Letters from James Fintan Lalor in Limerick

EDITED BY THOMAS P. O’NEILL, M.A.

After the failure of the Insurrection of 1848, most of the leaders of the Young Ireland Movement were imprisoned. Philip Gray, in Dublin, however, formed a new secret society, and, in 1849, James Fintan Lalor who had a few months previously been released from Newgate Gaol joined. Lalor also planned the establishment of a newspaper and had planned a co-operative ownership somewhat on the lines he had suggested in the Irish Felon on 24 June, 1848. In June, 1849, he decided to visit the south of Ireland to arouse enthusiasm for the project and, accompanied by Thomas Clarke Luby, later to be a prominent Fenian, Lalor set out by train for Tipperary. They were the guests of Father John Kenyon at Templederry for some weeks and visited John O’Leary in Tipperary Town to enlist his support. About the middle of July, Lalor and Luby set out for Limerick. Luby, however, had spent most of his funds, which had been provided by his uncle to defray the expenses of being called to the bar, on the tour and did not delay in Limerick. He had a letter of introduction from Arthur Cumming, a solicitor’s clerk, and a member of the Executive of the Organisation, in Dublin, to Tom Boland and Luby called on him and succeeded in persuading him to organise a branch of the Society in Limerick. Then, despite Lalor’s protests, Luby decided to return to Dublin on 21 July, 1849. Lalor remained in Limerick and the following letters to Luby were written by him stating the progress of his plans. They were preserved by Luby and published by him in his reminiscences printed in the New York Irish Nation of 30 June, 1883, and 5 July, 1884. The originals appear to have been lost and are not in the Luby Papers in the National Library (MSS. 331-3). Since but one copy of the Irish Nation is now known (the volumes for 1881 to 1883 in New York Public Library and the 1884 volume in the National Library of Ireland) the letters are now reprinted. Lalor, in true conspiratorial fashion, adopted a pseudonym, Edward Tobyn.

The letters give an account of Lalor’s activities during July and August and also give an insight into a division of leadership in the secret society. During Lalor’s absence from Dublin, Joseph Brenan was asserting his influence and was supported by Arthur Hughes Wyse, a pawnbroker, and Henry Augustine Byrne, a foreman upholsterer. Lalor’s chagrin at hearing the undertone of criticism from Dublin is clear. His staunchest supporters were Edward Keatinge and Luby. In Limerick, he inserted a notice in the Limerick Examiner calling a meeting for Tuesday, August 7, at 7.30 p.m., to launch his campaign for public support for his newspaper, which he proposed to call the Public Press. The meeting was held in the Great Rooms, 51 William Street, the quarters formerly occupied by the Sarsfield Confederate Club. An admission fee of 6d. was charged and a large crowd attended. The chair was taken by George Kerin, of Ardfert, and Lalor explained the details of the project. The meeting adjourned until the following Thursday and on that day Stephen Joseph Meany, the Young Ireland leader, who had a short time previously been released from gaol, addressed the meeting. He was not a member of the secret society but ardently supported Lalor’s plan for a newspaper. At that meeting it was arranged that Meany should seek further subscribers in the south and west of Limerick County before the journal would start
publication. Lalor called a further private meeting for Saturday, August 25, in Limerick and requested the attendance of his Dublin friends. Luby could not travel but Keatinge arrived. No record of this meeting survives, but it is likely that Keatinge endeavoured to heal the differences between Lalor and Brenan.

On September 5 a meeting to solve the difficulties which had arisen in the secret society was held and arrangements were made for an insurrection on September 18. Lalor's friends at Limerick do not appear to have taken part in the abortive rising. Lalor was to lead an attack on Cashel Barracks; few of the South Tipperary contingents, however, turned out so he dismissed those who joined him. Brenan alone led an active party at Cappoquin. The unarmed attackers, however, failed to surprise the police in the barracks and were beaten off. One policeman and one attacker were killed. This failure ended Lalor's schemes and his newspaper never appeared.

