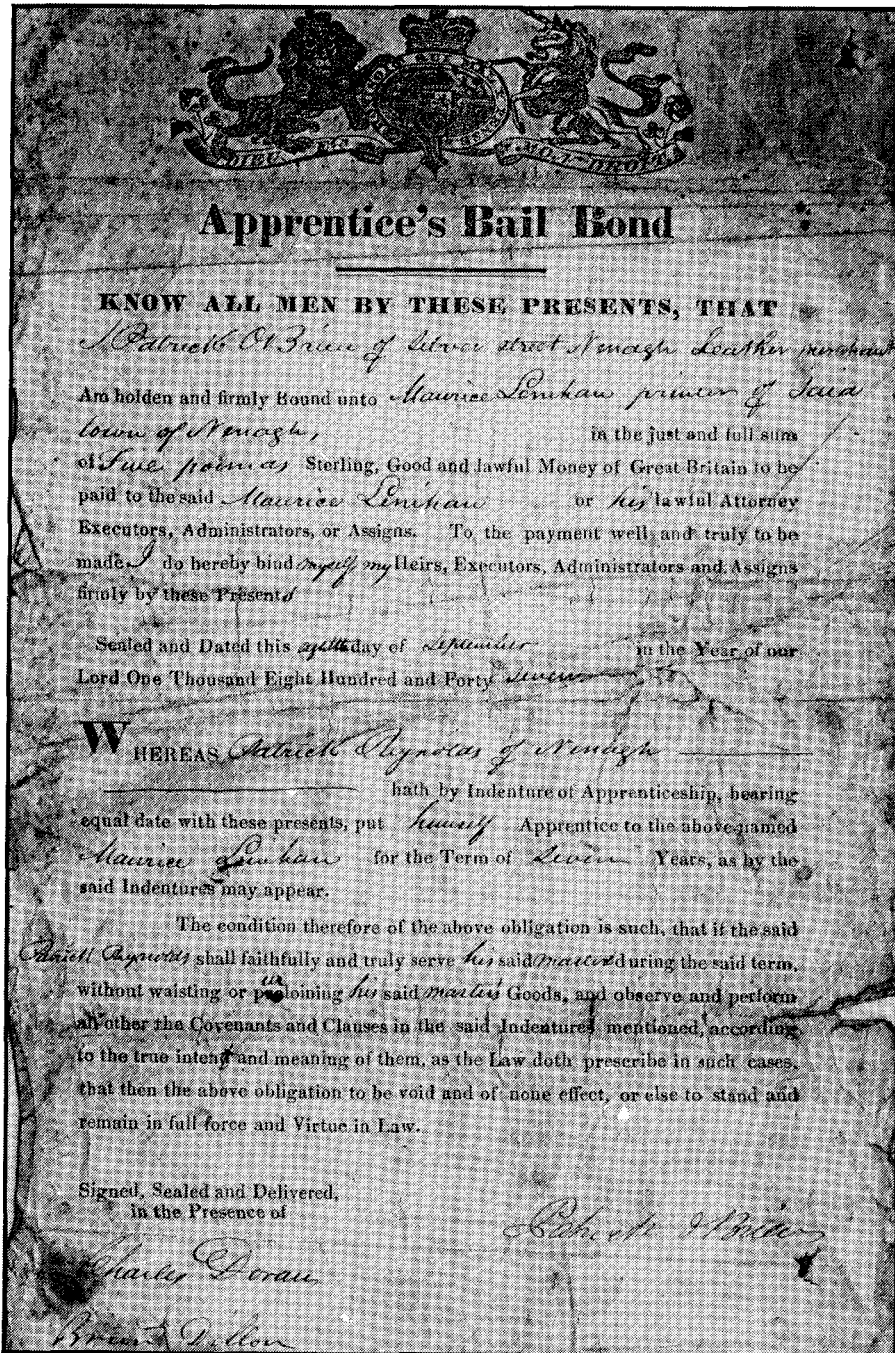




Maurice Lenihan:

HISTORIAN OF LIMERICK

Part Two
by Francis Finegan



An apprenticeship bond, signed by Maurice Lenihan in 1847.

