

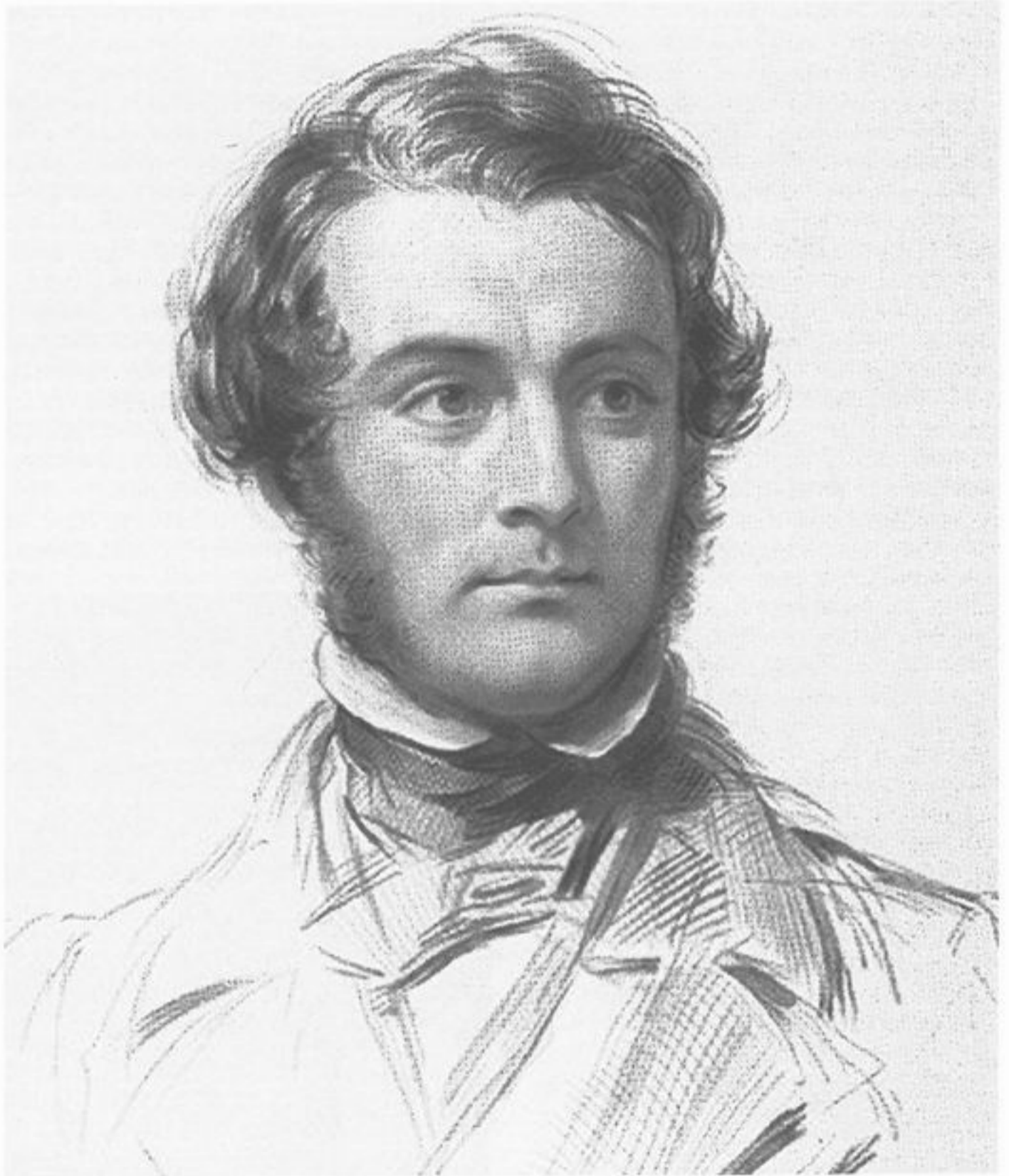
Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford MP: Contested hero of the Crimean War

There is a beautiful, large stained glass window in St Mary's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Limerick, which according to local folklore was donated by Florence Nightingale. Yet the person in whose memory it is supposedly donated, Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford, is not as well known. Despite being descended from the Dromoland branch of the O'Brien family and holding an estate outside Limerick city in Cratloe, County Clare, his memory has faded into obscurity.

