

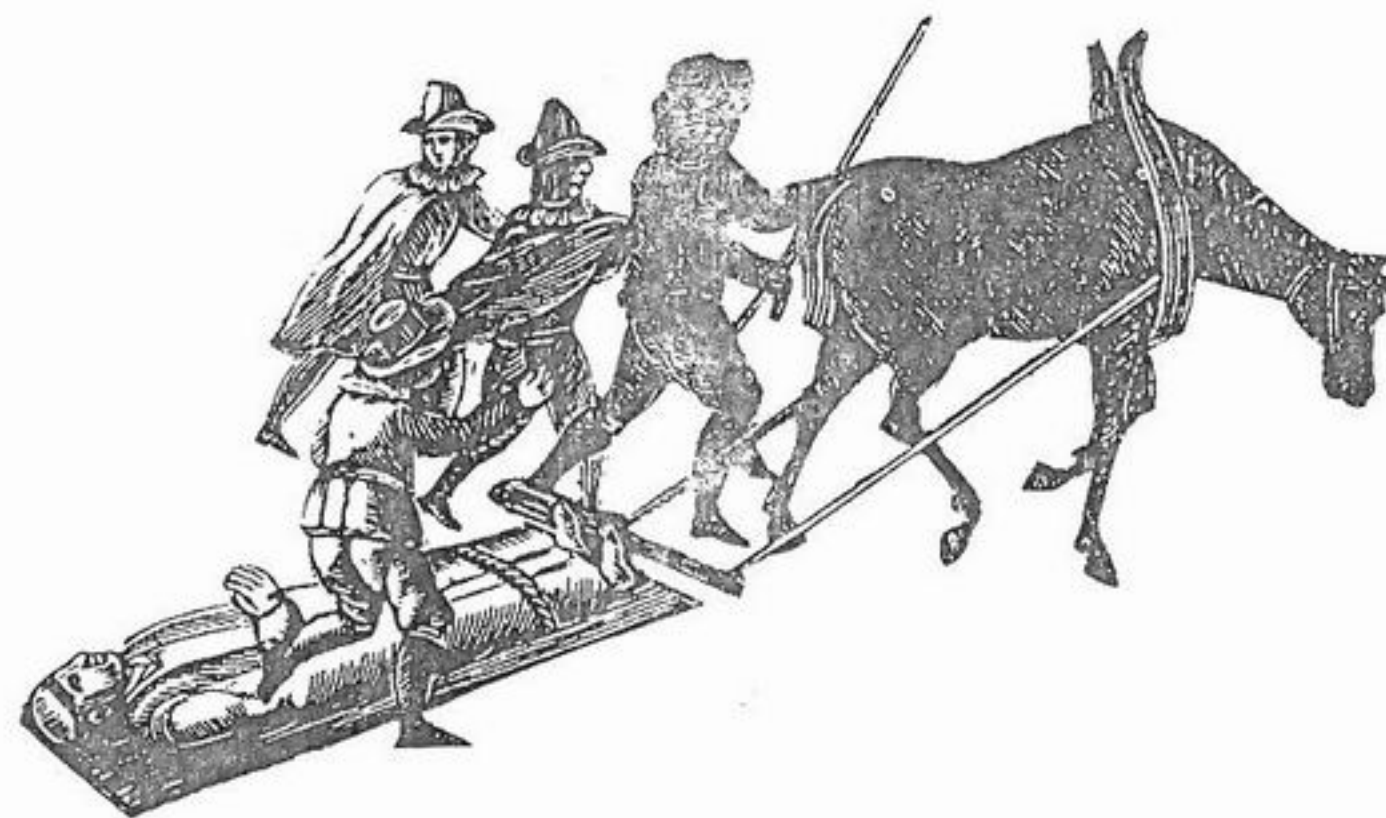
cles were worked and favours granted at his grave and at his place of execution. The remains of the church, which is now once again in ruins, can be seen in a small park in Camden Row, near Kevin Street in Dublin. The martyr's grave is probably within the walls of the church but the exact location is unknown.

Dermot O'Hurley's story is a strange one. A layman enjoying a peaceful and prosperous career in the universities of Europe is suddenly appointed archbishop of a diocese in strife-torn Ireland. A life of steady and unspectacular success ends in a year of tragic and terrible failure. He never even reaches his diocese. After no more than a few weeks of freedom, he is imprisoned, tortured, and put to death. Yet if he had ended his life as a Roman professor, his name would be forgotten. It is because of what seemed like his failure that his name lives on.

His generosity in accepting his appointment, his faith in making his journey home, his selflessness in giving up his freedom to protect his friend, his constancy in professing his religion, his endurance under extremes of physical pain, his grace and courage in the moment of death, these are the qualities that have endeared him to succeeding generations and made his name one of the greatest in the long roll of Irish martyrs.

