



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1995**

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ISSN 0791-0655

Paul Higgins, a man of legend in Killea

By William J. Hayes

Even though the Rev. Paul Higgins (c.1628-1724) is dead almost three hundred years, he is still a man of legend among the older people of Killea near Templemore, where he is buried. Up to at least the 1940s he was also a man of legend in Mayo, where he spent most of his earlier life. The visit of the late Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich to Killea in the late 1970s to see the tomb, and its restoration in 1992, have served to reactivate the local legends.

When Dr. Ó Fiaich came to the village on the slopes of the Devil's Bit to view the tombstone and its Latin inscription, his guide that day was the late Mrs. Nora McGrath, the retired school-teacher of the local school. They conversed in Irish and French, in which they were both fluent, as they sought out the tombstone in the SE corner of the almost totally ruined medieval church.

There was an aptness, at least in the use of Irish, in the vicinity of Paul Higgins's resting-place, as a contemporary document describes him as "having a competent knowledge" of Irish, Latin and English,¹ and as a "reasonable good scholar".² It was Higgins's Irish scholarship and his connection with the famed Ó Huiginn family of professional poets – the best known of whom was Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (c.1558-1617), whose grandson Pól was a contemporary of Paul Higgins – that brought Dr. Ó Fiaich to Killea.

One of the traditions in the neighbourhood of Killea concerning his earlier life is that when Higgins and another young priest were returning from the Continent and passing through Templemore, they saw a poster put up on behalf of the Established Church inviting some suitable applicant for the post of preacher in Irish. Paul, being hard up, accepted the offer. This legend has some factual basis at least.

Paul Higgins, or Pól O Huiginn as he was then, was a native of Co. Mayo and was ordained in Rome in 1668 or 1669,³ and apparently lost little time in getting back to Killala diocese, where he was appointed parish priest of Aughoo.⁴ Going on the dates given on his tomb inscription, he was around 40 years old at that time. The very disturbed decades of the 1640s and 1650s could well account for the delay or interruption in his studies for the priesthood.

Some time between 1670 and 1680, a period when laws against catholicism were being more strictly enforced, Paul and the protestant bishop of Killala and Achonry, Thomas Otway, became well acquainted, and they had many religious discussions and disputations.⁵ His eventual conforming to protestantism, practising as a protestant minister, and his marriage to a protestant, made him the butt of clerical satirical verse in his diocese. This satirical verse and the widespread folklore that centred round him is documented by Pdraigh Ó Moghráin in *Béaloideas*.⁶

When Otway was translated to the bishopric of Ossory, it appears that he invited Paul Higgins to Kilkenny, where he stayed with Otway. In the course of a letter to James Butler, Duke of Ormond and Lord Lieutenant, bishop Otway states that one Paul Higgins (it is notable that he gives the Irish version of the name), a "priest of the Romish church" who had come over to "ours", was staying with him.⁷ He continues: "I have known him ever since I was in Connaught and have discoursed and disputed with him. He is of unquestionable conversation and of more learning than generally their priests are, though I believe not of more than a man may well bear. He is very poor, and if your Grace should think fit to allow him some pension till something might be gotten for him, it might encourage others to come in".



Otway goes on to suggest that Higgins be given the task of translating "practical books of divinity, Latin or English, adequated to the understanding of the poorer Irish", for which there was a salary, he thought, in the college (i.e. Trinity). "He would be fit for that", he adds, "having a competent knowledge of those three languages and writing a better Irish character than I have else seen." The reference to his being poor and on the look-out for a post in which he could put his fluency in Irish to good use may have provided the material for the Killea legend already referred to.

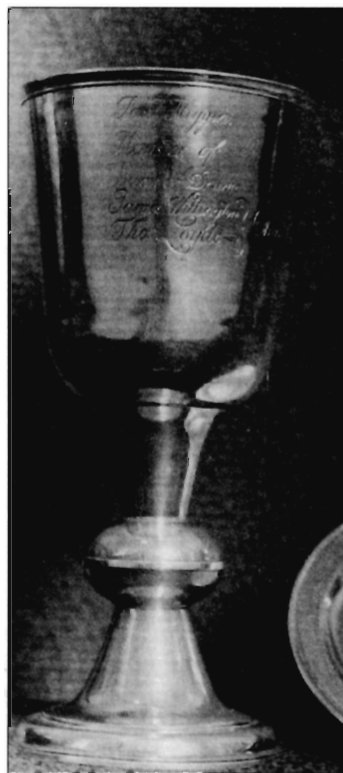
No doubt the period that the English-born and educated Otway spent in the west of Ireland as bishop of Killala and Achonry gave him some qualification to pass such a comment on Paul Higgins's Irish script. Whether the Duke of Ormond intervened on Paul's behalf at that stage is not on record. Some time after that Paul was in Dublin where he heard of the "resolution"⁸ of Dr. Narcissus Marsh (recently appointed Provost of Trinity) to have lessons in Irish reading and writing for the scholars of the house, all of whom were required to conform to the Established Church.

