The 1821-22 Incident in Murroe

(Being an extract from a forthcoming History of the Parish of Murroe)

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Part I: The Murroe Resolutions, 16th December 1821.

In order to understand the events which are outlined in this chapter, we must remember that the See of Cashel was vacant at the time. Dr. Bray, who had been archbishop of Cashel since 1792, died on 9th December 1820. His co-adjutor, Dr. Everard, who succeeded him as Archbishop of Cashel, only outlived him by three months, dying on 31st March 1821. After the death of Dr. Everard there was a vacancy in the See of Cashel for more than two years, which only ended with the appointment of Dr. Robert Laffan in July 1823. The so-called 'inter-regnum' in Cashel belongs in fact to the general history of the diocese, but Murroe was indirectly involved in the controversy, as we shall see.

It so happened that there were two Chapters in existence in the diocese, both with interests in the pending election: the Chapter of Cashel and the Chapter of Emly. Emly had been a separate diocese up to the time of Bishop Terence Albert O'Brien, who died during the Siege of Limerick in 1651. He was the last consecrated Bishop of Emly. Henceforth the Archbishops of Cashel would be designated Apostolic Administrators of Emly, as is evidenced by the Bull of appointment of Dr. Christopher Butler in 1712, and the Bulls of his successors.

However, the Chapter of Emly had continued to exist, though it had only two members, a Dean and an Archdeacon. The Rev. Daniel O’Brien, P.P. of Abington was the last Dean of Emly. He died on 27th July 1820. But the Rev. Edward Murnane, P.P., of Tipperary, was the Archdeacon of Emly. He appointed himself Vicar-Capitular of Emly on the death of Dr. Everard, although the Chapter of Cashel had already appointed their Vicar-Capitular, Dean Wright of Cashel. It was on account of the confusing and tedious negotiations between Rome and the two Chapters that the appointment of a new archbishop was held up.

Murroe was in the diocese of Emly, and the Parish Priest at the time was the Rev. Thomas O'B. Costello, nephew of the late Dean Daniel O'Brien. He felt that the Emly Chapter had a right to have some say in the election of the new archbishop. We still have a long letter written by Fr. O'B. Costello to Dr. Murray, the archbishop of Dublin, explaining his point of view:

"We beg leave to call your Grace's attention to the following statement of the proceedings that took place at a meeting of the clergy of Cashel and Emly held at Cashel on Monday 9th of April instant, which meeting was convened by the Rev. Dr. Wright, Vicar Capitular of Cashel for the purpose of choosing a successor to the

1 See art. by Mgr. M. Moloney in St. Munchin's Folk, 1949, pp. 17-32, on Terence Albert O'Brien.
2 Cf. Statuta Synodalit of Dr. Bray, 1813. p. 119.
3 The Parish of Murroe was known as Abington up to the death of the Rev. T. O'B. Costello in 1850.
4 He was P. P. Abington from 1815-1850.
late Most Rev. Dr. Everard. Highly as we respect the character of Dr. Wright, we at the same time question whether he was competent to convene this meeting by his own authority, because the dioceses of Cashel and Emly not having been canonically united, the jurisdiction of their respective vicars Capitulars is entirely distinct, and therefore to render any general meeting of the clergy of both dioceses legal, we submit that it ought to be convoked by their joint authority, which was not done in the present instant, Dr. Marnane, the Vicar-Capitular of Emly not having been consulted.  

Fr. Costello and the Emly group nominated their own candidate, Dr. Michael Slattery, a native of Tipperary. It is interesting to note that Dr. Doyle (J.K.L.) Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, also supported Dr. Slattery’s nomination, and endeavoured to have his name marked ‘dignissimus’ among the three names submitted to the judgment of the Holy See. Fr. O’B. Costello interviewed the archbishop of Armagh and many other Irish bishops, canvassing for Dr. Slattery. He seems to have travelled most of Ireland on horseback during these years, 1821-23, and came very much into the public eye at the time. However, all his efforts were in vain, as Dr. Laffan was eventually appointed to the See of Cashel. It was under Dr. Laffan that the Chapter of Emly ceased to exist, for the vacancy left by the death of Archdeacon Murnane was never filled.

