

Peter Walsh and the Confederation of Kilkenny

James Brennan, P.P.

The history of the Confederation of Kilkenny is familiar to readers of this Review. Less well known, if at all, is the part played in it by a Franciscan priest named Peter Walsh, especially in the controversy surrounding the conduct of the war and the making of peace and in particular the role of the Pope's representative John Baptist Rinuccini, versus the King's representative, James Duke of Ormond.

The Confederation of Kilkenny arose out of the rebellion of 1641. This began as a mainly agrarian rising of the North and of the Old Irish Catholics specifically. They were soon joined by the Old English Catholics or the Anglo-Irish, whom the tactics of the Dublin Administration drove into reluctant rebellion. The rebellion soon spread and was supported by the Catholic Bishops in Synod at Kells in 1642, declaring the war a just one, in defence of religion.

Kilkenny was chosen as the capital of the new Confederation Government, with its Supreme Council of clerical and lay membership. From its inception it brought together two main parties whose only real common ground was their Catholic religion, the Old or native Irish and the Anglo-Irish, or Old English. The Anglo-Irish were royalists in principle and were uneasy partners in a rebellion whose primary aim in the mind of the Old Irish was to shake off English rule in Ireland once and for all. To the Anglo-Irish as royalists, rebellion was repugnant to all their traditions and principles of loyalty. They looked to the King as their sovereign and accepted the Divine Right of Kings which the Stuart monarchy upheld. Their leader in Ireland, by royal appointment, was James, Duke of Ormond, who was also a staunch Protestant, with little sympathy for the Catholic cause.

The arrival of a Nuncio from Rome introduced a further element of discord: the idea of papal authority in temporal matters, and worse still its support of rebellion. There were soon two opposing sections in the Confederation, the

‘Ormondists’ and the ‘Nuncioists’, so-called. The acceptance of royal absolutism by the former meant the denial of papal authority (in temporals) which was supposedly the position of the Catholic Irish.

Thus, while the latter were preparing to prosecute the war (by now against a Parliamentary Government) to the complete overthrow of English power in Ireland, the former (the Anglo-Irish) were soon angling for peace and for a release from their anomalous position as ‘rebels’.

This aim was encouraged and facilitated by the King’s (Charles I’s) appointment of Ormond as Lord Lieutenant and Commander of the Irish forces in 1642, with the aim of negotiating peace and getting an Irish army over to England to support the monarchy in its war with Parliament — the Great Rebellion, or Civil War, which had broken out in August of that year.

Meanwhile, during 1643-44 the rebellion had spread to nearly all parts of Ireland, especially with the arrival of several military leaders from the Continent, notably Owen Roe O’Neill. This only brought the divisions in the Confederation of Kilkenny about the conduct of the war and the proposal for a truce to a new pitch. Ormond was active in promoting his peace policy. The arrival of a papal representative named Scarampi brought the religious issue to the fore and boosted the cause of the native Irish, now looking to Owen Roe as their champion.

With the royalist cause worsening in England the efforts of Ormond to secure a piece in Ireland became more desperate, and his pressure on the Confederation became more insistent.

At this point in the negotiations and controversies surrounding the issue, a new papal representative arrived in Ireland, the Nuncio, John Baptist Rinuccini. He reached Kilkenny in October 1645. From the first he took his stand on the issue of religious freedom and supported the Irish side in the war. Controversy and conflict in the Confederation soon reached a new height: Old Irish v. Anglo-Irish; clerical v. lay members; militants v. peace partisans, specifically over the Ormonde Peace of 1646.

Enter into this scene Father Peter Walsh, a member of the

Franciscan Order whose historic home was the Abbey of St. Francis in Kilkenny! Peter Walsh was born at Mooretown, Co. Kildare, probably in 1618 and possibly of an Old English family which had gone down in the world due to the repressive laws against Catholics. Nothing is known about his early life, and we only pick up his story when he went as a student and presumably a member of the Franciscan Order to St. Anthony's College, Louvain. There he was a contemporary of the famous Cornelius Jansen, the father of Jansenism, whom he admired and read, but did not follow. He had also as an Irish fellow-student Redmond Caron, who was later to join him in the Confederation in Kilkenny.