The offer of his services was immediately taken up by Dr. Marsh, who found Higgins "a reasonable good scholar, according to their way of education".⁹ A letter of commendation from Bishop Otway concerning "his conversation and the truth of his conversion" was also in Higgins's favour.

Marsh gave Paul Higgins board and lodgings in his own house and £16 per annum for his teaching. This he paid for out of his own means, such was his desire to have Irish taught.¹⁰ This was a dramatic departure from the college's anti-Irish language policy of the time. Marsh also engaged Higgins to preach an Irish sermon once a month in the college chapel at three in the afternoon to which the public was allowed to attend also.¹¹ Marsh himself records: "all which he performed (and had never fewer than about 300 to hear his sermons) all the time he stay'd which was for some years, until Dr. Sall dyed". This indeed is fine testimony of Paul Higgins's preaching ability. As there is no reference, direct or implied, to his wife during this period, it can be assumed that she had died before he left Killala.

The Dr. Sall referred to above was Andrew Sall of Cashel, another catholic priest who had conformed to the Established Church, and who lodged with Richard Price, protestant Archbishop of Cashel, as well as at Trinity College.¹² Price had been using the services of yet another former catholic priest, one Terence Tiernan, to preach in Cashel cathedral on the Rock every Sunday afternoon, to which it was reported that a great concourse resorted.¹³

It was that report that gave Dr. Marsh the idea of having Paul Higgins preach in the college chapel once a month, which he did apparently with notable success, attracting people from outside the college as well as the scholars themselves. Marsh also used Higgins's scholarship and fluency in Irish to assist the aging Andrew Sall in the revision and preparation for the press of Bedell's Irish Bible, which was printed in London in 1685. This was the first Irish translation of the bible.¹⁴



The Higgins chalice, which is in regular use in the Church of Ireland Church, Littleton. The chalice is 10½ inches (25 cms) high.

It was this collaboration of Paul Higgins and Andrew Sall – “Saul and Paul” – that is cleverly punned upon in one of the satirical verses of Killala. It begins: “*Siud Pól is Sál mur-*fháill* a bhí gan *chéill*”*

.¹⁵

When Sall died in 1682 the Duke of Ormond used his influence to have Paul Higgins appointed to Sall’s “good livings”, namely the rectorships of the Unions of Drom and Templemore.¹⁶ And so it was that Paul Higgins began his association with that part of Tipperary, where according to Dr. Marsh, writing in 1705, “he hath continued a firm protestant ever since”. Marsh could well make such a firm assertion as he himself was protestant Archbishop of Cashel from 1690 to 1694.

Besides the rectorships of Drom and Templemore, Paul Higgins held the curacy of Glankeen.¹⁷ These pluralist livings, which he held for almost the remainder of his long life, were indeed “good livings”, as they provided him with an annual income of about £200, equivalent to about £60,000 in today’s money.¹⁸ He held these benefices almost to the end of his long life.

His second marriage must have taken place sometime in the early 1680s, probably after his appointment to Drom and Templemore Unions. Only the personal name – Elizabeth – of his wife is recorded on his tombstone; her family name has not come down in tradition. Going on the dates given in his inscription, she was in her very early twenties and he in his late fifties at the time of the second marriage. His daughter, the only child of the marriage, was born around 1686, but she lived only to the age of 18, as the inscription also testifies.

Despite the testimony of Dr. Marsh already quoted, suspicion about the genuineness of his conversion inevitably became part of local folklore. One of the stories about Paul Higgins which is still related in the Killea district, and which was recorded by the Thurles historian Dr. Martin Callanan in 1930, is that he was preaching at Templemore when a bad thunder and lightning storm came on.¹⁹ He shouted at the congregation: “Kneel down and bless yourselves, ye divils, or you will all be in hell in a few minutes”.

At the early stages of Paul Higgins’s ministry there was only one usable church in all of the two Unions he held; that was Drom church, which was reroofed with straw in 1615. All the other old churches – Templemore, Killavinogue, Killea, Templeree, Glankeen, and others – were ruinous.²⁰ It was in Drom church that he witnessed the recantation of catholicism by Phillip Fogarty of Ballinlonty, Killoskekan, on 24 June 1710.²¹ Higgins may have organised the restoration of the western section of Templemore old church to serve as a protestant church, as after his retirement in 1721 his living was divided into two parts, Drom and Templemore, implying that there was then a usable church in Templemore.²²

According to local tradition he lived in the townland of Kilduff, not far from Killea, and the fact that his tomb and that of his family are in the old church ruin close to that village supports this tradition. There is a tradition also that he cultivated hops in Kilduff, and one field (now in the ownership of Mahers) is still called the Hop Field.

