

SCANDAL AT BRUFF

PART
FIVE

Looking back on my necessarily brief notes of the great controversy that surrounded Bishop O'Dwyer's expulsion of the Christian Brothers from Bruff I am struck by the venom which the priests injected into the affair. Were the priests jealous? I'd say so; so does Michael McCarthy in his book **Five Years in Ireland** where I read: 'The popularity of the Christian Brothers is not pleasant to the priests'.

Whatever the reason, mid-1899 arrived and the children of Bruff had had no schooling since the Brothers left in November 1897. The Bishop's plan now was to give them a national school, but the **Leader**, it's blood up, kept insisting 'No Brothers - No school'. Every time the Brothers were praised anywhere in the world the eulogy was printed with appropriate reference to the state of play in Bruff. A fair sample of this tactic, in July 1899, in otherwise harmless 'Notes & Comments' was this paragraph by Andy McEvoy referring to Australian praise of the Brothers:

Bruff fails to see why an educational system which serves the interests of children in the Antipodes should be considered unsuitable in a Catholic village in the county of Limerick.

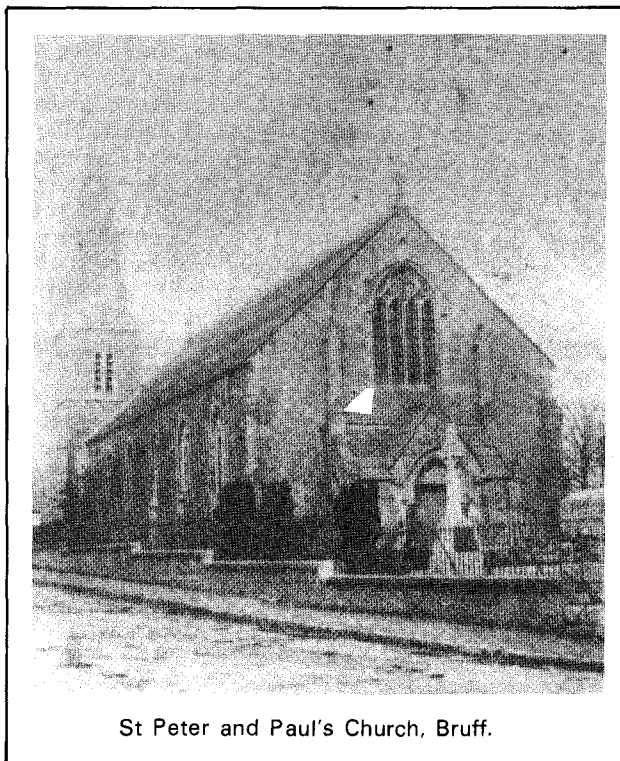
Verb. sap. And sure enough back at Bruff a public meeting of parents rejected any substitute for the departed Brothers, declaring it 'most inadvisable' for anyone to consider opening another school. Limerick City Council, already smarting from the Bishop's attack was not now backing any such agitation despite a lively speech at Bruff in which a John F. Osborne took Mayor John Daly to task for his 'subservience'.

'The agitation of the people of Bruff for the return of the Brothers is as vital to them as the amnesty of the Political Prisoners was to the people of Ireland in general. It was by the concentration of public opinion that the prisoners were released ... Mr Daly should remember that the Bruff people did their share of the work which brought about his amnesty'.

When the **Leader** was not editorialising its correspondence columns were in regular use to keep the pot boiling. In May 1899 we find a letter signed by John Cremin of Bruff (but written in the style of Edward Moran, the **Leader's** local correspondent fire-eater) which claimed that ownership of St. Patrick's Monastery was vested in the local people, that it was built for the sole use of Christian Brothers and 'this being so, the Bruff people are determined never to allow any other teachers to inhabit it'. The people, it seemed, were barring it to Bishop O'Dwyer and the letter, impertinently, told the Bishop and the P.P.: 'If Dr O'Dwyer and Fr MacNamara want to introduce National Education (with all due apologies for the word National) into Bruff, could they not erect a suitable repository for preserving their new graft of the 'tree of knowledge', new at least as far as Bruff is concerned? Have they not the Board of Works to appeal to, and would it not anyway be far easier for them to build a National School than it was for the people of Bruff to erect a monastery at a time when famine and emigration had impoverished the country? Fancy telling a bishop what to do!

