

Clonmel Grammar School

By Michael Ahern

The Reformation and the Tudor conquest brought about great changes in Irish education. The dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII also meant the closure of their schools. As part of the Tudor process of anglicisation, Queen Elizabeth ordered the establishment of a Free School in the principal town of every diocese, with Englishmen to be appointed as masters. This marked the introduction of the Grammar School system into Ireland.

Alarmed by this prospect, Catholics who could afford it were sending their children to Irish colleges, of which many were opened on the continent, and others provided a religious and secular education for those in their charge. At home the newly-formed Jesuit order was setting up schools in many towns throughout Ireland. "During the closing decades of the 16th century Latin Schools were conducted in Limerick, Kilkenny, Kilmallock, Clonmel, Youghal and Waterford, mainly under Jesuit direction. . . ."¹

The establishment of the Grammar School system as envisaged by Elizabeth was not completely successful as the conquest of the island was as yet incomplete and the Protestants too few in number. In fact it was to be another 100 years before Clonmel would have a Grammar School. However, the opening years of the 17th century saw a dramatic change in the political situation. Gaelic resistance was crushed at Kinsale and for the next 300 years Ireland, a predominantly Catholic country, would be ruled by a Protestant minority.

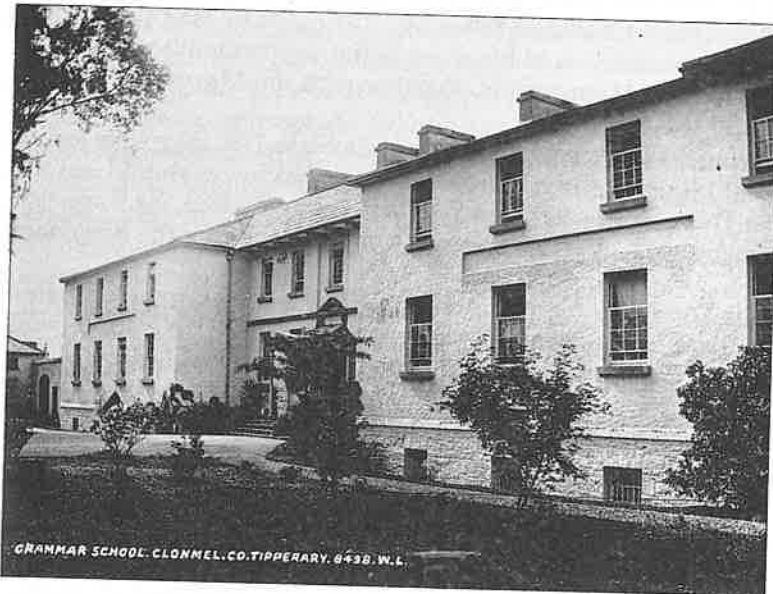
Because of these changes it was inevitable that the Jesuit-run schools should find themselves in an increasingly precarious position. The provision of Catholic education could only be sustained either with the connivance of the Protestant authorities or as long as control of the town councils remained in the hands of the Old English Catholic merchant classes.

The Jesuit School in Clonmel, situated close to Old St. Mary's Church, provided an excellent classical education. Around 1640 some disaster, possibly fire, struck the school. An extract from the Court of Survey held by the Cromwellian authorities in the town in 1655 refers to a house on the south side of the church "sett apart time out of minde for a ffree school", which was destroyed before the Rebellion of 1641.² Destruction does not appear to have been total because the school was still in operation and under Jesuit control until the arrival of Cromwell in 1650.³

In 1653 the school was re-assembled under Puritan control; there is a reference to that effect in a manuscript in Trinity College.⁴ In that year the Puritan authorities brought Edward Bainesbrigge and Mrs. Spencer to serve as schoolmaster and schoolmistress respectively. It is not known how long they remained in Clonmel; but by 1681 the school was no longer functioning and efforts were being made to re-establish it.

This time it would be under the control of the Protestant ascendancy, who were reinstated at the Restoration of Charles II, and Clonmel would finally have its Grammar School as envisaged by Elizabeth. In 1681 the Protestant bishop of Waterford, Hugh Gore, suggested that the school be reopened. His proposal was conveyed by Dr. Samuel Ladyman, then vicar of Clonmel, to the mayor, Francis Rabone. Furthermore, his lordship undertook to find a master if the townspeople would provide his accommodation and a suitable building for the school itself. From this, it would appear that the old premises which had housed the Jesuit School had by then become unsuitable.

