

Archbishop Fitz Ralph of Armagh – A Precursor of the Reformation

Churchman 002/6 1880

Charles Scott

Just as the drops come before the shower, so we find that there were many isolated attempts at Reformation long before the great movement of the sixteenth century. Even before Wickliffe, both in England and Ireland, there were some protestants against the errors and enormities favoured by the Roman See in the name of religion. Amongst these, one of the most remarkable, yet least known at the present day, is Richard Fitz Ralph, Archbishop of Armagh. By his piety and reforming zeal the name Armachanus was as well known in his time, throughout the whole Christian world, as it was two centuries later by the learning of Archbishop Ussher. Of the six great primates of Armagh—Patrick, Apostle of Ireland, Malachy, the friend of Bernard, Fitz Ralph, Ussher, Boulter, Beresford—he is by no means the least worthy of notice. With Malachy he may well be compared: both were reformers, but in different directions. He will be seen to have well earned the character given of him by John Foxe:—“He was a man worthy, for his Christian zeal, of immortal commendation.”¹

Fitz Ralph lived in the reign of King Edward III. This reign, extending over exactly half a century (1327-1377), was one of the most brilliant epochs of our national history. The importance of the political affairs of the time has no doubt obscured the view of ecclesiastical events and leaders, and to a great extent caused the suppression of many important details. Whether Fitz Ralph was born in Devonshire or at Dundalk in Ireland is a matter of dispute. He was brought up at the University of Oxford, under the tuition of the celebrated Bakenthorpe, commonly called, in the schools, the “Resolute Doctor.” He made such advances in his studies that he was commended to Edward III., by whose favour he was rapidly promoted. He became Chancellor or Commissary of the University in 1333, Chancellor of Lincoln in the next year, Archdeacon of Chester in 1336, and the year after Dean of Lichfield. We know little more concerning the earlier portion of his life. Henry de Burghersh, Bishop of Lincoln, sometime Lord Treasurer and Lord Chancellor of England, one of the most eminent prelates of that century, was his diocesan during the time that he was Chancellor or Commissary of Oxford. With another eminent prelate he was intimately connected. He made one of a company of learned men who met together in the house of Richard Aungerville, or De Bury, Bishop of Durham, the friend and correspondent of Petrarch, one of the most remarkable characters of the day. We are told of him [De Bury] that he was—

A man so singularly learned, and so devoted to literature, that he kept transcribers, binders, and illuminators in his palaces; and expended the whole of his ample income in purchasing scarce and curious manuscripts, for which purpose he employed agents, not only in England, but in Italy, France, and Germany. Besides the fixed libraries which he had formed in his several palaces, the floor of his common apartment was so covered with books, that those who entered were in danger of trampling on them. By the favour of Edward III. he gained access to the libraries of the principal monasteries, where he shook off the dust from various volumes (all MSS. as must necessarily be the case at that period), preserved in chests and presses, which had not been opened for many ages; and while Chancellor (Sept. 28, 1335) and Treasurer (1337) of

England, instead of the usual presents or new year's gift appendant to his office, he chose to receive those perquisites in books.

Though the bishop was actively engaged in political affairs, being ambassador to France and to the Low Countries, and away as long as nine years at a time, he never lost his love for books and bookish men. Old John Stow says that he so delighted in books that he had more, as was thought, than all the bishops of England besides. I cannot refrain from quoting the exact words in which Stow describes the eminent men whom De Bury had gathered around him:—

He greatly delighted in the company of clearkes, and hadde alwayes many of them in his family, among whom were Thomas Bradwardine, afterwards archbishoppe of Canterbury, Richard Fitz Ralph, archbishoppe of Armacham, Walter Burley, John Manditt, Robert Holcot, Richard Kilwington, all of them doctors of divinitie, Richard Wentworth or Beniworth, byshoppe of London, and Walter Segrave, byshoppe of Chichester. Every day at his table he was accustomed to have some reading; and after dinner daily he would have some disputation with his private clearkes, and other of his house, except some urgent cause hadde let him. At other times hee was occupied, either in service of God, or at his books.

