

*The Dean of Cashel and the 1918 general election**

By Fr. Patrick Gaynor

I used to attend meetings of the Supreme Executive [of Sinn Féin] in Dublin as often as I could at the approach of the [1918] general election. Reports from the constituencies showed that we had a good chance of winning two-thirds of the Nationalist seats. At one meeting I was asked to state which of three rival claimants would stand the best chance of election in West Clare – Brian O'Higgins, then principal of the Gaelic College in Carrigaholt, Paddy Brennan of Meelick, famous as a Volunteer in East Clare and Seán Ó Muirthuile, who had been Gaelic League organiser in West Clare for a time.

I had no hesitation in turning down Ó Muirthuile. His intrusion was unwarranted and smacked of intrigue; besides, he had antagonised many people in West Clare, including some of the clergy, by his gruff manner. I could not easily decide, having no personal preference, between Brian O'Higgins and Paddy Brennan.

In the end I had to give my candid opinion that Brian O'Higgins would be the more popular choice. He was well liked in West Clare for his charm of manner and his sincerity, and on that account – if I remember rightly – had received most votes at the local convention. Events showed that almost any Sinn Féin candidate would have been elected in West Clare, but I could not foresee events and I was afraid that many of the older voters would hesitate to support Paddy Brennan, who was regarded as a firebrand at the time.

Brian O'Higgins on the other hand was regarded as moderate and level-headed; he was styled "the gentle poet" of the Sinn Féin movement. I ought to have known that a poet can prove more extreme than a fighting man (who learns sense by meeting hard knocks). But even if I had the gift of prophecy, I would have felt obliged to respect the decision of the West Clare convention. I was – and still am – opposed to centralising all authority in Dublin and, in particular, I disliked anything in the nature of intrigue.

I missed a subsequent meeting of the Supreme Executive at which there was a barefaced intrigue. The convention in Louth had chosen a very strong local candidate, Mr. Coburn. He was a great businessman and was prominent all along in the Sinn Féin organisation. Perversely, the Sinn Féin Executive turned down Coburn and imposed J. J. O'Kelly (*Sceilg*) as Sinn Féin candidate on the people of Louth, at risk of losing the seat.

I heard at the next meeting that Fr. [Michael] O'Flanagan and some ladies on the Executive were responsible for this shameful decision, in order to find a seat for their friend. It was too late then to take any action or even to make a verbal protest; but I felt utter disgust on hearing that already we had a "monstrous regiment of women" high in our ranks, who did not hesitate to pull wires for personal ends.

Certainly, if I had any say in the affairs of Louth, I would have taught the Supreme Executive to respect local rights. We were lucky that O'Kelly, through the loyalty of our supporters, won the seat by a narrow margin. Again I lost some of my trust in Fr. O'Flanagan's judgement.

*This is a further chapter from unfinished and hitherto unpublished memoirs by a Nenagh priest who was a prominent figure in Sinn Féin from 1917 to 1922, and is published by permission of his nephew, Mr. Eamonn Gaynor. See *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1997, pp. 60-64. – Editor, THJ.

I lost some of my respect for Mr. O'Kelly. He should not have been a party to the intrigue. But at that stage we had plenty of patriots in our ranks who did not lose sight of their own interests or – perhaps — who imagined that their guidance was necessary for the nation. In my view, we needed practical men like Mr. Coburn, rather than abstract theorists, to help in the task of making Dail Eireann function as the lawful government of Ireland.

The only point of real importance which arose at the election concerned eight seats in Ulster, where nationalists had a majority, but where a three-cornered contest between an Irish Party candidate, a Sinn Féin candidate and a Unionist candidate might easily result in a victory for the Unionist. Our friends in the North, especially the bishops of Clogher and Derry, and many Sinn Féin priests and leaders were insistent that we should make a deal with John Dillon, to save those eight seats.

Eoin MacNeill was deputed to negotiate with Dillon, all our prominent leaders, except the elusive Michael Collins, being in jail. Lorcan Sherlock, Lord Mayor of Dublin acted – I think – as intermediary. He played a worthy part at the time, even though he remained neutral on the political issue because of his position.

At first Dillon offered to divide the nationalist seats in all Ireland equally with Sinn Féin; the proposal would have enabled him to retain seats (and salaries of £400 a year) for his favourites in the Party. Then he made a similar offer in reference to the seats in the Ulster counties. MacNeill told him that Sinn Féin would make no compromise outside the eight seats in which there was danger of a Unionist victory; and of these we wanted the four seats in which our organisation was so strong that we could probably have won them in any event. Dillon, I think, wanted to save the seat in South Down (a Sinn Féin stronghold) for Jerry McVeigh and would not come to terms on those lines.

