

THOMAS F. FEIGH: PHILANTHROPIST EXTRAORDINARY

BY CATHLEEN O'BRIEN-GRENNAN

Poverty was an accepted hardship in County Limerick during the early 19th century and was stoically accepted as a condition consequent upon oppressive laws imposed by an alien government. To be poor was bearable when neighbours were charitable and landlords, in the main, humane; but to have an added physical infirmity in a rural community, where only basic

medical facilities – at a price – were available, was a burden to be borne with resignation.

Tom Feigh was born with a club foot: he first saw the light of day in 1826 at Ringmoylan, Pallaskenry. He was destined to become an American mining pioneer when he purchased land located in the Cuyuna Range of Hills in the North Central part of Minnesota. Before 1830, hedge schools provided education but, in that year, the British Government

established national schools and small, crippled, Tom Feigh would at least have had the benefit of a primary education: he was reputed to be a serious scholar who was so careful of his books that he protected them in canvas sacking and kept them safe from dampness by storing them in a hole near the open hearth that always burnt turf, hand-cut in Clare and unloaded from boats anchored to bollards on Ringmoylan Pier.

Gradually conditions in Ireland were



Some Irish emigrants to America.

improving: the great Clare election of 1828 saw Daniel O'Connell elected to the Westminster Parliament and Catholic Emancipation followed in 1829. Agrarian unrest was, nevertheless, widespread and evicted families were forced to travel the roads or seek succour in town institutions. Some landlords helped indigent tenants by contributing passage money for emigration to America and Canada. Tom Feigh saw some of his neighbours depart and never to return to boreens that had blackberry bushes in autumn, as full of fruit as stars in the night sky; to humble homesteads that became derelict where previously comforting hearths had turf-sods piled like miniature pyramids and the sweet scent of peat permeated the wooden rafters and where strolling musicians were always welcome to sit by the fire, entertain the family, and enjoy fresh, brown-baked griddle bread.

Some displaced persons found work in Limerick City where, during the years 1824 to 1835, Wellesley (later Sarsfield) Bridge was being built. At that time, Gaelic was widely spoken in the countryside and interpreters were called to liaise between labourers and supervisors. Adare thatched cottages were built in 1828 and the Stonehall Fairs – notorious for faction fights – were held, and a new road was built to the north of old Kildimo and called the New Line, which, in time, became New Kildimo. Itinerant minstrels and labourers travelled through County Limerick and visited big houses like Shannongrove and Mellon, where servants and farm workers would convey the news, in 1831, that Adare Manor House was being constructed by James Connolly and the Blue Coat School – built on Bury land, confiscated from Edmund Fitzgerald – had closed its doors. The news coming to Ringmoylan and other areas would have been known to young Tom Feigh as after school he limped about the fields at the back of his home.

The night of the Big Wind, 1838, came three years before he emigrated to Canada and that awful, tragic night of disaster, is recalled, even today, when pictures of hurricane havoc and typhoon terror come to television screens as graphic as the geography of affected areas. Through all calamities, the resilient Limerick character came bounding back to retrieve remnants of optimism when, during the following year, 1840, the new Thomond Bridge spanned the Shannon.

During his early years, Tom Feigh would have seen the building of Ringmoylan Quay, and, indeed, have seen emigrants leaving the quay in small boats to ships anchored in the estuary. He would, by then, have completed his primary education and be apprenticed to the trade of shoemaker. As a young man looking along the Shannon that, like a mirror, reflected the sky and was, at times, as placid as a sheltered stream, and at times as angry as an Atlantic storm, it is interesting to speculate if his



A clash between workers and militia during the Baltimore and Ohio railroad strike of 1877.

acute intellect visualised the potential dormant on the American continent where, presently, he would stand near Green Bay, Wisconsin, and watch Lake Michigan reflect sable skies on the shores of Michigan State, like an Irish sky lying low over Rineanna before Shannon Airport was built; later, when he had moved to Duluth, Minnesota and prospered, he would see the winter wind whipping a cold, ice-choked Lake Superior, away beyond Apostle Islands and, in reverie, his thoughts must have crossed the Great Lakes to Ringmoylan and the Shannon, where a milder climate and warm water kept ice-blocks away from Beagh Castle Pier and Waller's Island sheltered squabbling seagulls.

