



In the early 1850s, a group of young poets came together in Limerick. The boy-poet, John Francis O'Donnell, was one of the leading members of this coterie. Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, became involved with the group and, in his unpublished memoirs, describes his fellow-poets in characteristic caustic vein:

"I became associated with a small host of literary young fellows in Limerick – all votaries of the Muse and rivals for her favour. The most distinguished of these was John O'Donnell, who afterwards figured in London under the *non de plume* 'Caviare'. I was often amused to hear some of those critical cockroaches biting at the loftiest literary planets of the age – I thought such pigmy presumption ought to be well chastised, but nothing can stop the venom of envious hearts. Those paltry, important candidates for Parnassian distinctions were great by little degrees at scribbling, quoting rhyming, reciting and criticising."

Another one of this group of poets was William Colopy, who left Limerick for America in March 1854. On the 18th August of the same year, the *Limerick Reporter* recorded:

"The friends and admirers of William Colopy, whose poetical genius is inviolably identified with the recollections of his native city, Limerick, will be happy to learn of his safe arrival in the land of George Washington, where a brighter destiny awaits him than attended his career in the land of his birth."

In September, the *Limerick Reporter* published a poem sent by Colopy from New York. Titled, 'To John F. O'Donnell', it is an impassioned farewell to his young friend who remained behind:

*"A cloud above my destiny, and anguish in my soul!
I saw the wate of waters between us foaming roll!
I saw the dear old 'City of Sieges' fade away,
Like evening's cloud-built battlements that melt at close of day.*

*But hope still hover'd o'er me, her spirit was divine;
I knew thy heart and faith would live, responsive beat to mine;
I knew the place of battles would still preserve its name—
Thy youthful genius there to guard, the temple of its fame.*

*When Sarsfield died at Landen, thy star glory fell.
From Luma's 'Stone of Treaty' pale freedom sigh'd farewell;
And in her fane, oh! friend of youth, a lyre she left to thee,
Inspired to sing the deeds, the names, and glories of the free.*

*Long may'st thou live to sing their deeds, thy city's hope and pride.
Strength, eloquence, and fire, and truth in thy wild song allied;
Leaving a tale of dimless fame to other bards to tell—
Friend of my soul, across the waves, I breathe this fond farewell."*

A TALE OF TWO POETS

by Jim Kemmy



John Francis O'Donnell, from a drawing by his artist friend, Edmund Fitzpatrick.

Michael Hogan, who was five years older than O'Donnell, can hardly have been too ecstatic at this generous tri-

bute. But the reality was that, despite his tender years, the precocious O'Donnell had already shown signs of the talent that was later to take him on to a full-time literary career.

Though they came from similar backgrounds and were much influenced by their formative Limerick childhoods, there are many contrasts in the lives of the two poets.

John Francis O'Donnell was born on the 29th July 1837, the only child of John and Mary (Fitzgerald), in Cornwallis (now Gerald Griffin) Street. (It is ironic that the street in which he was born has been re-named after his fellow-poet, Gerald Griffin). High on the wall above the door of Griffin's Fun-



An early drawing of Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond.

eral Undertakers is a stone plaque. A close inspection will reveal these words inscribed on the stone: "John Francis O'Donnell, Patriot Poet. Born in this house 1837."

His father, who died at an early age, had been a painter by trade. John Francis attended Leamy's School in Hartstonge Street, and, at fourteen, went to work as a clerk in a leather shop. He became a member of the Catholic Young Men's Society, which had been established by Dean Richard

Baptist O'Brien. He showed an early talent for poetry, and some of his verse came to the attention of the Dean. Through the priest's intercession, he was sent to the Diocesan College to further his education.

When he was fourteen, O'Donnell had begun to contribute verse to the *Kilkenny Journal*. Three years later, in 1854, the *Limerick Reporter* published twelve of his poems, and *The Nation* also began to accept his verse. In September of the same year, he wrote a notable article for a seventeen year old, titled 'Street Ballads', which also appeared in the *Reporter*.

With this background, it was natural that O'Donnell would have wished to become a full-time writer, but a poet's life offered poor financial prospects. Journalism provided the next best opportunity for a literary career and the young poet did not hesitate. In 1854, he found a job as a junior reporter with the Limerick newspaper, the *Munster News*, and thus set off on a new adventure as a literary journeyman that was to take him to Clonmel, Dublin and London.

O'Donnell left Limerick in 1855, when he was aged eighteen years, and, apart from occasional visits, never returned. During his stint in Clonmel, he married a local girl named Jones and they had three children. He appears to have had an uneventful family life.

O'Donnell wrote poetry and prose for some of the leading newspapers and magazines of the day, including *The Nation*. In addition, he acted as editor of a variety of publications and also wrote three books. But the best known collection of his verse, *Poems*, was not published until 1891, seventeen years after his death.

