

THE ELECTION OF 1874

By Michael McCarthy

Besides the Home Rule Movement, the other most powerful element in determining when the history of Irish politics ceased to be the history of English political parties in Ireland is the secret ballot. (1) Introduced in 1872 on the heels of the Representation of the People (Ireland) Act, 1868, which broadened the franchise somewhat, the Ballot Act confronted men of property in general, and landlords in particular, with the unpalatable prospect that "the lower orders would henceforward be able to vote as they pleased". (2) It was proposed to implement the Act in Ireland for the first time in 1874 in a by-election in Co. Limerick, caused by the elevation of Rt. Hon. William Monsell, M.P., for the county, to the House of Lords. (3)

The contest for the seat, in what was then a two-seater constituency, was one of the most exciting ever in Limerick's electoral history. Shortly before polling day the by-election was overtaken by the sudden dissolution of parliament and the calling of a general election, but that did not affect the basic quality of the campaign which at that stage had become personalised and vicious, involving candidates, party machines and clergy.

Some of the excesses of the campaign may have been due to the Ballot Act itself which led to the fracturing of the electorate along social lines. The increased electorate also obviously relished the disappearance of the day when the local landlord could rely on deferential politics to have himself returned - when he could march his tenants to the polls, with the threat of eviction from their homes, or the non-renewal of their leases, should they refuse to vote according to his wishes. (4) Even in 1868, only six years before, there was an instance of a landlord riding to the hustings at the head of his tenantry, 150 of them, all on horseback, who formed a semicircle round the hustings and waited while he was returned unopposed. (5) In 1864 many voters still remembered the time when a landlord would sub-divide his estate and make leases in order to create votes to help the candidate he favoured - it was as much understood that a tenant would vote with his landlord, as that he should pay his rent. (6)

Monsell's expected appointment as Lord Emly at the end of 1873 immediately signalled the beginning of the hustings. (7) By Christmas two candidates had entered the field: John J. Kelly, a landlord of Rockstown Castle, Grange, Kilmallock and Henry O'Sullivan, a tenant farmer, also from Kilmallock. Edward Synan, a Home Ruler, was the other sitting M.P. (8)

Kelly's main claim to fame seemed to be his father, a landlord, and his grand-aunt who donated the high altar to St. John's Cathedral. (9) O'Sullivan, on the other hand, had quite a political track record - he had been arrested on a treasonable charge as a Fenian and imprisoned a few years earlier. He had been a repealer in 1843, and was frequently on the wrong side of the crown forces from then on. (10)

January, 1874 saw the first major development in the by-election. A meeting of the Limerick and Clare Farmers' Club was held in the Theatre Royal. (11) The purpose of the tenant farmers' meeting was to decide which of the two candidates, each claiming to be a Home Ruler, they would support. At the outset the large gathering voted unanimously "that whoever would be elected should be one in whom they could place implicit confidence and reliance, that he should be a Home Ruler as defined by the Home Rule League, and a thorough Nationalist, and that they further believed that the time had come when a country should be represented by a person who would

give expression to the views and aspirations of the people." (12)

