

The Gentleman was Unmarried

by Miriam Lohan

There is a memorial plaque, to a man and his servant, on the wall of the old church of St Munchin on King's Island. It reads:

Near this spot are deposited the remains of Frank Stanway, late of Harrow in the County of Middlesex, Esq. Captain of the Royal Engineers, died 9th December 1832, aged 42 years. Also near this spot are deposited the remains of Joachim Antonio, born at Santarem in the Kingdom of Portugal, for 22 years the faithful servant of the above, died 5th November 1832, aged 41 years.

Despite its simplicity, this inscription suggests more depth of affection than the neighbouring plaque to Captain Thomas Ormsby, whose widow's overwrought 153-word tribute is crowned with a carving of a weeping angel. No other servants are remembered in the same inscription as their masters on these plaques or the gravestones outside. The church was deconsecrated in 1968 and renovated by Limerick Civic Trust in the 1980s. The Civic Trust maintain the building, and through working on various projects they have hosted, I have been passing this plaque for years, and wondering if it tells a love story. Did Stanway die of a broken heart?

As their relationship began around 1810, it is most likely they met in Portugal or Spain. Stanway was serving there as a Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers during the Peninsular Wars, and in 1809 was noted for blowing up an arch on the bridge over the Tagus at Alcantára, as French forces advanced.¹ The bridge had been built by orders of the Roman Emperor Trajan in 106 CE. It still stands, despite the destructive efforts of Moors, Spaniards, Portuguese and British forces in various wars.

Santarem lies further downriver, in the Kingdom of Portugal. It had been occupied by French invaders, who retreated in 1811. Seeking his fortune with Wellington's army, who were fighting for the Portuguese, might have been an exciting prospect for a young man like Antonio. Or perhaps he had lost family or property in the occupation and pillaging of his city and had nothing more to lose by leaving with the British. Either way, at some point in the chaos of these wars, Antonio met Stanway and stayed with him for the rest of his life.

The next mention of Stanway, now a Captain, is his leadership of a group of Spanish soldiers in restoring the fortifications of San Sebastian after the abdication of Napoleon. He returned to the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich in September 1814.²

In 1831, Stanway was posted to Limerick, to replace Captain Barry of the Royal Engineers, who had been stationed to Barbados, as reported in the *Cork Constitution*, 22 September 1831.³

There is no record of Joachim Antonio in local or British media for this period, nor in military records, but servants did not belong in such places. Antonio died on 5 November 1832. His burial at St Munchin's was not noted by the press at the time, as death notices were the preserve of the wealthy, or those who died in unusual circumstances, but it is noted in the burial records kept at St Mary's Cathedral. The entry adds that he was a Roman Catholic. Because he was a foreigner with no family in Limerick, a Catholic, and a servant, his burial in a Church of Ireland graveyard could only have been arranged by Stanway or someone from St Munchin's congregation. No cause of death is recorded, though cholera would have been the most likely cause. There was an epidemic in Limerick in 1832, spread by insufficient sanitation and its ravages even extended to the wealthy; outside St Munchin's is the tomb of Mary Ann Burbydge Collis, who died on 5 September 1832 and her death was announced by *The Limerick Chronicle* on the same day as follows:

This morning, of Cholera, at the home of John Perrot, Esq., North Strand, Mary Anne, daughter of the late Major Edward Collis. This young lady was on the streets yesterday in apparent good health.

If Antonio did die of cholera, it would cast a bitter irony on the only reference to Stanway's work in Limerick:

... a new sewer from the New Barracks [now Sarsfield Barracks], so as to join that now building by Daniel Barrington Esq. and the Earl of Limerick's property, to which Mr Barrington is agent. The communication alluded to was referred to the proper quarter, and Captain Stanway, R.E. in this city, is ordered to report accordingly.⁴