THE EARL'S CHAPLAIN

Maurice MacKenraghty



THE DESMOND REBELLION was over by the end of 1583. As a military commander, the Earl of Desmond had proved to be no match for his adversaries, the Earl of Ormond and his English allies. His only military success, if it can be called a success, was to attack and plunder the town of Youghal and then retreat again. From then on one misfortune followed another. His great castle at Askeaton was besieged and captured, his other strongholds were taken one by one, his supplies of food and ammunition ran out, his men deserted him in increasing numbers.

In 1580 a contingent of about 600 Spanish and Italian troops was sent to his assistance by the King of Spain, Philip II. They landed at Smerwick Harbour in September and entrenched themselves in Dún an Óir, the old promontory fort which had been used by James Fitzmaurice the previous year. They expected to be joined by an

Irish army under Desmond's leadership. Instead, they found themselves besieged from land and sea by a superior English force. Out-gunned and out-numbered, they surrendered and handed over all their arms. Thereupon the English commander, Lord Grey, ordered his troops to massacre the defenceless foreigners. Only a dozen or so officers were spared, in the hope that their families would be prepared to pay ransoms for their return.

The Earl of Desmond became a hunted fugitive, protected only by his own wits and the loyalty of his Irish supporters. He was accompanied by a handful of devoted followers, who refused to abandon him in his misfortune. One of these was Eleanor, his Countess, who shared many hair-breadth escapes with her husband. On one occasion they were surprised at night by their enemies near Kilmallock and the Earl and his wife hid themselves by standing up to their necks in an ice-cold river.

Another faithful companion was his chaplain, Father Maurice MacKenraghty. Maurice was a native of the town of Kilmallock, where his father worked as a silversmith. Instead of taking up his father's trade, he chose to study theology in preparation for the priesthood. He obtained the degree of Bachelor of Divinity and was in due course ordained priest.

Kilmallock lay in the territory of the Earl of Desmond. The promising young priest became attached to the Desmond household and was appointed chaplain and confessor to the Earl. When the Earl accepted the leadership of the rebellion in 1579, Maurice accompanied him throughout the campaign and undertook the duties of military chaplain to the fighting men. He remained faithful to his master even when almost all his other followers had forsaken him.

By the summer of 1583 the net was closing around the Earl. In June the Countess parted with her husband and went to the Earl of Ormond in a last desperate attempt to bring about a peaceful settlement. Her attempt was unsuccessful and the hunt for the Earl intensified. On the 17 September some soldiers under the command of Viscount Fermoy came upon a group of about a dozen men in the Sliabh Luachra area, on the border of Counties Cork and Kerry. It was the Earl of Desmond and his last few followers. In the chase

that followed, the Earl escaped but his chaplain, who was riding a slower horse, was taken prisoner.

The captured priest was sent to the Earl of Ormond, Black Tom, who ordered him to be confined in Clonmel prison. He sent a letter to London to Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's Treasurer, and informed him of the capture:

My Lord, if this be the priest that hath been hid with Desmond all this while, he may declare the names of his master's relievers with many other things, and so disclose much treason ... I would this chaplain and I were for one hour with you in your chamber, that you might know the secrets of his heart, which by fair or foul means he must open unto me.

The phrase 'fair or foul means' suggests that the priest was going to be tortured to make him reveal what he knew about Desmond and his supporters. There is no reason to suppose, however, that this was ever seriously intended by Ormond. His real aim in writing the letter was to convince the Queen that he was active in supporting her cause and hunting down her enemies. In all probability, his intention was to keep the priest in Clonmel jail for a year or two until the rebellion was over, and then have him quietly released.

Two months later, on the 11 November, the massive man-hunt came to an end. A group of soldiers, Irishmen in the English service, followed the trail of some stolen cattle to a cave near Tralee. Some men fled as they approached and they entered the cave to find a prematurely aged man, attended by a woman and two boys. It was the Earl of Desmond. One of the soldiers, a man called Daniel Kelly, seized him and cut off his head, the most wanted head in Ireland. The head was sent to Ormond and he in turn sent it to Queen Elizabeth, who ordered it to be displayed on London Bridge. So ended the life and the rebellion of the tragic Earl. He was greatly mourned by the people of Munster, perhaps more than he deserved, for he had brought nothing but misfortune upon them. But they knew that by his death they had lost the last defender of their old religion and their old way of life.

