

9 Into Controversies

After I had become a Fellow of TCD and a happily married man in 1935, my interests for a while had been almost entirely in academic and family affairs but gradually I was drawn into politics. My first public sally was prompted by an attack on 'compulsory Irish' in a speech by the Headmaster of my old school, Bishop Foy, in 1937. His objection to compulsion was reasonable enough but when he compared Irish with the language of the aborigines of Australia — without being familiar with either — I could not stomach it. I wrote to the *Irish Times* condemning his ignorant strictures and expressing regret that teachers and pupils in Protestant schools were discouraged from successfully teaching and learning Irish by prejudiced parents and school authorities. At that time many of the older generation of Protestants considered that attempts to revive Irish as the national language were unjust, although some of the protagonists of the revival, such as Douglas Hyde, had been Protestants. It was strange to me how much bitter feeling this caused, not knowing then that language reforms in Norway, Greece and elsewhere had sometimes caused riots and even deaths. (Much later my own attempts to revive the classical pronunciation of Greek roused some milder antipathy.) Stranger still, several of the bitterest enemies of the language denounced it from almost total ignorance, as J. P. Mahaffy had so notoriously done in the past, thereby incurring long lasting odium for TCD.

As in so many controversies of that kind in Ireland, the fundamental argument and the ensuing fury centred on questions of motive rather than of principle. Not a few Protestants suggested that the linguistic movement was a subtle move by militant Catholics to undermine their religious beliefs. Others deplored its probable effect on relations with Britain. Others more justifiably feared that classical and modern

languages would suffer, as in fact they did.

When I ask myself why I spent valuable research time on writing a letter about a headmaster's prejudice, I find three reasons. First, it was an academic objection to a derogatory pronouncement on linguistics, always a favourite study of mine, by an ignoramus. Secondly, ancestral loyalties were involved: a collateral ancestor, William Bedell, whose name I inherited, did much to promote and preserve knowledge of Irish in TCD and in his diocese of Kilmore. Thirdly — and this is what put me onto a slippery slope towards active politics — I believed that it was utter folly for Protestants to incur further dislike by not co-operating in reviving our rich and honourable language. We already had a large enough burden of historical odium to bear without adding to it. The sensible policy, as I saw it, would be to learn and even to excel at it, as some Protestants had done, or at least to encourage their children to learn Irish. It was unforgivable just to discourage them.

This set me thinking about the morale and status of the religious minority in the twenty-six counties. Plainly morale was low. For most Protestants the break with Britain and the Treaty of 1922, after the preceding reign of terror, had been like a severe surgical operation whose debilitating effects continued for years later. In 1922 so despondent were the leaders of the Church of Ireland in the twenty-six counties that the General Synod sent a deputation to see Michael Collins and W. T. Cosgrave asking whether Protestants were 'to be permitted to live in Ireland' or 'if it was desired that they should leave the country'. What pusillanimity for representatives of what W. B. Yeats proudly called 'the people of Burke and of Grattan'! In fairness it should be remembered that in those days the General Synod was largely dominated by laymen who were landowners and British ex-servicemen, 'the Colonels', a class that had suffered most severely in the previous years. If plainer Protestants had been as influential in it as they are now, I doubt that such a cowering petition would have been sent. Collins and Cosgrave gave a generous reassurance. What their inner feelings were, one can only guess — contempt or pity?

The sense of separation from Britain became sharper when Mr de Valera ousted the Free Staters in 1932 and proceeded to launch the 'Economic War', the External Relations Act, and the Constitution of 1937. And in 1936 the abdication of King Edward VIII, which de Valera had adroitly used for diminishing the authority of the British Crown in the Free State, had increased the gloom of ex-unionists in the South. These changes in 'forms of government' hardly concerned me at all but the poignant drama of the abdication was brought home personally to my wife and myself in an unexpected way.

On the night of the 10th December 1936, we were at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. Before the play, Ibsen's *Brand*, began, Hilton Edwards came out in front of the curtain

and announced that King Edward's abdication speech would be transmitted by the BBC at nine o'clock. He suggested that at the first interval we should come behind the scenes — the audience was very small, as it happened — and hear it in company with the players. So we did, and it was a strange experience to sit there among the actors and actresses in their costumes and make-up and to hear the ex-King's pathetic *apologia*, with his reference to 'the woman I love' and his final gruff, almost strangulated words, 'God save the King'. When we returned to our seats in the auditorium few of us, I think, heeded the rest of the play. The other drama had taken over in our thoughts and feelings.

