An Irish American's Observations on late Victorian Limerick and Clare

The following article was written in the summer of 1889 from notes taken by Major E. J. O'Shaughnessy while visiting Ireland in July 1888. 'The Major', as he was known, was a prosperous merchant, renowned for his high profile public life. He was born in Montreal in 1848, the last born of six brothers and the only child born after emigration, to John O'Shaughnessy and Ellen Finucane, both formerly of County Clare. From all accounts the emigrés adjusted quickly to their new country, the older sons found appropriate employment, and several followed their father's example and became successful tailors. The exception was the youngest son, Edward, who left the family circle suddenly about the age of 18. He claimed to have been involved in 'Fenian plotings' in Montreal, which were uncovered by an infiltrator. To avoid arrest he hurriedly slipped across the border into the US. After a period of hiding he settled in New York City.

In early 1880 Parnell's initial visit, followed by Davitt and others of that ilk, was the catalyst that created direction and momentum among the many Irish American groups in the big US cities, as the visitors hoped it would. 'The Major' was receptive to the message, and from 1880 the media reports him active in Land League organisations, in Home Rule clubs, various Irish nationalist societies and Catholic relief organizations. He was almost certainly a member of Clan na Gael, a semi-secret organisation which replaced the Fenian Brotherhood. Given his reported associations, one might wonder if his presence in Clare in the summer of 1888 had more to do than discovering his roots.

'The Major' wrote the article a year after his visit to Clare and he wrote it to a New York reading audience. So it is a New York Yankee's impression of a society quite alien to his way of life and an important eye witness report of the Vandalcur evictions. Because he was writing to a contemporary and local reading audience there are comments in his article that benefit from explanation. One in particular is 'Professor' George Reed Cromwell, said today to be 'America's Most Famous Forgotten Magic Lantern Showman'. This individual entertained New York audiences for decades by giving 'illustrious lectures' in large auditoriums on Saturday evenings. Long before movies and television these audiences lived vicariously through Cromwell's travel themed lectures, where photos of distant places and exotic things were projected onto a stretched canvas screen by technology loosely called the 'Magic Lantern'. Professor Cromwell's lectures were accompanied not only by dramatic photographic effects, changing lights and superimposed images, but also by carefully selected music played on stage. What is of further interest here is the statement that Professor Cromwell had three showing of photos of the Vandalcur evictions, one 'last winter' and two coming soon.

The writer returned from his six month Grand Tour of Europe on 18 October 1888, we believe with photos of the evictions. Cromwell's first presentation with photos of the evictions was made on 18 December 1888. This was long before the Lawrence studio in Dublin had commercialised the portfolio which proved to be such a commercial success.

Finally, it is important to note that the writer made it his business to become acquainted with many witnesses to the Vandalcur evictions, and he took care to record the names and actions of the tenants as well. In another published account the writer said that he travelled to the evictions from Kilkee in the company of several journalists from Dublin. In this article he gives us some names.

In another published article the writer says that he, his wife and her sister, as well as a small number of select people, were allowed 'within the ring of steel' of the military and constabulary to get close to the action. So the details he records here are likely accurate accounts of what he heard and what he saw.

A Birdseye View of Erin, an Irish American's Observations

It was on the 'ever glorious Fourth' that we first struck Ireland via Dublin and, as the latter was our first stopping place, we naturally called upon Col. McCaskill the American Consul, who, by the way, is a typical Southerner, hails from Mississippi and an appointee of Justice Lamar of the U.S. Supreme Court. Our object in calling was to ascertain if there was to be a celebration that day or evening. He said there was no Fourth of July celebration in Dublin for the last three or four years because he wished to remain neutral and not offend the Parnellites or Castlereaghs.

We then wended our way towards the city of the Violated Treaty, but at the railroad station in Dublin while two porters were trucking our trunks to the 'van' or baggage car, the boss foreman called them back to weigh our trunks and said we would have to pay two pounds and some odd shillings for excessive baggage. I informed the boss that the same trunks and weight accompanied us all through England and Scotland without charging us a penny extra. He replied that that made no difference; we would have to pay here, notwithstanding the fact that English capital and capitalists run all the railroads in Ireland, and they also run them into the ground by their excessive charges both in fare and baggage. The result of this English extortion is that the American tourist gives Ireland the go by.
The railway service of Ireland, which is managed by English companies, is the worst in the world. Their third-class cars or canal are narrow, rustiest and cheapest that can be imagined. They are simply plain narrow benches with backs and the fare for such an accommodation is double that of any railroad in Great Britain. But anything in Bellasis governmental eyes is good enough for the mere Irish.

