

**The Principality of Thomond and His Royal Highness  
Raymond Moulton Seághan O'Brien, 1936-1963;  
Ireland's greatest diplomatic farce.**

**DR JÉRÔME aan de WIEL**

*University of Rheims (Reims), France*

The extraordinary story of a conman who claimed to be heir to the Earldom of Thomond and entitled to use the title, which had been extinct since 1774, and managed to convince, at least temporarily, an amazing number of individuals, journalists and governments of the legitimacy of his claim and the existence of a 'principality' of Thomond. The bewildered, frustrated and less than effectual response of the Irish government is outlined in detail.

Before introducing a new Irish royalty to the readers of the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, allow me briefly to introduce myself. I am a lecturer in the University of Rheims (Reims), France, and currently Visiting Professor in the history department of University College Cork. My research interests and publications are in modern Irish history.<sup>1</sup> It was during my research in the National Archives in Dublin that I became aware of the existence of 'His Royal Highness the Prince of Thomond' Raymond Moulton Seághan O'Brien, or The O'Brien, head of the 'Most Honourable Dalcassian Order of the Princely House of Thomond'. The documents I found dated from the 1950s and 1960s. This frankly surprised me as I had never heard of the Principality of Thomond despite the fact that I had lived in Limerick for some years. I then asked several friends of mine, all born and bred in Limerick, and all confessed they had never heard of the man either,



**S.A.R. le Prince de Thomond**  
(Copyright C. Sonnel, Dublin)



**Plate 1 "His Royal Highness" and the flag of the "Principality"**

<sup>1</sup> Jérôme aan de Wiel, *The Catholic Church in Ireland, 1914-1918; War and Politics* (Dublin, 2003) & *The Irish Factor, 1899-1919; Ireland's strategic and diplomatic importance for foreign powers* to be published by Irish Academic Press in 2008.



let alone of the principality... A few months later, my surprise amplified considerably when I found documents about "His Royal Highness" in the German diplomatic archives in Berlin! Surprise then gave way to curiosity and I began to collect more and more data about The O'Brien's princely activities. The research, in all likelihood far from being complete, was astonishing. "His Royal Highness" tried to establish diplomatic relations between the independent Principality of Thomond, spreading over Clare and Limerick, and various European countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, France, Poland as well as the United States. Crowned heads and heads of state were approached, ranging from Prince Rainier of Monaco to Walter Ulbricht, the Secretary-General of the East-German Communist Party. What was even more astonishing was that this diplomatic farce would last from 1936 until 1963, at least! This is the story of the self-styled Principality of Thomond and its Prince.

### The legal battle

On 12 October 1936, *Time Magazine* in the United States published a column entitled 'Names make news'. In it, the journalist mentioned the name of Raymond Moulton O'Brien. He was apparently the heir of an old Irish title that had become extinct for almost two centuries and the gentleman personally knew nothing about it until his mother told him the truth:

Because the identity of his father was long kept secret from him, not until four years ago did Raymond Moulton O'Brien, British-born Manhattan oilman, suspect he might be the Right Honorable the Earl of Thomond of County Clare, Ireland. Son of his mother's first husband instead of her second, as she had led him to believe, he first learned of his claim to nobility when she was unable to provide him with a proper birth certificate, admitted that she had deceived him. Because no O'Brien has claimed the peerage of Thomond since 1774, the title had become extinct. Last week, though in London representatives of the British Crown denied resurrecting the title, oilman O'Brien proudly exhibited elaborately stamped documents which, he announced, entitled him and his wife to make their bow before King Edward VIII at his Coronation next May.<sup>2</sup>

O'Brien lost no time in trying to get his title recognised by the Irish authorities and the same year a Mexican court issued a judgement decree stating he was indeed the 'Earl of Thomond'.<sup>3</sup> In New York, he picked up his pen and wrote to Eamon de Valera, then President of the Executive, personally. He asked de Valera whether he would be allowed 'to carry and use the ancient titles of EARL of THOMOND and BARON IBRACKAN (Ireland 1756) in the Free State' and stated proudly: 'I would add that I have successfully claimed these titles not as a means to set myself apart, but to keep alive the memory and male line of King Brian Boroihme, who so valliantly [sic] with held [sic] against the English'.<sup>4</sup> It was a bad start as O'Brien's history was shaky; it was, of course, not against the English that Brian Boru had fought. This caught de Valera's Private Secretary's attention as he put a question mark next to "English". The Private Secretary replied to O'Brien in a one-line letter that the President acknowledged 'the receipt of your letter of the 7<sup>th</sup> instant'.<sup>5</sup> The problem was that curtness was not going to shake off the new claimant to the throne of Thomond... However, the authorities in Dublin were sufficiently taken aback to make enquiries about the Earldom of Thomond. Thomas Sadleir of the Office of Arms confirmed that O'Brien had in fact no right to claim his titles. He wrote:

<sup>2</sup> *Time Magazine*, 12/10/1936, 'Names make news' in <http://www.time.com> (consulted on 18/05/2007). The author is grateful to Mr Liam Irwin, head of the history department of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and editor of the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* for this reference.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, *Erin's Blood Royal: The Gaelic Noble Dynasties of Ireland* (London, 1999), p. 179.

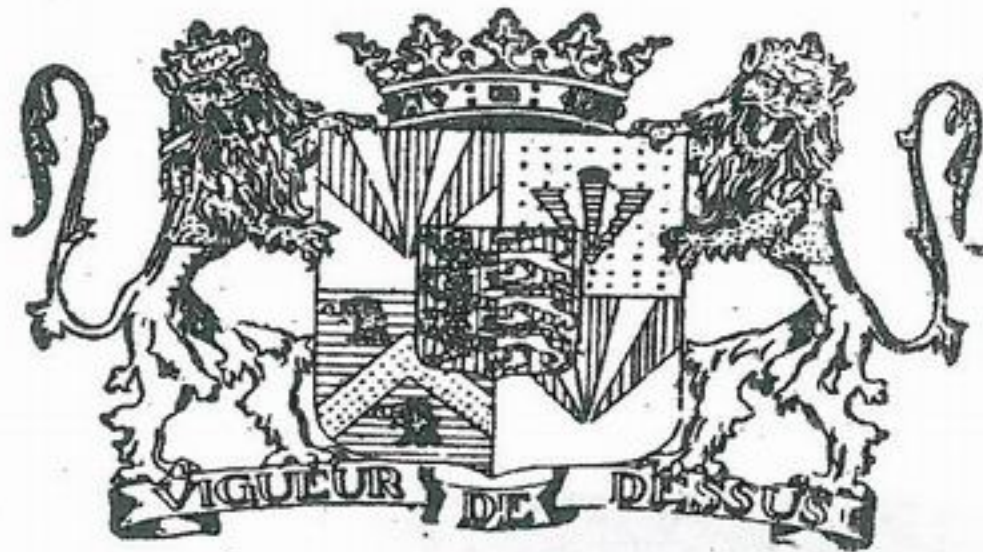
<sup>4</sup> National Archives of Ireland (hereafter referred to as NAI), Department of the Taoiseach, Taois/S9523, Thomond (O'Brien) to de Valera, 07/01/1937.