Early life

Augustus Stafford O'Brien was born in 1811. He was the eldest son of Stafford O'Brien, Esq., and his wife Emma. His father held moderate estates at Blatherwycke Park in Northamptonshire and Cratloe Woods in County Clare, while his mother Emma was the sister of the Earl of Gainsborough and the daughter of Sir Gerald Noel, Bart., MP, by Diana Middleton, Baroness Barham. O'Brien was born and raised in Northamptonshire and in his later years was educated at Trinity College Cambridge.¹ He was a man of 'joyous spirits and brilliant wit' who was described as being a favourite in a variety of societies, primarily due to him having attended Cambridge. Yet he was also a man who showed 'practical kindness to his poorer Irish neighbours' in Cratloe, Co. Clare.² He entered politics in 1841 as a Conservative candidate for his home county and was successfully elected. He was described as an 'eloquent' speaker in parliament and sided with Lord Derby and the anti-Peelites when the Conservative Party split over Sir Robert Peel's move to Free Trade in 1846.³

In 1847 he assumed his 'ancestral family name' by royal license thus becoming Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford and more commonly known simply as Augustus Stafford until his death.⁴ Throughout his political career he also kept a keen eye on Irish issues and events and spent the majority of his time debating those issues in the Commons while also being close friends of a number of Irish MPs.⁵ In 1852 although embroiled in a corruption scandal



Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford

by William Holl Jr., after George Richmond stipple engraving, 1848 or after
(Courtesy National Portrait Gallery)

by Paul Huddie

with a number of Derby's other 'subordinates', O'Brien was re-elected for Northamptonshire and following the formation of a minority Conservative government under Derby he was rewarded for his fidelity with the office of Secretary to the Admiralty. In that post he conducted himself with

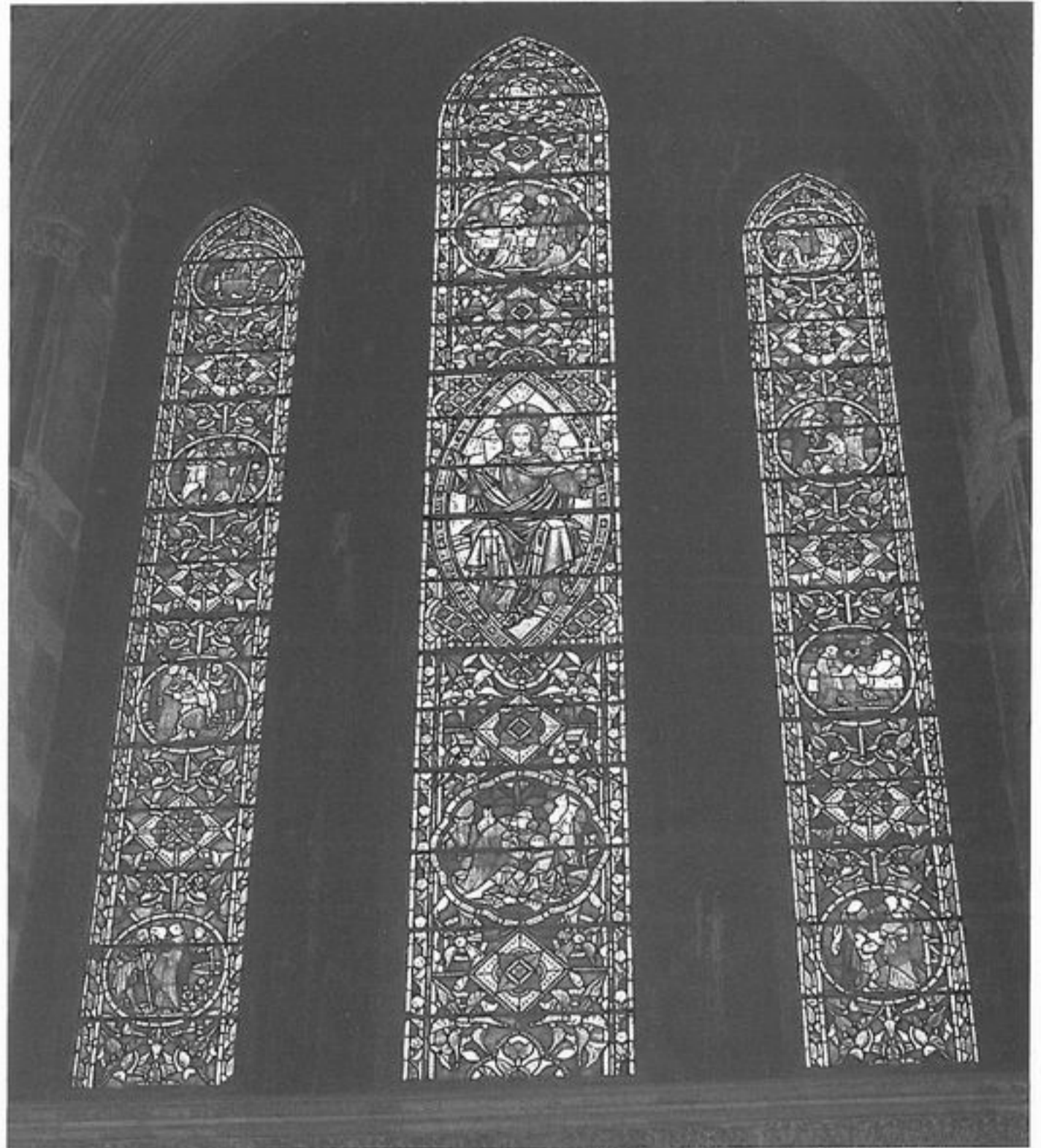
enthusiasm, speaking extensively on naval issue throughout the months of that short-lived government (February-December). In 1853 he was heavily involved in the debates on the inquiry into Maynooth. Yet in spite of his eloquence, his fidelity or his devotion to Ireland and its issues, it was not until the Crimean War that O'Brien's character became truly evident to all, and his 'former failing' of 1852 was, as *The Times* believed, 'blotted out'.⁶

