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 suppos-
edly 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 Blather-
wycke 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 Middle-
ton, Baroness Barham. O'Brien was born
and raised in Northamptonshire and in his
later years was educated at Trinity College
Cambridge. He was a man of 'joyous spirits
and brilliant wit' who was described
as being a favourite in a variety of societ-
ies, primarily due to his having attended
Cambridge. Yet he was also a man who
showed 'practical kindness to his poorer
Irish neighbours' in Cratloe, Co. Clare.

He entered politics in 1841 as a Conser-
vative 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.

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. 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. In 1852
although embroiled in a corruption scandal

by Paul Huddie

with a number of Derby's other 'subordi-
ates', O'Brien was re-elected for Northam-
ptonshire and following the formation of a
minority Conservative government under
Derby he was rewarded for his fidelity
with the office of Secretary to the Admir-
alty. 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 falling' of 1852 was, as The
Times believed, 'blotted out'.

Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford
by William Holl Jr., after George Richmond stipple engraving, 1843 or after
(Courtesy National Portrait Gallery)
The Crimean War, 1854-6

Following the initial success at the Battle of 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 utenlals were sent out and numerous funds were also established. One such fund was The Times Fund of which O'Brien became a commissioner. This was not the first philanthropic body, which he became a part of; in 1854 he was also on the committees of the Piccadilly Island Fund and the Central Association in Aid of the Wives and Children of Soldiers Ordered to the East.

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. 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. 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. 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. 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 portray O'Brien with as much 'kindness and zeal' as Florence Nightingale described him as having while at Scutari.

Yet not everyone's opinion of him was positive: one contemporary account from Colonel John Bourke, the brother of Lord Naas, 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 the Army in the East. Bourke also criticised Augustus for living away 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'. 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.

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 Losth Chichester Fortescue who wrote with great admiration in his own diary of the great work done by O'Brien at Scutari where he had 'behaved so well'. 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 ministered 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.

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 Paulet had endeavoured to maintain. 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. 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. Yet his most lasting effort was to call for a parliamentary commission of inquiry 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.

O'Brien himself returned to the Crimea in late 1855, where he happily reported a much improved situation. 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 of pain in his upper regions. He returned to Limerick 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 was afforded him.6 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.30 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.31

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 Angelica and Sarah. He was the son of 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 Damme and he even received a letter of thanks from Emperor Napoleon III of France himself.32

Augustus Stafford O’Brien Stafford, in spite of his unannounced 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 elsewhere. He returned to Great Britain in 1855 and devoted his remaining years to bringing the 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 landowner around Limerick and that he was seen by many including Chichester Fortescue as an 'Irishman' if not a Limerick man.33

REFERENCES

1 Morning Chronicle, 19 November 1857.
3 The Times, 21 November 1857.
4 Augustus was descended from Henry O'Brien, Esq. of Drumlanrig whose widow remarried Arthur Geoghegan who later assumed the surname of Stafford. B. Clarke, Esq., The British Gazeeteer, i (London 1852), p 366, Morning Chronicle, 19 November 1857.
5 The diaries of poet Sir Aubrey de Vere, whose brother was MP for Limerick during the Crimean War 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 Monson, MP for Limerick.
6 The Times, 21 November 1857.
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 remaining 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 1856, comprising an account of the operations, resources and general condition of the charitable, educational and religious institutions of London (London 1860), p 165.
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.
15 Bourke was the Dublin-born Conservative M.P. for Finsbury 1847-52 and Cockermouth 1852-57.
16 Colonel John Bourke to Lord Neas, 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.
21 De Vere, Recollections, p 88.
22 Commander of British forces on the Bosphorus.
23 Goldie, Letters, p 98.
24 Husard 3, xxxvi (22 February 1859).
25 Ibid., xxxvi, 1316 (7 February 1859).
26 Hewett, Fortescue, p 78.
27 The Times 21 March 1856.
28 Goldie, Letters, p 274.
29 Tournament's Easter 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 4829.
32 Canon M.J. Talbot, The Monuments of St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick (1976), records the following.
33 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 Slater of London. The cost of the memorial window, described by public subscription, was over £1,500.
34 Morning Post, 10 March 1858. Florence Nightingale donated £3 8s. to the total of £1,214 1s. 6d. collected, while thirty-nine contributions amounting to nearly £50 were donated by 'the tenantry and labourers of Cratloe Estate'.
35 Ibid., 14 March 1854; The Times, 28 November 1901.
36 De Vere, Recollections, p 89.
37 Ibid., pp 58 78; Hewett, Fortescue, p 58.