<sup>5</sup> NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, Taois/S9523, Private Secretary to O'Brien, 20/01/1937.



## Un Etat autonome peu connu...

Les armoiries  
de la Principauté



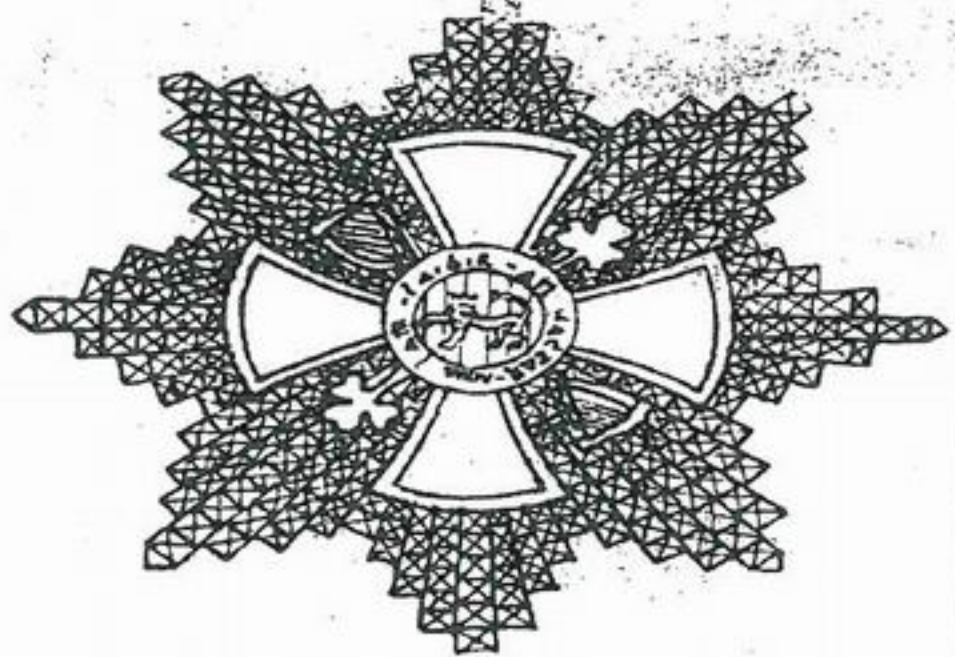
(Collection  
de l'auteur)

## *La principauté de Thomond*

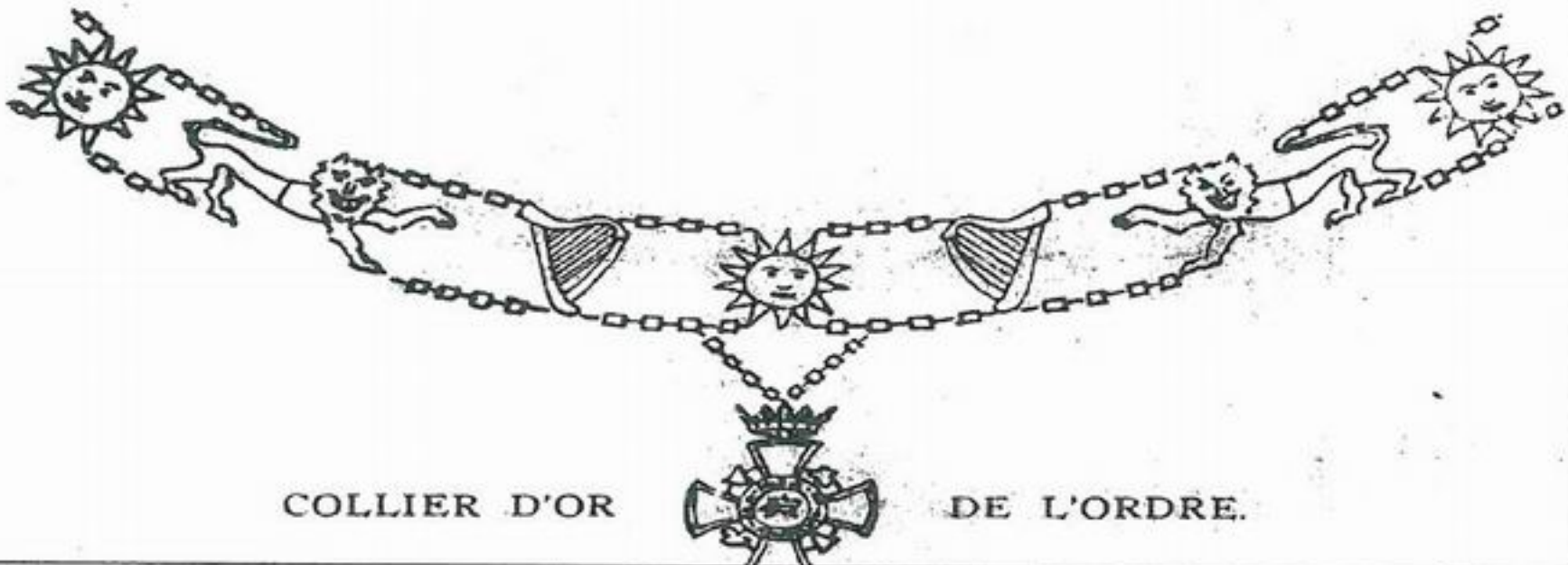
Plate 2 Armorial bearings of the "Principality of Thomond" – a little known "state"



CROIX DE L'ORDRE DES  
DALCASSIENS DE THOMOND.



ETOILE DE L'ORDRE.



COLLIER D'OR DE L'ORDRE.

Plate 3 Cross, star and gold collar of the Order of the Dalcassians of Thomond



With reference to your telephone conversation this afternoon, the title claimed by R.M. O'Brien of USA was created in 1543 and according to our records the male issue of the grantee became extinct on the death of Charles O'Brien 29 Dec. 1774. This Charles O'Brien was not recognised as Earl of Thomond, because his grandfather had been attainted and his honours forfeited in 1691.

