

## **"An Irish Ecclesiastical By-way - *the rise and fall of a minority Christian Tradition*"**

-----

Talk given by the Bishop of Clogher, the Rt Revd John McDowell to branches of the Church of Ireland Men's Society in St John's Malone on Tuesday 22 October 2013.

-----

I have to confess that I was at a bit of a loss knowing what to talk about tonight. As you are all too aware I have spoken at CIMS gatherings before but these have been preaching engagements and it is always relatively easy to find a devotional subject that is worth exploring.

Frankly, I can't imagine that my general stock of knowledge is of any interest to anyone other than myself. I am not a scholar in the strict sense of that word- someone who has devoted a sizable part of his professional life in pursuit of a closely defined academic interest.

I did begin a PhD in theology about sixteen years ago, and got a good deal of the reading done for it, but had to abandon it on becoming rector of S. Mark's, Dundela. The PhD was to be on a very influential Victorian theologian called FD Maurice, who was a truly remarkable thinker and activist, but he is not very easy going and certainly not a suitable subject for a cosy fireside chat in late October.

The last thing I wanted to talk about was myself, as I am still in that transition phase from being an incumbent to being a Bishop and haven't quite worked out exactly what I am meant to be doing yet. As a woman from Irvinestown said to me last year (and I am determined to take it as a compliment) "We never thought that we would ever have such an ordinary Bishop".

Apart from the Theology in TCD my only other areas of academic interest have been Business Studies at the London School of Economics and History (largely medieval) at Queen's, Belfast). I am sure that the last things you want to hear about are economics, which we hear far too much about than is good for us already, or the latest theory about the Lordship of Ireland in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Instead I have chosen something even more obscure (very much a by-way) but one which has a personal element to it, as everything must these days. If I could first set the scene.

The time and place where I want to begin my story is in France, in fact on the eastern side of Paris, on the 14 July 1789. On that day, as you probably know, a large crowd of citizens attacked the Bastille, a royal fortress in the Faubourg St. Antoine.

Their principal aim was to secure arms for their fight against the forces of the *ancien regime*. In the process they butchered the Governor of the castle and released the handful of prisoners incarcerated therein and proceeded to dismantle the fortress stone by stone rather as a later crowd would do with the Berlin Wall.

This act used to be thought of as the beginning of the French Revolution and it is, of course, still a national holiday in France. It can probably more accurately be called the moment when the opposition to the regime and the person of Louis XVI passed from the constitutional politicians to the mob.

The reaction to these events in Britain and Ireland was mixed. The radicals by and large were in favour. The young(ish) Wordsworth proclaimed that "bliss was in that dawn to be alive, and to be young was very heaven". He later changed his mind.

In Ireland the real radicals (who would later come together to form clubs of United Irishmen) mostly Presbyterians and Roman Catholics but often led by disaffected Anglicans found inspiration in the Revolution for their ideals of self-government for Ireland and separation from Britain.

When the dust had settled and the course that the revolution in France was going to take became clearer- and especially after the execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1793 and what became known as “The Terror” under Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety when 2600 were guillotined in Paris alone - reaction in Britain became more and more hostile.

This adverse reaction was best articulated by a remarkable Irishman - Edmund Burke - in a book which made him famous beyond the small circle of parliamentarians - his “Reflections on the Revolution in France”. The book was in the first instance a response to a sermon given by a Congregationalist clergyman extolling the virtues of the Revolution and hoping for its replication in England.

Burke’s book is a wonderful and still wonderfully readable warning against violent and sudden breaks with the past and outlines the subtle yet deep strengths of the British Constitution and, incidentally, it is also a strong defence of the Established Church and of the Anglican method. However it is not on this mainstream response that I wish to concentrate.

For there were other explicitly religious responses to the French Revolution. During the course of the revolution the authority of the Church had been greatly undermined, and although some clergy (notably the Abbe Sieyes) had a hand in the Revolution many had been executed by the revolutionaries and the Church, insofar as it survived at all, was made totally subservient to the interests of the State.

A statue to the god of Reason was erected in the Cathedral of Notre Dame and this militant side to the Enlightenment was exported all over Europe during the Revolutionary Wars. The French Revolution and its aftermath was simply the most cataclysmic event that Europe had endured since the Wars of Religion one hundred and fifty years earlier.