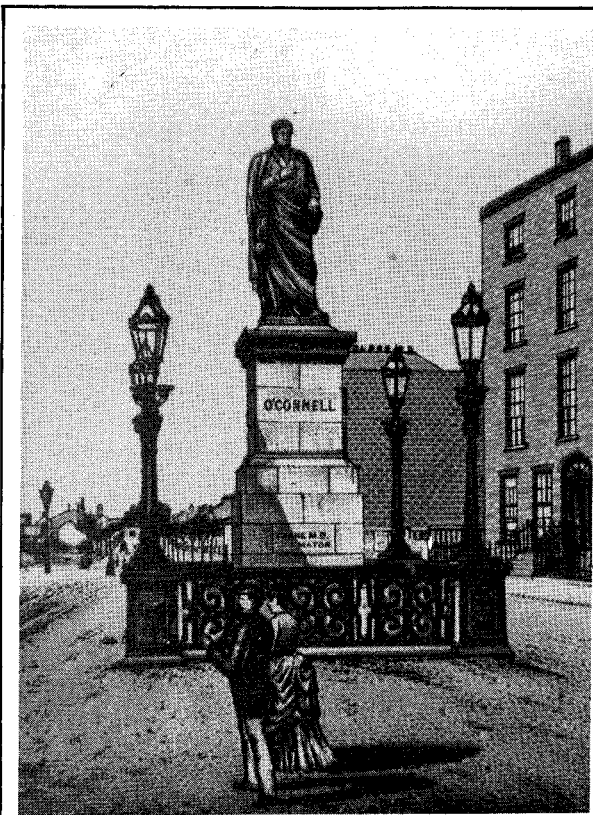
The vast majority of the tenant farmers at the meeting favoured the candidacy of O'Sullivan, not because he would seem to have been the more able candidate, but rather because of Kelly's pedigree. Kelly's father was a landlord owning 1,500 acres in Co. Limerick and nearly 10,000 acres outside the county. Some time previously he had evicted a number of tenants from his Ballybricken property for the non-payment of rents. One eviction in particular which angered people was that of a widow, Mrs. Hartwell Barry, and her children. A letter from one of her sons, Dr. Thomas Barry of Thurles, was read to the meeting of the Farmers' Club calling on members not to vote for Kelly's son because of who he was. This call was echoed by many speakers who said they could not vote for "the son of an exterminator"; nor could they vote for a man whose father made bullock walks for the landlords in the country and had done nothing to serve the farmers. (13) Kelly did not attend the meeting but sent a letter of apology stating that if and when he came into possession of the Ballybricken property he would redress any wrongs that may be satisfactorily proved as such. O'Sullivan did attend the meeting and in his address promised to fight for fixity of tenure and fair rents, proper treatment for political prisoners and denominational education. "Pigs and horses are better attended than the labouring classes of Ireland" he declared and added that this election was not between himself and Kelly but between one of the people and nominee of the Whigs (Liberals). (14) Needless to say O'Sullivan's candidature was supported by the Farmers' Club.

Kelly came under further attack as the campaign really got underway. At an O'Sullivan rally in Rockhill near Bruree, his credentials as a Home Ruler and as a Nationalist were questioned. One speaker stated that Kelly's conversion to Home Rule had been so recent and sudden as to arouse suspicion. Kelly had not become a member of the Home Rule Association until two months previously, on November 11. (15)

In spite of the attacks on him, Kelly pushed ahead with his campaign. In a letter to the **Limerick Chronicle** on January 8 he outlined his policy, stating that he was in favour of denominational education, Home Rule, further amendments to the Law of Landlord and Tenant Act, and the unconditional release of political prisoners. (16)

At this state of the contest, the clergy, Roman Catholic and Protestant, had begun to make their presence felt in favour of Kelly. At a meeting in Cruise's Hotel, Rev. Mr. Meagher, P.P. of Ballybricken attacked O'Sullivan's Fenianism: his curate, Rev. Mr. Shanahan, pointed out that O'Sullivan would be the perfect reason why Disraeli should refuse to grant Home Rule to Ireland. (17) Others of the clergy alleged that O'Sullivan's election would throw the country back twenty years.

O'Sullivan was rightly concerned about the lack of support he was receiving from the Roman Catholic clergy. That he would not get any support from the Protestant clergy was a foregone conclusion, particularly as Kelly was from their own class and religion. Occasionally at rallies and meetings O'Sullivan would claim that not all of the clergy were against him. But as if in answer to these claims, clerical opposition was suddenly to take a more



The O'Connell Monument, c. 1880.