Maurice Lenihan had not yet found the paper or the town that gave him full satisfaction. As has been said, he stayed in Limerick only about a year and a half. Yet in that short time he seems to have been fascinated with the city and its history. In later years, when he came to write his *Reminiscences*, he could draw on a fund of stories that he had picked up during his first sojourn in Limerick. It must be remembered that he was only thirty years of age when he took on the editorship of the *Limerick Reporter*, so it is not to be wondered at that, when offered the chance of a position on the more widely circulating *Cork Examiner* in March 1843, he availed himself of his new opportunity - though not without regret at leaving Limerick. His superior officer in the new venture was John Francis Maguire. His association with the *Cork Examiner* was to be short-lived. He remained only for six or seven months, yet some of his most notable journalistic work belongs to this period. His graphic reports of O'Connell's Repeal Meetings in the Southern Province were regarded as second to none; as a matter of course, Lenihan's reports were copied into the *Nation*, Davis's paper, which had been founded only the previous autumn. Many years later when Lenihan was an old man, he returned to Cork for the Fr. Mathew centenary celebrations. He recalled with pleasure that, on the occasion of this visit, he was still remembered and cordially received by his former colleagues of the *Cork Examiner* after his absence of nearly fifty years.

A few words on his friendship with Fr. Mathew will not be out of place here. We learn from the obituary memoir written by his son that: "It was during his short stay in Cork that he formed that close intimacy with the apostle of Temperance which lasted until Fr. Mathew's death. He was one day at a dinner in Cork to which Fr. Mathew had been invited. Before dinner a few young men mentioned to him that they had taken the pledge. He was rather shocked at what he considered their inconsiderate promise. But Fr. Mathew spoke a few words to him of the good he could do to others and of the reward he should have for his sacrifice. The inspiration came; then and there Lenihan knelt down in the drawingroom of his host and took the pledge, to which he remained faithful to his death. He always spoke of Fr. Mathew in words of veneration and never missed an opportunity on the platform or in the press to assert the moral and social benefits of his principles". The foregoing account is true in the main, if we change the place and the time. Lenihan met Fr. Mathew for the first time at a dinner given by his

godfather Bishop Foran of Waterford some years previously. We know that Fr. Mathew and Maurice were already fast friends before Maurice arrived in Limerick in 1841. In the Lenihan Correspondence in the National Library there is a letter with the signature missing but which can be recognised at once from the 'Reminiscences' as having been written by Fr. Mathew. It would appear that sometime towards the end of 1840 a man named Kempston, the proprietor and editor of the **Clonmel Advertiser**, made a scurrilous attack on Lenihan, and the outcome for Kempston was a sum of £300 damages and costs. It is unnecessary to inquire into Kempston's political views. He seems to have held more advanced Tory views than was customary among other Tory journals. The wretched man foresaw ruin ahead of himself and his family if he were forced to pay up. He got the bright idea of writing to Fr. Mathew to use his good offices with Lenihan to forgo what was his due, and offering a most humble apology for his misrepresentations of Lenihan's character. Fr. Mathew immediately wrote to Maurice, and of course Maurice generously gave up all claim against Kempston.

In the late autumn of 1843 Lenihan left Cork to found a newspaper of his own. Nenagh was to be the scene of his new labours. He had been prevailed upon by many people in public life, including the Bishop of Killaloe, Most Rev. Dr. Power, and Daniel O'Connell, to found a newspaper of his own in the repeal interest, and Nenagh had been suggested by them as the place most in need of such a paper. It is necessary to recall once more that Lenihan was now only thirty-two years of age, and yet his success as a journalist was such as to be acknowledged by men like O'Connell. 'The setting up of the Repeal paper at Nenagh was heralded in advance by a meeting of the "merchants, clergy and inhabitants of Nenagh held on Friday evening November 18th 1843", at which the following resolution of confidence in the new proprietor-editor was passed: "That Maurice Lenihan Esq., from his long experience at the press, his high public character and acknowledged ability, is eminently qualified to undertake this task ... and that we take this opportunity of tendering to him our entire confidence, support and cooperation, fully assured that the inhabitants of this and the neighbouring counties, to whom his name is long familiar, will evince a no less ardent zeal to sustain him".' O'Connell too, in a toast to "The Press" on the occasion of the dinner given in honour of William Smith O'Brien at Limerick early in December, gave his support to the new venture:

"We have the best and the worst press in the world. The Unionist party sets up a liar in a town, and

immediately the necessity exists for the other party to set up a truth-teller. As to the City of Limerick, 'The Limerick —' is the greatest liar that could be. I have known that liar for the last forty-six years, and it lies as fresh now as the first day. If you want to circulate a falsehood, there is no more convenient medium than 'The Limerick—'. At Nenagh they have 'The Guardian of Lies'. A more wicked or malicious print does not exist. I am happy to tell you there will be a *vindicator* soon in Nenagh which will upset the falsehoods of the 'Guardian of Lies'. The clergy and people will be avenged for the slanders perpetuated against them and for the falsehoods with which they are libelled. A particular friend of mine, a young gentleman whom I hold in high respect, is about to edit that paper in Nenagh. He is a credit to the city which produced him, as he will be to the town of his adoption. He possesses claims on our consideration and support: no man deserves them better. No man is better calculated to effect the object which he is about to take in hands. If he did not possess pre-eminent claims, I would not say it".

The role of vindicator, which O'Connell indicated for the new journal, gave Lenihan the idea of its title; so he decided to name his new paper the **Tipperary Vindicator**. Its policy was to comprise two big issues of the day:

(1) The disestablishment of the State Church and (2) the repeal of the Act of Union by constitutional means. Then, while preparations were being made for the establishment of the new paper, Maurice was married on the 29 November 1843, to Elizabeth Spain of Nenagh in the parish church of St. Mary's. It may be remarked, in passing, that he apparently did not live in Nenagh itself for a few years afterwards, as the names of none of his children are on the baptismal registers of St. Mary's.

It has just been said that Lenihan adopted, as a primary aim of his newspaper, the Repeal of the Act of Union by constitutional means. By this time it was already apparent that a brilliant group of the younger generation within the repeal movement were not content with O'Connell's *constitutional* policy. The Young Ireland group were pessimistic of O'Connell's ultimate success and were becoming more and more outspoken on their divergence of outlook. It might have been expected that Lenihan, who was of the younger generation, would have thrown in his lot with what came to be known as the Young Ireland group. Rightly or wrongly, however, he chose the plan outlined by O'Connell and vigorously defended *constitutional agitation* as the best means of furthering the repeal of the Union. He held openly by O'Con-

nell's policy and wrote strongly against what he believed to be a 'policy of impulse, uselessness and risk'. He was a pacifist in outlook, but this does not mean that his outlook was peace at any price. We shall see later that he showed fighting spirit when principles were involved.

To return to the foundation of the **Tipperary Vindicator**. Early in the New Year 1844 Lenihan received a letter from O'Connell encouraging him in the work he had just undertaken. This letter was specially treasured by Lenihan, and for many years it was to be seen framed in the offices of his newspaper after he had transferred business finally from Nenagh to Limerick.

"My Dear Lenihan,

I was extremely sorry that I have allowed the pressure of any business, even the trials, to prevent me from writing to you sooner. I did not know how to excuse myself. You may, however, be assured of this that my silence was not occasioned by any want of regard for you or any doubt of your qualifications to conduct a public newspaper. I am perfectly convinced of your trustworthiness in every particular, and if I could in any way forward your view with respect to the establishment of a Liberal paper at Nenagh, you should have my best assistance. You know that such a paper is exceedingly badly wanted there. You have a regular Tory liar established in that quarter, and it is absolutely necessary for the public interest that there should be an organ of truth and sincerity to contradict the mischief and to expose the falsehoods of the Orange rag - for that is the proper name to give it. I trust that you will obtain, as you certainly deserve, the entire support of the Catholics and of all the liberal Protestants of the neighbourhood. I know you well and long and know that you deserve the confidence and support of all the friends of civil and religious liberty.

