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## The Last Speech and Prayer of Blessed Terence Albert O'Brien, Bishop of Emly, 1651.

Hugh Fenning, O.P.

### INTRODUCTION

Terence Albert O'Brien, O.P., bishop of Emly, was executed at Limerick on 30 October 1651 after Ireton's long siege of the city. In 1992 he was one of many Irish martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul. His career has therefore been studied by many scholars over the past century, particularly during the period of intense historical research which preceded that solemn papal declaration. In the circumstances, one would not expect any fresh evidence to appear, and yet the bishop's 'last speech and prayer', printed at London as part of a pamphlet in 1651, has since come to light.

The pamphlet was, of course, well and truly hidden by the beginning and most prominent part of its title: *The Humble Petition of James Hind*. Hind, a notorious highwayman and royalist soldier, was to end his days on the gallows in 1652.<sup>1</sup> The rest of the title, and all save the first page of the text, concerned *'The Speech and Confession of the Bishop of Clonwel, at the place of execution at Limerick'*. A copy of this pamphlet, a slim quarto of eight pages, is preserved at the British Library with the call-number E. 647. (2). One of the compilers of the great printed catalogue of the Library, while listing this pamphlet under the name 'Hind (James)', changed 'Clonwel' to 'Clonmel' and suggested that the bishop in question might have been 'T. O'Brien, titular bishop of Emly'. Better still, the catalogue included a cross-reference under 'O'Brien (Terence), R. C. bishop of Emly', referring the reader to the James Hind pamphlet.

<sup>1</sup>The article on Hind in *D.N.B.*, ix, p. 893, mentions that he served in Ireland in 1649 as a corporal in the Marquis of Ormonde's life-guard, was wounded at Youghal, and escaped from Duncannon to the Scilly Isles.

Even at that, the text remained unnoticed until 1994 when a friend in London, Mr Dermot Walsh, came across it by accident while checking the catalogue for a book by another 'T. O'Brien', Timothy O'Brien of Castlelyons. The credit for the discovery belongs therefore to him alone.

Whatever about the 'Clonwel' of the title, or the 'Clonmel' of the catalogue description, the bishop in question was indeed Terence Albert O'Brien, bishop of Emly, for he was the only bishop executed at Limerick after the surrender of the city. Perhaps he was wrongly styled 'bishop of Clonmel' because Clonmel lay close to the southern borders of Emly and was a much larger town than any inside it. Besides, there had recently been a Dominican community in Clonmel itself. While Terence A. O'Brien was only one of two bishops excluded from pardon by name in the articles of surrender, the second excluded bishop, Edmund O'Dwyer of Limerick, disguised himself as a soldier and marched safely out of Limerick with the garrison. Ireton's troops entered the city on 29 October 1651, Bishop O'Brien was hanged on the following day, and on 3 November Ireton reported the bishop's execution in a long letter to London.<sup>2</sup> Our pamphlet wrongly gives the date of execution as 9 November, either through error or because the publisher extended the date by ten days to adjust the difference between the English and continental calendars.

One may well wonder whether this text preserves the actual words spoken by the bishop on the gallows; how that speech was transmitted so quickly to London; and in whose interest it was to publish it. We know that the pamphlet was issued on 21 November 1651, because the great book-collector George Thomason<sup>3</sup> to whom this copy once belonged was accustomed, as in this case, to write the date of publication on such tracts as he or his helpers could find. There was, therefore, a sufficiently long time, three weeks, for the text to find its way from Limerick to London. Bishop O'Brien, condemned on 29 October and executed on the following day, may well have written his last 'speech and prayer' during the night and handed the text to one of the 'friends' to whom he said good-bye before 'going up to the ladder' (p. 6). Alternatively, it may have been taken down in short-hand by an interested bystander. Nothing in the speech itself would lead one to suspect that it is either a pious forgery or a hostile work of fiction. George Horton, who published the pamphlet,

<sup>2</sup>J. T. GILBERT (ed.), *A contemporary history of affairs in Ireland, from 1641 to 1652* (Dublin, 1879-80), iii, 265-8.

<sup>3</sup>There is an excellent article on George Thomason (d. 1666) in *D.N.B.*, xix, 681-82.

worked at various addresses in London between 1647 and 1660, specialising in political pamphlets and news-sheets. Throughout that period a great number of political tracts, both parliamentary and royalist, poured from the press in London. Bishop O'Brien's 'speech and prayer' were uncompromisingly royalist. They were no less expressly Roman Catholic. The publisher may have wished to protect himself by stating in the closing lines that General O'Neill and all the rest executed after him 'declared themselves to be profest enemies to the Church of England'. Many were indeed executed, but not Major-General Hugh Buidhe O'Neill, governor of Limerick, who was eventually released.

As for the text itself, it seems better to reprint it here as it stands without detailed analysis or comment. It is essentially a religious document and, as such, deserves the attention of historians of Irish spirituality. One notices that the bishop refers more often to the Old Testament than to the New. More surprisingly, especially for a Dominican, he makes no reference whatever to Our Lady. His mind is on his own sins and on the saving power of the cross, so that he asks God the Father not to look down upon him in mercy: 'until I have hid myself in the wounds of Christ' (p. 5).

