

# Maurice Lenihan—historian of Limerick

by Francis Finegan

## PART ONE

**S**HART, in his first volume of the **Irish Pedigrees**, tells us that the name of Lenihan was that of a family of note in N. Tipperary and of chiefs in a district of Co. Waterford now known as the barony of Upper Third. According to the same authority, Maurice Lenihan's family was descended from this latter branch. Of Maurice Lenihan's more immediate ancestry we only know that his paternal grandfather, who came of farming stock from Ballybunoga, Co. Waterford, settled in Waterford City in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In all probability it was Maurice's grandfather who founded the family business in Waterford City. The late Mgr. O'Riordan, Rector of the Irish College, Rome, in an article published shortly after Maurice Lenihan's death, mentions that Maurice often spoke of his father and grandfather as "venturers", a term applied by local usage to men who carried on some barter trade with foreign countries. According to this account - for which Lenihan himself vouches - his grandfather and father used to freight a vessel with Waterford goods for Newfoundland and, after disposing of the goods there, bring back a cargo of Newfoundland goods to sell in Waterford. (1).

At all events, when Maurice Lenihan was born, his father James Lenihan is described as a woollen draper of Broad Street, Waterford. James Lenihan must have had a fairly prosperous business;

for Broad St. was then the leading business quarter of the city in the early decades of the last century. The maiden name of Maurice's mother was Margaret Burke. This lady was a native of Carrick-on-Suir, but her family was originally of Limerick stock who had been settled, according to a family tradition, in Carrick "for a few generations". It might be suggested that this family left Limerick about the time of the Williamite siege; for, according to another tradition in the same family, some of their ancestors were among the "Wild Geese" who fled the country and took service abroad in the Irish Brigades after the failure of the Stuart Cause. The Burkes of Carrick seem to have been a well-to-do family in the woollen trade. Without undue irrelevance to the subject of this paper, a few of their names may be introduced here. The Rev. Ulick Burke, P.P., of Stradbally, Co. Waterford and Edmund Burke the philanthropist were granduncles of Maurice. Of the former, Maurice tells us in the Reminiscences:

"A granduncle of the writer's ... Rev. Ulick Burke, who was ordained by the Bishop of Waterford, in a small room in the Bishop's house in Clonmel, on 27 April 1788 and, being sent out to Louvain to study after his ordination, was in Paris during the worst days of the reign of terror. Passing the Bastille when it was being besieged, he was pressed to work in the trenches, but succeeded by a stratagem in making his escape. Coming over to London, the son and heir of a noble family in France was



Portrait of Maurice Lenihan as mayor (1884).

entrusted to his care and, on reaching English soil, the youth full of joy knelt down and blessed the hour that witnessed his escape from the fiends of the Revolution. (Fr. Burke died in 1829 at Stradbally, while his nephew Maurice was still a student at Carlow College)".

The other granduncle of Maurice Lenihan, Edward Burke, whose name is still remembered in Carrick-on-Suir, was for many years a merchant in Waterford City. He died a very wealthy man and in his will left a sum of £30,000 to found an asylum or almshouse for deserving citizens of Carrick — a charitable institution which is still in existence. From the "Scrap-Book" (a miscellaneous collection of family letters and correspondence on historical matters, now the property of the Limerick Co. Library) we learn the name of a sister of Maurice Lenihan's mother. This aunt, Mother de Sales Burke, was for many years a nun in the Presentation Convent at Carrick-on-Suir. She was born in 1787, entered the religious life in 1810, and lived to the ripe old age of 97. The "Scrap-Book" as well as the Lenihan Correspondence in the National Library contain some of her letters to her nephew. The value of Mother Burke's letters lies in the fact that they enable us to trace various other members of this family, while they provide us with the only information available regarding Maurice Lenihan's wife and children.

Maurice Lenihan was born on 5 February 1811 in St. Patrick's parish,

wine-coloured board and fastened on the wall between the parlour window and the front door: **"Catherine Shanny, licensed to sell beer, wine and spirits to be consumed on the premises"**.

The Abbey fishermen on the way upstream rarely passed the door of this old public house. It was usual to see a pair of brecauns pulled up on the grass below the pub. Fishing rods resting against the gable, told their own tales:

"The rods at the thatch  
And the door on the latch".

