



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
1998**

**© County Tipperary Historical Society**

**[www.tipperarylibraries.ie/th](http://www.tipperarylibraries.ie/th)  
[society@tipperarylibraries.ie](mailto:society@tipperarylibraries.ie)**

**ISSN 0791-0655**

# *The Reluctant Rebel: William Smith O'Brien*

---

By Richard Davis

The leader of the 1848 rising in Tipperary, William Smith O'Brien, was born at Dromoland, Co. Clare, on 17 October 1803. He was the second son of Sir Edward O'Brien<sup>1</sup> and his wife Lady Charlotte O'Brien.<sup>2</sup> Descended from the greatest of medieval High Kings, Brian Boromhe, the O'Briens combined military skill and a pragmatism which accepted English titles and the Protestant religion. As a result, they were one of the very few Gaelic families to retain their ancestral lands, despite the successive conquests which followed the 11th century Norman invasions.

By the 18th century the family was a pillar of Protestant ascendancy, playing a leading part in the Irish parliament. Smith O'Brien's grandfather Sir Lucius was a prominent Volunteer and a supporter of the removal of Catholic disabilities, while his father Sir Edward voted against the Union, but subsequently represented Clare at Westminster. William's mother was the elder daughter of William Smith, a successful attorney, who through loans to landowners like the O'Briens accumulated a considerable estate based on Cahirmoyle in Co. Limerick.

As a child William oscillated between the proselytising Calvinism of his mother and the tolerant, patriarchal Anglicanism of his father, finally adopting the latter. Sent at an early age to a preparatory school in Kent, William accompanied his elder brother Lucius to Harrow in 1813. While school records indicate that they left in the year of entry, William himself claimed three years at the school.

In his late teens he studied at a private educational establishment run by the Rev. Bery Scott at Great Harborough, before following Lucius to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1819, graduating in 1826. Next year he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn. Sir Edward, however, lamented that William pursued London high society rather than profitable legal studies.<sup>3</sup> William's day book for 1826 and 1827 records a devotion to hunting, shooting, fishing, balls, billiards, whist, opera and theatre.<sup>4</sup>

In 1828 Sir Edward, who had resigned as MP for Co. Clare in place of his eldest son Lucius, nominated William for the pocket borough of Ennis. This was a popular choice as William had joined Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association, agitating for the right of Catholics to sit in parliament. In the Commons William soon proved more active than his elder brother. William's maiden speech on 3 June 1828, a few days after entering parliament, supported paper currency.

The parliamentary apprenticeship was interrupted by the epoch-making Clare by-election. Vesey Fitzgerald, Lucius O'Brien's fellow member for Clare, recontested his seat on joining the Tory Government headed by the Duke of Wellington. While Fitzgerald personally favoured emancipation, he adhered to a ministry still antagonistic. The Catholic Association consequently opposed him. William was invited by Thomas Steele, a fanatical supporter of O'Connell, to contest Clare against Fitzgerald. After William's refusal O'Connell himself, debarred as a Catholic, was triumphantly elected, ultimately forcing the government to admit Catholics to parliament.

The Dromoland O'Briens were, however, bitterly critical of O'Connell, not because of his Catholicism, but because he had encouraged tenants to defy their landlords at the hustings. William backed Catholic claims in parliament, but repudiated O'Connell's intervention in



Clare. The young O'Brien incautiously declared that all the Clare gentry had opposed O'Connell. This led to a duel on 30 July 1829 with Thomas Steele, who owned an estate in Clare.

At the general election of 1830 O'Connell's former supporter The O'Gorman Mahon defeated Lucius O'Brien in Clare. Only authoritarian action by Sir Edward O'Brien enabled William to retain the borough of Ennis. In 1831, after Mahon had been unseated for election irregularities on Lucius's petition, William was compelled to fight a second duel defending his brother against accusations of fabricating evidence.

His father Sir Edward in desperation stood again for the vacated county seat, but was humiliatingly defeated by O'Connell's son Maurice. Absent while campaigning for his father in Clare, William was criticised for missing a vital division on the new Whig Government's Parliamentary Reform Bill; he nevertheless voted with the reformers on 19 April 1831. A general election followed. In Ennis Vesey Fitzgerald claimed the seat for himself, excluding William.