Bishop's Gore's proposal won the approval of Rabone's successor, Stephen Moore, who became mayor of the town for the next two years. He decided to commemorate his mayoralty by creating an endowment for the re-establishment of the Free School. On 7 May, 1685 the school was reconstituted when Stephen, with the agreement of his father Robert, endowed it with 380 acres of land situated in the townlands of Lissenure and Clonbough near Roscrea. They were conveyed to two trustees, Charles Alcock and Thomas Batty, who were among the most prominent of the town's newly-arrived Cromwellian settlers.



Clonmel Grammar School — reproduced by Kenny Photo Graphics.

The rents from these lands were to be used for the creation and support of a grammar school in which the children of the Protestant freemen of Clonmel would receive a free education. As part of this re-organisation the school moved into a new building on the east side of Mary Street. The site was transferred to Clonmel Corporation by the Duke of Ormond at a nominal rent and was considered a prime location at the time, being "best retired from the noise and throng of the town." The deed of transfer also "empowered James, Duke of Ormonde, Richard and Stephen Moore, or their heirs, and the Mayor of Clonmel, or any two of them to appoint and change the master and masters of the school, as they saw fit and convenient."⁵

In the first 100 years of its existence the only information we have about the school concerns the masters who served in it. The first master of the new school was Andrew Coulter, M.A. who prior to his appointment had been master of the Free School in Waterford. His memory is commemorated on a memorial slab in the main entrance of Old St. Mary's Church.

One of the more interesting personalities to occupy the position of headmaster was the remarkable John Hayman. In 1733 he acted as returning officer in a parliamentary election for the borough. This did not seem to prevent him canvassing for one of the candidates, a certain Guy Moore whose children attended the school. In the proceedings which followed it was alleged that he offered £50, a considerable sum at the time, to be spent in Flahavan's public house on the understanding that Flahavan would vote for Moore. How the affair affected Hayman's fortunes we do not know.

When it came to the appointment of suitable headmasters, privilege and patronage sometimes

prevailed. In 1773 Stephen Moore, Second Viscount Mountcashel and great-grandson of the school's founder, formed a friendship with Richard Carey, then a student in Trinity College, and offered him mastership of the Clonmel school should it become vacant. Three months later the then master Mr. Harwood died and Richard Carey reminded his lordship of his promise. His lordship in reply felt that Mr. Carey was too young and that he must provide for his cousin, the Rev. Mr. Watts.

Carey decided to make the best of it and accepted the post of assistant master "on a salary of £80 per annum, in conjunction with Mr. Watts who was to receive the remainder of the endowment, residing at his benefice in the County of Kilkenny."⁶ Three years later in 1776 Mr. Watts, with the approval of Lord Mountcashel, sold his share of the endowment to Mr. Carey for £720 and on 13 August, 1777 Viscount Mountcashel, together with the Mayor of Clonmel, appointed Mr. Carey sole master of the school.

There was further intrigue involving the lands belonging to the school. In 1788 they were leased by Viscount Mountcashel to a Mr. Collins for three lives or 52 years, whichever should last the longest, at the yearly rent of £200. This rent was very much under their real value, for it appears that five years after the lease was made Mr. Collins let the lands to a Mr. Maher, for the remainder of his term, at £400 per annum.

This irregularity was noted by the Commissioners of Education. They were set up by Grattan's Parliament to enquire into educational endowments. They reported in 1791: "We apprehend there has been a misapplication of this charity, and that it ought to be redressed by bill or information brought by his majesty's Attorney-General for that purpose and we consider the lease to the said Mr. Collins injurious to the charity, and as a breach of trust in the trustees."⁷

No immediate action appears to have been taken, for the matter was to be raised again. Mr. Carey, it would appear, accepted the lease until 1801, in which year the patronage of the school was transferred from the Mountcashel family to John Bagwell. With the approval of his new patron the master took legal action at his own expense to have the lease set aside. The Chancellor ruled that the lease to Edward Collins be confirmed for the residue of his term, an estimated 30 years, and that Mr. Carey receive £400 per annum from the estates of the endowment, though Mr. Carey stated their value to be £700 at the time.⁸

The Twelfth Report of the Commissioners of Education in 1812 indicates that the Clonmel Grammar School had developed on quite different lines from those envisaged by its founders. It said: "With respect to the present state of the School itself, we find that Mr. Carey has not at present any boarders; but he states that at former periods he has often had forty; his number of Scholars, when we examined him, consisted of 21 Day-scholars, most of whom are Roman Catholics. Only one of his boys is a Free Scholar; six of his Pupils are the Sons of Freeman of the Town of Clonmel, and as such are entitled under the original Grant to their Education gratis; but their Parents being Persons in good circumstances do not claim the privilege."

