

Charlotte Grace O'Brien

by Frank Hamilton

ne hundred years ago a remarkable woman returned from New York to her home in County Limerick. Of wealthy landed stock, she cast aside the prejudices of the 1800s to open hostels for the poor in Queenstown and New York.

Charlotte Grace O'Brien, daughter of Young Irelander William Smith O'Brien, deserves to be remembered for her pioneering work in forcing shipping lines to improve conditions for emigrants.

The Rising was over. It had been a sad, pathetic failure. The leaders, hunted in the hills and rounded up by the military, heard the sentence of the courts. Death was commuted to deportation.

The cold grey stone of Kilmainham Jail contrasted with the colourful pinafore of the young girl who walked almost hidden in the folds of her mother's long black dress. It was a strange, frightening place. Her father looked defeated and lonely in that prison cell. He reached out to her mother and whispered.

"Go back to our estate, back to the poor ... back to our broken land".

A few days later, William Smith O'Brien, one of the landed gentry, ex-Member of Parliament, and now an Irish deportee, boarded the prison ship for Tasmania.

In the warmth of that July morning in 1849, there were no emotional speeches, no stirring shouts from supporters. There were no green uniforms of the Young Ireland Party. There was only the failure of an idea, and the dismal end of a heart-breaking Rebellion.

Mother and child went back to the broken land. The child was only three years old, but she was to remember. The ravages of the 1847 Famine were still visible. The ruined houses, the deserted and decaying farms, were mute witness to that tragedy as the Smith O'Briens made their way home to Cahirmoyle in the County Limerick.

Throughout the Kingdom of Thomond their ancestors had ruled. The O'Brien traced an unbroken line back to Brian Boru, High King of All Ireland, born in 926 A.D. In the light of the evening they returned to County Limerick. For the child Charlotte Grace O'Brien, seven long years were to pass before she again saw her father. He was allowed return to Ireland in 1856. For those seven years she and her brothers spent many happy hours visiting the family ancestral seat at Dromoland, in County Clare.

It was the land they once had ruled. Their inheritance was one of parliamentary representation, social prominence and wealthy landlordism. William Smith O'Brien had changed all that by his actions. A Protestant, he had warned the British Parliament about unrest in Ireland, sided with the Liberator Daniel O'Connell, and led the Young Ireland Party.

In the weary years of his exile, there was the social disgrace and hostile rejection of polite society. Before his revolt, however, Smith O'Brien had taken the precaution to sign his land and property over to his wife and family to prevent legal confiscation.

His eldest son, Edward Smith O'Brien, headed the family in 1856 when his father was allowed to return to Ireland. In 1863, Edward married Mary Spring Rice of Mount Trenchard, Foynes, County Limerick, and installed her as mistress of the family home at Cahirmoyle.

Father and son seldom spoke to each other. Charlotte Grace O'Brien endeavoured to act as peacemaker and also nursed her ailing father. The man who had led the Young Ireland Party had no home. He travelled from hotel to hotel, growing weaker, and often travelling abroad.

Charlotte Grace O'Brien continued to live in Cahirmoyle, with her brother Edward and his wife Mary. In 1864, a child was born to Mary, but her husband Edward had to hurry away after a mere glimpse of his young daughter to catch a boat for Wales and kneel at his father's deathbed. Four years later, tragedy struck again when Mary died, leaving three young children. Charlotte Grace O'Brien became "mother" to the children. She also began to write about nature, the changing seasons and the political climate.

In Limerick she saw the formation of the Redemptorist Confraternity. It was said that the city was going through a time of political discussion and ferment. The Fenian Movement had a wide appeal, and it was remarked that there appeared to be differences between many of the clergy and the movement. The Confraternity, it was claimed, had done much to win back men who had gone astray in political conviction.

Political conviction also came to Charlotte Grace O'Brien. It was a conviction born of social reality and the bitterness of experience. From the "Big House", she still met and mingled with

the poor of the land and talked with them about the state of the country.

Her years of caring for the young O'Brien children were crowded and packed with memorable incidents. Gradually they left the family home to continue their studies in England. At 34 years of age, when they had all departed, she faced a lonely future. She had devoted her life to the children, to the home at Cahirmoyle. She now had to shape her own future. However, the proud, well-built woman began to go deaf and was threatened with isolation by her affliction. Instead of passively accepting this handicap, Charlotte embarked on a new campaign to help the poor, the poor of the broken land, who were now emigrating in massive numbers to the New World.

She distrusted the motives and actions of the British government and in her way articulated the hopes of the native Irish. The Land War grew bitter and violence led to yet more repression. The agonising trail from the fields and valleys began. It led to the emigrant ships and cruel journeys across the Atlantic to the teeming cities of Boston or New York.

