

Magrath, Miler (Meiler)

by Judy Barry

Magrath, Miler (Meiler) (c.1522–1622), archbishop of Cashel, was probably born in Co. Fermanagh. His father, Donough Gillegrowmoe, was the coarb of Termon Magrath and Termonamongan in the counties of Tyrone, Donegal, and Fermanagh. Magrath became a Franciscan friar and was educated in Rome. From there he was sent to Ireland as a missionary and on 12 October 1565 was appointed catholic bishop of Down and Connor. In the late summer of 1566, in the company of the catholic primate, Richard Creagh (qv), he visited Shane O'Neill (qv), to whom he was related, but who had proposed his own twenty-three year old brother for the office.

The following May, within weeks of Shane's death, Magrath met the lord deputy, Sir Henry Sidney (qv), at Drogheda, where he declared himself willing to conform and to hold his bishopric of the queen. After some delay, Magrath went to London to press his case, where he tried to persuade the imprisoned Richard Creagh to follow his example. Magrath was appointed to Clogher on 13 September 1570, a see for which he had canvassed Rome in 1568, and translated to the archbishopric of Cashel (with which the see of Emly was united) on 3 February 1571. No successor was appointed to Clogher until 1605 and Magrath appears to have continued to assert his right to its temporalities. Moreover, he also continued to hold his papal appointment of Down and Connor, despite his marriage (c.1576) to Anne O'Meara of Lisany, Co. Tipperary, which prompted his fellow Franciscan, Eoghan O'Duffy, to compose a celebrated satirical poem, 'Miler without Mary and Mary without Miler'. Anne did not convert and their children were raised as catholics. Magrath was finally deprived of Down and Connor by Pope Gregory XIII on 14 March 1580.

As archbishop, Magrath took an early opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty. In July 1571 he imprisoned two friars at Cashel for preaching against the queen. He was summarily ordered to release them by the rebel leader James fitz Maurice Fitzgerald (qv), and on his failing to do so they were forcibly taken from him by Edward Butler. A year later he made confidential accusations of treachery against the earls of Ormond (qv) and Kildare (qv) which the lord justice, Sir William Fitzwilliam (qv), judged to be 'fancy rather than truth' (*CSPI*, 1571–5, 184–5). During the second Desmond rebellion Magrath passed on information to the government about the rebels: he may also have intrigued with the earl of Desmond (qv) and Archbishop Creagh, but only as a means of securing immunity. His reward came in 1582 when he went to England with a letter of commendation from the Irish council and was granted the united sees of Waterford and Lismore to hold *in commendam*, pending a full appointment, which was made in 1589. In 1584 Magrath arrested Maurice MacBrien, papal occupant of his see of Emly, and in 1590 he apprehended Walter Farranan, who was wrongly thought to be catholic bishop of Kildare.

In 1591 prominent citizens of Cashel took advantage of his absence in England to present a series of forty charges against him to Lord Deputy Fitzwilliam (qv), including simony, extortion, wearing armour, keeping an armed bodyguard, harbouring catholic bishops, and occupying twenty-two livings in the diocese. Magrath counter-attacked vigorously, both defending himself against the particular charges and submitting a memorandum on 30 May 1592 in which he outlined the strength of catholicism and the abuses within the established church, and argued for stringent measures to enforce conformity. He returned to Ireland in the same year with a privy council letter stating that he had been cleared of all imputations; warning the lord deputy and council that henceforth they were not to encourage catholics to slander protestant clergy; and instructing them to refer any further allegations against Magrath to London and to await directions before taking action. At about the same time, he was re-granted the once-more vacant see of Waterford *in commendam*. Relations with Fitzwilliam were strained and Magrath visited England again in 1593, without licence, to register complaints. In 1594 the court of high commission was instructed to enquire into many of the concerns that he had expressed two years previously.