As you might imagine many people in Europe interpreted what had happened as a warning from God and a sign of the times. There was a tremendous upsurge in speculation about the Last Things. Indeed it was around this time that a Church of Ireland clergyman, the curate of Delgany, in the diocese of Glendalough, began to call for a separation of true believers from the world and from the corrupt Churches, in readiness for the final Rapture and being taken up into heaven. That clergyman was called JN Darby and he helped found the sect known as the Christian Brethren, better known to us by their nickname of Plymouth Brethren. However I don’t want to talk about them either.

The French Revolution and its aftermath had some less extreme reactions such as the Oxford Movement in the Church of England which sought to distance the Church from the State and emphasised the Church as a self governing divine body not at the mercy of politicians but ruled by Bishops and ancient Councils. Its early members were called Tractarians after the now almost unreadable Tracts for the Times. It was in one of these that Newman wrote to the Bishops “Gentlemen, magnify your office”.

The group of people who I want to talk about tonight also had their origins at this time and it this rather apocalyptic atmosphere.

In 1819, four years after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, but with Europe still in turmoil, a man called Henry Drummond bought a house in Albury, Kent, in the south east of England. Drummond was a wealthy man, a banker like his father but raised in the home of his mother’s father, Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville.

He had been educated at Harrow and Oxford and had become an MP in 1810. He was deeply religious before it was tremendously common for the upper middle class to be so in the reign of Victoria. He had a particular interest in the fate of the Jews and was part of a group who at this time had tried to persuade Tsar Alexander I to establish a Jewish homeland in the Crimea.

The great nineteenth century historian and prophet Thomas Carlyle wrote of him:

*“He was a man of an elastic and pungent and decisive nature; full of fine qualities and capabilities,- but well nigh cracked with an enormous conceit of himself, which both as pride and vanity seemed to pervade every fibre of him and render his life a restless inconsistency; that was the feeling he left in me; nor did it alter afterwards, when I saw a great deal more of him,- without sensible increase or diminution of the little love he first inspired in me.”*

Drummond was also like so many religious men of his time consumed by interest in the Last Things and the end of the world and applied he himself very systematically to the study of those subjects.

However finding himself unable to come to satisfactory conclusions he set about organising between 1826-1830 what became known as the Albury Conferences.

The way he went about this will seem very naïve to the modern mind but you need to remember that this all happened before any methods of Biblical Criticism had been pioneered in Germany and long before they had become widespread even in academic circles in Britain or Ireland.

The Albury Conferences studied the Bible and tried to make a judgement about which prophecies had been fulfilled already in Jesus Christ and in the history of the Church to date. They also examined the political and social changes arising chiefly from the French Revolution and tried to see how these might be seen as fulfilment of the events described in the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to S. John the Divine, the final book in the New Testament.

To assist him in this task Drummond assembled interested people from many denominations but by far the majority ( 44) were Anglicans. These included his own rector the Revd Hugh McNeile originally from Ballycastle, and renowned as one of the great Evangelical preachers of his day, and another Irishman called Wilson who eventually became the Bishop of Calcutta.

Laymen were also involved, including Spencer Perceval the son of the only British Prime Minister to be assassinated ( 1812) and Lord Mandeville, who later succeeded his father as the Duke of Manchester. These men were not *sans culottes*.

The Conferences were also attended by one of the most remarkable Churchmen of his generation; Edward Irving the Presbyterian minister of the Caldeonian Chapel in London's Hatton Garden- of whom more a little later.

Following their protracted study of Scripture and the signs of the times the Conferences concluded that:

- the present age would not end quietly but by a terrible cataclysmic judgement and the destruction of the visible Church just as had happened to Israel in AD 70
- the most severe judgement would fall on the Churches and people of Western Christendom as having been the most highly favoured branch of the Church and who had not suffered persecution for many years
- this would be followed by 1000 years ( ie a millennium) of peace
- they published their belief that a great period of 1260 years had started in the reign of the Emperor Justinian ( 482-565) and had ended with the French Revolution when the vials of Revelation 4 had been poured out. The Lord would return shortly.

The conclusions of the Conferences would have remained just that- the conclusions of yet another conference- had it not been for the coming together of other happenings and people to make something much more concrete of them.

### **Charismatic Roots**

When the last of the five conferences was meeting reports arrived, probably through Edward Irving, of prophetic utterances occurring in tongues in a small Presbyterian Church in Rosneath in Scotland.