The decline in the fortunes of the pub set in when three salmon anglers were drowned in February 1930, only a few months after the Abbey fishermen had been forced off the river for ever. Soon all traces of the house disappeared. But fond memories of the old tavern have been preserved in two poems written after its dissolution.

Following a visit to the spot where the pub had stood one writer recalled the old place in these lines:

"This is the spot where Shanny's stood,  
By the stream near Plassey Wood.  
Here, where the three sisters toiled,  
The nettles now grow, dark and wild.

No trace of thatch or garden bright,  
No friendly sounds or becks,  
No clink of glass is heard within,  
Nor Kate's shrill voice above the din.

No voices in the evening air,  
Linger in this place so bare,  
Nothing but this mouldering mound  
To mark the pub on Plassey's ground".

Two verses from another poetic epitaph of Shanny's "An Old Angler's Dream", convey all the sadness and nostalgia for Plassey and its pub in times past:

"I oft-times think as my days draw nigh  
Of a pub near Plassey Mill,  
Of a field and hedge, all blossom starred,  
Where the anglers drank at will;  
And when the dark would shroud the scene,  
Hushing the merry din,  
Ann Shanny would look around and ask:  
'Well, boys, are ye coming in?'

Those memories cling as the waters ring  
O'er the falls midst rocks and sand;  
Those islands small, past the Garrison Wall,  
And the angler with rod in hand.  
As the salmon leaps and wild life peeps  
From shuttering rock and rill,  
I can hear Ann say, in her old dear way:  
'Well, boys, are ye coming in?'"



*Some Pennywell houses. (From a watercolour by Dorothy Stewart).*

Waterford, and was baptised in the Parish Church that formerly belonged to the Society of Jesus. His godfather at Baptism was Fr. Nicholas Foran, who later became Bishop of Waterford. Maurice was the eldest of a family of ten boys and five girls. He received his early education at a day school which was then attached to St. John's College. Of this school he tells us: "Strange as it may appear, Protestant boys were accustomed to resort to it for their education".

In 1823, Maurice was sent to Carlow College. "I entered", he says, "the College on 18 July 1823, with my brother Thomas, who died in less than two years afterwards — in February 1825. My father accompanied us to the College from home, which we left on the previous evening (Friday) by Bianconi's car for Kilkenny, where we slept at the Bush Hotel that night and reached Carlow the next morning about 11 o'clock". Some idea of Lenihan's career in Carlow College may be got from various entries in the College records of the period. He did not enter St. Patrick's as an ecclesiastical student, as has often been said. He entered the College as a lay-student, as is clear from the Report Books which deal exclusively with lay-students. Besides, his name never occurs in the lists of the ecclesiastical students. The error regarding this period of Lenihan's life may be due to the fact that, for many decades, past, St. Patrick's College (Carlow) has been a centre for ecclesiastical studies only. The College, however, in the early period of its existence catered expressly for lay-students also, and this department for lay-students in Lenihan's time is the parent of the present-day Knockbeg College.

From the report books of the College we can learn something of young Lenihan's tastes and progress in his studies. He showed marked ability in the classics and in modern languages (French and Italian). Mathematics were evidently not to his taste. Ironically enough, he showed no ability in History and eventually dropped the subject, as his masters must have considered it a waste of time for him. He was an enthusiastic member of the College Debating Society, and in his Reminiscences speaks of many of his contemporaries whose prowess as public speakers in later life was foreshadowed in those far off days. Chief among these were James Fintan Lalor and J.T. Devitt, who for many years was an outstanding figure in public life in Limerick. If Carlow boys of that period received every encouragement to train themselves in public speaking, it is no less true to say that they received a like stimulus to enable them to master the more difficult art of writing. In 1811 was inaugurated a College Magazine entitled **The Oracle**,

which was a symposium of the best essays written in the course of the year. The inaugural number of this magazine is the only one, apparently, that survives. In Lenihan's time, however, **The Oracle** was still flourishing and, in a review of the first number of **The Carlow College Magazine** (issued in 1869), we are told by Lenihan: "It is about forty years since **The Oracle** enjoyed its highest reputation under the distinguished editorship of the Revd. Edward Kinsella, then a Professor in the College ... At one o'clock each Sunday ... all the students, ecclesiastical and lay, assembled to hear read the best essays which **The Oracle** gave forth, with the running commentary of the gifted Editor". We cannot trace the names of the contributors, as each article is signed under a pseudonym. This in itself was an excellent plan as it encouraged all to participate in the competition to have their first literary efforts published.

