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# The Barricading of Nenagh Chapel in 1849

by Daniel Grace

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A newly-appointed parish priest finds his chapel boarded and barricaded against him. He is publicly pilloried as “a liar”, “a miscreant”, “a double-dealer” and “a Judas Iscariot”. He is bluntly told by a deputation that he is not wanted in the parish. His residence is attacked by night and its windows are shattered. Finally, he is forced to pass through a hissing mob - under military escort - to smash open the chapel doors himself with pick-axe and sledge-hammer.

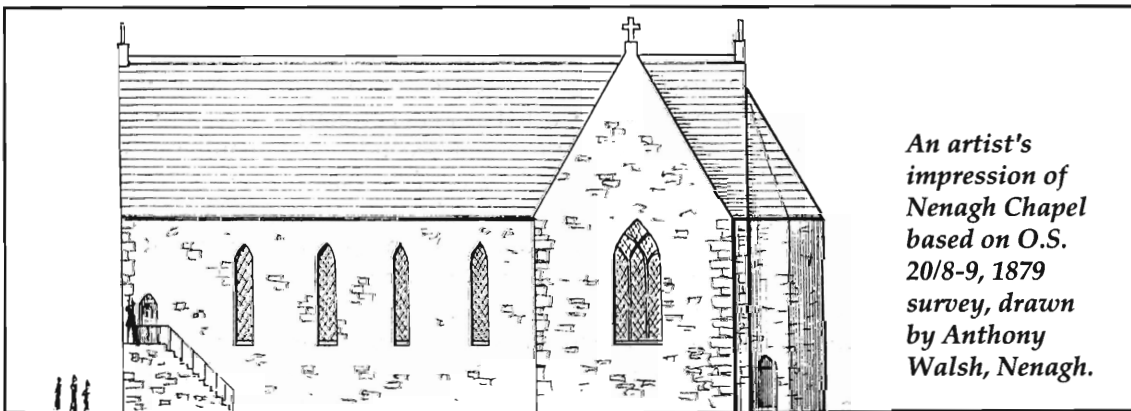
Those extraordinary scenes occurred in the town of Nenagh during the closing months of the year 1849<sup>1</sup>. The cause of the trouble was simple enough; the Bishop of Killaloe had appointed a new parish priest to the town against the wishes of the parishioners, who wanted their curate promoted to the office. The townspeople refused to accept the new man, and actively sought to prevent him taking possession of the parish.

By 1849 the parish priest of Nenagh, Dr. Ambrose O'Connor, was 80 years old and in poor health. He had been inactive for a number of years, and the burden of administering the busy and populous parish had fallen on the shoulders of the senior curate, Rev. Nicholas Power. Power was born in Co. Waterford, a short distance from Carrick-on-Suir, in 1802. He studied for the priesthood at the Irish College in Paris, and after ordination opted to serve in Killaloe diocese, where there was a shortage of priests at the time.

In 1830 he was appointed curate at Nenagh by the then bishop, Dr. Patrick MacMahon, and was to remain in the parish for the next 20 years. Another young curate was appointed to Nenagh that same year — Rev. Thomas Kenny, whose return as parish priest in 1849 sparked the entire controversy. Fr. Kenny was promoted parish priest of Castleconnell in 1838, while Fr. Power was left in Nenagh as, it was generally understood, the successor to Fr. O'Connor as parish priest.

Fr. Power was immensely popular in Nenagh, and indeed somewhat of a folk hero. There is a tradition that he was a great horseman, and that he once successfully challenged a member of the local gentry to a horse race at Tullaheady outside the town, which was watched by the entire populations of several surrounding parishes.

He was an outspoken defender of both the spiritual and temporal welfare of his flock. During the



*An artist's impression of Nenagh Chapel based on O.S. 20/8-9, 1879 survey, drawn by Anthony Walsh, Nenagh.*



cholera epidemic in the town in May 1849 he roundly condemned the Nenagh Guardians for refusing outdoor relief, accusing them of forcing the poor into "the death-trap workhouses" to kill them off, in order to keep down the rates<sup>2</sup>.

He also waged an unsuccessful campaign for the removal of David Young, the Ballymackey Electoral District Relieving Officer, whom he accused of grave dereliction of duty. Fr. Power had been incensed to find one Michael Minogue, his wife and six children starving to death outside the gates of Nenagh Workhouse, having been refused relief by Young on three successive occasions<sup>3</sup>.

