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THE FIRST EXECUTION FOR WITCHCRAFT IN IRELAND

WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL¹

We of the present age find it very difficult to enter into the atmosphere of the times in which witchcraft was a well recognized and not uncommon crime. It is a never-ceasing cause of wonderment to us that the whole Christian world, Emperor King and Noble, Pope Cardinal and Bishop, all shared in what we consider an obvious delusion. Thousands perished at the stake for this imaginary crime, no few of them in the Isle of Saints itself.

The extraordinary story of the first *auto de fe* in Ireland will well repay perusal, both from its intrinsic interest and as showing the practice of criminal law at that time and place and in that kind of crime,² as well as indicating the claims of the Church in such cases.

While witchcraft was an offense in Saxon times, it does not seem to have been vigorously prosecuted until the Church made it a heresy. One of the Extravagantes of John XXII dated at Avignon is perhaps the strongest fulmination against those who "pactum faciunt cum inferno, daemonibus, immolant, hos adorant, fabricant ac fabricari procurant imagines, annulum, vel speculum, vel phialam, vel rem quamcunque aliam magice ad daemones inibi alligandos, ab his petunt, responsa ab his recipiunt, etc."

Richard Ledred (Ledrede or de Ledrede), a Franciscan Friar of London, became Bishop of Ossory, Ireland, in 1318; in 1324, making an episcopal visitation of his diocese, he received formal information that in the City of Kilkenny there had long been and still were many heretics, sorcerers who used divers kinds of magic. On careful inquiry he became satisfied that the chief of these was Dame Alice Kyteler³ and that she had as accomplices her son William Outlawe⁴

¹Justice of the Supreme Court of Ontario.

²I take most of the following facts from a publication of the Camden Society: "A / Contemporary Narrative / of the / Proceedings / against / Dame Alice Kyteler / prosecuted for Sorcery in 1324 / by Richard de Ledrede, Bishop of Ossory / Edited by / Thomas Wright, Esq., B.A., F.S.A., etc. / . . . / London / . . . MDCCCXLIII." Sq. 8vo, cloth, pp. XLII, plus 61 (with advt. of Camden Society, 36 pp.). The narrative is in Latin, reasonably grammatical and with few non-latin words. The translation is in all cases my own, and as nearly literal as the idiom of the language will admit. The clause quoted from the Pope's Extravagant means "make a pact with hell, they sacrifice to devils, they worship them, they make and cause to be made images, a ring or a mirror or a phial or some other kind of article whereby to bind devils by magic" they seek and receive responses from them, etc.

³The name is given as "Kettle" by Sir James Ware in his account of the Bishop and by Holinshed in his Chronicle of Ireland, "Kiteler" in the Irish Patent Roll of 31 Edward I. Our older chroniclers did not trouble much about orthography; with them often "i's," "j's," and "y's" were all one.

⁴This is variously spelled in the old record "Outlawe," "Owtlawe," "Utlagh," "Utlaw," "Utlawe," "Outlaw."

and many others. Sorcery had been declared and was considered a kind of heresy and the Bishop took cognizance of it. He wrote to the Chancellor of Ireland for the arrest of these "pestiferous persons." William the son who like his father, William Kyteler was a banker and a very wealthy and powerful man, at once betook himself to the nobles of the land, "amicos sibi faciens de mammona iniquitatis."⁵

Amongst those applied to were his kinsman Roger Outlawe, the Chancellor of Ireland, Prior of St. John of Jerusalem (the Order of Hospitallers)⁶ and the Seneschal of Kilkenny, Arnold le Poer.⁷ These tried in vain to induce the Bishop to withdraw the charge; he persisted, but failed to obtain writ of arrest from the Chancellor, who set up that the writ could not issue unless and until the accused had been excommunicated for forty days.

The Bishop then cited Alice, then living in her son William's house, to appear in his Ecclesiastical Court; she at once removed out of his jurisdiction. Roger Outlawe sent many clerical advocates, who defended the charges made and contended that in such a case personal appearance of the accused was unnecessary.

She was "solemniter excommunicata" for forty days and more, and her son William was cited by the Bishop. When Arnold le Poer heard of this, he went with William to the Priory of Kenles (Kells)⁸ where the Bishop was, and urged him to withdraw the action "offering much and promising more"; he continued his supplication almost till midnight, but in vain. He left the Bishop, pouring out abuse and threats.