In all the railroads of Ireland there are first, second and third class cars or carriages, while in England and Scotland they only have first and third class, yet the third class cars of England are as fine as the first class cars of Ireland and the latter place has to pay for the fare of the third class equal to the fare of a second class or between the first and third class of England.

It is the same of everything; anything is good enough for poor old Ireland. The refuse remains at home, while the best is shipped to England or abroad. Strange to say that one cannot get a good glass of stout in Ireland. I asked a man in the Guinness brewery in Dublin and they said the poorest and cheapest remains in Ireland, while the best was exported to America.

On reaching Limerick we put up at Cruise’s Royal Hotel, the proprietor of which is a Yankee in his enterprise. It is by all odds the best hotel in the south of Ireland and is over a hundred years in existence under the same name. It seems to me that in these advanced times it should now be called ‘Flynn’s Nationalist Hotel’, as Royal means oppression, while Nationalist signifies progress.

Old Limerick with its oldest corporation is a quaint place to look at, and like every other place in Ireland, it is in galloping decay, particularly that part called the Irish English town which is in a terrible state. Raged, barefooted and bare-legged children exist in the collar or the gutter; they have a woe-begone look about them. Here is a splendid field for the missionary to Africa, China or Japan. The sore and weal eyes of these waifs attribute to their smoky huts, which abound all over Ireland.

Baal’s Bridge is a sorry sight, since the old women with their ample cloaks which covered the steaming tubs of the succulent ‘crubecas’ of a Saturday night are dead or gone to America. The surroundings of Barrington’s Hospital on the Mall and opposite are carried on in a squalid condition.

King John’s Castle holds its own and is still garrisoned with Her Majesty’s (God bless her) troops. The ‘Island field’ is also still there and is the daily parade ground of the many barracks of soldiers that now infest the quiet city on the Shannon.

On the street in front of Cruises Hotel it can be seen, especially on Saturday, young and old women with their long blue cloaks and hoods drawing a donkey and cart, with long sugar-loaf cans full of milk and buttermilk. Another of the sights of George Street you may see now and then is the youthful and intellectual looking Bishop O’Dwyer on horseback who rides for exercise from his palatial residence on the outskirts of Limerick.

The clergy and church would feel lost without the aid of the venerable but active Dr. O’Shaughnessy, who is Limerick’s unassuming and unostentatious philanthropist. Many a poor Catholic child he saved in his capacity as magistrate, in his efforts to have them committed to some Catholic institution where the needs of soul and body are cared for by the good Sisters. The kind hearted doctor is now in the sear and yellow leaf of his existence and was for a long time surgeon to the Duke of Cambridge. He is the go-between or peacemaker of the Protestant and Catholic citizens of his native city and many delicate missions he performs in the interest of religion, morality, and the peace of the town against the depredations of the Scotch capped and red-coated gravel crushers, who are a standing menace not only to this city, but every little town and hamlet throughout Ireland. The present Colonel in command at Limerick, it is evident the humane man and a gentleman, and strives to do right with his men, but of course it is physically impossible to keep all his soldiers in check, five-sixths of whom are Protestants and have no sympathy with the feelings and aspirations of the Irish people. If the English can be said to hold the entire soldiery scattered all over Ireland, that is, if their Scotch caps are any indication of their race. Another singular fact is that the great majority of the landlords are all officers ‘On Her Majesty’s Service’, another reason why brute force and wealth keeps Ireland on the ragged edge.

Dotted all over the green Indie are seen the barracks, the workhouse and the prison. This is the triangle by which the paternal government of England rules poor old Ireland.

From Limerick we took a small tug boat, called ‘army’ and some dubs a small steamer to Kilrush, the seat of the infamous Vandal21 evictions against the Plan of Campaign.22 A detachment of soldiers was packed down on the lower deck among the cattle, and I said to myself that it served them right for donning the hated red coat of English tyranny. They were going to protect the cut-throats and enemy men in evicting the helpless families from their huts and holdings. Arriving at Kilrush in Co. Clare, about 100 whips were pointed at you from the stone quay, each one shouting as loud as he could to attract attention in order to unaid a car.

