

# MICHAEL HOGAN IN AMERICA 1886~1889

**B**y 1880, life had become even more difficult than usual for Michael Hogan, the self-styled Bard of Thomond. His Shawn-a-Scoob pamphlets had lampooned members of the Limerick Corporation, the Catholic bishop and clergy, the merchant princes and professional people and had brought him notoriety and unpopularity. His period as a publican had ended in economic disaster and indignity. He had been forced to sell Thomond Cottage, his riverside pub and home at the New Road, Thomondgate, where he had lovingly laboured in building his own pier on the river's edge. His failing eyesight added to his misery. In much reduced circumstances, the poet and his wife Nannie went to live in a room in Ellen Street. The Bard had no regular income, apart from a meagre return from the slow trickle of sales from his best known book of poems **The Lays and Legends of Thomond**.

In 1881, Hogan was forced to re-apply for his old job as ranger, or caretaker, of the Island Bank, with a wage of four shillings a week. The Corporation, perhaps fearing another poetic onslaught, re-employed him and he was officially installed by the Mayor, Dr. Thomas O'Sullivan.

The Bard was not a man to accept failure in a quiet, philosophical manner. His autobiography is filled with bitter resentment against the world at large because of wrongs and alleged wrongs done to him. He constantly railed against the people and circumstances that he claimed were responsible for his downfall. In short, Michael Hogan was a born complainer.

Haunted by failure, traduced by his enemies, he felt neglected and isolated. In desperation, he contemplated one final effort to achieve literary fame and financial security. In his autobiography he tells of the emotional tug-of-war he experienced in making this decision - a decision to leave his beloved Shannon shore to seek a change of fortune in the New World:

"Many an hour during my mid-day rambles did I stand looking across the river at Thomond Cottage, in possession of a sordid, worthless stranger - a soulless fellow that made gold on his country's misfortunes; while I, who lovingly burned the midnight oil

by Jim Kemmy

## Part one

for the sake of glorifying her history and traditions, was a homeless wanderer ... Something whispered in the ear of my mind that I could not stay long in my native land except at the risk of becoming degraded by the shelter of the abominable poorhouse. As soon as my volumes would be all

never could be a flower garden for my soul in that tremendous land of strange, heterogeneous nationalities ... but (though it was) the very quintessence of atrocity to my thoughts, I resolved to go to the Land of the Dollars as the least of the evils".

But, as in so many other ventures in his life, there were to be some false starts before Michael Hogan set off for America. The first public announcement of his proposed departure came in the form of a letter to the **Limerick Chronicle**, written by Cornelius Fitzgerald, Mount St. Vincent, Limerick,



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

sold off I saw nothing before me but the Atlantic ocean with America at the other side. I always entertained a settled horror against going to America with all its boasted freedom and enormous wealth. I knew there

on August 6, 1881, who wrote: "I have just learned that Mr. Michael Hogan, Bard of Thomond, is about to reside in America ... Will the citizens of historic Limerick permit Mr. Hogan to depart without some substantial offering as a

tribute to his great genius? An humble testimonial presented to him at the present time would be more beneficial than a proud monument erected to his memory".

On August 14, the **Limerick Chronicle** added: "... we are pleased to learn that several gentlemen have responded in the most liberal manner to the suggestions thrown out by us, and have generously contributed towards presenting him (Hogan) with a parting testimonial, which, it is to be trusted, may prove worthy of the acceptance of our Irish Burns. We learn Mr. M. Sellors, solicitor, George Street, Limerick, has kindly consented to receive subscriptions to the proposed testimonial".

In a further letter, published in the **Limerick Chronicle** on August 16, Cornelius Fitzgerald suggested that an entertainment, at which selections from the Bard's poems would be recited, should be held at the Theatre Royal to swell the funds of the testimonial. The owner of the theatre Joseph Fogerty responded without hesitation and, following the performance, Michael Hogan presented a specially inscribed edition of the **Lays and Legends of Thomond** to "noble-minded Joe", in "grateful acknowledgement of his splendid Theatre Royal free of all charge, for entertainment for his (the author's) benefit, Limerick Dec. 19, 1881".

However, despite these fundraising activities, five long years were to pass before the Bard managed to make the break. In this period he wrote **The Siege of the Golden Balls**, a satire based on a Limerick breach of promise case involving a Bridge Street pawnbroker, and **The Snow Queen of Ardcuil**, a fantasy poem inspired by some Co. Clare traditions. These works were not among Hogan's best, and **The Snow Queen** failed to find a publisher, despite all the poet's efforts in Ireland and America.

The Bard's own attempts to "raise the wind" having failed dismally, it is doubtful if he would ever have left his native city if not for the intervention of an outside agency. A Limerick man named Weekes, then living at Fordham, New York, brought the saga to a head by offering to send Hogan a sailing ticket, and, despite all his misgivings, the poet accepted.

