Smith O’Brien’s Retribution

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This article, based on a recently-discovered document, recalls a postscript to the rising of 1848. Although he had failed dismally as a rebel leader, William Smith O’Brien showed that he was not devoid of political astuteness. In 1857 he wrote a letter which ended the political career of Sir Thomas Redington, who as Under-Secretary had offended the Young Ireland code of honour in ’48.

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After leading the uprising of 1848 William Smith O’Brien ceased to be active politically. But for many this chivalrous Clareman remained the elder statesman of Irish nationalism until his death in 1864. A letter which has come to light in the Dillon Papers in Trinity College, Dublin, shows that O’Brien still had political clout in 1857, the year after his return from banishment in Van Diemen’s Land (nowadays Tasmania, Australia).

This document, published below,¹ is important historically not only because of the information it provides about parliamentary corruption in post-Famine Ireland, but also for its insight into the mind of Smith O’Brien and the Young Ireland movement generally.

O’Brien emerges as an extraordinarily inept, if high-minded, revolutionist. Born in Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare, in 1803, he was educated at Harrow and Cambridge. He was a Member of Parliament for 20 years, being first elected as a Tory for Ennis borough in 1828. Although a Protestant, he supported Catholic Emancipation.

When O’Brien joined the Repeal Association in 1843 he initially deputised for O’Connell. Increasingly, however, his sympathies lay with the idealism and religious tolerance of Young Ireland. Contact with the romantic nationalists also made this Anglicised aristocrat more aware of his Thomond roots. (His brother succeeded as Lord Inchiquin in 1855.)

During the Great Famine O’Brien tried to stem the tide of hunger in Cahirmoyle, his west Limerick estate. After the Young Irelanders broke with O’Connell and formed the Irish Confederation, he emerged as their reluctant leader.

In 1848 he carried greetings to revolutionary France but failed to gain support for the Irish cause. Events in Ireland moved to a climax with the deportation of John Mitchel in May, 1848. When the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended on the 22nd of July, John Blake Dillon and Thomas Francis Meagher went to Ballinkeele, Co. Wexford, to confer with O’Brien. The three leaders decided there was no honourable alternative to armed resistance.

On their way to Kilkenny they stopped in Gowran to inspect the monastic ruins. This endearing ‘archaeological excursion’ was a measure of their attempted insurrection: while committed to violence they were not really capable of it. They spent a week trying to rouse the famine-stricken countryside. Crowds with “eyes red with rage and desperation” greeted them, but were unprepared for revolution. The insurgents dispersed after a skirmish with police in Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary.

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¹MS 6456/328. I wish to thank the Board of Trinity College, Dublin, for permission to publish this document.
Already warrants signed by the Under-Secretary in Dublin Castle, Thomas Nicholas Redington, had been issued for the arrest of O’Brien, Dillon, Meagher and Michael Doheny. A reward of £500 was offered for the capture of O’Brien, and £300 for each of the others. Dillon and Doheny managed to escape to the United States; O’Brien and Meagher were among those held. After about a week ‘on the run’ O’Brien, fearing to bring reprisals on the people who concealed him, decided to make for Cahirmoyle. He was arrested in Thurles railway station on the 5th of August. One of the policemen who knew him had whispered: ‘For God’s sake, Sir, why do you expose yourself so?’

He told the constabulary sub-inspector in charge of the escort which brought him on a special train to Dublin: ‘I have played the game and lost, and I am ready to pay the penalty of having failed. I hope that those who accompanied me may be dealt with in clemency; I care not what happens to myself.’

On arrest, O’Brien sent a message to Doheny’s house in Cashel to have his trunk collected, as he desired a change of linen. He did so on the naïve assumption that it would be delivered unopened. The portmanteau was forwarded to Dublin Castle, opened there and found to contain incriminating documents. O’Brien and three others were convicted of high treason and sentenced to death.

He wrote to Charles Gavan Duffy, who had been in custody since before the rising: ‘Among the circumstances which have occurred in connection with my defeat, capture, trial and conviction, few have occasioned to me so much anxiety as the act of inadvertence which placed in the hands of the government the letter from you which has been so much relied upon as an evidence of a treasonable conspiracy.’

O’Brien regarded himself as a prisoner of war, not as a convicted felon. He was prepared to die but unwilling to accept the indignity of transportation to Van Diemen’s Land. So an act was passed ‘to remove doubts concerning the transportation of offenders under judgment of death to whom mercy may be extended in Ireland.’ On the 9th of July, 1849, the four prisoners, whose sentences were commuted, set out on their 16,000-mile voyage to Australia; they reached Hobart, in Van Diemen’s Land, on the 26th of October, 1849.

