

# Grace Greenwood and Uncle Tom's Cabin in Limerick (1852-1853)

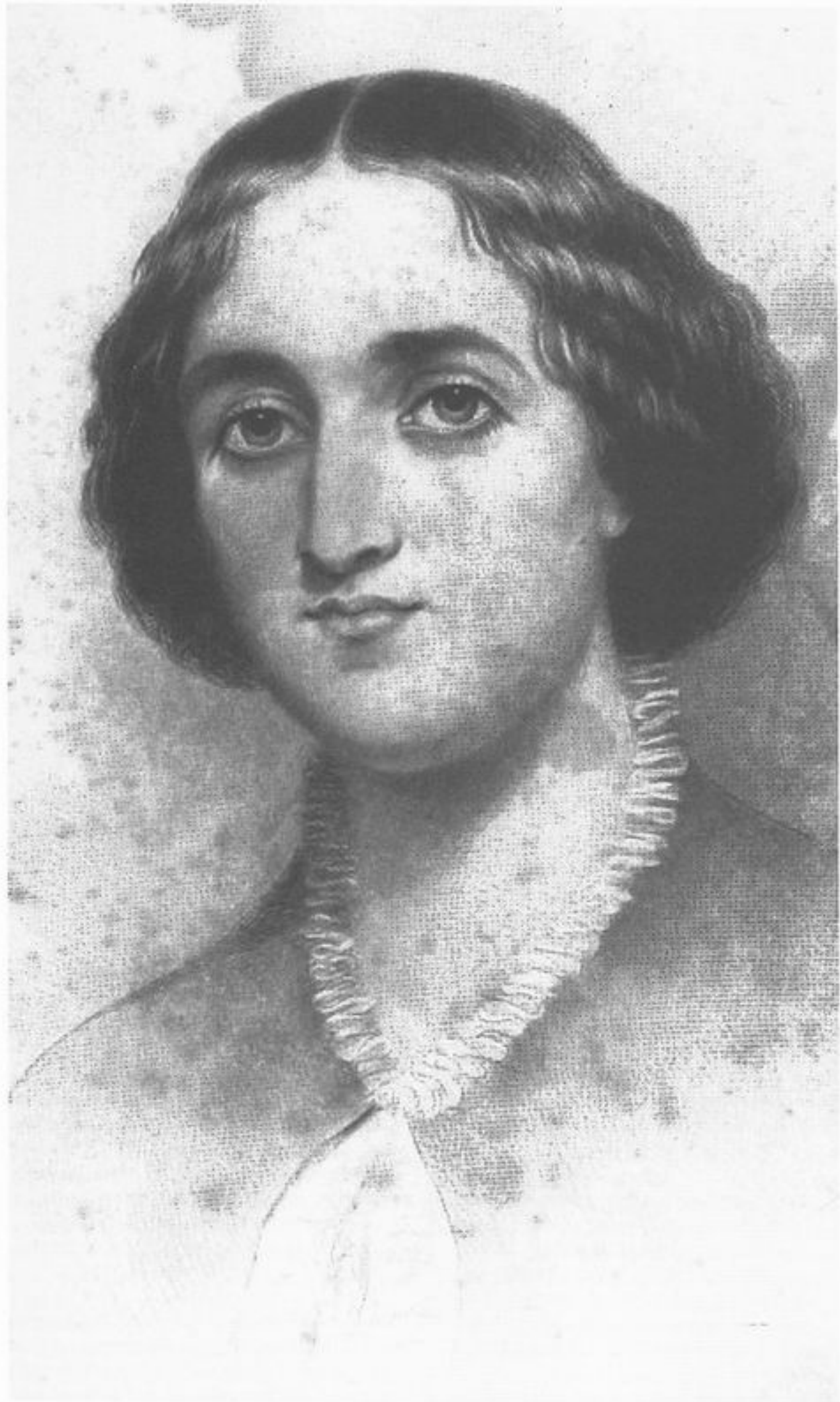
by Liam Hogan

In speaking for myself I speak for every coloured man I know, and I say that Freedom, in poverty and in trials and tribulations, even amidst the [cruellest] prejudices, is sweeter than the best fed or the best clothed Slavery in the world.<sup>1</sup>

– H.C. Smith (1867)