The years 1821-22 were unfortunate ones for County Limerick. The depression, which had followed after the Napoleonic wars, had brought considerable hardship and poverty to the agricultural classes. There was a general fall in prices throughout the whole country. Tenants found themselves unable to pay their rents, and thus an era of evictions was ushered in. In some places alternative work was found for the people, but in general the government seemed blind to the misery of the people. The newspapers of the time are filled with incidents of agrarian crime, especially in the counties of Limerick and Tipperary.

In the hope of satisfying the Irish people, the government suggested that the King, George IV, should visit Ireland. He arrived in Dublin in August 1821, and was received with enthusiasm everywhere. It was certainly a strange remedy for a serious social ill. But his departure seemed to be the signal for fresh disturbances. The trouble began on the Courtenay estates in West Limerick, and spread from there to the whole county, even into Clare and Kerry. Houses were burnt; blood was spilt. Murroe could hardly hope to escape the general contagion. Yet it did escape, and throughout the period 1821-22, it had the reputation of being the quietest parish in county Limerick.

When Fr. O’B. Costello was giving evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the State of Ireland, on 18th April, 1825, he made the following statement:

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1 Letter dated 21st April, 1821, now in the Dublin diocesan archives, Archbishop’s House.
2 Dr. Slattery was later appointed archbishop of Cashel & Emly, in 1834.
3 Fitzpatrick, Life of Dr. Doyle, 1, p.59.
4 I have relied on an old tradition among the priests of the diocese for this information.
5 Rev. Edward Murnane was P.P. of Tipperary 1780-1827.
6 Nearly every issue of the Limerick Chronicle 1821-22 contains references to outrages of this kind. Cf. also the late Canon Begley’s note-books, now in the Limerick city Library, containing extracts from newspapers for these years.
"It appears that the disturbances (in Co. Limerick in the years 1821-22) originated in the conduct of a gentleman on the Courtenay Estate; he was very severe towards the tenants, and the people who were in wealth previous to this were reduced to poverty, and they thought proper to retaliate upon him and his family, and upon those who took their lands...And the same spirit spread all over the country...and if the landlord was considered severe there were notices served, and his house attacked..."\textsuperscript{11}

The authorities stationed a small military party in the parish of Murroe, to aid the people keep out insurgents and marauders. But this military protection was not considered sufficient by some of the people of the parish. These banded themselves together to protect the parish in case of danger. They were given a lead both by the Parish Priest, Fr. O'B. Costello and the Protestant Rector of Abington, the Rev. Mr. John Jebb.\textsuperscript{12} Fr. Costello and Mr. Jebb were very good friends, as is clear from the evidence given by the former when asked about the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland in 1825:

"I do not think two clergymen could be on better terms than Dr. Jebb and I have been when he was rector of Abington."\textsuperscript{13}

It was apparently Mr. Jebb who proposed that a meeting should be held in the Murroe Chapel, in order to draw up resolutions for the preservation of the peace. It was thus agreed that a meeting be held on Sunday 16th December, 1821, in the Catholic chapel, and that the Protestant parson and the Catholic priest should successively address the people from the altar, after the last morning Mass: "a transaction the like of which I suppose never occurred since the Reformation," remarked Mr. Jebb.\textsuperscript{14}

We have two independent witnesses for the scene in the Murroe chapel. First of all there is Fr. O'B. Costello, who made the following statement in 1825:

"At one time the disturbances had reached the bounds of the parish in all directions; and I assembled the people in the chapel. The Protestant Rector attended, Mr. Jebb, now the Bishop of Limerick, and General Bourke.\textsuperscript{15} The people entered into resolutions to disclose, either to the magistracy or to me, any symptoms of this kind that should appear in the neighbourhood, or the names of any idle or suspicious individuals that might be passing through the county. Besides I had confidential persons in the other quarters of the parish, who would let me know immediately if these people had proposed oaths, or caused any disturbance in their neighbourhood."\textsuperscript{16}

The second witness to the event is the author of the \textit{Life of Bishop Jebb}, the Rev. Charles Forster, who was curate to Mr. Jebb at the time. He writes:


\textsuperscript{12} Jebb was Rector of Abington from 1810-23, and Bishop of Limerick from 1823-33.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{R.S.C.S.I.} p.425.

