

Bartholomew Dowling

by Paddy Lysaght

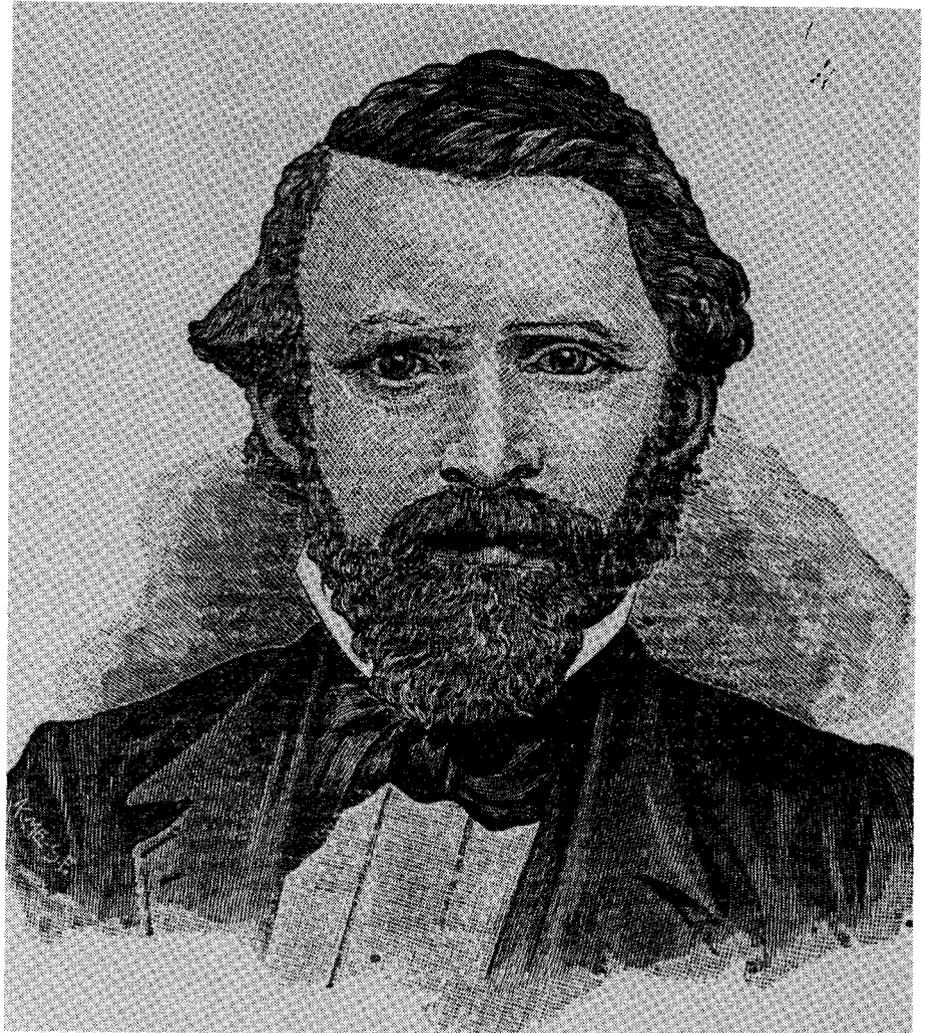
Bartholomew Dowling is, like the snows of yesteryear, forgotten. I doubt if any of the readers of *The Old Limerick Journal* will have heard of him, much less that he was a versifier or poet of some distinction that once lived and worked in Limerick.

I discovered him in what must be a scarce book, entitled *Irish Poets and Novelists*, published in San Francisco in 1892 and edited by one D.O. Crowley. Forty-seven pages of this four hundred paged book give fourteen of his poems as well as a line drawing of the author and a short biographical sketch, interspersed with an assessment of his work. In the half-dozen or so anthologies of Irish poetry which I have looked through, I have found him quoted once only, namely: in *The Ballads of Ireland*, edited by Edward Hayes, 2 vols., 1855. This anthology contains hundreds of forgotten poems by equally forgotten poets and just one of Dowling's poems is included. This, 'The Brigade at Fontenoy', one of his better poems, is a spirited ballad of nine, eight-line verses. In D.J. O'Donoghue's definitive *Biographical Dictionary of the Poets of Ireland* there is a half-page account of his life and work, which is simply an abridgement of what is found in the San Francisco-published book.

Dowling was born at Listowel, Co. Kerry about 1823. While he was yet a boy his parents emigrated to Canada, where he remained until after the death of his father in 1843. The family returned to Ireland in 1844 and settled in Limerick. He worked as a clerk with Limerick Corporation for the next four or five years. Why he left Limerick and what he did afterwards is uncertain, but we find him in 1852 in California engaged in mining. Finding this work uncongenial, he went to a place called Contra Costa in California where he farmed and built a home.

