An Election Incident in Broad Street, Limerick, 1859
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In the aftermath of the Great Famine the political affiliations of Irish members of parliament were often difficult to determine. The great Repeal Movement of O'Connell had petered out and more than twenty years were to pass before the Home Rule Party came into being. The so-called Irish Independent Opposition party of Sadlier and Keogh, derisively called by its opponents “The Pope’s Brass Band”, had been shortlived; and those M.P.s with a nationalist outlook or who sought the support of nationally-minded voters, subsequently went under the label of “Liberal”. At this time Limerick City was represented in Parliament by two members. In 1858 the two sitting M.P.s were Francis William Russell and James O’Brien, Q.C., both describing themselves as Liberals. In that year O’Brien resigned, on being appointed a judge, and a by-election was called to fill the vacant seat. Two candidates contested the by-election, Major George Gavin, of Kilpeacon, and John Ball, each calling himself “Liberal”. The election was held in February, 1858 and Major Gavin defeated Ball by 49 votes. However, on a petition by Ball, Gavin’s election was declared void and a new election was ordered for May, 1858. On a charge of bribery Major Gavin was disqualified from contesting this election. Though he was technically guilty it was generally agreed that he was not morally responsible for the bribery. Personally he felt deeply hurt and many of his supporters were so embittered that, in order to prevent the election of Ball, they declared for a third contestant, James Spaight. Ball withdrew from the contest and, on the 21st May, 1858, Spaight was declared elected unopposed.

The General Election of 1859

In parliament, Spaight supported the Tories and, consequently, lost any support which he may have had among the Liberal voters in Limerick. A General Election was called for May, 1859. There were three candidates for the two Limerick City seats—the two outgoing members, Francis W. Russell and James Spaight and, in addition, Major Gavin. Russell, a popular candidate, was sure of re-election and, therefore, the real contest was between Gavin and Spaight for the second seat. Gavin was actively supported by many of the Catholic clergy in the city, including Dean Butler, Parish Priest of St. Mary’s, who was later to become Bishop of Limerick. Fr. John Kenyon, Parish Priest of Templederry and veteran of 1848, returned to his native city to help Gavin. The Major and his supporters regarded the successful outcome of the election as necessary for the vindication of Gavin’s good name and honour which had been impugned by the charges of the previous year.

The Electorate and the Poll

Spaight realised that his seat was in danger and he tried to muster support among the Tories in the city. Tenants with votes in the Liberties were ordered by their landlords to vote for Spaight. They were brought into the city in a body and lodged in the Sailors’ Home, the night before the poll, much to the chagrin of Gavin supporters. Carriage-loads
of "helpers" were sent from Derry Castle, the Spaight home near Killaloe, but these were turned back at Castleconnell. The voting was open and had to be completed in the city in one day. (In the county election two days were allowed for the poll.) Polling was not held on the same day in every constituency. For instance, in 1859, the poll was held in Dublin on 2nd May, while, in County Kilkenny, the poll was not declared until the 20th May.

In Limerick City the poll was held on Wednesday, 4th May. The franchise was limited to those males who held houses in the city and Liberties of at least £8 annual value and who were properly registered. Therefore the electorate was small. Out of a population of 56,000, in 1859, only 2,013 had the franchise in the Limerick City election. Each voter had two non-transferable votes, but many voters cast only one vote so that only one candidate would benefit. These singles votes were called plumpers.

The city was quite peaceful during the Poll on the 4th May. Russell took the lead very quickly and by 2 p.m. Gavin had passed Spaight. When the poll closed, at 5 p.m., Russell had 1,207 votes, Gavin had 903 and Spaight was third with 803. 1,680 constituents had exercised the franchise.