The boss car driver of them all is one George Stapleton Jr., who looks like himself, of Kilkee, and is always ready with a joke. While driving the writer one day to Carrigaholt, he said that Bishop O’Farrell of Tramore, N. J.23 had come the same way to Kilrush and we did and Stapleton tackled him in the same manner to tie his car, but with more persistence. Finally, the Bishop addressed him in a jocular way, ‘What is the name of your horse?’ ‘Dinamite’ instantly replied the driver. ‘Then your my man,’ said the Bishop, who got in the car with his brother, a Jesuit Priest, and was driven to Kilkee.

The evictions took place within a radius of some ten miles around the town of Kilrush, of all of which property the Vandal21 must be held the most trustworthy landlords and agents respectively for generations. A curious and novel sight it is to a stranger and particularly to an American to see a whole regiment of harriers, infantry, constabulary and emergency men, comprising over a thousand men24 marching over the roads and highways of the farming districts of County Clare to evict a family of little children and old people out of their thatched cabins.

The battering ram or Balfour’s maiden25 as it is now happily called, always accompanied this procession of evictors. The doors of all these cabins are all stoutly barricaded so that even the battering ram cannot knock them in, so they have to begin at the stone wall near the door before they can force entrance, and when they make a break in the cabin, out would come a spray of (supposed to be) hot oatmeal water and Sheriffs’ officers asked if a ‘copper’ (the barker) would be the first to receive it on his wickor shield. Then he and the constabulary would rush in and club the occupants right and left and being then bruised and bleeding, they would be taken before Cecil Roche, the so-called removable magistrate, who would plant him in court of a hedge wall and appropriate to himself the powers of judge, court and jury; then one of the District Inspectors of police, which is the same as our captains of police here, goes through the formality of swearing out a summons for these poor people because it is a crime to resist eviction in Ireland.

Father O’Marra, of Dysart, interfered in behalf of a poor girl, and Cecil Roche told him that he wanted no priests to influence him in the discharge of his duty, and were it not for Col. Turner, the divisional magistrate, who was in supreme command, Father O’Marra would have posted the boundary lines of soldiers by the orders of the same Roche, who would have sent his spleen on these poor victims, with his hat cocked on the side of his head and nearly covering his nose. They would be handcuffed to each other, young and old alike, and marched off under military escort to the bridewell, as they call it, or prison, in Kilrush, a distance perhaps of seven miles from where they were evicted.

On resuming the evictions the next day,26 the magistrates would not allow the priests inside or near the grounds where they were to commit the evictions, but the representative of the London Times,27 the Loyal and Patriotic Union and their friends,28 were allowed inside, while the poor Sogarth Aroons29 were crowded back about 500 yards from the base of operations.

Father McKenna, the patriotic curate of Kilrush, protested against this, but all in vain, so did Sheehy, the M.P.30 but he received summary treatment.

Thousands of families on this Vandalogue estate have been kept in suspense for months expecting any day to be evicted, and after they would evict one family, the parade and show of cavalry, battering rams,
dragoons etc. would take up their line of march again and go to some other hut perhaps nine miles away.

One notable incident occurred during the march of the troops. The bell of the parish church of KIlrush would ring its funeral sound and all the shops and stores would have their shutters up, while the country around would be black with people following in the wake of this ghastly procession of evictors.

No one knew whose turn it would be next, but when they did, smoke would issue from the chimney, a sure sign that they were preparing to give these emergency men a warm reception, before they would surrender.

These emergency men are composed of broken down soldiers, the scum and black-legs from the north of Ireland, who do the dirty work of the sheriff and remov-
ables, and these are the creatures the high-
toned officers and lucky Highlanders of the
British army are supposed to protect in
their nefarious work.

The officers remarked to the reporters
that this was not the kind of warfare that
they agreed to engage in when they got
their commissions. There is no doubt that
that is true in some instances.

The emergency-man who bossed the workings of 'Balfour's Maiden' would have
twelve of his cut-throats on either side of
battling-rum sailor-fashion, so that when
they were ready he would say—"Back away
with them—Back away with them"—but
whether he meant away with the Irish or
away with the stones that fell at every thud
of the battler-rum the writer was at a loss to
discover, but certain it is that one would
not like to see any of these emergency men
on a dark road.

