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Archbishop John Brennan (1625-1693): his life and work*

By Catherine Breathnach

John Brennan, future bishop of Waterford and Lismore, and archbishop of Cashel, was born in 1625¹ in Kilkenny city of a family who were chieftains of the Ui Duach² region of Co. Kilkenny near Castlecomer since the ninth century. At the time of the Norman invasion, the O'Brenans were dispossessed and driven into the hills of their tribeland; but gradually they won back portion of what they had lost, and all the country round Castlecomer fell again into their hands.³

In the 1400s the O'Brenans became liegemen of the Earls of Ormond for the purpose of mutual protection and security, and with the support of the Butlers retained possession of their ancestral territory. When in the reign of Henry VIII the policy of surrender and regrant was put into execution, it was unnecessary for Henry to deal with the O'Brenans because of their relations with the Butler Earls of Ormond who were unfailingly loyal to the crown.

However, in 1614 the powerful Butlers relegated the O'Brenans to the status of occupiers within their ancestral homeland.⁴ The O'Brenan claim pleaded by solicitors at the court in England persisted without success throughout the 17th century. In 1637 the lands of Idough were purchased by Sir Christopher Wandesforde who, before his death in 1640, executed a trust deed by which the old proprietors would get compensation.

In fact the turmoil of the second half of the century ensured that they never did, and when in 1694 Sir Christopher III inherited the estate, he cleared it of the claims of the O'Brenans by making outlaws of them at his own expense.⁵ No doubt his task was rendered easier by the notoriety lately achieved by the band of Tories known as "The Brennans" who had been operating for about five years in Co. Kilkenny and who had broken into Kilkenny Castle and stolen a box of silver belonging to Captain George Mathew, the Duke's half-brother and agent.

Mathew took the Brenans under his protection and recovered the stolen plate.⁶ By an interesting coincidence his mansion at Rehill near Cahir provided a safe haven in his later years to the archbishop of Cashel, Dr. John Brennan.

Though descended from the old Gaelic family of Idough, John Brennan's family appear to have been living for some time in Kilkenny city. In his oath taken in the Irish College in Rome in 1650 the future archbishop gives Kilkenny as his home.⁷ In another Roman document he stated that he was the son of Hugh Brennan, and the absence of the 'O' from his surname suggests a long residence in Kilkenny city.

Kilkenny was Norman in its origins and dates from the beginning of the 13th century. Its burgesses jealously guarded their privileges. Yet we find William Brennan holding the important office of treasurer of the Liberty of Kilkenny in 1365 and again in 1375.

In 1383-84 a list of 111 freemen of Kilkenny contained four Brenans. In 1417 John Brennan, a merchant, headed the list of names of the "second twelve" on the town council.⁸ It is probable that Bishop Brennan's ancestors, although originally from Idough, had settled in Kilkenny long before he was born.

*Adapted from M.A. thesis, U.C.D., 1992.



Another anglicising influence on the young John would have been his Jesuit education. The members of that society were mostly Old English, and we find them in 1642 teaching grammar in Kilkenny⁹ in the famous school in which Peter White taught in the previous century. The school had five teachers, a large number in those days. The scholars of this school performed a play under the Confederation in 1644 and, contrary to the customary practice, it was performed, not in Latin, but in English.

It is highly likely that John Brenan, who began his theology and philosophy studies at the Jesuit-administered Irish College in Rome in 1647, had been prepared for such studies by the Jesuits in Kilkenny. Lynch writes of Brenan's "having made no mean progress in the humanities in his native land".¹⁰

John Brenan grew up in the exciting days of the Confederation of Kilkenny when Irish and Old English threw in their lot together to secure justice and freedom for Catholics. He would have heard much of the Plunketts — of Dr. Patrick, head of the Cistercians in Ireland, and of his brother the distinguished lawyer Nicholas Plunket, both high in the councils of the Confederation. He would have met Dr. Plunkett's young cousin and pupil Oliver, of Brenan's own age, long before the two set out for Rome. Oliver seems to have been part of the suite of the papal agent Father Peter Francis Scarampi.¹¹

Departure for Rome

In December 1646 Father Scarampi was in Waterford with five young men, waiting for a favourable wind to take them to Rome to study for the priesthood. The five were Oliver Plunkett, John Brenan, Peter Walsh (also of Kilkenny) James Stafford of Wexford and Robert Strange (who died in Rome in 1653). Early in February 1647 after an official farewell by members of the Supreme Council of the Confederation of Kilkenny who marched from the council-chamber in Waterford city to the quayside with them, the party sailed. It would be 25 years before Brenan again saw Waterford, next time as its bishop.