Higgins was around 84 years of age before he obtained a curate, Robert Gregory, to hold the services for him. He presented a communion cup and paten to that church in 1718, inscribed: “Paul Higgins, Minister of the Union of Drume. James Willington, Thos Loydon, Churchwardens”. This church plate are still in regular use in Littleton Church of Ireland church. It was transferred to Littleton in 1786 when the later protestant church in Drom was burned down accidentally around 1779.²³

Higgins remained on as rector of the unions until 1721, by which time he was around 93. Local folklore has different versions relating to his final end. One is that he asked for a Catholic priest, from whom he inquired if there was any hope of getting forgiveness. The priest is supposed to have said that there was no more hope than that water would run up a hill. With that he saw the tears running up Paul Higgins’s forehead.



Another version is that when Paul was near his end an unknown old man called to the house inquiring for him. His caretaker – Higgins's wife had predeceased him – said he was too weak to see any one. With that the stranger took out a snuff-box and said to bring it to Paul, who immediately asked that the stranger be admitted. After a while the stranger left and when the caretaker went in to see Paul there was a priest's stole on the bed. According to this tradition, Paul and a close priest-friend had exchanged snuff-boxes when they were working together earlier in their lives.

Paul Higgins's will was preserved in the Cashel Diocesan Registry,²⁴ but unfortunately it was part of the contents of the Public Record Office destroyed in the fire of 1922.²⁵ John Davis White gave some small insight into its contents in 1888. He records that he had to produce it on a Record at Nenagh, about the year 1841, "when there was much amusement on Mr Brewster (afterwards Lord Chancellor) reading out the bequest of 'my nagg Button'". Had the will survived it would now give valuable insights into his viewpoints at this latter stage of his life.²⁶

It was fitting that some local people of Killea took the initiative in 1992 to get the tomb of Paul Higgins, who still remains such a colourful part of local lore, cleared, restored and fittingly mounted on a low plinth. His death came finally in 1724 when he was 96, an extraordinary age for those times.

The inscription on his tomb in well phrased Latin reads:

HIS REPOSITATE REQUIESCUNT
RELIQUIAE REVNDI PAULI HIGGINS
NUPER ECCLESJARUM DE TEMPLE-
MORE ET DE DROM PASTORIS
DIGNISSIMI QUI OBIIT DIE X
OCTOBRIS
ANO DNI 1724 AETATIS 96
NEC NON RELIQUIAE ELIZABETAE
ET MARGARITAE ILLA UXOR HAEC
FILIA EIUSDEM PAULI EMERITATE
QUAE
HINC MIGRARUNT ILLA QUIPPE DIE
FEBRUARII 25 ANO DNI
1722
AETATIS 58 HAEC DIE MARTII
ANO DNI 1704 AETATIS SUAE 18

A literal translation is as follows:

Here deposited rest
the remains of the Reverend Paul Higgins
up to lately the most worthy pastor
of the churches of Templemore and Drom
who died on the 10th day of October in
the year of Our Lord 1724 aged 96
Also the remains of Elizabeth and
Margaret, the latter the wife and
the former the daughter of the same Paul.
Of this devoted pair the wife departed
this life on 25th February in the year of Our Lord
1722 aged 58 and the daughter on the 24th
March in the year of Our Lord 1704 aged 18.



FOOTNOTES

1. *Calendar of MSS of Marquess of Ormonde*, New Series (Hist. MSS Comm.), Vol. V, 1908, p. 491.
2. *The Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1933, p. 762.
3. *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Feb. 1943, p. 118.
4. O Moghráin, P.: Pól O Huiginn, *Béaloideas*, Iml. XV, p. 92, footnote 19.
5. *Ormonde MSS Cal.*, p. 491.
6. *Béaloideas*, Iml. XV, pp. 87-93.
7. *Ormonde MSS Cal.*, p. 491.
8. *The Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1933, p. 763.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *A New History of Ireland*: Moody, T. W., Martin, F. X. & Byrne, F. J. eds. (Oxford, 1976), Vol. 3, p. 450.
12. *The Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1933, p. 762.
13. *Ibid.*; cf. *Irish Book Lover*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (1930), p. 85.
14. *The Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1933, p. 764.
15. *Béaloideas*, Iml. XV, p. 101; cf. Doleful Fall of Andrew Sall, in *Calendar of Orrery Papers* (Dublin, 1941), ed. MacLysaght, E, p. 155.
16. *The Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1933, p. 764; Seymour, St. John D: *The Succession of Parochial Clergy in Cashel & Emly* (Dublin, 1908), pp. 40 & 48.
17. Seymour, op. cit., p. 41.
18. Seymour, op. cit., p. 113.
19. *Irish Book Lover*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (1930), p. 85.
20. Seymour, op. cit., p. 120.
21. O'Fogarty's of Castlefogarty, typescript, p. 16, *Callanan Papers*, Nat. Lib. of Ireland MS, microfilm P5489.
22. Seymour, op. cit., pp. 40 & 48.
23. *Journal of Royal Hibernian Archaeological Association of Ireland*, Vol. 8, 4th Series, 1887-88, p. 177.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
25. Letter to author from Dr. Raymond Refaussé, Librarian & Archivist, Rep. Church Body, 7 Dec. 1994.
26. Cf. *Journals of The Memorials of the Dead*, Vol. XI, No. 2 (1921), p. 86.