As a Tory after the passage of Catholic Emancipation, Smith O'Brien had worked conscientiously in parliament. His Irish poor law bill, introduced on 8 February 1831, was overshadowed by the debate on parliamentary reform, but he published a useful pamphlet on the subject,<sup>7</sup> sounding out pertinent authorities, including Catholic bishops. Advocating emigration, he became a founder member of Edward Gibbon Wakefield's National Colonisation Society. William also defended the East India Company's monopoly in a strongly imperialistic pamphlet<sup>8</sup> which incurred the ridicule of O'Connell's son Maurice. Ten years later on 2 June 1840 William pleased Wakefield by comprehensively justifying the latter's imperial principles in the House of Commons.

The O'Connell victory in Clare and the 1832 Reform Bill's elimination of pocket boroughs failed to destroy William's political prospects. He was a hot favourite for election by the new Ennis constituency when he withdrew in September 1832 on his unexpected marriage to Lucy Caroline Gabbett.<sup>7</sup> Lucy was the eldest daughter of William Gabbett of High Park, Co. Limerick, a former mayor of the City and an alderman until his death in 1864.

William had already fathered a son, and possibly a daughter, to Mary Ann Wilton in England. Though paid an annuity through Lucius conditional on silence, Mary Ann had baptised her children as O'Briens in a London church in early 1832.<sup>7</sup> No public scandal eventuated. Smith O'Brien and Lucy lived initially with Alderman Gabbett in Limerick, where O'Brien, supported by his father-in-law, became prominent in campaigns for emigration, education and port development.

Settling finally at Cahirmoyle, O'Brien rented at a nominal sum from his father. After Sir Edward's death in 1837 O'Brien acquired the estate piecemeal from his mother, who found herself financing a political career based on principles she repudiated. Moreover, Lady Charlotte's natural sister, Jane Brew, sponsored J.V. Crosbie, an imposter claiming to be her natural brother, Thomas Smith, with rights to his father's estate eliminating certain reversions to Smith O'Brien. The descendants of Harriet Arthur, the legitimate sister of William's mother, also had claims.

Politically O'Brien trod a precarious line between his family's conservative hatred of O'Connell and the Liberator's national influence on liberal politics. Before the 1835 general election O'Brien found it necessary to join O'Connell's Anti-Tory Association. O'Connell, originally favouring others, was persuaded by colleagues to endorse O'Brien. The County Liberal Club and local Catholic clergy were prominent on O'Brien's behalf. The latter displaced a sitting member to be elected for Co Limerick, while his brother Lucius was resoundingly



defeated as a Tory in Co. Clare. William, however, still maintained independence from O'Connell.

Back in the Commons, O'Brien, formerly a Tory supporter but now an independent Liberal, generally voted with Lord Melbourne's Whig Government, which was working with O'Connell to effect Irish reform. Extreme Protestants accused him of acting as O'Connell's "tail",<sup>9</sup> but O'Brien was more closely aligned with Thomas Wyse, a Catholic MP, once prominent in the Emancipation struggle but now dissociated from O'Connell. With Wyse, O'Brien promoted inter-denominational Irish education at all levels, continued to press for an Irish poor law, and encouraged the emigration of the poverty stricken. He clashed with O'Connell by supporting the poor law principle, the transfer of tithes from the minority Protestant establishment in Ireland to pay Catholic clergy, and an electoral registration bill which the Liberator considered helpful to the Tories.

The general election of 1837 after the death of William IV and the accession of Victoria saw O'Brien easily re-elected against a Tory Protestant but subjected to an election petition alleging Catholic clerical intimidation in their favour. Too impecunious to hire counsel or transport his own witnesses, O'Brien himself unsuccessfully petitioned parliament against the "Spottiswoode Conspiracy", a Tory campaign to finance election petitions against Whig or Liberal members. The Limerick challenge was eventually dropped.

In 1839 the struggling Melbourne Government attempted to suspend the Jamaican Assembly. Smith O'Brien voted against suspension, almost securing the ministry's defeat. Melbourne resigned. O'Connell and his followers blamed O'Brien for destroying an administration favourable to Ireland. A Limerick Liberal gathering attempted to force O'Brien's resignation from parliament, but the latter hurried from London to convene a larger public meeting in Limerick, which gave him a vote of confidence.

