

MICHAEL SCANLAN

“Poet Laureate of Fenianism”

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in the State Department of
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By

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THERE can be very few people in Ireland who, at one time or another, have not heard that fine, rousing song, *The Bold Fenian Men*. Canon Sheehan described it as one of the three great patriotic songs written in English by Irishmen. But of the many who know the song, or have heard it sung, there are few who could name its author, even if they were told that it was the same man who wrote *The Jackets Green* and *Limerick is Beautiful*. So has the name of Michael Scanlan been allowed to pass almost completely into oblivion. Surely the “Poet Laureate of Fenianism” merited better than to be so little remembered in his native land.

Michael Scanlan was born at Castlemahon, about three miles east of Newcastle West in Co. Limerick, on November 10, 1833. His father was Mortimer Scanlan, a shopkeeper and farmer; and his mother was Kate Roche of Castlemahon Mill. 'Murty' Scanlan, as well as owning a shop and farm, did some carting to Cork city. The Scanlan family were quite well-off at one time, but 'Murty', it would seem, was wild and reckless, having no head for business, with the result that the family gradually 'came down' in the world.

Besides Michael, there were three girls and two boys in the family. One of the girls subsequently married a man named Corbett, who lived nearby in Cooliska. Michael attended a school in Castlemahon that was kept by a very famous teacher named Daniel O'Callaghan, who hailed originally from Banteer, Co. Cork. Irish would still have been the generally-spoken language in the Castlemahon district in Michael's youth. When he was born there were still alive in the parish people who could have known the Gaelic poet, Tadhg Gaelach Ó Súilleabháin, from Minteenuwen, near Tournafulla. And he was three years old when the poet, Séamus Ó Coindealbháin, of Strand, near Newcastle West, was drowned in the Feale, on his way home from a fair in Kerry. Perhaps he heard some of the latter poet's verses being recited by the winters' firesides; lines, maybe, from his famous lament for Mac Finghín Dubh—

*A Mhic Mhuire na nGrás fuair bás dár
saoradh,
Agus d'jhulaing an pháis i bpáirt chlann
Éabha;
Goirm chughat láithreach id phárlús naofa
Anam an ard-ghlath, dob áilne tréithe.*

(O Son of Mary of the Graces who died
to save us,
And suffered the passion on behalf of
the children of Eve;

Call at once to your blessed parlour
The soul of the great chief of fairest
accomplishments).

Michael Scanlan was just fifteen years of age when his family emigrated; but by that time he had enriched himself with a large store of the history, legends and traditions of West Limerick. Nor was he unacquainted with the history, legends and traditions of Ireland in general, as his writings amply prove. At school he learned English, and learned it so well that Father L. Ó Muireadhaigh had no hesitation in saying of him in *An Ráitheachán* (Meithcamh, 1936) that "his writings, both prose and verse, show that he went to America equipped with a facility in writing English that has rarely been excelled by any of his countrymen."

While Michael was at school, things were steadily disimproving as far as the family shop and farm were concerned. This was not altogether due to his father's ineptitude, for the times were bad, with worse to come, the lean years of the mid-forties but leading up to the awful climax of the great hunger of Black '47 and '48 and '49. When, eventually, the famine came, and the fever, they brought bitter sorrow to the Scanlan family. Two of Michael's sisters, who had been playing in the village street all day, were suddenly stricken by the cholera, and died in one night.

It was a time of death and despair in Ireland, with thousands of hungry men and women daily descending on the ports, seeking out the emigrant ships that would take them across the perilous Atlantic to America. The Gaelic nation was visibly disintegrating; and the London *Times* exulted that, at last, the troublesome Celts were going with a vengeance.

