

THE REFORMATION IN IRELAND*

THE course of the Reformation in England—‘that catastrophe in the history of Christian civilization—the Reformation so-called’—is plain sailing, the proceedings in the alteration of religion are clear. It is otherwise with Ireland. Confusion and obscurity attend the narrative of events and historians of the period have for the most part earned an advocate’s reward and left truth to take care of itself. The work of Father Ronan is therefore the more valuable, and this second volume, which covers the critical years from Elizabeth’s accession till the death of James Fitzmaurice, is of high importance.

The story itself is dreary enough. It was ‘an age of insincerity, inconsistency, bluffing and temporising on all sides.’ Pride and avarice are exhibited, and at their worst; treachery and murder most foul are recurring incidents in the history of the relations of the English government to the people of Ireland. The feuds of the great Norman-Irish chieftains, of the houses of Butler and Geraldine in especial, the overweening pride of Shane O’Neill—whose patriotism is not to be denied, though Father Wolf, S.J., the papal commissary, wrote him down ‘a cruel, impious heretical tyrant’—the nominal submission of chiefs and nobles to the sovereignty of Elizabeth, the acceptance by seven of the Irish bishops of the Elizabethan supremacy and the further acceptance by five of the seven of the Protestant order of service—all these conspicuous things make melancholy reading. But despite the failure of the Irish chiefs to stand together in the presence of a common enemy and despite the utter misery and savagery of the people, the Elizabethan

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'reform' had no success in Ireland. In 1561 Father Wolf found that although the people were 'much given to vice they were free from heresy.' As for the Earl of Clanricard in Connacht he remained a 'devout Catholic' (not hesitating, however, to divorce a couple of wives and keep a few concubines), yet 'the pressure of English force was so great upon him, and he was so anxious to remain at peace with the English and in possession of his territories, that he elected to support two bishops who had taken the oath of supremacy.'

'Reform goeth but slowly' is the cry of Elizabeth's agents in Ireland. Her bishops, Craik of Kildare, Curwen of Dublin, Loftus—a Yorkshireman—of Armagh, confess their inability to accomplish any good and pray to be sent home without loss of stipend. The people of Kildare did not understand English and therefore 'neither I can preach unto the people nor the people understand me,' wrote Craik to his patron Robert Dudley. Within the Pale the chief result of the 'reform' was the utter decay and ruin of churches and chancels. Priests and people being forbidden to hear Mass, the handful of Protestant ministers and worshippers were totally inadequate for the number of churches. In seventy years after Elizabeth's first parliament the number of churches in the diocese of Dublin had sunk from 273 to 37; the rest had gone to ruin. Outside the Pale the attempted change of religion troubled the people but little. In such cities and towns as Waterford and Youghal, where a garrison might be temporarily stationed, the priest would be driven out for a time, but it was seldom he did not return when the soldiers had departed. The very prebendaries and minor canons of St. Patrick's in Dublin while 'they outwardly conformed by their presence at the services in the cathedral, drew their stipends, paid their Catholic vicars where possible to conduct Catholic services in the churches of their prebends and presumably said

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Mass themselves in houses in some back streets in the neighbourhood of the Cathedral.' Ireland remained Catholic. Elizabeth might appoint Protestant bishops; these prelates, as indeed they sorrowfully confessed, had no influence on the faith of the people.

The question of language made the Protestant 'reform' impossible for Ireland. Who could make head or tail of this new English Book of Common Prayer? Certainly not the Irish. The government toyed with the notion of turning the Protestant service into Latin so that the people might not perceive it greatly different from the familiar Mass, but the thing was never done. Besides, the scarcity of Anglican clergymen to perform the Anglican service was a difficulty.

Throughout that first twenty years of Elizabeth's reign the Protestant church gained no sure footing in Ireland. Sydney, in a letter to the Queen in 1576, declared that 'upon the face of the earth, where Christ is professed there is not a Church in so miserable a case.' Sydney went on to explain the cause of the misery. In the first place the churches were all in ruins. (Catholics being prohibited from using their churches, the buildings fell into decay.) In the second place there was a want of good ministers and a want of livelihood for ministers. Stipends must be provided for ministers who could speak Irish. The English government referred the lord-deputy to the Irish Council.

'Reform' therefore, moved but slowly; while the strife of Desmond with Ormond, and the disordered rapacity of the multitude of fighting men, dependents of the chiefs, who lived by preying on the peasantry, brought the unhappy country into the depths of wretchedness where hope is lost. As for the Catholic clergy, continually harried by English soldiers—Richard Creagh, that good and faithful archbishop of Armagh, willingly acknowledged the Queen's supre-

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macy in temporals, and was rewarded for his loyalty by long imprisonment in the Tower of London, where he died—they fell into the general demoralisation.

