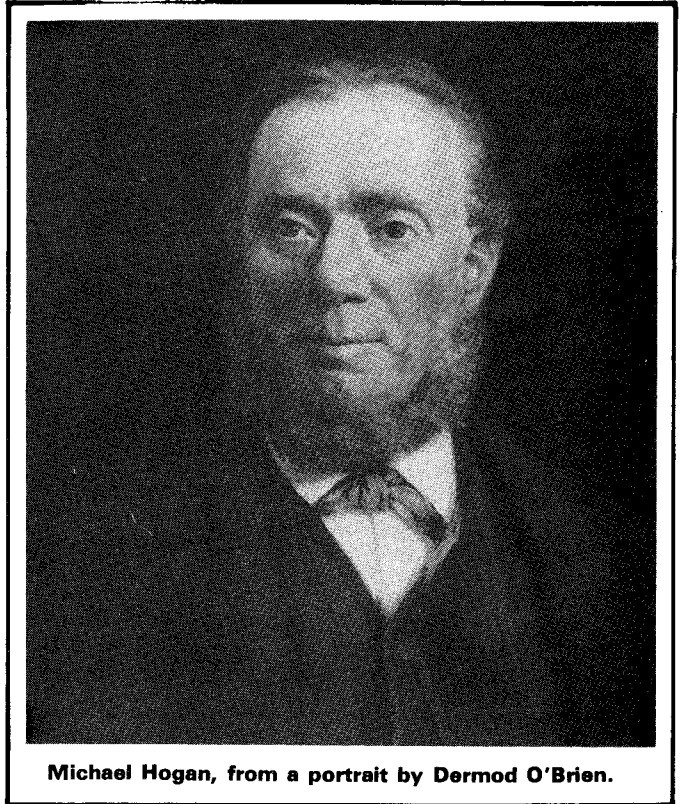


# The Dean and the Bard

by *W.W. Gleeson*



Dean Richard Baptist O'Brien.



Michael Hogan, from a portrait by Dermot O'Brien.

This year marks the 171th anniversary of the birth of Richard Baptist O'Brien, Dean of Limerick. He was born in Carrick-on-Suir in 1809 and two years later came to Limerick with his widowed mother.

Richard O'Brien was sent to school in the parish of St. Mary's and was in due course apprenticed to Lynch's grocery establishment in Mary Street, "next door" to where he lived at No. 27. The young O'Brien must have had some exceptional qualities for he attracted the attention of a zealous priest in the city, Father John Brahan. The priest became his friend and patron, and as a result of Fr. Brahan's intercession, he commenced his collegiate career in Knockbeg College, Carlow.

He was destined for the priesthood and, having graduated from Maynooth with distinction, he was ordained in 1839. Following his ordination he was sent to a Catholic college in Halifax, and thus it was clear almost from the start that Richard O'Brien would gain many honours. Despite his clerical duties, the young priest devoted much of his time and energy in his efforts to bring about a much-needed improvement in the social and intellectual lives of the people around him.

Returning to Limerick in the Famine year of 1845, Father O'Brien was appointed curate of his home parish of St. Mary's. Four years later he founded the Catholic Young Men's Society.

The Society was established in humble circumstances in the back room of a two-storey house at 46, Athlunkard Street. Not more than 30 men were present at the inaugural meeting, and according to the words of the founder, "they were mostly all of the labouring and working class, and only one or two had claims to anything more

than an elementary education; but they were earnest men, everyone of them, and they made a regular mission of the work they had undertaken".

The Society, we are told, was founded to promote the religious, intellectual, social and physical welfare of its members, and in due course its constitution and rules received the approval of Rome.

Today there are a great many branches of the C.Y.M.S., with a membership of thousands of men from many walks of life. Two local branches of the Society — St. John's and St. Michael's — each with a membership of several hundreds, continue their activities. Strong and widespread as the Society is at present, it is surprising to learn that there are no branches in most Limerick parishes, not even in St. Mary's, where it was first established, or in Newcastle West, where its founder breathed his last.

After establishing the C.Y.M.S. Richard O'Brien left Limerick and went to Rome to pursue his higher theological studies and on his return to Ireland was appointed to a professorship at the All Hollows Seminary in Dublin. He was next appointed parish priest of Kilfinane and in 1858 was made dean of the diocese. Dean O'Brien later became parish priest of Newcastle West, where he died in 1885.

