

'We disagreed in the desert, only because
we loved the promised land so much':

Young Ireland in Limerick, 1848¹

The Repeal Association, founded by Daniel O'Connell in April 1840, sought the legislative independence of Ireland via repeal of the 1801 Act of Union. It aimed to use the power of public opinion – 'Monster Meetings' – to force the British government's hand. It rejected any violence and the breaking of laws. O'Connell was in his late sixties when he established the new association and his dominance was soon challenged by a group of younger members, all clustered around the *Nation* newspaper. This grouping, the nucleus of the Young Ireland movement, included Charles Gavan Duffy, John Blake Dillon, John Mitchel, and Thomas Davis, the latter dying prematurely in September 1845. By 1846, the Young Irelanders had the unlikely figure of William Smith O'Brien, a Protestant landowner from Co. Limerick, as their leader. They seceded from the Repeal Association, establishing the Irish Confederation in January 1847. O'Connell's supporters, however, the 'Old Irelanders', remained the stronger force in Irish nationalist politics. The death of Daniel O'Connell had a further deleterious effect on the nascent Young Ireland movement, Old Ireland propagandists blaming them for 'the Liberator's' death. A chastening performance at the general election of August 1847 saw the Young Irelanders at an especially low ebb.

I

A dense cold fog covered the streets of Limerick city on the night of Tuesday, 11 January 1848.² The poor weather, however, did not dampen the chorus of approval that met William Smith O'Brien, the Young Ireland leader, as he entered the William Street rooms of the Sarsfield Club. O'Brien was president of the Sarsfield Club and the loud hometown cheers that greeted his arrival must have been heartening, recent months having proved most trying; a trip to Belfast in November disrupted by 'the dregs of the Old Ireland Repeal party' there, O'Brien struck firmly on the face by a stone.³ A journey to parliament, meanwhile, in December, to combat the new Crime and Outrage bill, had proved similarly futile. The coercion bill, as it came to be known, was a draconian government response to



John Mitchel



Charles Gavan Duffy

by Laurence Fenton

the famine-induced rising crime in Ireland. It passed easily into law, O'Brien's opposition hindered both by a heavy flu and by the wantonness of his fellow Irish members.

O'Brien returned to Ireland in mid-December, travelling home to Cahermoyle in west Limerick. Dejected and ill he refrained from full engagement with the arguments breaking out between the Young Irelanders in Dublin, the increasingly radical John Mitchel animated especially by clauses in the coercion act that allowed for the disarming of proclaimed districts. Mitchel's outlook on the famine had morphed considerably during the last months of 1847. Under the influence of James Fintan Lalor, he came to view the British government as guilty not just of gross incompetence in the administration of famine relief, but of the deliberate extermination of the Irish people. It was a line of thought that found expression in the indictment: 'The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine.'⁴

Mitchel called for a transformation in Young Ireland tactics. Other leaders were less sure. An alarmed Charles Gavan Duffy, the proprietor of the *Nation*, informed O'Brien of the new thrust to Mitchel's views, his threatening the government with 'secret societies' and encouraging the Irish people to disobey the new law.⁵

When the initial clamour of the Sarsfield Club died down, John O'Donnell, the secretary, read out a 'most cheering' statement of its progress, prospects, and finances. O'Brien, on a tour of inspection of the confederate clubs of Munster, returned to centre stage and explained how all the confederate clubs in Ireland, numbering eighteen at the time, were having their affairs looked into. He perused the Sarsfield Club's accounts and minute books, declaring them highly satisfactory. Its library, he continued, contained a 'very choice and excellent collection' and he was glad to see 'French and Irish classes already formed, and several other classes in state of formation.' He digressed onto his own deep knowledge of the Irish language and advised those students present to 'apply themselves to the examination of old Irish

manuscripts.' He praised the quality of the lectures being delivered by members of the club but encouraged that still more be given, one of the great principles of the Irish Confederation being the elevation the character of the country. He stressed that the lectures should not be confined to the more literate members of the club as even the 'humblest mechanic among them could tell them something about his own trade which they did not know.'⁶

Libraries, lectures, and the promotion of native manufacturing were all vital elements of the confederation ethos. Nevertheless, it was to a sustained chorus of 'hear hears' that O'Brien switched focus and reminded his audience how 'the primary object of the Confederate Clubs was not an instructional but a political one.' He called for unity between all classes and creeds and then addressed a recent letter that Mitchel had published in the *Nation*. According to Mitchel, the confederation needed to end its 'stupid' legal agitation and turn instead to the 'deliberate study of the theory and practice of guerrilla warfare.' The relinquishing of arms, he warned, under the terms of the coercion act, would be tantamount to 'virtual suicide.' O'Brien said he had 'read with sorrow' Mitchel's incendiary letter and could 'not concur in the policy or sentiments it propounded.' The club members moved to discuss the letter more fully at a later meeting and the night closed with O'Brien promising to donate some recently published Irish books and the announcement that Brian Dowling, a merchant, would soon deliver the first in a series of lectures on the American revolution.⁷

At one point during the course of the Sarsfield Club meeting, O'Brien commented that though the political strength of the confederates 'was not great at present, it did not follow that it would always be so.' One reason he had to be hopeful was that the influence of Old Ireland appeared to be waning. The facile opposition to the coercion bill offered by Repeal Association members of parliament had not gone unnoticed, with even Lord Clarendon, the lord lieutenant of Ireland, remarking 'Young Ireland is very popular ... and if J[ohn]. O'Connell [son of Daniel O'Connell] had come over the day after the Crime Prevention Bill was introduced, he would have been murdered for having *sould his Country*.'⁸

