

PART ONE

EDWARD THOMAS O'DWYER

by John Rushe



Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer. From a painting by Sean Keating.

DR. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick from May 10, 1886, to August 19, 1917—an episcopacy which, stretching over thirty years, was one of the most controversial in Irish ecclesiastical

Although but a curate at the time of his consecration, his unique combination of abilities, and his readiness to use them in a highly individualistic way, ensured his rapid rise to prominence. And this position of prominence he

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Dr. O'Dwyer.

quences.....most tragic and mortifying" of his actions long outlived the reconciliation of the Hierarchy with Rome. The Catholic M.P.s and their supporters remained unappeased and continued to hurl fulminations at the temporal arm of the Papacy, but since the Papacy was some distance away, they vented their most bitter anger on its most vocal Irish agent, the Bishop of Limerick, who, in May, 1888, on the eve of a meeting organised for Limerick by the National League to further the Plan of Campaign, "authoratively" addressed a letter to the Mayor (at the same time ensuring that the press got copies) forbidding his priests to attend and ruling that it was "a grievous sin for any Catholic to disobey the Decree", and "a much more grievous sin under any pretext to deny the Pope's authority to issue it". (7) The letter caught everybody—not least his colleagues in the Hierarchy—unawares; it was "the sensation of the hour", and O'Dwyer's public ordeal had begun.

As regards the attendance at the Limerick meeting, apart from ensuring the absence of the priests, the Bishop's letter was of little avail. William O'Brien, M.P., got a hero's welcome from 20,000 people gathered from Counties Limerick, Clare and Tipperary, and in a speech, modelled on that of Mark Antony over Caesar's body, drew jeers from the crowd at every mention of O'Dwyer's name.

Having paid his respects to the Bishop's high office and having asked the people to do likewise, O'Brien lashed out:-

.....never was Catholic Limerick called upon to strike a better blow, either for the old faith or for the old land.....(prolonged cheering).....aye, and in defence of the civil liberties of the Irish priests as well as of the Irish people (cheers).....from that duty I will not be deterred by threats (prolonged cheering).....threats, the rashest, the most unjust, aye, and I will say, the most disgraceful, that ever came from an Irish ecclesiastical (cheers, and a voice.....'and a—')

In a blunt reference to O'Dwyer's isolation within the Hierarchy, O'Brien continued:-

He (O'Dwyer) must excuse us if we do not feel altogether overwhelmed by his thunders when we remember that Archbishop Croke (cheers) and Archbishop Walsh (cheers) are included in the sweep of his censures.....

And Mr. J.R. Cox, M.P., took up where O'Brien left off:-

According to (O'Dwyer) they were committing a mortal sin by coming to the meeting (laughter).....The Papal Rescript was not binding on them for they knew it was based on error (cheers), and, if by attending the meeting he (Cox) was 'crushed into powder', he would be crushed under the protection of the great Rock of Cashel (cheers)". (8)

This extraordinary spectacle—the public humiliation of a bishop—was repeated at several other meetings that day (and subsequently), and was lavishly reported in the Irish and British press. Michael Davitt (at Bray) and John Dillon (at Dalkey and Kildare) were particularly bitter, using language which O'Dwyer termed "schismatical". Davitt branded O'Dwyer's action as:-

the worst possible form of clerical dictatorship.....which has worked such manifest injury to the Church on the Continent.....and which, if shared by any large number of bishops and priests, would shatter to its very foundations the Catholic Church of this country.

Dillon lambasted Rome:-

I believe that the authorities in Rome are learning.....that it is one of the greatest scandals recorded in the history of our faithful people that now in the hour of our trial the authority of Rome should be quoted by every rack-renting landlord in Ireland. (9)

On the Thursday following the Limerick meeting, William O'Brien travelled to Rathkeale (where O'Dwyer was on visitation) to receive an address of welcome from the local branch of the League and Town Commissioners. Later he was escorted to Ardagh where he was met by the parish priest and thence to the troubled Glensharrold Estate where he lauded the "silenced" Father Ambrose.

In the newspapers of the time, notably *United Ireland* of which William O'Brien was editor, accounts were printed of dozens of resolutions from public bodies all over the country in support of the anti-Rescript resolution of the Irish Catholic M.P.s and explicitly or implicitly denouncing O'Dwyer.

It was around this time, too, that O'Dwyer was threatened with assassination; the letter, undated and unsigned, for all its brutal imagery, had shades of the seething anger which O'Dwyer had drawn upon himself:-

Don't go out.....you will be done away with if you go into the chapel to say Mass you will be shot for there is (sic) men going from Dublin to send you to atternity (sic) for your conduct you are not a Catholic.....how much (sic) money did Balfour give you. The next thing we will here (sic) is your turning a protestant.....you Rotton (sic) Orange Man.

This threat of assassination—if genuine—would scarcely have surprised O'Dwyer, much less have deterred him from his 'fearless championship of truth as he saw it', for early in his episcopate the Nationalist M.P.s had sent him a warning through his priest friends to be careful of his public utterances or they would "retaliate

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Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, Lord Bishop of Limerick, whose stand against the blood-stained and tyrannical General Maxwell in 1916 gave an invaluable lead to the nation.

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