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CHARLES WESLEY GORDON OF LONDONDERRY

THE ROAD TO BANTRY

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My good friend, the Editor, has requested me to write the story of my most exciting change of circuits during my ministry. It was away back in 1922 that the most memorable removal of my ministry took place. Conference that year decided to move me from Charlemont in Co. Armagh to Bantry in Co. Cork. Those were the days of the 'Troubles', and Conference had been warned that as there was more trouble in the offing it would be advisable to make as few changes as possible, especially between North and South.

The warning went unheeded, and Conference was hardly more than over when fierce fighting began. British troops had been withdrawn and the Free State Government set up, but the extremists would not agree. In July, important bridges on the railway line between Dublin and Cork were blown up, and much of the line itself lifted, so that trains stopped running for some months.

Our daughter Betty was only a few months old, and my wife and

¹ This article originally appeared in two parts, published in the short-lived *Carbery Methodist* (Vol. 1, Nos. 2 and 3, of February and March, 1961). The editor was the Rev. Hamilton Skillen, then stationed in Skibbereen, who founded the journal. The author was the Rev. William Buchanan who was born near the Maze, Lisburn, on 10 April 1888. He entered the ministry in 1914 and married Jane McClelland of the Maze in 1919. They were appointed to Bantry in July 1922 shortly after their only surviving child, Betty, was born (12 April 1922) and remained there three years. William Buchanan died in Tandragee on 9 January 1966, five years after the article was published.

I were looking forward to our first manse in one of the loveliest parts of Ireland. The problem was one of getting there. We would have needed a helicopter! My predecessor had left Bantry on the very last day that trains ran to Cork, and as the people were left without a pastor we decided to make the journey in spite of the difficulties and hazards of travelling with a four-month old baby at the height of a civil war.

After many enquiries, it seemed that the only hope we had of ever getting to Bantry was to travel from Belfast to Liverpool, and then take another boat to Cork. There was nothing known about transport from Cork to Bantry. It appeared we would have to make our own arrangements on arrival at Cork.

We arrived in Liverpool in the early morning, and as soon as the booking office opened I applied for sleeping berths. I was told that every berth had already been allocated, but it was possible that some would be cancelled.

The morning papers reported a rumour that was later confirmed. It seemed that Michael Collins had been ambushed and shot somewhere between Cork and Bantry – the area through which we were to pass. Some passengers decided to stay in Liverpool and advised us to do the same. However there was to be no turning back for us, and plenty of cabins were available.

As we left Liverpool, we sailed into a strong gale and soon we were suffering from seasickness. My wife's cousin, a young girl of 17, was with us. She went to her cabin and we did not see her until next morning. The baby was very restless, and my wife and I both found it very difficult to sit up without being sick. But we took it in turns to nurse the baby, and so passed the night.

Next morning as we sailed into Cork we felt in good form, and everything seemed peaceful and lovely. On disembarking we took the first hotel bus to hand and arrived at the Metropole. Later in the day I went out into the city hoping to find my way to the manse, and report to the Rev. William Corrigan, Chairman of the Cork District. As I made my way along Patrick Street I met a gentleman whose face seemed to be known to me. Both of us looked back, then stopped and introduced ourselves to each other. He was Mr Richard Jagoe who, when he learned of my plight, advised me to go back to the hotel, and make myself known to Mr Willie Musgrave whilst he would contact the Rev. William Corrigan.

I learned that Mr Corrigan had arrived in Cork a few days earlier. He had to travel from Dublin to Holyhead, and thence to Cork. On arrival he



Former Bantry Methodist Church, built 1866 and sold in 1983. Now a health-centre.

had great difficulty getting into the manse in the night. I also learned that the Rev. Edward Bennett moved into Clonakilty the same day, and as his boat sailed up Clonakilty Bay it was fired upon but, fortunately, no one was hurt. Mr Corrigan came to see us in the hotel. He could not see how we were going to get to Bantry, and said we would have to remain in the Metropole until some means of transport turned up. We were beginning to wish we had stayed in the North! However, in an hour or so, a message came from another hotel in the city to say that a car from Bantry would be returning in the afternoon and would be glad to take us to our destination.

What a ride! There were six of us in the car. Because of the lack of space in the car, we had to leave our luggage in Cork. Even without the luggage there was very little room, and that journey will ever live in my mind. Frequently we were stopped by men with firearms – soldiers without uniforms – who examined the driver's permit. The main road was often blocked by felled trees, and deep trenches to stop military armoured cars. Because of the condition of the roads we had often to take to byways. Once we careered down a long rough lane, through a farmyard, across some fields and forded a river, which fortunately for us, was not very deep.

Wearied and tired we reached our destination at nightfall only to find the manse closed. Our letters and telegrams had not been delivered, and we were not expected. None of our people could put us up for the night as some of them had soldiers billeted on them, and Vickery's Hotel had been

burned down. However, good friends – the Warners, and Mr and Mrs E. Brookes – came to our aid. They put the manse in order and provided supper. As our friends said goodnight they told us not to be alarmed if we heard a few shots in the night, as these were heard most nights. Bantry had been fairly free from raids, and was considered a quiet spot. However, we had been in bed a very short time when we heard ‘the few shots’, and then a few more. Quite soon it was apparent that a fierce battle was raging on the streets outside the manse, and elsewhere. Bantry was held by the ‘Free-Staters’ and they were being attacked by the Republicans. We sat huddled together in a little back room. We remained there all night, as the battle raged until about noon next day.

