

Limerick in the General Election 1885

by James Doherty



he general election of 1885 was an important milestone in the history of Irish nationalism. It marked the high point of Parnell's leadership of nationalist Ireland. It also marked the half-way point in his leadership of the Irish Parliamentary Party. The party of 61 members which he had been leading since May 1880, was not completely his; solid supporters numbered no more than 30¹. After the general election of 1885, when the party returned with 85 Irish seats, it was his to command. (Parnell in fact commanded 86 seats in the house of commons because T.P. O'Connor, who was returned for the Scottish Division of Liverpool, voted with the Parnellites). This election also gave Parnell the balance of power in the House of Commons where his 86 seats was the exact difference between the Liberals (335) and the Conservatives (231) and Irish Conservatives (18). Whoever formed a government would need Parnell's support. This election result precipitated Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule.

In contesting the election the Parnellite organisation, the National League, undoubtedly derived benefit from the new Representation of the People Act (December 1884) which, by granting the right to vote to all householders in counties and boroughs and to lodgers in the counties, raised the electorate from some 200,000 to over 600,000. The agricultural labourers now had the vote as well as the working class. In Limerick city the electorate rose from 1,934 (1880) to 6,010 (1885) and in the county from 6,072 (1880) to 16,301 (1885)². This dramatic increase in the electorate frightened the Irish Tories who viewed it as a further democratisation of the Irish representation³. Parnell had firm control now over "an unsophisticated electorate"⁴, and he publicly demonstrated how firm that control was. This was as true of Limerick as elsewhere.

This was also the first general election contested under the Redistribution of Seats Act (1885). The two Limerick constituencies (City and County) which

had returned two MPs each since 1832 were abolished. In their stead there were now three constituencies returning one member each: Limerick City with an electorate of 6,010, Limerick East (8,474) and Limerick West (7,827). Nationally, the 1885 general election returned 103 members for 101 constituencies. 21 members were returned without a contest, of whom 19 were Home Rulers, two of them in Limerick East and West⁵.

The following table shows the extent of the Nationalist victory:⁶

Party	No. of Candidates	Returned
Nationalists	90	85
Conservatives	67	16
Liberals	16	—
Loyalists	6	—
Independents	4	—
Indep. Cons.	3	2
Indep. Nats.	1	—
	187	103

The National League, as will be seen, was strong in Limerick city and county. As Parnell's constituency organisation, although only three years old, it was a highly organised electioneering machine. While it appeared to be democratic it was in fact "an autocratically controlled body⁷." It was dominated by a 30 man committee which had never been elected, half of whose members were probably nominated by Parnell himself, and whose powers were never defined. Members of this committee who visited Limerick during the course of the election campaign were Tim Healy, Charles Dawson, T.D. Sullivan, John Redmond and John O'Connor. Another member of the committee, William Abraham, was a candidate in Limerick West. The role of the National League government from Dublin was clearly seen in the attempt to find a candidate to run in Limerick city.

Limerick, both city and county, proved typical of the manner in which candidates for the nationalist party were selected: the delegates met in private session under the chairmanship of a visiting M.P. They selected a candidate and then issued an "official" version to the press. After that, some dele-

gate, usually a priest, took the chair for a public session. At this stage both the selected candidate and those who had "withdrawn their names in the interest of unity" were "eulogised"⁸.

The three outgoing members of parliament for Limerick were all Home Rulers - Edward McMahon, who had been returned in the by-election of 1883 for the city, and E.J. Synan and W.H. O'Sullivan for the county. Neither Synan, who represented the constituency since 1859, nor O'Sullivan, holding the seat since 1874 and a Parnell supporter

when returned in 1880, appears to have been considered for the election of 1885. There was no doubt of a nationalist victory in Limerick, simply a question of who would be nominated and by how much he would win.