The utterers were two quiet saintly sisters Isabella and Mary Campbell. At exactly the same time further instances of speaking in tongues occurred in a congregation in Port Glasgow again among a family- Margaret, James and John McDonald. The apparently miraculous healing of Margaret Campbell who had been on her death bed accompanied these manifestations.

In an age such as our own in which Pentecostalism is a commonplace phenomenon this may not seem very impressive, but the fact that they happened in the extraordinarily sober, restrained and disciplined Calvinism of the Church of Scotland is very remarkable. The manifestations were unreservedly condemned by the Kirk.

All of these things interested Drummond and his friends as possible signs of the further fulfilment of prophesy ( especially of Joel 2 which promises that the Spirit of the Lord will be pored out on all flesh...) and the Conference sent two of their number ( Cardale and Taplin ) to investigate.

In their reports home they described a prayer meeting they had attended in Port Glasgow, They concluded with these words; things which from their point of view indicated the authenticity of the people involved:

*“They have no fanciful theology of their own; they make no pretensions to deep knowledge; they are the very opposite of sectarians, both in conduct and in principle (meaning they had no desire to establish some sort of sect of like minded people); they do not assume to be teachers; they are not deeply read; but they seek to be taught of God, in the meditation of his revealed word”.*

Some time after this, perhaps unsurprisingly, manifestations of speaking in tongues began to occur at prayer meetings of Edward Irving’s Scottish congregation in London. He forbade them at first in the main services of the Church where they had also begun to appear, but finding that they happened anyway he settled for controlling them.

Irving himself was, as I suggested earlier a most remarkable man; a friend of Carlyle and F D Maurice and admired greatly by the Foreign Secretary Canning. He was a preacher of brilliance whose sermons can still be read and made sense of despite a rather rhetorical style. On a lecture tour of Scotland in 1828 he was able to pack halls at 6.00am in the morning to hear his lectures on the Book of Revelation( what else!).

Here is a contemporary description of him:

*“He was never ungenerous, never ignoble; only an enemy could have called him vain....His pleasure in being loved by others was very great...but this he had in check at all times. To trample on the smallest mortal or be tyrannous...was never at any moment Irving’s turn; no man that I have known had a sunnier type of character, or so little of hatred of any man or thing. Noble Irving...generous, wise, beneficent...”*

He was what today we would call a charismatic figure, whose scholarship, preaching ability and energy drove forward every movement with which he was associated. But he died young (at the age of 42) in 1834 through overwork and heartbreak.

All of his four children died in infancy or childhood and he was finally excommunicated from the Kirk and deprived by the General Assembly because of certain beliefs he had about the Christ’s human nature.

However such was his influence on the religious movement which had its origins in the Albury Conferences that it is often (erroneously) called by his name “ Irvingite” even by so great a scholar as Henry Chadwick.

But now events were gathering pace and the same Pentecostal phenomena were being reported in a Roman Catholic parish in Bavaria and in Canada. As the Albury group sent out people to investigate these also it became clear to them that everything might soon descend into chaos and disintegrate unless some order and authority was brought to bear.

So at one of the regular prayer meetings held in Albury, Drummond, believing himself to be under the power of the Spirit called another man called Cardale to be an apostle and over the next few months, again believing themselves to be under the Spirit’s guidance, the Conference reinstated what they believed to be the biblical offices of angel, apostle and evangelist. [Angel referring to its use in Rev.1&2 which we would now usually understand as being a literary convention in apocalyptic writing]

The angels, functioning, as bishops then ordained priests so that the sacrament of the altar could be celebrated.

On the face of it this may look like just another Pentecostal sect but what marked it off as different was the clinging to ancient orders and the extreme reverence and order with which things were done. They understood holy faith and holy order to be inseparable.

In time the number of apostles reached twelve and they were then “separated” for their task. Here are their names and backgrounds;

In order to maintain a symbolic consistency with the Old Testament the whole world was divided into the tribes of Israel according to what was believed to be their defining national characteristics and each was assigned to an apostle e.g.

Cardale was the apostle of England: Drummond was the apostle of Scotland and the Protestant cantons of Switzerland: Armstrong (the Irishman) was the apostle of Ireland and Greece – thus anticipating by almost 200 years national propensities for financial bailouts-.

The group, who at this stage had no real name, set about other tasks.