After a hazardous journey in which they escaped pirates and also a chase by an English boat, they finally reached Rome in the month of May 1647. Plunkett, Brenan and Walsh were enrolled as students of the Ludovisian Irish College in Rome. However, as the college supported only about eight students and as there were no vacant places, they had to depend on the kindness of Father Scarampi to pay their fees and maintain them for the first year.¹²

Brenan's career in Rome was outstandingly successful. According to one source he won a doctorate in theology "on merit alone".¹³ The records of the Irish College are equally unstinting in their estimation of his conduct and talents. The students at the Irish College took a missionary oath binding themselves to return to Ireland after they had completed their studies and had been ordained. John Brenan took this oath on 29 June 1650.

He was ordained with Plunkett in the Basilica of St John Lateran on 2 December 1653 by Bishop Anthony Mac Geoghegan of Clonmacnoise. However, the situation in Ireland had altered drastically since their departure in 1647. To return just after the Cromwellian conquest would have ended in imprisonment, transportation or even death. The young priests requested and were granted permission to postpone their return until a future date.

Brenan was to remain in Rome for a further 17 years. He and Plunkett were together a good deal during that time. In one of his letters from Ireland later, Brenan refers to Plunkett as "my old Roman companion".¹⁴

Both priests made good use of the opportunity given them to study in Rome. In their letters,



especially those of Plunkett, we get glimpses of the impressions made by a great cosmopolitan city on the two young Irishmen. Rome was then a great centre of culture, drawing many foreign visitors annually. During the jubilee year of 1650 almost a million pilgrims visited the city.¹⁵

In later years both Brenan and Plunkett in their letters referred to contacts with some of these visitors, which helped to break down English prejudice against Rome and the Catholic faith generally. Propaganda College, recognising the talents of both men, appointed Brenan lecturer in philosophy and Plunkett lecturer in theology there.

Brenan was to spend 14 years teaching. It was said of him that he looked after his students carefully and initiated public literary discussions among them.¹⁶ Vatican officials in the various secretariats availed themselves of the advice of the two Irishmen on Irish affairs during this period.

During this time Brenan kept in close touch with religious affairs in Ireland of the 1660s. He "used his good name . . . to serve the needs of his native land", according to Lynch. Since 1663 the Irish Primate Archbishop O'Reilly had been pleading with the Vatican to send bishops to Ireland. In all these requests he mentioned Brenan. The exiled bishop of Ferns, Nicholas French, nominated Brenan also.

At their meeting in Dublin in June 1670 the Irish bishops unanimously proposed Brenan as worthy of a mitre. The previous July his friend Oliver Plunkett had been appointed to the primatial see of Armagh, and Brenan succeeded him as agent in Rome of the Irish bishops. For the next two years much of Plunkett's correspondence with Rome went through Brenan who had to read it, answer it, make copies and sometimes even decode it.

Around this time Brenan's health seems to have deteriorated, and when in 1669 new episcopal appointments were made, although he was destined for his native diocese of Ossory, a serious illness¹⁷ that lasted for some months prevented him from taking up this appointment. Indeed, he may not have fully recovered until 1671. However, despite the rigours of his later pastoral work in Ireland he seems to have enjoyed good health after that, apart from damage to his eyes in a snowstorm in 1674.

Bishop of Waterford

On 12 May 1671 John Brenan was nominated bishop of Waterford. The appointment was confirmed on 26 May by Pope Clement X, and his consecration took place in the Jesuit oratory in the Quirinal Palace in Rome on 6 September. It was a mark of the esteem in which Dr. Brenan was held that he was consecrated in Rome. He was also presented with a ring and a chalice.

Bishop Brenan was given a document from the Pope¹⁸ allowing the Irish people to eat meat on Wednesdays and eggs on Fridays. Shortly after consecration, Dr. Brenan set out for Ireland. Travelling home *via* Cologne and Brussels, he sailed from Rotterdam and reached London near the end of October. There, armed with letters of introduction given him in Rome, he met the Queen, the Secretary of State (Arlington) and the Duke of Ormond.¹⁹

Reaching Dublin early in November 1671, the new bishop of Waterford was soon to put his diplomatic training to good use. He found the Primate (Archbishop Plunkett) on excellent terms with the new viceroy, Berkeley, and the two prelates visited him in Dublin Castle. Berkeley received him cordially and assured him of protection.

The Primate had secured for Brenan through his cousin Nicholas Plunkett the friendship of the Protestant bishop of Waterford, Dr. Hugh Gore. Travelling south to his diocese, Brenan reached Waterford on 2 December 1671. Although pleased with his reception by both clergy and laity, he was also struck by their poverty. The see had been vacant for 22 years, and he



