

# SCANDAL AT BRUFF

by Dermot McEvoy

PART TWO

## THE CLERICAL NAPOLEON OF EAST LIMERICK

Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, 'the clerical Napoleon of East Limerick', as he was described in the correspondence columns of the *Limerick Leader*, was not in the habit of explaining his actions - even when they ran counter to Rome! He never explained why he had made conditions so intolerable for the Christian Brothers that they had to withdraw from Bruff where for forty years prior to November 1897, they had provided primary education for 1d a week and secondary for 2d and, when parents could not pay, for nothing.

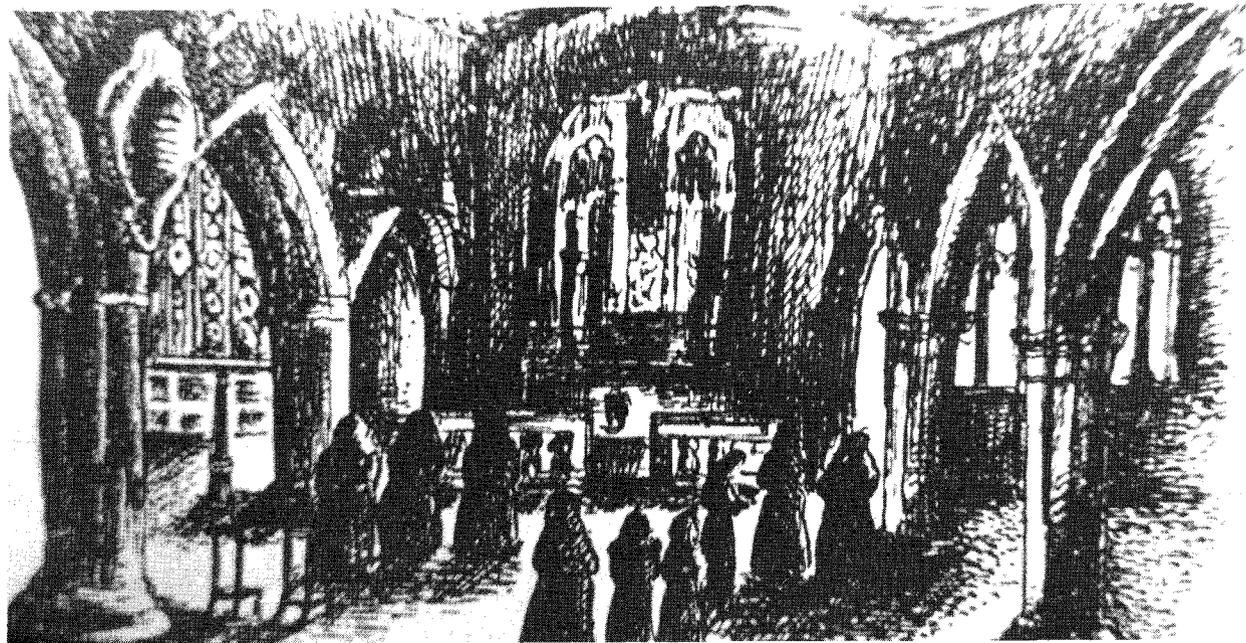
He disregarded entirely the defeat at the hands of the Pope of other Irish bishops led by Cardinal Moran of a proposal to have either the Brothers put out of Ireland or made subject to the bishops' authority. This intrigue had almost succeeded with Pius IX till the Brothers heard of it and sent representatives to the Vatican who succeeded in winning over Pius IX's successor - Pio Nono had died - to their cause. The new Pope not only put his face in opposition to the bishops, he also announced himself a special friend of the Order. Cardinal Moran, who was dispatched as Archbishop of Sydney, changed his mind about the Brothers as independent educationalists, and just at the time O'Dwyer was levering them out of Bruff he was welcoming them in Australia!

