

The Visionary, the Liberator and the Bishop

by Tom Donoban

In 1815, Ireland's economy was in a state of recession. The Napoleonic Wars, which had provided a much needed boom to the country, had come to an end. During the course of the war, Ireland became known as the "Food Larder of Europe", as it provided much needed food supplies to the British Army. In addition to supplying food, Ireland also supplied thousands of soldiers who joined in the fight against Napoleon. In the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the Irish soldiers who survived returned home to a country in the throes of depression, as demand and prices for agricultural produce had fallen drastically. The people of Glin, County Limerick, like the rest of Ireland, had lived through a boom period and were now feeling vulnerable and fearful for their future. It is not difficult to comprehend that, when a people are feeling insecure and nervous, they would cling to any leadership or spiritual guidance given to them. It was in these circumstances that the story of a visionary at Glin began to unfold.

Reports of a Visionary

On 12 December, 1815, Thomas Spring Rice, the future Lord Monteagle, then 24 years old, wrote from Mount Trenchard to the authorities in Dublin complaining of

"the unaccountable conduct of Fr. McEniry, the Parish Priest of Glin'. He stated that the priest "brought forward from the altar and supported by the might of his authority the visions of some enthusiastic devotee who prophesies that all the South of Ireland is very shortly to become the scene of devastation and blood". Spring Rice went on to state that he was not sure if the priest's intentions in "giving currency to these absurdities, were malicious or not". The danger, he said, was "that in a country remote and unimproved, important consequences could result in the prophesies when they were supported by popular prejudices".⁽¹⁾

On 20 December, Spring Rice wrote again from Mount Trenchard with an assurance that "his father had received a formal disavowal, by the priest, before his parishioners, of some of his most objectionable notions". He also stated that "edicts issued by the magistracy would only give additional importance to the subject". And he felt reassured by the fact that the priest was to receive severe censure from his Bishop, Rev. Dr. Tuohy.⁽²⁾

O'Connell arrives at Glin

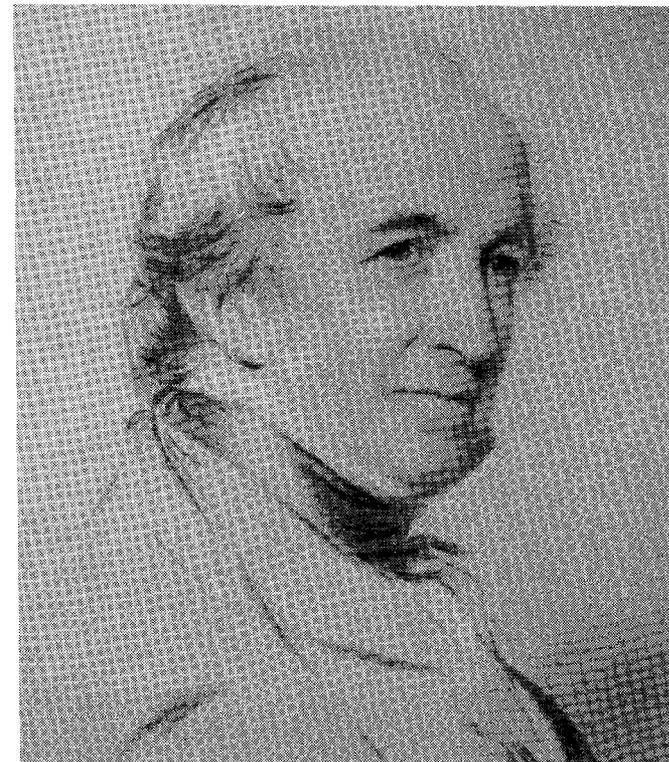
Despite the assurances from Mount Trenchard, a report submitted by Francis Lloyd⁽³⁾ on 26 December, after both of the above letters were written, gave a further

account of events in Glin. In the report he said:

I spent the last month in the neighbourhood of Glin, where I found the minds of the lower order of the people greatly disturbed, in consequence of the exhortation of their priests and although they may appear trivial and foolish, several gentlemen of that neighbourhood conceive they may further the views of the disaffected.

He further reported:

Councillor O'Connell accompanied by two other persons came in a chariot with a coronet on it to the Inn of Glin, and immediately sent for McEniry, the Parish Priest, who was in conference with them for some time. When a gentleman who also stopped at the Inn went by accident into the room where Mr. O'Connell and his friends were, he saw on the table before them, several papers, many of which appeared to him to be maps or charts. On his entry, they seemed somewhat confused, bundled up the papers and went to the window, where they conversed for some time.



Thomas Spring Rice.



Daniel O'Connell in old age.

The Visions

Francis Lloyd then went on to give an account of the visions:

On the next Sunday, the priest exhorted his flock to attend to their business and be prepared for Jan. 15th as he was informed by Catherine Healy, a prophetess that lived in his house, that a scourge was to come to this country. A large lady of Orangeism was to be sent from England, that would cut the legs and arms of Roman Catholics and allow them to bleed to death. With warnings of other matters of the same nature, this Catherine Healy is of the most profligate character, but she has got such ascendancy over the people that they are daily going in crowds to her to find out what place their deceased friends have got in the other world.⁽⁴⁾

The Bishop

Bishop Charles Tuohy's censure of Fr. McEniry⁽⁵⁾ was not very successful so he took the unusual step of publicly appealing to his flock by means of a letter to *MacDonnells Limerick Advertiser* in the issue of 13 February, 1816. He condemned "Satan and his agents, wicked and designing men. Extravagant and absurd predictions repugnant to the faith of the Catholic Church were being avowed and defended and bringing the religion into ridicule and contempt". He went on to name "Catherine Healy improperly known as the 'Holy Woman' whose revelation that infants who die immediately after baptism are condemned to a punishment of 24 hours' duration, are novel, erroneous and heretical. Any priest of the Diocese who transgressed the Diocese would be suspended and any lay person who gives support to the errors would be excommunicated as an unworthy member of the Church". He went on to say that "in the present distressed state of the lower classes, it was easy to work on weak minds under the mantle of religion. Any people holding arms should hand them up and the use of spirituous liquor should be avoided". The letter concluded by reminding the people of their obligations to their religion and not merely to avoid sin but occasions that led to it.