Although the school had been established exclusively for the free education of the sons of Protestant freemen, it is obvious that Catholic pupils were accepted, indicating the emergence of a Catholic middle-class. Although education was free, few availed themselves of the privilege. The parents were obviously people of ample means who wished to make a financial contribution towards the upkeep of the school.

Another development which had taken place, not provided for in the original charter, was the introduction of boarders. This innovation was not without its problems, for in 1814 the headmaster, Richard Carey, felt obliged to inform the Commissioners of Education that he refused to accept boarders "in consequence of finding that boarders at the term, charged 30 guineas per annum, were so expensive as it encroached on my private income; and I did not conceive the endowment compelled me to take boarders."⁹

The Report of 1812 gives a detailed picture of the school at the time. "The terms of Tuition for Day-scholars are four guineas per annum, and one guinea entrance; the course of education is confined to the Classics. No assistants are kept by Mr. Carey, nor is there any provision for Instruction in Writing and Arithmetic, &c. in this Establishment, for it appears, that there is an English and Writing School in the Town of Clonmel, to which Mr. Carey's scholars resort; and he has further stated to us, that there is not much demand for classical instruction in Clonmel, although the town is rich and populous, most of the inhabitants preferring to educate their children for Trade and Business. There do not appear to be any Statutes or Regulations for the Government of this School, nor is there at present any visitor to examine into its management."

In conclusion, the report comments on the state of the school building. "There is not any fund or provision for the repairs of the School (which is a very extensive concern) except what the Master pleases to appropriate out of his annual income for that purpose." George Borrow, the famous linguist and writer, who was a pupil of the school in the following year (1815), was later to give a description of the school's decrepit condition and the ageing schoolmaster, the Rev. Richard Carey in his autobiographical novel *Lavengro*.

"The schoolroom with its long, high, stone-floored hall was dirty and dilapidated. The boys used to crowd on stools and benches round a roaring fire, and the only master at the time, an old clergyman who taught the most elegant Latin, sat at a desk of black Irish oak. Occasionally he would raise his head, mumble out a few instructions about Latin or Greek tastes, and then bend again to his own reading. Nobody paid any attention to him. The boys had their books on their knees, and talked in low voices amongst themselves. They were not construing Latin or Greek. They were telling each other wild stories of adventures or playing cards." Allowing for Borrow's artistic licence, it was hardly an atmosphere conducive to study.

Richard Carey, the subject of Borrow's ridicule, served as headmaster from 1777 to 1821.¹⁰ His name and that of his family will always be associated with one of Clonmel's most popular amenities, Carey's Castle, a Victorian folly in the Canon Wood on the outskirts of town.

When Richard Carey's successor, Dr. Robert Bell D.D., took over in 1822 a converted dwelling-house in Richmond Place became a temporary residence for the school.¹¹ This was situated on the north side of the ruined flour mill in the present Emmet Street. The old building in Mary Street was reopened in 1830 as a Protestant Parochial School and served as such until its closure in 1930. It was demolished in the early 1960s to make way for the forecourt of the new Sisters of Charity primary school.

In 1824 the Commissioners of Education, in whom the endowments and government of the school had been vested since 1814, instructed Dr. Bell to secure estimates from reputable architects with a view to erecting a new school on a site in Irishtown, the ownership of which was transferred to the Commissioners by Colonel William Bagwell at a nominal rent of £1 per annum. The Commissioners granted a loan of £4,000 to be repaid by the master out of the rents of the school estate in annual repayments of £240. The building, which was to be the school's last home, was ready for occupation by 1830.

Under Dr. Bell Clonmel Grammar school entered its most successful phase. By 1828 the curriculum appears to have been broadened somewhat. If the purpose had been to gain more pupils, then it had the desired result. We find a total of 86 boys, most of whom were boarders paying 50 guineas a year, for which they received a classical, commercial and mathematical education with accomplishments. Eight assistants were employed, including four for classics, two for French and Italian, one for science and one for writing. There were also part-time masters for Drawing and Music.

This improvement seems to have been sustained into the following decade. The Select

Committee appointed by the House of Commons in 1837 to enquire into the Schools of Public Foundation in Ireland reported that from 1830 to 1835 a total of 586 boys attended, consisting of 227 boarders at 50 guineas a year, 301 day pupils at 10 guineas a year and 58 free pupils. "The fees for boarders at Clonmel were £50 per annum and this was higher than the fees payable at any of the other nine endowed schools named in the report, including Kilkenny, Midleton and Navan."

