

SIR JOHN BOURKE

A Limerick martyr

By Rober Edward Brennan, O.P.

THIS is the story of Sir John Bourke, lord baron of Brittas, and a lineal descendant of the Red Earl of Ulster.

Not long ago, I paid a visit to his castle home, now an ivy-covered ruin. It lies some 11 miles south-east of Limerick, on the banks of the Mulcair.

My guide was Paddy Ryan, a native of Annacotty, who has fished in every nook and corner of the river and has measured every inch of the ruins of Brittas Castle. Paddy, in his eighties, is still strong and hearty; and one of those anglers who never say die. As a lad in his teens, he learned A Boy's Song; and the enthusiasm of youth still rings in his voice as he sings the opening lines:—

Where the pools are bright and deep,
Where the grey trout lies asleep,
Up the river and over the lea,
That's the way for Billie and me.

But to return to John Bourke—from what I can gather out of books on his period, he was born around the middle of the sixteenth century. Growing to manhood, he was married to Mistress Grace, the daughter of Sir George Thornton. There were children to bless the union, but I have no idea of their names.

A MODEL FATHER

Sir John was well off in the goods of this world, yet in no sense attached to them. Neither was he cold-hearted, or overbearing, or hard to please. Quite the contrary! People proudly pointed to him as a model father and a magnanimous Christian gentleman; with a kindly disposition and all the lofty virtues that befitted his high rank. This, I may say, was rather unusual in his age, when persons of quality were more interested in sustaining their position and social prestige, than in nourishing the habits that make a good Catholic.

But of all the gifts of heaven and predilection that stand out in the life of a future martyr, that of fortitude is always foremost; and certainly Sir John Bourke was no exception to the rule, bearing himself most bravely and patiently and perseveringly in the face of every trammel to his faith. And there were stumbling blocks aplenty, to be sure, in those days of dark misrule! Moreover, as a man of quick sympathies, he was deeply affected by the sufferings of others; so much so that, at one time, he thought of taking his family to Spain, where the climate of religion would be more congenial for his children. A servant discovered his plan and revealed it to his father-in-law, who straight away took steps to prevent his departure. The thwarting of his desires, by God's sweet counter-plan, only served to make him more zealous than ever in the observance of his duties. He went to Mass openly, often bringing the priest into his own castle home for the celebration of the mysteries. His closest friends were the friars from St. Saviour's in Limerick; and chief among those, as we learn from old documents, was one Father Edmund O'Halaghan. Through a well-trained and well-paid system of informers, a close eye was kept on his private behaviour. His enemies, in fact, were simply biding their time 'til he would make a mis-step.

TRUMPED-UP CHARGE

At last he was arrested on a trumped-up charge of disloyalty to the king; whereupon he was whisked off to Dublin, so that he might be more securely guarded within the walls of its Castle. Meanwhile, a dreadful plague began to ravage the city, whereupon the high government officials betook themselves to country seats. Many prisoners lost their lives; and of those who survived, all were set free. Among the latter was Sir John Bourke.

Some very interesting tales are told of the time he spent in prison; how, for example, he said the little office of the Blessed Virgin, along with her Rosary, every day of his confinement; how, too, after the fashion of a monk, he set aside certain periods of the day for meditation on the truths of his faith. His cell was full of mice that kept running about his pallet at night and gnawing at his bedclothes. He seemed unconscious of their presence; or, if aware, like St. Martin de Forres, he treated them as God's creatures and worthy of his mercy. On one occasion, we are told, his dungeon became radiant with a heavenly light; giving him unspeakable consolation and assurance that his pains and discomforts were

pleasing to his Lord.

After his return to Brittas, Sir John again sought out the company of the Dominicans, asking Father Halaghan to receive him into the Confraternity of the Rosary. There is also some colour to the belief that he was enrolled as tertiary in the Order of Saint Dominic. Certainly, he practised the discipline which is common to that brotherhood: saying his beads devoutly every day; making frequent use of the sacraments; hearing Mass on every possible occasion; doing acts of charity to friends and enemies alike; conducting himself, in short, as a true follower of Christ and a most tender devotee of His Mother.