The people of Nenagh would have been upset to lose their popular curate, even if he were being promoted to another parish. They were particularly angered at what they perceived as a blatant injustice being perpetrated on him by his bishop, Dr. Patrick Kennedy.

On Tuesday, 2 October, 1849, Rev. Thomas Kenny P.P., Castleconnell, arrived in Nenagh personally bearing the news that he had been appointed Administrator with right of succession. Nenagh was stunned; but by evening there was a growing determination to have Power, not Kenny, as parish priest. That night saw a crowded meeting at the Temperance Hall to decide on the future course of action. "Every Catholic trader, shopkeeper, as well as the professional men of the parish were present", remarked the *Tipperary Vindicator*.

A requisition for a public meeting on the following Friday was signed by 160 of the leading Catholics of the town, including twelve members of the Town Commissioners, led by their Chairman, John Hanly. Hand-bills advertising the meeting were posted next day in Nenagh, the surrounding parishes and in the towns of Roscrea and Birr.

Early on Wednesday morning Fr. Kenny approached the chapel to discover a hostile crowd assembled, the gates tightly closed and the windows and doors nailed with strong planks of wood. During the night some of the working class had taken direct action to keep Fr. Kenny out. He pleaded with them to allow let him enter the chapel; but the crowd refused. Fr. Bowles, the junior curate, arrived and also pleaded with them: likewise to no avail. Kenny attempted to procure a sledge-hammer to break down the door; nobody would provide one.

Defeated, he returned to his lodgings and later that evening journeyed to Toomevara to consult with Dr. Kennedy, who was visiting his cousin, Rev. John Meagher P.P. Dr. Kennedy ordered him to return to Nenagh and persevere. That evening Fr. Power came to the chapel and implored the crowd to open the doors. Again they refused, saying that in the present circumstances they would open the chapel for no man.

On Thursday and Friday mornings Fr. Kenny again went to the chapel; each time he was refused entry by the crowd. One man told him: "You, Fr. Kenny, and Dr. Kennedy too, were far enough away when Fr. Power was building that chapel and mortgaging the coat off his back to make up the money for it". Another said they would "not allow Fr. Power to be made a footstool of by any man".

People were summoned to the public meeting on Friday, 5 October, by the ringing of the chapel bell at 12 o'clock noon. The Temperance Hall was crowded to capacity. John F. Magrath, solicitor, took the chair; William Healy and John O'Meara acted as joint secretaries. First a formal Chapel Committee was elected; then six resolutions were proposed, seconded and unanimously adopted.

The first resolution reaffirmed the allegiance and loyalty of the parishioners of Nenagh to the Catholic faith. The meeting then went on to recognise the right of the Bishop to make ecclesiastical appointments, but affirmed their right as laymen to express an opinion on how that right was exercised. The present appointment by Dr. Kennedy, the meeting considered "inconsistent with justice and a cause of irritation to the public mind".

A fourth resolution, adopted amidst loud cheering, affirmed their esteem and affection for Fr. Power, "an indefatigable labourer in all that belongs to the priest, the citizen and the patriot". The meeting called on Dr. Kennedy to continue Fr. Power in the administratorship and to give him the



parish after Dr. O'Connor's death. A deputation of 21 influential Catholics was selected to journey to Birr the following day to meet Dr. Kennedy to present a petition to him to that effect.

Finally, it was decided to insert the resolutions in the *Tipperary Vindicator*, *The King's Co. Chronicle*, the *Limerick Chronicle* and the *Dublin Evening Post*. Some objected to the insertion in the Dublin paper because of its Tory affiliations; the answer from the platform was: "Don't you know that some bishops read Tory newspapers?" The meeting concluded with loud and prolonged cheering for Fr. Power.

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Dr. Kennedy was reported to have often said that Fr. Power was being left in Nenagh to succeed to the parish on Fr. O'Connor's death. Now, however, the bishop had changed his mind and given the parish to Fr. Kenny. In his defence Dr. Kennedy argued that, since Fr. Kenny had recently been appointed Vicar General, he deserved a more important parish — and Nenagh was regarded as the best in the diocese.

This argument had some validity, but as the *Nenagh Guardian* pointed out, if Fr. Power was not to get Nenagh, surely he deserved a parish elsewhere, and it too wondered why Dr. Kennedy had not given him one. For apparently the bishop intended leaving Power in Nenagh as curate, despite the fact that he was the most senior curate in the entire diocese and his contemporaries had long before succeeded to parishes.

