Introduction

Bishop O’Dwyer of Limerick is widely known as the bishop who, shortly after the Easter Rising, publicly criticised the conduct of General Maxwell for his execution of those arrested. The immediate context was as follows: the Rising began on Monday, 24 April, 1916 at 12 noon and, on that day, the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic was proclaimed, by Patrick Pearse, from the steps of the Post Office; on 28 April, General Sir John Maxwell arrived in Dublin as Commander-in-Chief of the British army in Ireland; on 29 April, Patrick Pearse signed a general order of surrender of arms and the surrender was completed on 30 April; on 3 May, the execution of the rebels, by a process of military court martial, began with the shooting of Pearse, MacDonagh and Clarke, and ended on 12 May with the shooting of Sean MacDermott and James Connolly. (Roger Casement was hung on 3 August in London.) The total number of men executed was 16. In the course of these events General Maxwell wrote to Bishop O’Dwyer, on 6 and 12 May, requesting that he should discipline two priests, Fathers Thomas Wall and Michael Hayes, for their support of the Irish Volunteers.

Bishop O’Dwyer replied on 17 May 1916. He stated that ‘in your letter of 6 May you appeal to me to help you in the furtherance of your work as a military dictator in Ireland. Even if action of that kind were not outside my province, the events of the past few weeks would make it impossible for me to have any part in proceedings which I regard as wantonly cruel and oppressive.’ He continued: ‘Personally, I regard your action with horror; and I believe that it has outraged the conscience of the country. Then the deporting of hundreds and even thousands of poor fellows without a trial of any kind seems to me an abuse of power as fatuous as it is arbitrary and your regime has been one of the worst and blackest chapters in the history of the misgovernment of the country. I have the honour to be Sir your obedient servant …’ The terms of the Defence of the Realm Act, which came into force at the outbreak of War in August 1914, prevented his words being published in the national press. However, they were soon re-produced in pamphlet form; they became widely known; and they generated great sympathy for the rebels. Before the year was out, Bishop O’Dwyer made other significant pronouncements which were critical of British military rule in Ireland and which were favourable to the rebels. These will be considered later, after some consideration of the events and background that led Bishop O’Dwyer to act as he did.

Bishop O’Dwyer - early life and personal relationships

Edward Thomas O’Dwyer was born on 22 January 1842 at Holy Cross, county Tipperary; educated at the Christian Brothers School, Limerick; then at the seminary at Maynooth where he was ordained for the diocese of Limerick in 1867. He was a curate at St Michael’s Church, Limerick City (1874-1886) and then he was consecrated bishop, 29 June 1886. The diocese of Limerick at that time had 120 priests and 94 churches. The choice of words for his coat of arms assumed an almost prophetic significance in Easter 1916: “Virtuti non Armis Fido” – ‘I trust in Valour not in Arms.’

O’Dwyer was dedicated to his pastoral work but at times he also engaged in the political sphere. In 1870 he supported the Home Rule campaign of Isaac Butt, a Protestant, who was elected as an MP for Limerick. However, in 1887 he accepted Pope Leo XIII’s ban not only on the Fenians but also on the Plan of Campaign against landowners. This policy set him apart from some other bishops and priests and from many of the laity, earning him the name of a ‘Castle’ bishop: that is one who was sympathetic to English rule.

Bishop O’Dwyer was always very concerned about education and he was responsible for the foundation of a Limerick Teacher Training College. Government approval was granted in 1897; construction began in 1898; and, in 1901, Mary Immaculate College opened in co-operation with the Sisters of Mercy. Bishop O’Dwyer also played a major part in the publication of the Irish Educational Review (1907-1914). This journal reflected the high standard of Catholic academic journals at this time. For example, the Irish Ecclesiastical Record (founded 1864; revived 1880 by Archbishop Walsh of Dublin); the Irish Theological Quarterly (1906-1922); the Jesuit Journal, the New Ireland Review (1894); and the Catholic Bulletin (founded 1911). These journals not only treated of religious matters but also contained many articles and news items on contemporary affairs. O’Dwyer, therefore, acted from a very well informed intellectual background. He also had the ability to write with great clarity and power and did so to advance the traditional values of the Church. He was also traditional in relation to many modern developments.
in society; for example, he issued a statement against women's suffrage in 1912. When he felt that his authority was challenged, he was not afraid to defend himself. For example, when he had difficulties with the Jesuits, who he felt were acting too independently in their church in the Crescent, O'Connell Street, he built, in 1904, St Joseph's parish church some 100 yards away. This led to the popular naming of the church as 'the church of spite.'