I travelled from Clare to the next meeting of the Supreme Executive, having heard that the proposed compromise with Dillon would be under review. I saw no great distinction between the Dillonites and the Unionists. I thought that our first need was to sweep Dillon's faction out of public life. Loss of two or three seats to the Unionists at this election seemed of no great consequence; with Dillon's party broken we should have almost full Catholic support to win them back at the next election.

Collins's Playacting

But I did not reckon with the intensity of Catholic feeling in the North on this issue, or on the need to ensure that our case against partition should not be weakened by letting the Unionists win some of those eight seats. As well, the Supreme Executive would have alienated many Catholics in other constituencies (who might have been disposed to support Sinn Féin) if we refused to accept a fair compromise, so far as we could do so without sacrifice of principle.

Eoin MacNeill and George Murnaghan, who were best entitled to speak for the Northern Catholics, stated the case as clearly and so forcibly that I decided to set aside my personal feelings and to vote for the compromise which they advocated, namely, that we should withdraw our candidates in the four constituencies where we had less strength, and should instruct our supporters to vote for Dillon's nominees, provided (a) that those nominees, instead of standing for Home Rule, stood for Ireland's right to self-determination (which actually was the Sinn Féin position as stated by De Valera at the Ard Fheis in 1917), and (b) that Dillon agree to withdraw his candidates in the other four constituencies and to instruct his voters there to support the Sinn Féin candidates. We named the four constituencies which we wished to retain, because we were sure of victory in them, even if some of the Hibernians abstained from voting.

Only seven members of the Executive were present, Fr. O'Flanagan being absent, and the other members being in jail on charge of having been implicated in the bogus German Plot. Those present were Eoin MacNeill (one of the Vice-Presidents), George Murnaghan, Michael Collins, Mrs. Wyse Power, Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington (I think), Pierce Beaslaí and myself.

We all voted for MacNeill's proposal, except Michael Collins, who hesitated and delayed until he saw that we others had raised our hands in favour of the motion; then he raised his hand in a minority of one against the proposal; but if there had been need, Michael – who was no fool, though he might indulge in a piece of childish playacting – would have voted for the compromise; he easily consented to give effect by going North as our representative to conclude negotiations with Dillon's Party.

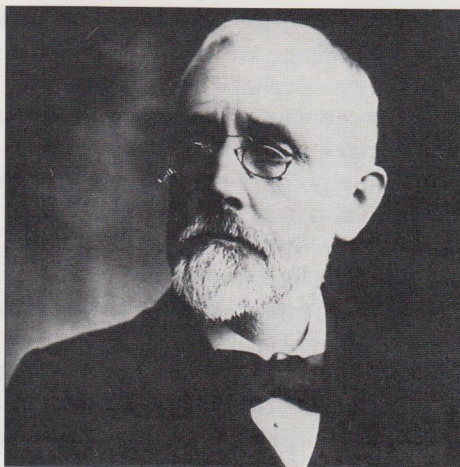
He could say afterwards that the weak men on the Supreme Executive had agreed to the proposal, while he – the man of principle – had been in opposition. Probably Michael's flair for little tricks of this kind and his skill in stealing the limelight, explain why he incurred Cathal Brugha's bitter enmity.

Pierce Beaslaí, dealing with this episode in the *Life of Michael Collins* (Vol. I, p. 248), represents quite falsely that Eoin MacNeill alone was responsible for the compromise with Dillon. I could testify, on oath if necessary, that Eoin MacNeill had full authority from the Supreme Executive to proceed with the negotiations assisted by Michael Collins, and also that Pierce Beaslaí himself voted in favour of the proposal.

I trust to memory of course, but I had special reasons for remembrance. I had less liking for the deal, and less trust in Dillon, than any other member had, so much so that I placed a resolution on the agenda at the next Ard Fheis – the secret midnight Ard Fheis which was held in John O'Mahony's hotel – requesting the delegates to decide on our policy for the future, in reference to the eight northern seats. I denounced the compromise with Dillon in rather fierce terms and pointed out that it had led to betrayal by the Hibernians – as we might have expected – which gave the seat in East Down to the Unionists. (I shall explain the betrayal in a moment.)

Instantly Michael Collins was on his feet to protest that "the compromise was an honourable agreement, honourably entered into and honourably kept, on our side". I liked and admired Michael and made allowance for his boyish capers because he had virtually carried the whole Sinn Féin movement and the Volunteers on his broad shoulders in those years. Therefore I hit back with the obvious retort: "if it were an honourable agreement, why did you vote against it at the meeting of the Supreme Executive Council".