Believe me, my dear Lenihan,

Very faithfully yours

Daniel O'Connell".

When the cleavage came between O'Connell and the Young Ireland Party, Lenihan chose to remain on O'Connell's side. His inborn sense of fairplay, however, did not allow his friendships with the members of the Young Ireland Party to undergo any change. He could see, too, that the popularity of O'Connell was already on the wane; and yet his political convictions were such that he refused to change over to the party which now was coming into favour - especially in Tipperary. He describes O'Connell's last journey to Derrynane through Nenagh: "O'Connell reached Nenagh about 2 p.m. Here he was met by Tom Steele and Maurice Lenihan and by a few other friends, who gave

him a hearty welcome. A crowd gathered about his carriage, but it was not such a crowd as had collected on former occasions of his visits to the North Riding of Tipperary. There was very little enthusiasm, no fervour, none of the spirit of former years — a sort of silence pervaded all. The work of mischief had been done by the new party". When O'Connell reached Limerick on his journey home, he was too ill to go to pay his respects to the Bishop, as had always been his custom; so he deputed Lenihan and another gentleman to do so on his behalf.

carriage decorated with placards and bunting. Even when O'Connell's shares were falling, Honest Tom always made a strong personal appeal of his own. Maurice devoted much time during this last visit to get the unfortunate man to express some belief in the principal mysteries of revealed religion, reasoning with him that so many Christians throughout the ages could not be in error while only a few faddists of the French Revolution were in the right - but all in vain.

It would be impossible on such an occasion as this to trace fully Lenihan's association with the Young Irelanders.

cal opponent. Let us hear from Lenihan himself the story as it is recorded in the *Reminiscences*:

"Doheny was arrested for a violent speech at Roscrea and was brought before the Rt. Hon. Francis Aldborough Prittie, D.L., who resided at Corville and who, after taking information against Doheny, committed him for trial at Nenagh Gaol. A strong escort of the 34th Foot conveyed him to the County Gaol of the North Riding. As the carriage turned up Peter Street, there was something like the desire for a rescue, but his guards were too many and the prisoner was committed to the custody of the gaoler.

Early next morning he sent me a note to the effect that Mr. Prittie was prepared to take bail for his appearance at the next Assizes of Nenagh. I went to Roscrea and Edward Stephen Egan of that town came with me to Corville, where Mr. Prittie received me with the utmost courtesy. We drove back to Roscrea, where bonds of £100 each were made out at Smallman's Hotel. This was 15 July, 1848. About 5.30 that evening Michael Doheny walked out of the gaol at Nenagh with Mr. Laffan a solicitor of Templemore and the present writer, cheered to the echo by thousands who had assembled about the prison, whom he addressed in a strong and eloquent speech".

At the conclusion of his speech Doheny paid this graceful tribute to Lenihan:

"I will now bid you farewell, but before I conclude permit me to take this opportunity of expressing my warmest and most sincere thanks to Mr. Maurice Lenihan of the *Tipperary Vindicator*. I sincerely thank him. The moment he heard that the charge against me was bailable, he proceeded to Roscrea to enter himself as my security and only this moment has he returned. My gratitude is the more intense towards him because he and I have differed on political matters and differed somewhat bitterly too. But with a generosity and nobleness of heart which have established for himself and his paper a high character and which have caused him to be respected most by those who know him best, he was the first man to enter my cell in that prison above and stretch the hand of friendship towards me and offer himself as my bail".

From Lenihan himself we get the remainder of the story: "He dined with me that evening at my house in Chapel Lane and then left. He hurried out of Nenagh, after addressing some words outside the town and some of the local clubs ... the O'Meara and the Fulton in particular ... which were dissolved a



"The Three Johns" left to right: John Martin, John Mitchel, Rev. John Kenyon, taken in Paris, 1866.