**G**race Greenwood was the pseudonym of Sara Jane Clarke, a pioneering author, lecturer, social reformer and abolitionist. She was born in Pompey, New York on the 23 September 1823. Once a staff writer for *Godey's Lady Magazine*, she was fired by Godey when pro-slavery readers complained about her abolitionist views that appeared in the *National Era* newspaper. Greenwood was the first female journalist employed by the *New York Times*, and her progressive work in the *National Era* was cited by Harriet Beecher Stowe as being an inspiration behind her starting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the great anti-slavery novels of the nineteenth century. Reading the frank views of a female writer on the controversial Fugitive Slave Law fortified Stowe's resolve to intervene and to speak her truth against the 'peculiar institution'. Beecher Stowe wrote to Gamaliel Bailey, the editor of the *National Era*, and explained how she was planning to write a book on slavery which would show the "best side of the thing, and something faintly approaching the worst" and how she "admired and sympathized with the free spirit of Grace Greenwood, and her letters have done my heart good".<sup>2</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was later serialised in the *National Era* in 1851. Greenwood in turn rhapsodised that Beecher Stowe was one of those individuals who "consecrate genius to a just, but unpopular cause" and that this leads to a "glorious renewal of the beautiful first enthusiasm of life".<sup>3</sup>

Greenwood toured Europe in 1852 and a series of her dispatches from England, Ireland and Scotland were given prominent coverage in the U.S. press. She wished to report on the state of post-famine Ireland and her writing vividly captures the utter desolation of a broken country. Her descriptions of a desperate people are poetic, powerful; but occasionally patronising and ahistorical. Her romantic concept of Ire-



A portrait of Sara Jane Clarke (1823-1904) better known as Grace Greenwood  
(Courtesy of Armstrong Browning Library)



Grace Greenwood was the first female journalist on the payroll of the New York Times (Courtesy of George Eastman House Collection)

land and 'Irishness' was evidently derived from literature, and she greatly admired the work of both Gerald Griffin (of Limerick) and Thomas Moore. Greenwood's account of the poverty that she witnessed is evocative. In Dunmanway, County Cork she encountered a people with nothing. She said that she would never forget

the forlorn, unmitigated wretchedness of the people who thronged round us at the little town at Dunmanway...all was squalor and tatters, soulsickening and disgusting ..[...]I turned away from the miserable creatures with a heavy heart with hopeless sympathy and vain pity.<sup>4</sup>

Taking a stage coach from Killarney to Tarbert on a cold misty morning, Greenwood was unimpressed by the landscape,

which was a "weary, boggy waste".<sup>5</sup> The deprivation in County Limerick was in her view the worst that she saw in her travels through Munster.

The cabins of the peasants were the most miserable of imaginable and inhabitable places - the peasants themselves were yet one depth of wretchedness below any we had seen before ... everywhere we saw the same sad picture - old Ireland in ruins, young Ireland in rags.<sup>6</sup>

The Great Famine is referred to by Greenwood, with stoic understatement, as that "late general distress." As her coach approached Tarbert, the driver pointed out what was previously a large estate but now the site for a workhouse. Greenwood,

aware at the disparity between the classes in Ireland remarked with simplistic satisfaction that there was:

retributive justice in the fact that, in the walls which once rung and rocked to the revelries of the improvident master, the poor tenants, whom his heartless extravagance tended to reduce to beggary, find in sickness and old age a quiet and comfortable home.<sup>7</sup>

This also revealed her own ignorance of Poor Law reform in Ireland, the appalling conditions within the workhouses and the great hatred that people had for these penal institutions. Greenwood assumed that the sole responsibility for the Famine lay at the door of Westminster and she was surprised when her driver pointed the finger of blame closer to home. She describes how:

he talked powerfully and with intense bitterness of the wrongs and sorrows of the Irish peasantry. I was struck by hearing him ascribe most of their sufferings, not to the English government, but to the native Irish proprietors, who, he averred, had revelled in heartless, wasteful extravagance, while the people starved.<sup>8</sup>

Her driver's opinion had perhaps influenced the pantomime-like narrative she projected onto the aforementioned workhouse.

