

A Rebel Priest

Dr. Walter MacDonald of Emil, Mooncoin, was the subject of an entertaining lecture given by Professor Denis Gwynn to members of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society.

Dr. Gwynn said: "I have been asked to speak to you about one of the most distinguished and most lovable Kilkenny men of the past hundred years, Dr. Walter MacDonald of Mooncoin."

As the lecture proceeded, it was quite clear why this claim was made. Indeed another could also have been pressed—that Dr. MacDonald was a rebel, always on the side of those in trouble, oppressed and treated unfairly.

Even still he is a legendary figure in Maynooth, where in his time he was affectionately known as Watty, even though he held the exalted position of professor of Dogmatic Theology and was head of the post graduate school in the Dunboyne Institute.

Always a controversial figure, he could many times have been dismissed for advocating policies and reforms with which the hierarchy disagreed.

DEAN OF OSSORY

He was born in 1854 in Emil, Mooncoin, son of a substantial farmer with priest relations in both his mother's and father's family. His uncle was president of St. Kieran's and later became the Dean of Ossory. It was he who helped the young lad through college and so set him on the road to Maynooth.

"Watty" spoke affectionately of his happy days around Mooncoin and his period in St. Kieran's, but he condemned the teaching methods and the lack of literary facilities.

These criticisms he also drilled at Maynooth, where he was ordained in 1876, and to which he returned in 1881, the interim having been spent in St. Kieran's where he developed a tremendous gift of teaching and started on the lonely road to reform wherever he saw it was needed.

His "Reminiscences" provide a splendid history of the church in Ireland for a period of just 40 years. He wrote that there were 2 matres et magistrae, Rome and Ireland. He made this statement because so many Irish priests were to the front

all over the world — in America, in Africa and in far away Australia.

FIRST BOOK

His first book, "Motion," was debated by the Roman censors and put on the index. Therefore from then on he could not get the necessary Imprimatur for any of his writings in theological subjects. This did not quell his spirit for he continued with his challenge of authority — and never, despite his continuous campaign in all directions, did the Irish bishops attempt to dismiss him.

Among the reforms agitated for was the right of Maynooth professors to be appointed by open competition and this to be followed by security of tenure. As professor of Canon Law he regave clear safeguards against dismissal, the bishops often ignored it.

He insisted that no appointment should be made unless the candidate had given proof in published writing of his fitness for the position.

This is how he came to write the controversial "Motion" a book on a difficult subject — a metaphysical study involving discussion of the freedom of men's actions and thoughts, a dissertation on the relationship between orthodox theology and science.

ON THE INDEX

One of his colleagues said that it conflicted with the Christian doctrine of free will. Rome placed it on the index and Dr. MacDonald asked why. He might as a result have been dismissed under a cloud, but he was not and continued in Dunboyne, loved by his students but often exasperating his colleagues.

He held that the Institution should be a place of research. Cardinal Logue and others held that the primary duty of the college was to place and to train reliable and industrious clergy. "Watty" maintained his stand that the clergy should be let enter into intellectual controversies.

In this, as in other points, Vatican Council has proved him right so far in advance was his opinion of lectures in Latin. He said "the language of our daily lives will be the vernacular wherein we do our thinking".

He also believed that the laity should have a direct

hand in parish finances and that the best way to interest them in such affairs was to publish a budget.

STRONG VIEWS

On matters outside the church he had equally strong views. He, with three others, publicly sent subscriptions to the Parnell fund when it had been condemned by Rome. He defended Dr. Hickey who was dismissed from Maynooth for denouncing the bishops who opposed essential Irish in the National University. He even advised Dr. Hickey to appeal to Rome.

For his part in this controversy, he became a friend of Sean O'Casey. He was one of the few clergy who felt sympathy for Jim Larkin and trade union movement. He showed his support during the long and anguished strike by refusing to take a tram in Dublin.

He strongly and emphatically criticised the managerial system in primary schools and restored the rights of the laity who provided the funds to maintain the system. He became involved in discussions about encouraging Catholics to enter Trinity College. His former antagonist, Cardinal Logue, asked him to speak on this problem at a meeting of the Maynooth union.

The invitation came most unexpectedly as the Cardinal must have known that Dr. MacDonald's suggestions would be "unusual". "I think that the true policy would be to go in at once in an organised body". He added that Trinity should be made into a true centre of Irish literature and science. This, among others thereof, would help to stop emigration and would also strengthen the Catholic press.

MADE BISHOPS

As the years went by, Dr. MacDonald saw many of his former students made bishops. It was sometimes said that the attitude of the hierarchy was the result of personal disappointment. This is far from true—he had no desire for a change in his own life, not even to be made president of Maynooth.

Speaking of a former president — Dr. Russell, Dr. MacDonald said: "It looks as if he committed the fault that so many men of his type commit, of giving up the line of work for which he was eminently suited, for one which did not suit him . . . Good presidents are very well, but professors are so much rarer — and better".