During the Nine Years War, Magrath received favour from both sides. He negotiated the surrender and regrant of the lands of Termon Magrath in 1596. But Hugh O'Neill (qv) spoke of him as our 'friend and ally' and said that he had hopes of his reconversion. When in 1599 Magrath was imprisoned by Con O'Neill, the earl's son, O'Neill immediately ordered his release, saying that neither his liberty nor his temporalities could be touched without direct authority from Rome. Later in that year Magrath offered his services to Cecil to negotiate with the earl, claiming that 'my alliance and friendship with Tyrone and the chiefest of Ulster is such that they shall hardly hide anything from me' (*CSPI, 1599–1600, 244*). The offer was refused, but he continued to ply the government with advice on how to end the war and with requests for favours, compensation for losses incurred during the war, jobs for his sons, and money to pay his spies. In 1600 he went to London, where the queen received him favourably and granted him a pension. In October he accompanied the young earl of Desmond (qv) back to Ireland where his conduct was highly commended by the president of Munster, Sir George Carew (qv).

In the new reign, concern about the state of the reformed church exposed Magrath to criticism. In 1604, Sir John Davies (qv) complained of the number of bishoprics and spiritual livings held by Magrath and his family and William Saxey, chief justice of Munster, singled him out as the prime example of those clergy who were 'more fit to sacrifice to a calf than to intermeddle with the religion of God' (*CSPI, 1603–6, 218*). In 1607 he was both appointed to the see of Achonry, in the archdiocese of Tuam, presumably *in commendam* and apparently in preparation for his surrender of Waterford and Lismore in the following year, and subjected to an ecclesiastical visitation. The visitors, headed by Archbishop Jones (qv), discovered 'such abuses and enormities as could never have been believed on the report of others' (*CSPI, 1606–8, 235–6*). Churches were decayed; no provision was made for divine service;

boys were advanced to vicarages; almost sixty of the livings were held by Miler, his sons and his widowed daughter; and after thirty-five years ministry in Cashel he had a congregation of one.

In the autumn of 1607 Magrath was at court fending off the threat of proceedings arising from his recent indictment by a jury in the county of the Cross of Tipperary which found that he had declared that Tyrone had been wronged about the Bann fishery, and 'had better right to the crown of Ireland than any Irishman or Scottishman whatsoever' (*CSPI*, 1606–8, 468). In November, the English privy council acceded to his request that Lord Deputy Chichester (qv) be ordered not to allow the case to continue, pending the king's pleasure. Three years later a coadjutor was appointed to Cashel, on the ostensible grounds that Magrath was now living in his native Fermanagh. The stratagem failed when the appointee appeared drunk in public on his first outing and was forced to resign and Chichester recommended that 'it were better not to discontent that heady Archbishop, and leave him at liberty, for he is a powerful man among the Irish of Ulster and able to do much hurt by underhand practices, in which he is well experienced' (*CSPI*, 1611–14, 241). King James concurred and in 1613 Magrath was appointed bishop of Killala *in commendam*.

In these years, whether for reasons of faith or policy, Magrath made overtures to Rome. At his request, David Kearney (qv), papal archbishop of Cashel, petitioned for a reconciliation and absolution for his heresy in 1608, and the provincial of the Irish Franciscans did likewise in 1612. Both petitions were granted, but Magrath never formally returned to the catholic church. In November 1619, at the request of Archbishop Kearney, his five sons and four daughters were legitimated by Pope Paul V. Magrath died on 22 December 1622, reputedly aged 100, and was buried in the cathedral in Cashel, where he had erected a monument to his memory. His epitaph, which he is traditionally believed to have composed, recorded his regret that he had not emulated the holiness of his predecessor in the see of Down, St Patrick.

CSPI, 1567–1612; *CSPI*, 1571–5 (2000); *DNB*; *APC*, 1590–1604; L. Ó Mearáin, 'Miler McGrath, archbishop of Cashel (1571–1622)', *Clogher Rec.*, ii, no. 3 (1959), 445–57; Richard Bagwell, *Ireland under the Tudors*, ii, iii (1963 ed.); *NHI*, ix; *The Irish fiants of the Tudor sovereigns* (4 vols, 1994), ii, iii; Hiram Morgan, 'The fall of Sir John Perrot', John Guy (ed.), *The reign of Elizabeth I: court and culture in the last decade* (1995), 109–25; Colm Lennon, *Archbishop Richard Creagh of Armagh, 1523–1586: an Irish prisoner of conscience of the Tudor era* (2000)