After they evicted Cleary's family, they
razed the cabin to the ground, because it
was a good substantial farm house, slate
roofed and with three chimneys. Their
object in demolishing the house completely
was so that nobody could reoccupy it
again. This was their policy right straight
through. An old tumbled-down hut, they
would only go through the formality of
excising, but where it was a fine house they
would tear it to the ground.

When smoke was seen issuing from the
chimney, these pirates would get a ladder,
climb up and stuff the chimney at the top
with straw, in order to suffocate and smoke
the tenants out, but they would never
budge, until compelled to by superior force.

Pat Magrath is the hero of them all; he
resisted eviction like a tiger and fought a
dozens of them single-handled, until over-
powerd by the hoots of their guns and
billets. He snapped his handcuffs, as if as
if they were made of twine, and he, poor
fellow, is now and has been ever since,
in Kilkee jail for knocking out Inspector
Hill.

Thos. O'Connor, a photographer of Lim-
erick, was present and took photographs of
all the eviction scenes, and Professor
Cromwell reproduced them on his imm-
ense canvas in the Grand Opera house in
this city last winter; and will show them
again next fall and winter.

Report had it that the present Captain
Vandepleur, married to a wealthy English
wife, that she would not live in Ireland,
and during the evictions they resided in
London, their residence on Kilkisart road, is
called 'the Kilkisart House' (to the Yankee, one would suppose these 'houses' in Ireland were hotels from
their sound.)

It was converted with its grounds into a
camp with barracks. But it seems Vande-
pleur has returned a poorer, if not a wiser,
man and he had to finally submit to arbi-
tration, proving that the 'Plan of Campaign'
as was after all successful.

Thus it is for Mr Kelly of United
Ireland, Mr Hall of the Freeman's Journal,
and other gentleman of the Dublin Irish
Times whose names I cannot recall, these
poverty-stricken tenants would receive
rougher and harsher usage.

It is a fact that thousands of American
dollars have gone into the coffers of this
same Vandepleur and his father before him,
to keep the 'wolf' (agent Studdert) from
the door. Vandepleur is considered one of
the small landlords of Ireland, but he owns,
or is supposed to own, miles upon miles of
land in Co. Clare. Landlordism has seen its
best days and land is going begging today
for a few shillings an acre, thanks to Davitt,
Parnell and William O'Brien, and it sur-
prised me to find that the Land League agi-
tation did not begin a hundred years ago
instead of ten, for no matter where you go in
Ireland you will see the evidence of
extreme wealth and extreme poverty.

There is the landlord's house or mansion
nicely nestled alongside of a hillside among
trees, parks, bushes, drives, walks, riv-
ers, gardens and all surrounded by a
huge stone wall and immediately outside
of the wall is his poor tenantry in abject squal-
or, want, misery, poverty, and the huts and
cabins ready to fall with age and decay, and
not a farthing will be spent to improve the
bodily of his tenants, and yet this landlord
(so the house-keeper informed me) will in-
vite guests from London to visit with them,
for a month or six weeks. their demesne in
Ireland, and that they with their liveried
flunkies will pass through the wreck of a
town which he calls his estate. These ele-
gant grounds and mansions of the landlord
class may be found all over Ireland.

The housekeepers of these mansions
are all Protestants and they will tell you
that their lordship or ladyship only lives a
few weeks during the hunting season, and
some never come to Ireland at all.

Dunraven, of Adare Manor, near Lim-
erick, is another broken down landlord and
he is trying now to recoup, if he thinks that
his cutter 'Valkyrie' can whip our American
yachts. He was wise some years ago in
hedging off, as he then heard the crack of
doom for Irish landlords, and purchased
some choice and valuable lands in the state
of Colorado.

The divisional and removable magis-
trates as well as the landlord class affect
leggings, jockey caps and knickerbock-
er. On Sunday during the eviction times,
some of the officers in civilian dress and
some of the authorities in command drove
over from Kilkisart House to Moore's Hotel
in Killkee, and after making a day of it, re-
turned to the hotel drunk. When asked to
settle they disputed their bill, kicked
and screamed, and finally fought among
themselves. Some of these officers in 'Her
I often heard it said, even by lecturers, that Ireland was overrun by beggars. We failed to find any except in the wilds of Connemara and Glengariff, and these were little children who would ask for “a penny to buy a book.” In the cities you will find some beggars the same as you will find in any city in Europe.