The young Queen's refusal to accept the removal of her Whig Ladies of the Bedchamber restored the Melbourne Government, thus exculpating O'Brien. Melbourne struggled on until defeated in the 1841 election, when the Whigs and O'Connellites were decimated and Peel's Tories returned to power. O'Brien was unopposed in Co. Limerick. The electorate generally approved his probity, conscientiousness and energy. Political leaders competed for his support. Whig leaders like Lords Melbourne and Palmerston invited him to dinner. Dexterously playing off opponents on both left and right, Smith O'Brien had achieved acknowledged independence and partly restored the political prestige of the O'Briens.

Alongside other Irish members O'Brien fought energetically but unsuccessfully to enable the Irish Poor Law to provide aid outside workhouses. Still opposed to Repeal, he vigorously attacked Peel's more repressive Irish policy. While O'Connell declared 1843 the Repeal Year and launched a series of "monster meetings" throughout the country, O'Brien remained in parliament leading the fight for Irish justice. To protest at the dismissal of O'Connellite JPs, O'Brien resigned his own commission.

On 4 July O'Brien moved unsuccessfully for a select committee on Ireland but initiated an important debate. He comprehensively indicted British administration of Ireland in the Commons. The Repeal Association printed and distributed the speech as a pamphlet. O'Brien then visited Belgium and Germany to reassure himself that Irish misery was unequalled in Europe. On his return in October he found the Repeal movement in tatters, with O'Connell and his lieutenants under indictment for sedition after the anticlimax of the banned Clontarf meeting. In response, O'Brien's despatched his subscription to the Repeal Association.

While O'Connell and his lieutenants were delighted, O'Brien's formidable mother was outraged at his "most selfish and reckless and heartless"<sup>10</sup> action and promised financial



retribution. O'Connell, pre-occupied in early 1844 with his trial and subsequent imprisonment from late May to September, delegated to O'Brien control of its weekly Repeal meeting in Dublin and *de facto* leadership. The latter won general acclaim for practical efficiency. He developed a parliamentary committee which presented a series of well-researched reports on the social and economic needs of the country. O'Brien achieved particular rapport with the "Young Irishmen" led by Thomas Davis and Gavan Duffy of the *Nation*.

O'Connell, his conviction quashed by the House of Lords but now 69, acclaimed O'Brien as a co-leader, but hoped for the succession of his son John. In early 1845 Peel's Government introduced legislation for three non-denominational university colleges in Ireland. O'Brien, long campaigning for such institutions, allied with the Young Irishmen in supporting the Colleges, with safeguards for Catholic interests.

Daniel and John O'Connell, however, aligned themselves with Archbishop MacHale and the Catholic bishops opposed to colleagues favouring compromise. O'Brien finally voted against the bill when Peel refused concessions to moderate Catholic opinion; but tension remained. A supporter of mixed education, O'Brien accepted denominational schools if demanded by Catholics.

In 1846 the Repeal Movement split. In May O'Brien, adhering to Repeal policy of refusing parliamentary duties irrelevant to Ireland, was imprisoned for 25 days by the Commons in an improvised "cellar". Experiencing "a towering passion"<sup>11</sup> against O'Connellites who refused complete endorsement of his action, O'Brien almost quit his seat. Young Ireland encouragement sustained him. Lord John Russell's Whigs replaced Peel in late June.

O'Brien and the Young Irishmen feared that O'Connell, backing non-Repeal candidates for Irish seats, might jettison Repeal for a new "Whig alliance". O'Connell introduced "Peace Resolutions" absolutely binding all Repealers to denounce bloodshed, past, present and future. In July Thomas Francis Meagher's attack on the "Peace Provisions" was silenced by John O'Connell. O'Brien, followed by the Young Irishmen, indignantly walked out of the Repeal meeting. The split had begun.