II

William Smith O'Brien did not attend the first anniversary meeting of the Irish Confederation, held at the Round Room of the Rotunda in Dublin on the evening of 12 January 1848. The event passed off without serious incident but tensions were clearly rising, long latent divisions brought to the fore by the callous coercion act. The majority view among the confederation leadership, epitomised by Duffy and O'Brien, remained attached to the dual ideas of constitutional action and class unity. They recoiled from any pre-



William Smith O'Brien

cipitate move toward violence, believing it untenable in a country so ravaged by ongoing famine. The more extreme views of Mitchel, gaining prominence especially among the proletarian members of the Dublin clubs, advocated civil disobedience, the arming of the people, and passive resistance to, and non-payment of, rates and rents. Already, Mitchel and Devin Reilly had severed their connections with the *Nation*, complaining of censorship from Duffy, and set about founding a new paper of their own, the *United Irishman* - 'established specifically as an Organ of Revolution.'⁹

The prospectus of the *United Irishman* was printed in the *Limerick Reporter* on 1 February 1848. That same issue carried the news of an insurrection in Sicily, the island off the south west coast of Italy,



Thomas Devin Reilly

linked to the Bourbon dynasty of Naples and ruled by the despotic Ferdinand II. Parallels with Ireland were swiftly drawn, the *Reporter*, edited by the Young Ireland supporting John McClenahan, stating:

*Sicily in its natural and political history and in its social conditions presents strong points of resemblance to Ireland, and the present throwing off of the Neapolitan yoke, is pregnant with warning and instruction to England and her rulers, that the tyranny practised over the Irish people, may one day become intolerable, and what has happened once in Sicily may happen again in Ireland. Let British statesmen, legislatures, and politicians, be warned that if they persist in misgoverning this unhappy country, the trodden worm may turn at last, and despite all the efforts of the friends of peace, the standard of revolt, aye, and of successful revolt may be raised, and the natural ally of England ... be forever lost to her.'*¹⁰

McClenahan's hopes that the Sicilian rebellion would rouse the Irish to greater action were short-lived, its occurrence overshadowed by further dissension within the ranks of Young Ireland.

On 18 January 1848, Richard O'Gorman jun., a twenty-two year old Young Irelander from Dublin, described to O'Brien how 'wearied and disgusted' he was 'with our squabbling here.' The confederation was 'doomed,' he declared, 'its days are numbered.' O'Gorman concurred with O'Brien 'that it is better it [the confederation] should perish, than be the organ for the dissemination of the mischievous and foolish doctrines of the Infant Ireland.' Despite this 'Infant Ireland' jibe, O'Gorman could not deny Mitchel's 'opinions are fascinating.' Nevertheless, he begged of O'Brien, 'I wish you were in town.' It would better 'for us all to be together in debate than to be doing battle singly.'¹¹

O'Brien, characteristically stubborn, did not heed the calls of Duffy and O'Gorman to return to Dublin as soon as possible. He was, however, greatly concerned that the Irish Confederation was being damaged by its association with Mitchel's writings. When at last he travelled up to the capital in late January he acted decisively, presenting to a general meeting of the confederation ten resolutions that, in essence, reiterated as the basic principles of the confederation of an Irish parliament by the 'combination of classes,' meaning alliance with landlords, to be achieved through 'constitutional action.' The ensuing debate, generally cordial, lasted a wearying three days. O'Brien, a landlord himself, praised Mitchel personally but argued that arming the people in the present adverse circumstances - famine and a lack of great popular support - would lead only to 'confusion, anarchy and bloodshed.' Mitchel, for his part, did not call for any immediate rising but insisted on the need to arm the people. He also made clear his antipathy for the majority of the insuper-

ably laggard Irish landlords, stating he would not waste any more time trying to accommodate them into the Young Ireland cause. A vote late in the third night of the meeting upheld O'Brien's resolutions. A few days later Mitchel, Reilly, and John Martin resigned from the council of the confederation, though not from the confederation itself.¹²

The difficulties for Young Ireland were compounded in late February by the defeat of Thomas Francis Meagher in a Waterford by-election. The cause of this election was the acceptance by Daniel O'Connell jun., one of the Liberator's own sons, of a consular position in France. This episode gave further credence to confederation claims of Repeal Association 'place-hunting' and the run of the young and charismatic Meagher for the seat in his native Waterford was a brief source of great excitement. Two members of the Sarsfield Club, Daniel Doyle and William Lane Joynt, both solicitors, travelled from Limerick to assist Meagher in his campaigning.¹³

The days leading up to the election saw a number of scuffles break out between the Young and Old Irelanders of Waterford, and although Meagher had the apparent support of the un-franchised masses of the city he came third and last in the election, behind the Whig Sir Henry Winston Barron and the Old Irelander Patrick Costelloe.¹⁴ Shortly after this failure, O'Brien made another dispiriting journey across to parliament, labelling the other Irish members of the House of Commons 'tame as well beaten hounds' who 'licked the hand which struck them.'¹⁵ Into this morass of torpor and dissension the news of revolution in France struck like thunder.

