

The martyrdom of Bishop O'Devaney

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Henry Peel OP tells the story of the 17th century martyrdom of Bishop Conor O'Devaney and a young priest, Fr Patrick O'Loughran.

George's Hill on Dublin's Northside is best known today because it is the site of George's Hill Presentation Convent. This was the first foundation of the Presentation Sisters in the city. It dates from 1794. The site has also been identified as the place of martyrdom of the Franciscan bishop of Down and Connor, and a priest, Patrick O'Loughran, who had been arrested in Cork on his return from the continent. They were hanged, drawn and quartered on February 1st, 1612.

The bishop was in his eighties and the priest about thirty five. They are included in the seventeen Irish martyrs whose annual memorial is celebrated on June 20. There are ten separate accounts of the martyrdom which agree substantially about the details. Two of these claim to be based on the testimony of eyewitnesses. The third was written by a Franciscan from Dundalk within three months of the event. He would certainly have met people who were present. The fourth was compiled by Franciscans in Louvain from letters received from Ireland a short time after the martyrdom.

Place of execution

In 1612 George's Hill was simply a hill outside the city. There was then only one bridge over the river Liffey. It gave its name to Bridge Street which it connected with Church Street, named after the Church of St. Michan. It was over that bridge that Conor O'Devaney and Patrick O'Loughran were brought by cart from Dublin Castle to George's Hill on February 1st, 1612. The bishop is reported as saying that he was being carried to his place of execution while Christ had to carry his cross. Crowds gathered to accompany them on their journey and it is estimated that there were several thousand at the place of execution. The Catholic population of Dublin was certainly well represented. Until the last moment the prisoners were offered a pardon and preferment if they would take the Oath of Supremacy.

On arrival at the place of execution the prisoners were released from the cart to which they had

been tied lying on their backs faced upwards. Immediately, they knelt to pray. The Sheriff, surrounded by soldiers, ordered them to approach the gallows. The bishop threw off his cloak and appeared in his Franciscan habit. He had told a woman who visited him in prison to make sure that he was buried in his Franciscan habit saying that he esteemed it more than the insignia of a bishop. He requested that the priest should be the first to suffer lest the spectacle of his own suffering should weaken his resolution. The request was refused.

As he mounted the scaffold a great cry arose from the crowd. Even at this last moment he was offered his freedom and preferment if he would confess his treason and take the Oath of Supremacy. He replied that he was being put to death for his faith and not for treason.

Scaffold bathed in red glow

On reaching the top step of the scaffold the bishop prayed aloud for all who were present. He prayed for the Catholics of Dublin and of Ireland, urging them to persevere in their faith. He prayed for all heretics and for their reunion with the Church and he forgave his persecutors. He kissed the hangman's rope, placed it around his neck, drew the veil over his face and held out his hands to be tied.

It was at this moment that an event occurred which was recorded by almost all the sources and evidently was remembered by all the witnesses. The sky had been dark and overcast all that day. Now as the sun was setting the clouds parted and the scaffold was bathed in the red glow of the setting sun. While the bishop hung on the gallows the clouds closed over again.

After the bishop had been hanged the executioner cut off his head and held it up with the customary cry: 'Look on the head of a traitor'. The work of dismembering the body was completed and the crowd surged forward, seeking some relics of the martyr.

The execution of the priest followed in similar fashion. The remains were buried on George's Hill but disinterred the following night and given honourable burial. One source which claims the testimony of an eyewitness records simply that they were buried 'with other martyrs'. This may mean St. Kevin's churchyard where the memory of the martyred Archbishop of Cashel, Dermot O'Hurley was still green.

Member of the Franciscan Order

Conor O'Devany had entered the Observant branch of the Franciscan Order in the friary of Donegal sometime around 1550 when he was a very young man. This friary had been founded by the ruling O'Donnell family in 1474. It had not yet been confiscated since the royal writ did not run in the Gaelic North until after the surrender of Hugh O'Neill in 1603. Conor O'Devany was appointed bishop of Down and Connor by Pope Gregory XIII in May 1582. He was one of three bishops consecrated on May 13th, 1582 in the Church of Santa Maria dell' Anima in Rome. He returned to Ireland shortly afterwards.

Conor O'Devany was one of six bishops and a gathering of the clergy who attended a synod in Clogher in 1587 which promulgated the decrees of the Council of Trent. He was captured and imprisoned in Dublin Castle in the nervous aftermath of the failure of the Spanish Armada in 1588 but managed to obtain his release and returned to continue his pastoral care of his diocese. In the early summer of 1611 he was again taken prisoner and lodged in Dublin Castle.

The Elizabethan conquest was completed with the surrender of Hugh O'Neill in 1603. What is known as the 'flight of the Earls' followed in 1607. There was no longer any political or military focus of resistance to English rule.

Accused of treason

In 1612 O'Devany was accused of assisting Hugh O'Neill and Brian MacArt O'Neill in their treasons. The bishop admitted that he had lived in the war zone during the nine years war. He had done so because it was his duty to discharge his pastoral care and he had confined himself to doing his duty. He protested that he was being charged because of his religion and not because of any treason which he denied having committed. The bishop also denied the competence of a secular court to try him. The Chief Justice commented that Christ had submitted to being tried by Pilate to which the bishop replied that he was content to play the role that Christ played before Pilate.

Lord Deputy Chichester had thought that by making an example of a bishop and a priest he would cow the Catholics, particularly those of the Pale into religious conformity. The attempt had the opposite effect and provoked a demonstration of religious fervour in the heart of the Pale. Martyrdom was forging a link between the Old English and the Gaelic Irish. Five days after the execution Chichester reported to London 'how a titular Bishop and a priest being lately executed for treason merely are notwithstanding thought martyrs and adored for saints'.

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