I did not wish to embarrass Michael by scoring a mere debating point, but I did wish that responsibility should not rest on myself or on the Supreme Executive to decide the question of the eight Northern seats at the next election. Actually the question never arose again. Lloyd George introduced Proportional Representation for Ireland, under the "Home Rule Bill" of 1920, in a vain hope that the new system might benefit Dillon's remnant of a Party. We had not departed from Sinn Féin principles, since Dillon's candidates in the four constituencies would



John Dillon, leader of the Irish Party – a photo take in 1914.

stand for Ireland's right to self-determination. Our fault lay in making a deal with men whom we could not trust.

Dillon evaded accepting the compromise before nomination day, with the result that we were forced to nominate Sinn Féin candidates in all eight constituencies, and Dillonites were likewise nominated for those seats. Catholic pressure in the North was so strong that Dillon had to accept the Sinn Féin offer, but being chiefly concerned to save seats and salaries for his special friends, he would not agree to leave us the four seats in which we had a strong organisation.

Cardinal Logue's Role

Finally, and most unfortunately, Cardinal Logue was asked to make the division; the blame rests upon him for the consequences. It would have been as well if Dillon were allowed to make his own choice in the first instance. We wanted South Down, where we were strong, not East Down, where the Hibernians were overwhelmingly strong. But the Cardinal, like John Dillon, thought only of saving a seat for Jerry McVeigh, member for South Down; he threw the luckless member for East Down into the discard and allotted the seat to Sinn Féin.

The position then was that the names of the Sinn Féin candidates and Dillonite candidates would appear on the ballot-papers and a man was free to vote for either candidate. Instructions were issued to all nationalists to vote for the Sinn Féin candidates in the four seats which Cardinal Logue had allotted to us, and Sinn Feiners had orders to vote for Dillon's nominees in the other four seats. The Sinn Feiners obeyed orders and Dillon's nominees were duly elected.

The people generally obeyed orders in three of our allotted constituencies, but in East Down the Hibernians played false and voted – as they could do – for their own nominee, whose name, as I have said, appeared on the ballot-papers. Probably they thought that they could steal a march and win the seat; instead, they gave victory to the Unionists. I do not blame the ignorant and selfish Hibernians; I blame Cardinal Logue and Dillon, and Joe Devlin who gave them an opportunity for treachery.

Cardinal Logue allotted East Tyrone, East Donegal, South Armagh, and South Down to Dillon, leaving Derry City, West Tyrone, South Fermanagh and East Down to Sinn Féin. MacNeill and Collins could not well have refused to let Cardinal Logue act as mediator, even though they knew that he was bitterly hostile to Sinn Féin and would take his cue from Dillon and Devlin.

I can say, with perfect truth, that had I been in MacNeill's and Collins's shoes, I would have fought the eight seats, rather than accept the Cardinal's mediation; he had no sense of principle outside Church affairs – nor even there if he could plant a Northerner in some coveted position. Neither had he any scruple about trailing his scarlet robes in the mud, pulling wires and canvassing after the manner of a Poor Law Guardian.

It was common knowledge that he canvassed fiercely to procure the matronship of a Dublin hostel for some Northern lady. He is said to have been very amiable and kind to his priests, and he was certainly very shrewd and competent as a Churchman, but he was extremely narrow and provincial in outlook. It was a further count against him that he had advocated recruiting for the British Army when he might well have kept silent. I gave him due respect as head of the Irish Church, but that was the limit of my respect.

In North Tipperary, Joseph MacDonough (brother of Thomas MacDonough, executed after 1916, but not of Thomas's stature), was chosen as the Sinn Féin candidate. I staged some 30 meetings in "North Tipp" on the first Sunday of the campaign, sending Fr. Harry Spain to

Kilcommon (where the pastor had refused to let me speak, not that I could have gone: I asked permission only as a test and for fun), and sending young men from Nenagh – Patrick Ryan and others – who had never made a speech, to discourse on Sinn Féin after Mass at chapels out the country, to practise oratory and to help Sinn Féin.

Dr. Codd, Bishop of Ferns, made some pronouncement against us: “but what else could you expect”, said Dermot Gleeson [later District Justice and historian] at a meeting in Lorrha, I think, “from a man with such a queer name!”. At this instant display of strength and organisation (though it was more apparent than real at the time), Dr. Esmonde, who had genuine nationalist convictions and sympathies, retired from the contest and gave Joseph MacDonough a walkover in “North Tipp”. In other places too, the Sinn Féin candidates were elected without challenge.