III

Brought to the throne by the 'July Revolution' of 1830, King Louis Philippe, the 'Citizen King', was un-deserving of the appellation. From 1840 he had ruled France in concert with the conservative politician and historian Francois Guizot, corruption and economic crisis the chief traits of their regime. The summer of 1847 brought the beginning of a series of banquets held throughout France that served doubly as reformist rallies. In January 1848 Louis Philippe prohibited one such banquet in Paris and in consequence a demonstration was called for 22 February. The demonstration was banned but Parisians took to the streets regardless and were joined in cries of 'Down with the ministry' by disillusioned members of the National Guard. Louis Philippe at last dismissed Guizot but on the streets, as the barricades were enthusiastically erected, power passed from the reformers to the radicals and on the night of 23 February a small knot of protestors, red flag in hand, clashed with a contingent of troops. Shots were fired and a score of protestors left dead. A funeral procession formed, more barricades were raised, and riot turned ineluctably to

revolution. On 24 February Louis Philippe abdicated his throne and a provisional government was established, consisting in the main of well-known reformers such as the poet Alphonse de Lamartine but including also more radical figures like Louis Blanc as well as the symbolic ordinary worker, Albert. That night the Second Republic was proclaimed from a balcony of the Hotel de Ville.¹⁶

'Glory to the French people!' exulted the *Limerick Reporter*. 'They are worthy of liberty. Their noble deeds kindle holy emotion and sympathy in every breast not dead to the pulsations of freedom.' The monarchs of Europe were 'quaking on their thrones' and the time had come for Britain to 'give us back our parliament, at once, and let every man have his own country.'¹⁷ For all of Europe the revolution in France carried a great deal more consequence than any outbreak in Sicily. The members of the Sarsfield Club were naturally eager to celebrate the French revolution and, like other confederate clubs throughout the country, drafted congratulatory addresses to the French people. To further mark the auspicious turn of events the club illuminated all its windows with candles on Sunday, 5 March, and flew 'a large and beautiful Tricolor [sic] Flag, and beside it the Green Flag of Ireland, trimmed with white, and both having golden tassels.' Inside, John O'Donnell, a solicitor with offices at 9 William Street, buoyantly suggested the best way of showing support for France was 'by cherishing the like unquenchable hatred of tyranny, and by exhibiting in practise the same intense devotion as that which prompted the Citizens of Paris, in defence of their rights, to oppose their naked breasts to the sabre and the musket, and in three short days, to hurl the hoary despot from his guilty eminence (hear, hear, and loud cheers)'.¹⁸

The following day 'a grand and universal illumination' took place in Rathkeale in west Limerick in support of the French revolution. 'The whole town lighted at an early hour' and with tar barrels 'blazing at various points,' shots 'fired in all directions,' and 'bands playing spirit-stirring national airs,' it had the appearance of 'a gala night.'¹⁹ Cheers were heard for the *United Irishman* and a soldier who helped light a bonfire outside Magee's public house was arrested and confined to his barracks.²⁰

According to the *Reporter*: 'Nothing could exceed the excitement and joy of the people of this city upon the arrival of the news of the complete triumph of Young France over hoary despotism.'²¹ The Limerick magistrates, however, played down any shows of enthusiasm. On Friday, 3 March, Joseph Tabuteau, formerly a magistrate in the county of Tipperary, sent Thomas Redington, the under-secretary in Dublin Castle, a poster acclaiming the French revolution that had been put up around the city. He acknowledged that some people in Limerick were disposed 'to create disturbance' but had 'no reason at present to believe it will succeed.'²²



John Martin

Tabuteau wrote again on the evening of the Sarsfield Club's illumination, stating that, as of five o'clock, there had not been 'the slightest attempt at a meeting, and the town wears the appearance of an ordinary Sunday.' The Young Irelanders, he continued, had at 'about two o'clock exhibited three flags from the windows of their Club room, one of which is the Tri Coloured flag, but the circumstance has not created the slightest interest and not a soul has stopped to view them.'²³

The people of Limerick had, perhaps, more vital issues on their mind – simple food and shelter. The four major workhouses in the county were all dangerously overcrowded and it was about this time, too, that three young girls, Bridget Hayes, Honorah Downey, and Bridget Clune, so dismayed at the dire conditions in which they lived, fled the auxiliary workhouse at Mount Kennet in the city while still wearing their workhouse apparel. They were quickly caught and jailed for stealing workhouse property, their ragged workhouse clothes.²⁴

Despite the unruffled views of Tabuteau the temper of Irish nationalism was transformed by events in Paris. Revolution, it was felt immediately, was on the march, Irish minds recalling easily the centuries of past affinities with France, the great Catholic protector. One of the members of the new provisional government in Paris, Ledru-Rollin, had even attended Daniel O'Connell's monster meeting at Tara in 1843. In Cork, Joseph Brennan, an eloquent but impulsive young nineteen-year-old confederate, shocked even the members of his own Desmond Club when he proclaimed, after the mayor of that city had refused to call a congratulatory meeting for the French people, that Ireland had 'a surplus of landlords and fat aldermen' and that 'blood was a commodity of which there would soon be lavish expenditure.'²⁵ Lord Clarendon trembled 'to think of the



Richard O'Gorman, Junr.



