

Cloney, Sheila

by Patrick Maume

Cloney, Sheila (1926–2009), protagonist in the Fethard-on-Sea boycott, was born Sheila Kelly on 6 May 1926 in Fethard-on-Sea, a village on the Hook peninsula of south-western Co. Wexford, daughter of Thomas Kelly, cattle dealer, of John's Hill (just outside Fethard), and his wife Sheila (née Hornick). The Hornick family had a long and sometimes tense presence in the area; several Hornicks were among the victims of the Scullabogue massacre in 1798. Sheila had two brothers and two sisters; both sisters married catholics and brought up their children as catholics. The Fethard area had an unusually high proportion of Church of Ireland members, and was known to some local catholics as 'little Belfast'. (In the 1950s, the weekly congregation of the local Church of Ireland church, St Mogue's, which served three united parishes, was about fifty; the entire population of the village – as distinct from the surrounding rural areas – was 107, about twenty-five of whom were protestant.) While relations between the two groups were superficially cordial, there was a residual hostility, based on the social boundaries imposed by religious differences and on local memories of the 1798 rising and the nineteenth-century land war.

The Kelly family were members of the Church of Ireland, but Sheila was educated at the local catholic national school, at Poulfur, where she first met Seán Cloney (qv), who was a collateral descendant of the 1798 insurgent Thomas Cloney (qv), and whose uncle was the parish priest of the area for fifty years (serving successively as canon, archdeacon and dean). The Cloney family lived at Dungulph Castle, a restored mediaeval dwelling just outside Fethard, and farmed 116 acres; they had business and personal contacts with the Kellys.

After leaving school, Sheila Kelly went to London to work in domestic service. In July 1948, Seán Cloney, who had gone to Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk on family business, visited her in London. When Sheila revisited Fethard the following month, they began a relationship that caused Seán to be expelled from the local amateur drama group by the catholic curate, Fr William Stafford. After a year's commuting to and fro across the Irish Sea, the couple decided it was impossible to marry in Wexford and considered emigration. On 1 August 1949 they both moved to Bury St Edmunds, and after cohabitation married on 8 October 1949 at Hendon Registry Office. After catholic clergy in Wexford learned of their whereabouts, a catholic priest began to visit them; Sheila was persuaded to agree to a catholic marriage ceremony, which took place on 26 November 1949 at the Augustinian priory in Hammersmith, London. As a precondition for this ceremony, Sheila signed the pledge then demanded by the catholic church from both parties in a mixed marriage, that their children would be brought up as catholics. The couple, however, had a private agreement that their children would be brought up in both traditions, and subsequently had their union blessed by an anglican clergyman. They lived in Bury

St Edmunds before returning to Fethard in August 1950. Two daughters were born, in 1951 and 1954; their parents did not bring them to either place of worship.

Sheila worked on the farm and managed the farm accounts, while remaining an active member of the local Church of Ireland congregation. As the elder daughter reached the school-going age of six, the couple came under increasing pressure to send her to the local catholic national school rather than its Church of Ireland counterpart. Local catholic clergy visited the house regularly, culminating in an incident when Fr Stafford told Sheila that she would have to send her daughter to the catholic school and had no choice in the matter; threats were made that she would be prosecuted under the School Attendance Act, and she feared her daughters could be taken from her. These pressures led to tension between the couple; Seán would have preferred to have his children raised as catholics. Sheila repeatedly threatened to take the children and go away 'to think things over', although her family members, informed by Seán, tried to dissuade her. Her father eventually gave her £30 to go away for a few days, and she raised £35 by selling a litter of pigs.

On 27 April 1957, while Seán was working on the farm, Sheila drove to Wexford with her two daughters and then travelled to Belfast. There she contacted the evangelical Irish Church Missions for help and legal advice. This contact with evangelical organisations, seen by themselves as spreading the light of the gospel and protecting vulnerable individuals from catholic intimidation, and by catholics as a nefarious proselytising conspiracy, rapidly led to the involvement of ultra-protestant activists, including Norman Porter (qv), Revd Ian Paisley (1926–2014), and the barrister Desmond Boal (1929–2015).

Boal appeared at Dungulph Castle on 30 April, and informed Seán that Sheila would only meet him to discuss reconciliation if he would first agree to the children being brought up as protestants, sell the farm and emigrate either to Canada or Australia, and consider converting to protestantism himself. (Sheila later denied any knowledge of these demands.) Seán took habeas corpus proceedings in Belfast, and the case attracted newspaper publicity, while Sheila and her daughters spent several weeks in Edinburgh with protestant activists before moving under false names to the remote island of Westray in the Orkneys.

On Sunday 12 May, Fr Stafford, speaking from the pulpit of the catholic church, (falsely) accused the protestants of Fethard of having supplied Sheila with money to take her children away, and called on local catholics to boycott them as a religious duty to safeguard the faith of catholic children. This boycott received the tacit support of the parish priest and of Bishop James Staunton of Ferns. It was enforced by a number of influential local activists linked to the church and the Knights of St Columbanus (some of whom stood to gain economically by injuring protestant competitors). Two protestant-owned shops lost their catholic customers; catholic labourers refused to work for protestant farmers; the Church of Ireland school closed after the catholic teacher resigned, and a protestant replacement teacher received

death threats. Sheila's two brothers sought Garda protection after a shot was fired near the house of one of them, causing his wife to suffer a miscarriage.

Seán Cloney was among a minority of local Catholics who consistently opposed the boycott, repeatedly stating in public that neither the Fethard Protestants nor his wife's family were complicit in Sheila's actions; indeed, his wife's family had told him that if Sheila refused to return and he secured custody of the children, they would assist him in bringing them up.