Up until about 1839-40 each group who met for worship did so according to the liturgical tradition of the majority of those attending- very often either Presbyterian or Anglican. However the apostles set about a study of liturgy and devised a series of services heavily influenced by Anglicanism and Orthodoxy.

Here is their Book of Liturgy which is pretty comprehensive and in places flamboyant.

In order to make clear to the world what they believed God had called them to do, they published what they called “The Great Testimony”. This document was then sent to three people- the Pope, the Emperor of Austria and the King of France- the three great temporal rulers of the day. It was later sent to many other people.

The principal objective of the Great Testimony was the restoration of the unity of the Church in readiness for the end times and the return of the Lord.

That is another important distinction between this body and other Pentecostal sects; they never saw themselves or spoke of themselves or intended to become a separate denomination. They simply described themselves as people “gathered under apostles to do a work of the Lord” within the Universal Church.

Needless to say however the strangeness of what they believed said and did forced them out of other denominations. But still they did not give themselves a denominational name and the name by which they are known in history came about as an accident.

And it came about in this way. The emergence and development of the movement coincided with the only national census Britain that ever enquired in to citizen’s religious activities. Invariably those associated with the movement described themselves as congregations gathered under apostles, but to the question “To which Church do you belong” they put “The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” and a clerk at the Census Office assumed that the words “One and Holy” were adjectives qualifying the nouns “Catholic and Apostolic”- so they became officially known as “The Catholic Apostolic Church”.

Only thirty-two congregations responded to the census of 1851 but we know from other sources that there were at least three times as many. The census recorded 7437 members of whom just over 6000 were communicants and living mostly in the South East of England- about 50% previously Anglican, 30% non-conformists and 12% Roman Catholics.

They experienced some spells of growth spreading to Europe, the USA and Canada but they were beset by a number of crises.

As with many Pentecostal groupings it soon became unclear where authority lay- in the inspired words of prophesy as uttered in Church or in the office of apostles.

The apostles decided that it lay with them but one of their number withdrew in 1840 and was never replaced which undermined their sense of permanent authority.

Also the apostles had found it impossible to evangelise 12,000 from each of their national groupings which they had thought necessary to happen (Rev 7) before Christ's return. They tried to re-energise the movement by introducing a liturgy of "sealing in the Spirit" which the apostles administered to all adult members. They also sealed a number of C of E bishops who sympathised with their aims.

But the third crisis was the most serious of all as the apostles simply began to die off. They believed themselves to be called directly by the Lord and there were no replacements. Effectively what they decided was that they had failed in their vocation to convince the Church of the danger it was in and that it was not in a fit state to receive the returning Lord.

In other words they allowed the movement to pass slowly into extinction. The first apostle to die was Armstrong, the apostle to Ireland, in 1879, and as the others got older they were unable to travel and could only give advice by post.

The ceremonial was reduced, sealing ceased and there were no further ordinations –what in Catholic Apostolic literature is interpreted as "the silence in heaven for thirty minutes". New members were only admitted by birth and marriage.

The last apostle-Wodehouse- died in 1901 aged ninety-one- interpreted as "the covering of the ark".

The last Angel died in 1960 and the last priest- a man called Davson- in London in 1971. There is still today a very small number of Catholic Apostolic lay people who meet each week to say the Litany at the Church in Little Venice, Paddington, London. As priests died members were told to go to their local Anglican Church. Their cathedral in Gordon Square is today used by Forward in Faith under a lease with the Trustees of the Catholic Apostolic Church.

There were two churches in Ireland-one in Dublin and the other in Belfast on the Cromwell Road, off Botanic Avenue. When the Belfast Church closed in the late 1940's the premises were offered to the Church of Ireland Chaplaincy at Queen's and were used for a number of years by Canon Edgar Turner, then chaplain. The communion plate of the Belfast congregation is now used in the parish of S. Dorothea, Gilnahirk. The Church was given back to the CA Trustees when the new Church of Ireland chaplaincy building was acquired in Elmwood Avenue and the building was deconsecrated and was subsequently use as a rehearsal studio by the Arts Theatre in the days when it had a resident professional repertory company.

The Belfast Church had opened in 1886 and its last priest, a most saintly man called Milward, died in 1946 at his home in Sicily Park.

The last people to be married in the Church in Belfast were Elizabeth Laws McQuillan and William James Frederick McDowell, my mother and father and the last two children to be baptised were Robert Gyle McDowell and Frances Jane McDowell my older brother and sister.