

A Colporteur Kicked By A Priest On A Westport Street: The MacAskill Assault Case of 1905

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I

It was around half past three on the afternoon of Friday, January 6th 1905 when Alexander MacAskill left his lodgings to go about his business in Westport town. Children were congregated outside the house he was staying in, apparently to listen to a brass band playing in the convent grounds across the street. But a crowd of these children followed MacAskill as he went on his way. "Some remark about selling books" was directed at him and he was struck from behind by a clod.¹ Going into the RIC barracks, MacAskill asked the police to disperse the children.² Dissatisfied with the result of their efforts, he then decided to return to his lodgings. A constable accompanied him and, as they proceeded, a crowd, this time with a more adult composition, followed them. As MacAskill remonstrated with the constable about this 'exhibition', Fr. Michael McDonald, Administrator of Westport, came through the crowd to confront him. Following a brief verbal exchange³, Fr. McDonald struck MacAskill. By now, Sergeant Mooney and a second constable had arrived on the scene:

Constable Mannix accompanied MacAskill to his lodgings in Altamont Street, Constable Connolly and myself keeping back the crowd, which had swelled to about 400 people, principally composed of country people who were in town, it being a holiday. Some stones were thrown by small boys but no injury was done. While MacAskill was being admitted to his lodgings the crowd became somewhat menacing and in consequence I warned Fr. McDonald of the serious responsibility of his action in the matter...⁴

After MacAskill had gone inside, the priest called on the crowd to disperse, which it did. Advised by Sergeant Mooney to leave immediately, MacAskill insisted on remaining in the town, guarded by the police, until Monday, January 9th, when he left by the morning train for Ballina.⁵

A report of what had occurred, together with relevant background information, passed up along the line from the local barracks to the District Inspector's office in Westport, to the County Inspector's office in Castlebar, to the Inspector General's office in Dublin and finally to the most senior civil servant in Ireland, the Dublin Castle Under Secretary. MacAskill, it stated, was "an itinerant missionary (speaks Irish) & colporteur under the Irish Presbyterian Assembly Mission. He is an M.A. of Edinburgh University, a Licentiate of the United Free Church Scotland and a Licentiate of the Ministry of the Irish Presbyterian Church. He travels about remaining from 4-6 weeks in each place selling general literature, the New Testament Douay & ordinary versions & other scriptural literature including the "Christian Irishman", edited by the Irish Presbyterian Mission".⁶ It was material in the current issue of the *Christian Irishman* that had offended Fr. McDonald, leading him to confront and strike MacAskill. Particularly offensive to the

priest was a passage on its second page dealing with the Jubilee of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception which attributed to Roman Catholicism the view that Mary was superior to Christ and declared this to be blasphemous.⁷

Speaking to Sergeant Mooney after he had returned to his lodgings and the crowd had dispersed, MacAskill had asked for Fr. McDonald's prosecution by the police. But he was advised by the Sergeant, and later by District Inspector Brownrigg as well, "that it was my part to prosecute, except in case of a grave assault. I could only say that that was not the law I was accustomed to; but that I would consider it".⁸ According to the police, MacAskill "communicated with the Agent of the Committee of the General Assembly who have been advised by the local assembly that a prosecution by him would not be advisable in the interests of the local mission work which has been hitherto peacefully carried on".⁹ The police could have exercised their own discretion to initiate a minor assault prosecution but they were clearly disinclined to do this. Up along the line to Dublin Castle there was concurrence, albeit "with regret" on the Inspector General's part,¹⁰ that a prosecution would be inadvisable.

II

A month was to elapse before this confrontation between a priest and a colporteur became widely known. The February issue of the *Christian Irishman* published a letter from MacAskill describing the incident and made editorial comment on it. But, in doing so, it omitted all names of the people and places involved, referring only to 'a well-known Irish town'. Westport was, however, identified as being the scene of the crime in a letter from "A Christian Irishman" which was published in the February issue of the *Catholic* (a periodical with an ultra-Protestant outlook). In this polemical letter Fr. McDonald's name was rendered as MacDonnell and the priest was claimed to be a relative as well as a namesake of the Dublin Castle Under Secretary, Sir Antony MacDonnell. A brilliant career in the Indian Civil Service notwithstanding, MacDonnell – as an "Irish Catholic, a self-confessed Liberal and the brother of a Nationalist MP"¹¹ – was regarded with hostility and suspicion in many Protestant and Unionist quarters after his appointment as Under Secretary in 1902. In this vein "A Christian Irishman" referred to "the reign of terror under which peaceable and law-abiding Protestants are living in this part of the country since 'Sir Antony' took it upon himself to govern Ireland through his clerical policemen". He also alleged that the actual policemen present "dared not interfere to protect [MacAskill], or even to remonstrate with his assailant, fearing a private report of their conduct to 'Sir Antony' and a subsequent transfer 'for the good of the service'".¹²

The story moved from small circulation periodicals of the politico-religious fringe into the mainstream press on February 7th when the *Belfast Newsletter* published a "Specially Contributed" piece under the heading "Where Rome Rules. A Westport Episode". This incorporated the whole of the letter from "A Christian Irishman" and also drew upon MacAskill's letter. The Dublin *Daily Express* picked up the story on the following day.

