

THE EARL-BISHOP OF DERRY AND THE CATHOLIC QUESTION

WHEN Frederick Hervey, Earl of Bristol and Protestant Bishop of Derry, died on July 8th, 1803, in Albano, having about him none but hired servants, Cardinal Erskine took upon himself the troublesome duty more properly to have been discharged by a British representative in Rome if there had been one, of winding up his affairs.¹

This wealthy eccentric is best known by the vivid picture given by Froude in *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, of his activities in connection with the Irish Volunteers. He drove to the National Convention of the Volunteers at Dublin in November, 1783, in an open landau drawn by six horses magnificently apparrelled in purple, with white gloves, gold fringed, and gold tassels dangling from them, and buckles of diamonds on knee and shoe: 'His own mounted servants, in gorgeous liveries, attended on either side of his carriage. George Robert Fitzgerald rode in front with a squadron of dragoons in gold and scarlet uniforms, on the finest horses which could be bought in the land. A second squadron brought up the rear in equal splendour, and thus, with slow and regal pace, the procession passed on, volunteers falling in with bands playing and colours flying, the crowd shouting: "Long life to the Bishop," the Bishop bowing to the crowd.'

The incident certainly typifies the Earl-Bishop's strange spectacular character and career, but whilst many popular articles have been written on his queer antics and conduct, he was by no means an inconsiderable man as a political

¹ Cardinal Erskine was in London from 1793 to 1801 as Papal Envoy, and took some part in the preliminary negotiations for the Concordat of 1801, between Napoleon and Pius VII.

thinker. This is to be seen particularly in his views on the problem of Ireland and Catholic Emancipation, which were at this period interlinked one with the other.

Froude regards the Earl-Bishop's affection for Ireland with suspicion, and sets down the part he played in the Volunteer movement to a love of excitement and vanity rather than to a personal interest in Ireland. Lecky goes into more detail,² and seeks some explanation for the inconsistencies of his character. He scandalized a scandalous age in his later years with his licence and libertinism, yet Wesley speaks highly of the exemplary way in which he carried out his duties as a bishop, and the political philosopher Bentham praised his learning and his personal charm. He figures in Irish history as a fatuous Quixote of politics yet his views on Ireland and the Catholic Question were about half-a-century in advance of his time.

His father was Lord Hervey, ridiculed by Pope and redeemed by the testimony of his own Memoirs. He served in Walpole's administration, first in the entourage of Queen Caroline, and later as Lord Privy Seal. He exercised a great influence over George II. The Earl-Bishop's mother was, in her youth as Mary Lepel, the reigning toast of Whites. Pope and Gay immortalised her charms in verse whilst Chesterfield gives us an inventory of her accomplishments in sober prose. From Lady Hervey her son derived the two characteristics which strongly influenced his life—a love of Continental life and an attraction towards Catholicism which disturbed his contemporaries, and which, indeed, sat oddly on a Bishop of the Established Church fifty years before Emancipation. Lady Hervey was a truly remarkable woman. Her learning was not merely of a decorative and conversational order. She took a keen interest in theological questions. This is evident from her letters to the Rev. Edmund Morris, who acted as tutor to

² *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 1892 edition, 5 vols. See principally vols. ii, iv and v.

her sons, and which were published in 1822. The following passage written in 1749, arising out of her comments on Conyer Middleton's once famous *Inquiry as to the Miraculous Powers of the Church*, reminds us of the Tractarian controversy of the next century:

'One thing only seems pretty evident to me, which is that the Fathers and the Protestants can hardly be supported together. All those things which we call superstitions and innovations of the Roman Catholics were undoubtedly the practice of the primitive Christians; and though I believe the Papal power was an innovation, yet their ceremonies and faith were to my apprehension not so. Therefore I must stick to my old opinion that the Reformation as managed by Henry VIII was warrantable according to Christianity; but that introduced by Luther and Calvin, and adopted by Edward VI, was not quite so clearly founded in authority.'

This attraction towards continental life and Catholicism is to be found also in the Earl-Bishop's daughter, Elisabeth, Duchess of Devonshire, who lived for some years at Rome, and died there in 1824. She was a great friend of Cardinal Consalvi, the Papal Secretary of State. Her stepson, the Duke of Devonshire, journeyed to Rome when he heard of her illness, and is said to have feared a conversion upon her death-bed to the Catholic Church. This, several contemporaries allege, though on no real authority, explains why he excluded all friends to whom she might in her last moments confide any troubled thoughts on the subject. Her friends, Madame Recamier and the Duc de Laval, were only admitted when she was speechless, and a few minutes before death.

