

Fr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer and The General Election of 1874

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When Gladstone resigned his premiership and called a general election at the close of 1873 he caught the newly formed Home Rule League off-guard. At the inaugural meeting of this body, only three weeks before, the decision had been taken to put up candidates who would be committed to Home Rule at the next general election. Gladstone's premature resignation, however, had not given Isaac Butt and his followers sufficient time to prepare a satisfactory panel. In the forthcoming contest, therefore, the constituencies could expect little help from the Home Rule League, and they were advised to select their own candidates.

It was expected that many of the Irish Catholic representatives, who were then sitting as Liberals, would seek re-election on the Home Rule ticket. In this eventuality it would be difficult for the electorate to distinguish between the *bona fide* Home Ruler and the political opportunist. Among the Whigs there were bound to be some who would adopt the Home Rule programme solely in the hope of being returned to Westminster. Others among them would pledge themselves to fight for the Pope, for persecuted religious, for the Fenian prisoners, or "for anything they think will help them to bamboozle the 'free and independent' electors", while all the time they would studiously avoid any commitment to work for Home Rule.¹

Opposed to the Liberals there would be, of course, the Conservatives. These made no claim to support the movement for self-government.

Finally, there was a third group of candidates who were ready to make Home Rule the first point in their election programme. These, while forming the core of Butt's movement, were mostly unknown and untried.

The issues on which Butt decided to contest the general election of 1874 were clear enough. Home Rule was "the one great object to which all our energies should be directed" he told his own constituents in Limerick City.² The *Freeman's Journal* which, like the bishops, was now coming over to the side of the Home Rulers, wanted it to be clearly understood that "the Irish platform is home rule and denominational education..." It went on to add that the voters should see to it that "no one gets a vote who is not in favour of these two principles".³ Butt's most pressing task at the beginning of the campaign, however, was to find "a sufficient supply of impeccable federalists" on whom he could rely to work for his policies.⁴

Although the Irish Hierarchy by 1874 was more inclined to accept Butt's Home Rule programme, many of the bishops had certain reservations about it. It was to be expected, then, that in the coming general election some prelates, at least, would give their support

¹ *Nation*, 22 March, 1874.

² David Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, London 1964, p. 188.

³ *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Feb., 1874.

⁴ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*, Revised Edition, Glasgow 1973, p. 153.

to those candidates who, though willing to include Home Rule in their election manifestos, were better known for their Liberal tendencies. If Butt was to have the bishops on his side, therefore, he would have to respect their preferences—preferences which often went to a Liberal rather than to a nationalist of more advanced views.

To complicate matters further the tenant farmers, like the Home Rulers, were planning to canvass the constituencies with the view to returning candidates fully pledged to the promotion of land reform. Butt's ideal of a united non-party, or rather, non-partisan, Home Rule Movement, that would be "disassociated from every other popular aspiration" was giving way before the pressure of practical politics.⁵ Although during the ensuing campaign there were several instances where the advanced nationalists clashed with the tenant farmers, in certain cases they managed to reach agreement on the same candidates. This was the situation in County Limerick where W. H. O'Sullivan, who was regarded generally as being an advanced nationalist, was chosen to contest the election on behalf of the tenant farmers.

William Monsell, who had represented County Limerick in the House of Commons as a Liberal Member for many years and who had served as Post-Master General in Gladstone's outgoing Ministry, had been raised to the peerage in December, 1873, with the title of Lord Emly. Consequently his seat became vacant just prior to the dissolution of Parliament, but the campaign to fill it formed part of the overall campaign of the general election. Into this contest Fr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer—then a curate in Newcastle West, and later to achieve fame as Bishop of Limerick from 1886 to 1917—entered with the full force of his impressive oratory and literary talent.

The present article does not allow for a lengthy treatment of Fr. O'Dwyer's political activities before 1874. However, ever since his ordination in 1867, and principally following on the launching of the Home Rule Movement in 1870, he had attained to a certain prominence in the political field. He was the sole representative of the Limerick Diocese to stand on the hustings with Butt when the latter contested an election in Limerick City in 1871. During the course of Butt's campaign the young curate addressed a political meeting to explain why he, "a simple priest in the county of Limerick", had come before the public to support Butt. He wished, he declared, to voice his approval for Home Rule, and he was anxious to work for the unification of the diverse elements in the country. If peace and order were to flourish in Ireland he held that the English Government would have to meet the wishes of the people to make them "a nation by self-government".⁶ After Butt managed to capture the seat the *Nation* was enthusiastic in its praise both of Fr. O'Dwyer and Fr. Quaid of O'Callaghan's Mills for the contribution they had made to Butt's victory. They were described as "worthy priests and patriots". The people had demonstrated by "the rapturous reception" accorded to them both how deeply they were touched and gladdened by the presence of the priests in their "accustomed place" which was "in the van of the struggle for Irish Freedom".⁷