On a personal level, the major influence on his life, especially the crucial years of 1914-1916 was his contact with Mgr Michael O'Riordan (1857-1919), the rector of the Irish College in Rome from 1905-1919. O'Riordan, a native of Granagh and priest of the Limerick diocese, was not only an efficient administrator of his college but also he was an able academic, having written *Catholicity and Progress* in 1905 to rebut the claims by Sir Horace Plunkett that the Catholic religion was an obstacle to an advanced civic and social life. Through O'Riordan, O'Dwyer became part of a wider unit of influence, which began with the founding of the *Catholic Bulletin* in 1911. O'Riordan wrote for this journal, which had a wide circulation, and his assistant, Fr John Hagan (1873-1930), wrote a monthly 'Notes from Rome' column. Hagan also informed his priest friend, Fr Michael Curran, of the Dublin archdiocese, of events in Rome. Curran was the secretary to Archbishop Walsh of Dublin and thus both Walsh and O'Dwyer not only had an informed view of happenings in Rome but also their own views were given favourable prominence in the *Catholic Bulletin*. Mgr Denis Hallinan (1849-1923; bishop 1918), assistant to Bishop O'Dwyer, not only shared his views but also publicly expressed them in the *Catholic Bulletin*. Last, but by no means least, O'Dwyer also became very friendly with Bishop Michael Fogarty of Killaloe (1859-1953; bishop 1904) and respected his views on many matters. Fogarty's influence, like that of O'Riordan and his colleagues, was particularly important in the 1916 period.

O'Dwyer's changing political views, 1910 - 1916

There was an evolution in O'Dwyer's political thinking. In 1910, O'Dwyer privately expressed support for Ireland's independence but he was unwilling to identify with the Irish Party. For example, he informed Mgr O'Riordan, 24 June 1910, on the accession of King George V, that 'we owe England thanks for nothing we have received. All the rights which have been restored have been victories won; they are not gifts, nor even rights freely yielded.' These sentiments have their echo in his later response to Maxwell. However, at that time, he was reluctant to identify with the Irish Party of John Redmond. For example, in September 1910, O'Dwyer and his clergy did not attend a Home Rule demonstration in Limerick which Redmond, John Dillon and Joseph Devlin attended; and, on 26 February 1912, he resisted Bishop Fogarty's request to support Redmond publicly by saying that he only intervened in religious matters. To do otherwise, he concluded, might indicate a change before death or senile decay.'

O'Dwyer's later political position and his relationship with John Redmond were determined by the evolution of the Home Rule process and by the events of the Great War. Some salient actions provide the context for his actions and illustrate the changing political mind set of that time. For example, on 31 March 1912 there was a Home Rule demonstration in Dublin with Redmond and Pearse present; on 16 April 1912 the first reading of the Home Rule Bill took place; on 18 September 1912 Sir Edward Carson opened a campaign against Home Rule with Ulster Volunteers present; on 16 January 1913 the third reading of the Home Rule Bill was passed but rejected by the House of Lords; on 24 July 1913, Sir George Richardson arrived in Ulster to take command of the Ulster Volunteer Force, c.50,000 strong; on 25 September 1913, plans for an Ulster Provisional Government were announced by Sir Edward Carson; on 25 November 1913, the Irish Volunteers were founded in Dublin by Eoin MacNeill; on 25 January 1914, Pearse, in Limerick, stated that the Volunteers aimed to secure Home Rule - soon afterwards Pearse joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood and went on a mission to America; on 20 March 1914, the Curragh mutiny occurred and army officers refused to take action against Ulster; on 24 April 1914, the Lerm gun-running took place and c.35,000 rifles were received by the Ulster Volunteers; on 25 May 1914, the third Reading of the Home Rule Bill was passed; on 17 June 1914, Redmond took over control of the Irish Volunteers c.150,000 men; on 26 July 1914, the Howth gun-running provided arms for the Irish Volunteers; on 3 August 1914, Redmond pledged the Irish Volunteers to defend Ireland, if war broke out; on 4 August 1914, England declared war on Germany; on 15 August 1914, the Defence of the Realm Act was imposed in both England and Ireland; on 18 September 1914, the Home Rule Act was given the royal assent but suspended for the duration of the war; on 20 September 1914, Redmond, at Woodbridge, committed the Irish Volunteers to fight abroad and this led to a split in the movement; on 28 September 1914, Carson stated that he would repeal the Home Rule Act at the first opportunity.