This eminent prelate was the most determined bookworm of the good old times, and he seems to have infused into his friend Fitz Ralph his own love of books. His opinion of books well deserves to be borne in mind: "These are teachers who instruct without rod or ferula, without severe expressions, or anger, without food or money. When we come to them, they are not asleep; when we enquire for them they do not secrete themselves; "when we mistake them, they do not complain; if we are ignorant, they do not despise us." He died in 1345, at his palace at Auckland, two years before Fitz Ralph was appointed to Armagh. We can well suppose that Richard must have been a man much appreciated for his learning when he was able to gain the friendship and companionship of such a person as Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham.

Walter Burley or Burleigh, known as the "Perspicuous Doctor," the great pupil and opponent of the celebrated Duns Scotus, also deserves some notice. His mind was engaged upon all the then known branches of knowledge, but metaphysics and theology seem to have occupied the chief place in his attention, and with him, no doubt, Fitz Ralph must often have delighted to engage in the abstruse but useless disputations of the schools, before "the Lord taught him, and brought him out of the profound vanities of Aristotle's subtilty, to the study of the Scriptures of God."

Theology, too, was well represented in that learned company in the person of Thomas Bradwardine, called the "Profound Doctor," afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, but only for one short week. He was a student and expounder of the doctrines of Augustine, and his great work, "De Causa Dei," advanced notions which would in modern times be called extreme Calvinism. He was a man "whose firmness of character was only surpassed by his unpretending modesty," and "who, though his name does not appear in the calendar, was in very truth a saint."

If we cannot easily get a full and distinct view of Fitz Ralph himself, we can at least see him reflected in the character and tastes of his chosen companions. Books, metaphysics and theology, represented by De Bury, Burleigh, and Bradwardine, seem from the few notices that we have of him, all and equally to have occupied his attention; and, no doubt, had his lot in after-life been favourable to such studies, he would have been as eminent in all as these

were in each. His love of books never forsook him, and when in remote Armagh he had his chaplains at Oxford searching for books.

It is little wonder that just at this period we should have but little notices of ecclesiastical affairs. On the 26th of August, 1346, the French were defeated at Crecy, and on the 12th of October the Scots were repulsed at Neville's Cross. In the following year Fitz Ralph was advanced by Clement VI. to the See of Armagh, and was consecrated at Exeter by John de Grandison, Bishop of Exeter, and others, on the 8th of July, just about three weeks before the surrender of Calais. Amidst these stirring events Fitz Ralph began his primacy.

At Armagh he found himself in the midst of a long-standing controversy with the See of Dublin as to the primacy of the kingdom. Armagh was admittedly the more ancient See, and in Celtic times had unquestioned supremacy, as being the chair of St. Patrick; but in consequence of the English invasion, the See of Dublin became at once a position of great importance. Always filled by able English politicians, who had great influence with the rulers of the Pale, it soon surpassed in power the older See, venerated by those who came now to be termed the "mere Irish." In 1337 an attempt was made to gain the formal primacy, for when David, Archbishop of Armagh, was summoned to attend a Parliament, and when "he made procession in St. Mary's near Dublin, he was hindered by the Archbishop of Dublin and clergy, because he would have the cross carried before him, which they would not permit." Thus there was the same dispute as to precedence, *De jaculatione crucis*, in Ireland, that existed years before in England between York and Canterbury. In 1348, after the appointment of Fitz Ralph, the King took the part of Dublin, and wrote to Cardinal Andomar urging that Dublin should be exempted from any subjection to Armagh.