Emigration acted as a safety-valve when the population was increasing and not enough land was available to settle all family members, and Tom's brother and three sisters preceded him to Canada – possibly departing by boat from Ringmoylan to a ship anchored in the estuary, and, in 1842, when 16 years old, he followed them to Canada. As he drifted downstream, he would have seen turf boats crossing from Moyasta, in County Clare, to Ringmoylan; and looked with nostalgia, at boats unloading seaweed on Beagh Quay at the grey outline of Ballysteen Quay receding as Reeves Rock came in sight and at Aughinish Point, where the salt-strewn air of the Atlantic perhaps remained an abiding memory, like the soothing scent of peat when he became domiciled in Duluth, chief port on the American side of Lake Superior – so far inland from the surging surf of the sea and in the State of Minnesota. He left Ireland the year the *Nation* newspaper was launched, and Thomas Davis, Charles Gavin Duffy and John Mitchell were becoming prominent in Irish life. No record is extant of Tom Feigh's arrival, settling, and work in

Canada: by 1856, however, he was resident in Appleton, Wisconsin.

The *Duluth Evening Herald* of 3 May, 1910, featured an article about iron ore mining on the Cuyuna Range of Hills in Minnesota from Crow Wing to Aitkin County, as far south as Mille Lacs Lake and north to Morrison and Todd Counties. Prospectors used dip-needles to trace the many lines of attraction before exploration by drilling. A new source of wealth was being tapped and any prospective pioneer who had the foresight to purchase land in the North or South Ranges and in the vicinity of the Mississippi River, was already potentially a mining millionaire. Names of prospectors who purchased land are catalogued by the newspaper and amongst them is Thomas F. Feigh.

How Tom Feigh, handicapped by a congenital deformity, travelled from Canada to Appleton, Wisconsin, is not recorded, and his adventurous spirit only became known widely in 1918, when he died and the *Chicago Evening Post*, dated 3 November, 1918, reported details of his will. Being lame, seemingly, did not deter him in his determination to prospect for potentially valuable land and, in 1856 – two years before Minnesota became a state – he hired a frontiersman to carry him overland, on his back, in mid-winter, more than 200 miles from Appleton, Wisconsin, to Duluth, Minnesota. It is not known if he worked at his trade of shoemaker in Duluth but, like all shrewd businessmen, he could accurately access the worth of land which, on instinct, he purchased, so much so, that soon it became an axiom that "after Tom Feigh looked at a piece of land there was no use even trying to get an option on it". Somehow, he got the money to buy 140 acres of land in Superior, Minnesota, near Allous Bay, which later greatly enhanced in value, allowing him to accumulate

sufficient capital to invest in more land at the Head of the Lakes.

From his will, filed in the Probate Court in 1918, details of his courage and enterprise are known. After he had staked his claim to Minnesota land, he looked to the great Missouri River for transport to Nebraska and his uncanny ability to visualise land potential led him to take an option on land where the City of Lincoln stands. As Nebraska did not become a State until 1867, it is possible that Feigh witnessed the transition from independent territory to Statehood: he would have seen settlers 'roll West' to challenge and cross the Rocky Mountains, along old Indian trails to the watershed of the American continent. Always restless to travel and speculate, he went into Colorado but had gone before it became a State in 1876; he ventured further afield to California and had already made many small investments before the great gold rush of 1849 and California had the requisite number of inhabitants to gain statehood in 1850.

One winter, in Colorado, he set out with a companion for an inspection of mining land when a heavy snowstorm overtook them and they spent a day and night walking through the drifts; when they reached the place, Feigh bought the land and beat a corporation purchaser by two days – evidence of his endurance and perseverance.

Keen judgement of character was an attribute that enabled him to carefully choose companions and he easily used charm and native wit that belied the observant quality of his smiling blue eyes. Some luck element was also present, for with his handicap, certain constraints would have inevitably, limited movements and he would have had to elicit help in raw, rough, warlike territory, where attack from hostile Indians and trigger-happy outlaws was always a danger. His affability, energy, and tenacity – attributes that marked the character of early pioneers – made him accepted and respected amongst the other speculators who helped "win the West".

The call of the Great Lakes and the spreading land, as far, as from dawn to dusk, where he owned property, drew him, in 1870, like a magnet, to Lake Superior District. Some time later, the great Minnesota Ranges were found and it was most propitious for him, as he was able to sell land which he had bought near Two Harbours, twenty years previously, for \$800 (dollars) at a profit: he sold his land for 800,000 dollars. Mining prospecting was the burgeoning business in 1880 and Tom Feigh, although he had no technical knowledge of ore mining, had the reputation of a man who knew 'how to make a trade', and financial investment and support for his prospecting activities followed. He located mines on the Vermillion Range and the Mesaba Range and started developing them extensively. He took little interest in this part of the work,



One of the first of the American trains to take settlers to the prairies.

leaving it to trained experts. Later, when the mines were in operation, and with adjacent towns developing he found out what the people needed, and set about supplying their needs. The biggest part of his fortune, however, came from the 320 acres he purchased at Brainerd at 10 dollars an acre: about this time his income was reputed to be 300,000 dollars a year.