Mr. R.M. O'Brien, if the representative of this family, would first have to get an Act of Parliament passed reversing the attainder, & then prove his claim to the title before a Committee of the House of Lords [London], before he could legally be style Earl of Thomond. No jurisdiction in such a matter could possibly be claimed by any court of the United States. I was officially informed in a letter of 27 Nov. 1936 from the Judicial Department of the House of Lords that up to that date 'no claim or petition by Raymond Moulton O'Brien had been presented'.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the Earldom of Thomond would not be revived. But the matter would not rest there. On 21 January 1937, the law firm Thos. Crozier & Son in Dublin, acting on behalf of O'Brien, sent a letter to the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Joseph P. Walshe, respectfully submitting that 'the Constitution [of the Free State] does not affect this matter, as it is not the conferring of a Title, but merely the recognition of an old one'. To add flesh to the bones, Crozier & Son included a four-page document 're. Raymond Moulton O'Brien Earl of Thomond and Baron Ibracken [sic], evidence to support the claim of the above to the peerage in Ireland'. The law firm stated: 'It would involve Mr. O'Brien in great expense and trouble to be recognised by the House of Lords, and he is anxious to know if there is any possible way in which the matter could be done in the Free State'.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, O'Brien wrote again to de Valera, asking permission to carry the titles and this time explaining that 'the Decree which I hold adjudicating to me the Conveyance of title to the Titles EARL of THOMOND and BARON IBRACKAN have been legalized by the Governments of Germany, Mexico, France and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg'.<sup>8</sup> The historian Peter Berresford Ellis has written that the German government ratified the decree issued by the Mexican court in 1936 and that Luxembourg and France followed the year after.<sup>9</sup> One must remain cautious with The O'Brien's claims here. Nazi Germany and Republican France might well have fallen into the trap, but royal-minded Luxembourg remained vigilant as will be seen. In Dublin, de Valera began to have the disagreeable feeling that he had been bitten by a transatlantic bulldog who would not let loose that easily. The authorities prepared their final answer, or so they thought. A previous similar case was dug up, concerning a Count de la Poer who wanted his titles to be recognised, titles which had also become extinct by reason of attainder. On this occasion, the Attorney-General had argued that only the Oireachtas [Irish parliament] could remove the attainder by an Act of Parliament. But the Oireachtas had refused to do so then. Consequently, it would be the same for O'Brien's claims. The government was sure that the British House of Lords would not determine that 'the present applicant [was] the rightful heir by descent' and even if it did, 'the Government of the Irish Free State would refuse to introduce the legislation necessary to reverse the attainder'. O'Brien, still in New York, was duly informed of Dublin's decision,<sup>10</sup> but did not accept it and wrote back to de Valera, emphatically stating: 'Being in possession of my property, honours, title and dignity I merely requested permission to carry the same in the Irish Free State having regard to the present Constitution, to which request I do not as yet appear to have been favoured with a reply'.<sup>11</sup> The Private Secretary's answer was the usual one-line letter.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., letter of Thomas Sadleir, 20/01/1937.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Crozier & Son to Secretary of Department of External Affairs, 21/01/1937.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Thomond (O'Brien) to de Valera, 01/02/1937.

<sup>9</sup> Berresford Ellis, *Erin's Blood Royal*, p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, Taois/S9523, Roinn an Uachtaráin, 09/02/1937 & Private Secretary to O'Brien, 24/02/1937.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Thomond (O'Brien) to de Valera, 19/03/1937.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Private Secretary to O'Brien, 05/04/1937.



But Thomas Sadleir of the Office of Arms was contacted again for good measure and reassured the government that 'there [was] nothing in law to prevent a man assuming and bearing any name he [wished] whether that name be in the form of a title or otherwise, provided that in doing so he [did] not infringe the rights of some other individual'.<sup>13</sup> On this note, matters rested a little and Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 gave de Valera and his new title of Taoiseach a well-deserved break that is, however, until a second Thomond, a count this time, appeared from the ashes of Europe...

#### 1945: return of Ireland's last Wild Goose

A few weeks after the end of the Second World War in Europe, P.J. O'Byrne of the Irish legation in Rome, wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Frederick Boland. It concerned a Count Anthony Henry Patrick Donald Rory O'Brien of Thomond who wished to settle in Ireland, the home of his ancestors. O'Byrne had had a long conversation with him and formed the opinion that he was 'a desirable person to admit to [Irish] citizenship'. The Count himself had written a letter to Eamon de Valera, asking him for authorisation to come and live in Ireland. He wrote:

My name will tell Your Excellency that I come from an old Irish family who had played a very prominent part in Ireland's history and had to leave the country at the beginning of the 17th century. Since then we have lived in Austria, where nearly all of us served as officers in the Austro-Hungarian army. But none of us has ever forgotten where we came from and though serving Austria loally [sic], we have always considered ourselves firstly and proudly as Irish. The head of the family has always retained the old title of an [sic]"Earl of Thomond", even after my great-grandfather had become a Knight of the Military Maria Theresia Order (equal to the British Victoria Cross) and had been created an Austrian Baron.<sup>14</sup>

The Count had also enclosed a curriculum vitae. He was born on 27 December 1895 in Vienna. During the First World War, he had been a fighter pilot with the rank of captain in the Austro-Hungarian air force and had been awarded the prestigious Military Maria Theresia Order. Then, he became a journalist and foreign correspondent, notably for the *Germania* and the *Reichspost* and had even been expelled from Germany by the Nazis 'on account of journalistic activity against national socialism'. He had also been a 'lecturer on philosophy of law at [the] Catholic university [of] Louvain [in Belgium]' and 'professor of sociology and philosophy of law at Vienna University'. Before Austria was annexed by Germany, he had become an officer with the rank of brigadier in the Austrian auxiliary army. He was arrested by the Germans and imprisoned in Vienna before living in exile in Prague, Zagreb and Belgrade. He eventually reached Italy in 1944 and subsequently contacted the Irish legation in Rome.<sup>15</sup> De Valera might have been excused if he had thought he was in fact in presence of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character. But this O'Brien had impeccable references. The former Austrian Chancellor before the German annexation, Kurt von Schuschnigg, pleaded with the Taoiseach to allow O'Brien to settle in Ireland. He was, according to Schuschnigg, 'a good Catholic and a good citizen'.<sup>16</sup> This could only appeal to de Valera. Moreover, about two and a half months later, Cardinal Theodor Innitzer, the Archbishop of Vienna, wrote a similar letter to the Taoiseach in which he stated: 'I consider it my moral duty as the head of the Austrian Episcopate to follow Dr. Von Schuschnigg's example and to tell Your Excellency how wholeheartedly also I support Count O'Brien-Thomond's application and

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Roinn an Uachtaráin, 07/04/1937.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Department of Foreign Affairs, embassy series, Rome, 1413: Count Anthony Rory O'Brien of Thomond, O'Byrne to Boland, 06/08/45 & Thomond to de Valera, 04/08/1945.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Thomond to de Valera, 04/08/1945.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Schuschnigg to de Valera, 04/12/1945.