It was widely known that relations between the priest and his bishop were not good. The parishioners of Nenagh felt that Dr. Kennedy was being vindictive towards their popular curate and was now taking the opportunity to chastise him for alleged wrong.

Fr. Power's 'crime' was his continuing friendship with Maurice Lenihan, proprietor-editor of the *Tipperary Vindicator*. Lenihan and Dr. Kennedy had initially been on friendly terms; indeed, it was Dr. Kennedy who encouraged Lenihan to establish his newspaper at Nenagh. But their friendship cooled over their conflicting attitudes to the Charitable Bequests Act, 1844<sup>4</sup>. This Act, which attempted to regulate the flow of legacies to charitable institutions, sharply divided Catholic opinion in Ireland.

One faction, led by Daniel O'Connell and Archbishop MacHale of Tuam, claimed that it would damage Catholic charities. But a second faction saw possible benefits in the Act, especially as 8 of the 13 Commissioners appointed to administer it, were Catholics. These included four bishops: Crolley of Armagh, Murray of Dublin, Denvir of Down and Conor and Dr. Patrick Kennedy of Killaloe.

Most of the Killaloe clergy opposed the Act; the *Tipperary Vindicator*, following the O'Connell line, forcefully condemned it in its editorials. Dr. Kennedy was placed in an embarrassing position and felt compelled to resign from the Commission with some loss of face. He took the opposition of the paper as a personal affront and as an attack on his integrity and grew increasingly hostile to Lenihan — and also to Fr. Power, who continued to cultivate Lenihan's friendship, despite the known attitude of the bishop.

Relations worsened over an incident which originated in the parish of Monsea in 1848 and led to the suspension of Fr. Anthony Nolan, the parish priest<sup>5</sup>. In January of that year an attempt was made to serve eviction notices on 29 families in the townland of Urra; but the tenants had absconded and the notices could not be served. Dwyer, the process server, returned to the village of Puckane and, assisted by Sub-Constable Leahy from the local barracks, nailed copies of the notices to the doors of the Catholic chapel.

The following Sunday an enraged Fr. Nolan denounced this action from the altar, and wondered why the people had not risen up and driven process server and policeman from the village. Sub-Constable Leahy, who was present at the Mass, reported the offending words to his superiors at



Dublin Castle; they urged Dr. Kennedy to take action. The upshot of the affair was that Fr. Nolan was suspended from office for three months for altar denunciation.

The *Tipperary Vindicator* immediately rushed to the defence of Fr. Nolan and accused Dr. Kennedy of being unjust. Lenihan, perhaps, was hasty, because Fr. Nolan had previously denounced persons from the altar and had been warned by his bishop that any repetition would incur suspension. Also, although Fr. Nolan appears to have been unaware of it, the process server when not able to serve eviction notices personally was entitled to post copies on public buildings; and chapels were designated as such. He had also nailed copies to the doors of the local Protestant church.

Dr. Kennedy believed (and claimed to have proof) that the offending articles in the *Vindicator* were either written or inspired by Fr. Power — a charge emphatically denied by both Power and Lenihan. At a meeting of the clergy in Nenagh a few weeks later a resolution, condemning the *Vindicator* and asking the clergy to withdraw their subscriptions to it, was proposed by Fr. Kenny P.P., Castleconnell, at the behest of the bishop. The resolution was agreed to by all the clergy present except Fr. Power. Dr. Kennedy was angry at this, and was determined to punish him for his apparent insubordination.

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The Nenagh deputation set out for Birr at 9 a.m. on Saturday 6 October, 1849, to loud cheering and hurraing. There seems to have been unbounded confidence that the bishop would see things the parishioners' way and would withdraw Fr. Kenny from the parish. On arrival at Birr the deputation went to Molloy's Hotel; four of their number - John F. Magrath, Thomas Fitzpatrick, John Hanly and Malachi Ryan - were selected to meet with the bishop. Dr. Kennedy received them politely, but firmly refused to yield on the matter. He could not, he said, be dictated to by laymen on whom he could or could not appoint to ecclesiastical office.

The four returned to Molloy's Hotel, and after lunch set out for Nenagh. Seven miles from the town they were met by a troop of young horsemen with trumpets, eager to carry back news of their impending return. The crowds grew denser as they neared Nenagh, all eagerly asking: "Are ye bringing us good news gentlemen?", and "Is Fr. Power rightified?". Dusk was falling as they entered the town, and people stood in their open doorways with lighted candles in their hands.

