



A Most Unpleasant Affair

It is said that drink rather than poetry is the curse of the Irish and this may be the truth of the matter and complicit in the recent nightly disturbances. Though Acts of Parliament and other licences did regulate the sale of beer and other liquors on the Sabbath, these laws are flouted with some impudence by the proprietors and inhabitants of the Stafford Street district public houses and beershops, which stay open into the early hours of Sunday morning. On each occasion when Men of the Law attempt to evict the Irish drinkers it is said to be a state of bedlam. Yet these uproars seem of minor consequence when I consider events in recent days, due to the appearance of the infamous Baron De Camin at our distinguished Corn Exchange.

De Camin is the self-appointed scourge of the Catholic Church, a vituperative character of some notoriety, who proposed to give lectures on three consecutive nights on the subject of 'The Jesuits', 'The Nuns and The Inquisition' and 'Auricular Confession' - the latter a topic I know nothing of, and in any other circumstance would perhaps be inclined to attend, out of a genuine curiosity, had I not experienced the riotous behaviours these subjects have inspired. De Camin is a Frenchman - the most insolent of fellows - a diminutive and corpulent figure who is transformed into a larger than life character once upon the boards. You would think he was an incarnation of Bonaparte himself!

Now given the damage to both our property and to the reputation of our goodly town, Mr. Brommage would do well to consider how far better it would have been to extend the appointment of Miss Clara Seyton until the end of the month. Her Popular Musical and Dramatic Monopolylogue Entertainment would have provided our audience

with more nourishing and less contentious fare. And it must be said that while her Costly Scenery and Decorations were indeed marvellously expensive, the final bill of settlement would surely be a far lesser matter of disputation.

The reputation of the Baron preceded him and given the inundation of the locality with Irish folk - many unscrupulous landlords are letting out two or three rooms to more than twenty of them at a time - it was likely that the quarrels in Wakefield would be visited upon us. The thrust of De Camin's argument is that the Pope is none other than the Anti-Christ and the Whore of Babylon as described in the Book of Revelation, and that Vatican cabals seek to deliver good Christians into the hands of Satan. He insists that Popery is a not a religion but a political system for enslaving us all. He deplores the pomp and circumstance, ritual and colour beloved of the Catholic clergy and makes effort to mimic it throughout his lectures. He has no end of prejudices! He claims that nunneries are houses of ill-repute and are used by priests on payment of a suitable amount of coinage to the Pope. Furthermore, he claims he has evidence that half of all nuns are men in disguise. He castigated the unhealthy practices of the Papist multitude as a breeding ground for 'Famine Fever' - and there are many who do agree that the Irish bring with them the cholera. I can vouch for his unshakeable conviction having found it necessary to be present while he spoke unpleasantly of these matters in both public and private. I found him an odd mix of the most disagreeable yet strangely charismatic. It has been brought to my attention that he stays in the best of accommodations with his entourage and I do wonder how deeply these Anti-Popish diatribes must line his pockets.

It was wholly unfortunate that Mayor Ironmonger was away on business and thus unable to deal with the situation to immediate effect. I feel he would have had a firm grip on the situation and his absence was sorely felt. While the better type of well-to-do Catholics have ignored defamations in the past, the newly arrived working class immigrant is ready to throw a punch or hurl a stone or swing a sturdy stick when there is talk of 'miserable Irish darkening our towns'. With a million dead in the Famine fresh in their memory and another two million forced to flee the barren fields of their native land, perhaps is to be expected that they will fight their corner, however much of a stinking midden it may appear to be to any other reasonable citizen. Yet we were quite unprepared for the explosion of ill-feeling and agitation in the town.

There are now conflicting reports of how events unfolded. Mr Brommage told me that upon receiving an anonymous threatening letter, he had written to request a police presence at the first lecture on Monday night, the 28th day of the month, but the Police stated that this was not possible given that the letter was marked Monday, and thus it was their perception that his request therefore related to Tuesday the 29th. The Reverend Kelly later informed me that he had on a prior occasion asked that the contentious lectures be banned on the grounds that they would surely result in a breach of

the peace, as they had evidently done so in other towns. When the Mayor did return, on the Tuesday morning, he met with the priest who reiterated his legitimate concerns with some vigour.

