At the age of twenty-two, William Monsell inherited the family properties, a goodly inheritance. The heart of the estates was the property at Tervoe and Carrigogunnell, consisting of about 600 acres. Tervoe House had only just been completed, and was in excellent repair. It was filled with beautiful furniture, pictures, silverware, glassware and other objets d'art. The rest of the lands consisted of properties in the parishes of Monasteranenagh and Ballycahane, near Croom, an estate at Athlacca and another at Bruree, all in County Limerick. In County Clare, he drew rents from lands in Cratloe and Quin. There were properties in Limerick City, including a house at St. John's Square, as well as a former town house in Kildare Street, Dublin, which was now leased, and used as a hotel. Monsell's annual income at the time of his coming into this agglomeration was estimated at £3,881, which is equivalent in present day purchasing power to about £230,000.

Monsell was thus one of the County Limerick's most eligible bachelors. Jane Austen has written that "it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Monsell had already made his choice when he inherited Tervoe. He first paid court to Lady Anna Maria Charlotte Wyndham-Quin (1814-1855) in 1834. She was the only daughter of Windham Henry, 2nd Earl of Dunraven (1782-1850) and his wife, the former Caroline Wyndham (1790-1870). Lord Dunraven was one of the wealthiest men in Ireland, and was somewhat concerned about having Monsell, who was much his social inferior, for a son-in-law. He laboriously calculated William's income, and made some effort to put him off, but after two years, he eventually gave his consent to the happy couple. William and Anna Maria were married in the parish church in Adare on 12th August, 1836. Six days later, Anna Maria's brother, Edwin, Viscount Adare (1812-1871) was married to Augusta Goidl, his sister's closest friend.

The marriage of William and Anna Maria was a very successful one. Their love and devotion to each other never dimmed throughout the eighteen years that they were together. Anna Maria was: beautiful and a pleasant young woman and an ideal companion for the serious and conscientious landlord. The newly-weds were young and very much in love, and were part of a large network of family and friends that gave them enormous emotional security and satisfaction. Monsell's mother, Olivia remarried in 1833, his father having died in 1824. Her second husband was John Cromie (1786-1875) of Cromore House, Port Stewart, Co. Derry. Cromie had been married twice before and married a fourth wife, following Olivia's death in 1859. He was a benevolent, though autocratic landlord who dominated the town of Port Stewart, which he largely owned. He and Olivia were very happy together, and her death on 1 January, 1859, filled both husband and her son with great sorrow.

Monsell's uncle, Archdeacon Thomas Monsell, lived a few miles from the Cromies. His residence was at Dunboe House, just outside Castlerock, Co. Derry, where he presided over a family, consisting of his wife, three sons and a...
William Monsell as a young man. Photograph by Michael Martin.

daughter. His son, John Samuel Bewley Monsell (1814-1875), also a clergyman, was one of the great hymn-writers of the Victorian age. Another son, Charles (1815-1851), was also ordained. William and Anna Maria frequently visited Co. Derry and spent many long and happy weeks with their relatives there.

In Co. Limerick, the Monsells were particularly friendly with the Wyndham-Quins. Monsell’s closest friend was his brother-in-law, Edwin, Viscount Adare (who succeeded his father as 3rd Earl of Dunraven in 1850). They collaborated on many projects, and were rendered more intimate by the closeness that existed between their respective wives. The Dunraven family were extremely rich. Their main residence in Ireland was Adare Manor, set in the picturesque village of Adare, about ten miles from Tervoe. They also had an immense property in Glamorganshire, South Wales, and in Gloucestershire. Dunraven Castle and Cleeve Court, respectively, were their country residences on these estates. They also had a town house at 94 Eaton Square in London’s fashionable Belgravia (which they disposed of in 1849). The Monsells visited all these palatial houses and were especially fond of Dunraven Castle.

