

Carpenter, John (1729-86), also known as Seán Mac an tSaor or Maca tSaoir, archbishop of Dublin, was born in Dublin, the son of a merchant tailor. He received his early schooling in Dublin and, between 1744 and 1747, was associated with the Gaelic language and cultural circle which had formed around Tadhg Ó Neachtain, scion of a Connacht bardic family who had settled in Dublin. It was probably under Ó Neachtain's influence that he compiled an Irish grammar, a miscellany of prose and poetry and a book of devotion for his personal use which included part of the *Imitatio Christi* in Ulster Irish. In 1747 he sailed to Lisbon, entered the Irish College there and was ordained priest in 1752. He took a doctorate in theology before returning to Dublin in 1754.

His first years in the pastoral ministry were spent in St Mary's chapel, Liffey Street. According to one account, he was an elegant preacher and a zealous catechist who had build three schools for the poor and orphaned and managed to stay above diocesan party politics. He was not afraid, however, to challenge established, diocesan custom. In 1763, for instance, he put his name to a complaint that many parish priests were defrauding their assistant priests. The following year, securely in favour with Archbishop Fitzsimons, he was admitted to the archdiocesan chapter as prebendary of Cullen. He quickly won the confidence of Fitzsimon's episcopal colleagues. When the Irish College in Lisbon fell into difficulty, they appointed him as their representative to the Portuguese court to save the institution. About this time too he became involved in the Catholic Committee, formed in 1760 to represent Catholic interests. At this stage he began to work closely with John Curry and Charles O'Connor of Belanagare, both prominent members of the committee. He shared their views that the penal laws

were not only unjustified but also economically damaging. With O’Conor he also shared a serious academic interest in Irish language and history. In late 1767 Archbishop Fitzsimons sent him to London to act as secretary to Nicholas, viscount Taaffe, the prominent nobleman of Irish origin, who had travelled from Vienna to support the Catholic delegation then negotiating, with the Earl of Bristol, the wording of a test oath. It was hoped that would be a preliminary to the passage of relief acts in the Irish parliament. Despite the importance of his mission, Carpenter had to appeal twice to Fitzsimons to pay his expenses, explaining: ‘Let only a reasonable estimate be made of a proper allowance of a plain honest man, who can go a-foot and drink porter.’<sup>1</sup> Carpenter impressed Taaffe who recommended him for promotion.

Fitzsimons was already ill, being described in a letter from France in late 1769 as ‘old, blind, *hors de combat* and perhaps already dead.’<sup>2</sup> Carpenter was appointed his successor on 16 April 1770. His consecration, on 3 June 1770, in a private house, hints at the limits of tolerance in the city at the time. He held the parish of St Nicholas as mensal, resided in a large house on Usher’s Island and said Mass in Francis Street every Sunday at eight o’clock. The Dublin clergy gave him their firm support. His first act as archbishop was to ensure that collections taken up at the church door were properly divided between parish priests and assistants. An assiduous administrator, he visited his diocese regularly and his first publication was a set of provincial and synodal constitutions. This appeared in 1770. His pastoral priority was to improve standards of religious and moral practice among clergy and laity alike. In this context, he was especially concerned about clerical drunkenness. His social concerns were part

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<sup>1</sup> Moran (ed.), *Spicilegium Ossoriense* iii, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> William Fitzharris Giffard at Corbeil-sur-Seine to cardinal prefect, 15 Sept. 1769 (Vatican Archives, Fondo Missioni, pacco 58).

of a broader political vision for he was convinced that the maintenance of moral and social order was the best way to persuade the government to relax anti-Catholic legislation. He enjoyed good relations with Protestants. In 1773 he was admitted to the Royal Dublin Society, an event described by Charles O'Connor as '...a revolution in our moral and civil affairs the more extraordinary, as in my own days such a man would only be spoken to through the medium of a warrant and constable.'<sup>3</sup> This was an indication not only of changing religious attitudes in the establishment but also of the widespread esteem for Carpenter's character and learning.

