

Father William Fitzgerald (1836-1899) –Fenian supporter, Trappist monk, Poet.

In the Primary Valuation of Ireland 1852 William Fitzgerald was recorded as the occupier of holding 19B in the townland of Bosnetstown.¹ The records show that William was a tenant of Lord Lisle's on an extensive farm of almost 128 acres, with values of £109-15-0 on the land and £5-5-0 on the buildings. There was some readjustment to his holding in the years that followed because by 1864 it had been reduced to almost 98 acres.² However, by that time, like many of his neighbours, he had managed to negotiate a 21 year lease with the landlord, Lord Lisle, dating from 25 March 1863.³ Many of the smallholders in the townland only had yearly tenancy on their farms but those with more substantial farms held their farms under 21 year leases. Leases provided tenants with a greater measure of security and enabled them to invest in improvements on their farms.

By 1880 the names of the landlord and the occupier of the Fitzgerald farm had changed. Michael Hayes had 'married into' the Fitzgerald farm⁴ and was now the registered occupier, following his marriage to Catherine Fitzgerald. The townland of Bosnetstown, as part of Lord Lisle's bankrupt estate, had been sold in seven separate lots in the Landed Estates Court in 1869. Thomas Carroll bought Lot No. 13, which comprised 220 acres including the Fitzgerald holding, for £5,100.⁵

William Fitzgerald was married to Mary Slattery who may have been a member of the Slattery family, neighbours in Bosnetstown.⁶ William and Mary had twelve children and their second child, William, was born on the 24 March 1836. Young William benefited from the national school system which was introduced in Ireland in the 1830s. Patrick Murray's school, famous for English Literature and Grammar, was housed in the upper storey of the Market House in Kilfinane at the time so it is likely that William was able to avail of this opportunity for further education. But he also witnessed the devastation which the Famine wreaked on his native townland between 1845 and 1851.

Clearly, whole families in Bosnetstown were wiped out during that bleak time in Irish history. In May 1846 Rev George Wren, Rector of Kilfinane Church of Ireland, reported to the Relief Commissioners in Dublin that there were 47 destitute families in the townland of Bosnetstown-a total of 235 individuals only 51 of whom were able to work.⁷ Given this statistic it is not surprising to learn that the number of houses dropped from 89 to 51 between 1841 and 1851 and that the population showed a decrease of almost 45%.⁸ Like many of his contemporaries this experience was likely to have influenced William's political views in later life. He was ordained a priest in 1859 and the family biographer, Laurence Fitzgerald, believed that he was probably ordained for the Foreign Missions in England.⁹ According to him, William Fitzgerald's name does not appear in any of the Irish Church Registers nor is there any record of his having been ordained in the Diocese of Limerick.¹⁰



In 1859 while William Fitzgerald made his ordination vows another Irishman, James Stephens, was travelling the country swearing in members to a newly-formed, oath-bound, secret society, the Irish

¹ <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/coshlea/bosnetstown>

² Cancellation Books for Bosnetstown, Barony of Coshlea in the Valuation Office, Dublin

³ Landed Estate Court Rentals 1850-1885, National Archives of Ireland

⁴ Cancellation books.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Fitzgerald, Laurence. *The Musings of a Monk by the Rev. William Fitzgerald* edited, given a title and foreword written by Laurence Fitzgerald (Melbourne, 1981)

⁷ RLFC 3/7/2304, National Archives, Dublin

⁸ Census 1841, Census 1851

⁹ Fitzgerald, Laurence. *The Musings of a Monk* (foreword)

¹⁰ *ibid*

Republican Brotherhood or the Fenians as they were also known.¹¹ The leaders of this new movement, which quickly gained a considerable following in the United States, Britain and Ireland, promoted the principle of armed insurrection as the only means of achieving Irish independence. However, intense opposition to the



Fenian movement came from Paul Cullen the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin.