A change in the official response to the incident became apparent shortly afterwards. On Monday, February 13th Fr. McDonald was served with a summons to appear at Westport Petty Sessions on a charge of assault. The case was heard on Thursday, February 16th. The prosecution was conducted by District Inspector Brownrigg, the defendant was represented by a King's Counsel, Redmond Barry, while another barrister, R.D. Megaw, attended holding a watching brief on behalf of the alleged victim's employer. Only two prosecution witnesses gave evidence: Sergeant Mooney, who was not cross-examined, and Alexander MacAskill, who was. On the bench sat a Resident Magistrate, Robert Starkie, and two local Justices of the Peace, Richard Gibbons and John Walsh. The outcome was reported to his superiors by the District Inspector as follows:

The assault was proved to be of a trivial nature in itself & was admitted by the defence.

Mr. Barry cross examined MacAskill from the copy of the "Christian Irishman" which he had sold on 6th January & pleaded that it contained controversial matter that exceeded what could be considered as fair and reasonable criticism & that its contents were so highly insulting to the R.C. clergy that the sale of the publication was sufficient justification for the assault.

The two R.C. magistrates adopted this view & the case was dismissed on the merits by the majority of the bench. Mr. Starkie R.M. dissented & considered that there was no justification for the use of violence & that there should have been a conviction.

The case caused considerable local excitement. Several of the R.C. clergy were in the court which was unusually crowded. There was also a large crowd outside. The people were orderly except for an occasional cheer inside & out which of course became general & prolonged when the decision was announced.

The Westport Brass Band was waiting about 80 yds. from the Court House & played Rev. Fr. McDonald back to the Presbytery & paraded the principal streets of the town.

I am hopeful that the incident will not arouse any serious sectarian feeling.¹³

The state of local excitement was attested to by the report of the case in the *Mayo News*: "public feeling has run very high ever since it became known on Monday that Fr. McDonald, the reverend pastor of Westport, was to be put on trial for giving an imported bible reader, named MacAskill, a kick in the posterior".¹⁴ A similar observation was made by R.D. Megaw in the report on the case that he furnished to his client: "on approaching Westport it became apparent the nothing else was thought of but the prosecution of the priest. All Westport seems to have turned out to meet the arrival of the 10.20 p.m. train on Wednesday evening, evidently in the expectation of giving a reception to the unfortunate Mr. MacAskill but they were disappointed in this... the "Belfast Newsletter" was blamed for the prosecution and its strictures in Westport were bitterly resented".¹⁵ MacAskill had gone by train as far as Castlebar on Wednesday and came by road to Westport under plain-clothed police guard on Thursday morning. For the *Mayo News* "all these precautions were no doubt adopted to justify the statement in the letter of a Westport Presbyterian that the Protestants live under a reign of terror in Westport".¹⁶

During the hearing the Resident Magistrate had remarked that: "I know the Westport district and it is a perfectly peaceable one and remarkably free from sectarian feeling".¹⁷ To R.D. Megaw "in Westport it was clear that the Protestants highly disapproved of the prosecution; they seem to place no reliance on the protection of the laws, and resent any interference with a priest". Such an attitude did not, however, forestall a backlash in the aftermath of the court case. On February 22nd the Westport Urban District Council unanimously passed the following resolutions:

1. That we are surprised and disappointed that the Protestant community of Westport and district has not disassociated itself from the individuals who introduced the man MacAskill and sympathised with the object of his visit.
2. That we heartily congratulate Fr. McDonald, our reverend pastor, upon the firm and decisive steps he took to prevent the religious feelings of our Catholic people being insolently outraged in their own homes, and that we pledge ourselves to indemnify him in this action, and, further to relieve him of the necessity of having to perform so disagreeable a task again.
3. That we fear the Protestants of this district have created a serious state of affairs by not having spoken out promptly in repudiation of the audacious calumnies of certain Orange newspapers that the lives and property of Protestants are unsafe in the south and west of Ireland, and that they are able to live in these parts only by effacing themselves; and that we, the elected representatives of Westport, regard it as our imperative duty to denounce such statements as vile slanders upon our kindly and tolerant people.¹⁸

The meeting which passed these resolutions was presided over by one of the Justices of the Peace who had dismissed the charge against Fr. McDonald, John Walsh. Their seconder was a Church of Ireland councillor, George Clarke. He stated that the members of his church "have nothing to do with that [i.e. MacAskill] class of fellow" and declared that "as to the statements in that Belfast newspaper I would be very happy to repudiate the charge they make".¹⁹

Councillor Clarke's efforts notwithstanding, "audacious calumnies" and "vile slanders" concerning Westport continued to appear in "certain Orange newspapers". Editorials criticising the verdict, as well as reports of the court proceedings, appeared in both the *Belfast Newsletter* and in the *Dublin Daily Express* on February 17th. "A more scandalous travesty of justice was never perpetrated", the *Newsletter* thundered, "here is an instance of MacDonnellism in excelsis". Another "Specially Contributed" article which dealt with the court hearing under the headline "The Westport Farce. By One Who Was There" was published in this Belfast paper on February 23rd. Discussion of the Urban Council resolutions by the Westport Board of Poor Law Guardians, at which the attitude of clerical and lay Westport Protestants towards itinerant missionaries was unfavourably contrasted with that of their Newport counterparts and calls for the boycotting of Westport Protestant businesses by Catholic customers were made, gave the story a further lease of life. An editorial headed "Intolerance at Westport" accompanied the reporting of the Guardians' discussion in the *Daily Express* on February 18th. The Urban District

Council and Poor Law Board proceedings formed the subject matter of another “Specially Contributed” *Newsletter* piece on March 7th. This was headlined “The Westport Episode. Protestants To Be “Driven Bag & Baggage” From The Town”.²⁰

