Richard O’Gorman in Limerick, 1848: A Further Note

by Laurence Fenton

Subsequent to the perusal of archives held in Trinity College, Dublin, I wish to add the following to my article in the last edition of the Old Limerick Journal.

‘Irish nationalism [in 1848] lacked the program, strategy, and popular following necessary for revolutionary challenge.’ John Belcham in 2001, is quite correct in this assertion, but could Lord Clarendon [Lord Lieutenant, 1847-52] in 1848 be so sure and confident? Certainly not when one considers the information finding its way to him from the spies that infiltrated the Young Ireland Movement. It has been noted that two events in the first half of 1848, the French Revolution of 24 February (‘Everywhere the oppressor trembled before his victim . . .’), and especially the trial, sentencing and transportation of John Mitchel in May, led to an exponential growth in Confederate clubs and membership. The Police Reports located in the Trinity College archives offer a glimpse of the activities undertaken at these clubs and a brief sense of the character of the membership. The information passed on most assuredly greatly and gravely exercised the mind and resolve of Clarendon.

In early April, after visiting Dublin’s Swift Club, the informant E F No.1 noted the flagrant disregard for laws concerning weapons, consequent to the Crime and Outrage measures of 1847. On 12 April he gave a fuller account, revealing how arms, including 2 pikeheads, 2 bayonets, a short (shot?) gun and one horse pistol, were being exhibited and shown to the members. At this stage the number of persons enrolled in the Swift Club E F No.1 estimated at 700. Three days later the same spy reported how the Grantian Club had challenged the Swift Club to a shooting match at Dublin’s North Wall. Such impunity had to be, and was, challenged. The effect was that E F No. 2 on 17 April could attest that the arrests of persons at the St. Patrick’s Club to a shooting match had led the leaders of the Swift Club to a challenge. ‘I heard today that he [O’Gorman] has been arrested.’ The spy’s confidence in his more legitimate cohorts was wholly misplaced and O’Gorman escaped to Constantinople.

Meagher and Richard O’Gorman travelled to Paris to offer an address of congratulations to the new Republican Government. However, the eagerness of the Provisional Government of Alphonse de Lamartine to appease, primarily, British concerns as to its incendiary intentions ensured they met with little favour. However, such matters of realpolitik had not occurred to the men of the Swift Club, some members of which, E F No. 1 reported, on 19 April claimed France had proved to be a deliverer of subjugated nations and declared war on Britain. This mixture of bluster, cockiness and naivety was again evident again in the fantastic claims bandied about, and recorded on 23 April by E F No.1, of the number of arms in store for the would-be rebels: 300,000 pikes in Wexford town, thousands more in Waterford and Limerick City and County.

This bravura, repeated in clubs and newspapers throughout the country, was shown up as a white elephant come August and the feeble denouement to Ireland’s year of revolution.

Of the much discussed whereabouts of O’Gorman, E F (no number) noted tentatively on 9 August: ‘It is stated by a few that O’Gorman was seen in Custody this day in Dublin [sic].’ More than a week later, 18 August, and E F’s confidence in the authorities had grown: ‘Keely, tailor, . . . he states that O’Gorman has escaped to America, but this most likely is said to deceive and I heard today that he [O’Gorman] has been arrested.’

REFERENCES
4. Though it was not until 18 July that Clarendon actually proclaimed Dublin (city and county), Drogheda, Cork and Waterford and thereby assumed the right to disarm everyone in these places: Sloan, William Smith O’Brien, p. 241.
5. The report says July, but its content clearly indicates August.