O'Dwyer though was not alone in believing himself a Napoleon who had not been at Waterloo: the Brothers were successfully hunted out of Mallow and, later, Tullamore where the parish priest had them shifted on the plea that they were too heavy a tax on the town though, adding, he continued the collection for them. Commenting on this last circumstance, a writer to the *Leader's* vast array of protest letters to the editor, M.J.

Furlong, of South Main Street, Wexford, said the money went to swell the income of the priest, 'the townspeople deriving no benefit except the pleasure of seeing their children grow up without the benefit of either education or religion'.

I must interpolate here that I am not writing history; this is just a sketch to give the flavour of the times, an attempt to show the need for an informed public essentially through the medium of a free press. Elsewhere in Ireland the bishops had 'got away with it': O'Dwyer tried the same tactic in Bruff. He forgot the up and coming *Leader*, its proprietor Jer Buckley and my father Andy ('Publish and be damned') McEvoy: they were, of course, to be 'damned' - by excommunication, if that is effective - but that's another story.

How, though, am I to present the Bishop's side? I am aware of an attempt in recent years to get information from the Limerick diocesan archives. The man who tried was told there was no resident archivist and, more significantly, that there was no relevant material pertaining to this era in the archives! Readers of this *Journal* can believe that if they like. If they do believe it, they will also believe the Very Rev. Charles McNamara PP VG., Bruff, who told a deputation of townspeople that he did not know why the Brothers had left, that he had not the 'slightest antagonism' towards them, and that he would 'not object' to their return. According to the *Limerick Chronicle*, a conservative sheet and the leading paper of the city, of November 11, 1897, Dean McNamara promised: "I will have nothing to do with the appointing of any teacher without consulting the parishioners and until the Superior General of the Christian Brothers is heard from". The deputation, led by John Carroll JP, went away satisfied; they believed the Dean. A fortnight



The convent chapel at Bruff; from a drawing by Elizabeth Corsellis.

later, after the publication of the Superior General's letter in the *Leader*, they were back; the Dean had changed his tune: there was no hope of getting the Brothers back and they should write to the Bishop. The *Leader* reported that the deputation left in a state of bewilderment and anger. On the 30th of the month they saw O'Dwyer who told them the immediate return of the Brothers was 'hoped for'; their reply was that no other teachers would be acceptable to them. They were escorted out of Limerick by St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band 'amid considerable enthusiasm'. Limerick City had joined the fray.

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Meeting my father Andy McEvoy, who had been editor of the *Limerick Leader* at the time of the Bruff affair and was then editor of the *Clare Champion*, Dr. Michael Fogarty, Bishop (later Archbishop) of Killaloe, asked in my presence: 'Why don't you go to Mass, Andy?' 'I am not allowed to,' my father replied, 'I was excommunicated a lifetime ago by Bishop O'Dwyer'. 'Yerrah, Andy, forget about it', said the bishop, 'Shure O'Dwyer was mad; everyone knew that. Will I see you at my Mass on Sunday?'

He and Dr. Fogarty were great friends and I know that subsequently Andy was occasionally to be seen in the Pro-Cathedral at Ennis, though his Saturday night reading would have been the latest booklets of the Rationalist Press Association.

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Three times a week the *Leader* kept hammering away at 'Scandal at Bruff', inviting the Bishop 'not to permit such injustice and cruelty to be practised in his diocese', calling on him to recall the Brothers, saying slightly tongue in cheek, it would be an act which would ever redound to his credit and 'speak trumpet-toned for his sense of justice'. The *Leader* without actually saying so, hinted at what was really motivating O'Dwyer - the replacement of the Brothers by the National School system which, as elsewhere, would be completely under his thumb and would not detract from the revenues of his seminary by providing free secondary education for the children of the poor. Hence an early sting in the tail in one leading article:

If the Brothers are not recalled then all we have to say is to express a confident hope that the sturdy men of Bruff would simply make the life of the grabbers whoever they may be an intolerable burden to bear.