Frederick Hervey was destined for the law and did get as far as entering Lincoln's Inn, when, suddenly and inexplicably, he made up his mind to take Orders in the Established Church. Although he was ordained in 1754, he remained for thirteen years without any other appointment than that of Chaplain to George III, a post to which

he was appointed in 1762, and with which was combined the lay office of Clerk of the Privy Seal. He married when he was twenty-two, Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Jermyn Davers. Although she subsequently proved a wealthy wife, through the death of her only brother without issue, both bride and bridegroom were portionless and without prospects at the time of the marriage. Thus there may well have been some elements of romance about the match, although in later years the Bishop was apt to refer to his wife unflatteringly as a 'majestic ruin.' She was somewhat older than him.

Hervey took a course of serious theological study with Dr. Conyers Middleton, whose views were, however, considered unorthodox. Some of the Bishop's sermons survived long enough in manuscript to be read by his successor, who was impressed by them. Wesley writes of 'his Lordship's useful and judicious sermon on blasphemy of the Holy Ghost.' In 1765 he went on a tour of Italy with his old school-fellow, Sir William Hamilton. In the following year he visited Corsica with Mr. Burnaby, the English chaplain at Leghorn. Burnaby's record of the visit was made use of by Boswell in his better known account of the island. But travel did not wholly occupy him. We find him looking for an appointment. On the death of Dr. Chapman he applied for the Mastership of Magdalene College; four years later he tried to become head of Corpus Christi, when Dr. Bernardeston retired. The Duke of Newcastle was annoyed by an application for the Deanery of Bristol—the first information he had received of the vacancy. In 1767 he was saved further importunity by being appointed Bishop of Cloyne during his brother's brief period as Viceroy of Ireland. The new bishop was still travelling on the Continent at the time of the appointment.

He arrived in Ireland at a very important moment in the political history of the country. During the first half of the eighteenth century it had been the custom of the

Viceroy to spend only a few weeks in Ireland each alternate year at the opening of two-year sessions of the Irish Parliaments. They made the Lords Justices who governed the source of all power and patronage. The rivalry of these understudies of sovereignty had led to embarrassments of a very serious kind. With an object of checking the power of the great nobles Chatham put a stop to viceregal absenteeism. In future, viceroys had to live in Ireland. It is said that Chatham's plans for Ireland included a union of the legislatures and a very large measure of Catholic relief. But Chatham fell ill, and his nominee, Lord Bristol, resigned. There followed the Townsend and Harcourt administrations in Ireland.

Although he began to study the social and political conditions of the country in which he found himself a bishop, Hervey stood aloof from parties, and his devotion to his pastoral duties and abstention from political intrigue are in marked contrast to his later years when he intervened so spectacularly in the politics of the era of the Volunteer Convention. Hervey did not continue long, however, as Berkeley's successor at Cloyne. In 1768 he was nominated to the rich bishopric of Derry, at the instance of Shelburne.

He entered on his new duties with vigour, carrying out many schemes and improvements in land-management, bridge-building, church-building, coal-mine prospecting, and so on. In the first year of his episcopate he carried out an exhaustive visitation of every parish in the diocese, introduced a scheme to provide pensions for the widows of deserving rectors, and in his church-building activities he aimed at making Protestantism the 'visible as well as the Established Church.'

The most curious feature of Hervey's rule was the cordiality of his relations with Catholics and dissenters. He contributed to the building of their chapels and meeting-houses, and to the support of their priests and ministers almost as freely as to his own communion. At a time when Catholic churches were barely tolerated by the Pro-

testants in the north of Irēland, the Bishop was anxious to encourage the erection of decent chapels, and when he built a new church for his own flock he would hand over the old one to the parish priest! Catholics and Dissenters together subscribed for his monument at Ickworth. The explanation for this conduct is that he accepted the Protestant doctrine of private judgment in its most logical form. The Presbyterians of Derry expressed 'their perfect approbation of the liberality of his Lordship's religious sentiments' in May, 1784. 'The liberality of sentiment which you ascribe to me,' he replied, 'flows from the rare consistency of a Protestant bishop, who feels it his duty, and has therefore made it his practice, to venerate in others that inalienable exercise of private judgment which he and his ancestors claimed for themselves.'