Walsh, who was obviously an able student, took his degrees in Philosophy and Theology from the famous Irish College at Louvain. At some point also he was ordained priest. He returned to Ireland in 1645/6 and was appointed Lecturer in Philosophy and Theology to the Franciscan students in St. Francis' Abbey (a small group of half-a-dozen or so, it seems).

He was described by a contemporary as "a learned man, of keen intelligence, on which he presumed much; eloquent and quick in argument; so much so that he was given to loquacity". Others spoke of him as being "vain and egotistical". (His writings bear these comments out). We are told that he liked display, rich clothes and travelling style, sporting a silver sword; not a typical Franciscan, one would be tempted to say; but then it was necessary for priests and religious to dress as laymen for safety in a time when penal laws against Catholics were still on the statute books.

Peter Walsh was clearly an ambitious and restless type who was attracted both by controversy and by political intrigue, because this satisfied his vanity (mingling with the mighty) and enabled him to show off his learning. Walsh was fond of the limelight and he found it in the controversies and conflicts of the Confederation. He also found his natural leader in the person of Ormond, who soon saw his value as a propagandist for his peace negotiations. The two men first met in Kilkenny, at the Castle, by Ormond's invitation.

It was inevitable, then, that such a man as Peter Walsh in such a place as Kilkenny in 1646 could not remain content

with his duties as a teacher of Franciscan novices. His political career began with his opposition to the Nuncio over the Ormond Peace of 1646, which was regarded as a “sell-out” to the Parliamentarians by the Irish party in the Confederation. The Nuncio had taken the Old Irish (and Catholic) side in the controversy, whereas Walsh was by now committed to the Ormondist, or Anglo-Irish Party. Meanwhile, a nationalist assembly in Waterford, at which he was present, condemned the Peace, but Walsh ignored this.

He had gained considerable notoriety in Kilkenny, particularly for his sermons (a contemporary speaks of “his scandalous sermons in St. Canice’s”) and had fallen foul of the clerical party in the Confederation. In a public sermon in his own Church of St. Francis he attacked the Nuncio’s policy and urged obedience to the supreme civil authority (i.e. Ormond’s, representing the royalist cause — desperate though this was by then with the King a prisoner of the Parliamentary forces in England).

As a result, Walsh was suspended by the ecclesiastical authorities from further preaching and deprived of his lectureship; but, protected by the Anglo-Irish lay leaders in the Supreme Council, he continued to defy the Nuncio. His own superiors took a sterner view of all this and had him imprisoned in their convent at Castledermot in Co. Kildare.

But, the Ormondist party in the Confederation was now in the ascendant and Peter Walsh emerged from custody just in time for a new phase of controversy over the truce with Lord Inchiquin, who had joined the Parliamentary forces in Ireland. Walsh, we are told, emerged from his confinement at Castledermot to “offer himself to the malignant lay part of the Council”.

All this was the occasion for renewed strife in the Confederation, with Rinuccini issuing his formal Censure against the truce. Peter Walsh took a leading part once more, preaching openly in St. Canice’s. He also produced his first book, entitled *Queries and Answers*, also called *The English Book*. This little book appeared as the product of a panel of theologians at Kilkenny who met to examine the validity of the Nuncio’s censure (of the Inchiquin truce), but it was Peter

Walsh who drew it up, and it is his thinking which it primarily represents. Indeed, he himself claimed as much for it subsequently.

The *Queries* was his first publication printed in Kilkenny by the printing press that had been set up by the Confederation. Apart from the immediate local issue (of the censure), Walsh used it to air his views on the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical authority, upholding the principle of royal absolutism (as against papal authority in the same sphere), and demanding full obedience to the King or his representatives in temporal matters. This plunged him into controversy on a wider stage and on bigger issues such as that of Gallicanism in France and the Divine Right of Kings in England, as opposed to papal authority in general.