The County Convention was held in the Theatre Royal on Friday, 6 November. Described as "the largest and most important gathering of Priests and People held at any such assemblage yet formed in Ireland"⁹, it clearly caused headaches for reporters. The nationalist *Munster News* claimed that 80 branches of the League were represented by 320 delegates; in addition, they counted 160 priests who, as honorary members, were entitled to attend without membership cards¹⁰. The Conservative *Limerick Chronicle* reported that 84 branches were represented by 363 delegates and that 90 priests attended¹¹, and it is interesting to note that these figures were well above the normal average of 150 laymen and 50 priests at such conventions.¹²

The MPs present were John Redmond, John O'Connor and T.D. Sullivan, who took the chair. The priests included two noted land agitators, Fr. Eugene Sheehy of Bruree, who was elected Honorary Secretary, and Fr.

David Humphries of Murroe. The nine candidates whose names were put forward included the outgoing Synan and O'Sullivan. However, William Abraham and John Finucane were selected without a contest for Limerick West and East respectively¹³.

Abraham, of Fort Prospect in Limerick, a member of the committee of the National League as noted above, was a Protestant whose involvement in the Land War (1879-'82) had earned him three spells in prison and no doubt now helped to earn him his selection. He was Chairman of the Limerick Board of Guardians. His proposer, Fr. Sheehy, told the convention that if Parnell sent a "grey horse" to Limerick they would vote for such an animal¹⁴. This was a curious but telling tribute to Parnell's influence in nationalist Ireland, even if it did come from one who made no secret of his admiration for the Irish leader. In recommending Abraham, Fr. Sheehy made pointed reference to the support of the Catholic clergy in Limerick for a member of another faith. This, he felt, was an indication of how Protestants could expect to be treated in an Irish parliament. Abraham took up the same theme. He was living proof to Englishmen who believed that Home Rule was "Rome Rule" that "religion or religious distinction had nothing to do with the Irish cause"¹⁵.

John Finucane, of Coole House, Caherelly, near Limerick, the candidate for Limerick East, served alongside Abraham as Vice-Chairman of the Limerick Board of Guardians. He was a farmer who claimed that he was "amongst the oldest agitators in the South of Ireland"¹⁶. His clerical proposer was Fr. Kelly, C.C., Castleconnell. Finucane does not appear to have played as public a role in the election campaign as his colleague in Limerick West.

Later that night, taking advantage of the presence in the city of leaders of the party and the hundreds of delegates to convention, Fr. Sheehy delivered a lecture at the Theatre Royal. The Mayor, Stephen O'Mara, presided over the gathering, the theme of which was "Our Hopes and How to Attain Them"¹⁷. Before he embarked on his wide-ranging and well-received version of the history of Irish ills, Fr. Sheehy referred to the happenings of that day. The convention, he believed, "marked the closing of an era of National wrong and ushered in and hastened on the era of National redemption"¹⁸. This effectively struck the key-note for the nationalist campaign. "The Priests and People were prepared to sustain the standard of Mr. Parnell and his party", he said. Towards the end of his long address he warned that:

"The longer England postponed the restoration of their rights ... the fuller would be the concession of Irish

liberty they would finally resolve ..."¹⁹.

The aftermath of the lecture introduced another note which was to engage nationalist attention for a while: there was as yet no candidate for Limerick city. In thanking the Mayor for presiding over the night's entertainment John O'Connor, M.P., announced that it was the wish of the party that the Mayor, Stephen O'Mara, would stand in the city. The Mayor was not prepared to give an answer.

The next day the Conservative opposition gathered under the auspices of the "Loyal Constitutional Club" to select candidates to oppose Home Rule. The meeting was presided over by the prominent businessman, James Spaight. The candidates selected were Mr. C.B. Barrington, J.P., Glenstal, for Limerick East, Mr. J. Roche-Kelly of Islandmore, near Croom, for Limerick West and Mr. Edmund Russell for the city. It was hoped that these candidates could "conciliate Liberal as well as Conservative support on the ground that a 'constitutional' effort is required to support the rights of property in county and city"²¹.

In fact, the Conservatives were simply going through the motions. The county candidates did not in the event contest the election at all. Neither did Russell in the city. Instead, Spaight did. According to the *Limerick Chronicle*, "At the earnest entreaty of his friends ... among them being electors of every shade of religious thought and almost every grade of political opinion, he has consented once more to fling himself into the breach"²². But it was a losing battle, as even the paper later admitted - even his friends "never for a moment anticipated a victory"²³.