At the time of the 1874 election, then, it was well known that the young curate fully accepted the policy of Home Rule, and the means Butt was advocating for its attainment. Nevertheless, as will appear in the sequel, his action in this campaign was far from meeting with the general approval. By way of a preliminary explanation it will suffice to say that like his political leader, Butt, Fr. O'Dwyer showed a marked reserve towards

⁵ *Nation*, 31 Jan., 1874.

⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 Sept., 1871.

⁷ *Nation*, 23 Sept., 1871.

mass agitation. The principles of democracy, let alone their implementation, were as yet new to most Irish minds, and the force of mass agitation was something more to be feared than trusted. Butt had tended to look on all such trends as leading inevitably to violence, and violence ran counter to his basic political philosophy of constitutional agitation. Fr. O'Dwyer accepted this view completely, and although according to his contemporaries he never spared himself in working for those who came under his pastoral care, he was slow to realise that the people themselves could, or would, contribute in a significant and positive manner to the shaping of their country's future. This, coupled with a certain lack of appreciation for the plight of the tenant farmers, goes a long way to explain the young curate's stand during the general election of 1874.

Of the two contenders who came forward for the County Limerick seat on the Home Rule ticket one was John James Kelly, whose father had been a member of the Repeal Association years before. He received the backing of the anti-Tory, and pro-clerical *Munster News*.⁸ In his address to the electors at the beginning of his campaign he introduced himself as "inheriting the liberal principles" of his family. He placed education at the head of his list of priorities. Secondly, he pledged himself to work for Home Rule, assuring the electors that he would give his "unqualified support" to the resolutions already adopted by "the Irish nation" through its representatives at "the Great Home Rule Conference". He was of the opinion that the recent Land Act had already done much to alleviate the difficulties of the tenant farmers, but he admitted that "something yet remains to be done", and he promised to support "further amelioration" in the interests of the rural population. Finally, he included the release of the Fenian prisoners in his election manifesto, and undertook to work in harmony with other interested bodies in the amnesty movement.⁹

Despite Butt's appeal to preserve unity, since dissention could only effect harm to the movement for self-government, the Limerick Farmers' Club, not satisfied with Kelly's contention that he was the right man to represent them in Parliament, resolved to support instead W. H. O'Sullivan, a prosperous tenant farmer from Kilmallock. He had been active in the national movement for years, and the added fact that he had undergone imprisonment after the Fenian Rising made him acceptable as well to the advanced nationalists of the area.

In his election manifesto O'Sullivan placed Home Rule at the head of his programme, adopting, like his opponent, the principles enunciated at the Home Rule Conference in the previous November. He promised to give denominational education his wholehearted support, and declared that he would strenuously oppose "any attempt to infidelise the rising generation by a system of irreligious education".¹⁰ With regard to the land question he would be satisfied with nothing less than what the Tenant Conference, which had taken place in Dublin in February, 1873, had demanded, particularly fixity of tenure at valued rents. He also promised to work for the release of political prisoners, and gave force to this pledge by reminding his supporters that he had once undergone "some of the ill treatment and persecution they are enduring". He was also concerned, he declared, with the miserable condition of the labouring class, and he undertook to work for their interests if he were elected.

⁸ *Munster News*, 24 Dec., 1873.

⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 10 Jan., 1874. This manifesto was first issued on 23 Dec., 1873.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 Jan., 1874.



On the day O'Sullivan issued his manifesto a letter from Fr. O'Dwyer appeared in the *Munster News*.¹¹ O'Sullivan, he wrote, was "not qualified to represent this great county". On the grounds of "personal unfitness" alone, his election to Parliament would be "most disastrous". He was not in the same class with Butt, Shaw, Martin or Blennerhasset, all of whom had brought honour and respect to the Irish cause. Referring to O'Sullivan's claim to have been a persecuted Fenian, O'Dwyer contended that his arrest had been the result of an error. Far from taking an active part in the '67 Rising he had publicly abjured any connection with the Fenians. He then went on to distinguish between those whom he termed Nationalists (by which he meant Fenians) and those whom he termed Home Rulers. While he declared himself to be a convinced Home Ruler, he also stated that, though he did not subscribe to their policies, he nevertheless respected the views of the Fenians.