John Blake Dillon

amount of disaster that may be oncoming ... The lower orders in Dublin are already somewhat excited and say now that the French have got their liberties they will come and help us get "repale" [sic].²⁶

For Richard O'Gorman, events were 'hurrying so fast' that no man could say 'what treasures lie hid in the depth of tomorrow.'²⁷ Such was the sense of imminence and exhilaration, great changes touching distance away, even ostensibly moderate Young Irelanders began to speak out in a manner that made a mockery of earlier criticisms of Mitchel (who by now had declared for a Republic in the *United Irishman* and was 'more Jacobin than the French' according to Duffy²⁸). An ebullient Meagher declared himself 'in raptures,' wanting 'bold strokes, and nothing else!'²⁹ Duffy, meanwhile, urged the formation of an armed national guard and together with John Blake Dillon discussed the procurement of 'funds and military aid from our countrymen in America,' contemplating rebellion once the harvest was in.³⁰

This burst of zeal and fervour was dampened slightly by fears that the Mitchelite wing could carry the country too soon down the path to open rebellion. Regarding the Dublin clubs it has been observed that events in Paris made Mitchel's brand of militant nationalism even more attractive than before.³¹ Mitchel's mindset in the aftermath of the French revolution is clear from passages in his *Jail Journal* that argue 'depopulated, starved, cowed and corrupted' as Ireland was still it was better to 'attempt resistance, however heavy the odds against success,' better 'that men should perish by the bayonets of the enemy than by their laws.'³² O'Brien, who hailed the French revolution and was heartened by its largely bloodless nature, still viewed any immediate outbreak in Ireland in terms of 'rashness' and 'criminal folly.'³³ Further-

more, both he and Duffy remained desirous of obtaining some input into the Young Ireland movement from the higher orders of society, the landlords and the gentry Mitchel openly rebuked. Class unity was their goal but with leadership coming unquestionably from the men of property, from the top down, the upper and middle classes before the masses. Duffy, indeed, positively feared 'a mere democratic' rising, 'which the English Govt. will extinguish in blood; or if by a miracle it succeeds ... will mean death and exile to the middle, as well as the upper classes.'³⁴

IV

At the meeting of the Sarsfield Club on the night of the illumination, John O'Donnell spoke of his 'sincere and unaffected pleasure' at the presence of so many Old Irelanders. He accepted it 'as a happy omen as the harbinger of returning brotherhood amongst Irishmen,' declaring 'Be this night's meeting the commencement of our renewed union - be all our paltry and unmeaning differences from this night forward obliterated and forgotten.'³⁵ In a letter to William Smith O'Brien a few days later he described the meeting as 'densely thronged by men of all parties' exhibiting a 'most anxious desire for reamalgamation.'³⁶

The following afternoon, in another manifestation of reunion, members of the Sarsfield Club and the Congregated Trades (staunch Old Irelanders in the main) met and marched together with bands and banners to the spacious corn market that even with 'the wetness of the day ... was completely filled.'³⁷ Along the way the Trades 'walked ... in front of the Club room & Cheered warmly for the members of the Club in token of reconciliation.' The mayor, Michael Quin, an O'Connellite said by O'Donnell to be 'in

disfavour for his lukewarm sympathy to the late French doings,' attended the meeting albeit briefly.³⁸ Another congratulatory address was drafted and carried, the majority of the crowd then dispersing to cries of 'Vive le Republique.' Those that stayed on heard preposterous schemes to raise 200,000 men to send to France lest any despot, Tsar Nicholas I or the Kings of Austria or Prussia, try to interfere with the new republic.³⁹

Reconciliation was on the minds of the Young Ireland leaders, also, unity and fraternity the fresh bywords. Conciliatory articles appeared in the *Nation* and *Pilot* newspapers, erstwhile antagonists. O'Brien, fearful that the myriad divisions within Irish nationalism would see a great opportunity for strong action go to waste, initiated talks with the Old Irelanders in Dublin. One of the first signs of a thaw in relations was a meeting of the Irish Confederation at the Music Hall in Dublin on 15 March where 'the coal porters, formerly so hostile to the Confederation, had volunteered to act as wards-men for the evening, a duty freely entrusted to them, and most faithfully discharged.'⁴⁰ The signs of union throughout Ireland were aided by a fresh torrent of favourable news from Europe; tumult on the streets of Venice and Milan; revolution in Berlin; riot and insurrection at the heart and periphery of the sprawling Austrian empire, Viennese democrats, Czech moderates, and Magyar aristocrats all striking blows against the integrity of the empire and sending the canny old chancellor, Prince Metternich, into flight.

Lasting union between the factions did not come easily, however, either in Limerick or in the country as a whole, the intoxicating wave of rebellion sweeping through Europe not enough to obliterate the old local enmities. In Limerick, a number of meetings were held between the Young and Old Irelanders of the city in an attempt to organise a demonstration for St. Patrick's Day, where repeal of the union between Britain and Ireland would be demanded. Difficulties arose over a joint petition the two groups were drafting. The Old Irelanders wanted it sent to parliament but this was against the principles of the confederates who did not recognise Westminster's power over Ireland. The Sarsfield Club wished instead to address the Queen and were supported in this stance by a leading article in the clearly partisan *Reporter* that pointed out how both Daniel and John O'Connell had petitioned the Queen on numerous occasions in the past.⁴¹ The groups met up again but could not surmount their differences, the compromise offer, as per instructions from Conciliation Hall, the headquarters of the Repeal Association in Dublin, to petition both Queen and parliament still unacceptable to the Limerick confederates. O'Donnell raised new issues, too, making clear his displeasure with some of the ingratiating wording suggested, like 'respectful gratitude,' which he said made him want to cut off his hand.⁴²