The Procession

As soon as it became obvious that Major Gavin was going to win the second seat great excitement swept the city. Thousands crowded into George's Street (now O'Connell Street), Patrick Street, Rutland Street and across Mathew Bridge. At 5 p.m. the Major himself appeared, mounted on a white charger, surrounded by crowds absolutely delirious with enthusiasm and followed by car-loads of his friends and supporters. The procession moved over Mathew Bridge, down Merchants' Quay to the City Court House, up Quay Lane and across Nicholas Street. After passing down through Peter's Cell, the crowd, all the time increasing in size, continued on towards St. Mary's Catholic Church. After the Major had paid a courtesy call on Dean Butler, he placed himself again at the head of the procession which turned up Athlunkard Street and then went left into Mary Street.

At the end of Mary Street, near Baal's Bridge, a company of armed police was drawn up across the entrance to Sir Harry's Mall, in line with the house at the corner of Mary Street and the Mall, a house then occupied by John Meskell, a shoemaker. This detachment of policemen were led by Sub-Inspector Milling and were under the civilian control of Dr. Gore, J.P. The procession passed over the bridge peacefully and into the Irishtown. The enthusiasm in Broad Street was indescribable. Gavin had headed the Poll in the Irishtown Ward, getting more votes (97) here than Russell, while Spaight received a mere 18 votes in the whole ward. The windows were thrown open and handkerchiefs waved all along the street.

Stone-throwing

As some of the crowd passed the house of Richard Gamble, six houses up from the bridge on the southern side of the street, stones were thrown at the house; Gamble was known to be an active supporter of Spaight. Some windows were broken before others in the crowd stopped the stone-throwers. The incident took less than a minute and Major Gavin, who was well ahead at the time, was quite unaware of what was happening. The crowd proceeded up John Street and, near John's Gate, the house of another Spaight supporter, a man named Cronin, was stoned and windows were broken. After passing through John's Square Major Gavin continued up Cornwallis, now Gerald Griffin, Street and turned down William Street. He then proceeded up George's Street, still followed by
thousands, to the new statue of Daniel O’Connell in the Crescent—it had been officially unveiled in August, 1857. At this stage many left the procession—it was tea-time—but the crowd which followed the Major into Pery Square was still numbered in thousands. After turning into the Boherboy they moved back in the direction of the Irishtown and after Crossing William Street they went on down High Street.

**Broad Street**

Passing through Mungret Street, the procession now entered Broad Street once more. All the while the rapturous greetings continued, the Major doffing his hat and bowing continuously, and a band in front played “Garryowen”.

While the procession had been proceeding through the newer part of the city Dr. Gore had requested Sub-Inspector Milling to move his police across the bridge, into the Irishtown. When the procession re-entered Broad Street these police were drawn up in front of Gamble’s house. When Gore saw the immense crowd approaching he told Milling to draw his men aside and let the procession pass unimpeded. Accounts differ as to what precipitated the tragedy which was to follow. One newspaper reported that missiles were thrown at Gavin from the upper windows of Gamble’s house as he passed below. The Major rode on, but some of the crowd began to stone Gamble’s house and soon the house came under severe attack. Gore ordered the police to clear the street and the latter, with fixed bayonets, charged the crowd. The terrified people ran before them, many of them scattering and running down the adjoining lanes as a cry of “Murder!” went up. Very soon the street was cleared up to the old market house—the site of Thomcor Castle—at the junction of John Street, Broad Street and Mungret Street. The police formed a double line across the street, thus preventing the rest of the crowd from passing into Broad Street from Mungret Street.

At the same time Gamble’s house came under renewed attack, being now completely unprotected. The ladies were still at the upper windows of the houses as another detachment of police moved down Broad Street. These were led by Sub-Inspector O’Reilly and were under the civilian control of Edward Gonn Bell, Resident Magistrate of Castleconnell. Bell claimed later that some of the stone-throwers turned on him and the police as they approached. He read the Riot Act but this had only the effect of increasing the animosity of the crowd in front of Gamble’s house. Bell then ordered the police to fire on the crowd. After the first volley the people thought that blank cartridges were being used, but two or three more volleys were fired and one man was killed instantly and five more were wounded. This had the effect of dispersing the crowd and Bell and his party of police moved on to Baal’s Bridge. Some arrests were made.

