

William Smith O'Brien,

6 October 1803 to 18 June 1864

The late Dr. Brendan O'Brien, son of Dermot William O'Brien PRHA and great-grandson of William Smith O'Brien, was at one time President of the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland.

A story is told that a Dubliner was showing a visitor the sights of Dublin. Having admired O'Connell Bridge, the wide spaces of O'Connell Street, then dominated by Nelson's Pillar, and the memorial to Daniel O'Connell, they came to the statue of William Smith O'Brien. The visitor asked "and what did he do?" The Guide replied "walk around the statue now." "But there is nothing there" said the visitor. "That is just what he did."

It is true that Smith O'Brien did not lose his life for Ireland nor did he cause the loss of the lives of more than a very few of his followers. He never aroused the adulation given to Wolfe Tone, whose efforts came to nothing, nor that accorded to Robert Emmet, who was no more successful, but whose dramatic speech from the dock and the romance of his attachment to Sarah Curran ensured for him a place in our national history. Like those two, Smith O'Brien worked wholeheartedly for the good of Ireland and her freedom.

In order to appreciate what he did and at what cost it is well to consider his background. He was a Protestant and a landlord at a time when the latter carried a burden of odium even greater than in the present day, while the former, separating him in an important part of life from the vast majority of the people of Ireland, made his task of trying to unite and raise them against rule from Westminster practically impossible. Smith O'Brien traced a clear line of descent from Brian Boru, High King of all Ireland. The family became Protestant when they surrendered the Kingship of Munster to Henry VIII. Up to about 1700, the O'Briens fought sometimes for and sometimes against the English, but during the 18th century, his forebears, the baronets of Dromoland, had settled down as landlords in Clare. His grandfather, Sir Lucius, was a member of Grattan's Parliament and worked actively for the good of the Irish people. He opposed the Union and died about the time it came into being. William's father took little part in politics, but lived on his estate in Clare.¹ He married Charlotte,

by Brendan O'Brien

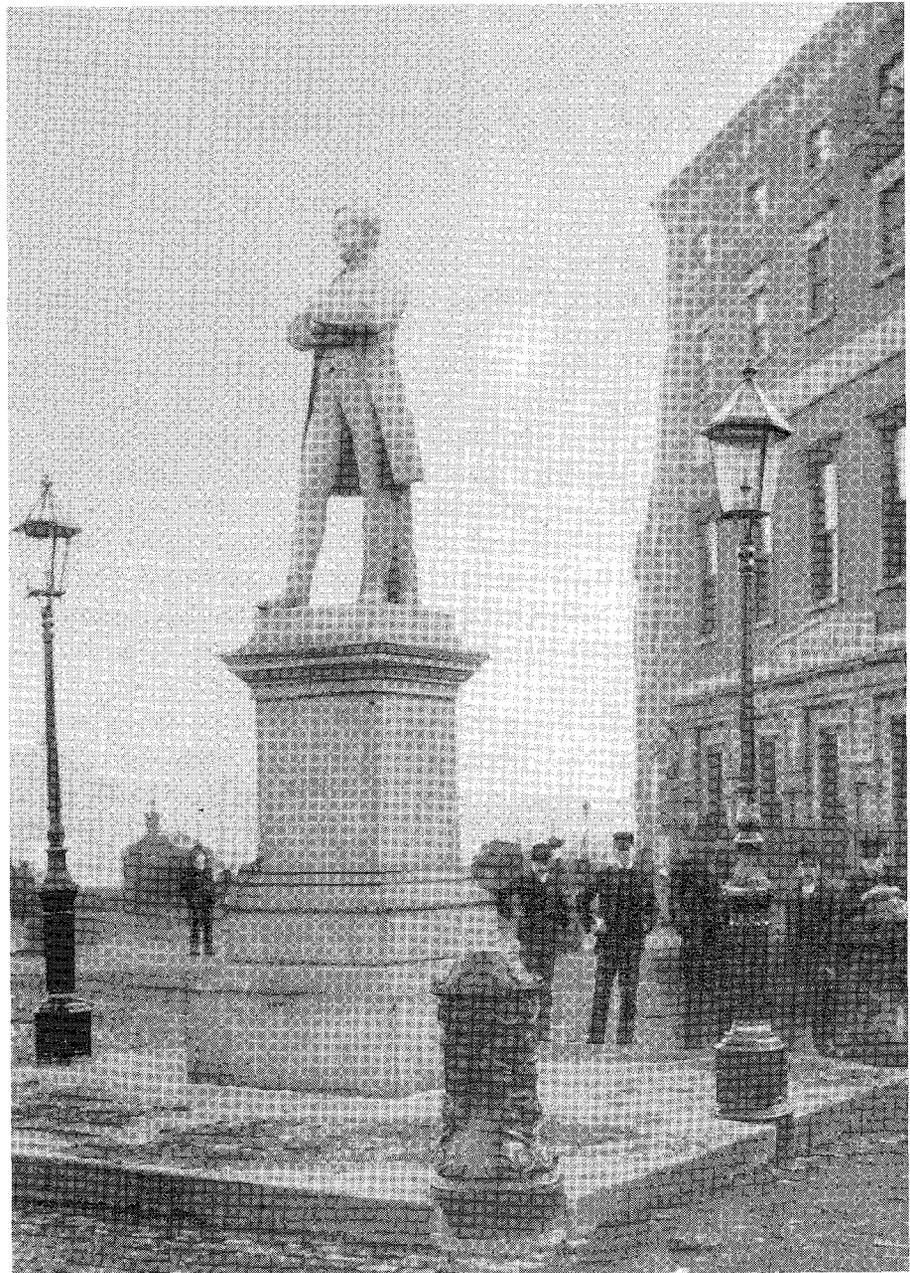
daughter of William Smith of Cahirmoyle, and William was the second son of this marriage. He was sent to school at Harrow and subsequently went to Cambridge, where he was later President of the Union.