Archbishop Cullen, Ireland's first Cardinal and a supporter of constitutional politicians, was at this time wholeheartedly engaged in elevating the culture and influence of the Roman Catholic Church to a pivotal position in Irish society and throughout the British Empire. In addition he shared the Church's horror of the destabilising effects of revolution on society and the threat thus posed by the Fenians to the Church itself. Thanks to the opposition of Cardinal Cullen Fenians everywhere found themselves condemned by Papal constitutions and pronouncements.¹²

However, Cullen's efforts to deny the Fenians clerical support had mixed results. Many priests were noted champions of the Fenian cause and of the struggle for tenant rights and later again in the War of Independence. For example, the Ardagh-born Father Robert Ambrose, as a teenager had taken part in the Fenian Rising in West Limerick in 1867, as a young priest had vigorously defended the evicted tenants of Glensharrold and as Parish Priest of Glenroe (1904-1926) had provided support and sustenance to members of the East Limerick Flying Column.¹³ Father William Casey, who was a lifelong and tireless champion of victims of landlord injustice in Abbeyfeale, was born in Kilbeheny in 1840 and therefore a contemporary of William Fitzgerald's.¹⁴ As a youth William Casey would have been well acquainted with Fenianism since his home parish of Kilbeheny is situated just approximately ten miles from Kilclooney Wood. Kilclooney Wood was the location of the last battle of the Fenian Rising in 1867 where the celebrated Fenian activist Peter O'Neill Crowley was shot dead.¹⁵



The significance of the Fenian Rising lay in the sequel to the event and this is where Fr. William Fitzgerald's intervention was noted. In Manchester three Fenians, Allen, Larkin and O'Brien were hanged for accidentally killing a policeman in an attempt to rescue their leader, Colonel Kelly, from a prison van. In the same year another rescue attempt at Clerkenwell by Fenians involved an explosion in which more than twenty people were killed.¹⁶ These incidents evoked anti-Irish sentiment in Britain but the executions of the three Irishmen (known

¹¹ Lee, Joseph. *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918* (Dublin, 1973) pp. 54-60

¹² *ibid*

¹³ O Duinnin, Nioclás. *The Fenian Parish Priest of Glenroe: Fr Robert Ambrose PP (1850-1926)* (Clo Abha na gCaorach, 2009)

¹⁴ Collins, Marian. *Galtee come West The Story of Fr. William Casey (1840-1907)*

¹⁵ *The Cork Examiner* 2 April 1867

¹⁶ Beckett, J.C. *The making of modern Ireland 1603-1923* (London, 1966) p 361

as the Manchester Martyrs), with dubious convictions, roused public opinion to an extraordinary fervour in Ireland and among the Irish in Britain. The focus of attention now turned to the many Fenian prisoners (including leaders like O'Donovan Rossa) languishing in extremely harsh conditions in British prisons in England and Western Australia. The Amnesty Association was set up to campaign for amnesty for these men and quickly gained considerable support. Meetings were held at various locations around the country, many of them places of historical or Fenian significance. One of those meetings was held at Kilclooney Wood on 15 August 1869.¹⁷

It was at this public meeting in Kilclooney Wood that Fr. William Fitzgerald was called upon to address the crowd. His words revealed his absolute conviction of the righteousness of the Fenian cause and his fearlessness in promoting it. He argued that in view of the sentiments roused by the events at Manchester and Clerkenwell and of the threats to Britain from enemies in Europe and America the time was ripe for British Prime Minister Gladstone and the Liberal M.P. Bright to release Fenian prisoners. Defiantly he stated "I am not afraid or ashamed as a Roman Catholic priest, to be here vindicating the rights of the people's honest friends to be set free the thralldom which they are enduring for their efforts at the removal of universally acknowledged wrongs, and for honouring those who are suffering death in the honest vindication of right."¹⁸

Father Fitzgerald told the listeners that the Fenian martyrs did not require prayers for their salvation only for greater glory. Clearly, he regarded Peter O'Neill Crowley as one of those heroic martyrs whose motivation to act was the memory of the flogging that was meted out to his United Irishman uncle, Fr Peter O'Neill. Father Fitzgerald proposed that Kilclooney Wood should "be henceforth designated Kilcrowley Wood in honour of one of the most purely unselfish of men that has ever lived in this tide or time".

He chided the British Prime Minister for speaking of peace while "O'Donovan Rossa has his hands ironed behind his back and compelled to crawl like a centipede to lick up some morsels of bad porridge not good enough for a dog; and this treatment then supplemented with twenty one days on bread and water."

