

DEATH OF AN ARCHBISHOP

Dermot O'Hurley



THE BEST KNOWN Irish martyr of the sixteenth century died in Dublin in the same year as Margaret Bermingham. For a time he was her fellow prisoner in Dublin Castle, though there is no evidence that they ever met. He was Dermot O'Hurley, who three years earlier had been appointed Archbishop of Cashel. Like Patrick O'Healy, he died without ever reaching his diocese.

Dermot O'Hurley was born in Emly, Co. Tipperary, about the year 1530. His father was a land-owner and acted as an agent in business matters for the Earl of Desmond, which meant that the family were well-off by the standards of the time. As a young man, Dermot was sent abroad to study at the University of Louvain in Belgium, where he began what was to prove a distinguished academic career. At this time he had no intention of becoming a priest

and his interest was mainly in legal studies. He received a doctorate in both civil and canon law and was appointed Dean of the University's law school. After fifteen years in Louvain, he went to the University of Rheims as Professor of Law and spent four years there. Finally, about 1570, he made his way to Rome where he continued to work and lecture in the field of law, and where he soon gained a high reputation, not only as a scholar but as a man of deep faith and outstanding moral character.

In 1581 it was decided to appoint a new archbishop to the vacant see of Cashel. Pope Gregory XIII asked Dermot O'Hurley to accept the position and he agreed. It is hard to say which was the more extraordinary, the offer or the acceptance. A fifty-year-old layman who had spent all his life studying and teaching law seemed a strange choice to be an archbishop. Nor was the position offered an attractive one. Dermot was now in comfortable middle age, a settled and respected member of the academic community. He was being asked to leave this peace and security and return to Ireland, where he would have to live as a fugitive with the ever-present threats of betrayal, imprisonment, torture and death. That the offer was made and accepted says all that needs to be said about the respect in which he was held and the qualities that deserved it.

In the summer of 1581 a series of ordinations brought Dermot through all the grades of the clerical life, the four minor orders followed by the four major orders, subdeacon, deacon, priest and bishop. In September he was formally appointed Archbishop of Cashel and in November he was given the *p a l l i u m*, the sign of an archbishop's rank. It now remained for him to find some safe way of getting back to Ireland and taking up his duties.

It was not until the summer of 1583 that he succeeded in making the journey. In the little port of Le Croisic in Brittany he met a ship's captain from Drogheda who was willing to take the risk of bringing him to Ireland. As a precaution, he sent his baggage and his documents of appointment on another ship, so that if he were captured there would be nothing to betray his identity. His own ship made the voyage safely but the other ship fell into the hands of

pirates and the documents found their way to Dublin Castle. By the time he landed in Ireland, the authorities knew he was coming and were already on the watch for him.

Knowing that there would be government spies watching those leaving the ship at Drogheda, he disembarked at Holmpatrick, a little harbour near Skerries. It was his first time to stand on his native soil for more than thirty years. He was met by an Irish priest, John Dillon, who brought him to stay at an inn in Drogheda. At dinner in the inn, he unwisely let himself get involved in a debate about religion with an argumentative Protestant gentleman. He spoke with such force and learning that it was obvious he was no ordinary traveller. A well-wisher told him that he was in danger of betraying his identity and advised him to leave at once. Father Dillon's cousin, the Baron of Slane, had his castle only ten miles away and the two men decided to go there as quickly as they could and ask for shelter.

In the meantime, the Protestant gentleman made his way back to Dublin Castle and reported what he had seen and heard. His name is given as Walter Ball and it seems very likely that he was the same Walter Ball who had so often argued with priests in his mother's house and had recently committed her to prison for her faith. The Castle officials did not take long in putting two and two together and coming to the conclusion that the man in the inn was none other than the newly arrived Archbishop of Cashel. The hunt was on.

Thomas Fleming, Baron of Slane, welcomed the two men and invited them to spend some time in his house. Slane Castle still stands now as it stood then on a hill beside the river Boyne, one of Ireland's largest and stateliest homes. It was easy for the two men to remain out of sight in a private room in the castle while they waited for the hue and cry to die down. After some days, they became bolder and began to appear in public and to eat with the Baron and his guests.

One day a new visitor arrived at the Castle. He was Sir Robert Dillon, a man who graphically illustrates the tangled web of loyalties, political, religious and family, in which so many people of the time found themselves entrapped. Sir Robert was chief justice of the common pleas and a member of the privy council. At the same time, he was a cousin both of the Baron and of Father Dillon. Ambition pushed him towards the new religion, family ties and traditions

urged him to hold on to the old. Whose side was he on? His family and friends did not know. He hardly knew himself. It is not surprising that the archbishop, after more than thirty years abroad, found it difficult to know who he could trust.