His diary for 1826 starts:

"Oct 12th. Birthday Reflections.

I have this day reached the age of 23 and confess I feel disappointed when I reflect

how much more limited my acquirements are than I expected they would have been at this period. I hoped to have been engaged in active life, but find myself still in a state of pupillage. My character is, however, nearly formed, my opinions are becoming consistent, my principles fixed and my wishes uniform. The portrait I am about to sketch will probably be too favourable. I should say then that good nature, benevolence and a desire to make others happy are qualities of my disposition ... That I am neither sordid nor ungenerous, that I



Statue of W.S. O'Brien in its original position before being moved to O'Connell St. in 1929.



Lithograph of Smith O'Brien, c.1848.

Limerick Museum.

am incapable of envy tho' sometimes inclined to jealousy. My understanding is rather solid than brilliant. Judgement predominantly over imagination ... In ease and retirement I languish; in turmoil and excitement I enjoy the full measure of existence ... I have no desire to be rich. My acquirements consist of some knowledge of the Classics - History - French literature - Politics and Political economy - Metaphysics - Moral Philosophy - I know nothing of Natural Science - I find a great delight in Poetry and Painting.

hazard incurring a greater evil in attempting to correct it."

This is an interesting comment in view of William's later conduct with regard to the abuses in the government of Ireland.

This part of the diary ends with a page headed "List of grievances affecting the English Empire AD 1828. Inadmissibility of Catholics to Parliament &c." "West India Slavery" and so on. Then "Memoranda ... Admission of Catholics to degrees in Universities ... Circulating Libraries ... Agricultural Associations ... Education ... Irish Fisheries ... Improvement of Cottages ... Drainage of bogs and waste lands." From this it appears that, even in 1828, he was much concerned with the problems of the common people.

At the other end of the book the pages are divided into squares, each representing a day, and filled with the briefest of notes. They extend from 1828 to 1839. A few examples: May 5th 1828: "Took the oath and my seat, dined at

Club." May 7th "Dined at H.C. [House of Commons], Catholic question." Many days contain no more than H.C. or the places where he was on the particular day, and many mention the books he was reading. In one appears the word "Irish." He certainly learnt Irish, as he urged landlords to learn the language in order to be able to converse with their tenants, and when sailing into exile, he is glad he has his Irish prayer-book. Many Irish texts, transcribed by him, are mentioned in the index to his papers.

