



The Strange Case of the Drunken Bishop

A REFORMATION MYSTERY
SOLVED

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In June 1538 the Lord Deputy, Lord Leonard Gray, embarked upon a flag-showing expedition through the west of Ireland, visiting among other places the town of Galway. In his formal report to King Henry VIII he states that while in the town he administered the oaths of Supremacy and Succession not only to the Mayor and Corporation but also 'to the bishop there'. The strange thing about this statement is that there was not and never had been a bishop of Galway. The Town had been included in the diocese of Enachdune (Annaghdown) until 1484 when, by papal decree, it was separated from it and made subject only to a warden. To whom then did the Deputy administer the oaths?

It might conceivably have been the warden, who presumably exercised many of the functions of a bishop in the town, but this view presupposes that Gray made a mistake as to the ecclesiastic's rank, a most unlikely supposition as visiting viceroys are normally most careful to ascertain the exact status of local dignitaries with whom they come in contact. The same objection applies to the possibility, asserted as a fact by Bagwell,¹ that the person concerned was Christopher Bodkin, archbishop of Tuam, in whose archdiocese the town lay; furthermore Bodkin was a prominent and forceful character who would certainly have been known to the Deputy, if only by reputation. If an actual

bishop was involved it cannot have been John More, bishop of Enachdune, for he was a papal appointment who resisted Henry's ecclesiastical changes and was indeed imprisoned for a time for his pains. The problem, although curious, would be of minor interest were it not for the fact that the same— or possibly a later— incumbent of this non-existent see surfaces again, in somewhat disreputable condition, in Kilkenny some fifteen years later.

In his autobiographical account² of his brief but turbulent period as bishop of Ossory in the spring and summer of 1553, John Bale, in a passage commenting on his subordinate clergy, writes *And one of them, for example, was the drunken bishop of Galway, who, besides these uncomely brags, boasted furiously in the house of one Martin, a . . . servant to the Earl of Ormand, and in other houses more, that the bishop of Rome was the head supreme of the christian church in earth, and should be so proclaimed in Ireland, the said Martin, as God's good friend rebuking him for it. The exercise of this bishop is none other but to gad from town to town over the English part, confirming young children for twopence a piece, without examination of their christian belief, contrary to the christian ordinances of England, and at night to drink Rob Davie and Aqua Vitae.*³ and in a later passage he tells us that *It was also noised abroad, by the*

*bishop of Galway, and others, that the antichrist of Rome should be taken again for the supreme head of the Church of Ireland.*⁴

Bale needs to be read with caution, for he was a bitter controversialist and one moreover who perceived a correspondence between the enjoyment of the pleasures of the table and the exposition of theological error, but he was no liar; his words ring true and we can hardly doubt that some such person as he described actually existed. Since not only Bale but, as the context of the passages makes clear, his clergy accepted this 'bishop of Galway' as a genuine prelate it is inconceivable that we are dealing with an imposter. Bagwell suggests that he was probably John More of Enachdune who had eventually conformed under Edward VI⁵ but this is mere conjecture and it is difficult to see why More, drunk or sober, should have been idling around in Kilkenny in the summer of 1553. We need to look for a bishop apparently free of diocesan responsibilities— so that he could gad from town to town— and one moreover who must, despite the evidence of backsliding, have accepted the royal supremacy, as he would not otherwise have been able to officiate in 'the English part'. Several candidates fit these conditions⁶ but only one has a known connection with Galway.

Henry's chosen instrument for the introduction of his religious changes in the Irish Church was



George Browne, an Englishman, consecrated archbishop of Dublin in 1536. Browne had previously been the English Provincial of the Austin Friars and as such had overall responsibility for the Augustinians of Ireland whose Vicar-provincial, Dr Richard Nangle, became one of Browne's first supporters in Ireland. Despite a statement to the contrary in the brief and unreliable note on him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*⁷ Nangle, whose value to Browne was greatly enhanced by his ability to preach in Irish, was probably a Palesman rather than a Galwegan. The name is a corruption of the Cambro-Norman *de Angulo* and the main branch of the family stems from the Gilbert de Angulo who accompanied Strongbow to Ireland and whose eldest son Jocelyn was rewarded with the barony of Navan.⁸ Branches of the Nangle family did establish themselves in Connaught but there, in Irish fashion, they adopted the surname MacCostello.⁹ The point is of little importance however for while Richard Nangle apparently belonged to a cadet branch of the Co. Meath family he had a long established connection with Galway. As early as 1508 the Augustinian friary there was founded by Margaret Athy, wife of Stephen Lynch Fitz-Dominick *Dubh* 'at the earnest solicitation of Richard Nangle, a friar of the same order'¹⁰ and he was still there in 1517 when Richard Edmund de Burgo

