A Riot In Limerick, 1848

Prologue

Like its chief protagonist, William Smith O’Brien, the Irish Rebellion of 1848 has long had a lowly place in Irish memory and history. However, its sesquicentennial renewed interest in the events of 1848. In 1998 Taoiseach Bertie Ahern unveiled a plaque on the gable end of the “Warhouse,” as widow McCormack’s infamous old house is known locally. The 1990s, indeed, were book-ended by impressive works on the failed rebellion and its leaders by Brendan O’Cathaoir, Richard Davis and Robert Sloan. However, the perception of the rebellion as farce has not been totally eradicated.

The subject of this article, a riot in Limerick in April 1848, is in many ways symptomatic of the failings of the Irish rebellion of that year. It was inextricably linked to firstly the divisions between Old and Young Ireland, secondly the role of the Catholic clergy in Ireland at the time and finally the work of castle spies in disrupting the efforts of Young Ireland.

The split between the Irish Repealers, caused by the 1846 secession from the Repeal Association by the Young Irelanders, was compounded in 1847 by the death of Daniel O’Connell. Old and Young Ireland seemed intransigently opposed to one another. But the French Revolution in February acted as a catalyst for reunion. Enthusiasm abounded and the gaping differences between Old and Young Ireland showed signs of healing. When Smith O’Brien, John Mitchel and Thomas Francis Meagher were summoned on charges of sedition in March their bail was paid, in part, by John and Maurice O’Connell, the liberator’s sons. Further solidarity was evidenced on 21 March when a demonstration begun by Young Irelanders in Dublin was readily joined by large numbers of Old Irelanders from their headquarters at Conciliation Hall.

In April a deputation including O’Brien and Meagher went to Paris to present an address to the Government of the newly formed French Republic. Although it was not their intention to seek any material assistance, the Irish deputation were received somewhat cautiously by Alphonse De Lamartine, head of the Government, who was intent on stabilising his country’s relations with Britain. Nevertheless the Irish were buoyed by their visit, O’Brien glad that Louis Philippe had been deposed without harm to personal property. Indicative of O’Brien’s unremitting desire for an all-class alliance against the Union, he believed a native version of the French National Guard would provide an organisation in which all classes and creeds might enrol without regard to political differences.

Riot and Reportage

O’Brien returned to Ireland, and on 15 April a meeting held in Dublin was attended in equal number by Old and Young Irelanders. O’Brien soon made his
way to Limerick, where he was met with rapturous roars of approval from joyous crowds. According to Davis, Limerick, after the French Revolution, along with Kilkenny, was a place where Old and Young Ireland fraternised openly, asserting the revolution had destroyed old quarrels and distinctions. O’Brien sought out and made an arrangement with John Mitchel, whose growing radicalism he opposed, whereby the latter agreed not to accompany the former on his tour. Nevertheless, once in Limerick, O’Brien discovered Mitchel’s arrival, too, was imminent. According to an early biographer, Mitchel “did not understand that he was precluded in honour from accepting a particular invitation such as this by his consent to not accompany O’Brien on his southern tour.” Making matters worse was a recent article in Mitchel’s newspaper the Limerick Reporter: “the mortal enemy of the Irish working man, tiller and artificer.” The liberators’ supporters were understandably incensed. But the Limerick Confederates still threw the celebratory dinner on Saturday night, 29 April, in honour of the “Three prosecuted Patriots”, Smith O’Brien, Meagher and Mitchel. According to Smith O’Brien’s personal account, “Scarcely had the proceedings of the evening commenced when the groaning of the O’Connellite mob assembled outside the building was followed by the throwing of stones. Before long an attempt was made to set fire to the house by burning an effigy of Mitchel close to the window, and a regular battery was established against the door. After the proceedings continued (under the eyes of the police) for more than half on hour, the door was at length broken to pieces”.

“O’Brien claims that from the outset he wanted to go out and address the crowd, but was restrained by friends. With the throwing of the burning effigy of Mitchel through an upstairs window, O’Brien at last made it outside, stick in hand “expecting to receive a blow immediately upon my issuing from the opening.” Finding a clearing amidst the crowd, O’Brien flung away his “small deal stick” and cried out “A cheer for Repeal.”

I walked gently towards home, accompanied by a party of the mob who did not appear disposed to injure me, and after washing the blood from my face at the house of the shopkeeper, received no further molestation on my way to the house of Mr. Gabbett.”

The Limerick Reporter has been described by Smith O’Brien’s biographer as “always supportive” of O’Brien. When O’Brien, disillusioned by outlandish rumours that he and his Young Ireland colleagues had murdered O’Connell, decided not to seek re-election to Parliament in accordance with his motto: “the greatest triumph ever recorded in the history of elections.” The Limerick Reporter was also a strong supporter of the Limerick Confederates and was bound to the Sarsfield Club through their mutual motto: “The People - The True Source of Legitimate Power.”

Unsurprisingly, the Limerick Reporter was vociferous in its support of O’Brien in the aftermath of the debacle. Its reporter, who had attended the soiree, explained that as letters of apology from a number of Catholic curates were being read - Saturday evening services made it impossible for them to attend - a scuffle was heard at the door and a volley of stones were hurled at the windows. Those inside were unprepared for these occurrences, but not unduly worried, after all it was to be presumed that the police or the military would intervene. The words of Catholic curates were being read - Saturday evening services made it impossible for them to attend - a scuffle was heard at the door and a volley of stones were hurled at the windows. Those inside were unprepared for these occurrences, but not unduly worried, after all it was to be presumed that the police or the military would intervene. 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circumstances of the country, when the minister has almost declared war, and the Irish people are preparing to meet the threat, that disunion must be fatal to the hopes of the country.... I have no hesitation in saying Dr. O'Brien is not an honest Repealer.