The following day, Tuesday, the Bishop was met after divine service at the border of Kells by Stephen le Poer, bailiff of the hundred of Overk,⁹ with a writ under the seal of Arnold le Poer for the attachment of the Bishop by all his goods and chattels and for his

⁵ "Making to himself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness." The Vulgate version of Luke XVI, 9, reads: "facite vobis amicos de mammona iniquitatis": "make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness."

⁶ He became Lord Chancellor of Ireland in 1321, was displaced in 1325 by Archbishop de Bicknor of Dublin, but reinstated in 1326. See Haydn's Book of Dignities, 3rd Ed., p. 574.

⁷ "Arnoldus," "Arnaldus," "Arnauldus." "Le Pouwer," "le Poer," "le Power," "Power," "Poer," etc., etc., Lord of Coulmaccamny in Co. Waterford from 1308 to 1336. A "Seneschal" was really a governor, or rather viceroy, with very great powers, limited in territorial extent. For the present purpose it is not necessary to inquire into the range of his powers.

⁸ A town in Kilkenny well known in the Ecclesiastical History of Ireland; once a walled town of considerable importance, it is now a village of about 250 inhabitants.

⁹ The word translated "hundred" is "contrata," "contrad," a district in Ireland or Wales corresponding to the English hundred. Overk is a barony northwest of the River Suir.

incarceration in the prison of the Castle at Kilkenny. After an amusing colloquy, the Bishop, having satisfied himself of the genuineness of the seal and having taken possession of the writ, gave himself up to be led to prison. He did not do so however, until he had been threatened with the hue and cry¹⁰ if he did not go along quietly and without actual physical laying on of hands.

He refused to ask for a reconciliation and went to gaol where he was detained¹¹ till after the day set for William to appear before him. In the meantime the whole diocese was put under an interdict, Arnold le Poer, Stephen le Poer and their followers were excommunicated, while clergy and laity flocked to see the imprisoned prelate. Arnold le Poer, as Seneschal, caused public notice to be given for all having cause of complaint against the Bishop to appear before the King's Court to be holden at Kilkenny on a day named. Two Justices of the King's Bench were sent down by the Chancellor and the Treasurer¹² to hold this Eyre or Assize at Kilkenny; many complaints were lodged but all thrown out by the jurors. William Outlawe seeing this, went at once to the Chancery of the Liberty of Kilkenny and unearthed an old and false accusation or indictment against the Bishop which had been officially cancelled and quashed as belonging to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction. He had it re-written, rubbed it with the proper materials to make it look as though not new-written and sent it to the *custos* of the Royal Seal for the Liberty to be sealed and sent before the Court. The *custos* refused to seal it and William sent it to Arnold le Poer that he might perhaps detain the Bishop in gaol under it. Arnold sent to the Bishop demanding sureties that he would appear in the secular Court, offering that if he gave security he would be released. The Bishop refused for several reasons; first, that the

¹⁰ "Clamor et hutesium" (or uthesium). Every vill was bound to pursue one charged with felony, with hue and cry, blowing horns, etc., so that the culprit was "horned" from vill to vill. This would be more disgraceful for the Bishop than an actual physical seizure of his person. That he was making no idle threat, Stephen indicated by showing to the Bishop "ad quod faciendum loricati qui cum serviente erant et caeteri pedites cornu ad hoc parata habuerunt circa colla," "that for this purpose the armed men who were with the officer, and the other foot soldiers had round their necks horns strung all ready to do this."

¹¹He was allowed no servant or companion, "exceptis uno fratre socio et uno famulo ad faciendum sibi lectum et uno garcione ad parandum sibi prandium;" "except one priest as a companion, one male servant to make his bed, and one lad to prepare his dinner." "Garcio" is mediæval Latin, from which comes the modern French "garçon" (Irish "gossoon"), boy, attendant, servant.

