

Sir Peter Tait



One of the great success stories of the last century was the rise of Peter Tait from the status of poor pedlar to that of philanthropist, innovator extraordinary, merchant prince, shipowner, knight, alderman, thrice mayor of Limerick and – in a descending order of importance – aspiring parliamentarian. It is a story of courage, outstanding ability, ambition and enterprise of a rare order.

Tait was born in 1818 in the Shetland Islands, either in Lerwick or the rural district of Tingwall. The exact location has not been established. The name of his residence on Poynder's Road, in London, was "Tingwall House" and this may be a pointer to his birthplace. He came to Limerick in his early teens and, according to some writers, he may have thought he had landed in America, for there was much emigration from Scotland and its isles then, though this is most unlikely, for young Tait was a brighter boy than many others of his age. However, it is quite possible that he may have intended to use Limerick as a jumping-off ground for the Americas.

Apprentice

Young Tait was not a person content to depend on the charity of others, especially his family, who appear to have been in fair circumstances, so he found himself a job as an apprentice in the drapery firm of Cumine and Mitchell, in George's (O'Connell) Street. The proprietors of this firm were both Scots, and even if this connection were not enough to find favour between employer and employee, there was always a preference for Scots in the drapery trade.

During the last century, apprentices resided in the large drapery establishments – a kind of 'bed to work' regime. Tait was happy enough with the system until he was given notice that his services would not be required during the winter months. Apparently those apprentices who were last in were first out during the slack period. Tait offered to work without pay and for his bread and board only, but to no purpose.

Nothing daunted, the out-of-work apprentice bought himself a hawker's basket and a quantity of small haberdashery items and started off on a career as a pedlar. The astute young businessman noticed that the many sailors disembarking at the harbour – Arthur's Quay at that time – were always in need of shirts, so he started buying shirts in the big drapery stores and selling them at a small profit along the quays. The success of this strategy seems to have sharpened his sense of enterprise and given a flip to his ambitions, for after a few months, he

by Kevin Hannan

procured a Singer sewing machine – new on the market – and employed a woman to make the shirts.

Big Business

In 1850 he made his first move towards big business when he rented rooms in Bedford Row and employed a number of women making the shirts. These he designed and cut himself, having studied the art of garment draftmanship. The business prospered to a surprising degree. After three years of hard work and much success, he placed an advertisement in the *Limerick Chronicle* seeking applications in his rapidly expanding shirt manufactory for 500 extra workers. This move was made necessary by an order from the War Office in London to make shirts for the troops engaged in the Crimean War. It is believed that the first to wear the Limerick

shirts were the 'C' Troop of the 8th. Royal Irish Hussars. The troops were cut to pieces the following year in the famous charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, when they were led into 'the valley of death' by Viscount Fitzgibbon of Mountshannon, Castleconnell.

Tait was now on the 'pig's back', and well on the way towards independence and prosperity for life. He had devised an unprecedented system of mass producing the garments. Heretofore all garments were individually made; the same operator making-up the garment completely, a tedious and time-devouring method. Tait's system (which was later copied by Henry Ford in his motor car manufactory) was to revolutionise clothing manufacture – indeed all kinds of manufacture – on a large scale by having each of a number of workers completing one simple operation. By the time the garment reached the last operator, it only required the finishing touches. Thus was born the 'production line'.



Portrait of Peter Tait, Mayor of Limerick, 1866-68.

Marriage

Tait became an integral part of the social scene when he married Rose Abraham, who lived at "Fort Prospect" (near Janesboro). The marriage took place in the Independent Chapel in Bedford Row. This church was later adapted as a cinema - the well known "Grand Central". The new Mrs. Tait did not have to move far away from her old home, for her husband had purchased the beautiful "South Hill House", not far from "Fort Prospect". This was a splendid residence on an eminence in the southern suburbs of the city and affording panoramic views of the Clare hills. As proof that his success never went to his head, Tait's proudest possession (other than his wife) was the basket which he carried through the streets and lanes of the city hawking his simple merchandise. This he had hanging by white silk ribbons in his porch in "South Hill" as a memento of his hard times.

Unfortunately, this curio was destroyed in a fire which caused considerable damage to the house in 1863. The Taites resided in one of the Tontine houses in Castleconnell during the repairs of the fire damage.

