



Cumann Staire Chontae Thiobraid Árann

Co. Tipperary Historical Society, The Source Library, Cathedral Street, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, Ireland
353 (0) 52 616 6123 society@tipperarycoco.ie www.tipperarystudies.ie/thc

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society@tipperarycoco.ie

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Marcus Bourke and his writings

By Denis G. Marnane

Three research interests, Tipperary, the GAA and advanced nationalism lie at the heart of the published work of Marcus Bourke. Over nearly forty years he has made significant contributions to our knowledge of these subjects, both on their own and as they interconnect. His work has been variously focussed, on biography, institutional history, crime, but throughout marked by two key characteristics, diligent research and the application of his legal training. „More than anything else, Marcus Bourke’s Tipperary roots have motivated and shaped his historical writing. He is a Tipperaryman, though not one fortunate enough to have been born or brought up in the county!

The part of the county that matters most to Marcus Bourke is Tipperary town. The fact that his grandfather was a founding member of Arravale Rovers is a credential that still resonates. Technically a Dubliner, though in fact a Tipperaryman – in exile, Marcus spent a succession of summer holidays in Tipperary town, giving him a knowledge of local personalities which can still surprise. The part of the town that he knew best during those years was the district known locally as ‘the new town’ and known to history as New Tipperary. It was apt therefore that his first substantial piece of published research was a series of three articles on New Tipperary in the *Irish Independent* in 1965, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the building of that monument to tenant solidarity.¹

These articles constitute the first critical account of what was a key episode in the second phase of the Land War. William O’Brien MP, the Mallow-born editor of Parnell’s newspaper *United Ireland*, was the most influential outside figure in the struggle. A skilled writer, O’Brien was able to give his account of these events in Tipperary, which in the context of the tenants’ failure to get their way, very much minimised his own role. Marcus Bourke’s articles challenged this and rightly called into question O’Brien’s subsequent self-serving protestations that the episode was a purely domestic Tipperary matter.

Without this series of articles by Marcus Bourke, the New Tipperary anniversary would have passed without notice. In Tipperary town nothing was done to mark the occasion (an omission not repeated during the centenary). On a personal note, these articles carry a share of responsibility for the pages of *Tipperary Historical Journal* filled by this writer since 1988. The fact that such fascinating events had taken place on one’s doorstep and that a national newspaper considered what had happened all those years ago of sufficient interest to devote such space, struck one as remarkable. Of necessity, these articles raised more questions than they answered. From the point of view therefore of this writer and what would become a consuming passion, these articles are the most significant words written by Marcus Bourke. Why expect someone else to investigate the New Tipperary episode in detail? Contrary to what the secondary education history syllabus and the history department of UCD assumed, historical investigation is a light that could be directed in a narrow beam, illuminating one’s own place and bringing to life again one’s own people. In doing this with respect to New Tipperary, Marcus Bourke was of enormous help, willingly sharing his information and knowledge of possible sources.

In 1967, Marcus Bourke had two books published. The less important was a biographical

study of The O'Rahilly, who was killed near the GPO during the Easter Rising in 1916.² The author knew members of the O'Rahilly family and wrote the book in response to the fact that during all of the attention centred on the Rising and its key personalities during the fiftieth anniversary O'Rahilly remained a somewhat neglected figure, remembered mainly for his remark about having helped to wind the clock and consequently he would be there to hear it strike. Marcus Bourke had limited access to O'Rahilly family papers. Nevertheless this book served its purpose and it may be remarked that a number of other important players in the 1916 drama have still not received the attention of biographers. In 1991, The O'Rahilly's son Aodogán (whose account of his experiences on the Republican side in Tipperary during the Civil War was published in this Journal in 1992) published a more detailed account of his father's career, based on fuller access to family papers. (*Winding the Clock – O'Rahilly and the 1916 Rising*, The Lilliput Press, 1991)

For his second biography published in 1967, Marcus Bourke examined the life and times of Tipperary town's greatest son, the Fenian John O'Leary.³ O'Leary's long life (1830-1907) impinged on many aspects of nineteenth century Irish history: Young Ireland, the Fenian movement, the *Irish People* newspaper, political imprisonment, exile, the IRB, land agitation, the Literary Revival and not least, separatism during the lean years of the ascendancy of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Researched during the early 1960s, the author was able to draw on the memories of people for whom the centenary of the 1798 Rebellion was not just history but part of their own life stories. The mid-1960s was a period notable for the display of republican triumphalism: 1966, the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising and 1967, the centenary of the Fenian Rising. A deal of flag waving before History turned nasty at the close of that decade.

