

THE FIRST MARTYRS

Patrick O'Healy and Conn O'Rourke



SMERWICK HARBOUR is a wide and secluded bay on the tip of the Dingle peninsula, the most westerly point of Ireland. In the sixteenth century it was a favourite landing place for ships from Europe that wanted to avoid attracting the attention of the English authorities. It was a place where smugglers landed their goods, where soldiers brought in arms and ammunition, where priests, who had been ordained in the continental seminaries, returned to their homeland. There was no-one to see them except a few Irish-speaking farmers and fishermen, and they could be trusted to keep a secret.

One day in the summer of 1579 a small boat from Brittany put into the bay. Two men dressed in sailors' clothing left the boat and set off in the direction of Limerick. Their appearance was deceptive.

They were not French sailors but Irish Franciscans. They came from the Co. Leitrim area and had both probably joined the Order of St Francis at Dromahaire Friary, which had managed so far to survive the suppression of the monasteries. They were then sent to Europe for the priestly training that Ireland could no longer provide and now they were returning to minister among their own people. Their names were Patrick O'Healy and Conn O'Rourke.

Patrick O'Healy was the older of the two, having been born about 1545. He studied theology and was ordained priest in Spain, where he soon became known as an outstanding scholar and preacher, as well as a man of great goodness and holiness. In 1575 he visited Rome, seeking help for Sir James Fitzmaurice, an Irish nobleman who was planning what he called a crusade, a military expedition to Ireland in defence of the Catholic faith. Patrick made such an impression on the Vatican officials that he was appointed Bishop of Mayo the following year by Pope Gregory XIII.

His return to Ireland was beset by difficulties. In addition to the normal dangers of travel in those days, there were English spies in the principal cities and ports, watching all who came and went. In the winter of 1577-78 he set sail from Portugal with Fitzmaurice but they were beaten back by storms and had to abandon the expedition. He went on to Paris while Fitzmaurice returned to Spain.

In Paris Bishop O'Healy stayed in the Franciscan Friary and helped in the education of the young friars. Those who met him were struck by his humility and kindness as well as by his intellectual gifts. It was here that he met a young priest name Conn O'Rourke, about five years his junior, a member of the noble family of the O'Rourkes of Breifne. In the spring of 1579 the two set out for Brittany to try and find a ship's captain who would bring them to Ireland. After a long wait, they managed to get a boat. A favourable wind blew them to Ireland and they landed safely in Smerwick Harbour, probably in the month of June.

They chose an unlucky time and place to make their landing. The whole of Munster was in ferment. A mixture of politics and religion had brought the south of Ireland to the brink of rebellion against Queen Elizabeth and her government in Dublin. Elizabeth's policy was to extend her rule to every corner of Ireland and to put an end to

the Catholic religion. Every man, woman and child in the country must acknowledge her as their temporal and spiritual ruler, as queen of their country and head of their Church.

The Queen's chief agent in the south of Ireland was Sir William Drury, who had been given the title Lord President of Munster three years earlier. He distinguished himself by his zeal in seeking out those he suspected of disloyalty and putting them to death. In one letter written in 1578 he boasted of four hundred executed in Munster by martial law, that is, without being given a trial or any opportunity of defending themselves. His aim was to terrorise the Irish into submission, but in fact his cruelty was having the opposite effect and driving them into open revolt.

The two men, the bishop and the priest, made their way through the counties of Kerry and Limerick until they came to Askeaton, seat of the Earl of Desmond, the cousin of Sir James Fitzmaurice and the most powerful nobleman in Munster. They hoped that he would give them shelter and help them on their way. Gerald FitzGerald, fourteenth Earl of Desmond, was a descendant of the Norman invaders who came to Ireland in the twelfth century and who in the course of four centuries had become an accepted part of Irish life. They were known as the Old English, to distinguish them on the one hand from the Old Irish, the original inhabitants of the country, and on the other hand from the New English, those who had come to Ireland in Elizabeth's reign and had no understanding or love for the country.

The Earl was known to have little love for Elizabeth's rule or for her religion. He bitterly resented the Queen's attempts to curb his power and as a result of his defiance he had been imprisoned for several years in the Tower of London. He was a vain, melancholy, moody man, irresolute, impetuous and obstinate, a dreamer and a poet as well as a man of action. Yet for all his contradictions he inspired a surprising loyalty among his people, who preferred to be ruled by the FitzGerald than by the New English land-grabbers.

The ruins of the Earl's house are still to be seen in Askeaton and even in decay they make an impressive sight. The house was both a fortress and a mansion. Built on an island in the river and surrounded by walls and battlements, it was strong enough to withstand a

besieging army. Inside the walls was a splendid residence with a vast banqueting hall where the Earl could entertain his guests in kingly style. On this summer's day, the whole place must have been bustling with life and activity. Soldiers, armourers, grooms, artisans, gardeners, victuallers, and a multitude of household servants would all have been busy about their various duties in the service of the great Earl.

The two travellers asked to see the Earl but were told he was away and were brought to see his wife instead. Eleanor, Countess of Desmond, was an able and strong-minded woman, a kind of Irish Lady Macbeth, far more practical and politically astute than her husband. She could see that the Queen's representatives were trying to force the Earl into a hopeless rebellion so that they could confiscate his vast territories, some of the richest land in Ireland.

The arrival of the two men was an unwelcome shock to her. She feared the effect on the Earl of these visitors from the continent, with their talk of the Catholic counter-reformation and of the crusade to turn back the tide of Protestantism. It was the kind of talk that could turn the Earl's head and involve him in a romantic, doomed rebellion. It was fortunate in her eyes that the Earl was absent and she began to see a way of turning the incident to her advantage.

