

Chapter 4: Reformation in Ireland

Introduction

The 16th century was a period of great change not alone in Ireland but throughout Europe. It was the time when the religious reform movement split the western Church, and created a division among Christians which is still felt today. In Ireland, the split was keenly experienced because the new English, the most recent settlers to arrive on our shores, adhered to the new reforms, while the native Irish and many of the Anglo-Normans remained loyal to Rome. This added another dimension to the mix of what it was to be Irish, but it also brought strife and distrust which strained good relations between the peoples of Ireland down to the present day.

The precise story of the Blessington area in the 16th century is not easy to unravel. But a picture of the Archdiocese of Dublin in the context of what was happening in the country in general throws light on the tribulations experienced by people at this time of intense political and religious upheaval.

Reign of Henry VIII



Henry VIII

Henry VIII acceded to the throne of England in 1509 and reigned for almost forty years. One legacy of his reign that particularly impacted on Ireland was his break with Rome. This break was initiated by his desire to obtain an annulment from his wife, Catherine of Aragon, to clear the way for his marriage to Anne Boleyn. When the pope refused, Henry declared himself Supreme Head of the Church in 1534, thus renouncing papal authority. Henry had little interest in theological change and remained Catholic at heart and it was two of his three children who succeeded him, Edward VI and Elizabeth I, who took up the reform ideas epitomised by Luther and Calvin that swept through Europe at the beginning of the 16th century. Henry's rift with Rome, however, eased the way for them to introduce the reformed liturgy as the state religion.

Another seminal change which began under Henry and was completed by Elizabeth was the defeat of the Gaelic order. Henry inherited the title 'Lord of Ireland', but effective authority was exercised through the Anglo-Norman dynasties. By the late 15th and early 16th centuries, power was mainly centred on one family, namely the Fitzgeralds, Earls of Kildare. Following the failed uprising of Silken Thomas, the Fitzgerald heir, this changed and in 1541 Henry declared himself King of Ireland. And so the semi-autonomous lordship of Ireland that began with the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 was at an end. Ireland, unlike England however, had never been completely conquered by the Anglo-Normans and over the centuries the area under their control had shrunk. By the time of Henry's reign, English law did not extend beyond the Pale, that is, Dublin and much of the surrounding counties of Louth, Meath and Kildare, as well as Anglicised outposts like Carrickfergus, Kilkenny and



Silken Thomas

Waterford. The rest of the country was ruled by local Gaelic chiefs, where English authority was mainly powerless. But this situation was about to change. Henry's immediate objective was to subdue the whole country and restore it to good order and obedience, and he hoped to achieve this through a policy of 'surrender and regrant' - this was a strategy whereby Irish and Anglo-Normans alike would submit to the king's authority and in return their lands would be restored and held in future under English law. Later a policy of plantation was begun under Henry's eldest daughter, the Catholic Mary Tudor, who in 1553 succeeded to the throne after Edward's short reign. The plantation saw a large part of the midlands (mainly present-day Offaly and Laois) being granted to English settlers following the failure of the O'Connor and O'More uprising in 1556 and it set the pattern for the next hundred and fifty years. It was a policy that proved to be the death knell of the Gaelic system.

Changes in the Church in Ireland

The cultural and political divide which existed in the country between the Gaelic and Anglicised areas was reflected in how the church operated. In the Gaelic areas, despite the organisation of the country into dioceses in the 12th century, individual churches remained closely associated with the local chiefs; in contrast, in the Anglicised areas these were structured on a diocesan basis with bishops in some cases appointed by the king himself. Dublin, Meath and Armagh, for instance, had mostly English-men appointed as bishops but within these dioceses there was a stark division between areas under Gaelic control and those loyal to the English administration. The most Gaelic province in the country was Ulster with only Carrickfergus and Newry and their immediate vicinities loyal to the Dublin administration. In the Archdiocese of Armagh, for instance, English appointed bishops had little understanding of the language or traditions of most of their flock.



Threecastles towerhouse, built by the Lord Deputy, Gearoid Mór Fitzgerald (1456-1514) to defend the Pale.