This disposes of the suggestion that the Earl-Bishop was either indifferent to religious divisions, or, on the other hand, in any way sympathetic towards presbytery or Catholicism, 'that silly but harmless religion.' Wesley speaks of the 'admirable solemnity' with which he celebrated the Holy Communion, and his invitation to the well-known divine, Skelton, to become his chaplain and preach his consecration sermon appears to have been prompted by a sincere admiration for the learning and piety of a writer whom he only knew through his theological works. No, in spite of his later career, there is a certain degree of consistency in his conduct. Froude draws a colourful picture of Hervey, playing the part of a medieval prince-bishop, and aiming at making himself King of Ireland. A more recent writer describes him as a precursor of Wolfe Tone, dreaming of Ireland as a nation, as a people.³ This view has passed into history, with the result that the Earl-Bishop's conduct becomes inexplicable. The fact is that he was not 'separatist' in

³ Dr. Patrick Rogers. *The Irish Volunteers and Catholic Emancipation*, 1934.

his views, but held fast to the idea of permanent union between England and Ireland. His political views were those of Chatham, and his disciple, Shelburne, who wrote that Ireland's 'independence would more likely secure its dependence on England.'⁴

His frequent residence in Italy gave him opportunities of learning much that was hidden from his colleagues at home, and from English statesmen, as to the ideas entertained at the Vatican on the one hand, and among members of the Irish Brigade in France on the other, about Ireland's future. Writing to his daughter, he said that the outbreak of war between England and France, following upon the American War of Independence, would give to Irish disaffection an opportunity which, if not counteracted by concessions and precautions, might prove fatal to the English connection. Again, writing to Sir William Hamilton, he condemns in strong terms the penal laws, and stresses the danger to the English connection which would inevitably follow a policy of no concessions.

We find the Earl-Bishop energetically trying to impress his view on responsible ministers, that the concessions embodied in the Relief Act of 1778 should be made as wide as possible. In two letters to Pery, long the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, he not only urged the importance of concession while there was still time to yield gracefully, but sketched a policy for the future. He proposed to secure the loyalty of the priesthood by vesting the appointment of the Catholic bishops and clergy of the Crown, and giving them endowment in land. 'In order to perpetuate the political orthodoxy of our Irish priests,' he suggested that seminaries for the education of priests should be established in every Irish province. Compare this plan with the subsequent foundation and maintenance of Maynooth by Government.

⁴ Lord Edmund Fitzmaurice. *Life of Lord Shelburne, First Marquis of Lansdowne*, vol. ii, pp. 360-67. 1912 edition.

' Could you at this crisis obtain the legal exercise of that silly but harmless religion which they now exercise illegally, and a revocation of that impolitic statute called the Civil Act, which has so reduced the list of the Popish nobility that all the influence of the Popish people and gentry is thrown into the hands of the clergy, I am well persuaded that the French upon their landing could not procure an insurrection of fifty Papists . . . I hope we shall be too wise to act the second part of the American tragedy, and wait until our enemy compels us to terms of moderation.' Thus the Earl-Bishop wrote to Pery from Rome in May, 1778.⁵ The French invasions of Ireland took place twenty years later.

It will be noted that Hervey is consistent in his written opinions, constructive, and unionist: by timely and gracious concession the imminent danger of rebellion and civil war can be avoided, and the ties between the two countries maintained and strengthened.

The relief afforded by the Act of 1778 proved sufficient to remove the immediate fear of a Franco-Irish alliance and to please though not entirely satisfy the Earl-Bishop. 'The countenance of the French ministers in this place upon the first intelligence of the Roman Catholic Bill,' he wrote from Rome to his daughter in the autumn of 1778, 'was the clearest proof how salutary that measure was, and that the medicine would go, if the faint-hearted physicians permitted it, to the root of the evil; but remember, dear child,

Truths would you teach and save a sinking land,
All fear, none aid you, and few understand.

The prejudices of some, the interests of others, the fears of still more, and the indolence, indifference and supineness of all barriers which even Lord Chatham found insurmountable.'⁶

⁵ Hist. MSS. Comm. Eighth Report. Appendix I, p. 197.

⁶ Vere Foster. *The Two Duchesses*, 1898, p. 58.

Litton Falkiner, in his brilliant monograph on the Earl-Bishop, to which I here acknowledge my great indebtedness, suggests that the Bishop's political principles were formed under the inspiration of the elder Pitt, 'as their later development was certainly paralleled by the opinions of Shelburne, the remarkable statesman who for a time wore the mantle, and in the divided Cabinet of Rockingham led the adherents of Chatham. Hervey's tenure of the lay office at Court had been coincident with the grand period of Pitt's career, and during Chatham's second ministry he was an official in the Premier's own department. It may well have been that this young scion of a family which had played a great part in the politics of the preceding generation, was admitted to a share in the ideas on Irish politics of the great object of his political veneration. The coincidence of their views is, at any rate, remarkably illustrated in their attitude towards Irish Presbyterianism. There is a curiously close resemblance between the language in which the great Minister in a letter to the Irish Viceroy in 1760 defended the Presbyterians as a very valuable branch of the Reformation, and a body which 'with regard to their civil principles have in all times shown themselves to be in England and Ireland firm and zealous supporters of the glorious revolution under King William and of the present happy Establishment,' and the passage in Hervey's letter twenty-five years later to Arthur Young, in which he defends the advocacy by a bishop of the Established Church of 'the anti-episcopal schismatics called Presbyterians,' by pointing out that, 'as to their political principles, I think them, from their system of parity and from their practice in most parts of Europe, infinitely more favourable to political liberty than ours.'