The Crimean War, 1854-6

Following the initial success at the Battle of the Alma and the pyrrhic victory at the Battle of Balaklava in September and October 1854 respectively, a catastrophic breakdown in the transport, supply and medical systems of the British Expeditionary Force to Russia occurred. Those breakdowns were reported in the contemporary press and in letters sent back home from the front. They described the scenes of wounded men being transported on the top decks of ships and of hospitals filled with hundreds of soldiers with gaping wounds and no bandages to bind them or nurses to treat them. In response to this there was a national outcry which culminated in the departure to the East of nearly two hundred nurses including lay women, fifteen Irish Catholic nuns and Florence Nightingale. Coupled with those volunteers thousands of parcels full of clothes, food and necessary utensils were sent out and numerous funds were also established. One such fund was *The Times* Fund of which O'Brien became a commissioner.⁷ This was not the first philanthropic body, which he became a part of; in 1854 he was also on the committees of the Pitcairn Island Fund⁸ and the Central Association in Aid of the Wives and Children of Soldiers Ordered to the East.⁹

In November 1854 he left England for the East and was one of six Irish MPs who went to the Crimea during the war, but he was the only one not to go as a soldier.¹⁰ In the East O'Brien initially set about viewing for himself the reported deficiencies and administrative chaos, which had been, reported in soldiers' letters and the press reports.¹¹ There he made notes on the numbers of medical staff, the supplies and facilities available, the conditions of those facilities and the living arrangements of the troops at Balaklava.¹² Yet it was not long before he himself became involved in the relief effort, far beyond his capacity as coordinator of the publicly subscribed funds which Florence Nightingale and others had access to. Contemporary accounts in the press describe O'Brien in the hospitals tending to the sick and wounded men, talking to and writing letters for them and even assisting in operations.¹³ Although he may well have conducted himself in such an admirable fashion, such reports by *The Times* about one of its own commissioners must be taken liberally, as some embellishment may well have occurred. In fact not all contemporary accounts portrayed O'Brien with as much 'kindness and zeal' as Florence Nightingale described him as having while at Scutari.¹⁴

Yet not everyone's opinion of him was positive; one contemporary account from Colonel John Bourke, the brother of Lord Naas,¹⁵ painted O'Brien in a very different light. Bourke was an officiating officer at the hospitals of Scutari for the majority of the war. In a letter to his brother sent from Scutari on 8 April 1855 he expressed his wish to highlight what he saw as the falsehoods, which he believed Augustus had reported to the Committee of Inquiry into



Three panelled stained glass window in St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick
(Courtesy Noreen Ellerker)

the Army in the East.¹⁶ Bourke also criticised Augustus for living away¹⁷ from Scutari and merely coming to the hospitals for a few hours every day to make notes 'for the sole purpose of bringing himself into notice'.¹⁸ The only thing he claimed O'Brien had contributed was for them to roast one of the oxen for the soldiers' Christmas dinner because 'it would look so nice in the newspapers', but as no one, not even O'Brien, would pay for the animal, nothing happened.¹⁹

Yet this just seems to have been the personal grudge of an officer who spent much of the war at Scutari. On the other hand the contemporary press hailed him as a hero as did Florence Nightingale and the Liberal MP for Louth Chichester Fortescue who wrote with great admiration in his own diaries of the great work done by O'Brien at Scutari where he had 'behaved so well'.²⁰ Even some thirty years after O'Brien's death some people still recalled with fondness his endeavours in the East. In his autobiography in the 1890s the poet Aubrey de Vere, a close personal friend, recounted how during the war when cholera 'raged fiercely' on board the French ships and O'Brien 'minister[ed] assiduously among their sick crews, at imminent risk of his own life, having previously handed over whatever money he had at his disposal for the increase of their comforts'.²¹

