

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Rev. Thomas J. Lavin, M.A., C.C.,
Tibohine,
Castlerea,
Co. Roscommon.

Identity.

Subject.

Most Rev. Dr. Edward O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick,
1842-1917.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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Form B.S.M. 2

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Dr. Edward O'Dwyer - Patriot - Bishop of Limerick

(1842 - 1917)

By Rev. Thomas J. Lavin, M.A., C.C.

One evening away back in the midsummer of 1913 an aged churchman was sitting in the lounge of a Kilkee hotel. He was reading avidly and with evident emotion Canon Sheehan's novel, "The Graves at Kilmorna". A priest-friend entered unexpectedly and was surprised to find him so deeply moved, his eyes moist with tears. But down through the years he had always kept a warm spot in his heart for the Fenians who rose gallantly in the spring of his ordination year. Now he was reading, for the first time, Sheehan's beautiful but pathetic story of Fenian courage and idealism, and it struck a responsive chord in his own generous heart. To many at the time, the story of the now ageing churchman being moved to tears by Sheehan's novel would have seemed highly improbable, if not, indeed, mythical; for hitherto even those closest to him - his own diocesan clergy - had not realised the deep love of Ireland that lay beneath the apparent indifference with which he viewed Ireland's bitter agrarian troubles, and the seemingly anti-national feeling which inspired his denunciation of the Plan of Campaign. But within a few short years Ireland would have rebelled against her centuries-old oppressor, and the lineal successors of the Fenians would find their stoutest and most intrepid defender in this seventy-two years old churchman. Indeed,

within four years death would have claimed him, and not merely his own diocesan clergy, but the clergy and laity of all Ireland, and of the greater Ireland beyond the seas, would realise that he who had passed away had entered the glory of Ireland's patriot dead. Dr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick from 1886 to 1917, was, in truth, a great patriot-bishop.

To chronicle the activities of Dr. O'Dwyer from the Fenian Rising of '67 to his death in 1917 would necessitate a talk of much greater length than the Director of Radio Éireann can accommodate on one programme. So, I can barely mention many facets of his career: the magnificent ecclesiastical work done by him during the long years of his episcopate; his condemnation of the Plan of Campaign, which, on principle, he deemed unjust; his opposition to the Irish Parliamentary Party; his deep interest in all branches of education (his evidence before the Royal Commission on University Education was no less valuable than his founding of the brilliantly-edited Irish Educational Review); his dominating personality in the councils of the Irish Hierarchy (he wrote the Pastoral Letter of the Maynooth Synod 1900, and drafted many of the episcopal pronouncements emanating from Maynooth); his powerful defence of Newman against the modernists, which won him an autograph letter from Pope Pius X; his golden-voiced tongue which held his audience in Limerick and elsewhere spellbound; his deep personal sanctity, and rare manliness of character. But it is not for these admirable characteristics and many-sided activities that Dr. O'Dwyer's name is held in such high esteem by patriotic Irishmen of this generation, rather

is it for the historic part played by him in espousing and supporting the cause of Sinn Féin and defending the honour and integrity of those who fell in 1916.

Dr. O'Dwyer first came into prominence as a Nationalist in 1915. Already the English recruiting campaign had lured thousands of Irishmen into the British army, and was, in fact, daily achieving greater and more spectacular successes, when, to the consternation of its supporters, it was dealt a deadly blow by Bishop O'Dwyer. It so happened that, in November of that year some Connacht emigrants embarking at Liverpool for the U.S.A. were attacked and mobbed as shirkers by English civilians, and the crew refused to man the ship in which they intended to travel. This unprovoked attack on Irishmen drew a spirited protest from Dr. O'Dwyer. In an eloquent letter to the newspapers, he wrote: "Why should those Irish lads be forced to join the British army? What is the war to them? Their crime is that they are not ready to die for England. Why should they? What have they or their forbears ever got from England that they should die for her? This war may be just or unjust but any fair-minded man will admit that it is England's war not Ireland's". The letter came as a benediction on the cause of Sinn Féin.

Time moved quickly. It was Easter 1916. On the Thursday of that historic week, General Sir John Maxwell arrived in Ireland as Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, with full powers to crush the insurgents and the insurrection. By Saturday, 29th April, the rising was over. On May 3rd, Pearse, MacDonagh and the veteran Tom Clarke fell before the firing squad; next day, Plunkett, Daly, Willie Pearse, O'Hanrahan; on the

9th, Thomas Kent; on the 12th, the disabled Seán Mac Dermott and the wounded Connolly. Within a few weeks scores had been sentenced to death, thousands arrested, and without any semblance of trial, deported to English jails, while England, through her unscrupulous press-agencies had spread, and was spreading, throughout the world, the damnable lie that the insurgents were criminals, looters, murderers, "the riff-raff and rabble" of Dublin.

