

CLARE

ASSOCIATION YEARBOOK



Bungay, Welford, which form part of the N18 and Norfolk, Welford, were constructed in 1851, being the first and open to traffic in 1852. The Clare Association was formed in 1851.

THE GLANDINE SCHOOL CONTROVERSY

INTRODUCTION

Harry Hughes

About one mile south of Miltown Malbay on the Ennis Road lies the townland of Glandine, a peaceful rural settlement which, for most of its known and recorded history, was an uneventful place typical of any other townland in West Clare in its social and economic organisation and religious practices. And like other places in West Clare it had its flirtations and involvements with some of the more dramatic movements in Irish history. In 1867 there were rumours and counter rumours of Fenians roaming the hillsides - but then the Irish countryside was alive with shadowy Fenians that year. More tangible was the presence of a local company of the IRA during the War of Independence, some of whose members took part in the Rineen ambush of September 22, 1920. But the most controversial episodes in the story of this townland occurred between 1851 and 1863 when a protracted dispute arose over the teaching of religion in a school established by a local landlord. At issue in this conflict was the emotionally explosive question of proselytism, or souperism, as it is popularly known.

The denominational confrontations in the Miltown parish, centred on Glandine, are not as well publicised as others in Clare like the bitter disputes in the Loophead Peninsula centering on Fr. Michael Meehan, Henry and Marcus Keane and the Little Ark, all of which, and much more on this topic, is documented in Ignatius Murphy's Diocese of Killaloe, Part 3, 1850-1904, Ch. 2. But the Glandine controversy formed part of the larger picture of religious conflict which afflicted the West of Ireland in the decade immediately after the Famine when evangelical ministers, aided by some landlords, embarked on an intensive proselytising campaign. One such landlord - although he was far from being the most ardent in this regard - was Colonel George Wyndham.

CIVILIZING THE POPULATION OF MILTOWN

George Wyndham (1787-1869) succeeded to the family estates in Ireland in 1837 - the seat was at Petworth in Sussex - and later took the title of Lord Leconfield. He owned vast estates in England and Ireland with considerable property all over County Clare, largely in mid and east Clare, but with portions in West Clare as well, in the parishes of Kilfarboy and Kilmurry-Ibrickane.

In fact the estates owned by Lord Leconfield were the largest held by any absentee Landlord in the county. His estates in West Clare were in the townlands of Clonadrum, Emlagh, Knockanalban and Caherush in Kilmurry-Ibrickane; and Clohanmore, Clohanbeg, Killernan, Dunsallagh, Kildimo, Carrowduff and Glandine in Kilfarboy (Miltown) parish. Although an absentee he soon made his presence felt as an improving landlord determined on a policy of farm consolidation, assisted emigration, and education for the children of his tenants and others who might wish to avail of the opportunity. With this in mind he opened a school in Glandine in 1851, an undertaking which was to cause him and his agents considerable difficulties over the next decade and more.

According to Leconfield - and he expounded his aims in numerous private correspondences, public manifestoes and letters to the papers - the sole purpose of his school was to provide an elementary education. There would, of course, be Bible reading, without comment, and no interference with the religion of Roman Catholic children. The school's central mission was graphically expressed by the Rev. Henry Murphy, Leconfield's Inspector of Schools in the county when, writing to the Headmaster, Mr. Samuel Ball, he reminded him that his task was "to civilize and enlighten the population of Miltown". If the majority of Roman

Catholics in the parish remained blissfully unaware of the altruistic efforts being mounted on their behalf then their clergy were alert to the potential dangers of the religious curriculum in the new institution. The school had scarcely opened its doors when the controversy began.

EXPOUNDING THE SCRIPTURES

For the most part the dispute was an epistolary pedantic affair with a voluminous correspondence between the Landlord and his agents on the one hand and the Roman Catholic Clergy and supporters on the other. Much of this correspondence came into the public domain via letters to the newspapers of the day, in particular the "Clare Journal", the leading Clare paper at that time and a firm supporter of Leconfield and his school. There is also an enlightening triangular private correspondence between Leconfield, the Rev. Henry Murphy who, as well as being a relentless diarist and his Lordship's Inspector of Schools, was Episcopal Dean of Residence Queens College Belfast and Chaplain to the Lord Bishop of Down and Connor and Dromore - and he sometimes signed off with all titles appended - and Mr. Samuel Ball, Headmaster of the School. This correspondence, while reflecting the main sequences of events in the story, also allows us invaluable insights into the thinking of these three key players and their personalities.