The motives which led a few years later to his incon-

⁷ C. Litton Falkiner. *Studies in Irish History and Biography*, 1902.

gruous apparition in the midst of the armed volunteers of Ireland, and for which the Bishop is best known, are obscure. His correspondence gives us no clue; rather does it underline the contrast between his sober and thoughtful appreciations of the political situation and the violence of his actions. Furthermore, his then recent accession to the title and estates of the Earldom of Bristol would, one would imagine, strengthen his ties with England. Falkiner gives the most adequate explanation. 'Although the extravagance of speech and action was the Bishop's own,' he writes, 'it will be found that in his policy he was not animated by any wild revolutionary notions, but rather that he was pursuing, by methods peculiar to himself, objects in which he was cordially supported by some of the most eminent of English statesmen.'

It must be remembered that the Volunteers were not a revolutionary organisation. Lord Clare asserted in 1798 that there was not a rebel among them. True, Lecky refuses to accept the statement, but Clare had grounds for his statement. Not only did Fox and Burke approve and assist the early policy of Grattan, but there was a considerable section among the English Wihgs who were prepared to act with those who went beyond Grattan in their views as to Reform. In November, 1779, Lord Shelburne defended the Volunteers in the House of Lords. Their main demand was for reform, and Shelburne was a reformer who not merely favoured an extension of the franchise among Protestants, but, like the Bishop, was in favour of the admission of Catholics to complete political liberty. In 1782 he actually mooted a Reform Bill in the Rockingham Cabinet. Next year when Flood broke with Grattan—a dramatic occasion at College Green which may be compared with the equally famous scene at Westminster when Burke and Fox severed their political connection—Shelburne's natural sympathies with the elder patriot were reinforced by the alliance which was formed between Fox and Grattan.

Flood had become a member of the English House of Commons in 1783. (It will be recalled that Castlereagh, too, had a seat in both the Irish and the English Parliaments.) In his drive for reform in the Irish house was Flood aiming to provide his English colleagues with a precedent from College Green which might be successfully relied on at Westminster? Reform was in the air. The sympathy with which the Volunteer movement and its reform policy was regarded by English political theorists is very much in evidence in Bentham's *Defence of Radicalism from Particular Experience in the case of Ireland from 1778 to 1788*. Bentham was a close friend of Shelburne's. Chatham had favoured reform. To digress: here we have one of the fascinating 'ifs' of history. If Shelburne could have obtained the support of Fox in the Chathamite ministry which he formed in 1782, and in which the younger Pitt held office, the great measure of 1832 might have been anticipated by half a century. The French precursors of revolution admired the existing English system, but this move towards more truly representational government, if made, might have had some effect on the course of the French Revolution. Or again, we to-day, might look back and see a precedent for the present conflict between democracy and totalitarianism. If this reform measure had been introduced into our constitutional system in 1782, the 'dialectic,' so to speak, of our opposition to the French Revolution and to Napoleon might have taken a vastly different form.

But is all this a satisfactory defence or explanation of Hervey's conduct? Hardly. His extravagant conduct suggests mental instability; an inherited taint which in his father had taken the form of epilepsy and which revealed itself in a temporary disorder of the brain. The Irish Viceroy, Rutland, considered that his violent language, his efforts in recruiting corps of volunteers, and the semi-regal way in which he travelled around collecting the addresses of local bodies and corporations, rendered him

amenable to law. Pitt was more cool, but feared the results if a prosecution should prove necessary, since the Bishop had become a popular hero with the Volunteers of the north of Ireland.