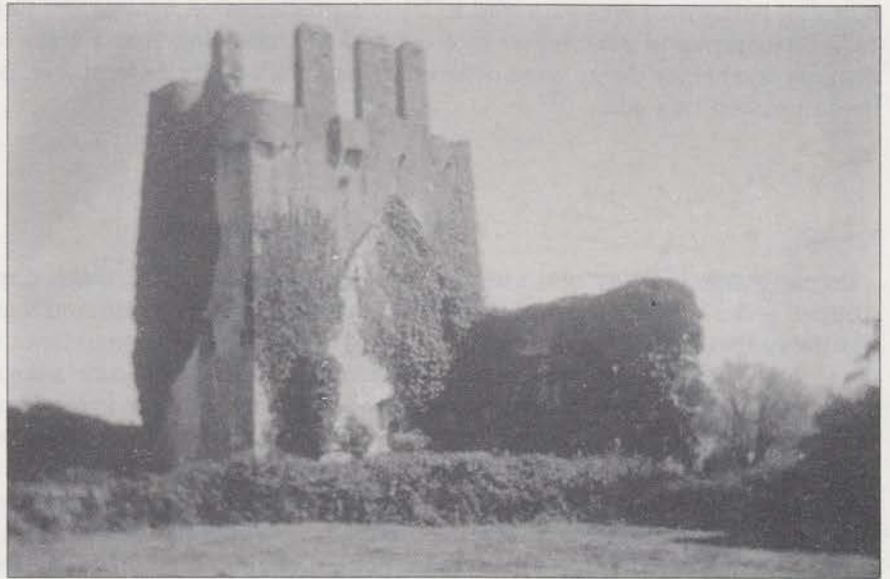
had to borrow some requisites from the religious to carry out his functions. He found that in Waterford city non-Catholics were now as numerous as Catholics; but — initially at any rate — they did not show any discourtesy to him. He accepted an invitation to visit the Protestant bishop, whom he found very civil and polite.

In charge of the diocese of Waterford when Dr. Brenan arrived in 1671 was Dean Robert Power, who for 22 years after Bishop Comerford had been exiled had “sat at the helm of the boat of this church” and “showed himself to be a skilled captain”.²⁰ The new bishop appointed Power as his vicar-general, considering him “a venerable man of great experience in diocesan matters”.

Dean Power, a veteran of the Cromwellian persecution, who “when danger arose, hid himself in secret dens, so that with marvellous cunning he always escaped the ambushes set for him by the enemy”²¹, would pass on some of this acquired wisdom to his new prelate as he showed him round the diocese. He was a relative of the Powers of Curraghmore, who still retained their ancient patrimony and provided badly-needed shelter and support for the clergy.

The Catholic mass-house where Dean Power ministered was near the present Granville Hotel, a disused warehouse with its back against the city wall. According to local tradition Bishop Brenan lodged somewhere in High Street. Waterford city, however, was to prove inhospitable to Brenan within a couple of years of his arrival there. “His city is full of fanatics and mad Presbyterians”, wrote Plunkett in 1673. However, by avoiding political issues the new bishop meanwhile managed not to antagonise the authorities or to draw unwelcome attention to church activities.

*Kilcash Castle,
where Archbishop
Brenan often
received hospitality.
— Photo courtesy
Elizabeth Healy.*



Plunkett, writing to Rome, had the highest praise for him. “To tell the truth, the bishop of Waterford, considering the combination of prudence, gravity, learning . . . he possesses, has no equal in this country.” The authorities at Propaganda Fide also held Brenan in high esteem, and depended on him to give a fair judgement when controversies arose.

The most serious dispute, in which it was hoped he would bring peace, was that between the archbishops of Armagh and Dublin. Each claimed the superiority of his see. This was one of the first commissions given to Brenan and, as his letters about it to Rome show, probably the most difficult.

Perhaps the most sensitive commission given to the new bishop, however, was to investigate his own metropolitan, the archbishop of Cashel William Burgat. He found him in semi-retirement four miles outside Cashel. The two candidly discussed the complaints against Burgat, and Brenan sent a report to Rome.²²

In the summer of 1672 Dr. Brenan contracted an eye ailment that lasted for three months and made it difficult to read or write. He took the occasion to visit his own friends and family in Kilkenny, and also Bishop Phelan of Ossory. Bishop Phelan introduced him to Walter Butler of Garryricken in Co. Kilkenny (who was married to Lady Mary Plunkett, a relative of the Primate) and to Walter's father Sir Richard Butler of Kilcash, both devoted friends of Bishop Phelan during his entire episcopate. It was one of the paradoxes of the Restoration era that Kilcash, a Butler mansion, was a haven for the Catholic clergy, while Sir Richard's brother James was so attached to the established church that Charles II dismissed him as Lord Lieutenant in 1669 when he was negotiating a secret treaty with the Catholic King Louis XIV of France. The Duke returned to favour in 1677, and it was he who gave the order for the arrest in 1679 of Oliver Plunkett.

Bishop Brenan would be grateful for the protection of the Kilcash Butlers in the days ahead. But in 1672 his hopes were still high and his letters to Rome optimistic. ". . . we enjoy great liberty in performing our ecclesiastical functions . . . the new viceroy . . . is supposed to be favourable to the Catholics", he wrote. However, in March 1673 he felt a wind of change blowing "on account of the serious threat of persecution . . . from London".