In his autobiography the Bard recounts his tortured feelings in the last few days before his departure:

"All interest and love of home had turned into bitter hatred in my heart. My whole nature was poisoned and disgusted against my own worthless people. I longed for thousands of miles to intervene between myself and them. I spent the Sunday before left taking a last farewell of the Shannon and its shamrock banks, the scenes of all the daydreams of my life

... I was homeless, friendless and alone in the land I loved as heaven; and was soon to become a forlorn exile for ever ... As I returned to the city along the side of the river, St. Mary's glorious 'Bells of the Legend' pealed out an enchanting diapason over the blue bosom of the Shannon. I stood enraptured drinking into my heart every tone of their delightful melody. I had heard their majestic chimes since childhood, but until then, I never heard them ringing with such deep mournful sweetness. I imagined they were playing me a farewell anthem, and I blessed them with all my soul. When the chimes ceased I turned to take a last look at Thomond Cottage across the river ... I quickly walked away in tears ..."

An extra spur to leave was provided by Hogan's disillusionment with the local nationalists, and the Bard could not resist a parting shot at his erstwhile colleagues:

"As if to stimulate my resolve in quitting my native land for ever the nationalists of Limerick began to show me the cold shoulder. Their patriotic principles were so lofty (that) I was far too humble for their dignified notice, and so they shunned me to show the seasoning nobility of their patriotism ... On the following Wednesday I left Limerick for Queenstown. I bade adieu to no one for no one came to bid adieu to me. Altho' the city was thronged with patriots and nationalists, yet I did not see the face of one of them coming near. I took their absence as another proof of their magnanimous devotion to Ireland and her cause. A few years ago I would have a host of them around me on such an occasion as this. But now I did not miss them when I remembered the changeful and brittle tempers of that sensitive article called Irish patriotism. The parting with my poor erring wife was painful and distressful ... I released myself from her and bade her a friendly goodbye".

On Friday, September 19, 1886, Michael Hogan left Queenstown on board the steamship "Britannia". He carried a travelling bag which contained a few shirts, four pairs of stockings, some handkerchiefs, forty-four copies of **The Lays and Legends of Thomond**, the manuscript of **The Snow Queen of Ardcuil** and some copies of his recently composed poems.

The poor, fifty-four years old, half-blind poet must have looked a pathetic sight as he remained alone on deck as the ship sailed out of port. He recalled: "Oh, how my spirit fainted at the bare idea of going to America. I felt like one under sentence of death on his way to the place of execution. But the iron edict of destiny was on me and I could not turn back".

After an eight days' voyage Hogan found himself in the teeming bay of New York. As night fell, he remained on deck "looking towards the great Empire City all blazing with gas lamps and electric lights". Again, his confused, tormented mind became flooded with feelings of homesickness:

"My heart turned cold and heavy as I said to myself: 'What business have I to venture into such an endless wilderness of a city? Who'll notice me amid the sweeping rush of human affairs that are every hour being transacted there? O' God, I wish I were back in poor Limerick and living in the meanest cabin on the banks of my native Shannon".

On disembarkation, the Bard was met by one solitary friend, who had come to take him to the home of the Weeke's family at Fordham. The Bard's first impressions of this strange land are worth recalling, especially his sense of wonderment at the sight of the overhead railway:

"When I looked up at the elevated railroad on which I was to travel I was thunderstruck at the daredevil speculation that achieved such an enterprise - a railroad running parallel with the housetops sixty feet above the level of the streets, but when I climbed the long stairway that led up to the platform, crowded with a busy human mass, so high above terra firma, I was puzzled to understand how such a thing could exist without some desperate accident occurring daily. When I took a seat in one of the cars and was whirled along the sky like Juno's chariot, my wonderment increased as I looked down on stores and saloons and the heedless throngs that surged to and fro beneath, quite careless of the thundering train of vehicles that passed over their heads. I thought America outdevilled the devil, and so it had. That night in Fordham confirmed my worst anticipations of the repulsive sort of people I was doomed to herd among."

In **The Land of Iron**, one of the very few poems he wrote about America, Michael Hogan later repeated these overpowering impressions:

"Iron, iron everywhere,  
Cold and callous, without pity,  
I prayed, I fear, an iron prayer,  
For freedom from this iron city.

If to those people power was given  
To rise and pierce the sky's environ,  
They'd build high railways in God's Heaven

And turn the angels into iron".  
The man who had paid the Bard's passage and with whom he was to stay had been a professional pugilist who now had a sinecure of eighteen dollars a week. He was also prominent in the politics of Fordham. The morose and middle-aged Hogan had in his own

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words gone from "the frying pan into the fire".

"I knew I'd have a bad time with this political savage, his neighbours told me so, and it turned out too true. He only wanted to use me for mean political purposes alike abhorrent and revolting to my nature. I always detested politics and politicians since I saw politics turned to a well paying

profession in Ireland, but now in America I found myself in the very centre of the corrupt element I hated most".

Less than a month after his arrival in New York, the Bard was making plans for his return to Ireland. In a letter to his Limerick friend William Lonergan, dated October 24, 1886, he claimed that he "could not exist among such

roaring iron scenes no more than a skylark could live amid the crash and din of the battlefield", and went on to denounce New York as "a seething cesspool of all the infernal cleverness and human rottenness of the whole Earth". (In this and in other letters of Michael Hogan I have retained the Bard's own spelling and punctuation).