The de Vere family were also part of the group. Their country seat was at Curraghchase, on the road from Limerick to Askeaton. Sir Aubrey de Vere (1788-1846) and his wife had five sons and three daughters. Three of their sons, Sir Vere (1808-1880), Sir Stephen (1812-1904) and Aubrey (1814-1902), were close to Monsell. The O’Briens, who lived at Dromoland Castle, Newmarket-on-Fergus, were also his friends. Sir Edward O’Brien (1773-1837) and his wife had five sons and four daughters. His daughter, Harriet (1803-1884), succeeded his father as 3rd Earl of Dromore Castle, near Adare, Co. Limerick and became famous as one of the leaders of the Young Ireland movement. A distant cousin was Augustus Stafford O’Brien (1811-1883), who lived at Cralloe Woods House, across the Shannon Estuary from Tervoe House, and also at Blatherwicke House, in Northamptonshire.

Two other families who lived nearby were more closely connected to the de Veres than to the Monsells. The most prominent were the Perys, Earls of Limerick, who lived at Limerick House, Henry Street, Limerick, and later at Dromore Castle, near Pallaskenry. The Spring Rice family resided at Mount Trenchard, just outside Foyne and their head, Thomas Spring Rice (1790-1866), the 1st Baron Monteagle, was the most significant Limerick politician of the nineteenth century.

This cultured, wealthy, politically active group, related by blood and marriage, also shared a common social and intellectual background. Their closest counterpart were the English Whig magnates of the period 1770 to 1830, an elite of the aristocracy which included a dazzling array of sophisticated and multi-talented people. The Limerick group, part of which later became known as the ‘Tervoe Convent Set’, represented the Irish landlord class at its best. Reverend William Sewell wrote in the Quarterly Review of 1840 that “an Irish gentleman, well born, well educated, and with his natural tendencies modified by English associations, is perhaps one of the most perfect specimen of civilized nature” and based this conclusion on his dealings with the Limerick gentry, especially Monsell and Adare. What is most remarkable is the number of distinguished people provided by this group. The politicians included three in the front rank, Monteagle (who was Colonial Secretary in 1834, and Chancellor of the Exchequer, from 1835 to 1839), Smith O’Brien, and Monsell himself. The 2nd and 3rd Earls of Dunraven both sat in the Commons before taking their seats in the Lords, and Stephen de Vere, Sir Lucius O’Brien of Dromoland (brother of Smith O’Brien) and Stafford O’Brien were also M.P.s. The literary figures included Aubrey de Vere, one of the most noted Irish poets of the nineteenth century and the friend of Tennyson, Browning and Wordsworth, and his father, Sir Aubrey, and brother Stephen were also poets, as was Smith O’Brien. The 3rd Earl of Dunraven was a friend of the astronomer, Rowan Hamilton, and besides astronomy his vast range of intellectual activity included archaeology, architecture, theology, and even spiritualism. Monsell, the de Veres and Dunravens contributed frequently to learned journals and periodicals and published pamphlets. Finally, the Dunravens created the beautiful mansion and village of Adare, and the O’Briens and Perys also added to the stock of the country’s architectural heritage with their magnificent castles at Dromoland and Dromore respectively.

The group was characterised by a strong sense of Irishness. Monteagle, Monsell, the 3rd Earl of Dunraven and the de Veres were all very patriotic and passionate in their love of Ireland.
Two Repeal candidates were elected, and relief that he organised were successful. The sheer horror and scale of the events of that traumatic time caused many hitherto staunch unionists to question their beliefs. Thus, Isaac Butt (1813-1879), a bigoted Tory and Orangeman, came to change his opinions and Monsell's life-long unionism was badly shaken. At the beginning of the famine, the Tory Government of Sir Robert Peel had been in office since 1841. Peel responded with vigour and efficiency to the catastrophe and the measures of relief that he organised were successful.

However, in 1846, he brought about the repeal of the Corn Laws, which had been introduced in 1815, to maintain the price of corn at a reasonable level. This measure was designed to lower food prices, and supposedly help the hungry Irish masses. It had little effect in this regard, but proved highly controversial and brought about a split in the Tory party. Peel and his followers (the Peelites) broke away from the official party and this third political grouping survived as a separate organisation until 1859, when they were absorbed into the ranks of the Liberals. Among the most prominent Peelites were Gladstone, the 4th Earl of Aberdeen (1815-1895), the 5th Duke of Newcastle (1811-1864), Monsell was described as a Peelite by Newman, and it was this split that severed his connections with the Tory party. However, his political progression was much more complicated than that of the average Peelite, as a result of his Irishness and direct experience of the famine.

