

Donnelly (O'Donnelly), Patrick(Pádraig Ó Donnghaile)

by Éamonn Ó Ciardha

Donnelly (O'Donnelly), Patrick(Pádraig Ó Donnghaile) (1649–1716), catholic bishop of Dromore, born at Desertcreat, near Cookstown, Co. Tyrone, was possibly the son of the Patrick O'Donnelly who was deemed to be a person 'excepted from pardon of life or estate' under legislation of the commonwealth parliament of 1652. It is possible that Donnelly spent the three years before his ordination in the Drogheda school founded by Archbishop Oliver Plunkett (qv) in 1670. Ordained by the primate at Drogheda in 1673, Donnelly later served as a curate in the archdiocese of Armagh. His name appeared on a sworn testimony made in the presence of Dr Edward Tyrrell (qv) relating to an attempt by the apostate friar Anthony Daly to induce the tories to kill the archbishop. With his brother Terence (bishop of Derry 1720–26), Donnelly embarked for Paris in 1679 to continue his studies; supported by a bursary at the Irish college, he graduated with a doctorate in law.

On returning to Ireland he served in the diocese of Armagh as parish priest of the united parishes of Louth and Knocklouth, parish priest of Keady, and vicar general of Armagh under Dominic Maguire (qv). In 1697 he was appointed to the see of Dromore by the exiled James II (qv), under an indult which allowed him to be consecrated by a single bishop. Donnelly remained in Ireland after the passing of the Bishops' Banishment Act of 1697, residing in the fastnesses of Slieve Gullion, where he is remembered in local tradition by a field still called the 'bishop's quarters'. Although he registered as a priest under the Act for the Registration of the Clergy in 1704 he was arrested on the evidence of one Walter Dawson in 1706 for exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Committed to 'the Black Dog' in Newgate prison in Dublin, he provided the inspiration for a eulogy by the poet Seán Ó Neachtain (qv), 1650–1729. While in prison Donnelly consecrated Edmund Byrne (qv) as archbishop of Dublin on 31 August 1707. Owing to the absence of any other bishops in Ireland, Thaddeus Francis O'Rourke (qv), formerly private chaplain to Prince Eugene of Savoy, whom Donnelly had consecrated as bishop of Killala only a week before, and Francis O'Ferrall, archdeacon of Ardagh, joined him in the prison to perform the ceremony. His trial finally collapsed for want of evidence.

About this time, Donnelly played a noble part in conducting the campaign for the reconciliation with the church of the repentant John MacMoyer (qv), who had been instrumental in the conviction for treason of Archbishop Plunkett (1681). He also intervened in the election of a vicar general for the see of Armagh after the death of Archbishop Maguire in 1707. Although the clergy of Louth had chosen John Verdon, parish priest of Louth, as their superior Donnelly invalidated the election and appointed Peter Dowdall, parish priest of Ardee. His opposition to Verdon's candiditure earned him the hostility of a pro-Verdon faction among the clergy of the archdiocese.

Donnelly's intervention in the ecclesiastical politics of the archdiocese reflected his ambitions to succeed the ailing Dominic Maguire and prompted a statement in his favour attributed to Dean Brian MacGurk (qv) (who later died in prison in 1713), which survives among the papers of the Parisian notary Jean Fromont. Although enthusiastically endorsed by Byrne of Dublin, O'Rourke of Killala, the superior of the national seminary in Paris, and large sections of the Armagh clergy and students, Donnelly was passed over owing to James III's intervention on behalf of Hugh MacMahon (qv), who was appointed in July 1715.

Donnelly died in 1716 and was buried in the protestant cemetery of Desertcreat (also the final resting-place of his brother Terence). A slab emblazoned with a mitre and crozier, and bearing the inscription FEL[IM] [BRAD?]Y lends currency to McRory's claim and the popular tradition that Donnelly was the subject of the ballad 'The bard of Armagh', immortalised by the great tenor John McCormack (qv). The grave is also referred to locally as 'The bard's grave'.

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T. Ó Fiaich, 'Dánta fa chléir Ardmhacha', *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, ii, no. 2 (1957), 323; M. McRory, 'The life and times of Dr. P. O'Donnelly, 1649–1716', *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, v (1969–70), 3–33; Liam Swords, 'P. O'Donnelly, bishop of Dromore, 1649–1716', *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, xv, no. 2 (1993), 84–97