

EDMUND RICE 1762-1844

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Introduction

This lecture concerning the times of Edmund Rice 1762-1844, is presented in three sections:

- A. The Penal Codes which caused social, religious and political suppression.
- B. How the Church and Education fared in these circumstances.
- C. Some few reflections on the life of Edmund Ignatius Rice.

Edmund Rice was born in a period of appalling deprivation and degradation. Since the final collapse of the old Gaelic Order, the history of Ireland had been one of almost unrelenting sorrow and while there were phases of comparative ease, a general pattern of savage suppression and exploitation became established. The Puritan Government of 1641 had decreed the absolute suppression of the Catholic religion in Ireland. And the rebellion of the same year had been crushed with devastating savagery. Cromwellian massacres were carried out for the greater glory of God and the best land was confiscated for division between new Protestant settlers and unscrupulous adventurers. Even after the Ulster plantation in the time of James I, two-thirds of cultivable land remained in the hands of Catholics. But after Cromwell, three-quarters passed to a small minority of Protestants. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 raised hopes, but while Catholics enjoyed for a time a more tolerant religious atmosphere the law relating to land ownership stayed as it was. Under James II in the 1680s, there was a renewal of hope. A Catholic Viceroy was appointed, Catholics were admitted to important administrative offices, and an Irish Parliament, nominated by Catholics, passed an Act reversing the Cromwellian land settlement. It was a piece of legislation which gave favoured Protestants a fright, but it never came into force. The success of William of Orange at the Boyne brought disastrous consequences for Catholics and after the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 a further round of confiscations placed more land in the hands of the Protestants. It is on record that in 1688, the Catholic majority owned only 22% of their country's land, but by 1703 their share had

dwindled to about 15%. By the middle of the 18th century it had shrunk to 7% and in 1788 it stood at 5%. The appropriation of land from its rightful owners was only a part of the overall scandal. The Puritan Government had decreed total suppression of the Catholic religion in Ireland and an inevitable effect of this policy was that those who chose to remain Catholic would be deprived of many basic human rights. Protestant domination of the Catholic Irish was nearly absolute. Catholics were excluded from all public life and from much normal social activity. Any form of Catholic education was forbidden and it was illegal for a Catholic to buy land, obtain a mortgage on it, rent it at a reasonable profit, or inherit it in the accepted manner. When a Catholic land owner died, his estate could not pass to his eldest son but had to be divided equally among all his sons. And if any of the sons became Protestant, he automatically inherited the entire estate. A wife who turned Protestant could claim part of the husband's holding and should a Catholic make a profit in excess of one-third of his rent, he could lose his lease to the first Protestant who would inform against him. A Catholic was not permitted to rent land on a lease of more than thirty-one years. Not only did the penal laws prevent Catholics from acquiring land by purchase, but they also contained provisions which made the continued leasing of land a matter of considerable difficulty, especially when the land was competently and profitably used.

The deliberate debasement of Catholics could be seen in many other areas as well. They could not join the army or navy. They could not vote or be elected to Parliament. They could not enjoy any office of State. Those of them who had been able to lead the lives of country gentlemen found themselves subject to the penalty of whipping should a sporting gun be found in their possession and they could not keep a horse worth more than five pounds. Priests were banished from the country and should they return and be discovered, they were liable to be hanged, drawn and quartered. Bounties were offered for the capture of clergy and priest-hunting traffic was actively encouraged. In a campaign unparalleled for its inhumanity and severity, the Irish Catholic was reduced to the status of an inferior animal and the Lord Chief Justice could say with perfect truth that the law does not presume any such person to exist as an Irish Catholic. The Irish peasant was reduced to abject slavery. He had no rights. He was subjected to the most extortionate rents. He had no redress against arbitrary eviction, and should his talents and industry lead to improvements, he faced even higher rents or dispossession.

The Penal Code concerning education was brought to its iniquitous perfection by 1730. Repressive laws of most ferocious character were enacted especially from 1703 to 1709. No Catholic could teach anyone anywhere in Ireland. The Catholic sent abroad for education lost all rights to property and was an outlaw in respect to all civil rights. The Catholic teacher was equally the object of attack with the Catholic priest. The penalty provided was transportation into penal servitude either on the sugar plantations of Jamaica, Barbados and Georgia, or the tobacco plantations and swamps of the Carolinas and Virginia. These laws were generally enforced with all the power

of an ascendancy party determined to destroy the soul of the nation. Parallel with this repressive policy, an education system was gradually evolved whereby "the children of Popish natives may be so won over by affectionate endeavours that the whole nation may become Protestant and English". This was the officially declared objective of the charity school society which later gave way to the heavily subsidised charter schools. These were devised "to rescue the souls of thousands of poor children from the dangers of Popish superstition and idolatry and their bodies from the miseries of idleness and beggary". The charter schools founded in 1733 were governed by a board of Archbishops, Bishops and Ministers of the established Church with Grand Masters of the Orange Lodge. Its widely circulated plan of 1735 urged a compulsory scheme to make every poor Romish family in the kingdom with one or two of their miserable, half-starved, naked children between 8 and 12 years of age, male and female, have them bred up in the Protestant religion in work houses. And that parents might have no access to them, the children taken in one province might be sent to another. The annual Government grant, often over 40,000 pounds a year, was withdrawn in 1829, following revelations made about the operation of the system.

