

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

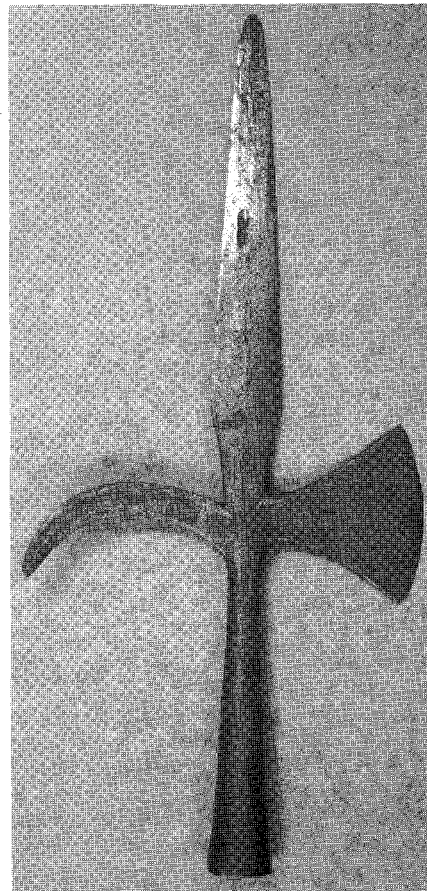
by Laurence Fenton

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 for revolutionary challenge.¹ 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 ...')² and especially the trial, sentencing and transportation of John Mitchel in May, led to an exponential growth in Confederate clubs and membership.³ 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 1847.⁴ 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 was estimated at 700. Three days later the same spy reported how the Grattan 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 had led the leaders of the Swift Club to advise against members bringing arms to their meetings. Not that these measures substantially impacted on the desire to join clubs, for by 18 April 20 new members were being admitted to the Swift Club, with a further 300 ready to join.

In April an Irish delegation including William Smith O'Brien, Thomas Francis



Steel pikehead made for Young Ireland by Thomas Ahern, Vulcan Iron Works, 13 Catherine Street, Limerick, 1848
(Limerick Museum)

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 August⁵: '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.' The spy's confidence in his more legitimate cohorts was wholly misplaced and O'Gorman escaped to Constantinople.



Brand of Thomas Ahern on the blade of the pike

REFERENCES

- 1 J. Belcham, 'The Waterloo of Peace and Order: The United Kingdom and the Revolutions of 1848' in: D. Dowe et al (eds), *Europe in 1848: Revolution and Reform*, New York and Oxford, 2001, p. 243.
- 2 William Smith O'Brien cited in R. Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien and the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848*, Dublin, 2000, p. 209.
- 3 L. Fenton, 'Richard O'Gorman in Limerick, 1848' in the *Old Limerick Journal*, No. 38, Winter 2002, p. 60.
- 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 those places: Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien*, p. 244.
- 5 The report says July, but its content clearly indicates August.