

William Smith O'Brien and Cahermoyle



The following article consists simply of a few comments on the Young Irelander, William Smith O'Brien (1803-64), Member of Parliament for Limerick from 1835-1848, and his Co. Limerick home. The information has been garnered primarily from the works of two historians who have done much recently to rehabilitate the character and career of Smith O'Brien, Richard Davis and Robert Sloan.¹

William Smith O'Brien was the progeny of Sir Edward and Lady Charlotte O'Brien. He only inherited the 'Smith' of his moniker in 1809, upon the death of his mother's father, William Smith. It was to William Smith that the large estate at Cahermoyle belonged. He bequeathed it first to his daughters, Charlotte and Harriet, and secondly to young William. Cahermoyle is located in the west of County Limerick and the nearest towns to it both today and when Smith O'Brien resided there are Rathkeale and Newcastle (West).

The seat of the O'Brien family in the early nineteenth century was Dromoland, and it was here that William grew up (between his study periods in England, that is). He later lived at Inchiquin Cottage in Corofin. Having first prevaricated between careers in the navy or army - for he was the second son, after Lucius O'Brien (1800-72), later the thirteenth Baron Inchiquin - William settled upon life at the Bar. In 1828 he entered politics and served as Member for Ennis until 1831. It was with his 1832 marriage to Lucy Gabbett that part of the Cahermoyle estate was granted to William by his mother. The marriage came just six weeks after William first met Lucy at the Curragh. They were wed on 19 September in Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare. Lucy's father, Joseph Gabbett, had been Tory Mayor of Limerick, 1819-20. Initially William's family had been unhappy with the marriage but soon all came to like and love Lucy.

The Cahermoyle estate entire was valued in September 1832 at £4,016 a year. William received just 318 acres, worth £600 a year, plus the Georgian house that was quite dilapidated. For the course of reparations, from October 1832 to October 1834, the O'Briens lived in Lucy's father's house at 78 George's Street (now O'Connell St.) in the city. The house was still only just habitable and in 1835, Lucy and William, while beginning to entertain there, continued planting and repairing the house and grounds.

It was also in 1835 that William was

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Miniature portrait of
William Smith O'Brien c.1840
(Limerick Museum)

elected as MP for Limerick. This necessitated that he take up a residence in London, too, for half the year. At first Lucy travelled with William for the parliamentary sessions that normally lasted from late January to August, a journey that entailed three days travel from Cahermoyle to London by boat and coach. This became more difficult as their family grew - the first son, Edward, was born in early 1837. Soon William's long journey was supplemented by long separations. The family habitually arrived now only in spring to see the patriarch. When O'Brien's political complexion changed in 1843 from independent Liberal to Repealer, he joked to Lucy (who worried over the political move) did she not think it better, now he was heavily involved in the Repeal Association and stationed more in Dublin than London, closer to Cahermoyle. Lucy failed to see the humour.