'confirmed unto Richard Nangle, *sacre pagine professori*, of the order of the hermits of St Augustine' certain monies to pray for the souls of himself, his parents and successors.¹¹ On his appointment as Vicar-provincial Nangle moved, of course, to Dublin but he must have either retained or later acquired a house in Galway for we are told that in the later 1530s he 'had for some time taken up residence' there.¹²

Nangle's support for Henry's ecclesiastical reforms was soon rewarded; in 1536 he was consecrated bishop of Clonfert, a see vacant since the death of Dennis More in 1534. He was not, however to enjoy his elevation for long for Clement VII had already provided Roland de Burgo, a kinsman of Ulick Burke, the chief of the McWilliam Burkes. De Burgo returned to Ireland sometime before 10 November 1537 and with the aid of his kinsmen expelled Nangle from the see and forced him to retire baffled and in some fear for his safety to Galway.¹³ Henry at first directed the Lord Deputy to prosecute de Burgo under the Statute of Provisors but nothing was done, doubtless because of the need to avoid antagonising Ulick Burke, who became, under one of the most important of the Surrender and Regrant agreements, the first Earl of Clanricard.

Nangle could not have taken the oaths of Supremacy and Succession at the time of his consecration as the necessary legislation had not

then been passed by the Irish parliament and the obvious explanation of Lord Leonard Gray's bishop is that he was still living in Galway at the time of the viceroy's visit in 1538 and took advantage of it to make a public, and politic, demonstration of his loyalty to the crown.

The problem of finding suitable employment for this loyal but surplus bishop was solved *pro tem.* early in the following year when he was appointed as Browne's suffragan. At this stage he enjoyed the favour of the archbishop who commented in a letter of 16 February 1539 to Thomas Cromwell

*I have provided a suffragan, named Doctor Nangle, bishop of Clonfert, who is not only well learned, but also a right honest man, and will undoubtedly set forth as well the word of God, as our prince's causes, in the Irish tongue, to the discharge, I trust, of my conscience.*¹⁴

Within a few years, however, Nangle was to suffer a series of reverses. He had, it seems, been promised the site and buildings of the Augustinian Friary in Dublin at the time of its suppression but on 10 July 1541 these were 'granted for ever to Walter Tyrell, of Dublin, merchant, at the yearly rent of 6s. 1d. Irish money, in consideration of a fine of £114. 13s. 4d.'¹⁵ In October of the same year his last hope of regaining possession of his diocese of Clonfert disappeared when Roland de Burgo surrendered

his bulls to Henry and thus became the *de jure* as well as the *de facto* bishop. Most damaging of all he fell out of favour with his patron, Browne, and at some time before 28 November 1543, the date of the mandate for George Dowdall's consecration as archbishop of Armagh, had been replaced as Browne's suffragan by one Thady Reynolds.¹⁶ Richard Nangle is heard of by name no more.

There can be but one reason why a man of undoubted ability and (because of his command of Irish) great potential value to the Henrician church should have been allowed to drop out of sight: Nangle had become a hopeless alcoholic. Only thus may we account for Bale's 'bishop of Galway'. He must be Nangle, advanced in years, without regular income or employment, clinging pathetically to the shreds of his ecclesiastical dignity and seeking consolation for his disappointments in the bottle. Contemplating his unhappy situation he came to rue his early eager support for Henry's religious changes and, through conscience, or in the vain hope of recovering his position when Mary replaced the dying Edward, he turned again to Rome.

