

Scandal at Bruff

 PART FOUR 

Another Lent (1899) arrived without any let-up in the struggle between the people of Limerick city and county and Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer over the departure of the Christian Brothers from Bruff. Insofar as the bishop's stand could be determined - not an easy thing to attempt as he was continually shifting his ground - his case was that they left of their own accord; the people's attitude was that he booted them out to make room for the national school system and to confine secondary education to establishments more directly under his control; the Brothers, shying away from publicity, left the lists after their first announcement that exclusion from Mass at the convent and withdrawal of the Reserved Sacrament in their monastery had meant they could not carry on; not quite the sack, but a constructive sacking.

Lent opened in Bruff with a sort of olive branch from Dean McNamara, PP, VG. He announced at first Mass on Sunday, 17 February, that ashes would be blessed on the Wednesday, that there would be evening devotions during Lent, and Lenten Stations, all of which had been withheld the previous year because of what Dr. O'Dwyer called the people's 'sinful conduct' in agitating for the return of the Brothers. If this denoted a change of heart on the part of the bishop, it got short shrift from my father, Andy McEvoy, then editing the **Limerick Leader**. He denounced it as 'an attempt to kill the agitation by kindness' and editorialised: 'It only serves to make the people more convinced of the rights of their cause and to inspire them with the hope that the authorities, having given way in one respect, may throw dignity to the winds and do them justice in all'.

Olive branch rejected, Dr. O'Dwyer, in a sermon in Limerick took up the fresh challenge to his authority by what he described as 'pernicious literature' which dealt with matters of a religious nature with 'a freedom and want of due restraint which is quite painful to notice.' To this, (the **Leader**), riposted that it had the unanimous support of the people of Bruff: to

by Dermot McEvoy

where not even the public mouthpiece of the clergy had the temerity to support the Bishop or the Parish Priest ... if, in these circumstances, we have, according to O'Dwyer, sinned, or have deserved to be dubbed anti-religious in the opinion of a few back-boneless creatures, we cheerfully accept the responsibility'. The editorial accused the bishop of a most glaring misstatement in his sermon and declared that 'when a clergyman mixes in purely mundane matters he should be considered as an ordinary citizen, not as a priest... and Dr. O'Dwyer is capable of erring in worldly matters'. Oh, what treason, then as now!

Parenthetically, it should be said that from all the yellowing pages of the **Leader** available at the British Museum's newspaper library at Colindale, - and there are gaps - the gravamen of the editor's case against the bishop was that education at Bruff was not just an ecclesiastical matter, that it was a matter primarily for parents; moreover, that no other bishop or parish priest in Ireland had taken such sanctions as he had against the Brothers at Bruff. Indeed, a Christian Brother, who has been following this series in **The Old Limerick Journal**, told a relation of mine in Dunlaoghaire: 'What is being published is all true; it is in the archives at Marino'.

Nettled by what he must have regarded as the contumelious attitude of the **Leader's** editor, Dr. O'Dwyer, on March 31, met a députation of the Bruff People's Restoration Committee at Kilmallock and told them: 'I will never agree to the return of the Brothers, **but if the people approach me respectfully I might do something**' (my emphasis). My own view, and I may be wrong, is that here was another olive branch, but, as Pius Browne of Bruff records in his unpublished manuscript, the 'now inevitable answer' of the **Leader** was still the drawn



Bruff, circa 1912.

sword. Nor would it sheathe the sword when early in May Limerick City Council declined on a vote to support the Bruff Committee. The **Leader** promptly cited the Bishop of Salford who had declared at a Brothers school opening that it was the 'divine right' of parents to choose the mode of their children's education and, brushing aside the City Council, stated: 'Bruff is not weak-kneed, nor is the active support of the City Council or Corporation, however desirable it might be, necessary for the continuance of the struggle, which is ultimately bound to succeed ... The Mayor of Limerick, though favouring National Independence, is silent on the application of this principle locally.'

The unusual lack of enthusiasm for Bruff by the City Council was not due to the exhaustion of public opinion but to something else which Pius Browne notes and which I can confirm from knowledge of my father and his attitudes: the campaign for the return of the Brothers was now elevated to a demand for a basic civil right and the class issue, rich v poor, was being raised: the **Leader's** reply to the Council concluded: '...those who subscribed most generously to the Bruff Defence Fund in Limerick were the working classes, and it is only at election time their grievances are remembered'. Which was all on a par with an editorial in the **Leader** of the time which was headlined, I was pleasantly surprised to note, 'Vote Labour'. (I don't know what the owner of the paper, Jer Buckley, thought of that one!).