When O’Brien and Mitchel met in Tasmania they walked for several hours ‘talking of ’48.’ They blamed the people and, even more unreasonably, the Catholic clergy for their ignominious failure. Mitchel recorded in his Jail Journal that O’Brien told him:

Priests hovered round him everywhere; and, on two or three occasions, when the people seemed to be gathering in force, they came whispering round, and melted off the crowd like a silent thaw. He described to me old grey-haired men coming up to him with tears streaming down their faces, telling him they would follow him so gladly to the world’s end—that they had long been praying for that day—and God knows it was not life they valued, but there was his reverence, and he said that if they shed blood they would lose their immortal souls; what could they do? God help them, where could they turn? And on their knees they entreated him to forgive them for deserting him. So they slunk home to take care of their paltry old souls, and wait for the sheriff’s bailiff to hunt them into the poorhouse.

Mitchel did not explain how ‘old grey-haired men’ were going to overcome the might of empire. O’Brien admitted retrospectively that he had ‘totally miscalculated the energies of the Irish people’; however brave and well-intentioned, the Young Irelanders were

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4Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History*, London 1883, p. 757.
5O’Sullivan, *Young Irelanders*, p. 184.
7NLI MS 464, p. 133.
removed from the real plight of the common people. Their spiritual leaders believed the rising had no chance of success and feared that military reinforcements would re-enact the atrocities of 1798. The clergy’s conservatism was strengthened by the shooting of Archbishop Affre at a barricade in Paris on the 27th of June, 1848.

A priest who was in Ballingarry said O’Brien had delivered a ‘death-blow’ to the movement by announcing to his hungry followers that they would have to feed themselves, as he “did not mean to offer violence to anyone’s person or property.” Significantly, Mitchel’s Tipperary friend, Father John Kenyon, refused to support an insurrection on the lines insisted upon by O’Brien, who in his brief career as rebel leader resembled Don Quixote more than his ancestor, Brian Boru.

While the British press ridiculed the 1848 Ballingarry battle of Widow McCormack’s cabbage patch, the government decided to avoid making martyrs of the convicted leaders. Instead, it wished to consign them to oblivion in the penal colonies. A campaign for their release continued in the Irish and Irish-American press, however; those who had not escaped were granted conditional pardons in 1854 and received full pardons two years later. On returning to Ireland, O’Brien maintained that the struggle for self-government could be carried on by constitutional means.

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In 1852 Duffy, who was acquitted after five trials, had the satisfaction of defeating Sir Thomas Redington at the polls in New Ross, Wexford. Redington was denounced, among other things, for having evicted 180 people from his estate in Kilcornan, Co. Galway, since the Famine. His canvass was preceded by a troop of dragoons, a company of infantry and three detachments of police, and followed by a retinue of hired tenants.

Five years later Redington was still trying to return to Parliament. A vacancy occurred in Galway borough after the general election of 1857. Anthony O’Flaherty, M.P. since he was supported by the Young Irishers a decade earlier, had been unseated on petition. His kinsman, Martin O’Flaherty, a friend of Dillon’s (who was also back in Ireland from America), wrote to O’Brien: “Doubtless you are already aware that Redington is up for Galway, and I am sorry to say with strong prospects of success.” Electors in this notoriously corrupt borough were so eager for a contest that “the heads of each trade to the number of 30 in six jaunting cars went out to Kilcornan to invite Sir Thomas Redington to stand.”

Martin O’Flaherty reminded O’Brien of a promise to expose Sir Thomas Redington’s behaviour after his capture, whenever “this miserable fellow offered himself for Galway.” O’Brien’s ‘exact narrative’ appeared in the Nation on the 1st of August, 1857. Headlined ‘The Knight and the Carpet Bag’, his letter had the desired effect. Redington did not go forward in Galway and the issuing of an election writ was postponed. Redington, who had been the first Catholic Under-Secretary, ended up as Commissioner of Inquiry respecting Lunatic Asylums in Ireland.

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13Dictionary of National Biography.
The text of Smith O’Brien’s letter, dated the 21st of July, 1857, is:

My Dear O’Flaherty,

I have no hesitation in complying with your request that I should relate to you the history of my celebrated portmanteau, and you may make any use you think fit of my narrative at the approaching Galway election or elsewhere.

When I was captured at Thurles in 1848 I was taken into a room in which were General McDonald, Mr. Gore Jones and some other persons. General McDonald, who appeared to be nearly as much excited on the occasion as I was, though probably under very different influences, immediately proffered to me various civilities, which were tendered, I must admit, in a very incoherent manner. He offered me a bottle of champagne—he told me that he had been the guest of my father or brother at Dromoland and that if there was anything that he could do for me that would contribute to my comfort he would be happy to comply with my wishes. I was completely thrown off my guard by this sort of address and, believing that I was in the hands of a gentleman, I said to him that I declined his proffered hospitality, but that as I had been for some days without a change of dress, it would be a great comfort to me to obtain at once a portmanteau which I had left at the house of a friend in Cashel. He declared that he should have it, gave me no intimation that it would be searched, and Mr. Gore Jones or one of the other officials received a letter from me authorising its delivery to the bearer of my note.