Monsell was horrified by the catastrophes of this period - disease, hunger, destitution and despair. Like many of the landlords, he worked very hard to alleviate the people's suffering. The Dunravens and de Veres were also active in famine relief work, while Archdeacon Monsell of Derry contracted famine fever while ministering to his people and died in November, 1846. Monsell served on relief committees and was a guardian of the Limerick Poor Law Union. He saw many scenes of horror and suffering during this time, and on at least one occasion, was reduced to tears by what he beheld.

However, he was also disgusted by the total inadequacy of the measures taken by the British Government to deal with the crisis. After the Peelite split, the government of Peel was forced to resign and the Liberals, under Lord John Russell (1792-1878), came to power. Russell, a cranky, vacillating little man, at the head of a minority government and under the influence of Sir Charles Trevelyan (1807-1886), Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, and chief of the British civil service, rigidly adhered to the laissez faire doctrine of non-intervention in economic matters. Thus the government could not give the starving people enough food, as this would distort the Irish agricultural system. Instead, public works programmes were established, to provide employment for the destitute peasants. They could then buy food with the monies earned in this manner. This was a ludicrous policy, but was made worse by the insistence that the public works could not be 'reproductive' (they could not benefit private individuals). This led to a great deal of useless 'public' works being carried out, while valuable projects, such as draining and reclaiming of waste lands, were left undone. Monsell agreed with the notion of public works (indeed all strands of public opinion, including Daniel O'Connell, supported this method of famine relief) and agitated in favour of making the works 'reproductive'. He was one of the leaders of a campaign to bring about this change, and on 5 October, 1846, the Chief Secretary, Henry Labouchere (1798-1869), issued a statement authorising certain reproductive works to be carried out. Monsell has been credited by some with bringing about this change in government policy, but other commentators maintain that more prominent advocates of reproductive works influenced the issuing of the 'Labouchere Letter'.

Monsell and his circle underwent considerable mental and political turmoil at this time. William Smith O'Brien had declared for Repeal in 1843, and in 1848, was to be found at the head of an armed revolt against British rule. Stephen de Vere travelled to Canada in one of the ships carrying emigrants to North America. Only Smith O'Brien carried this to the point of advocating militancy and even armed rebellion. The group was also possessed of a strong social consciousness. All of them believed in the concept of noblesse oblige, that "property had its duties as well as its rights", and that as gentlemen and persons of wealth and standing, they had a duty to help their less well-off compatriots. They were all resident and improving landlords, Monsell and Stephen de Vere, in particular, being renowned for their kindness to their tenants. Finally, their serious and high-minded mentalities made the group passionately interested in the religious controversies of the time.

The Limerick gentry continued to provide individuals of the same stamp up to the early years of the present century. Monsell's son, the 2nd Lord Emly, became a prominent convert to Irish nationalism and the labour movement. Montague's great-granddaughter, Mary Spring Rice (1800-1905), was an important instigator of the Wyndham Land Act of 1880, which allowed factory owners to purchase land and provide individuals of the same stamp up to the early years of the present century. The Dunravens were leading lights in the Catholic Church, the de Veres were advocates of reproductive works, and the O'Briens were leading lights in the labour movement. Monteagle's granddaughter, Mary Spring Rice (1800-1905), was an important instigator of the Wyndham Land Act of 1880, which allowed factory owners to purchase land and provide employment for the destitute peasants. They could then buy food with the monies earned in this manner. This was a ludicrous policy, but was made worse by the insistence that the public works could not be 'reproductive' (they could not benefit private individuals). This led to a great deal of useless 'public' works being carried out, while valuable projects, such as draining and reclaiming of waste lands, were left undone. Monsell agreed with the notion of public works (indeed all strands of public opinion, including Daniel O'Connell, supported this method of famine relief) and agitated in favour of making the works 'reproductive'. He was one of the leaders of a campaign to bring about this change, and on 5 October, 1846, the Chief Secretary, Henry Labouchere (1798-1869), issued a statement authorising certain reproductive works to be carried out. Monsell has been credited by some with bringing about this change in government policy, but other commentators maintain that more prominent advocates of reproductive works influenced the issuing of the 'Labouchere Letter'.