When Edmund was born in 1762, one of the blackest periods in the history of Ireland was beginning. The common people had sunk to a depth of misery and despair never before experienced. There was abject and widespread poverty and this in general is always degrading. Drunkenness and debauchery were normal. The number of children abandoned to foundling hospitals and proselytizing institutes presented an appalling picture. A short recital like this of the low state of religion and public morality gives a true if unattractive picture of the country around 1800. There were reasons of course and there were excuses. The years of persecution were bound to have their effect and the constant deprivation of education was felt. By 1850 the situation had changed completely. There were still running sores, there were poverty and lassitude, but the awakening had come. Hence, the catastrophe of the famine which should have completely ruined the land in 1848, did not push the people back into the low state they had reached before. A radical change had been effected during the years 1800-1850. How does one account for this miraculous change? There is first of course the working of God's grace and God works through human means. He raised up a group of people who tackled the problem from various points.

First among these was a remarkable archbishop, Dr Murray, whose leadership was invaluable. Great work was done by the founders of religious orders, Edmund Rice and Nano Nagel, Catherine McAuley and others. These people undertook the promotion of education where it was most needed and introduced certain elements in education which had been missing. There were many schools in the country in the 1800s, but these schools had to charge fees and so the poor, the unwanted, could not afford them. Brother Rice cared for them. He set up schools in the towns where poverty and its attendant vices were worst. He made religion and prayer a necessary part of the school day. Later on when it became possible for him to gain Government financial help, he

rejected it, because it would limit the religious activities of the schools. The spirit of discipline was instilled. Pride in their ability was given to the pupils, the poor were able to improve their lot and to rise above their poverty. Religion and prayer became part of the life of the people and from then on the resurgence began.

During Edmund Rice's youth, various concessions were granted by relief Acts of 1778,81,91,92,93. Catholics were granted very important concessions relating to tenure of land, leases, property rights. They were allowed to teach school and to send their children abroad for education. They could become barristers, attorneys, notaries. They could be admitted to civil, military and naval posts. They were no longer debarred from taking degrees in Dublin University. Forty shilling freeholders, though granted the franchise, were still ineligible for election to corporations or to either the Irish or British Houses of Parliament. Barristers were free to marry Catholic wives. Solicitors were no longer compelled to educate their children as Protestants. As might be expected, few if any of the beneficiaries under the various Relief Acts were exempted from taking the oath of allegiance. This oath, instead of being what it purported to be, was an insulting invective against the Pope and Catholic doctrine. Briefly stated, Catholics were compelled to profess loyalty to the reigning monarch in language disloyal and disrespectful to the Holy See. As it contained nothing contrary to faith and morals, Catholics were advised that in conscience they could take it, but the imputations against Catholic doctrine contained in this oath could not go unchallenged even in a partially emancipated island.

The Catholic committee having already become such a formidable force for promoting Catholic interests, decided in 1792 to lodge its public protest against this oath and its absurd implications. Waterford, Edmund Rice's city, joined in this protest. The first records of the activities of the Waterford Catholic Committee are given in the local press under the date 24 April 1792, when Edmund Rice with other leading Catholics of the city, signed the Roman Catholic declaration against the Oath prescribed by the 1778 Act. The declaration was a lengthy document in which the Catholic attitude was clearly defined and the several clauses of this insulting Oath repudiated one by one. The protest had the desired effect. For when a new Relief Act was passed the following year, 1793, the Oath was withdrawn and a less offensive Oath of Allegiance substituted.

The nature of the harassment and persecution was not the same in both centuries. The penal laws of the 17th century were directed unashamedly against the bishops and priests and the religious belief of the people, while those of the 18th, the one in which Edmund Rice was born and grew to manhood, were devised almost exclusively to ensure the impoverishment and the enforced ignorance of the entire Catholic population. Because of the universal destitution of the peasantry in the 18th century, the clergy too were frequently in dire want and the profound reverence shown them by their parishioners since the years of persecution under Elizabeth was severely

tested. One factor, sometimes known as the novitiate question, had undermined the clergy. This phenomenon to which the contrived destitution of the people had greatly contributed, was already apparent by the middle of the 17th century and even before that. Briefly, it may be stated so. Since any Catholic education was forbidden for boys or young men, congregations of Friars were forced to accept as novices, young men often of dubious calibre and virtually illiterate. Following one year's novitiate in primitive conditions, often in a cabin or shed, without rule of silence, habit or spiritual direction, these young men were ordained as priests and sent overseas to begin their priestly training. Diocesan clergy fared little better having to learn to read and write latin in the Hedge schools, they too were ordained forthwith and sent to the continent for the required courses of philosophy and theology. Not surprisingly perhaps, some men having been so ordained, failed deliberately or otherwise, to make the journey to Europe, and these became rogue priests, diocesan and regular alike, and a constant source of scandal to the laity and of heartbreak to the bishops. Others sailed to the colleges of the continent but refused to return to the squalor from which they had escaped, but most came back to work selflessly for their trampled people. Then in 1751 Rome forbade the practice of accepting novices in Ireland. Hereafter novices might be accepted and trained only on the continent. So in the next twenty years the number of friars had so diminished that the diocesan clergy were left to defend the faith alone. One further phenomenon needs to be considered touching the plight of the clergy, in the opening years of the 19th century.

