

Brittaine, George

by Fergus O'Ferrall

Brittaine, George (1788–1848), protestant evangelical preacher and novelist, was born in 1788 in Dublin, the son of Rev Patrick Brittain (1762–1804), curate of St James's parish from 1789 to 1804. (The spelling Brittaine was adopted by George). He entered TCD on 6 September 1804, and graduated BA in 1809 before serving as curate in the parishes of St Nicholas Without, Dublin, and of Bray, Co. Wicklow, in 1811, and as curate in the parish of Muckno, Co. Monaghan, from 1811 to 1817. In 1816 he married Anna Maria, daughter of Col. Henry Monck Mason. Anna Maria's brother, Henry Joseph Monck Mason (qv), was known for his protestant evangelical missionary endeavours and in 1818 founded the Irish Society ('for promoting the education of the native Irish through the medium of their own language'). Brittaine then became vicar of Kilmactranny, Co. Sligo, (1817–23), where he oversaw the building of the church and glebe house, and finally served as rector and vicar of Kilcommock (Kilcommick), Co. Longford, (1823–48). At Kilcommock he enjoyed an annual income of £507 (£230 in rents and £277 in tithes) and oversaw the building of a new church at Kenagh, Co. Longford, in 1832.

Brittaine has been described by his contemporary, Rev Richard S. Brooke, as 'a striking and interesting preacher [who] had a noble and intellectual countenance and presence' (Brooke, *Recollections of the Irish church*, 144). Before his appointment to Kilcommock parish his only published work was *A sermon preached by the Rev George Brittaine ...* (1819) preached in Elphin Cathedral on 19 August 1819 on the Biblical text 'Where is the flock that was given to thee, thy beautiful flock?' (Jeremiah 13:20). This text was apposite for protestant evangelicalism during what has been called the 'Second Reformation'.

Co. Longford was then an important centre for protestant missionary endeavour and Brittaine's ministry there coincided with the struggles for catholic emancipation, for the abolition of tithes and for the repeal of the Union. Powerful local landed families, most notably the Maxwells, Kings and Lefroys, led the protestant evangelical and tory political resistance to the catholic advance amid frequent, bitterly contested elections in Co. Longford during the 1830s and 1840s. The countess of Rosse, Jane King, was another fervent advocate of the protestant cause: the mother-in-law to Longford's biggest landlord Robert King, Viscount Lorton (1773–1854), she was a generous benefactor of Brittaine's parish.

This local context is essential for understanding his efforts to enhance the protestant cause and to disparage catholicism and catholic priests, and heavily coloured his writing, including eight novels published between 1828 and 1840. (For all that, there is a tradition that he enjoyed amicable personal relations with Fr Philip Maguire, the catholic parish priest of Kilcommock (1816–1856)). Isaac Butt (qv) introduced him

to the *Dublin University Magazine* as a contributor whose published pieces included a serial novel, 'The orphans of Dunasker' which appeared from November 1837 to June 1838. Brittain had published *Recollections of Hyacinth O'Gara* in 1828: like all his subsequent novels it was published anonymously but it was well known in protestant and literary circles that he was the author. Following this he published *The confessions of Honor Delany* (1829), *Irish priests and English landlords* (1830), *Irishmen and Irishwomen* (1830), *Mothers and sons* (1833), *Johnny Derivan's travels* (1833), *Nurse McVourneen's story* (1833) and *The election* (1840).

All his novels were published by Richard Moore Tims in Dublin and contemporaneously in both London and Glasgow, some appearing in assorted editions in subsequent decades. In the 1870s *Irish priests and English landlords* and others were revised and republished by Rev Henry Seddall. These novels are important as exemplars of Irish evangelical fiction and for the insights into the mentality of those who feared the rise of Irish catholic democracy, particularly in the highly charged local context of Co. Longford. *The election* captures an important aspect of the reality experienced by voters in Co. Longford in the 1830s, describing how tenant farmers were torn between family ties, loyalty to their landlord and fear of the priests and popular O'Connellism.

In 1831 Maria Edgeworth (qv), his contemporary and near neighbour, wrote from England 'Mr Brittain would adore me if he knew how many grand people I have induced to delight themselves with his books, especially the last [*Irish priests and English landlords*], which upon the whole I think the most powerful' (Colvin (ed.), 531–2). Likewise in 1840 Viscount Lorton desired Anthony Lefroy to buy a whole set of Brittain's novels. Critics who did not share Brittain's views dismissed his literary efforts. A reviewer in *The Athenaeum* (Dec. 1839, 946) observed 'The sad trash which is here put forward as a portraiture of the social conditions of the Irish peasantry needs no refutation ... the intended effect is lost in absurdity.' However his novels remain important literary sources for political, religious and social relationships during the rise of catholic democracy led by Daniel O'Connell (qv).

George Brittain died on 28 March 1848 and was buried in the cemetery of St George's church, Kenagh, Co. Longford. His wife died on 15 February 1851 and was also buried there, as was their only child, Georgina Charlotte Henry (d. 1846), who had married her father's eventual successor in Kilcommock, the Rev Thomas Henry.

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*The Athenaeum Journal of literature, science and the fine arts from January to December 1839* (14 Dec. 1839), 946; Richard S. Brooke, *Recollections of the Irish church* (1877), 144; Stephen Brown, *Ireland in fiction* (1915); Christina Colvin (ed.), *Maria Edgeworth, letters from England 1813–1844* (1971); Irene Whelan, *The Bible*

*war In Ireland: the 'Second Reformation' and the polarization of protestant–catholic relations, 1800–1840* (2005); Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber, *A guide to Irish fiction* (2006), 181–183; Fergus O'Ferrall, 'Rev. George Brittain (1788–1848), rector of Kilcommock and novelist', *Teathbha, Journal of the Co. Longford Historical Society*, vol. 111, no. 2 (2007), 21–27; J. B. Leslie and D. W. T. Crooks (eds), *Clergy of Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh biographical succession lists* (2008), 272–3, 367–368; Fergus O'Ferrall, 'The rise of the catholic middle class: O'Connellites in County Longford', Fintan Lane (ed.), *Politics, society and the middle class* (2010), 48–64; Lauren Clark, 'Rev. George Brittain and Joris-Karl Huysmans and sensitive subject/object matters: literary representations of cultural change?', *Journal of Franco–Irish Studies*, vol. 3, issue 1 (2013), 118–131