During his lifetime he had a special interest in literature and politics. He wrote three published novels: *Ally Moore*, *Jack Hazlitt* and *The Daltons of Crag*. An ardent admirer of Daniel O'Connell, the Dean worked hard to win moral and material support for the Irish Repeal Movement.

Given the state of nineteenth century Limerick life, it

would be surprising if all Richard O'Brien's activity in the literary and political fields had been received with uncritical acclaim. Among his critics was none other than Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond. It was, indeed, one of fate's unfortunate twists that caused the Dean to fall foul of the battling Bard.

The issue on which the initial dispute occurred is now lost in the mists of Limerick history but, whatever the reason, it is regrettable that the Dean is also remembered today, for his celebrated row with Michael Hogan. The story of the Bard's grievances is set forth in two of his *Shawn-Na-Scoob* pamphlets, No. 7 and 8.

As in the case of Hogan's hostility towards Maurice Lenihan, this enmity could have had its origins in the Bard's own character, and could well have been more personal than political. The poet suffered many cruel disappointments during his life, and seeing the Dean's literary success and his promotion within the Church, he reacted in a predictably caustic manner.

In the seventh pamphlet, published in 1876, the Bard nicknamed the Dean "Bullybottom", and goes on to allege that he received his "spiritual training" by selling drugged whiskey in the Englishtown and that for all the milk his mother sold "she gave him no drop of human kindness". Hogan further accuses the Dean of betraying the Young Irelanders.

The Bard reserves his most bitter satire for the eighth pamphlet. In *Association of the Elect* (the Catholic Institute) he lets fly, and then advises the Dean on his future conduct:

Ah, Dean "astore"! in time repent  
The precious hours you have misspent  
At rogishtales for slavish print,  
And slavish readers;  
Your sad Jack Hazlitt they don't want,  
Nor sinner — breeders.

Go preach the Gospel to the poor,  
And enter on their humble floor;  
And share with them your wordly store,  
And drop your quibbling;  
I vow 'twill please your Master more  
Than all your scribbling.

Throw off your luckless vain conceit,  
Sow seeds of love instead of hate;  
And in your manner, speech and gait  
Like Christ be plain;  
Then — not till then — I pledge my faith,  
You'll be a Dean.

The blest Apostles preached in hovels,  
Saint Paul or Peter ne'er wrote novels;  
Because a true Saint never grovels  
For praise or gain —  
Throw by your literary bubbles,  
And be a Dean!

To the poor broken tenant go,  
Give Christian balm to his deep woe;  
And save him from his landlord foe,  
And cure his pain;  
Just do Christ's work and then we'll know  
You are the Dean.

The poor man's wrongs make bare and show  
The wicked hand that gave the blow;  
Lay fraud and base injustice low,  
Like demons slain;  
And when before the Lord you go,  
He'll know the Dean.

Not content with this onslaught, the Bard contrasts the behaviour of the Dean with that of Rev. Thomas Fitzgerald, P.P., "late of Fedamore. A true priest, a consummate scholar, and a thorough gentleman". The work



The Old St. Mary's Catholic Church.

then concludes with Hogan bidding the Dean an abusive farewell:

There are some priests, in soul so grand,  
That would not touch your faithless hand;  
Men who are glories in the land,  
And in Christ's fare;  
'Tis those we love and understand,  
Not you, poor Dean!

Oh, how far distant are you from  
The heavenly mind of Father Tom,  
Whose lore could show a golden vein;  
Compared to him you're but a gorm  
Poor foolish Dean!

Farewell, and drop your scribbling evil,  
Dean, donkey, dignitary or devil!  
And learn to be wise and civil,  
Kind, good and plain;  
And then you'll rise to your own level,  
Like a true Dean!

As usual, the Bard exaggerated. His attack is not only wild and inaccurate, it also offends against fair play and common justice. Public opinion, however, was not influenced by the criticisms and the Dean's reputation remained high.

It would be nice to believe that the Bard and the Dean made up their differences before the latter's death, though we have no way of knowing if this reconciliation ever took place. In accordance with his last personal wish, the Dean was laid to rest at the Gospel side of St. Mary's Church. "It is here the poor people pray", he is recorded to have said, "and they will, I hope, remember me in their prayers". Just behind the high altar, an impressive stained glass window serves as an everlasting memorial to Dean Richard Baptist O'Brien.