It was to be the last in a long line of defeats for Spaight, who had an unenviable record at the polls as the standard-bearer of Conservative Limerick. He was first elected unopposed in 1858 and defeated the following year when he secured only 807 votes. He came third with 658 votes in 1865 when his Conservative companion, Josh Seaward, managed a total of four votes. Three years later, Spaight did not stand but he tried again in 1874 when, with 587 votes, he was defeated by Isaac Butt, then leader of the Home Rule Party. Spaight stood in the by-election caused by Butt's death (1879) but lost again (658 votes) to D.F. Gabbett (Home Ruler). He failed again in 1880 (620 votes) and yet again in the 1883 by-election (520 votes)²⁴. The only consistent feature of his ventures to the polls, apart from his persistent defeats, appears to be the continual decline in his vote (apart from the hiccup in 1879).

In the meantime the search for a Home Rule candidate for the city continued. O'Mara, having refused to rise

to O'Connor's hint after Fr. Sheehy's lecture, was visited by a deputation on Saturday, 7 November. This attempt to get a response ended in failure. The deputation made it clear that a 'no' answer would be unacceptable²⁵. When the City Branch of the National League met on Thursday, 12 November,



O'Mara was in the chair. He stated that while he had the support of the Pig Buyers and the Limerick Union as well as that of the Parliamentary Party, he did not intend to run. Mr. John Dundon, solicitor, announced that he was not going to run either²⁶.

The reluctance of local candidates to put themselves forward pointed to an unpalatable conclusion: the nationalist candidate in Limerick might have to be an outsider. The *Munster News* noted that it would be "discreditable if a Limerick man is not selected". Although members of the League were refusing to "go in for the position", neither was the League prepared to support any one who contested the seat from "outside their ranks". Abraham now came forward to suggest that if neither O'Mara nor Dundon was to run then the only choice left was to ask Parnell to send down "one

of his trusted lieutenants". This suggestion, predictable enough coming from a committee member of the League, appears to have drawn a muted response. One member suggested that this was a bit premature. There was a need for consultation between the League leadership in Dub-

The meeting at Abbeyfeale took place against the background of a murder in Kerry which had attracted considerable attention, not least from the Conservative press which saw it as an example of what could be expected from Parnell's leadership of the masses²⁹. John O'Connell Curtin, originally from

