

Freedom and Conflict



nder the Municipal Privilege Act, Ireland, 1876, Borough Councils were given the right to "vote for and admit any person" to be an Honorary Freeman of their city. It also stated that any person with a criminal record could not qualify for the honour. The procedure for awarding the Honorary Freedom to an individual takes place at a council meeting, where the vote has to be unanimous. The recipient would come to the city to accept the honour and would be presented with the certificate of freedom. The recipient would then sign the Roll of Honour. Written on the first page of the Roll of Honour was the Freeman's Oath of Allegiance to the reigning British Monarch.

In cases where the council voted the Honorary Freedom and, for some reason or other, the recipient was not able to attend the ceremony or the name was not entered on the Roll, then the recipient, and only the recipient, had the right to question the reason for the omission of the name.¹ It was the Town Clerk's duty to look after and maintain the freeman's roll and to make it available for inspection where there was a dispute to claims of entry (in court) to the roll.

In January 1899, Limerick voters elected a majority radical and nationalist city council. A police report of the period alleged that twenty-one members of the new city council, out of a total of forty, were also members of a secret society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which was the offspring of the Fenian movement.²

by Des Ryan

John Daly, a Fenian, was elected Mayor. He served in that office until January 1901, and during that time he conferred the Freedom of the City on some of his friends in the nationalist movement, Thomas J. Clarke, (1899) James F. Egan, (1900) and Maude Gonne (1900).

In early October, 1899, war erupted between Britain and the Dutch republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal in South Africa. The Dutch, who were mainly farmers (the Dutch word for farmer being Boer), stood in the way of British expansion in South Africa. The war lasted until May 1902 and is commonly known as the Boer War. While there was much sympathy in Ireland for the Boers, we were, as part of the British Empire, at war with them.

By September 1900, President Styne of the Orange Free State, was on the run and President Kruger of the Transvaal, in order to avoid being captured by British forces, crossed the border into Portuguese East Africa. From there he sailed to Europe (and exile) on the cruiser *Gelderland* provided for him by the Queen of Holland. In Ireland, two months later, a proposal to make Kruger an honorary freeman came before Dublin and Cork city councils, but was knocked on the head by the Lord Mayors of both cities.³

The Lord Mayor of Dublin told the councillors that he had got "eminent advice on the matter"⁴ from a high legal

authority⁵ and that the proposal was not in order, and could not be put 'before the city council.'⁶

In Cork, during an acrimonious meeting of the city council, the Lord Mayor declared the proposal illegal. Another councillor asked sarcastically why they didn't offer the Freedom to Emilio Aguinaldo [who was fighting American aggression] in the Philippines. The meeting broke up in disarray.⁷

Needless to say, Mayor Daly was disappointed by the actions of both Lord Mayors. At a meeting of Limerick city council on 29 November, he referred to the reception that President Kruger had received in France "they had read" he said, "with pain that recently the capital city of their country, through the assumption of authority by one who at one time pretended to be a Nationalist would not permit the citizens to express sympathy or extend honour to such noble a statesman on the ground that it was illegal". They had also read in the papers that more recently in Cork another avowed Nationalist who was found in the Nationalist ranks until he got pitchforked into office, refused to accede to the wishes of the citizens to honour the name of Kruger and express sympathy with the struggle of a brave nation for liberty. In order to give this Council the right to voice its feelings the Mayor said that if any councillor wished to put forward President Kruger's name for the Freedom of the City he would accept it. Councillor W. Whelan, an I.R.B. member, handed in a proposal that the freedom of the city be conferred on



MAY FORCE MOVE YOU TO GENTLENESS — (Shakespeare)

The three Boer Generals (centre) with Chamberlain and Kitchener. From a cereal advertisement in the Limerick Chronicle, 6 Sept. 1902



President Kruger arriving in Holland

Kruger on the occasion of his visit to Europe and in recognition of his stand against Great Britain. Councillor Stokes told the meeting that when the proposal came up for voting he would oppose it.⁸

A short editorial in the *Limerick Chronicle* commented that "if it is going to be the rule to present the "freedom of the city" to any and every stranger visiting us, or not visiting us, who may find favour in the eyes of the Corporation wholly and solely because they are "agin the Government" it is just as well to know it. Then when real services are to be rewarded, sensible folk will be able to cast about for an honour, the bestowal of which will be really worth having and not one which is very fast losing any honourable significance it ever did have."⁹

