

The Liberator and the Limerick ladies

by James Doherty

Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, and his son, John, M.P. for Limerick from 1847 to 1851, involved themselves in many arguments in their time. Few of their public quarrels can have been as curious as the one recounted below which, we shall see, indirectly involved Limerick and its female population.

The controversy arose during the visit to Ireland of "The Times Commissioner", as he was popularly known. The Commissioner sent to Ireland by the London **Times** was Thomas Campbell Foster (1813-82) who had conducted similar investigations in Wales and Scotland. The entire series of letters which appeared in the **Times** from August 1845 until January 1846 was published as "Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland" by Thomas Campbell Foster, Esq., of the Middle Temple, Barrister-at-Law ("The Times Commissioner"). It is a monument to the literary and perambulatory talents of the author.

Campbell Foster stated that his purpose in visiting Ireland was "to lay before the public, in a readable form, my impressions during a tour through Ireland, and to state what, of the many prevailing opinions and anomalies, on careful observation, appeared to me to be the true condition of the Irish people".

The **Times**, for its part, when introducing him to its readers, noted that the Commissioner would have his enemies. It was a prescient remark. It was inevitable that his reports on Ireland would attract the attention of the Liberator and his formidable clan, watchdogs of nationalist Ireland. Their invective knew no bounds when, writing on 10 November 1845, after visiting the O'Connell estate, the Commissioner castigated the ageing Liberator as one of the worst landlords in the Kingdom.

But the O'Connells had already launched their attack as early as 29 September. On that occasion father and son appear to have been equally involved, to the extent, it would appear, of repeating each other. Addressing the Repeal Association at Conciliation Hall, John O'Connell dubbed Campbell Foster the "gutter Commissioner". Having raised many laughs at the Commissioner's expense, the younger O'Connell informed his audience that Foster had called Irish women "ugly".

As we shall see below, by the time he arrived in Limerick, this accusation of such lack of gallantry was still rankling.

Where did the O'Connells get their ammunition for such a charge? If we accept the Commissioner's version, we may learn something about the O'Connells as political in-fighters. According to the Commissioner, they had deliberately misinterpreted a contrast which he had drawn between Leitrim ("dirt, disorder, wretched poverty, rags and the rudest system of cultivation") and Fermanagh ("cleanliness and order, and the people, both men and women, were well dressed, tall and good-looking"). They would appear to have taken this to indicate Foster's view of women outside of Ulster as "ugly".

Campbell Foster seems to have been impressed by the physical appearance of Limerick. His letter, dated 23 October 1845, became Letter XXI of the published collection. In part it reads as follows:

"Without entering into any lengthened description of the city of Limerick, it will be enough, perhaps, to state that it is a large, well built, and evidently thriving town. It possesses wide and straight streets - the first instance I have yet met with of this being the character of any town in the west of Ireland - many handsome public buildings, some manufactories of lace, gloves, and brushes, most extensive flour-mills, and a very large 'pig factory', as it is called, at which 1,000,000 pigs a year are slaughtered. The Shannon, which is here a magnificent river, passes through the town, which is built on either side of its banks. A handsome bridge, designed by Nimmo, and several other bridges, connect each portion of the town. A good deal of shipping and small craft find sufficient commerce for employment, and the one dock which exists is very inadequate for the trade. A number of men are seen idling about the streets, who might, it is said, obtain work for 1s (5p) a day, which they refuse; still, however, an air of commercial activity and prosperity pervades the place.

The brush factory employs about 300 men, who receive from £1 to

30s (£1.50p) a week wages, and many of the brushes are sent to London. When it is considered that 14lb. of potatoes may be purchased for 2d. or 3d., according to the market, and that this is the chief food, this rate of wages is high, as compared with that of most English towns.

The lace factories, give employment to about 1,000 girls; the most extensive of these factories - that carried on by Messrs. Greaves - employs 240 girls, who receive on average 3s.6d. (17½p) a week each. Very beautiful lace is made at this factory, on an invention of the proprietors, for which they obtained a prize of a silver medal at the exhibition of Irish manufactures in 1844; it is similar in appearance to the finest Brussels lace, and Her Majesty is said to have obtained several specimens of it.

The 'pig factory', and the extensive flour-mills of Messrs. Russell, also give a great amount of employment and encouragement to trade. The glove manufacture is falling off, from the gloves manufactured not maintaining their former character".

Still clearly smarting from the gibes of the O'Connells over their version of his assessment of the relative charms of Hibernian womanhood, the Commissioner selected the women of Limerick as the weapons with which to refute the charges of ungallantry directed against him. He continued:

"The town and county of Limerick have also obtained much celebrity for their pretty women. I had the opportunity yesterday of being present at a charitable bazaar held in the town, and certainly the number of handsome women and the female beauty assembled there, maintained this character, and fully equalled in these respects any similar assemblage which I have seen in any part of England".

Thus he refuted the charges of the O'Connells. From Limerick he moved on to Tipperary and then to the southwest where, as noted above, he launched a full broadside against the O'Connells for the management of their estates.

On the above complimentary note we can leave the Commissioner to his rambles and the O'Connells to one of the more peculiar of the many controversies in which they became embroiled.