In June the archbishop of Dublin had to retire to France when the king and his advisers told him that parliament was expected to issue a proclamation against the Catholic clergy. In June 1672 Essex replaced Berkeley as viceroy, and the following year a wave of persecution began. Bishops and senior clergy were ordered to leave Ireland by 1 December; but both Plunkett and Brenan defied this edict.

Hardship in Armagh

Brenan made his way north to join his friend in hiding in Armagh diocese. On the way he stopped at the home of the Earl of Fingall, who was married to Ormond's niece. He was received charitably there and offered asylum in spite of the edicts.²³ Brenan, not wishing to endanger the earl, stayed only one night and speedily joined his friend, in comfortless conditions. Plunkett describes them: ". . . the house where Bishop Brenan and I are is made of straw and is roofed in such a way that from the bed every small shower of rain refreshes us. . ."

Six weeks later, Plunkett wrote again: ". . . my companion and I . . . were obliged to take to the road. Snow . . . was falling, a cutting wind . . . blowing into our faces . . . the eyes both of my companion and myself have been trickling water and . . . I shall lose more than one tooth because they are giving me severe pain. My companion has several ulcers on his arm and can barely use it. . ."

Dr. Brenan added some lines to this letter: ". . . in the company of my old Roman companion we have been together sharing the same fate for the last two months . . . at every moment exposed to . . . spies. . ."²⁴

In May 1674 Plunkett informed Rome that Brenan was ". . . at present on a mountain about twenty-nine miles from Waterford. . ." This was in the eastern Knockmealdowns near the present Mount Melleray some miles outside Clonmel, a desolate uninhabited place at that time.

Plunkett and Brenan suffered extreme hunger and cold while in hiding. In Armagh diocese, Plunkett tells us, "more than 500 Catholics died of hunger, and the bishop of Waterford and



I would greedily gobble down a piece of oaten bread . . . the wealthy do not want them [religious and prelates] in their houses, they are afraid of the penal laws."

"The poor have nothing to give them, such is the shortage; and so great was the death-rate of all sorts of animals, which were the wealth of the poor Irish people, that thousands upon thousands of Catholic families in my province left their homes and have taken to hunting . . . winter . . . was particularly severe with heavy snow and ice — so bad that the farmers could not till the ground. . .²⁵

The second half of the 17th century appears to have had some very severe winters. Ten years later Dr. Brenan described exactly similar weather conditions. In consequence of the risks to which the bishops were exposed, the obligation of *ad limina* visits to Rome to report on their dioceses was dispensed with in 1675 for 25 years and the faculty was granted to them of making this visit through their resident Procurator in the Roman court.

The archbishop of Cashel died on 27 April 1675. A dispute in the metropolitan chapter followed and two vicars were appointed. However, Dr. Brenan settled the dispute and John Saul was appointed vicar-general. In Plunkett's view Brenan would be the ideal choice as archbishop, although not all the hierarchy agreed, some preferring a Munster man.

A petition was received in Rome on behalf of Richard Butler for the Cashel vacancy, signed by many of the Butlers, including the Baron of Cahir and Richard Butler of Kilcash. The Chapter in Cashel, resenting Brenan's recent treatment of them, petitioned Rome for the appointment of Peter Creagh. But by early 1676 Rome had decided on Brenan, who still hesitated for almost a whole year before accepting.

Protected by Butlers

As a bishop had to reside in his diocese, Dr. Brenan was reluctant to leave the security inherent in the hospitality he received in the various Butler houses he was sheltered in. The problem was solved by allowing Brenan to retain his Waterford post, a concession that owed much to Plunkett's influence.

Amongst the noble residences he was fortunate to be able to use were the Powers' at Curraghmore, Sir Richard Butler's at Kilcash, Walter Butler's home at Garryricken and George Mathew's former home at Rehill. The Everards, whose splendid mansion at Burncourt had been destroyed in Cromwell's time, also helped to maintain Brenan.²⁶

From the Registry of Parish Priests and from places mentioned in his reports we know that Dr. Brenan spent most of his later life in south Tipperary near the Waterford diocese. Here, where he was sure of shelter from the Butlers, he felt safe. The survival of Butler land-owning families meant also a continuity of the tenurial class not evident in other estates. Irish remained the spoken language of this area at least until the 19th century.²⁷

As Brenan moved from one retreat to another his whereabouts were difficult to track, and must have been equally so for any spies or pursuers. Extraordinarily active, his presence was felt everywhere throughout his diocese; yet his place of abode could not be found. His new diocese would also provide him with havens of security.

George Mathew's splendid new castle at Thomastown was ever open to Brenan, while during the popish plot George's brother Theobald Mathew provided shelter for Dr. Brenan at Annfield.²⁸ However, in his later life Rehill mansion was the residence most frequented by Dr. Brenan. Most of his ordinations took place here, and it is mentioned in his official correspondence.



The years 1676-7 were busy years for Bishop Brennan. He held a Diocesan Synod in Carrick-on-Suir on 16 May 1676. Then in September Dr. Plunkett spent a month in Munster. The following July another synod was held at Clocully near Ardfinnan, another Butler house. Eustace Comyn and the other informers on his trail later tried to convince the authorities that all this activity had political overtones.