Some slight details, both in the speech and in the prayer, indicate that the charges brought against the bishop by General Ireton were those of treason and of having been 'engaged in arms'. Bishop O'Brien's defence on both scores was that he had acted to preserve his own principles and beliefs, and also 'for the establishing of the King and the rest of the royal issue in their just rights and privileges'. These points will interest those concerned with the legal aspect of the case.

Wing's *Short-title catalogue* lists four copies of this pamphlet still to be found in as many English libraries. The following text is reproduced from the British Library copy. It seems best in the circumstances to reprint the entire pamphlet, including the opening page about James Hind the highwayman and royalist. I am indebted to Mr Dermot Walsh, not merely for finding the document and obtaining a photocopy of it, but for his research into the careers of James Hind and the book-collector George Thomason.

## TEXT

The Humble Petition of James Hind  
(close prisoner in Newgate)  
To the Right Honourable the Councill of State;  
And their proceedings thereupon.

Together with the Speech and Confession of the  
Bishop of CLONWEL at the place of execution  
at Limerick in Ireland  
on the 9 of this instant November, 1651.

As also,

His Prayer immediately before he was turned off the ladder;  
and his declaration to the people, concerning the King of Scots,  
and the grounds of his engagement against the Parliament.  
Likewise the manner of the Deportment of General Oneal,  
and 29 colonels and other officers,  
who were all hanged at the same time.

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London, printed for G. HORTON, 1651.

The humble Petition of James Hind, to the Right Honorable the  
Council of State; and their proceedings thereupon.

Sheweth,

That whereas your petitioner (close prisoner in New-gate) is  
unfeignedly sorrowfull for all his late miscarriages, whether testified  
against him, or acknowledged by him, and that upon earnest seeking  
of God, and inquiring into his Will, your petitioner is convinced of  
his former misdemeanours and acting; but yet remaineth under the  
heavie Yoak of Irons and Bondage:

May it therefore please this honourable Council to take these  
premises into your gracious consideration; and to vouchsafe your  
Christian favour and clemency to your poor Supplicant, for the set-  
ting of him free from this intolerable Iron Yoak; for the granting of  
his friends access unto him, and for the reducing of him from the  
bare boords, to a more Christian-like Condition.

*And your petitioner shall ever pray, &c.*

These premises being taken into consideration, it was ordered that  
he should have a bed; which was the final result.

By letters from Ireland it is certified, that upon the surrender of  
the strong Town of Limerick in Ireland, the Bishop of Clonwel, Gen.  
Oneal, Col. Fitzpatrick, Col. Hugh Brian and 27 more Colonels,  
Lieut. Colonels, and Majors, were delivered up to the Lord Deputy  
Ireton, on terms of mercy; who upon the 8. of this instant Novemb.  
called a Council of Officers, and after some time spent in debate  
upon matter of life, it was resolved that justice should seize on them;  
and accordingly gave sentence, that the said Bishop Oneal, and the  
rest should be executed on the day following; and that a Gallows

should be set up in the Market-place, which was accordingly done; and on the 9 instant the Bishop, O Neal, and the rest, were all brought to the place of execution, being guarded by 6 Troops of Horse, and one Regiment of Foot. When they were brought to the said place, the Bishop was the first that tasted of the Cup; and coming to the foot of the Ladder, he kissed it, saying,

*Good people,*

This is a very uncomfortable place, for me to deliver my self unto you; but I beseech you pardon my failings, and the rather, by reason of the sad occasion that hath brought me hither: Indeed, I have been long in my race, and how I have looked unto Jesus the Authour and finisher of my faith, is best known to him; I am now come to the end of my race, which I find to be a death of shame, but the shame must be despised, or there is no coming to the right hand of God; Jesus despised the shame for me upon the Crosse, and God forbid but I should despise the shame for him upon the Gallows; I am going apace, as you see, towards the Red Sea, and my feet are upon the very brinks of it, an Argument I hope that God is bringing me to the Land of promise, for that was the way by which of old he led his people.

But before they came to the Sea, he instituted a passe over for them, a Lamb it was, but it was to be eaten with very sowr herbs, as in the 12. of *Exodus*. I shall obey and labour to digest the sowr herbs, as well as the Lamb, and I shall remember, that it is the Lord's passe-over, I shall not think of the herbs, nor be angry with the hands that gathered them, but look up only to him who instituted the one, and governeth the other: For men can have no more power over me, than that which is given them from above; and although I am denied mercy here on earth, yet I doubt not but to receive it in heaven. I am not in love with this passage through the Red Sea, for I have the weakness and infirmity of flesh and blood in me, and I have prayed as my Saviour taught me, and exampled me; *ut transiret calix ista*, That this cup might passe away from me; but since it is not, that my will may, his will be done; and I shall most willingly drink of it as deep as he pleases, and enter into this Sea, I and I passe through it, in the way that he shall be pleased to leade me. And yet (good people) it would be remembrad [*sic*], That when the Servants of God, old Israel, were in this boystrous Sea, and Aaron with them, the Egyptians which persecuted them, and did in a manner drive them into that Sea, were drowned in the same waters while they were in pursuit of them: I know my God whom I serve, is as able to deliver me from this Sea of blood, as he was to deliver the 3. Children from

the furnace. *Dan. 3.* And I most humbly thank my Saviour for it. My resolution is now, as theirs was then; their Resolution was, they would not change their principles, nor worship the Image which the King had set up; nor shall I the imaginations which the people are setting up; neither will I forsake the Temple and Truth of God, to follow the bleating of Jeroboams Calves in Dan and in Bethel.