To mark the Jubilee year of 1776, he prepared a form of instruction, suitable for use before the Sunday parochial Mass which was published as his *Rituale*. Because he was aware of the importance of local traditions in the personal piety of the faithful, he gave prominence to native saints in the *Missale* published in the same year. In 1777 he caused Butler's new catechism to be published anonymously in Dublin. Three year later in 1780 he produced the second and fuller edition of Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints* in which, as in his *Missale*, he gave prominence to the Irish saints. The work included an appendix by the archbishop on the glories of the ancient Irish church. He probably had the assistance of Charles O'Connor in preparing this piece.

His episcopate saw continuing progress in the provision of Catholic primary education. There was a slowing down in the rate of church building in the 1770s and 1780s, a reflection, perhaps, of lingering hesitation over the wisdom of leaving the existing, retiring chapel for more commodious, ostentatious accommodation. In rural areas, however, the construction of new chapels greatly improved access to the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Diarmuid Ó Catháin, 'Charles O'Connor of Belanagare: antiquary and Irish scholar,' in

*Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 119 (1989), p. 154.

sacraments. His 1780 formal report to Rome offers an account of his view of the state of the church in the city. It is especially interesting for what it reveals of his attitude towards the local regular clergy. Carpenter accuses them of failing to live the common life. He claims that they persist in maintaining the fiction of 'blind convents' i.e. religious houses that existed only on paper or in memory. The regulars' tendency to appoint superiors to, and even accept novices into, these phantom establishments, means, Carpenter continues, that the city is overrun with unemployed religious, some of whom turn couple beggar or, worse still, Protestant.

Carpenter was frequently consulted by *Propaganda fide* regarding Irish domestic matters. His status permitted him to intervene personally in other dioceses on occasion, most notably in Dromore in 1772 and in Armagh in 1774-5. Rome also sought his advice regarding the affairs of the Irish colleges' network in Europe. In 1774, following the suppression of the Jesuits, he recommended the appointment of Irish rectors in Rome and Salamanca in order to prevent their falling into the hands of foreign nationals.

As the penal code gradual loosened between 1771 and 1782, he found new responsibilities falling on his shoulders. This was mainly because the relaxation of anti-Catholic legislation was made to depend on a test-oath which had been devised by the Protestant Bishop of Derry, Frederick Hervey to divide Catholic opinion. Crucially it included a denial of the pope's temporal power, a point that rendered it unacceptable to Rome and to Carpenter. He did not take it until 1778 when he was assured of the Holy See's formal approval. Though his hesitation annoyed many of his episcopal colleagues in Munster and not a few prominent Catholic laymen, it preserved both the unity of the Irish Church and the doctrinal link with Rome. His gradualist approach toward re-establishing links with the government did not betoken,

however, any social radicalism. Carpenter was a firm defender of property and law. He denounced the 'combination' of Dublin workers and their oath-bound opposition to employers. For him industrial strife was unacceptable not only because it damaged the economy but, more significantly, because it gave the government a bad impression of Catholics.

After 1780 Carpenter was less active, probably due to bad health. Most of the lobbying at Dublin in connection with the Catholic Relief Act of 1782, for instance, was done by the bishop of Ossory, John Thomas Troy, who eventually succeeded him. He did write to Rome to complain that Bishop Hervey had exercised influence on the bishops of Cashel, Meath and Waterford, to accept a new, Gallican mode of electing bishops with little reference to Rome. He died on 29 October 1786 and was buried in St Michan's graveyard in a grave owned by his brother-in-law Thomas Lee. The proceeds of the sale of his effects went to Teresa Mulally for the benefit of her school. His library of over 4,000 books was dispersed.

Under Carpenter, the Catholic Church in Dublin continued its tentative emergence from the political and cultural ghetto of the penal laws. He proved a sensitive, cultured guide. However, he was perhaps the last archbishop of Dublin sufficiently rooted in the Anglo-Irish, Gaelic and European elements of Irish Catholicism to recognise the importance of blending all three to face the political, cultural and intellectual challenges of the time. Under his successors, the reintegration of the Catholic Church into the British State dominated the Dublin archiepiscopal agenda. To this overwhelming priority, the cultural and intellectual dimensions of religious practice and belief took second place.