The Production Line

Tait next applied his mass production system to the fast manufacture of boots for the armed forces. After his first big order was rejected on the grounds of inferior quality, the merchandise was accepted, after Tait had insisted on a re-examination of the product. To cope with his ever-expanding enterprise, Tait rented more spacious accommodation in Lord Edward Street. In due course he erected a modern factory on the site, the largest ever in the city.

By this time Tait's confidence had swelled up to such an extent that he petitioned the British War Office, through the Lord Lieutenant in Dublin, requesting an order for complete army uniforms. At that time equipping a regiment with uniforms was a ponderous task; every item had to be made by hand by individual tailors. This fact must have swayed the War Office, for Tait was soon established as the official supplier of uniforms to the British army.

Tait's factory, now known as "The Army Clothing Factory", employed more than a thousand workers at reasonable wages. It generated relative prosperity among the working class and was a far cry from the soul-destroying slavery of the lace factories. It also provided a useful spin-off for local shopkeepers.

American Civil War

After the Crimean War, when the demands for British army uniforms slackened off, Tait went further afield to Canada and America. He was almost encumbered with orders. He received massive commissions from the Canadian army and the Confederate forces down south. To assist in the transport of uniforms to America, Tait used the three



Stained glass window at Southill House, home of Peter Tait.

ships, "The Kelpie", "The Evelyn" and "The Elvie", which formed his own transatlantic fleet.

In 1864 he revived the flax spinning industry in Limerick, re-opening the old factory at Lansdowne which had been established by the Russell family in 1851. This industry proved a great boon to the people of Thomondgate for five years. It closed in 1869 due to a general depression in the market.

In 1865 Tait became an Alderman in the Limerick Corporation. In the same year he purchased a residence in London, but still maintained his South Hill home. He also opened factories in Leeds and London to cater for his now almost worldwide clientele.

Around this period Tait's wholehearted benevolence included monetary assistance to the perpetually down-at-heel Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, a spontaneous act of charity that saved him

from the poison pen of the vitriolic poet, who had lampooned in his bitter satires, many respectable citizens, including John Rickard Tinsley, John Norris Russell and his brothers, James Bannatyne and many others. The Bard, who hated all merchants since his days working as a labourer in Russell's mills, made a notable exception of Tait by writing some complimentary verses about him.

Honours

In 1850 the firm from which Tait had been turfed out into the streets and lanes of the city was taken over by George Cannock and John Arnott, and eight years afterwards, when Arnott resigned his partnership, Tait became the new partner. Thereafter the firm became known as "Cannock and Tait". No doubt it was a thrilling experience for Tait to be back as part-owner of the firm where he had worked as an apprentice draper.



The premises of Wm. Todd & Co., in the mid-nineteenth century.

At that time Tait started a small glove-making department in Cannock's premises, but was not successful.

Tait's ships had done trojan work supplying uniforms to his customers at the other side of the Atlantic. The "Evelyn" succeeded in reaching the blockaded ports with uniforms for the Confederate forces and returned loaded with cotton. When this news reached the city, Tait was feted, and the citizens went wild with delight. Councillor T.C. Phayer made the following proposal at a Town Council meeting: "In acknowledgement of services rendered by Alderman Tait to this city, by the establishment of his great military clothing factory and flax factory, and drawing attention to the capabilities of our noble river by the starting of his steam vessels to America, we thereby request him to accept the office of Mayor for all the employment he has given the city". Tait was duly elected mayor for three consecutive years, 1865/66/67.

During the last year of his mayoralty, Tait launched a shipping service, in conjunction with the Belgian Government, between Ostend and Brazil. Later the service was extended to many European and American ports. This concern was known by the grandiose title: "The London, Belgian and River Plate Steamship Company".

Tait's Clock

In that year also the famous Tait Clock was finished in Baker Place, a unique event, as the Lord Mayor of Dublin,

(Limerickman William Lane Joynt), said in the course of an address to the great gathering at the handing-over ceremony: "I assure you I feel the deepest pride and satisfaction in being present on this interesting occasion, which reflects much credit on those whose generosity is manifested in this testimonial, a splendid and enduring proof of their gratitude, and of their kindness towards the Mayor (Peter Tait), as it is also proof of his signal services to his fellow citizens And I am

proud that you have departed from a time honoured principle, that you have not waited 'til death laid him low to inscribe on some tombstone a record of his virtues and generosity, but in his lifetime as an encouragement to him to nobler virtues and as a tribute to his greatness".