And I pray God blesse all this people, and open their eyes, that they may see the right way, for if it fall out that the blind lead the blind, doubtless they will fall both into the ditch: For my self I am (and I acknowledge it in all humility), a most grievous sinner, and therefore I cannot doubt but that God hath mercy in store for me a poor penitent, as well as for other sinners; I have upon this sad occasion ransack'd every corner of my heart, & yet I thank God, I have not found any of my sins that are there, any sins now deserving death by any known Law. And I thank God, though the wait [i.e. weight] of the sentence lie very hard upon me, yet I am as quiet within, (I thank Christ for it) as I ever was in my life; I shall hasten to go out of this miserable life, for I am not willing to be tedious; and I beseech you, as many as are within hearing, observe me, I was born and baptized in the bosome of the Church of *Rome* (the ancient and true Church) and in that Profession I have ever since lived, and in the same I now die. As touching my engagement in arms, I did it in two respects. First, for the preservation of my principles and Tenents [tenets?]. And secondly, for the establishing of the King, and the rest of the Royal issue in their just Rights and Priviledges. I will not enlarge my self any further, I have done, I forgive all the world, all and every of these bitter Enemies, or others whatsoever they have been, which have any wayes prosecuted me in this kind; I humbly desire to be forgiven first of God, and then of every man, whether I have offended him or no; if he do but conceive that I have: Lord do thou forgive me, and I beg forgiveness of him, and so I heartily desire you to joyn with me in prayer.

*The Bishop of Clonwel's Prayer immediately before  
he was turned off the ladder.*

O Eternal God, and merciful Father, look down upon me in mercy, in the riches and fulness of all my [sic] mercies look down upon me; but not till thou hast nailed my sins to the Crosse of Christ. Look upon me, but not till thou hast bathed me in the blood of Christ; not till I have hid my self in the wounds of Christ, that so the punishment that is due to my sins, may passe away and go over me; and since thou art pleased to buy me to the uttermost, I hartily beseech thee, give me now in this great instant full patience, proportionable com-

fort, a heart ready to die for thine honour, the King's happiness, and the Church's preservation; and my zeal to these (far from arrogance be it spoken) is all the sin (human frailty excepted, and all incidents thereunto), which is yet known of me in this particular for which I now come to suffer. I say in this particular of Treason, but otherwise my sins are many and great, Lord pardon them all, and those especially whatsoever they may be which have drawn down this present judgement upon me; and when thou hast given me strength to bear it, then do with me as seems best in thine own eyes, and carry me through death, that I may look upon it in what visage soever it shall appear to me. O Lord, I beseech thee, give grace of repentance to all people that have a thirst for blood; but if they will not repent, then scatter their devices so, and such as are, or shall be contrary to the glory of thy great name: the truth and sincerity of the ancient Catholique Religion, the establishing of the Royal Posterity in their just Rights and Liberties, the preservation of this poor Church in her truth, peace, and patrimony, and the settlement of this distracted and distressed people under their ancient Lawes, and in their Native Liberties: And when thou hast done this in meer mercy for them, O Lord fill their hearts with thankfulness, and with religious dutiful obedience to thee and thy Commandments all their dayes. So Amen, Lord Jesus; and I beseech thee receive my soul to mercy.

When he had finished his Prayer, he took his leave of some friends there present, saying, *God's blessing and his mercy be upon you all*, and so went up to the Ladder, where he again prayed as followeth.

Lord I am coming as fast as I can, I know I must pass through the shadow of death before I can come to see thee; but it is but *umbra mortis*, a meer shadow of death, a little darkness upon nature; but thou by the merits and passion hast broke the jaws of death; so Lord receive my soul, and have mercy upon me.

No sooner had he uttered these expressions, but immediately he was turned off the Ladder. And after him, Gen. Oneal was the next in order, who died very penitently, and so did all the rest, who at the very hour of death, declared themselves to be profest Enemies to the Church of England<sup>4</sup>

## FINIS

<sup>4</sup>Only three prisoners were executed before 3 November 1651, when Ireton wrote to Lenthall. They were Bishop O'Brien, Thomas Stritch, mayor of Limerick, and Major General Purcell, 'all of whom we presently hanged, and have set up their heads on the gates; the latter two being the original incendiaries of the rebellion and mischiefs in it, or prime engagers therein.' J. T. GILBERT, *op. cit.*, iii, 267. Among those later executed were Sir Patrick Russell, Geoffrey Baron, Dominic Fanning, Daniel O'Higgin, M.D., and James Woulfe, a Dominican friar of Limerick. Major-General Hugh O'Neill was not in fact executed, although Ireton wished to hang him.