Of Honest Tom Steele Lenihan has much to say in the *Reminiscences* and especially during his years at Nenagh. He had known Steele, of course, since the brave days of the tithe-war. "I had frequent opportunities", he says, "of meeting Honest Tom in after life, and I became one of his most intimate friends. He spent many of the latter days of his life with me, when I had occasion to perceive how thoroughly earnest he was and how perfectly chivalrous and disinterested in all his public proceedings". Poor Steele seems to have been quite crazy during his last days. To Lenihan's embarrassment, he insisted on driving Maurice out every morning during his visit, in a

He tells us in the memoirs that he only heard Davis speak at a public meeting, but never made any personal contact with him. He was introduced to Mitchel at a dinner of the "82" club, but the matter ended at that. But he seems to have known personally, over a number of years, every other Young Irelander who came into prominence. He had many memories of the rising of 1848. In that year he took residence in a house in Chapel Lane, Nenagh. This house was later known as the "Rebels' Den", because James Stephens spent some time in hiding here after his escape at Ballingarry. It was in this house that Michael Doheny received hospitality from Lenihan, who was now his politi-

few weeks afterwards. (These clubs, O'Meara and Fulton were respectively named after the Parish Priest and Protestant Vicar of Nenagh in 1798). That night he went on towards Temple-derry, and thence he proceeded to Cashel on his way to Slievenamon. Later, £300 was offered for his capture, but he had fled the country and gone to France". Lenihan and Egan both forfeited their bail. After Doheny had escaped to France he was made the target of many calumnies in the press of the day. Nasty names like spy and thief were bandied about, but Lenihan put a stop to the despicable campaign by coming forward and defending Doheny's reputation. Doheny wrote to Lenihan from Paris thanking him for the splendid vindication of his character.

Thomas Francis Meagher was a very young man when Lenihan first made his acquaintance in the hey-day of the Repeal Movement. He was impressed by the young man's enthusiasm and verve, and he records in the *Reminiscences* that he published in the *Tipperary Vindicator* young Meagher's first political speech - not for the value of the speech itself but simply to encourage the youth. When Meagher was sentenced to death at Clonmel in September 1848, Lenihan visited him in prison the same evening and spent many hours with him in the condemned cell. Happily the sentence was commuted to transportation to Tasmania, whence Meagher escaped to America. "Before Meagher left Ireland", writes Lenihan, "he gave me his portrait and several other mementos; and since his arrival in America, where I know he will attain still higher honours, he has written me several most friendly letters. If I were asked to state my first impressions of all the Young Ireland leaders, I should unhesitatingly ascribe the first place to Thomas Francis Meagher as the most enthusiastic patriot, the most gifted orator, the most single-minded and amiably disposed young man I had ever the good fortune to know".

In the same autumn of 1848 Lenihan was a witness for the defence at the trial of Terence Bellew McManus, and on the evening of the latter's conviction he was invited by the men under sentence of death to attend a special supper which had been allowed them by the authorities of Clonmel Gaol. After the supper, when Lenihan was about to take his leave, he was presented by McManus with some autographs for himself and a few friends.: "To—, as a token of respect from a convicted traitor, who notwithstanding is still true to his native land".

Fr. Kenyon, a native of Limerick city and the parish priest of Temple-derry in 1848, was one of Maurice Lenihan's harshest critics. His attacks upon the policy of Lenihan's newspaper are in

strange contrast to Michael Doheny's defence, which we have just noticed. But again, Fr. Kenyon and Maurice Lenihan remained friends in private life. In general, Lenihan did not judge men by their politics, and his political opponents in the Young Ireland movement realised this. After the failure of the '48 rising, the Young Ireland leaders were mercilessly assailed by the Tory press. When the release of William Smith O'Brien was mooted, some of the diehard newspapers returned to the attack by stating that O'Brien (who was a Protestant) had determined on the total extermination of Protestantism in the country. Lenihan's able pen, however, speedily put an end to the slanderous campaign. It is possible that many of the Young Ireland leaders were glad that Lenihan continued as an O'Connellite, for by doing so his influence was all the more felt.