The clock-tower was designed by the City Architect, William Corbett, who also designed the pedestal for the Treaty Stone. The builder was Mr. Connolly and the limestone was quarried in Garryowen.



Southill House, the home of Peter Tait.

The Hustings

The following year Tait was knighted, and later in the same year he made the greatest mistake of his life by allowing himself to be inveigled into parliamentary politics, standing as a Tory against the Liberals, Francis Russell and George Gavin. A second candidate stood against the Liberals in that election. He was the nationalist journalist, Richard Pigot, who later became notorious as the forger of the Parnell London *Times*.

It was bad enough for Tait to risk losing many of his friends and supporters by openly declaring his support for the Tories, but the campaign, one of the dirtiest ever fought in the city, was fraught with faction fighting, bribery, serious damage to property and even murder; a man named John Hill lost his life in a fight between rival mobs in – of all places – Baker Place, in the shadow of the recently erected, beautiful memorial clock. Even the Bard of Thomond was brought into the fray by liberally pillorying the leading citizens who were opposed to Tait's political opinions. After all the turmoil, Tait was defeated, an event which marked the beginning of the decline in his fortunes.

Many citizens were flabbergasted by Tait's association with the Tories – long-time enemies of all nationalist ideals – and his opposition to the two Liberal candidates, who were pledged to support Gladstone's movement to disestablish the Protestant Church in Ireland. Almost overnight, people turned against him and made their hostility known in many ways, so much so that he was so conscious of his unpopularity that he resigned the mayoralty on 1 December, 1868.

The South Hill Scandal

Added to these misfortunes were the smarting after-effects of the affair which came to be known as "The South Hill Scandal", an affair that hinged around a maid servant named Ellen Hinchey at "South Hill", and Tait's ne'er-do-well brother, John. According to a contemporary account, "Hinchey became rather intimate with Tait's brother, which led to the birth of a child". Working class girls such as Ellen Hinchey who became pregnant outside of marriage in those days usually ended up in the Union Workhouse doing penance in worse than sackcloth-and-ashes, or serving a miserable life of hard labour and reparation as a "penitent" in the Good Shepherd Convent where her 'sin' would never be forgiven. But this was not the case on this occasion. All possible steps were taken to shield the Tait household from disgrace by sending the mother and child as far away from South Hill House as possible. But the Tait's and their accomplices reckoned without those who differed from Sir Peter's political philosophy. The affair obviously became a *cause celebre* in local political circles and was exploited by Tait's political opponents to bring down the maximum amount of public embarrassment on his head.

The *Limerick Chronicle* took a



Tait's Clock, at the turn of the century.

sympathetic view of Tait's treatment of Ellen Hinchey and placed all the blame at the maid's door. According to the newspaper, Peter Tait, then Mayor of Limerick, only became aware of the situation some eight months after the child was born. The *Chronicle* published a report on an investigation, held in Limerick Lunatic Asylum, on 4 February, 1868, and commented:

"The Mayor provided her with money and had the child sent to a convent to be brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. He gave the girl an allowance of £1 a week, at the same time placing her in a position in London to enable her to have access to the child whenever she pleased. But possessed of an ungovernable passion, she gave so much annoyance to the Rev. Mother Superior at the Convent of Saint Vincent de Paul, where the child was placed, that the lady would not have the woman annoying her in the outrageous manner she did, and gave back the child to those from whom she received it".