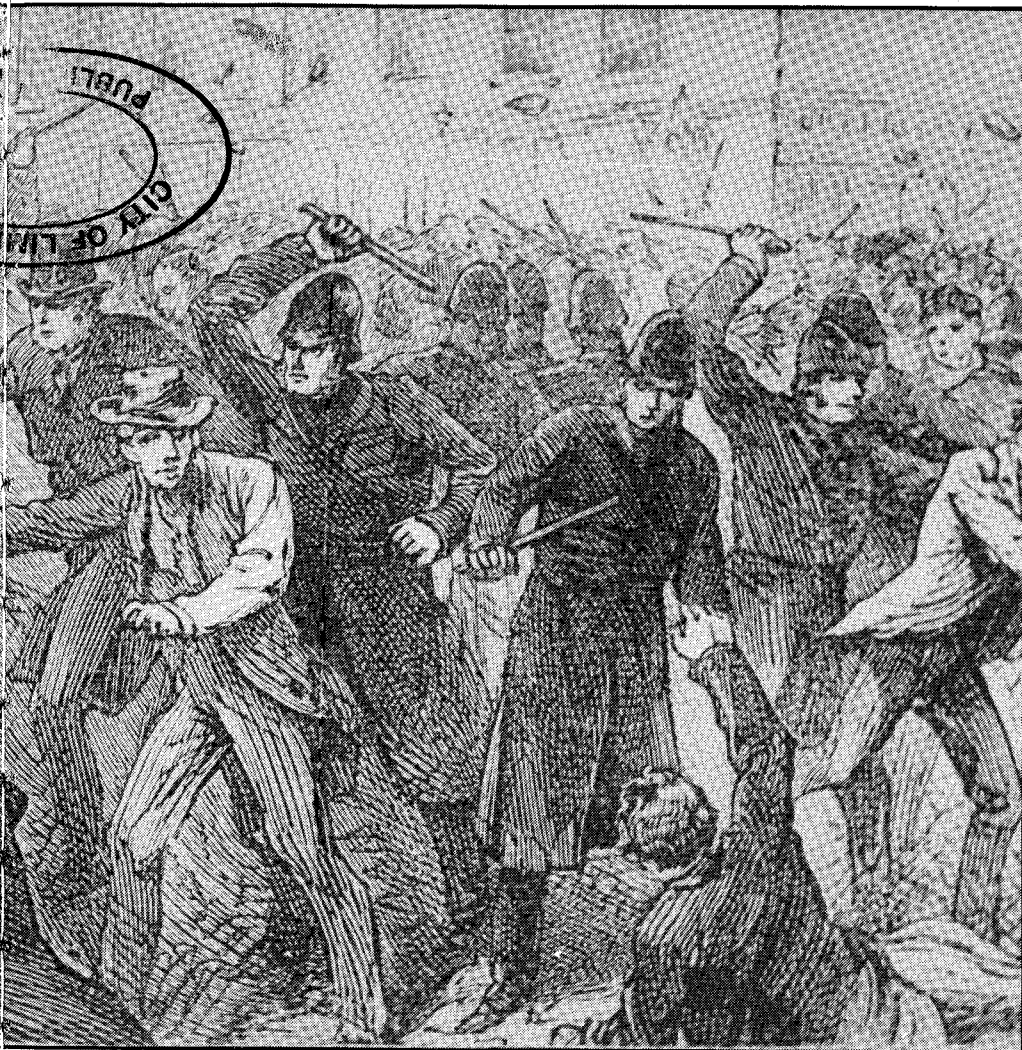
It transpired that Fr. Sheehy's Parnellite "grey horse" had arrived in the form of Mr. Henry Joseph Gill of the publishing firm of Gill and Son, Dublin. Gill, a member of Dublin Corporation and former M.P. for Westmeath County, was proposed by O'Mara and seconded by Fr. D. Fitzgerald, parish priest of St. Mary's. After Dawson pointed out that Gill had the support of the Parliamentary Party the names of the other two candidates, P.N. Fitzgerald and John McInerney, were withdrawn by their proposers. O'Mara recommended Gill as "a thorough Irishman and a good Catholic", who had been sanctioned personally by Parnell³³. Gill, it turned out, had one other important qualification - he was sufficiently wealthy to bear all the necessary expenses.

The issue in this election, Dawson stated, was "the National Question - whether or not they were to have a National Parliament sitting in Ireland". Abraham took the opportunity to electioneer for himself: "... the English government, whether it be Whig or Tory, will be compelled to yield to the demand of the Irish people". If nationalists could not restore the native parliament, "they would give up Parliamentary agitation". O'Mara brought the mood down to a more mundane level. He wanted a contest, he said, as he "wished to have the satisfaction of seeing the Conservatives getting a good beating once more".

The fact that an outsider had been selected however, seems to have created some tension. For a start, the **Limerick Chronicle** reported that the choice of Gill was "received with anything but satisfaction by many of those present, judging by the remarkable absence of enthusiasm with which the announcement of the decision was greeted at the public meeting held immediately after the private assembly". The paper reported that the "meeting was of a most tame and unanimated description"³⁴. Even allowing for the bias of this self-proclaimed "Conservative and Loyalist" newspaper³⁵, the lack of a local candidate was obviously on the minds of those trying to market Gill.

His supporters seem to have been on the defensive. Dawson stated that Parnell had waited for a considerable time for a name from Limerick and had adopted Gill "on the failure of the people of Limerick to send him a name on which they could cordially and unanimously agree"³⁶. Obviously sensitive to the charge that Gill had been imposed on Limerick by Parnell, Fr. Joseph Bourke, P.P., Cratloe, who had earlier proposed and then withdrawn John McInerney, also of Cratloe, stated:

"... it was continually stated by their enemies in the Press that the nominees of Mr. Parnell were



Disorder after election meeting in Limerick.

lin and the city representatives before a decision was made²⁷.