She then took the ferry from Tarbert up the "broad, clear, shining flood" of the River Shannon to Limerick. After visiting the affluent section of the city, the English town and Newtown Pery, she judged Limerick to be a "well-built, pleasant and apparently prosperous town". A short excursion to Castleconnell followed, where she enjoyed the famous rapids, before returning to the city to admire St. Mary's Cathedral and its "melodious bells". She was impressed by King John's Castle which she considered to be "in a fine state of preservation considering its great age".<sup>9</sup> Then Greenwood toured one of the larger lace factories in the city. It was here that Greenwood's social conscience was piqued further. While she was pleased to see "so many poor girls employed" she felt "pained to find them crowded into two small and ill-ventilated rooms". This lace factory was a sweatshop. She expands how:

breathing the close air of those workshops, and looking on the pale, worn faces of some of the toiling young creatures around me, the delicate beauty of the richest lace they wrought had small charm for even my feminine fancy.<sup>10</sup>

There were five lace factories in Limerick city in 1853 which employed up to two thousand women in total. The publisher John Tallis wrote in 1851 that Limerick Lace was "celebrated for more than 300 years" but that it was only a traded commodity from the early nineteenth century on.<sup>11</sup> Thus the manufacture of lace moved

from the cottages to the factories. It's difficult to say which lace factory Greenwood reported on. The company, James Forrest and Son of Grafton Street, Dublin, which supplied Limerick Lace to the Queen, owned the Abbey Court lace factory in Limerick city which employed over five hundred women.<sup>12</sup> Robert McClure's lace factory on Clare Street employed two hundred and fifty. Mr. Rolfe's factory had sixty female employees and Mrs. Leicester Greaves' around sixty, both of which were located on Patrick Street. The most likely is the large lace factory at the Philosophical Buildings on Glentworth Street, where seven hundred women were employed. If this is the case then there is a piece of historical serendipity at play, as it was in this building in 1845 that Limerick held an anti-slavery soiree in honour of their guest Mr. Frederick Douglass.<sup>13</sup> Greenwood and Douglass were old friends and as racism reared its ugly head in Washington D.C. in 1877 Greenwood (then a Washington correspondent) famously defended him in the *New York Times*. Douglass was overcome with gratitude and wrote to her that:

You have done many services with your facile pen, guided by justice and enlightened liberality during the last thirty years, but you have never come to rescue more chivalrously and effectively and I may add, when your help was more needed than in the present instance. My only fear now is that you have invited to your own heart blows that ought to fall upon mine alone.<sup>14</sup>

The rag fair in Limerick city was also of notable interest to Greenwood. She had little sympathy for the beggars she encountered there. While she empathised and admired the peasants who she believed were struggling to better themselves, she coldly judged these beggars to be thespians in disguise:

By far the larger number of those who apply to the traveller for charity are vagabondish in their instincts and indolent in their habits, and prefer to beg rather than to labour, either in or out of the workhouse ... the professional beggar dresses with as much skill and care as any actor.<sup>15</sup>

This observation is undermined by her critical view of the factory conditions in Limerick; she failed to make any connection between the two. Greenwood had been approached by many beggars throughout her tour of Ireland and it seems that by the time she arrived in Limerick, her patience was at an end. Her views on the ingenuity and motivations of these people also lacks context and understanding i.e. that many individuals would do anything they could to avoid entering the despised workhouse. How different would her report be if she had spent time in one?

In a way she had anticipated the advice of modern day travel guides when she reminded her American readers to "set your

## Theatre Royal, Limerick,

By permission of the Rt. Worshipful W. H. HALL, Esq.  
Mayor.

UNDER THE SOLE MANAGEMENT OF  
**Mr. CHARLES POOLE,**  
(Lessee of the Theatre Royal, Belfast,)

THIS EVENING, FRIDAY, 6TH MAY,  
Last Night but One of

### Uncle Tom's Cabin

To conclude with the Laughable Farce of  
**SLASHER AND CRASHER.**

TO-MORROW EVENING, SATURDAY.  
Positively the Last Night of

**UNCLE TOM'S CABIN,**  
To conclude with a Laughable Farce.

ON MONDAY EVENING, 9TH,  
The Performance will commence with a Drama entitled  
**THE CORSICAN BROTHERS,**  
To conclude with a Laughable Farce.

Dress Boxes, 2s. 6d. ; Orchestra Stalls, 2s. ; Pit, 1s. ;  
Gallery, 6d.

Half price at 9 o'clock—Boxes, (only) 1s. 6d ;  
Tickets to be had of

**James D. Goggin,**  
PRINTER TO THE THEATRE ROYAL,  
37, PATRICK-STREET.

May 6.