From the moment Protestantism was established as a State religion in Ireland, midway through the 16th century, every Roman Catholic church and chapel were either plundered or used for Protestant services only. Henceforth, Mass had to be said in woods, bogs, lime kilns, gravel pits, on mountain tops and so on. Effectively therefore, it may be said that in a great many places Sunday Mass became a rare experience and the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance virtually ceased to be practised, except on the occasion of feasts. It could not have been otherwise, bearing in mind the difficulty of travelling barefoot for miles on end by narrow winding paths, often on cold, wet and foggy mornings, crossing treacherous streams, hazardous bogs and misty moors, to a place where a priest might turn up and a Mass might be said and the place and time might be known. The Irish clergy showed remarkable common sense, and an admirable missionary zeal in facing this challenge. They visited every hamlet in the parish twice annually before Christmas and Easter to administer the Sacraments, to check on the religious education of the children. It would require many pages to do justice to this wonderful phenomenon commonly called Stations of Confession. Of all the clergy, the station priest was the one who, whatever faults his fellow priests found with him, kept the light of faith undimmed in the hidden bogs and valleys in the remote mountain sides of Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries. However the practice had begun to be seriously criticised at the turn of the Century, and by the time that Edmund Rice had opened Mt Sion in 1804, that most effective bulwark was already under seige.

Two further and later phenomena need to be touched on in considering the backdrop to the drama that unfolded in New Street in 1802 where Edmund founded his first school. The demise of the Catechist and the Parish Poet. In the absence of Roman Catholic teachers or schools throughout the penal period in Ireland, it is pointless to discuss the education of the peasantry and their attention to the faith, and yet there must be a credible explanation for the retention of that faith in all its pristine purity over so long a period of deprivation. Who filled the gap? Apart from the parents of the children, and apart from the station priest, who in the nature of things could hardly have taught too many, the education of the children in the faith could have been ensured in two ways only. The ministrations of the local peasant catechists, ordinarily non literate, and without books or the ability to read them, and the unfailing, not to say aggressive support, of the local poet. To understand the extraordinary influence of the poetic effusions of the local rhymesters, and the highly rated competence of the untrained and unlettered Catechists of both sexes, one would have to appreciate, however dimly, the nature and authority of the primacy of the human memory in earlier centuries, over the written word, a phenomenon of which there could be virtually no appreciation in literate culture, less so in an electronic culture such as ours.

Few people today are aware of the almost incredible feats of memory of which very ordinary people were capable. And which may be assumed to have been commonplace before reading man came into his own. A constant among peasant catechists was the ability to recite the entire catechism by heart, question and answer alike and in logical sequence. Many of them had entire sermons by heart, and all had command of endless prayers and songs, as well as endless dogmatic rhymed meditations suited to every religious occasion while pious anecdotes from the lives of the saints were a staple diet in the instruction of children. Most of the prayers and much of the doctrine had long been versified because real poets as well as those of established repute were almost to the last man, champions of the faith and quite remarkably conversant with its doctrine. An endless litany of such local poets and unpolished rhymesters added continually to the already vast reservoir of versified prayer, doctrine, argument and anecdote in defence of the faith and in condemnation of the reformists, particularly Luther and Calvin. Against the formidable combination of local poet, devout catechist and station priest, the new religion, the established religion, got scant quarter. Satire, wit, venom and a remarkable familiarity with the Old testament, as well as the New, all combined to arm the makers of verse in their unceasing war with the established Church. Nor did they ever hesitate to call to account the occasional priest who yielded to Friday's meat.

Only one cancerous phenomenon could have undermined the invincible combination of poet and catechist, the destruction of the medium essential to the function of both. That medium was the Irish language, the language of Edmund Rice's Westcourt, his boyhood and the peasantry among whom he lived. In his own lifetime, however, it had begun to lose ground, slowly at first, and then more rapidly, although

it was still widely spoken in the Callan area years after his death. All too soon, the language of conquest had begun to replace the local language of the law courts, of industry, of commerce, of power, of press and Parliament, rank and promotion in Church and State, and of all things else that spoke authority. Meanwhile, that older language, echoing as it did the prophetic voice of the people succumbed finally to the wiles and wishes of the conqueror and to the weakness of those who had once loved and revered it, a weakness begotten of deprivation and degradation that never seemed to end. Almost over night, the catechists had gone silent, and the poets had ceased to sing to the peasantry who no longer listened or cared.

The lecturer presented each of the audience with a copy of the Icon of Edmund Rice, an original of which is at Xavier Community, Indooroopilly, and also a copy of the street plan of Waterford in the times of Edmund Rice.

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