III

The pledge to indemnify Fr. McDonald contained in the second of the Urban District Council resolutions was to provide the story with its grand finale. On St. Patrick’s Day, before an attendance which was reported to be in excess of ten thousand people, Fr. McDonald was presented with an address and a purse of sovereigns containing one hundred guineas. Speaking in reply to this presentation, Fr. McDonald depicted his confrontation with MacAskill as part of “a fight for the principle that Irish Catholics in their own land and in their own homes shall have a right to practice their religion without insult and outrage from the hirelings of the stranger”. Devotion to Mary had preserved the faith of the Irish people through the times of persecution and dispossession:

And this is the devotion that a handful of Presbyterians tried to insult here in Westport lately. To point their insult they watched the time when the Catholic Church throughout the world was honouring the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin. They got here a wretched creature from Scotland, which is the shame of Europe for immorality, and sent him around from house to house, to the humble homes of our poor but virtuous people to tell them beneath their own roofs that their devotion to the Immaculate Mother of God, the devotion of our race, the devotion of our martyred forefathers, the devotion that is deep in the heart of every Irish Catholic, is unblushing blasphemy and an outrage on God. Where is the priest with an Irish spirit in his heart or with Irish blood in his veins who could stand coldly by and leave the chastising to another? If there be such a priest I am not that man (loud applause).

Turning to the circumstances and timing of his prosecution Fr. McDonald declared that he had been prosecuted “at the command of the bigots of Belfast”. Belfast’s relationship to the rest of Ireland he likened to the conduct of a jealous woman towards her stepchildren: “the Irish stepmother has long experience in blackening the children of the soil in order to secure their heritage for her own”. Westport’s Protestants were then indicted for behaving in a manner characterised as “cowardly and criminal”. A small privileged minority enjoying “the fat of the land and the cream of the commerce”, these Protestants “have not stirred a finger to do justice to their Catholic neighbours who have been so foully slandered (hear, hear). Every public body in the County of Mayo had called upon the Protestants of their district to contradict and repudiate these foul slanders, but neither contradiction nor repudiation is forthcoming”. Fr. McDonald next looked forward to radically changed times:

The day is nigh when we will lift up our heads and assert our rights, and be slandered no longer in our land (applause). There will be levellings up and levellings down. Intolerance will be taught a lesson, and hostile ascendancy must go. But let no honest man be alarmed. Ireland has need for all her sons, and there will be always here room and fellowship for every man, no matter what his creed and nationality may be, who is willing to do a man's part to build up the fortunes of our broken country. But for those who defame our land and despise our race and defile our holy faith there will never be peace and tolerance in Ireland (loud applause).

Fr. McDonald concluded his speech by noting that the sum of money with which he had been presented was far greater than was needed to indemnify him for the expense he had incurred and he pledged himself to erect an oratory on Croagh Patrick with the balance.²¹

IV

The historical roots of the kind of proselytism in which Alexander MacAskill was engaged lay in the growth of a militant evangelical current within Irish Protestantism from the later years of the eighteenth century. The 1820s and 1830s witnessed a resurgence of religious controversy with great public debates being held in various parts of the country between Catholic and Protestant clerical champions. This period also saw the establishment of a number of Protestant mission colonies in different parts of Ireland.

The missionary effort attained its greatest intensity around the middle of the nineteenth century. Capitalising on British evangelical interest in 'experiments' such as the Achill Island colony, on interpretation of the Great Famine in terms of Apocalyptic prophecies and on other factors heightening politico-religious tensions around this time, the Society for Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics (ICM) launched a crusade to convert Irish Catholics to Protestantism in the late 1840s. The west of Ireland was the location of much of the ICM's initial efforts. But by the late 1850s the momentum of the ICM's crusade was declining. Unable to sustain small isolated communities of its rural converts in the face of the bitter local hostility engendered by their creation, it began in the late 1860s to concentrate its activities in the larger towns and cities.²² Elsewhere only sporadic or localised bursts of activity by mostly itinerant colporteurs and street preachers from societies such as the Open Air Mission persisted by the end of the century.

Street preaching was a potent source of local disorder and recrimination with police reports of trouble in more than a dozen places as far apart as Wexford and Sligo in the decade before the MacAskill-McDonald confrontation.²³ A tendency on the part of preachers to choose prominent locations on crowded and volatile occasions, such as fair days, only increased the likelihood of violent hostility. Drafting in extra manpower, moving the preachers on to more defensible and less provocative spots together with the enlisting of the influence of key authority figures in the local community on the side of calm and forbearance were the main resources relied upon by the police in containing conflict.

Missionary incursions generally enjoyed little support from the resident Protestant clergy and laity who were long afterwards left to face the sectarian animosity they had inflamed. In 1897, for instance, the police reported that the Rector of Wexford and “practically all the Protestants of Wexford were strongly opposed to street preaching on the ground that it would only arouse bitter feeling and do no possible good.”²⁴ Leading the preachers on this occasion was another Rector whose involvement in such activities had made him notorious. In his autobiography Canon J.O. Hannay, who became Rector of Westport in 1892, refers to this fellow clergyman in recalling Wicklow clerical meetings he had attended while serving as a curate in Delgany before his move to the west of Ireland:

“There was a Mr. Hallows, the Rector of Arklow, who considered it his duty to preach to the Roman Catholics in the streets of his parish with a view to converting them to what he regarded as a better faith. In these efforts he was loyally supported by his curate. Unfortunately the Roman Catholics did not like it. They showed their disapproval by hooting and booing and even throwing stones at Hallows, with the result that after a while he could only do his preaching under police protection... the proceedings at Arklow were very unseemly and the position of Hallows fellow clergy became difficult. We were all ready to admit that it was most desirable, not only in interests of the souls of the Irish people, but for political considerations, that the Roman Catholics should be converted to the faith of the Church of Ireland, a creed which involved loyalty to the crown and the constitution... We were, I think, most of us, a little uncomfortable when we considered our own failure to make any effort to secure this great end. We could not help admitting that Mr. Hallows showed courage and energy far superior to ours.