In the Diocesan Archives of Waterford and Lismore there still exists a list of the Decrees enacted by Dr. Brennan at the synods of 1676-7.²⁹ The most important priority for Dr. Brennan was to have a clergy well-trained and of sound moral fibre. To achieve the first he favoured a continental education for the priests of his dioceses, and spent some of his own meagre funds to achieve this. To ensure the high moral standards of his pastors he dwelt at length on this subject in the synods.

The Decrees show detailed guidelines directing the public and private lives of the clergy. Dr. Brennan was a very strict man himself and strict on his priests. The Decrees of the synod of 1676 were comprehensive and must have formed a blueprint for pastoral work for many years. They set controls for the direction of the church through the stormy days ahead when the guiding hand of the bishop would not always be there.

Decree no. 82, the first in the chapter on Images, Relics and Indulgences, is interesting in the light of the revival of interest in recent years in sheela-na-gigs:

If any gross or mutilated images or any that are unpleasant to behold should be discovered in our united dioceses they should on no account be exposed for public veneration but should rather be buried with honour, by the priests in an appropriate place. . .

Monsignor Corish's interpretation of this decree is that the Catholic Counter-Reformation clergy must remove sheela-na-gigs discreetly without making trouble. He points out that the terminology used is very similar to that used by the Irish church on two previous occasions in the 17th century — at the Synod of Tuam 1631 and at the Synod of Ossory 1672 — and that this consistency suggests a formula.³⁰ The Cashel-Waterford-Ossory area has a disproportionately large number of sheela-na-gigs.

The hardships suffered by Irish Catholics especially in the Cromwellian period would have revived many superstitious practices. Dr. Brennan was determined to root out any such aberration and to reform the Irish church along the lines of the Council of Trent. Despite the difficult and dangerous times he lived in, he never lost sight of his goal.

By going about his work with the minimum of fuss, Dr. Brennan managed to elude government attention. He even used the opportunity to take possession of his archdiocese in the interregnum between the passing of one viceroy (Essex) and the return of his successor (Ormond). About



The seal of Archbishop Brennan.
(Copyright — National Museum of Ireland.)

this time also he consecrated Dr. Dooley bishop of Limerick in an unusual ceremony which contrasted sharply with that of his own in Rome. Dooley was formally made a bishop in an old ruined house in a remote spot on the Limerick-Cork border between Drumcolliher and Broadford.

This event did not come to Ormond's ear until four years afterwards, through an informer named French who lived in Drumcolliher. He had stumbled on it from a witness named John Ankettle who was married into the nobility and lived near Broadford. Ankettle was summoned by Ormond to tell him the story; but in his old age Butler had apparently become more benign, and seems to have done nothing more about this act of defiance by Archbishop Brennan.³¹

Although Dr. Brennan did his best to attract as little attention as possible from hostile authorities, when the occasion demanded it he was ready to strike a blow in public in defence of the Catholic faith. Shortly after he became archbishop of Cashel, when he heard that his opposite number of the Protestant faith proposed to preach in Irish in Cashel, he arranged for a special Confirmation ceremony there. Speaking publicly, he forbade attendance at the Protestant ceremony. Not a single Catholic attended!³²

The "Popish Plot"

In February 1678 Archbishop Brennan travelled to Dublin to meet Ormond, who received him kindly but warned him of impending trouble for Catholics. In June he visited Tuam, whose archbishop was in exile, and in October he was back visiting his own province of Munster. He advised caution amid the disturbances that were then brewing. The "disturbances" to which Brennan discreetly refers would be none other than the terrors of the so-called popish plot, which would take the lives of two archbishops and keep a third in exile for another seven years.

This plot made its appearance in 1678 and in a short time roused the English people to a state of frenzy. There followed in Ireland a stream of "narratives" and "informations" consistent with the "discoveries" of Titus Oates. In October the Lord Lieutenant issued a proclamation ordering all Catholic dignitaries "to depart the Kingdom" and forbidding their harbouring by anyone.

Almost immediately, Peter Talbot, the Archbishop of Dublin, though a sick man, was arrested and committed to Dublin Castle, where he died.³³ Archbishops Plunkett and Brennan stayed in their dioceses. The following year in December Plunkett was arrested in north Co. Dublin, where he had gone to attend at the death-bed of his old kinsman and teacher, Dr Patrick Plunkett.³⁴

Brennan, now the only archbishop still free, stood in almost as much danger as the Primate. His movements were watched and reported on by informers. In the summer of 1676 the activities of the Catholic clergy attending their synod and other clerical meetings had been observed and reported on, though little attention had been paid at the time to the informers' tales. In the frenzy of the popish plot, however, they adopt a new significance.