In Trinity next day I found opinion divided. Our outspoken Professor of French, Rudmose Browne, bitterly denounced the protagonists in the virtual deposition, especially Baldwin and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lang, of whom he quoted a scurrilous lampoon ending 'O Lord, how lang, how full of cant you are' (Cantua being an old word for Canterbury), but events soon showed, as I see them, that they had done what had to be done.

The enactment of the new Constitution in 1937, giving us an ambiguous kind of republic (the 'dictionary republic') and abolishing the Governor-Generalship also helped to draw me into politics in a haphazard way. Sir John Maffey, later Lord Rugby, was sent over as British Representative with John, later Sir John, Betjeman as his press attaché. They were a cleverly chosen pair. Maffey soon won popularity by his keen interest in horse racing, hunting, shooting and fishing, while Betjeman with his unconventionality and his cloth cap and his bicycle soon became popular in the literary and artistic circles. An early public function that Maffey attended in Dublin was a dinner given by the Hibernian Catch Club, founded in the seventeenth century by members of the choirs of St. Patrick's and Christ Church Cathedral. The Catch Club — 'Catch' of course referring to a kind of song — at that time was strongly West British. It still toasted the British royal family as well as the British military forces. Maffey was pleasantly impressed. The President of the Club, in proposing the toast of the visitors, took it upon himself to assure the guest of honour that all of those present, and many throughout the country, were still strongly attached to the British Crown.

I happened to be there as the guest of my kind, bridge-playing friend, James Weir, and I was silently thinking my own dissenting thoughts during this loyal — or disloyal — speech and during Maffey's reply. Then, without any previous warning, I was called on to second the reply on behalf of the guests. I had only two choices — either to mumble some conventional platitudes or to speak out what I had been thinking. I had not yet been given the good advice of the Public Orator of TCD, Sir Robert Tate, never to go to a public ceremony without having thought out what you would say if unexpectedly asked to speak. So, being young and tactless — but I am not sorry for it — I frankly

said that I disagreed with the President's remarks on our loyalty and allegiance, with due respect to our guest of honour and to his people. I have never experienced a chillier atmosphere. Even the wine in my glass seemed colder when I sat down to scant applause. Naturally I was not asked to a Catch Club again, which I regretted for the sake of the music and good fare. Maffey wrote me a cordial letter about what I said. He was big in mind as well as in stature.

The outbreak of war and the Republic's declaration of neutrality in 1939 increased the Protestant minority's sense of isolation. This was intensified by the strict censorship imposed on the Irish newspapers. Oddly enough, I became one of its minor victims. The story of the British evacuation from Dunkirk, as we heard it from the British radio, moved me to compose some rather brash verses about it in which — in a way pretty sure to annoy everyone, but I did not mean it so — I compared the courage of the British forces with that of Pearse and Connolly in 1916. I sent the poem to the *Irish Times* for publication, and for a little extra cash for the Stanford family. In reply the Editor, R. M. Smyllie, sent me back the proof copy stamped 'STOPPED BY CENSOR'. He enclosed a note saying 'You can now number yourself among the really elect — those who have been banned by the Censor! What a country! *Che gente!*' Smyllie's colourful personality and his ingenious methods of evading the political censor have been well described in Brian Inglis's *West Briton* and Lionel Fleming's *Head or Harp*.

In TCD during the early part of the war, when a German invasion and occupation of Ireland was not unimaginable, we sometimes discussed how we might react to Nazi interference with our academic freedom. I remembered how in Greece General Metaxas at the height of his dictatorship had banned lectures on passages of the ancient Greek authors that were too liberal for his policy. Professors had been imprisoned for opposing him. Would we in the Classical Department have the courage to risk punishment? And what about the fate of our Jewish colleagues and students? My own opinion was that none of us could really know how we would behave under severe pressure until we felt it. In proof of that I recalled a story about our beloved Professor of German, Max Liddell. In ordinary life he was a very quiet and unaggressive person — one might almost call him timid. During 'the Troubles' he had come over as a correspondent to an English paper to find out how things were in Ireland. At a rural public house near Sligo his friend, R. M. Smyllie, decided to play a joke on him. Just before Liddell set out to walk back to town Smyllie sent two other friends on ahead with instructions to jump out at Liddell as if in an ambush, expecting some rather cruel fun. But when they did jump out Liddell, instead of panicking, charged them with his umbrella pointed like a bayonet, and the laugh was on the ambushers.

