

Cloney, Seán

by Ronan Fanning

Cloney, Seán (1926–99), farmer, central figure of the Fethard-on-Sea controversy, and historian, was born 5 September 1926 in Co. Wexford, the only child of Michael Cloney (1866–1934), steward of Dungulph estate, and his second wife, Ellen (née Cavanagh), of Templeberry, Gorey, Co. Wexford. The Cloneys were an old Wexford family who counted among their ancestors the United Irishman Gen. Thomas Cloney (qv). In 1817 the family had acquired through marriage Dungulph Castle, outside Fethard-on-Sea on the Hook peninsula, Co. Wexford; by the late nineteenth century it was owned by two sisters, Bridget and Mary Cloney, who in 1896 asked their cousin Michael to leave his position as clerk in a Dublin shop and take over as steward. He eventually inherited the farm. Michael Cloney was a prominent Wexford citizen who served as JP and, on the establishment of the Irish Free State, as peace commissioner; he was also a member of the New Ross district council and the board of guardians. He died when Seán was eight and his wife died eight years later, in 1943; Seán then had to leave his school, Rockwell College, to run the 116-acre farm.

In October 1949 Cloney married a local girl whom he had known since childhood, Sheila Kelly, daughter of Thomas Kelly, a stockbreeder and member of Fethard's small Church of Ireland community. They were married in London and, in accordance with the 1908 papal decree *Ne temere*, Sheila agreed to bring the children of the marriage up as Catholics. However, she was a devoted member of her own church, and when in 1957 her elder daughter, Eileen, reached the age of six, she was undecided where to school her. The local Catholic curate at Poulfur, Fr William Stafford (d. 1980), came to the house in April 'and left with the words that Eileen was going to the Catholic school whether Sheila liked it or not' (Seán Cloney, quoted in *Independent*, 22 Oct. 1999). This set off an unfortunate chain of events: on 27 April 1957 Sheila Cloney, incensed at being ordered around by the Catholic clergy and apparently feeling unsupported by her husband, fled from Fethard with her two daughters (Eileen and Mary). Three days later Desmond Boal, a barrister and associate of the then little-known evangelical Protestant preacher the Rev. Ian Paisley, came from Belfast with terms of settlement: Sheila demanded that Seán sell Dungulph Castle and the family emigrate to Canada or Australia, where the children would be brought up as Protestants. This was greeted with consternation in Fethard-on-Sea. A thunderous altar pronouncement led to a boycott of all Protestant businesses in the neighbourhood. Fr Stafford, backed by the local parish priest, Fr Laurence Allen (1889–1963), declared this would continue until the children were brought back.

It became a national cause célèbre and was extensively covered by the Dublin, Belfast, and international papers – Seán Cloney was one of the few Irishmen

whose photograph appeared in *Time* magazine in the fifties. The bishop of Ferns, Dr James Staunton (1889–1963), was expected to intervene to end what was becoming a national scandal, but he declined to comment, and on 30 June the bishop of Galway preached a sermon in Wexford defending the boycott. However, the taoiseach, Éamon de Valera (qv), had already criticised the boycott's 'damaging effect on the national reputation for religious tolerance' at a meeting he sought with Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv), who did not disagree but who insisted that their discussion be kept confidential; de Valera had also been advised of opposition to the boycott in local Fianna Fáil circles by one of his senior ministers, James Ryan (qv), who came from south Wexford. On 4 July, de Valera responded to a dáil question 'as Head of Government' by declaring the boycott 'ill-conceived, ill-considered and futile' and by asking all with influence 'to bring this deplorable affair to an early end'. In September 1957 Fr Allen succumbed to such pressures and ended the boycott by buying a packet of cigarettes in a protestant store. Although Seán Cloney was critical of his wife's peremptoriness, he quickly made public his 'chief initial concern': 'the re-making of a broken home' (Seán Cloney to *Ir. Press*, 6 July 1957). He refused to cooperate with the boycott (of which he was privately much more critical in a confidential letter of thanks to de Valera next day) and he managed to trace his family to the Orkney Islands, where they had gone with the help of hard-line Belfast evangelicals. The family returned home on 31 December 1957, but intense public scrutiny drove Sheila away again and she did not return permanently until the following Easter. The children were then educated at home to avoid reigniting hostilities or giving victory to either side. Seán remained a practising catholic but gave up attending the local church in Poulfur in favour of the nearby parish of Templetown. The episode was the basis of the 1999 film *A love divided*, which misleadingly portrayed the young Seán Cloney as boisterous and uncultivated; although he had no further formal education after leaving Rockwell College, he was widely read and of a genuinely intellectual disposition – indeed his intellectual interests sustained him through illness in his last years.