On returning to Britain, he issued his

findings and told of his experiences to the Commons, during the debate on the censure of the Aberdeen government in January 1855. From January to March he continuously presented his findings in order to disturb 'the repose of the old system & its secrecy', which Florence Nightingale believed Lord William Paulet²² had endeavoured to maintain.²³ He called for provisions to be made for invalids in the East to remit their money back home in order to support their families and for those soldiers who did return to receive all pay and medals due to them.²⁴ O'Brien highlighted the presence of private individuals in the East distributing aid to the sick using the *The Times* Fund and he went into huge detail on the deficiencies and dreadful state of Scutari, which included a death toll in 1855 double that of 1854.²⁵ Yet his most lasting effort was to call for a parliamentary commission of enquiry to be formed to report on the condition of the army in the Crimea and to investigate the conduct of the military and government authorities regarding the breakdowns, deficiencies and sufferings in the East. He even invited the former Secretary of War, the Duke of Newcastle, to go out with him to see what he had seen. Something he subsequently did, albeit without Augustus.²⁶

O'Brien himself returned to the Crimea in late 1855, where he happily reported a much improved situation.²⁷ As well as

this, his second request was acted upon, when a Royal Commission of Enquiry was appointed in 1857 to investigate the hospitals that had existed in the East, and to which O'Brien himself was appointed a commissioner.²⁸

Death and memorial

O'Brien died on 18 November 1857 at Morrison's Hotel, Dublin from a prolonged affliction while en route to England from Limerick. Contemporary reports claimed that he had suffered from 'a painful disease', which was referred to as colic in one account. He had been prone to severe attacks, which were thought to have left him in 'delicate health'. In spite of his weakened state his demise was not expected and sincere shock was expressed by a variety of contemporary newspapers. Yet one detailed report highlighted that O'Brien had been ill for some time in Limerick before travelling to Dublin to seek 'superior medical advice'.²⁹ Due to the sudden nature of his death, the absence of any relatives from Dublin at that time and the reported large doses of opiates administered by the attending physician, a coroner's inquest was held. The inquest determined that O'Brien had died of 'natural causes' and cleared the doctor of any malpractice. *The Times* gave the proceedings of the inquest a full page, which was a clear expression of the high regard, which it afforded him.³⁰ Yet that high regard which his friends, colleagues and the public, especially the Irish public, felt did not go unexpressed.

Not long after his death in 1857 a committee was formed which included the Marquis of Drogheda, the Earl of Powis, five clergy and two MPs to collect funds to erect some form of testimonial in his memory. Although the form which it should take was initially debated in the end it was decided that the money raised would be used to refurbish a dilapidated part of St Mary's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Limerick and to erect a large stained glass window, consisting of three individual panels in the same. To produce the required memorials the committee called for public subscriptions. Contributions were collected by all the members of the committee as well as Messrs Hoare & Co of Fleet Street in London and the Provincial Bank in Limerick, and by 10 March 1858 the fund had received £907 5s. 6d.³¹ The memorial, which was to be 'both a tribute of private affection' and 'a record of his labours in the east' has gone down in local Limerick folklore as having been donated by Florence Nightingale herself.³²

O'Brien might be described as a somewhat complex man. He was a man who changed his name and conducted electoral fraud but was also heavily involved in philanthropic endeavours both at home and abroad. He never married and had no children. He had at least one older brother named Henry and two sisters called Angelina Mary and Sophia Lilius.³³ He was a man who wished to represent the interests of many people: his English constituents,

the Irish people, the people of Pitcairn Island, British soldiers and their families and even French sailors.

For his latter endeavours he was given the nickname 'le cher Monsieur Damne me' and he even received a letter of thanks from Emperor Napoleon III of France himself.³⁴

Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford, in spite of his inauspicious early years, was a key figure in the public's response to the catastrophes of the Crimean War, 1854-6. He was an ordinary man who, alongside Florence Nightingale, devoted himself to alleviating the distress of the fighting men in the Crimea from Ireland, Great Britain and even France. He returned to Britain in 1855 and devoted his remaining years to bringing the British government to account for its failures in the East and to ensuring that those soldiers who survived the war received what they were due and that their families would also be cared for. This he did both inside and outside of the House of Commons and while serving as a commissioner for the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Hospitals in the East. Although he was not born in Ireland the fact that he was the cousin of the revolutionary William Smith O'Brien and had large estates in Clare ensured that he was a 'well-known and well-loved land-owner around Limerick' and that he was seen by many including Chichester Fortescue as an 'Irishman' if not a Limerick man.³⁵