One of the least pleasant experiences during the war came when my wife and I

listened to the squadrons of German bombers, guided by the neutral lights of Dublin, droning over our heads in Dalkey on their way to bomb the North. One evening the blitz came closer. I was sitting in the Common Room of TCD drinking coffee after Commons with Theo Moody. Suddenly the lights dimmed in a curious way — ‘Perhaps a bomb somewhere’, one of us joked, but it was no joke. When I arrived home to Dalkey, my wife, pale and agitated, met me at the door. ‘Are you all right?’ she asked. ‘Of course I’m all right. Why? What’s wrong?’ She told me that a bomb had been dropped and had exploded close by. Next day we saw the huge deep crater it had made at the junction of Rosmeen Park and the main road in Sandycove, luckily causing very little damage. Speculations about the reason for this and the few other similar bombings, were endless. An attempt at the Mail Boat? A warning of what would happen if we broke our neutrality? It certainly helped to keep us all on edge in and around Dublin.

In neutral Ireland the closed-in, nervous atmosphere from 1939 to 1945 made us all too much inclined to brood on our own insular ills and fears. The mood of the religious minority in the South seemed to have become dangerously despondent. Many of those who might have advocated more dynamic policies had joined the allied forces. The controlling bodies of the Church of Ireland — the General Synod, the Diocesan Synods, the Representative Church Body and the parochial vestries — still had a large proportion of backward-looking elderly people, many of them British ex-servicemen or ex-colonial officials. On the other side, militant Catholic action had become more and more aggressive through organisations like the Legion of Mary, Maria Duce, with its Fascist overtones, the Catholic Truth Society and the Knights of St. Columbanus. At the same time the special recognition of the Roman Catholic Church in the Constitution of 1937 had made some Protestants feel that they were graded as second class citizens. Indeed, if one read the strident anti-Protestant pamphlets sold on the barrows of the propagandists, one might be led to believe that to be truly Irish one must be a Roman Catholic, as well, some suggested, as being of Gaelic ancestry and speaking Irish. Besides, there was the risk, of course, of being condemned to eternal damnation as a heretic, unless saved by the formula ‘invincible ignorance’. No hope, it seemed then, in Ireland or in the next world for a hymn-singing English-speaking Protestant with a Sassenach name like Stanford unless he changed everything. As to changing my name, I must confess that when I saw it rendered as Liam de Stanfort¹⁴ on my Leaving Certificate in 1928 I was tempted for a while. But as the only surviving son I could not bring myself to extinguish what had been the name of my family in Ireland for centuries.

The result of heeding such propaganda was a growing sense of alienation. It was

¹⁴ W. B. Stanford used both his first names. He was known as Willie in school, Bill to his family and close friends and Bedell more formally

implied that we, the Protestants, had really only two sensible courses to follow — imitate the chameleon or leave our country. However, it must in fairness be emphasised that the successive Irish governments, loyal to the principles of Thomas Davis and liberal republicanism and eager to conciliate Protestants in the North, had never countenanced that kind of propaganda, nor indeed had liberal-minded Catholics.

When I read these prolific pamphlets I felt something of the indignation (*saeva indignatio*) that lacerated Dean Swift's heart in his day. I decided that a defence of the traditions of my own 'sect', the Church of Ireland, was needed, and since no one else seemed inclined to attempt it — better to lie low and say nothing was the prevailing policy then — the moral imperative pointed towards myself. So in 1944 I left the quiet pastures of the ancient world to write a booklet called *A Recognised Church*, taking the title, with some irony, from the clause in the Constitution stating that the State 'also recognised' the Church of Ireland and other religious minorities.

My main argument seems banal and unnecessary now that the concept of a pluralist State and the magnanimous precepts of Pope John XXIII have been widely accepted in Southern Ireland. The climate of opinion was very different, as I have said, in the nineteen-forties. So I emphasised the depth and strength of our roots in the country, and asserted that our historic contribution to Ireland was not contemptible. I recited the hackneyed litany of Protestant Nationalists, Swift, Tone, Edward Fitzgerald, Emmet, Butt and Parnell. And I praised the traditional 'work ethic' of the Protestant community quoting a phrase current among Catholics in some areas, 'Let's do it good and Protestant'. In general I argued that Protestants had good reason for believing that they could contribute valuably and acceptably to their country in the future. The older generation of Protestants who read the book disliked the nationalistic tone and some Catholics took offence at my allegedly arrogant attitude and my references to the various kinds of pressure that Protestants had been experiencing since the Treaty.

