

Michael Hogan

in America 1886-1889



As the year 1886 came to an end, Michael Hogan's troubles did not recede. His New York host, the "Brute" of Fordham, continued his bouts of heavy drinking, and made the Bard's life even more miserable than it had been in Limerick.

Copies of the poet's book **The Lays and Legends of Thomond** were confiscated by his host as a guarantee of repayment of the sum he had advanced for Hogan's passage to America. The books were only returned to the Bard when some influential neighbours intervened and the Brute relented. Michael Hogan has written in his unpublished memoirs that he sold 30 of these books for a dollar each and sent home half of the sum to his wife Nannie.

The coming of winter further cut off Hogan's chances of escape. He wrote a letter to his fellow-poet John Boyle O'Reilly, the editor of the **Boston Globe**, and sent him an autographed copy of **The Lays and Legends** for review. O'Reilly was not impressed, and though he promised to review Hogan's book in the **Globe**, the notice never appeared. In characteristic vein, Hogan bitterly recorded:

"I never believed a true poet could be a knave till then. At the wind-up of his epistle, which was a short one, he strongly advised me to return to Ireland. That's all the proof I experienced to the genuineness of his patriotism".

As Christmas drew near, the Brute went on another of his periodic binges. The half-blind, beleaguered Bard once again bemoaned his fate:

Christmas came - the first I ever spent out of poor Ireland. Oh, what a crushing despair that tortured my heart far too terrible and tempestuous for any studied thoughts of mine to delineate. Oh, how vengefully I denounced the relentless fate that drove me from my native land. If I could only cry it would give me some relief but the fountains of my heart were all as dry as the sun parched bed of a summer brook. On Christmas Eve I saw no mould candle, no holly

PART TWO

by Jim Kemmy

and ivy, no Christmas block in the fire, no congenial greeting, no friendly hilarity to honour the sacred festival, such as I always saw in the Old Land. At 12 o'clock that night not a bell was rung to hail the holy time of the Lord's nativity. How sorrowfully I missed the harmony of St. Mary's sweet-toned bells. Three thousand miles of a dreary ocean lay between me and them. I flung myself into bed, with an additional pang in my heart".

Hogan attempted to pass his time by writing some poems for **The Clare Advertiser**, published in Kilrush. After the rebuffs by Patrick Ford and John Boyle O'Reilly, the Bard made no further efforts to secure the publication of his poems in America. He wrote:

"I never wrote a single line for any American journal. I felt a settled aversion against these scandal-mongering newspapers and their mercenary reporters. Neither could I set myself to write anything on any American subject whatever. My feelings were frozen dead against the country and the disgusting, dollarised manners of its people".

In February 1887, a visit from a Limerick man, then living in New York, led to an unexpected change of fortune for the Bard. Hogan asked his caller to place a short notice in the local newspapers informing the readers of the poet's address. On the following Sunday, many visitors called to see the Bard. He tells of the many invitations he received to visit various homes, adding that he only accepted one from Edward G. Fitzgerald, a native of Kilmallock, Co. Limerick.

His new-found friend was as good as his word and, on the following Tuesday, he duly arrived to take the Bard to his home at 287 Broadway, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Hogan had "a slight knowledge" of Edward Fitzgerald's wife Marcelle from the time she had been a young girl in Limerick. They greeted the poet warmly and held a welcoming party in his honour. The Bard recorded that he

"was happy for the first time during many years".

After Hogan had spent three weeks with the Fitzgerald's, he told them of his great reluctance to return to Fordham. He was overjoyed when they informed him that he was welcome to remain with them for the duration of his stay in America. The Bard lost no time in going to collect his few belongings, but again he fell foul of the ram-paging Brute. All day long, the fugitive poet tried to keep out of the clutches of the drunken man, until Edward Fitzgerald returned and released him from his captivity. Hogan has given his impressions of the event:

"I left all my American troubles behind me in Fordham; happiness, peace and contentment awaited on my visit to the hospitable Geraldines ... In all my life I never met people so congenial to my thought and tastes, and so socially kindred to my heart's wishes and feelings ... they shared their comfortable home with me and made me happier than ever I felt in all the sunniest period of my days".

But contentment never rested too easily or too long on the Bard. On August 8, 1887, he received a letter from Limerick, written in his wife's name, which stated that she had been admitted to the Workhouse hospital, following a suicide attempt. Though Hogan knew the letter was a hoax, this did not prevent him from venting his spleen on his "poor, weak-minded wife" and his "old thieving" mother. In a letter to his Limerick friend William Lonergan, written on the same day (August 8), he also complains about "the blazing, boiling heat" and about "the Irish, the meanest pack of dogs in America", some of whom had swindled him out of a few of his books and 13 dollars.

Michael Hogan appears to have suffered from some illnesses during his stay in America. In his letter to William Lonergan, he refers to a fit of cholera which "was finally cured by old French brandy, fresh eggs and new milk supplied by the kind people who have care of me". In this case, the cure was certainly much more welcome than the disease. (The Bard's own spelling and punctuation are retained in this letter).

287 Broadway
Williamsburg
Brooklyn E.D.
N.Y. Aug. 8. 1887.

Dear William,

I would have replied to you long ere now but for the burning, roasting weather that raged here during the past seven weeks turning every house into an oven and every one into baked pies. More than 1000 people, men, women and children died from over heat and sunstroke. More than a hundred horses dropped dead under waggons in the streets by sunstroke. I never went outside doors during the whole summer, yet I did not escape the consequence of the terrible heat I got a fit of cholera and was prostrated for many days, but was finally cured by old French brandy, fresh eggs and new milk supplied by the kind and generous people who have care of me.