¹²The Chancellor was Roger Outlaw; the Treasurer, Walter de Isteleppe (de Istelep, de Istlep, de Istelip, Islip), a relation of the well-known Simon Islip, Archbishop of Canterbury. He was appointed Treasurer of Ireland in 1315, superseded the same year, he was reappointed in 1317 and remained in office till 1325. Haydn, p. 558.

real cause of his imprisonment was the prosecution for sorcery which he had initiated; second, the alleged indictment had been cancelled and quashed; third, even if true, the matter was testamentary and not cognizable in the civil Courts, and, fourth, and especially, those who imprisoned him were excommunicated *ipso facto* and he was not bound to answer before excommunicated persons.

Arnold, eighteen days after, sent by the Bishop of Leighlin, Meiler le Power,¹³ his uncle and Sheriff of Kilkenny, a warrant for the liberation of the prisoner. He came out in full pontificalia, and forthwith cited William again.

Shortly before the day for appearance came around, the Bishop was served with a writ to appear in the King's Bench at Dublin to show why he had placed his diocese under an interdict and to answer charges laid against him by Arnold le Poer; he was told by the Bailiff serving the writ that if he failed to appear he would be fined £1,000.

He was also cited by the Dean of the "metropolitan church" (i. e. St. Patrick's), vicar of the Archbishop of Dublin¹⁴ (who was in remote parts), to appear before him to answer in the same matters.

The Bishop appeared by attorney and endeavoured to excuse his want of personal appearance by setting up that to reach Dublin he must pass through the territory of Arnold and his friends, and consequently it would be unsafe for him to try it. The Dean did not give effect to this plea; but found against the Bishop and dissolved the interdict.

It does not appear what, if any, proceedings were had in the King's Bench; probably the matter was allowed to drop.

The next step was in the Court of the Seneschal in Kilkenny on Monday next after the Octave of Easter, 1324. The Bishop had decided to call in the aid of the secular arm formally, and sent to ask the Seneschal then sitting in Court to allow him to speak certain words in the case of the Church and the faith "before him, the nobles and the people, his parochials, there gathered together." Arnold refused. The Bishop, carrying in his hands the Host, went with many priests in solemn procession to the door of the Court. Some of the

¹³Or Miler le Poer, who was Bishop of Leighlin from 1320 to 1341. Haydn, p. 621. In 1600 this Bishopric was united in the Bishopric of Ferns and Leighlin and in 1835 in that of Ossory, Ferns and Leighlin. Haydn, page 622.

¹⁴The Dean was William de Rodyerd or Rudyard, Treasurer of St. Patrick's, elected Dean in 1312, and remaining Dean till 1348. He is said to have become Chief Justice of the King's Bench 1331, but Haydn does not mention this: Haydn, pp. 577, 617. The Archbishop of Dublin, who was also Bishop of Glendalough, was Alexander de Bicknor, elected 1317 and remaining in office till 1349. Haydn, p. 615.

nobility tried to stop him, but notwithstanding he kept on toward the Bench. Arnold jumped down and with many opprobrious and vituperative words drove the Bishop away "et turpiter ejecit."

But after much persuasion by his followers Arnold relented; he told his officers to place at the bar (where thieves and robbers were wont to be sentenced) "this vile, rustic vagabond from England with the rubbish which he carries in his hands."¹⁵

The Bishop loudly protested against this ignominy, but did not forget his purpose; he spoke manfully and urged his claim to the arrest of Alice and her son. The Seneschal told him to go for help to the King's Court or "elsewhere"; for he would get none in *his* Court.

Almost at once, the Bishop received another citation to answer in the Court of the Archbishop at Dublin to a charge laid against him by Alice for falsely accusing her of heresy and excommunicating her "non citatam, non monitam, non convictam super dicto crimine."¹⁶

On this citation the Bishop appeared by attorney and also sent in a "written brief." It was set up on his behalf that Alice had been convicted before him of heresy, that she had adjured and then relapsed, and that he was proceeding against her for the relapse, but that nevertheless she was allowed to go freely around Dublin and to associate with many, cleric as well as lay. Only one person, William de Nottingham, ventured to argue that an appeal such as this of Alice's did not lie in cases of sorcery. The Bishop failed to justify, and was saddled with "much trouble and expense."

About the same time the Chancellor cited the Bishop before the Parliament, i. e. the House of Lords, at Dublin, the Justiciar of Ireland and the Lords of the Kingdom. The Bishop made his way to the capital by side roads, fearing, and justly fearing, that he would be beset on the highway.