John Pigot, a prominent Young Irishman based in Dublin, was dispatched to Limerick to take part in the negotiations. On Thursday, 16 March, he reported back to O'Brien on the final meeting between the parties, held the day before at the Town Hall. The Sarsfield Club delegation had consisted, in part, of Pigot, John O'Donnell, Dr. William Griffin, and John McClenahan of the *Reporter*. The group of Old Irishmen included the mayor, the Revd. Dr. O'Brien of St. Mary's parish, James McCarthy of the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, and a Mr. Hickie, of the Trades. Once more, the Old Irishmen, following instructions from John O'Connell in Dublin, advocated a petition to parliament that the Young Irishmen rejected. 'At last it fell from Dr. O'Brien that the forms having been sent from Concn Hall, they [the Old Irishmen] were reluctant to depart in one word from them.' Another of the Old Irishmen then threatened, in a seemingly exaggerated manner, 'that such violence & riot never was seen in Limerick as would take place if we did not adopt a petition to Parliament.' The meeting broke soon up after this outburst. The Rev. Dr. O'Brien, however, 'expressed a hope' that the 'conference need not terminate without taking some steps towards a future union.' He suggesting they form 'a common club to read out the news from France & Italy, if they could agree on no more.' Pigot concluded that though thwarted for the moment a desire for real union remained evident in Limerick.⁴³

St. Patrick's Day passed off peacefully in Limerick though the army had prepared for disorder, occupying the city at strategic points with 'cannon pointed from the barracks' and 'provisions and rum laid in for a siege.'⁴⁴ Three days later, on Monday, 20 March, the Old Irishmen, heeding at last the strong mood for reunion, gave way on their earlier preconditions. A joint committee of Young and Old Irishmen sent a public letter to the mayor asking him to convene a 'Meeting of the inhabitants of this City, on Saturday next, the 25th of March, at two o'clock for the purpose of adopting an address, respectfully calling upon the Queen to take measures for the re-assembly of the Irish Parliament.' Ten men from each side were to take charge of the preparations.⁴⁵

In response to this new accord between the repealers of Limerick, Henry Maunsell, the high sheriff, sent Lord Clarendon an 'Address from the City of Limerick' signed by members of the gentry and business elite. They pledged, in view of 'the lamentable state of agitation which surrounds us,' their 'unalterable attachment to our Sovereign and to the institutions over which she presides.' The 200 or so signatories included the businessmen William Roche, William Spaight, and Edward Hartigan, the architect James Pain, and the founder of Barringtons Hospital, Matthew Barrington.⁴⁶ Limerick remained loyal, was their clear message.

On the morning of Saturday, 25 March, the army were again in full view. For the *Reporter*, they acted provocatively, but 'it was in vain that scouts of huzzars were galloping to and fro, and keeping a sharp lookout for the enemy with their forests of pikes from the plains of the county of Limerick, and the mountains of Clare and Tipperary!' In the early afternoon the members of the Congregated Trades, the coopers, carpenters, coach-builders and cabinet-makers, slaters, sawyers and stonecutters, plasterers and painters, shipwrights, millwrights and nailors, all gathered in the rain on Clare street, unfurled their copious flags and colourful banners. Led off by the bands of the temperance societies, the vast assembly travelled through the city, cheered all along their circuitous route, at last crossing Mathew Bridge and converging to strains of 'The Glories of Brian the Brave' on the potato market on the banks of the Shannon. 'Not only was the entire area of the market densely filled, but the railings, the roofs of the sheds, the windows of the large houses in front, and the pathways outside.' The *Reporter* made an exaggerated claim for some 10,000 people being present.⁴⁷ The Tory leaning *Limerick Chronicle* put the figure at closer to 3,000, a sizeable number all the same.⁴⁸

The mayor, Michael Quin, spoke first, lauding the sight of union between Old and Young Irishmen. An Old Irishman, the Rev. Dr. O'Brien, followed him onto the podium and said of past difficulties 'We disagreed in the desert, only because we loved the promised land so much.' He continued on the theme of union, declaiming provocatively 'the graves of the famine dead and the cabins of the famine-stricken call for union,' ending 'God calls for union' while at the same time, to loud cheers, taking a strong and friendly grasp of the hand of William Corbett of the Sarsfield Club. Among the many later speakers were a number of ordinary labourers before Daniel Doyle, a solicitor affiliated to the Sarsfield Club, read aloud the address to be sent to the Queen demanding the restoration of a native Irish parliament.⁴⁹

V

A few days prior to the mass meeting in Limerick news reached the city of the arrests for sedition of William Smith O'Brien, John Mitchel, and Thomas Francis Meagher. Placards were posted immediately announcing a meeting at the Sarsfield Club's rooms. John O'Donnell asserted he was not 'alarmed or cast down' by the arrests, but that every 'fresh insult was a new incentive to hate.' John Dowling, a solicitor from Newcastle West, yet another solicitor in the Limerick confederate ranks, read out amidst cheers a resolution that pledged those present 'to sustain our illustrious President [O'Brien] with our fortunes, and if necessary with our lives in his struggle for the independence of this land.'⁵⁰