That summer, Father MacNamara PP agreed to receive a deputation of the people of Bruff and hopes were high

By Dermot McEvoy



St Peter and Paul's Church, Bruff.

there might be a resolution of the conflict. The PP, however, noticing that a Michael O'Shaughnessy was not present (he was in Dublin on urgent business it was explained) declared it was intended contempt or 'imperfect knowledge of the rules of etiquette', said he was 'open to no further argument', and stormed out. This was the same Father MacNamara who slammed the door in Andy McEvoy's face when he called to make a polite enquiry at the outset of the affair, scarcely, a judge of good manners. Then there was the odd case of the curate, the Rev. Robert Ambrose, who at about this time said in public about the agitation: 'I have my feelings ... and my feelings are with the people from whom I sprung'. The people expected big things from him, but when a cow's liver was thrown at a clerical student who was taking the bishop's side, Fr Ambrose changed his tune. He called the people from whom he had sprung, 'informers, forgers and long-eared creamery donkeys'!

In his unpublished manuscript of the history of Bruff, Pius Browne notes that Fr Ambrose rather liked handing out abuse. He cites his sermon of Sunday, July 10, 1899 when he took as his text: 'Beware of false prophets who come up to you in the clothes of sheep, but who are inwardly ravening wolves'. Fr Ambrose went on: 'I am sorry to say that the people of Bruff have been made the victims of false prophets' ... (at which twenty people left the church). He then called the leaders of the Bruff Campaign 'scandal-givers, cowards, hypocrites and idolators. In fact, they are nothing short of being amadauns. A little learning is a dangerous thing and there are young brats who think they know a great deal because they can write a report for a newspaper'.

Pius Browne points out that one of the 'young brats' was certainly Edward Moran. But Fr Ambrose was only taking the lead from Bishop O'Dwyer who, as I have noted in earlier instalments, regarded himself as the only educated person in the county).

Late summer and early autumn the **Leader** flexed its muscles over the strong rumour that a National teacher was coming to Bruff; editorially it excoriated the idea. But a teacher did arrive, a Harry Massy Musgrave, and October 6 the school re-opened under the new national system: it had two pupils, the brothers Wall. On October 13, as the brothers walked to school they had eighteen RIC to protect them; there were several baton charges and three people were severely injured.

A summons returnable at the local Petty Sessions relating to a disturbance on September 25 recited:

The Queen, at the prosecution of District Inspector J.J. Heatly, R.I. Constabulary, complainant, V. Patrick Dunne, John Dunne, John Cremin, Patrick Mulcahy, Cornelius Fogarty and James Butler, defendants. Whereas a complaint has been made to me that you ... did unlawfully, with a number of other persons to the number of one hundred and more assemble together with intent unlawfully to intimidate the Rev. J. Ambrose CC and Henry M Musgrave, and that you did use intimidation towards the Rev J. Ambrose CC and Henry M Musgrave, subjects of Her Majesty the Queen ... and did endeavour to stir up and keep alive discontent in the minds of Her Majesty's subjects ... and to set certain of Her Majesty's subjects against certain others of them...

Not to be outdone, John Cremin, not the least of Her Majesty's subjects, took out a summons against Fr Ambrose, another of Her Majesty's subjects, complaining that he 'did unlawfully wield a stick over complainant's head, thereby being guilty of a constructive assault on the complainant, and, in the alternative, of such conduct as was calculated to provoke a breach of the peace. This is to command you to appear as a defendant ... and show cause why you should not find sufficient sureties to be of good behaviour towards Her Majesty the Queen, and towards all Her Majesty's subjects, and that in default of such sureties you may be committed to prison for such time as the said Justices shall see fit'.