It is interesting to note that despite several reports on the visionary, none of them emanated from Glin. When Francis Lloyd recommended to the local magistrates to send Catherine Healy to the House of Industry in Limerick, "they seemed willing but feared the animosity of the people who called her the 'Holy Woman'."⁽⁶⁾ Spring Rice justified his involvement by the fact that Loughill was part of his estate and the Parishes of Glin and Loughill were one.⁽⁷⁾ It would have been more appropriate for the Knight of Glin to report the matter. He had, with the local gentry, built up a good relationship with Fr. McEniry and his congregation. This was evidenced in 1814 when the gentry of the district gathered with the

Knight in the Roman Catholic chapel and helped in its repair and re-roofing.⁽⁸⁾ The one thing that concerned Francis Lloyd in his report more than the visionary was the fact that Daniel O'Connell was involved, as the authorities were deeply suspicious of his activities in the Catholic cause, and Lloyd said that his visit to Glin "had something improper for its object".⁽⁹⁾ It is possible that subsequent to the publication of Bishop Tuohy's letter in 1816, warning excommunication, the people of Glin desisted from getting involved in any further dealings with Fr. McEniry⁽¹⁰⁾ and Catherine Healy. Fr. McEniry died that year and what became of Catherine Healy nobody will probably ever know.

Pastorini Prophecies

In order to put the story of the visions in context, it should be stated that prophecies of this nature were not unusual at this time and they were often prompted by fear and outside influences. In the early nineteenth century, the writings of an English Roman Catholic Bishop Walmsley, under the pen name of "Signor Pastorini"⁽¹¹⁾ excited much interest among the general population of Ireland. The book was to be found mainly in roadside inns and the homes of the more educated people. However, it was in the form of small tracts and handbills that the work penetrated the cabins and farmhouses of Irish country people.

Pastorini's writings dealt with the *Book of Revelations* and how the wrath of God would be poured out about fifty years after 1771, before the Second Coming. For some people, Irish Protestantism was to be the victim of this wrath. The spread of these ideas was helped by the oral tradition, especially by schoolmasters. While the book was first published in 1790, its prophecies did not seem to take hold until after 1816, and it was between 1821 and 1825 that the predictions were expected to be fulfilled, beginning with the annihilation of the Protestant population.

There is little evidence that the Pastorini cult penetrated County Limerick prior to 1816, but similar millenarian ideas appear to have taken root, particularly in Glin. It was in Limerick that the Pastorini prophecies enjoyed the greatest vogue, the Bishop Tuohy was one of the few bishops who spoke out against his "people being led astray". By 1822, the book (or part of it) was in circulation in the Tarbert/Glin area among the lower order of Roman Catholics, who were threatening the extinction of Protestants. Distress and the fear of famine was quoted as encouraging these prophecies, and the resultant disturbances in Tarbert led William Sandes to plead for arms to save the local yeomen from being murdered. Daniel O'Connell condemned the spread of these prophecies and it is ironic that he was the main political beneficiary of all the turmoil as the peasantry believed that if he could not lead them to the destruction of Protestantism, he would at least accomplish its abasement in Ireland.⁽¹²⁾

REFERENCES

1. State of the Country Papers, 1717/52, National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 2.
2. SOC, 1717/53, National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 2.
3. Francis Lloyd is possibly the same man who served as Sheriff in Limerick and who was remembered for the severity of his treatment of the 1798 rebels. He served as Mayor of Limerick in the years 1809 and 1810. He may have been visiting a former Mayor, Joseph Sargent, in Glin, or Mrs Elizabeth Lloyd, daughter of Tomás Óg, Knight of Glin, and widow of the Reverend Lloyd, who died in 1807.
4. SOC, 1717/2, Public Records Office, Bishop Street, Dublin 2.
5. Bishop Charles Tuohy served as parish priest of Rathkeale between 1808 and 1814. During his time in Rathkeale, he helped to rebuild the church in the town. He served as Bishop of Limerick between 1814 and 1825, and during his term he invited Edmund Rice to set up schools in Limerick City.
6. SOC, 1717/2, National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 2.
7. SOC, 1717, National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 2.
8. *The Diocese of Limerick from 1691 to the present time* by Rev. John Begley, Dublin, 1938.
9. SOC, 1717/2, National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 2.
10. Fr William McEniry a native of Ballylahane, Newcastle West, was appointed to Glin in 1806. He died on 16 July, 1816, and is buried in the ruined church of Castlemahon.
11. Charles Walmsley *The General History of The Christian Church from Her Birth to The Final Triumphant State in Heaven, Chiefly Deduced from The Apocalypse of Saint John The Apostle*, by Signor Pastorini (Dublin, 1790).
12. *Irish Peasants' Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914*. Edited by Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr.

SOURCES

- History of Limerick* by Maurice Lenihan, Limerick, 1866.
The Knights of Glin by J.A. Gaughan, Kingdom Books, 1978.
History of Limerick, op.cit.
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Deel Views, Easter, 1995, 'Fr. Charles Tuohy (P.P. Rathkeale 1808-14, Bishop of Limerick, 1814-25)', by Pat Coleman.
 J. Begley, *op.cit.*

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