recommend it to the Irish Government for special consideration'.<sup>17</sup> Faced with such impressive letters of recommendation and the perspective of welcoming "home" a lost "Irish" aristocrat whose family had rebelled against the country's English oppressors, the decision was taken to bring back O'Brien-Thomond into the fold. The Count was a lucky man as the Department of Justice was not particularly in favour of welcoming refugees after the war.<sup>18</sup> Then again, he was of blue blood of course... On 22 February, Boland informed T.J. Kiernan, Minister Plenipotentiary to the Holy See, of the decision and added that de Valera would write to Schuschnigg.<sup>19</sup> Once in Ireland, O'Brien sought employment in University College Cork in 1947.<sup>20</sup> He was indeed involved in academic activities. The same year, he published a book called *Archbishop Stepinac: the man and his case*.<sup>21</sup> Was there any relation between Count Anthony O'Brien of Thomond and Raymond Moulton Seághan O'Brien, the Prince of Thomond? It remains difficult to answer, especially since the first character had undoubtedly very good and reliable credentials. But, here a little mystery worth mentioning emerges. When Raymond Moulton Seághan O'Brien set up his Principality of Thomond on 7 April 1948, his Tánaiste (heir apparent or second-in-command) was a man called Norman Gerald O'Brien, who had been "Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force".<sup>22</sup> Now, as seen, Count Anthony O'Brien had been a captain in the Austro-Hungarian air force during the Great War: simple coincidence or something more? In any case, on 22 May 1946, the *Irish Press* published an article entitled 'Last of the "Wild Geese" Comes Home'. It stated: 'Anthony Henry Baron O'Brien, Count of Thomond, last surviving member of the O'Brien family who migrated from Ireland in the "Flight of the Wild Geese", in the seventeenth century, has returned to the country of his ancestors and will settle down in Ireland'. There was also an interview with the Count.<sup>23</sup> The *Irish Press* could not have known that it was wrong in claiming that the Count was the last of the O'Briens as Raymond Moulton Seághan O'Brien had set foot on Irish soil to reclaim his crown and land!

#### 1948: birth of the Principality of Thomond

On 19 January 1949, the *Southend Times* in Britain had a rather sensational article entitled 'Count d'Angerville comes to Canvey to work on formation of an Independent State in Eire'. The following was reported:

Plans for a new independent state in Eire are being made in a bungalow on Canvey [Essex]. Count Howard d'Angerville, eldest son of the Lord Count of Angerville, of Belgrave Square, London, has been appointed Honorary Dalcassian Envoy and Minister to England by His Highness Prince O'Brien of Thomond, and he is busy preparing plan and papers before setting up offices of the Thomond Legation in London.<sup>24</sup>

"His Royal Highness" had come back to haunt the Irish authorities, but now he was a good deal closer to his fiefdom. The reporter of the *Southend Times* then went on to interview Count d'Angerville in the Yacht House where he had just moved in, apparently because of his mother's poor health and who had been told by her doctor to live near the sea.<sup>25</sup> The proximity of yachts

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Innitzer to de Valera, 20/02/1946.

<sup>18</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and Europe 1919-1948* (Dublin, 1988), pp 205-6.

<sup>19</sup> NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs, embassies, Holy See, 26/4, Boland to Kiernan, 22/02/1946.

<sup>20</sup> Cork Archives Institute, PR6 papers of Seamus FitzGerald, 976, 16-24 September 1947, 'Correspondence file between FitzGerald and Alfred O'Rahilly, President UCC, discussing the possibility of securing a position for Count Anthony O'Brien at the College. Includes CV of the Count', in [www.corkcorp.ie](http://www.corkcorp.ie) (consulted on 18/05/2007).

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Henry Count O'Brien of Thomond, *Archbishop Stepinac: the man and his case* (Westminster, 1947).

<sup>22</sup> *La Nation Belge*, 27/03/1949.

<sup>23</sup> *The Irish Press*, 22/05/1946.

<sup>24</sup> *The Southend Times*, 19/01/1949.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



also allowed d'Angerville to leave at immediate notice should a couple of Bobbies, or worse MI5 agents, knock on his door... But, the journalist did not suggest this. Instead, he seriously took notes of what d'Angerville had to say. According to the latter, 'Thomond is 65 miles long by 35 miles wide ... and its principal industries are agriculture and ranching, and it is a favourite spot for holiday makers'. He went on to say that Prince O'Brien was the '29th descendant of the famous King Brian Boru' and that the Prince was presently living in Dublin, although he owned Castle Clare. D'Angerville declared: 'Ninety percent of the 90,000 inhabitants of Thomond are Catholics, and they look up to Prince O'Brien as their spiritual head. They love him'. Personally, he was the godfather of O'Brien's son, Prince Torlough the Strong, heir of the Principality of Thomond. Conscious of the times he was living in, in this case the Cold War, d'Angerville said: 'We of Thomond want to see the small individual nations going their own way and making their own destiny in the world. This will prevent the march of Communism'. Finally, d'Angerville showed his interviewer copies of the constitution of the principality and specified: 'Thomond has not been recognized by the British Government as yet, or the Eire Government. But we are now going ahead and Eire's Repeal of the External Relations Act will assist us'. However, he added: 'Thomond has now been recognized by most of the crowned heads and republics throughout the world, including America, Sweden, Denmark, France, Belgium, Latvia, Estonia'. That the two last mentioned countries had recognised the aristocratic Principality of Thomond was highly unlikely as they had been annexed by Joseph Stalin in 1940... Count d'Angerville's fantastic declarations set alarm bells ringing in the journalist's mind and he checked with the High Commissioner for Ireland in London who told him: 'I have never heard of the place'. The Foreign Office was equally emphatic: 'We have received no indication that such a State exists'.<sup>26</sup> Yes, but the problem was that a certain number of crowned heads, heads of state and diplomats had been caught in the con game. However, O'Brien had a superb and uncanny gift for public relations. On 27 March 1949, the *Nation Belge*, one of Belgium's leading newspapers, published an article called "Pour les amis de la nature, Connaissez-vous la principauté de Thomond?" (For nature lovers, do you know the Principality of Thomond?). It was a long article written by seemingly an academic named Dr. G. Proot. Proot informed his readers that the principality had been set up on 7 April 1948 and recognised as such by many countries. The small state was a heaven for nature lovers and hunters at the same time. Game was plentiful and there were 'hundreds of old castles, abbeys and monasteries, all built by the O'Briens'. The golf links were out of this world! The principality's capital was Iniscluanruadha, or Inis. The national colours were yellow and white with, in the middle of the flag, a crow holding the coat of arms of the House of Thomond. The legal currency was the "Irish mark" and the official exchange rate was ten marks to the sterling pound, but both sterling and Irish punts were widely used... There were two main newspapers in the principality, the *Clare Champion* and the *Thomond News*, each having a circulation of 10,000 copies. Then, it was stated that 'His Royal Highness Colonel Prince O'Brien is the hereditary protector of the Aran Islands; the regent is Royal Air Force Squadron Leader, the Tanist Norman Gerald O'Brien, Knight Commander of the Dalcassian Order (Dalcassian comes from Dál Cais, a territory around the river Shannon where Brian Boru had lived); the heir apparent is Prince Turlough the Strong, Seeghan, Baron of Ibracken'. Amazingly, The O'Brien had even managed to enlist the help of the illustrious Russian aristocrat, and now émigré in London,<sup>27</sup> Prince Nicholas Vladimirovitch Galitzine who had been appointed head of the "Munster College of Arms".<sup>28</sup> Galitzine's would be in for a rude awakening... It remains a mystery how O'Brien was able to manipulate a serious newspaper like the *Nation Belge* and somebody like Galitzine. But, it was a fact and it had not escaped the vigilant eyes of William P. Fay, Ireland's chargé d'affaires in Brussels. On 24 March 1949, he reported to the Department of External Affairs in Dublin the

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Prince Galitzine Nicholas Vladimirovitch in <http://worldroots.com>, consulted on 19/06/2007.