At the same time, besides being, I think, good Christians, certainly good Protestants, we were most of us gentlemen by birth and education. Now a gentleman does not mix himself up in street brawls. It is contrary to his whole conception of his position that he should suffer the indignity of being hooted and stoned by the corner boys of a small provincial town. We should, I think, if we had lived in primitive times, have shrunk from martyrdom, not because we were afraid to die for our faith – we could have done that – but because martyrdoms must have appeared to those who witnessed them as irredeemably vulgar affairs. We found ourselves in the position of men in whose hearts there was a religious conviction which would have led us to approve of Mr. Hallows, but who as gentlemen deprecated his action very strongly indeed.”²⁵

The predominant response of the Catholic clergy - as noted, for instance, in police reports relating to Enniscorthy in 1897 and Roscrea in 1898²⁶ - was to urge their flocks to ignore, and not to physically interfere with, street preachers. In confronting MacAskill on the street and striking him, Fr. McDonald thus radically departed from a norm of clerical influence being cast on the side of peace and good order. In only one other reported case of disorder arising out of proselytism in the period was the prosecution of a priest actively considered. The priest concerned was Canon McAlpine of Clifden who stood accused of inciting a crowd to attack street preachers on two different occasions. In 1903

it was ultimately decided to bring the Canon's actions to the notice of his bishop rather than to prosecute. When trouble flared again in 1906, the failure of the Westport prosecution in the previous year was one of the considerations that successfully weighed against the Canon being charged. In this instance proceedings were brought against six members of the crowd that had attacked the preachers, with two of the defendants being convicted and fined by the magistrates.²⁷ Unlike Fr. McDonald, Canon McAlpine had not himself struck a blow during either of the disturbances.

V

Fr. McDonald would not, of course, have been prosecuted had the Dublin Castle authorities adhered to the view of the incident they had initially adopted. Seen from one politico-religious perspective, this *volte face* was the abandonment of a reasonable and sensible response in order to quieten an 'Orange howl': seen from the other, it showed the authorities being forced by a vigilant press to uphold the law of the land even though this interfered with their efforts to ingratiate themselves with the Catholic clergy. On one point these polar opposite perspectives were in perfect agreement. A relationship of cause and effect obtained between press exposure of what had taken place in Westport and the prosecution of Fr. McDonald.

This, however, was not the case. External intervention was involved in the reversal of the initial decision that there should be no police prosecution but this did not come from the press. The actions of Fr. McDonald in the aftermath of his confrontation with MacAskill were also crucially important in changing the official mind:

At Mass at Lecanvey on 15th [of January] Fr. McDonald referred to this assault [on MacAskill] & praised the active part taken by those persons who came to his assistance.

He also referred to Mr. David O'Brien, colporteur of Presbyterian Church Mission, of James St. Westport, by description but not by name. He told his congregation to scald O'Brien in the face with hot water & to set their dogs on him should he visit their houses to sell books or tracts.²⁸

Listening in the congregation were three Murrisk policemen who subsequently drew up statements of evidence which were attached to a report sent to his superiors on January 20th by District Inspector Brownrigg.²⁹ Also on January 20th Captain Wade Thompson, Chairman of the Society for the Protection of Protestant Interests, wrote to the Chief Secretary, George Wyndham, informing him that the events of January 6th had been reported "at a representative meeting of this society held yesterday" and asking him what action the authorities were taking in the matter.³⁰ When this letter was shown to Wyndham, it was accompanied by the files detailing what Fr. McDonald had done in Westport and said in Lecanvey. Wyndham's response was, first, to observe that the file should have been submitted to him for his consideration at the time his Under Secretary had concurred with the police recommendation against taking action and, second, to call for advice from the government law officers.³¹

The Under Secretary, Sir Antony MacDonnell, responded that a report on the MacAskill incident had been given to the Chief Secretary as part of a more general weekly statement on January 21st. He prefaced this by writing:

I may explain that the police reports dated 18th inst. [i.e. those detailing what the priest had said in Lecanvey] give a different complexion to this case from what it bore when I saw the papers on the 17th. I then agreed with the [RIC Inspector General] that in the interest of the peace of the district MacAskill should be left to his own remedy.³²

The Lecanvey reports also carried weight with the Chief Crown Solicitor for Ireland, Sir Patrick Coll:

The proceedings of Mr. MacAskill in offering for sale in such a place as Westport a publication so offensive to Roman Catholics was calculated to provoke a breach of the peace. At the same time the assault on him by Fr. McDonald in presence of the police followed by his advice to his congregation cannot I think be passed over... On the whole a prosecution is a very unpleasant alternative but it seems the most expedient.³³

The Attorney General, John Atkinson, concurred that Fr. McDonald should be prosecuted for “this inexcusable assault”.³⁴ On February 1st a minute from the Under Secretary instructed the RIC Inspector General that a police prosecution should be brought against Fr. McDonald. Wyndham himself also wrote a minute on the matter on February 1st in which he commented on Fr. McDonald’s action:

This is a mere matter of public order. It is extremely to be regretted that a person in the position of Father McDonald should have so far forgotten himself. But – as in any similar case unconnected with sectarian animosity – if respectable people get into a row and commit an assault they must be summoned by the police.