While in Limerick he had written some ballads for the *Nation* newspaper, the mouthpiece for the Young Ireland movement. He had a talent for composing patriotic poems, and Thomas Davis had encouraged him to chronicle in ballads and verse events of patriotic interest that had occurred in Thomond, to help kindle the enthusiasm of the people towards the movement's militaristic ideals. That he was well-known and respected is evident from the fact that he entertained John Mitchel, J.J. Shields and Terence Bellew McManus when they visited him on their tour of America.

Subsequently he left farming and settled in San Francisco. In 1858 he



Bartholomew Dowling.

became editor of a paper called *The San Francisco Monitor*, and for the next four years he wrote poems, stories and sketches for this paper. His health, never too robust, subsequently declined, and he died unmarried at the age of 40 in 1863.

Since his poems never appeared in book form and since many of them were written under a multiplicity of pseudonyms he has never received the acclaim he probably deserves. There is no point in standing Dowling side-by-side with the major Irish poets; he does not belong there. He is a minor poet who does not appear in anthologies simply because he never wrote a really memorable poem. We recall Charles Wolfe for his 'Burial of Sir John Moore'; John Kells Ingram for his 'Who Fears to Speak of Ninety-eight', and even our own Aubrey de Vere is best remembered for his haunting 'Little Black Rose'. Dowling is forgotten; he never hit the target like these. Still his poems are worthy of a place amongst the shelves where these and many more nineteenth century versifiers gather dust.