<sup>28</sup> *The Southend Times*, 19/01/1949.



above article and commented: 'It appears to be either an attempt at unusual tourist propaganda, or else a rather over-elaborate joke'.<sup>29</sup> And the joke with the press continued. On 14 January 1950, The O'Brien announced the birth of his daughter in the *Evening Mail*:

Colonel His Highness Prince, Count of Thomond and Pogla (The O'Brien) has pleasure in announcing the Birth, By the Grace of God, of a Catholic Heiress to the Principality of Thomond (Clare) in the person of Her Highness Princess Grania Bebhinn. The birth occurred at a private nursing home on January the 3rd last, and Her Highness was baptised solemnly into the Traditional Faith of the Sovereign Princely House of O'Brien of Thomond, whose Senior Catholic Branch has owed Spiritual Allegiance to the Holy See since the dawn of Christianity in the Emerald Isle.<sup>30</sup>

To mark the occasion, The O'Brien had invited the crème de la crème of old European nobility. Present at the ceremony, he claimed, were His Majesty Marziano H. Tit., Emperor of Constantinople (among others...), Their Serene Highnesses Prince and Princess Hohenlohe-Schillingsfuerst, His Imperial Highness Prince Pietro Amoroze d'Aragona, and Their Serene Highnesses Prince and Princess Zappala-Lascaris. Apparently, the last mentioned prince had been made a Knight Commander of the Dalcassian Order (KCDO).<sup>31</sup> If any of these people even existed it is unlikely that they attended the baptism of the infant "heiress of Thomond". Sadly, this time The O'Brien did not seem to have obtained the blessings of the Holy See on his daughter like it had been the case for his son "the Catholic heir to the Principality of Thomond in the person of His Highness Prince Turlough the Strong, Baron of Ibrackan" two years earlier in 1948...<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, "His Royal Highness" was about to show his talent for oratory in court.

### From mental hospital to tribunal

On 1 June 1949, the *Irish Times* published an article entitled 'Woman fined for Assaulting Man in Flat'. According to the story, Mrs. Kathleen McElvery had an apartment in a house situated at 74 Lower Leeson Street in Dublin. Raymond Moulton O'Brien lived in the same house. McElvery complained that O'Brien had 'assaulted her friends going in and out of the house'. Consequently, she rang O'Brien's door and when he opened she 'struck him a hard blow between the face and the shoulder'. But there was more to this rather banal story between bad neighbours. During the cross-examination by Gerald Hickey (solicitor), O'Brien found himself in a tight corner:

-Hickey: *I suggest that the reason you did not go to the police is that, perhaps, you were too well-known to them?*

-O'Brien: *I am a very well-known man throughout the country.*

-Hickey: *Were you ever in prison before?*

-O'Brien: *Does that concern the issue?*

-Hickey: *What was the offence for which you were convicted?*

-O'Brien: *I do not remember.*

-Hickey: *Was it an offence in connection with a woman?*

-O'Brien: *It could be.*

-Hickey: *Was it in connection with a girl under the age of 16 years?*

-O'Brien: *What has this to do with the present case?*

-Hickey: *Would you be surprised if a man got into the witness-box and stated that you have no right to use the title of Lord O'Brien?*

-District Justice: *[I am] not going to try the genealogical tree of any person. There [is], or [was] an Ulster King of Arms to do that, and [I am] not going to waste the time of the Court in deciding whether any person [is] a lineal descendant of Brian Boru or not.*<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs, series 414 (press & information), 414/18: Irish affairs in Belgian newspapers, 1946-1952, Fay to Boland, 24/03/1949.

<sup>30</sup> *The Evening Mail*, 14/01/1950.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Berresford Ellis, *Erin's Blood Royal*, p. 179.

<sup>33</sup> *The Irish Times*, 01/06/1949.



Clearly, the judge had no time for society life and gossip. Or was it because in 1944 in the High Court, O'Brien had tried to claim damages against a fictitious person who had stated that he was not The O'Brien?!<sup>34</sup> It was not the end of O'Brien's problems with justice yet. Perhaps badly shaken by his confrontation with the court, O'Brien was sent to Grangegorman Mental Hospital, 'in a nervous and distressed condition', according to the *Evening Mail*. However, the newspaper reported that on 17 June, he had been arrested on his release from Grangegorman. He was due to appear in Dublin Criminal Court 'on charges of indecency'.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, on 3 December 1949, the *Irish Times* reported that the jury of the Central Criminal Court in Dublin 'failed to reach a verdict in a case in which Raymond Moulton Sean O'Brien ... was charged with indecently assaulting a 12-year-old girl'. But, the trial had not been without its bizarre moments. O'Brien admitted that 'he usually dressed in a green Irish kilt and a green Highland jacket and that he was in the habit of frequenting St. Stephen's Green for studying and writing. He was a member of a number of Orders of Chivalry'. This did not fall on deaf ears and Mr. R.J. McLoughlin, the prosecutor, questioned him on his blue blood:

-McLoughlin: [*Are you not somewhat imaginative about your status?*]

-O'Brien: *That is quite incorrect.*

-McLoughlin: *I submit you try to suggest to the jury that you are not only a man of great rank but that you have somewhat of an acquaintance with the Hierarchy of the Catholic Church?*

-O'Brien: *I have certain connections.*

McLoughlin: *Am I right in thinking that yesterday morning you appeared in this court with some clerical garb?*

-O'Brien: *Yes.*

-McLoughlin: *What clerical garb?*

-O'Brien: *As you can see me now, just a black overcoat.*<sup>36</sup>

Later, in 1950, O'Brien was in the Central Criminal Court of Dublin again for the same kind of charges. Again, he was found not guilty.<sup>37</sup> This judicial saga should have put an end to "His Royal Highness's" claims once and for all. Here was the perfect opportunity for the Irish authorities to get rid somehow of the Prince and his principality. But instead, The O'Brien had been energised and galvanised by his court experiences and it was the beginning of a dazzling "diplomatic career" that would cross all borders in Europe, including the Iron Curtain, much to the annoyance and frustration of the Department of External Affairs!

