

## The Boycott at Fethard-on-Sea, 1957



The Boycott at Fethard-on-Sea, 1957:  
A Study in Catholic-Protestant Relations  
in Modern Ireland

Eugene Broderick

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Boycott at Fethard-on-Sea, 1957:  
A Study in Catholic-Protestant Relations in Modern Ireland,  
by Eugene Broderick

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## INTRODUCTION

In August 1957, *Time* magazine published an article under the heading 'Fethardism'. It commented that Ireland which had enriched the English language with the word 'boycott' had now invented a refinement of this term. The new word was 'fethardism' and owed its origin to the village of Fethard-on-Sea in County Wexford. This word was defined as: 'to promote a boycott along religious lines', and was inspired by events which had attracted national and international attention. The boycott in question was directed at Protestants by their Catholic neighbours over the matter of the disappearance of a local woman with her two young children. The woman was Sheila Cloney and she had fled Fethard with her two girls, Eileen, aged six, and Mary, aged three, because she, a Protestant, would not agree to have the children educated in the local Catholic primary school. When she had married her husband, Sean, in 1949, she had promised to raise any children born to them in the Catholic faith. In April 1957, she broke that promise in a dramatic and public fashion. Her actions incurred the wrath of the Catholic community of Fethard, which became convinced that Sheila had acted with the knowledge and connivance of some local Protestants. In response, it was decided to boycott villagers who were members of the Church of Ireland in order to exert pressure on them to secure the return of the Cloney children.

Fethard-on-Sea is a small village located on the Hook Peninsula, a tapering promontory in the south-western corner of County Wexford, which forms the eastern boundary of Waterford Harbour. Its association with this harbour gave the Hook a strategic importance for several centuries. In the late sixteenth century the English government constructed a fort at Duncannon to counter a threat from Spain. Over two hundred years later three Martello towers were built in response to the dangers presented by Napoleon.

The Normans colonised the Hook in the twelfth century. The next major period of colonisation occurred in the sixteenth century with the Reformation. Much of the land in the peninsula belonged to the Catholic Church and with the introduction of Protestantism in England, the land was confiscated and given to English settlers. This land settlement, with its profound social and political consequences, was to survive for more than two centuries. Catholic descendants of dispossessed Irish landowners and

Protestant descendants of the English settlers were forced to live together in a relatively confined area, with all the attendant sectarian tensions. The village of Fethard became part of the Loftus Hall estate in 1634. This family developed the village, intending to use it as a port. However, the increase in the sandbank at the mouth of Fethard Bay meant the abandonment of the plan. Consequently, Fethard declined in importance, becoming an insignificant village in what was considered the isolated Hook area, a peninsula where older cultural and social features resisted the intrusive forces of change.<sup>1</sup>

In 1957 the village of Fethard had a population of 107. The local Church of Ireland community numbered around twenty five. The parish of Fethard was part of a union composed of two other parishes, Tintern and Killesk. In 1959 this union had a total Anglican population of 137.<sup>2</sup> It was a small Protestant community, though relatively large by the standards of others throughout rural Ireland.

The boycott against Fethard's Protestants was declared, publicly and formally, on 12 May 1957 and lasted, officially, until about the last week of September – a total of nineteen weeks, at least. Though begun with an official declaration, no such declaration heralded its finish. It simply petered out from the end of September, though it did endure, albeit with a reduced intensity, for at least another ten weeks. The Anglican community affected by the boycott was small, and the brunt was borne by a hardware merchant and his wife, a newsagent, a piano teacher and a number of local farmers.

Notwithstanding the small numbers involved, the boycott attracted national and international attention. The dramatic events in the isolated Wexford village were to be played out on a number of stages – the law courts of Belfast, the fields of Ulster on 12 July, Dail Eireann, Seanad Eireann and the Orkney Islands. It was to involve some of the central figures of Irish life in the 1950s – the Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, the President of Ireland, Sean T. O'Kelly, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Lord Brookeborough, socialist parliamentarian, Noel Browne, Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Armagh, Cardinal John D'Alton, other Catholic and Protestant bishops and other politicians, north and south of the border.

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is based on Billy Colfer, *The Hook Peninsula* and *ibid.*, 'The Hook, County Wexford', in Allen, Whelan and Stout (eds.), *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, pp. 262-76. Information provided by Nicholas Furlong is also acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> H.W. Robinson, *A Study of the Church of Ireland Population of Ferns Diocese, 1973*, p. 16.

The central figures in the drama, however, were ordinary citizens of the Irish Republic. Sean and Sheila Cloney were simply two people from a farming background. The significance of the controversy in which they found themselves was fully appreciated by contemporaries. It was the first and only conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities along clearly denominational and sectarian lines since the establishment of the independent Irish state. This fact alarmed some people as it questioned the state's claims of religious tolerance. For one the boycott at Fethard-on-Sea was 'the most terrible thing that has happened in this part of the country since the civil war'.<sup>3</sup> For another it was the 'most terrible thing in the history of this country since the Phoenix Park murders' [of May 1882].<sup>4</sup> Whatever about this hyperbole, these contemporary commentators clearly realised that the boycott was an episode the importance of which transcended the boundaries of a Wexford village and the misfortunes of the individuals at the heart of it.

