DAGGER AND GORGET IN POSSESSION OF MR. J. GRENE BARRY, D.L.

CRAGGAN-OWEN—TOM STEELE'S FAVOURITE TOWER.
(see page 247)

Photo by]
[G. Hodgins, R.N.
TOM STEELE.

A SKETCH.

The illustration of the dagger presented to Tom Steele, with the notes by Mr. James Grene Barry, in the present number of our Journal, will recall to mind a local celebrity who helped to make history in the first half of the nineteenth century. It may be interesting for the present generation to learn something more of the life of one so closely connected with Clare and Limerick during that stirring period, and whose purity of purpose, and whole-souled devotion to the cause which he espoused, has never been questioned.

Thomas Steele was born at Derrymore, in the County Clare, on the 3rd of November, 1788. His ancestor, whose original name was Champion, afterwards changed to Steele, was an officer in Monmouth's regiment in the time of Charles II. He came from Somersetshire, and settled first in Tipperary, near Nenagh, and afterwards in the Co. Clare.

The subject of our sketch was educated at Magdalen College, Cambridge, and took his M.A. degree there in 1820, becoming afterwards a Member of the Institute of Civil Engineers. Steele, however, was not of the temperament calculated to settle down to the dull monotony of a professional career. The spirit of chivalry appears to have been strong in him from youth, and through life he nurtured a sympathy with all those whom he conceived to be suffering from oppression or injustice of any kind.

On the death of his uncle, he succeeded to some property in Clare, and resided at Cullaun, now the residence of Mr. R. O'Brien Studdert, D.L., whose grandfather was Tom Steele's uncle. The late Mr. William Steele Studdert, of O'Brien's-bridge, was the son of Charles Studdert, who succeeded to the property on the death of Tom Steele.

Close to Cullaun stands Craggan Castle, a peel tower on a rocky eminence, over a small lake called Craggan owen (1). The castle is

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now known as Craggan-owen Castle. We are told that Steele preferred this ruined keep to his own house, and intended some day to restore it. It appealed to his bold, romantic spirit, standing proudly on its crag; and, where unprotected by the lake, it had a moat hewn out of the solid rock, bidding defiance to the invader. Steele's initials are cut upon one of the quoins. In 1855 it passed into the possession of the Revd. John Harvey Ashworth, who restored it, and resided there; and from him it passed to Mr. Redmayne of Kilcornan, in whose family we understand it still remains.

In 1823 the Spaniards were in revolt against Ferdinand VII., and claimed a Constitution. Steele volunteered his services to the Insurgents and received a commission in their army. He fought with some distinction at Cadiz; however, by the aid of the French troops, Ferdinand succeeded in regaining absolute power, and the struggle for a Constitution was in vain (2).

On his return from Spain he found the Irish people engaged in the great struggle for Catholic Emancipation, under the leadership of O'Connell. This was a cause that appealed to the chivalrous nature of Steele, and he joined in the agitation with all the pure-souled enthusiasm that was inherent in him. Seeing that faction-fighting and secret societies were preventing the possibility of any united effort being made by the people towards securing emancipation, he set himself the task of reconciling opposing factions, and of collecting arms from the members of the secret societies wherever he could find them. The stories of his adventures on the latter mission, while journeying at night through the lonely glens and wild mountain slopes of his native county, afford evidence of the zeal and determination of the man, and the amount of danger and toil he was prepared to face in the interest of his fellow-countrymen. For his services in this respect, O'Connell styled him the Head Pacificator of Ireland.

The events of these stormy times have already been fully chronicled, and it is unnecessary to refer to them here. The agitation for Emancipation may be said to have culminated at the Clare election, when O'Connell was returned to Parliament on the 2nd July, 1828. He was

(2) We find him again, in 1839, offering his services to the King of the Belgians, to defend that nation's independence against the aggression of any foreign power.
proposed by The O'Gorman Mahon, and seconded by Tom Steele. O'Connell was fortunate in having two such champions; for in these days men did not wait upon the law of libel to defend their honour, and few would care to besmirch O'Connell, or his supporters in Clare, with two such noted duellists as O'Gorman Mahon and Steele to defend them.

Steele had a great affection for O'Connell, and the Liberator always regarded him as his most devoted lieutenant. When O'Connell came to visit him in Clare, he—though a Protestant—had one room in his house prepared as a chapel for O'Connell's use, and, true to his romantic ideas, the altar was formed of the covering-stone of a Dolmen (called "Druid's altar" by some), which had also served as an open-air altar, around which the people worshipped in penal times.