\textsuperscript{14} Forster, \textit{Life of Bishop Jebb}, p.160.

\textsuperscript{15} General Richard Bourke, of Thornfield, had some property in Abington. He also gave evidence before the Select Committee in 1825. Cf. \textit{R.S.C.S.I.} pp. 324-41.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{R.S.C.S.I.} p.420.
"The people were not assembled for the purpose of worship, but the place and the day gave a solemnity to the meeting and sanctified its object. The Protestant clergyman, from the altar, addressed the people. He gave to their conduct the applause which it merited, and exhorted them, in the most earnest manner, to continue the same course of loyalty and good order. His address, which occupied half an hour, was heard with breathless attention; and the result was, that at the close of it, the people, with one voice, and with acclamation, came forward to give their assent to the Resolutions." 17

We are fortunate in having these Resolutions preserved for us by the Rev. Charles Forster. They were drawn up and proposed by the Rev. Mr. Jebb, and seconded by Fr. Costello.

"Resolved, that we, his Majesty's loyal subjects, the Inhabitants and Landholders of the Parish of Abington, in the County of Limerick, are animated by a lively sense of gratitude to our benignant Monarch, for his late paternal visit to, and kind approbation of, his Irish subjects.

Resolved, that we unfeignedly lament, that any portion of our fellow-countrymen can have so soon forgotten the kindness of their sovereign, and contributed, by the violation of the laws, to dim those prospects of future beneficence, which his Majesty's gracious deportment while among us, opened to our view. 18

Resolved, that we altogether disapprove of those secret associations, and private meetings, which, in opposition both to the letter and the spirit of our free and glorious constitution, have, for some time past, unhappily prevailed, in different parts of this country.

Resolved, that we consider it a gross offence against the laws of God and man, to administer, or take, those oaths, which, under the seal of secrecy, have been tendered, and still are tendered, by designing persons, to many of our deluded fellow-countrymen . . . .

Resolved, that we rejoice in the peace and tranquillity hitherto maintained in this parish of Abington; and are determined, by every means in our power, to preserve to ourselves this honourable distinction." 19

This meeting in the Murroe Chapel became so famous that it was mentioned in a speech in the House of Commons made on 2nd April 1822 by Charles Grant20 and also in a debate in the House of Lords, Westminster, on 10th February 1824 by Viscount Althorp.21

Reading these Resolutions today, we are struck by their excessive patriotism vis-à-vis England. In fact they suggest an obsequiousness which one would not normally associate with an Irish country parish in the 1820's. How can we explain the tone of the Resolutions?

In order to make a judgment on this matter we must remember two things:

(i) Other parishes were making like Resolutions
(ii) There was a very practical reason, financial, behind it

18 Mr. Jebb could have meant this to refer to his own personal interview with King George IV, in Dublin, when he had reason to believe that the King had already singled him out for promotion. Loyalty to the English crown was something which most Irish Catholics were agreed on at this time, even though they wanted Catholic Emancipation and self-government for Ireland.
19 Forster, op. cit. pp. 183-4. I have omitted two of the Resolutions, which are rather lengthy.
20 Quoted by Forster, op. cit. p. 165.
(i) In the *Limerick Chronicle* of 15th December, 1821, we read the following information:

"The Roman Catholic Inhabitants of the United Parishes of Kilconloe, Killehenny, Gale and Lisselton, in the Co. of Kerry, having assembled in the Chapel of Lisselton on Sunday 25th. November, 1821.
Present: The Rev. Jeremiah O'Sullivan, P.P.
Resolved: That we very much lament the outrages committed in, and the deplorable state of the Co. of Kerry. And we solemnly declare our firm attachment to our Gracious King and to the Constitution, and that we will not enter into any Conspiracy against the laws of our country etc. . . . ."