A few days passed without any further incident, and then another battle flared up. This time we barricaded ourselves in the manse kitchen, which had only one window. We covered the window with mattresses, tables and anything that might stop a bullet. We remained there all that night, all next day and the night following. Next morning quite a few people called and urged us to leave the manse, and, if possible, find a place of shelter in the country. A Church of Ireland family welcomed us to their home which was just outside the town of Bantry. Then Mr Warner offered us the use of his bungalow, for as long as we wished to stay.

Next morning, as I was trying to get a fire going in the kitchen range, Mr Warner came in and said, ‘We had the gentlemen last night, but don’t tell your wife.’ ‘The gentlemen’ were the Republican soldiers. A band of these soldiers had come and had to be provided with supper, beds and early breakfast. As this had happened so often in past years, our good friends, and many others made light of the trouble these nocturnal visits caused. Fortunately ‘the gentlemen’ never gave us a visit or any annoyance. They had respect for all clergymen.

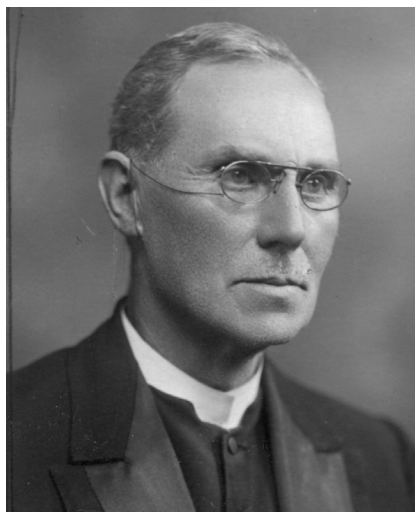
Going to Bantry town on errands or pastoral work was a rather exciting ordeal. The first river was spanned by a high bridge of five or six arches. The two middle arches had been taken down, which meant that travellers had to scramble or, if wet, slide down a steep bank, then climb up a rough ladder, after having hopped over large stepping stones in the river. I usually cycled, and one had to be rather agile to jump the stones and climb the ladder with a bicycle on one’s shoulder. Coming to the next river with a bridge down meant making a long detour, or carrying the bicycle a mile or so along the stony beach of Bantry Bay. Once I attempted to wade across the river, but I dropped into a deep channel, and got well ducked for my foolish bravery. Only once were we ambushed at one of these bridges. By

lying flat on the ground in a sheltered spot, we escaped injury.

We moved into the manse again just before Christmas. We were advised to sleep on mattresses placed on the floor under windows, just in case a stray bullet was fired by accident or by some irresponsible person. Gradually things quietened down, and became normal. We got to know the members of our church in Bantry and in Durrus. One could not have wished for a more loyal or kinder people. They did everything to make us happy and comfortable.

In spite of broken bridges and deep trenches on all roads, the attendance at worship on Sunday was wonderful. Farmers could not use their cars, so they made the six-mile journey riding on their farm carts. They were generous in their giving, not only in support of their own church which they loved, but to connexional funds as well.

I will not easily forget an experience during one of my early visits to Durrus. I had cycled there for an afternoon service a number of times, but always accompanied by Mr Edward Brookes. On this weekday I went alone. It was getting late, and I became uneasy as it was not safe to be out alone at night. I was told of a shorter road to Bantry and given minute directions. The last word to me was 'keep left at the crossroads and you will not go astray'. I had a glorious freewheel for a couple of miles, and then I came to the parting of the ways. There were really five roads with



The Rev. William Corrigan (left), arrested while on Home Mission tour in West Cork in 1922 when he was mistaken for Éamon De Valera.

two to the left. It was getting dark and I was in a dilemma about which road to the left I should take. I took the one to the extreme left. Soon I began to think I was on the wrong road, as the wind was against me as it had been on my journey out. However, I saw the lights of what I hoped was Bantry, but which to my dismay, turned out to be Durrus. I had been riding in a circle for five or six miles, in the dark. A surveyor happened to be cycling my way to Bantry, and I was grateful for his company. He told me he had more bridges blown up in West Cork, than any other surveyor in the Free State. When I got home my wife was in a panic, and a search party was being got ready to start out and find the wanderer.

Our Home Mission Deputation was the Rev. William Corrigan. He was doing all West Cork and had an exciting tour – walking miles, thumbing lifts on farm carts or any other vehicle to help him along his journey. At the Bantry meeting, he inquired if anyone knew of any vehicle going towards Skibbereen next morning. We saw him off next morning on one of Warners' bread vans. When he got to Ballineen he was arrested and taken to Headquarters for interrogation, as he resembled Mr De Valera in appearance. The local Methodist minister was called to Headquarters and succeeded in satisfying the authorities that Mr Corrigan was indeed a Methodist minister.

The Overseas Missionary Deputation came to us in the middle of March. He was an Englishman, and his people begged him not to go to that wild country – Ireland! When he got to Bantry he congratulated himself on having had a good time everywhere he travelled, so far. We had arranged that next day he would travel by mailvan to Drimoleague, and the Rev. J.D. Foster would meet him there with his pony and trap and convey him to Skibbereen. It happened to be the 17th March, and the mailvan did not run. He had to hire a sidecar, and when he arrived at Drimoleague behind time, Mr Foster had left for home, so he had to continue to Skibbereen by sidecar. To make matters worse, he heard that a young man had been taken out of his home, not far from Bantry, and shot by some of his own party, by the roadside. This news was rather frightening, and our Deputation preacher was most unhappy. When he got back to England he wrote an interesting article about his tour in the *Methodist Recorder*.

Those were hard and dangerous days, but through all the Lord brought us on our way, and one can thank Him for many lessons and experiences which enriched our lives; and for the affection and friendship of people.

May the few who remain be long spared to hold the fort and bear their witness in that corner of our native land – the land we love the most.