While the city League pondered its situation, Abraham and Finucane were busy meeting their followers, visitations which, in the absence of any serious opposition, could hardly qualify as canvassing. They made a triumphant stopover at Newcastle West on Sunday, 15 November, en route to Abbeyfeale. Abraham assured his listeners that he was glad to be among those who would "fight for their rights in an alien Parliament". He was certain that "the time was at hand when England will have to concede to the Irish people their God given right - the right of managing their own affairs in their own Parliament"²⁸.

At Abbeyfeale they were greeted by the parish priest, Fr. W. Casey, and shared a platform with Tim Harrington, M.P., one of Parnell's chief lieutenants.

Limerick, was murdered in front of his family on the night of Friday, 13 November, at his home at Molahiff, near Farranfore³⁰. The murder was part of the agrarian unrest in North Kerry at this time and his killers were described as "moonlighters" who had rendered the district "horror-stricken". Fr. Casey condemned the murderers and Harrington warned that the members of the National League "in Kerry would hunt down these scoundrels and extirpate them from the country"³¹.

The search for a nationalist candidate for the city came to an end on Friday, 20 November, when over 100 delegates of nine city branches assembled in the Town Hall. The clergymen included Fr. Sheehy. Parnell was represented by Tim Healy and Charles Dawson. Dawson, described as a "native of Limerick", who was M.P. for Carlow, presided³².

forced on the Convention. He held that the Convention in that room had given a flat denial to that statement and a greater calumny could not be stated in the Press than that the nomination of Mr. Gill was at the dictation of Mr. Parnell³⁷.

Certainly, the *Limerick Chronicle* was prepared to risk the charge of calumny. Having described the nationalist conventions as "moonshine meetings", now, on the same page as the report of Fr. Bourke's speech the '*Chronicle*' warned its public that "an edict from Mr. Parnell set them all (the local candidates) aside and placed above their heads a certain Mr. Gill, of Dublin". The editorial continued:

"We wonder if any sensible Nationalist - one whose intelligence has not altogether forsaken him - has not arrived at the conclusion that the so-called Conventions of Mr. Parnell are not the most self-evident imposition that has ever been inflicted upon an over-credulous people"³⁸.

Gill's election agent, the solicitor John Dundon, found possible virtue in an outsider for the seat: "... it does not always follow that the man who is local is the best judge of the local interests in the district or of the city". He considered that an outsider with the right qualities could soon make himself acquainted with local interests.

Gill himself was still harping on this same theme a few days later when he addressed a meeting at the O'Connell Monument in the Crescent. "He had the disadvantage of not being a local man, but, perhaps, this was not so great a disadvantage as many thought. If a man were a true Irishman he would be given a hearty welcome all over the country"³⁹.

It is notable, since a history of ill-health is not generally considered an asset when running for public office, that his supporters were at pains to point out that Gill had wrecked his health in the Irish cause while sitting for Westmeath County from 1880 to 1883. He had in fact resigned to recuperate⁴⁰.

The '*Chronicle*' ended up by asking somewhat testily: "Will the Mayor and his friends explain how it is that no Limerick man is thought worthy of representing the city in Parliament? ... Conservative and Loyalist as we are, if we are to be represented by a Nationalist, we prefer a local one"⁴¹.

Spaight, who "found it impossible to do a personal canvass" made his bid for support in a Public Notice which appeared in both the '*Chronicle*' and the *Munster News*. "At the urgent solicitation of many friends, including Conservatives and Liberals, Catholics and Protestants, I have consented once more to address you and seek your suffrages". His assurance, to what must have been either extremely optimistic or very politically unsophisticated sup-

porters, went on to state that "recent startling changes in the political atmosphere have almost obliterated the old party landmarks, and, now, in the presence of common danger, Conservative and Liberal, Catholic and Protestant, can stand side by side as defenders of the Crown and Constitution". Describing himself as a tenant farmer and "a large employer of labour", he continued that while he would do his best to examine the causes of the "general depression", he would "countenance no attempt to impose duty on the food of our toiling millions"⁴².

