

Scandal at Bruff

PART THREE

Readers of the earlier instalments of Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer V the Christian Brothers and the People of Bruff have asked me to explain how on earth the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda in Rome could have ruled against the Brothers. The bishop did not enlighten 'uneducated persons' who clearly included my father, then editor of the Limerick Leader. The only clue I can offer, and it comes from Michael McCarthy's Five Years in Ireland, is that the bishop, visiting the convent at Bruff, found 'a nun and a Christian Brother' arranging the altar in preparation for the Mass that was about to be celebrated. He made inquiries, says McCarthy, and discovered 'that the Brothers heard Mass daily, and frequently answered Mass in the nuns' chapel, which was situated in the centre of the House, and (as the Bishop O'Dwyer seemingly scandalised, found) that there was no separation whatever between them and the nuns and the young lady boarders'. All of which, he insisted, was most improper and must cease: he decreed that the Brothers could not continue to hear Mass in the Convent. **O tempora, o mores!**

McCarthy goes on to say: 'Against this decree and I should say, still more so against the insinuation it conveyed' the Brothers appealed to Rome; but Dr. O'Dwyer's decision was upheld. It was that, and the withdrawal of the 'reserved Blessed Sacrament' from the Brothers' own oratory that caused their Superior-General to withdraw the Brothers from Bruff 'to the great loss and indignation of the Inhabitants, who freely vented their wrath on Bishop O'Dwyer'. Yet, as I said in the last issue, the Bishop publicly expressed his indignation that they left without even saying 'Good-bye'.

This may all seem odd, even outrageous to present-day minds; it was outrageous even by the standards of the time. In a High Court action that was partly to interrupt 'Scandal at Bruff' it emerged that for the previous 30 years O'Dwyer had known it was against ecclesiastical law to 'reserve the Sacrament' in a religious community of fewer than four people and, at the time he struck, there were only three Brothers at Bruff. As regards O'Dwyer's shock-horror at finding Brothers, nuns and 'young lady boarders' (I suppose his Lordship meant girls as all the ladies of title were Protestant) sharing Mass, it was pointed out in the High Court that a Brother had on several occasions

by Dermot McEvoy

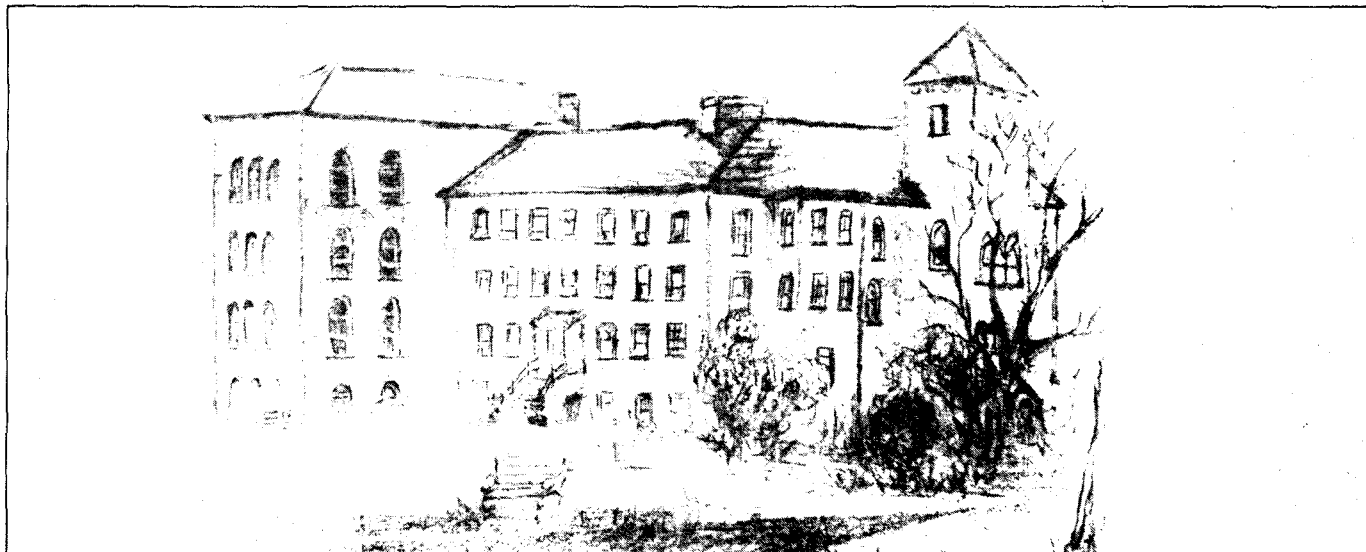
served O'Dwyer's Mass in the convent chapel when exactly the same mix of dangerous people were in the congregation.