In 1987 Sean Cloney was interviewed in the *Sunday Press*. He commented on the reluctance in Fethard to discuss the events of thirty years earlier. Reflecting on this circumstance, Cloney expressed the belief that people 'are embarrassed and afraid, and fear comes into it quite a bit on both sides; they do not want to raise up something which has unpleasant memories for all'.<sup>5</sup> Twenty years after these comments were made things have not changed for some people. There is still a reticence about the events of 1957. Some who did speak to this author, did so on condition that they would not be identified, and their information cited as 'a confidential source'.

While acknowledging and understanding, to a degree, the attitude of not wanting to bring up unpleasant events, it is nevertheless important that the boycott be the subject of an objective study. It is a unique event in modern Irish history in terms of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants and demands more than the short and incomplete references it receives in various publications. This book, however, can be nothing more than an initial step in contributing to an understanding of the events in Wexford in 1957. The complete story, if ever told, must await, for example, access to the archives of the Catholic Diocese of Ferns and the papers of Dr John Percy Phair, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Ossory and Ferns. The latter have been deposited in the Representative Church Body Library, Dublin, and will not be available for consultation until 2057.

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<sup>3</sup> *Irish Times*, 26 June 1957.

<sup>4</sup> A.M. Sullivan to Mrs. S. Auld, 31 July 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/13(81).

<sup>5</sup> *Sunday Press*, 1 February 1987.

In the spirit of understanding it is necessary to explain the use of certain words. The word 'Catholic' is used as a synonym for Roman Catholic. This reflects popular usage, and must not be construed as a denial of the Catholic claims of the Church of Ireland. The word 'Protestant', when used in the text, is generally a synonym for Church of Ireland or Anglican, unless the context suggests the inclusion also of non-Anglican Protestants. Anglicans were to be the focus of attention by the boycotters and the members of a small, minority Church were to experience the anger of the offended members of the majority creed in Fethard, as both denominations became embroiled in a bitter confrontation.

# CHAPTER ONE

## FLIGHT

On Saturday, 27 April 1957, Sheila Cloney hurried her two young daughters, Eileen and Mary, aged six and three years respectively, from their home, Dugulph Castle, a restored fourteenth century building of sixteen rooms, at Saltmills, near the village of Fethard-on-Sea, County Wexford, to the family car. She told her children that they had to ‘get away’ before their father, Sean, got back home. He was occupied in ploughing in a far field and no explanation was offered to the children for the haste of the departure. In her anxiety to leave, Sheila scraped the bumper of the car on the car house door. The vehicle headed in the direction of Wexford and was later found by Sean Cloney abandoned on the town’s quays.<sup>1</sup>

Sheila Cloney was born on 6 May 1926, the daughter of Thomas and Sheila Kelly. Her father, a member of the Church of Ireland, was a prominent figure in the local community and a well known cattle-dealer. He had a reputation for kindness, helping less fortunate families by giving them a cow in order that they might enjoy the benefits of milk. His daughter, Sheila, was a committed member of the Anglican Church and attended worship at the local St. Mogue’s Church, located in nearby Fethard-on-Sea. Her husband, Sean, was a member of a distinguished Catholic family, which had contributed many priests and religious to the Church. His uncle, Thomas Cloney, became one of the best known clerics in the Diocese of Ferns. He served as parish priest of Templetown, in which parish was located Dugulph Castle, from 1911 to 1955, when he died at the age of 91. Sean Cloney was born on 5 September 1926. He had a difficult childhood. His father died when he was young and his mother suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for much of her life. She suffered severe pain as a consequence of this ailment and was bed-ridden for many years. She died when Sean was seventeen and he had to leave his studies at

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Eileen Cloney.

Rockwell College, County Tipperary, to assume responsibility for the running of the 116 acre family farm.<sup>2</sup>

It was at a local dance class that Sean Cloney first saw Sheila Kelly. He was attracted to her and they began going out together. They married in the Catholic Church in Hammersmith, London, on 26 November 1949. The couple stayed nine months at Bury St. Edmunds and then returned to Wexford and Dungulph Castle. Their first daughter, Eileen, was born on 10 April 1951, followed three years later by Mary, born on 30 October 1954.

The Roman Catholic Church governed marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics by means of a papal decree, *Ne Temere*, which had been issued in 1907. Its main provision was that, as a condition of the marriage, the non-Catholic party must agree that any child of the union be brought up in the Catholic faith. In accordance with this decree, Sheila Cloney agreed to bring up her children as Catholics. Therefore, the two Cloney girls were baptised as members of that Church. However, according to Rev Edward Grant, Rector of Fethard Union from March 1946 to November 1956, the Cloneys had planned that their first child would be baptised both in the Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church. At that time the Church of Ireland baptism would have to be celebrated first, for while the Protestant Church recognised as valid a Roman Catholic baptism, the reverse was not the case. This plan did not come to fruition as the nuns managing the nursing home in Wexford Town, in which Eileen was born, arranged her baptism as a Catholic soon after birth. Remembering this incident, Rev Grant wrote: 'Not long after Sean reported that happening to me. However, an infringement of the couple's policy of mutual regard and joint planning had occurred and that, in my opinion, was something which Sheila, a forthright character, would not forget'.<sup>3</sup>

