**Nixey Boran and the Struggle for Workers´ Rights**

George Boran

**The Importance of history:**

I would like to start by calling attention to the importance of history. Why are we here tonight, in the church of Moneenroe¿ Just to talk about the past? The book we are launching, “Challenge to Power”, written by Anne Boran, describes the role of her Dad, Nixey Boran in organizing the coalminers to defend their rights in the Castlecomer area, and his role in taking the struggle to a national and an international level. This is a scholarly book that has been very well-researched and resourced and so will last the test of time.

But we don´t just go back to the past, to live in the past. History is important in order to learn from our mistakes. Our identity as a people, also, depends on our awareness of our roots in the past. A people without an awareness of its history lack a spinal cord as a person.

But in remembering Nixey Boran, we are also remembering his generation, a generation of the Easter rising in 1916, of the war for independence, the trauma of the civil war and the generation that made possible the dream of “being a nation once again”. So many heroes who were willing to sacrifice everything so we could take our place among the countries of the world as a democratic and free nation, whose centenary we celebrate this year.

**Conflict with the Church**

As a priest, and so part of the Church hierarchy, I would like to comment on the role of the Catholic Church in this struggle. Nixey was denounced from the altar by the bishop Collier of Ossory, in Moneenroe Church. Also, the local parish priest, Fr. Kavanagh, conducted a systematic campaign against him, especially after his visit to the Soviet Union. It must have taken great courage for Nixey and the miners to face the wrath of the Church in the context of a rural culture in the 40thies when the Church wielded such moral power. Eventually, the Church succeeded in breaking the local trade union. However, later when Nixey joined the National Union, the minors´ Nixey bargaining power increased. It is easy to understand why Nixey would have been excited with the new socialist movement that proposed to unite workers against the excesses of Capitalism, and made it possible for a trade union leader, in the small rural community of Moneenroe, to make contacts and unite with workers on national and international levels.

To some extent, it was understandable a certain fear of the Church of Communism. Marx had said that religion was the opium of the people. There were rumours of religion being persecuted in the Soviet Union. It was only much later that the full extent of the atrocities of Stalin would come to light. However, the bishop and local priest should have been more understanding because, already in 1891, Pope Leo XXIII had published his famous encyclical, Rerum Novarum, on the condition and rights of workers. Fr. Johnny Kearns told me that, when Nixey died, he went into Bishop Birch in Kilkenny and told him. This man has been badly wronged by the Church in the past. You need to come to his funeral mass and preside at it. Which he did.

**Lessons learned in South America**

When I went to Brazil as a young missionary, in 1970, all this took on a new light. I found myself in the middle of a bloody military dictatorship that lasted 20 years and proposed to defend Christian values. At the same time, I was being exposed to Liberation Theology which was strengthened by the conclusions of the meeting of the Latin American bishops in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. The Medellin document proposed that the moral force of the Church should be placed at the service of the poor and the working class in their struggle to build a more just and fraternal society.

Throughout history, every time the Church has sided with the rich and powerful it has lost its prophetic voice and distanced itself from its founder, Jesus Christ and the Gospel message. The Latin American Church, by its preaching and concrete involvement in the struggle for justice, was showing that while religion can be a drug (opium) to persuade people to accept their lot in this life, in the hope of being rewarded in the next, it could also be a tool for liberation. And this could have the force of an atomic bomb in a continent that lived with two contradictions, being a Christian continent that teaches love as its central message and, on the other hand, a continent that accepted enormous oppression and poverty. All oppressive governments try to use religion to control their people and to persuade them that to rebel against authority was to rebel against God. The Latin American theology freed people by revealing that the God of the Bible is different from the God of unjust rulers. In the seventies and eighties, I had the privileged of being part of a Church with great bishops, great priests, great sisters and great lay people who gave witness to a prophetic Church that sought to link faith and life and faith and social action. Two years after my arrival in Brazil, Nixey died so I was never able to discuss my new insights into religion with him.

What always struck me was that Nixey never had a bitter word against the Church. He was a deeply spiritual man. His commitment was to God, not to individual Church ministers. He could see the bigger picture. The God of the Pharoah was not the God of Moises. Religion could be used to keep the masses quiet and submissive, but it could also be a tool for liberation. At the end of his life, Nixey was a very prayerful man and would often go to daily mass. Before leaving for Brazil, I remember going with him, his wife Bridie and my mother (two brothers married two sisters) on a trip to the West of Ireland. Every time we passed a church he would stop the car and we would go in to say a prayer. Nixey was one of those rare leaders in history, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who was able to unite faith and politics, spirituality and a political struggle.