For a biography to succeed, it helps if the biographer actually likes his subject, while at the same time being constructively critical of the life being examined. This critical aspect, in the prevailing mood of the period when the work was researched and written, could easily have been sidelined. It wasn't. There is much in O'Leary's life to admire, not least his consistency of opinion, dedication of purpose and a refusal to be seduced by fickle popularity. But the biography also explored the relationship between O'Leary's opposition to land agitation and his personal financial dependence on rent from his Tipperary property. Marcus also wrote an introduction to the 1968 reprint of O'Leary's own account of his Fenian experiences.⁴

Another revolutionary icon, Thomas MacDonagh, also a native of the county, was the subject of a short article by Marcus Bourke in 1968.⁵ This examined MacDonagh's role in planning the Rising and was an attempt to get past the dominating personalities of Connolly and Pearse and place at least one of the other five into some kind of context. Apart from a review in *Irish* of T.P. Coogan's *The I.R.A.*⁶ much of the 1970s was devoted to researching a history of the GAA which was published in 1980.⁷ Fr Matt Ryan 'The General', PP of Knockavilla for many years, and a man whose career as a public figure took in the land war, the language revival and the national struggle, was the subject of an article by Marcus Bourke, published in 1987, the fiftieth anniversary of his death.⁸ The focus of the article was Ryan's role in the land campaign and it is clear that the scale of Ryan's public career was such that it merits a full scale biography. The end of the 1980s saw the publication of the fruits of much of that decade's historical research, again a GAA subject, perhaps the GAA subject, a study of Michael Cusack.⁹

With respect to Tipperary historiography, while Marcus Bourke had already made important contributions, his greatest arose out of a meeting in Thurles in 1987, when the County Tipperary Historical Society was founded with the purpose of publishing an annual journal 'to promote the study of the history, archaeology, folklore and geography of the county'. Marcus Bourke was appointed editor and was responsible for fourteen issues of the journal, 1988-2001,

in the process establishing *Tipperary Historical Journal* as one of the leading regional studies publications in the country. Apart from his role as editor (discussed elsewhere), he contributed some ten articles and around fifty book reviews. Five of the articles contain reference material.¹⁰ The most important of these was published in 1989, an updating of Joseph Hayes's *Guide to Tipperary Newspapers*, together with a listing of where these vital sources for local studies may be found. In this context, it should be said that everyone interested in the history of Tipperary town and district owes a debt of gratitude to Marcus Bourke who ensured that the NLI has a file of the town's newspaper, *Tipperary People* and *Tipperaryman*.

Surprisingly perhaps, only one of these ten articles dealt with the GAA, a fascinating piece of detective work with respect to Thomas St George McCarthy, RIC officer and one of the 'Seven' at Hayes's Hotel in November 1884.¹¹ The other four articles very much flowed from the writer's legal background. For the first, Marcus Bourke stood on familiar ground, Tipperary town. His article was a timely look at the history of the Erasmus Smith educational endowment and its 'Abbey' grammar school in that town. An examination of the litigation of the 1920s and '30s in order to give catholic access to the endowment may have seemed academic but at the time a campaign was underway to revive the financial settlement of 1938 in the interests of the present 'Abbey' secondary school.¹² (Since the article was published, this campaign has been successfully concluded.)

In the late twentieth century, no other event in the county excite such interest in archaeological and historical circles, as the discovery of the Derrynaflan hoard. On the tenth anniversary, the *Journal* published two articles, one by Michael Ryan of the National Museum, looking at how this discovery impacted on our heritage. The other article, by Marcus Bourke, examined the legal ramifications of the find, especially the role of the Supreme Court in deciding ownership.¹³

In the 1990s, Marcus Bourke took to murder. The murder of Joseph Bergin in December 1923 and the subsequent trial of James Murray, both members of the Free State army, was an episode arising out of the Civil War. Neither victim nor accused were from Tipperary. The writer's interest arose from the fact that two of the lead players in the legal drama were from Tipperary. Michael Costello, then a colonel and Director of Military Intelligence, was a native of Cloughjordan. William Carrigan, a native of Thurles, was one of the prosecuting team. Marcus Bourke's article is a lucid exposition of the issues raised in the trial and gives a sometimes startling view of the murky doings of some of those, chiefly Costello, charged with defending the newly created state.¹⁴

The most recent article in this *Journal* by Marcus Bourke, saw his Tipperary town background and legal knowledge come together to discuss the legal machinations on the part of the British to ensure the execution in February 1921 of Sean Allen, a captain in the Third Tipperary Brigade. Allen had been found in possession of a weapon and an IRA manual when searched by British soldiers near the town in January of that year. Within two weeks he was tried by court martial in Cork and sentenced to death. His family appealed this sentence and the writer gives a clear account of the legal issues and the way in which legal nicety was overwhelmed by political considerations. Of particular interest is the point that this case was used by the Free State two years later to justify the execution of Erskine Chiders.¹⁵ A strength of this article and others dealing with legal topics, is the writer's familiarity with personalities in the Irish legal profession over the past decades. This knowledge came into play when Marcus Bourke turned his attention to the murder of Mary McCarthy near New Inn in November 1940.¹⁶