In the late autumn of 1849 James Rutherford Brown, the founder of the *Limerick Reporter* under whom Lenihan had worked six years previously, offered his business for sale. Hitherto there was not sufficient opportunity for Lenihan to start a newspaper of his own in Limerick, as the city had enough newspapers to meet all political tastes. Besides that, in the days prior to railways and telegraphs, Nenagh had been a better centre for communication with Dublin. The new methods of travel and communication, however, cancelled out any advantage that Nenagh might have possessed over Limerick. Lenihan now decided to buy up the *Limerick Reporter* and amalgamate his own paper with it. After the purchase and before leaving Nenagh for good, he reassured his newspaper readers at Nenagh and in the surrounding districts that the *Tipperary Vindicator* was not going to disappear but that, while preserving its identity, it should add to its stature in being joined with a city newspaper. The amalgamated journals would be published simultaneously in Nenagh and Limerick. In spite of the new double name of the paper - *Limerick Reporter* and *Tipperary Vindicator* - Limerick folk always referred to it as the *Reporter*, while the Tipperary folk admitted only the name of the *Vindicator*.

The new offices at Limerick seem to have been situated in Denmark Street. They were in Denmark Street, at any rate, some years later when a disastrous fire occurred which involved the lives of seven people. Lenihan refers to this accident in the last chapter of his *History*. His new residence was at 2, Patrick Street, and he was to live there for the next seventeen years. It was at 2, Patrick Street that he wrote the *History of Limerick*. When Maurice and Elizabeth Lenihan came to Limerick, they had a family of two sons and two daughters - Anastatia, James, Maurice and Mary. Five other children, all girls,

were born in Limerick. Their names were, Margaret, Elizabeth, Ellen Agnes, Harriet Patricia and Anne. It seems that the youngest daughter, Anne, died in early childhood, as no reference to her is found in family letters of the period when the children were growing up.

Glancing at random through the files of the *Limerick Reporter* of the early 'fifties, one cannot fail to be impressed by the reading matter provided by Lenihan for his customers. He believed that as a journalist he had the special mission of giving his subscribers information not merely of a passing nature - the news of the day - but of providing them with information of the kind that endures. All through life he seems to have possessed an uncanny sense for discovering men and matters that make history in their day and forever. Thus we find in an issue of his paper one week-end of 1852 the full text of Cardinal Newman's *Second Spring*. There it appears, this masterpiece of limpid English by one of the greatest masters of the language. The lectures of Cardinal Wiseman appear by weekly instalments just as they left the Cardinal's pen. For many years he gave generous space in his columns to aspiring poets; and when good verse was not forthcoming from Limerick or the vicinity, he regaled his readers with good verse published elsewhere. Some of the earliest ballads and religious verse of Michael Hogan (Bard of Thomond) found hospitality in Lenihan's paper, and it is reassuring to Limerick men to know that in later years when Hogan, mellowed by the years, laid aside his enmity for Lenihan, he began to contribute verse to the *Limerick Reporter* again. Some of the earliest of the poems of John Francis O'Donnell also found a place in the same paper.

Lenihan was scarcely three years settled in Limerick when he decided to enter public life as a member of the Municipal Council. At the elections in November 1853 he was successful in the old Patrick Street ward. The Patrick Street ward was merged the following year in the Customs House division under an act of parliament which overhauled the whole system of municipal representation hitherto prevailing. With the exception of a couple of years about the middle sixties, when he found it necessary to relinquish his seat in the corporation in order to complete his *History of Limerick*, he represented the Customs House ward division from the winter of 1854 until the winter of 1887 - when, owing to old age, he decided not to seek re-election. The story of Maurice Lenihan during the fifties and up to the middle sixties of the last century, has for its background the events that he himself has recorded for that period in his *History of Limerick*.

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