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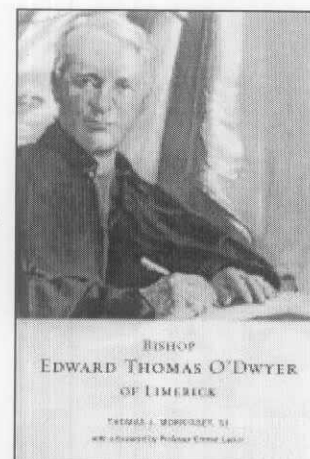
## The Battling Bishop

By Frank Prendergast M.A.

The recent publication by the Four Courts Press of "Bishop Edward Thomas O Dwyer of Limerick 1842 - 1917" by Dr. Thomas Morrissey SJ, is a long overdue study of one of the most extraordinary members ever of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy.

Throughout his entire career he was never far from controversy, not least with his fellow Bishops for whom he was a celebrated *bête noire* but also when occasion demanded, with the major British and Irish politicians of his day as well as influential civil servants and newspaper editors.

Arguably this attitude could be attributed to his self-assurance deriving from his pride of race. His father was a member of the historic Tipperary sept the O Dwyers of Kilnamannagh, three of whom were Abbots of Holy Cross Monastery in the 15th and 16th centuries and another a Bishop of Limerick, Edmund O Dwyer, who escaped the Cromwellian siege of that city disguised as a soldier. Thomas Morgan O Dwyer, the Bishop's granduncle studied for the priesthood in the Propaganda Fide in Rome where he was a fellow student of the future Pope Leo XIII.



Shortly after his birth at Holy Cross, Tipperary in 1842, his father was transferred to Limerick where the future Bishop grew up and was educated there by the Christian Brothers and in Doon, Co. Limerick and was a prize-winning scholar.

When his application to become a priest for the Diocese of Limerick was accepted he was obliged to study for a year at St. Munchin's College, then run by the Jesuits, prior to his entry to Maynooth as an eighteen year old in 1860. His academic brilliance continued there where he had as classmates four future Bishops and Canon Peadar O Laoire who was to become later the foremost Gaelic author of his day. However he was recalled to the Diocese prior to the completion of his studies and was ordained in St. John's Cathedral in 1867, one month before the Fenian Rising.

As a curate he served in eight parishes in the county and city during which time he involved himself zealously in political and social campaigns. In 1870 he stood on a platform with Isaac Butt, founder of the Home Rule Party in that year's parliamentary election. Butt's father, a Church of Ireland Rector, had been born in Adare where Butt himself spent some of his childhood. Few priests showed any such interest at that time. Later as a curate in St Michael's Parish in the City he saw the havoc wrought by alcohol on his poorer parishioners. He actively drove the temperance campaign. On 13 November 1877 at a public meeting held in the City Hall to debate his project for the closure of public houses on Sundays, he accused the Mayor of rigging the meeting in favour of the publicans. Later on

he removed his coat to face a heckler and the meeting ended in uproar. The St Michael's Temperance Society which he founded was a huge success in the sporting and cultural life of the city. His concern for the poor led to his establishment of the Artisans' Dwelling Company. Some of the houses they built still survive. His anger at the gap between the rich and the poor of the city drove him on one occasion to seek to address the Harbour Board, comprised mainly of local merchants. O Dwyer singled out one in particular by name and denounced him for his neglect of his workers' housing needs. He had the grace and wit, though, to apologize for this outburst in the "Limerick Chronicle" of 5 April, 1881. His zeal, however, stirred the Corporation and wealthy classes to provide hundreds of homes for the poor.

Another expression of his concern for the poor was the establishment of the Limerick Catholic Literary Institute which sponsored lectures and provided newspapers and an excellent library for its members. It was no great surprise then in February 1886 when, on the sudden death of the very popular Bishop Butler, the name of Edward Thomas O Dwyer was being spoken of by public and clergy as a successor. He was overwhelmingly voted for by his fellow priests, and Cardinal William Massajo, presenting his case in Rome, reported that he knew "Latin, Greek, French, German and Italian". He was then 45 years old.