Lenihan's merits as a classical scholar received a remarkable tribute of recognition when he was chosen out of all the student body to compose a Latin ode in honour of Bishop Doyle ("J.K.L.") when the latter returned from London after giving his memorable evidence before the British House of Lords. In a letter to William Francis Fitzpatrick some thirty years after the event, when Fitzpatrick was writing the **History of the Life and Times of Dr. Doyle**, Lenihan gives us a description of the celebrations at Carlow College on the joyous occasion:-

"I well remember 1825, when Dr. Doyle returned from his examination in Parliament. We illuminated Carlow College in his honour; and at the annual academic exhibition in that year, I happened to be selected by Dr. Kinsella to write the contratulatory ode in honour and welcome of Dr. Doyle on his victory in the Lords ... The study hall was crowded to excess; many now numbered with the dead were there in the exuberance of joy inspired by the occasion. Dr. Doyle occupied a rich throne in the Academy Hall. As the boys of the lay college, a fine group of eighty, proceeded up the room and approached, his countenance was lighted up with extreme pleasure; and how well I remembered the noble expression which beamed from his eyes glistening with the light of genius and radiant with good humour, as I went on to discharge the honourable and gratifying duty I was chosen from my companions to perform. (Then follows a remarkable reminiscence of the great patriot bishop). On Sundays it was my custom to go into the Parish Church from the College grounds to hear him preach. What a preacher was he! How stately — how solemn — how impressive — how grand! The form of the apostle and

the patriot now, after the lapse of thirty years, is strongly impressed upon my mind, reminding one of the Chrysostoms, the Cyrils of Alexandria, or the Ambroses of the early ages of the church. No one ever heard him on the altar of Carlow Church that would not wish to hear him again. And no one ever listened to his wonderful exhortations or more elaborate sermons without profit ... without being impressed by the majesty and power of his eloquence".

It was at Carlow College too that young Lenihan saw Daniel O'Connell for the first time. O'Connell was accompanied by Richard Lalor Sheil at the Leinster Provincial Meeting for the promotion of the Catholic Emancipation Bill. The meeting was held in the Parish Church — apparently because no other suitable venue was obtainable. Lenihan again does not tell us how he managed to be present. In his Reminiscences he quotes the speech made by Sheil on the occasion, remarking that the speech in question is not to be found in the published edition of Sheil's speeches. Perhaps he had already decided upon his future career and persuaded an indulgent Rector to let him have the opportunity of testing his bent for journalism.

Another of Lenihan's memories of Carlow days may be permitted here — the story of Bishop Doyle and the plaster cast. It seems that a needy artist named Tournarelli had decided to try his luck by making a statue of the famous prelate. But how was he to get the Bishop to pose for the statue? Taking his luck in his hands, he asked for an audience of Dr. Doyle and, being ushered into his presence, fell upon his knees to explain as respectfully as possible the reason for his coming. The artist then explained that he was anxious, from patriotic motives, to provide posterity with a true likeness of his Lordship. His Lordship, far from being impressed by the patriotism that inspired the request, just became angry instead. The unfortunate man, in desperation at the thought of losing forever any opportunity of having a likeness of his Lordship, straightway confessed that lower motives of a pecuniary nature were not unmixed with the loftier patriotic intention already expressed. Bishop Doyle was at once disarmed by the poor artist's candour and, with all the humility of the truly great, allowed Tournarelli to take a plaster cast of his face. This charming story, for some reason hitherto overlooked or rejected by the various biographers of J.K.L., is given at some length in the Reminiscences. Lenihan assures us that he heard it from Tournarelli himself at a soiree in the house of Timothy Nowlan, a bookseller of Carlow town, in 1828. He was only a boy of seventeen at the time and was to spend another three years at Carlow





*Charles Bianconi at the time of his marriage.*

College.

Lenihan has much to say about Carlow College in the *Reminiscences*. Again and again he returns to the names of his former professors: Dr. Kinsella, Dr. Nolan, Dr. McSweeney, Dr. Cahill. The social side of College life is not neglected. He has much to say of the excellence of the plays; yet he does not seem to have taken part in them himself. His services as a member of the orchestra or as a solo player were in demand on such festive occasions. An entry in the College cash books records the purchase of violin strings by Maurice and his brother Thomas. We know that Maurice was a gifted musician, though it must be admitted that his reputation in this respect was later to be overshadowed by that of his more gifted son James Lenihan.