She gave no inkling of her true feelings to the two newcomers. On the contrary, she welcomed them warmly and pressed them to stay for a while and rest after their travels. They were glad to accept her invitation and they remained there for three days, enjoying the hospitality and comfort of the great house. Then they resumed their journey to Limerick city, where they could take the bridge across the Shannon and continue on through Connacht to the bishop's diocese of Mayo.

They did not know that they were walking into a trap. The Countess had sent a message to the Mayor of Limerick and told him about the two men who were approaching the city. It was meant to prove that she and her husband remained loyal to the Queen. The mayor sent out his soldiers to intercept them and the two were taken prisoner and thrown into Limerick jail.

The old writers are understandably scathing about the action of

the Countess in betraying her double trust as a Catholic and as a hostess. 'Beneath her outward show of kindness there did lie treachery, a vice very commonly found in women,' one of them wrote ungallantly. In her defence it could be said that her treachery was no greater than that of the Queen's men who were trying to entrap her. Her first thought was for her husband and her children and for them she was ready to sacrifice two strangers. She could not foresee the fate that lay in store for them, since up to this time no bishop had been put to death for his faith in Ireland.

Bishop O'Healy and Father O'Rourke were only a short time in jail when the threatened invasion took place. It turned out to be something of an anti-climax. Sir James Fitzmaurice landed at Smerwick on the 18 July 1579 with a force of a few hundred soldiers scraped together from various European countries. He established himself at Dún an Óir, a pre-historic fort on a small headland overlooking Smerwick Harbour, and called on the Catholic people of Ireland to rise in rebellion. The English reacted in panic and sent every available soldier to Munster to repel the invasion. Sir William Drury himself made for Limerick and decided to interrogate Bishop O'Healy. He thought that he must have come to prepare the way for the invaders and that he would be able to give valuable information about their strength and their plans.

At his first confrontation with the bishop, Drury decided to try persuasion rather than force. He promised that he would set him free, allow him to take possession of his diocese and heap him with all kinds of honours, on two conditions. One was that he would renounce his faith and become a bishop of the Queen's Church. The other was that he would reveal exactly what his business was in Ireland. The bishop answered firmly that he would not abandon his faith even at the cost of his life, and that his only business in Ireland was to carry out his duty as a bishop by working for the advance of religion and the salvation of souls.

Drury then asked him what plans the Pope and the King of Spain had made for the invasion of Ireland. It is unlikely that the bishop knew much about these plans. He had been a friend and supporter of Fitzmaurice in Rome but he took no part in preparing for the invasion. Even if he did have some information, he was not prepared

to say anything that would betray the trust of others or put them in danger. He refused to answer.

Drury decided to use force and ordered him to be tortured. The jailers brought in sharp nails and a hammer and began to hammer the nails into the bishop's fingers. As he still refused to give any more information, the torture was intensified until some of his fingers were torn from his hands. It was all in vain. Nothing that they did could make him speak.

Finally Drury ordered the two men to be put to death. There was no trial, nor could there have been, since they were guilty of no offence except refusing to acknowledge that the Queen was head of the Church; and that was not a capital offence under Irish law at the time. So Drury simply claimed the right under martial law to dispense with a trial. He declared that the bishop and his companion were guilty of treason and condemned them to be hanged. In reply, the bishop repeated that he and his companion were innocent of any crime and that the sentence was contrary to all law and justice; and he reminded the judge that he himself would have to face the just and all-powerful Judge before long.

Drury left Limerick for Cork and brought the two prisoners with him. They were put sitting on two garrans, small Irish horses, their hands and feet tied, and a strong guard of soldiers surrounding them. If this display was intended to strike terror into the onlookers, it failed in its purpose. The sufferings of the two prisoners and the courage they displayed aroused the sympathy and admiration of all who saw them on their journey. Drury stopped in Kilmallock, a walled town about twenty miles from Limerick which at that time was one of the most important towns in Munster. It was here that he gave the order for the sentence to be carried out.

The prisoners recited the Litany of the Saints and gave one another absolution as they were led to the trees that were to be their place of execution. The bishop added some words of encouragement to the younger man to strengthen him in the face of death. Then he spoke to the crowd which had assembled and urged them to remain steadfast in their faith and in their obedience to the Roman Pontiff. He finished by asking them to pray for him and his companion. The

two men were then hanged by the neck until dead. It was about the 13 August 1579.

After their execution, their bodies were left hanging from the trees for a week. During this time they were made the butt of all kinds of mockery and abuse. The soldiers used them as targets to practise their marksmanship, saying, 'Now I'll shoot the Pope's bishop in the head,' or the arm or the leg, and so on. When they had finally tired of their sport, the two bodies were taken down by sympathisers and buried in an unknown grave.

Drury continued on his way to Cork. Soon after this, he was struck down by a sudden and mysterious illness and died on the 3 October. The people saw it as a just retribution for his crimes and it was rumoured that in his last hours he called upon the martyrs for forgiveness.

Patrick O'Healy was the first bishop to be put to death for his faith in Ireland. Young, vigorous, a man of deep learning and spirituality, he could have made an outstanding contribution to the life of the Church in Ireland at this crucial time. It was not to be. He died without ever setting foot in his diocese. But the way he and his companion died was widely reported and long remembered, and it strengthened many in their commitment to the old religion. In death they achieved what was denied to them in life.