The deputation finally reached the Temperance Hall, and there to mounting anger revealed the outcome of their meeting with the bishop. Up to this there had been little personal abuse directed at either Dr. Kennedy or Fr. Kenny; but now angry accusations, such as "Castle bishop", "schemer", "double-dealer" and "Judas Iscariot" were freely bandied about.

The following day (Sunday) Fr. Power celebrated mass at the workhouse at Tyone, and a large congregation of townspeople flocked there. When he entered the dining hall to commence mass, he was greeted by a spontaneous outburst of applause. Many parishioners journeyed to country chapels to hear mass, especially to Ballinaclough and Carrig.

Fr. Bowles, the other curate and a supporter of Fr. Kenny, went to say mass at the Brewery Auxiliary Workhouse; but all the inmates reportedly rushed out, and only the Master and his family attended. Fr. Kenny celebrated mass at the Gaol — where presumably the prisoners had little choice whether to attend or not!

Next day, Frs. Kenny and Bowles went to the Workhouse to hear confessions; the inmates, with two or three exceptions, refused to go. That evening several cartloads of stones and some lime and sand were deposited outside the chapel gates with a view to building up the entrances more securely. On Tuesday 14 masons and numerous labourers assembled to do the building; but Fr. Power arrived and persuaded them to desist.

Later that evening Fr. Power addressed a public letter to the parishioners, imploring them to open the chapel: "Hear me then, my esteemed and beloved friends. Open the door of God's temple and



you will make me happy for ever. You will save yourselves and your children from the desolation which must inevitably result from a continued interruption of the offices of our holy religion". Fr. Power, whatever his private feelings, took no part in the agitation against Fr. Kenny, doing his utmost to quell the situation and get the chapel reopened. His stance stood to his advantage in his subsequent career.

The chapel remained closed during the following weeks and was not even opened for the funeral mass of Rev. Ambrose O'Connor P.P., who died on Thursday 11 October. The parishioners either followed Fr. Power to whichever institution he was celebrating mass at, or went to the country chapels. Late on Saturday night 20 October stones were thrown through the windows of Fr. Kenny's residence. This action was deplored by the respectable Catholics of the town; but the culprits were not apprehended.

On Monday 22 October Fr. Power was ordered by Dr. Kennedy to quit Nenagh and proceed to Kinnitty as curate. Later in the day trunks were seen being loaded on to a covered car outside his residence, and the news of his removal spread like wildfire. At a meeting at the Temperance Hall that evening the Chapel Committee decided to request Fr. Kenny formally to leave the parish.

Next day a deputation went to Fr. Kenny's lodgings, and the remonstrance asking him to leave was read by John O'Meara in "a clear, firm and distinct voice". "During the reading", reported the *Tipperary Vindicator*; "Fr. Kenny appeared to labour under great nervous excitement and the colour of his features frequently changed". However, he refused to give any commitment to leave the parish.

Although the chapel had now been closed for 20 days, it was only barricaded with timber and had to be guarded day and night. Now it was decided to strengthen the "fortifications". On Wednesday 24 October, masons began building walls 14" thick against each of the five entrances. This action was designed to relieve the burden of constantly guarding the chapel and to demonstrate to the Bishop the utter determination of the parishioners.

But the stalemate could hardly continue indefinitely, and Fr. Kenny determined to forcibly take possession of the chapel. He was advised that he was legally entitled to do so, as an old law from the reign of James I made it an offence to close up any place of public worship. On Tuesday 30 October he visited the Resident Magistrate, Major Plunkett, told him of his intention to force the chapel the following morning and requested police protection<sup>6</sup>.

Plunkett, well aware of the hostility of the town and the danger of serious rioting, decided to draft in extra police from the country stations and to seek military aid from the 79th Highland Regiment stationed at Summerhill, Nenagh. At 5 a.m. the following morning the police, numbering about 100, swiftly sealed off the entrance to Chapel Lane and Abbey Lane, and took possession of the chapel yard to prevent the bell being rung to raise the alarm.

But their actions were observed, and young boys ran through the town yelling: "Fire; the chapel is on fire"! Soon an angry crowd had collected at the entrance to Chapel Lane. At 6 a.m. Frs. Kenny and Bowles, armed with sledges and pick-axes and protected by a detachment of troops, came down Summerhill towards the chapel. They were jeered and hooted at by the mob; but because of the military presence no attempt was made to assault them.