For the whole of 1584 Father MacKenraghty remained in prison in Clonmel. The living conditions were primitive in the extreme, but after his months and years on the run he was well accustomed to

hardship. Though he was kept in close confinement, he must have been allowed to receive visitors fairly freely. We are told that he carried out an active apostolate from his prison cell, strengthening the waverers and encouraging the faint-hearted to remain firm in their faith. He urged sinners to turn from evil, to restore ill-gotten goods, to give generously to the poor, to live lives of prayer and holiness. His words were given added force by the example of his own faith and piety and by the patience with which he bore his suffering.

So matters continued until Easter 1585. One of the leading citizens of Clonmel was a man named Victor White, an alderman of the town and a devout Catholic. He approached the head jailer and offered to give him a sum of money if he would release the priest on Holy Saturday night, so that the Catholics of the town could celebrate Easter by going to confession, attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion. The priest would return to the prison on Sunday morning and no-one would be any the wiser. The jailer agreed to the proposal and pocketed the bribe.

As ill-luck would have it, the President of Munster, John Norris, happened to arrive in Clonmel with a troop of soldiers around this time. The jailer, seeing an opportunity of doubling his profits, went to Norris and offered to betray the leading Catholics of the area for a suitable consideration. All that Norris had to do was to raid Victor White's house in the early hours of Easter morning and catch all his birds in one net.

Holy Saturday arrived and Father MacKenraghty was allowed to leave the prison and make his way to White's house, a substantial residence with its own private oratory for the celebration of Mass. As darkness fell, Catholics from all the neighbouring areas began to arrive. Word of the priest's coming had spread and the house was soon filled with people. We have a description of the scene based on eye-witness accounts:

Now that the long-awaited and joyful hour had come, it was with the greatest zeal that the priest spent the whole of that night in hearing confessions. By early morning all was in readiness for the celebration of Mass. Those of the congregation who had already confessed were divided among the different bedrooms, where they devoted themselves to prayer in preparation for communion.

Others were in the chapel making the altar ready. Others were still being absolved by the priest. The noble Victor was walking in the hall, awaiting the arrival of yet more Catholics, greeting them courteously when they came, bringing them quickly to the chapel, and at once returning to the hall to receive the next comers.

While all this going on, the soldiers were silently making their way through the streets and surrounding the house. Suddenly they burst through the door and found Victor still awaiting his guests in the hall. They arrested him on the spot and then rushed through the house, hoping to catch the priest in the act of saying Mass.

The confusion was indescribable. Some of those in the bedrooms stayed where they were in the hope of being overlooked. Others ran down to the basement to hide themselves. Those who were in the oratory rushed out in disorder, leaving chalice and vestments behind in their panic. Finding the doors guarded by armed men, a number jumped out of windows and some of them were injured in the fall.

Father MacKenraghty himself hid under a heap of straw. The soldiers prodded it with their swords and one of them pierced his leg but he managed to avoid crying out and they passed on. He waited until the hue and cry died down and then succeeded in making his escape. Most of the others were allowed to go, though not until the soldiers had deprived them of their valuables. Victor White was marched off to jail.

What happened next bears a striking resemblance to the capture of Dermot O'Hurley. Victor White, like the Baron of Slane, was threatened with the loss of his property and even of his life unless he could persuade the priest to return and give himself up. But Victor was a braver man than Slane and he steadfastly refused, saying he would rather die than betray the priest.

In his hiding-place, Maurice heard of his friend's danger. He returned to Clonmel of his own free will and surrendered himself to the authorities. He was at once loaded with chains and sent back to his old place of detention, the town jail. This time his fate was in the hands of Norris, not Ormond, and he could expect no mercy.

There is no record of any trial, nor could one have taken place, since the prisoner had not committed any capital offence. Norris

simply invoked martial law. He declared him to be guilty of treason and sentenced him to be hanged. He made the offer, usual in these cases, to set the prisoner free and lavishly reward him if he would recognise the Queen as head of the Church. The prisoner rejected the offer and was led to execution.

He was dragged through the streets of Clonmel in the customary way at the tail of a horse. When he came within sight of the place of execution, he asked to be allowed finish the last part of the journey on his knees and this wish was granted. Arriving at the gallows, he spoke to the crowd for as long as he was allowed, urging them to remain always true to their faith and asking for their prayers.

He was hanged for a time from the gallows, cut down while still alive and immediately beheaded. It was the 20 April 1585. For more than a week his head was exhibited over the cross in the centre of the town as a warning to those who might be tempted to follow his example. Then the Catholics, having bribed the appropriate officials, were allowed to collect his remains and bury them in the ruins of the Franciscan church, behind the high altar.

The memory of his death remained alive in Clonmel for many generations. The alley-way off Lough Street where Victor White's house stood became known as Martyr's Lane. The large number of young men from the town who became priests in the years that followed was attributed to the example of Father Maurice McKenraghty.