On his appearance before the Bishops and Lords, Arnold accused him of acting upon a Bull of the Pope which had not been approved

¹⁵The word I translate "vagabond" is "trutannus," a mediæval Latin word with variant forms "trudandus," "truannus," "trutanus," meaning a buffoon, jester or wandering juggler, from old French "truand" or "truant," a vagabond; our word "truant" is the same. Arnold thought the Bishop should have stayed at home in England, and wished that he had. "Hordys," which I translate "rubbish," Wright thinks means "dirt." I cannot trace the word. Probably it is a form of "ordure" from old French "ord," Latin "horridus," but it may refer to the bread of the Host from "hordeum," "barley."

¹⁶"Not cited, not advised and not convicted of the said crime." We see now the advantage of her non-appearance in person. She was able to set up that the proceedings were taken behind her back and that she had not had her "day in Court."

by the King. He claimed that there never were any heretics in Ireland, but it was called the Isle of Saints.¹⁷ "But" he continued, "now comes this foreigner from England and says that we are all heretics and excommunicated, setting up some Papal constitution of which we have never heard. Because defamation of this land touches the person of us all, you should all take part against him."

The Bishop defended himself so vigorously that Arnold lost his temper and made fearful threats against him. Friends intervened, and it was at length agreed to leave the matter to a Commission of four Bishops and the Dean of St. Patrick's.¹⁸ On the hearing the Dean would not believe that Arnold had directed the imprisonment of the Bishop; but he triumphantly produced the writ which he had taken from Stephen le Poer. The Commissioners reported the fact to the Justiciar and Council; and Arnold was compelled to beg forgiveness from the Bishop. The Bishop freely forgave him the personal affront, but insisted on being allowed to proceed without hindrance against the heretics and their "fautors" in the diocese. This was agreed to, security given for it, and the two kissed each other in presence of prelates and the King's Council, "facta pace inter ipsos."¹⁹

Then the Bishop sent letters supplicatory to the Chancellor, asking for an order for the arrest of Alice, excommunicate for forty days and more; but he was unable to obtain it.

He also asked the Dean of St. Patrick's (Vicar General of the Archbishop of Dublin) to cite Alice to answer on a certain day at Kilkenny before the Bishop on a charge of heresy and relapse; this the Dean willingly granted, but she disobeyed the citation.

The Bishop, remaining in Dublin, sent a commission to his diocese to inquire into the charges of heresy. Orders were given by the proper authorities to take all accused to the gaol at Kilkenny and produce them before the Commission.²⁰ Arnold also directed the Sheriff and William Outlawe, laymen, to inquire concerning witchcraft "if perchance what was alleged by the Bishop was true." The Bishop's Commissioners divided the people into three parts and so made three inquisitions. One of these was specially as to Alice and her six

¹⁷ "Vos melius nostis quod in terræ Hybernæ nunquam inventi fuerunt hæretici, sed insula sanctorum consuevit appellari." "You know very well that in the land of Ireland there never have been heretics, but it is accustomed to be called the Island of Saints."

¹⁸The Bishops of Ferns, Adam de Northampton (1312-1346); of Kildare, Walter de Veele (le Veele, Calf) (1299-1332); of Emly, William Roghened (Rogheved, Roghead, i. e., Roughhead) (1309-1335), and of Lismore, John Leynagh (1324-1358); the Dean was William Rudyard, already mentioned.

¹⁹"Peace being made between them."

²⁰Composed of the Bishop's Ordinary of Ossory and two other clerics skilled in the law.

alleged accomplices. The Sheriff and William put the poorer people in gaol but "the mother of William, the mistress of all, they allowed to remain free."

When the Bishop heard this, he set off for his diocese. Evading an ambush at a bridge, he came to Kilkenny. Forthwith (*statim*) he entered the gaol and examined the accused. Many of them confessed even more crimes than they had been accused of, and said that Dame Alice Kyteler was mother and mistress in all the villainy.

The Bishop wrote the Chancellor from Acheth (Athy, a town in Kildare on the Barrow) and also the Treasurer, asking for the arrest of Alice, William and a number of persons named alleged to be accomplices; but in vain. He then wrote the Justiciar, with little better success. The Justiciar sent his writ to Arnold le Poer directing him to do justice upon Alice, William, her son and the others named "until they should be reconciled to Holy Church."