In Ireland the military and the constabulary tramped through the countryside with legal writs and Crown summonses to bring on the battering ram, barricade the doors and windows, and evict the occupants of small thatched houses.

Ahead lay the great unknown, the wonders of the new world and the promise of gold-paved streets. The cold reality was different. The city slums took the wretched, the hungry, the evicted, and led them from one form of cruelty into another more wicked desperation.

Long before and after the Famine, the emigrant trade was a flourishing one. In her youth Charlotte Grace O'Brien had seen the ships sail down the Shannon from Limerick. The conditions were like prison ships, with hundreds of poor people, men women and children, huddled together without light, without air and wallowing in filth.

"In many ships the food is seldom cooked sufficiently. The beds were filthy and teemed with all abominations and were never aired on deck. The narrow space between the berths and cargo was never washed or scraped until the day before quarantine when all hands were required to scrub up and put on a fair face for the Doctor and Inspector.



Charlotte O'Brien when superintendent of the Emigrants' Home.

"No moral restraint was attempted. The voice of prayer was never heard and drunkenness and all the ruffianly debasement was not discouraged because it was very profitable for the Captain who traded in the grog. The emigrants endured these conditions, languished in disease and fever, passed away without the reassurances of spiritual consolation and were buried at sea without the rites of Church".

The evicted emigrants came from workhouses. "The Guardians have sent by the ship "Governor" from Limerick, 120 inmates of the Workhouse. Chiefly females, there being only eleven children and no adult males, and the females being with few exceptions, single and ablebodied and well fitted for farm or household service²."

"Emigration Office, Quebec. The Chief Emigration Agent in a letter to the Newcastle West Union, County Limerick, wrote: 'Already we have had the arrival of 248 paupers chiefly female, from Nenagh and Kilrush. They received 15 shillings each on landing and 200 proceeded direct to Toronto at

an expenditure of 12 shillings each'.³"

The "paupers" were to find a champion in Charlotte Grace O'Brien. In 1881 she began the work for which her name is remembered. On a visit to the port of Queenstown, she inspected some of the ships used in the emigrant trade. She was shocked by conditions. All sexes and all ages were huddled together. She began a campaign to improve the lot of the young emigrants. Her reports and writings in the *Pall Mall Gazette* aroused the liberal conscience and led to Parliamentary questions on the activities of the large shipping lines.

An aspect of the emigrant trail which gravely concerned Charlotte was the lack of protection afforded to young girls emigrating to the cities of America.

She urged the Catholic Church to open a hostel for emigrants at Queenstown, but the Church was slow to respond. So Charlotte registered herself as a lodging-house keeper and bought a large house capable of accommodating over 100 people. It was the beginning of her pioneering

work for the emigrants in general, and for young girls in particular.

Her next mission was to cross the Atlantic and set up a similar reception hostel in New York. When she arrived in that great city, Charlotte did not book into a fashionable hotel. Instead, she took a room in a tenement house and lived amongst the poor Irish.

"A month spent in New York gave me a full insight into the lives of the Irish emigrants and the fate of the innumerable unprotected girls who were swarming through my own hands at Queenstown⁴."

During her campaign she became friendly with leading Catholic Church figures. She was impressed by the control the priest had over the poor emigrants. She put forward the idea that a chaplain should make the journey on each Atlantic voyage.

The shipping lines, under pressure from her campaign, made improvements in the facilities. Berths were divided and washing bowls provided for steerage passengers. The Queenstown hostel remained open for three years and during that time the shipping lines made the passage more comfortable for emigrants.

Her work in America consisted of making people more aware of the emigrant problem and founding migrant Aid Societies. Her deafness did not interfere with her work, but by 1885 her strength was almost exhausted. Her campaign slipped from the headlines, and she quietly returned to County Limerick, to her dogs and ponies, her memories and loneliness.

She wrote prose and poems and corresponded with her friends. Into the 1890s she re-examined her religious beliefs and became a Catholic. Her last, failing years were spent making friends with people like Douglas Hyde and those in the Gaelic League Movement. She supported the growing nationalism, but died peacefully, aged 62 years, in 1908 long before the red blood of another revolution stained the green land.

She, too, had rebelled. It was a rebellion not of anger but of love, the love this woman had so unselfishly given to the welfare of emigrants from the broken land.

She was only a child when the words of her father had been whispered in Kilmaham Jail. "Go back to our estate, back to the poor ... back to our broken land⁵."

Charlotte Grace O'Brien had rallied to the cause and had worked to heal the broken land.

REFERENCES

1. From the report of Stephen de Vere, 1848.
2. From *The Changing Face of Limerick*, by Frank Hamilton, Robbie Press, 1977.
3. From *The Changing Face of Limerick*, by Frank Hamilton, Robbie Press, 1977.
4. From a letter to her sister-in-law.
5. From *A Memoir*, by Stephen Gwynn, Dublin, 1909.