While the couple's second daughter, Mary, was also baptised a Catholic, neither child attended a place of worship. As Eileen approached the age of compulsory school attendance – she was due to start school on 29 April 1957 – Sheila began to baulk at the notion of her children being brought up as Catholics and was unhappy at the prospect of her daughter attending the local Catholic school. Notwithstanding his wife's concerns and what Grant styled 'the couple's policy of mutual regard', Sean wanted his two girls to be raised as members of his Church and to attend the Catholic school. The local Catholic clergy became concerned at the fact that Sheila appeared to be considering reneging on the vows she had made

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<sup>2</sup> Paragraph based on interviews with Eileen Cloney and Nicholas Furlong.

<sup>3</sup> E. F. Grant, 'The Fethard Boycott: Recollections and Reflections', RCBL, PC52, p. 1.



under the terms of *Ne Temere*. In the weeks before the date for the commencement of Eileen's schooling Dungulph Castle was visited frequently by the parish priest of Templetown, Rev Laurence Allen, and by his curate, Rev William Stafford, who had charge of the parish's chapel-of-ease, located at Poulfur, and in which Sean worshipped.<sup>4</sup>

According to Edward Grant, this was not the first time the Catholic clergy had concerns regarding the Cloney children. The year before the priests of the parish had been made aware of the fact that when Sean indicated that he wished to take Eileen with him to the Holy Thursday mass, Sheila had objected, asserting that her children would never attend a Catholic chapel. They had also intervened, with the assistance of her husband, when Sheila sent her children to receive private tuition from her grand-aunt, Lucie Knipe. Miss Knipe, a Protestant, had been the Sunday School teacher for a number of years. Grant wondered whether pressure had been exerted on Sean to support the priests in this matter.<sup>5</sup>

Sheila, however, was becoming increasingly determined that Eileen would attend the Church of Ireland school in Fethard. Tensions increased between her and the priests. When she informed them that she and her husband were making up their minds on the matter of the school, Sheila was told in no uncertain terms that there were no minds to be made up. She was reminded by the priests of what the Catholic Church considered to be her solemn vow to bring her children up as members of that Church, which meant sending her children to the local Catholic school. Sean Cloney had a preference for this.<sup>6</sup> As the Catholic clergy exerted their pressure on her, Sheila spoke to her husband about going away to think things over. Eight days before she left, Sean told her father, Thomas Kelly, of the situation and of the possibility that his daughter would leave Fethard. Her father and family did their best to dissuade Sheila from such a course of action. Recalling the events years later, Sean Cloney commented that Sheila's father 'knew his child well enough that battleships would not stop her'. He decided to give her £30, enough, in Sean's words, 'for just a short trip'. Clearly, her father did not envisage a prolonged absence, nor did he regard his money as facilitating such an eventuality.<sup>7</sup> So when Sheila left her home on April 29, it did not come entirely as a surprise to her husband.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Eileen Cloney; *Sunday Press*, 1 February 1957; this contained an interview with Sean Cloney.

<sup>5</sup> Grant, 'Fethard Boycott', p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Wexford historian, Nicholas Furlong, was told by Sean Cloney that the scene in the film *A Love Divided* was a very accurate depiction of the meetings between his wife and himself, and the Catholic clergy.

<sup>7</sup> *Sunday Press*, 1 February 1987.

She went to Belfast. Eileen Cloney has few memories of this episode, remembering it simply as ‘a time of just being away’. She recollects, albeit vaguely, the house and the children being sent out of the room when grown ups were speaking.<sup>8</sup>

On Monday, 29 April, Gwendoline Sullivan, a Belfast based solicitor, received a telephone call from Sheila Cloney, seeking advice on what Sheila termed ‘a domestic matter’. The solicitor was given authority to instruct counsel. Sheila also gave the solicitor a number at which to contact her with a view to making an appointment. Later that day Sullivan instructed barrister, Desmond Boal, and the two lawyers met Sheila at an address, the location of which was given over the phone.

The next day, Desmond Boal arrived at Dungulph Castle and remained with Sean Cloney for a considerable length of time. The barrister informed Cloney that his wife and children were in Belfast and presented him with what were described as the terms of a settlement. This contained four elements:

- Cloney was to sell his property in County Wexford.
- He was to go to Canada or Australia with his wife and children.
- He was to agree to his children being brought up as Protestants.
- He was to give consideration to changing his own religion.

He was told by Boal that his wife would not meet him anywhere unless he accepted the terms beforehand. Boal insisted on the urgency of the situation, claiming that Cloney’s wife was getting ready to go to a destination which would not be disclosed to him. Sean rejected the terms.

On the first day of May, Sean Cloney arrived in Belfast, where he consulted a solicitor, James Gerard Doran. Later that day Sean reported the disappearance of his two children to the Royal Ulster Constabulary at Musgrave Street Barracks. In response, the police maintained a watch at the passenger boats leaving the city. Furthermore, Sean employed the services of a private inquiry agent but he was unable to trace the girls.