Those who considered themselves the defenders of the interests of Spaight's "toiling millions" appear to have changed their stance since O'Mara had declared that he wished for a contest in order to give the Conservatives "a good beating". O'Mara now accused the Conservative candidate of "involving the city in turmoil and tumult over an election, out of which he cannot hope to issue even in a less disgraceful manner than those in which he was formerly engaged". Dundon and Fr. D. Shanahan also attacked Spaight for his address⁴³.

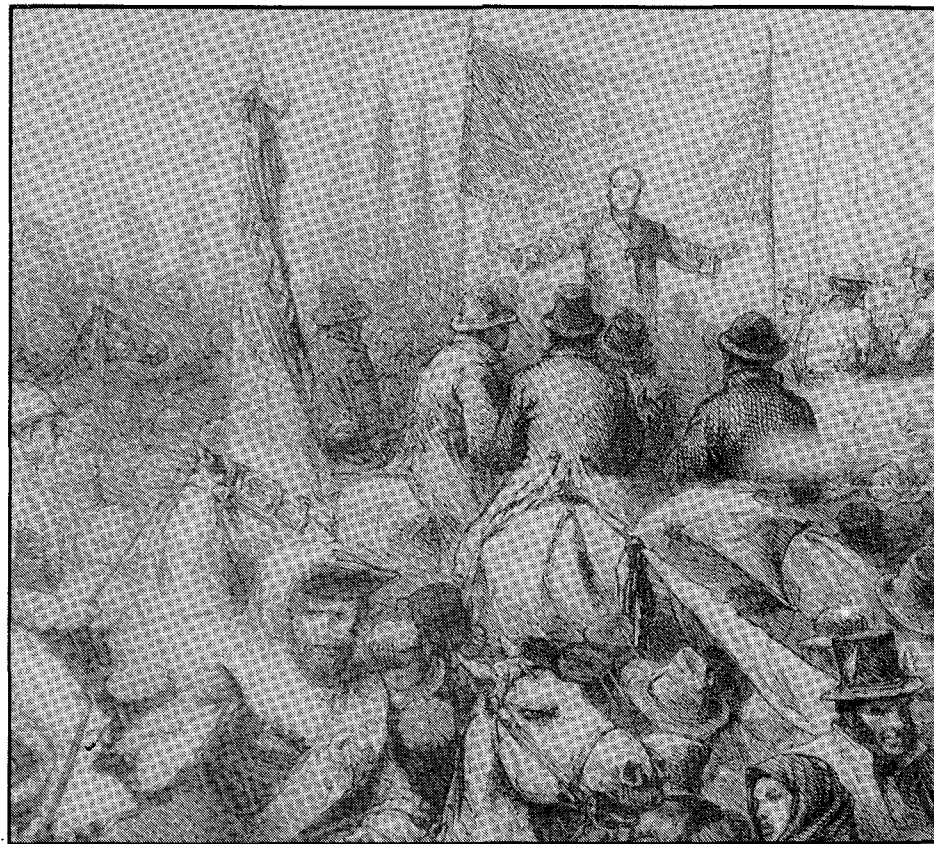
people, despite the efforts of the Boherbuoy band to attract a crowd, and much enthusiasm did not seem to prevail"⁴⁵.

Gill was reported as saying, "I believe that we shall within the next two years obtain the just rights of Ireland"⁴⁶. This seems to have been his last address to the electors because on the next two nights he did not appear, having suffered a sprained foot in his hotel, which kept him away also from the count on the following Saturday.

The *Munster News* used these last rallies before the city polls opened on Friday, 27 November, to make its contribution to the theme of nationalist anger at the Conservative fight for the seat:

"The intolerant minority will do nothing to conciliate the people - they will neither support their claims to equal privilege with themselves, or ...to any at all, striving rather to keep them in the slavish dependence in which they have been so long held"⁴⁷.

After pointing out that the extended franchise had created "overwhelming odds" for the Conservatives, the paper attributed the contest in Limerick city to



Election meeting at Limerick.