*William Smith O'Brien in the dock, Clonmel Courthouse, October 1848 – Tinsley's drawing.*

Expelled from Repeal for a theoretical support of force, the Young Irelanders operated initially as an "Irish Phalanx", disseminating nationalist propaganda through the *Nation*. O'Brien took the lead in contributing seven letters addressed to his fellow landlords on "Reproductive Employment". Here O'Brien, exculpating resident colleagues from major responsibility for the deepening Irish potato famine, demanded more positive Government action. Investment in development such as Irish railways was preferable to futile relief schemes impoverishing local landowners forced to pay increasing rates. In parliament also O'Brien proved a merciless critic of the Russell Government's *laissez-faire* famine administration, denouncing *inter alia* the distribution of quotations from Adam Smith, the economist, instead of food.<sup>11</sup>

Negotiations with O'Connell broke down: O'Brien condemned misuse of funds; the Liberator denounced violence, a non-issue to O'Brien. In early 1847 supporter pressure created the Irish Confederation, confronting O'Connell's Repeal Association. Reluctant to spend much time in Dublin, O'Brien agreed to act as *de facto* leader. The Confederation, still hoping to negotiate terms with the Repeal Association, mirrored it in organisation. Hopes of speedy reconciliation were dashed by the death of O'Connell in May 1847. His son John assumed the leadership of the Repeal Association, portraying the Confederates as his father's murderers.

O'Brien maintained his personal prestige with difficulty under such attack. Attempting to appeal to the Orangemen of Belfast, O'Brien's Confederate delegation was shouted down by furious O'Connellites. At the general election of 1847 the Young Ireland Confederates made little impression. O'Brien himself, disillusioned with the British parliament, relaxed in Scotland and Donegal. His followers, however, secured his re-election for Co. Limerick *in absentia*.

As Irish misery and famine intensified in late 1847 the Confederates bickered with each other. O'Brien and Gavan Duffy opposed Mitchel's demand for a rent and rate strike. Mirroring the split with O'Connell, Mitchel rejected O'Brien's ten resolutions for a constitutional movement and withdrew. The example of the French Revolution of February 1848 reunited Confederates. O'Brien pressed for unity and negotiated an Irish League to combine Old and Young Irelanders. Rejecting constitutionalism, he demanded arms and a National Guard.

After a mass demonstration on 21 March 1848 at Dublin's North Wall O'Brien, Mitchel and Meagher were indicted for sedition. Soon after the demonstration but before the trial O'Brien led a delegation to France, but the revolutionary government preferred an English alliance. Before an irate House of Commons on 10 April O'Brien denied seeking military assistance from France, but admitted advising the Irish to arm and welcomed Chartist aid.

At a Limerick meeting with Mitchel on 29 April O'Brien was stoned and seriously injured by a mob incensed by the former's attack on O'Connell in his *United Irishman*. Mitchel resigned from the Confederation and O'Brien returned to Cahirmoyle to recuperate. Unpacked juries acquitted O'Brien and Meagher, but Mitchel was convicted of treason-felony by an all-Protestant jury. With the other leaders, O'Brien refused to use Mitchel's hasty transportation to launch a premature rebellion. O'Brien's tactless statement that the policy of the new unifying Irish League approximated that of the Confederation helped to persuade John O'Connell to abandon the League at the eleventh hour and re-establish the Repeal Association.

A revolutionary junta organising rebellion did not include O'Brien, thought to be too slow and conservative. O'Brien also remained aloof from the elected executive of the clubs, proliferating as the instrument of insurrection. Hoping a show of force could achieve self-government without bloodshed, O'Brien's rhetoric, like that of his colleagues, escalated: "when will Ireland strike?"<sup>13</sup> He hinted at a blood sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

O'Brien's actions belied his strong words. He proceeded in July to make a leisurely tour of

the clubs in the south, praising the scenery in notes to his anxious wife. While pleased at his reception by the people, O'Brien emphasised moderation. At a *soirée* in Cork, O'Brien deprecated the emphasis on arms in Duffy's *Nation*, which propounded guerrilla warfare; men learning to work together in groups O'Brien considered more significant. During his travels, intended to cover the whole country, O'Brien was "very cautious in the language used by me" at a meeting of the new Irish League in Dublin.

The Whig Government finally suspended the *habeas corpus* act. Arrests followed after 9 July. When informed by Meagher and John Dillon of a warrant for his apprehension, O'Brien considered the alternatives of accepting arrest, escaping or initiating rebellion. The correct option, he later believed, was acceptance of arrest, potentially more dangerous to the Government; but honour, in view of recent rhetoric, demanded resistance. The enthusiasm he received at Enniscorthy, Kilkenny and especially Carrick-on-Suir was "so intense that I hesitated no longer".<sup>15</sup>

O'Brien soon found that he had "miscalculated the energies of the Irish People." To stimulate support, he addressed meetings at Kilkenny, Callan, Carrick and Cashel, before arriving at Mullinahone where thousands gathered before the Catholic clergy advised against insurrection. O'Brien next led his motley but numerous supporters to Ballingarry. He then moved to Killenaule where he had a minor success, stopping a troop of dragoons at his barricade and allowing them to proceed when their officer insisted that he was under no orders to arrest O'Brien.