In the same letter, O'Dwyer devoted one paragraph to the other candidate, J. J. Kelly. His family, he claimed, had to answer for the unjust treatment of their own tenants, and although this had been the work of Kelly's father, his son would have to bear some share of the responsibility. He proposed that a court of enquiry be set up, presided over by Butt himself and J. G. MacCarthy of Cork, for the purpose of assessing the amount of restitution that should be made to those tenants so that Kelly's name might be fully cleared.

Dr. Butler, the Bishop of Limerick, and the majority of his clergy, gave their support to Kelly. The bishop had convened a meeting of his priests at St. John's Cathedral for the purpose of arriving at agreement on a candidate, and, according to Begley, it was due to the remarks of the young O'Dwyer that the clergy opted for Kelly by 80 votes to 3. They also issued a manifesto on his behalf.¹²

In this statement the people of the diocese were reminded that their priests had no power nor "the slightest disposition to dictate" to them as to how they should vote. They only wished to offer an honest opinion, for what it was worth.¹³ As far as the election programme went they favoured Home Rule, denominational education, land reform and amnesty. However, they were convinced that in order to promote these aims successfully in Parliament, Limerick should elect "a man of education, intelligence, position and ability". It was the majority view among them that Kelly answered these requirements adequately. Referring to the allegation that Kelly's father had been an 'exterminator' the priests claimed that this was much exaggerated, and that in Kelly's own case it did not apply. Referring to W. H. O'Sullivan, they expressed the fear that his election to Parliament would be "a complete disaster" both for Limerick and for Home Rule. It would lend substance to the allegation, already being made in some quarters, that the Irish were out for separation, since it was well known that O'Sullivan represented "extreme views".

Notwithstanding the opposition of the clergy, the tenant farmers remained convinced that O'Sullivan was their man. It was too much for them that Kelly had been associated in any way with the repression of their class. Furthermore, the support he was getting from Lord Emly and from the Bishop of Limerick, both well known for their strong Liberal tendencies, led the advanced nationalists to suspect his Home Rule pledges. John Ellard, who was one of Butt's most trusted lieutenants in the Limerick area, wrote that many

¹¹ *Munster News*, 3 Jan., 1874.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14 Jan., 1874.

¹³ *Cork Examiner*, 10 Jan., 1874.

took Kelly for "a mere nominee of Monsell's and the bishop", and that although he had pledged himself to work for Home Rule he was making it "a secondary question to education" in his manifesto.¹⁴

The campaign itself was hotly contested, with neither side sparing the other. The day after his manifesto appeared in the press O'Sullivan took the opportunity, during the course of an election meeting in Newcastle West, where O'Dwyer was then serving as a curate, to criticise him in turn. This was followed by yet another letter from O'Dwyer in which he reiterated his disapproval of O'Sullivan. He scathingly referred to his poor command of the English language at the Newcastle West meeting. His style, he declared, was "better known in stableyards than in the society into which Mr. O'Sullivan is trying to get pitchforked".¹⁵ A week later, at a meeting in his native Kilmallock, O'Sullivan referred to O'Dwyer as "the Newcastle slanderer", which, predictably, drew another broadside from the curate. This time he attacked O'Sullivan for boasting of his Fenian connections. He was not worthy, according to O'Dwyer, "to be named on the same day" with those who had risked their lives in '67. Instead he alleged that O'Sullivan had in public court disowned on oath the cause for which he claimed he had suffered, and that "solely for the paltry profits of a public house".¹⁶

Meanwhile Kelly was using O'Dwyer's biting sarcasm to his own advantage. Shortly after the appearance of the first letter in the *Munster News* there was a meeting of his supporters at Cruise's Hotel at which, incidentally, no mention is made of O'Dwyer being present. Kelly remarked that his opponent would not cut a very impressive figure with Disraeli and Co.¹⁷ Later, at a meeting of his supporters in Newcastle West, at which several priests were present, cheers were called for "the energetic, talented and patriotic Fr. O'Dwyer." He was praised for his letter to the press, which had succeeded in "dissipating the mists" raised by the popular agitators who were achieving little besides doing "incalculable mischief" to the "cause of the country and Home Rule".¹⁸

Throughout the county, as the campaign progressed, there were several instances where priests were hooted off political platforms, and where they in turn led mobs against O'Sullivan's supporters.¹⁹ In another letter to the *Munster News* Fr. O'Dwyer criticised the violence that accompanied O'Sullivan's campaign. He described how "raging mobs" followed him around and turned peaceful towns into "bear-gardens".²⁰ He also stated in the same letter that those who supported O'Sullivan were "going in the teeth" of their bishop and priests, and were, in fact, associating themselves with known bigots like the landowner, Delmege, and the Protestant, Archdeacon Gould. Any support given O'Sullivan was, he wrote, a "sanction and help to violence and tyranny".