His consecration as Bishop was hugely popular with the public who marked the occasion with blazing tar-barrels and band parades. But the glow of this applause was not to last too long - a mere few months after his consecration he gave the first indication of his independence and intellectual courage. The Irish Hierarchy at that time was dominated largely by two Archbishops - William Walsh of Dublin and Thomas William Croke of Cashel. O Dwyer who felt strongly about Catholic education was critical of Walsh and the Hierarchy for what he saw as their slowness in the campaign for a Catholic University. Soon after he defied them again by rejecting their request that he stand down from the Senate of the Royal University and invoked their hostility causing Croke to write to Walsh "that he (O Dwyer) should be put down."

Later still he was in open conflict with his fellow Bishops with the sole exception of Dr. Healy, Co-Adjuter of Clonfert, on their support for the Plan of Campaign led by the Archbishops. He denounced this trenchantly because, although a lifelong nationalist, he opposed any approach that might lead to violence. His stature grew immeasurably when Rome issued a special Rescript backing his stance. This was a major embarrassment for the two Archbishops but an obvious cause celebre for the British and Irish Tory Press.

O Dwyer again drew down the wrath of the Nationalist MPs when he forbade his priests to attend a monster meeting called in Limerick in support of the Plan of Campaign. He was denounced vehemently by William O'Brien MP, Michael Davitt and John Dillon and his life was threatened. His stinging rebuke led to another public meeting under the shadow of St. John's Cathedral. In turn this was attended by a huge platform of Nationalist leaders as well as the Mayor and Corporation. The Bishop was denounced from the platform as a liar to the cheers of the crowd. Leading English Catholics, lay and clerical, supported him, however, and criticised his ostracism by Nationalist Ireland. These included Lord Tennyson's son and Bishop Vaughan, later Cardinal. His old friend Fr. F.S. Flanagan of Adare comforted him with the prediction that his conduct would be justified. Two months later the Parnell Divorce issue destroyed the Irish Parliamentary Party. The subsequent turmoil caused Cardinal Logue to write that "Bishop O Dwyer's analysis was correct." The latter's stature was enhanced enormously.

He was equally forthright on the dominant theme of his episcopacy; the rights of Catholics to a proper education system at all levels, primary, secondary and university and his opinions, although sometimes vehemently expressed, earned respect from adversary and friend alike.

This is fertile material for any biographer and Dr. Morrissey, himself a noted educationalist, provides a fascinating outline of O Dwyer's persistence and realism based on his commanding intellect and a thorough grasp of what he wanted for his people. In his compellingly readable outline of his subject's contribution to the debate on equality of treatment for Catholics in university education, he describes O Dwyer's personalised attack in March 1904 on the failure of the Home Secretary, Wyndham on this issue, as "unbecoming a gentleman, let alone a bishop."

A more tangible legacy of his endeavours was his establishment of the Mary Immaculate Teacher Training College in 1898 which has since grown into a major institution in Irish education.

But his later conduct of affairs often called into question his sense of judgement which could on occasion be described as petty. He had bitter rows with the Church of Ireland Authorities in the matter of rights of access by Catholic children to the Leamy's and Roxborough primary schools. After protracted debates the Bishop was successful in relation to Leamy's but lost out in respect of Roxborough School. In the latter case "he manifested some of his least attractive characteristics giving way at times to intemperate, hectoring language and to blustering outbursts when not getting his way."

His episcopacy was further marred by his bitter conflict with the Jesuit and Christian Brother congregations in his Diocese on issues of education on which he had very strong views. The issues took place at Limerick and Bruff. His bitterness with the Jesuits related to their claim to educate lay pupils as well as apostolic students thereby weakening support for the Diocesan College of St. Munchin's. Their case was upheld in Rome and increased tensions between them and the Bishop. In reprisal he made it more difficult for them from 1901 to hear confessions and preach in the Diocese. He also built St. Joseph's Church a mere 150 yards from the Jesuit Church. St. Joseph's thus became known locally as "the Church of Spite".