I heaved a sigh of relief at our easy victory, and as there was no need for activity in Clare (whither, as Diocesan Inspector, I could have gone to achieve some limelight during the campaign), I settled down happily to have a rest in Tyone. To my surprise and not greatly to my liking, Sean Morrissey and another man from Clonmel arrived in Tyone one morning with a tale of woe. One of our local organisers in Clonmel had a leaflet printed on which there was a quotation from James Connolly’s writings, which might, but for a qualifying clause, be given a socialistic meaning.

Dean Innocent Ryan of Cashel seized on the leaflet and without scruple misquoted James Connolly’s words by omitting the qualifying clause, in order to proclaim that Sinn Féin was a socialistic movement. The Dean knew right well that the leaflet had been printed locally and was of little consequence, that there was no tinge of socialism in the official proclamation which had been issued by the Supreme Executive; that the organisation had the support openly of the bishops of Killaloe, Clogher and Derry and of other distinguished prelates.

His venomous speech in Clonmel (outside his Diocese) was simply a cheap election trick. Worse still, in falsely accusing Sinn Féin of being socialistic, he directly attacked his own parishioner, Pierce McCan – one of the finest Catholics I ever knew and one of the noblest characters. He went so far as to proclaim that a vote for Pierce would be a vote for anti-Christ! In plain terms Dean Ryan showed himself to be a very clever political opportunist; he claimed, brazenly, to speak as a priest and spoke in deceit. The Dean, a very able theologian, did not omit the vital clause by accident or in ignorance; he wished to better his case. He engaged in a long controversy in the daily papers with Alfred O’Rahilly [later President of U.C.C.]; luckily for him, Alfred did not advert to his having unscrupulously omitted part of the text in citing James Connolly’s words.

The people of Clonmel and of East Tipperary knew well that the Dean’s impetuosity had betrayed him into many a blunder. He made another blunder soon afterwards, when he took Jimmy Walsh, the impostor of Templemore, into his house and proclaimed belief in the “miracle”.

Probably Dean Ryan’s vicious attack did no harm to Pierce McCan in East Tipperary, where he was so well known. But the Sinn Féin leaders in Clonmel thought that the Dean’s bogey of socialism might frighten pious Catholics: so they sent Sean Morrissey, who was chairman of the local executive, and another delegate (whose name I forget) to Dublin and asked, at No. 6 Harcourt Street [Sinn Féin headquarters], that Fr. O’Flanagan be sent to speak in Clonmel.

Harry Boland is likely to have been in charge, and Harry and I were good friends. In any event, the Clonmel delegates were told that Fr. O’Flanagan could not spare time and were advised to see me, the only other priest on the Supreme Executive. So, in their anxiety, they travelled down to Nenagh and arrived in Tyone. I was in a dilemma. I disliked intruding into

Waterford diocese, fearing lest the reaction amongst the clergy would be unfavourable. On the other hand, because of my official position I could not let down the organisation.

I told Sean Morrissey and his friend that I would not incur suspension for making a speech. Instead of doing good by such folly, I would do harm and would embarrass my own Bishop (Dr. Fogarty), who was staunchly on our side. Sean assured me that the priests of Clonmel, while taking no part publicly, were sympathetic; that the pastor would allow me to speak at the meeting. That assurance left me without excuse. I could no longer shirk going to Clonmel.

On arrival, I called upon the parish priest and was kindly received, though he must have thought me a fool, and I was given permission to speak at meetings in Clonmel parish. For his sake, and for policy's sake, I tried to deal gently with Dean Ryan. I remember only the trend of the speech, which was published at length in the local paper. I explained that Dean Ryan, in order to make his case, had cut out a clause which left James Connolly's words open to interpretation as being out of harmony with Catholic doctrine; that Sinn Féin had the support of many Irish bishops and that its policy was set forth in our official proclamation; that we had only one end in view, namely, to achieve the freedom of Ireland.

I dismissed the Dean's claim that a vote for Pierce McCan would be a "vote for anti-Christ" by reminding the people that John Mitchel, when he contested Tipperary, had likewise been denounced by a parish priest in Nenagh as anti-Christ! I went on to explain our policy – that we had done with the British Parliament and asked to have done with the British Empire.

We held a second meeting on nomination day, when there was a fair in Clonmel. Fr. Burbage from Kildare diocese was the principal speaker: he was a very able priest and most sincere. He gave the people a sound discourse on the philosophy of Sinn Féin, speaking for nearly an hour, but there were no interruptions. The people in and around Clonmel make the nicest audience in Ireland: even on this fair-day, when they were tired, one might have been speaking in a church. I had compassion on them and made the briefest speech of my career.