Brennan's vicar-general in the Waterford diocese, Dean Power, was keenly watched. He was a close relative of Richard, Lord Power of Curraghmore, who for Jacobite sympathies and aid was finally taken and lodged in the Tower of London, where he ended his days in October 1690.³⁵ The informer, John MacNamara, who reported on a clerical meeting at Knockhouse near Waterford which Brennan attended, stated that he was told in confession by Dean Power that "great preferments . . . indulgences . . . and pardon for sins" would be given to those "in a capacity to help and assist the holy cause", which was to help the French king to "invade the Kingdom of England and Ireland."³⁶

Eustace Comyn, another miserable wretch who coveted a share of the government money then circulating so freely for information, had encountered Brennan at Carrick-on-Suir. There



according to the spy the archbishop was collecting money for a French invasion.³⁷ Brenan was at a supposedly treasonable meeting with a large number of the clergy at Clodully, where they were again said to be collecting money to introduce a French landing.³⁸

Brenan was said to have been at meetings also in Col. Pierce Lacey's house at Curroe in 1676 and 1679.³⁹ When the Primate Oliver Plunkett arrived in Munster in September 1676 to make a report to Rome on the Cashel archdiocese prior to the appointment of Dr. Brenan as successor to Dr Burgat, the plot thickened, according to the spies. Plunkett was met by Brenan, Dean Power and others. Brenan was seen producing "Bills from the Pope to the said Primate".

That month Brenan narrowly missed arrest. He and the Primate had met some of the clergy at the housae of John Walsh, a lawyer at Ballyneiry in Co. Tipperary. Eustace Comyn, "resolved to discover all their villainy", went to two justices of the peace in Clonmel, Francis Alcock and Robert Low, and in the presence of the Mayor demanded a warrant from them to arrest Plunkett, Brenan and Power. The justices refused to comply until they had first warned the archbishops to flee. Afterwards they gave him the warrant.

Comyn pursued Brenan and Plunkett to Co. Kilkenny "to one Mr. Walter Butler's House, a Nephew of the Duke of Ormond, who meeting with this Informant threatened him at a high rate and asked him how he durst come upon his Land that the said Mr. Butler gave his Pistols to one George Lee with a design to Kill this Informant who narrowly escaped with his Life. . ."⁴⁰

This was all of two years before the appearance of the popish plot. For his pains, Comyn found himself lodged in Trim jail, "where he remained for 3 weeks in a starving condition in Irons until he was removed from thence to Dublin and his Leggs tied under the Horses belly and then was brought before Sir John Davis Secretary of State who at the first sight called this Informant a Rogue" and further imprisoned him for eight months.

Normally, the condition and character of such informers would ensure that they got little hearing. Ormond's estimation of Comyn was that he was "something betwixt a fool and a madman". He had previously referred to "Eustace Comyn's mad narrative".⁴¹ But Ormond had made similar estimates of the informers in Plunkett's case.

It is difficult to understand the frenzy which now took over. Previously discredited witnesses were now wholeheartedly encouraged. John MacMoyer, one of the chief witnesses against Plunkett had in 1676 tracked the Primate to Munster and made a report to Essex.⁴² But Essex took no notice; there was no market then for such stories. Five years later, however, the same evidence was to be used against Plunkett at his trial.

Although Dr. Brenan remained in his diocese during the persecution, he was fully conscious of the danger he lived in and he often felt apprehensive, as we see from the following paragraph (roughly translated) of one of his reports at this time:

"These past years he [the bishop] did not leave his residence despite the fact that he was in great danger, and that he suffered much tribulation and misery during those times when he was hunted by his enemies. But the Lord in His mercy protected him, although he was suspected of being involved in the false plot."⁴³

Brenan fully identified with Plunkett's plight, and was even mentioned at the trial in London. His position as agent in Rome of the Irish clergy was deliberately misconstrued. The sum of £50 decreed by the bishops to be paid to Brenan for his work had been altered in MacMoyer's copy of the 1670 Statutes of the National Council of Bishops to £500, an '0' being inserted with ink of a different colour. This was pointed out by the Primate.⁴⁴

The judges nevertheless accepted the forgery because it fitted their purpose to regard Dr Brenan as the commanding officer in Rome in charge of Catholic military activities. This would be fully in keeping with the outline of the popish plot as designed by Titus Oates.

Record of Plunkett's Execution

When the travesty of a trial ended and Brenan's friend Plunkett was condemned and hanged at Tyburn on 1 July 1681, we can imagine the pain felt by John Brenan. With frenetic energy he set himself the task of collecting and forwarding to Rome the accounts of witnesses to the trial and execution of his friend. For the greater part of the material available on the death of Oliver Plunkett we are indebted to Dr. Brenan. His friend's right forearm was entrusted to John Brenan. After him it passed into the custody of the archbishops of Cashel, and is now preserved in the Dominican Convent, Cabra, Dublin.⁴⁵

In 1681 Brenan was the only Catholic archbishop in the country. According to his report to Rome that year, the bishop of Limerick was the only one who was tolerated by the authorities on account of his age.⁴⁶ In his usual cautious style he referred to his own low profile at that time:

"Nothing is known about the metropolitan of this province, and should he be taken, woe to him. Some say he has left the kingdom, some say no; but wherever he is he does not allow himself to be known . . . we now live in such a conjuncture that each one fears his own shadow. . ."