It was in the context of these events that Bishop O'Dwyer's political views evolved. Initially, he supported Redmond's campaign for Home Rule. In his Lenten pastoral of 1913, he declared that 'it is only natural that a country on which God has stamped the individual features of a nation, and in which through centuries the feelings and aspirations of nationhood have never died, should get into its own hands the management of some part, at least, of its own domestic concerns, and the shaping of its fortunes.' These general
expressions in favour of Home Rule were given a more specific expression on 12 October 1913 when he publicly supported a Home Rule demonstration in Limerick and encouraged his priests to attend – he was unable to do so. However, he praised Redmond for his 'great power and dignity' and expressed his 'best wishes for success.' O'Dwyer's good will towards Redmond may have been helped by the fact that, in May 1911, Redmond had persuaded the government to remit part of the debt on Mary Immaculate Training College.

O'Dwyer's break with Redmond, and his sympathy for the Irish Volunteers who opposed him, gradually developed in the early years of the war. In some ways the motives that led O'Dwyer to take his stand were the same as led some Irish Volunteers to take part in the Rising. For that reason, it is instructive to identify them:

Firstly, he did not publicly support Redmond's call at Woodenbridge for the Irish Volunteers to fight in Europe. While some bishops and many priests did so, O'Dwyer, like Archbishop Walsh of Dublin, remained silent. The split that followed in the Volunteers led to c.170,000 following Redmond as the National Volunteers and c.11,000 retaining the title of Irish Volunteers. In Limerick, the Royal Irish Constabulary, reported that there were c.7,000 National Volunteers and c.450 Irish Volunteers.

Secondly, O'Dwyer saw the accession of Sir Edward Carson and other Unionists into the Coalition war cabinet on 19 May 1915 as a capitulation to the Unionist campaign against Home Rule. O'Dwyer's friend, Bishop Fogarty, informed John Redmond that he could no longer support him on account of this 'horrible scandal.' He spoke of 'the usual nonsense about England's solicitude for small nations. Little she cares for small nations.' Fogarty concluded that 'there is nothing to choose between Carsonism and Kaiserism; and of the two, the latter is a lesser evil.' O'Dwyer shared the same views and did not attend, or support, a Home Rule rally in Limerick in July 1915. It should be noted that earlier, on 23 May, a rally of the Irish Volunteers, led by Patrick Pearse and Tom Clarke, was attacked by a crowd in Limerick and had to abandon its parade.

Thirdly, O'Dwyer, when he became aware of the secret London Treaty of 26 April 1915, between England, France and Russia with Italy, was more than ever convinced that Redmond's support for England in the war was not justified. The treaty not only promised Italy territorial gains at Austria's expense but also explicitly stipulated that the Pope's pleas for peace should be rejected. It also stated that the Pope would not take part in any final peace conference. O'Dwyer probably knew of the treaty terms towards the end of 1915, through his contacts with O'Riordain. For some time, O'Riordain, and Hagan in the Catholic Bulletin, had given warnings of Redmond's naivety in the face of English influences at the Vatican. They noted particularly the appointment of Sir Henry Howard as English envoy in late 1914/January 1915 and the continued influential presence of Cardinal Gasquet, Cardinal Merry Del Val and Fr. Philip Langdon, osb.