I had arranged that a telegram would be sent to me from Nenagh, announcing the unopposed return of Joseph MacDonough in North Tipperary. We missed no points in those days! I simply announced that I had received the telegram and read it to the people and added that the first Sinn Féin victory in the county would be repeated on the day of the poll in East Tipperary and in South Tipperary. I think that the people were disappointed when I said "there is no longer need for speeches" and sat down.

I addressed a meeting of the leaders in Clonmel in the Town Hall and canvassed the voters of the town, always meeting with courtesy. I made an incursion by request to Kilmacthomas in Waterford, where I met Cathal Brugha in the local hall. I also made a speech, by permission, in Tipperary town and another in Fethard, in support of P.J. Moloney [elected Sinn Féin T.D.].

I liked Cathal immensely, and I think the liking was mutual, even though he and I might not agree on details of policy. He was straight and sincere, both as an Irishman and as a Catholic, but his grim determination did not allow him to take account of obstacles. He saw the goal of an Irish Republic and only death could stop him [as it did in the subsequent Civil War].

Confronting Dean Ryan!

The leaders in Clonmel, Sean Morrissey, John O'Gorman, Matt Feehan and another very earnest worker (whose name I forget) had to call on Dean Ryan for permission for priests to attend our meeting in Cashel. I went with them for the interview, lest the Dean might try to frighten them with his socialistic bogey. I felt no awe of Dean Ryan; his brother Joe in Galbally was married to my cousin and friend, Mary McCormack of Ballyvalode.

A Cashel Sinn Feiner, who had a slight tremor in his hands, joined the party. Sean Morrissey explained the purpose of our visit and at once, the Dean held forth on the offending leaflet. When he had paused for breath I said: "Dean, you may terrorise Catholic laymen, but you will not terrorise me: why did you not quote the exact words of the leaflet? Why did you omit a vital clause?" He side-stepped those questions and protested against being accused of terrorism.

"Look at your own parishioner", I retorted, "see how he trembles in your presence!" One of the Clonmel men – an honest man evidently – was saved by a kick in the shin from blurting out that the Cashel man's tremor was natural, which I did not know until we were on our way home. The Dean insisted that the leaflet should be withdrawn publicly, but I would not let down the man who had printed it in good faith. "How can you expect us to accept your verdict", I asked, "when you did not quote the words exactly? In my opinion the statement, rightly understood, is in harmony with Catholic doctrine".

The Dean was in such a state of perspiration that one of his few remaining curls went limp, and to Sean Morrissey's amusement fell down over his eye! In the end he gave permission to invite priests to the Cashel meeting. For fun, I asked if he would let me speak at the meeting. To my surprise, he gave consent and to my relief, he withdrew consent by letter next day, unless I would "denounce the leaflet publicly from the platform". I kept a copy of my reply to his letter, lest anyone might say I made up the whole story.

The Dean could have let his consent stand with safety; I would not have intruded into his parish on any account. Besides, I attached very little importance to making speeches at that stage: we needed rather to concentrate on canvassing and on organisation. I doubt if I influenced many votes by my incursion into East Tipperary, but I did give the local leaders help and encouragement. They were so grateful that they insisted on my return to Clonmel a few months afterwards on my accepting a present of a gold watch (worth at least £30). The Sinn Feiners in Kilmacthomas, where I had merely made a speech, gave me an address and a gold chain and seal to match the watch.

Fr. [later Canon] William Burke, a priest of Waterford diocese and a chaplain in the British Army during the World War, assailed me in a letter to *The Freeman's Journal* and suggested that I was "a suspended priest". Fr. Burke was so "superior" that he would not use the letters "C.C." after his name. I could have taken a libel action against him and against the *Freeman* in the British courts with permission from [Sinn Féin] headquarters, but it did not seem worthwhile.

Fr. Burke was somewhat eccentric. I think that he was the Fr. William Burke who wrote *Priests of the Penal Days*. Instead of citing documents such as the sheriff's lists in full, he omitted details which would be of great interest to students of local history.

Dr. Fogarty [Bishop of Killaloe] told me long afterwards with a little smile that Dean Ryan had reported me to him for my speech in Clonmel. The Bishop added: "Of course, if I had known, I would not have let you go down to Clonmel". He was very tolerant of our escapades in Sinn Féin days. But he would not have needed to make me stay at home if I could, by any means, have shirked my incursion into Waterford diocese.

I say nothing about the [general election] victory which swept Dillon's party out of the political arena and gave us a mandate to adopt Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin policy, with the advantage that we now had an army of Volunteers to challenge the British army of occupation and to uphold the authority of our new Irish Government, Dail Eireann. Sean Morrissey remarked that I took the victory very calmly. "Ah, Sean", I said, "it is only now that we have to face our real problems!"