According to the College Records, Maurice Lenihan did not return, apparently, after mid term 1829. And yet the long obituary notice, written by his son for the **Reporter & Vindicator** of December 31, 1895; states: "When he had spent six years at Carlow, his

father died and the loss was a crisis which gave direction to his future career. He was one of a large number to provide for after an expensive education. Nevertheless he was kept at College for two years longer, when an accident turned him to journalism". Mgr. O'Riordan, who was the intimate friend of Maurice in his last years, states that he left Carlow College in 1831; and Maurice himself mentions in the *Reminiscences* that he left in his twentieth year. It seems most likely, then, that he spent eight years at Carlow; for if he left in 1829 he could hardly have failed to remember that year which will always be memorable for the passing into law of the Catholic Emancipation Bill. Nor would he have been likely to forget that it was the same year in which his father died at the early age of forty.

Lenihan's son has told us that it was an accident which turned his father to journalism. Yet, it is more probable that he had quickly to make up his mind as to the means of earning a livelihood; for there is evidence that the family

business had ceased to prosper after the death of Maurice's father. During the summer vacation of 1831, according to the obituary notice mentioned above, Maurice went to spend a holiday with a Mr. Hacket of Clonmel, a cousin of his and the editor of the **Tipperary Free Press**. The Summer Assizes were then in progress, and Mr. Hacket got his young visitor to help him in reporting and preparing materials for the paper. Young Lenihan showed an aptitude for the work and writing came easy to him. Mr. Hacket then persuaded Maurice that he was marked out for a successful career in journalism, so Maurice then and there decided to throw in his fortunes with the **Tipperary Free Press**. He remained with his cousin, however, only two years. From the start of his journalistic career, he seems to have acquired the gift of making and keeping friends. He could now speak as friend to friend to such a celebrity as Richard Lalor Sheil, whom he knew hitherto only by sight since the day he mitched school in Carlow. Michael Doheny and many more of those who were later to become known for their connection with the Young Ireland Movement were now being gradually added to his list of acquaintances. His work as a newspaper reporter brought him into contact with all classes of people. The leisurely progress of the Bianconi coach was conducive to conversation to while away the long hours of travel. He discussed the present and future of Ireland, and his companions on the journey reasoned about these things from what happened in the past. Gradually he acquired a rich store of local history and anecdote. To add to his knowledge he invariably sought out the oldest local inhabitant and acquired some of that local colour which he was to display to good effect in later years when he came to write his **magnum opus** the **History of Limerick**. The tragic story of Fr. Nicholas Sheehy of Clonmel, stories of the Raparrees, and many other stories of the past not quite so tragic were listened to at first hand. At the persuasion of some friends Lenihan left the **Tipperary Free Press** in 1833 and joined the staff of the **Waterford Chronicle** in the hope that his ability would have a better field and wider opportunities in his native city. The **Waterford Chronicle** had been in Catholic hands since 1826, just seven years previously, when it was acquired by the Barron brothers at a cost of £3,000. Philip Barron was a well known Gaelic Language enthusiast — surely a phenomenon amongst journalists in the early decades of the last century. The management of the **Waterford Chronicle**, however, did not long remain with Philip or his brother; for they had to close down to avoid a heavy action for libel threatened by some local magnate

whose influence with Dublin Castle was paramount. The **Chronicle** then passed into the hands of Peter Strange of Aylwardstown Castle, Co. Kilkenny, who was a nephew or cousin of Cardinal Wiseman. "During Mr. Strange's time", Maurice tells us, "and at a comparatively early age I became its editor, publishing three times a week and a weekly paper in addition, with little or no assistance. I went through my work with hearty good-will and a stout heart".

