during which the see was vacant after the death of the aged bishop. Long before he was consecrated Bishop of Killaloe he was a marked man, and for much of that time he was regarded the

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The River Shannon, Killaloe.

most wanted man in the kingdom. His outstanding abilities, coupled with his connections with the most influential people in France, made life unpleasant for the authorities in Dublin, who feared his political alliances and threatening intrigues.

A Fugitive

The impact of this daring bishop on the packed and troubled stage of the period may well be gauged from the following reference by Essex in a letter to Arlington:

Since my coming into the Government of this Kingdom, there is one Moloney who calls himself Bishop of Killaloe come over hither. I have spoken with him several times and find him a very wise and discreet man. He is the ablest of all those of the Roman persuasion. He has spent most of his time in France, and I am apt to persuade myself, is too eminent a man to lye concealed without being taken notice of. He has employed his time since his arrival here - and not without success - in composing the differences which were among those of his own religion, as particularly those disputes which have occurred between Peter Talbot and Plunkett, their titular Primate.

This was a shrewd judgement from Essex, for we find him writing to Ormond the following November: 'Moloney, Titular Bishop of Killaloe, whom I look upon as the most dangerous (because the wisest) man of all the clergy, made a compromise of all the differences between their Primate and Peter Talbot'. The following year, Dr. Moloney, with other bishops and priests, was transported out of the kingdom; but he returned in 1677 to become, once again, a thorn in the side of the government. An order went out from Orrery, President of Munster: 'Arrest Moloney and seize his papers'.

But this was easier said than done. The wily bishop was not regarded as the wisest man in the kingdom for nothing. For nearly three years, he lived the life of a hunted animal, using his expertise in disguise to baffle the forces of the crown and those of his own flock who were ever ready to conciliate the favour of the authorities by informing on him. Nevertheless, he was betrayed by one of his own, but the blood-money was never collected, for the bishop, sensing the betrayal, crept out of his hiding in Mungret Street, Limerick in the dead of night and made his way to Kilrush, where he was fortunate to find a sloop which was about to sail for France. Many other prelates were also forced to flee to that friendly country but would have been in dire straits but for the benevolence of O'Moloney, who came to their assistance through his ample purse. He sent a petition to Rome explaining the plight of the bishops, asking for permission to have them employed to perform their episcopal functions for the ordinaries of the places where they resided. Pope Innocent XII acceded to this request and authorised the exiled prelates to exercise their episcopal functions, and also instructed the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda to send them 300 *cudi* to relieve their immediate needs.

Dr. O'Moloney had no hope of returning to Ireland after the fall of James. Before his death in Paris in 1702, he disbursed some of his wealth in building a chapel attached to the Irish College, an edifice to which he also largely contributed. He established a number of bursaries for the exclusive benefit of members of his own family. A number of the clan availed of this private charity, until the capital was eroded and the bursaries extinguished.

He was buried in the College of the Lombards, and in the Irish College there

is a fine memorial slab to his memory.

We are told that at the ancestral home of the Moloneys in Kiltanon there was a marble table, with an inlaid number of playing cards, which, according to tradition, was given to him by Louis XIV. in atonement for the king having lost his temper when playing and tearing up the cards.

Mathew Moloney

Another member of the Moloney clan was Mathew Moloney, who was appointed vicar-general of the diocese of Limerick and Killaloe by his kinsman before he left the city. He was parish priest of St. Mary's, and during the short-lived occupation of the city by the Jacobite army, said Mass in the old cathedral. He did trojan work for the citizens during the sieges, and took a leading part in the defence of the city. After the surrender, tradition tells us, he was called upon by a Williamite officer named Ormsby to surrender the keys of the cathedral: the priest was dilatory about acceding to this demand, and the officer brandished his sword menacingly over his head, whereupon the priest, probably acting in self-defence, struck the surprised officer with the weighty keys.

Fr. Moloney's position as vicar-general, and his kinship with Bishop O'Moloney, marked him out for special attention by the authorities; but his presence in the city was tolerated until 1698, when a law was passed requiring all ecclesiastics to leave the country. He refused to recognise this law and made no attempt to conceal himself. He was arrested and charged with being a Popish vicar-general and sentenced to transportation beyond the seas. He was taken to Cork for embarkation, but we are not sure that he left the country, and if he did it must have been only for a short time, for he was buried in the old churchyard of Kilquane, on the banks of the Shannon, where a massive slab marks his grave. The following remnant of the inscription was legible on the memorial after it was shattered by some Williamite sympathisers while attending a funeral there:

*Here lieth the body
of Dr. Mathew
Moloney who was
Vicar General of
ye diocese of Limerick
and Killaloe for
36 years parish . . .*

SOURCES:

- History of the Diocese of Limerick*, Begley, 1938
- History of Limerick*, Lenihan, 1866
- Biographical Dictionary of Irishmen in France*, Dublin, 1949
- The Great Tyrconnell*, Petrie Studies, March, 1920.
- The Priest Hunters*, Irish University Press, 1974.