organised dimension. Eighty of the Roman Catholic clergy of the Limerick diocese issued a statement which roundly attacked O'Sullivan's background and his ability to represent the constituency. They declared that "he was no Fenian, that he never encouraged Fenianism by word or act". (18) They said that his oratory was distinguished by "more vehemence than grammar" and that if he was sent to Westminster, Limerick would be disgraced, and the whole representation of Ireland rendered ridiculous. They urged that the new member should be a man of intelligence, position and ability, "which conditions are fulfilled by Mr. Kelly and not by Mr. O'Sullivan". They asserted that the extreme opinions of the latter "would be a crushing blow to the Liberal Party" and would alarm Englishmen. (19) The statement was almost reminiscent of David Moriarty's famous sermon of 1867 in which he called down upon the Fenian's "God's heaviest curse, his withering, blasting, blighting curse", following that with "and for their punishment eternity is not long enough, nor hell hot enough". (20) In spite of the vehemence of their condemnation of him, O'Sullivan soldiered on with his campaign, claiming at a meeting in Kilmallock the support of the clergy of the diocese of Cashel. (21) Within two days, however, Dr. Leahy, Archbishop of Cashel, had written to the **Cork Examiner** denying that he and all his priests, with one exception, were in favour of Mr. O'Sullivan, and pointing out that he had asked his priests to remain neutral in the campaign. (22) But clerical neutrality in the electoral campaigns of those days was significantly rare.

The English press was quick to criticise clerical involvement in the contest. The **Pall Mall Gazette** commented: "Fortune has certainly been unkind to the Roman Catholic priesthood in Ireland. After a long period in which they saw almost all their aspirations gratified by the Imperial Parliament, their candidates returned with unhesitating obedience by well-drilled constituencies, and their policy carried into effect by the whole force and

weight of the Executive Government, they are now experiencing the blight of a reaction ... In vain have the bishops, painfully recognising the fact that the Parliament at Westminster will never give their Church a rich endowment or themselves an undisputed mastery over the education of the Irish people, accepted the Home Rule programme, though there is nothing in their secret hearts they more thoroughly dread. In vain has the fidelity of a 'patriotic priesthood' to national hopes been celebrated by an unwonted alliance of clerical and democratic organs. The Nationalists, Fenians and Home Rulers are apparently determined not to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for their spiritual leaders, and the ballot gives them every opportunity of doing as they please in this respect ... But what is more striking is the determined attitude of resistance assumed by the Roman Catholic masses in relation to the impending contest in the county of Limerick ... The policy of priests in Limerick and elsewhere was very plain. They hoped by taking advantage of the Home Rule excitement to procure the election of a number of members, pledged, of course, to the Home Rule programme, but much more deeply interested in the attainment of what the clergy desire in regard to education. They wanted moderate Home Rulers, harmless men." (23)

The **Times** of London also got involved: "... For neither of the candidates could there be found a counterpart in the political controversies of this island. The tamest of them would be thought a character from a melodrama on any English or Scotch platform. Mr. Kelly is a moderate man who is gently and ceremoniously ushered upon the scene with the good wishes of the landlords and the mingled blessings and exhortations of the clergy. He is, indeed, a landlord who has to answer for the sins of a father who thought his land his own, and dealt with it accordingly. The son, however, has seen the error of his father's ways, and his friends are able to plead that he himself has not pulled down cottages, evicted tenants, or otherwise shown a stronger appreciation of the land than of its occupants. As it appears that the bare suspicion of an understanding with either the landlords or the priesthood is likely to be prejudicial, the electors are assured that Mr. Kelly has come forward on his own motion and his own responsibility, and that he is nothing more than his father's child - fortunately, not too like him ... But promise what he may, pledge himself as he may, and whoever his sponsors may be, Mr. Kelly does not possess the requisite guarantee in his own career, and in those of his immediate friends and relatives. It is in these respects that Mr. O'Sullivan is so unquestionably superior ... So far nothing can be plainer than the differences between the two men. But then comes the rub. The Ballot has descended like a dark cloud on the battlefield, and every individual on either side can act as private opinion, or conscience, or personal interest, or the noblest feelings, or the basest, may influence him.