Much of the Archdiocese of Dublin was also outside the Pale. West Wicklow, for example, which included the modern-day parish of Blessington, was on the marches, a border area between the Gaelic O'Toole and O'Byrne territories of Wicklow and the Anglo-Norman Pale, and it is unlikely that a Dublin-based English archbishop held much sway over its inhabitants. In addition, many appointees to the See of Dublin also held the civil position of Lord Chancellor, which further distanced them from the vast majority of the people. Prominent archbishops in Dublin during Henry's reign were Hugh Inge, John Alen and George Browne. Both Inge and Alen had come to the notice of Henry's chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey. Inge's first appointment in Ireland was in 1512 when he became Bishop of Meath. A decade later he transferred to Dublin as Archbishop and for a period before his death in 1528, he also held the position of Lord Chancellor. His successor, John Alen also held both positions. Alen, however, came to an untimely end – he was murdered in 1534 by one of Fitzgerald's followers during the Silken Thomas revolt because of his association with Wolsey, who was an avowed enemy of the Earl.

The king himself selected the next appointment to fill the vacancy left by the murder of John Alen. He was George Browne, previously an Augustinian friar, who was consecrated

Archbishop of Dublin in 1536 by Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury and a major leader of the Reformation in England. Browne is generally recognised as the first Protestant Archbishop of Dublin and like his predecessors, he held the position of Lord Chancellor. He was one of Henry's key supporters in Ireland but his efforts to have the king accepted as head of the church met with strong opposition from the clergy in the Dublin Archdiocese. This did not stop him implementing one of Henry's key policies, namely the suppression of the monasteries and the transfer of their wealth to the exchequer. The king's commissioners who undertook the task of confiscating valuables from the monasteries were forced to confine themselves to that part of the country where they felt safe to travel, namely Anglo-Norman areas in Leinster and Munsterⁱ. The value of the items the commissioners confiscated was modest and contrasted sharply with England. For example, the Cathedral in Old Leighlin in Carlow yielded £13 6s; the Parish Church of St Brigid in Kildare £6 4s, while the Priory of Kilmainham, the building of which was described as spacious and very elegant and was



Jerpoint Abbey, suppressed under Henry VIII



Chapter House, St Mary's Abbey, off Capel St, all that remains of one of Dublin's finest medieval monasteries.

used afterwards as the residence of the Lord Deputy, yielded only £1 6s. The reason for this modest haul may be that religious objects had been hidden by the monks but it is also possible that devotional images found in churches in Ireland had little material value, being mostly made of wood or stone. What was greatly lamented by the ordinary people was the wanton destruction of revered relics, such as, St Patrick's crozier, allegedly the *Bachal Iosa* (Staff of Jesus), which had been held in Christ Church in Dublin, and the Holy Cross of Ballyboggan, Co Meathⁱⁱ both of which had attracted many pilgrims throughout the medieval period.

Hand in hand with the suppression of the monasteries and the confiscation of their wealth was the transfer of church land to new owners. The monastic estates were now broken up and there was no shortage of people eager to benefit. Among those who sought monastic property was the Archbishop, George Browne, but he was unsuccessful in acquiring the Franciscan Friary of New Abbey between present-day Ballymore Eustace and Kilcullen. It was granted instead to Thomas Eustaceⁱⁱⁱ, 1st Viscount Baltinglass, on the grounds that the property was strategically positioned on the edge of the Pale which Eustace was in a better position to defend. The Eustace family were among the Anglo-Norman class who significantly benefitted from the dissolution of the monasteries. Other new English officials and their families were more successful than Archbishop Browne: at Kilbride in west Wicklow the Anglo-Norman church along with a considerable amount of land, formerly the property of the Knights Hospitallers at Kilteel, was transferred in 1540 to Thomas Alen, a brother of the Lord Chancellor and kinsman of the former archbishop. Thomas Alen also acquired the lands of St Wolstan's Abbey in Celbridge at the same time.

Although there were no major change in Catholic doctrine until after Henry's death in 1547, nonetheless a few influential people in England were receptive to the more radical reforms

advocated on the continent by Luther and Calvin – for instance, Thomas Cranmer and George Browne were enthusiastic supporters for a new Protestant liturgy. And with the accession of Henry’s nine year old son, Edward VI, Protestantism became the established religion in England. The reforms saw radical new changes – the Book of Common Prayer replaced the Mass, the use of the vernacular was brought in instead of Latin and married clergy were officially allowed.