The Scanlans soon followed in the wake of the tens of thousands who had already sailed, leaving Castlemahon in November, 1848. With them went the Corbett family

of Cooliska, who were related to them by marriage. That sorrowful, early parting from his native land seared itself into Michael's memory. He was to recall it in one of the very first poems he wrote in the New World :

*The apple boughs were dripping dew
On my pathway—
The robin sung the meadows thro'
His plaintive lay—
The valleys never looked so sweet
As on that day,
When from my childhood's blest retreat
I turned away
To breast the wild and searching sleet
That sweeps the world's highway.*

*I turned upon the mountain heath
To look my last;
And gazing o'er the vales beneath
My tears fell fast;
Bright eyes that sparkled long ago
Rose soft in view,
Sweet voices floated from below,
That I well knew
Were but the echoes of my woe
From 'neath the churchyard yew.*

*How fast the stern and rock-ribbed coast
Fades from my sight;
Soon, soon, the green hills will be lost
In endless night;
The morn will rise on wings of gold,
And the sad sea
Unto the hills will sing her old
Weird melody.
Yet I will never more behold
Thy beauties, 'ghrá mo chroí!*

*Land of Righe na nGael, adieu!
On shore or sea,
Where'er I roam, my heart, still true,
Will turn to thee;
Wherever mountains kiss the skies,
Or bright streams roll,
Thy daisied hills will proudly rise
Within my soul;*

*Each river dancing to the sea
Will sing to my heart of thee.*

Emigrating to America at that time was made doubly heart-breaking by the unlikelihood of there ever being a return. And so it was that Michael Scanlan turned to song to ease his sorrow. What he produced may not have been great poetry; but it had all the grandeur and nobility of something that came straight from the heart—

*The day is dying,
The eve is sighing,
Our bark is flying before the wind;
The sunset's splendour
Falls soft and tender
Upon the green hills we leave behind.
Our tears are flowing
The while we're going,
For love is showing the mountains grand,
The glens and meadows
In lights and shadows,
And the pleasant valleys of our native land.*

*Oh! skies, grow brighter!
Oh! winds, blow lighter!
Let not the night nor the deep sea hide
From our fond vision
That dream Elysian
That flings its beauty across the tide.
Ah! poor hearts beating,
There's no retreating,
The winds are cheating with whispers bland;
The hills are sinking,
Our souls are drinking
The last sweet vision of our native land.*

After a three years' stay in Boston, the Scanlans moved to Chicago, where they finally settled. Since they had arrived in America, and for some years more, Michael was to engage in various pursuits. First, he worked at shoemaking; then he ran a saw-mill; after that he tended a grocery counter. His next venture, the starting of a candy factory, was made in conjunction with his brothers, John Francis and

Heads erect, eyes to front, stepping proudly
together,
Sure freedom sits throned on each proud
spirit there.

Down the hills twining,
Their blessed steel shining,
Like rivers of beauty they flow from each
glen;

From mountain and valley,
'Tis liberty's rally,
Out and make way for the bold Fenian Men!

It may be of interest to note that the word "bold" did not appear in the first version of the song to be published. That version included a stanza omitted in later versions:

Up for the cause, then; fling forth our
green banners;
From the East to the West, from the South
to the North—
Irish land, Irish men, Irish tongue, Irish
manners—
From the mansion and cot let the slogan go
forth.

Sons of old Ireland, now,
Love you your sireland now,
Come from the kirk or the chapel or glen,
Down with all faction old,
Concert and action bold—
That is the creed of the bold Fenian Men.

Scanlan referred in that stanza to the Irish tongue, and it would surely have pleased him could he have known that one day an Irish translation would be made of his song.

Seo chugainn na slóite 'teacht 'nuas droim
a' tsléibhe,
'S a mbrat ag craitheadh go hard leis a'
ghaoith;
Is deas 'gus is aerach a gcoiscéim 's a n-éide,
Sheacht mh'anam na tréinfhir nach
dtréigfeadh a dtír!

Tá dealramh 'gcuid sleamtrach 'cur maise
ar na gleanntáin,
Mar loinnir na maidne nuair éiríos a'
ghrian;
Tá a nglórthaí go dána 'cur troda ar a
námhaid—
Fágaigí an bealach ag slóite na bhFian!