"We must confess we cannot be quite sure that the eighty clergy who have come forward to guarantee the nationality and good faith of the more moderate candidate are honest and sincere according to the English rendering of the words. We cannot feel sure that they at all expect or even desire Home Rule, in any conceivable sense of the word for nothing is more certain than that they would find the Celtic element as antagonistic to high clerical pretensions in Ireland as throughout Western and Southern Europe generally. We cannot believe that they have even made up their minds to face the difficulties involved in the education of the people according to the people's faith when the said people are so much and so bitterly divided in faith as they are in Ireland. We cannot believe that they or Mr. Kelly really desire to see the creation of a race of real landowners poorer by the rent charges due to the nominal landlords. As little can we

realise that these clergy and their friends connected with the land join in a cry for the release of all men whose crimes have a political aspect, except just to dress up their appeal to the people. They tell the people that they will do themselves much harm by sending extreme men to the British Parliament, but they do not appear to be conscious that their own profession of political faith is as extreme as Mr. O'Sullivan's - at least, that it admits of as extreme an interpretation. Mr. O'Sullivan speaks out and does what he says. Mr. Kelly's friends recommend wise counsels, but the wisdom of their counsels is rather in expression than in the things expressed, and the only folly they recognise in the thorough National Party, its candidates and proceedings, is that it concedes nothing and goes to the root of the matter ... Now comes the question. How will the Ballot work when the elector has to consider in the silence and darkness of his own mind the respective appeals of spiritual advisers, political fanatics and possibly too, the small voice that whispers of justice, wisdom and peace". (24)

By now the tussle for the seat was being conducted with a fierceness and savagery which would never be seen again in Limerick's electoral history. On Sunday, January 18, a dead donkey was hung before the door of one of Mr. Kelly's supporters in Drumcollogher. In the same village a rope was hung across the road to which hung an ass' skin as a sign of "welcome" for Mr. Kelly, who was due to canvass there. (25) At a public meeting of O'Sullivan's in Bruff at which 3,000 people attended, police charged with fixed bayonets when violence broke out. Dr. O'Shea, the parish priest of Rathkeale, was pelted with mud for which offence a young lady called Anne Nolan was subsequently charged with assault. (26) At Shanagolden and at Tournafulla when the priests tried to read the declaration of the Catholic clergy of Limerick diocese during the Sunday Mass, members of the congregations objected and walked out of the churches. (27) One of the worse incidents of the campaign occurred at Askeaton when a butcher called Walshe cheered for O'Sullivan during a Kelly canvass was shot dead by two men at his own door as he held his grandchild's hand. (28) This outrage provoked the pro-Kelly newspaper, the **Limerick Chronicle**, to opine: "Many sensible men look upon the approach of Parliamentary elections as the visitation of a great evil, and in former times, while the Ballot was still but one of the things spoken about, there was some ground for this feeling. Under the new law, however, we are enabled to rejoice in the disappearance from contested elections of those scenes of riot and disorder and the mob intimidation which hitherto were generally to be experienced. But notwithstanding the confessed advantage secured to life and property under the Ballot Act, we have seen, since the commencement of the contest for the county of Limerick, that much bad feeling will still exhibit itself, and that some men will yet be opposed to allowing others to have their opinions". (29)

An interesting feature of the 1874 by-election and of public meetings in general then, which has since disappeared from the political landscape, was the phenomenon of "the groan" as an expression of disapproval. For example, at a meeting of working men on Thursday, January 15 in the Labourer's Hall, Charlotte Quay, to consider the election and Home Rule, there was so much "groaning" that the meeting was nearly abandoned. A clergyman addressing the meeting and extolling the virtues of Mr. Kelly said: "Mr. Kelly is a gentleman (tremendous groaning). You may groan as you please, but I tell you that I am not afraid to call for three cheers for Mr. Kelly (groans) ... Mind now, I am not saying one word against Mr. O'Sullivan, for if I met him in the streets tomorrow I would shake hands with him; but I believe

that he is not fit to be a Member of Parliament at present (groans)." (30) The "groans" of political meetings was closely related to that employed by crowds of tenants who after an eviction would march past the offending landlord's house and at a signal from their leader would emit the most terrifying collective "groan".