Murphy comes across as meticulous and snobbish, diligently discharging his duties to all concerned and often patronising in his attitude to Ball while servile in correspondence with his Lordship. Leconfield's character emerges as a fairly typical portrait of an improving landlord: zealous and benevolent and knowing what is best for everyone. As the controversy intensified his patience became frayed and references to fanatic priests and their pernicious influence sprinkle his letters. And Sam Ball, the man in the middle, who bore the brunt of the local assaults on the school, is seen to be determined, energetic, and forceful in his teaching, and not without a sense of pragmatism. The first public salvoes appeared in the "Clare Journal" in the Spring of 1851, with a letter from Rev. Thomas Hill, of Miltown Malbay, in February, resolutely defending the standard of education in the schools under his control and denouncing "the dangerous influence of the Glandine School where Catholic children were paid and clothed in order to induce them to apostatize". By return came the reply from the Rev. Henry Murphy, in all his capacities, denying Fr. Hill's claims and refuting the allegation that the school was connected to "the London Hibernian Society - or any other Society," and going on to restate the objectives of the school - "imparting a good general education to his (Leconfield's) tenantry" and recapitulating his Lordship's instructions about non interference with the religious beliefs of Roman Catholic children. Fr. Hill was again in the Journal on March 17th accusing the Headmaster of "expounding the scriptures regularly twice every week" and telling the children that "the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church are false". The Rev. Murphy reiterated the official position in his reply - essentially that the school was not a proselytising institution - and appended a letter from its four teachers - Ball, Eliza Ball, J. Campbell and S. Russell - confirming the view. Hill's riposte in early April demanded the removal of Bible reading from the classroom. The Bible was the crux of the matter. According to Leconfield and supporters the Bible was to be read without comment. Despite their assurances the local Catholic Clergy maintained that Master Ball

...and ... reading the Bible with complimentary and engaging in a non too subtle proselytising. So while Leconfield highlighted the non sectarian ethos of his school the Catholic Clergy, with equal persistence, asserted the contrary. There was ample room for misinterpretation and confrontation.

It is difficult to establish precisely how far practice exceeded aspiration in this dispute, but a close reading of the private correspondence would suggest that Ball had adopted a vigorous approach in Scripture classes and gone past his official brief. In 1853 there was an avalanche of letters from Murphy to Ball cautioning him about commentary and expressing unease at Ball's involvement with the management of the local Church of Ireland. The most trenchant warning came in a letter of November 5, 1853:

Now, dear Sir, I must again repeat that my sole object in the stringent caution I gave was to prevent the recurrence of such things, knowing how injurious they would be (if not ruinous) to the success of the good work in which we are all engaged - viz to civilize and enlighten the population of Miltown.

The above extract is from a letter written by the Rev. Henry Murphy, dated 5th November, 1853, and addressed to Mr. Samuel Ball, Headmaster at Lord Leconfield's school at Glandine, Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare and it is one of a voluminous triangular private correspondence between his reverence, his lordship and the hapless Mr. Ball, the recipient of many such admonitions.

The note of urgency is obvious; the recurrence (underlined in the original) referred to was Ball's conduct in Bible Class. In a letter to Leconfield around the same time Murphy describes Ball as a "hot-headed man" and restates the case for the policy of non-interference. The hapless Ball defended himself as best he could laying the blame for his woes on priestly agitation.

Leconfield himself, in his public correspondence and manifestoes, repeated the claims that the purpose of the school was "to give a liberal education, calculated to elevate a moral and social condition, and to furnish strength to maintain a spirit of manliness and independence". However, in Leconfield's moral and religious scheme of things, independence of thought meant freedom from the perceived tyranny of popery. In a revealing letter to Ball in 1861 he explains the liberating nature of his educational system which was conducive to fostering a spirit of inquiry which would, in time, expose the true nature of popery "which aimed a curtailing liberty of thought as well as action". It was, he said "a religion of ceremonies and superstitions". The reliably sycophantic Murphy echoed these sentiments on the "baneful principles of popery" and proclaimed his conviction that his Lordship's influence would guarantee the right to an "open and free Bible". But it didn't in Miltown.