Reform and Resistance

On Easter Sunday 1550, Archbishop Brown introduced the new liturgy into Christ Church Cathedral. But there was little enthusiasm for change. Opposition was strong among the clergy and the people of Dublin city, and it was only in churches in the immediate vicinity of the Castle, the bastion of English rule in the country, that the new liturgy was adopted. In the country generally many of the gentry remained Catholic as did most of the leading families in Anglicised towns, such as Wexford and Waterford. Indeed two successive Lord Deputies, Grey and St Leger, conscious of the unsettled political situation and the need not to stir up trouble in the country, advised against introducing reform too quickly.

Edward’s reign lasted only five years and there was a short respite for Catholics under the new monarch, Henry’s eldest daughter, Mary Tudor, sometimes remembered as ‘Bloody Mary’ because of the number of Protestants she had executed. Two of these martyrs, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer were burnt at the stake in Oxford in 1555 and are commemorated in a stained glass window in St John’s Church of Ireland, Cloghleaigh. The window was erected by Isabella Fitzmaurice Pratt of Glenhest, Manor Kilbride, a descendent of the Ridley family. Ridley and Latimer along with Archbishop Cranmer, who was executed in March 1556, are known as the Oxford martyrs.



Memorial window in St John’s Church, Cloghleaigh with the inscription: ‘16th Oct 1555. Died at the stake in Oxford my mother’s ancestor Bishop Ridley and his friend Bishop Latimer’.

With the accession of Mary’s half-sister, Elizabeth, in 1558, Protestantism once again became the state religion. The new religious



Elizabeth 1

reforms, however, continued to make little progress in Ireland: the clergy were said to be badly educated and in short supply and parishes had little income. In 1566, the Lord Deputy, Sir Henry Sidney, noted that even within the Pale parishes lacked curates while church buildings were universally in ruin. In the 1570s, the Protestant Bishop of Meath, Hugh Brady, reported ‘the verie walls of the churches down, very few chancels covered, windows and doors ruined or spoiled’.(Moss, 204)

The majority of people in the country remained Catholic and alongside the new official religion an underground church developed. Throughout the country, the Catholic gentry and merchants who had always endowed their local churches now opened their homes as places of worship. They also sheltered and supported priests as did, for instance, the Talbots of Malahide and Mabel Browne in Kildare. The latter, the wife of the 11th Earl of Kildare, was a member of a noted English Catholic aristocratic family who harboured prominent priests in her home at Kilkea Castle near Castledermot.

Initially, the main trust of Elizabeth's administration in Ireland was political, to subdue the country and to have the Gaelic chiefs submit to English rule. Until this was achieved it was deemed unwise to force religious change. All persons holding public office including bishops, however, were obliged to take the Act of Supremacy acknowledging Elizabeth as head of the church. And this put pressure on the bishops to declare their hand. When the Irish Parliament met in 1560, two bishops, Walsh of Meath and Leverous of Kildare, refused to take the Oath and thereby lost their Sees. Seven bishops who took the Oath appeared to conform – Bishop Devereux of Ferns, the last abbot of Dunbrody Abbey, stated that while he much preferred to be a Catholic he did not wish to lose his See. But it would seem that the majority of the bishops while outwardly conforming remained Catholic at heart. At the close of Parliament that year it was said that 'most of the bishops left the city rather quickly' (Corish, 91), no doubt feeling safer when removed from the eye of the authorities. This ambiguity with regard to the implementation of the new reforms was a feature throughout the early part of Elizabeth's reign. The political situation was changing, however, and this ambiguity was not to last.

Desmond Rebellion and Its Aftermath

When Henry VIII put aside Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn he antagonised not only the Pope but Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Thereafter Catholic Ireland had become a security risk and this became a major issue under Elizabeth when the Anglo-Norman Desmond family in Munster revolted against the encroachment of the London administration. The uprising, known as the Desmond Rebellion (1569-73; 1579-1583) took on a religious dimension when their leader, James Fitzmaurice, appealed to the Pope for assistance. An alarming situation was further exacerbated when James Eustace, 3rd Viscount Baltinglass^{iv}, a devout Catholic, assisted by the Wicklow chief, Fiach Mac Hugh O'Byrne spread the rebellion to Leinster, almost to the very heart of English administration in Ireland. With the rebels expecting support from Catholic Europe, Elizabeth's armies retaliated with brute force: a scorched-earth policy was adopted resulting in great numbers of men, women and children perishing as famine stalked the land. A papal force of Spanish and Italians who landed at Smerwich Harbour in Kerry in 1580 was mercilessly butchered^v. After the defeat of the Desmonds, their land was confiscated and given to loyal English colonists.^{vi}