Both candidates received the public approval of Butt, although David Thornley holds he was the first to suggest to O'Sullivan that he should run. In private he favoured him more than Kelly, and was confident of his success.²¹ His whole attitude in the affair throws light on what was, perhaps, Butt's own most serious weakness as a politician—one

¹⁴David Thornley, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁵*Munster News*, 7 Jan., 1874.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 14 Jan., 1874.

¹⁷*Limerick Chronicle*, 6 Jan., 1874.

¹⁸*Cork Examiner*, 14 Jan., 1874.

¹⁹L. J. McCaffrey, "Home Rule and the General Election of 1874, in Ireland", *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. IX, no. 34 (Sept. 1954), p. 202.

²⁰*Munster News*, 7 Feb., 1874.

²¹David Thornley, *op. cit.*, p. 194.



which eventually disqualified him from becoming a leader in any real sense of the word. By nature tolerant and easy going, he strove at all times to avoid open conflict with others, particularly where this called for any assertion of his own authority. In the end the Irish people were to turn from his good natured style of leadership to one that was made of sterner stuff.

Even Butt's own campaign in Limerick City, where he was once more presenting himself as a candidate, was marked by a lack of unity among his supporters. The Farmers' Club clashed with the advanced nationalists. The *Nation* attributed the dispute to the existence of a rumour that the farmers were anxious to 'shunt' the Home Rule question in favour of tenant right.²² Eventually it was found advisable to hold two separate meetings to sort the matter out. The first of these was held in the city, and was attended by Butt and by his running mate, Richard O'Shaughnessy, who was then being accused of sacrificing Home Rule to the interests of Catholic education. At this meeting there were six priests present, of whom only two were seculars. A few days later there was a second Home Rule meeting in Kilmallock, under the auspices of the Farmers' Club. As well as Butt, O'Shaughnessy and O'Sullivan, there was also a large number of clergy, mostly from the Archdiocese of Cashel. Fr. O'Dwyer is not mentioned as having been present at either meeting.

There was, then, considerable confusion in Limerick during the election campaign. In vain was Butt approached to act as mediator between the supporters of Kelly and O'Sullivan. On the advice of his son, who was managing his campaign in the city, he took himself off to England and remained there until the election was over. Given these circumstances it must have been extremely difficult for any of his followers in the locality to intrepit his mind correctly. It was also quite possible for them to remain loyal to Butt and to Home Rule while voting for either candidate.

As it transpired O'Sullivan was the victor at the polls and much was made, subsequently, of his success as a nationalist victory over liberal unionism. Some commentators later regarded this as a significant forerunner to the historic intervention of Parnell five years later.²³ The power of the priest in politics, like that of the landlords, seemed to have suffered a fatal blow. This, as later events were to show, was not really the case, however, and the Catholic clergy "continued to be a most important factor in the home rule campaign".²⁴ Their help was eagerly welcomed by the leaders of every political movement for the rest of the century and beyond.

As to O'Dwyer's opposition to O'Sullivan, whatever its reason he could hardly have been said to have supported the cause of liberal unionism. This would have called for a complete, and shortlived, *volte face*. After Kelly's defeat he still remained "a staunch Home Ruler".²⁵ When the results of the election were announced he wrote to the *Munster News*, and while he made reference to some remarks O'Sullivan had made about him after the election, he called for peace, and expressed the hope that there would be a united nationalist front in Limerick in the future.²⁶ Years later he was to substantiate the claim that he harboured no ill will towards the victor when, on his first episcopal visit to

²² *Ibid.*, p. 243.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁴ L. J. McCaffrey, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

²⁵ John Begley, Rev., *The Diocese of Limerick from 1691 to the Present time*, Dublin 1938, p. 569.

²⁶ *Munster News*, 14 Feb., 1874.