Thomas F. Feigh, as he was popularly known in Duluth, was benevolent and philanthropic and the *Duluth Sunday News Tribune* of 19 January, 1913, commends his donation of 30,000 dollars for an addition to St. Mary's Hospital, "to be devoted to the treatment of crippled children". His own personal conviction emerged when he declared: "There are many children of all nationalities whose crippled condition could be eased if taken in time. My purpose in making this donation is to give these children an opportunity of receiving treatment free of charge, so that they may enjoy life by being relieved of deformation". His Tallpes deformity made him conscious of necessity of having early orthopaedic manipulations that would avoid the orthopaedic surgery of advanced cases. When he was born in County Limerick, no specialist health care was available to

the poor, and he was adamant that had he received proper, early, medical treatment, he would not have had to go through life crippled. He also donated 30,000 dollars for the construction of three churches in the Duluth area and International Falls, near the Canadian border.

As time went on, he sat back and watched how his investments turned to enormous dividends when railways came and gave access to isolated farm-lands and to more mines that were discovered on rocky ridges. Although he never married, he lived contentedly in Duluth for thirty years. In 1908 – the year the Wright brothers in North Carolina flew the first aircraft – he had amassed sufficient money to be able to take his two grand-nephews and Mary O'Grady, his grand-niece, on an extended European tour, visiting Rome, the Holy Land and Ireland. In County Limerick, he resided in the Dunraven Arms Hotel in Adare and from that base travelled by horse-drawn side-car to visit his surviving relatives, the O'Brien family, in Ringmoylan. The Irish scene had undergone many changes since he had emigrated. In 1891, Charles Stewart Parnell died, and Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill was presented to

parliament in 1893. By the year 1900, John Redmond had attained leadership of the Nationalist Party, and a new, revived nationalism came in 1906 with Arthur Griffith and Sinn Féin. Strange, indeed, it must have been for a visiting exile, who was mostly self-educated, to realise that, in 1908, the passing of the University Act allowed the establishment of universities in Dublin and Belfast. As a businessman, employing labour, Tom Feigh would have been interested to learn that the Irish Transport and General Workers Union was founded and James Larkin elected as its president. As he recaptured old memories on the tranquil boreens of Ringmoylan, he would learn that a new Ireland, like the ever-rising phoenix, was emerging, seeking an identity and, influenced by the Gaelic League, would later culminate in the Easter Rising and the establishment of the Irish Free State.

Until he made his will, Thomas F. Feigh had a strong disregard for the law and lawyers: he was his own lawyer and played his own tune, as he had successfully conducted his business affairs. An aphorism of his, comparing the law to a fiddle, was frequently quoted and repeated: "Regarding the foolishness of law terms and lawyers", he claimed, "the law is like a fiddle. You can play any tune you want on it".

Even in his declining years his philanthropic inclinations were paramount, for in his will, he left 100,000 dollars for the building of St. Thomas' Catholic Church in Chicago. He died leaving two million dollars, and nominated thirty-three beneficiaries – all relatives and living in America, England and Ireland – and six trustees "to manage his estate, hold possession of all property, collect and receive the rents, royalties, interest, revenues, income, profits, and to pay over the net rents, royalties, interest and income, divided in equal shares, annually", amongst his thirty-three named relatives.

Thomas F. Feigh, born in Ringmoylan, County Limerick, and a poor, lame shoemaker, can hardly have visualised the pinnacle of achievement he would eventually attain, when he departed from the banks of the Shannon, where in winter, wailing winds sighed like banished banshees and brought battling billows to break and groan on Saint's Island; where, in spring, fat cattle grazed on Mellon Point and strengthening sun called away the morning mist that, like a cloak, sheltered green grass from any ravages of night; where summer serenity had the river as gentle as a sheltered pond, with the setting sun as bronzed as if rising above the desert, and reflecting on the silent stream in long beams of gold and orange that sparkled and danced on the water; where in autumn, when the year began to decline, chill winds came like unwelcome harbingers and spread staggered mounds of seaweed along the shore, where grey wagtails and robins came to feed. In

quiet, reflective, moments, no doubt, as he looked along Lake Superior towards Copper Harbour, he would have remembered those, early indigent years in Ringmoylan, where he saw radiant rainbows, like colourful bridges, arched from Clare to Limerick and pondered the tradition of capturing a leprechaun to guide him to the elusive crock of gold, hidden where the rainbow ends in speckled sparkles, before disappearing in the ground. His fortune was, however, concealed in the Cuyuna Hills of Minnesota: he had to be patient and accept poverty until his passage money arrived.