A new factor now entered the equation: the most recent settlers, ambitious young men wishing to forward their careers, were Protestant and it was this new wave of people who pushed the reform movement in Ireland. For example, Adam Loftus^{vii}, originally came to



Rathfarnham Castle built by Archbishop Loftus

Ireland around 1560 as chaplain to the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Sussex, but within a short time was appointed Bishop of Kildare and in 1563 at the age of 28 was created archbishop of Armagh. Four years later he was appointed to the See of Dublin and in 1581 was made Lord Chancellor. Under Loftus, the reform movement was given a new impetus and he played a key role in establishing Trinity College, which he regarded as necessary for the education of reformed clergy.

Catholic Martyrs

In the aftermath of the Desmond Rebellion, a series of oppressive measures was directed at Catholic priests and bishops and especially those newly returned from the continent. Historian, Marianne Elliott, believes the harshness of these measures were ‘gratuitous acts by those in power in Ireland rather than policy developed in London’. It was at this time that the first Catholic martyrs were created, as for instance, Margaret Ball of Dublin and Archbishop Dermot O’Hurley of Cashel^{viii}. Margaret Ball, the widow of a Dublin Alderman, sheltered and supported priests and in doing so provoked the ire of her son, Walter, the mayor of Dublin who had conformed. In 1580, he had her arrested and paraded through the city streets. She spent the next three years imprisoned in Dublin Castle where she died at the age of 70.

The execution of Archbishop Dermot O’Hurley took place in Dublin Castle around the same time as Margaret Ball’s death. He was born in Limerick around 1530 into a prominent Gaelic family and taught for many years in various universities on the continent until finally he was appointed Archbishop of Cashel by Pope Gregory XII. In 1583, he returned clandestinely and after landing in north Dublin made his way to Slane Castle, the home of Thomas Fleming, 10th Baron Slane, where he stayed for some time. One evening he unintentionally revealed his identity to a fellow guest, who happened to be a government official, who reported him to the authorities in Dublin. The Baron was ordered to arrest O’Hurley which he duly did. The Archbishop was imprisoned in Dublin Castle and accused of conspiring against the Queen and her government. He was tortured and following an arbitrary trial, was hanged on Hoggen Green in Dublin (now College Green). His body was later taken by a group of devout people and buried in a graveyard in Kevin St where it became a popular place of pilgrimage for many years.

End of the Gaelic Order

Ten years after the Desmond Rebellion another major insurrection took place, this time in Ulster. The revolt known as the Nine Years War was led by the English educated Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, who until then was believed to be a trusted servant of the queen. His chief ally was Red Hugh O’Donnell, Earl of Tirconnell who had escaped from Dublin Castle some time previously and in the dead of winter had made his way to Glenmalur and the protection of Fiach Mac Hugh O’Byrne. His companion, Art O’Neill, however, died in the Wicklow mountains and is commemorated by a cross on the slopes above the King’s River Valley.



Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone

Like the Desmonds in Munster, O’Neill and O’Donnell appealed for assistance from Spain, arguing that they were waging a war to win ‘Catholic liberty’ and to free Ireland ‘from the rod of tyrannical evil’ (Bardon, 98). Soon most of the country was engulfed by the war. Despite initial success by the rebels at the Battle of the Yellow Ford, defeat eventually came when O’Neill and O’Donnell marched south to relieve a Spanish force which had landed at Kinsale. What followed was a disaster for the Irish cause and led ultimately to the Flight of the Earls and the Ulster Plantation. It was the effective end of the Gaelic order. And with the shiring of Wicklow in 1606, English rule was now extending to all parts of Ireland.