Working-class Limerick at any rate began more and more to be involved. On June 20, 1898 the rooms of the Limerick 1798 Centenary Association in Sarsfield Street were packed to the doors with local trades' representatives who unanimously pledged support to the **Leader** and thanked Jer Buckley for its editorial championing of the Brothers' cause. As some descendants of the men who were there may be reading this today, here are a few of the names: Michael Prendergast, treasurer, '98 Association; C. Ryan, Tailors' Society; M. Bourke, president, Wolfe Tone Club; M. O'Connor, Young Emmet Club; William Creagh, treasurer, Congregated Trades.

John Daly, the old Fenian, apologised for being unable to be present, 'as otherwise I would do my share in defence of the **Leader** against ecclesiastical despotism'. John O'Brien, who had summoned the meeting by poster only the previous evening, set the tone: 'But for public opinion being canvassed over Bruff the Brothers in Limerick itself would be in a worse position. When John Godsell and myself and several tradesmen of the city went to Brother Walshe in the Monastery he told us the schools were already showing signs of decay, that the school in Creagh Lane was in danger of toppling down on Brothers and pupils, and that he had not the money to put it in a sanitary condition.

The Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer knew that when he cut off the weekly contribution of the workmen of Limerick he was using the thin edge of the wedge to drive them out of the city altogether. Our principal duty tonight is to assist the Brothers and, in assisting them, we are advocating the plucky little journal which at great risk to itself came forward to take the side of the oppressed. Because the **Leader** had the courage of its convictions was that a justification for Dr. O'Dwyer or any other clergymen to say it would be the dearest drop of ink that ever fell from an editor's pen? It is our duty to show our Bishop it will be the cheapest drop and that when this agitation ceases the Christian Brothers will be a permanent institution in Ireland in spite of ecclesiastical tyranny'.

John O'Brien was cheered and so was Michael O'Connor (Corporation Employees) who said it was no longer, 'Remember Limerick and British treachery' but 'Remember Bruff and clerical treachery'! He reminded the audience that the Brothers had been refused state aid because they refused to take down the emblems of the faith from their classrooms, Michael Prendergast (Bakers) and James Ryan (Tailors) praised the **Leader's** stand over Bruff, then the meeting appointed men for each district to resume the penny-a-week collection from each workingman to be paid direct to the Brothers. It was a collection which Dr. O'Dwyer had discontinued. (It had been pointed out to the meeting that the half-yearly chapel-gate collections for the Brothers 'by kind permission of His Lordship' did not

reach them intact; they got only 4d out of every shilling subscribed).

In the same issue of the **Leader** there is a reference to the dismissal of a national teacher in Sligo by Dr. Clancy, Bishop of Elphin: he claimed that as manager of the school he had a Divine Right to do so. Said the **Leader**: 'Dr. Clancy goes one better than any other prelate in Ireland ... (but) the divine right to do wrong went out of fashion many centuries ago. Dr. Clancy may try to revive the pattern, but it won't wash. Divine right or no divine right, Dr. Clancy's head-coachman would not enter his lordship's service on the terms made for an Irish schoolmaster. In his superior, lofty way, so like a provincialised Zimians, Dr. Clancy is simply splendid. Dr. Walsh of Dublin, is only a poor prelate alongside this great Churchman ... he roundly states that his brethern, the Corporation of the Maynooth Union, are only fooling away their time by not grappling with the managerial question, and proclaiming the 15th century comedy of Divine Right'. Anything to take a rise out of the in-placable Bishop of Limerick, the Most Rev. Thomas O'Dwyer!

But Dr. O'Dwyer was not idle. On July 4 it was reported in the **Leader** that Brother Walshe of Limerick had gone to the employees of the Waterford & Limerick Railway and told them he could no longer accept subscriptions from them. He did not say why.

On a lighter note, and lest I should be accused of selective reporting, I am happy to record that I came upon a report of the conviction for being drunk and disorderly at Ennis railway station of the man who was to be my maternal grandfather, P.J. McInerney, chairman of the Ennis Board of Guardians. He was fined a half-guinea. The Head Constable of the RIC was asked 'Of what did the disorder consist?' and answered, 'He was shouting "Up Kruger" and I would arrest any man who did that'. It is also possibly worthy of note that Andy McEvoy, who was to be my father years later, editorialised in the **Leader** about this monstrous persecution of a Fenian patriot'!).

(To be continued).



St. Peter and Paul's Church, Bruff; from a drawing by Tony Hartnett.