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America, and later publicised the horrors that he had seen. His brother Aubrey published a severe criticism of British rule in 1848, entitled *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds*. Monsell, the ex-Tory, came to be known as a Federalist. Federalism was an amorphous movement whose chief spokesman was a liberal Protestant landlord from County Down, named William Sharman Crawford (1781-1861). The Federalists advocated a compromise between the Unionists and the Repealers. O'Connell demanded a parliament in Dublin, equal in status to the British Parliament, but the Federalists wanted a subordinate legislature to handle Ireland's internal affairs, so that Westminster would continue to deal with Imperial affairs, such as the Crown, foreign policy, the Colonies, etc., Ireland would continue to return members to the imperial body. Accorded to the Federalist viewpoint, and revived it in the form of Home Rule in the 1870s. Its only practical expression was in the Northern Ireland Parliament of 1920-1972.

Monsell became very anti-English at this time, and seemed to be heading for the Repeal movement. The Limerick Grand Jury came out in favour of Federalist ideas in a series of resolutions drawn up by Monsell. He also acted as honorary secretary of the Reproductive Works Committee, which was set up in December, 1846. It was an all party body of landlords and gentry, and on 14 January, 1847, it convened a meeting in the Rotunda in Dublin. This conference was attended by twenty-six MPs, a number of peers, and many landowners and professional men. A number of resolutions designed to counter the famine crisis were passed. The remedies suggested included reform of the landlord/tenant law, better housing for agricultural labourers, land reclamation and other public works, and it was stated that the cost of emergency employment schemes should be paid for by the British exchequer rather than by the ratepayers of Ireland. Soon after, an Irish party was formed to fight for these reforms. It seemed that the famine was bringing about revolutionary changes in the Irish political landscape. Monsell strongly supported this Pan-Irish front. Unfortunately, it soon collapsed. Charles Gavan Duffy (1816-1903), one of the leaders of the nationalist Young Ireland movement, hoped to recruit Monsell at this time. His name as an Irish nationalist seemed about to be made.

However, Monsell's political direction in 1846-1847 is a matter of much speculation and interpretation. He associated with Repealers, and was a member of the short-lived, inglorious Irish Council, dominated by O'Connell's supporters. Many thought that he was about to take the Repeal Pledge. He seems to have genuinely wrestled with his conscience and to have seriously doubted the desirability of British rule in Ireland. Federalism, itself an ill-defined and vague concept, seems to have been his most extreme position, however. Besides, the split between O'Connell's Repealers and the Young Ireland movement was becoming more and more bitter and acrimonious. Monsell did not want to become involved in either organisation, and thus embroil himself in their bickering and squabbling. The general election of August, 1847, brought his political career to a crisis. This election was fought in Ireland against a background of famine, disease and social despair. Monsell stood as a candidate in County Limerick, and was determined to avoid the mistakes that he had made in 1837. His candidature was a masterful display of ambiguity. He stood as a Liberal, but hinted at being a Repealer. He advocated tenant rights, civil and religious liberty, and the development of the economy. His gesture at Repeal consisted of a promise to support greater Irish control of Irish matters. The election was marked by the usual savage violence that characterised Irish elections at this time, and his success was accomplished amidst scenes of extreme disorder. He topped the poll, with 588 votes, followed by Smith O'Brien, the Repeal standard-bearer, who took the second seat with 482 votes.

