

SCANDAL AT BRUFF

PART ONE

by Dermot McEvoy

AFTER almost forty years in Bruff a small community of Christian Brothers, which had been providing much-praised secondary education under the Intermediate system for local boys, was withdrawn in November 1897, without explanation. It was only when shocked parents from the town and its hinterland got together in a public meeting, presided over by John Carroll, J.P., chairman of Kilmallock Board of Guardians, that the news reached the *Limerick Leader*, of which my father, Andy McEvoy, was the youthful editor under the guidance of Jer Buckley, the proprietor. Andy McEvoy had been trained by the vigorous Jasper Tully M.P., owner-editor of the *Roscommon Herald*; their joint motto was the Duke of Wellington's retort to the blackmailer, 'Publish and be damned!' The *Leader's* task of seeking an explanation for the Bruff events became a crusade.

By the time Andy McEvoy arrived in Bruff to start his probe all that the Carroll Committee had been able to unearth was a letter from Richard A. Maxwell, Superior General of the Brothers in Marino, saying that the Brothers had always been kindly treated by 'the good people of Bruff' and that they would retain memories of the people in their grateful recollection. This letter ended: 'I gave notice to the Bishop, Dr. O'Dwyer, that I was obliged to withdraw the Brothers in consequence of circumstances of which His Lordship was fully aware, circumstances which caused the Brothers much trouble and over which they had no control and which rendered it impossible for them to remain any longer in Bruff'.

No clues there as to why, so Carroll and his men called on the Dean of the diocese, Very Rev. Dr. McNamara P.P., V.G., of Bruff; he did not know why either, or so he told them, and came up with the suggestion that the deputation should ask the Bishop to send them a French order of monks to replace the Brothers. The deputation allowed itself to be fobbed off and, appropriately servile, wrote to the Bishop as instructed.

Now, Andy McEvoy was always respectful of bishops, though he never accepted that they were above the law. His only aim when he descended on Bruff, with the full backing of Jer Buckley, was to elicit the truth — no matter who suffered. His first salvo, fired on 12 November 1897 in the *Leader* under the headline: 'The Christian Brothers' Exodus from Bruff — Were they Hunted?', carried a brisk report (for those days) 'From Our Special Reporter': 'The departure of the Brothers has aroused universal comment not alone in Bruff but in the city and county. On Friday week last the pupils assembled as usual and the day's work was gone through. The boys were not informed that the school was to be closed nor was any intimation of that kind conveyed to their parents. Late that night it was rumoured the Brothers had left ... no cause could be assigned for their doing so and it was at first thought the Superior General had decided to transfer them and replace them with other members of the Order'. A reasonably moderate opening.

All that the editor could get from the Superior of the Brothers in Limerick was that the 'people of Bruff know three-fourths of the reasons why the Brothers had to leave'. He said in the *Leader*: 'There is evidently a nigger in the woodpile somewhere', and more acridly 'Right well the P.P. of Bruff knows why the Brothers were withdrawn, right well he and the people of Bruff know the prolonged, petty persecution to which the Brothers were subjected.



Andy McEvoy, editor of the *Limerick Leader*.

The Brothers, I dare say, good men as they are, withdrew quietly so as not to have a scene. The people of Bruff were always loyal to the Brothers and the Brothers I feel would never leave only through compulsion'.

That at the time, was dangerous stuff but the *Leader* pressed on. The editor reported that the Brothers' school and residence had been built by the people on land given free by the Earl of Limerick, that the Brothers continued to teach there without trouble up to the time a seminary was established by the clergy with one of the curates of the parish on its teaching staff, that both schools had Intermediate classes and:

whether rivalry existed or not the indisputable fact remains that the late Vicar, Archdeacon Cregan, approached the Brothers with a view to their adopting the national system of education. Of course this was scouted by the Brothers who are implicit believers in their own system. The poor boys of Bruff were taught free by the Brothers and those whose circumstances allowed it had moderate fees charged.