It was on the same evening as the conferring of the Freedom of the City on Maude Gonne that the vote on whether or not to give Kruger the freedom took place. Out of a Council of forty members, only twenty-four turned up for the ceremony. The hallway outside the council chamber was packed with people. After Miss Gonne had signed the roll of honour, the proceedings moved on to the question of whether or not President Kruger should be conferred with the same honour. Mr. Stokes, who had originally opposed the proposal, wanted to know if they were acting legally in offering this honour to a man who was at war with this kingdom and would they be enhancing the value of the freedom by

giving it to Kruger. When the Mayor in reply said "yes" the majority of the councillors and the crowd joined in to support the Mayor. Mr. Stokes felt that it was not right that the corporation should vote the freedom of the city to Kruger and he proposed that the offer be withdrawn. When Councillor Hayes made it known that he supported Mr. Stokes, there were shouts from the crowd to "put him out".¹⁰ Councillor O'Brien suggested that they add the name of President Styne as well. The Mayor, in reply, pointed out that "while in Europe Mr. Kruger was representing both republics. "There might be a time" he said "when President Kruger



President Kruger on a South African sixpence of 1893.

(Limerick Museum)

would come to our city representing the people of the Transvaal, and receive the honour they were conferring on him that night".¹¹ Councillor Whelan, who had made the original proposal said "it was not impossible that Mr. Kruger could receive the freedom. When the honour was conferred on Mr. Gladstone, the Mayor and the Town Clerk went to England with the roll of honour to get his signature". When Mayor Daly called for a show of hands, there were twenty-two for and two against.¹²

As the proceedings in the council chamber came to a close, Mr. Hayes, who was about to leave, was mobbed, and owing to the violent attitude of some of the younger men, he had to remain in the Town Hall until the crowd dispersed. Some of them were still outside when Mr. Hayes came out, and although protected by the police, he received a hostile reception.¹³

Of course Mr. Stokes was right, President Kruger was never able to take up the offer; and the Mayor didn't indicate if he was willing to travel to France to get the roll of honour signed, although he did travel to America the following year.

On 31 May 1902, the war in South Africa ended when the Boers signed the Treaty of Vereeniging. By that time, President Styne's health had deteriorated. When he heard the terms of the treaty, he rejected them and resigned from his position as President. He named General Christiaan De Wet, who was also opposed to the treaty, as his successor. Five months later, on 16 August, 1902, the Boer generals, Louis Botha, Christiaan De Wet and Jacobus Koos De la Rey, arrived in England to continue the negotiations with the British government. The generals had sailed from South Africa on the steamship *Saxon*, which docked at Southampton. A large number of people had gathered at the docks and as the generals landed, they gave them a rousing welcome. From there they travelled to London to meet Lord Kitchener, Lord Roberts and Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary. Three days later, they were in Holland to confer with President Kruger and to visit ex-president Styne, who was in Europe for medical treatment.¹⁴ The generals arrived in Rotterdam and went from there to the Hague. Botha said that they did not come to hold festivities, but the cordial reception was a consolation to the minds of the Boers, who had experienced so much sorrow. "We are deputies" he said "of one of the most ruined people because we did our duty and defended our liberty and independence". They met ex-president Kruger at Utrecht. He would not recognize the treaty and knew that he would never be allowed to go back to South Africa.¹⁵ It was around this time that the generals were asked if they would visit Ireland. Their reply was that they would go if time permitted.¹⁶

On 23 August, the *Limerick Chronicle* announced that the "City of the Violated Treaty" was about to distinguish itself. At a meeting of the city council, it went on,

Alderman Daly told his fellow councillors that at the next meeting, he would be putting forward a proposal to confer the freedom of the city on Botha, De Wet and De la Rey" as the greatest living champions of civil and religious liberty. While the *Chronicle* admired the trio for having fought gallantly in the defence of what they conceived to be "liberty" of their respective countries we are not concerned to deny; but we must really ask Alderman Daly to be just a little more explicit in so far as their claims to be regarded as champions of religious liberty are concerned.¹⁷

In a longer editorial, on 26 August, the newspaper referred to the proposal as "the forthcoming-farce" It didn't believe that the city council would go out of its way to pass the proposal to confer the freedom on the Boer generals. The whole thing was a piece of tawdry clap-trap, calculated to give the world a degrading misconception of the city and its people. The editorial went on to say that it believed that the sensible members of the council wouldn't degrade the highest honour that the city could give. If, as we hope will not be the case, foolish counsels should prevail, and the proposal be passed, then the whole thing will only be a farce. Anyway, the paper made out the "honour" will never be "conferred" in the proper sense of the word.