The paper gave prominence to everything in favour of the Brothers even to glowing reports of their work 'in the Antipodes!' It also gave much space to letters favouring its own attitude (apparently it got no letters expressing a contrary view!); the letters came from all over Ireland, sent circulation leaping, helped to make the *Leader* the paper it is today. A sample of the excessive type of praise it was getting is worth quoting:

Would to God there were more honest papers like the *LEADER*. There would then be less deceit, scheming and double-dealing. For years we have had from altar, pulpit and the Irish hierarchy a terrible outcry against Model Schools, Queen's Colleges and godless schools, with parents being threatened even with Excommunication if they dared to send their children to such unholy places. The cry then was for denominational education and the Christian Brothers at the sacrifice of home ties, bright worldly prospects and all that makes life dear voluntarily devoted their lives to the secular and religious training of the youth of Ireland. Right well and nobly have they done their duty as the positions gained by their pupils testify.

To add to Bishop O'Dwyer's annoyance the *Leader* gave a list of his own priests who had been educated by the Brothers, some by the very Brothers he was now accused of banishing. It was a telling blow and in a public statement by the Bishop early in the following year, 1898, there was no doubt to which paper he was referring when he condemned the action of a certain newspaper in Limerick City which is doing more to undermine the Catholic faith than all the proselytisers among us'. It was an intemperate outburst, but the *Leader* was not for long to be the Bishop's only target. John McInerney, chairman of Limerick Board of Guardians, which had passed a resolution in support of the Bruff people, got a letter from The Palace, Corbally, which put him and the Guardians in their place:

.....the resolution to which I refer, was most improper and even irreligious. The Bruff affair is one of a purely religious and ecclesiastical character. Do your Guardians think that because they have been elected to manage a Workhouse they are competent to rule the Church?'

(I shall return later to this letter; (it is worth further consideration.)

The Guardians could reasonably have asked in the light of the Pope's ruling favouring Christian Brothers as educators if a bishop was competent to rule the Church. That was to come; and the *Leader* was to ask the question - and suffer the consequences.

Meanwhile, back at Bruff a strong force of the RIC under District Inspector Sharpe had taken over. A platform was erected at the upper end of the town; it carried banners O'Dwyer could scarcely describe as irreligious - 'Signum Fidei', 'The Voice of the People is the Voice of God', 'God Defends the Right' and 'Bruff demands the return of the Christian Brothers'.

The Limerick No. 9 Independent St. Mary's Band, and the Kilmallock Fife and Drum Band played in Mr. John Carroll JP. The *Chronicle* reported it as a festive occasion. A letter was read from John Finucane MP stating, 'My sympathies are entirely with the efforts of the Bruff people'.

E.T. Moran, the *Leader's* correspondent in Bruff, who supplied the ammunition for editor McEvoy, proposed a resolution demanding the return of the Brothers (fair enough) and a second resolution (below the belt) that could not have improved the Bishop's temper:

While we sincerely appreciate the zeal with which the Bishop of Limerick is urging the claims of the people of Ireland for the endowment of a Catholic University, we regret the inconsistency to which apparently His Lordship has committed himself by the removal from Bruff of the Christian Brothers, who by their labours in the past have shown themselves to be the ablest Catholic educationalists any country could possess.

Accusing Bishop O'Dwyer of 'inconsistency' and counterposing his endowment of the university with his treatment of the Brothers showed a keen sense of battle tactics. But this was no manufactured agitation, though it was certainly channelled by Andy McEvoy of the *Leader*, and in my view rightly so. For instance, at that Bruff meeting Dr. Sheedy of Kilmallock said:

There will not be one word uttered today that will be offensive to or derogatory of His Lordship. Though we differ from him, we do so as dutiful children. We put it to His Lordship is it right to treat the remonstrance of the people of Bruff with refusal. We are not rebels, we pay taxes, we have 'locus standi', we are not to be ignored. I hope the Bishop will not force the people of Bruff to put their backs to the wall and therefore give grounds for sneering or contempt to the enemies of our country and that he will reconsider.



Dean Charles McNamara.

But there was to be no room for moderates in the tussle against the implacable Bishop.