On the other hand the pupils attending the seminary have always paid for their tuition on a much higher scale. Those who are well informed positively assert that rivalry existed between the schools and they point out that the establishment of the national system would effectively put an end to any more pupils being prepared for the Intermediate examinations by the Christian Brothers. The introduction of the national system would also

seriously interfere with the rights of the people in this way. When the Christian schools were initiated the building was erected by the parishioners at their own expense and vested in the late Dean Cussen and his successors as their trustees.

If the National Board obtained control over the school, the Parish Priest would become its manager and the voice of the people as to the appointment or dismissal of a teacher would not be heard. This was one consideration which actuated the minds of the people when they attempted to obtain an explanation of the departure of the Brothers ...

Then again, harping on "The Reason Why", Andy McEvoy wrote:

Now what caused the Brothers to go? They always had liberal support from the people, a support which would be doubled if necessary, it was ascertained. To get at the facts which led to the withdrawal is impossible. But there are some interesting details of the relations between the Brothers which were imparted to our representative. The Brothers always had the privilege of attending Mass daily in the Convent chapel, but eleven months ago this privilege was withdrawn and the Brothers were forced to attend at the parish church.

At first sight this would seem to be a very trivial matter, but there can be no doubt but that it seriously inconvenienced the Brothers and materially interfered with their school hours. Mass is celebrated daily at 7 o'clock in the convent and this allowed the Brothers who had but a very short distance to go to be back in the schools in time to get ready for commencing work at 9 sharp; church Mass does not commence until after 8 o'clock and therefore it can be seen that attendance at it prevented the Brothers from opening their schools at the accustomed hour. This discloses a strange state of affairs and if a similar system of giving unnecessary trouble to the Brothers in other directions was indulged in there is no one to doubt the Rev. Bro. Maxwell's statement they found it impossible to remain in Bruff.

Relentlessly, the probing went on. The Leader was then a tri-weekly and the heading stayed in type 'Scandal at Bruff! Further inquiries revealed that the bone of contention was the superior teaching at the Brothers' schools and that parents were induced to send their children to the seminary only when they had 'become smart and intelligent at the Brothers' schools'.

The Leader reported that Dean McNamara resented the attitude taken by the people: 'At first Mass last Sunday he spoke of the unreasonable hours at which a deputation waited on him'. In the same issue there was a leading article which referred to 'miserable and undeserved petty persecution of the Brothers', 'a disposition to hide the true facts' and the 'jealousy of the priests of the success of the Brothers'. It concluded:

The men of Bruff will be the veriest ingrates if they tamely permit the expulsion of the Brothers and allow, as it has been suggested, a foreign order of monks to supply their place. The Christian Brothers are good enough for Bruff and for Ireland; they are kindly Irish of the Irish, neither Saxon nor Italian, and we want no glib instructors from beyond our own borders to educate the boys of Bruff or the young men of Limerick and Clare.

When all the facts have been obtained we shall ask the people to join with us in condemning the party that is culpable in this matter and assist us in putting down injustice with a strong hand, no matter where it is perpetrated or from what quarter it may come.

Fighting words! Especially as the perpetrator of the injustice was none other than Bishop O'Dwyer and well Andy McEvoy knew it! Undaunted, he returned to the attack three days later and on Monday, 15 November 1897 in 'Notes and Comments' (a heading my father retained 50 years later when, as editor of the *Clare Champion*, he was hitting out at the *New Pretentious*) he wrote:

We consider that no further evidence is needed to show that the Christian Brothers have met with treatment at the hands of the clergy at Bruff which is the reverse of what might be expected from those whose duty it is to preach Christian charity. Is it



The staff of the Limerick Leader in 1902.

possible that a mere worldly matter of the success or non-success of two schools has led a Roman Catholic priest to stigmatise the people of Bruff as "moonlighters" and this from the pulpit of the parish church!

The evidence is all the one way and we are forced to express the opinion that a community that has done so much for the youth of Ireland has been treated to a system of coercion by the Catholic priesthood that is far worse in its effects and more petty in its causes than any passed by our British rulers in their attempts at subduing the national spirit.