Unfortunately the 1821 file of the *Limerick Chronicle* in the Limerick Leader Office, is defective for the last two issues, in which the Murroe Incident may have been reported. But it is interesting to note that this Co. Kerry meeting took place before the Murroe one, and that its Resolutions were very much the same. However, there is no mention of the Protestant Parson attending it.

(ii) The second point to consider is the practical reason behind these resolutions. They were not just empty words giving evidence of a pretended allegiance to the English rule in Ireland. We must understand this fact if we are to judge the incident in its true light.

Owing to the disturbed state of the county of Limerick in 1821, an Insurrection Act was passed and enforced even in those baronies which continued in a state of tranquillity. The Insurrection Act had been preceded by a Peace Preservation Bill, which meant that each barony had to bear the burden of maintaining an extra military force, and there were additional taxes imposed on land-owners to cover the cost of keeping order. The magistrates in the baronies of Clanwilliam, Owneybeg22 and Croonagh sent a memorial to the Government, signed by most of the leading proprietors and by clergymen of both Catholic and Protestant Churches, stating the good order that prevailed in these parts of the country, and asking that they be exempted from the heavy tax imposed by the Peace Preservation Bill. The government, however, refused to exempt them from paying the tax, which amounted to about seven-pence an acre.23

As the tax fell on the proprietors of the land, it was they who had to bear the burden of paying the government. Both Fr. Costello and Mr. Jebb were acting on behalf of the landowners in passing these Resolutions in the Murroe chapel. Thus we see that their aim would seem to have been primarily to obtain evidence for the government to get a reduction of the tax. However, they must also have desired the ensuing peace which followed upon their resolutions. And the seriousness with which they took the whole affair is evidenced by the fact that the meeting was held in the chapel.24

It is, perhaps, worthwhile remembering that no other large public building existed in country districts, apart from the local chapel. It had become customary for meet-

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22 Murroe is in the barony of Owneybeg.

23 All the facts of this particular question are given by General Bourke in *R.S.C.S.I.* pp. 332 et seq.

24 Fr. Costello farmed some 22 acres, and Mr. Jebb also had a farm attached to the Glebe House. Both would have had to pay the new tax.
ings of various kinds to be convened in chapels throughout the whole country. However, the Irish bishops, soon after Catholic Emancipation, felt that something should be done about this situation, which was, after all, an abuse. By a decree of the Irish hierarchy, passed on 28 January, 1834, (some twelve years after the Murroe incident), it was declared:

"That our chapels are not to be used in future for the purpose of holding therein any public meeting, except in cases connected with charity or religion, and that we do hereby pledge ourselves to carry this resolution into effect in our respective dioceses."

How far the meeting in the Murroe chapel came under the heading of "charity or religion" we cannot say. It certainly had some connection with peaceful co-existence in the Parish, and religion was put forward as the motive force for keeping the law. However this may be, it is certain that the hierarchy made no reference then, or ever afterwards, to the possibility or desirability of a Protestant clergyman 'preaching' in a Catholic chapel. It is this latter fact which makes the Murroe incident of 16th December 1821 so unique and so unusual.

Part II: Famine in Murroe 1822.

The Winter of 1821-22 was a very severe one, and it was followed by a famine which lasted throughout most of the year 1822. The population of Murroe parish at this time was over 6000,28 and we can imagine the calls on local charity and government funds for the relief of those in want. We are fortunate in having some first-hand accounts of the famine of 1822, both in the newspapers of the time, and also in the publication of the London Committee appointed on 7th May, 1822, to manage contributions for the relief of famine sufferers in Ireland.