By now two other Liberal candidates had thrown their hats into the electoral ring. Robert E. Reeves and Bernard King both had letters published in the **Limerick Chronicle** asking for support for their policies. Reeves, from Capard, was in favour of denominational education, exploitation of the country's mineral wealth, and support of fisheries, but was ambivalent on the land tenant question. (31) King, from George's Street, said that he was in favour of Home Rule, the release of political prisoners and universal suffrage ("universal" then being defined in male chauvinistic terms); in his letter to the independent electors of Limerick he also stated that he had fine boats for sale in his shop at 6/6 and 7/9 a pair. (32) Neither candidate lasted very long. Reeves formally withdrawing his candidacy through the newspaper on January 17; (33) King's just withered away.

The contest between Kelly and O'Sullivan continued along sectarian lines, with the tenant farmers canvassing as best they could with their limited resources and inexperienced team, competing with Kelly's machine which combined the backing of the gentry and commercial interests as well as the considerable expertise and political clout of the clergy. In spite of the forces lined up against them the farmers continually proclaimed their message: "No, they would never support an exterminator even if the Pope himself recommended him". (34) Kelly at this stage was known at O'Sullivan rallies as The Sham Squire and The Son of an Exterminator. (35) An anonymous letter to the **Limerick Chronicle** summed up the feeling in O'Sullivan's camp: "Catholics of this country ... if you really are in earnest for Home Rule - if you really denounce Whigism, Ultramontanism, and priestly interference in politics, prove it now. Remember the oft repeated words of the Great O'Connell -

Hereditary bondsmen know ye not,
He would be free, himself must strike the blow'.
Strike that blow now." (36)

But matters were to get more complicated before that blow was struck.

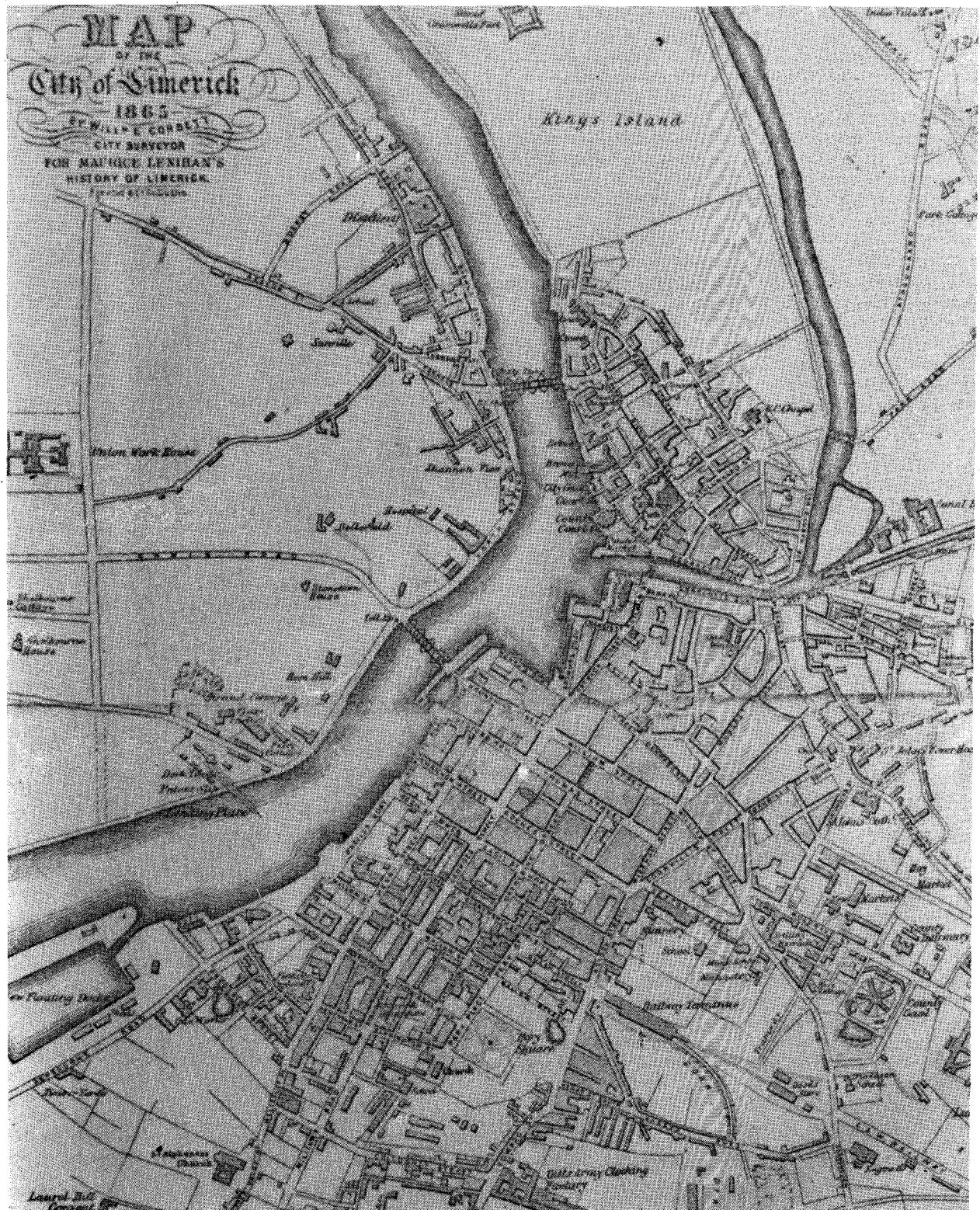
On a broader front, Gladstone's government had disappointed many in Ireland when it failed to deliver on the long-awaited University Bill in 1873 but none more than the Irish bishops who then used their influence against him; in fact, the opposition of the Irish Liberals contributed directly to his sudden decision to go to the country on January 26. (37) But the Irish bishops had already begun to place their hopes on the Federalist Isaac Butt who had been elected for Limerick city in 1871. So it was understandable why the Limerick clergy should favour the more moderate Home Ruler Kelly, even though his declaration for the cause was rather late and hasty and just in time for the Great Home Rule conference held in Dublin at the Rotunda on November 18, 1873. (38)