Stanway died on 9 December 1832, in his rooms on Mallow Street, Limerick. Reading the plaque would lead one to believe that he took his own life because he did not want to go on without his 'faithful servant'. A romantic would imagine poor, heartbroken Stanway taking a draft of poison and drifting off to sleep while thinking of happier times with Joachim. But Stanway was a soldier, and a Royal Engineer at that, so he knew exactly how to dispatch himself efficiently. He cut his throat with a sharp razor that he had fastened to his hand with a silk cloth, to ensure a steady stroke without snapping the blade back in its handle, as reported in the *Limerick Chronicle* on 12 December, and the story was picked up by dozens of newspapers in Ireland and Britain, growing in gory detail as it spread. The *Limerick Evening Post* described: 'a frightful spectacle – his head being nearly severed from his body.' Not to be outdone, *The Pilot* (Dublin) proclaimed that: 'The boards were deluged with blood, and that part of the room immediately opposite to where the dreadful act was committed gave dreadful testimony of the deed, the papering of the wall being stained by the same crimson hue, as the

Proved at Louth on the 29th June 1832 before the Reverend Judge of the Court of Delegates and Surrogate by the Oath of Thomas Wemyss Esq. the said Bachelor named in the said will to retain, administer and execute the same only to administer.

Limerick 10th May 1832.

Frank Stanway Capt in the Corps of Engineers do hereby declare this to be my last will & testament & to be in force as such & bequeath to my servant Joachim Antonio the sum of five hundred pounds sterling for his faithful services the residue of my money effects & records I bequeath to my brother Henry Esq. Twenty one hundred pounds sterling in my name in 1/4 annuity 5/8 per cent & Twenty five hundred pounds sterling in 1/3 per cent annuity & 5000 pounds & 5000 pounds also 1/4 annuity on 5000 pounds annuity & if both should die at George's Hotel in St. George's Street Limerick as witnesses in the presence of me as witnesses & if both should die at George's Hotel in St. George's Street Limerick as witnesses in the presence of me as witnesses

Item I would wish that Col. Wemyss or any kind friend would collect my private papers and transmit them with my servant Joachim to Woolwich to the care of my good friend Major Matson Royal Engineer who will I am sure take care of Joachim until he hears from my brother or until death releases him.

Witness my hand & seal as witness my signature & seal this 10th day of May 1832.

Frank Stanway

Witness my hand & seal as witness my signature & seal this 10th day of May 1832.

Thomas Wemyss Esq. Solicitor & Friend

Last will and testament of Capt Frank Stanway in 1832

blood spouted to some feet distant on the first incision of the razor,' while *Saunders Newsletter* alights on the detail that: 'he fixed a dressing-glass on a chair by his bedside, in order, it is thought, to have less difficulty in effecting the horrid act.' It is also reported that Stanway left a letter addressed to Colonel Wemyss, the commanding officer at his garrison.

Almost all the newspapers use the same phrase: 'The gentleman was unmarried.'

An inquest was held before 'Alderman D.F.G. Mahony and M. Gavin Esq, and a most respectable jury, when Dr Cross, 83rd Regiment, and Dr Franklin were examined, also the domestics of the house, and the secretaries in the Engineer Office, who deposed to some striking singularities in his manner within the last month - incoherent expressions and frequent instances of forgetfulness and lapses of memory, accompanied with nervous agitation and depression of spirits.' Their verdict was that Stanway 'came by his death in consequence of having inflicted a wound on his neck with a sharp instrument while in a fit of mental derangement,' reported the *Freeman's Journal* on 14 December. Stanway's symptoms of mental derangement are not inconsistent with bereavement. On 18 December, the same newspaper gives an account of his funeral: 'The remains of the late Captain Stanway, Royal Engineers, were interred with military honours on Thursday morning in St Munchin's