123, George's Street,
Limerick,
Wednesday,
(25 July, 1849).

Dear Luby,

I am here at Miss Marchant's—in great dudgeon with you for leaving me in the midst of more than I can do. This place promises more business than either of us expected. I believe, indeed, that I have struck on one of the very richest veins of ore in all Ireland. But disclosures have been made to me which show that there is at least one hand on our helm which is trying to steer us on the rocks. You know who it was that carried about him but three books—one of them being 'Sartor Resartus.' A friend here wrote to him some time ago—about three weeks since, I think—for information and instructions. He did get what was plainly and evidently a regular and prepared answer—though it did not profess to be so—from Mr. P. J. Barry; which answer quoted the exact words of his own letter, and gave him, at all points and particulars, the exact information and instructions he required. This requires to be looked into cautiously. Don't mention it, for the present, to anyone but Keatinge.

I have not as yet seen the person to whom you got an introductory letter. He has never called. I have, however, met half-a-dozen others—all comrades. We have not yet concluded articles; but their manner, bearing and conversation promise immediate and rapid work.

Duffy and Thos. Carlyle were in town here, at Doctor Griffin's from Saturday till yesterday morning.

I am arranging a public meeting. I have a deal to say which I can't say for many reasons besides want of time.

May I beg for an immediate answer, giving me the fullest account you can of the present state of affairs and condition of feeling—events for the last three weeks, and intentions and prospects for the future. Tell

1. Limerick Examiner, 4, 8, 11 Aug. 1849.
3. Joseph Brenan. The other books were the Bible and Davis's poems or Thierry's Norman Conquest.
4. A brother of Gerald Griffin, the novelist.
Keatinge I shall write to him in a day or two. Bid him write without waiting for my letter. Is Mrs. Gilligan (1) expressing any impatience about her Rent?

Address to: —Mr. E. Tobyn—under cover to—Mr. James O'Malley, (Bookseller and stationer) 20, George's Street, Limerick.

Give Keatinge this address: and tell him to put his letter in a sealed envelope addressed to me—and enclosed in a second envelope addressed to O'Malley. Both his former letters were read by the persons to whom the exterior envelope was addressed.

Faithfully yours,

E. TOBYN.

Limerick, Tuesday, July 31 (1849)

My Dear Sir,

I wrote you a letter on Wednesday last, pressing for an immediate answer; and on yesterday I got your reply, commencing with 'I HASTEN! to write to you' etc.

Your letter is written that sort of style which conveys no definite information. 'Darts and arrows of insinuation,'—'considerable misconstruction'—'accept public monies,'—'plausible pretext,'—'handle to hang up interested motives,'—'discontented parties,'—'unpleasant enquiries,'—'soothe many murmurs,'—'soreness and discontent,'—'deep and widely-prevailing discontent,'—'great muttering,'—'loss of time and retrogression,'—'things went on well once,'—'nothing goes on well now'—(since I left Dublin?) dissatisfaction and difficulties,—'labour and moderation and conciliation'—'Reany violently inflamed,'—etc.—and there is your entire letter, slightly abridged.

Who are these discontented parties? Why and for what are they discontented? And with whom? With themselves? or with me? Now mark this, so much as one hour's labour, moderation or conciliation I never will use towards any such purpose of re-arrangement, etc., as you speak of. I find I must disconnect myself altogether from those men (imperfect) (2) for either popularity or (imperfect) already gone too far along (imperfect) with those small, petty (imperfect) devils—who are truly doing nothing but trying to cross, trip up, and fetter the one single Racer who is running for the Plate.