The translation is by the Ulster writer, Seosamh Mac Grianna.

In *The Bold Fenian Men* Michael Scanlan bewailed the fact that in the past "our foes were united and we were divided"; but he was to see the same forces of disintegration at work in the Fenian Brotherhood. There seemed no escaping the fate which made of Irishmen a

"dream bocht silte nár chuir lena chéile".

When the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States split into two sections, one of which followed the leadership of Colonel John O'Mahony and the other that of Colonel William R. Roberts, Michael Scanlan sided with that part of the organisation which followed the leadership of Roberts.

Roberts' wing of the Fenians was governed by a body known as the Senate. Scanlan was a member of the Senate, and took an active part in organising the attack on Canada in 1866, the purpose of which was to compel England to release her hold on Ireland by seizing one of the outposts of the British Empire. Many Irishmen then, and since that time, considered it a foolish and fantastic scheme, which diverted from the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland the support which it had received from the Fenian Brotherhood in America when the latter was a united organisation.

The American Fenians who believed in the practicability of invading Canada supported the idea with much enthusiasm; and a great fair was held in Chicago for the purpose of raising funds for the venture. Fenian bonds were issued, many of them bearing the signature of Michael Scanlan. Father Ó Muireadhaigh states that in the

great quarries north-west of the city a force of about 1,500 men, most of them veterans of the civil war, were trained and drilled by Colonel James Quirk. *On to Canada!* became the general watchword.

The United States was at that time pressing the English Government for a settlement of what was known as the Alabama Claim. This claim was in respect of injuries caused to the United States by the support given the Confederate States by England during the civil war; and it is well-known that American diplomats used the Fenian threat against Canada to hurry England into making a settlement. And so muskets and ammunition with which it was intended to equip the expedition were purchased by Fenian agents in United States' arsenals from surplus material left over from the civil war, which had ended the previous year, 1865.

General Sweeney, who had command of the expedition, though advising against it, asserted that the United States Government officials, when selling their stores to his agents, were perfectly well aware of the purpose for which they were intended, and their willingness in allowing the sales, together with the sympathy expressed for the Fenians by individuals in eminent positions in Washington, caused him to be totally unprepared for the subsequent seizure of the arms and ammunition.

But before that seizure took place, four hundred Fenians, under Colonel John O'Neill—civil war veterans all of them—crossed the Canadian border, and at Ridgeway severely defeated two regiments of Canadian Volunteers, one of them the Queen's Own, which was considered the best Volunteer regiment in Canada. An alarmed English Government promptly settled the Alabama Claim for 15,000,000 dollars; and American troops and gunboats prevented further forays into Canada by the Fenians.

Scanlan, as Father Ó Muireadhaigh remarked in his article in *An Ráitheachán*,

vigorously expounded the physical force idea in such songs as *Dear Old Ireland*. This song was written, according to its author, "to save the organisation from being seduced, by a catchy refrain, into voicing sentiments—if they could be called sentiments—which appeared in Mr. Sullivan's song, such sentiments as the following:

*We've seen the wedding and the wake,
The pattern and the fair,
The stuff they take and the fun they make,
And the heads they break down there,
With a loud hurroo and pillaloo,
And a thundering Clear the Way!*

The following are some stanzas from Scanlan's song:

*Far from the hills of Innisfail,
We meet in love tonight,
Some of the scattered Clann na nGael,
With spirits warm and bright.
Why do we meet?
'Tis to repeat
Our vows both night and day
To dear Old Ireland!
Brave Old Ireland!
Ireland, boys, hurrah!*

*Some left her shores long years ago,
Some never saw her hills,
But for her glory and her woe
Each faithful bosom thrills.
We give no cheers,
But vow her tears
Revenge shall wipe away.
Ah! dear Old Ireland!
Brave Old Ireland!
Ireland, boys, hurrah!*

*Let cowards bend in abject prayer;
Let tyrants frown and threat;
Be ours the duty to prepare
With sword and bayonet.
Let babblers cease
To prate of peace;*