The final nationalist rallies were held at the O'Connell Monument where, the Mayor presiding on the three nights, from Monday, 23 November to Wednesday, the crowds were entertained by two brass bands. At least the *Munster News* was entertained⁴⁴, but the *Limerick Chronicle* painted a darker picture: "The Mayor presided over a small number of

"the merest wanton bravado" which would require the people of Limerick "to hurl back in the teeth of those who flung them, the insults which are offered the Nationalist party by the Tory minority, through the address to which their representative's name is signed"⁴⁸.

These last minute fulminations of the Nationalists against the Conservatives

seem to have been the only bit of excitement in an election which would be remembered, "as one of the least interesting that has ever been held in the city". Whereas in England the Tories had enjoyed "unexpected success" and the Whigs made a "desperate battle for supremacy"⁴⁹, in Ireland the result was a foregone conclusion, not least in the Limerick constituencies.

There had been no bustle or excitement in the city on polling day. There was a low turn-out of voters. It proved difficult to get the nationalist voters out as they foresaw no difficulty in defeating the Conservative candidate. There was apathy also on the Conservative side because the Nationalist could not be defeated.

Gill received 3,098 votes to Spaight's 635⁵⁰. Of Spaight's showing the *Munster News* observed: "a more miserable exhibition the political annals of Ireland do not present". Accounting for Conservative abstention, the paper noted: "... it may be that they have begun to conclude that there is no patriotism or even common sense in any longer opposing a movement which



will give them the management of their own affairs"⁵¹.

The result was greeted with predictable chagrin by the *Limerick Chronicle*, as it declared "...the irresponsible majority have thought fit ... to swap an influential Dublin hatter for an equally influential Dublin book binder"⁵². (The 'hatter' can only be a reference to Edward McMahan).

Warming to its theme, the '*Chronicle*' went on to claim that there had been an "unprecedented number of blunders" at several of the polling booths and that the number of spoilt and otherwise illegal votes was very considerable. (The *Munster News* gives a total of 36 papers "unmarked in any way" and 44 "wrongly marked".) Bemoaning the low poll, the '*Chronicle*' claimed that "The only inference to be drawn is that those silent voters, who had not sufficient courage to cast in their lot manfully with the Conservatives, were either anti-Parnell to a man, or had got thoroughly disgusted with Parnellite manipulation of this ill-starred constituency"⁵³.

It would appear that of the 800 Protestant voters on the register, "only something like 390 came out". This would mean that the balance of Spaight's votes came from Catholics⁵⁴.

There had been an irregularity. The brass figure of '8' which was provided for use in sealing the boxes of papers, at the end of the voting, was used in three stations to stamp the actual ballot papers (at the Market, Rural and Custom House booths)⁵⁵. Spaight agreed to the Mayor's request that the 726 voters involved should not be disfranchised and these were included in the totals.

Another complaint was made by James O'Mara. He found the Register or Parliamentary List of Voters for Limerick "remarkable for mis-spelling, misdescription and other errors". He said that it was impossible to find on the Register those entitled to vote. (This may have been due to the haste with which the register was drawn up to facilitate the election - the Franchise Act had only become law on 6 December 1884). The *Munster News* at any rate blamed the Clerk of the Union: "We will not go to the length of saying, by any means, that the lists were 'jerry-mandered', but their preparation was evidently treated very lightly". Names, they said, were printed "higgledy-piggledy" and "dictionary order" was disregarded⁵⁶.

Polling day in Limerick East was Monday, 1 December. Finucane, accompanied by supporters, and Abraham, gathered about one o'clock at the County Courthouse in Limerick. As was to be expected "no excitement prevailed". Two hours later, for want of any other nominations, he was declared the member for Limerick East.⁵⁷

On the following day Abraham, accompanied by Fr. Sheehy, arrived at Rathkeale Courthouse for the same formality. Fr. Sheehy, hyperbole at the ready, observed that the result in Limerick West "told the world that Limerick was the platform upon which the fallen foe of Ireland dare not stand a defeat".

On 17 December 1885, the *Hawarden Kite* announced Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule. Parnell and his party were, it seemed, within sight of the goal which they had dangled in front of the electorate during the campaign.

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