It did not occur to me at the time that there was in the portmanteau any document that could comprise either myself or anyone else, but I confess that, even if there had been in it such papers, I could not have believed it possible that a general officer obtaining possession of it, not by way of capture but upon an honourable understanding, would have allowed it to be rifled by state detectives of any grade whatsoever. On the day after my arrival in Dublin the clothes which the portmanteau contained were delivered to me, and it is due to the officials of the Castle to say that the only articles of wearing apparel that appeared to have been abstracted were a set of studs which I have never seen since my capture. It will not be forgotten that in consequence of the discovery in my portmanteau of a letter written to me by Charles Gavan Duffy, the indictment against him was changed from a charge of treason felony to a charge of high treason. For several weeks I suffered much pain of mind, not only from indignation against those who had thus kidnapped my letters, but also from self-reproach for having through my confiding inadvertence compromised the safety of a friend.

Lord Clarendon [the Viceroy] and his officials however met with the retribution which they deserved, for the charge of indictment against Mr. Duffy led them into such a succession of blunders and acts of meanness, that the public feeling at length revolted against this prosecution and Mr. Duffy, who would probably have been transported on the original indictment with as much promptitude as had been shown in the case of Mr. Mitchel, completely baffled the law officers of the crown in a succession of trials, which in point of duration, in point of vindictive prosecution, in point of unworthy artifices used to procure a conviction were I believe unmatched in the annals of British judicature. Mr. Duffy enjoyed also the triumph of meeting at the hustings of New Ross and of putting to rout Sir Thomas Redington, who was the chief performer in the episode of the portmanteau.

I have been informed and believe that when my portmanteau arrived in Dublin it was carried to the Castle, that its contents were there examined most minutely by Sir Thomas Redington, and that all the letters which it contained were read by Sir Thomas Redington in the presence of his private secretary. That there can be no doubt as to the minuteness of this examination is proved by the circumstance that every paper bears the initials of either Sir Thomas Redington or of his private secretary. The papers contained in this portmanteau were of a most miscellaneous kind—letters from private friends—scraps of poetry—bills and receipts—political memoranda—visiting cards—registry certificates—medical prescriptions, legal papers, rentals, etc. In short they were a collection of papers which had accumulated during my stay in Dublin and which I had taken with me to the country with a view to transfer them to Cahirmoyle.

To any candid and generous mind the contents of the portmanteau would have afforded sufficient evidence to produce a conviction that I could not have contemplated an immediate insurrection when I left Dublin: for in such case it was utterly improbable that I should have taken papers of this description with me on my excursion to the County of Wexford. Yet in spite of this presumption the agents of the Castle made every possible effort on my trial to prove that I had gone to Wexford and Tipperary with the intention of raising an immediate rebellion. The fact was that I had long been fully convinced that resistance to the British Parliament was the duty of every Irishman, but I had been extremely anxious to avert, as long as possible, a collision on account of the terrible and uncertain hazards of such a strife, and it was not until the Irish nation had been deprived of the right of trial by jury, by the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act (of which proceeding I first became apprised when I was in the County of Wexford), that I resolved finally to call upon the people to take up arms in open resistance to misgovernment.

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During my imprisonment (I forget the exact date) a large proportion of the papers which my portmanteau had contained were restored to me, but under circumstances which left no doubt on my mind that they had undergone manhandling and close inspection by the subordinate officials of the Castle as well as by Sir Thomas Redington: and some letters written to me by my wife have never yet been returned to me.

Now I shall leave to others the task of determining how far the conduct of Sir Thomas Redington on this occasion was or was not consistent with the character of an Irish gentleman. As he had the advantage of being educated at an English university, it is to be presumed that he learnt there the principles of honour which are in vogue amongst English statesmen. Had he been a wretched stipendiary of the British Government whose sole means of existence depended upon his official salary, I should have found some apology for his having undertaken to do the dirty work of England, but he is, I believe, possessed of an independent fortune, and was not compelled by any overruling exigency to act as a detective for England. Not being, I trust, very vindictive in my disposition I would willingly have forgotten this transaction if my own private feelings alone were concerned. But I still continue to cherish some regard for our national pride and for our national honour—though, alas, the confidence which I once placed in the noble sentiments of my fellow countrymen is greatly impaired. It therefore seems to me that it would be an eternal disgrace to the Irish nation if a single constituency could be found in this island which would confer popular honours as a reward for such conduct, or select as its representative a man who has acted such a part towards one whose chief aim in life has been to vindicate the rights of his fellow countrymen, and especially of those who belong to the religious persuasion which is professed by Sir Thomas Redington. If Sir Thomas deserves to be rewarded for his services, I venture to suggest that it is from the English people—not from Irishmen—still less from Roman Catholics that he ought to receive the meed of such deservings. It is possible that there are many constituencies in England to whom he could not recommend himself more effectually than by proclaiming that he had aided in rifling the portmanteau of an Irish rebel, who was induced by the allurements of a British general to place it within his grasp.

Dillon being a barrister had probably checked the letter of his friend, O’Brien, for libel. Asked to comment on it, the hapless Redington told the Nation that he merely did his duty in 1848.