Lenihan has some interesting things to tell us in the Reminiscences concerning these early years with the **Waterford Chronicle**. In his journalistic capacity he met the celebrated English writer William Cobbett during the latter's lecture tour in Ireland in 1834. Lenihan could not fail to be impressed by a man of Cobbett's intellectual stature, a man possessed of so thorough a knowledge of history, economics and sociology — a science then almost ignored. In preparing reports of Cobbett's lectures for his newspaper he tells us: "I could not refrain from doing all that lay in my power to finish off Cobbett's lectures as far as I heard them. I liked the way so well in which he put his opinions that I felt pleasure in making a fair and favourable transcript of them in my notes, and Cobbett afterwards stated that he never got better reports of his lectures than those which I gave". It may be remarked here that Lenihan never learned any short-hand methods of reporting; his notes were entirely in long-hand. His memory however was remarkably developed, and with the aid of a few long-hand notes he could reconstruct a lengthy speech. He was frequently complimented by O'Connell for his faithful rendering of the latter's long orations. Indeed, during the following decade when O'Connell's movement for the Repeal of the Union was at its height, Lenihan had come to be regarded by all as the spokesman of

the press.

The most memorable of Lenihan's experiences during his association with the **Waterford Chronicle** were those of the tithe war. The tithe war was just gathering momentum when he joined the staff of this paper. His splendid exposition of the case for abolishing the tithes made the **Waterford Chronicle** one of the best known provincial newspapers. The work was dangerous and difficult. In after years he had many memories of this stirring period — the massacre at Carrickshock, the shootings at Fermoy, the enormous meetings of the people held to protest against the system at Mitchelstown, Tincurry, etc. He seems to have been more than a passive observer at the anti-tithe demonstrations. Perhaps he felt on occasion that it was up to him to make news for his paper by taking part in the proceedings. Mingled with tragic memories of this period are some that for Maurice were not so tragic. In a meeting at Clonmel one evening, Lalor Sheil happened to be the principal speaker. The gathering was held in a large loft near the hotel where Sheil, Lenihan and the other speakers happened to be quartered. The meeting was a great success, but unfortunately only a fraction of the audience could be admitted. At the end of his speech, Sheil left the room with Lenihan to prepare copy for the press. They had no sooner reached the door when the floor of the loft collapsed. Fearing that the crowds outside might only make the confusion now raging within the collapsed loft worse than it was, with wonderful presence of mind they began to harangue the concourse outside on the utter iniquities of the tithe system. Meantime, the discomfited audience within were able to leave the rickety building by various exits with nothing worse than a few scratches. It seems that Charles Bianconi was present in the capacity of chairman, and Lenihan naturally

lamented that his excellent friend (this is his habitual manner of referring to Bianconi) should come by any mishap. On another occasion Lenihan and a few others were travelling in a coach to attend an anti-tithe demonstration. They were hailed by a soldier (a redcoat) who asked them for a lift, and the party within the coach consented. The meeting was assembling in a field considerably nearer than they had anticipated and, when the crowds saw the redcoat within the carriage, there was an immediate call to arms or, rather, sticks and stones. Lenihan and his companions had considerable difficulty in persuading the rowdier elements that they were not police.

After an association with the staff of the **Waterford Chronicle** for eight years, Maurice Lenihan reluctantly gave up the post for a new venture in journalism. At the persuasion of many friends he applied for an secured post of editor of a newly-founded journal of liberal views — the **Limerick Reporter**. This paper was started by a Limerick gentleman, James Rutherford Brown. The date of the first issue of this paper was significant — July 12, 1829. Rutherford Brown was a liberal in politics and from the start the new paper strongly urged the Repeal of the Union, a question that had now come to the fore with the temporary settlement of the tithes question. Lenihan arrived in Limerick on June 11, 1841, but remained as editor of the **Limerick Reporter** only until March of 1843. During his last years with the **Waterford Chronicle** he seems to have toyed with the idea of relinquishing journalism for the law. His ability as a public speaker attracted the notice of some eminent lawyers, and in his Reminiscences he mentions the encouragement he received from Sir Michael O'Loghlen to desert "the Fourth Estate", as he usually describes the journalist's lot: "I happened one night to be called rather suddenly to respond to a toast and, having acquitted myself as well as I could under the circumstances, I was complimented by O'Loghlen, who intimated how good a prospect lay before me should I think well of pushing my fortunes at the bar".

Lenihan, however, decided to continue in the career on which he had first set his heart. But he had not yet found the paper or the town that gave him full satisfaction. How he ultimately found both will be told in a further article.

#### References

1. In Newfoundland in 1763, out of a total population of 13,112, there were 4,795 Irish Catholics (See article "Irish Bishops in Newfoundland in **Studies**, March 1931).

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*Tom Steele, Daniel O'Connell and The O'Gorman Mahon.*