

The Church of Ireland in South Tipperary in the Twentieth Century

Robert McCarthy

We know from -South Tipperary 1570-1841 by David Butler that the Protestant population of the South Riding has been declining ever since 1834. But it was still sizeable then and the cores of Protestantism were the three urban centres of Clonmel, Tipperary and Cashel each containing a Protestant population in excess of 500 persons – rural Kilcooley was another core.

Clonmel itself had 1737 Anglicans plus 250 dissenters. In 1834 the total Protestant population of the South Riding was 8081 persons. By 1861 this had sunk to 6176 persons. By 1890 Cashel and Emly had sunk to 4584 with 33 incumbencies (i.e. the area served by a parish priest) and 44 churches. By 1911 this had sunk again to 3655 while the population of the Lismore parishes in Co. Tipperary was 1932.

The First World War saw the numbers fall even more drastically: there were now only 1330 in Cashel and Emly while the Lismore parishes had halved to 993. By 1935 the total population of Cashel and Emly was only 967 and although incumbencies had halved since 1890 there was only an average of 57 people per incumbent. There were now only 447 people in the Lismore parishes whereas there had been 1931 as recently as 1911.

By the time of the sparsely populated areas enquiry in the late 1950s there were only 746 in Cashel, but ministered to by 11 incumbents. The Lismore parishes now had only 371 people ministered to by three incumbents.

By 1990 Cashel diocese had sunk to three incumbents with populations of 265; 166; and 146 respectively while the Lismore parishes had sunk to one incumbent who also looked after Fethard and Kilvemnon. This dismal record of numerical decline had to be borne by real people on the ground – the people were for the most part lay – clergy could always go elsewhere.

Bishop Harvey (Bishop of Cashel and Emly, Waterford and Lismore 1935-58) kept the show going almost regardless of numbers: he did not take Canon Cooke out of Carrick-on-Suir until he and his daughter were almost the only parishioners. But the recommendations of the Sparsely Populated Areas Commission and inflation together led to wholesale amalgamation of incumbencies and closure of churches. The churches of Ballysheehan, Donohill, Cullen, Kilshane, Galbally, Newchapel, Killaloe, Ardfinnan, Derrygrath and Rathronan were all to close. Ardmayle, Mealiffe and Carrick-on-Suir had closed already.

Before inflation began to bite, endowment income went a long way towards paying incumbents. A good example is Tullaghmelan where despite small number (the church

population in 1919 was only 55) a resident rector was maintained until 1946. Endowment income paid half his stipend and most of the rest was paid by the Earl of Donoughmore.

Another aspect of the decline in numbers was that it was the small country churches which were closed – the few town churches were somehow kept going. But of course the town parishes had declined proportionally much more than the country churches around them. St. Mary's Clonmel was once attended by more than a thousand – neighbouring Tullaghmelan (with which I am intimately connected) always had small numbers. Thus according to the visitation of 1836 the church population of the parish was only 35 and there was a very creditable Sunday attendance of "over 20". In 1919 the average attendance in the parish church was 18 with an average of 10 in Newcastle in the afternoon – and this from a total church population of 55. Today the average attendance is 10 – as the late Lady Donoughmore once remarked to me "if we didn't all come there would be nobody here".

The story of Cahir parish is a salutary one. In 1868 the church population was 627. In 1950 the average Sunday attendance was 51. The resident vicar left in 1978 and was not replaced and in 2000 the average Sunday attendance was only 14, despite having by that date lost its satellite churches of Ardfinnan, Derrygrath (Woodroffe) and Shanrahan (Clogheen). How long can it be maintained despite the fact that it is one of the loveliest churches in the county having been designed by John Nash and containing a window by Sir Ninian Comper?



A Kilcooley parish outing to the Rock of Cashel in the 1920s.

Since disestablishment in 1870 the church of Ireland had been a lay-led church and the fact that in the latter half of the 20th century the gentry either died out or sold out sounded the death-knell for this rural church. They were still in place in 1970 as an examination of the lay membership of the Diocesan Council of Cashel and Emly in that year will show. The following were the lay members:-

H.R. Langley	R.K. Pennefather
Major H.J. Delmege	S.L. Grubb
H.E. Thompson	Major G.T. Ponsonby MC
W.M. Baker	Lt Col. R. Lidwell DSO
C. Gray	Lt Col The O'Grady MC
F. Van Bevan	Major J.W. Hughes MC
Major M.W. Keane	C.O. Mansergh

Only two of those would not consider themselves to be country gentlemen. The Diocesan Council of Waterford and Lismore had a similar composition including the Earl of Donoughmore, Lt Commander Bagwell and Col Silcock.

By the end of the century they had all gone and had not been replaced. By that time there were only three incumbents left in Cashel diocese; while the Lismore parishes in Co. Tipperary were all under the care of the rector of Clonmel who also looked after Fethard and Kilvemnon. His combined population was 269.

How long can it now last? The chapter of Cashel Cathedral has already collapsed. How soon will the diocese of Cashel go the way of Emly which has already collapsed – it has no incumbents and only the churches of Abington and Clonbeg are still functioning? There are currently 16 churches in use in South Tipperary – Loughmoe (Dovea), Holycross, Killenaule, Kilvemnon (Mullinahone), Athassel (Golden), Templeniery (Bansha) have all now been closed though the roofs are still on.

I do not share Dr Butler's optimism that the planning laws will save the remainder of the churches. I believe that the indifference of the planning authorities and the vandalism of the church authorities will result in the destruction of most of the remaining country churches. Soon all that will be left are the trees which are a feature of all our country churchyards. Also surviving will be the Georgian glebe houses which are dotted throughout the South Riding on their miniature estates which again are liberally supplied with trees. All are now in lay ownership.

A good example is Knockgraffon (New Inn) built in 1784 by the Revd Nicholas Herbert who was also vicar of Carrick-on-Suir at the behest of Archbishop Agar who insisted that his pluralist incumbents should reside at least part of the year. The church has been long demolished and the trees recently cut down, but the glebe house and its trees stand inviolate in lay hands.

Another example is Tullaghmelan Rectory built in 1817. It cost £850 and is larger than most – probably because the incumbent was better paid than most being ex officio Treasurer of Lismore Cathedral and his gross stipend in the 1830's was £436. All the rooms face north or east (to save the upholstery) and it sits on a miniature estate thickly planted around its boundaries with trees and surrounded by sturdy stone walls.