As regards the Christian Brothers, the Bishop, noted for his care for the poor in education matters, resented the attitude of the Order's Superior General, Brother Richard Maxwell who had an equally strong temperament and was a former practising lawyer. When the question of a reform school at Glin, County Limerick, was mooted, Maxwell decided to deal directly with the Local Government Board so as to avoid any Episcopal interference in the Order's affairs. O Dwyer was enraged and as a reprisal forbade the Brothers to make their weekly public collections for clothes and food for their poorer boys, a practice they had followed since their arrival in 1816. The public were enraged and the Limerick Trades Council, led by their popular president John Godsell, continued the collection and organized public support for the Brothers. The dispute was ended when O Dwyer accepted an apology from the Brother Superior, J.B. Welsh, on a personal row which took place between them on the issue.

The dispute at Bruff was far more serious and protracted. It began in 1896 when the local Parish Priest, Fr. Charles MacNamara took issue with the Brothers on the question of their involvement in Intermediate education and the question of their compensation. Following a series of other lesser issues his "petty tyranny" supported by the Bishop led to the overnight abandonment of their school by the Brothers after 40 years there. The matter which went to Rome then led to a public boycott of the school and subsequent threats of excommunication with a public stand-off between public and clergy urged on by the 'Limerick Leader'. It dragged on for years before an end was brought about in time but relations had been badly damaged.

Two other events illustrated the two sides of the Bishop's character. In 1891 he intervened in a bitter public strike by the Limerick Pork Butchers' Society for higher wages. He conducted a public meeting astride a horse in Mulgrave Street and divided the workers on either side of the street - pro and contra the proposals he put to them. They were carried, and the Butchers in return built the magnificent altar to Our Lady in St. John's Cathedral in gratitude.

Later on, however, in the same cathedral, in 1899 when the first ever Limerick Labour Corporation had been elected under the Local Government Reform (Ireland) Act 1898, he asked the Fenian Mayor John Daly to leave the cathedral at a public service there. The latter and half of the Council walked out of the cathedral in protest.

During his career, surely one of the most turbulent of any Bishops in the history of the Irish Church, he argued publicly with such figures as the historian William Lecky, the Brothers Arthur J. and Gerard Balfour, both Chief Justices for Ireland, the Judicial Commissioners under the Educational Endowment Act, Michael Davitt and such opinion-formers as the Farmer's Journal, Daily Express, Irish Times, Evening Mail, London Times, Spectator and Pall Mall Gazette, mostly on matters of education. His main driving force was always the question of a decent education for Catholics.

A Colleague, Dean Edward Punch, later said of him: "this man feared nothing or nobody". This was nowhere more truly proven than in his spirited rejoinder to General Sir John Maxwell, the Commander of the British Forces in Ireland in 1916 who had written him peremptorily to restrain two priests of the Diocese, Reverends Thomas Walsh and Michael Hayes as Maxwell considered them to be a "dangerous menace". O Dwyer's carefully thought out reply contrasted the execution of the 1916 leaders with that of Maxwell's own involvement in the failed attempted insurrection of 1895 in the Jamestown Raid. This was against the Boer Government of Paul Kruger for which most of the 450 insurgents involved got off scot-free. He added to Maxwell's embarrassment by publishing his reply. He became a national hero overnight; the wheel had turned full circle. A lifelong nationalist and land-reformer who eschewed violent methods always, he had been vilified as a Unionist and Castle Catholic and was now being proclaimed as the champion of nationalist Ireland. But, alone of all the Irish Hierarchy, he was the only one to support the leaders of the 1916 Rising .

The Limerick Corporation, some of whose Mayors had clashed bitterly with him, now conferred on him the Freedom of the City on 14 September 1916. His reply on that occasion in which he denounced the fickleness of public opinion, is surely to be ranked with anything that emanated from classical Greece or Rome. "My duty as a Bishop is not to flatter you or stoop to the methods of the demagogue". How faithfully he followed that belief has been outlined by Dr. Morrissey in his meticulously detailed research. He has dealt with his subject very fairly, outlining his strengths and weaknesses in an engrossing writing style which is likely to attract the 'lay' reader as well as the academic. This work is long overdue and will be greatly welcomed.

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