The charges against Mitchel related to inflammatory articles he had published in



Thomas Francis Meagher

the *United Irishman*. O'Brien and Meagher were indicted for speeches they had made at the large meeting of the Irish Confederation at the Music Hall in Dublin on the evening of 15 March. The apparent (though in the end illusory) success of the revolutions across Europe, and the ineffectiveness of his latest efforts in parliament, had caused O'Brien to adapt his views somewhat so that on the night in question he spoke out in a manner far stronger than heretofore, perhaps carried on his path to sedition by the buoyant feeling in the hall, filled as it was with Young and Old Irishmen alike. He had begun with familiar pleas on the need to exhaust legal methods of opposition, and warnings that any immediate insurrection would be 'put down in a week.' However, he now supported the arming of the people and the formation of a national guard, recalling the efforts of the armed Volunteers of 1782. He also admitted for the first time to being 'miserably disappointed' with the inaction of his fellow landlords and warned they faced having their lands 'sold as national property' in the aftermath of any national struggle. The sections of the speech that most likely set Clarendon's mind to prosecution were those raising the spectre of a French invasion of Ireland, military aid from America, and the mutiny of Irish soldiers in the British army.⁵¹

O'Brien had deep reservations about once more being so publicly linked with John Mitchel. He saw the joint prosecutions as a deliberate government ploy to taint him and the confederation with the militant *United Irishman* views. Nevertheless, in a show of solidarity and strength, the three men, on 22 March, walked together to the police headquarters in Dublin. Surrounded by supporters they followed a course from the committee rooms of the Irish Confederation at D'Olier Street up through College Green

and Dame Street. John O'Connell, likewise showing support, offered bail for Meagher and O'Brien. Afterwards, the three 'Prosecuted Patriots' returned to D'Olier Street to deliver speeches. Richard O'Gorman followed on, declaring to great cheers: 'Although as yet I have not had the honour of receiving the attention of the Government, I'll give them cause soon to pay me a visit.'⁵²

VI

Soon after the three 'Prosecuted Patriots' made bail, a delegation of Young Irelanders, led by William Smith O'Brien, left for France to present the provisional government there with a congratulatory address. In this respect they mimicked nationalist movements from the continent entire. Their number included an ordinary workman, Edward Hollywood, a Dublin silk weaver, in homage to the granting of Albert, a French worker, a seat at government in Paris. The expedition, however, was unfulfilling as the new French leader, the poet-politician Alphonse de Lamartine, attempting to step back from an earlier radical manifesto of foreign policy, proffered only vague expressions of support. Nevertheless, the ratcheting up of political tension continued unabated. O'Brien spoke to the Paris United Ireland Club of the need for all supporters of Irish nationalism to familiarise themselves with arms and from the end of March the spectre of pikes and rifle clubs began to dominate communications between the Limerick magistrates and Dublin Castle.

When the first murmurs of confederate arming reached Pierce George Barron, the Limerick magistrate was sanguine in response. Barron, a Catholic from Kilmacthomas in Co. Waterford, was a former high sheriff of Waterford and a failed parliamentary candidate. He advised Dublin Castle how he had made inquiries but found no proof to the rumour that 'one of the Wardens of the Confederate Club here, was extensively engaged in making Pikes.' He did, however, note a 'very infamous [sic] & seditious placard ... posted this morning through the City, signed "Michael Doheny."' It carried the name of a Dublin printer and he promised to send a copy to the Castle for investigation. Barron believed it a 'considerable inconvenience' that Limerick city had not been proclaimed at the same time as the counties of Limerick and Clare, among the first areas to be sanctioned by the coercion act in December 1847, as the 'persons who have not got Licences in the Counties of Clare & Limerick place their arms with their friends in this City, ready to receive them when required.' In the event of any disturbance Limerick city could be a 'great focus of organization.' Yet he was not excessively concerned, the Sarsfield Club was 'well watched, & up to this period their proceedings have produced no sympathy or excitement among the mass of the population.'⁵³

This was broadly the same conclusion reached by another local magistrate,



Michael Doheny

Joseph Tabuteau. 'Though the party calling themselves young Irelanders cannot be accused of want of energy in propagating their sedition and encour-

aging rebellion,' Tabuteau did 'not as yet perceive they have made much progress among the mass of the people, to encourage them to proceed to act of rebellion.'⁵⁴ The mass of the people were no doubt too debilitated by famine, the month of April witnessing the forced migration of 150 women from Limerick to Australia in an attempt to trim the unconscionable numbers inside the workhouses.⁵⁵ Of Doheny's poster, neither Tabuteau nor the police had seen many people stop to read it. He did not think arms were being hoarded to any great extent though he had heard 'there was a pike head or two purchased from a Blacksmith of the name of Ahern in Limerick, and that more could be had there.'⁵⁶ Barron had information 'that Pike Heads are making at the forges of two Black Smiths in this City' and 'are deposited at the confederate Club Room, the price fixed is 2 6d each.'⁵⁷

