

Tuam in the Olden Days

(Continued)

By JARLATH A. O'CONNELL

THE BURNING OF 'THE SCHOOL'

Tuam Roman Catholic Free School was established by Archbishop Kelly in 1826. A piece of ground consisting of a number of disused sandpits at Old Ballygaddy Road was leased from The Representative Church Body and here the school was erected at a cost of £600 subscribed entirely by the people of the town.

Some notes relating to the subsequent history of the school were published in a previous edition of 'The Reader' and for the purpose of the present article it is sufficient to refer to the fact that the premises passed into the hands of the Irish Christian Brothers in 1851.

On the 15th July, 1859, the term of the ground lease expired and The Brothers applied for a renewal. Their application was refused by the landlords however and it soon became apparent that Lord Plunkett, the Protestant Bishop, had plans for the conversion of the premises into an orphanage. Appeals to reconsider the matter were submitted to His Lordship but he remained adamant and his agent, Mr. Strachan, was instructed to proceed with the eviction of the Brothers.

Throughout the town His Lordship's decision was received with resentment and as the day fixed for the eviction approached tempers had arisen to such an alarming pitch that the Authorities thought fit to draft in about 400 extra constabulary from the surrounding districts and a company of soldiers was also brought into the town. The following is an account of the subsequent events as reported by the Tuam Herald of the 18th June, 1859:—

"Considerable excitement and sensation were created here this week by the arrival, first, on Thursday of a Company of the 59th regt. and on that and the following day, of large contingents of the Constabulary, for the purpose of aiding the Sheriff, who

came on Friday to take possession of the School House and adjoining premises, which Lord Plunkett, in the exercise of his power as we before stated, was determined to secure for certain purposes and with feelings and for practices characteristic of those who are enabled to wield the unjust and unjustifiable powers vested in the Law Church . . . Nevertheless, matters, it appears turned out very differently from what was either anticipated or expected; for, on Thursday night, the house, having been previously vacated by the Brothers, was set on fire and though the military and police were in attendance together with a large crowd of the townspeople, no effort was made to save it or arrest the progress of the fire which continued up to last night, and no vestige now remains of what was once a very substantial, well-built, useful house and erected at the expense of the people of Tuam. There was a good deal of clamour and excitement amongst the crowd but save the exception of some few stones said to be thrown at the windows of the new row of houses lately erected by Lord Plunkett on the Ballygaddy Road, nothing of consequence occurred beyond the conflagration.

On yesterday Mr. O'Hara, the Sheriff arrived in town again and, accompanied, by the military and police, proceeded to the locality and obtained possession of the premises. John F. Brown Esq. was the magistrate in command throughout the proceeding and Sub-Inspector Harvey commanded the police.

When the occupation was being thus insisted upon the boys of the school in large numbers assembled, together with several grown persons and tearing down the branches of the trees and shrubbery which surrounded the place, formed in procession and walked through all the streets of the town, cheering and shouting."

During the week after the burning there was great Police activity in the locality and eventually a large number of persons including several girls was arrested. They were charged at Tuam Petty Sessions with "being engaged, aiding and abetting in the destruction by setting on fire the Christian Brothers' Schools in this town, on the night of the 15th inst. and following day, same being as alledged, the property of the Protestant Bishop of Tuam." The account of the proceedings as published in the local Press was prefaced by the following statement:—

"As on a recent notorious occasion, so on Monday was this town visited and the Courthouse filled and surrounded with bristling platoons of menace-charged and terror-bearing Constabulary in order to instil into the youthful minds of the Papist urchins of this benighted town, the lasting, and startling lesson of Protestant power and superiority."

On the Bench were John J. Bodkin, Esq. ; in the chair : Arthur Netterville ; C. J. O'Kelly ; Robert Kenny ; O'C. Donelan ; John F. Brown ; W. J. Burke ; W. Marshall Day and T. J. Butler R.M. Esqs.

Mr. Blakeney, Crown Solicitor, with Mr. Concanon prosecuted and Messrs. Tully and Higgins appeared for the Defendants who were :—

Mary Meally, John Gordon, Denis Mullen or Tighe, Thomas Morris, Thomas Noone, Michael Conway, Martin Conway, Pat Lindsay, Robert Stockwell, John Furey, William Egan, Bridget Mogan, Mary Bowens, Margaret Blake, Margaret Mullen or Tighe, Michael Canavan, John Fahy, Thomas Tighe, Edward Gannon, Martin Kelly and Bartholomew Quinn.

The first Witness was Michael Phair, the Process Server, who gave evidence of the assembling of a great crowd of people at the burning. He remembered seeing certain of the Defendants taking part and at one stage some one had struck him with a stone. Other Witnesses gave evidence of identification and at the conclusion of the Hearing the following were returned for trial to the Assizes :—

John Gordon, Thomas Morris, Mick Conway, John Furey, William Egan, Thomas Tighe, E. Gannon, Martin Kelly and B. Quinn. The case against Thomas Noone was withdrawn as was also that against P. Lindsay who was then absent with his Regiment. The cases against the other Defendants were dismissed but, subsequently, Pat Brennan and Denis Mullen or Tighe were arrested on Warrants and returned to the Assizes.

In due course the Defendants came before the Assizes at Galway and were acquitted. There would appear to have been adequate evidence against them but, at least one prosecuting Counsel must have been hampered in his efforts by the knowledge that at least one of his sons had taken part in the burning.

After the Hearing all the accused had to walk from Galway to Tuam and they were met at Anbally by a large number of townspeople who escorted them into Tuam amidst general jubilation.

It is obvious that throughout the whole affair the sympathy of the Constabulary was with the Brothers and their inactivity during the actual burning was not lost on Lord Plunkett. He subsequently demanded an enquiry as to their conduct on the historic night but I can find no reference as to the outcome.

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