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Fordham, New York City,  
Oct. 24, 1886

Dear William,

I wrote to you on the 2nd. inst. but received no reply up to this date.

I now regret to tell you that this American climate is not agreeing with me. My sight is going from bad to worse since I landed here - in fact I dread I shall become stone blind if I remain here any farther length of time.

If my sight remained good I certainly would achieve great success in this country, but I cannot stir outside the door to look after anything that would redound to my interest, without some person to conduct me, but the people here are so selfishly busy with their own affairs that no one will attend to me for an hour unless well paid.

This is the finest country in the world for strong healthy people who are able to work, for them there is plenty of money to be earn'd. I met people from Thomondgate who came out here very poor, years on years ago, but they are now owners of great properties and rich positions. Since I came the weather has continued to be in a splendid summer state of calm and cloudless sunshine every day, but it is no good to me - I can do nothing.

Some friends here have proposed my passage back to Ireland, and I must accept it before I run blind altogether. Please send for my poor wife and read this for her, I could be happy at home instead of coming here only for her folly and the Puritanic villiany of my accursed old mother. I do not by any means find fault with this country, if I had the use of my eyesight. There is superabundance here for the whole world. I could get a situation here as proof-reader to one of the newspapers at 18 dollars a week (£4, or near it) but my bad sight would not let me have it. This enormous City is crowded by newspapers, all sensational with daily events. It is also crowded with corrupt sections and circles of the rottenest political rogues and blackguards in the world. It is also overflowing with well-dressed immoralities sustained by bribed law. The constant roll and din of tram-cars and trains through the thronged thoroughfares remind a person of a stupendous flood with an incessant echo of muffled thunder. It is daring, deafening and sickening.

The joyful Devil seems to be boss-engineer of the whole God-damn concern. I could not exist among such roaring iron scenes no more than a skylark could live amid the crash and din of a battlefield. If I were to breathe my last amid the holy solitude of an Irish hillside I'll go home rather than live bathed in the damnation opulence of this terrible commercial Nenivah iron, men and women are only fit for this thundering iron place. It is the seething cesspool of all the infernal cleverness and human rottenness of the whole Earth.

Give my best regards to Mrs & Baby Thomas and please accept same from

Your sincere friend  
M. Hogan. B.T.

W. Lonargan. Esq.

Fordham, New York City.

Oct. 24, 1855.

Dear William

I wrote to you on the 2<sup>nd</sup> inst,  
but received no reply up to this date.

I now regret to tell you that this American  
Climate is not agreeing with me. My sight  
is going from bad to worse since I landed  
here - in fact I dread I shall become stone blind  
if I remain here any farther length of time.

Your sincere friend

W. Lonargan Esq;

M. Hogan. B. J.

But, as with so many of the poet's proposals, all did not go according to plan and his return to Limerick was to be delayed for three years.

His host was commonly called "The Brute" by the people of Fordham, and the Bard and himself were soon at each other's throats. During a party in the house the two men came to blows, with the poet being floored after the exchange. One of the neighbours took Hogan home to stay with him for the night to avoid further trouble.

In his unpublished manuscript the Bard next describes his unhappy meeting with Patrick Ford, the editor and owner of the **Irish World**:

"I went in and after waiting for some time the great Irish patriotic journalist appeared. His address was cold and reserved and I felt I was in the presence of a hard selfish, calculating

man of the world whose own darling interest was his only gospel beyond all other things. I told him my reasons for coming to America - that I had great hopes in Irishmen of far-famed national principles such as he professed, to give me some encouragement to publish and circulate some M.S. written on Irish subjects (which) I had brought with me ... He said he would gladly accept my offer but that the supporters and readers of his journal were all practical politicians who would have nothing from him but articles illustrating political matters ... He asked me if I had any desire to return to Ireland, (that) if so he would procure me a free passage. I said I was not prepared to return - and then I parted from him grieved and disappointed."

The scene between the wealthy,

well-dressed Ford and the shabby, penniless Bard can well be imagined. Hogan was hurt by the editor's refusal to publish **The Snow Queen of Ardcuilen** in weekly parts, though it must be said in this case that Ford's literary judgement was fully justified. The poem is long and turgid and is one of the Bard's dullest pieces.

But the poet was not a man to let such a slight pass without retaliation. In his manuscript he wrote:

"Ah, those Irish braggart patriots in America are surely composed of queer absurd elements. They readily subscribe for dynamite to blow up English cities but they have no friendly hand for a poor fellow countryman lost, friendless, homeless and forlorn".

Though written in the last century, these words still have a topical ring to them.

## "The Snow Queen of Ardcuilen,"

A NEW WORK IN TWENTY DUANS OR PARTS,

BY THE BARD OF THOMOND.

This romantic Story of Castle and Cottage, is written in a semi-Ossianic style, rich with landscape word-painting, and bright with sparkling imagery of thought, feeling and action.