Monsell's political conversion was completed over the next three years. He had declared for the Liberals in an ambiguous fashion but they were the obvious party for someone of his current state of mind. His progress towards Roman Catholicism made of him an advocate of civil and religious equality, while the famine emphasised the need for reform of the landlord/tenant relationship, and the development of the economy. These were policies more attuned to Liberalism than Toryism. He still carried with him the baggage of the Peelites and the Federalists, but these served to distance him further from the Tories. The Federalist concept gradually faded in the late 1840s and Monsell discarded it completely by 1850. He voted consistently with the Liberals on all important issues from 1848 to 1850. He owed his election to the Repeal standard-bearer, who were usually found working in the Liberal interest. By 1850, he was definitely counted as being a...
Liberal M.P. In 1848, he had been horrified by Smith O'Brien's rebellion at Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary, but was personally distressed by his friend's transportation to Tasmania. He interceded with the authorities on several occasions over the next few years, to mitigate the severity of O'Brien's sentence.

Monsell's religious conversion occurred in his early years as an M.P. In the late 1840s, as a member of the Fraternity of St. Barnabas, he took spiritual guidance from Archdeacon Henry Edward Manning (1808-1892), a leading Tractarian. However, the latter's own Anglicanism was now so weak that he soon abandoned the task. Newman took over instead, and under his influence Monsell decided to become a Catholic. His famine experience had also given him an empathy with the Catholic peasants, while his increasing association with Catholic clergy as a result of his relief work and political activity, brought him closer to their church. Eventually, it was Newman's influence which decided the issue for Monsell. He travelled to England and stayed with his friend Ambrose de Lisle at Grace Dieu, in Leicestershire. On 12 December, 1850, Monsell was received into the Roman Catholic Church in the presence of de Lisle, his family and his servants.

He was a major convert. Cardinal Wiseman, the Primate of England, congratulated him warmly. The Irish bishops, and especially Monsell's friend, Bishop Ryan of Limerick, were delighted. Others were horrified, including Stafford O'Brien, and Adare's wife, Augusta. It was also stated at the time, and in subsequent years, that Monsell had become a Catholic to enhance his political career. This shabby allegation was made by, among others, Caleb Powell, who had lost his seat in the 1847 general election, and the irrepressible Bard of Thomond, Michael Hogan. It can be refuted on two counts. Firstly, an examination of Monsell's correspondence over several years will show his conversion was a gradual and a painful process. He took his religion too seriously to use it as a means of political advancement. Secondly, his conversion was remarkably badly timed if it really was a cynical manoeuvre. The month of his reception into the Church, December, 1850, saw Britain and Ireland convulsed by the most violent anti-Anglicanism of the entire 19th century - the campaign against the restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy in England and Wales. Indeed, he wrote to his mother-in-law, Lady Dunraven (who strongly disapproved of his conversion), stating that while he believed his move would harm his political career, he would not allow this to deter him.

Lady Anna Marie Monsell never became a Catholic, although she sympathised with her husband's position, and defended him to her outraged mother. Lord Adare (who became 3rd Earl of Dunraven on his father's death, in 1850) did not become a Catholic until 1855, due to his wife's vehement opposition. Her tactic was to threaten to have a heart-attack when he seemed to be about to convert. After he finally did so, they became seriously estranged and quarrelled bitterly over the education of their eldest son, the future 4th Earl (in disgust, he ended up by becoming an agnostic!). Stephen de Vere had become a Catholic in 1846, and his brothers, Aubrey and Vere, did so in 1851. Manning became a Catholic in 1851, and eventually rose to be Archbishop of Westminster, in 1865, and Cardinal, in 1875 (the first Anglican convert to receive the red hat). Smith O'Brien and Stafford O'Brien remained Protestants.

It was most unusual for a Protestant landlord to become a Catholic, so the ordinary people of the Clarina and Mungret area were astonished by Monsell's move and several stories have survived in the folklore of the locality concerning it.