O'Dwyer did not exactly tell lies, but there was a considerable *suppressio veri* in his first public intervention. It followed the refusal of Limerick Corporation to let a room in the Town Hall to a committee for the defence of the Brothers. In a letter to the Corporation the Bishop said that the previous summer (1897) he had a letter from Rome from the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda acquainting him of complaints made by the Brothers' Superior General against the Parish Priest of Bruff and he had asked the PP to explain in writing.

There were some questions of fact and some questions of Ecclesiastical Law. They were all investigated by Propaganda and in due course the decision of the Holy See came back to me and in that decision every point, except one, raised by the Brothers was ruled against them... the charges were dismissed. The one exception... was as to the exclusive use of the School House at Bruff and on that I advised the Parish Priest for peace sake, no matter who was right or who was wrong, not to press his claim and he acted on my advice.

Not very informative so far, is it? Now Bishop O'Dwyer snipes at the very Brothers he had assured the Bruff deputation he held in such esteem and hoped would return:

I can only attribute it to a want of knowledge of Ecclesiastical Law on the part of the Christian Brothers to have gone to Rome on such a case at all. However, when the Holy See had spoken I hoped the whole matter would be at an end, but I am sorry to find that not only uneducated writers outside, but even some leading members of the Christian Brothers' Community themselves... still regard as persecution the very things which the Holy See decided were the duties of the Parish Priest to do. In fact, there has been no persecution of the Christian Brothers and I think I am entitled to ask the people of the City and Diocese to accept my word for the truth of that statement...

The Brothers left Bruff of their own accord. They did not even pay me the courtesy of asking my opinion, but simply notified their decision to me. I consider it then rather unreasonable to be asked now to invite them back... If the Brothers had consulted me before they left I should have advised them to remain. Things have now gone so far that I do not think the good of the people or the interests of religion would be served by their return. I am, dear Mayor, very truly yours in Christ. Edward Thomas. To the Right Worshipful Michael Cusack, Mayor of Limerick.

Not one word there about the point raised at the Corporation by the deputation of O'Brien and Brady (Bandmaster of St. Joseph's Orphanage) that for the previous eighteen months most of the contributions by the public to the Brothers had been taken from them by the Bishop and diverted to other uses. Not a word about the cancellation of the 8 a.m. Convent Mass in Bruff which the Brothers attended prior to school; not a word about the withdrawal of the Blessed Sacrament from their monastery chapel. It is surely a distortion of the truth to say the Brothers 'left of their own accord'; and another distortion that the Bishop would have stopped them. Small wonder it was not just the 'uneducated writers' who declined to take O'Dwyer's word. No wonder at all though there is apparently nothing in the diocesan archives about all those big questions of ecclesiastical law; obviously they were not important enough to keep for historians to examine!

Bruff, before it was infested with RIC to protect an O'Dwyer appointed teacher, had much more to say. A sample of the people's reply to the 'clerical Napoleon of East Limerick':

We also consider that the letters written by 'uneducated persons' were plain facts and truths and will compare favourable with letters written by past students of more pretentious colleges, and we invite His Lordship to contradict any statement made in any of these communications.

I have a long way to go before I conclude Scandal at Bruff. The 'missing' archives are an obstacle, but let me say parenthetically that perhaps it is just as well an 'official' historian of the Diocese of Limerick did not get hold of them and produce his version of the truth. It might be like the History of the Diocese of Killaloe which District Justice Gleeson produced, of which Archbishop Michael Fogarty told me: 'He left all the fun and pathos out. He thought I'd find it offensive. Not a bit of it. I made mistakes as did my illustrious predecessors. The Church has a habit of surviving us all'.

And what had Gleeson left out? That a Tipperary priest had run away with a woman and that as a old man he had come back to the Church; that a Clare priest refused to be transferred and set up a religion of his own which was well supported until he too came back to the fold. Killaloe however did not call in the RIC; Bishop O'Dwyer did that! And O'Dwyer, as my father pointed out, was himself a Christian Brothers' past pupil!