He saw history in the making: he saw the United States expand from sea to shining sea: he saw the western wilderness, unknown until covered wagons crossed the prairies in long, lingering lines, like white-sailed yachts, propelled by favourable winds: he saw territorial boundaries mapped and population influx; the granting of statehood: he followed trails on horseback and oared canoes along wide, wandering rivers: he saw cacti and desert from stagecoach windows, before railways spanned the continent. As he travelled and speculated in land and property, American politics was concerned with the slave trade question and, in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President. In 1861, the Southern States seceded and Civil War began. Lincoln returned for a second term in 1864, and General Lee surrendered in April 1865. Other American Presidents had a term of office during his lifetime. In the year 1856, when he travelled from Wisconsin to Minnesota, James Buchanan was President: in 1870, when he returned to Lake Superior District, Ulysses Simpson Grant occupied the White House; in 1918, when he died, Woodrow Wilson – a descendant of Scotch-Irish settlers – held the highest office in the United States.

The energy and tenacity inherent in the character of Tom Feigh ignited that vigorous spark of determination that gave him persistence to succeed and he was fortunate in having a keen business sense that made survival, in a competitive continent, with many nationalities, possible in the somewhat lawless outposts of the New World. He used his talents wisely; became proficient at trading and disarmed many a "rough-neck" with his warm smile and courtesy; he could persuade and convince colleagues to his point of view and won the respect of partners when they saw how his enthusiasm conquered the drawbacks of his handicap.

He came a long way from humble beginnings in West Limerick to North West Minnesota, where he became a distinguished member of the Duluth community and was held in such high regard that he was constantly consulted by mining prospectors. His honesty, loyalty, and compassion for the disadvantaged – as much as his philanthropy – gained him the esteem of the mixed nationalities settled in the emerging mid-

west and his talent for business made him revered by frontier people who lived close to forests and rivers and relied on game for sustenance and barter. Like all humans, Feigh had his faults but he maintained an acceptable balance; he was fortunate in having that strange likeable quality, that unfathomable aural emanation that seemingly sent magnetic pulses that attracted a response in others and helped to break the conventional barriers that society erects for protection and privacy. A true pioneer, with that indomitable spirit of enterprise that brought railways to the wild wilderness; that opened the way for the uniting of a continent; that impressed a new civilization on tumultuary tribes, who previously imposed the law of the wild to serve the course of survival.

The iron mines discovered in Minnesota continue to produce iron ore but stocks are now so depleted that Tom Feigh's relatives no longer benefit financially from dividends. Many of the former beneficiaries are, however, still living and great grand-nieces, great grand-nephews and great, great grand-nieces and great, great grand-nephews are scattered throughout England and Ireland. The County Limerick connection is also extant: Thomas Feigh's sister, Margaret, married into the O'Brien family in Ringmoylan and inherited the former Feigh home. Daniel O'Brien, a grand-nephew, lived in the house, and during the 1908 European tour, welcomed Feigh when he visited the country house where he was born. In later years, Daniel told his son, William, that when Tom arrived he enquired if the hole in the wall above the hearth, where he stored his schoolbooks, continued to be used – he was pleased to learn that the safety-deposit container that protected his books was constantly in use as a storage area.

The house where Tom Feigh was born was occupied by his great grand-nephew, William O'Brien, until 1989. William's sister, Peggy Fitzgerald, a great grand-niece, lives locally in Dromore; a great grand-niece, Cathleen O'Brien Grennan, lives in Shannongrove, Pallaskey, and another, Mary O'Brien-Kiely, lives in Charleville, Co. Cork.

Of the six trustees appointed to manage the estate of Thomas F. Feigh, two survived in America until recent times – Patrick J. O'Brien and Mary O'Grady. Both have, however, now passed away – Patrick O'Brien in 1969 and Mary O'Grady in 1975. As stipulated in the terms of the will, the estate will be closed 20 years after the death of the last-named trustee.

Tom Feigh, a poor, crippled shoemaker from Ringmoylan, could never have visualised that his faculty for trading would earn him a place in American history, when he discovered iron ore mines, and by thrift and good management, become a Minnesota mining millionaire, whose philanthropy gave hope to the handicapped.