

The Survival of the Confraternities in Post-Reformation Dublin

COLM LENNON

St. Patrick's College, Maynooth

When the Reformation came to Dublin in the 1530s it might have seemed as if the age of the confraternities or religious guilds of the city was over. As elsewhere in Europe, these institutions provided conduits for obituarial prayer for members and their families, welfare for the deprived, education for the young, and pomp and pageantry for citizens during the civic year. Handsomely endowed with gifts of money, lands and houses, the guilds gave employment to an increasing number of lay-appointed chaplains who celebrated mass at the confraternal altars in the parish churches of Dublin. By the early sixteenth century the guilds had acquired the titles to properties yielding hundreds of pounds per annum in rents from estates in the city, suburbs and vicinity.¹ Membership incorporated men and women from all social orders within the municipality, although the preponderance of patrician brothers and sisters in certain key guilds such as those of St. Sythe's in St. Michan's, St. Anne's in St. Audoen's and Corpus Christi in St. Michael's parish was to be a significant feature of their later survival into the seventeenth century. Continuity with medieval devotions was enshrined in the practices and pieties of the guilds, those of St. George and St. Mary's, Mulhuddard, providing an awning for holy wells to the east and west of the city, for example, and the fresco behind the altar of St. Anne's denoting veneration of the holy family. A few of Dublin's most commodious residences—Geneval's Inns and Blakeney's Inns, for instance—served as assembly places for guilds members and colleges for priests, in those cases for Corpus Christi and St. Anne's

1 See Myles V. Ronan, "Religious Customs of Dublin Medieval Guilds," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, fifth series, 26 (1925): 225-47, 364-85; Colm Lennon, "The Chantry in the Irish Reformation: The Case of St. Anne's Guild, Dublin, 1550-1630," in R.V. Comerford, Mary Cullen, J.R. Hill and Colm Lennon, eds., *Religion, Conflict, and Coexistence in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), 6-25; Mary Clark and Raymond Refausse, eds., *Directory of Historic Dublin Guilds* (Dublin, 1993), 32-40.

respectively.² More spectacularly the guilds of Corpus Christi and St. George were chief organisers of the two principal pageants in Dublin cultural life, held on the festivals which their dedications celebrated.³ State and municipality would have been hard put to it to overlook the manifestations of corporate piety represented by the guilds.

Particularly objectionable to the proponents of the religious reforms were the propagation of cults at altars, shrines, and wells, and the perpetuation of belief in Purgatory through the chantries of the fraternities. Not only did these features of guild worship remain intact, however vestigially, in the Reformation, but the very institutions themselves managed to survive. Certain small material losses were sustained in the first phase of reforming in cases where the properties of guilds such as St. Anne's were intertwined with those of the Dublin religious orders which were dissolved in the late 1530s.⁴ And in the more rigorous period of innovation of the mid-century under King Edward VI guild practices such as processions and patronal devotions were imperilled by the prevailing ambience. Yet no formal move to suppress the chantries and religious guilds was made in Ireland, despite such a course being advocated by the royally-appointed archbishop of Dublin, George Browne. He hoped that the dissolution of those associations would bring a band of land and property under crown patronage which could be used to found several grammar-schools and a university in Ireland.⁵ That Browne's proposal of 1547 was not taken up was due to a fusion of administrative neglect and state pragmatism. Symptomatic of the former was the failure to convene a parliament to enact the doctrinal and other changes under Edward. The Irish church, the running of which the state took over, was impoverished in most dioceses, lacking the benefices and livings which would have attracted a dynamic and enthusiastic ministry to the parishes and bishoprics.⁶ Already assured of rich acquisitions of monastic estates and advow-

2 Colm Lennon, ed., "The Foundation Charter of St. Sythe's Guild, Dublin, 1476," *Archivium Hibernicum* 48 (1994): 3-14; idem, "Chantries in the Irish Reformation," 10-25; Clark and Refausse, eds., *Historic Dublin Guilds*, 33-34, 35, 38.

3 J.T. Gilbert, ed., *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin* [hereafter cited as *Anc. rec. Dub.*], i, 239-41, 242, 324.

