

Terence Albert O'Brien

by Joe Coffey

Limerick has a long history littered with characters whose names are legendary. In the 17th century Limerick underwent three major sieges in which marked the city history and have left their legacy to this day. Patrick Sarsfield, the Treaty Stone, the Walls of Limerick are amongst the people or landmarks that even today are part and parcel of the city and its environs.

There are also many those whose heroic and stoic resistance in that period have largely been forgotten.

One such character is Terence Albert O'Brien. O'Brien was born in Limerick to a prosperous Catholic family in 1600. His family belonged to the Ara O'Briens faction, descendants of Brian Ban O'Brien who had challenged unsuccessfully to decide the Kingship of Thomond and who, when defeated at the battle of Dysert O'Dea had fled across the Shannon and settled in the district known as Ara. Terence's father was a big landowner in County Limerick in the district of Cappamore. His early years were spent being educated by the Dominican order in Limerick. The site of the Dominican friary of the period is located in the Kings Island area of the city and the some of the ruins are clearly visible today. He spent from 1620 to 1628 studying in Toledo and became a Dominican friar. When he returned to Ireland he was elected a Prior of the Dominican house first in Lorrha and then Limerick. In 1643 he was elected Provincial of the Irish Dominican Order and selected the following year as one of the two representatives in Rome. He was undoubtedly a man of strong belief and character. He was posted to Lisbon after a period in Rome. Whilst in Lisbon he was advised that he had been appointed as co-adjutor to the aging Bishop of Emly. He was described by Rinuccini, the papal Nuncio in Ireland of the period as 'a man of prudence and sagacity, who had been in Italy and is so expert in the management of Church revenues that happy results might be expected from his care' Rinuccini has nominated him for Bishop and saw in him a strong and devout character whose skills would be of benefit to the Church. The Nuncio was anxious to promote strong leaders and defenders of the faith in Ireland to cope with the times in which they living in. O'Brien was one of nine bishops consecrated at the time to defend the people and their faith.

O'Briens personal experiences, his education, his profession, his travel and his return to his abode in Limerick were all elements of his character which were to merge with events of the period to leave O'Brien his place in local history.

Events of the period meant warring Irish, British and various continental interests were waging warfare in Ireland at the time. The English Civil war of the 1640's had by and large led to Irish support for the Monarchy against the Parliamentarians. O'Brien had been one of the vast majority who would have hoped for a monarchist victory. Unfortunately it did not come to pass and after their victory the Parliamentarians set about bringing Ireland to heel. O'Brien came to prominence at a council in Kilkenny held to bring peace and unity to various Irish factions that had

come to prominence during the English civil war. He is on record of not only appealing to the representative for a united front but also for practical revenue raising taxes and for petitioning the holy see for practical and symbolic gestures to strengthen their position.

The 1640s had seen the Irish Catholic position in the country under continuing threat. Even the brilliant victory of Owen Roe O'Neill at Benburd in June, 1646 failed to stem the tide. In 1647 heavy defeats for Catholic armies at Kanturk and Dangan Hill served to undermine and dampen the spirits of the people. 1649, the last year of the decade proved a notable one for the future of the Irish. Ireland's warrior hope O'Neill died, King Charles the First was executed and Cromwell invaded Ireland.

In August 1649 Oliver Cromwell led the Parliamentary army to Ireland to subdue the Irish who would resist their rule.

Cromwell's army and their deeds served well to make him one of the most detested characters in Irish history. Cromwell returned to England the following year and left his son in law Ireton to oversee the submission of all Irish opposition. They were successful in their quest and when they took Clonmel in May 1651 the Irish commander of the town, Hugh O'Neil fled to Limerick to organise the city as one of the last points of resistance to the Cromwellian army.

Their march on Limerick was aided by acts of treachery upriver from Limerick at O'Briens Bridge and Killaloe where desertions and treachery by their respective garrison commanders Captain Kelly and Colonel Fennel enabled the English Parliamentary army to cross the Shannon, march on Limerick and effectively surround the city.

The siege of the city began in June 1651. Militarily there was little prospect of the city falling to a military action and a prolonged siege forcing submission was seen as the best means of overcoming the defenders. In common with most sieges at the time the following months led to severe and dire hardship for the citizens of Limerick and its defenders. It is estimated that up to 5000 and possibly more died of diseases caused by overcrowding, dirt and malnutrition.

Naturally the siege and its consequences within the walls led to various factions and opinions. The besieging army offered terms for surrender at various stages which would have been more than acceptable to many. However, O'Brien was a hardliner who refused and rejected all overtures from Ireton and his aides and galvanised continued resistance to those he regarded as enemies of his country and his faith. It was alleged at a Dominican Chapter General in 1656 that he had been offered a substantial bribe by the Cromwellian forces to leave the city at the start of the siege. It is known that as well as galvanising the defenders and the citizens to resist the besieging and attend to his religious duties he also spent time tending to the ill and wounded. Apart from O'Neill and O'Brien the other prominent characters within the walls were Aldermen Fanning & Stritch, Domnic Fanning, Father Wolfe and General Purcel. The Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul were also prominent in their resistance and assistance within the city walls.

However, on 29th October 1651 Major General Hugh O'Neill met Ireton at the gates of the city and formally surrendered it to him. The terms of the truce could be seen by many as generous. The garrison of some 2500 men laid down their arms. Many were already well on the road to death as the months had taken their toll. Of the Citizens, those who wished to leave the city were free to do so, those who did not could stay in peace in return for allegiance to the new regime.

However, as is always the case, there were exceptions: Bishop Terence Albert O'Brien and nineteen other high profile defenders seen as agitators in prolonging the defence of the city were to be executed on Ireton's orders. Amongst the twenty there was another bishop, Edmund O'Dwyer, who was the only one to escape, a feat he achieved disguised as a soldier allowed to march out of the city along with the remnants of the garrison.

On the day the city surrendered O'Brien was arrested and taken to what was known as the Pesthouse. As a man who had been clearly identified as a person of principal activity and influence in the obstinate holding out, he was put on trial almost immediately along with a colleague Father James Wolfe. O'Brien's only request at this point was for a confessor which his captors granted him. Once the formalities of finding him guilty were done he was executed on 31 October, 1651. He was led from his place of detention to the gallows in Clare Street. A man who had been noble born, who had served his faith and his country was to pay the ultimate price for his services. Even as he was led to the gallows manacled and tethered he exhorted the people to defend and guard their faith and pray. His head was severed and impaled on the spikes of St. John's Gate. His legacy of stout and devout resistance, his willingness to stand up and be counted in dark and forboding times for his faith and his country mark him out as a noble man amongst men, not by virtue of his birth but by virtue of his life, vision and sacrifice.

For his part Ireton died within ten days of the siege ending, succumbing to plague. His body was returned to England, the same vessel containing a chained O'Neill who was being sent to imprisonment in the Tower of London. He was eventually ransomed by the Spanish court and freed to Spain.

Bishop Terence Albert O'Brien had become a martyr for his religion and his country. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in _____ along with other Irish Martyrs.

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