The archbishop appeared more zealous than ever to keep intact the organisation of the church, so carefully built up in the past decade. Even when in hiding he did what he could, keeping in touch by letter with his clergy and laity. It was impossible to hold any meeting of the clergy or perform visitation of any kind, but when the wave of persecution began to ebb, he made a private visitation of his diocese.

As the Irish church was now without a primate, Brenan's view was sought by Rome about a successor to Plunkett. He recommended Edward Dromgoole for Armagh and Patrick Russell for Dublin. The latter was appointed, but Dominick Maguire got the primacy, arriving in Waterford in March 1684, where Brenan met him.⁴⁷ Maguire's over-confidence and too-public appearances worried Brenan.

The year 1685 renewed the hopes of Irish Catholics with the accession of James II. In June of that year Dr. Brenan was able to return to his residence — presumably Rehill where many of his ordinations took place from 1685 on.⁴⁸ He still exercised caution. Although the Catholic king was to change things for the better, this improvement only lasted a few years. During that period Brenan was very active: he held two diocesan synods and a provincial one, and administered confirmation publicly. Brenan and Primate Maguire paid their respects in Dublin to the new viceroy Clarendon, whom Brenan also met again in Limerick.⁴⁹

In Kilcash, where he spent the autumn of 1687, Brenan compiled two long reports⁵⁰ on his dioceses. From his report on Cashel we find that the Cathedral, "perched on a hill", was a ruin even then, except for one chapel where in summer the Protestant bishop officiated. The town of Cashel seemed to be bustling with Catholic religious. The cathedral in Lismore had been restored by the Protestant bishop.

With the deposition of James II by William of Orange, the good times for Irish Catholics came to an end. Brenan, however, was little involved in politics, his chief interest remaining his diocesan work. From Kerry he wrote to Rome in February 1691, concerned over the new Datary (for the appointment of bishops) which James II had set up in Dublin, to which Brenan was totally opposed. He was ever vigilant against the erosion of papal power by the monarch.

The next heard of the archbishop of Cashel was on 25 September 1691 during the course of the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Limerick.⁵¹ The draftsman of that treaty on the Irish side was Sir Toby Butler, then resident at Knockgraffon, a close friend of the Rehill Butlers, whose widow spent the last years of her life with her daughter at Rehill.⁵²



It seems likely that Brenan's advice was sought by Sir Toby on the drafting of the first article of the Treaty. By this article, Catholics were to have the same privileges in the exercise of their religion which they had in Charles II's reign, or privileges consistent with the laws of Ireland. This article was not interpreted generously by the Irish Parliament. But by that time Dr. Brenan was in his grave.

His last two letters were sent from Rehill in September 1692. His last gave a grim picture of the end of the century.⁵³ Most of the bishops had fled; they were in St Germain's in attendance on James II.⁵⁴ Since their departure three bishops had died; only Brenan and his friend Dr. Phelan of Ossory remained in Ireland. The bishop of Ossory was reported to be hiding in huts, caves, woods and mountains.

A nephew of the bishop of Dublin, writing to Rome on 10 November 1692, stated that Brenan, despite rumours of his death, was still alive and in good health.⁵⁵ However, on 29 January 1694 a vicar capitular for Waterford was appointed. So between those two dates, probably early in 1693, John Brenan died.

There is only one contemporary record of Brenan's burial place, a few miles from Rehill. In a manuscript copy of Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* made by the scribe Tadhg Ó Neachtáin, son of the Connaught poet Sean, a note in the scribe's hand states that the former archbishop of Cashel (naming Brenan) was buried in the tomb of Dr Keating in the church of Tubrid in Co. Tipperary.⁵⁶

This little ruined church is a reliquary of two giants of the 17th century, each working on a cause teetering on extinction — the preservation of the Irish language and that of the Catholic faith.