At a council of war at Ballingarry on 28 July O'Brien's refusal to allow the commandeering of food incurred criticism, and it was agreed that most of his lieutenants would go their separate ways. Later it was suggested that there was a move to depose, or even execute, O'Brien.<sup>16</sup> Many followers probably agreed with Patrick O'Donohoe that "a man of such virtues could not and never will succeed in Ireland". O'Brien's most revolutionary action was to threaten the owners of the Boulah coal mines with dispossession if they did not raise the wages of the miners and lower their prices.

On 29 July 1840 a party of about 40 armed police, challenged by O'Brien's depleted forces, barricaded themselves inside Widow MacCormack's house near Ballingarry, taking her children as hostages. O'Brien refused to allow his lieutenants to torch the house with the children inside and was nearly killed in a parley with the police when stone-throwing by his supporters evoked a volley of fire, killing two men.

The rebel army disintegrated and O'Brien was obliged to escape on horseback after police relief arrived. Though pockets of resistance continued for some weeks in other areas, the rebellion was effectively over. The leaders were either arrested or forced to flee overseas. After being harboured for several days, O'Brien was arrested on 7 August at Thurles railway station, attempting to return home.

The trial of O'Brien and three colleagues for high treason at Clonmel courthouse in October 1848 removed the farcical element from a rebellion recognised as "contemptible" by its leader. O'Brien's family, including his mother, rallied around him at Clonmel, despite their disapproval of his actions. Partly to placate them, he allowed his lawyers (led by James Whiteside, a future Chief Justice who had defended O'Connell in 1844) to fight the case on legal technicalities, instead of an open appeal to the public. Immediately before being sentenced to death an unflinching O'Brien declared that he had done his duty.

Irish public opinion ensured that O'Brien and his colleagues, Thomas Francis Meagher, Terence MacManus and Patrick O'Donohoe, were not executed. For eight months after their conviction they lived in relative comfort in Richmond prison, Dublin. O'Brien's appeal through



a writ of error was rejected and he was formally expelled from the House of Commons. Freely entertaining his family, O'Brien deemed incarceration one of the happiest periods of his life. Hopes for an early pardon were dashed when the Government, by special legislation after the refusal of the prisoners to petition, commuted the sentence to transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land.

Departing on 9 July 1849, the *Swift*, a naval sloop, carried the exiles in reasonable comfort to Van Diemen's Land on 31 October 1849. O'Brien alone refused his parole for an immediate ticket-of-leave, which allowed relative freedom. Instead he spent nine months at a convict probation station at Maria Island, on the east coast of Van Diemen's Land. Here from 13 November 1849 to 10 January 1850 he was restricted to a small cottage and tiny yard, constantly supervised, and refused all social contacts.

He had, however, a large supply of books and was able to communicate with family and friends through censored letters. He maintained a journal (published in 1995 as *To Solitude Consigned*) which documents his deteriorating morale and belief that Sir William Denison, the Governor of Van Diemen's Land, and his Comptroller of Convicts, Dr J.S. Hampton, were trying to destroy him. News of O'Brien's treatment when published in Duffy's revived *Nation* increased the exile's reputation as a martyr and fuelled demands for a pardon.

The Maria Island station doctor finally insisted that O'Brien be allowed to take walks with a keeper. Befriended by the Irish station commandant Samuel Lapham, O'Brien, with some justification, was accused of taking liberties with his thirteen-year-old daughter Susan, subsequently (as Mrs Susan Wood) a celebrated essayist in New Zealand. An escape, organised by O'Brien's friends, failed miserably on 12 August when an armed guard arrested a row-boat attempting to take O'Brien to a waiting vessel.