I'll bet a cathedral to be hayseed that when Propaganda ruled in Rome on the Brothers' appeal O'Dwyer had not provided all that information: the result might have been the same, but the Cardinal Prefect would have been well within his rights in rebuking O'Dwyer as an accessory to whatever was supposed to be the crime.

Meanwhile, back in rebellious Bruff, there was another odd development. At first Mass on Sunday, 23 February 1898, Dean MacNamara read the Lenten Regulations and announced the stations for the coming week. At the second Mass the Dean changed his tune. He said: 'Dear Brethern, I have now a most painful announcement to make to you since this morning'. He'd had a letter from O'Dwyer: 'In this letter the Bishop directs me to announce to you that I am to hold no stations as he considers it would only be a mockery to administer Sacraments to you owing to the sinful conduct of which you have been guilty within the past few months.'

The Dean continued: 'The Bishop has also directed me to say that there will be no ashes blessed for the people on Ash Wednesday; there will be no Mass in the Church in the mornings during the coming week; and there will be no evening devotions during Lent. I hope you will not continue with the attitude you have up to the present assumed'. He also said that the people seemed to censure one curate in particular for the language he used at the outset of the controversy. He assured them that this was unintentional adding 'when a preacher ascends a pulpit he often makes use of language which on reflection he would not express'. The curate was Rev. Robert Ambrose, who had called the people who declined to accept the *diktat* of 'the clerical Napoleon of East Limerick' 'Moonlighters, cowards and corner-boys'. He was the priest who, outside the church, was answered by being hit in the face with a pig's liver!

The **Limerick Leader** editor was having none of O'Dwyer's bullying. He wrote: 'Whatever threats his Lordship may make or



The Convent, Bruff; from a drawing by Helen Duhig.



Michael McCarthy, author of "Five Years in Ireland".

carry out will not in the least shake the determination of the people of Bruff. They are conscious they have done nothing that they need be ashamed or sorry for. It is the first time they have been denied the right of having the blessed ashes placed on their foreheads - a sacred function of our Church **which should recall to his Lordship's mind that he, as well as the people, will some day have to appear before a just and merciful Judge**'. The article concluded by asking: 'What crime did the Christian Brothers commit that has prejudiced his Lordship so much against them that he will not accede to the wish of his people by directing the return of the Brothers?'

Back at Bruff a parish meeting continued to demand the return of the Brothers and unanimously passed a resolution 'that all the threats Dr. O'Dwyer and Dean MacNamara are capable of uttering will not prevent us achieving this desirable end'.

Meanwhile, a further attempt was made by a deputatin to see Dr. O'Dwyer. They saw him all right - for a few seconds in which he told them he had already given his final answer. 'You seem to forget there is a bishop in this diocese, but I'll let you see that there is', he said and, turning on his heel, left them speechless. 'On with the good fight', declaimed the **Leader**, 'and God defend the right!' The Bishop then played his ace, the card it is obvious he always intended to play: he brought in an unfortunate national teacher, Thomas Bowman, to take over the Brothers' school at Bruff.

He found the streets of Bruff lined with RIC, a detachment surrounding the school and everywhere he went he had a special guard of more RIC. No pupils turned up. The **Leader** commented: 'Bowman or No-man will never take the place of the pious Brothers. The strong men of Bruff will make the lives of the grabbers of the evicted Brothers' scholl a hell on earth.' The next comment declared: 'The people of Bruff will not allow their children to be taught by a grabber' and on that same day, 1 December 1897, Bowman, despite the squads of RIC, had to 'run for his life' from Bruff; he could not even find a car to drive him. A leading article announced, 'War has been declared by his Lordship; we regret it, but we venture to say the Bishop will regret it the more'.