The following day Cloney went to see Desmond Boal. He told the barrister that he was anxious to discuss the suggestion of emigration to Australia or Canada with his wife. Boal informed the Wexford farmer that he would be able to speak with his wife on condition that he accepted the terms as relayed to him at their previous meeting. Boal drove Cloney back to his hotel and said that he would get his wife and return in half an hour. It is unclear in a subsequent affidavit by Cloney whether he accepted the terms or not. It is possible that he did and this would explain Boal’s

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<sup>8</sup> *Sunday Press*, 1 February 1987; Interview with Eileen Cloney.

statement regarding returning with Sean's wife. However, Boal did not come back to the hotel and Cloney left later in the afternoon to see his solicitor.

The reason Boal did not return is that Sheila Cloney had disappeared. When her solicitor, Gwendoline Sullivan, called at the house in which she was staying to communicate to her client what her husband had said she was informed that Sheila had gone away that morning. Her informant was unaware of Sheila's whereabouts and intentions.

At 9.00am the next day Cloney again called on Boal. Cloney's subsequent description of the barrister's reaction would suggest that he believed that some settlement based on the terms presented to him had been accepted by Sean. To quote from a later affidavit presented by Cloney in court: 'He accused me of not being honest with him and told me I had closed the door to a settlement with my wife and that he would not assist me further'. Perhaps Boal was aware of Cloney's visit to his solicitor and regarded this as a breach of good faith. Perhaps it was verbal bluster by Boal who, knowing that Sheila had fled and realising that likely he had no meaningful role to play, wished to extricate himself from the situation. Whatever the explanation, Sean's legal representatives went to the High Court that same day and sought a conditional order of habeas corpus, which was granted.

Four days later Sean Cloney's lawyers were back in court. On Tuesday evening, 7 May, Ambrose McGonigal, QC, acting for Cloney, stated that despite extensive enquiries he had been unable to trace Sheila Cloney to effect personal service of the conditional order of habeas corpus on her. Desmond Boal had refused to accept service. McGonigal emphasised the urgency of the situation, commenting: 'The whole facts of the case would indicate that Mrs Cloney is getting out of the way and out of Mr Cloney's way to get the children away from him'. The court ruled that the conditional order was to be served on Sheila's solicitor, Gwendoline Sullivan.<sup>9</sup>

A month or so later, on Friday, 7 June, Sean Cloney was back in court, his barrister seeking to have made absolute the conditional order of habeas corpus made in May. Furthermore, application was also made to have service of a conditional order on Gwendoline Sullivan deemed to be good service on Sheila Cloney. When the order was served on her, as directed by the High Court in May, Sullivan informed the judges that she had made no attempt to contact Mrs Cloney. She claimed that she did not know what attempt she could have made. One of the judges, Mr Justice McVeigh,

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<sup>9</sup> *Wexford People*, 11 May 1957.

interjected with the observation that the solicitor could have called at the house at which she had met with Sheila Cloney. Sullivan explained that she had been told on a previous visit that Sheila had left. McVeigh countered that Mrs. Cloney might have returned, a point conceded by Sullivan. However, in further testimony the solicitor stated that she did not consider it her duty to return to the house, as her instructions had been withdrawn on 1 May and she had said what she regarded as a 'goodbye' to Sheila. As far as she, Sullivan, was concerned this was the 'end of it'. She had returned the next day, accompanied by Desmond Boal, as they both wanted to communicate to Sheila what her husband had said. This evidence elicited an effective rebuke from Justice McVeigh: 'You had no instructions at that time. Would it not have been just as important to try to get in touch with her when you had the court order than when you had some communication for her after your instructions had been terminated?' Sullivan made no reply.

Sean Cloney's barrister, Ambrose McGonigal, then asked that Sullivan be directed to disclose the address of the house at which she and Sheila Cloney had met. He urged this course of action on the court as the future of the two young girls was at stake. Sullivan claimed privilege as Mrs Cloney had told her that the address was very confidential and had requested that it not be disclosed. Sullivan told the judges that Sheila had almost whispered it over the telephone. The claim of privilege was considered by the judges during the adjournment for lunch. When it reconvened, the court ruled that it considered the interests of the children as paramount and that the address should be disclosed. Out of consideration for those currently residing there, however, this address should not be given in open court. Rather, it was to be written down. Sullivan did as ordered. Moreover, the judges ruled that the court felt that it should not dispose of the matter until all efforts to locate the two girls had been exhausted. It was proposed to adjourn the case for one week in the hope that in the interval further information might be obtained as a result of the disclosure of the address. The judges concluded by stating that unless further evidence was produced by then, the court was not inclined to grant substituted service on Gwendoline Sullivan.<sup>10</sup>

One week later the High Court again gave consideration to making absolute the conditional order of habeas corpus. Ambrose McGonigal opened the hearing by presenting to the court a statement made by his instructing solicitor who had investigated Gwendoline Sullivan's meeting with Mrs Cloney at the address disclosed, by order of court, the previous