The Queen's proclamation dissolving Parliament was published on January 26. (39) The writ from the Hanaper Office for the by-election was superseded by those for the general election, but nothing could take from the four-week-old battle in county Limerick which by now had reached such a pitch that police with fixed bayonets were a familiar feature of all rallies. (40)

In spite of the hustings for the general election, the English press was still intrigued by the Limerick county election. **The Globe**, commenting on the Nationalists' reproach of Limerick's clergy for their ingratitude, said: "Irish logic is somewhat difficult to follow. Mr. Kelly is indignantly repudiated and repelled as a nominee of Lord

Emly, who, as Mr. Monsell, was a member of the government which passed the Land Act. How then are the clergy guilty of ingratitude for voting for Lord Emly's nominee? Perhaps the secret of the apparent inconsistency is to be found in the fact that the Roman hierarchy and clergy, although willing to advocate the sort of Home Rule which would give them the ascendancy, are suspected of subordinating the Nationalist cause to their ecclesiastical interests and pretensions, as they do in Germany and Switzerland. It may be so; but to what a strange complexion

has Mr. Gladstone's famous remedial legislation, his Church Bill, and his Land Bill, and his abortive University Bill, come at last when it culminates in a civil war at Limerick between the partisans of a candidate who has to disguise his ministerial connections under the cloak of a moderate Home Rule ... and the Fenians pure and simple ... Was there ever a more admirable illustration of the wisdom and success of governing Ireland 'according to Irish ideas' than the grand patriotic scrimmage at Limerick". (41)



William Corbett's 1865 Map of Limerick.