The words were applauded and echoed throughout the meeting by subsequent speakers. The Limerick Reporter clearly sympathised with this opinion, and readily allotted to Rev. Dr. O'Brien the role of agitator. Even the publishing of Reverend O'Brien's response to the criticisms, where he bitterly lamented the excesses of the night and avowed that had he been present he "should have jeopardised [his own] life to save Smith O'Brien from personal injury" failed to convert the Reporter or its readers. Letters continued to pour into the office of the Reporter, and those published were unanimous in their contempt for Rev. O'Brien, the "instigator" of the riot."

Possibly the two most prestigious Irish newspapers in circulation during the Repeal movement were The Nation and The Freeman's Journal. The former, edited by Charles Gavan Duffy, was, from its 1842 inception, the organ of the Young Irelanders, most of whom (including Smith O'Brien), regularly contributed to its pages. Though ostensively a Confederation Hall (Old Ireland) paper, The Freeman's Journal, led by its editor John Gray, was very much an advocate of union

Part of a satirical sketch published in Punch (Limerick Museum)
between the various Repeal factions.

In *My Life In Two Hemispheres*, Duffy leaves in no doubt the vaunted position of Smith O'Brien at the time of the riot: "No man at that time was so important to the cause." Thus it was of paramount importance for the movement that any ideas O'Brien harboured of quitting politics after the riot should be swiftly quashed. Without O'Brien's leadership the hopes of the moderate Young Irelanders for an all-class alliance would almost certainly have vanished. The Nation's initial comments on the riot amounted to little more than a panegyric of his efforts for Ireland during the preceding twenty years. In a remark later events showed to be wildly erroneous, The Nation declared that O'Brien "was marked for the time in which he appeared." Like Socrates and Aristides before him, O'Brien was a victim of "native ingratitude" and was duly honoured by The Nation by placing him in such exalted company.31

While admitting that "The Attorney-General ... the Saxon parliament in Westminster, and the mob in Limerick, seem to act in concert, and most harmoniously do they pull towards the same end", The Freeman's Journal, commenting on the "affronted members of the Sarsfield company," was adamant that Mitchell alone had been the target of the rioters.32 In an article titled "The Governmental Riot in Limerick," the Freeman did not doubt the presence of a "guiding authority." It bemoaned the large network of spies and "demom emissaries" operating throughout the country and expressed the hope that "create divisions among the friends of the country - to cover with disgrace the cause dearest to Irishmen."33

However, the preoccupation of the Freeman was the poor treatment bestowed upon Rev. O'Brien by his fellow countrymen, and the debilitating effect of such strong emotions on further efforts that at that time was so important to the cause. The Freeman here facet to Europe's revolutionary impulses. The paper proffered that the antiunionism of the Sarsfield Club to "forget and forgive" and "instead of continuing the hostility ... to resume the unfinished work of union where they left off, and carry it up to consummation." The Nation actually managed to convey a rather positive outlook on the riot. It was acknowledged among contemporaries, including Gavan Duffy, that O'Brien's English accent and aloof manner made it difficult for the ordinary people to connect with him. The indignation provoked by Limerick riot, and evident in the number of deputations and letters to O'Brien in the days after the riot condemning his treatment, The Nation claimed, supplied such a "tie of personal affection." The Freeman's Journal too suggested that the riot should be the stimulus for further union between Repealers: "Let us then ... unite in love, in sympathy, in co-operation, if we cannot unite in one association" and forcibly declared "let UNION AMONGST OURSELVES be the watchword of all who desire to RESURRECT THE UNION WITH ENGLAND."34

**Alternativ**

The riot is most remembered as a farce. It was horribly ridiculed in England in Punch. Lord Clanendon had sway both with the editor of the Times, John Delane, and with the World newspaper in Dublin. The Times began "to feel ashamed that we ever treated the Irish agitation as a subject for serious discussion or an object of reasonable fear." The World targeted O'Brien's well-known lineage: "How would Brian Boru have wept over his degenerate descendant." The ridicule continued as the "aristocratic force party were adjudged to have "reasoned with their fists and persuaded with their shillelaghs" [sic], and the physical force party were dubbed "tea drinkers." Clarendon himself believed the affray was "a heavy blow and a great discouragement to the Young Irelanders," and could snigger as O'Brien, with two black eyes, appeared in court (on sedition charges) two days after the riot. However, the situation soon turned around, and the images of dissension emanating from Limerick provoked an attempt at rapprochement between the disparate sections of the Repeal movement. A Protestant Repeal Association was established in Dublin on 9 May, and formal negotiations between the Confederation and Conciliation Hall, cut off in July 1847, reconvened in the offices of the Freeman's Journal where John Gray, amongst others, acted as a facilitator to the talks. The discussions resulted in the formation of the Irish League that met for the first time on 11 June. These signs of progress were soon dashed, first by the continued intransigence of John O'Connell, who by 22 June was denouncing the League. More important was the news from Paris. On 25 June Archbishop Affre of Paris was shot during the infamous "June Days" revolt by the Parisian working classes. Whatever support the Catholic clergy had been willing to lend the would-be revolutionaries quickly disappeared with this new facet to Europe's revolutionary impulses.

This loss, allied to O'Brien's determination not to "offer violence to anyone's person or property" when the Young Irelanders took to the field of battle in July, when set against the backdrop of three years of famine, meant in reality that rebellion never stood a chance of success.35

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