According to the Report of this Committee, the counties principally affected were: Clare, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and Limerick. It furthermore stated that the principal cause of the distress was "the bad quality and partial failure of the potato crop of the preceding year, 1821, the consequence of the excessive and protracted humidity of the season, and it had been greatly aggravated by the rotting of the potatoes in the pits in which they were stored."27

An appeal was sent out by the London Committee for support, and money poured in from all over the world. The enormous sum of £304,180 was collected within a very short time. Relief was given throughout the distressed areas by cash payments, food and clothing. According to its Report, the Committee spent over £18,000 in Co. Limerick, and Murroe received its share of these bounties.

When the crisis was over, a surplus remained in the hands of the London Committee. It was decided to distribute this in further bounties to the affected areas. The sum of £200 was sent to the Rev. Mr. Jebb to distribute among the people of Murroe. Mr.

23 Decree quoted in the Dublin Evening Post, 18 Oct. 1834.

26 Census of Ireland 1821.

Jebb decided to use this money in the manufacture of implements of industry, to be distributed among the people “as a reward for their exemplary conduct during the late troubles.”

He got all the wheelwrights in the parish to start work making several hundred wheels and reels, to be used for the manufacture of linen. He hoped to introduce this industry to Murroe, and he was obviously influenced by the fact that in Northern Ireland the linen industry was bringing prosperity to the people. When the London Committee heard of his intention, they sent him a further £100, in token of their approval of his idea.

£300 went far in those days, and Mr. Jebb took great care in the manufacture of the various wheels and reels. He personally supervised the distribution of these implements, taking care that neither jobbery nor private favour should enter in. However, it is to be feared that the good intentions of Mr. Jebb went for nothing, and his hopes of introducing the linen industry to this corner of Co. Limerick were shattered. He was elected Protestant Bishop of Limerick in November 1822, and neither his successor, the Rev. Mr. Lefanu, nor the Parish Priest, seem to have taken an interest in his scheme.

The Rev. Mr. Jebb did not spend all the money he got on these implements. He was able to apply a portion of it to aid those who found it impossible to get work in the summer and autumn of 1822. The task he set these men was the lowering of a steep and difficult hill which obstructed the market road from Abington to Limerick, known as Connel’s and Flannery’s hills. In a letter to the London Committee sent in the autumn of 1822, Archdeacon Jebb wrote:

“It is a gratifying circumstance, that after the last two works had been completed, and when the allocated £100 was almost expended, the poor labourers on Connel’s and Flannery’s hills requested permission to finish their work without hire, from a sense of gratitude for the relief afforded them, and, as they expressed it, ‘for the comfortable manner in which they had been paid.’ The request, of course, could not be complied with: but when the poor fellows understood that I intended paying the surplus from my own pocket, though they laboured honestly and diligently throughout, they worked double tides for the last week, to diminish the expense: and the superintendent (a man conversant with road making) declared, he had never seen work so spiritedly executed in the course of his life.”

The Rev. John Jebb’s remarks about paying the “poor fellows” “from my own pocket” may be questioned. At least we may go into the matter a little deeper, and take the records of the Grand Jury Presentments for the County of Limerick as a starting point. We are fortunate in possessing a complete file of the Grand Jury Records from 1807 to the end of the 19th century, a year by year, except for a few years which are missing from the set in the Limerick County Library.

The following extracts show that the Rev. Mr. Jebb was receiving considerable sums of money for road-building, between the years 1813-1823:—

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28 Forster, op.cit. p. 170.
29 Ibid. p. 171.
30 Some of the old people of Murroe remember seeing these wooden wheels and reels, but they have long since disappeared.
31 In the townland of Ballyguy.
32 The Famine of 1822 : Character & conduct of the Poor. p. 145.
1813 Spring Assizes: “To Rev. John Jebb and Ed. Keas, to repair 126 perches of the road from Limerick to Cashel, between the bridge of Dooglasha and Laurence Fleming’s house, at 8/6d per perch. £33. 11. 0d.

1818 Spring Assizes: “To John Jebb, Clk. and Sam. Keys, to repair 156 perches of the road from Nenagh to Cashel and Limerick, between John O’Brien’s house at Cappanuke and Abington Cross, at 9/- per perch. £70. 4. 0d.