It is likely enough that Dillon's arrival in Slane was no accident and that he hoped to find out some information about the archbishop. His hopes were soon fulfilled. When the dinner was served, Dermot was among those at table. It was an unwise move, but the Baron probably felt that even if Dillon did recognise him, he could be trusted as a guest and a kinsman not to betray him. In this he was mistaken. The archbishop's name was never mentioned but his bearing and conversation once again gave him away and Dillon was in no doubt who he was. He said nothing at the time but returned to Dublin and reported to the Lord Justices that he had found the man they were looking for. Then he wrote a letter to the Baron telling him to arrest the stranger staying in his house or suffer the consequences.

The Baron was furious at the letter. He had no intention of breaking the laws of hospitality and laying hands upon an honoured and distinguished guest. It was clear to Dermot, however, that it was no longer safe for him to stay in Slane so he decided to make his way south to his diocese of Cashel. He wanted first of all to pay his respects to the Earl of Ormond, in whose territory the diocese of Cashel lay. He had as his travelling companion one of the Earl's illegitimate sons, who had been staying in Slane. They came to Carrick-on-Suir, where the Earl had his principal residence, an old fortified castle to which he had added a new manor-house in the Elizabethan style. It has recently been renovated and today looks much as it did when Dermot O'Hurley visited it in the September of 1583.

Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, was generally known as Black Tom, a reference both to his complexion and his character. He was another of those Old English nobles who liked to keep a foot in both camps. He grew up in the royal court in London, where he embraced the Protestant religion. His dark good looks made him a favourite of Queen Elizabeth and some said a lover as well. Back in Ireland, he took the English side against his long-time enemy the

Earl of Desmond in the Munster rebellion and by the autumn of 1583 he had brought the rebels close to defeat. He had shown no mercy to their lives or their property, killing men and burning crops and houses wherever he went. Yet at the same time he had no desire to increase the power of the English Queen in the south of Ireland. He was fighting for himself, not for her. He wanted to live as his forebears had lived, ruling his people in the old way, without dictation from Dublin or London.

Despite his profession of Protestantism, he still retained an affection for the old religion. He greeted the new archbishop respectfully and this respect deepened as he came to know him better. It is said that he asked him to administer the sacrament of confirmation to his young son and heir, James, a sickly child who was feared to be in danger of death. He made arrangements for a house to be put at Dermot's disposal in the town and saw to it that he was provided with food and anything else that he needed.

Dermot was now in a position to see for himself the sorry state of the people of Munster. As a result of the scorched earth policy pursued by Ormond and his English allies, famine and disease were widespread. The English poet, Edmund Spenser, has left us a graphic description of the scenes he witnessed in the wake of the conquering armies:

Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them. They looked anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves, they did eat of the dead carrions, happy where they could find them, yea, and one another soon after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves. And if they found a plot of watercresses or shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue therewithal, that in short space there were none almost left and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void of man or beast.

One of the archbishop's first objectives was to restore peace to the region entrusted to his spiritual care. Shortly after his arrival in Carrick, news arrived that the Earl of Desmond had been surprised by some soldiers on the borders of Cork and Kerry. The Earl's chaplain,

Father Maurice MacKenraghty, was taken prisoner and the Earl himself barely escaped. The archbishop began to explore the possibility of making contact with the Earl. He hoped he might be able to negotiate peace terms between him and the Earl of Ormond and so bring the war to an end.

He was equally anxious to reconcile those who were divided by religious differences. He wrote a very courteous letter to that notoriously unprincipled character Miler Magrath, who had been appointed Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor by the Pope and then Protestant Archbishop of Cashel by the Queen. Written in Latin, it is the only one of Dermot's letters that has survived. In it he thanks Magrath for a favour he had done to his sister, Nora, and assures him that he will not try to deprive him of his title of Archbishop of Cashel. He will be content to be known simply as Dr O'Hurley.

Would that we could meet face to face and speak our minds to one another. Then would it be made manifest how truly I am your friend. Far from desiring to do aught that would harm you or endanger your position, I would be content with my academic title and my family name. I seek to make war on no man. I desire to plant and foster friendship and peace. If you can be persuaded of the truth of this, then will you love me and I in turn will love you and yours. If you invite me to meet you, I will trust in your words, for there are many things we can speak of that may not safely be put in writing.

The letter was dated 20 September 1583. It was never sent because of the sudden arrival in Carrick of a very agitated Baron of Slane. He went first to the house of the Earl, who directed him to the house where Dermot was staying. He had a tale of woe to tell. After Dermot had left Slane, the Baron was summoned to Dublin and accused before the Council of having harboured a notorious traitor in his castle. He was threatened with fines and imprisonment if he did not immediately find the traitor and bring him to Dublin. He begged Dermot to come back with him to the city. Otherwise, he was in danger of being completely ruined.

