

# Richard O'Gorman in Limerick, 1848

## I

**T**he death of Daniel O'Connell in July 1847 had a detrimental effect on Young Ireland and the Confederation they had established in the wake of their 1846 secession from the Liberator's Repeal Association. Old Ireland propagandists played up the belief that O'Connell's heart had been broken by the Young Irelanders, and his funeral was delayed until the eve of the August 1847 elections, where the Young Irelanders were overwhelmingly defeated. With the January 1848 by-electoral defeat of the enigmatic Thomas Francis Meagher ("Meagher of the Sword") in his hometown of Waterford, Gwynn believed the Young Irelanders were at their lowest ebb.<sup>1</sup>

The revolution in France on 24 February (and the subsequent revolts throughout the Continent) cataclysmically altered the Irish political landscape, wholly revitalising Irish nationalism in general and the Young Ireland movement in particular. The number of Confederate clubs throughout the country rose in the first five months of that year from 18 to 40. In April a delegation, including William Smith O'Brien, Meagher and Richard O'Gorman, went to Paris to deliver an address of congratulation to the newly formed government of the French Republic. They returned with the tricolour but minus O'Gorman, who stayed on a few weeks to study the National Guard.

On 10 April the Chartist movement in Britain dissolved with the failure of the mass demonstration at Kennington Common. With revolution on its own shores averted, the British government turned their attention to the increasingly militant Repealers in Ireland. O'Brien, Meagher and John Mitchel were all arrested, with the latter successfully prosecuted on charges of treason-felony and late in May sentenced to 14 years transportation. The anger and indignation evoked by the trials of the movement's leaders, and in particular the conviction of Mitchel, led to an immense proliferation of clubs in June and July, where at its peak, 40,000 members made up 225 clubs.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout May O'Brien had continued to advise against insurrection (as a landowner he deprecated the possible destruction of property and social disintegration) even though a significant minority, in the Dublin clubs primarily, advocated action to prevent the transportation of Mitchel. A public letter of his published in the *Nation* of 17 June,

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

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.<sup>3</sup> 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



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

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.<sup>4</sup>

## II

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup> 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 who were not resolved to forego their manhood, and lie down as trampled serfs and slaves forever, under a foreign government."<sup>9</sup>

The following day, Sunday, O'Gorman and two associates, Messrs O'Donnell and



## 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.<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> The *Limerick and Clare Examiner* reported that 80-90 people enrolled in the Kincora club in Killaloe, 80 more in Newport.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> Conversely the *Reporter* opined that the club member-

ship 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.<sup>14</sup>

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. The first stops were at Rathkeale and Newcastle West. 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.<sup>15</sup>

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,



Arrest of William Smith O'Brien at Thurles railway station, 1848.

(Limerick Museum)

before the *Kerry Post* could exclaim: "insurrection had broken out at Abbeyfeale."<sup>16</sup>

### 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 junction with the force which they expected O'Gorman to lead, or attack the town at once". However, the "evil news from Tipperary" disheartened the group and crestfallen they soon dispersed.<sup>17</sup>

O'Gorman's adventures did not end with the rebellion. As Duffy stated, the papers of the country were filled for weeks with speculation on his whereabouts and indeed his continued existence.<sup>18</sup> On 31 July the *Cork Examiner* ran a story purporting to announce his death. This

false statement, it appears, resulted from the suicide in Tarbert of an Edward Gorham, who as well as possessing a similar sounding name, bore some physical resemblance to O'Gorman.<sup>19</sup> On subsequent occasions it was rumoured that O'Gorman was hiding out in the Gap of Dunloe, the mountainous areas of West Limerick or indeed had made his way back to France. At one point two Limerick boatmen, Patrick Nash and James Dillane, were arrested for taking O'Gorman aboard the *Garryowen* steamer bound for Kilrush.<sup>20</sup> The story that most captured the public's consciousness concerned O'Gorman's supposed escape from the clutches of his would-be captors, disguised of an old woman as he disembarked from the *Erin-go-Bragh* 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.<sup>21</sup> But it has survived and even Davis' study of the Young Ireland movement refers to O'Gorman's escape in a dress.

Throughout these perilous adventures O'Gorman was accompanied by two erstwhile companions, Messrs 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 arrest had completely extinguished any spirit that may have existed among the people there". Yet O'Gorman could be proud that "Although a large reward [£300] was offered for my arrest, no one of

the people during all the time I was among them betrayed me - On the contrary, with few exceptions, I received in every poor man's house that I visited, such welcome and hospitality as they could bestow."<sup>22</sup>

One of the reasons ascribed for the failure of the revolt was O'Brien's determination not to do any harm to personal property - "the genteel rebel ... promised only glory - not confiscated estates."<sup>23</sup> 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 Donellan Balfe, the government spy, who wrote, "Cork was waiting for Dublin, Waterford was waiting for Cork, and Limerick was waiting for Waterford!!!"<sup>24</sup>

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