Footnotes

1. Millett ed: *Coll Hib.* 6 and 7, pp 115, 219. See also CATHALDUS GIBLIN ed., 'Processus Datariae' in *Father Luke Wadding*.
2. Lynch: *Dr Praesulibus*, Vol II, p. 118. Excerpts quoted here trans. by an tAthair Pádraig Ó Nualláin.
3. Rev. W. Carrigan: *History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory*, Vol. II (Dublin 1905), p. 157.
4. James Graves: 'Ancient Tribes and Territories of Ossory', in J.K.A.S. (1849-51), pp 239-240.
5. John P. Prendergast: *Ireland from the Restoration to the Revolution* (London 1887), p. 130.
6. Col. MSS. Marquis of Ormonde Vol. 7, pp 155, 157, 377, 410.
7. Rev. John Hanly: *Records of the Irish College Rome*, in Arch. Hib. 27, p. 70.
8. *Liber Primus Kilkenniensis*, ed. and trans. Prof. J. Otway Ruthven (Kilkenny, 1961), p. 20.
9. Rev. T. Corcoran: *State Policy in Irish Education 1536-1816* (Dublin 1916), p. 21.
10. Lynch: *De Praesulibus II*, p. 118.
11. R. Dudley Edwards in *Blessed O. Plunkett; His place in History*, in B.O.P. Historical Studies, p. 14.
12. Hanly: *Letters*, p. 1.
13. Lynch: *De Praesulibus II*, p. 119.
14. Moran: *Memoir*, p. 276.
15. Tomás Ó Fiaich: *Oliver Plunkett* (Indiana, 1975), p. 13.
16. Lynch, p. 119.
17. *Scrittura*, Vol. V, Fol. 236, (1685) (in A.P.F.).
18. *Lettere*, Vol. 54, Fol. 373, 24 Oct. 1671. See also Lynch, p. 120.
19. *Lettere*, Vol. 54, Fol. 143, 9 Dec. 1671.
20. Lynch, p. 121.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Millett: 'Rival Vicars in Limerick 1654-1671', in *North Munster Studies* ed. Etienne Rynne (Limerick, 1967), pp 302-3.
23. Millett: *Coll. Hib.* (22 and 23), p. 71.
24. Hanly: *Letters*, p. 389.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
26. Richard H. A. J. Everard: *The Family of Everard Part II*, in *The Irish Genealogist* 1989, Vol. 7, no. 4, p. 523.
27. Daithí Ó hOgáin eag. *Duanaire Thiobrad Árann* (Dublin, 1981), pp 9-12.
28. Rev. W. Bourke: *Irish Priests in the Penal Times* (Waterford 1914), pp 94, 348.
29. Moran: *Spic. Oss.* ii, pp 226-245. I am indebted to Mary Brennan, former sec. of Classics Dept. U.C.D., for her translation of decrees.
30. Mons. Patrick J. Corish: Letter to author, 22 Jan. 1992.
31. Cal. Mss M. of Orm., Vol. 6, 1681 (no date), pp 126-8.



32. Power: p. 61. See also Sir James Ware: *Whole Works Concerning Ireland* (Dublin 1789) ed. Walter Harris, Vol. 1, pp 486-487.
33. Cal. Mss M. of Orm, Vol. 5, p. 24.
34. Hanly: Letters, p. 533.
35. Mss of House of Lords 1678-1688, no. 317, 9 Nov. 1680, pp 218-220, in Hist. Mss Comm. 11th Report, Appendix II.
36. Informations of John MacNamara etc., 6 Jan. 1680, Lecky A. 3. 8. T.C.D.
37. Examination of Eustace Comyn in Cal. State Papers Dom. P.R.O. London (London 1915), p. 254. 28 Sept. 1679.
38. Information of Eustace Comyn . . . to House of Commons 15 Nov 1680 (London 1680) N.L.I. MS —.
39. Information of Maurice Fitzgerald Gent, 11 Dec. 1680 in Lecky A. 3. 8. (T.C.D.); also Thorpe, p. 11 (N.L.I.).
40. See n. 38.
41. Ormond to Arran 31 March 1681, and 29 Dec. 1680, in Cal. Mss of M. of Orm., Vol. V, pp 23, 540.
42. Examination of John Moyre, 27 Dec. 1676, in Burke, op. cit., p. 49.
43. Scrittura 4 Oct. 1683, Col. IV, Fol. 632.
44. Alice Curtayne: *Trial of Oliver Plunkett* (Dublin 1953), pp 149-157. See also Hanly: Letters, p. 574.
45. Father Christopher O'Dwyer: 'Dr John Brennan' in *Clonmel Nationalist* 1975; also Sr. Terence O'Keefe, *Cabra*.
46. Moran: *Memoirs*, pp 435-6.
47. Power: op. cit., pp 76-7.
48. Walsh ed: *Registry of Irish Parish Priests Anno 1704*.
49. S. W. Singer ed: *Clarendon Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 395; Vol. II, p. 6.
50. Report on Cashel, 6 Nov. 1677 in Scrittura, Vol. V, Fol. 336; also in Power, op. cit., pp 84-88; Waterford Report 9 Nov. 1677, in Waterford Jn. Vol. 13, also in Power; op. cit., pp 90-95.
51. John T. Gilbert ed: '*A Jacobite Narrative . . .*' (Dublin 1892, reprint Shannonn 1971), pp 167-8. See also Walter Harris: *William Henry, Prince of Nassau and Orange* (Dublin 1749), p. 34.
52. Toby Butler: 'Sir Toby Butler', in *Butler Soc. Jn. Vol. 5-6* (1973-6).
53. Power: op. cit., p. 100.
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55. Scrittura, V Fol. 452.
56. Ms G. 192 in N.L.I., p. xxiii.

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