In 1828, O'Brien was elected MP for the Borough of Ennis, and in that year Daniel O'Connell won one of the two seats for the county in the famous "Clare Election." O'Brien opposed his candidature, as the Clare seats were regarded practically as their property by the O'Brien family. The candidate defeated by O'Connell was Vesey Fitzgerald. Following this, O'Brien said that no Protestant had voted for O'Connell but O'Connell's "preposterous head pacificator," Tom Steele, denied this in such terms that eventually he and O'Brien fought a duel in which neither was hurt. There is no mention of the election nor of the duel in the scanty diary.

O'Brien entered Parliament as a Tory and supporter of Peel, first as the member for Ennis, later for Limerick, but he had joined the Catholic Association in 1828 and spoke in Westminster in favour of Emancipation. From 1828 to 1843 he continually worked for the cause of Ireland, urged a proper poor law system, sought to improve education and tried to get the government to remunerate the Catholic as well as the Protestant clergy. He ceased to be a party man very soon, and wished his Irish fellow MPs to vote for any good motion by the Tories and against any bad one by the Whigs and vice versa. It should be remembered that during this time, O'Connell and his three sons, Maurice, Morgan and John, were all MPs.

During these years, O'Brien was still a Tory and felt that reforms in Ireland should be carried out through the Union Parliament and in a constitutional way. As all his efforts failed, he became more and more aware of the hopelessness of these methods, and in 1843 he joined the movement for the Repeal of the Union. From this time onward, he rapidly achieved the highest degree of importance in that movement.

O'Brien's personal life during these years must be mentioned. He married, in 1832, Lucy, daughter of Joseph Gabbett of High Park, Co. Limerick, and had five sons and two daughters. The eldest son, Edward, was born in 1837, and the youngest of the family, Charles, in 1849. He was baptised in Kilmainham Gaol. About the time of his marriage, he inherited the Cahirmoyle Estates from his grandfather, William Smith, and added the name to his own - he had been baptised William only. In spite of what James Connolly writes, this was not a very large inheritance. Still, he had property, a family and position, so that it is true, as John

The diary has comments on many books, of which memoirs and history, both in English and French, form the majority. Of Paine's *Rights of Man* he writes

... "This book will receive applause hereafter as being amongst the first of those works which have developed the true principles and ends of Government. The Author is too revolutionary. It is often better to submit to an abuse than to

Mitchel later wrote, that he had more to lose by rebellion than any other Irish leader.

Politically, the most important part of O'Brien's life was the period from 1843 to 1848, but its importance must be considered against the background of the work of Daniel O'Connell.

By 1840, it became clear that there was no hope of improvement while the Union endured, and O'Connell, now in his sixties, founded the Repeal Association, pledged to work for an independent Irish Parliament, and in 1841, Charles Gavan Duffy, John Blake Dillon and others founded a weekly newspaper, *The Nation*, a paper which should be "unshackled by sect or party - able, Irish and independent." This paper enthusiastically embraced the cause of Repeal.

In 1843, the Lord Chancellor dismissed a number of prominent men from their positions as magistrates because of their repeal activities. O'Brien demanded in the Commons whether he, though not a Repealer, would be dismissed if he presented petitions for Repeal from his constituents. On failing to get a straight answer, he resigned the magistracy. In this same year, he inaugurated a full debate at Westminster "On the present unrest in Ireland" with a speech which announced that he saw no alternative to Repeal if the government persisted in its refusal to legislate for the removal of Irish grievances.

After the debacle of the Clontarf meeting, when the Repeal Association was deprived of its leaders, O'Brien announced that he wished to become a member. During the year he had attained a unique position as an independent MP. His devotion to his country was recognised by men of every party. In an incredibly short time he was acclaimed, not only by the young men, but by O'Connell himself and



Punch cartoon, Limerick Museum.

the whole movement, as a national leader. Gavan Duffy's book leaves no doubt as to the immediate effect produced by O'Brien's adhesion to the Repeal Move-

ment. When O'Connell and the others were unable to take part in the activities of Repeal, O'Connell himself proposed that O'Brien should act as his deputy.



Engagement at Ballingarry, where a detachment of fifty armed police took refuge in Widow McCormack's house.

The Illustrated London News, 12 Aug. 1848.



Arrest of Smith O'Brien at Thurles railway station.

Limerick Museum.