This writ, wholly without precedent and unintelligible, could not be acted upon; and the Bishop applied again and more insistently for the proper writ. This at length was given him.

In the meantime the Bishop had again cited William Outlawe to answer on the old charge. William came to the Court where sat the Bishop with the aged Bishop of Lismore (Leynagh) as coadjutor, armed to the teeth (*armatus usque ad dentes*) with a great following, also armed. The case was adjourned to be heard on the arrival of the Justiciar. The Justiciar came, and in the presence of Justiciar, Treasurer and Lords of the Council, the Bishop, sitting as a Judge, caused to be stated the whole proceedings against Alice. He then pronounced judgment against her as "sortilegam, magam, haeticam et relapsam" that she be delivered to the secular arm and her goods forfeited. He also the same day had a great fire made in the middle of Kilkenny, in which he burned a "sack full of her pyxes, powders, unguents, nails, hair, herbs, worms and innumerable other abominations with which she had perpetrated her sorceries and other unchristian acts."

The next day the Bishop gave the writ against Alice to Arnold, who ordered the Sheriff to act upon it. The Chancellor, however, went and stayed with William Outlawe in his house; and the Bishop again cited William on the former charges. He appeared with counsel and was convicted. He confessed many charges, and on his bended knees submitted himself to the Bishop and Holy Church. The Bishop ordered him to prison till he should consider what sentence to impose; as to the charges which he denied the Bishop ordered that he should purge himself canonically by twelve compurgators.

The Chancellor and the Treasurer came to the Bishop asking for mercy to the unfortunate man. They procured the Justiciar and others in high station to intercede also; and at length, in consideration of these entreaties, the Bishop consented to pass a lighter sentence than he had intended—namely, that the convicted man should every day for three years hear three masses at least, should feed a certain number of poor persons, and that he should at his own expense cover with lead the chancel of the cathedral and the whole church from the steeple to the east and the whole of Mary's Chapel in the same church. But the Bishop for a time withstood all entreaty to allow the prisoner to be at large; at length, however, he consented.

Many of William's friends offered the Bishop money, but the Churchman said that even for such "a sum of florins as would fill the cathedral church to the roof he would not in a matter affecting the faith accept money, openly or secretly."

Hearing from several sources that William was not performing the penance imposed on him and did not intend to, he sent letters supplicatory to the Treasurer, who directed letters patent to issue as requested, whereupon the Bishop cited all the officials of the secular Court. They appeared, and were ordered to take William to goal again, which they did.

On this same day was burned Petronilla de Midia²¹ and the story of this unfortunate woman is so extraordinary that I translate it in full. She had apparently been convicted after the visitation of the goal by the Bishop:

"On this same day was burned Petronilla of Midia, the heretic, one of the accomplices of the said Dame Alice, who after she had been flogged by the Bishop through six parishes for her sorceries, then being in custody, confessed publicly before all the clergy and the people that at the instance of the said Alice she had wholly denied the faith of Christ and of the Church, and that she had at Alice's instigation sacrificed in three places to devils, in each of which places she had sacrificed three cocks at cross-roads without the city to a certain demon who called himself Robert Artson (filiam Artis) one of the inferior order from Hell, by shedding their blood and tearing them limb from limb, from the intestines of which, with spiders and black worms like scorpions with a certain plant called millefoil and other plants and disgusting worms along with the brain and the

²¹ "Petronilla," "Petronil" (Sir James Ware), "Petronill" (Holinshed), was apparently the mother of Basil, another accomplice, who seems to have escaped, like her mistress Alice; "de Midia" sometimes is written "de Media."

swaddling bands of a child dead without baptism, she, in the skull of a certain thief who had been beheaded, and on the instruction of the said Alice, made many confections, ointments, and powders for afflicting the bodies of the faithful, and for producing love and hatred and for making the faces of certain women on the use of certain incantations appear to certain persons to be horned like goats. She also confessed that many times she at the instance of the said Alice and sometimes in her presence had consulted devils and received responses; and that she had agreed with her (Alice) that she (Alice) should be the mediator between her and the said devil Robert, her (Alice's) friend.