Kilmallock, he called on O'Sullivan who was then retired from politics. Later he granted the rare honour of allowing his body to be interred in the grounds of the parish church.²⁷

Why O'Dwyer should have supported Kelly against O'Sullivan, who was most definitely the popular choice, is not clear. The fact that the bishop favoured Kelly is not of itself sufficient explanation of O'Dwyer's stand. Dr. Butler, after all, had not supported Butt's nomination in 1871, while the young curate was the only Limerick cleric to have gone on the hustings with him where, oddly enough, he rubbed shoulders with O'Sullivan. Between them, then, there had to be some accord on issues like Home Rule and amnesty.

Some historians have explained the clerical opposition to O'Sullivan as arising from his Fenian connections. But neither would this suffice to account for O'Dwyer's action. Even though he did not agree with the Fenian interpretation of nationalism, on his own public avowal he respected it. Besides, he had gone to some length to demonstrate that O'Sullivan's ties with the Fenian Movement were in any case very tenuous.

Since his only connection with the rural population was through his father's family who had been landed gentry in Tipperary, and because of his own urban upbringing, it could be argued that O'Dwyer did not sufficiently appreciate the plight of the tenant farmers. Unlike the majority of the Irish clergy he did not have his roots in the tenant-farmer class, and so he did not enjoy the same background as the bulk of the electors in the Limerick county election. He nonetheless claimed that he sympathised with their cause, and would hardly, therefore, have opposed the agitation for land reform. As Bishop of Limerick, later, he was to write in his own defence that he was a land reformer, and that he detested "as earnestly as any man" the oppression of heartless landlords, and was prepared to "go to any lengths, sanctioned by religion to restrain them".²⁸ These sentiments, when all is said and done, differed in no significant way from those of W. H. O'Sullivan.

According to his own testimony O'Dwyer refused to support the popular candidate because he did not consider him to be sufficiently educated. He was anxious that the Irish members at Westminster would create a good impression on the English. Thinking somewhat along the lines Butt had enunciated in 1870 O'Dwyer was inclined to the view that politics was the business of gentlemen, and that formal education was a prerequisite to success in this field. In this, however, he was not fully abreast of events. A new phase of Irish politics was now opening, and the ordinary people were "beginning to be capable of running their politics for themselves". The time was at hand when they "no longer needed the leadership of any aristocracy, clerical or lay".²⁹ With the advent of a more universal, and secret ballot the ordinary people were turning to their own kind for men to represent them. Although the tenant farmer, then, might lack formal education and social standing, all desirable attributes in themselves, he made up for these in that he was basically honest. This quality alone made him preferable to "the most genteel university educated dandy who ever banged a ministerial kettle drum, or participated in a whig lobby".³⁰

It would appear, then, that O'Dwyer had backed the wrong man in 1874 rather than the wrong policies. Perhaps there is much in what Begley says when he reduces O'Dwyer's choice to one between personalities. His decision was made on the type of man he would have representing the Irish cause at Westminster.

²⁷ *Limerick Leader*, 20 Aug., 1917.

²⁸ *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 Jan., 1888.

²⁹ J. H. Whyte, "The Influence of the Catholic Clergy on Elections in Nineteenth-Century Ireland", *English Historical Review*, 75 (April, 1960), p. 255.

³⁰ *Nation*, 31 Jan., 1874.

His support for Kelly, however, did not affect his standing with the people of Newcastle West in any serious way. This in itself was a tribute to his high standing with the people, for it was quite common that priests who failed to follow the line of the majority "were penalised by their flocks".³¹ When he was transferred to Shanagolden in April, 1874, he was presented with a purse of sovereigns "on the part of numerous subscriptions" at "a large meeting" got up in Foynes in his honour.³²

But the memory of his opposition to O'Sullivan did not die as easily in certain other quarters. Later it would be adduced as proof of his lack of sympathy for the land reformers. More than a decade after the 1874 election William O'Brien referred to it during the course of a public meeting in Limerick when the Plan of Campaign and Boycotting were being sternly opposed by Bishop O'Dwyer. On that occasion O'Brien declared that it was "a most singular thing" that the bishop seemed to possess the special faculty for being on the wrong side in politics "in every action of his life..."³³ This is a not uninteresting comment on the man who is best remembered nowadays for the stand he took against General Maxwell in 1916!

³¹ J. H. Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

³² *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 April, 1874.

³³ *Ibid.*, 24 May, 1888.