

Fr. Eugene Sheehy

by John Harrold

It is Easter 1916, in Dublin and the Rising has started. The republican garrison in the General Post Office is under siege and the 350 plus garrison in the GPO is under the command of James Connolly. Events are not going well for the Irish rebels. The building is taking a pounding and, amid the mayhem, an old frail priest moves among the Volunteers, giving Holy Communion to the rebels and ministering to the wounded. The priest is Fr. Eugene Sheehy- 'militant spokesman for the tenant-farmer' known as 'the Land League Priest'. For almost a week the insurgents held the GPO but by now time is running out. It is Friday, 28 April, and the building is on fire and starting to crumble. It offers little protection to those inside and the decision is made to evacuate via Moore Street to a nearby factory. The evacuees take up positions, mainly in the houses along Moore Street. Only now does the fragile priest leave.

Early next morning, the members of the Provisional Government who are present on Moore Street decide that their cause is lost and propose to negotiate a surrender. A few days earlier, on Wednesday, 26 April, Fr. Sheehy's nephew-in-law Frances Sheehy-Skeffington had been summarily executed at Portabello Barracks. He was a pacifist and had no involvement in the Rising. Fr. Sheehy's former altar server in Bruree, Eamon de Valera, was the last leader to surrender.

Eugene Sheehy was born in Broadford, County Limerick in 1841, eldest son of a relatively well-off milling family. He had a younger brother, David, and a sister, Mary. Their father was a devout Roman Catholic and hoped that both his sons would become priests. Eugene studied in Mungret College, near Limerick city. Because of their father's objection to the compulsory oath of allegiance required of students of Maynooth, both Sheehy sons were sent to the Irish College in Paris to study for the priesthood. David returned to

Ireland while Eugene went on to be ordained in Paris in 1868. In 1876, Fr. Eugene Sheehy was appointed curate to his first parish in Kilmallock, County Limerick. He was appointed Administrator in the neighbouring parish of Rockhill-Bruree in 1884 and two years later, on 8 October, 1886, became Parish Priest there on the death of the incumbent, Fr. Enraght.

During his time in Bruree, Fr. Sheehy was noted as a fine preacher, a staunch nationalist and a devoted priest. He was known for his nationalistic sermons, which were not lost on one of his altar servers, Eamon de Valera, who later credited his former Parish Priest with imbuing him with patriotism. Fr. Sheehy's Land League ideals led him into confrontation with local landlord, John Gubbins of Bruree House, in 1886. The landlord threatened to evict some of his tenants for arrears of rent. When the landlord refused to reach a compromise on the evictions, Fr. Sheehy organised local farmers to refuse permission for the foxhunt, led by Gubbins, entry to their lands. Gubbins sold his hunting horses as a result of this boycott, but the evictions still took place later in the year.

Remembering the misery and suffering he had seen as a child, Fr. Sheehy, shortly after his arrival in Kilmallock, became involved in the land agitation movement. He was at the inaugural meeting of the Land League in Dublin in 1879 and quickly set up a branch of the organisation in the Kilmallock area, becoming branch president. By doing so, he was defying the bishops who had condemned the Land League. In an effort by the authorities to suppress the organisation, Fr Sheehy, along with other branch members, was arrested in May 1881. The priest, described by the Special Resident Magistrate, Clifford Lloyd, as "most violent, disloyal and a notorious Fenian" was imprisoned in Naas and then in Kilmainham Jail until his release four months later. After his release, he travelled with Charles



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Stewart Parnell to Cork where they received a tumultuous reception. It was during this visit, according to his niece, Hanna, that Fr. Sheehy, in the course of his address said: "No man has a right to set the bounds to the onward march of a nation". This was later used by Parnell and is inscribed on a statue to his memory in Dublin. Later that year, Fr. Sheehy, accompanied by Tim Healy (who became the first Governor-General of the Irish Free State), travelled to America to raise funds for the Land League.



Fr Eugene Sheehy with Hanna and Francis Sheehy Skeffington in August 1912



Charles Stewart Parnell with Fr. Eugene Sheehy

Fr. Sheehy, having already defied the Irish bishops and the local landlord, went one better and defied the Pope. Pius IX had confined himself to the Vatican following the unification of Italy. He, and successive Popes until 1929, became known as the 'Prisoner in the Vatican'. Leo XIII, successor to Pius IX, had been persuaded to condemn the renewed agrarian movement in Ireland, now known as 'the Plan of Campaign'. At the time of the annual Peter's Pence collection for the benefit of the Pope, Fr. Sheehy's brother, David, was in Tullamore Jail because of his support for the Plan of Campaign. The priest, in his sermon on the occasion of that collection, contrasted the conditions under which his brother was being held at Tullamore with those of the Pope in the Vatican. He urged the parishioners "to contribute whatever you feel you can afford to the support of the Prisoner of the Vatican". Apparently, little or no money went from the parish to Rome in 1887.

After his ordination, Fr. Sheehy's return to Ireland coincided with the movement to revitalise Gaelic games, which culminated with the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884. He may not have been at that historic meeting at Hayes' Hotel in Thurles, but he was deeply involved with the

new organisation from the start. He was elected to the first Central Council of the GAA. He was also involved in the split which took place in the Association in Limerick in 1887, which led to the county having two boards for over a year, with both holding county championships. He set up the South Limerick Hurling Club, which was based in Bruree, guiding his charges to the Limerick Senior Hurling County title in 1893.

When Fr. Sheehy took seriously ill in 1907 his niece, Hanna, came from Dublin to look after him. He retired as parish priest of Rockhill-Bruree in 1909 due to continued ill health and went to live in Dublin.

Fr. Sheehy was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and served on its executive for a time. In 1910, he visited America, representing the Supreme Council of the IRB at the annual Clann na Gael convention. In Dublin he became particularly friendly with Thomas Clarke and Sean McDermott. He attended the meeting at the Rotunda in Dublin in November 1913, at which the Irish Volunteers were founded, a meeting also attended by his former altar boy, Eamon de Valera.

Fr. Sheehy's brother, David Sheehy, was M.P. for Galway from 1885 to 1900 and for South Meath from 1903 to 1908. David Sheehy, like his brother, also spent time in prison for his involvement in the land agitation in 1887. David Sheehy's daughters, and Eugene Sheehy's nieces, included Kathleen (mother of Conor Cruise O'Brien), Hanna (wife of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, executed without trial in Dublin in 1916) and Mary (wife of Tom Kettle, an Irish nationalist who was killed in 1916 during the Battle of the Somme in World War 1).

Fr. Eugene Sheehy died on 15 July 1917, just over a year after his heroics in the GPO and is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.



Portrait of David Sheehy MP