On 21 August O'Brien was transferred during general reorganisation to a cottage at the notorious penal station at Port Arthur. Isolated again, planting a small garden varied his routine of reading and journal composition. The need to help Samuel Lapham (sacked for indulgence to him at Maria Island) and a petition from his friends in Hobart finally persuaded O'Brien to abandon what his mother regarded as a childish refusal to take his ticket. Allowed to reside in the New Norfolk district, O'Brien left Port Arthur for Hobart Town on 18 November 1850.

Money now became a problem. Receiving a limited allowance from rents depleted by the famine, O'Brien sought an income to liquidate the expenses of his bungled escape and to assist the unemployed Lapham. Between 22 February and 15 December 1851 he tutored the motherless sons (13 and 10) of an Irish settler, Dr Henry George Brock, at Red Rock near Avoca. Imposing an exacting but kindly regime, O'Brien tired of teaching and returned to Elwin's Hotel, New Norfolk. There he remained until Elwin sold out in March 1854.

O'Brien received notice of his conditional pardon while residing in Richmond. After attending dinners in his honour at New Norfolk, Hobart Town and Launceston, O'Brien, with John Martin and Kevin O'Doherty (who had not escaped) left Launceston for Melbourne, Bendigo and Geelong in July 1854. In Melbourne he received entertainment from the influential Irish and a massive gold cup, now in the National Museum of Ireland, from Irish miners.

In his second residence at New Norfolk,<sup>17</sup> O'Brien had enjoyed an active social life, paying frequent house visits to local settlers and entertaining them at his hotel. After punishing three of his Young Ireland colleagues for visiting him during his first residence, the Government vigilance relaxed. At Elwin's and elsewhere O'Brien fraternised with Young Ireland colleagues, separately transported – John Mitchel, John Martin and Kevin O'Doherty. O'Brien endorsed Mitchel's escape strategy in 1854.



An early ecumenist, O'Brien attended services at all churches, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Catholic. His particular friend was Fr Oliver Bond, the Roman Catholic pastor of New Norfolk. O'Brien stayed often with Captain Michael Fenton, an Irish officer turned Tasmanian politician, now agitating for self-government. O'Brien's political experience, shown by his publication of a constitution for self-governing Tasmania, was clearly invaluable.

Returning to Europe via India, O'Brien stopped at Madras to visit a relative. Eventually he reached Brussels where he was reunited with his family. Here O'Brien published his two-volume *Principles of Government, or Meditations in Exile*, which *inter alia* praised transportation as the most effective form of punishment, while advising the removal of penal colonies from Australia to the Falklands.

O'Brien also travelled extensively through France, Switzerland, Italy (visiting Rome for the first time from 18 January to 7 February 1856) and Egypt. On 9 March 1856 O'Brien took his eldest son Edward, a promising classicist about to enter Dublin University, for a tour of Greece. A petition signed by numerous MPs of different parties and support from the United States and Canada helped to truncate the tour on 16 June when O'Brien was notified of an unconditional pardon.

The hills of Clare blazed with tar barrels; in Co. Limerick Rathkeale (near Cahirmoyle) was "brilliantly illuminated" when O'Brien returned to Ireland on 8 July 1856. Immediately a representative delegation from Tipperary invited him to fill a parliamentary vacancy. Much gratified, O'Brien refused. He had spent too long away from his family and no longer believed in parliamentary agitation.

With the co-operation of A.M. Sullivan's *Nation*, O'Brien published a series of addresses to the Irish people to wean them from political apathy. Disliking secrecy and rejecting force while England was at peace, he gave no countenance to the new Fenianism of his former allies, such as James Stephens. However, in 1861 O'Brien attended the huge funeral in Dublin of his Van Diemen's Land colleague Terence MacManus without realising its implications for Fenian propaganda.

Though never denying the moral justification for his rebellion in 1848, especially after the decimation of population resulting from famine, O'Brien followed his wife's injunction to lead a life of "tranquil usefulness"<sup>18</sup> at home. He performed his duties as a landlord, poor law guardian and advocate of educational and industrial development. So great was his popularity that, despite his refusal to attend political meetings, O'Brien's appearance in Irish country towns and villages evoked immediate demonstrations in his favour.