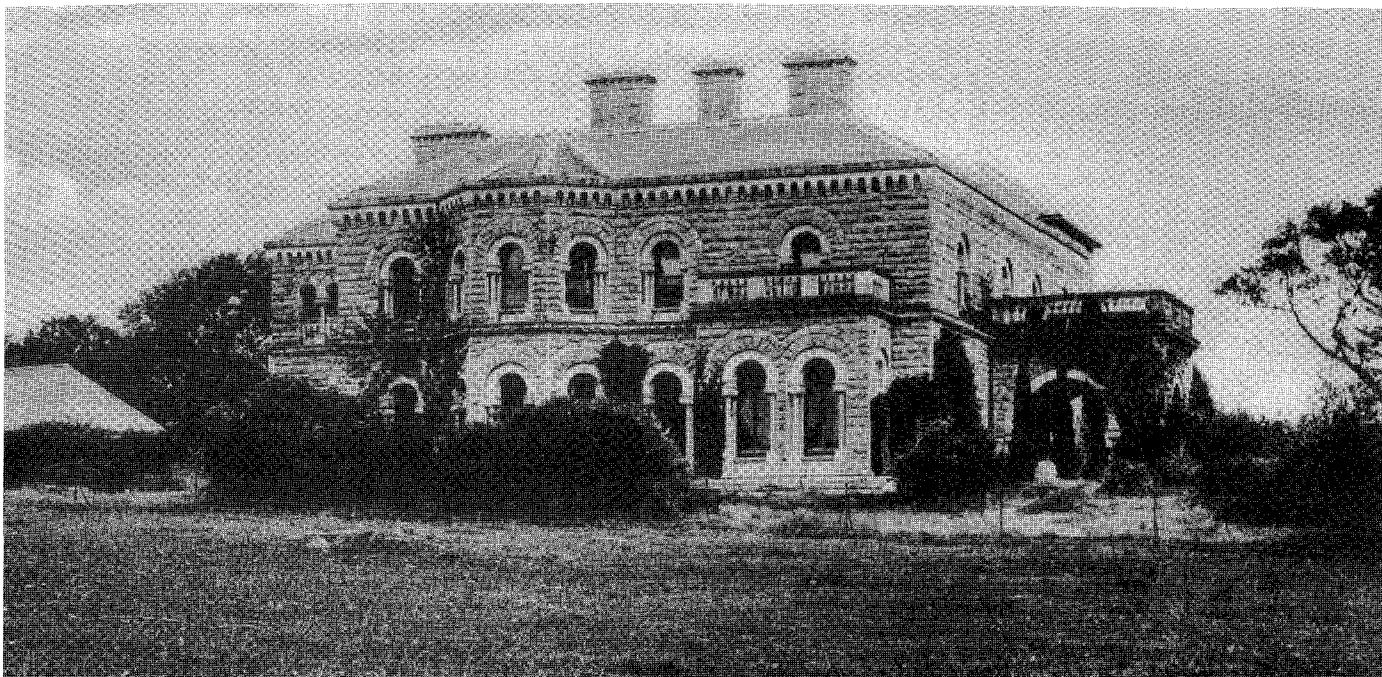
William Smith O'Brien grew to love Cahermoyle, but it was never comfortably his. He enjoyed reposing periodically on the estate, primarily from August or September to January. There he witnessed the birth of his first daughter in autumn of 1840. There he read widely - Rousseau, Bentham, Thucydides - and wrote and corresponded diligently on the pressing questions of the day: education, tithes or poor law. And the locals liked and admired William both personally and professionally. Bodies of people from Rathkeale and Newcastle came up to his house spontaneously to inquire as to his position,

and hear him then expound on his Young Irelandism and other topical issues. They came en masse to Cahermoyle to celebrate his 1847 election victory. In 1846 O'Brien, following the Repeal policy of handling only Irish business in parliament and refusing to sit on a Scottish railways committee, was imprisoned in the precincts of the House of Commons. Lucy wrote how: 'The trades people at Newcastle & Rathkeale are most vehement in your support.'²

Still, a confluence of circumstances ensured William was perpetually uncertain that Cahermoyle would remain his home. In the first place it had never been absolutely preordained that Cahermoyle was destined to become his, though family lore did claim that the old William Smith had suggested it was suitable for Charlotte's second son. Then in the mid-1830s an impostor, claiming to be Thomas Smith, a deceased (aged eight, in 1812) lovechild of William Smith's, emerged to claim part of the Cahermoyle estate. After some public embarrassment for the family the impostor was proven to be the son of a market gardener from London.

A want of money, too, affected William and Cahermoyle: MP's were not paid a salary at this period and William was heavily reliant on his mother for financial support. He simply was not making enough from the rents on his estate to continue to run and improve Cahermoyle as he wished, and to live for half or more of the year in London, where he continuously stayed in very modest quarters. Charlotte insisted that to spend money on refurbishing Cahermoyle, or Carmoyle as she wrote, would be to waste it if William did not give up politics. In January 1838, William conveyed back to his mother both the Cahermoyle house and six acres of the lands in exchange for an annual payment of £120. Charlotte took possession of the house, though it was understood that William and his family continued to both run the estate and live in the house when in Ireland.

However, having previously derided Cahermoyle as a mere farmhouse and complained about the situation of the house on the estate, Charlotte, especially in the wake of Sir Edward's death and Lucius' marriage (reducing her status at Dromoland) started to intimate she would like to live, perhaps, at Cahermoyle. This, combined with Charlotte's distaste for his repeal politics, left William's position often quite tenuous. In 1843, as he was on the cusp of joining the Repeal Association, William advised Lucy to 'prepare for the worst': he was certain they were about to



Postcard showing Cahermoyle house c.1905

(Limerick Museum)

be excluded from Cahermoyle.