Dermot agreed to go. It was a scarcely credible decision. Anyone could have told him that he was putting his liberty and his life in

danger. It was true that he had not meddled in politics and was guilty of no crime in Irish law, but that had not saved Bishop O'Healy or many others. It is possible he may have seen it as an opportunity of convincing the Dublin government that he was a man of peace and that they had nothing to fear from him. It is possible but unlikely. The simplest explanation is probably the true one, that he did not want the Baron to suffer for his act of hospitality and that he was willing if necessary to lay down his life for his friend. He set out for Dublin on the road that led to torture and death, another Regulus setting out for Carthage. It was the act of either a fool or a saint, and Dermot was no fool!

Some inkling of what lay in store was given to him when they stopped in Kilkenny for the night. The Baron was lodged splendidly in the house of a noble friend. The archbishop was locked up in the public jail. One of the prison officials was a Catholic and Dermot spoke to him about the Bishop of Ferns who had recently abandoned his faith because of fear. 'Many are lions before the fight,' he said, 'but in the fight are found to be but stags. I humbly pray the good Lord that it may not so befall me. For he who thinketh himself to stand, let him beware lest he fall.'

He arrived in Dublin on the 7 October and was at once imprisoned in the Castle. A few days later the interrogations began. At that time, the office of Lord Deputy was vacant and the government was headed by the two Lord Justices, Loftus and Wallop, both Englishmen. Adam Loftus, the Protestant Archbishop of Dublin, was a weak and ineffectual character, entirely dominated by his more forceful colleague, Sir Henry Wallop. Wallop had made up his mind that Dermot O'Hurley was sent by the Pope to encourage and organise rebellion in Ireland. If he could be made to talk, he would be able to reveal all the Vatican's plans for overthrowing the Queen's rule and religion in the country.

The interrogations proved fruitless. Dermot repeated that he came in peace and that his mission was a purely spiritual one. The Baron of Slane and Father John Dillon were brought in for questioning but they had nothing to say that would incriminate the prisoner. The Lord Justices began to be seriously worried. They could

not put him on trial, as there was no case against him. They could not release him, as this would be a humiliation for the crown and a triumph for the Papists. They wrote increasingly anxious letters to London asking for instructions about how to proceed.

Instructions soon came from Sir Robert Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State. He was one of the most sinister figures in that sinister court, a master of espionage and what would now be called disinformation. He specialised in uncovering real or imaginary Catholic conspiracies and was well used to dealing with captured priests in England. His method was to send them to the Tower of London to be tortured on the rack in the hope that they would make some statement incriminating themselves or others. Then they were tried and executed for treason. He told Loftus and Wallop to torture the prisoner until he confessed everything he knew.

This advice was far from welcome to the two Lord Justices. The torturing of an archbishop was liable to cause an outcry not only among the common people, who counted for little, but among the nobles, who were still very much a force to be feared. Even Black Tom, the Earl of Ormond, who had done so much to crush the rebellion in Munster, was known to be favourably disposed towards Dermot. If he were to change sides, the whole country could be lost. The Lord Justices were beginning to be sorry they had ever become involved with the archbishop and their only wish now was to be rid of him. They wrote to Walsingham and offered to send him to be tortured in England:

But for that we want here either rack or other engine of torture to terrify him and doubt not but that at the time of his apprehension he was well schooled to be silent in all causes of weight, we thought that in a matter of so great importance, and to a person so inward with the Pope and his Cardinals and preferred by them into the dignity of an Archbishop, the Tower of London should be a better school than the Castle of Dublin, where being out of hope of his Irish patrons and favourers, he might be more apt to tell the truth.

Their suggestion met with a cool reception. Walsingham had enough problems in England without importing more from Ireland. He was

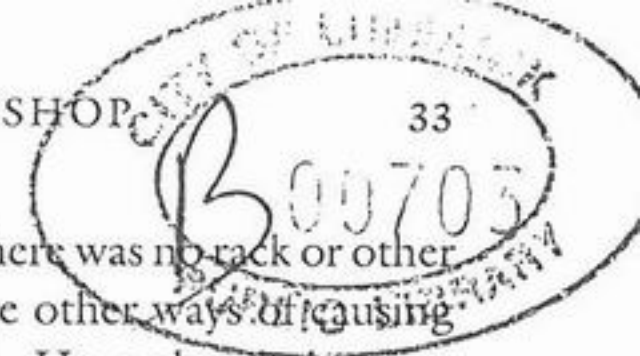
not prepared to accept their argument that there was no rack or other instrument of torture in Dublin. There were other ways of causing pain that needed no elaborate equipment. He ordered them to 'toast his feet against the fire with hot boots'.