The most stringent public criticism came from Sean O'Faolain in *The Bell*, which he was editing with great distinction at that time. He devoted an editorial of thirteen pages to my booklet in the issue for June 1944¹⁵ under the heading 'Toryism in Trinity'. He deplored its 'sectarian' approach and its sense of grievance — which I had not intended. It was 'Protestantism at its most protesting and least creative'. It was 'puritanical even inhuman'. It showed 'no real sense of the past' especially about the consequences of the penal laws and the famine. As to its allegations of Catholic hostility and pressure, the careers of many Protestant patriots proved that 'where a man's political attitude was sound his religion has never been anyone's concern'. My 'ideal'

¹⁵ The Bell Vol. 8 No. 3 June 1944 pp 185–197

of ‘the good-and-law-abiding citizen’ gave him ‘a bellyache’. He approved, however, of my assertion ‘Above all considerations of loss and gain I put my conviction that if you are a true Irishman you love Ireland before all countries and, if you do not love Ireland before all countries, you are not in your heart a true Irishman’. He concluded, ‘Even though Professor Stanford has made many mistakes and above all the mistake of not talking as an Irishman but as one-twentieth of an Irishman [what, I wondered, about the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland], I feel glad that he has at least shown that Protestants are not all stone dumb.’

With characteristic fair mindedness O’Faolain asked several eminent citizens to comment on *A Recognised Church*¹⁶. He published some of their remarks in the same issue as his editorial, noting that several had refused to commit themselves. They dwelt mainly on a negative aspect, the allegations of sectarian pressure. Three — Dr. Hodges, Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick, Arnold Marsh, Headmaster of the Quaker School in Waterford, and the Rev. R. J. Kerr, Rector of St. George’s Church in Dublin — said that such pressures did exist. Two said no — Helen Chenevix, speaking for the Trade Unions and the Labour Party, and Lil Nic Dhonnchadha speaking for Gaelic enthusiasts. Lennox Robinson, speaking for theatre people, said that he had never encountered pressure in his own milieu but that he had once attended a proselytising week-end party and had obstinately remained ‘a black Protestant’. (He was a parson’s son.)

Those were all Protestants. What I felt at the time to be rather like a Brutus stab came in the comment by my Catholic friend, Maurice Hartnett. He, after attributing any pressure that existed to ‘rival organisations set up, as its promoters allege, to fight the exclusiveness of Freemasonry’, went on to say ‘Ascendancy throughout human history has been loath to part with its privileges and trappings’, so ‘between the lines of Professor Stanford’s pamphlet do I detect a faint sighing for the fact that “the glory of our house is departed”?’ This, of course, used to be a common pseudo-sympathetic gibe, that all the Anglo-Irish spent their time grieving over departed glory and privilege, and novelists have exploited the theme endlessly. It may be true of ‘big house’ people but, as Maurice well knew from our long talks in Trinity, I and my family had not shared in the ascendancy’s advantages. My ancestors for three generations had been modestly-paid clergymen. The glory of our house was a quiet country rectory and as a student I was probably less affluent than Maurice himself.

Looking back at O’Faolain’s searching criticisms, I agree with their main tenet that my booklet was too narrow in its outlook and I know now that what he said about

¹⁶ The Bell Vol. 8 No. 3 June 1944 pp 218–232

hostility towards Protestants was and is true — that the large majority of Irish Catholics accept as a good citizen any Protestant who proves his genuine loyalty to Ireland. I could perhaps have made a good case against some of his other points, but did not try, not out of wisdom or prudence but because I now was using all my spare working time to edit the *Odyssey*. Besides I was consoled by the assurances from many of the younger Church of Ireland generation that they had gained confidence from what I had said and I was asked to give parish lectures all over the country on the prospects for Protestants in the South.

Happily, no ill-feeling resulted between Sean O’Faolain and myself. I have long admired his courageous efforts to promote liberal ideals in the young Republic and his brilliant short stories, with such subtle nuances, so cosmopolitan, so humane and so anti-puritanical, remain among my chief literary pleasures. His frequent salons at his house on Killiney Hill, where he included people of all creeds and political parties, did much to heal old wounds and bitterness. Only on one evening did we see a political abyss re-open for a while. Erskine Childers, later to be President, was among the early guests. Later my College friend ‘Christo’ Gore Grimes arrived with an uninvited guest of his own, Desmond Fitzgerald, one of the Free State Ministers who had agreed to the execution of Childers’ father. The guests divided on Civil War grounds, like the water of the Red Sea at the approach of the Children of Israel, leaving us stranded and bewildered in the middle.

