

## Wilford, The Bishop's House

Pearl Flannery

The traveller from Mullinahone to Thurles is struck by the gaunt appearance of a large isolated house standing back some distance to the right of the road, a few miles from the village of Mullinahone. Wilford House formerly had been a residence of a branch of the Butler family. But, in my youth it was untenanted save for a herd and, indeed, remained so until it burned down several years later. The scandal of the defection of a Bishop Butler imbued the house, in the popular imagination, with a sinister character in keeping with its bleak, desolate aspect. It was known locally as "the bishop's house".

Once, when I was driving with my father along that road, he told me the house had belonged to a bishop of Cork who had left the Church, married, and later repented. The penitent was told that he would be forgiven "when the rivers flowed against the hills". On his deathbed, his sorrow was so great that his tears ran up his forehead. It was a traditional, local story of the apostasy and repentance of Bishop John Butler, 12th Lord Dunboyne.

John Butler was born at Grange in the parish of Kiltinan, Co. Tipperary in 1731, the third son of Edmond Butler, 8th Baron Dunboyne, and Anne, daughter of Oliver Grace of Shangnagh. Father John Kingston has told the story of his life<sup>1</sup>. After ordination in Rome in 1755, Father Butler served as parish priest of Ardmayle (which included the present parishes of Boherlahan and Dualla) in the archdiocese of Cashel. Subsequently, he was created archdeacon and served as secretary to his kinsman, Archbishop James Butler<sup>1 2</sup>. In 1763, when 32 years old, he was consecrated Bishop of Cork. Following the deaths of his three brothers and a nephew, he found himself, in 1786, heir to the title and extensive estates of the Dunboynes.

The peerage was an old one, stretching back several hundred years, and John Butler was the last of a long line. An ancestor, Thomas Butler, had married the heiress of the Lord of Mullingar and Dunboyne, in whose right he acquired the manor of Dunboyne in Meath. One of the Dunboyne Butlers had subsequently married a de Birmingham heiress, thereby coming

into possession of lands in Tipperary where Kiltinan Castle was the family seat until it fell to Cromwell in 1650. According to Father Kingston, Bishop John Butler was a proud man and "pride in his family and extreme concern for its perpetuation was the cause of his apostacy and disgrace". In December 1786, he resigned the see he had ruled for 23 years and requested from the pope an immediate release from his vows in order to contract marriage. In those days, communication with Rome was slow; an answer could not be expected for several months. However, in January 1787, the bishop left Cork and shortly afterwards married a distant cousin, Maria Butler, who was about 23 years old. She was the daughter of Theobald Butler of Wilford House. Her family had become Protestant to retain the Wilford estate.

Lord Dunboyne's letter eventually reached Rome. On June 9th, 1787, the Pope sent his reply by special messenger in care of the Archbishop of Cashel, James Butler (II). The pleas and warnings of the Holy Father were in vain. On Sunday, August 19th, 1787, John Butler appeared in St. Mary's Protestant church, Clonmel, to take the prescribed oaths of Abjuration and Supremecy, to recant his previous "errors", and take Communion from the curate, Mr. Dunlevy.

Lord Dunboyne and his wife retired to Dunboyne Castle, Co. Meath, where he was remembered as a benevolent landlord, generous to the poor. He abstained from attending service in the Protestant church and declined invitations to ordinations in Trinity College. After some years, he leased Dunboyne Castle and took a house in Leeson Street, Dublin (afterwards, for several years, the Convent of the Sacred Heart). He had a summer home in Balbriggan, Co. Dublin (now part of the Loreto Convent). He must have been a frequent visitor to the estate of his wife's family at Wilford. My father's grandmother, Bridget White, grew up in the neighbourhood and may, in her youth, have seen the tall, thin man with the black wig and dark patch over one eye, whose strange story was to become part of the folklore of the countryside.

Lord Dunboyne's hopes for an heir to his possessions and title were doomed to disappointment. He fell gravely ill in the spring of 1800 in his house in Leeson Street. Realising that the end was near, he entrusted to his physician two letters for immediate transmission to Dr. Troy, Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. One

informed Dr. Troy of his serious illness and his desire of repentance. The other, to be sent to the Pope, asked for absolution from all the censures he had incurred. Fearing that the letter would not reach Rome in time, Dr. Troy deputed a distinguished Augustinian, Dr. William Gahan, to visit Lord Dunboyne at once. According to Father Kingston, "it is to be assumed he reconciled the old man to the faith of his baptism."

Lord Dunboyne died on May 7th, 1800. His burial place has been the subject of dispute. Father Kingston believes that he rests in the family vault in the Augustinian Abbey in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, to which the body was removed from an earlier grave, probably after his wife's remarriage in 1801. There is a tradition that it was conveyed there by his sister.

Lord Dunboyne willed to his wife the rents from certain estates and the furniture and effects of the Leeson Street house. He left his estates in Tipperary to his heirs-at-law, the sons of his sister, Catherine O'Brien-Butler. Against the wishes of the Archbishop of Dublin, he left the Dunboyne estate in Co. Meath to Maynooth College. This last bequest led to a protracted lawsuit which was settled in 1809 by an agreement known as the Compromise. The O'Brien-Butlers retained Dunboyne Castle and the surrounding lands and Maynooth got the remainder of the Dunboyne estate (438 acres). The legacy was used by the College to establish a postgraduate course for students of the College, which has become famous as the Dunboyne Establishment.

## NOTES

- (1) John Kingston, *Reportorium Novum* (Dublin Diocesan Historical Record) Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 62-82 (1962). See also, *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society Journal*, Series 2, Vol. 20, p. 143-6 (1914).
- (2) Three Butler archbishops, two of the Ormonde line and one Dunboyne, guided the see of Cashel through the troubled years of the 18th century. Dr. Christopher Butler, a native of Garryricken near Mullinahone, Archbishop of Cashel from 1711 to 1757, lived as an outlaw for many years under the Penal Laws. Dr. James Butler (I) became coadjutor of

Cashel in 1750 and succeeded his cousin as Archbishop in 1757; he died in 1774. Dr. James Butler (II), Archbishop from 1774 to 1791, compiled Butler's Catechism. He and his predecessor made their home in Thurles which, being in Butler territory, was more hospitable to them than Cashel where the Protestant archbishop had his seat. Dr. James Butler (II) built, in 1791, the house in Thurles which is still the Archbishop's residence.

## **Kilkenny Archaeological Society Programme 1987**

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Feb. 20    | “The Callan Schism” 1869-'79 — Patrick Hogan   |
| March 20   | “Excavations at Dublin Castle” — Conleth Manning.  |
| April 5    | St. John's — Priory - Maureen Hegarty,<br>Tombs - John Bradley.  |
| May 10     | ‘Knocktopher’ — Margaret Phelan<br>Leac-an-Scail — Ellen Prendergast.<br>Kilcurl Castle — John Kirwan. |
| May 16     | Australian Reception.  |
| June 7     | “St. Canice's Library” — Rev. Robert McCarthy.   |
| June 18-27 | German Trip.   |
| July 18-19 | Bus Trip — Dublin.   |
| August 20  | “Ballinakill & Heywood” — Christopher O'Shea.  |
| Sept. 20   | “The Tholsel”, Kilkenny — Peter Farrelly.  |
| Oct. 16    | “Heraldry of Kilkenny Merchant Families” —<br>Gerald Crotty.   |
| Nov. 20    | “Thomas Shelley of Callan” — Joseph Kennedy.   |
| Dec. 13    | Christmas Lunch.   |