Nevertheless, when supporters of the Baron turned up that Monday night, they found a large crowd of angry Irish, including many from Walsall, gathered outside intent on violence and preventing access to the building. There was only one policeman on duty. None could enter in the ferocity of the affray that ensued and the Directors of the Exchange were forced to announce the cancellation of the night's lecture. A large force of police arrived by 9 o'clock and it took them an hour or more to clear the area, though the mob seemed satisfied that the Baron had been bested. Upon his anxious return, Mayor Ironmonger conferred with local Magistrates and resolved that order would be upheld and that mob rule by the Irish labourers and colliers should not interfere with the rights of free speech in England.

That Tuesday night they placed themselves on the steps of the Corn Exchange with a considerable body of police, who were armed with large staves. It is estimated the gathering crowd numbered 3000, many of them carrying sticks and stones with impudence. I have never seen such a mass of Catholics gathered in one place and they looked a frightful horde. There was an Irish contingent within the hall, having purchased the cheaper promenade tickets. Despite these individuals being searched upon entry, stones were hurled at De Camin when he finally mounted the proscenium and bowed down before his mock altar, complete with candles and a crucifix surmounted by a large doll which he claimed to be a Saint. He was attired as a Friar with a red cross on his front and back, though he had thoughtfully donned a life-preserver for the evening's entertainment. There were immediate boos and hisses and persistent cries of "Judas!" and "Turn him out!" and some curses I cannot repeat. It was not possible to hear any of his undoubtedly mischievous invective above this caterwauling.

The restless crowd outside the building resorted to hurling volleys of stones, smashing windows by the dozen. Mayor Ironmonger did not take kindly to having his hat removed by a missile and read out the Riot Act. With some difficulty and necessary force, the lines of police pushed the crowds back. One Magistrate called upon De Camin to cancel his lecture under the terms of the Act, but the arrogant fellow flatly refused. When it looked like things may turn from bad to worse, the Reverend Kelly made a miraculous appearance and took to the stage. With a wave of his hand he quieted his aggrieved flock. He called out to them "Calm down now, lads, will ye?" and he persuaded the Catholics to leave with a remarkable discipline. All the while the Baron skulked in the wings. The doors were then barred as additional protection and the Baron stepped back up to make a scathing attack on the Jesuits, the 'foulest spies of the Pope' he called them. It was the oft-quoted opinion of Dr Heylin that the Irish were 'generally well-made, strong, active, haughty of spirit, careless of their lives, patient in cold and hunger,

constant in love, light of belief, greedy in glory'. He thought that if they were bad there was none worse, but if they were good you could hardly meet better. The Baron concurred with the former sentiment and entirely disagreed with the latter. He continued to hurl ever more outrageous calumnies upon the Papists, with a terrific devilish diatribe. The lecture concluded at 11pm, not a moment too soon in my humble opinion, but not before the Baron turned his oratorical skills upon the very men who were protecting him this evening, making the most outrageous complaints. I, for one, risking life and limb to be here, do not take kindly to being called a 'Popish adherent'.

Unfortunately, on the following day, Baron de Camin let it be known that he would insist on delivering another provocative sermon, to be accompanied by a mysterious woman he addressed as 'the Baroness', who claimed to have intimate knowledge of nuns. He announced that women were to be excluded from the part of his lecture which addressed the 'Auricular Confessions', and neither was I privy to this as I was posted to the rear entrance of the building this night.

Colonel Hogg reported to the Magistrates that the overcrowded lodging houses in the vicinity of Caribbee Island would pour forth their inmates in incredible numbers, who would be prepared to attack a single policeman or two with great ferocity and savageness, but who were equally expert in beating a retreat when faced by a sufficient force to repel their lawless proceedings. He said that only the severest weather would keep these wild Irish ruffians at bay, and it promised to be a warm and clear night. With these thoughts in mind, a further 120 men from the Mining, Pottery and Rural Police Districts were called upon to provide very necessary assistance. The Yeomanry were mobilised, along with the Enrolled Pensioners, and Special Constables sworn in.

With this miscellaneous force at his apparent disposal in defence of free speech - even if it was to be deployed for a citizen of Gaul - the Baron attempted to book the Corn Exchange for a further appearance, 'by popular demand' as he did put it to us. Mr Brommage correctly declined him, on the basis that he did not know if his insurances would cover the damages to date and he could not say who would foot the bill for the public disorder. De Camin, the ever persistent agitator, then tried to book rooms at both St. Mary's School and the Temperance Hall in Bilston, but here he was also rebuffed. For this we must be thankful to God, for I speak for many of us Protestants when I say that I have now had a bellyful of his stories about the particularities of the misbehaviour of Catholic priests, their lascivious lustful practices and abominable behaviours. I trust we have seen the last of this fellow!