In 1845, when Thomas Davis died, Gavan Duffy, seeking another chief political writer, found John Mitchel, a Northern Unitarian, but a most fervid supporter of Repeal and a man filled with hatred of English rule. He was never restrained in his utterances and became at once an enemy of John O'Connell, who was ambitious to succeed to the pre-eminent position held by the Liberator. His arrival did nothing to heal the rift in the party.

The unity of the Repeal Movement was shaken when O'Connell supported Grey Porter's "Federal" plan, which was opposed by O'Brien, Davis and the younger men. Then there was a rift when O'Connell and the Catholic hierarchy opposed the bill for the establishment of provincial university colleges, which was supported by O'Brien.

Another source of dissension arose in the English Parliament. The O'Connells, O'Brien and all other members, on taking their seats, had to take an oath by which they undertook to obey the commands of the House on matters of attendance and serving on committees. In April 1846, O'Brien had been delayed by urgent famine relief work in his constituency, and so arrived in London after the O'Connells, and was amazed to find that John O'Connell was already serving on one of the English Railways Committees. O'Brien was summoned to serve on one of these and immediately refused. After a debate, he was apprehended by the Sergeant at Arms and imprisoned in the House. In spite of the efforts of his friends on the Committee, the Association failed to support him. This widened the rift between the Young Irelanders and the O'Connellites. The injustice of his imprisonment was so obvious that he had gained much sympathy in the House of Commons, which voted for his unconditional release after a little less than

a month of his imprisonment.

Throughout the Repeal Movement, O'Connell was opposed to the use of arms. O'Brien reluctantly aligned himself with the young men of the movement, who felt that circumstances might well justify an appeal to force of arms.

In 1845, famine and fever struck Ireland, getting more serious year by year. The Irish group in Parliament kept urging the needs of the starving people, but without any effect except to produce Acts of coercion whereby the law could be enforced on those who looted food stores. It is against this background of misery that Smith O'Brien and the Young Ireland party moved towards armed insurrection.

1848 was the culminating year. The population of the country was diminished by a third and the survivors were weakened by hunger and disease. O'Brien had been seriously ill towards the end of 1847, but had recovered and was taking his full part. He was re-elected MP for the County of Limerick against his wishes, but John O'Connell was returned for the City and at a meeting in Limerick, the O'Connellites attacked O'Brien and his party and he was knocked down and injured. Later that year, Mitchel, Gavan Duffy and Meagher were prosecuted for "Treason felony" because of their writing in *The Nation*. Mitchel was convicted and sentenced to seven years transportation. The others were not convicted because juries disagreed. This was the final oppression which drove O'Brien into armed rebellion.² He was not a military leader, the country was too weak to support him, and the English had very large forces of police and troops ready to crush the rising.

The story of the actual rising is a long and sad one. The people were enthusiastic for O'Brien, but the military organisation was quite inadequate. There were practically no arms and there was no

provision for feeding a force in the field. In the end, there was a rather pathetic "battle" in which two of O'Brien's followers were killed, and he himself was captured when he tried to get away. He and Meagher were imprisoned together in Clonmel and were eventually convicted of treason and condemned to be hanged and quartered. They were imprisoned later in Richmond Prison in Dublin while awaiting the result of an appeal. There was no means by which the sentence could be commuted, even by the Queen, but legislation was rushed through Parliament and the leaders were condemned to transportation for life.

He was placed on board HMS *Swift* to be conveyed to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) along with Meagher and other State Prisoners. On board he kept a detailed diary for his wife, early in which he writes: "I have lamented that I was not executed at Clonmel. I endeavoured to impress upon both the English and Irish people a consciousness of the internal power of the Irish Nation. All is now changed, Hope and Exultation are converted to Despondency and Humiliation."