Catholic Revival

A major effect of the Desmond Rebellion and the Nine Years War was that the lines of demarcation between the new religious practices and the old became more fixed and people could no longer fudge their belief. Above all it became clear that Ireland would not become completely Protestant. A Catholic revival in Europe spear-headed by the Counter-Reformation, which had begun earlier with the Council of Trent, was now well in place. Young Catholic men from the wealthy mercantile and gentry class were now going to Europe to be educated – even as early as 1562 the government was perturbed by the number leaving for abroad. New colleges and seminaries catering for Irish *émigrés* were springing up on the continent – the Irish College at Salamanca in Spain was established in 1592 the same year as the foundation of Trinity College in Dublin. Similar colleges were established at Douai in France and Leuven in Belgium in 1603 and 1606 respectively. When the newly ordained priests returned home,



Irish College, Salamanca



Entrance to Irish College Lueven. The Irish inscription translates as 'for the honour of God and glory of Ireland'

they tended to stay close to their families where they were assured of a support network. A good example from this period was the home of Robert Walsh and Anastasia Strong, both from prominent Waterford families, who were closely related to a number of priests. According to Robert's nephew, the Franciscan Luke Wadding, Anastasia 'kept her house continuously open for clerics, poor students and pilgrims, to whom she gave lodging in her great charity'. According to another contemporary source, she did so at the risk of losing all she possessed (Hensey, 143). The Roche family from New Ross, likewise, were a strong Catholic family; in the 1620s one son was Bishop of Ferns while another was the Vicar-Apostolic of Leighlin, and William Barry, a Kildare cleric, reported that their mother, Joan, opened her home to priests.

Another feature of the Catholic revival was the restructuring of dioceses although this proceeded at a cautious pace. Initially there had been some confusion regarding the loyalty of particular bishops to Rome following the introduction of the reformed liturgy. But as vacancies occurred following the death of an incumbent they were filled often by members of religious orders, many of whom had remained in the country. In this the authorities in Rome were assisted by Fr David Wolfe, a noted Counter Reformation Jesuit priest, who was made Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland in 1560, with a brief to report on the state of the country as well as to recommend suitable candidates for bishoprics. Further appointments to vacant Sees were made in the next two decades but the life of a Catholic bishop was a hazardous one – they were constantly on the run, harassed by the authorities and always fearful of arrest. These difficulties intensified in times of conflict, as for instance during the Desmond Rebellion and the Nine Years War. Some bishops paid the ultimate penalty and were executed, as we saw with regard to the newly appointed Archbishop of Cashel, Dermot O'Hurley. Others were imprisoned for long periods while more fled to exile on the continent. The Papal Nuncio, Fr Wolfe, is a case in point: from the time of his arrival into the country his every move was watched until eventually he was arrested and imprisoned in Dublin

Castle from where he made his escape and returned to Rome in 1567. In time, Rome deemed it more prudent not to appoint bishops to vacant Sees but to assign priests, known as vicars-apostolic, to oversee the running of dioceses. In cases where a bishop was in exile such a priest was known as a vicar-general. John White, who served as vicar-apostolic in Waterford and Lismore diocese between 1578 and 1600, was described by a government official as ‘an arrogant enemy to the gospel, and one that denieth all duties to her Majesty’. Among the ordinary people of Kilkenny, Waterford and Clonmel, however, White was ‘worshipped like a god’ (Hensey, 261). The situation whereby dioceses were run by vicars-apostolic continued into the 17th century.

On the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the Stuart James 1 came to the throne. There was an expectation, initially, that his reign might ease the situation for Catholics but this hope was short lived. Following the discovery in 1605 of the Gunpowder Plot, an alleged Catholic conspiracy to blow up the House of Parliament in London, there was a period of repression. Despite this the authorities in Rome were sufficiently optimistic to recommence appointing bishops. And so in 1611, Eugene Matthews became the first resident archbishop of Dublin. But the situation for Catholic clergy remained far from easy as is evidenced in a letter written to Rome in 1609 by David Kearney, Archbishop of Cashel: ‘As for us ecclesiastics, being always encompassed with dangers, we imitate the skilful seaman, who, when the tempest threatens, draws in the sails, and unfurls them on the return of calm’ (Hensey, 270).