4 Lennon, "Chantries in the Irish Reformation," 11-13.

5 Ibid., 6-7, 11-12.

6 Brendan Bradshaw, "The Edwardian Reformation in Ireland," *Archivium Hibernicum* 34 (1976-77): 83-98; S.G. Ellis, "Economic Problems of the Church: Why the Reformation Failed in Ireland," *Journal of Ecclesiastical*

sons of impropriated benefices, the lay leadership in town and country had consolidated their position vis-a-vis the church. And the state authorities chose not to jeopardise the good will built up behind the early movement for political and ecclesiastical reform in the 1530s and 1540s by insisting on the disgorging of leases to confraternal property in and around Dublin. As for the devotional side involving orbits and lay-appointed chaplains, for example, the hope was perhaps that these aspects would be extirpated slowly over time by dint of educational advance and conciliatory handling.⁷

Crown and church authorities were keenly aware of the role of the Old English urban elite as cynosures, all the more pronounced in a colonial setting. The pattern of endogamous nuptiality among the patrician families was tightly-knit, one commentator remarking that "they bind themselves together through intermarriage and reject Irish suitors with the utmost contempt."⁸ Upwardly mobile patricians attained gentry status through matrimonial contracts with county families. The partiality and cliquishness of Dublin lawyers and jurors gave rise to complaints on the part of newcomers. The nexus of marital, business, land and legal ties was copperfastened by the granting of borough status by the crown to the municipality of Dublin in 1548, which confirmed the state's reliance on the socio-economic elite of the city to provide good and orderly government locally.⁹ Critical to this agglomeration of patrician power was their continuing influence within the ecclesiastical system. The civic leaders were accustomed to having a stake in the former monastic institutions as lessees, estate managers and legal counsel. With the grants of secularised abbey property came rights to tithes and advowsons which had been appropriated by the monasteries. Membership of the guilds on the part of patrician men and women reinforced family bonds, urban and suburban identity and mercantile relationships. The operation of the leaseholding system of the religious guilds gave them more opportunities for enrichment and collective management. And the dispensing of aid to the poor and sick through the guilds reflected and complemented the paternalistic welfare system of the city council. The practical actions of the fraternities thus meshed with those of the municipal corpora-

History 41 (1990): 239-65.

7 Colm Lennon, *Sixteenth-Century Ireland: The Incomplete Conquest* (Dublin, 1994), 306-7, 311-15.

8 Richard Stanihurst, *De rebus in Hibernia gestis* (Antwerp, 1584), 31-32.

9 See Colm Lennon, *The Lords of Dublin in the Age of Reformation* (Dublin, 1989), chapter three.

tion which embodied *par excellence* the social, economic and cultural ascendancy of the civic patriciate.¹⁰

With the coterie of twenty-four aldermen at its centre, the corporation acquired more power after the incorporation of Dublin as borough, mediating as it did between citizens and state administration. Although it had a legal function in the furthering of the religious changes during the Reformation, the mayor as head of the corporation and justice of peace being charged with enforcing the act of uniformity of 1560, the civic council was even-handed in its official policy towards religion. The overriding objective was to preserve civic order and harmony, as evident for example in the conciliar ordinances for the continuation of certain religious rituals associated with trade guilds in the 1560s.¹¹ A key feature of the Elizabethan period, however, is the interlinking of guild and corporation activity through the striking frequency of dual membership of the bodies. The confraternity of St. Anne was usually headed by an alderman and ex-mayor of the corporation, and the membership was heavily representative of the bench of twenty-four. In 1584, for instance, fifteen aldermen were members of St. Anne's guild, and the percentage was never less than fifty through the decades around the turn of the century.¹² The membership roll of the guild of St. Sythe is not extant but at its inception in 1476 the majority of the foundation-members, including the first master, were aldermen who served as mayors and bailiffs in the municipality. Of that group a significant number resided in the Oxmantown suburb in which the parish church of St. Michan was located.¹³ The guild of St. George had an institutionalised link with the corporation, serving as a confraternity under municipal patronage. Its officers, the masters and two wardens, were *ex officio* the outgoing mayor and bailiffs (later sheriffs) of the borough.¹⁴ The lazar house of St. Stephen operated as a quasi-confraternity under municipal patronage, the Dublin-born custos of the lazar being nominated by the mayor and city council, and then presented to the chaplain of St. Stephen's chapel to the archbishop of Dublin.¹⁵

The lenience of the state regime in the implementation of the Reformation statutes allowed for continuity in religious practice, person-

10 Ibid., 131-32, 144-50.

11 *Anc. rec. Dub.*, ii, 30-31, 49.

12 Lennon, "Chantry in the Irish Reformation," 16-18.

13 Lennon, "Foundation Charter for St. Sythes's Guild," 3-5.

14 *Anc. rec. Dub.*, ii, 119.