A few days later, Captain William O'Donnell, who had travelled from South Africa to England with the generals, paid a flying visit to Limerick to see some friends and relatives. Captain O'Donnell, who was a native of Waterford [others claimed he was a Limerick man], emigrated to South Africa some twelve years before and had settled in the Orange Free State. At the outbreak of hostilities, he joined a Boer commando unit, where he served in an important post under General Brandt. He told a reporter from the *Limerick Leader* that he was interested in the proposal by Alderman Daly to give the freedom of the city to the Boer leaders. He went on to say that the reports published in the English press about the general's movements were unwarranted, "but I may tell you" he said "that General De Wet informed me personally that he would visit Ireland". The inference from this, the reporter made out, was that if the freedom was granted, General De Wet would come to Limerick. Captain O'Donnell pointed out that the movements of the distinguished generals had not been finalized. They fully appreciated the sympathy received from



Christiaan de Wet

Ireland in their struggle against the British, and all three, should arrangements allow, would come on a short visit to Ireland.¹⁸

It was at a meeting of the city council on 4 September, with Alderman O'Brien deputizing for the Mayor, that the vote to give the freedom of the city to Botha, De Wet and De la Rey took place. Alderman Daly put forward his proposal and added that he had been guilty of omitting President Steyn's name and he now asked that it be added to his proposal. The council accepted. He had been reproached, Alderman Daly said, for having described these men as champions of civil and religious liberty. Perhaps it was not easy to argue that question as he was not well versed in theology, or matters of religion. These men had been charged with being bigots, but he was assured on the authority of Capt. O'Donnell, a Limerick man, who had fought with the Boers, and who knew these men, that they were not bigots and that in their country nuns and clergymen enjoyed the greatest freedom. Ald. Daly went on to say that he had been informed by Capt. O'Donnell that the

generals were anxious to come to Ireland to acknowledge the sympathy the Irish people had for them in their struggle for freedom. He felt that this would answer some of the critics, who said that the proposed honour to these men was an empty title. He also said that not a man, rifle or cartridge was sent from Ireland to their aid. It was his opinion that "if the people of Ireland had rifles and cartridges they would desire to use them for themselves just as readily as they would in South Africa". He thought it would be an agreeable and pleasing thing to place on the honorary freedom roll of the city four of the greatest champions of liberty in every sense of the word. "It would be a glorious day for him" he said "to have the privilege of being the first city to confer on the generals the only honour left to them."¹⁹

Councillor Prendergast wanted to add the name of Captain O'Donnell, but by that stage it was too late, so he gave notice that he would be putting it forward at the next meeting of the Council. When Mr. Prendergast was asked if there was any information that such a compliment would be accepted by these men, he said there was. Alderman Daly then intervened to say "that he had information of a negative character that ex-President Kruger had accepted the freedom of Limerick as one of the highest honours

that could be conferred on him". Another member of the council, Mr. Moloney, wanted to know if there was any previous intimation received from President Kruger, the Town Clerk replied that there wasn't.²⁰ When Councillor Long repeated his original remarks that they had no information from the generals that they would accept the compliment. Mr. Prendergast replied "excuse me, Mayor, I said we had". Councillor Stokes, who had opposed the giving of the freedom to President Kruger, said he had no objection in giving it to these men but he felt that Limerick Corporation should have some indication from them that they would accept it and if they had he would not put any obstacle in the way. He went on to say that Alderman Daly had been more moderate in his language than he expected but he did take exception to his remark about the use of arms in Ireland against England. As a loyal subject he took strong exception to the remarks and he could not allow them to pass without dissenting from them. When he saw that their King had received those men he would not have the slightest objection to

conferring the freedom of the city on such distinguished men, but it was, in his opinion making little of the freedom of Limerick by conferring it on men without knowing if they would accept it. At that point Alderman Daly intervened to say that he had the positive assurance of Captain O'Donnell that the Boer generals would be glad to have the freedom conferred on them.²¹

A few days later, Mr. Nolan, the Town Clerk, received the following telegram from Scheveningen, near the Hague - "In the name of his Honour Mr Steyn, I wish to thank the Corporation of Limerick cordially for the honour conferred upon him by granting him the freedom of the City of Limerick - Fraser, Private Secretary.²² When General De la Rey was interviewed in Amsterdam, he told the reporter that "they had not come [to Europe] as political personages and their mission was solely to obtain assistance."²³

Several days later, General De Wet received news, at the Hague, that his 13 year-old son had died in South Africa. He was greatly distressed by the news and was by that stage exhausted from the travelling and negotiations. It would appear that after a conference with his colleagues, he decided to remain in in Europe.²⁴