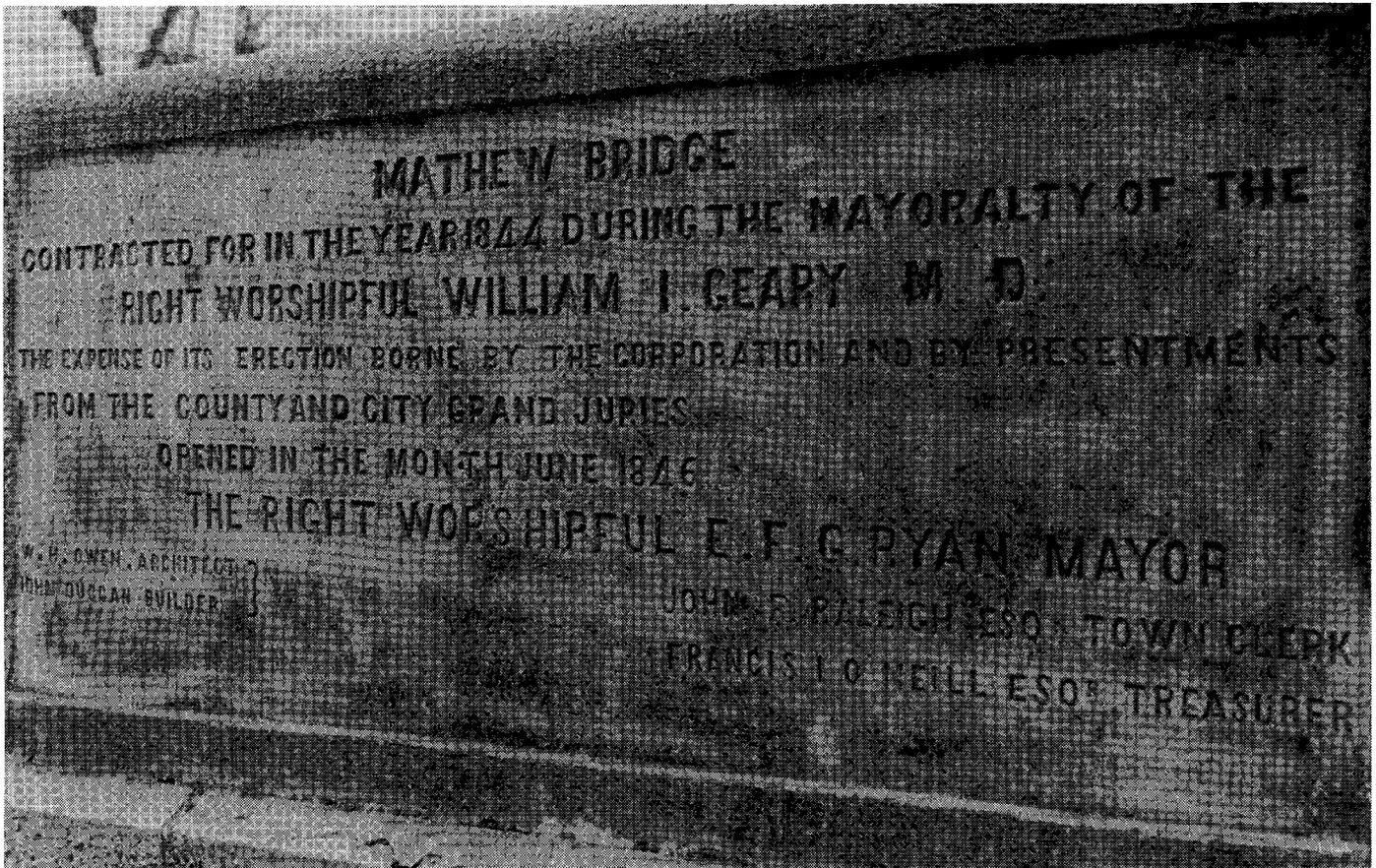
Take for example a verse from one

of his poems entitled 'The Foreign Shamrock':

*I place the leaves above my heart, as a
wondrous talisman,
For they bear me back to a better time,
ere the exile's lot began;
And again, in the flush of glowing youth,
among my own I stand,
In the bright mirage of a generous hope,
in my own lost native land.*

It is well constructed; it has style and feeling; it is moving in its simplicity. One might quibble with its nostalgia, yet many a greater poet would find it difficult to express its sentiments more felicitously. He handles words with care, but like so much of nineteenth century verse, he is often too profuse, and like most of the *Nation* poets, his patriotism is over-zealous.

Of the fourteen poems in Crowley's anthology four are of Irish interest. One may call into question the historical correctness of his poem entitled "The Assault on Limerick", but I believe it fitting that it be given in full here.



Bartholomew Dowling arrived in Limerick in 1844, at the start of the construction of Mathew Bridge.

The Assault on Limerick

by Bartholomew Dowling

*Ho, Limerick! ancient Limerick, arouse
thy heart to-day;
Put harness on thy citizens and gird thee
for the fray;
Nerve thy arm for thy homesteads, for the
altar and the shrine,
And the time-enduring memories, proud
city, that are thine.*

*Thy battlements are tottering, thy walls
are sapped away,
And yawns at length the breach whereon
full fifty cannon play,
And, thundering o'er the space between,
with fierce exulting cheers,
Carlisle and Drogheda lead on King
William's grenadiers.*

*They've mounted on the ruined wall, two
thousand, firm arrayed,
Casting before them, on their path, the
deadly hand grenade.
And with a shout of triumph they sweep
upon their way,
Nor dream of what a welcome we've
prepared for them to-day.*

*Now shall they feel our Irish steel thro'
crest and helmet glide;
For Sarsfield's charging in our van with
Galway at his side,*

*And where e'er his plume is waving, the
Brandenbergs lie low,
And the shout is raised the loudest: "No
quarter for the foe!"*

*As break the tempest-driven waves
recoiling from the rock,
The chosen band of Brandenberg shrink
from the fiery shock,
And o'er the din of battle, and o'er the
wild hurrah,
Loud swells the gladsome tidings: "The
foreigners give way!"*

*Yet 'tis only for a moment: fierce
Hammer's on the wall,
He charges with his Danish guards, tho'
fast and thick they fall;
And the stout brigades of Camdon rush
quickly to his side,
And Bolcastel's good regiment to swell
the bloody tide.*

*But tho' we are out numbered and sore
pressed by the foe,
While we have hands to grasp the sword
we'll deal them blow for blow;
Tho' our brethren fall around us, still
our bravest and our best
Gather, like eagles to a feast, 'round
Sarsfield's towering crest.*

*In the thickest of the battle, in the sorest
hour of need,
When even hope had left us, and but
honor bade us bleed,
A vision came upon us, such as warrior
seldom saw,*

*That filled our hearts with daring, and
our foemen's hearts with awe.
The matrons of our city, with heroism so
sublime,
The maidens of the city, in their beauty
and their prime,
Join their kin amid the carnage, and
batlle by their side,
The mother and the daughter, the sister
and the bride.*

*We paused but for a moment, while o'er
our spirits came
All the fond and gentle memories that
feed affection's flame,
Then passed into our bosoms a wild and
stern glow,
As we looked back at our city, and then
forward at the foe.*

*We paused but for a moment, then arose
our thrilling cheer,
Such as men but seldom hearken and
forget not when they hear,
While, beside our bravest warriors, soft
lily hands assail
The foe that flies before us, like leaves
before the gale.*

*And then the breach their cannon made,
we filled up with their dead,
And we chased them to their trenches, by
gallant Sarsfield led;
And we looked down from our ramparts,
that evening, o'er the plain,
While the twilight cast its shadows, and
the foe entombed his slain.*