

A Riot In Limerick, 1848

Prologue

by Laurence Fenton

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 "Warehouse," 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.¹ However, the perception of the rebellion as farce has not been totally eradicated.² 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.³

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.⁴

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.⁵ O'Brien soon made his



Punch cartoon by Thackeray ridiculing the incident

(Limerick Museum)

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.⁶ O'Brien continued home to Cahirmoyle, where he stayed for a few days, returning to the city on the night of the 29 April for a gathering of the Limerick Confederates the Sarsfield Club had organised.

Prior to leaving Dublin for his tour of the southern Confederate Clubs, 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."⁷ Making matters worse was a recent article in Mitchel's *United Irishman* that had labelled Daniel O'Connell "the mortal enemy of the Irish working man, tiller and artificer."⁸ 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:⁹

"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 an 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 was at this moment struck in the face but, as soon as struck, several persons rushed up and said, "Do not injure Mr. O'Brien." They threw their arms round me with a view to prevent me from falling. Whilst I was in this attitude (one of my arms being raised) I received a very severe blow in my side, which incapacitated me from any further active exertion. 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".¹⁰

The *Limerick Reporter* has been described by Smith O'Brien's biographer as "always supportive" of O'Brien.¹¹ 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 August 1847, John McLenahan, editor of *The Limerick Reporter*, was one of the men who, at the last moment, nominated O'Brien for the county seat and duly engineered his successful election in absentia. The paper rejoiced, declaring it "the greatest triumph ever recorded in the history of elections."¹² 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 office being right opposite, and within a few yards, would not permit the burglary to proceed, or that the Mayor, who also resided in the immediate vicinity of the place, and must have heard what was going on, would at once interfere to prevent a breach of the peace and to protect life and property. Both expectations were disappointed.¹³

The assault continued for an hour, the windows being smashed and replaced with boards on the inside, before escalating with the burning of an effigy of John Mitchel adorned with the inscription "Mitchel, the calumniator of O'Connell." The men inside eventually took it upon themselves to open the door and take the fight to the mob. When one member of the crowd attempted to enter the building and was shot in the thigh, it "was the signal for flight of the entire mob!" It was only at this stage in the proceedings that the Mayor made his long awaited appearance - "as if for the rescue of the mob!" What was even more galling "He actually arrested Mr. Corbett, who was laudably engaged in preserving the peace that his worship was sworn to preserve, and paid for preserving, but did not preserve!"¹⁴ The streets finally being cleared, the police too entered the fray "either to share the victory, or protect their friends ... the prominent leaders of the attack on the life of Mr. Mitchel."¹⁵

The connivance of the authorities with the perpetrators of the riot was one of the major talking points for all the Irish commentators on the riot. As we have

seen from his personal memorandum, Smith O'Brien was in no doubt of their involvement. The *Limerick Reporter's* man on the scene shared these sentiments. "Time was given for the perpetration of that crime, and when the attempt failed, then the civil and military power interfered with a flourish of trumpets."¹⁶ The *Reporter* went on to observe that earlier in the day "these ruffians were seen drinking at several low public houses" and asked "Where did they get the money for the whiskey?" In light of the events later that evening, the answer the correspondent gave was "secret service money."¹⁷ Such a source would also explain the ruffian's possession of pistols. The editorial of that day was equally forthright:

"The Crown witnesses kept at the lying-in-hospital were let loose to head the drunken mob and foment the outrage - while, by previous concert of the Government, the authorities were to look on and not interfere till the last moment - that a riot might be consummated".¹⁸

Subsequent editorials remained steadfast in the belief that "the treason that was perpetrated here on Saturday night" was "plotted several days before."¹⁹ The reasoning behind the government's conceit was, the *Limerick Reporter* believed, the Lord Lieutenant Lord Clarendon's hope to disarm Limerick under the recent Crime and Outrage Act.²⁰

Another issue surrounding the reporting of the riot was the culpability of the Rev. Dr. O'Brien, a Catholic priest who had in the run up to the soiree published in *The Limerick and Clare Examiner*, and distributed widely as a handbill, a letter in which he protested "against designating the coming soiree to be an act of the United Repealers" of Limerick.²¹ When the soiree reconvened after the disturbances had been quelled on the Saturday night and Mitchel rose to declare "Sir, I fear that I am unfortunately the cause of your meeting this night being disturbed," the *Limerick Reporter* stated his claim was met with loud cries of "no, no, it was [Rev. Dr.] Father O'Brien did it all."²² In private correspondence Mitchel laid the blame for the riot chiefly on Rev. O'Brien's shoulders.²³ In Cork a few days after the riot, Meagher wrote: "The most desperate indignation exists here, in every mind, against the Revd. Dr O'Brien and all his ruffians. They would kill him, in spite of his surplice, if he was to be found here."²⁴

The 2 May edition of the *Reporter* contained a letter from a Daniel O'Connor that attacked the Reverend for his role in fomenting the riot: "If Father O'Brien did not wish to come he and those who agreed with him might have remained at home. But whence that dictatorial arrogance which would assume to act and speak for the city?"²⁵ Such sentiments were rife at the meeting of the Sarsfield Club on Monday night, 1 May, where the Chairman, Dr. Giffin, vilified Rev. O'Brien's newspaper article and attempts to sow the seeds of disunion among the Repealers of Limerick:

"He knows that in the present

THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF FASHION.