For the Bishop, who fancied himself a patriot and got people to believe it, this must have hurt.

Back again at Bruff the editor reported on the 'cruelty' meted out to a Brother Keogh 'in making this aged crippled man walk morning after morning in all weathers to the parish church'. He found it sufficient to rouse popular indignation against the author (the Bishop!). He also discovered that Father McNamara had not allowed the usual announcement of the Collection for the Brothers to be made the previous September and that it was only under pressure from Marino that a tardy and brief announcement was eventually made in the church. He wrote in the Leader: 'It was short and sweet and in complete contrast to the usual well-deserved eulogy on the Christian Brothers and their work'.

Among other 'antagonisms' he discovered: 'The Holy Sacrament is kept wherever a community of the Brothers exists. Yet a short time after Dr. McNamara's appointment to the parish he withdrew this privilege. Nor would he allow Mass to be celebrated once a week as heretofore in the Brothers' oratory'.

After many attempts Andy McEvoy eventually met the Dean out walking. He introduced himself and promised that the Leader would give his views every prominence:

He turned sharply upon me and asked what the Leader meant by stating there was friction between the clergy and the Brothers. There was no such thing, he said; he accused the Leader of wishing to create dissension. I answered that nothing was further from our intention and to prove it we would publish his view of the case, if he had any. "I will say nothing whatever", was his reply and he turned away in indignation, "Thank you", was my sole remark.

The former agent of our paper has been intimidated from continuing its sale and his placards torn down, it is alleged at the instigation of the clergy. It was not to be expected that the Leader reporter would be invited to wine and biscuits, but he did expect to be received more courteously.

No wonder the leading article was somewhat abrasive: The Leader in the interests of truth and justice and animated by the sole desire to arrive at the state of things as it really existed, has succeeded in the face of no little difficulty in throwing some light on the subject of the Brothers' tale of tyranny in Bruff ... In acting as he did, Father McNamara allowed the case against him to go by default and the Brothers, uncompensated victims of persecution of a contemptible character, stand out as victors in the eyes of the public. And because of the tyranny practised upon them and the unworthy thrust directed against them they are at this moment nearer and dearer than ever to the hearts and affections of the people.

If the people of Bruff disapprove of the departure of the Brothers, and we have the most convincing proof that they do, it is their bounden duty to at once give fearless but respectful expression to their feelings and insist on, or at least strongly request, their immediate recall.



Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer.

Otherwise they will stamp themselves before their countrymen as the veriest slaves in God's creation and as men utterly wanting in the most elementary principles of honour, self-respect and common gratitude.

We learn today that Father McNamara has stated that the French order of monks have declined to come to Bruff. This is truly a healthy sign of the times — in France at all events — and the monks referred to are deserving of every praise for refusing to touch the evicted school. We are also informed that the P.P. has asserted that in consequence of this it is his intention to bring national teachers into the schools but the national teachers of Ireland are honourable men and we doubt very much if Father McNamara will find them less pliant tools in his hands than the monks of gallant France.

Gallant France! Oh my! Anything to hit at the Bishop! As I have said, it was fighting stuff. O'Dwyer had never before been challenged on his own doorstep. Greek had indeed met Greek: no quarter was asked and none was given.

What I have recorded are only excerpts of the opening rounds of a battle royal. Going through those old files at the British Museum newspaper library at Colindale in North London made me feel proud of my father. Fancy tackling a bishop! Foolhardy enough, but Bishop O'Dwyer; it must have been like casting doubt on the truth of the tablets handed down on Mount Sinai.

It was while my father was on the Leader that he met my mother, she was teaching in the convent at Rathkeale. I was not even dreamed of ... yet reading that piece 'It was not to be expected I would be invited in for wine and biscuits ...' made me think I had written it!

I hope to deal with the case of the People versus O'Dwyer and the continuing part played by the Limerick Leader in the affair in the next edition of The Old Limerick Journal .