Richard O’Gorman in Limerick, 1848

by Laurence Fenton

Richard O’Gorman (1826-1895) as a young man.

Richard O’Gorman in later life, a judge of the New York Supreme Court.

however, demonstrated a new readiness to resort to physical force while a further series of arrests of newspaper editors, including Charles Gavan Duffy, in mid-July edged O’Brien still closer towards rebellion. It was generally accepted at this stage that in August rebellion would follow, if not indeed precede, the harvest. On 21 July O’Brien, Meagher, John Blake Dillon, P.J. Smyth and the returned O’Gorman met at the latter’s Dublin residence, where it was decided to go to the south and west of Ireland, areas supposedly “ripe for revolt”, and place themselves “at the disposition of the People, to lead them or follow them, as events might determine”. The counties of Limerick and Clare were allocated to O’Gorman.1

Dublin may have been the county with the greatest single number of Confederate clubs (56), but the Munster area combined accounted for nearly half of all clubs in the country. Limerick, with 15, followed Tipperary and Cork who had 49 and 33 respectively. Although Richard Davis believed that Limerick, together with Kilkenny, was the city where Old and Young Ireland fraternised most openly, asserting the French revolution had destroyed old quarrels and distinctions, it had nonetheless in April been the scene of a, probably government inspired, riot between the Old and Young Irelanders.6 Richard O’Gorman arrived in the city of Limerick on Saturday 22 July and had interviews with various people “supposed to be influential, who evinced great ardour and resolution, held out encouraging hopes”, and made statements as to the eagerness of the people for immediate action.7

According to the staunchly pro-repeal Limerick Reporter, words could not express “the burning enthusiasm with which he was received in every Club, while he described the deadly tyranny under which the nation groans, pointed out the duties and kindled the hopes of the people”. On that first night O’Gorman addressed the Sarsfield Club, Brian Borhoime Club, Hugh O’Neill and John Mitchel Clubs, speaking not only to the members, but to the “large masses of the people that congregated outside, who received him with every demonstration of enthusiasm”. O’Gorman, wrote the Reporter, was “a man of genius, heroism, and unblemished reputation - a man whose high character the breath of suspicion has never tainted.” However, his rhetoric, if heartfelt, was not particularly novel. O’Gorman preached against the “woes and oppressions of seven centuries” and the “agonies and inhuman degradations of the late famine”. Each speech concluded with him exhorting the audiences to enrol into the Clubs and to “prepare in every way that became men of manhood, and lie down as trampled serfs and slaves forever, under a foreign government.”8

The following day, Sunday, O’Gorman and two associates, Messers O’Donnell and
Punch cartoon on the riot in Limerick between Old and Young Irelanders, April 1848.

(Old and Young Irelanders)

The battle of Limerick.

Punch cartoon on the riot in Limerick between Old and Young Irelanders, April 1848.

(Limerick Museum)

Doyle, travelled to Killaloe and Newport to speak, agitate and enrol. The success of these trips was debated in the leading Limerick journals. According to the Reporter the "immense multitude of people" present immediately formed themselves into Clubs. The more cautious (or perhaps cynical) Limerick Chronicle wrote that in Killaloe the deputation "walked about for some time in despair, but ultimately they mustered a crowd of 300 idle persons", of whom no more than 50 enrolled in the immediately formed Club. Likewise in Newport the peasantry "reluctantly promised to take his advice in resisting the Government in their attempts to crush the spirit of the Irish people." The Limerick and Clare Examiner reported that 80-90 people enrolled in the Kincora club in Killaloe, 80 more in Newport.

Another aspect of Limerick's preparedness for revolt the papers disagreed on was the bravery of the club leaders. For the Chronicle they were "quite nervous, hourly dreading arrest," with several members resigning in terror. Conversely the Reporter opined that the club membership continued to rise rapidly, and when the police did visit them, inquiring as to the names and addresses of the presidents and vice-presidents, they were promptly evicted, their action serving only to further increase the numbers and enthusiasm of the clubs in the city.