HER *Ponche*.—HÉLAS! mon ami, accord to my griefs one little corner of your excellent Journal. In me behold the dethroned sovereign—the veritable ex-monarch of France. My reign survived the Revolution which overthrew the Bourbons; it was superior to that of NAPOLEON himself; it ceased not with the Restoration, nor with the accession of the citizen-king; but it has fallen with the dynasty of LOUIS-PHILIPPE. Ah! *mon cher Ponche*, I am dethroned by the Provisional Government. They have usurped that dictatorship which, from my throne in Paris, I exercised over the civilized world. Not content with taking on themselves the affairs of the nation, they have assumed the administration of my province, and have not hesitated to prescribe rules for costume. Do you know what they have done? They have

ordained that the Members of the National Assembly shall wear a black coat, a white waistcoat with lappels, a tricolor sash with a gold fringe, and also in the left button-hole a red ribbon, on which shall be worked the *fasces* of the Republic. This they have decreed, as they say, 'considering that the principle of equality implies uniformity of costume for the citizens called to the same functions.'

"But, *Mr. Ponche*, if the principle of equality implies that, does not the principle of liberty also imply that each individual shall wear what he pleases, subject always to my direction? What, I demand, does the Provisional Government know of coats, and waistcoats, and sashes, of fringes, of pantaloons, of ribbons and button-holes? It is to me that belongs the arrangement of that sort of thing. Aid me, *cher Ponche*, in the assertion of my just claims. It is true that you have sometimes made jokes of me and my subjects—their *coiffures* and *moustaches*, and beards, and trowsers, and boots. Nevertheless, I confide that you will not allow me to suffer injustice, and will boldly declare to M. LAMARTINE and his colleagues, that it is enough for them to mind their own business without interfering with mine, so that they ought not to invent dresses any more, but to leave all such things to myself, who have the honour to be

"*Mon cher Ponche*,
"Your thrice-devoted admirer,
"LA MODE."

THE LIMERICK TRAGEDY.

SCENE I.—*The Sarsfield Confederation Club at Limerick. MITCHELL, MEAGHER, SMITH O'BRIEN, and CONFEDERATES, at Tea.*

1st Confederate. Friends, countrymen, and traversers—
Mitchell. Say traitors.

Traitors, man, traitors; stick not at the word.

1st Confederate. Friends, countrymen, and traitors—is your tea agreeable?

Meagher. To render it perfection,
Give me another knob. Thanks. Oh! my friends,
Would that this knob, now, were a Saxon pate,
This spoon a stout shillelagh.

Smith O'Brien. Sir, Amen!

Mitchell. Would that yon teapot, which contains Souchong,
Were charged, instead, with real gunpowder;
The spout a fuse, the whole a hand-grenade,
That I might hurl it on the Saxon slaves!

Mob (without). Yah! Come out o' that! Bad luck to ye! Hurroo!

2nd Confederate. What means this hubbuboo?

Meagher. It is the roar
Of the Young Irish Lion.

Mitchell. Glorious din!
He cries for English blood. Cry on. Thy thirst
Shall soon be slaked; soon shall thy fangs be flesh'd
In the black hearts of Britain's myrmidons.

Smith O'Brien. Well roared, young Lion! Let him roar again.

Mob (without). We'll lam ye to fling mud upon O'CONNELL.
[Mob howls again.]

3rd Confederate. What say they of O'CONNELL?

Smith O'Brien. Never heed:

His was the paltry creed of Moral Force,
And it hath perish'd with him. Give us pikes!
Mitchell. Pikes is the word. Pikes! For the love of Heaven
Get pikes—get rifles if you can—get scythes—
Get reap-hooks—cut and mangle, smite and stab
The scoundrel Saxon. Crush them into jam
With tables, chairs, hand-basins—any thing—
From bed-room-windows flung. Throw molten lead:
Squirt scalding vitriol in their soldiers' eyes.

[A brickbat comes through the window, and smashes MITCHELL'S cup and saucer.]

Ha! what was that?

Meagher. A little compliment,
Which doubtless was intended for the head
Of some Old Irelander among the crowd.

Mitchell. A well-meant argument—had it told home—
But 'twas a mercy that it miss'd my head. *[More howling from the mob.]*

Eh! What's all this? 'Tis very like a row!

Gracious—'tis not the time for fighting yet!

[A ruddy glare appears at the window. Renewed yelling from the mob.]

1st Confederate. Look out.

2nd Confederate. What's the matter?

3rd Confederate (mounting on a chair, looks through the window). What do I see?