### First blue blood victims

In September 1949, Prince Nicholas Vladimirovitch Galitzine was a sad man. He told a reporter of the *Sunday Chronicle*: 'I think I have been misled'. His Highness, a real one this time, said that 'his latest and greatest decoration –the Most Honourable Dalcassian Order of the Princely House of Thomond- is not to be found among the official records of this country [Britain]'. The Russian émigré was understandably heartbroken. But, it also showed at Galitzine's own expense that he knew next to nothing about nobility in Europe. The *Sunday Chronicle* went on to expose The O'Brien, and also quoted d'Angerville. It very correctly stated: 'From his secret H.Q. in the Republic of Ireland and from offices on the Continent, O'Brien disseminates correspondence on notepaper bearing the coat-of-arms and consular seal of his "country" and embellished with a

<sup>34</sup> Berresford Ellis, *Erin's Blood Royal*, p. 179.

<sup>35</sup> *The Evening Mail*, 17/06/1949.

<sup>36</sup> *The Irish Times*, 03/12/1949.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 18/04/1950 & 19/04/1950.



golden crown'.<sup>38</sup> However, some ministries in Europe were on their guard against The O'Brien's schemes, others were not. The Prince of Thomond approached the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in order to establish diplomatic relations and also to have the Dalcassian Order recognised. But, on this occasion, Jean-Robert Schleich de Bossé, a Luxembourg civil servant and heraldry specialist, got suspicious as he could not find any reference regarding the Prince in various heraldry books. He wrote a letter to John A. Costello, the then Taoiseach, asking for more explanations. It was the Irish Chief Herald who replied to Schleich de Bossé by including a prepared statement, outlining why O'Brien was not a descendant of Brian Boru and that there was never such a thing as a Principality of Thomond. The statement was unequivocal: 'It will be seen, therefore, that the use by Mr. O'Brien of certain titles, such as "Prince of Thomond", "Count O'Brien of Thomond", "Baron Ibrackan", etc., to describe himself, has no authority beyond his own whim'.<sup>39</sup> But, the Department of External Affairs's feathers had been badly ruffled. It was high time to stop The O'Brien. It decided to circulate to all its missions abroad, 'except OEEC and Beirut', the same statement prepared by the Irish Genealogical Office and sent to Schleich de Bossé so as to forestall any of O'Brien's initiatives and especially prevent major diplomatic embarrassments. The circular read:

I am enclosing herewith for your confidential information a copy of a note by the Genealogical Office on the genealogical and territorial claims which are being put forward by a Mr. Raymond Moulton Seán O'Brien of 74, Lower Leeson St., Dublin. Mr. O'Brien's fantastic claims are presented with such skill and affrontery [sic] that unsuspecting people in many quarters are deceived by him. You will no doubt report any instances in which his activities may come to the notice of your office. Mr. O'Brien is on the Passport Stop List of the 16th January, 1946, a copy of which was supplied to you.<sup>40</sup>

But, it was simply not enough. Some time in 1949, the very serious *Blason*, a Belgian journal for heraldic studies of international repute, published a nine-page article entitled "La principauté souveraine de Thomond" (The sovereign Principality of Thomond). In it, readers could familiarise themselves with the not so-well known little principality, at least not so well-known for the time being. A map of county Clare was included and also various representations and photographs of the flag of the principality, the coat of arms, "His Royal Highness", and the medals and decorations of the "Most Honourable Dalcassian Order of the Sovereign Princely House of Thomond". The writer of the article, Fortuné Koller, claimed that the governments of Denmark, Portugal, the Netherlands, the United States, France and Switzerland had recognised the existence of the Principality of Thomond.<sup>41</sup> By so doing, the not so fortunate Fortuné had made an egregious ass of himself, to put it mildly. It was therefore no surprise that when he found out, he wrote to the Irish Genealogical Office and vented his spleen. He said that he was 'determined to put an end to this ridiculous story of the Principality of Thomond' and used the French pejorative term "fumisterie" (con). He had been informed by a friend from Dublin that O'Brien had faced the Central Criminal Court. Now, it was his firm intention to take countermeasures. He had already written an article for an Italian journal since it was in that country where, apparently, quite a few people had been victims of The O'Brien, notably in chivalry orders. Also, Koller had in mind to write to all the legations in Brussels. However, he was afraid that O'Brien might sue him and asked the Irish for advice.<sup>42</sup> The Genealogical Office was at a loss and informed the Department

<sup>38</sup> *The Sunday Chronicle*, 04/09/1949.

<sup>39</sup> NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, Taois/S9523, Schleich du Bossé to Costello, 18/09/1949 & Chief Herald to Schleich de Bossé, 12/10/1949.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Department of Foreign Affairs, embassy series, Paris, 114/32: Thomond (principauté), DEA to all Missions, 18/12/1949.

<sup>41</sup> NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, Taois/S9523, *Le Blason*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, F. Koller's letter, 12/01/1950.



of the Taoiseach that it was not in a position to advise Koller and also opined that the matter was now of such a nature, higher authorities had to deal with it.<sup>43</sup> The Department of the Taoiseach's answer was rather worded in between the lines and implied that Koller could safely sue O'Brien, if he wanted to do so as the latter could not support his claims.<sup>44</sup> It would have definitely suited Dublin. Other people and institutions also enquired about The O'Brien's blue blood, for example the Library of the House of Lords in London, Professor Julius Pokorny (specialist in Celtic/Irish studies) from Geneva, the Dean of the faculty of Philosophy of Wurzburg in Germany, Coadjutor Bishop M. Donahue from Michigan, Don Norberto de Castro y Tosi from Costa Rica, Sir Algar Howard of the College of Arms in London, Dr. Ottfried Neubecker (herald) from Berlin and Mgr. O.W.D. Wappler from Amsterdam.<sup>45</sup> And yet, despite his strenuous efforts to get diplomatic recognition abroad, The O'Brien failed to grasp his chance to meet Queen Elizabeth in person. On 31 December 1952, the *Evening Herald* explained to its readers that the British Coronation Court of Claims, 'which hears petitions of those claiming the privilege to take part in the [coronation] ceremony by virtue of office of hereditary title', had considered three claims. However, when the court called for The O'Brien's, nobody turned up:

When the name of the Irish claimant, 'His Highness Prince O'Brien of Thomond' was called (the name appearing on the printed documents) there was no response and the petition was passed over. The petitioner's address was given in the documents as the 'Dalcassian Legation, Charlemont Steet, Dublin.'<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps did Raymond Moulton O'Brien think that he was getting too close to the truth, or was it a case of The O'Brien refusing, after due consideration, to take the Saxon Shilling! It was equally true that "His Royal Highness" had a more urgent matter on his mind, the fight against Communism...