I read in your last letter with thorough feelings of regret the sudden exit of your fine little child Thomas. Indeed I felt it keenly, and more so when I contemplated the deep desolate grief that his loving mother felt over his loss. 'twas a sad blow that deprived her of her first born son.

Dear William I had a letter this morning from a person in Limerick telling that my poor wife has been carried raging mad to the Workhouse hospital. This news has completely prostrated me - The letter also says that she attempted suicide before she was taken to the hospital. Now I received a letter written in her name by some woman in the hospital but it never alluded to the poor thing's insanity, only said she was ordinary laid up with weakness of her system, and she asked me to send her £1 at once and to return home as quick as possible.

I now believe the writer to be an imposter. If my poor wife has gone mad what would she want of money. Will you kindly ask Mr. Hurley the agent of the little garret room where she lived, what has become of her little things or if she had left any after her. She always had the germs of insanity in her, it is a hereditary disease in her family, and I always treated her gently on that account. I would have sent her some money during the summer but I had not got it. All the books you sent are here on my hands yet. No one would think of buying them and sitting to read them in the blazing, boiling heat of the summer months. I was swindled out of a few of them by Irish people and 13 dollars beside - so you see I was not able to send her anything. The Irish are the meanest pack of dogs in America. They deceive and betray each other more than they do at home. Every nationality here, Dutch, Jews, Danes, Germans and Italians stand loyal to each other but the rascally Irish. They are the only black spot on the human page and such of them that have anything of the world's goods above another to boast of ... their swaggering insolence is something abominable.

Tell, dear William, if my poor Nannie owes you anything or if there is anything due to you for the books you took so much pains to send me - If so, let me know it and I will send it the very first I realise, with a million thanks ... I see by that letter sent to me from the Workhouse hospital, that my thief of an old mother is in the infirm ward laid up very bad - if this be true I wonder what has become of all the money she stole from my poor weak minded wife in Thomond Cottage. If she hasn't it stuck in some hole or another, the devil must have taken it. He is always ready to clutch money ill got, and my old thieving parent never carried an honest penny of her own honest earning in her miserable purse.

She always cutely and closely watched her sly advantage to rob and cheat the innocent and unsuspecting. She has been the whole cause of my poor wife's misfortune and distruction. May God give her the same measurement.

I will never see my poor wife alive. This insanity will kill her - my poor deserted, forlorn, friendless Nannie - There's fire and nettles in my heart.

Give my true sympathy and respects to Mrs L ... and accept same yourself from

Your sincere but sorrowful
Michael Hogan Thomond

W. Lonergan Esq.

Later in the same month (August) of 1887, the Fitzgeralds moved house "to a handsome country cottage" at Locust Avenue, Corona, Long Island, New York. The Bard drew on his poetic imagination to describe his new surroundings, and had another swipe at his fellow-countrymen in America for

their neglect of his literary work.

"I was always an ardent lover of rural scenes and here I had a calm landscape mirror that reflected the smile of Nature in a quiet way. I did a good deal of Irish song work here, because the failure of my eyesight made me incapable of enjoying any

other pursuit. There was nothing to ruffle the harmony of my peace, only the thought of having no choice of publishing a volume of my works in America. My Irish countrymen were too much engrossed in politics and place-hunting to pay me or my national literary efforts the slightest

KEEP THIS MEMORANDUM.

New York Jan 4 1887

Bought of *Irish Emigrant Society*

5225 One Pound Sterling, \$

Per favor of *Irish Emigrant Society*

Per *Irish Emigrant Society*

Per

Arthur Brown 46 Duane St. N.Y.

A copy of the money order sent by Michael Hogan from New York to his wife in Limerick, dated January 4th, 1887.

attention. Still, they are mighty distinguished patriots for all that, where the charm of dollars has the biggest attraction".

So, Michael Hogan settled down to the most restful and pleasant period of his American stay. He continued to correspond with his friends in different parts of Ireland and America. Tim

Costello, a member of the well known Killeany, Co. Limerick family of stonecutters, poets and artists, was then living at Moorhead, Clay County Minnesota. The Bard and the Costello family continued to exchange letters right up to the poet's death.

In one letter, written in November

1888, the Bard complained that he was suffering from piles. In his reply, Tim Costello enclosed "an infallible remedy for piles ... if you can get unsalted butter - strain or squeeze the melted butter and tobacco through a linen cloth". (The letter's original spelling and punctuation are retained here).

Moorhead,
Clay County,
Minnesota
December 2nd. '88

Dear Bard,

Sincere thanks for the specimen of your handwriting ...

After your severe attacks of illness, I am of opinion you must now be very careful of your health, and I think it would do you good to take a trip to Ireland next summer ... There are fellows around here calling themselves doctors if once they get a person into their hands hardly anything but the grave could get you away from them. Depend on your own care for the benefit of your health and do'nt mind the doctors. I enclose you an infallible remedy for piles if you can get unsalted butter - strain or squeeze the melted butter and tobacco through a linen-cloth.

As a token of thanks to Mrs. Fitzgerald and family for their great kindness to you, I am determined (if I can find time) to paint her on silk, something in the shape of a wall-banner. Though Killeany was a bad place to learn painting, except a fellow wishes to paint himself with mud. I hope you won't think little of my painting until you see some of it and judge for yourself.

Hoping I may soon again have the pleasure of hearing from you.

I am dear Bard,
faithfully and respectfully yours

T. Costello.

P.S. If you keep up your courage and mind your health I am confident you will see better times yet. It ought to be some consolation to you to know that it is when men like (you) die their fame begins to live then your name will be known and read in every news-paper all over the world.

T.C.

It is not known if Michael Hogan used the Costello recipe to ease the

pain of his piles. But despite this discomforture, the Bard prepared to

celebrate his third and last Christmas in America.