Some time around the end of February 1584 his orders were carried out. A pair of raw-hide boots were brought into the Castle and were thickly coated on the inside with a mixture of salt, butter, oil, tallow and other fats. The archbishop was forced to put his bare feet and legs into the boots and made to sit on a stool with his legs stretched out in front of him, held in position by a wooden stocks. A fire was then lighted under his feet, as described in an early account based on the testimony of eye-witnesses:

The oil, being brought to boiling by the heat of the flames, caused unbearable anguish to his feet and legs and the like, in such wise that pieces of skin fell from the flesh and pieces of flesh from the bared bones. The officer charged with overseeing the punishment, being unused to such unheard-of torture, did quit the cell of a sudden, lest his eyes look longer on such barbarous cruelty and his ears be affrighted by the cries of the most innocent archbishop resounding through all the neighbouring places. In his agony, the victim kept crying out, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' No other words passed his lips. No confession of guilt, no accusation against his friends, no reproach against his enemies, no renunciation of his faith, nothing except the constantly repeated prayer, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' The torture ceased only when he lost consciousness.

It seemed for a while that he was dead. He was wrapped in a sheet and laid on a feather bed. Some water was forced between his lips and he gradually began to return to life. As the days and weeks passed, he became able to sit up and then to stand and finally to limp a little around his cell.

Apart from bringing the victim to the point of death, the torture had accomplished nothing. The Lord Justices made one last effort to break his resolution. They offered him one of the highest positions in the government service if he would renounce his office of bishop and recognise the Queen as head of Church and State. He



refused. They even sent in his sister Nora to talk to him and try to change his mind. He stood firm and bade her to ask God's forgiveness for trying to turn him from the path of duty.

Wallop and Loftus were now very frightened indeed. A note of desperation began to creep into their letters to Walsingham. 'We humbly pray Your Honour to be careful in our behalf,' they pleaded, 'considering in how little safety we live here.' A public trial was more than ever out of the question. It would end with the archbishop's innocence clearly established and their own guilt and cruelty proclaimed to the world. It could be the spark to set off another rebellion. The only solution they could see was to invoke martial law and execute Dermot secretly without trial. Walsingham consulted the Queen and obtained her consent. 'The man being so resolute as to reveal no more matter,' he wrote, 'it is thought meet to have no further tortures used against him, but that you proceed forthwith to his execution.'

On the 19 June, they issued the order for his death. Even under martial law the order was illegal, since martial law could not be invoked against anyone with property worth more than £10. The order was carried out the next day, the 20 June 1584. Very early in the morning, Dermot was taken from his cell and led out of the Castle by the small postern gate. The other prisoners guessed where he was going and raised a great clamour of protest. Among them was a bishop who cried out that he was more deserving of punishment for his sins than the innocent archbishop. Margaret Bermingham may also have been among the protesters if she was still alive. The commotion did not stop until the chief jailer ordered the prisoners to be beaten into silence.

They brought him outside the city walls to Hoggin Green, a stretch of open country near the present St Stephen's Green. It was intended to carry out the execution secretly but just as he was mounting the ladder a group of Dublin merchants arrived unexpectedly upon the scene. They had risen early and come out into the countryside with their bows and arrows in order to have an archery contest. It is to these Dubliners that we owe this description of his last moments found in an old manuscript:

He stood upon the ladder and with great humility and patience

uttered these few words following:

"Gentlemen, first I thank my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ because it hath pleased his divine providence to send you hither to bear testimony of my innocent death, being that it was meant I should die obscurely, as may be seen by sending me to this place of execution so early.

"Be it therefore known unto you, good Christians, that I am a priest anointed and also a bishop, although unworthy of so sacred dignities, and no cause could they find against me that might in the least degree deserve the pains of death, but merely for my function of priesthood, wherein they proceeded against me in all points cruelly contrary to their own laws, which doth privilege any man that is worth ten pound in goods not to die by martial law, which I leave between them and the majesty of the Almighty.

"And I do enjoin you, dear Christian brethren, to manifest the same unto the world and also to bear witness at the day of judgement of my innocent death, which I endure for my function and profession of the holy Catholic faith." And so desiring them to join with him in prayer, recommending his soul to God his maker and redeemer, most patiently ended his life.

He was put to death by hanging. It does not seem that he was mutilated or disembowelled, but the rope used was made of twisted twigs to prolong and intensify his agony. The Dubliners returned to the city and reported what they had seen and heard to their fellow-citizens. The same old manuscript describes his burial in a way that brings the gospel story to mind:

And when the report of the execution was spread abroad in the city, certain devout women went forth and had his body brought down, which they carried with great reverence unto a little church without the walls called St Kevin's, where he was buried, and his clothes which he did wear was kept among them as relics of his martyrdom.

St Kevin's was an old church, probably built before the coming of the Normans, which had fallen into ruin. After Dermot was buried there, the Catholics of Dublin restored and enlarged the building and made it into a place of pilgrimage. It was said that many mira-

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.