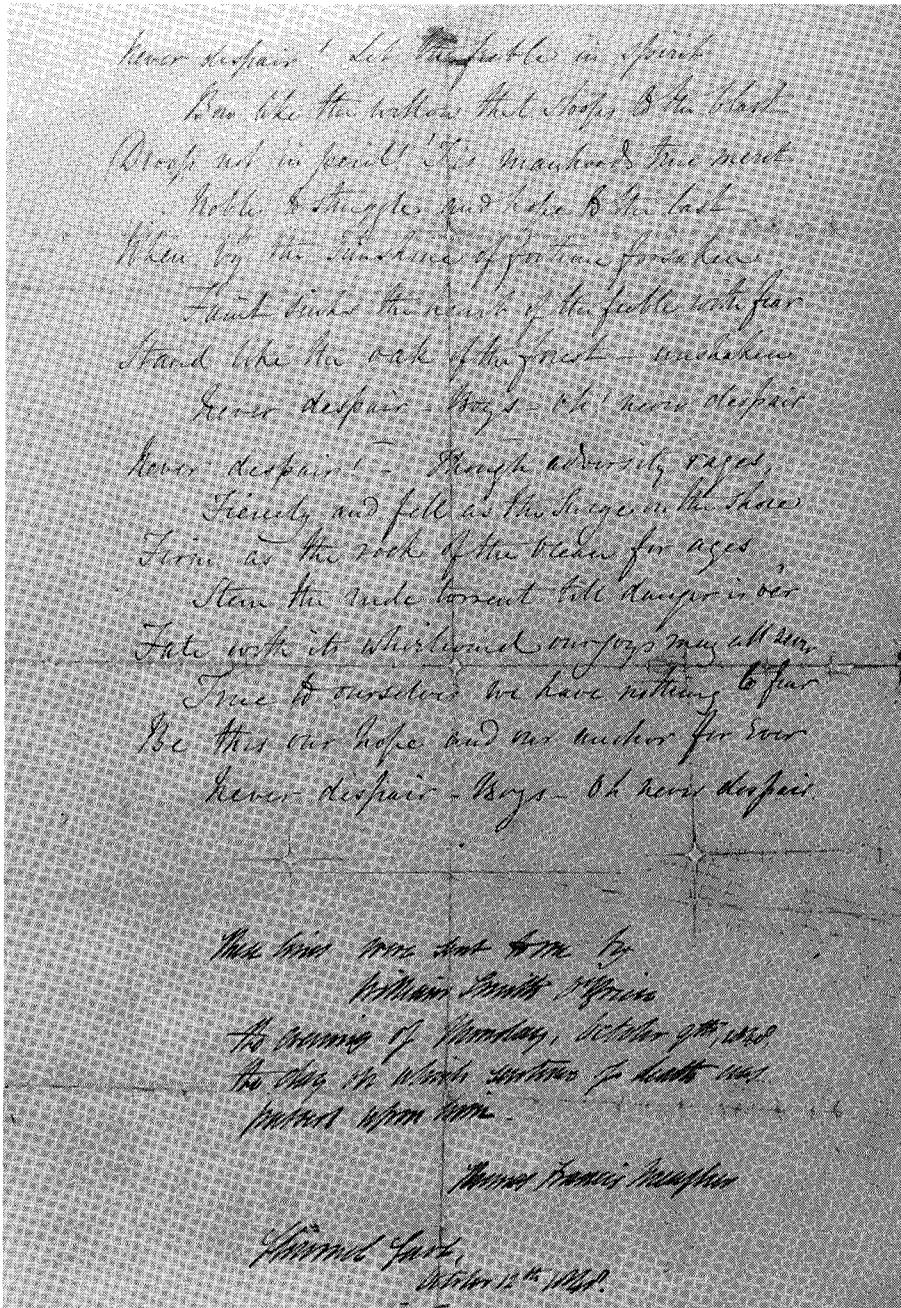
When he reached Tasmania he was offered limited freedom if he gave his parole not to escape. He refused and was imprisoned with common felons for nearly two years.³ Eventually his health suffered so greatly that he gave his parole. Mitchel, in his famous Jail Journal, describes seeing him and meeting others of the patriots. Meagher, and later Mitchel, escaped and a plan was made in New York to rescue O'Brien, but before it could be achieved he was released in 1854, but forbidden to return to Ireland. He received a great welcome in Australia, and there is in the National Museum a large gold cup presented to him by Australian admirers. Unlike most of the Young Irelanders, he did not settle in America, but travelled on the Continent until he was allowed to return to Ireland in 1856.