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<sup>10</sup> *Irish Times*, 8 June 1957.

week. He requested that he be permitted to question Sullivan on information contained in the report. On permission being granted, McGonigal pointed out that Sullivan claimed that Sheila Cloney had met with her on a certain date, but the solicitor did not think that a third party had been involved in making the arrangements. This McGonigal found strange. He explained that Sheila had arrived in Belfast from Wexford after 6.00pm and had been able to get in touch with Sullivan. However, it was outside normal office hours and Sullivan's telephone number was not in the directory. This raised the obvious and important question as to how it was possible for Sheila Cloney to make contact with Gwendoline Sullivan. What McGonigal was suggesting was that another person gave Sullivan's name to Sheila and that same person might still be able to contact the runaway woman. When asked about this Sullivan denied that Mrs Cloney told her that she had been given the solicitor's number by another party. When asked did she know where Sheila got the number, Sullivan replied in the negative. McGonigal then questioned her about another telephone number which had been found written in ink on the back of the directory at the address she had given the court. Sullivan asserted that she could not enlighten the court on this matter and that she had not used this number.

McGonigal then informed the court that he did not propose to pursue the case any further that day in view of the fact that Mrs Cloney and her children could not be located. Should further information be obtained he hoped to return to make application for an order, either conditional or absolute. Accordingly, the High Court refused to make absolute the conditional order of habeas corpus.<sup>11</sup>

By this time the legal proceedings unfolding in Belfast were essentially irrelevant as far as Sheila Cloney was concerned. Likely motivated by the terrifying realisation of the enormity of what she had done and the terrible fear of her children being taken from her, Sheila had fled the city even before the first High Court hearing. Edward Grant has written that the Irish Church Mission, based in Dublin, was approached to help Sheila. This mission, together with her Belfast supporters, arranged for her hasty departure from the city.<sup>12</sup> Eileen has a memory of her mother, her sister and herself being in what she describes as 'an awful rush' to leave. She remembers Sheila running, carrying cases, to board either a boat or a train. They departed for Scotland, where they spent some time in Edinburgh. Eileen was sent to school there for a period of between four to seven

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15 June 1957.

<sup>12</sup> Grant, 'Fethard Boycott', p. 5.

weeks. She recollects inquiring about her father and her mother fobbing off the queries with vague replies. Her schooling was organised by the man of the house in which the Cloneys were staying. Involved in Protestant missionary work, it was he, together with others, who arranged for the next stop – one of the Orkney Islands, Westray.

On this remote, windswept place, Sheila and her children stayed with Jackie and Nan Scott, who were farmers. Eileen remembers being treated very well by the Scotts. It was a house where the relatives of the Scotts came and went, on a regular basis. Sheila helped her hosts by milking cows and doing other chores around the farm. Eileen has particular memories of one resident of Westray, Helen Pottinger. She spent a lot of time in her company. Helen had spent sometime in Zambia as a missionary and now lived with her husband and father. Though the girls missed their father, Eileen does not recollect their being particularly distressed at this time. She regarded the Westray interlude as an adventure.<sup>13</sup>

Far removed from Fethard-on-Sea, Sheila Cloney was oblivious of events there which her actions had caused. The young Wexford woman was to be the excuse for one of the bitterest episodes between Catholics and Protestants in the modern history of the independent Irish state.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Eileen Cloney.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BOYCOTT

The disappearance of Sheila Cloney caused anger and deep resentment among certain sections of the Catholic community of Fethard-on-Sea. The local Catholic clergy regarded her actions as an affront to the authority of the Church and an unconscionable violation of a solemn promise. Most serious was the fact that the immortal souls of her children were in grave danger of eternal perdition unless the two girls were returned safely to their home. This safe return was a necessity of paramount importance which transcended all other considerations. The parish priest, Fr Laurence Allen, left much of the day-to-day handling of this crisis to his younger curate, Fr William Stafford who, as a consequence, was to become synonymous with the boycott. Stafford was a popular figure in the community, and was regarded as a very hard-working priest. He was also popular with his fellow priests in the diocese. He had a reputation, however, for a volatile and excitable temperament.<sup>1</sup> As a curate, he would have acted with and under the authority of his parish priest. Given the rigid and hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, and the relatively lowly status of a curate, Stafford's actions would have required the sanction of his superior. Fr Allen, a man steeped in the Fianna Fail republican tradition, supported and encouraged his curate throughout the affair. It is, therefore, unfair to cast Stafford in the role of bogeyman for what was about to happen. Moreover, the bishop of the diocese, Dr James Staunton, would have been informed of events as they unfolded in Fethard.