### **1951, the year Irish military intelligence got involved**

On 14 October 1951, the *People* came up with a rather unusual story. The O'Brien had decided to protect Ireland from the encroachment of Bolshevism by setting up a paramilitary organisation nicknamed the "Black Eagles", which would fight "in the spirit of the Crusaders". The *People* stated:

'Prince' calls up recruits to Black Legion In an upstairs flat at Charlemont-street, Dublin, Colonel His Highness Raymond Moulton Seagham [sic], Prince O'Brien of Thomond is spending the week-end planning to recruit 5,000 officers and men to the Black Legion. The Legionaries are to be a militant security arm supporting the new political group the United Christian National Party, formed seven days ago. They will wear British Army uniform dyed black and superimposed with the eagle of Brian Boru.<sup>47</sup>

The newspaper indicated that The O'Brien's men had pasted posters on lampposts in Dublin, calling for recruits. This, in turn, caught the attention of Irish military intelligence and its chief, Colonel Dan Bryan. On 19 December 1951, Bryan sent a report on the Black Legion to Seán Nunan, the Secretary of External Affairs:

The [Black Legion] came under notice last September, when posters appeared in the City, appealing for recruits for the Black Legion, and for funds for the United Christian Nationalist Party. You will see from the attached copy of documents that the organisation has all the hall-marks of orthodox Fascist movement. You will note that the 'leader' is Raymond Moulton Seagham O'Brien the self-styled 'Prince of Thomond',

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Chief Herald to Department of the Taoiseach, 23/01/1950.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Department of the Taoiseach to Genealogical Office, 02/02/1950.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., letters of 23/01/1950, 09/05/1951 & 11/05/1951.

<sup>46</sup> *The Evening Herald*, 31/10/1952.

<sup>47</sup> *The People*, 14/10/1951.



an adventurer with a criminal record. The Director of 'Culture' is Seamus Murphy, a taxi-driver of Captain's Road, Crumlin, who formerly was an active member of Cowan's organisation. Since the date of the posters there has been no development in regard to the Legion and I am of the opinion that it is not likely to come to anything.<sup>48</sup>

The Irish United Christian Nationalist Party was in all probability modelled on the Christian Nationalist Crusade, founded in 1942 by Gerald K. Smith in the United States and active in St. Louis during the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the fact that the Black Legion was not deemed much of a threat to the Republic, military intelligence decided to keep a close eye on its activities and to the relief of the Dublin authorities, the Department of Defence announced in January 1953 that the movement had at one time 25 legionaries but that it was now 'practically non-existent'.<sup>49</sup> But what was "His Royal Highness" playing at? At the same time as he was fighting the Reds, and even masterminding the downfall of 'the Arch Communists of the Kremlin and their dupes at the Genealogical Office [in] Dublin Castle',<sup>50</sup> he was trying to establish diplomatic links with East-Germany, this in the period when Taoiseach Eamon de Valera and Minister of External Affairs Frank Aiken were stubbornly refusing to accept recognition of the eastern Communist area of Germany, on the rather insistent advice of the West-German government in Bonn and its embassy in Dublin.<sup>51</sup> In October 1960, Walter Ulbricht, the Secretary-General of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (the Socialist Unity Party, i.e. Communist Party) and actual leader of the regime, received a letter from P. Mac Donnell, the secretary of the Royal Dalcassian Legation in Dublin. The East-Germans were thrilled. Indeed, they had been trying to get their state recognised for a number of years, notably by sending letters to leaders of neutral countries. The Irish government never replied to them but here came a letter from the Principality of Thomond. But, where was Thomond? Excitement soon gave way to consternation in East-Berlin when they discovered the truth.<sup>52</sup> Should we consider if The O'Brien was a double-agent?!

### 1960: "His Royal Highness" makes the history pages

After the fiasco of his Black Legion, the Prince of Thomond intensified his efforts to get diplomatic recognition for his private statelet. In 1958, William P. Fay, the Irish Ambassador to France, received a letter from Count d'Aillières, the Chamberlain of His Serene Highness the Sovereign Prince of Monaco. D'Aillières informed Fay that he was in possession of a letter from the Prince of Thomond but as he did not know about the existence of his principality, he was asking for more information. He had included a copy of the letter, written by P. Mac Donnell on behalf of The O'Brien:

*The Government of the Principality of Thomond  
Department of Foreign Relations*

*A Chara,*

*I am directed by His Royal Highness The Prince of Thomond to request you to be so good as convey to His Serene Highness Prince Rainier of Monaco His Royal Highness' most Happy Congratulations on learning of the Birth of a Royal Heir, in the person of Prince Albert, to the Crown of Monaco, and to say that His Royal Highness rejoices with His Serene Highness' devoted Subjects at this joyful news. I may add that I have been instructed to arrange a Holy Mass in celebration of this great event.<sup>53</sup>*

<sup>48</sup> NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs, P168/5: D/Defence, Black Legion, Bryan to Nunan, 19/12/1951.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Callanan to Fay, 26/01/1953.

<sup>50</sup> Berresford Ellis, *Erin's Blood Royal*, p. 179.

<sup>51</sup> Paula L. Wylie, *Ireland and the Cold War: Diplomacy and Recognition, 1949-63* (Dublin, 2006), see chapter four 'Cold War diplomacy in the case of East Germany', pp. 117-48.

<sup>52</sup> Damian Mac Con Uladh, 'The Poor Relations: The GDR and Ireland' in Joachim Fischer, Pól Ó Dochartaigh & Helen Kelly-Holmes (eds), *Irish-German Studies*, 1-2001/2002, p. 84 & footnote 54, P. Mac Donnell to Ulbricht, 21/10/1960.

<sup>53</sup> NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs, embassy series, Paris, 114/32: Thomond (principauté), d'Aillières to Fay, 28/03/1958.



Fay must have been dumfounded. As we have seen, it was him who first reported the “diplomatic activities” of The O’Brien in 1949, Now, it was 1958, nine years later, and the Prince of Thomond would not bow out and had come back to salute him. Fay immediately replied to d’Aillières, explaining the whole situation and regretting on behalf of the Irish Government the fact that Prince Rainier had been bothered by this.<sup>54</sup> But, as much as this beggars belief, Dublin did just not know how to tackle Raymond Moulton Seághan O’Brien. Indeed, in August 1958, the Department of External Relations issued a circular ‘to all Missions and Consular Offices’ and once more O’Brien was involved; this time it concerned his transatlantic consulates:

A person calling himself ‘His Excellency The Dean The Right Honorable Sir Earl Anglin James, Archbishop Primate, Laurentius Peace Missions’, wrote to the Department from Toronto earlier this year requesting the appointment of ‘The Right Honorable Dr. Bruce Vickers’ as our Honorary Consul General in Mexico and his own appointment as Irish Honorary Consul General in Canada. Mr. James’ letter was on headed paper allegedly of the American International Academy, 45 Gramercy Park, New York 10, N.Y.. From enquiries made by the Consul General at New York, no unfavourable information about the Academy has come to light. However, among the Honorary Presidents named in the headed paper used by Mr. James is ‘H.H. The O’Brien, Prince of Thomond, Ireland’. The Ambassador at Ottawa has reported that Mr. James is understood to have described himself as Minister Plenipotentiary of Thomond in Canada, Mexico and the United States of America.<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, the Department of External Affairs instructed its ambassadors and consuls not to acknowledge the letters of the American International Academy and forward them to headquarters in Dublin. In 1960, The O’Brien’s efforts were crowned with a three-page article in a reputable French history journal, *Aux Carrefours de l’Histoire*. The title was *Un Etat autonome peu connu... La principauté de Thomond* (A little-known autonomous State... The Principality of Thomond). The front page contained a representation of the principality’s coat of arms with the French inscription *Vigueur de Dessus* (Strength from Above). Then, there was a picture of Thomond Bridge, the Treaty Stone and King John’s Castle in Limerick. Obviously, in the meantime the Prince’s legionaries had moved to annex the city... Everything looked happy and prosperous, in stark contrast to Frank McCourt’s reminiscences of the city in *Angela’s Ashes*. Then, there was a portrait of “His Royal Highness”, worthy of *Hello Magazine* today. The article itself was a description of the principality and its history. The government consisted of one single ministry, divided into seven departments, and passports were issued to the subjects of the Prince. There were many consulates abroad. It was said that The O’Brien was hoping to sign ‘treaties of friendship’ with the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. ‘This country does really exist: it is the Principality of Thomond in Ireland’, wrote the author.<sup>56</sup> By doing so, Léon-L. Gruart had joined Fortuné Koller on the list of unfortunate egregious asses, but both men were in good company as they rubbed shoulders with Galitzine, Vatican cardinals and others. Undoubtedly, this was the Prince’s *cerise sur le gâteau* (cherry on the cake) as the French say. On 18 July 1962, the West-German embassy sent a detailed report to Bonn on the activities of “His Royal Highness”. It said that for the last few years, certain newspapers in West-Germany had published articles on the existence of the principality. The Ambassador warned that it was the work of a ‘slightly deranged man’ in Dublin, who had fixed a plaque on his house, stating “The Royal Dalcassian Consulate”. O’Brien had made another couple of victims, continued the Ambassador. Two German businessmen had travelled to Ireland, attracted by the low corporate taxes the Principality of Thomond offered.<sup>57</sup> The O’Brien, precursor of the Celtic Tiger!

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Fay to d’Aillières, 31/03/1958,

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, DEA circular ‘To all Missions and Consular Offices’, 20/08/1958.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Léon-L. Gruart, ‘Un Etat peu connu... La principauté de Thomond’, *Aux Carrefours de l’Histoire*, no. 35, 1960.

<sup>57</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv, Berlin (archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Bestand B31, Band 238, German Ambassador to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18/07/1962.



The last document found by this author, dates from 1963. It was a reply from the Prince's secretary, P. Mac Donnell, to an enquiry made by the French editor of the *Monde des Philatélistes*, a journal dealing with stamp collecting. Mac Donnell (or was it O'Brien himself?) seemed to have lost patience with the Taoiseach's government:

The Government and The Principality of Thomond has existed as a Sovereign State since most ancient times and in the 18th Century the Country was over-run and completely occupied by the British Enemy Forces. The State was brutally ravished and reduced to a [sic] 'English Vassal County'. Such acts of Aggression and Pillage however do not, according to International Law, extinguish the Original and Inherent SOVEREIGNTY residing in the Ruling House and in the State itself and consequently this Sovereignty is still INTACT today notwithstanding the frequent and systematic Raids and Looting parties which we have endured over the past 12 to 15 years at the hands of the Dublin Administration calling itself a 'Government' and claiming at the same time to have Jurisdiction over the 6 Counties comprising Northern Ireland which claim is equally and totally ineffectual.<sup>58</sup>

Touché! Mac Donnell made a valid point concerning Northern Ireland. But he had also, unsurprisingly, wildly exaggerated in using the terms 'Raids' and 'Looting parties' to describe in all likelihood Garda confiscations of his self-created stamps.

### Conclusion

There was perhaps a predictable end to this extraordinary story: "His Royal Highness" ended up in a psychiatric hospital. The Knight of Glin wrote that an unkind but witty commentator had said of O'Brien: 'He was eventually confined to St John of Gods, an institution then situated at Stillorgan Castle... an address well suited to his dignity'!<sup>59</sup> The Irish authorities, The O'Brien's most hated enemies, had finally cornered him or put him in a straitjacket... Raymond Moulton Seághan O'Brien died in Dublin on 31 March 1977 and was buried in Birmingham, England.<sup>60</sup> However, questions and remarks still remain. On the one hand, it seems totally incredible that the government was at a loss about what to do with him, and this for at least twenty-seven years! (1936-1963). On the other hand, the government had undoubtedly an opponent of genius whose skill and tactics for public relations were simply unprecedented. To initially persuade a true-blooded Stalinist such as Walter Ulbricht takes exceptional skill. Were The O'Brien and P. Mac Donnell the same man? The *Spectator* said of Raymond Moulton O'Brien that he invented personalities as he went along.<sup>61</sup> What about Count Anthony O'Brien and Count d'Angerville? They mysteriously disappeared in the course of the story; at least, the author of this article was not able to find out more about them. What about O'Brien's finances? To run a principality, even imagined, cost money. Think about all the stamps used for his diplomatic correspondence, for example, or the articles and notices in newspapers and journals. The West-German embassy in Dublin provides us with a few clues. According to the report it sent to Bonn in July 1962, the Irish authorities and police did not want to be more active against O'Brien, lest they should make more publicity for him and appear ridiculous. As to money, the report stated that O'Brien 'runs a jumble shop for secondhand sewing machines'.<sup>62</sup> Was that source of income really enough? The author would greatly appreciate if readers of the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* contacted

<sup>58</sup> NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs, embassy series, Paris, 114/32: Thomond (principauté), Mac Donnell to Editor of *Le Monde des Philatélistes*, 30/03/1963.

<sup>59</sup> The Knight of Glin, 'Some are to the manor born, but some buy the title', in <http://www.independent.ie>, Sunday January 30 2005 (consulted on 18/06/2007).

<sup>60</sup> Berresford Ellis, *Erin's Blood Royal*, p. 180.

<sup>61</sup> *The Spectator*, 26/10/1957.

<sup>62</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv, Berlin (archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Bestand B31, Band 238, Ambassador to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18/07/1962.



its editor if they have more information on the “Prince of Thomond”. But, there is a twist in Ireland’s greatest diplomatic farce. The *Institut français de Micropatologie*, an institute dealing with the study of small states, lists the Principality of Thomond as a ‘non-officially recognised micro-state’.<sup>63</sup> Without a shadow of a doubt, The O’Brien would have been extremely satisfied to know that this was as recently as June 2007! And let us face it; the temptation is hard to resist making a deep bow.



**Plate 4 “Prince O’Brien of Thomond”**

<sup>63</sup> ‘Liste générale de micro-états et micro-nations non officiellement reconnus, P-Z’, in <http://geocities.com/CapitolHill/5829/LISTp-z.html?200720> (consulted on 20/06/2007).