The new Archbishop, however, was not the man to be easily imposed upon without some attempt to assert his rights, and he showed the same fearlessness and independence in this as he afterwards did in matters of much greater weight. Having probably gained over the King, he next year (1349) triumphantly entered Dublin with his cross borne erect before him. The Lord Justice, fearing that the public assertion of his rights would lead to a breach of the peace, hastily sent him back to Drogheda. The King now issued his commands, no doubt for the sake of peace, that he should not raise his cross in the Province of Dublin; and again urged Cardinal Andomar to use his influence with the Pope to have the question set at rest, and to have the claims of the prelates finally adjusted. This, however, was not decided until after Fitz Ralph's death, in the time of Innocent VI., when it was determined that "each of them should be a primate; but for distinction of style the Primate of Armagh should entitle himself Primate of all Ireland; and the Metropolitan of Dublin should inscribe himself Primate of Ireland: like Canterbury and York in England, the first of which writes himself Primate of all England, the other Primate of England." Thus the old Celtic See retained its pre-eminence; one solitary and nominal success in the long struggle between the native and the invader, between Celtic and Latin Christianity.

We have but few notices of Fitz Ralph's work in the Irish records. In 1351 he is noticed as having preached a sermon in English at Coleraine, the only entry of the kind in the Irish annals. About this time he obtained a license from the king to buy up livings in the hands of aliens; and, in pursuance of this authority, he purchased from a French monastery the patronage of Donaghadee and Derryaghy, two well-known parishes in the diocese of Down and Connor, which continued from that time until the passing of the Irish Church Act in the presentation of the Archbishops of Armagh. These are the only local notices we have of him, but they are characteristic. We see special notice of his preaching, and we see, too, how he

exercised his care that parishes should not be supplied by foreigners, but be in the hands of the native bishops.

Soon, however, matters of much more importance engaged the attention of the sturdy Primate. A dispute with the Prior of the Convent of St. Peter and St. Paul at Armagh involved him in the great controversy then going on, throughout the whole Western Church, between the parochial clergy and the Mendicant Friars.

The four orders of Franciscans (Grey Friars), Dominicans (Black Friars), Carmelites (White Friars), and Augustins (Austin Friars), were called Begging Friars. They claimed the right of entering any diocese or parish, and, under special license of the Pope, hearing confession, selling indulgences, begging for their convents, and administering the sacraments. It will be seen at once that such claims were greatly to the prejudice of the rights of the bishops and parochial clergy, as well as a very serious injury to the cause of religion and morals; because the people were thus drawn from the care of the parochial clergy by the specious promises and claims of the friars, and, worst of all, those who by crime and wicked courses were under the ban of the parish clergy were readily received by the friars and obtained absolution from them. In the pages of Chaucer, who about this time was coming into note, we have pictures, living sketches, of the parson and the friar. In the prologue to the “Canterbury Tales” he draws the friar, he who—

—Knew well the taverns in every town.
He was the beste beggar in all his house.
For though a widow hadde but a shoe,
Yet would he have a farthing e’er he went.
For there was he not like a cloisterer,
With threadbare cope, as is a poor scholar,
But he was like a master or a pope,
Of double worsted was his semi-cope.

See, too, how he draws the pardoner, that is, the friar with license from the Pope to sell indulgences—the same that roused the spirit of Luther:—

His wallet lay before him in his lap,
Brimful of pardon come from Rome, all hot.
He had a cross of laton full of stones,
And in a glass he hadde pigges bones.
And with these relics, whenne that he found
A poore parson dwelling up inland,
Upon a day he gat him more monaie
Than that the parson got in monthes twaie.
And thus with feigned flattering and japes,
He made the parson and the people his apes.

Very different is the picture Chaucer draws of the parochial clergy: witness his description of the parson:—

Rich he was of holy thought and work.
He was also a learned man, a clerk,
That Christes gospel truely would he preach.
His parishens devoutly would he teach.
Wide was his parish, and houses far asunder,

But he ne left naught for no rain or thunder.
This noble ensample to his sheep he gave
That first he wraught, and then he taught.
—Christes lore, and his apostles twelve
He taught, but first he follow'd it himselve.