The Cahirmoyle Estates were held by trustees for his eldest son, Edward, who at the time of his father's return was only nineteen. Father and son did not get on well, and Smith O'Brien took to his travels again. In 1859, he visited the United States, and the California gold medal, given annually at the RDS Art Competitions, is a memento of that trip. He took no further part in politics after his return, and eventually died in 1864 in Anglesea, where he was living with his sister. He was buried at Rathronan, a mile from Cahirmoyle, and was accompanied to the grave by great crowd of mourners and admirers.

FOOTNOTES

The following footnotes have been added by Richard Davis, biographer of William Smith O'Brien.

1. In fact Sir Edward O'Brien (Smith O'Brien's father) sat for many years in both Grattan's Parliament and later at Westminster. Even after retiring in 1826 he was heavily involved in opposing O'Connell in 1828 and made



William Smith O'Brien

How many years have passed since last
we heard
The pleading voice of him who dared to
die
For Ireland and her cause, professed,
abhorred,
And watched the kindling of his eagle eye?

Years, units of the centuries, roll on,
And with their growth our memories wax
pale
Some great cloud breaks in lightnings - it
is gone
Remembered only as a fireside tale.

But there are deeds that must outlive the
years,
And trample them beneath them into dust;
Deeds kept immemorably sweet with
tears,
As a gay maiden keeps her love's first
trust.

And such a deed was his, who leaped from
heights
Of sullen splendour and of proud descent,
Down where the People's tempest
troubled lights
Made baleful dawns below the firmament.

He saw our sorrow, and he pitied well;
He saw our weakness, and he came to
save;
And fighting fearlessly for us he fell,
Thank God, to win no coward's narrow
grave.

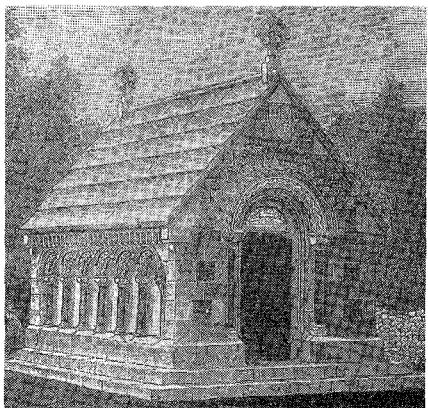
No, but to find an everlasting tomb,
Not in cathedral or in mountain glen,
But where the Passion Roses ever bloom,
In the stout hearts of his stout
countrymen.

O Protestants of Ireland, by his grave
Let us, the patriot prays, embrace at last;
Let us foul quarrel and dissension waive;
Let us say, Peace unto the bloody Past.

His sleep will be the sweeter for the past,
His memory with richer fruit be rife,
If you will but consent with us to act,
And save the Nation's long imperilled life.

-Zozimus

From *The Munster News and Limerick and
Clare Advertiser*, 16 July 1870



Tomb of Smith O'Brien at
Rathronan Cemetary.

Limerick Museum.

Poem, *Never Despair*, written by Smith O'Brien at Clonmel Jail, 9 Oct. 1848,
the day sentence of death was passed on him, with authentication by
Thomas Francis Meagher.

Limerick Museum.

another attempt to get back his seat in 1831, when he was beaten by Maurice O'Connell.

- There seems to be some confusion between events in 1847 and 1848. At the general election of 1847 there was a riot in Limerick when Fr. Kenyon tried to nominate Richard O'Gorman against John O'Connell. O'Brien was knocked down and injured on 29 April 1848 by Old Irelanders furious at John Mitchel's attacks on Daniel O'Connell. Again, O'Brien (15 May), Meagher and Mitchel were put on trial in early 1848. The juries of the former two disagreed but Mitchel's trial was delayed and he was found guilty under the newly passed treason felony act (27 May). The Lord Lieutenant, Clarendon, deliberately avoided putting Duffy on trial in May

because he seemed slightly more moderate than the others. He was later arrested in July 1848 and tried three times before being released. The conviction of Mitchel was hardly the 'final oppression' which drove O'Brien into insurrection as he was insistent that there should be no attempt to rescue Mitchel.

- The statement that O'Brien in Tasmania 'was imprisoned with common felons for nearly two years' is incorrect. He was only under constraint for one year and even then was generally isolated from 'common felons' who were not allowed to speak to him. He had his own cottage at both Maria Island and Port Arthur! However, the article is generally interesting and I'm sure many errors will be uncovered in my work.