'Murmurs likely to arise regarding the expenditure of the shareholders' capital—from whom are those murmers LIKELY to come? From the shareholders themselves? Send me a list of them, and I shall return their money at once, on getting back the receipt. Or from those who never contributed one shilling—Byrne, Brennan, Wyse, etc.? Bah!—

I think I may pronounce Limerick, City and County, to be ours. I don't wish, however, to speak prematurely. I hold meeting on Monday Next. No rooms to be had sooner. Meantime, I go to Rathkeale, 18 miles off, etc. What are others doing? Ireland to an Orange that I am the only one making any progress! If there be retrogression elsewhere it is none of my fault.

1. Lalor's Dublin landlady.

2. The four parts mentioned as 'imperfect' were so described by Luby in the Irish Nation. Apparently the original in his possession was torn or frayed.
I never said anything prejudicial to Reany's character or honour. I always liked and respected the man. It is a mere naked lie to say I ever used language that could hurt him. I may, however, have used some pettish expression of discontent with him on some occasion—but can't recollect whether I did. You say nothing about the friend you were expecting about this time. (1) Let me know whether he has arrived—or whether you have heard from or of him.

I wish greatly you would write by return-post, if possible. I have reasons for this. Write therefore. Address me as before, under cover to Mr. James O'Malley, 20, George's Street, Limerick.

Faithfully Yours,

E. TOBYN.

Private

Limerick, Monday,
(20 Aug. 1849).

Dear Luby,

You and Keatinge are required here on Saturday next. It is on the requisition of the managers of the Limerick establishment that I write this. I have given them—God forgive me for it—rather a favorable impress of you—much better, I fear, than you merit,—God forgive you for that.

They must see you and K, and have a full consultation with you,—a deciding conference. Time is nearly up. They will receive and treat you hospitably,—and they engage that your stay here will cost you nothing. You will only need to stop one day,—or two at most. Others are also expected and summoned. Keep this strictly to yourself. Say nothing of it to any one whatsoever, except Keatinge. Don't even tell any one, except Mrs. Luby (2) that you are leaving town. If you have not got the fare, per train, you must only beg, borrow, or steal it. Here you must be on Saturday, if you be a true man,—or if you value the opinion of Limerick. I wish you and Keatinge could arrange and contrive, between you, to get W.M. (3) of Kilkenny to be here also that day. I don't know him—but perhaps Keatinge does.

I beg you to remark that if you don't choose to come, you derange more than, for obvious reasons, I can tell you by letter.

One thing I beg,—that you will answer this immediately on receipt. You recollect my address, I suppose. If not, Keatinge can furnish it to you. And, in God's name, let your answer be, that you will come. If not, don't hereafter blame me, or anyone but yourself, for the results of your refusal.

It is to me, a bad sign of what our people and ourselves are made of, that I am obliged, or feel myself obliged, to write so pressingly.

Faithfully yours,

E.T.

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1. Eugene O'Reilly, who was expected to return from Italy where he had been in the service of the King of Sardinia.
2. Luby's mother.
3. William Mackey, an organiser of the secret society.
Tipperary, Thursday.
(23 Aug., 1849).

Dear Luby,

I wrote to you on Monday from Limerick, on a matter of much and immediate importance, requesting an answer by return-post. I have got none.

You are required in Limerick on Saturday, to attend a general Conference of the principal shareholders, in order to decide finally as to the where, when, and how the Paper is to be started. Keatinge also is required. So are others. Those others have answered, promising to attend. You and Keatinge have not.

The Limerick shareholders desire me say that they will receive you and all others coming on the same business, as guests, treat you hospitably, and save you all expense during your stay. You must come, if you really wish the paper to be started with any prospect of success. If you haven't got the amount of the fare, per train, you must beg, borrow, or steal it. One thing, at least, you can do;—you can condescend to answer this and my letter of Monday by return of post. In great haste, yours,

E. TOBYN.

P.S. I put my last letter under cover to Mrs. Luby. Address your answer to Mr. E. Tobyn—under cover to Mr. James O'Malley—(Bookseller and Stationer)—20, George Street, Limerick.