There seems to have been at this time a growing dissatisfaction at the teaching and practices of the Mendicant Orders. This feeling appears to have been general, and by no means confined to the secular clergy. There is strong evidence of it in the work called "Piers Ploughman's Vision," written probably in the year 1352, a work which does not appear to have had its origin in an ecclesiastical source:

I found there friars
All the four orders,
Preaching the people
For profit of themselve
Glossed the Gospel
As them good liked,
There preached a pardoner,
As he a priest were;
Brought forth a bull
With many bishops' seals,
And said he himself might
Assoilen them all,
Of falsehood, of fasting,
Of avowes y-broken.
Lewed men loved it well,
And liked his words;
Comen up kneeling
To kissen his bulls.

It would indeed appear that the same vigour and independence of the national mind so strikingly displayed in the political world was being manifested also in religious matters. The attitude of King Edward with regard to the ecclesiastical scandals of the day was, no doubt, a consequence of as well as an encouragement of the popular feeling. The Pope claimed the right not only of appointing to vacant benefices, but of appointing before the vacancy occurred, and meanwhile taking a portion of the income for his nominee. In 1343, the King wrote protesting against such appointments, and in 1350 the Statute of Provisors was passed to put an end to this scandal. Such a course could not fail to encourage others to speak out boldly against the abuses of the Church of Rome.

Fitz Ralph took the part of the parochial clergy, and, no doubt encouraged by the general feeling, attacked the friars with great vigour and severity. He was led to denounce the whole system as unscriptural, and as opposed to the mind of Christ. Having come to this conclusion, he maintained it fearlessly before people and Pope. Being in London on business, in 1357, he found certain doctors disputing about the begging of our Saviour Christ. By special request he preached seven or eight sermons to the people at Paul's Cross, and maintained certain propositions, amongst them the following:—

That our Lord Jesus Christ in his human conversation was always
poor, not that that He loved poverty, or did covet to be poor;
That He did never beg; that He did never teach to beg;

That, on the contrary, He held that men ought to be without necessity to beg, and that there was neither wisdom nor holiness for any man to become a mendicant.

For these propositions he was cited by the friars to appear before the Pope, and appeals were laid against him to the number of sixteen. He was supported in the struggle by the bishops and clergy of England, and they subscribed money to forward the cause. He went to Avignon; four cardinals were appointed to hear the appeal. On the 13th of November, 1357, he addressed the Pope and cardinals. He was admittedly successful in his vindication of himself and his propositions; but, as the unknown monk who wrote the “Chronicon Angliæ,” published by the Master of the Rolls, says, “*Proh dolor*, alas! the English clergy backed out of their promises” of money; and, the friars having plenty of money, the cause was decided against him. It is well known that at the Papal Court of those days the longest purse had the best case. Many things he suffered at the hands of the friars: attempts were made to apprehend him; coasts were watched for him; he fell, too, into the hands of thieves, and lost his money, but it was wonderfully restored to him. These things he recounts in a prayer, the beginning of which is given by Foxe:—

To Thee be praise, and glory, and thanksgiving, O Jesu, most holy, most powerful, most amiable, who hast said, I am the way, the truth, and the life;—a way without deviation—truth without cloud, and life without end. Thou hast shown me the way; Thou hast taught me the truth; and Thou hast promised me the life. Thou wast my way in exile; Thou was my truth in counsel; and Thou wilt be my life in reward.

We see in these words a beautiful and simple faith, expressed in the elaborate and scholastic manner of the time.

His argument against the friars, addressed to the Pope, has been several times published. It is entitled, *Defensorium Curatorum*; or, *Defence of the Parochial Clergy*. In it he supports his charges at length, and gives some curious examples, drawn from his own experience, of the injury done by the friars. He says—

In mine own diocese of Armagh I have as good as two thousand under me, who, by the censure of excommunication every year denounced against wilful murderers, common thieves, burners of men’s houses, and such like malefactors, stand accursed; of all which number, notwithstanding, scarcely fourteen there be who come to me, or to any about me, for their absolution. And yet all they receive the sacrament as others do, and all because they feign themselves to be absolved, by none other than the friars.