Cloney had another brush with the catholic church in 1982. As a member of a fund-raising committee in Fethard-on-Sea, he helped prevent Fr Sean Fortune (qv), a paedophile priest who then came as curate to Poulfur, from wresting control of a local community hall from the committee. Fr Fortune denounced from the pulpit 'an evil influence' in the parish, a reference apparently aimed at Cloney. Although fourteen years elapsed before Fortune was belatedly charged with sexual assault against young boys, Cloney was privately warning families renting a holiday apartment in Dungulph Castle from the mid-eighties that, if they wanted to bring their children to mass, they should go to Templetown rather than to Poulfur.

In his later years Cloney became a noted local historian. A regular contributor to the journal of the Old Wexford Society (later the Wexford Historical Society), he wrote papers on the Colcough family of Tintern Abbey, on water mills (there was one in the grounds of Dungulph), on stone artefacts of Wexford, and on the history of the Cloney family – he had an extensive archive going back to Gen. Cloney's

involvement in the 1798 rebellion. As historical adviser to Comóradh, the Wexford 1798 commemorative committee, he was responsible for the Scullabogue memorial in Old Ross graveyard. In November 1995 he was injured in a car accident after which he became quadriplegic as a result of a botched medical procedure, which necessitated his spending almost three years in the national rehabilitation hospital; he successfully sued Dublin's Mater Hospital for medical negligence in the high court in May 1998 and lived to hear Bishop Brendan Comiskey's apology on 31 May 1998 for the boycott not only to the Church of Ireland but also to those members of his own church, 'who were then and since saddened and dismayed – even scandalised – by church leadership at that time'. Cloney died 18 October 1999 in Wexford general hospital and was buried in Templetown graveyard. He was survived by his wife and two daughters, Eileen and Hazel; another daughter, Mary, predeceased him by a year.

The priest who celebrated Cloney's funeral mass suggested that he might best be remembered for the humour and dignity with which he responded to his illness – characteristics that informed his correspondence by voice-activated computer and the twinkle in his eye when he told visitors that there were those in Fethard who believed his illness was a punishment for opposing the priests. He was enduring one of many periods of hospitalisation in Wexford general hospital when Seán Fortune's body was brought there after he had committed suicide while awaiting trial, but he spoke of that strange coincidence without the faintest hint of satisfaction. Cloney will be remembered as a role model for resistance to the abuse of priestly power and as a beacon of tolerance amidst sectarianism.

NAI, Taoiseach's Department, S. 16247; Hubert Butler, 'Boycott village', in *Escape from the anthill* (1985); Seán Cloney, 'The Cloney family of Co. Wexford', Kevin Whelan and William Nolan (eds), *Wexford: history and society* (1987), 316–42; Tim Fanning, 'The Fethard-on-Sea boycott' (unpublished BA dissertation, UCD, 1998); *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society*, no. 17, 1998–9; *Ir. Times*, 14 and 16 May, 1 and 6 June, and 24 July 1998; 20 and 23 Oct. 1999; *Independent* [London], 22 Oct. 1999; *Independent on Sunday*, 24 Oct. 1999; information from Bernard Browne (Aug. 2006); personal knowledge