James 1

A provincial synod was held in 1587 in the diocese of Clogher, which was attended by seven bishops, six from Ulster and one from Connaught, as well as a great number of ordinary clergy. That a synod could be held in Clogher in relative safety at this time was due to its situation in a part of the country which remained under the control of the Gaelic chiefs – although this was to change in the following decade as a result of the Nine Years War. The synod discussed how the diocese might restructure itself in the light of the recommendations of the Council of Trent.

In the early decades of the following century, renewed efforts to restructure the church saw no less than nine synods convened between 1606 and 1632, six in the Archdiocese of Cashel and the remainder in Dublin. In June 1614, for example, three years after his appointment to Dublin, Eugene Matthews held a synod. It took place not in the capital city, but in Kilkenny and was attended by the vicars-apostolic of all the suffragan dioceses, David Rothe of Ossory, Luke Archer of Leighlin and Daniel O’Druhan of Ferns. The synod stressed that a major responsibility of a priest was to ‘know his people and be an example to them in word and in work; to preach to them and instruct them in the faith; and to administer the sacraments’ (Hensey, 272). Because of the takeover of most churches by the new religion, the synod affirmed the central role in the life of the parish of private houses that were used for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. Later synods laid down guidelines for the celebration of Mass outdoors, emphasising that this should take place with due reverence, using linen altar cloths and at least one wax candle, while the altar itself should be protected from the wind and rain.

As was the case with bishops, there was also uncertainty in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation regarding the loyalty of individual priests. Many priests who stayed on in their parishes remained faithful and risked flouting the law by not changing over to the reformed

liturgy, perhaps sometimes in the hope that a very volatile situation would eventually settle down. Indeed up to the excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570, Rome itself had hoped a reconciliation could be worked out with the reformers. But this was not to be. Religious orders, like the Franciscans and Dominicans, were far more numerous on the ground than were secular priests and they continued to give spiritual care to the people for many decades. Three Franciscans, John O'Mulloy, Cornelius Dougherty and Calfrid Farrell, for example, who were executed in Abbeylisle around 1588, had spent the previous eight years travelling and administering the sacraments throughout Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford.

By the beginning of the 17th century, newly ordained men were returning from the continent and the number of secular clerics greatly increased. And so by 1623 it was estimated that there were upwards of 1,200 priests in the country: 800 diocesan, 200 Franciscans and 200 belonging to other religious orders. Historian, Raymond Gillespie, gives the figure for the Archdiocese of Dublin ten years later as 90 priests; 10 secular with the remainder belonging to religious orders. With regard to the religious orders, the Franciscans or friars had always been associated with the Gaelic parts of the countryside. Unlike the Cistercian and the Augustinian orders, the Franciscans never owned large tracts of land and were noted for their austere and simple way of life. For centuries they had looked after the spiritual and temporal needs of the people and they were to the fore in the restructuring of Catholicism in Ireland.

Case-study: the Return of the Franciscans to Drogheda

A good example of the Catholic revival is the following account of the return of the Franciscans to Drogheda recorded between 1617 and 1618 by the provincial of the order, Fr Donatus Mooney. Four friars came back to Drogheda around 1610 to find the church and other buildings associated with the monastery all ruined by Elizabeth's armies during the Nine Years War. Nothing survived, 'all writings, tablets and monuments' had passed into other hands or were destroyed and the site was given to new owners (Murray, 277). This was now in the possession of Moyses Hill, the founder of the Downshire dynasty associated with Blessington^{ix}, who according to Fr Mooney was 'an inveterate hater of the friars and their religion'. Hill intended building a mansion on the site for the viceroy, Arthur Chichester, in the hope that his 'presence might overawe the people of Drogheda and deter them in the practice of their religion' (Murray, 277). But bad luck was traditionally believed to follow those who acquired church property and this was said to be the case with regard to Hill. Various misfortunes befell him and he abandoned his plans for the site.

The four Franciscans who returned to Drogheda lived in rented accommodation – each had their own cell while they used a common room for meals and other activities. A room had been fitted out as an oratory for the benefit of their parishioners. It consisted of an altar with a choir behind it, a pulpit and seats for confession and the people were said to frequently receive the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The friars preached openly on Sundays and holydays and appeared to have been tolerated by the authorities. They wore the habit of the order when indoors but changed into ordinary clothes when out and about. The four Franciscans were not the only clergy in the area – a number of secular priests also looked after the needs of the people, saying Mass in various private houses in the town, but they were more circumspect in their movements. Fr Mooney's impression was that the fearless attitude of the friars inspired and gave courage to the secular clergy who now also moved more openly about the town.