But as Sir John grew in grace and the arts of sweet contemplation, his worldly affairs seemed to fall away and decline, going from one bad estate to another; due, in the main, to the conniving of those who abhorred his religion and were plotting his ruin. . . . We come, then, to Rosary Sunday, 1606, when matters reached a crisis. Some time before, word had been passed to the authorities that the baron of Brittas intended having services in his castle for the Christians of the neighbourhood. The Dominicans from Saint Saviour's, with Father Halaghan in charge, were invited to celebrate the Banquet of their Eucharistic Lord. It was early October, with its mist and mellow sunlight; when trees and shrubs are glowing with nature's richest hues; and the grain, now grown fat by the summer's long nursing, is waiting to be harvested and carried off to the barns. For Catholics, however, it was anything but a season of fair weather and prosperity. All over the land, the priests were being hounded and tracked down; and the penalty of death, which was levelled against those who said Mass, also fell on the layman who gave refuge to God's ministers or in any way aided their "base popish practices."

RAN GRAVE RISK

Now, Sir John was no stranger to the tactics of priest-hunters. Perhaps better than most people, he was aware of the risk that he ran in having the sons of Saint Dominic at his castle. . . . the celebrant had intoned the Gloria; and the choir, caught up in the spirit of Our Lady's Feast of Roses, was gallantly responding with Peace on earth to men of goodwill, when a loud roar of voices was heard at the gates. It was the answer of the soldiery to the hymn of the angels.

Forewarned of the movements of his enemies, Sir John had arranged for some defence of his keep, so that Mass could go on, despite the pounding at the barriers. Resistance was stout enough to last for several days; then, seeing the bootlessness of holding out any longer, Lord Brittas and the Dominicans stole away from the castle under cover of darkness. How the latter fared afterwards is unknown to the historian; but of Sir John it is recorded that he fled down to Waterford, where he remained in hiding some time, seeking passage on a ship to Spain. Before he could leave, however, he was identified by a woman from Carrick-on-Suir who gave in his name to the authorities. He was taken prisoner and brought back to Limerick where he had to stand trial. The verdict, of course, was a foregone conclusion: he was guilty of treason and sentenced to be hanged.

Such was the fate of the brave Christian knight who had kept trust with his God and his conscience—and with her whom he always honoured as his Queen of the Rosary. The judge who condemned him was Sir Dominic Sarsfield.

In 1606, the site now occupied by the Good Shepherd convent was known as Gallows Hill; and

Miss Gwynneth Jones, Crawfordsville, Iowa, U.S.A., one of 28 members of the 4H organization of America now in this country to study farming and social conditions. Seated (l. to r.): Mr. Seán O'Grady, Chairman; Miss Jones, Miss Mary Bowen, Treasurer. At back is Mr. Jim Ruttle, Mrs. and Mr. E. Sheehy, Springmount House, whose great, Miss Jones was, and Mr. Thos. McDonnell.

here, atop its summit, Lord Brittas died the death of a martyr on the 20th of December. Before the rope was put round his neck, he made an unusual bequest; dedicating the child that his wife was expecting to the Order of Saint Dominic; adding that since this was all he had left of his earthly inheritance, he willed it to God and the service of religion. It was a girl whom the mother called Eleanor; and obedient to the wishes of her father, she went off to Portugal in her 33rd year, to become a Dominican nun in a convent near Lisbon. There she died in the odour of sanctity on the feast of Our Lady's Assumption, 1661.

OUR LADY OF LIMERICK

As a postscript to what I've written, I might add that the end of Sir John's career was the beginning of the story of Our Lady of Limerick; for, Patrick Sarsfield, who gave up her lovely image, was the nephew of the man who passed sentence on the saintly baron; and the statue was offered in reparation for the sin of the uncle. . . .