With Michael Hogan the story was different. He was born on the 1st. November 1832, at the New Road, Thomondgate. His father, Arthur, was a skilled woodworker and was, according to his son, a quiet, well-mannered and refined man, well known for his wit and love of music.

Michael Hogan tells us in his memoirs that he went to the local Christian Brothers School but that his teacher failed to interest him in any subject. He says that he passed his time in scribbling rhymes and lampooning other students, and that he left the school after one year just as wise as he entered it. He wrote these childish lines, at the time, to explain his short academic career:

*"I was the funniest idle fool
That ever graced a Christian school;
I never learn'd a common rule
In any book;
For I, like every headstrong male,
My own way took."*

Hogan, who suffered from poor eyesight, served an apprenticeship to

his father but never became a proficient craftsman and only worked at the trade for a brief period during his adult life. He became a mill worker and was employed by the firm of Russell at Newtown Pery and Lock Mills. He also served for two periods as custodian of the Turf Quay and caretaker of the Island Bank, in the employment of the Limerick Corporation. Unlike O'Donnell, he lived all his life in his native city,

one, and he developed an intense dislike of his mother. He wrote:

"I may justly think that I was born and reared in a war-camp on account of those incessant hostilities between my Dalcassian father and my Puritan mother, but my mother was always the aggressor in everything..."

Again, in complete contrast, O'Donnell loved his mother and wrote about her with deep affection in one of his best



This stone plaque was erected in 1905 on the front wall of Griffin's Undertakers, Lower Gerald Griffin Street to honour John Francis O'Donnell and to mark his birthplace.

except for three years in America, between 1886 and 1889.

Apart from the decade between 1868 and 1878, when he wrote and published his *Shawn-a-Scoob* pamphlets, he was never able to earn his living as a writer. And the money he made from this venture soon vanished, when the pub he had opened at his new home at Thomond Cottage, New Road, Thomondgate, failed and he had to again take up residence in a tenement.

Hogan's home life was not a happy

poems, 'Limerick Town', whereas Hogan frequently castigated his mother in the most vitriolic manner, in poetry and prose.

And his relations with his brothers and other relatives were far from cordial:

"My relatives were a clan of moral assassins to me and if I were destined to enjoy the blessings of peace and amity, it was by clearing away from amongst them. They were decidedly ignorant ... Not one of them could

read or understand anything I wrote or published. They nursed a deadly jealousy against me for the literary reports I won and the small reward my hard industry gained."

Hogan's relations with printers, publishers and fellow-writers were invariably difficult and tempestuous. He had three books published, the best known being *The Lays and Legends of Thomond*. Like O'Donnell, some of his poetry appeared in *The Nation* and he also wrote for Limerick and Clare newspapers.

It is clear from his attitude to John Francis O'Donnell that the two poets had long ago gone their separate ways. But O'Donnell did not let it go at that. In his poem, 'A Traitor', he drew on all his literary powers and personal observation in depicting Hogan – warts, bad eyesight, and all:

*"I knew him well; keen witted sly,
Thin lipped, with an eternal sneer
Wreathing his mouth; a lustrous eye,
Deep, passionate, but insincere.*

*Man of all moods; a misanthrope
At least in brain if not in heart-
His sole ambition-his one hope
To hurl the lance or shoot the dart.*

*Of slaying satire; for his eyes,
Abhorring brightness, loved to dwell
Where all the hues of Paradise
Were blotted by the desk of hell.*

*He had kind moments, when some
rays
Of better nature shone, despite
His frozen looks and guarded ways,
And dazzled with their tender light.*

*Woman he loved not; so he said
For her, within his soul inurned
Contempt, by low experience bred,
Volcanic like, upheaved and burned.*

*Years grew on him; and he was
white;
I met him oft in lane and street
Creeping through the imperfect light
With bended head and failing feet.*

*Age froze the sneer upon his lips
To grinning marble: bleared and dim
His full orb'd eyes, in foul eclipse,
Grew heavy, melancholy, dim."*

It is a penetrating but chilling picture of Hogan, and shows that there was no love lost between the two poets.

Shortly before his death, at the early age of thirty-seven, O'Donnell left the life of literary drudgery to become a civil servant at a British Colonial Government office. He died on the 6th May 1874, and was buried at Kensal Green Cemetery, London. Like his life itself, the burial ceremony was a quiet affair and his funeral passed almost unnoticed in London and Limerick.



Michael Hogan in old age.

Michael Hogan went on to outlive O'Donnell by twenty-five years. When he died, aged 67 years, on the 20th April, 1899, all the prominent politicians and citizens of the day attended his funeral to Mount St. Lawrence Cemetery.

O'Donnell's poetry, is largely forgotten today, and Hogan is remembered for just one work, 'Drunken Thady'. They were minor poets, but their contributions to the literature of their native city are worthy of greater public appreciation.



A letter sent to Michael Hogan from Moorhead, Minnesota, in February 1898.