The investigation showed Ellen Hinchey to be a handful who sorely tried

the patience of all those with whom she came into contact, and went on to give a glowing account of Peter Tait's benevolence. The *Chronicle* went on:

Next she was sent to New York to her brother, through an arrangement with Dr. Butler, and the sum of £30 remitted to the Roman Catholic Bishop there. But the woman's conduct there became so scandalously outrageous that the Archbishop in New York gave her up the money to get rid of her. The next that was heard of the woman was her return to Limerick and giving annoyance to the Mayor and his family, making him miserable, and compelling him to have persons on the look out for her, so as to guard against her wiles. Let it be remembered that the child had to be taken from the woman to prevent her from murdering it, which she attempted to do in London, as was proved at the investigation. What greater kindness could be done to any unfortunate female than was exhibited by the Mayor, who, throughout sought to save her character before the world and to veil her shame? In some unaccountable way the Mayor



A mid-nineteenth century drawing of George (now O'Connell) Street.

secured the enmity of some parties who had attempted to rob him of his peace of mind, and, if possible, to destroy his moral character and drive him from the city. Has anything so disgraceful occurred in the annals of Limerick as the hunting to death of the Mayor, to gratify a shockingly revengeful feeling? If the Mayor had taken the child and sent it adrift in the world, or placed it in some Protestant institution to be brought up in the established Church there might be some excuse for the proceedings that had taken place; but he did the contrary. He did all he could to shield the wretched woman from the shame such conduct as hers brings on the guilty members of her sex. While she had no claim whatsoever on him, his generosity to her seems to have been outstanding.

The article also records the 'certification' of Ellen Hinchey by doctors Gelston and Fitzgerald. So Ellen Hinchey was simply taken out of circulation without the condemnation of judge or jury. All through the affair her 'sin' was aggravated in every quarter, while the villain of the piece, John Tait, who was hardly mentioned in the whole affair, simply vanished from the scene. If the girl's state of mind was such as to warrant locking her up in the lunatic asylum, the degree of responsibility of the father of the child for her mental condition was not mentioned.

Though it is not easy to make a judgement on the affair at this stage, it could, perhaps, be said that Peter Tait treated Miss Hinchey as well as could be expected, given the social class attitudes of the day. However, it was held by many

intelligent observers at the time that Ellen Hinchey was perfectly sane, and that her final incarceration in the lunatic asylum resulted from the actions of those who spitefully exploited her clandestine association with Tait's brother to bring all the odium possible on Peter Tait.

Collapse

Shortly after his set-back at the hustings, Tait saw the collapse of his shipping empire, a tragedy some writers attributed to his preoccupation with politics and the consequent neglect of his business interests. His partner in the River Plate Company, George Cannock, had to sell much of his property to meet his creditor's demands and the Clothing Factory was closed for a short time pending the presentation of the liquidator's statement.

Tait's preoccupation with a passionate desire for a seat in parliament took pride of place over his business interests. Furthermore, his unique manufacturing systems had been eagerly adopted by rival manufacturers in England, particularly in London and Leeds. In 1871 he was defeated in a bye-election. Then he returned to his native Shetland to contest a bye-election there. This time he changed his colours and stood as a Liberal. But how could he win? Many of his people were jealous of his success in business, and his opponent, Samuel Laing, accused him of being a bad Protestant. In his first attempt at election in Limerick he was accused of being too much of a Protestant by standing as a Conservative! His final bid for parliamentary honours was made in Limerick in 1874, when he stood as a Liberal/Home Rule candidate. But it was a

belated effort to conciliate the trust of the nationalist-minded people; as well as that, he was up against two of the most popular Home-rulers in the country, Isaac Butt and Richard O'Shaughnessy.

After this final disappointment at the hustings, Tait resided in London. The Limerick clothing factory suffered through his continued absence. His son, Robert, and brother-in-law, William Abraham, were hopelessly at sea in running the business, which continued to decline until it closed in 1875. It re-opened again in 1877 under new management and continued to operate uninterrupted until it closed in the 1970s.

For the next 15 years little or nothing was heard of Tait, except whisperings of his possible whereabouts now and again. In 1890 the sad news reached the city that he had died at the Hotel de France, Batoum, in South Russia. It was reported that he was trying to set up a cigarette manufactory in Salonica. This would have been some achievement for a man of 82, for that was the age given in the death notice in the *London Times*, of 18 December, 1890.

He left fifty pounds to the world, only a little more than the three half-crowns he brought to Limerick nearly 70 years before!

SOURCES

Limerick Chronicle files.
Letters of Charles Tait.
Memoir of Margaret Laing.
Memoir of Isla Baring.
'Cannock's': A Social and Economic of the Limerick Company from 1840-1930 by Frances Twomey, Limerick City Library.