Major Plunkett reported that the parish priest and curate had to remove the mason work and timber barricades with their own hands, "as they could not prevail on a single person to assist them, and men they had previously engaged ran away, fearing the vengeance of the people". After nearly two hours' exertion, they succeeded in opening one of the doors and got in. The military were then withdrawn; but 20 policemen were left on duty in the chapel yard to prevent it from being re-barricaded. The police were to remain in the vicinity of the chapel for all the following week.

Next day, 1 November, was a holiday of obligation and a Fair Day in Nenagh. Only about ten



parishioners attended mass in the chapel; but a large number of country folk in town for the fair did so, despite the fact that they were hooted and jeered at by a mob outside the chapel gate.

One parishioner who attended mass was Maurice Lenihan; he was particularly insulted because he had been involved in the opposition, and was now apparently "selling out". Perhaps he now felt that the affair had gone far enough and that it was time to call a halt? The fact that he had already decided to transfer his newspaper from Nenagh to Limerick may have been a factor in his decision.

In a sense Lenihan was correct, because whether the parishioners realised it or not, the game was now up. Fr. Power was gone and was not going to get the parish; Fr. Kenny showed no sign of flinching; the chapel was now open again. As the weeks passed parishioners began to drift back to the chapel, many no doubt glad not to be facing winter treks to country chapels. The Chapel Committee continued to meet weekly; but attendances began to dwindle.

They had abandoned all hope of Fr. Power getting the parish, and were now demanding that a new parish priest be sent to Nenagh, preferably Dr. Blake, P.P., Roscrea. Some refused to concede; as late as 19 December it was reported that many parishioners "continued to manifest the same unswerving determination". But by the New Year the controversy had disappeared from the newspapers, although it had not been settled but rather had slowly ground to a halt. There was still the occasional act of defiance — especially from brides who refused to allow Fr. Kenny to officiate at their weddings!

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It remains to record briefly the subsequent careers of these clergymen prominent in the agitation. Rev. Thomas Kenny P.P. died of fever on 17 July 1850. His remains were laid to rest, not at Nenagh, but at Castleconnell, where his days had certainly been happier. According to local tradition, a curse - "the Curse of the Seven Marys" - was placed on Fr. Kenny, by some of the parishioners; this is believed to have caused his death!

Fr. Kenny was succeeded as parish priest of Nenagh by Rev. Daniel Vaughan, P.P., Killaloe. On 19 November 1850 Dr. Patrick Kennedy died at John's Place, Birr, after a protracted illness and was buried in the church there. Some months later he was succeeded as bishop of Killaloe by Rev. Daniel Vaughan, P.P., Nenagh.

Although Fr. Power was out of sight in Kinnitty, he was not forgotten by the people of Nenagh. A public subscription was taken up, and in April 1850 a deputation journeyed to Kinnitty to present him with a gig made at Moylan's Coach Yard, Nenagh, a spirited horse, a set of silver-mounted harness and a silver-mounted whip, saddle and bridle. On the harness was a crest with the Latin inscription: *Per crucem ad coronam* (Through suffering to glory) - a prophetic motto in the case of Fr. Power.

When Daniel Vaughan became bishop, he appointed Nicholas Power parish priest of Killaloe and Vicar General of the diocese. In 1865 Fr. Power was consecrated coadjutor bishop to Dr. Michael Flannery, who had left the diocese due to ill-health. Dr. Power travelled to Rome for the First Vatican Council, and shortly after his return died at Killaloe on 20 March 1871.

#### SOURCES

1. This article is largely based on detailed accounts of the controversy in the *Tipperary Vindicator* and to a lesser extent on the reports in the *Nenagh Guardian*. It has not been considered necessary to give detailed footnotes for each individual event.
2. *Tipperary Vindicator*, 9. 5. 1849.
3. *Ibid*, 23.5.1849.
4. *Ibid*, 17.10.1849.
5. The Nolan controversy is fully reported in the *Tipperary Vindicator* and *Nenagh Guardian* for the months, February to May 1848. See also Daniel Grace: "The case of Fr. Anthony Nolan P.P., Monsea 1845/48", *Cois Deirge*, Autumn 1978.
6. An account of the opening of the chapel is found in Major Plunkett's Report to Dublin Castle, 1 November, 1849 - National Archives, Outrage Reports, 1849 Tipperary, 27/2827.