Regarding the colporteur, the Chief Secretary wrote that “the action of Mr. MacAskill was of a most provocative character” and he posed two questions to the law officers:

- (1) Should the police be instructed to warn Mr. MacAskill that he must not hawk his literature in the streets.
- (2) If he persists in so doing, can he be bound to keep the peace?

Wyndham’s minute concluded that the prosecution of Fr, McDonald “must proceed whatever steps may be necessary to prevent unwarrantable provocation”.³⁵ The replies he received to his questions advised him that it was possible for MacAskill to be given a warning by the police but that he could not be bound to keep the peace if he persisted in his actions. The Attorney General’s reply spelt out the narrow limits of what it was possible for the police to do. While MacAskill could be warned:

His conduct may be mischievous and irritating but it is not illegal and he is, therefore, entitled to protection from the Authorities. The warning, therefore, if given, should not be a warning not to hawk or sell this literature. That the police have no right to give. The warning should be confined to this. He should be told that the sale of this literature may cause disturbance and tumult; that it may expose him to danger; and that, if tumultuous crowds assemble and threaten him, it may be the duty of the police, in order to preserve the peace in the only way possible, to remove him from the streets and escort him to his own house and prevent him from leaving it until the danger has passed away... MacAskill cannot be bound to keep the peace although, of course, his assailant can. Nor are the police entitled to stop him selling this literature if no crowd have assembled at all. A breach of the peace must be threatened and the removal be the only way of preventing it.³⁶

MacAskill was traced to Letterkenny by the police where his having declined to prosecute was formally confirmed. He was subsequently served there with a subpoena for his attendance at court as a witness in the case brought by the police. No reply was sent to Captain Wade Thompson who wrote again seeking one on February 9th. A response dated February 13th informed the Captain that a prosecution was being brought and that the case was due to be heard on February 16th.³⁷

VI

After the case had been heard, District Inspector Brownrigg was “hopeful that the incident will not arouse any serious sectarian feeling”. But Fr. McDonald’s supporters, and the priest himself, were sharply critical of Westport’s entire Protestant community. Was any response on the part of the Protestant community to the charges being made against them evident? And did any Protestants in the locality suffer retaliation as a result of what occurred?

In seconding the Urban District Council motions Councillor George Clarke certainly sought to distance Church of Ireland members from MacAskill’s activities but that Church’s most locally representative body, the Aughaval Select Vestry, was not inclined to follow the lead he had given. The minutes of the meetings it held around this time record only the transaction of routine church administrative business.³⁸ Nor is any mention of the MacAskill affair to be found in Canon Hannay’s preserved 1905 correspondence. The excessive power of the Irish Catholic clergy and how newly emerging social or political movements – such as the Gaelic League, Sinn Fein and the Independent Orange Order – might combat this evil were topics being discussed with correspondents such as T.W. Rolleston and Lindsay Crawford but what was widely represented as a concrete manifestation of priestly tyranny taking place on Hannay’s own doorstep, so to speak, was not alluded to.³⁹ The first George A. Birmingham novel, *The Seething Pot*, was published while the MacAskill affair unfolded and, as result of his claim to have been caricatured in this book, Fr. McDonald activities would shortly impinge to a much greater extent on Hannay’s life. A clergyman’s gentlemanly social standing was, once again, centrally involved:

I [Hannay] had, so he [McDonald] thought, represented him as something less than a gentleman and this was my real offence. I might have called him a thief or an atheist and he would have minded it much less. It is an odd fact but men resent a slight on their gentility more than anything else that can be done to them; unless of course they happen to be gentlemen. Then they do not mind. This priest, in his fury, stirred up the people of Westport against me. He used to write weekly articles in the local papers, with such titles as “The Author of *The Seething Pot* Unveiled”. The people, convinced that they ought to rise in defence of their faith, used to gather outside my house at night and boo at me. They burnt me in effigy in the streets. They made an attempt, only moderately successful, to boycott me, all in the hope of demonstrating to an uninterested world that this priest had the table manners of a gentleman. It was an amazingly silly business, though only mildly amusing at the time.⁴⁰

Hannay’s Presbyterian counterpart, the Reverend John A. Bain, was constrained to take a more active part in the public controversy surrounding the MacAskill affair and a letter from him published by the *Mayo News* on March 18th raises the issue of retaliation. In this letter he wrote that “a dastardly attempt has been made to injure a member of my congregation because he is alleged to have invited Mr. MacAskill to the district.” Attempting to show the injustice of this, the Reverend Bain then went on to describe the actual circumstances of the colporteur’s recent visit:

Mr. MacAskill is an agent of the Irish Mission of the Presbyterian Church. He itinerates from place to place and his tours are arranged by the Superintendent of the Mission in Dublin. He had been through the eastern part of the country, and took this district on his way to work through the rest of it. He was to have stayed in Newport and to have worked the district from there but when he failed to find lodgings in Newport I told him he would be able to get rooms easily in Westport, and that he could work the district as easily from here. Accordingly he took this course and went through the district, including Newport, from here.⁴¹

The taking of the Reverend Bain’s advice seems to have had very unfortunate consequences for MacAskill’s Westport landlady. The letter of “A Christian Irishman” to the *Catholic* had stated that, when MacAskill returned to his lodgings after Fr. McDonald had assaulted him, “the mob remained outside for some time howling and stone-throwing until MacAskill’s landlady – a most respectable Protestant old lady – was almost frightened to death”.⁴² Nor, it was subsequently to be alleged, did this lady’s tribulations end with MacAskill’s departure from her house:

The old lady who accommodated Mr. MacGaskill (sic) with a lodging in her house for a few nights derived her whole support from the letting of her rooms. Two bank officials lodged permanently in her house, and they represented two of our great banking corporations who have branches in Westport. The directors of these great banking companies were so conscious that the taint of MacGaskill lodging for one night under the same roof with one of their minor officials would so prejudice or paralyse their business in that town and district that their officials were at once sent off from the infected region to distant branches and their successors as a matter of course had to seek for lodgings elsewhere in Westport... No other lodger ever darkened the door of the old lady who took Mr. MacGaskill under her roof for a night. Her occupation, her sole livelihood, was gone. She stated to the writer some time after that there was not a shilling between her and the workhouse, and friends kindly came to her relief and supported her by their donations for the few months which elapsed, until the friendly hand of death freed her at last from her poverty and troubles.⁴³

This statement was made in a letter to a Belfast newspaper, extracts from which were reproduced as a propaganda handbill by the Ulster Unionist Council during its campaign against the Third Home Rule Bill in the 1911-14 period. The handbill described the letter's author as "a respected Wesleyan Minister" and its extracts also provide a third eye witness account of the assault itself to set alongside those of Alexander MacAskill and of Sergeant Mooney:

I was in the town of Westport on the day in question and was witness to the scene, the full particulars of which have never been published. Mr. McGaskill, the colporteur, I should say, showed no hostile or provocative spirit towards the Roman Catholic population. The tract which he sold could hardly be considered dangerous even for a Roman Catholic to read. The priest, however, thought otherwise, and on hearing of the sale he rushed out and encountered the colporteur on the street, and forthwith gave him a thoroughly good kicking, of which he boasted on the following Sunday from the altar in language which gentlemen do not usually express – so at least it was reported by some who were present. A number of persons who witnessed the assault rushed to the scene, not by way of protecting the colporteur, but in order to second the work of their pastor and make the kicking more impressive, and if the police had not speedily intervened Mr. McGaskill would have fared very badly indeed. He was, however, with difficulty rescued and escorted under strong guard to his lodgings, where sentinels were posted to keep watch and ward for the rest of the day and during the whole of the night until they were able to send off their charge by an early morning train.

The kicking affair was soon noised abroad through the town and through the adjacent country, and in the course of a few hours the lodging house was besieged by an excited maddened crowd, apparently expecting an opportunity of imposing addition chastisement on the unfortunate colporteur, And if the unfortunate man had appeared outside his lodgings on that night all the police force available would not have saved his life.⁴⁴

It is noteworthy that these `full particulars`, furnished several years later, are in conflict at several points with the contemporaneous accounts of the colporteur and the sergeant. First, the contemporaneous accounts both have MacAskill followed by a crowd (or, perhaps, two distinct crowds) before being assaulted: in the later one the priest and the colporteur seem to be on their own when the former kicks the latter. Second, the phrase `a thoroughly good kicking` is imprecise but it certainly suggests a more aggravated and violent assault than was described by either MacAskill or Sergeant Mooney. Third, the later account not only has the crowd forming after the assault had taken place: it also imputes to this crowd a much more violent disposition than is suggested by either the policeman's report or the colporteur's letter. Fourth, MacAskill did not leave Westport the next day, Saturday: by his own and the police accounts he stayed until Monday morning. Fifth, no mention of a crowd forming outside the lodging house later on Friday after news of the afternoon's events had spread is made by MacAskill or by Sergeant Mooney. The last mention they make of a crowd is when Fr. McDonald calls on it to disperse after MacAskill has got back into his lodgings. MacAskill was prevailed upon by the police not to continue going about his colportage business in or around Westport and it is not clear if he left his lodgings at all between his fraught return there on Friday afternoon and his departure for the railway station on Monday morning. Of this period MacAskill wrote only that "the police gave me assiduous protection...I felt grateful for that, and sorry for their standing out in such cold and wet weather".⁴⁵

If the `respected Wesleyan Minister` witnessed what took place on January 6th 1905 did he play any role at the time in making the events widely known? Could he, for instance, be the author of the `A Christian Irishman` letter to the *Catholic*? Although there are similarities between this account and that of the handbill - both make reference to MacAskill's landlady and both use the incident to drive home the same politico-religious propaganda message - there are also major differences. In the letter of `A Christian Irishman` the story of how the colporteur was followed by a hostile crowd and assaulted by the priest unfolds in the same way as it is told by Alexander MacAskill and by Sergeant Mooney. No `maddened excited crowd` returns to besiege the lodging house in the account of `A Christian Irishman` although he too makes a claim that MacAskill could have suffered further and much more serious violence on that eventful Friday:

It was rumoured throughout the town yesterday [i.e. Friday January 6th] evening that MacAskall's (sic) landlady was afraid to keep him in her home any longer and that he would be leaving Westport by the 10.30 p.m. train. After nightfall it was noted that the rowdy element were drinking rather freely in the public houses, and a few of the leaders appeared to be well supplied with small silver, which they were spending freely in treating their chums. Some time before the 10.30 p.m. train was due to leave, they proceeded in twos and threes to the vicinity of the railway station where they concealed themselves along the dead walls leading to the station, which is some distance outside the town, while a few remained in the vicinity of MacAskall's lodgings, which is on the road leading to the railway station, evidently waiting to give the signal should MacAskall leave.⁴⁶

The Ulster Unionist Council handbill that resurrected the MacAskill assault case several years after its occurrence was headed in bold capital letters "Why Protestants Fear Home Rule" and formed part of a series setting out "religious" objections to Irish self-government (a separate leaflet series set out the "political" objections). Within this leaflet series the story of the colporteur who was kicked by a Mayo priest nestled alongside others such as that of the McCann case,⁴⁷ which was responsible for bestowing popular Protestant notoriety on the *Ne Temere* papal decree dealing with mixed marriages. Originally highlighted by an article in the *Belfast Newsletter*, the MacAskill assault case thus became a cautionary tale from distant Westport twice told to a Unionist audience in the northern metropolis.