He alleges against the friars that, on account of the privileges granted to them by the Popes, “divers young men as well in universities as in their fathers’ houses, are craftily allured by the friars, their confessors, to enter their orders; from whence also they cannot get out when they would, to the great grief of their parents and the no less repentance of the young men themselves.” He tells of “a certain substantial Englishman being with him at his inn in Rome, who, having a son at the University of Oxford who was enticed by the friars to enter into their order, could by no means afterwards release him; but when his father and his mother would come unto him, they could not be suffered to speak with him but under the friars’ custody; whereas the Scripture plainly commandeth that whoso stealeth any man and selleth him (Exod. xxi.) shall be put to death; and, for the same cause, the father was compelled to come up to Rome to seek remedy for his son. And thus may it appear what damage and detriments come by these friars unto the common people.”

He next shows the injury done to the universities.

Laymen, seeing their children thus stolen from them in the universities by the friars, do refuse therefore to send them to their studies; rather willing to keep them at home to their occupation, or to follow the plough, than so to be circumvented and defeated of their sons at the university “as by daily experience,” he saith, “doth manifestly appear.” For whereas in my time there were in the University of Oxford thirty thousand students, now are there not to be found six thousand; the occasion of which so great decay is to be ascribed to no other cause but to this circumvention only of the friars aforementioned.

Fitz Ralph, no doubt disappointed and disheartened by the success of the friars at the Papal Court, was about making his way back to Ireland when he died at Avignon on the 16th of November, 1360; not without grave suspicion that he died of poison administered by his enemies, the friars.

It would seem that his death put an end to the strife between the secular clergy as a body and the Mendicants. Henry of Marlboro’ in his “Chronicle” says, “Richard Archbishop of Armagh dyed at this time at the Pope’s Court, and Richard Kilminton dyed in England, therefore the controversie ceased between the clergie and the orders of Begging Friars.

Others helped in the good work. We find that John de Trevisa, Vicar of Berkeley and Canon of Westbury, the church of which Wickliffe was also a canon, published in English “A Translation of a Latin Sermon of Radulf or Fitz Rauf, Archbishop of Armagh, Nov. 8th, 1357, against Mendicant Friars.” Fitz Ralph is said to have written eighteen distinct treatises on theological and other subjects.

As might be expected, very different opinions have been held with regard to Fitz Ralph and his work. A certain cardinal, when he heard of his death, exclaimed that the same day a mighty pillar of Christ’s Church had fallen. Cardinal Bellarmine, on the other hand, ranks him among heretics, or bordering on them. “He was thought to have offended by the exuberance of his knowledge.” Capgrave, in his “Chronicle,” says of him:—“In Oxenforth he held straunge opiniones, which Wiclef meyntened aftirward more venemously.” No wonder his opinions seemed “straunge,” for the same writer speaks of Wickliffe as “the orgon of the devel, the enemy of the chorch, the confusion of men, the ydol of heresie.” Wickliffe says of him in his “Triologue:”—“Armachanus boldly published his conclusions at Avignon before Innocent and his assembly of Cardinals, and defended them by word and pen even to the death.”²

About ten years after his decease his bones were brought over to Dundalk by Stephen de Valle, Bishop of Meath. There he was long venerated under the name of St. Richard of Dundalk. In a Synod held in Drogheda on the 20th of June, 1545, it was ordained that the festival of St. Richard, Archbishop of Armagh, should be celebrated with nine lessons *in crastino Johannis et Pauli*. The proceedings were begun for his canonization, but were never concluded. No doubt it was found upon inquiry that he was a “sore saint” for the Pope. He was, however, indeed canonized in the grateful memory of his people. In Dundalk there was a fountain dedicated to him, to which all the neighbourhood flocked, thinking that whoever drank of its waters should be free from fever. There was preserved his shrine, and also his ring, endowed, as it was supposed, with many virtues. His day was celebrated with great devotion. A couplet has been preserved which lets us see how the common people regarded him—

Many a man I see, and many a mile I walk,
But never saw I holier man than Richard of Dundalk.