And that general demoralisation was appalling—so contemporary records assure us. Thus, Edmund Tanner, who became bishop of Cork, could write in 1571 ‘not a hundred Irishmen in all Ireland have been infected with heresy, though not a few, for fear of penalties and confiscation of goods, attended the profane rites of the heretics, and the demoralisation of the people is such that a pious Catholic is hardly to be found; and no wonder since the clergy are the most depraved of all In fine so gross is the ignorance of the people that there are many who, passing all their lives in the grossest sin, have grown so accustomed thereto that they dare to say that it is just as lawful for them to live by theft or rapine as to him that worthily serves the altar. And nevertheless so well inclined are they, or rather prompted by the Holy Spirit, to a good life, that it needs but the admonition or reproof of a good man and forthwith they are dissolved in tears lamenting that they knew not that such things were sins or contrary to the commandments of God.’

Father Ronan is satisfied that ‘in the main one must accept Tanner’s statement.’

The apostolic labours of Edmund Tanner lasted but three years. ‘As papal commissary he travelled almost the whole of Ireland, administering the Sacraments, but secretly on account of persecution. In spite of ill-health he persevered, until at last, worn out, he died on June 4th, 1579, in the diocese of Ossory.’

The wretchedness of those first twenty years of Elizabethan rule is illuminated by the work of these devoted bishops, Richard Creagh and Edmund Tanner.

The muddle and confusion of the times is illustrated not only by the appeal of the English to Lacy, the

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Catholic bishop of Limerick, to help keep order and assist the Protestant authorities in 1568—an appeal that was not disregarded—but even more by the arrest of Edmond Daniel, a Jesuit student, by the Catholic mayor of Limerick. Edmond Daniel ‘may be regarded as the first Irish victim of whose martyrdom it is possible to produce direct contemporary evidence.’ According to Father Wolf, he died ‘in the city of Cork on the 25th of October, 1572, for the Catholic Faith and in the Catholic Faith to the great edification not only of the Catholics, but even of the heretics.’ And the Catholic mayor of Limerick, who handed the martyr over to the English authorities for execution, can only plead to Rome in excuse for his conduct, that ‘he had been constrained to arrest certain persons who appeared to be opposed to the Queen and among the rest Edmond Daniel who, he afterwards discovered, was a clerk in minor orders. He told how he handed him over to the State authorities some months later; how the cleric was tried for treason; how he was convicted without very convincing evidence, and how he was eventually executed.’

The story ends with the death of James Fitzmaurice, ‘a brave and gallant gentleman, witty, learned, impassionate, circumspect, active, generous, devout, subtle and quick of apprehension, eloquent, of a high and adventurous politic and dissembling mind; too forward and apt to travail, to take pains and to endure thirst, cold and hunger . . . The English through his death took heart and courage and the Irish were daunted, having lost their leader, being never like to find such another.’

And it was not at the hands of the English that Fitzmaurice fell, but by the bullet of the Burkes of Castleconnell.

Of the preparations for that fateful expedition of James Fitzmaurice, Father Ronan writes fully. It is

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a tale of a Catholic King of Spain and a Most Christian King of France, mutually distrustful and suspicious, each afraid to move to the assistance of Catholic Ireland. To support Mary Queen of Scots against Elizabeth was to strengthen France at the expense of Spain, and at a time when the Netherlands were in revolt; so Philip saw the situation and would do nothing, nor allow, so far as he could prevent it, the Pope taking action. And the King of France, with his Huguenots and mortal fear of Spain, needed to keep on good terms with England. So Elizabeth (and Cecil?) played with Catholic King and most Christian King until England was lost to the faith and the Irish had been crushed. In vain the Irish Catholics on the Continent reminded Philip of Spain of the motto 'he that would England win, let him with Ireland begin'; Philip, pondering the political situation, would not be hurried.

Pope Gregory XIII, misdirected by Dr. Sander and other Catholic exiles, took it for granted that the English people were ready and anxious to dethrone Elizabeth (whom the Pope called 'an impious Jezebel') and restore Catholicism. Rome therefore encouraged the expedition of Fitzmaurice; with the result that the Pope was made hateful in the eyes of Englishmen, denounced as a foreign power and an enemy of England. The prejudice thus created has never been entirely uprooted.

Father Ronan's work helps us to disentangle the threads and arrive at an understanding of the very tortuous business in Rome and Madrid, even as it helps us to follow the turns and twists of affairs in Ireland in those critical twenty years. Because covetousness and base intrigue, murder and theft loom very large in the annals of the Reformation in Ireland, the nobility of the brave disinterested few is the more glorious and the more welcome. Thomas Stuckley ex-

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pirate and stout man of Devon, wholeheartedly anti-English and doomed to die in warfare with Arabs in Africa, cuts a queer figure; but he has his part—a minor part, no doubt—in the tragedy of Fitzmaurice and the invasion of Ireland.

JOSEPH CLAYTON.

WAYS AND MEANS

(A Provisional Epitaph)

A MAN of many might-have-beens
Which seldom seemed to pay—
For when, by chance, he had the means,
He always lost the way.

H.D.C.P.