So we come to the close of a sunny day in August. The meadows around Brittas are yellow with buttercups; and from the lonely walls of the castle, I've plucked a leaf of ivy that will never turn here in my book of treasured memories. . . . the present owners of the land that once were Sir John's asked me to tea before returning to Limerick. . . . the mother was showing me her children, one by one, of whom she is proud with good reason. "And last, but not least," I heard her say, "this is our little Eleanor, christened in honour of Sir John Bourke's youngest daughter." After 300 years, the people of Brittas have not forgotten the great lord who was master of their harp, before his life was snuffed out on a gibbet. But for those outside its pale, I fear that the majority have no notion of its import and traditions. Nor can they be blamed altogether, since there is neither marker, nor placard, nor signpost, to tell the passing traveller that this was the home of one of Ireland's greatest heroes. To supply the omission, therefore, the fathers of Saint Saviour's in Limerick, with their friends, have sent a petition to the Board of Public Works that a plaque of seemly size and proper wording be erected on or near the ruins of Brittas Castle; so that goodfolk passing by may call to mind the splendid virtues of the man who once lived there; who crowned his useful life by giving it generously for his faith; and who, in the future designs of divine Providence, may one day be raised to the altars of the Church.

HINTS FOR THE HOME

Boys' pyjamas nearly always tear at the bottom of the front opening. Prevent this by sewing on the inside two pieces of tape in the form of a letter T, one down the seam and the other across. Do this when the pyjamas are new and there will be no trouble later on.

Coffee produces a very stubborn stain, and a coffee stain on a carpet will be very difficult to remove unless it is tackled while still fresh. Emergency action when coffee is spilled on a carpet is to sponge the area immediately with a cloth soaked in clean water. After going over the area with the cloth wet, rinse it, wring it out and mop up as much of the moisture in the carpet as possible. See that the damp area is not walked upon. If a stain is left, rub glycerine into it, as this will remove the colouring matter. Wash out with lukewarm water containing a little solution of ammonia.

Do not contemplate cleaning discoloured elements on a gas fire. They become very brittle in use and the chances are that they would break in removal or while being cleaned. For all the principal makes it is possible to get gleaming white replacement elements at moderate cost.

Hang a bunch of fresh mint in your open kitchen window. This will keep the flies out. Have you joined a Christmas club yet? Some are open now and many more will open in September. This is an excellent way of saving up for those special Christmas items that seem to run away with the money if they all have to be paid for out of the Christmas budget itself.

NEW SECTION IN BREADBAKING COMPETITION

THIS year's National Wholemeal Breadbaking competition—the sixth to be organised by the E.S.B. in co-operation with the National Ploughing Association—will include a Parish Section to encourage a greater number of people to take part. The Parish competitions will be organised with the help of Muintir na Tíre, Macra na Féirme and the Irish Countrywomen's Association.

To provide greater scope for competitors, Parish Committees, with representatives from the co-operating groups, will be set up throughout the country. In organising the competition at parish level, which involves a great deal of extra effort, it has been found necessary to drop the section for juvenile competitors. The competition will be open, therefore, only to competitors of 16 years of age or over.

Parish winners will compete in the county finals, and each county winner will compete for the overall awards in the National Final in Thurles on November 7th and 8th next.

50 PRIZES. Up to 50 prizes representing a total value of about £1,000 will be

awarded. The overall winner will receive the E.S.B. Perpetual Trophy—the National Award—and a cash prize of £50 presented by the National Ploughing Association, together with a de luxe electric cooker. In addition, there will be substantial cash awards and numerous consolation prizes for runners-up as electric cookers, food mixers, vacuum cleaners, radios, convector heaters and electric hair driers.

Among other interests co-operating with the organisers are the Technical Instruction Branch of the Department of Education, the County Vocational Education Committees and the Irish Flour Millers' Association. Last year's total entry of over 4,000 was the largest since the competition was started in 1957, and it is hoped that that figure will be exceeded this year.

AIM. The aim of the competition is to foster an interest in home breadbaking. Irish home baked bread is becoming increasingly popular among visitors to the country. There is no charge for entry. Details are available at any E.S.B. office.

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