Fourthly, O'Dwyer was distressed, even annoyed, that Redmond made no effort to advance the Pope's appeals for peace. On 4 August 1915 O'Dwyer informed Redmond that 'Irish Catholics had no excuse for disregarding the appeal of the Pope' and requested that he bring 'great influence to bear on the English government and press it to give his proposal fair and reasonable consideration.' Redmond gave reasons for not acting on this recommendation and O'Dwyer communicated these views to Bishop Fogarty. Meanwhile, in the Catholic Bulletin, the voices of O'Riordain, Hagan and Hallinan continued to promote the Pope's appeals for peace and O'Dwyer's own appeal for peace was published in Italian in Rome and given to the Pope.

Fifthly, Bishop O'Dwyer responded to the words of John Redmond, in November 1915, that a group of Irish people who were trying to emigrate from Liverpool to avoid conscription were 'very cowardly.' By this time Bishop O'Dwyer was acutely aware of the deaths of many Irishmen, especially those of the Munster Fusiliers, on the western front and in the ongoing campaign in Gallipoli. He wrote, on 10 November 1915, that:

The treatment which the poor Irish emigrant lads have received at Liverpool is enough to make any Irishman's blood boil with anger and indignation. What wrong have they done to deserve insults and outrage at the hands of a brutal English mob? They do not want to be forced into the English army, and sent to fight English battles in some part of the world. Is not this within their right? They are supposed to be freemen, but they are made to feel that they are prisoners, who may be compelled to lay down their lives for a cause that is not worth "three rows of pins" to them. ...

Their crime is that they are not ready to die for England. Why should they? What have they or their forebears ever got from England that they should die for her? Mr Redmond will say a Home Rule Act on the Statute Book. But any intelligent Irishman will say a simulacrum (i.e. mere pretence) of Home Rule, with an express notice that it is never to come into operation. This war "may be just or unjust" but it was England's war, not Ireland's.

This statement was banned from publication by the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act of August 1914. However, it was published by some journals and eventually secured nationwide and worldwide recognition. Mgr O'Riordain had it translated and published in Rome. Augustine Birell, Chief Secretary at Dublin Castle at the time, told the Royal Commission on the Rising that it was 'one of the most formidable anti-recruiting pamphlets ever written.' These events chart some of the steps that led Bishop O'Dwyer to make his statement, on 17 May 1916, against the conduct of General Maxwell, which served as the introduction to this paper.

Other factors influencing Bishop O'Dwyer's response to General Maxwell and the Rising

It was of major significance that Bishop O'Dwyer was aware, through his contact with Mgr O'Riordain, that Count Plunkett had an audience with the Pope on 8 April 1916 at which the Pope, Benedict XV, had imparted a blessing on the Irish Volunteers. The blessing, it should be stressed, was on the Volunteers, and their aspirations for Ireland, and not on a rebellion. The context, in which the blessing took
Firstly, although a new form of press censorship was introduced on 1 June 1916, as part of the martial law regime, O'Dwyer's letter continued to circulate and it generated many positive responses from individuals and public bodies. One of the public bodies was the Tipperary Board of Guardians and Bishop O'Dwyer replied to them on 23 June 1916 in a letter which was even more critical of General Maxwell.

Bishop O'Dwyer wrote: "I beg to thank the Guardians of the Tipperary Union for the resolution which they were so good as to adopt in approval of my attitude towards that brute Maxwell, who, in my opinion, is only one degree less objectionable than the government that screens behind him... but Ireland is not dead yet. While our young men are not afraid to die for her in open fight and when defeated stand proudly with their backs to the walls as targets for English bullets, we need never despair of the old land and your resolution will be a comfort to those who reverence the memory of Ireland's latest martyrs..." Words like these caused some of O'Dwyer's episcopal colleagues to warn him about his own personal safety.

Maxwell remained in his position as head of a martial law regime until the end of August 1916 and could, in theory, take action against the bishop. However, O'Dwyer was not deterred.

Secondly, Bishop O'Dwyer delivered an even longer statement on the Easter Rising, when accepting the Freedom of the City of Limerick from the Corporation in September 1916. He declared, on 14 September 1916, that: 'General Maxwell had the effrontery to give him directions for the government of his diocese, but he hardly thought he would repeat the experiment. (applause) But besides the protection of the two priests against this military dictator, there was the question of his attitude towards the young men whom had been deported in Dublin. Was he to condemn them? Even if their rebellion was not justifiable theoretically, was he to join the condemnation of men and women who without trial were deported in thousands?..."