The dead man was John Grace, a carpenter, who had been married three months. His body was taken to Barrington’s Hospital, together with the wounded. William Clohessy, aged 14 years, the son of a widow in Garryowen was shot in the back, the ball entering the chest and passing close to the spine. John McNamara, from the Island, had a gunshot wound in the thigh. John O’Brien, from the Green near the Blackboy, had a gunshot wound in the right shoulder. John Rice had a gunshot wound in the left shoulder. Young John Meskell was standing at the door of his father’s shop, at the corner of Mary Street, in the Englishtown, when he was shot in the face; the ball entered below his left eye and lodged in his neck from which it was later satisfactorily extracted in Barrington’s Hospital. A young man putting up shutters on the windows of Donovan’s public house, near Gamble’s, had a narrow escape when a beer-cask beside him was perforated. In all, about fifty shots were fired.
Meanwhile, in Mungret Street, the crowd, which was being held back by Gore and the other policemen, became very excited on hearing the gun-fire. They tried to break through into Broad Street but the double line of policemen held fast and Gore enlisted the aid of some of the local businessmen who spoke to the crowd and managed to quieten them. Major Gavin, on hearing of the disaster, returned to Broad Street and, with the Mayor, Michael Robert Ryan, Dean Butler and several other priests and local politicians, set about dispersing the people quietly. The Mayor was up all that night, visiting the wounded in Barrington’s Hospital and consoling the relatives of the victims. Groups of women stayed outside the hospital during the night crying and lamenting.

**Post-mortem**

On Thursday morning, the 5th May, the official declaration of the Poll was made at the City Courthouse. Emotions were still very high. Two speakers whom the local newspaper called “the man with the green hat” and “the man with the Iron Face” demanded vengeance for the people. Major Gavin had to be restrained by the High Sheriff when he spoke vehemently against the actions of the police. Father William Bourke, who had recently been appointed parish priest of Bruree after serving for many years as Administrator of St. John’s, called for justice for the poor people of his former parish. Father John Kenyon, of Templederry, called on Major Gavin to use all his powers to ensure that justice was done. A committee was set up to collect subscriptions for the victims and their relatives.

That evening, six people, who had been arrested during the disturbances, were brought before the Mayor’s court, charged with rioting. Four were discharged; one, Jeremiah Mannix, was fined 5/- or seven days in gaol for throwing a policeman’s hat into the river. Another man got a month’s imprisonment for stone-throwing. At one o’clock on Friday morning young Clohessy died in the hospital after lingering since Wednesday in great pain. McNamara also died of his wound some days later. At eleven o’clock on Friday morning an inquest was opened on Grace and Clohessy at the hospital. After being adjourned until 2 p.m. the inquest resumed and a jury was sworn. The jury viewed the bodies of the dead victims and then the proceedings continued, this time at the City Courthouse. Here Dr. Thomas Gelston gave evidence that apart from young Meskell, all the victims, dead and wounded, had been shot in the back. He also stated that only two policemen were admitted to the hospital, one suffering from a slight scratch and the other showing no external mark of injury but complaining of a pain in the back.

When the inquest was resumed on Saturday it was revealed that the policemen involved had been ordered off on duty to Rathkeale on the pretext that they were needed for the election in the county which was due to take place a week later. The inquest was adjourned once more; but, finally, the jury brought in a verdict of manslaughter against Bell and 26 policemen. After an investigation all were acquitted. Spaight petitioned Parliament to have Gavin unseated but this time the petition failed and Gavin retained his seat. He represented Limerick City from 1859 until he retired in 1874, heading the poll in the General Elections of 1865 and 1868, with Russell in second place. Major Gavin died in 1880. James Spaight contested six subsequent elections for Parliament, the last in 1887, each time without success. He was knighted in 1887 and died in 1892. Father William Bourke contracted a cold while in the city and died in a short time (1859). He is buried in St. John’s Cathedral, opposite the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
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