Prompted perhaps by a reference of Hartnett’s to exclusiveness, I published another political booklet in 1946. Entitled *Faith and Faction in Ireland Today*, it tried to dissuade people in the North and South from what I clumsily called ‘exclusivistic’ policies, as exemplified in terms like ‘A Protestant People’ and ‘Catholic Ireland’. I pleaded instead for ‘comprehensivism’. I protested against Orange injustice against Catholics in the North and against the subtler pressure against Protestants in the South, where I denied that ‘Home Rule was Rome Rule’. My attempt to apportion the blame for our apartheid equally offended people on both sides, but no significant public discussion followed. However it disproves the assertion that I heard from a leading television interviewer in March 1983 that there had been no protests from southern Protestants against sectarian injustices in Northern Ireland during the earlier period of divided Ireland. In fact, I also repeated my objections to ‘exclusivism’ at several Church of Ireland conferences in the North and the South, with little approval, needless to say, in the North.

When I come to read these two rather naive manifestos again, I see much that I should have expressed differently. But the times were darker for the religious minority then, and I was a neophyte in political thought. However, I am not sorry that I wrote them, even though they made me some lasting enemies. Silence is not always golden, though an iron curtain can be a protection at times.

Quieter men

They were not among those who came with the Norman,
 barons eager for principedoms, knights for earls' domains,
 predacious, intractable conquerors as far as Sicily
 and the fabulous citadel of Byzantium.

These were quieter men and came in later days —
 younger sons of yeomen from deep English lands,
 hungrier citizens of the mellowed minster towns,
 distant relatives of small courtiers,
 cousins of clerics, tradesmen self-improved.

A king would say, laying his gold-clothed hand
 on a crooked map, patched like a herald's tabard,
 would say 'This region must be occupied
 with loyal Englishmen to drive the unruly Celts
 westwards to their perdition. Find the men.'
 Then fellows of suave phrase, and pliable
 conscience, would send out others like themselves,
 but salaried less regally, to speak and write
 to fathers of large families, to adventurous men,
 to hungry ones, to cramped, dissatisfied,
 hopeful, romantic, missionary, desperate,
 credulous persons between York and Kent.
 These heard of tillage lands richer than Somerset,
 of boundless timbered woods, fish-teeming streams,
 mild winters and no dread of summer drought,
 acres for men who never owned a rood,
 new life and welfare in an uncrowded land,
 prosperity — all sanctioned by their King's command.

Chester or Bristol was the last friendly town
 some of them saw for three grave centuries,
 the last towns free from whispered undertones
 in an alien tongue, free from the stealthy foot,
 the silent gaze of implacable enmity,
 free from the sudden chill of discovery
 'This land we hold is not, is never, ours.'
 Chester recedes. The broad stone-coloured sea

flows eastward past the bows. The morning sun
lights a green hill and wooded seaboard. Then
'Ireland' the cry goes, 'Ireland, our new home'.
Women light-haired and palely crimson cheeked
marked English breed as clearly as with flags
draw nearer to a husband's arm and clasp
his salt-dried hand and wonder, half dismayed,
half gladdened. Men gaze keenly down the coasts
marking the greenness, wondering what's beyond
the third high tier of hills. The helmsman turns to steer
his course for Howth and thinks of a tavern near.

Through Dublin then, part city part fortress,
terribly watchful, lively with unease,
on through the western Gate into the land.
Travellers now could tell them what they asked.
These conquered Irish, were they now extinct?
How savage were they? Did they live in caves?
Did they wear clothes, and were they terrified
at sight of civilized men? Perhaps they'd yet see some,
before the race perished out of the land.
They quickly heard the answers, and shuddered
at their deception and their dangerous plight.

The Irish were unconquered, undiminished, still
walking the country as their own, armed in the woods,
terrible in forays from the mountain glens,
swift, skilled in warfare, proud in an ancient pride
of princely palaces and heroic arms,
firm in the old faith, contemptuous of death.
Into their ancestral territory
these Englishmen had come, like sleep-walkers
along a precipice where eagles nest.
They stared at the land around them in a new way,
the sheltering woods, the tunnelled river-reeds,
strange multi-coloured boglands laced with pools
in weary flatness towards the treeless rim,
mountains menacing the furthest parts.