Bowman, from Cappamore, issued a writ for libel against the **Leader**. O'Dwyer was later publicly to admit saying he'd make the **Leader's** articles the 'dearest drop of ink put on paper'. It did not knock a feather out of Jer Buckley, the patriotic owner who had already been in jail for contempt of Her Majesty's judges (he returned to Limerick to a tar-barrel and torchlight procession!). Bruff's retort was to open a 'Christian Brothers' Defence Fund' and to announce that all subscriptions would be acknowledged in the **Leader** for whose defence in the High Court the fund was established. In appreciation the editor wrote: 'We have unselfishly taken our stand by them (the people of Bruff) without counting the cost - they are not ungrateful, and will in return take their stand by us, no matter by whom or from what quarter we may be struck at.'

Even with this action hanging over its head, the **Leader** did

not refrain from swiping at O'Dwyer, the instigator of Bowman's action. The paper editorialized: 'There are men... in his Lordship's diocese who have no cringing ways about them... who hate with the strength of freemen every contemptible and miserable act that savours of wrongdoing and bespeaks the tyrant'. The Defence Fund in its circular sneered at the 'Lord Bishop of Limerick' and declared: 'With great respect (!) to our Bishop, we take the liberty of saying we have a perfect right to choose our own teachers and our own system of education and, in asserting this right, we are fortified by no less an authority than His Holiness Pope Leo XIII'. It cited his Encyclical declaring it was a father's right to see in what institutions his children should be educated and what masters should teach them moral precepts. It went on: 'The Bishop (O'Dwyer) evidently wishes to compel us to choose an alternative system of education.'

This reply must have really stung Dr. O'Dwyer, as no doubt it was intended. A letter in the **Leader** - it was flooded with letters from all over Ireland and subscriptions to the Fund - had a nasty slap for O'Dwyer in reminding Limerick of the life-size statue in the church at Bruff to Dean MacNamara's predecessor, Dean Cussen, 'their saintly pastor' who had brought the Brothers to Bruff, 'a true pastor modelled on St. Lorcan O'Toole (patron of Dublin) who did not leave as much cash at his death as would pay his funeral expenses'. (O'Dwyer not only rode to hounds; he kept his own pack). The punch-line was: 'I suppose the next thing we'll hear from Bruff will be that a stonecutter will be sent there to chisel the name of the Christian Brothers from the statue's pedestal'.

The **Leader** itself fantasised about travellers in the future from New Zealand digging in the ruins of Bruff and, finding the mammoth correspondence about 'Scandal at Bruff' would be thankful they had not lived in that time. 'If the traveller were versed in our history and had read how we followed at the feet of our pastors with almost canine attachment and, as occasion arose, defended them with our lives he would say 'Faithful creatures, they deserved better than to be smitten by their pastors'. If he happened to be a comparative anatomist he might make an interesting scientific study of our case and show how this fidelity was so poorly rewarded.'

In all that time not a single letter supporting O'Dwyer found its way into any journal. I am satisfied, knowing my father, that if there had been any to the **Leader** they would have been published; he was that kind of man. A sample letter in the **Leader** of 20 April 1898:

'I think the hierarchy have miscalculated their power and influence and may find there is a limit as far as the people are concerned. I believe too the people will not constitute them the predominant partner on the Board of Catholic University. It would be most inadvisable to place such power in the hands of those who have proved themselves so intolerant whether you estimate them by their treatment of National Teachers or Christian Brothers or their action in politics...'

A priest whose name was suppressed wrote: 'If we had a Catholic Government and Sovereign and prelates with the same disposition of mind as O'Dwyer, and that military could be employed by these at will, I feat Catholicism would be a thing of the past in Erin because no man could stand such despotism, usurpation, tyranny... if his Lordship is infallible as a bishop, he is not infallible as a man'.

I end this instalment offering reflection: We have had Catholic governments for 60 years; where's the Catholicism in face of the materialism of today and, where are the Brothers, where are the ordinands? The bishop won the fight, but the Church is losing the battle. Even by those terms, Dr. O'Dwyer has a lot to answer for.

I wish to express my gratitude to Pius Browne, Bruff, for his generous gesture in bringing to my attention his unpublished manuscript on the history of Bruff. I am particularly grateful to him for allowing me to consult his chapter on "The Bruff Agitation".