15 M.V. Ronan, "Lazar Houses of St. Laurence and St. Stephen in Medieval Dublin," in John Ryan, ed., *Essays and Studies Presented to Eoin MacNeill* (Dublin, 1940), 480-89.

nel and belief, which gradually fostered recusancy by the 1590s. While officially neutral in religious complexion, the corporation had a small band of enthusiastically Protestant aldermen upon which the state and church authorities hoped to rely for the furtherance of reforms in doctrine and liturgy.¹⁶ Among the uncommitted majority the religious guilds made a significant contribution in this phase of continuity. Apart from one guild, that of St. Mary in the church of St. Nicholas Within, which was transmuted into a Protestant chantry,¹⁷ the other major city confraternities functioned in a circumspect manner within the older milieu. Although chaplains became singing men, the appointing of obits apparently dwindled and guild pageantry was either elided or secularised, there were vestigial religious traces of the religious functions of the guilds in the decades after the 1560s. In 1593, for example, the guild members of St. Anne voted funds for the relief of poverty within the parish of St. Audoen's and a substantial loan was offered to help the victims of a massive explosion at Dublin's quayside in 1597. The altar of St. Anne in St. Audoen's was refurbished in the same year and the guild-house later became one of the mass-houses of Dublin, competing with the Protestantised parish churches.¹⁸ The kinsfolk of many guild members were among the first continentally-trained priests who returned to their localities on the Counter-Reformation mission, being sheltered in their family homes. And the receptrices of priests such as Anna Sedgrave, mother of the first Jesuit missionary, Father Henry Fitzsimon, S.J., were active in the guild of St. Anne and other associations.¹⁹

The crystallising of the politico-religious issues in the 1590s came about not only as a response to state pressure on complaisant church-papists but also through internal developments within the ranks of civic leadership. Most important of all was the emergence of a corporate Catholicism which drew much of its strength from the confraternal experience and protectionism. At a decisive time just before the bull of excommunication of Elizabeth I in 1570, another papal missive came to the attention of Catholic guildspeople in Dublin. This document of Pope Pius V, dated 1569, enjoined all Catholic members of religious confraternities and associations, especially in Protestant countries, to lease lands and properties to their co-religionists only, and to expend income

16 Lennon, *Lords of Dublin*, 135-38.

17 Clark and Refausse, eds., *Historic Dublin Guilds*, 38-39.

18 Lennon, "Chuntries in the Irish Reformation," 13-16; idem, *Lords of Dublin*, 185.

19 For Henry Fitzsimon, S.J., see *Words of Comfort...to Distressed Catholics*, ed. Edmund Hogan (Dublin 1881), 200ff.

from this source on the maintenance of priests. That the papal bull of 1569 was influential among guild members is attested by the finding of a copy among the muniments of the guild of St. Anne nearly seventy years later.²⁰ In practice the pattern of renting to Catholics was pronounced. The masters and wardens of the guild of St. Sythe were said by observers to have disposed of all the lands among themselves, that is, fellow-Catholics.²¹ The leaseholders of St. Anne's from 1585 to 1623 were Catholic by a proportion of over two to one, though during that time a fifth of the membership was Protestant. In the 1620s many fee-farms were granted to selected Catholics who retained the titles to the guild properties. The Catholic solidarity of this institution was most evident in the leadership of masters and wardens, all of whom in the four decades down to the 1630s were accounted strongly recusant.²² The defensiveness of the guild in the face of commissions of enquiry can be seen in the decision taken to appoint key-holders for the stoutly-locked cabinets for the muniments in the 1590s.²³ This conservative exclusivity mirrors that of the municipal corporation which was mustering its legal and material resources in the face of challenges to its chartered liberties in the early Jacobean period. Hostile commentators noted that a discriminatory policy towards Protestant newcomers was in operation in the municipality in trade, apprenticeships and social intercourse.²⁴

The belated attack by the Protestant authorities on the overt Catholicism of the *fin de siècle* manifested itself in a variety of ways. This campaign was weakened by the absence of anti-chantry legislation in Ireland, though features such as obits and processions may have vanished even without evangelical strictures.²⁵ In a preliminary skirmish in the courts in 1597 the quasi-confraternity of St. Stephen which tended the lazars of Dublin was forced to defend its standing in the wake of the dissolution of the monasteries, successfully fending off a suit against its corporate legality.²⁶ In the first decade of the Jacobean period the state's

20 For the text of the Bull, see Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. B 479; see also H.F. Berry, "History of the Religious Gild of St. Anne," *Royal Irish Academy Proceedings*, 30, section C (1904-1905): 34-35.