The *Queries and Answers* was also the basis for Walsh's later and greater work on the Remonstrance of 1661 which marked the renewal of these same controversies in the period of the Restoration. (The text of the *Queries and Answers* which I have used was reprinted with that of the *History and Vindication of the Loyal Irish Remonstrance*, which was itself published in London, 1673-74. There is a good copy of this book in St. Canice's Library, Kilkenny).

The publication of the *Queries* was an important step in Peter Walsh's political career. Coupled with his preaching, it stamped him as the spokesman of the lay members of the Supreme Council in their challenge to the Nuncio's exercise of it. Rinuccini himself regarded Walsh at this stage as his chief enemy, and in his report to Rome recommended that he be cited before the Inquisition.

Finally, the publication of the book marked the complete split in the Confederation on the issue of the truce. The return of Ormond to power in November 1648 and the Nuncio's departure from Kilkenny in 1649 swung the domestic conflict in favour of the lay or Ormondist party. The Supreme Council was carrying out a programme to coerce the clergy into obedience to its policy. Pressure was brought in particular upon the Franciscans, the largest Order in Ireland at the time, of whom most were loyal to the Irish cause and had actively supported the Nuncio in

defiance of all Peter Walsh's efforts. To further this policy, an external Visitor was brought from Louvain; none other than Father Redmond Caron, Peter Walsh's former fellow-student at St. Anthony's College.

Caron was of more obvious Anglo-Irish extraction than Walsh, in fact, and had his own connections with the Ormondist group. His sudden transfer from the academic calm of Louvain to the political tug-of-war in Kilkenny and his flattering reception by the Anglo-Irish leaders there was perhaps too much for him; in any case he took the side of Ormond and the Supreme Council, like Peter Walsh before him. Inevitably, the two were now close friends and allies in the effort to coerce their 'disloyal' colleagues in the Franciscan community. Actually, when Caron (an academic and not a man of action) began to show weakness and indecision, it was Walsh who took over and led the more extreme section of the Order. Caron soon submitted to authority and was replaced by a new Visitor; Walsh continued in opposition.

By this time, however, Peter Walsh and his faction were endangered from another side; the royalist cause was collapsing. It was already lost in England after the execution of Charles 1 in January 1649. Cromwell's army was running riot on the east coast of Ireland (Aug. 1649) and Ormond, repudiated now by the Catholic Bishops, was preparing to flee to France. (The Nuncio had left Ireland in February). The majority of the Ormondist clergy had by now begun to revise their views and Walsh, with his more extreme supporters, was being attacked with greater boldness by the Nuncio's clerical following.

Kilkenny was taken by Cromwell in March 1650; the Confederation was at an end. Peter Walsh had now to leave Kilkenny and go into hiding. He was sheltered for a time by Lord Castlehaven, but the latter's departure for France in 1651 left him without a protector. At a provincial synod held in the fastness of Glenmalure he was excommunicated and declared an outlaw. He had to pass from one hiding place to another in great misery until he got safely out of the country with the connivance of the new Parliamentary government in Ireland, and reached London in September 1652. Apart

from a visit to Spain in 1654, where he was imprisoned for a time by his own Franciscan superiors, he lived in obscurity in London until the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, in the wake of which he returned to Kilkenny. With Ormond's return as well, Walsh began a new phase of controversy about loyalty in the form of the Remonstrance of 1661. This was to produce his *magnum opus*, *The History and Vindication of the Loyal Irish Remonstrance*, which was eventually published in London in 1673 — but that is another story, or a rather later chapter in the same story.

Federation of Local History Societies

The Federation has mounted a most interesting project. In partnership with the National Library, 1000 scenes photographed in the Lawrence collection are being rephotographed. The project is nationwide as the Federation of Ulster Local Studies is also involved. Local Societies have undertaken to take pictures, as far as possible, from the position in which the originals were taken. Fugi Films have generously sponsored the project and have supplied the film which is to be used. K.A.S. is involved and the Kilkenny pictures were taken by Father O'Doherty and Dr. Richard Freyne.