At the year 1377, it is noted by the old chronicler of St. Albans before mentioned, that by many miracles and wonders at his tomb, God vindicated Master Fitz Ralf, “at which the friars, it is said, are badly content.”

Wickliffe and Trevisa are both celebrated for the part they took in furnishing the people of England with the Holy Scriptures in their own mother tongue. It would appear that Fitz Ralph attempted to do the same for the native Irish. It is said that he possessed a copy of the New Testament in Irish, and that it was made by himself. According to the information of Bale, quoted by Archbishop Ussher, this copy was concealed by him in a certain wall of his church, with the following note: “When this book is found, truth will be revealed to the world or Christ shortly appear.” The book was found when the church of Armagh was being repaired in the year 1530. Foxe tells us he credibly heard of certain old Irish Bibles translated long since into the Irish tongue, which, if it be true, it is not other like but to be the doing of this Armachanus; and he adds that the fact was testified by “certain Englishmen which are yet alive and have seen it.”

Whether Archbishop Fitz Ralph translated the New Testament into Irish or not, there can be no doubt as to the estimation in which he held the Holy Scriptures. Nothing is more remarkable than the use he makes of his Bible in the “*Defensorium Curatorum*.” On every point his great appeal is “to the law and to the testimony,” to the teaching and practice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Of him it is well said by the St. Albans chronicler, *Constat veraciter, quod erat probatissimus scriba in regno cœlorum*, “A right well-approved scribe in the kingdom of heaven.”

Richard Fitz Ralph, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, has no monument: his burial-place is almost forgotten; but whilst his “*Defensorium Curatorum*” exists, he will be venerated as a bishop, a Christian, and a man: as a bishop, for the watchful care of his flock against friar and Pope; as a Christian, for his simple faith and excellent knowledge of the Scriptures; and as a man, not merely for his learning, but because in an age of heroes he was remarkable for his stubborn independence, undaunted courage, and constancy even unto the death—a man indeed “worthy of his Christian zeal of immortal commendation.”

CHARLES SCOTT

Endnotes:

- 1) The following list of authorities, which refer to this obscure period and are quoted above, may be useful to the inquirer:—Rymer’s *Fœdera*; Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, Cattley’s ed.; *Defensorium Curatorum* in Brown’s *Fasciculus*; Capgrave’s *Chronicle* and *Chronicon Angliae* in Rolls Series; Reeves’ *Down and Connor*; Mant’s *Church of Ireland*; Townsend’s *Biblical Literature*; Cave’s *Historia Literaria*; Stuart’s *Armagh*; Monck Mason’s *Religion of the Ancient Irish Saints*; and the indispensable *Notes and Queries*.
- 2) The opinion expressed above by Capgrave as to the similarity of the views held by Fitz Ralph and Wickliffe, has been that held by every writer until very recently. It was constantly

maintained that Wickliffe was animated by the example of Fitz Ralph, and continued the struggle in which he had been engaged. Since the appearance of Dr. Peter Lorimer's translation of Lechler's work, the latest and best on John Wickliffe, it is necessary, in deference to the opinions of the learned writer and editor, to modify any positive statements as to the connection between the work of Fitz Ralph and that of Wickliffe. I feel, however, that there is still something to be said for the uniform testimony of all early writers who have alluded to the subject, that Wickliffe continued the struggle begun by Fitz Ralph. It is at least certain that Wickliffe was acquainted with Fitz Ralph's labours and held him in high estimation.