After exile O'Brien was vocal on foreign policy. He maintained that the Crimean War was unnecessary and denounced British repression in the Indian Mutiny of 1857-8. Contrary to his views in 1830, O'Brien now depicted British rule in India as "a continuous development of fraud, perfidy, hypocrisy, and cupidity – mingled, I admit, with many traits of resolution and daring intrepidity".<sup>19</sup> Unlike his fellow exile John Martin, O'Brien denied that a war between Britain and France under Napoleon III would facilitate revolution in Ireland; Ireland, he now believed, should depend on her own resources.<sup>20</sup>

O'Brien's earlier dislike of Napoleon III's regime was later modified after a visit in 1861 to Marshal MacMahon, descended from an Irish family closely allied to the O'Briens. In Italian affairs O'Brien was critical of the Risorgimento and (surprisingly in a Protestant) supported the papacy's temporal power.<sup>21</sup>

The highlight of O'Brien's post-exile career was his visit (covering 7,000 miles) of Canada and the US between February and May 1859.<sup>22</sup> He encountered the passionate enthusiasm of Irish-Americans and other sympathisers in almost every township. President James Buchanan who, as the United States ambassador, had intervened on O'Brien's behalf with the British



Government, received him in Washington. Accompanied by Mitchel, O'Brien met leading politicians of all opinions, most notably William Seward, Stephen A. Douglas and Alexander Stephens. O'Brien was impressed by a slave plantation in the deep south without abandoning his rejection of slavery in principle. He visited an Indian reservation in Niagara and received an Indian deputation in Indiana.

In Canada he urged the French and Irish to work together. He lectured on America in Dublin after his return, and demonstrated a greater appreciation of democracy. O'Brien attempted to mediate between Seward and Southern politicians when the American Civil War broke out in 1861. Though he disapproved of secession, O'Brien believed that, once a *fait accompli*, it could not be put down by force. Unlike Meagher, who fought for the North, and Mitchel, a partisan of the South, O'Brien believed that Irish-Americans should keep out of the war.

In the same year O'Brien was devastated by the death of his wife Lucy, who, though not sharing his political opinions, had been loyal and devoted throughout their chequered married life. The Cahirmoyle estate had been placed in trust for Lucy and the children in 1848, to avoid Government seizure after conviction for high treason. The trustees, his friend Woronzow Greig<sup>23</sup> and his brother Lucius, now Lord Inchiquin, now felt unable to restore O'Brien to full ownership after Lucy's death. A Chancery compromise settlement awarded the estate to O'Brien's eldest son Edward, who agreed to pay his father the then considerable annuity of £2,000. O'Brien nevertheless declared that, because of his brother Lucius's "treacherous and unfeeling" behaviour, he would never meet the latter again.

Resigning as chairman of Newcastle West Board of Poor Law Guardians, O'Brien resided at Killiney near Dublin. He considered the resumption of a political career, but mainly indulged his love of foreign travel. Some weeks after his wife's funeral O'Brien began a lengthy tour of Europe. He passed through France, Baden, Munich, Vienna. Most important was his visit to Hungary, whose struggle to regain her old constitution from Austria paralleled that of Ireland.

O'Brien saw the Diet in session at Pesth and met Franz Deák, whose system of passive resistance helped to achieve Hungarian success in 1867 and was used as a basis for Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin movement. In late 1862 and early 1863 O'Brien revisited the Continent, spending Christmas in Rome. On his return to Dublin he lectured on Russian oppression of Poland in aid of Polish refugees.<sup>23</sup> O'Brien documented his foreign travels in a series of unpublished journals, which are preserved amongst his family papers.

Travelling with his daughter Charlotte through Bangor in Wales, O'Brien was struck down by a liver complaint and died on 18 June 1864. Though the family endeavoured to prevent a popular demonstration at the funeral, vast crowds followed the coffin as it was borne through Dublin for transport by rail to Cahirmoyle, for final interment at the family mausoleum at Rathronan graveyard on 25 June. Of his seven children, only Robert and Charlotte, famous for her assistance to emigrants, supported Irish self-government. In 1870, a statue of William Smith O'Brien by Thomas Farrell, RHA, was unveiled by his friend John Martin; it now stands close to that of Daniel O'Connell in Dublin.

