

Thomas Walsh

— Cashel's Forgotten Archbishop

by Seán Ua Cearnaigh

Cashel, Munster's archdiocese, has produced many distinguished prelates, among them the martyred Dermot O'Hurley, David O'Kearney, John Brennan of whom Catherine Breáthnach wrote so comprehensively in the 1993 *Tipperary Historical Journal*, Christopher Butler (brother-in-law of the saintly Lady Margaret Iveagh of Kilcash) and Thomas Croke. All five have received their due measure of recognition from historians and church authorities. Sadly, such is not the story in the case of no less a distinguished Cashel archbishop, Thomas Walsh (1588 - 1654), who ruled the Munster archdiocese during one of the most turbulent periods in its history.

It is difficult to understand how Walsh, one of the most learned and courageous churchmen of his time, has all but faded from history and popular memory. With the honourable exception of Father Charles P. Meehan, friend and confessor to James Clarence Mangan, historians have given him scarcely a footnote. It is my intention, therefore, to consider the life and labours of Thomas Walsh and, in doing so, do something to revive his memory.

He was born in Waterford city on 3 February, 1588. In that same year the distinguished Franciscan and friend of Thomas Walsh, Luke Wadding, was born in Waterford. Thomas Walsh's ancestors were established in the city as well-to-do merchants and were noted for their loyalty to the faith of their fathers. His parents followed faithfully in this tradition. Indeed, at the the time of Thomas Walsh's birth his father, Robert, was a state prisoner; this because he refused to take the oath of supremacy which the Protestant authorities were then endeavouring to force on a reluctant people.

Waterford was one of the many places where the Reformation had almost completely failed and would at the time of Thomas Walsh's birth, have been regarded as among the most Catholic of Irish cities. When, in 1685, John Long, the Protestant primate attempted to promote the new religion in Waterford by means of schools, his mission met with no success whatsoever. Although no documentary evidence exists regarding Thomas Walsh's early education, we can assume that it was received locally. In 1600, at the age of twelve, his parents sent him to Santiago de Compostela, then the capital of Galicia in northwestern Spain. Here he was received into the home of his maternal uncle, Bishop Thomas Strong. Strong, in fact, was Bishop of Ossory but had been forced into exile by the authorities for non conformity. In Spain he had been appointed coadjutor to the Archbishop of Compostela.

Santiago de Compostela was then, as now, one of the great cultural and religious centres of Spain and boasted an Irish college which Thomas Walsh may have attended. In any event, his uncle ensured that he underwent a thorough course of preparatory studies

for the priesthood, most of it under the supervision and guidance of scholarly theologians. He was then sent to the Irish seminary in Lisbon and later to the Irish College in Salamanca where he obtained the degree of Doctor of Divinity and was ordained priest.

Having spent some years in Spain and various other places on the Continent, he returned to Ireland in 1624 where he involved himself in missionary duties. On 4 August of the same year Archbishop O'Kearney of Cashel died and attempts to find a successor were put into motion, by no means an easy task, given the troubled state of the country and the general hostility towards the old faith by the authorities.

Thomas Walsh was summoned to Rome by Pope Urban VIII and created Archbishop of Cashel at the age of 38. The consecration took place on 8 July, 1636. The new archbishop returned to his see shortly afterwards.

He was beset by huge difficulties. British government spies and informers constantly trailed and sought to trap him. Forced to administer confirmation and other sacraments in woods, secluded hollows and within locked doors in Catholic homes, he daily ran the risk of capture and imprisonment. Despite these difficulties and dangers, he managed to convene a number of synods. These were held not in chapels or places of residence but in secluded forest settings. His luck did not hold, however. Rev. Charles P. Meehan in his book "The Rise and Fall of the Irish Franciscan Monasteries" (James Duffy, 1869) tells us that it was while presiding at one synod in 1633 that he was arrested and brought to Dublin.

Meehan writes:

"On the journey to the metropolis he was accompanied by Archibald Hamilton, son of the then Protestant archbishop of Cashel, with whom he discussed various points of doctrine, so learnedly and so much to the young man's satisfaction, that they ever afterwards thought more kindly and better of each other. After a short imprisonment in the Castle, the archbishop was summoned to appear before the deputy, who could elicit nothing from him except that he was allowed a small stipend by the king of Spain to enable him to live; and as soon as he had proved to Stafford's satisfaction that he maintained no traitorous correspondence with Spain, he was set at large and allowed to return to his diocese. Thenceforth, that is to say, from 1633 to 1639, he was suffered to exercise his high functions with less constraint."