The battle for the soul of the parish was taken up by many commentators in the "Journal" and other newspapers. Leaders in the "Journal" supported Leconfield and denigrated the position of the Catholic Clergy. In April 1851, the newspaper, convinced it had spoken the last rational word on the matter, closed its pages to further correspondence. They were to be re-opened in dramatic fashion in 1853.

'A DISGRACEFUL FRACAS'

Fr. Hill's opposition was oratorical and epistolary but his curate, Father John Fahy, favoured the inflammatory and physical. It was a case of muscular catholicism confronting evangelical protestantism. Fahy determined to close Ball's School - as it was known locally - and began to patrol the roadway in front of the Schoolhouse seeking to prevent pupils entering. One such morning, in September 1853, while patrolling the approaches to the School he was intercepted by Ball. The ensuing altercation developed into a physical struggle when Fahy assaulted Ball with his horse whip and was in turn knocked into a drain. Both parties issued summonses and the case of the "disgraceful fracas", as the Journal described it, was held at the Miltown Petty Sessions early in

September. It was a long day in court and souperism got a complete airing. Perhaps the most poignant comment came from one tenant farmer whose children were attending the school. James Howe, giving his evidence in Irish, summed up the predicament of the ordinary individual when he exclaimed: "My heart is broken between the Landlords and the priests". Incidentally, the Irish was translated by one Mr. Weir O'Connell, a member of the Irish Bible Society who was present in court. The Irish Society was then quite active in Miltown. Both cases were struck out but outside the court house Ball was again the recipient of direct catholic action when a local woman hit him on the side of the head with a stone, rendering his unconscious. The legend of Sam Ball as the source of all local agitation was beginning to take off.

'A RUDE AND BARBAROUS PEOPLE'

Inevitably the conflict and attendant publicity affected the attendance. Murphy issued detailed reports on the progress of the pupils, the numbers in attendance, and the religious affiliations of the children. For example, for the school year 1852/53 he notes a decrease in the number of girls and boys attending. In his report of July 1853 he records 18 on Roll, "7 protestants and 11 romanists" but concedes that 36 pupils had been withdrawn so that the girls school was "barely existing". However he noted a slight revival towards the end of the year. A similar picture emerges in the boys school. The number on Roll was 40, "14 protestants and 26 romanists", but again 36 students had been withdrawn during the course of the year, but again there was an increase in numbers towards the end of the year. Murphy singled out the "fanatic priest" Fahy as the main cause of declining Rolls as he was constantly on the road intimidating children going to and from the school. The report for July 1853 contains another interesting comment where Murphy expresses relief that the Irish Church Mission Society had withdrawn from Miltown. In his opinion this would reduce tension in the neighbourhood which would allow the school to continue its work. Apparently these missionaries had been actively proselytising as opposed to the more passive methods favoured by Murphy. In the same report Murphy marvelled at the courage of the Roman Catholic children who attended while opining that it would take time for the influence of the school to be felt because the locals were "a rude and barbarous people...fit and proper tools of the priest". Murphy never revealed these prejudices in public; they were confined to his private letters and direct reports to his master.

Some years later in the report for the year 1856 Murphy was much more optimistic: "the schools are now in a more satisfactory state than they have been for a very long time", and noted the increase in student numbers. In 1857 he records 49 girls in attendance, 37 of those being Leconfield's tenants' children; 47 were "romanists" and, surprisingly, only 2 were protestants; and in the boys' school there were 47 on Rolls, of whom 35 were Leconfield's tenants' children, while the religious breakdown was 41 catholic and 6 protestant. The observations in this report show Murphy purring with satisfaction.

TURF BOYCOTTING AND INTIMIDATION

The clerical opposition to Ball's school had not abated but it was less openly physical and confrontational. However, with the arrival of a new parish priest, Michael Bugler (1859-70), the curate John Fahy had the support of someone who was equally determined to oppose Glandine on all occasions, and in every way possible. The agitation resumed and in June 1859 we find Ball, in great agitation, practically under siege in the Schoolhouse with the priests outside the gate preventing turf being brought to the house. In a letter to Leconfield in the same month he complains about being intimidated while visiting the shops in Miltown, accusing the priests of organising the intimidation. At this juncture the local landlord, Burdett Morony, became involved and he ordered his tenants to ferry turf to the Schoolhouse threatening eviction if they refused. This aggressive attitude would be characteristic of