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The impact of the 1848 insurrection

By Pádraig Ó Snodaigh

To see how others see us is always useful. The *Economist*, looking back on 30 December 1848 over “the most eventful year in the history of modern Europe”, ignored Ireland and all that happened here in 1848. As Saville, best of the historians of 1848, wrote (in his *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (London, 1987), “. . . Ireland, with nearly one million dead, and with a massive emigration still continuing, was not considered part of the momentous happenings of this momentous year . . .”.

The view from Ireland (as Saville commented) “was different”, quoting a report from *The Times* Dublin correspondent, writing on 23 August 1848 when the Smith O’Brien ‘uprising’ was still in everyone’s mind. “On the one hand, I find a turbulent, rebellious, demoralised population about to be famine-stricken, yet clinging with a death gripe to the possession of the soil on which they inflict their own poverty . . . On the other hand, I find a landed aristocracy, entirely separated from the sympathies of the people, impoverished by their own extravagance, daunted by the dangers to life and poverty, from which they are never free . . .”.

However, we need look forward to understand the wellsprings of 1848 and to appreciate its effects. We can see that when in 1837 O’Connell broke with the English radicalism he had heretofore been in broad agreement with, distancing himself from Chartism and the incipient trade union movement, a vacuum was created which the more radical Young Irelanders filled. Among these were Mitchel (later MP for Tipperary) and Lalor, who with John O’Leary and others was to organise another attempt at insurrection, which petered out at Cappoquin on the night of 16 September 1849. Lalor then contacted Luby (also of Tipperary stock) with a view to starting a new journal. What was left of these two insurrectionary movements began the Irish Republican and Fenian Brotherhoods in 1858 here and in the U.S.

When in 1836 the Orange Order was dissolved, one of the first lodges to protest was Roscrea Lodge (No. 365), one of three in this county. But, come ‘48, they re-assembled and somehow got Government weapons. According to their official historian R. M. Sibbett (in Vol. II of his *Orangemen in Ireland and Throughout the Empire* (London, 1939, pp 346-7)), “. . . the Orangemen saved Ireland for the British Crown in 1848 and made the rebellion . . . an inglorious undertaking . . .”.

It is time to look at 1848 again, to see it in terms of local leaders and events. As a Carlovian, I am glad to see Patrick O’Donohoe get his place in the sun – despite O’Brien’s disdain of him in exile, as the former published his newspaper in Tasmania for a living.