In the history and correspondence of this period as published, Steele does not appear prominently amongst the politicians with whom O'Connell took counsel. He was always more or less of a dreamer, filled with ideals, and at times, both in his speeches and writings, he indulged in such wild and fanciful theories, as to completely overshadow and conceal the practical view of the question; but, as O'Neill Daunt (3) has written of him, "His very faults were often the exaggeration of high and noble qualities. If he shared the extravagance of Don Quixote, he also partook of the Don's contempt for baseness, perfidy, and cowardice." It is for these qualities he earned for himself the title by which he will be known best to posterity—"Honest Tom Steele."

He was intimately associated with the public life of the City of Limerick, in which he was very popular. This was due in a great measure to his allegiance to O'Connell. His residence in Clare was within easy reach of the city, and during the famous Clare election, Limerick was the base of operations for O'Connell and his party. Lenihan states that "there was no city in Ireland for which O'Connell had entertained more affection than for Limerick." (4) It is therefore not surprising to find his devoted friend taking a keen interest in city affairs, and a leading part in all its political demonstrations. In 1828 he published "Practical Suggestions for Improving the Navigation of the Shannon," which was then, and unfortunately still remains, undeveloped.

(3) "Ireland and her Agitators." W. J. O'Neill Daunt: Dublin, 1867.
(4) History of Limerick, p. 481.
as a distributing channel for the traders of Limerick. The “Order of Liberators” had been started by O'Connell, and Steele was the Patron and President of the Limerick Chapter. After the Clare election the landlord class saw that their power was on the wane, and efforts were made to consolidate it by establishing Brunswick Clubs through the country; while the opposite party, in their own interests, formed Liberal and Independent Clubs (5). Tom Steele was the founder of the Independent Club in Limerick, in August, 1828, just two months after the Clare election. The writer of this sketch was fortunate enough to find amongst some old family papers, his maternal grandfather's certificate of admission as a member of this club (No. 64 on the list of members), with a printed copy of the Rules. We reproduce the copy of the Rules as an interesting record of Tom Steele's connection with Limerick. The first President, Edmond Ryan, was Mayor of Limerick in 1846; the Treasurer was his brother. Their father, Michael Ryan, was, according to Lenihan, "the most extensive and esteemed merchant in the city."

After the passing of the Emancipation Act of 1829, and throughout the period of O'Connell's Repeal Agitation, Steele continued to identify himself with the public life of the city (6) and O'Connell’s policy. When others wavered in their allegiance, and the dissension caused by the Young Ireland movement broke the spirit of the Liberator, Tom Steele remained true to the last; and yet, within the City of Limerick, with whose history he is so honourably identified, there is not as much as a mural tableau to his memory!

The spirit of poetry was strong within him, and in giving expression to his thoughts it very frequently predominated, and sometimes impaired the force of his argument. The following passage may be said, both in its choice of language and ideas, to reflect the spirit of the man: "... There is a power and magic in the ruined battlements; and when I stand in the ancient Cathedral of Limerick and listen to the choir and the organ; when I hear the chant of the High Mass, the ringing of


(6) Lenihan, in his History of Limerick, p. 496, gives a description of a great Repeal Meeting at Limerick, in 1840, at which O'Connell was present, when 60,000 people marched in procession. He states: "On this occasion, as usual, honest Tom Steele was a conspicuous actor and speaker. He identified himself in a particular manner with the Congregated Trades, associating himself with the Coopers. The spectacle was one of the most remarkable ever witnessed in Limerick."
LIMERICK INDEPENDENT CLUB.

At a Meeting of the Club, held this Day, at the Canal Hotel, pursuant to adjournment,

Thomas Steele, Esq. in the Chair,

The following Resolutions were entered into, as forming the fundamental Rules of the Club—

1st.—That the first object of the Club be to promote mutual kindness and reciprocal benevolence amongst all classes and persuasions of His Majesty's subjects.

2nd.—That the object of the Club be also to assist in superintending the Education of the Poor, in this City and Liberties.

3d.—That the Club be also bound to discontinue and prevent the existence, in this district, of all Secret and Illegal Societies whatever.

4th.—That the next object be to put an end to Feuds and Parties amongst the People, and to prevent Riots or breaches of the Peace.

5th.—Next, to ascertain the number of Persons possessed of Freeholds in this City and Liberties, and to take care that all Freeholds be duly registered, and the owners ready to exercise their Elective Franchise, and to assist every Claimant to Freedom in obtaining the enjoyment of their Chartered Rights.