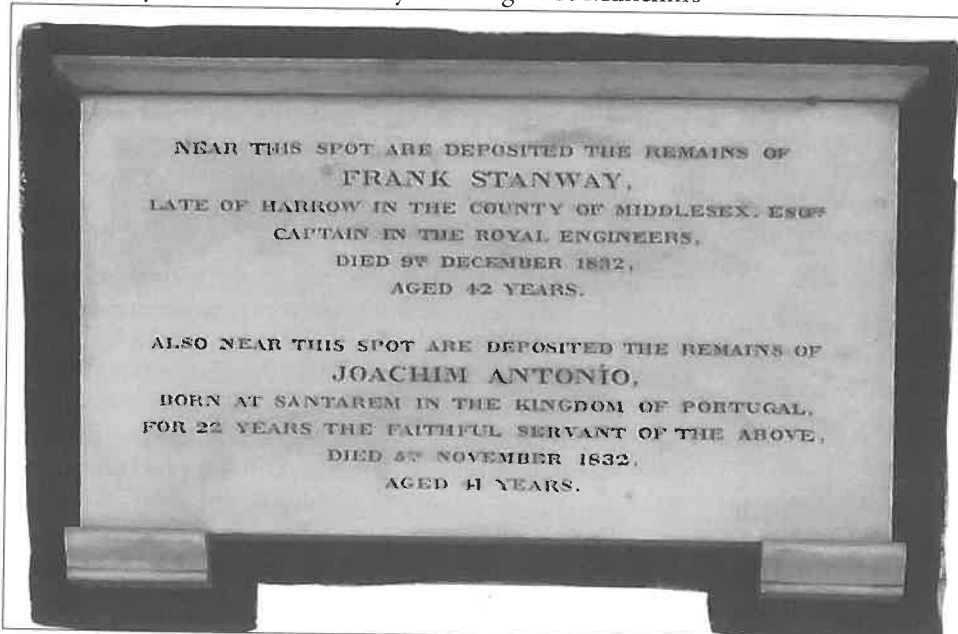
Church. The cortege was truly splendid and imposing. The procession was attended to the graveyard by a vast concourse of spectators.'

Stanway had updated his will earlier in 1832. It reads:

Limerick, 10th May 1832

I, Frank Stanway, Captain of Corps of Royal Engineers do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament and to be reserved as such. I bequeath to my servant Joachim Antonio the sum of five hundred pounds sterling for his faithful services. [...] New: I would wish that Col. Wemyss or any kind friend would collect my private papers and transmit them with my servant Joachim to Woolwich to the care of my good friend Major Matson Royal Engineer who will I am sure take care of Joachim until he hears from my brother or until death releases him. ⁵

It is striking that a servant should be the first mentioned in a will, bequeathed such a large sum of money, and subject to careful arrangements of the sort that might be made for a widow or child. The rest of Stanway's money and property was bequeathed to his brother Henry. The Col. Wemyss mentioned here is the man to whom Stanway addressed his



Memorial plaque to Capt Frank Stanway and Joachim Antonio in St Munchin's COI church

suicide note. Wemyss confirmed at probate court in London that the will was Stanway's, and he was the only witness there who knew Stanway in Limerick.

Because Antonio predeceased Stanway, his brother Henry Stanway, also in the Army but based in England, inherited the £500 as well as his own bequest. The following year, Henry arranged for the plaque to be mounted in St Munchin's Church. On 14 November 1833 the *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondence* announced: 'An elegant white marble tablet, with suitable inscription in black letters, has been erected in St Munchin's Church, Limerick, to the memory of the late Captain Frank Stanway, Royal Engineers, whose sudden death, under very distressing circumstances, caused a deep sensation in that garrison some months ago.'

A plaque inside the church holds more prestige than a gravestone outside, though no such stone now exists; perhaps the pair are buried together under the church. The present building, designed by James Pain, dates from 1827, so there might have been room in the crypt five years later. Perhaps they are buried outside in the family tomb of friends, or in a grave that went unmarked because a plaque is more lasting and visible. The plaque also connected Henry Stanway to Limerick; his death in 1846 in Nova Scotia, was reported in the *Limerick Chronicle* because he was 'brother of the late Captain F. Stanway, Royal Engineers, who died suddenly in this garrison, in December 1832.'