Still, the near-constant anxiety of O'Brien's with regard to Cahermoyle was matched only by an intensification of his affinity for the place. After the 1846 secession of the Young Irelanders from the Repeal Association, Sloan (p. 165) contends, O'Brien's 'preference for life at Cahermoyle became more evident than ever.' That year Charlotte gave him £100 for papering and painting the house. This prolonged stay was, for Sloan, indicative of O'Brien's failure to provide leadership to the new group in the years prior to 1848. Sloan does, however, acknowledge O'Brien's sense at the time that he was more needed in Limerick than Dublin on account of the incipient famine and its consequent devastation. Cahermoyle escaped the worst ravages of the famine as it was mostly given over to grazing and the tenants were not too potato-dependent. William, however, was immersed in Limerick's efforts to combat the potato blight and attended any number of Relief Committees and Board of Guardians meetings at Newcastle.

In the epochal year of 1848 O'Brien couldn't keep away from his 'beloved' Cahermoyle. Returning to Ireland from a trip to post-revolution France he headed straight for home. Afterwards, he spent most of the month of June recuperating at Cahermoyle after being injured during an affray in Limerick between Old and Young Irelanders, although fomented in all probability by government spies. As the Young Irelanders verged ever closer to open rebellion, Smith O'Brien went in July on a tour of the southern Confederate Clubs to foment, and organize for, the imminent cataclysm. In the midst of this prelude to revolt he still planned for a short stay at Cahermoyle. He did not make that trip, though, as events soon overtook the man.

Shortly before the rising at Ballingarry,

and feeling rather desperate at the desertion of so many men from his ostensible throng of rebels - brought about by the urgings of local Catholic curates - O'Brien proclaimed he would head for Cahermoyle, whose tenantry would conceal and protect him from the British authorities. After Ballingarry and the failure of the rising, Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant, believed O'Brien to be making his way to Cahermoyle. Certainly, when arrested at Thurles railway station the ticket he held was for Limerick.

Having been transported alongside fellow rebels to Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania), William Smith O'Brien, in 1856, was pardoned and returned to Ireland. Bonfires marked the prodigal's path through Limerick. In Cahermoyle the family 'repaid the devotion of their tenants by an entertainment in August. One hundred and fifty dependants and friends dined on beef, mutton and pasties, washed down by wine and flagons of native ale.' Dancing and sports accompanied the festivities. For Davis this was patriarchal landlordism at its best.³

However, the reunion with Cahermoyle was not without an unfortunate coda. In 1848 O'Brien, to secure the estate for his family in case he was executed, had put Cahermoyle in a trust. His brother Lucius and friend Woronzow Greig were the trustees. When he returned from exile, Lucy naturally devolved responsibility for managing the estates back to William, but not officially. Upon her death in June 1861, neither of the trustees would consent to William's request for full ownership of the estates. William refused to speak to or meet Lucius again and his friendship with Greig, his duelling second in their youth, too, was damaged irrevocably. A fairly financially rewarding compromise was reached whereby the estate went to his eldest son, Edward, with an annuity of £2,000 for William himself.

However, the combination of this difficulty with Lucy's death ensured that Cahermoyle was now tarnished for Smith O'Brien. For the last three years of his life he felt, he said, no more than a visitor at Cahermoyle. Depressed 'by the sorrows of a domestic calamity' and 'harassed by anxiety connected with my property' O'Brien took to travelling Europe and America.⁴ - to combat his unhappiness, Smith O'Brien made his Irish home in Killiney, Co. Dublin. Political involvement was kept to letter writing.

William Smith O'Brien died on one of his travels, in Bangor, north Wales, on 18 June 1864. His second daughter, Charlotte, was with him. Smith O'Brien was buried in Kilronan cemetery near Cahermoyle, where a small mausoleum now stands. Hundreds of his tenantry attended the funeral. Earlier thousands had paid their respects in Dublin. Edward, William's eldest son, was a classicist who had travelled Greece with his father. He rebuilt Cahermoyle in the 1870s in an Italianate style. Like Dromoland, the house eventually fell out of the family's ownership and is now a nursing home for the elderly.

REFERENCE

1. R. Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien and the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848* (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2000), R. Davis, *Revolutionary Imperialist: William Smith O'Brien, 1803-1864* (The Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1998), R. Davis and M. Davis, (eds.), *The Rebel in his Family Selected Papers of William Smith O'Brien* (Cork University Press, Cork, 1998). See also T. Keneally, *The Great Shame: A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1998) and B. M. Touhill, *William Smith O'Brien and his Revolutionary Companions in Penal Exile* (University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 1981).
2. R. Davis and M. Davis, p.48.
3. R. Davis, p.327.
4. T. Keneally, p.325.