6th.—That it be the object of this Club to promote public and private charities, of every description, sanctioned by law.

7th.—That all the proceedings of the Club be public, and open to the inspection of all the members, and of all Public Officers, Magistrates, and any other persons having any kind of authority whatsoever from or under Government.

8th.—That there be no Oath whatsoever required or admissible from any Member, and that secrecy be utterly banished from any of the Rules, Regulations, Proceedings or Meetings of the Club, or any portion thereof; but that it be a fundamental rule of the Institution, that every Gentleman seeking to be admitted a Member, do make a distinct and positive pledge, to act upon every important political crisis according to the decision of the majority, without regard to any private or personal interests or feelings whatsoever.

9th.—That every person wishing to become a Member, shall be proposed by one Member and seconded by another, a week's notice of such being given to the Secretary, and that One black bean to every Five white ones, excludes the person so proposed, and that no less than Twenty Members form a Ballot.

10th.—That the terms of admission be One Pound Yearly.

11th.—That the following Gentlemen be appointed Officers of the Club for the next Three Months:—Edmond Ryan, Esq. President; William Hackett, Esq. Vice-President; William Ryan, Esq. Treasurer; and Thomas Molony, Esq. Secretary.

THOMAS STEELE, Chairman,
THOMAS MOLONY, Secretary.

August 18, 1688.
the Mass bell, and view the incense ascending from the altar in one of
the Convent chapels; when I wander through the gardens of the holy
Sisterhood of St. Mary's, and view their figures gliding among the gothic
ruins; when I sit upon the ancient bastion in St. Munchin's Cemetery
upon a gloomy evening, and listen to the sullen sough of the wind
among the dark elms over my head, and the rushing flood of the
Shannon that sweeps past its basement, and hear the roar of the bugles,
the beat of the drum, and the voice of the trumpet within the Court of
the Castle, I become inspired by a feeling solemn and mournful, different
from that of which I am susceptible in any other place in the world; but
not very unlike that with which, upon the shore of the solitary lake where
he reposes, I hear the wind whisper at night in the grass around the
grade of my father, whom I have never seen."

The strain of these years of continuous agitation and political excite-
ment was sure to leave its mark upon a man of Steele's temperament,
while to one so utterly indifferent as to the value of money, it meant
financial ruin. His extravagance at all times knew no limit, and became
ludicrous in many instances, when he proceeded to lavish money
advanced to him by friends, with even greater recklessness than if it
was his own. The result was, that whatever property he had, passed
from his hands. Worried by his own private affairs, he found still
greater trouble looming on the political horizon. Dissensions amongst
his countrymen were reducing to impotence the great organisation he
had laboured to develop. Then came his greatest blow, the death of
O'Connell, whom he almost worshipped, and all this while the shadow
of Famine and Death enveloped his native land, and he was now power-
less to offer her any aid. Such was the sorrowful picture that presented
itself to the mind of poor Tom Steele when penniless in London in
1848. Is it any wonder that, under such a painful strain, the tender
chord of reason snapped? and that he sought relief by jumping into
the Thames from Waterloo Bridge. The rest is soon told; he was
rescued, and conveyed to Peel's Coffee House in Fleet Street, where the
proprietor and loving hands ministered to his wants, and he lingered on
until the 15th June, 1848, when he died. His remains were conveyed
to Dublin; the coffin was carried to the tomb by four Tipperary men,
and rests in the "O'Connell Circle" at Glasnevin.
Sir Bernard Burke (7), in a sympathetic note on Tom Steele, refers to the obituary notice in the "Standard" at that time; a generous tribute of respect from the leading Conservative Journal in England, with an extract from which we wish to conclude this sketch.

"With a broken spirit, and a broken heart, and a broken fortune, he died almost deserted, at an Inn in London— a pauper, alas! but not a beggar . . . When, in consequence of the late deplorable attempt, his destitution was made known, many who differed from his opinions hastened to his relief, and in a few days contributions were poured in which would soon have swelled into a fortune. There could have been no doubt about it. But Steele was not of Ireland's 'mendicant patriots.' His gratitude shed tears at the offer, which his noble nature would not permit him to accept. . . . Poor fellow! what must have been his feelings when he found Lord Brougham, whom he so often denounced, hastening to his aid, and Colonel Perceval, chief among the Orangemen, watching by his death-bed? Fare thee well, noble, honest Tom Steele! A bolder spirit in a gentler heart never left earth—let us humbly hope, for that home where the weary find rest."

P. J. Lynch.