While murder always exercises a certain bleak spell over readers, Marcus Bourke's study of

the trial and conviction of Harry Gleason, does something more. The analysis of a small rural community and the way in which its different elements responded to the extraordinary circumstances of a murder, reveals a good deal to a modern reader about values and attitudes in a world in many respects very remote from us today. Circumstances surrounding murder are of course dramatic but a more cerebral satisfaction is available to the reader of this book from the incidental information about the pace and pattern of everyday life in the Irish countryside sixty years ago. Relations between neighbours, agricultural practices, leisure pursuits, sexual behaviour, the tensions between public and private morality, issues of class, the role of public opinion and its tyranny and the theory and practice of law enforcement – insights with respect to all of these topics are between the covers of this book. The book in its title asks a question: ‘Was Harry Gleeson innocent?’ Gleeson had been defended by Sean McBride who never doubted his client’s innocence. Gleeson was found guilty and executed in April 1941.- The author goes over the evidence and calls into question the verdict it produced. - This book in fact is a powerful argument against capital punishment.

With a lifetime’s involvement in journalism, the legal profession, historical research and the GAA, Marcus Bourke has a comprehensive knowledge of the key figures in these strands of Irish life. He acted as one of the consulting editors to an important work of Irish biography published in 1996.¹⁷ He contributed biographical entries on the several dozen lawyers covered by this book, together with entries on three well known *Irish Independent* journalists. To the new *DNB* (Dictionary of National Biography) (forthcoming) he contributed the entry on Michael Cusack and to the forthcoming *Encyclopaedia of Ireland* (Macmillan Reference), he contributed entries on Cusack and the GAA. The major work on Irish biography is in course of preparation by the RIA and CUP and to this he has contributed six entries on leading GAA personalities. Also in the pipeline, in co-operation with other writers, is a history of Dublin GAA.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Irish Independent*, 7-9 June 1965.
2. Marcus Bourke, *The O’Rahilly* (Anvil Books, Tralee 1967).
3. Marcus Bourke, *John O’Leary A study in Irish separatism* (Anvil Books, Tralee 1967 and University of Georgia Press, Athens 1967).
4. John O’Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*, Introduction by Marcus Bourke (Irish University Press, Shannon 1968).
5. Marcus Bourke, ‘Thomas MacDonagh’s role in the plans for the 1916 Rising’ in *The Irish Sword*, VIII, 32 (1968), pp. 178-85.
6. In *Feasta*, XXIII, 6 (1970), pp. 22-3.
7. Marcus de Búrca, *The GAA: A History* (G.A.A. Dublin 1980 and second edition, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin 1999).
8. Marcus de Búrca, ‘Fr Matt Ryan and the Land Question’ in *Dúchas* (1987), pp. 75-91.
9. Marcus de Búrca, *Michael Cusack and the GAA* (Anvil Books, Dublin 1989).
10. J.C. Hayes, ‘Guide to Tipperary Newspapers 1770-1989’ in *THJ* (1989), pp. 1-16; Marcus Bourke, ‘Journal of Cork Historical and Archaeological Society: an Index to Tipperary material 1892-1991’ in *THJ* (1992), pp. 57-62; Marcus Bourke, ‘Car Owners in North Tipperary in 1906’ in *THJ* (1994), p.66; Marcus Bourke, ‘Car Owners in South Tipperary in 1906’ in *THJ* (1996), pp. 171-2; Marcus Bourke, ‘The Military History Bureau – a list of Tipperary names’ in *THJ* (2001), pp. 147-8
11. Marcus de Búrca, ‘The curious career of Sub-Inspector Thomas St George McCarthy’ in *THJ* (1988), pp. 201-04.

12. Marcus Bourke, 'Erasmus Smith and Tipperary Grammar School' in *THJ* (1989), pp. 82-99.
13. Marcus Bourke, 'Derrynaflan: Ten Years On: Supreme Court Makes New Law' in *THJ* (1990), pp. 160-64.
14. Marcus Bourke, 'Shooting the messenger: Col. Costello and the Murray Case' in *THJ* (1997), pp. 42-59.
15. Marcus Bourke, 'The fight to save Sean Allen' in *THJ* (2001), pp.53-55.
16. Marcus Bourke, *Murder at Marlhill Was Harry Gleeson Innocent?* (Geography Publications, Dublin 1993).
17. Louis McRedmond (ed.), *Modern Irish Lives, Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Irish Biography* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin 1996).