#### **A boycott is organised**

Rumour and gossip gripped the small village in late April and early May 1957, as people sought explanations and, inevitably, scapegoats. An opinion was formed, and apparently confirmed by the High Court proceedings in Belfast, that Sheila Cloney had received assistance, financial and otherwise, from some of her co-religionists in Fethard. The

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<sup>1</sup> As described in various interviews.

former rector of the parish, Rev Edward Grant, has suggested that a particular incident may have served to give credence to this opinion. The local Protestants had established a fund to raise money for a presentation to Canon Talbot, the clergyman who attended to their spiritual needs after Grant's resignation and prior to the appointment of his successor. The passing-on of a contribution to a local shop owner and treasurer of the fund, Leslie Gardiner, in his shop, in public view, had been, in Grant's words, 'seen, noted, reported, and wrongly interpreted, as having been to a fund to finance Sheila's flight'.<sup>2</sup>

Gradually, the notion of a boycott was proposed by some villagers and found favour. Such a dramatic course of action would have required the approval of Fr Allen and it is inconceivable that he did not inform and seek the sanction of his bishop. Sometime later, Staunton denied that the boycott had originated at his instigation.<sup>3</sup> While this is true, he was certainly aware of what course of action was favoured by Fethard's Catholic leaders, clerical and lay, and his approval would have been sought. In any case, Staunton had great sympathy for their viewpoint as he was particularly concerned at what he regarded as instances of Protestant proselytism in other parts of the country. He would have deplored and been incensed by an apparently brazen example in his own diocese.<sup>4</sup>

When Fr Stafford addressed his congregation on 12 May 1957 what he said had the prior knowledge and approval of his parish priest and bishop. He announced a boycott of Protestants in Fethard until the return of the Cloney children had been secured. The grounds for this action were that some of these same Protestants had assisted Sheila Cloney. Simon Kennedy has captured the drama of the occasion in his novel *The Year the Whales Came I*, which is set against the backdrop of the boycott:

At Sunday morning Mass, the priest gave the sermon of his life. There was hardly a sound in the church..... 'Catholic children have been stolen from this parish, aided and abetted by Protestants from this parish', he said. He told how opportunity after opportunity had been given to have the children returned but they had been treated with derision and greeted with a list of demands including an additional requirement that their father damn his soul and self and become a Protestant.....He then outlined that there would be an exercise in Catholic action by the withholding of patronage and custom from Protestant people in business. This would be

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<sup>2</sup> Rev Edward Grant, 'The Fethard Boycott, 1957: Recollections and Reflections', RCBL, PC52, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Daithí O Corrain, *Rendering to God and Caesar: The Irish Churches and the Two States, 1949-73*, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> Confidential source.



done in a dignified manner, he said. There would be no heckling and jeering. No threats. No intimidation. We were free to favour whosoever we might with our custom – it was up to us to choose – and we would do so bearing in mind that he who caused injustice to my faith and my beliefs must answer to me. We would stand by our religion.....Some people said that this was a B-O-Y-C-O-T-T [ the priest spelt the word, he did not speak it] and that was what was being organised.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of the boycott proclaimed by Stafford was both punitive and remedial: punitive because it was believed that members of the Protestant community had assisted Sheila in her departure; and remedial in order to compel Protestants to secure the return of the children.<sup>6</sup>

### **The boycott begins**

Two shops in the village of Fethard, owned by members of the Church of Ireland, became the focus of the boycott. One was a hardware store, run by Leslie and Pearl Gardiner; the other a news agency owned by Betty Cooper. After two weeks of Catholic villagers staying away from his store, Leslie Gardiner was reported as describing business as being at a 'standstill'. He had not sold an ounce of mangold or turnip seed since the boycott had begun. Betty Cooper experienced a considerable drop in the sales of newspapers and periodicals, as former customers made alternative arrangements.<sup>7</sup> On an average Sunday she sold fifty newspapers. However, on Sunday, 2 June, the total was only twenty. Moreover, local children had ceased buying sweets in her shop.<sup>8</sup> By its third week the boycott had assumed a determined character, the *Irish Times*, being told on behalf of local Catholics:

The Roman Catholic population is firmly convinced that local Protestants financed and cooperated in the disappearance of this woman and her two children. The attitude of the Catholics is that the people who did so should take active measures to get the children back. The Catholics will not cooperate until the children are returned.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Kennedy, *The Year the Whales Came In*, p. 187. This account, though fictional, is based on Kennedy's extensive research and knowledge of the episode and represents a serious attempt by him to convey the sermon as accurately as possible.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, 'Fethard Boycott', p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Irish Press*, 28 May 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, 164/18(1).

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Times*, 3 June 1957.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Protestant farmers also felt the impact of the actions of Catholic neighbours. Locals refused to sell cattle to Sheila Cloney's father, Thomas Kelly.<sup>10</sup> Grant has recorded that local cattle dealer, Con Power, who lived in Templetown, told Kelly that he had been instructed, the first or second day of the boycott, not to proceed with a sale that had already been arranged between them. To circumvent the boycott, Power agreed to sell the cattle to a Waterford Catholic farmer, Whelan by name, who was an associate of Kelly's. Fr Allen learned of this transaction and confronting Power, the priest tore up the cheque. Whelan, on hearing of this, instructed a solicitor to initiate proceedings against Allen. Whelan, however, was persuaded to change his mind and the deal fell through.<sup>11</sup> Others stopped buying milk, with farmer Alexander Auld, who lived a mile from Fethard, losing ninety-five per cent of his business.<sup>12</sup> Even the local Anglican piano teacher, Lucie Knipe, was not immune from the villagers' wrath: she lost eleven of her twelve pupils.<sup>13</sup>