In the gap of Dunlewey, you will find women selling socks for a shilling apiece and also little girls, tidy and clean looking without hat or shoe knitting industriously and if you don’t buy their socks, they will ask you for a penny to buy a book; they will also sing in Irish for you. This is the extent of professional begging so-called.

An American arrived towards dusk in Killarney and stopped for a moment at the Railway hotel and then made a hurried visit to the village without seeing the Lakes and rushed back and said he saw all of Killarney and took the first train for Cork and Queenstown. The village of Killarney is an eyecore to the Lakes.

The leading hotels as well as the railways are all run with English capital and the waiters are either Germans or Swedes. In one hotel I was told to boom or advertise it, which I did in sending away their letterheads and printed envelopes, but when I came to pay my bill each envelope and letter sheet was charged a penny each. This system prevails in Great Britain and on the continent.

The car drivers will tell you they are paid nothing but you are charged a fixed price for the car and they leave it to your generosity to pay the driver what you please.

The “boots” or porter will also charge you what you please in the absence of the “master.”

All these charges tend to disgust the average American tourist, who is used to the one price system. The rates at the hotels in Ireland average with the hotels here, but in Ireland the rent is comparatively nothing, while in the United States the rent is considerably heavy. The difference is that in the old country their summer is short and they make enough to keep them for the remaining of the year. They simply keep open to accommodate the commercial men, and their charge is about one third the tourist rates.

It is not surprising therefore, that the American shortens his stay in the Emerald Isle.

The principle (sic) industry of the country is that manufactured by John Butlers.

Ireland is a monumental ruin

The shopkeepers whom I interviewed, particularly the Protestants and excepting a few in the North are all in favor of a change. They say business cannot be worse and Home Rule is the panacea that would revive it.

REFERENCES
1 Colonel James Luke McCashill, a Democrat from Mississippi, was a political appointee of President Cleveland, and apparently a friend of Lamar, appointed to the Supreme Court in early 1889 by the newly elected President Harrison. McCaskill was a graduate of the University of Mississippi, and during the Civil War was initially the Adjutant for the 18th Mississippi. After the War he practiced law, entered Mississippi State politics, and was leaving his position of a Trustee for the UM when he was appointed the US Consul to Dublin, 1885-1889.

2 This refers to the politics of the times. Charles Stewart Parnell represented the Nationalists while the royalist seat of power was represented by those in Dublin Castle.

3 Limerick was known as the City of the Violated Treaty. The Treaty Stone, in Limerick, is reputed to be the stone on which the treaty was signed.

4 James Fenian was indeed known as a very competent manager of this very famous hotel. His hotel was considered the best around, and foreign visitors frequented it, as did those engaged in governmental affairs. It was a very famous landmark in the city. It was razed in the 1890s to make way for a new street now known as Cruise’s Street.

5 The old part of the city was divided into the Irish town and the English town.

6 Cribeens are pigs’ feet and they were considered the most ingredient in a stew.

7 A Thirteenth Century castle, one of the best preserved Norman castles in all of Europe.

8 Island Field was long used as a parade and training field for military forces.

9 Bishop Edward O’Dwyer was consecrated Bishop of Limerick in 1866 and continued to serve until his death in 1917. At this time he was at odds with the Nationalist Parliamentarian Party. Though he stood for Home Rule he opposed the methods used in the Plan of Campaign and so in 1887 he was charged by some as a “Landlord Bishop.” He took the papal brief and with the Papal Rescript and forbade the priests of his diocese to participate in meetings and activities supporting the Plan of Campaign. The attacks on his character were met with spirited rebuttals, and he became hostile with several nationalist leaders, including William O’Brien. None-the-less he was thought of as a man of his conviction, and remembered quite fondly when he died.

10 Dr. William Brooke O’Shaughnessy, 1809-1889 was famous for his work in pharmacology, and introducing the use of “cannabis sativa” to Western medicine. He was also famous for his work in telegraphy, which he undertook on his second posting to India. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1856 for his work in introducing the telegraph to India. He returned to Ireland due to ill health and was truly in his “scar and yellow leaf” stage of his life in 1886, as he died the following year.

11 This refers to men like Captain Vanden all and Lord Darunaw, who served