*God send us war, we say,
For dear Old Ireland!
Brave Old Ireland!
Ireland, boys, hurrah!*

Despite the disappointment caused by the failure of the Canadian venture in America, and despite the failure of the Rising in Ireland in March '67, the American Fenians never lost heart, and in May, 1867, they founded a paper, which they called *The Irish Republic*. Michael Scanlan was appointed editor of the new paper; and his son tells us that he not only wrote all the editorials but most of the prose articles that appeared in it as well. Father Ó Muireadhaigh who, while on a visit to the States in 1917, happened to see some copies of the paper, had this to say: ". . . if the few copies we have seen may be taken as an index, the paper was a gem of literary merit."

The Irish Republic, which advocated physical force as the only means of obtaining Ireland's freedom, soon came into conflict with the organ of John O'Mahony's Constitutional Movement. In the end both papers used more ink in attacking each other than they did in attacking Ireland's enemies. *The Irish Republic* ceased publication in 1873.

In their unselfish devotion to the Fenian movement, and to the cause of Irish freedom in general, the Scanlan brothers neglected the great business they had built up as candy manufacturers, and, eventually, lost it; and now, when *The Irish Republic* ceased publication, its editor, Michael Scanlan, found himself in straitened circumstances. Before long, however, he found employment as a minor clerk in the State Department at Washington. Here his ability was soon recognised; promotion followed rapidly; and in a few years he had risen to be Chief of the Bureau of Statistics in the Department. In this position he did very valuable work for the United States, by inaugurating a system that required

American consuls throughout the world to send reports to the Bureau of Statistics, in which they furnished information as to the articles and products of the States for which there was a market in the respective countries to which the consuls were accredited. The information thus received was then passed on to American businessmen; and, as a result, the foreign trade of the United States greatly increased. Prominent public officials, including such men as James G. Blaine, Secretary of State; William MacKinley (afterwards President of the United States) and John A. Logan, strongly commended the work Scanlan was doing.

Great Britain realised that the reports were seriously affecting her own world trade and, according to Scanlan's son, used all her social and diplomatic influence at Washington to cripple the Bureau Chief's work, even succeeding one time in having him temporarily demoted.

In 1912, after he had completed thirty-seven years' service in the State Department, he retired and returned to his old home in Chicago. He gave his remaining years to revising his writings and preparing them for publication.

Already, he had published a book of poems, which he called *Love and Land*. This work appeared in 1869, and contained such pieces as *Address to the Fenians*, *The Flag of Green*, *The Fenian Men*, *Dear Old Ireland*, *We'll Sing of Thee, dear Ireland*, *Limerick is Beautiful* and *Castlemahon*.

Scanlan always retained a deep love for his birthplace, and for his native county. He wrote at least one song about Castlemahon—

How bright are the stars of our infancy
glowing
How green are the fields where in
boyhood we roved;
The streams, like our youth, full of purity
flowing,
The distant blue hills—all the haunts
that we loved—

Like a dream of lost Eden, their beauty's
 still shining;
 We gaze on their glory, but fate whips
 us on
 O'er the wild sea of life, with our hearts
 ever pining
 For the spirit's lost home in
 Castlemahon.

As well, he wrote a poem of twenty-eight stanzas dealing with a legend of Knockfierna, Limerick's celebrated fairy hill. And he wrote a number of fine songs about Limerick, the best known being *The Jackets Green*:

*When William stormed with shot and shell
 At the walls of Garryowen,
 In the breach of death my Donal fell,
 And he sleeps near the Treaty Stone.*

*That breach the foeman never crossed
 While he swung his broad sword keen;
 But I do not weep my darling lost,
 For he fell in his jacket green.*

It is remarkable the number of songs in which Limerick's Garryowen is celebrated. To patriotic Irishmen Garryowen became almost synonymous with Ireland. This is how Michael Scanlan sung of it:

*Oh! Garryowen is gone to rack;
 Her blood is on the outlaw's track;
 The night hangs cheerless, cold and black
 Above the silent river.*

*Yet voices live along those walls
 That ring out like old bugle calls
 Through lonely streets and ruined halls—
 "Our native land forever!"*

*Then, draw your swords for Garryowen,
 And swear upon the Treaty Stone
 To live for Ireland's sake alone
 In Garryowen na Glóire.*

Scanlan's finest tribute to Limerick was paid in his tuneful song, *Limerick is Beautiful*, a song not to be confused with a much inferior composition that goes by the same name.