The boycott resulted in the Catholic sexton of St Mogue's Church, Mary Stafford, giving up a position she had held for seven years. Commenting on her decision, she said: 'I knew the boycott was on and as a Catholic my convictions urged me to resign'.<sup>14</sup> More serious for the Protestant community was the resignation of the Catholic teacher, twenty-two years old Anna Walsh, from their local national school. This school closed on 15 May, and its eleven pupils found themselves deprived of an education. Anna Walsh explained her decision in terms similar to those of Mary Stafford: 'Being a Catholic, I thought it was proper for me to resign in the circumstances. The reason I gave the Department of Education for my action was the boycott. I am not prepared to go back unless or until things are settled'.<sup>15</sup>

The operation of the boycott was overseen by a vigilance committee of laymen. Such committees were an integral part of Irish Catholicism in the 1950s when members of the laity monitored aspects of parochial and diocesan life in such matters as the operation of censorship legislation and the conduct of local dances.<sup>16</sup> As the boycott continued, members of this committee arrived in the village, once a week. Some reportedly travelled

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<sup>10</sup> *Irish Press*, 28 May 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, 164/18(1).

<sup>11</sup> Grant, 'Fethard Boycott', p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Irish Times*, 3 June 1957.

<sup>13</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 June 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(14).

<sup>14</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 2 June 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(3).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Simon Kennedy.

from New Ross, eighteen miles away.<sup>17</sup> According to the *Belfast Telegraph*, they administered the boycott 'on military lines'.<sup>18</sup> Their activities were shrouded in secrecy, the committee's very existence denied by villagers. The *Irish Times* reported on 8 June that no one in Fethard 'will say whether or not a particular person or group is encouraging the continuance of the boycott'. A few weeks later Catholics were reported as rejecting the notion that events in village were in any sense organised; rather, they presented themselves as engaging in a spontaneous action which was an example of voluntary cooperation in response to a grave wrong.<sup>19</sup>

### Reaction of the Protestant community

The initial reaction of Fethard's Protestants to the boycott was one of surprise and hurt.<sup>20</sup> For them, the actions of Sheila Cloney were essentially a private domestic affair. Those who made public pronouncements made it clear that the local Anglican community had played no role in her disappearance and had no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the children. Leslie Gardiner declared that Protestants had 'no hand, act or part in the Cloney disappearance', the whole village knowing about it before Protestants did. He and his co-religionists had 'clear' consciences. William Kelly, Sheila's brother, expressed similar views, denying any Protestant involvement in the flight of his sister and nieces.<sup>21</sup>

For the spiritual leader of the village's Anglican community, Rev Adrian Fisher, it was to be a most difficult time, the difficulty compounded by the fact that he had only been instituted as rector of the Fethard Union of parishes on 9 May. Before he arrived in Wexford, he had served as a British army chaplain since 1952, spending one year, 1956-7, in Cyprus. At the institution service, the Bishop of Ferns and Ossory, Dr John Percy Phair, referred, ironically, to 'this chaplain coming from troubled Cyprus to this quiet out-post of the Church of Ireland'.<sup>22</sup> After the institution service, Fisher heard the archdeacon of the diocese telling the bishop about Sheila Cloney's disappearance and that there might be trouble brewing. This was the first the new rector had heard about events in Fethard and he did not attach any importance to what was said. He took his first service at

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<sup>17</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 September 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(146).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Irish Times*, 22 June 1957.

<sup>20</sup> *Irish Times*, 27 May 1957.

<sup>21</sup> *Irish Press*, 28 May 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(1).

<sup>22</sup> Grant, 'Fethard Boycott', p. 2.

St. Mogue's Church on 12 May, the same day that Stafford preached the boycott sermon.<sup>23</sup>

As the boycott continued, the actions of Catholic villagers were regretted and criticised, Betty Cooper commenting: 'It was a pity that Catholics should be treating Protestants like this as the Protestants had nothing to do with Sheila Cloney's disappearance'.<sup>24</sup> Rev Adrian Fisher was more forceful in his comments:

I think it is unjust that the Roman Catholic community should interfere in this way with Protestants who have nothing to do with the matter. I think myself there is no canon law for the boycott in Fethard and that the Roman Catholic Church would condemn it if it were brought to the attention of the papal nuncio.<sup>25</sup>

He repeated his criticism of the boycott in early June, appealing for an end to it. He protested that 'innocent citizens' were being 'victimised', which he described as 'stupid' because the matter was no concern of theirs.<sup>26</sup> Bishop Phair, speaking on a visit to Fethard on 7 June, adopted a less forthright tone than the parish rector, but nevertheless issued an unequivocal disavowal of Protestant involvement in Sheila Cloney's departure and a clear criticism of the Catholic response:

These people [Protestants] have not the remotest idea as to where this woman has gone. They know nothing whatever about her movements. Even her own parents did not know until she went away..... And it is tragic to think that they should now be victimised and punished for a thing over which they had no control, and know absolutely nothing about. I can assure you I know nothing either... My community knows as much about the matter as a child unborn.<sup>27</sup>

A month later, writing in the diocesan magazine, he was less moderate in his use of language, describing the boycott as 'cruel and pitiless'. Once again he denied any Protestant involvement in Sheila Cloney's disappearance: 'There is not one jot of evidence that any member of our

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<sup>23</sup> Pam Fisher, 'The Fethard-on-Sea Boycott in County Wexford, May 1957', Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/35(1).

