The Medieval Province of Armagh

By Rev. Aubrey Gwynn, S.J.

THE MEDIEVAL PROVINCE OF ARMAGH, by Revd. Aubrey Gwynn, S.J.
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This new work of Father Gwynn's must be accounted amongst the most interesting and valuable contributions to the study of Irish in recent times, if only because it represents the first genuine attempt to grapple with the difficult problems of Irish Church history in the period that ensued between the coming of the Normans and the Reformation. To be sure the work is very circumscribed, and the reader will be disappointed by the very first sentence of the preface, in which the author describes it as essentially a commentary on the three volumes in the Public Library of Armagh, commonly known as Octavian’s register, Cromer’s register and Dowdall’s register, the three covering the period from 1460 to 1546. The author keeps pretty strictly to his self-imposed limits but, the more one studies the work, the more is it apparent that it is a pity he has done so. The whole period of the history of the Church in Ireland, between the Synod of Kells and the Reformation, is quite the best documented we have. The materials for its history are there in abundance, but they are largely unworked. In particular the very large mass of documents relating to almost every parish in Ireland which are calendared in the twelve printed volumes of the Papal Registers series, the 15th and 16th century Obligationes pro Annatis, of which many dioceses have appeared in the issues of Archivium Hibernicum, and the remainder are in transcript at Maynooth, have been largely unworked. The general historians of the Church in Ireland, and of such dioceses like Limerick and Ossory, which have had otherwise adequate accounts of them put in print, have, one and all, passed over this period with a few generalisations. Father Gwynn, therefore, in this field is a pioneer, but this volume reveals quite clearly that there is no man in Ireland better qualified for the heavy and troublesome task of writing the history of these centuries of Irish Church history in the same manner as Dr. Ryan, S.J., has done for the earlier period in his Irish Monasticism, or the late Dr. Curtis for this same time in the secular sphere. Therefore, we may reasonably regard this book as merely the first step in a new historian’s conquest, and one which is all the more difficult, because the story to be told will lack all the glamour of the golden age of monasticism as well as most of the glory of the penal times.

The book is essentially a specialist’s work, and is mainly concerned with the extraction of and comparison of numerous details concerned with the day to day work of the Archbishops in the province of Armagh in the indicated period. The province in effect was divided into two parts—that which lay inter Anglos and was concerned with those portions—mainly around Drogheda, Dundalk and Meath—and the hinterland, inter Hibernicos, where the Irish chieftains still held sway. The author shows us that, while the Archbishops—who were all English in this period—exercised a fairly normal rule by Visitation and Ordinary jurisdiction—in the area within the Pale, they were also, though to a more limited degree, able to control the Armagh portion of their own diocese (inter Hibernicos) by means of Irish Vicars, and to exercise their metropolitan jurisdiction, at least in a limited way, throughout the entire province. In respect of the comparatively limited area under their immediate con-
control, Father Gwynn traces the history of that control and of the Primates relations to the English Kings and Government with great care and in great detail, relying in the main on the entries in their registers and on the documents mentioned above, as well as on the general State papers of the period. This has been obviously heavy work, and the author is to be congratulated on the great care and industry he has brought to it. Be it said at once that the effort has been well worth while for, in respect at least of this area, we have for the first time a reasonably clear picture of affairs in the government of a medieval Irish diocese for the first time. He shows us how the Primate exercised his jurisdiction, both as the Ordinary and through his ecclesiastical courts and, in the end of the period, gives us a competent picture of the difficulties which the impact of the Reformation had on the then existing situation. This last has been to a large extent already dealt with by such works as “Dr. Dudley Edward’s Church and State in Tudor Ireland,” but Father Gwynn adds some interesting detail as well as an estimate of Primates Cromers troubles with the new dispensation and an account of the Dublin Parliament which dealt with the Statutes regarding the Royal supremacy.

Father Gwynn goes on to deal with the dioceses of the Armagh province seriatim. Here in the main he gives only an account of the episcopal succession in each, and some estimate of the various Bishops. Throughout he confines himself very strictly to documentary evidence dealing with the Bishops themselves, and with some few cases which reached the Archbishops court and were entered in his register there. Many of the details are not edifying, and it may be that here we may find the true reason why so many eminent authors have, so to speak, “shied” at this whole period. That there is no valid reason why this timidity should continue any longer, Father Gwynn’s book is in itself an outstanding proof. When seen in the perspective of the years of the general history of the Church on the Continent which followed the Great Schism, there is no reason to be unduly scandalised at events in Ireland, and every reason why we should have an understanding of the true significance of the very many far from edifying documents which appear in the Calendar of the Papal Letters for almost every diocese in Ireland at this time and, in particular, for those dioceses which lay inter Hibernicos.

If we have a quarrel with Father Gwynn it is that he did not go further and give us some general picture of the state of religion in the province during his chosen period. To do this would need an examination and assessment of a very large number of papers, indeed. Thus we have no account of the position of religion in general, of the state of government by Visitation in the Irish quarters, of observance of rule amongst the religious orders, or of the general cure of souls in such a diocese as Raphoe, where the diocesan government passed from father to son at one stage of the 15th century. The general impression left is that there was a complete breakdown of the Visitation system in its usual meaning in some at least of the Irish dioceses at this time, and a general picture of gloom in which the devotion of the Observantine Franciscans stands out like a beacon—a fact which many will regard as the reason why these devoted men were held in Ireland all through the penal times and, indeed, are still held in our own.

On the whole reading this interesting and valuable book leaves one with the impression that, until a similar work is done for the remainder of the Irish Provinces and dioceses, it will not be possible to make a general assessment for
the whole of Ireland in this troublesome period. This work will not be easy—indeed for Tuam and Cashel it will be even more difficult than the task which Father Gwynn has accomplished. For there we have no surviving registers at all and, except for one or two early MSS, like the Black Book of Limerick, very little to guide us through the vast and tangled skein of the various Papal documents and English State papers. Moreover, for some of the Irish dioceses—Cashel is an outstanding example—there has been no attempt at all to write anything approaching an adequate diocesan history, or even to make available such documents as there may be in the diocesan registries. Men like Archdeacon Seymour have here laboured alone and are the more worthy of our gratitude on that account by their preparation of materials.

There are one or two points of detail worthy of notice. Thus (pp. 240/1) the problem of the succession in Killaloe, and of the appointments of the two Bishops of Ardagh to hold it in administration in the early 16th century, is even more complicated than the author indicates. For Bishop James O'Corrin had been deprived of this See long before 1539, and there is a record of yet another O'Brien being appointed to it besides the Bishop Toireadlech (not Terence) who died in 1525 after an episcopate of 42 years. The author does not follow the later fortunes of Bishop Kirwan of Ardagh.

On the whole, therefore, a most valuable book breaking new ground with great care and scholarship. The main criticism is that it does not go far enough and that the author might have worked on a larger canvas and given us that more detailed picture of a period than which, it is quite clear, there is no one in Ireland more competent to deal with than himself.

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