*This Day Published. Second Edition,*

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the second best selling book of the 19th century and its phenomenal sales were only surpassed by the Bible

face to flint" when interacting with beggars or else you may not enjoy your "holiday" in Ireland. While Limerick's economic and social development in 1852 parallels with many present day developing countries, the moralising Victorian attitudes towards poverty and destitution lives on. The lace that was made in the factories in Limerick was sold to the wealthy shoppers on Grafton Street, Dublin and in London. Today nothing has changed in this regard except the sweatshops are no longer located in Limerick but in far-flung places like India and Bangladesh.

Overall, Greenwood's appraisal of Ireland was positive, she thought the British government was now "earnestly endeavouring to repair some of the innumerable wrongs and the immeasurable evil of cen-

turies of misgovernment [of Ireland]". She concluded that while many (racist) commentators suggested that Ireland's problems will only be solved through the immigration of the Irish and emigration of the Scotch (a.k.a. ethnic cleansing), she believed that the "best work for Ireland is yet to be wrought by [those who] are truly devoted to her good and her honour, and stay by her in her hour of need".<sup>16</sup> She cited sectarianism as the greatest barrier to this, and wrote that it was "still carried on with much spirit, creating and keeping alive unchristian alienations and enmities among the people".

She reserved her harshest criticism for the elites she met in Dublin, living such a lavish lifestyle in a nation that had seen its population almost halve in six years:

I have frequently found them wanting in the spirit of nationality – completely anglicised in thought and feeling. They, many of them, speak of Ireland and the Irish as though not of it, or them. An Irish aristocrat speaks of the poor peasantry very much as the Southern American speaks of the blacks.<sup>17</sup>

### Uncle Tom's Cabin at the Theatre Royal, Limerick

While Greenwood toured Ireland, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had become the most talked about book in the country. It was translated into over twenty languages, was the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century and it's not hyperbolic to say that it stirred debate about slavery and the nature of oppression across the world. It is unlikely that her Irish hosts realised that Greenwood was so influential in the book's genesis. It was immensely popular in Limerick and in May 1853 a successful dramatic production of the book was performed at the Theatre Royal on Henry Street.<sup>18</sup> The Theatre Royal, which could hold up to 1,300 persons, was "densely thronged" for the debut performance while "many had to retire, not being able to obtain admission".<sup>19</sup> The local press were full of compliments about this "interesting drama" which was "replete with the telling incidents of the world famed authoress, Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe". The hero of the story, George Harris (played by Mr. Wolfenden, a famous Shakespearian actor) was "loudly and deservedly applauded by a shrewd and discerning audience"<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Poole, who played the part of Eliza was commended by one critic for the "exceedingly arduous and difficult task in portraying the varied scenes of toil and hardship encountered." A Mr. Pritchard was the "tyrant slaveholder" Simon Legree. The production was in such demand that it ran for a week. On the surface it could be thought that anti-slavery sentiment had been to some extent reawakened in Limerick, but in reality the pathos of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was enjoyed more as a form of entertainment than inspiring any particular moral or political advocacy. Talis qualis, the performance each night was followed by a farcical comedy.

### Censorship, Fear and "Uncle Pat's Cabin"

In 1853 attempts were made some clerics in the Vatican to add the book to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the list of books banned by the Catholic Church. According to Rev. Hubert Wolf this effort was only instigated after the book was translated into Italian and French. The English and German versions were apparently no concern for the Vatican as these were perceived as "Protestant languages". It was argued that the book would encourage rebellion against the "natural social order" and that it showed Quakers in a positive light, which would help to "spread the Protestant poison."<sup>21</sup> There was intense argument over the book. One member of

the committee argued for the ban, although he had not read it. Another had read it, and lauded the book's intention, the abolition of slavery, "this is exactly what Catholics want". He asked the reading committee of the Holy Inquisition "have you forgotten that we learned all humans are descended from Adam and Eve and are God's creatures?" and produced evidence of papal opposition to the slave trade. The book was not added to the Index, but nonetheless the *Belfast Newsletter* reported that it had been condemned by the Holy Inquisition in Rome as a "damnable and pernicious work".<sup>22</sup>