A gibbet—yes, a gibbet—at the door,
'Neath it a blazing tar-barrel, o'er which
Dangles an effigy. Why! What? Yes! No!
Yes, by the Powers it is—MITCHELL—'tis thine

[A stone flung through the window strikes the speaker, who falls.]

Smith O'Brien. We are betrayed.

Mitchell. This is the Saxon's work.

Mob (without). Moral Force and O'CONNELL for ever!

[More stones are thrown through the windows. Some of the Confederates fire pistols on the mob, who knock violently without.]

Other Confederates tear up benches and pile them against the doors. MITCHELL, MEAGHER, and O'BRIEN, stand aghast with horror.]

Meagher. What's to be done?

Smith O'Brien. Quick—let us fly.

Mitchell. I say, lend me a pistol.

Meagher. Have you not a dagger?

Mitchell. Will some good fellow find me a disguise?

A Carter, one of the Confederates. Here, take this frieze.

Mitchell. Thou art a friend in need! How to escape!

[The door is burst open. The mob rush in and attack the Confederates.]

The tables are overturned, the crockery smashed, &c.]

Ha! through the casement!—Onward come our foes!

'Tis neck or nothing now, and so here goes.

[Exit MITCHELL, scrambling out of window, followed by MEAGHER and SMITH O'BRIEN.]

SCENE II.—*The Office of the "United Irishman." Sub-Editor, and Persons employed upon the Paper.*

1st Person. How 'scaped our Editor this awful shindy?

2nd Person. Almost by miracle. Press'd by the crowd,

Who hurl'd all sorts of missiles on his head,
Dagger in hand, with which, umbrella-like,
He warded off the heavy shower of blows
Which fell from the shillelaghs, he the door
Gained of a dwelling-house, and there he fought,
Since he could run no further, till the folks
Their friendly portal oped and let him in.

1st Person. And how sped MEAGHER?

2nd Person. Guarded by two friends,
Who right and left hit 'mong the furious mob,
Belaboured sore; yet with unbroken bones
MEAGHER got safely into his hotel.

1st Person. And SMITH O'BRIEN?

2nd Person. Faith, I cannot say;
But much I fear it is all up with him.
Soft! hither comes our batter'd Editor,
With his much bruised friend.

Enter MITCHELL and MEAGHER.

Meagher. Oh, brutes! Oh, beasts!
Oh, rapparees! Could I believe my eyes,
Or credit even my aching sides, which told me
That Irishmen were thrashing Ireland's friends?

Mitchell. Oh! that the skin which clothes this form of mine—
This poor tann'd hide—a Saxon did incase.
Ah! what a twinge was that. But all my hurts
Are nothing to my inward bruises. Oh!

Part of a satirical sketch published in Punch

(Limerick Museum)

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".²⁶

Giffin's 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 jeopardized [his own] life to save Smith O'Brien from personal injury" failed to convert the *Reporter* or its readers.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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 ostensibly a Conciliation Hall (Old Ireland) paper, *The Freeman's Journal*, led by its editor John Gray, was very much an advocate of union

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."²⁹ 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 founder. 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."³⁰ Like Socrates and Aristides before him, O'Brien was a victim of "native ingratitude" and was duly honoured by *The Nation* by its 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*, contrary to assertions of *The Limerick Reporter*,³² was adamant that Mitchel alone had been the target of the rioters.³³ 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 "demon emissaries" operating throughout the country whose purpose was: "To create divisions among the friends of the country - to cover with disgrace the cause dearest to Irishmen."³⁴

However, the preoccupation of the *Freemans* was the poor treatment bestowed upon Rev. O'Brien by his fellow countymen, and the debilitating effect of such strong emotions on further efforts toward union between the fractious strands of the Repeal movement. The *Freeman* of 6 May wrote, "no man could more deeply deplore the occurrence" than the Reverend. It continued:

"So strongly and feelingly does this excellent clergyman express himself on the subject, that we take the liberty of quoting one sentence from a private letter we received this morning from him - "As for me, had I been in Limerick, I should have fallen by Smith O'Brien's side before he had been injured."³⁵

The *Nation* - while also not doubting the collusion of government authorities in the riot - had an equally sympathetic view of Rev. O'Brien's plight, regretting that his name had become "mixed up in that bad business."³⁶ The paper proffered that the fury of the members of the Sarsfield Club arose from their "justifiable indignation from the outrages offered to their guests - a feeling of insulted hospitality which we can understand and honour."³⁷ It urged the affronted members 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."³⁸

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 had supplied such a "tie of personal affection."³⁹ *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 REPEAL THE UNION WITH ENGLAND."⁴⁰

Aftermath

The riot is most remembered as a farce. It was horribly ridiculed in England in Punch. Lord Clarendon 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."⁴¹ The *World* targeted O'Brien's well-known lineage: "How would Brian Boru have wept over his degenerate descendant."⁴² The ridicule continued as the moral 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."⁴³ 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 seditious charges) two days after the riot.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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