1821 Spring Assizes: “To John Jebb, Clk. and J. Spelman, to repair the bridge of Doolash, in the parish of Abington, on the high road from Cashel to Limerick, between the Glebe house and the church of Abington, Owneybeg.” £19 15 4d.

1822 Spring Assizes: “We accept the Contract of the Rev. John Jebb, D.D. and Samuel Keayes, to keep in repair for 7 years from this Assizes, 696 perches of the road from Nenagh to Cashel and Limerick, between the Cross of Wilton and the malt house at the bounds of the Barony of Owneybeg, and that the usual security be lodged with the Treasurer.

1823 Spring Assizes: “To the Rev. J. Jebb, and Sam. Keas, being the amount of their contract for one year, on 696 perches of the road from Nenagh to Cashel, between the lawn of Wilton, and the Malt House at the bounds of the barony of Owneybeg, at 6d per perch. £17. 8. 0d.

In putting the people to work on the roads, Mr. Jebb was no doubt giving honest employment, and he may have had to supplement the Grand Jury grants out of his own pocket for the moment. But there was nothing to stop him re-claiming his expenses afterwards. And since the two hills which he had levelled were on the road from Cashel to Limerick, which passed through Abington, he was definitely helping his own road-building contract at the same time. As we do not possess the Rev. Mr. Jebb’s own accounts book, we cannot say to what extent he was out of pocket in the hill-leveling enterprise. All we can say is that he received £300 from London for charitable purposes, and also further sums of money from the Grand Jury, to be spent on road-work, in the locality of Abington. It is true that the Rev. John Jebb was more a scholar than a business-man, but we may presume that his partners in the road-building contract made up for this, and saw that their accounts were balanced. All the historian can say is that there is a suggestion that the Rev. Mr. Jebb was killing two birds with the one stone: helping the poor of the parish in giving them employment, and helping his own road-building contract into the bargain.

As final proof of the affection with which he was held by all in the parish of Murroe, where he had been Rector for nearly fifteen years, Dr. Jebb, on his appointment to the See of Limerick, was presented with an address from the Catholics of the parish, drawn up by the Rev. Fr. Costello. While in return, Dr. Jebb wrote the following letter to Fr. Costello:
Abington Glebe,  
20 Feb. 1823.

"In taking leave of Abington, I cannot suppress the wish that some memorial of me may occasionally present itself before you, when you are resting from the pastoral labours of the day; and request, therefore, that you will have the kindness to accept two articles of furniture for your new house, which I have had in daily use since 1810..."  

On reflecting upon the events which took place in these years 1821-22 in Murroe, one cannot but be struck by the spirit of goodwill which existed between Catholics and Protestants. It was the eve of Catholic Emancipation, and certainly the peaceful spirit and non-sectarian feelings of the people were in accord with the principles laid down by Daniel O'Connell in the following year, when he founded The Catholic Association.

In his attitude towards Protestants, Dr. Costello was certainly following the example set him by Dr. Everard, archbishop of Cashel, who died in March 1821. According to the evidence of the Rev. Mortimer O'Sullivan (a Protestant parson who had spent some time as a curate in Tipperary): "Dr. Everard was very conciliatory in his manners and deportment towards Protestants, and I believe maintained a very general intercourse with them."

One hesitates to imagine what the next archbishop of Cashel, Dr. Laffan, would have said about the meeting in the Murroe chapel in December 1821. However, there was no archbishop at the time, and Fr. Costello's immediate superior, Fr. Murnane, the Vicar-General of Emly, was his good friend. The incident of having a Protestant parson address the Catholic parishioners in their own chapel after Sunday Mass thus went without official comment.

This spirit of peaceful co-existence between Catholics and Protestants in Murroe was to last for ten years, to be rudely shattered by the Tithe War of 1831-38.

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32 Fr. O'B. Costello had just finished building Farnane House at the time. What the two articles were we cannot say.

34 Quoted in The Limerick Reporter 10 May, 1850, as part of an obituary to Fr. Costello, who died on 6 May.