<sup>24</sup> *Irish Times*, 3 June 1957.

<sup>25</sup> *Irish Independent*, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(2); no date recorded on cutting but very likely late May or early June, 1957.

<sup>26</sup> *Irish Press*, 7 June 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(13).

<sup>27</sup> *Irish Times*, 8 June 1957.

Church assisted in, or even sympathised with Mrs Cloney's flight from her home'.<sup>28</sup>

While Fisher was critical of Catholic actions, he was very hostile in his attitude towards Sheila Cloney. He also made it clear that he was also speaking on behalf of his bishop. Shortly after her departure, the rector expressed his sympathy with the plight of her husband and condemned Sheila in very forthright terms:

I sympathise with Sean Cloney that his wife left him and disappeared with the children, and I condemn her action in doing so. She was under a solemn obligation to have the children brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. She broke that solemn obligation and without a word of warning disappeared with the children. I pray God that I may be pouring oil on troubled waters when I say that everybody in the Church of Ireland condemns her actions in running away with the children and breaking up a home. Speaking as an Irish priest of the Church of Ireland, I condemn it and I know that my bishop, Rt Rev Dr J. P. Phair, condemns it. Everybody in the Church of Ireland condemns it and prayers are being said in the three churches of the Fethard Union for an end of the boycott and a happy solution of the Cloney affair.<sup>29</sup>

### **Phair's visit to Fethard**

As noted earlier, Bishop John Phair visited Fethard on 7 June. He was then an octogenarian, having been Bishop of Ossory and Ferns since 1940. The purpose of the visit, according to him, was to talk to and encourage the local members of the Church of Ireland who by then had been experiencing three weeks of the boycott. He met with twenty-five people in the village school for one hour. The occasion was primarily a pastoral one and Phair advised those in attendance 'to be their natural selves, to be kindly and helpful and to go around with smiles on their faces'.<sup>30</sup> This advice certainly resonated with the exhortations of Christian fortitude one might expect in an episcopal pronouncement. However, it also suggested a disposition towards avoiding the unpalatable reality of what was happening in Fethard. Other comments by the bishop reinforce this sense of his almost wishing the episode away and thus not have to confront and address it.

In particular, Phair attacked the publicity which the boycott had attracted. It was his view that this boycott would have died out much sooner, were it

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<sup>28</sup> *Diocesan Magazine*, July 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/21, p.3.

<sup>29</sup> *Irish Independent*, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(2).

<sup>30</sup> *Irish Times*, 8 June 1957.

not for the attention paid to it by the newspapers. He expressed the opinion that ‘this tragic business will fade out and quietly come to an end if there is less fuss about it’.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Phair had made essentially the same point the day before his visit to Fethard, when he told a representative of the *Evening Mail* that the situation had been exacerbated by publicity: ‘If there had been less written about it the whole thing would have settled long ago’.<sup>32</sup>

A desire to avoid controversy also inspired Bishop Phair’s reaction to a question from a reporter as to his response to a suggestion, contained in a letter to the *Irish Times*, that Protestants from all over the country should buy goods from the two boycotted shopkeepers. He rejected the idea out of hand: ‘I think it is a most unworthy suggestion. That is not the way to solve the problem. It is a senseless retaliation and I exhort my community not to pay any serious attention to it’.

Finally, Phair’s denunciation of mixed marriages revealed a view that their avoidance would prevent episodes such as the one at Fethard. While such views were consistent with his long and deeply felt opposition to *Ne Temere*, and the offence he felt at the loss of members of his flock to its demands on Protestants,<sup>33</sup> in this instance, however, by shifting the focus to such marriages in general, the complexities raised by the Cloney case were skirted around and a panacea for any future problems attending on mixed marriages was postulated. In simple, stark terms Phair stated: ‘Of course, I deplore mixed marriages. I do all in my power to discourage them. I think that people should marry into their own faith and Church. Then these things would not happen’. This was a theme he returned to in the July edition of the diocesan magazine where he argued that Fethard had shown clearly the unhappiness that may follow from an inter-Church marriage. It was a lesson he hoped Protestants would not forget.<sup>34</sup>

### **Closure of Fethard village school**

One of the more serious consequences of the boycott was the closure of the Protestant national school in Fethard on 15 May 1957. The eleven pupils on the roll found themselves deprived of an education. On 5 June Owen Sheehy Skeffington, one of Trinity College’s representatives in the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *Evening Mail*, 7 June 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/18(18).

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Rev D. N. S. Phair. Rev Phair’s grandfather was a Church of Ireland clergyman and Bishop Phair’s cousin. The bishop was a regular visitor to his rectory at Kilmallock, in County Limerick.

<sup>34</sup> *Diocesan Magazine*, July 1957, Fisher Papers, UCDA, P164/21, p.3.