The boycott received national and international publicity, with Ulster Unionists citing it to disprove claims by anti-partitionists that the Irish Republic was tolerant towards religious minorities, and collecting funds to assist the boycotted Protestants. (Other subscribers to this fund included Muriel MacSwiney (qv) and Serjeant Alexander Martin Sullivan (qv)). The boycott was repeatedly defended by Michael Browne (qv), bishop of Galway, who presented criticism of this 'peaceful and moderate protest' as morally equivalent to communist persecution of Catholicism, and by the Wexford Labour TD Brendan Corish (qv); it was, however, publicly condemned by Éamon de Valera (qv) and by Northern Irish nationalists. Attempts to spread the boycott beyond Fethard, or to enlist the public support of national Catholic organisations, failed, and in August–September a formal cessation was negotiated at the behest of state authorities. The boycott continued informally at a lower level for some years, and lasting damage was done to inter-faith relationships locally and nationally; Sheila's father never fully recovered from being shunned by local people he had regarded as friends.

In October 1957, Sheila Cloney, unaware of these events, read of them in a Protestant missionary journal and contacted Seán. The family were reunited in the Orkneys in November and returned home on 31 December 1957. Sheila and the children left again to escape publicity, finally returning at Easter 1958. The Cloneys decided that their daughters would attend neither school nor church, since the choice of either would be seen as a victory for that tradition, but would be educated at home. The Cloneys subsequently had a third daughter (b. 1961), who was baptised in both the Church of Ireland and Catholic churches; Fr Stafford continued to call into the house and pressurise the Cloneys. (In later life, Seán expressed regret that he had not supported Sheila at the time of Fr Stafford's initial intervention and that he had not followed the advice of a sympathetic priest, who told him during the boycott that if Sheila returned he should exclude clerics of all denominations from his house.) The elder girls led a socially isolated life until the late 1960s, when they became active in Macra na Feirme and other local organisations.

The Cloney family campaigned in 1983 against the adoption of the eighth amendment to the constitution, which imposed a constitutional ban on abortion; while the initiative in this was taken by the couple's two eldest daughters, who saw the amendment as sectarian and endangering women's lives, Sheila supported them by distributing leaflets outside the Church of Ireland church. In general, however,

Sheila avoided publicity and preferred not to discuss the boycott even with her children (whereas Seán became increasingly willing to recall it for interviewers in the 1980s and 1990s). Sheila remained an active member of St Mogue's congregation, reading the Bible daily. Known for her love of music, which she transmitted to all her family members, she played the piano and was believed to have perfect pitch. She regularly attended Wexford Festival Opera productions, and was a fan of the local Pike Men Singers. Active in the local Tidy Towns committee, she had a wide circle of correspondents and local friends, and read biographies and history; her favourite novel was *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier. She took a keen interest in animal welfare (stray cats in particular).

When the couple's second daughter, Mary, died in 1998, her funeral was held in the catholic church (after Church of Ireland prayers at the funeral home), and she was buried in St Mogue's graveyard. Brendan Comiskey, the catholic bishop of Ferns, issued a formal apology for the boycott in 1998. A fictionalised film was made based on the boycott, *A love divided* (1999; dir. Sydney Macartney), with Orla Brady as Sheila and Liam Cunningham as Seán; Sheila is presented as the protagonist and Seán's character considerably simplified. While other members of the Cloney family (including Seán) cooperated with the production, Sheila disapproved of it and chose never to watch the film. After Seán's death in 1999, Sheila moved into a bungalow beside Dungulph Castle, but remained active almost until her own death, in hospital in Wexford on 28 June 2009. The catholic parish priest attended her funeral in St Mogue's.

The Fethard-on-Sea boycott reflected longstanding nationwide religious divisions, and could have taken place in any of several previous decades; what was chiefly remarkable about it was the extent to which it was blunted by international pressure, deriving from official concern that Ireland be presented as modern, tolerant and attractive to international investors. It is indicative of changing attitudes in subsequent decades that, while in 1957 Sheila was publicly denounced even by her own family and Church of Ireland representatives for 'breaking up a home' and violating a solemn pledge (to the private annoyance both of evangelicals and of liberals such as Hubert Butler (qv), who complained that public protests should have been made against the *Ne temere* decree as well as the boycott), journalistic coverage of *A love divided* and of Sheila's death usually praised her for showing moral heroism in standing up to clerical bullying; some commenters claimed that her action contributed to the liberalisation and secularisation of Ireland in subsequent decades. (This perception was reinforced by Seán Cloney's role in the 1980s in opposing the bombastic and bullying catholic curate Sean Fortune (qv), who was subsequently revealed as a paedophile, when attitudes to Fortune to some extent reflected residual local divisions dating back to the boycott.)

Ir. Press, 4 May, 8, 15 June, 1 July 1957; *Ir. Times*, 27 May, 7, 8 June, 1, 9 July 1957; 10 Jan. 1958; 24 Aug. 1983; 8, 20 May 1999; 6 June 2007; 30 June, 1, 11 July 2009; *Ir. Independent*, 30 May, 6 June 1957; 4 July 2009; *Sunday Independent*, 7 July 1957; 20 Dec. 1998; 9 May 1999; 5 July 2009; *Cork Examiner*, 11 May 1999; *Tuam Herald*, 18 Mar. 2000; *Wexford Echo*, 1 July 2009; *Wexford People*, 1 July 2009; Tim Fanning, *The Fethard-on-Sea boycott* (2010); Eugene Broderick, *The boycott at Fethard-on-Sea, 1957* (2011)

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