REFERENCES

- 1 *Morning Chronicle*, 19 November 1857.
- 2 Aubrey de Vere, *Recollections of Aubrey de Vere* (London 1897), pp 87-9.
- 3 *The Times*, 21 November 1857.
- 4 Augustus was descended from Henry O'Brien, Esq. of Dromoland whose widow remarried Arthur Geoghegan who later assumed the surname of Stafford. B. Clarke, Esq., *The British Gazetteer*, i (London 1852), p.306; *Morning Chronicle*, 19 November 1857.
- 5 The diaries of poet Sir Aubrey de Vere, whose brother was MP for Limerick during the same period, contain numerous references to O'Brien, while the diaries of Chichester Fortescue, MP for Louth express an admiration for him. He was also a friend of William Monsell, MP for Limerick.
- 6 *The Times*, 21 November 1857.
- 7 Sum M. Goldie, *Florence Nightingale: letters from the Crimea* (Manchester 1997), p.48.
- 8 The Pitcairn Island Fund was a philanthropic society founded in 1852 and the aim of which was to give aid to the people on that small island in the Pacific Ocean.
- 9 The Central Association was established on 7 March 1854 to aid the families of the soldiers in the Crimea. Unlike the Patriotic Fund, which was established later that year it provided for the families of living soldiers. It was presided over by the Duke of Cambridge before and after he had served in the Crimea. It aimed to open communication with all army depots, to give aid to its local associations, to inform of offers of em-

ployment and where possible pay for education of children. On 11 November 1856 'having completed its main purpose' it was dissolved with 'a portion of the surplus' capital remainder being endowed to the Soldier's Infant Home, at Hampstead. *Morning Post*, 8 March 1854; *The Times*, 8 March 1855; Sampson Low, Jr., *The charities of London in 1861, comprising an account of the operations, resources and general condition of the charitable, educational and religious institutions of London* (London 1862), p.166.

- 10 Captain Edward Pakenham, Major Thomas Pakenham, Major James P. Maxwell, Major William Stuart Knox and Lt-General Sir George Charles de Lacy Evans.
- 11 *The Times*, 18 December 1854.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 18 December 1854.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 18 December 1854; Sir John Smyth VC, *In this sign conquer: the story of the army chaplains* (London 1968), p.80.
- 14 Goldie, *Letters*, p.48.
- 15 Bourke was the Dublin-born Conservative MP for Kildare 1847-52 and Cockermonth 1852-57.
- 16 Colonel John Bourke to Lord Naas, National Library of Ireland, Mayo Papers, Ms 11180.
- 17 O'Brien did live on board the *Sanspareil* during his time in the East. *Morning Chronicle*, 18 December 1854.
- 18 Mayo Papers, Ms 11180.
- 19 Bourke underlined this for emphasis.
- 20 Osbert Wyndham Hewett (ed.), *'...and Mr. Fortescue* (London 1958), p.80.
- 21 De Vere, *Recollections*, p.89.
- 22 Commander of British forces on the Bosphorus.
- 23 Goldie, *Letters*, p.98.
- 24 *Hansard* 3, cxxxvi, (22 February 1855).
- 25 *Ibid.*, cxxxvi, 1316 (7 February 1855).
- 26 Hewett, *Fortescue*, p.78.
- 27 *The Times* 21 March 1856.
- 28 Goldie, *Letters*, p.274.
- 29 *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 26 November 1857.
- 30 *The Times*, 18 November 1857.
- 31 *Morning Post*, 10 March 1858; List of subscriptions to a memorial to Augustus O'Brien Stafford, M.P. in St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick, 1857-1858, National Library of Ireland, Ms 4820. Canon M.J. Talbot, *The Monuments of St Mary's Cathedral*, (Limerick 1976) records the following:
The stained glass was executed by Messrs Clayton and Bell of London. The architectural portion of the work was carried out under the supervision of the eminent Architect, Mr. William Slator of London. The cost of the memorial window, defrayed by public subscriptions, was over £1,500.
- 32 *Morning Post*, 10 March 1858. Florence Nightingale donated £3 3s. to the total of £1,214 1s.6d. collected, while thirty-nine contributions amounting to nearly £50 were donated by 'the tenant and labourers of Cratloe Estate'.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 7, 14 March 1864; *The Times*, 28 November 1901.
- 34 De Vere, *Recollections*, p.89.
- 35 *Ibid.*, pp 87-8; Hewett, *Fortescue*, p.80.