In the meantime, Reuters news agency in Amsterdam issued a manifesto on behalf of the generals entitled "Appeal of the Boer Generals to the Civilized World." In it, they described how their country had been destroyed. How, as representatives of their people, they were commissioned to go to England in order, in the first place, to appeal to the government to ally the immense distress everywhere devastating the new Colonies. If we did not succeed," they said "we were to appeal to the humanity of the civilized world for charitable contributions. As we have not succeed up to the present in inducing the British government to grant further assistance to our people in their indescribable distress, it only remains for us to address ourselves to the people of Europe and America". They went on to describe how the British army [in a scorched earth policy] had burned at least thirty thousand houses on Boer farms: everything either being burned or destroyed including furniture, orchards, agricultural implements, and every living animal was carried off or killed. We address ourselves to the world with a prayer to help us by charitable contributions for our widows and orphans, for maimed and other needy ones and for the satisfactory education of our children. All contributions will be assigned to a fund called General Fund of Help for the Boers. We solicit the hearty co-operation of committees in various countries of America and Europe. We are now on the point of visiting these countries in succession, with the object of establishing satisfactory organization". The manifesto was signed Louis Botha, C.R. De Wet and J.H. De la Rey.²⁵

It was on Thursday, 3 October, that the I.R.B Councillor, Michael Prendergast, put

forward his proposal to give the freedom of the city to Captain W. O'Donnell, whose bravery has won for him the admiration of the Boer leaders and soldiers in their fight for freedom. They were all aware" he said "of the struggle in South Africa, where one of the greatest Empires at present in the world concentrated all its forces to crush out a brave and noble race and drive them from their possessions and homes. While other nations stood by and saw the injustice done to these people, one small band of men went to their assistance, and amongst them was Captain O'Donnell." When the proposal was put to a vote it was passed unanimously.²⁶

None of the Boer leaders, or Captain O'Donnell, came to Limerick, even though I feel they did have the opportunity to do so, to be conferred with the freedom of the city. Conferred in the proper sense of the word, where, at a specially convened meeting of the City Council, they would receive their certificates of freedom and more importantly, sign their names on the register of freemen. There is no mention of them whatsoever in the Roll of Freemen. When a vote is taken unanimously by the City Council, even though every member need not be present, to give the freedom to a deserving personage, then there is an obligation on the recipient, out of courtesy, to come to the city and accept the honour. We can see from this essay that the Boer representatives had more serious problems to attend to and that there was no financial gain or assistance to be had by coming to Limerick.

Postscript

Generals Botha, De Wet and De la Rey remained on in Europe for several months. A Russian newspaper announced that they would travel to that country to raise funds for the Boer cause.²⁷ Boer Commandants P.H. Kritzinger, Joubert and Willem Fouché arrived at Southampton on the steamship *Saxon*, when they were interviewed, they made it clear that they were on a private visit to England. Kritzinger told the Reuters representative that "he was a British subject and was anxious not to say or do anything against the British government or South Africa".²⁸ It was also noticed that during a royal procession in London, that General Botha clapped while De Wet and De la Rey remained passive as the new king, Edward VII, passed the reviewing stand in Trafalgar Square.²⁹ The nearest any Boer general got to visiting Ireland was when Ben Viljoen came and gave a lecture in Belfast;³⁰ while in Portugal, Boer Commandant, Pienaar, was stopped from giving a lecture in case it would cause an anti-British demonstration.³¹ It was in mid-December, 1902, that Botha and De la Rey [there was no mention of De Wet: he had probably gone back sooner] left Waterloo station, in London, on their journey back to South Africa. Both men were in good spirits but Botha, the newspapers reported, appeared in anything but robust health.³²

In 1910, the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, British Natal and Cape Colony were joined into what was known as the Union of South Africa; a new state, a racist state, where only the whites had rights and the indigenous population was kept in check by the system of apartheid. Louis Botha (1862-1919) was its first prime minister. When the First World War began in August 1914, Botha took South Africa into the war on the side of Britain. Christiaan De Wet (1854-1922), who favoured the Germans, became involved in a rebellion against his fellow-countrymen. De la Rey (1847-1914), who was also implicated, was accidentally shot dead on 15 Sept 1914, when a car, in which he was a passenger, drove through a police road block. Over a period of three months, the rebels were involved in sporadic fighting with government forces. De Wet lost another son in the fighting. Eventually he was captured and was given six years in prison. He was released after twelve months and died on 3 Feb, 1922. Louis Botha passed away after a heart attack on 27 August, 1919. Some say it was from the effects the Spanish Flu, which was raging world wide at that time. It was not until 1994, after years of internal strife, that South Africa's first democratic elections were held and Nelson Mandela became president.³³

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