*Oh, Limerick is beautiful as everybody
 knows,
 And by that city of my heart how proud
 the Shannon flows;
 It sweeps down by that brave old town, as
 pure in depth and tone,
 As when Sarsfield swept the Saxon from
 the walls of Garryowen.*

Five years after his retirement from the State Department, Michael Scanlan died in the hospital of Saint Mary of Nazareth in Chicago. He had been ill for only a week. He was buried in Calvary Cemetery, his funeral, Father Ó Muireadhaigh tells us, being attended "by a large concourse—clergymen, judges of the different courts, business-men, Irish sympathisers, and a few—pathetically few—old comrades of the almost forgotten revolutionary movement."

The date of his death was March 6, 1917. It was an appropriate date for the old Fenian's final leave-taking, for it was exactly the fiftieth anniversary of the day that Fenian men of his native County Limerick had risen in revolt, and fought and died for Ireland at Kilmallock.

The following obituary of Scanlan appeared in the *Gaelic American*—some extracts from his poems have been omitted: "Michael Scanlan, whose death in his eighty-fourth year, in the Hospital of Saint Mary of Nazareth, Chicago, on Tuesday, March 6, was announced in last week's *Gaelic American*, left a record of many years' service to Ireland, both as a patriot and poet. He was born in Castlemahon, County Limerick, on November 10, 1833, and came to the United States in 1848. His mind was filled with a knowledge of the history, folklore, poetry and traditions of his native land, and much of what

he knew of those things has found expression in the fine and varied collection of verse which he has left behind, and which he finished compiling and revising shortly before his death.

Michael Scanlan may truthfully be called the Poet Laureate of the old Fenian movement. His *Bold Fenian Men* was known practically in every Irish home, both in Ireland and America.

Scanlan's *Limerick is Beautiful* is rich in the expression of the poet's patriotism and love for his native place.

The Irish Soldier's Address to Columbia is another poem written by Mr. Scanlan which has never lost its popularity—it has been printed and reprinted thousands of times on both sides of the Atlantic.

Michael Scanlan settled in Chicago sixty-five years ago. He and his brothers were for several years in the candy manufacturing business. Their firm was the largest of its kind then in the west. In 1867, inspired by his desire to help his native land, and because of his well-known literary ability and his activity and prominence in the Fenian Brotherhood, he became editor of the *Irish Republic*, which, as its name indicated, advocated the complete severance of the ties binding Ireland to England.

In 1887, Mr. Scanlan was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Statistics in the

Department of State in Washington. (He had been a clerk in the bureau for some years previous to that time). It was he who inaugurated the system of monthly reports by American consuls as to trade opportunities in foreign countries to which they were assigned. These reports were distributed among merchants and manufacturers and helped very materially to increase the foreign trade of the United States. About five years ago, Mr. Scanlan retired from his official position in Washington and spent his time since then with his family and his books.

Michael Scanlan is survived by his son, Judge Kickham Scanlan of Chicago, and by two daughters, Erin Scanlan and Mrs. John Fleming. Two brothers, John F. and Mortimer, also survive him."

For some reason, the revised collection of Michael Scanlan's songs, to the preparation of which he had given his last years, was never published. But sufficient of his songs survive to keep his memory green.

Michael Scanlan was one of a noble band, men of whom Peadar Ó Ceárnaigh would later say in a well-deserved tribute of song—

*We may have had as good men,
But we'll never see better.
Glory O! Glory O!
To the Bold Fenian Men!*