The phenomenal popularity of the book invited international comparisons between different systems of oppression, injustice and bondage. In Imperial Russia the book was suppressed by the authorities. The French edition of the book had been available in Russia for years, but since only the educated, aristocratic Russian could read in French, it was not seen as dangerous to the ruling elite. A Russian edition, which eventually appeared in print in 1857, was believed to have a higher chance of being read by peasants and it was feared that the book could encourage violent opposition to the repressive system of serfdom.<sup>23</sup> Russian intellectuals wrote that it reminded them of the plight of the serfs in their homeland. In Romania, the book was translated into the native tongue in 1853. Romanian intellectuals saw much to compare between the enslaved Roma and American slavery. Admittedly there were many legal differences between the two, Roma slavery was less stringent, but this did not prevent numerous references to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the Romanian press, with one article claiming "that the Moldo-Romanian reader will find a misfortune similarity between the fate of the Blacks in America and those from our country".<sup>24</sup> Slavery in Romania was abolished in 1856.

The Irish were also active comparing these different miseries. Within months of the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a new show entitled *Uncle Pat's Cabin* hit the American stage. It was in fact a lampoon of the novel, set in Ireland and starred Barney Williams (real name Bernard O'Flaherty), the famous Irish minstrel actor and comedian.<sup>25</sup> It was produced by Henry J. Conway, whose stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* removed the anti-slavery message, highlighted the racial stereotyping, and outrageously changed the ending so that slave sales were the solution to Uncle Tom's problems.<sup>26</sup> P.T. Barnum, who was unwilling to even utter the word slavery, boasted that this version gave a "true picture of negro life in the South."

Three decades later the book's influence was still being felt in Limerick. It was in 1882 that William Upton published a novel which he also entitled *Uncle Pat's Cabin*. Upton, a (former) Fenian leader, land war campaigner and labour activist, hailed from Ardagh, Co. Limerick. He dedicated *Uncle Pat's Cabin* to the Land League founder, Michael Davitt, then languishing in a British prison.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Conway's disingenuous stage adaptation, William Up-

ton's nod to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not an attempt to diminish the horrors of slavery. Instead it alludes to the many different forms of political and social oppression that can exist, and is therefore an expression of solidarity.

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 *San Antonio Express*, 23 September 1867.
- 2 Harriet Beecher Stowe to Gamaliel Bailey, Boston Public Library, 9 March 1851.
- 3 *The National Era*, 2 October 1851.
- 4 Grace Greenwood, *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe* (New York 1854), p. 82.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 92.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 93.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 93.
- 8 Grace Greenwood, *Europe: its people and princes: its pleasures and palaces* (Boston 1853), p. 81.
- 9 *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe*, p. 94.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 94.
- 11 John Tallis, *History and Description of the Crystal Palace: And the Exhibition of the World's Industry in 1851, Volume 3* (London 1852), p. 40.
- 12 *The Nation*, 22 January 1853.
- 13 Liam Hogan, "Oh what a transition it was to be changed from the state of a slave to that of a free man!" Frederick Douglass's Journey from Slavery to Limerick (1845), *The Irish Story* (ed. John Dorney), 29th September 2014, URL: <http://www.theirishstory.com/2014/09/29/oh-what-a-transition-it-was-to-be-changed-from-the-state-of-a-slave-to-that-of-a-free-man-frederick-douglasss-journey-from-slavery-to-limerick/#.VDgZBWddXzM>
- 14 John Muller, *Frederick Douglass in Washington D.C.: The Lion of Anacostia* (Charleston 2012), p. 78.
- 15 *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe*, p. 95.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 113.
- 17 *The New York Times*, 12 October 1852
- 18 J. F. Walsh, 'The old Theatre Royal', *Old Limerick Journal*, Vol. 3 June 1980, p. 13.
- 19 *Nenagh Guardian*, 7 May 1853.
- 20 *Limerick Leader*, 6 May 1953.
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- 22 *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 September 1853.
- 23 John Mackay, 'The First Years of Uncle Tom's Cabin in Russia', *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture* (Iowa City 2006), p. 69.
- 24 Mihaele Mudure, 'Blackening Gypsy Slavery', *Blackening Europe: The African-American Presence* (New York 2004) Heike Raphael-Hernandez (ed.), p. 266.
- 25 *New York Clipper*, 6 May 1876.
- 26 William McKee Evans, *Open Wound: The Long View of Race in America* (Chicago 2009), p. 138.
- 27 William C. Upton, *Uncle Pat's Cabin, or life among the agricultural labourers* (Dublin 1882).