

Archbishop John MacHale

1791 – 1881

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(Written in 1997)



Archbishop MacHale is considered one of the most remarkable men of his time. Born in 1791, in Tubbernavine, his father was Pádraig Mor MacHale, and his mother was Mary Mulhern. He had five brothers and two sisters. Their names were Thomas, Martin, Myles, Patrick, Edward, Ann and Mary.

John MacHale was sent to a hedge school in Lahardane at the age of six or seven. He wore the ‘tally’ while he was at school. The ‘tally’ was a stick which hung around the neck. It was about twelve inches long and about one inch wide. Whenever a child spoke Irish in the school the teacher would put a notch on the stick. When the child came home in the evening he would get punished for speaking Irish in the school, even though Irish was spoken in his house.

John MacHale witnessed two events which had a major effect on his life. He saw the French march up by his house in 1798. He also saw them carrying Father Conroy’s body down from Castlebar where he had been hanged for treason because he had shown the French the short way up to Castlebar- through the Windy Gap.

In 1804 John MacHale rode on horseback to a classical school in Castlebar. He was a very bright student. His teacher was Pat Staunton. He stayed with his aunt at Crimlin. Later at the age of seventeen he went to Maynooth. While he was a student he was appointed lecturer in Dogmatic Theology. Six years later he was promoted to a professorship in that subject. He was ordained a priest in 1814.

Eleven years later Father MacHale became co-adjutor bishop of Killala. The churches were few and the condition of these churches was pitiable due to the poverty of the people. Dr. MacHale said “There are in the diocese of Killala no churches or almost none. Our churches were taken possession of by the Protestants. Those which the Catholics have since built are mere cabins covered with thatch which do not deserve the name of churches. For this reason the faithful are very often obliged to hear Mass in the open air, nor have the priests any facility for preaching to them”.

Archbishop MacHale was a great friend of Daniel O’Connell. It was he who gave Archbishop MacHale the title “Lion of the fold of Juda”. He played a major role in building the Cathedral in Ballina. They started to collect funds in 1822, but the task was proceeding at a snail’s pace until after the new co-adjutor arrived in 1825. In 1827 they gathered a lot of money and the work on the site began in the early Spring of the same year. It took about five years to build. They even went on building it during the famine.

While they were building the cathedral John, Bishop of Killala became John, Archbishop of Tuam. All of the people came out on the streets to say good-bye to him.

In 1831 the English government decided to set up the National School system. Archbishop MacHale was not very keen on the idea, but he couldn't stop them. Archbishop MacHale was very interested in the Irish language. He translated many books into Irish, such as the Bible, the Greek Iliad and he also wrote an Irish catechism.

Towards the end of his career he tried to better the conditions affecting religion, education and he wrote many letters to the English government to try and better the conditions for the poor. Archbishop MacHale spent fifty six years in the episcopate and he celebrated the sixty-seventh anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

The passing of the great Archbishop on November 7th 1881 was mourned, not only in Ireland, but in every country in which Irish people lived.

In 1981 the Centenary of Archbishop MacHale's death was celebrated with special ceremonies in Lahardane and Castlebar. The people of Addergoole are still very proud of their illustrious Churchman who was a brave and courageous leader when times were hard and the people needed a voice to speak on their behalf.



A plaque marking the birthplace of Archbishop MacHale was unveiled in 1981, on the centenary of his death. The plaque was designed by Francis Hourigan and erected on a wall of the Doyle home in Tubbernavine in November 1981.

Note: This article has been extracted from:

“Celebrating 150 Years of Primary Education in Lahardane N.S. 1847—1997”

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