What of Monsell's attitude to Ireland's great social problems? In the 1840s, he agreed with the prevailing economic wisdom that Ireland's greatest problem was its huge population, living in dire poverty. His solution was for the British government to promote emigration to the British colonies. This would have the desirable effect of clearing the country of its excess population, while providing Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa with the labour that they needed so greatly. Ireland's difficulty was the Empire's opportunity. When the surplus millions were thus disposed of, it would then be possible to consolidate the many small holdings in the country into economically viable farms. At the same time, a major investment would need to be made in the Irish agricultural sector, to enable it to realise its full potential. Monsell was a strong advocate of the Encumbered Estates legislation of 1848-1849, under which thousands of bankrupt Irish landlords sold their estates to new owners, who, it was hoped, would sink...
Tervoe, partnership between landlord and tenant, resided amongst his tenants. He firmly believed that there should be a sanctity of private property. However, he only heard of Monsell’s supposed misdeeds at second-hand, and, besides, the evidence against this contention is overwhelming. The unanimous testimony of his contemporaries, including members of the Land League and Irish nationalists, was that he was a kindly and benevolent proprietor. Perhaps more significant is the absence from the folk memory of Clarina of any reference to evictions by Monsell. The Monsells are still remembered there with affection.

much needed funds into their acquisitions. (These hopes were not realised). A further element would be the provision of agricultural education which would teach Irish farmers the skills and knowledge required to achieve greater productivity and efficiency. Monsell himself was a patron of agricultural education in the national school attached to his property at Tervoe.

Monsell did not believe in the abolition of the landlord system. He was a landlord himself, and had a vested interest in the established order. He was horrified in the 1880s and 1890s when the Land League campaigned for the landed estates to be divided among the tenants, regarding this as communism and an attack on the sanctity of private property. However, he firmly believed that there should be a partnership between landlord and tenant, although the latter would have a subordinate role. He was always a benevolent and improving landlord, who resided amongst his tenants. He advocated the Three Fs (Fair Rent, Fixity of Tenure, and Free Sale) which were the standard demands of tenants' groups until the wish for the total buying out of the landlords came to the fore in the 1880s. Monsell practised what he preached. With regard to the first F, he did not increase his rents at all from the 1830s to the 1880s. His tenants enjoyed fixity of tenure, for he evicted no-one during his entire fifty-eight years as owner of the Monsell estates. Finally, he allowed his tenants to sell their farms, subject to his approval. He tended to give his tenants 31 years leases on their farms rather than the usual one-year tenancy agreement. During times of distress, he wrote off arrears of rent, and took it upon himself to repay Board of Works loans for improvements taken out by his tenants. In 1844, he told the Devon Commission investigating the Irish land system that a land agent's duties “upon a well managed estate consist in looking after the condition and welfare of tenants”.

Monsell preached enlightened landlordism as well as practicing it. He wanted the government to promote the Three Fs by encouraging landlords to grant long leases, and by legislating for tenant right (which usually meant compensating tenants for improvements carried out on their farms when they departed from same). He favoured a limited amount of peasant proprietorship. He wanted to see some estates bought and then sold to the tenants, so as to give more people a stake in the status quo, but never saw this process as leading to the complete disappearance of the landlord.

It was alleged by Alexander Somerville (1811-1885), a Scottish observer of the Great Famine, that Monsell was a bad landlord, who had cleared many tenants from his estates. These unfortunate now lived as paupers in Limerick City, he wrote. Somerville was a respected witness whose comments cannot be lightly dismissed. However, he only heard of Monsell’s supposed misdeeds at second-hand, and, besides, the evidence against this contention is overwhelming. The unanimous testimony of his contemporaries, including members of the Land League and Irish nationalists, was that he was a kindly and benevolent proprietor. Perhaps more significant is the absence from the folk memory of Clarina of any reference to evictions by Monsell. The Monsells are still remembered there with affection.

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4. The most complete account of Monsell's religious conversion is found in "William Monsell, M.P. and the Catholic Question in Victorian Britain and Ireland" by Dermot S. Roantree (Ph.D. Thesis U.C.D., 1990). The present author's own research concurs with Dr. Roantree's conclusions. However, Dr. Roantree's conclusions. However, Dr. Roantree's conclusion is that Monsell's religious conversion differs from the present author's conclusions.
5. PP. 1845 (20). Evidence taken before the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the occupation of land in Ireland (Devon Commission), p. 789.