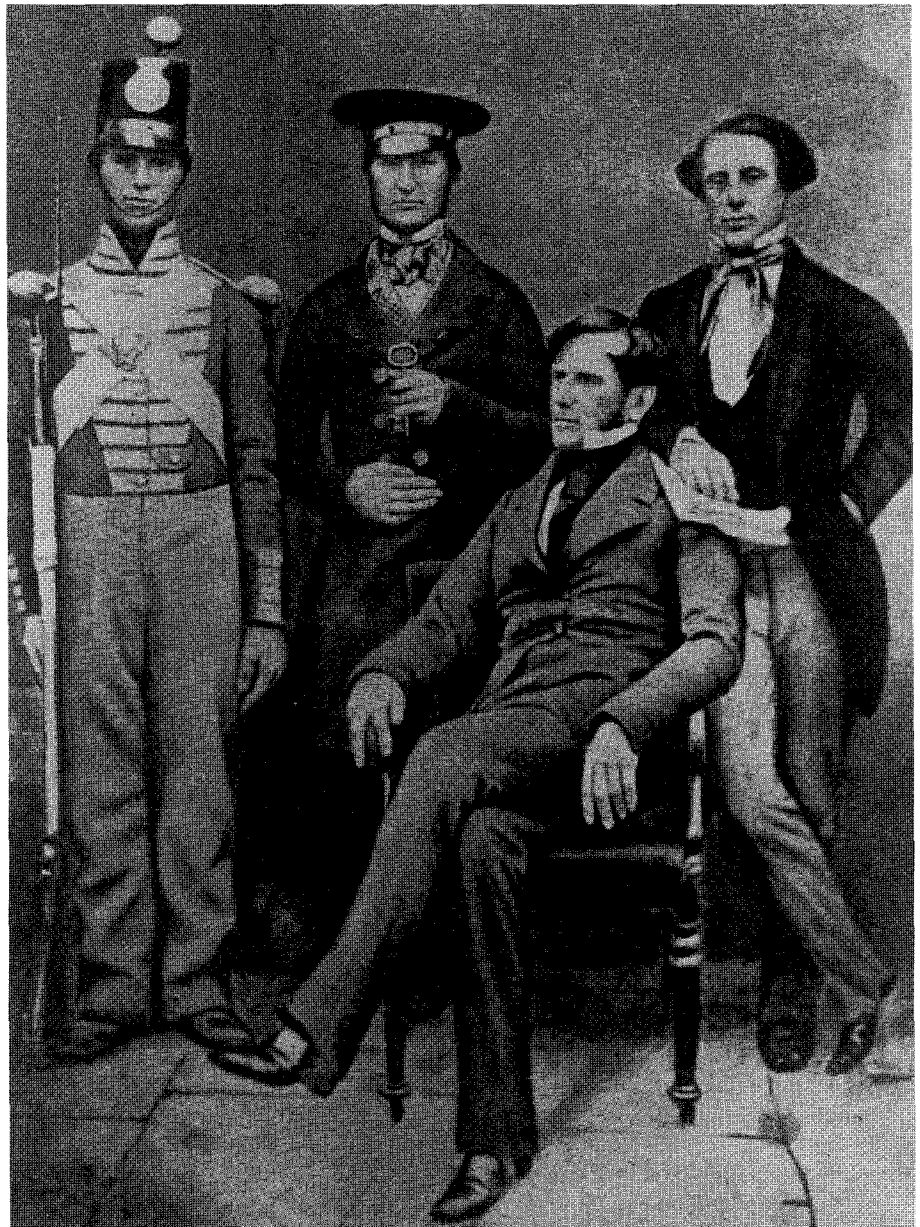
Commensurate with the rise in the tone of Irish nationalism, rifle clubs had begun to appear throughout the country. On 8 April 1848 the military secretary of Limerick referred to parties of Young Irelanders going 'openly about the Town with their rifles on their Shoulders.' They had commenced shooting practise 'in the Quarries in the neighbourhood of the Town daily and till a late hour at night.'⁵⁸



With the city not yet proclaimed there was little the magistrates or police could do to stop such manifestations of opposition. Elsewhere, Dublin confederates held weekend rifle practice and shooting competitions in the Wicklow Mountains, similar activities occurring in Cork, Waterford, Galway, and Kilkenny. These rifle clubs helped attract greater numbers into the orbit of the confederate cause as the comradely and competitive element was attractive to young men who might not have held strong political views but who partook to be with and to best their friends and fellow workers.⁵⁹ In Limerick, young women were occasionally present at the rifle practise, another reason to join up and show off one's prowess.⁶⁰

The *Reporter*, naturally, was full of information on the 'two or three rifle clubs being got up in this city.' It advised readers about the price and availability of firearms in Limerick, how 'a first-rate single gun (twist barrel) can be had at Mara's for about two guineas,' a rifle costing seven or eight pounds.⁶¹ One article described rifle club members meeting 'at the Quarry, on North Strand, for practice, and their shooting, which we had the pleasure of witnessing, was admirable. Even with "smooth bores" some of them hit the bull's eye several times at a distance of eighty yards.'⁶² Another piece told how 'A few of the soldiery, who happened to be present, took part in the amusement, and made some tolerable shots, but by no means to be compared with the close hits of the civilians. Perhaps they wanted to shew [sic] how they could miss a mark when they wished.'⁶³ This insinuation that Irishmen in the army would refuse to turn their weapons against their countrymen was popularly held at the time, encouraged by the example of the National Guard in Paris, and promulgated even by O'Brien. For John Mitchel: 'All the country was fast becoming aroused; and many thousands of pikes were in the hands of the peasantry. The soldiers of several regiments, being Irish, were well known to be very willing to fraternise with the people, upon a first success and the police, in such an event, would have been a green-coated Irish army upon the moment.'⁶⁴