The committee drew attention to the fact that in addition to Greek, Latin and English, instruction was also given in Hebrew, French and Italian as extras, and that the textbooks used included those required for the Greek and Latin tests for entrance to T.C.D. The school day at that time would hardly find favour with today's teachers and pupils. It was a demanding one, divided into four sessions: 7 a.m. to 9 a.m.; 10.30 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.; and finally one from 6 p.m. to 8.30 p.m.

The Report of the Commissioners of Education for 1838 recorded payment of the seventh instalment (£240) of the Government loan for the building of the new school, and added that the "school continues in a very flourishing condition". Now in his late sixties, the time had come for Dr. Bell to make way for his successor. He retired in 1841 to take up a clerical appointment offered to him by his friend, the Bishop of Cashel and Emly.

When the school was re-opened in August 1842 it was under the new name of Lissenure House. Under Dr. Bell's successor, the Reverend Thomas Kettlewell, the school was to enter a troubled period in its history.

The reasons for this can partly be explained by the strained relations that developed between Dr. Kettlewell and the Commissioners of Education. Initially, the performance of the school was not affected by this dispute. The Annual Report of the Commissioners for 1844 says: "Amongst classical schools of private foundation, those of Clonmel, Carrickmacross, Ballyroan and Bandon continue to be the most successful." In their report of 1845 they state that "Amongst the schools of private foundation, those of Kilkenny, Carrickmacross, Bandon and Clonmel continue to be the most numerously attended."

Dr. Kettlewell, in accepting the position from his patron, Lord Mountcashel, assumed that he was entitled to the entire rental of the school estate, as his predecessor had been. When he was informed by the Commissioners that his annual rate of remuneration was £200 per annum he challenged them, but received no satisfaction. In March 1849 he published a 64-page pamphlet entitled "Exposure of the Commissioners of Education in Ireland", copies of which were circulated to members of the British Parliament.

This led the Commissioners to visit the school in Clonmel. Their report, dated 14 April 1851, expressed "regret for the manner in which that School had been conducted", but that it did not warrant them "proceeding to deprive the Master of his situation." They felt that the Rev. Kettlewell's pamphlet was "actuated by excited feelings, arising from misconceptions", which "cannot contribute either to raise the character of the School or benefit that of the present Master."

Another factor which affected the fortunes of the Rev. Kettlewell was the dramatic decline in the number of students enrolled during the six-year period 1842-47, when the total almost halved. Anticipating an increase in numbers, he availed himself of credit extended to him by local traders to purchase extra beds and bedding. By the end of 1847 Mr. Kettlewell's financial instability was such that he was obliged to discontinue the reception of boarders and to reduce his teaching staff. In a letter to *The Tipperary Constitution* (Jan. 25 1848) he stated that this course of action was promoted by "the high prices of provisions and the reduction in income so generally prevailing."

The Endowed Schools Commission meeting in Clonmel on 21 August 1855 reported the school

to be in an unsatisfactory position owing to the pecuniary embarrassments of the master, and recommended that steps should be taken for his removal, his imprudence having had the effect of "depriving an important town of an efficient school for some years." No steps were taken to carry out this recommendation, and the master continued in office until his failing health obliged him to close the school in 1873.

His successor, Rev. Abraham S. Hutchinson, M.A., re-opened the school in March 1874 with three or four boys. By the end of the year the numbers had increased to thirty. At a sitting of the Endowed Schools (Ireland) Commissioners in the Grand Jury Room, Clonmel, on 2 October 1879, Mr. Hutchinson stated that there were nine boarders and 25 day boys on the rolls. He had three resident assistant teachers.

The first assistant master taught classics and received £90 a year with board; the second assistant taught physical and practical science and had £80 a year with board; the third assistant master was a German who taught his native language and French, and was in receipt of £40 with board. There were two non-resident masters, one who taught drawing and was also on the staff of the School of Art in the town; the other taught music and was also organist in the local church.

An interesting point was that the fees charged for boarders show a decrease from those charged 40 years previously. Boarders over eleven paid £45 a year, and those under eleven £40. Day boys over eleven paid £10 per annum and those under eleven £8. Hutchinson was in receipt of a salary of £300 a year from the Commissioners of Education as master of the school, and on Sundays he had "duty as a clergyman".