The Irish Volunteers were too few for the enterprise, but that perhaps was the worst that was to be said against them. Rebellion to lawful must be the act of the nation as a whole, but while that was true, see the case of the Irish Volunteers against England.

The very Government against which they rose, and which dealt with them so mercilessly, had proclaimed its own condemnation. What was that ghost of Home Rule which they kept safe in lavender of the Statute Book but a confession of the wrong of England's rule in Ireland?

In the very height or depth of this juggling the great European war broke out, and the political leaders of Ireland took up the cry from their masters in England that this was a war for small nationalities (laughter) - to protect them from oppression, and allow them to live and develop on their own national lines. No appeal could go deeper into the Irish heart... One could not be surprised if the Irish Volunteers said - if all this is true of Belgium, and Serbia, and Poland, and all the other small nations of Europe, does it not hold good for Ireland? When Lord Wimborne, and Mr Devlin, and Mr Redmond, called on young Irishmen to go to Flanders and give their lives for Home Rule in Belgium, was it not natural in view of the state of their own country that they should ask themselves if it was not British cant and hypocrisy, and in their anger break out in rebellion.

These Irish Volunteers imagined that Ireland had an inalienable right to govern herself (applause); that the deprivation of it was worse for every interest of their country than any number of bad laws in detail. That a foreign Government forced on an unwilling people was a usurpation, and resistance to it was a duty: (applause) Of course they were wrong. (laughter) These reasons might hold good against any other country, but not against England, the home of freedom, the chivalrous and disinterested friend everywhere of small nationalities that take her side. (laughter and applause).

What frightened him? It was not the number of rebels nor the strength of their armaments, but the knowledge that they were the true representatives of Ireland and the exponent of her nationality. (loud applause)

Ireland will never be content as a province, God made her a nation, and while grass grows and water runs there will be men in Ireland to dare
and die for her (applause). It is that national spirit that will yet vindicate our glorious country and not the petty intrigues of parliamentary chicane. And if our representatives in parliament had relied on it, instead of putting their faith in Asquith and Lloyd George and the Liberals, they would not be where they are to-day.

Conclusion

The words of Bishop O’Dwyer, and his use of the term ‘usurping government’ to describe the character of British rule in Ireland, have a relevance even today as one debates the morality of the Rising in the terms of the just rebellion theory. He also engaged in private correspondence with Bishop Foley of Kildare on that issue. However, that debate is for another day. At the time, the words of Bishop O’Dwyer made a tremendous impact. He was a lone voice supporting the rebels; most bishops were critical of the Rising, several of them publicly – Cardinal Logue, AB Harry of Cashel, Kelly of Ross, Mangan of Kerry and others: and no lay people were willing, or able, to defend the rebellion. They were also fearful of martial law. However, Mgr O’Riordain did publish O’Dwyer’s views in Rome and he added his own defence of the Rising in a book entitled, *La Recent Fiammazione en Irlanda*. Bound in a red cover, it became known as the little Red Book, although a white bound cover was given to the Pope.

O’Dwyer’s September speech, like his earlier statements, was published by some journals in defiance of the censors and reached a worldwide audience. All of his statements after the Rising played a vital part in making the Easter Rising acceptable and preparing the ground for a new republican Sinn Fein party in October 1917 and the creation of Dáil Éireann in January 1919. The bishop did not live to see these developments: he died on 19 August 1917 but he was active and influential until the last months of his life. Soon after the bishop’s death, Thomas Ashe, who died on hunger-strike a month later, on 25 September 1917, encouraged his fellow hunger-strikers to ‘pray to Bishop O’Dwyer and the dead who died for Ireland.’ He merits recognition not only in Limerick but also in Ireland as the only voice to speak out publicly in sympathy with those who had fought and died in the Easter Rising. The transforming effects of his public interventions, after the executions of 1916, were invaluable, if incalculable. He certainly lived up to the motto which he had selected for his episcopate - ‘I trust in valor not in arms.’