Regarded with contempt by clergy and laity alike— Bale tells a story about a gallowglass bringing a dog in a sheet with twopence hanging around his neck to be confirmed with his neighbours' children 'noting this beastly bishop more fit to confirm dogs than

Christian men's children'¹⁷ — he was, we may assume, dubbed, because of his past connection with the town, 'the bishop of Galway' i.e. the bishop of a non-existent see. Bale, new to Ireland and with an imperfect knowledge of her religious establishment, missed the irony and took this satirical title as a genuine one.

If Nangle had indeed hoped by his intrigues with Bale's restless clergy in Kilkenny to obtain preferment under Mary he was disappointed once more. The date of his death, which cannot have been long delayed, is not recorded and his place of burial is unknown. We may leave this unfortunate old man with the reflection that he was a victim of his age and the hope that when he eventually came to judgement the piety and scholarship of his earlier years was not entirely forgotten.

NOTES

1. R. Bagwell, *Ireland under the Tudors* (London, 1885–90), Vol. 1, p.228.
2. J. Bale, *The Vocacyon of John Bale to the Byshopperrycke of Ossorie in Ireland, his Persecutions in the same, and his Final Deliverance* (Harleian Miscellany, Vol. vi)
3. Religious Tract Society, *Writings of John Fox, Bale and Coverdale* (London, 1831), Bk.II, p.10.
4. *Ibid.* Bk.II, p.13.
5. Bagwell, *op. cit.* p.388.
6. Two unattached royal bishops have been eliminated. Christopher Bodkin was bishop of Kilmacduagh until his translation to Tuam in 1539; a William O'Shaughnessy (of whom nothing is known) was appointed by Henry to replace him but does not seem to have

taken possession as Bodkin continued to hold the bishopric *in commendam*. Possibly O'Shaughnessy acted as his suffragan. More interesting is Patrick MacMahon, consecrated as a royal bishop and intended for Ardagh. The see lay in the territory of the O'Farrells of Annaly; MacMahon was unacceptable to them and one of the sept, Richard O'Farrell, became the royal bishop. Baffled, MacMahon returned his allegiance to Rome and became the papal bishop of Ardagh. He was unable to exercise functions in the see until Mary came to the throne when he became the *de jure* bishop. He does not appear to have been a wise choice for he was eventually deprived for 'simony, non-residence, leaving his cathedral in ruins, etc.'

7. A. F. Pollard, 'Nangle, Richard', *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1885–1900), Vol. XIV, p. 32.

8. H. Montgomery-Massingberd (ed.), *Burke's Irish Family Records* (London, 1976), p. 872.

9. E. McLysaght, *Irish Families, Their Names, Arms and Origins* (3rd ed. London, 1972), p. 95. Curiously the only other Nangles who have played a prominent part in modern Irish ecclesiastical history, the scholarly James Nangle who assisted Bedell with his translation of the Bible and the pugnacious Edward Nangle of 'Second Reformation' fame, were also engaged in proselytism through the medium of Irish.

10. J. Hardiman, *The History of the Town and County of the Town of Galway from the earliest period to the present time* (Dublin, 1820). p. 272.

11. *Ibid.* p. 272.

12. R. D. Edwards, *Church and State in Tudor Ireland* (Dublin, 1935), p. 85, n.4.

13. Pollard, *op. cit.* p. 32.

14. R. Mant, *History of the Church of Ireland from the Reformation to the Revolution* (London, 1840), p. 153.

The full text of this letter reveals the strength of Browne's support for Nangle

at this period, referring to him as having been promoted to Clonfert 'by the king's majesty and you; and by commandment of the king's highness, and your good lordship, by me consecrated; although as now he is expelled, and a Rome runner, who came in by provision, supported by one McWilliam, a naughty traitorous person, governor of those parts, to whom the said Doctor Nangle showed the king's broad seal, for justifying of his authority, which the said McWilliam little esteemed, but threw it away and vilipended the same'.

15. M. V. Ronan, *The Reformation in Dublin 1536–1558* (London, 1926), p. 204.

16. *Ibid.* p. 307. Ronan's reference to the mandate for George *Cromer's* consecration is a slip of the pen; the date makes it clear that it is Cromer's successor Dowdall that is involved. Thady Reynolds was provided, in 1540, by Paul III, for the see of Kildare in opposition to Henry's choice, William Meagh. He was unable to exercise functions and surrendered his bulls to the king in the same year.

17. Bagwell, *op. cit.* p. 388.