Rev. John Mahaffy, F.T.C.D. who inspected the school in 1881 on behalf of the Endowed Schools Commissioners, submitted a very critical report. With an enrolment of nine boarders, he declared that "As a boarding school it was a failure" and the amenities for same were inadequate, having no bathroom, and "water is only obtained by being pumped up, with a troublesome process." The teaching standards were marked by a "want of soundness and efficiency".

He went on to comment on the salaries of the assistants, which he deemed "inadequate". Concerning the headmastership, he claimed that the clergymen who filled this post did so from the sole motive of improving their income. From his examination of the present incumbent's performance he said "that he could hardly have undertaken school work from a strong desire for this kind of life, or from any zeal or experience of teaching."

Devastated by this criticism, the Rev. Hutchinsinon tendered his resignation the following year and was replaced by the Rev. Mervyn Le Ban Kennedy. At a meeting in Clonmel Courthouse on 26 October 1887 he informed the Endowed Schools (Ireland) Commissioners that the school had 36 boarders and eleven day boys on its rolls. Perhaps the most surprising fact is that the school attracted boarders from a very wide area. They came from counties as far apart as Monaghan, Galway, Mayo, Cork, Kerry and Waterford.

Another observation made at this meeting related to the apathy of the local Protestant community towards the school. In an effort to rectify this a committee, including representatives of the founders and patrons of the school, was set up "for the promulgation of a scheme for the government of the Clonmel Endowed School".¹² The headmaster was opposed to certain provisions in the draft scheme. Consequently he dismissed the boarders in the summer of 1880 and closed the school to the day boys after Christmas.

The scheme was amended in accordance with the wishes of the Commissioners of Education. Accordingly, the schoolhouse and school lands passed from the Commissioners of Education to a body of local governors in 1890, who administered it until its closure in 1922. The governing body consisted of three representatives of the founders of the school, two representatives of

the Diocesan Council of the Protestant Diocese of Waterford and Lismore; two representatives of the Protestant freemen of Clonmel; two Presbyterian representatives; one representative each from the Wesleyan Methodists and Quakers in Clonmel, and five representatives of "Subscribers" who contributed to the financial support of the school.

On 5 July 1894 the school and lands were transferred from the Commissioners of Education to the new Board of Governors. By 1903 the school was in operation again under the headmastership of William J. M'Clelland.¹³ By 1910 he proudly reported that he had succeeded in attracting 13 boarders, in addition to 13 day boys, and that enrolment was increasing.¹⁴

However, political events were soon to cast a shadow. Catering mainly for the sons of British army officers, the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the British withdrawal sounded the death knell. The school building was commandeered by Free State forces on the outbreak of the Civil War. The end of hostilities saw the premises vacated, but it was felt that the decline of the town's Protestant population did not justify its reopening. Today the building is the headquarters of the engineering section of the Tipperary S.R. County Council.

The school, whose students had once swelled the ranks of the civil service, made successful careers in the church, won reputations on battlefields in the service of the British Empire as well as being numbered among the distinguished graduates of Trinity College, had closed its doors for the last time. The boys who trooped down to service in Old St. Mary's in their skull caps, Eton collars, short jackets and striped trousers, and who played hockey and cricket in the present G.A.A. grounds, are now a distant memory.

Footnotes

1. M. MacCurtain: *Tudor and Stuart Ireland* (Dublin, 1972), p. 126.
2. R. C. Simington: *The Civil Survey, 1654-1656, of Co. Tipperary* (Dublin, 1931), Vol. 1, pp. 385-7.
3. Rev. T. Corcoran mentions the existence of a Jesuit school in the town in 1649. See *State Policy in Irish Education* (Dublin, 1916), p. 24.
4. T.C.D. MS. No. 1040 c.1660. (*A list of all the schoolmasters within this nation.*)
5. Twelfth Report of the Commissioners of Education, 1912, p. 279.
6. Memorial presented to the Commissioners of Education in 1814, by Richard Carey.
7. Report of Commissioners appointed in 1778 under the Act of Grattan's Parliament, 28 Geo. III, c.15, to enquire into educational endowments in Ireland (published 1791).
8. Report of Endowed Schools Ireland Commission 1857, Vol. I, p. 44.
9. Submission of Rev. R. Carey to Commissioneres of Education, Monday 21 Feb., 1814.
10. The Free School of Clonmel, by M. Quane, in *Journal of Cork H. & A. Society*, 1964, p. 9.
11. See n7.
12. *Clonmel Chronicle*, Nov. 1887.
13. Quane, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
14. *Ibid.*