NOTES

¹ Letter from Alexander MacAskill, *Christian Irishman*, February 1905.

² Sergeant Mooney's report, 7 January 1905, National Archives Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers (NA CSORP) 1906 26,453 refers to "about 100 school children assembled in the street cheering and shouting" while MacAskill was in the barracks.

³ "Hereupon Father _____ came up to me with a copy of the *Christian Irishman* in his hand. At once the explanation of the whole demonstration dawned upon me. He asked me if I sold that book. As I had sold a copy earlier in the day, I at once acknowledged I did. "What right had you to sell it to my people?" Without a moment's delay, he lifted his foot and kicked me on the legs." Letter from Alexander MacAskill, *Christian Irishman*, February 1905. The purchaser was, according to MacAskill, a middle-aged woman.

⁴ Sergeant Mooney's report, 7 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453. "The whole thing occupied about 15 minutes". MacAskill's version of what happened after Fr. McDonald struck him is: "The sergeant and a large crowd were at his [the priest's] back. I told the constable that they must take Father _____ in charge for assault. Then we moved on. Missiles were thrown. A clod struck the constable on the head. The presence of the children in front checked, I think, to some extent, the throwing of missiles. When passing along the wall at _____, a stone struck the back of my head. Fortunately, my cap band, where it struck me, was pretty strong, and the blow only raised a weal. After reaching my door I had to wait for a few minutes before it was opened, my landlady not knowing what was up. Father _____, with a large crowd around him at the gate, urged the police to drive me out of town. Missiles were still harmlessly flying. To watch the throwers, the police mounted the parapet. By and by Father _____ beckoned the crowd to disperse. Only children remained. The sergeant chased them away and came in to speak to me" Letter from Alexander MacAskill, *Christian Irishman*, February 1905.

⁵ District Inspector Brownrigg's report, 11 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

⁶ Ibid. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines a colporteur as "a hawker of books, newspapers etc. *especially* (in English usage) one employed by a religious society."

⁷ Sergeant Mooney had obtained a copy of the *Christian Irishman*, and appended this, with the passage on page 2 that offended Father McDonald marked, to his report.

⁸ Letter from Alexander MacAskill, *Christian Irishman*, February 1905.

⁹ District Inspector Brownrigg's report, 11 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

¹⁰ RIC Office Dublin Castle to Under Secretary, 14 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

¹¹ Eunan O'Halpin *The Decline of the Union* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1987) p. 33.

¹² Quotes are from the *Belfast Newsletter* 7 February 1905. The National Library of Ireland's holding of the *Catholic* is incomplete. The volume for 1905 is one of those wanting. On Unionist hostility to MacDonnell see F.S.L. Lyons "The Irish Unionist Party and the Devolution Crisis" *Irish Historical Studies* Vol. VI, No. 21, 1948, pp. 1-22 and Andrew Gailey *Ireland and the Death of Kindness* Cork, Cork University Press, 1987 especially Chapters V-VIII.

¹³ District Inspector Brownrigg's report, 16 February 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

¹⁴ *Mayo News* 18 February 1905.

¹⁵ Megaw's report was published in the *Daily Express* 21 February 1905 and in the *Belfast Newsletter* 23 February 1905.

¹⁶ *Mayo News* 18 February 1905.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* For derisive comments on this remark see “The Westport Incident” *Church of Ireland Gazette* 24 February 1905.

¹⁸ *Mayo News* 25 February 1905.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ The April 1905 issue of *Christian Irishman* commented that “not the least remarkable feature of the transaction has been the studied silence of the Roman Catholic papers. Reports of the trial did, of course, appear at the time but with the exception of some local criticism which tried to make a hero of the reverend gentleman prosecuted by the police, the subject has been resolutely and significantly avoided. Evidently, in their judgment, the less said about the affair the better.” A characteristically unapologetic piece in the *Leader* of 4 March 1905 headed “Intolerant Westport” seems to have been overlooked by the writer.

²¹ *Irish Protestant* 1 April 1905.

²² See Desmond Bowen *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1978).

²³ See Public Record Office [London] Colonial Office Papers (PRO CO) 903 5 Miscellaneous Notes B Series (4), PRO CO 903 6 Miscellaneous Notes B Series, PRO CO 903 7 Miscellaneous Notes W Series for accounts of incidents in Arklow, Athlone, Galway, Howth, Sligo, Rathfarnham, Waterford, Cork, Roscrea, Queenstown, Enniscorthy, Carlow, Wexford, Gorey and Clifden.

²⁴ PRO CO 903 6 Miscellaneous Notes B Series.

²⁵ George A. Birmingham *Pleasant Places* (London, Heinemann, 1934) pp.68-69. To Fr. McDonald Alexander MacAskill may have been ‘a wretched creature from Scotland’, but in its editorial comments on the assault suffered by the colporteur the February 1905 issue of the *Christian Irishman* states that the priest’s “kick, this cowardly kick, was dealt to an educated gentleman, a university graduate”.

²⁶ PRO CO 903 6 Miscellaneous Notes B Series.

²⁷ The NA CSORP 1906 26,453 file contains material relating to the trouble at Clifden in 1903 and 1906 as well as material relating to the Westport MacAskill case.