The **Leader** commented: 'The incidents which led to the issue of the summonses ... occur almost every day'. On the day of the hearing Fr Ambrose refused to be sworn and said, 'I will never give evidence'. The case was adjourned for a month. The cross-summons was withdrawn. The **Leader** reported that while the witnesses were being brought to court Tom Fitzgerald, a well-known local personality and athlete, approached Musgrave and 'flattened him, sending his hat reeling in the mud'. (Pius Browne remarks of the incident: 'The Duggan family in Bruff are closely related to Fitzgerald, a fact which they are not unwilling to admit, unlike many others...'). Good on the Duggans, I say!

Her Majesty the Queen was not all that popular at the time, even since and Father Ambrose was to regret invoking the royal intervention: the next Sunday he was booed in the streets and walked to the Parochial House with an escort of RIC. Swarms of RIC were on patrol everywhere and the two Wall brothers had eight RIC as escort going to school and eight more to take them home. And of course the newspaper 'war' continued unabated, shifting now to the **Cork Examiner**, which had a big daily circulation in Limerick city and county. On 30 October it published a remarkable letter from the Bruff Committee men. John Cremin and friends. The letter was a

riposte to an ill-informed editorial that described Fr Ambrose as 'a priest of holy and patriotic character'. Here are some excerpts from the letter in the issue of 30 October:

'Having read ... an editorial reference to the recent prosecutions, we, the defendants, beg to make a few remarks with reference to the denunciatory tone of your article and (the description of) Fr Ambrose as a priest of holy and patriotic character.

'In the early part of last month a marriage ceremony was taking place in Bruff parish church at which Fr Ambrose officiated. A young man from the town happened to be best man. Just as the ceremony was about to commence Fr Ambrose happened to see this young man smile and without further ado struck him three blows on the head, one of which caused him to bleed profusely from the ear. The assault took place at the foot of the altar and no doubt redounds to the credit of the rev. gentleman as he did it probably in a 'father-like manner' and in accordance with that 'way' he has.

'As to his patriotism, the people of Bruff draw conclusions from his constant intercourse and association with the representatives of the Government he purports to despise. His matutinal visits to the Bruff barracks are not very creditable for such a distinguished patriot...

'You say, sir, that owing to the action and forgiving demeanour of the rev. gentleman the magistrates decided to adjourn the case for a month'. (But) his demeanour had not the slightest influence on the magistrates. On the contrary, they were taught a very wholesome lesson by the manner in which he conducted himself on the witness table. Patriotic outbursts, accompanied by violence in a Petty Sessions Court, are rather a burlesque on nationality ... Fr Ambrose and his friends would like to see us punished, but the authorities declined to do so.

'Sir, the people of Bruff wonder how the **Cork Examiner**, which is in total ignorance of the merits of the dispute, could have the audacity to come forward to advise them to surrender the principle for which they have been fighting for the last two years ... If his Lordship the Bishop of Limerick, and Fr MacNamara require a National School, no doubt the Government will aid them in erecting one. If they want a seminary, no doubt they are able to afford to establish one.'

The letter goes on to rail at the **Examiner** for calling Fr Ambrose a 'true soggarth' as 'astounding ... considering his reverence's attempt to brand a certain section of the people with Careyism and Piggotism in the Press, (and) others whom he thought it proper in the Pulpit to compare to long-eared creamery donkeys'. The **Leader** was never to let the priest forget those donkeys.

On Sunday, November 4, the Rev. Fr. Tierney, a Redemptorist firebrand from Limerick arrived unannounced in Bruff. According to Pius Browne's remarkable unpublished manuscript, the **Redemptorist Domestic Chronicle** has Fr Tierney saying: '**For the Bishop to bring the Brothers back would be a sacrifice of his dignity and that of the Hierarchy. This cannot be done**'. At any rate, the remarks lead to uproar in church with Fr Tierney being called 'Dr O'Dwyer's big gun' and Dr O'Dwyer 'a tyrant' and the egregious Fr Ambrose remarking that it 'would take the Boer to fight the people of Bruff'.

Just over a week later Limerick Corporation was called on to condemn several instances of Bishop O'Dwyer being 'groaned at in the streets'. The War went on and the reason it did, balancing all contemporary accounts, was precisely as stated in the off-the-cuff remarks of Father Tierney which I have quoted. His Lordship Edward Thomas O'Dwyer was determined to be His Dignity.

(To Be Continued)