"She also confessed publicly that with her own eyes she was a witness when the said demon in the form of three Æthiopians carrying three iron rods in their hands appeared to her said mistress (Alice) in broad daylight and (while she was looking on) knew her (Alice) carnally, and after such a shameful act he with his own hand wiped clean the place where the crime was committed with linen from her bed.

"Amongst other things she said that she with her said mistress often made a sentence of excommunication against her own husband with wax candles lighted and repeated expectoration, as their rules required. And though she was indeed herself an adept in this accursed art of theirs, she said she was nothing in comparison with her mistress, from whom she had learned all these things and many more; and indeed in all the realm of the King of England there was none more skilled or equal to her in this art . . .²²

²²All the "crimes" confessed by Petronilla can be found in similar confessions in England and Scotland. In many cases it is hard to say how much the penitents themselves believed. The cocks sacrificed are said by Holinshed to have been red and nine in number. With them were sacrificed nine peacock's "eies" (probably the "eyed" feathers from the tail of a peacock or perhaps "eier," "eggs"). "Millefolium" was a well-known "witch's herb." What I translate "linen" is "Kanevacio" in the original; "canevacium," "cannevasium," "canabasium," "Kanevacium" from "canabis" hemp was a mediæval Latin word for linen or hemp cloth. Our word "canvas" is derived from it. By some it is said that it was Alice who was the first witch burned in Ireland, but that seems to be a mistake. Another disgraceful act of which Alice and her associates were accused, and which is not mentioned in Petronilla's confession, is that they were wont to kiss the "pudendum" of their devil "sub cauda." In Pitcairn's "Criminal Trials in Scotland," Vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 212, is an account of a meeting of Witches with Satan in the North Berwick Kirk, where Satan "maid ane dewelisch sermon, and the sermon being endit he came doune of the pulpett . . . and caussit (the accused) Kyse his erse." This was as late as 1590. In an extremely rare Black-letter tract copied by Pitcairn, Vol. I pt. II, p. 213, sqq., we find a confession by "Agnis Tompson" (Sampson?) "that the Divell . . . at North Barrick Kirke . . . in the habit or likenesse of a man" when she and her associates were long in coming "enjoynd them all to a penance which was that they should kisse his buttocks . . . which being put over the pulpit bare everyone did as he had enjoyed them."

"Publicly confessing her detestable crimes, she was burned in presence of an infinite multitude of people with due solemnity.

"And this was the first heretical sorceress burned in Ireland out of so many at so many different times."

William, after a week's imprisonment, sent to the Bishop asking him to visit him in prison. He did so, and William, stripping himself almost naked, threw himself in the dust before the prelate, asking forgiveness. After a severe lecture, in which he compared the unfortunate prisoner to Lucifer and with the utmost plainness detailed many of his faults, the Bishop forgave him for his offenses against his person, but as to the rest, his excommunication could not be removed until he had made satisfaction to the Church.

The Chancellor, his kinsman, being sent for and accused by the Bishop of many faults, humbly confessed them, and then made intercession for William. It was finally agreed that he should cover with lead the cathedral church from steeple to the east with the Mary Chapel within four years and give proper security for implementing his promise. But he had not purged himself concerning the charges which he had denied; and he must remain in prison and in chains till that matter was arranged. At length it was decided that he should go to the Holy Land by the next means of passage and at his own expense, and that if from age or infirmity he could not do this, he, his sons or executors, should pay as much as that would cost to the Bishop, Dean and chapter for pious uses.²³ For his stubbornness he had to pay for a priest *in perpetuity* to celebrate mass in the Church of the Virgin in every place the Bishop should decide upon, and also visit the Shrine of St. Thomas the Martyr (at Canterbury) and there publicly confess his sin, abstaining from meat every third day until the completion of his pilgrimage.

As to the remainder of these pestiferous heretics, some were publicly burned, others confessed their sins in public clothed in a shroud marked before and behind with the cross; others were lashed through the city; others were exiled from city and diocese; others escaping from the jurisdiction of the Church were excommunicated; others fleeing in terror and hiding were never found.

Alice's fate is not given in this singular document; but from other sources we know that she escaped to England. Her subsequent fate is, however, wholly unknown.²⁴

²³Not an unusual sentence; it meant in fact that a pretty stiff fine would be paid.

²⁴Holinshed's Chronicle of Ireland, page 69.