Smith O'Brien was neither a spellbinding orator nor an effective revolutionary. He made a principled stand in Tipperary and was later invited to represent it in parliament. He admitted that family pride was a serious failing, and would have been prouder as the son of a chimney sweep who "had subsequently raised myself to distinction by my talents or by my public service".<sup>25</sup> Lacking the literary flair of John Mitchel, O'Brien's views were well-expressed, more balanced and a better model for future generations. He loved Ireland more than he hated England. He anticipated aspects of a strategy of passive resistance, later taken up by Arthur Griffith.



O'Brien worked assiduously for the Irish language, modestly declaring at the end of his life, "I am still but an aspirant to the honoured title of a Gaelic scholar".<sup>26</sup> His breadth of interests and reading was vast; he patronised education and learning at all levels. He was completely without religious prejudice, attending churches of all denominations. He was capable of learning from experience, moving from the almost feudal conservatism of his youth to a greater appreciation of democracy based on the secret ballot. In Van Diemen's Land he expressed compassion for unfortunate convicts, sinning through poverty rather than inherent corruption.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps O'Brien's greatest achievement was the rehabilitation of the great family of Brian Boru, which, appearing to have sold out to the foreigner, now returned to the patriotic mainstream.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. 1773-1837.
2. 1781-1856.
3. Sir Edward O'Brien to Lady O'Brien, 11, 26, 30 & 31 March 1825, etc., Inchiquin Papers, MSS 2797 & 3627, National Library of Ireland (NLI).
4. William Smith O'Brien's Day Book, 1826-39, in possession of Mr Anthony O'Brien.
5. *Plan for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland; with observations on the English and Scotch Poor Laws, Addressed to the Landed Proprietors of Ireland*, 1831.
6. *Considerations relative to the renewal of the East-India Company's Charter*, 1830.
7. 1811-61.
8. Hugh L. Weir, 'William Smith O'Brien's Secret Family', *The Other Clare*, Vol. 20, April 1996, pp. 55-6.
9. *Limerick Standard*, 14 March 1837.
10. Lady Charlotte to Smith O'Brien, 24 October 1843, Smith O'Brien Papers, NLI MS. 433, No. 1071.
11. Smith O'Brien to Lucy O'Brien, 6 May 1844, Smith O'Brien Papers, NLI MS. 436, No. 1569.
12. *Hansard*, Vol. 89, 19 January 1847, p. 84.
13. *Nation*, 17 June 1848, quoted in R. Davis, *William Smith O'Brien: Ireland-1848-Tasmania* (Dublin 1989), p. 19.
14. Whether on the gallows high,/Or in the battle's van,/The fittest place for man to die/Is where he dies for man. Though attributed to O'Brien by the *Boston Pilot*, 21 October 1848, the poem was shown by T.P. O'Neill to have been quoted by him from Michael Joseph Barry, *Nation*, 28 September 1844. See also Davis, *William Smith O'Brien: Ireland-1848-Tasmania*, p. 24.
15. W.S. O'Brien, *Correspondence between John Martin and William Smith O'Brien, relative to a French Invasion*, Dublin, 1861, p. 32.
16. Chisholm Anstey to Smith O'Brien, 14 April 1850, Smith O'Brien Papers, NLI MS. 444, No. 2711.
17. R. Davis, *William Smith O'Brien: Ticket-of-Leave New Norfolk*, Hobart (Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies), 1996.
18. Lucy O'Brien to Smith O'Brien, 13 March [1854], Smith O'Brien Papers, NLI MS. 8654.
19. *Nation*, 22 May 1858.
20. W.S. O'Brien, *Correspondence between John Martin and William Smith O'Brien, relative to a French Invasion*, Dublin, 1861.
21. R. Davis, et al., eds., 'To Solitude Consigned': *The Tasmanian Journal of William Smith O'Brien*, Sydney (Crossing Press), 1995, p. 433.
22. For details, see R. Davis, "William Smith O'Brien and the American Civil War", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, December 1993, pp. 45-53.
23. 1805-1865, Trinity College, Cambridge, English Northern Circuit barrister, statistician, FRS.
24. He published his oration in a pamphlet, *Lecture on Poland* (1863).
25. *Nation*, 27 September 1862.
26. Smith O'Brien to Archdeacon O'Brien, 23 December 1863, quoted in *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 January 1864, collected in O'Brien cuttings, Smith O'Brien Papers, MS. 3375, NLI.
27. 'To Solitude Consigned', p. 172. See also introduction and conclusion for more information relating to this essay.