Monday 24 July brought news to Limerick of the suspension of Habeas Corpus (whereby Lord Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant, could detain persons, including members of Parliament - Smith O'Brien until 1 March 1849), and of the warrant and reward out for the arrest of O'Gorman. Consultation resulted in the decision to quit the city and depart for the countryside. In his narrative for Duffy, written in 1881, O'Gorman is quite vague about his activities at this juncture, save they "would do for a novel." Most pressing on his mind, though, was the absence of any communications from O'Brien, with whom he had agreed to keep in constant contact so as to better concert their efforts in Munster. O'Gorman dispatched numerous envoys in search of his leader, finding out later that many had been arrested en route. He soon headed for Tipperary town himself in an attempt to rendezvous with O'Brien, who from Ballingarry sent word to O'Gorman to return to his organising in Limerick and to await further communications.

O'Gorman complied with his chief's orders, but there would be no further instructions from O'Brien. July 29 saw him lead the revolt into the open with a siege of some police in the house of the Widow McCormack just outside Ballingarry. Though there was no real military engagement, one of the rebels was killed before O'Brien led his men away from the scene when the police reinforcements were imminent. Going his own way, he was eventually arrested in Thurles railway station.

The news of the defeat at Ballingarry destroyed any hope of stirring the people of Limerick to rebellion and O'Gorman "received definite and reliable information from the City of Limerick, which convinced me that all hope of cooperation there was gone, and that the movement had so far been a failure". Not, however,
before the Kerry Post could exclaim: "insurrection had broken out at Abbeyfeale."16

III

Inspired by an earlier oration of O'Gorman's, some inhabitants of Abbeyfeale on 3 August made a prisoner of a detective who entered the town with a warrant for O'Gorman, and resolved to collect all the firearms in the area. The next day, in a group of over 200 men, they seized the Limerick - Tralee mail coach, emancipating the baggage and firearms it carried. The leader of the group was a man named Hartnett, who spoke of himself as a Captain to O'Gorman's General. Any official dispatches were held on to, but all the personal mail was returned the next day to the local postmaster. The group had much more than mail theft on their agenda and, as they surrounded the town of Abbeyfeale, it was eagerly debated among them "whether they would unite to form a raid on the town at once". However, the "evil news of O'Gorman's supposed escape from the clutches of his would-be captors, disguised of an old woman as he disembarked from the Errigo Dachy steamer at Kilrush. The truth of this story is, of course, highly questionable, and neither the Reporter nor the Chronicle, or indeed fellow-repealer Michael Doheny, gave it any credence.21 But it has survived and even Davis' study of O'Gorman's escape in a dress.

Throughout these perilous adventures O'Gorman was accompanied by two erstwhile companions, Messers Doyle and O'Donnell. The trio eventually boarded a ship for Constantinople, having spent a month or so avoiding capture in the wilds of Clare, where also "the news of O'Brien's determination not to do any harm to personal property - "the genteel rebel ... promised only glory - not confiscated estates."23 If this was a character flaw, it was not O'Brien's alone. Richard O'Gorman was extremely satisfied that "with many men half armed, undisciplined and reckless, about me day and night, there was no case of any outrage committed by any of them on life, limb, or property - no disgrace of that kind was attached to the movement". As for Limerick's place in the history of the rebellion, it seems unfortunately apt to quote John Donnellan Balf, the government spy, who wrote, "O'Gorman was waiting for Dublin, Waterford was waiting for Cork, and Limerick was waiting for Waterford!!"24

REFERENCES

4 NLI MS 5886, Narrative of the Rising by R. O'Gorman, p. 13.
5 Owens, Popular Mobilisation and the Rising of 1848, p. 56.
7 NLI MS 5886, Narrative by O'Gorman, p. 14.
8 The Limerick Reporter, 25 July 1848.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 The Limerick Chronicle, 26 July 1848.
12 The Limerick and Clare Examiner, 26 July 1848.
13 The Limerick Chronicle, 26 July 1848.
14 The Limerick Reporter, 25 July 1848.
15 NLI MS 5886, Narrative by O'Gorman, p. 15-16.
16 Cited in The Limerick Chronicle, 9 August 1848.
18 Ibid, p. 769.
19 The Limerick and Clare Examiner, 2 August 1848.
20 The Limerick Reporter, 15 August 1848.
22 NLI MS 5886, Narrative by O'Gorman, p. 17-19.