The Confederation of Kilkenny (1642-1650) drew together, even if not altogether for similar objectives, prominent members of the native Irish and Old English aristocracy and clergy. As we know, the Old English, more concerned with freedom to practise their religion openly than with national liberty, sometimes clashed with their fellow Catholic Gaels to the ultimate detriment of the Confederation. Archbishop Walsh, wary at first, eventually achieved considerable prominence in its ranks and was appointed a spiritual peer of the Supreme Council.

Perhaps the golden moment of his career was the reconsecration of Cashel Cathedral in 1641, an event attended by virtually all the clergy and most of the gentry of Munster. The restoration of that magnificent monument of the faith occasioned widespread celebrations and huge sums of money were raised for the purpose of restoring the old Rock place of worship to its former glory. This restoration was Walsh's greatest claim to fame.

But Cashel Cathedral's reign of splendour was short-lived. When the notorious Murrough O'Brien, alias Lord Inchiquin, and his Puritan army invaded the town in 1647, many of the local population were slain. Among them were members of the local Dominican

community and the mother of the Franciscan martyr, John Kearney, was also a victim. A Jesuit priest, Theobald Stapleton, was burned at the stake by order of Inchiquin.

A Tipperaryman, Father Stapleton, was a leading Gaelic scholar and lover of the language who had translated a Latin catechism "*Cathechismus seu Doctna Christina*" into Irish eight years before his tragic death. In a prologue to this work he castigated members of the Irish learned classes for their indifference towards the native tongue.

Fear and terror reigned everywhere in and around Cashel during Inchiquin's murderous invasion. Hundreds of people sought refuge in the Cathedral which was then set alight by Inchiquin's army. Many perished in the flames or were done to death while attempting to escape. It is believed that as many as 3000 died at the hands of the Puritan army. Altogether it was one of the darkest days in Cashel's history.

On 13 July 1648 Archbishop Walsh managed to once again reconsecrate the cathedral so sacrilegiously pillaged and defiled by Inchiquin's troops. Sadly, it was a short-lived triumph as Father Meehan reminds us :

"In less than two years afterwards, however, the archbishop had to deplore the fatal final fall of the grand old edifice into hands of anti-Catholics."

Meanwhile, Walsh was seen as something of a unifying force in the Confederation where he did much to resist the wily schemes of the faithless Lord Ormond. If this royalist peer was frequently able to thwart and deceive the Old English and some of the Gaels, he met more than his match in Cashel's indomitable archbishop, who in fact, was the chief Irish adviser to the Papal Nuncio Giovanni Battista Rinuccini, with whom he became acquainted shortly after his arrival in Ireland, as noted by Father Meehan:

"On the 21st November, 1645, Rinuccini, after a few days repose in the residence which the confederates appointed for him at Kilkenny, proceeded on foot to pay a formal visit to lord Mountgarrett, then president of the council, who, to do the pope's minister greater honour, had arranged that the reception should take place in the grand gallery of the ancient castle of the Ormonds . . . At the foot of the grand staircase he was met by Thomas Walsh, archbishop of Cashel, Thomas Fleming, archbishop of Dublin, and Heber MacMahon, bishop of Clogher, who, after mutual congratulations, ascended the stairs, and were then ushered, by Sir Richard Bellings, into the presence of the lord-president."

That Thomas Walsh was Rinuccini's right hand man may be gauged from the following remarks of Father Meehan:

"His devotedness to Rinuccini cannot be questioned, for, on his arrival, he hastened to Limerick to congratulate him, and whenever the former came to Cashel, he was received in the archepiscopal palace with cordial welcome and unbounded hospitality. In fact, Walsh was the nuncio's constant companion, on all occasions when the latter visited Munster, following in his train, as we have already seen, when Limerick feted the victory of Benburb, and assisting him with his counsels when he went in person to press the siege of Bunratty."

Although at all times Rinuccini's chief confidant, Walsh did not always agree with him as Father Meehan points out:

"Instead, however, of adopting his views on all occasions, Walsh on more than one instance, had the manliness to dissent from them, nor could he be induced to embrace the non-expediency principles of the oversanguine Italian, till the latter, miscalculating his resources, assured him of aids from abroad, which eventually never came, or came so sparingly that they proved worse than useless."