By mid-April, the political temperature in Limerick was increasingly febrile. The *Reporter* reprinted audacious articles from the *United Irishman* titled 'Our War Department' describing how best to drill and make gunpowder. Other columns carried rumours of huge shipments of pikes coming into the port of Dublin from Liverpool. The United Repeal Club of Limerick was formed (though in truth the two sides never truly conjoined), and at a meeting of the Sarsfield Club, in reply to an excited cry from the floor that the Milanese had their Archbishop leading them against Austria, the Rev. Dr. O'Connor declared 'Yes, and you will have the Priests with you should the time ever come that you want them to lead you (great cheering).' In Rathkeale, the nearest large town to O'Brien's Caher-



William Smith O'Brien (seated) in Kilmainham Gaol prior to his transportation
(Limerick Museum)

moyle estate, rifle practice was held every evening and the people were 'in high pluck and spirits, at every corner you turn you can see a drawing [on the doors of houses] of Pikes and *improved Pitchforks*.' The ideal pikes were to have nine-foot handles of seasoned ash and twelve inch spears.⁶⁵

In response to the ever-bolder Young Ireland behaviour in Limerick, James Sexton of Richmond Place, a former sheriff of the county, sought Lord Clarendon's 'sanction in forming a volunteer force to be ready to act if any consequences should require it.'⁶⁶ A priest called Evans from Kilmallock in east Limerick, less amenable to the nationalist cause than other clergy, noted a 'very disloyal and seditious feeling' spreading among his parishioners. Publications like the *United Irishman* were being exhibited in shop windows to deleterious effect, argued Evans, providing details of a letter some men in the local workhouse had drafted for Mitchel's paper, stating there were 150 of them 'able and willing to take

the Pike or Gun and rush forward as soon as the word of command is given.' The writers promised to extract themselves 'from the yoke of Misrule and Tyranny which is the cause of having so many stout Hearts thrown into a Poor House to be fed with the refuse of Slaves in other countries.'⁶⁷ The British government was to blame for their penurious circumstances, these men believed, and they were willing to take retaliatory action. Evans had obtained his copy of the letter through an informant, William Gavin, one of the paupers from the workhouse.

Clarendon did not take up Sexton's offer of a volunteer force but there was growing concern among his subordinates in Limerick. Barron now definitely wanted the city to be proclaimed, as being 'placed in the centre of proclaimed districts ... it affords a ready & safe depository for the Arms of those who would not be allowed to carry them in any of the adjoining districts.' The topic of 'Special Constables' arose and Barron thought 'it would be most desirable to have such a body sworn

in,' warning that their selection 'should not be left to the Mayor of Limerick an avowed Repealer.'⁶⁸ Barron and the other magistrates may have been alarmed by the striking appearance on the night of Monday 27 March of a great number of fires atop the mountains of Limerick, Clare, and Tipperary. This vast illumination of the countryside of the Golden Vale, each fire going up in response to another, was caused by the mistaken belief it was 'a signal of rejoicing for some victory achieved by the disaffected in Dublin.' The cause, however, of the first fire that gave signal to all the others was more prosaic – the burning in Murroe of 'a craggy field of furze.'⁶⁹ It was, nonetheless, an ominous sign of the enthusiasm with which those dwelling amid the mountains of Munster might greet any feat against the government.

Police spies were soon set to work and in early April two men claiming to come from Bruff purchased pikes at Thomas Ahern's Vulcan Iron Works at 13 Catherine Street. Ahern, long established in the city, was suspicious of the men. His son followed them after they left and watched them report back to a police station. The two men had visited other blacksmiths in the city as well to gather information though it was still legal to make, sell, or purchase pikes there. For the *Reporter*, these underhand methods were an attempt to frighten the blacksmiths, but instead of being cowed Ahern was emboldened and promised to exhibit a pike-head in his window.⁷⁰ It was reported later that 'One of the wretches that bought the pikes at Mr. Ahern's shop came back afterwards. Mr. Ahern was not at home; but Mrs. Ahern denounced him, a crowd collected, and would have stoned him to death had he not fled for his life.' It was also rumoured that 'A detective, assuming the character of a Frenchman, has been visiting the Sarsfield Club, and, we have heard also, the Temperance Societies.' 'The people have their eye upon him', the *Reporter* noted with foreboding. 'We warn him that he is not safe in Limerick.'⁷¹

By the end of April the Sarsfield Club was courting with confidence and making plans to hold soirees for the three 'Prosecuted Patriots' in Limerick city and Rathkeale. Joseph Tabuteau wrote to Dublin of the need for efficient government note-takers to be present at these events, as it was likely the three Young Ireland leaders would 'express their sentiments freely.' Proper records would be needed for any future prosecutions and while the police 'may be able to take down particular sentences sufficiently accurate and be able to furnish the general purpose of the speeches ... a regular Government reporter on the spot ... could furnish the long words, and support the police in the general sense they take of the meaning of the speeches.' No such person was available in Limerick. A note attached to this letter read: 'W Hodges & his son both excellent reporters will arrive at Limerick on Friday night and attend the meeting there & at Rathkeale for the purpose of

taking notes of the speeches delivered.'⁷² The Limerick soiree, however, the ostensible celebration of three valiant leaders, was to take a startlingly unforeseen course.⁷³

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