It was in these circumstances that Maxwell set about silencing the patriotic priests of Ireland. He would start with Limerick diocese where two priests were known as outstanding supporters of the rebels. On May 6th he wrote to Bishop O'Dwyer complaining that Fathers Wall and Hayes "were a dangerous menace to the peace of the realm", and asking that they be changed from their parishes to such offices as would deny them intercourse with the people. He concluded by asking Dr. O'Dwyer to co-operate with the military authorities in restoring peace to the realm. Dr. O'Dwyer received the letter at Kilmallock, where he was staying for Confirmations. He instructed the local Parish Priest, Canon O'Shea, to reply asking Maxwell to specify his charges against the priests. On May 12th, the very day that the fifteenth insurgent had been executed, Maxwell launched his charges. One of the priests had spoken against conscription, had blessed the colours of the Irish Volunteers, had attended lectures by P.H. Pearse; the other had appealed to all members of the G.A.A. to join the Volunteers, had shown disrespect to the King, and had inspired disloyalty in the people by his public approval of Sinn Féin.

Now, the Bishop, himself, replied, and his reply, more than anything else in his long episcopate, has indelibly written his name into the history of Irish nationalism. He wrote: "I have carefully read your allegations against Fathers Hayes and Wall, but I do not see in them any justification for disciplinary action on my part. They are both excellent priests, who hold strong national views, but I do not know that they have violated any law, civil or ecclesiastical. In your letter of the 6th instant you appealed to me to help you in the furtherance of your work as military dictator of Ireland. Even if action of that kind were not outside my province, the result of the past few weeks would make it impossible for me to have any part in proceedings which I regard as wantonly cruel and oppressive". And he concluded, in words which thundered the scorn and defiance of an outraged nation: "Personally, I regard your action with horror, and I believe that it has outraged the conscience of the country. Then the deporting of hundreds and even thousands without a trial of any kind seems to me an abuse of power as fatuous as it is arbitrary; and altogether your regime has been one of the worst and blackest chapters in the history of the mis-government of this country".

The influence of these patriotic and defiant words on the minds of the Irish people at a time of national crisis and seeming defeat was incalculable; and of no less potency was their echoes wherever Catholics and Irishmen were to be found in the capitals of the English speaking world, offsetting, as they did in large measure, the vile propaganda so sedulously spread by the British press. And Ireland was no less grateful to Dr. O'Dwyer

than to the men who died. "The heart of Ireland", said one of the patriot-soldiers and writers of the time, "leaped with love for the men who died, with love for the cause that called them, with pride in this new champion who had risen up to speak for Separatist Ireland in her hour of need".

Resolutions of congratulations and thanks were passed by public bodies throughout the country, and by Irish-Ireland societies in the leading American cities. In the course of his reply to a resolution from Tipperary Board of Guardians, 23 June, 1916, Dr. O'Dwyer wrote: "Ireland is not dead yet; while her young men are not afraid to do and dare for her in open fight and when defeated stand proudly with their backs to the wall as targets for English bullets, we need never despair of the old cause. . . Your resolution will be a comfort to those who reverence the memory of Ireland's latest martyrs, and will assure them that our countrymen, in spite of all the corruption that is at work, distinguish between genuine patriotism and all the spurious stuff that has been disgusting us of late".

On 14th September, Dr. O'Dwyer received the Freedom of the City of Limerick, and replying, he delivered a memorable and inspiring speech, in the course of which, he again vindicated the men of Easter Week, and referred in scathing terms to the professed but hypocritical war aims of England. With cutting sarcasm, he speaks of Asquith's proposals for the Partition of Ireland: "If Germany were to offer corresponding proposals to Belgium, with what scorn they would be rejected; with what burning indignation Mr.

Asquith would roll out his resounding periods of denunciation of such an outrage on national rights; and if some young Belgians faced the German soldiers and fought like men until their resources were exhausted, and when they surrendered were shot dead in cold blood, in twos and threes for days after, how England would appeal to heaven for vengeance on their murderers. One thing I know and that is, that their country would never disown them. The men of Easter Week were the true representatives of Ireland and the exponents of her nationality". And, he concluded, in words which place him alongside Tone, O'Donovan Rossa and Pearse, as an authentic interpreter of national aspirations: "Ireland will never be content to be a province. God has made her a nation, and while grass grows and water runs, there will be men willing to dare and die for her. Sinn Féin is the true principle."

In May 1917, the British censorship in Ireland refused publication to another forceful letter of Dr. O'Dwyer, condemning, with all his own powers of invective, the harsh treatment meted out to Republican prisoners in English jails. It was his last effort to further the national cause.

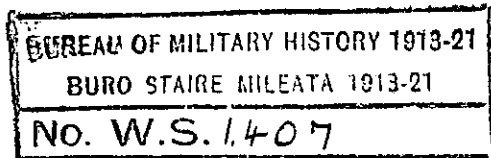
The voice that rallied a distracted and leaderless Irish nation, gave it cohesion and inspiration, was on the Sunday within the Octave of the Assumption stilled for ever, and the great soul of Limerick's fearless patriot-bishop passed to join Pearse, Connolly and the rest of that noble company of 1916 leaders whose ideals and honour he had so ably upheld and defended during life.

It was unfortunate that he did not live to see the fruit of the great work to which he lent such splendid aid in the sweeping victory of Sinn Féin in the 1918 election, and the subsequent establishment of Dáil Éireann. But, perhaps, a greater destiny awaits him; perhaps, as Francis Ledwidge wrote of Thomas MacDonagh -

When the Dark Cow leaves the moors
And pastures poor with greedy weeds,
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

SIGNED: (R) Thomas J. Levin

DATE: 4th April 1956



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