In his clear exhortation to the crowd to join in the armed struggle he quoted the words of the poet Byron-

Hereditary bondsmen, know ye not,

Who would be free themselves must strike the blow.

On a positive note he acknowledged the disestablishment of the Protestant Church (as the State Church) and he expressed the hope that Orange and Green together would carry the day.¹⁹

On 13 November 1869 another demonstration was organised at the same venue headed by Fr Fitzgerald who once again addressed the huge crowd. One newspaper report claimed that 30,000 people attended. This time his tone had changed. He had given up the hope that the political prisoners would be liberated by Mr Gladstone. He asked the people to be calm and peaceable and told them that he would not be heading up the Amnesty meetings again. He even suggested that perhaps the Amnesty meetings should cease. Clearly, he had a change of heart in relation to the Fenian movement and it is not known what influenced this change.²⁰

In 1874 Father William entered the Trappist Monastery of Mellarey in France.²¹

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, Laurence *Musings of a Monk by the Rev. William Fitzgerald*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*



Cistercians, also known as Trappists, are committed to a strict monastic life of silence and penance in reparation for sin and for the salvation of souls. Father William received the religious habit in 1875 and took simple vows in 1877.

Why did he become a Trappist monk? Laurence Fitzgerald, a descendant of the Fitzgerald family had this to say on that matter, *“Papers in the archives in Dublin refer to Fr. Fitzgerald as a suspended priest. One may surmise that the hierarchy suspended him because of his outspokenness on Irish national politics, and perhaps imposed on him restraint on further utterances. What better way to comply than by taking the habit of the Trappist monk with the accompanying observance of seclusion and silence”*.²²

The manuscripts of Fr. Fitzgerald’s poems (edited by Laurence Fitzgerald) which survive are testament to his erudition and also to his playful sense of humour. The amnesty speech delivered by him in Kilclooney Wood on 15 August 1869 contained many apt literary references. His poems contain references to biblical tracts, to mythology and to historical events and legends. Laurence Fitzgerald believed that two of the poems, *The Bivouac* and *The Kilfinane Mother-in-law*, were written while he was a secular priest and that the other poems were composed while he was a Trappist monk. However, in *The Bivouac* Fr. Fitzgerald creates a strong contrast between the image of a semi-permanent military camping site suggested by the title and the actual depiction in the body of the poem of a holy place set in a Continental landscape

“a glen on a mount which tall cypresses cover

Fair olives embosom”

where the senses are soothed by the *“smells aromatic”* of *“spikenard and balm”* and

“the waterfall’s music, the organ there playing,

*Resounds through its vault in the night’s solemn moon”*²³

This is hardly the voice of an angry Fenian supporter or of a disgruntled suspended priest but instead it could be interpreted as the voice of a man who has wholeheartedly embraced the monastic life.

“In Nature’s own temple, so holy and calm.”

In the poem entitled *Mellarey* Fr. Fitzgerald invoked the influence of bees in the story of the Trappist monks. It was a bee who led the Norman monks to Mellarey where the monastery stood. It was the simple but industrious life of the queen bee which inspired the reform of the order of Benedict

“Her hospitality did tell the model Trappistine”

The Breton monastery of Mellarey is analogous to the busy bee-hive sending out workers all over the world to *“the dry sand of Algiers”*, to *“the roar of Tyber’s waves”*, to *“Erin’s hills”*, and to *“the mighty Michigan.”*

The *Kilfinane Mother-in-law* is a humorous poem which recounts the banishment of Old Nick the devil from Kilfinane. Unlike some of the other poems it has a distinct rhyming pattern which suggests that it may have been written for entertainment purposes.

²² ibid

²³ ibid

*Since then ugly Nicholas has never
Inside of the parish set hoof;
Its people he thinks are too clever
To live with them under one roof.
And when the folks die in Kilfinane
No bolts of Hell's gate will he draw
But shout "here ye shan't put a shin in
Go up to my people-in-law"*

It is believed that Fr William Fitzgerald spent the remainder of his life in the monastery in Mellarey in France. He died in 1899. His sister, Catherine Hayes of Bosnetstown, was informed of his death by one of the monks at Mount Mellarey, County Waterford.²⁴

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²⁴ *ibid*