21 Dublin, Representative Church Body Library, MS C.6, 1.26.13, ff. 28-29.

22 Lennon, "Chuntries in the Irish Reformation," 21-24.

23 Ibid., 21.

24 See, for example, Barnaby Rich, *A New Description of Ireland* (London, 1610), 185-86, 189.

25 Lennon, "Chuntries in the Irish Reformation," 7.

26 Ronan, "Lazar Houses of St. Laurence and St. Stephen," 480-89.

attorney challenged the warrant of the main religious guilds of St. Anne, St. Sythe and Corpus Christi in the court of king's bench, and these institutions apparently overcame the hurdle by pleading their chartered rights.²⁷ Thereafter sporadic bouts of litigation ensued, punctuated by complaints by Trinity College academics and Church of Ireland incumbents in the parishes where guilds survived. These individuals probed the matter of where the income from the fraternity rentals went, suspecting that Catholic priests were the real beneficiaries.²⁸ Concurrently, however, it seems that Protestant activists had ceded the ground to the Catholic associations, preferring themselves to marshal their straitened resources for controlling key services and agencies of education and welfare, in competition with the Counter-Reformation agents.²⁹ In the 1630s the viceroy, Thomas Wentworth, took on the guilds as part of the attempt to re-endow the Anglican state church which had been stripped of many of its assets. His solution was to take over the running and resources of the confraternities, but in this he was foiled, one commentator claiming that his failure to curb St. Anne's guild in particular was one of the reasons for Wentworth's downfall in Ireland.³⁰ The turbulence of the mid-century decades provided the guilds with a respite from the imbroglio and it was not until the later seventeenth century that the legal position of the guilds was tackled decisively. St. Anne's was formally dissolved in 1695, St. Sythe's and Corpus Christi lingered on until the early eighteenth century and the last of all the late medieval chantries, St. Mary's, was dissolved in 1881.³¹

The strategies for survival adopted by the Dublin confraternities were varied, mostly based on legal argument and buttressed by Catholic corporateness. By the time of the waning of these late medieval institutions they had performed a function in preparing the ground for new Tridentine confraternities. These bodies were different, being controlled by the Counter-Reformation clergy, and incorporating more the individ-

27 Royal Irish Academy, MS 12 E 2, pp. 26, 32.

28 Lennon, "Chuntries in the Irish Reformation," 19-20; idem, "Foundation Charter of the St. Sythe's Guild," 5.

29 Cf. Colm Lennon, "'The Bowels of the City's Bounty': The Municipality of Dublin and the Foundation of Trinity College, 1592," *Long Room* 37 (1992): 10-16.

30 Berry, "St Anne's Gild," 33-37; Royal Irish Academy, MS 12 D 1, ff. 41r-v; Dublin, Gilbert Library, MS 245, "A Further Consideration of the State of St. Anne's Guild," 1682; Lambeth Place Library, MS 929.37, pp. 1-2. I am very grateful to Canon John Crawford for the last reference.

31 Clark and Refausse, eds., *Historic Dublin Guilds*, 33, 34, 38, 40.

ualism of the early modern era. But the religious guilds of the earlier period had made an important contribution, and not just in the religious sphere. They had offered community, kinship and material resources to the seminary priests, and more broadly had accustomed the members to ecclesiastical patronage and sociability. They had helped to forge the identity of groups of citizens at a time of testing and uncertainty. For example, in the parish of St. Michan in which the guild of St. Sythe survived a significant proportion of the parishioners dissented from the state church in the 1610s³² and the ministry of the Catholic priest, Father William Browne, was no doubt greatly assisted by the resources of the guild which were worth more than double the permitted income of L 40 per annum.³³ The religious guilds of Dublin transmitted the traditions of civic devotion and piety through succeeding generations in a variety of ways. The transmutation of a confraternity into a Church of Ireland chantry, as in the case of St. Mary's, forms one intriguing type of continuity, counterpointing the discovery of the fresco of St. Anne and the holy family at the altar dedicated to her in St. Audoen's church late in the last century, a patronal link with the fifteenth-century founders.³⁴ In the case of Dublin, "cuius regio eius religio" did not apply, as the civic majority opted for the alternative confessional path to that of the state regime. Driven by civic devoutness, led by municipal luminaries, shielded by the city council and their own royal charters, the confraternities helped to facilitate the transition from pre-Reformation Christianity to Counter-Reformation Catholicism with the minimum of upheaval.

32 John Meagher, ed., "Presentments of Recusants in Dublin, 1617-18," *Repertorium novum* 2:2 (1959-60): 269-73.

33 "Archbishop Bulkeley's Visitation of Dublin, 1630," ed. M.V. Ronan, *Archivium Hibernicum* 8 (1941): 58n.

34 *Irish Builder* (1887), 348.