Whatever relationship existed between Stanway and Antonio, it was evidently supported by Stanway's brother and friends. Homosexual relations between men were punishable by death at this time; James Pratt and John Smith, the last men to be executed for this, were hanged in London three years after Stanway and Antonio died. If it was a romantic relationship, Wemyss and Henry were necessarily discreet while the pair were alive, but must have felt that commemorating them

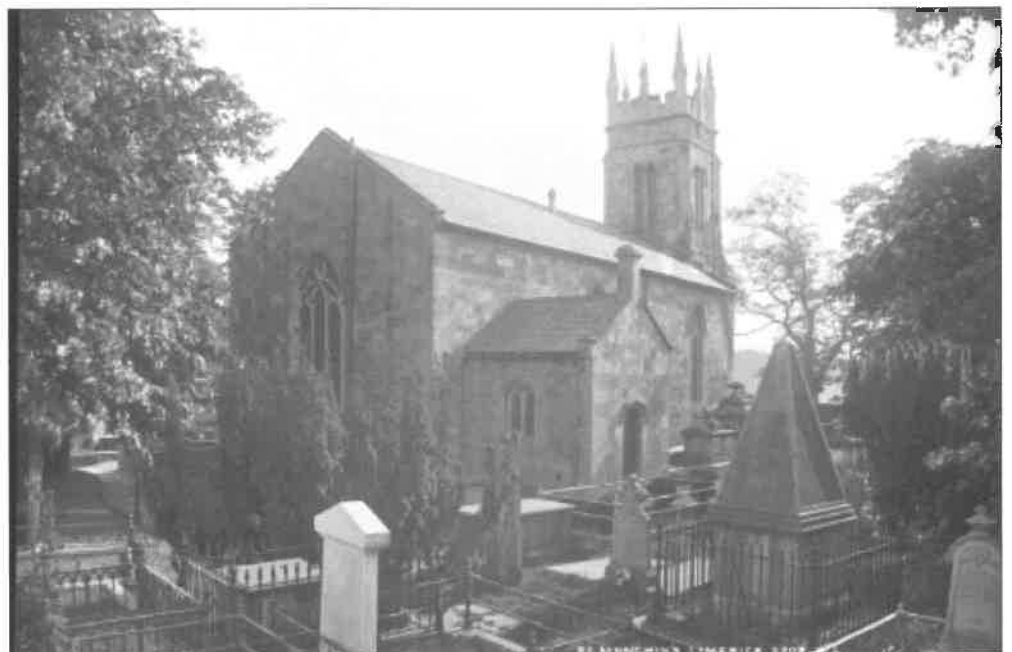
together, in a prominent place, was the right thing to do. If the relationship was a platonic one, the will and the plaque are evidence of an extraordinary crossing of the boundary between master and servant that prevailed at that time, and makes them a remarkable pair for that.

With contemporary sensibilities, it is easy to read the plaque and infer that Stanway and Antonio were a couple. Indeed, it has raised many an eyebrow among visitors to the church. When the plaque was mounted, however, to voice such a suspicion would have been an outrageous slight on their characters. So, if a further modern speculation about the plaque may be allowed, it is this: perhaps, over the years, members of the congregation who felt restricted by the class, religious, or sexual mores of their time, might have read between its marble lines, and seen that other kinds of relationships were possible. In this respect, the inscription adds a brighter epilogue to the sad story of Frank Stanway and Joachim Antonio.

References:

- 1 Dr Mark Thomson, *Wellington's Engineers: Military Engineering in the Peninsular War 1808 – 1814*. (Barnsley, 2015)
- 2 Thomas William John Connolly, *History of The Royal Sappers and Miners: from the formation of the Corps in March 1772, to the date when its designation was changed to that of Royal Engineers, in October 1856, Volume 1* (London, 1857).
- 3 All newspaper references from the British Newspaper Archive available at: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> and Limerick City Library Local Studies available at <http://www.limerickcity.ie/library/localstudies/>
- 4 *Dublin Observer*, 20 October, 1832.
- 5 Stanway's will, which was obtained from The National Archives at Kew, UK.

St Munchin's Church of Ireland church, Limerick (Courtesy of the Lawrence Photograph Collection, National Library of Ireland).



Miriam Lohan is an artist, writer and researcher. Her connection to St Munchin's church is through her work with Limerick Youth Theatre and Island Theatre Company, based in the church until 2008, and most recently with Limerick Civic Trust, where she has created a database of the graves and plaques. For the past five years she has kept a beehive on top of the bell-tower.