In 1648, when some of Ormond's lackeys in the Confederation's supreme council engineered a truce with Inchiquin, ruthless slayer of Catholics in Cashel and elsewhere, Rinuccini resolved to pronounce sentence of excommunication on those responsible for this gross act of betrayal. In this he was strongly supported by Thomas Walsh. However, some bishops and Jesuit priests vehemently opposed the move, but Walsh continued to stand by Rinuccini and the more nationally minded members of the Confederation. This is not to say, however, that Walsh always acted prudently. Father Meehan cites one particular error of judgement:

"It must be acknowledged, however, that Walsh formed one of the deputation that waited on Lord Ormond when he resumed the Viceroyalty, and that he then did sign articles of peace with that nobleman, in the fullest assurance that he was thus securing all the concessions which Ripuccini had demanded . . ."

Was Walsh taken in by the wily Lord Ormond? History must decide one way or the other. And what can one say of Ormond's version, which he placed on record shortly before his departure from Ireland!

"The Roman agents, having returned to Ireland, brought with them a brief, which the pope addressed to the Irish prelates, and, without mentioning the matter to me, they gave out that, as papal briefs have monitory power, they, the bishops, were bound to pay more respect to such documents than to the nuncio. By means of this most crafty and diabolical device, they succeeded in bringing to Kilkenny three of the most scrupulous of them, namely, the archbishop of Cashel and the bishops of Waterford and Emly. He of Emly, however, on being made aware of the fraud that was about to be practised, contrived to escape, as he lodged in the suburbs, but as for the other two, who slept in the city, they were detained, and had to subscribe, in order to complete the required number of signatures."

Walsh, it seems, had acted in good faith but soon found to his cost that Ormond set absolutely no stock or value on treaties with the Irish Catholics, who, as a whole, he abhorred.

Walsh had good reason to lament his imprudent act, but redeemed himself somewhat when, on 23 August 1650, he joined with five other patriot prelates in denouncing Ormond as an implacable enemy of the Catholics.

During Ireton's siege of Limerick, Walsh, engaged as he was with local clergy, was a virtual prisoner in the city. On the city's surrender, however, he managed to make his escape. He lay low in the village of Ballygriffin. Sadly, his luck did not hold. He was captured in his hiding place on 4 January 1652 and removed to Clonmel prison where he suffered fearful privations. The Cromwellian authorities offered him his liberty provided that he promised to never again resume his episcopal duties. This he steadfastly refused to do. He was then removed to Waterford prison where he was kept in close confinement until October 1653, still refusing to consent to abandon his episcopal duties. He was then released, on condition that he emigrate to Spain.

He reached Santiago de Compostela in late November 1653. It should have been a happy homecoming to a place he loved in his youth. But the many hardships suffered by him in his episcopal career and his recent prison privations had taken a dreadful toll. He was now completely broken in health. Only a few months of life remained to him. He died on 4 May 1654. His tomb is in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. His good friend Father St. Leger, who was at his bedside during his last fatal illness, wrote for him a

splendid Latin epitaph. It is as follows:

"Exilium lateras incommoda damna pericia vinclaque pro vera religione. Tuli ilia tulisse mei sunt ornamenta sepulchri. Nobilior titulis omnibus ille mihi est. Coetera nil faciunt sunt. Nomina vana legarur in tituli marmore. Multa tuli exilum terra est. Coelum mihi patria. Coelum morte peto. Exilii et terminus ille mei."

Father Ignatius Fennessy, O.F. M. has translated the above as follows:

"For the sake of the true religion, I put up with exile, places of refuge, troubles, losses, dangers and prison chains. To carry them is for me like having ornaments in a tomb. That for me is more than all titles. Other things do nothing for me. They are vain names bequested in a title on marble. I put up with many things, earth is exile. Heaven is my fatherland. I seek Heaven through death. It is the end of exile for me."

Note - I am deeply indebted to my very good friend and fellow Tipperaryman John O'Keeffe of Newtownpark Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, who supplied me with invaluable information on Archbishop Walsh. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Father Ignatius Fennessy, O.F.M., Killiney.

Tám thar a bheith buioch dóibh beirt.



James, 1st Duke of Ormonde (1610 - 1688)