His character changes after 1783. Relations with his wife and family became impossible. In 1793 he left Ireland for good. But although he neglected his duties as father, husband, bishop and peer, we still find him interested in Ireland's future. It sounds odd, but there it is. In the beginning of 1798 Lord Pelham received a long letter from him giving his views on the state of Ireland. The diocese of Derry, he said, was the real centre of the rebellion in Ireland, and the present was the third paroxysm which had taken place in the last thirty years. The Hearts of Oak, the Hearts of Steel, and the Defenders were all symptoms of the same deep-seated discontent and disease; and as he had gained the confidence of his turbulent people more completely than any other member of his cloth, he could tell the ministers confidently that there were only two measures which could effect a real and radical cure. The first was a complete change in the law of tithes. He described at length the hardship and irritation the existing system produced in Ulster. 'My remedy for this evil is simple. I proposed it in 1774, and it was accepted by the Bench of Bishops assembled at the late Primate's, but—by way of experiment—confined to the diocese of Derry; but my illness and other circumstances made me drop it. This was the remedy, grounded on the English statute for inclosing parishes. . . . an Act to enable every rector and vicar, with consent of the patron of the parish and the bishop of the diocese, to exchange his tithe, or any portion of his tithe, for land of the same value, so that the exchange will only be gradual in the parish.'

But this measure must be accompanied by another great change—the payment of priests and dissenting ministers. The Presbyterians, who had a few years before so enthusiastically supported the Bishop as the great champion of

religious liberty would have been surprised at his line of reasoning. 'Is it not a shame that in any civilised country, and where there is an established religion as well as a Government, there should be teachers professedly paid by their hearers for preaching against both the one and the other? Neither Popish nor Presbyterian parson should, in my opinion, be permitted by law to preach or pray indoors, but under the Great Seal of Ireland. The Crown should be the patron of all dissenters, seceders, and schismatics whatsoever, and the Crown should either pay them, or be the cause of their being paid, and then Government would be certain of the people they appoint, and the doctrines they would teach. The payment might be made either by a direct grant, or by a county or baronial rate, or by dividing the Church funds as livings became vacant. 'This would effectually tear up rebellion by the roots. Where the treasure is, there would be the heart likewise . . . Anything so anomalous as a man in a civilised state paid for preaching anarchy, confusion and rebellion I do not conceive.' Unless an antidote is very speedily applied to the diseased body politic, that body will infallibly burst.⁸

Thus concludes the bishop's homily on 'money talks.' Subsidise popery and dissent and Government will have no more trouble! I should point out that the Bishop made a distinction between Papists and Catholics; between Catholics, that is, and Catholics who were bludgeoned by Protestant public opinion into disparaging the Pope, asserting their 'complete intellectual independence,' and—in short—attempting an impossible compromise.

The great debate on the Union could not tempt the Earl-Bishop from his continental retreat, but he authorised Lord Abercorn to place his name on an address in favour of it. This seems to be his last intervention in Irish politics. It will be noted throughout that, in spite of the

⁸ Lecky, iv, 217-219.

inconsistency of his actions, his written opinions form a coherent and intelligible whole.

His main activities during his time abroad seem to have been art collecting. By 1798 his art treasures were estimated to be worth £20,000. This was exclusive of what had been sent home. He assisted many struggling artists, including Flaxman, and the extent of his liberality was strikingly shown during the French occupation of Rome in 1798. The administrator of the army in Italy was petitioned by 343 artists to spare the collections of the Bishop, which had been seized by the French. They pointed out that he had helped many of the first artists of the day to exist during the troubled period of the war. The petition had its effect. Although the Bishop, who was detained as a prisoner at Milan, was in a state of continual terror for the safety of his pictures, General Berthier accepted the trifling ransom of £400.⁹

From 1792 to 1796 he was intimate with the notorious Emma, Lady Hamilton. His friendship with her husband continued undisturbed by this new development. When Nelson appeared on the scene the Bishop became closely attached with another lady of equivocal virtue, the Countess von Lichtenau, the mistress of Frederick William II of Prussia. However, he did retain some moral sense, since we find him upbraiding Goethe at Jena for making Werther a character in 'every way immoral and damnable,' and encouraging suicide in the *Sorrows of Werther*. The poet floored him with an attack upon the theology which drove weak-minded people to the madhouse by preaching the horrors of hell.

The general reader is more acquainted with the aberrations and spectacular antics of the Earl-Bishop than with his more serious side. It is so much easier to write entertainingly about 'a lover in lawn sleeves,' or to see him as

⁹ An English translation of the petition is given in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 68, pp. 434-435.

a mitred rebel; a prince-bishop whom Sir Walter would have loved to create. Here I have underlined his views on the interlinked problems of Ireland and the Catholic Question, but I hope I will be pardoned for turning over the sensational details of his life in search of an effective tail-piece. His remains were sent to England on board the 'Monmouth' for interment, and Mr. Elliot, the the British Minister at Naples, obliged to humour the superstitious dread with which sailors regard the presence aboard of a corpse, caused the body of this eccentric Maecenas of art and sculpture to be packed and shipped as an antique statue. Such grim felicity!

ROBERT AUBREY NOAKES.