19th Century Franciscan Church in Drogheda, built on site of the Medieval Friary

There was still good reason, however, to fear the authorities: since the return of the friars, the monastery had been raided twice. During the first raid altar vessels were seized but despite this Mass was celebrated as usual the following day. The second raid was more dramatic: the celebrant, Fr Haelan, an elderly priest noted for ‘his gentle, innocent and deeply religious character’, had just finished Mass when he was summarily arrested (Murray, 277). But the other friars escaped by using a secret passage into a neighbouring house. The women of the town, however, incensed by what had happened, threw stones and clubs at those arresting the friar and rescued him. But he feared that the authorities

would bring the fury of the viceroy on the people and gave himself up. He was brought to Dublin and arraigned before the Lord Chancellor and spent six months in jail before being released. On the same day two other clergy were also apprehended: one was wearing secular clothing and the people successfully secured his release by saying he was a merchant from Cork, while the other was initially treated harshly but when it was ascertained he was of Scotch extraction he was allowed his freedom.

This report by Fr Mooney of conditions in Drogheda probably reflects the situation for priests in the country as a whole in the opening decades of the 17th century. The Catholic Church in Ireland had begun to tentatively show a public face again after a half century of conflict and suppression. There was a hope that the situation for Catholics was improving. But this hope was short lived: within a few decades the country would once again be engulfed in a bloody uprising, to be followed by the cruellest period of all – the Cromwellian era.

Notes

ⁱ The areas were in the present-day counties of Carlow, Cork, Kildare, Kilkenny, Limerick, Louth, Meath and Westmeath, Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford.

ⁱⁱ The Cross of Ballyboggan was held in the Augustinian Priory of *De Laude Dei*, founded in the 12th century by Jordan Comyn, presumably a relation of Archbishop John Comyn who was associated with Blessington (see Chapter 3, Anglo-Normans).

ⁱⁱⁱ New Abbey was among the properties which were later forfeited by Thomas Eustace’s grandson, James, following his ill-fated rebellion (see following section on Desmond Rebellion and Its Aftermath) and the property was then given to the poet, Edmund Spenser, who originally came to Ireland as secretary to the Lord Deputy, Arthur Grey, and was granted estates in Munster following the Desmond Rebellion.

^{iv} Viscount Baltinglass was married to Mary Travers who inherited Monkstown Castle, which was used for clandestine meetings by her husband and the other conspirators at this time. The castle and lands attached to it were later inherited by the Cheevers family from whom it was acquired by Archbishop Michael Boyle at the time he obtained the Blessington estate.

^v Remnants of this force are said to have made it to Naas where they were massacred at a site traditionally known as *Fód Spáinneach*.

^{vi} Blessington’s founder, Archbishop Michael Boyle’s family was among the new English who profited by the Desmond rebellion and subsequent plantation. Michael Boyle’s cousin, Richard Boyle, came to Ireland to settle legal entitlements to the land in the aftermath of the rebellion. He subsequently acquired large tracts of land and became one of the greatest benefactors of the Munster Plantation.

^{vii} Adam Loftus later acquired a large estate in south Dublin on which he built Rathfarnham Castle. The estate was also part of the lands forfeited by James Eustace, Viscount Baltinglass following the failure of his rebellion.

^{viii} In 1992, Pope John Paul II beatified seventeen Irish Catholic martyrs. These were a representative group chosen from a list of almost three hundred who died for their faith in the 16th and 17th centuries. Of the seventeen beatified, nine were executed in the six year period between 1579 and 1585.

^{ix} Moyses Hill arrived in Ireland in the 1570s and fought with the Earl of Essex and later with Mountjoy in their campaigns against the O’Neills. He subsequently acquired land near Larne which the family later added to, making them one of the largest landowners in the country. The family subsequently acquired titles, including Marquis of Downshire. In 1778 they

inherited the Blessington estate by virtue of the marriage, almost a century earlier, of Eleanor Boyle, daughter of Michael Boyle, Blessington's founder, to William Hill of Hillsborough, a descendent of Moyses Hill.

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