Edward Synan, the second former M.P. for the county, now entered the race but his base was quite strong among the farmers and commercial interests and his track record in parliament well-proven. A new candidate proposed himself as a nationalist - Mr. D.J. Reardon of Picadilly, London, and in a letter to the **Limerick Chronicle** stated that he was in favour of Home Rule, the Land Bill, denominational education and the release of political prisoners; he never set foot in the constituency during the election. (42)

The Pall Mall Gazette had a final comment and prediction to make before polling day; "The result will probably be the return of a Home Rule majority in Ireland, of whom four-fifths will be practically the delegates of Cardinal Cullen ... A band of real Home Rulers at Westminster could do little more than expose the absurdities of their own cause; but a compact array of Ultramontane politicians under priestly orders, wearing Home Rule as a mask or wielding it as a menace, is an element in politics the appearance of which inspires us with equal aversion and alarm". (43)

On February 10 the voting took place throughout the 23 booths in the county. (44) Out of a population of 191,936 only 6,300 were qualified to vote. (45) Generally speaking, polling was orderly but there were some riots and disturbances; for example, in the Newpallas area "every imaginable weapon was used and it is asserted knives were even resorted to - weapons certainly new to the district." (46) It was to be another few years before the Ballot had removed the ashplant and the faction fighting from Irish politics.

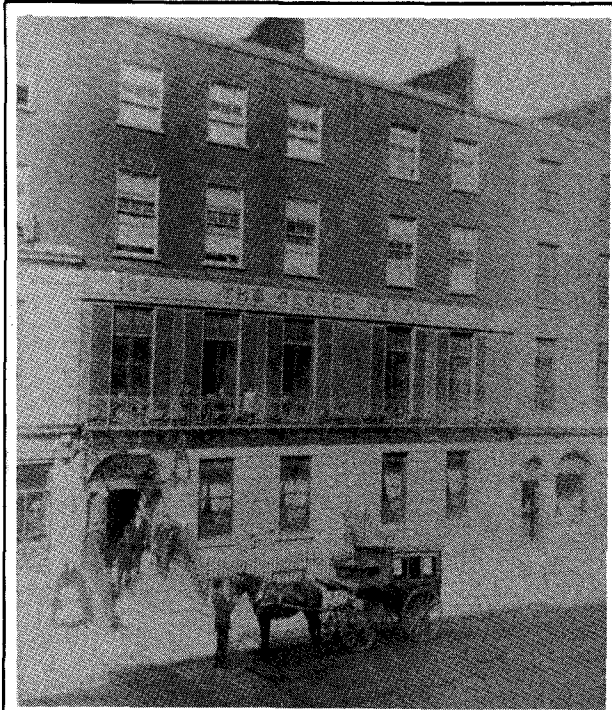
The riots of polling day, however, gave way to celebrations throughout the villages and towns of the county as O'Sullivan headed the poll with 3,521 votes, Kelly trailed the field with 995 votes and Synan took the second seat with 2856 votes. (47) O'Connell Monument was the first stop on O'Sullivan's victory trail and there he declared that "he rejoiced he had taken part in demolishing Whiggery in the city, and that in his person he had smashed it in the county!" (48)

The Unionist **Limerick Chronicle**, while it regretted that no conservative candidate stood for election in the county, still rejoiced at the outcome: "Ten years ago the power of the Roman Catholic clergy was one of unquestioned sway. To that purpose have they used this all but sovereign authority: how much to advance their power of their order: ... Today that power like a column shaken with an earthquake, has been utterly and irremediably overthrown ... The period is, indeed, a momentous one, it is one not merely of transitory change, but of actual revolution; and our firm belief is that we are on the eve of still mightier changes and yet more mighty results." (49)

Henry O'Sullivan went to Westminster and represented the county until his resignation from politics just before the general election of 1885. (50) While the clergy may have been wrong-footed in 1874 and their power shaken as a result, it was merely a temporary setback, as subsequent elections were to show. But the most remarkable feature of the '74 election, apart from the virtual destruction of the Liberal Party in Ireland, was the introduction of the ballot - that basic test of a working democracy which gives the governed the power to change their governors, if they so wish, without recourse to violence.

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