²⁸ District Inspector Brownrigg’s report, 20 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453. “Mr. O’Brien native of Belfast has been for some years in Westport in his present occupation. He has never been in any way interfered with & appears to be popular. He sells general & scriptural literature and a few copies of the “Catholic”. He does not fear any violence in consequence of Fr. McDonald’s remarks which I think will have little effect with the people. The local police will pay attention to the matter for some time.”

²⁹ The policemen were Sergeant Gilmartin and Constables Condon and Lynch. Constable Condon’s recollection of Fr. McDonald’s words was: “there is always a Bible reader or jumper in Westport who permanently resides there and goes through the country on a bicycle – a small little fellow like a barrel – with a bag of books before him; so should he or any other of them call to your houses you know how to treat them. Water is cheap and with a can of boiling water makes a “greaskeen” of his face. You have also dogs for which you pay half a crown and make use of them on these fellows. So with the boiling water and the dogs keep them away”. Statement of Constable Condon, 18 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³⁰ Captain Wade Thompson to Chief Secretary, 20 January 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453. Formed in reaction to the launching of the Catholic Association in 1903, the object of the Society for the Protection of Protestant Interests was “to secure, as far as possible, that in matters of business and employment, Protestants shall not suffer injustice because of their religion”.

³¹ Note from George Wyndham to Under Secretary, 30 January 1905, on file originally registered as 1,563 (of 1905) NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³² Note from Sir Antony MacDonnell to Chief Secretary, 31 January 1905, on file originally registered as 1,563 (of 1905) NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³³ Note of Sir Patrick Coll, 31 January 1905, on file originally registered as 1,563 (of 1905) NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³⁴ Note of John Atkinson, 31 January 1905, on file originally registered as 1,563 (of 1905) NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³⁵ Minute of Chief Secretary, 1 February 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³⁶ Opinion of John Atkinson, 6 February 1905, NA CSORP 1906 26,453. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ NA CSORP 1906 26,453.

³⁸ Minutes of Meetings held by Aughaval Select Vestry on 11 April 1905, 25 April 1905 and 31 May 1905, Representative Church Body Library (Churchtown, Dublin) P 158/5/4.

³⁹ J.O. Hannay Papers, Manuscripts Room, Trinity College Dublin Library. The weekly *Irish Protestant*, which Lindsay Crawford edited, gave extensive coverage to the MacAskill affair. The 1 April issue, which reported Fr. McDonald’s St. Patrick’s Day speech under the headlines “Sectarianism Rampant. £100 for Kicking a Protestant. Westport Rules of Toleration”, commented in an editorial entitled “Protestantism and Unionism” that “intolerance of the Westport type creates a mistrust in the breasts of Irish Protestants that retards the growth of national unity, and prejudices all attempts at mutual forbearance and accommodation”.

An oblique reference to the MacAskill affair could be read into an article Hannay published in 1911. Here, illustrating the different meanings that Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists attached to the word liberty, he referred to two examples. One was the kicking of street preachers or tract sellers by those opposed to their evangelizing, the other his own experience whereby “a prominent Gaelic Leaguer was refused permission to sit upon a local committee of the League because in some writings of his he had used expressions which were supposed to be insults to the Catholic faith”. See pp. 101-103 of J.O. Hannay (“George A. Birmingham”) “The Religious Problem in Ireland” pp. 96-110 in Basil Williams (ed.) *Home Rule Problems* (London, P.S. King & Son, 1911).

⁴⁰ George A. Birmingham *Pleasant Places* (London, Heinemann, 1934) pp. 162-163. Hannay refutes the accusation that he had caricatured Fr. McDonald but his statement that he had “hitherto been on friendly terms” with this priest must surely be open to question in the light of the charge of “criminal and cowardly” behaviour that Fr. McDonald had laid against Westport’s Protestants in his Saint Patrick’s Day speech.

⁴¹ *Mayo News* 18 March 1905. The Reverend Bain went on to argue that missionary efforts of all kinds (including those carried on by Catholics in predominantly Presbyterian Scotland) should, as expressions of strongly held faith, be viewed in a more positive light and he quoted the Pope in support of his deprecation of the way in which “Bible reader” had been turned into a term of abuse in Ireland. In an appended editorial comment the

Mayo News claimed to know nothing of the alleged attempt to injure a local Presbyterian and refused to reevaluate MacAskill's missionary work. He had "masqueraded through this district as a simple bookseller, not as a missionary of the Presbyterian Church, and under the pretence of doing ordinary commercial business, he endeavoured to disseminate among our Catholic people publications ridiculing the Blessed Virgin and their well-known devotion to the Mother of God."

⁴² *Belfast Newsletter* 7 February 1905.

⁴³ *Why Protestants Fear Home Rule*, Ulster Unionist Council, Leaflets For Distribution, Religious, U.C. 71. The handbill is undated. Neither a title nor a date of publication is given for the Belfast newspaper in which the letter from which the handbill extracts are taken was published. There is a bound volume of this Ulster Unionist Council Religious leaflet series in the National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Letter from Alexander MacAskill, *Christian Irishman*, February 1905.

⁴⁶ *Belfast Newsletter* 7 February 1905. The letter of 'A Christian Irishman' is headed Westport January 7th. The author does not indicate whether he witnessed any of what he narrates or whether he is entirely reliant on hearsay evidence. As noted above, the *Mayo News* believed him to be a Westport Presbyterian but he may have belonged to another denomination.

⁴⁷ See Raymond M. Lee "Intermarriage, Conflict and Social Control in Ireland: The Decree *'Ne Temere'*" *Economic and Social Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, 1985 pp. 11-27.