

DANIEL O'CONNELL AND  
ELLEN COURTENAY

II

ELLEN Courtenay's ultimatum to O'Connell, declaring that she had received promises of assistance from 'many persons,' and that 'it would make her fortune' to denounce him publicly, was posted to O'Gorman Mahon, the young Member of Parliament for County Clare, at the end of February, 1831. It was exactly a year later that, in the Fleet Prison in London, she added the date to the last footnote to the pamphlet, which was published and at once broadcast over England, by the Editor of the *Satirist*. He must have made a very handsome profit on the sale of so small a publication at the price of half a crown per copy. The pamphlet comprises twenty-seven small pages of narrative in large black type, followed by ten pages of footnotes in smaller type, which are mainly concerned with a denunciation of O'Connell's public activities as an Irish agitator, and are written in the familiar style of all his political critics at the time.

The first footnote, for instance, denounces 'this man of atrocity' for having 'violated the sanctity of the Lord's day by changing even its title, and styling it "the O'Connell Sunday"' with the object of 'wringing from the poor Peasantry their last penny . . . . to enable him to pursue his insatiable ambition.' And the concluding footnote, which is quite obviously written to serve as political propaganda for quotation throughout England, fills four pages of close type. It begins by explaining that 'in political science I profess not to be an adept: it is not exactly the province

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of a female, nor is it at all in consonance with my taste and inclination—but of common sense and ordinary foresight, I lay claim to such share as is usually allowed to women. These qualifications enable me to see clearly through the motives which actuate this braggadocio of Ireland, this Cromwell of his day.' After much more abuse of this kind, she describes how O'Connell had 'succeeded in lighting the flame of discord and religious contention amongst his countrymen and the kingdom became a scene of rude disorder.' The Catholic Emancipation Act is explained as 'the voluntary concession on the part of a liberal and enlightened administration,' whereas the 'agitator' had 'modestly claimed the merit of having forced the measure of emancipation of His Majesty's Ministers!' 'Surely,' she exclaims, the 'credulous Hibernians' will upon the next election reject 'this worthless and spurious braggart' and will restore to the councils of the Nation 'the worthy, intelligent, and excellent Knight of Kerry, and his colleague Colonel Crosbie.' And this most useful political tract, composed by a woman who proclaims to all the world that she has been seduced by him and left to starve, concludes with the following most judicious blend of politics and sentiment:

How can the popularity of such a man be long preserved? Raised up by fraud and dishonour—he must soon tumble from his high station, and his fall will then be still more rapid than his ascent. When such an event does take place I heartily pray that his sins may be purified by contrition and atonement—and that the Father of all Mercies may extend that indulgence to him, which in this world he withheld from the wretched being that fell beneath his power.

Such is the parting prayer of the desolate, unfriended and broken-hearted

ELLEN COURTENAY.

Fleet Prison, London.

Feb. 27, 1832.

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It is unnecessary to examine in any detail the hysterical narrative which is the main content of the pamphlet. By her own account, Ellen Courtenay's father was 'a native of Cork, and was well known as a man of high respectability and character, possessed freehold and leasehold property to a considerable amount, and built in the City of Cork several elegant houses. His own house was the receptacle for literary characters of all grades—the men of genius, the scientific, the clergy and professional men of all branches, found there a hospitable home; his kitchen too, was ever open to the poor and the unfortunate, by which description of persons it was almost daily filled.' The bankruptcy of a banker and other disasters reduced his means. His wife, Ellen's mother, was also 'well known; her character was so distinguished by acts of charity, that her death was regretted similar to a public calamity—almost every shop in the City of Cork having been closed on the occasion.' Owing to her father's financial difficulties, Ellen Courtenay decided to leave home and earn her own living, having equipped herself before leaving Cork with a certificate to the 'excellence of her moral character' from the Catholic bishop.

After her arrival in Dublin the young lady, being then 'scarcely Fifteen Years of Age,' made her way to O'Connell's house in Merrion Square to consult him concerning a mortgaged leasehold of her father's. He received her 'with much cordiality and kindness,' but instinct, she says, warned her that it was better to conduct her subsequent business dealings with him in writing, during the eight months in which she 'engaged herself at a Boarding School of the first class' in Dublin. At the end of that time O'Connell, according to her story, asked her to come and see him concerning the mortgaged house, at Merrion Square; and it was on this occasion—to which her polite vocabulary does

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ample justice—he ‘sullied his fame and his honour irretrievably, by one of the most ungenerous, disgraceful and inhuman assaults on a defenceless female, ever recorded in the black catalogue of human depravity. Vain were all my struggles, all my prayers, all my cries for assistance; he sunk the man in the brutality of the monster, and desisted not from his prey, until he had accomplished the most remorseless and flagrant aggression which ever disgraced humanity.’

How anyone can ever have believed such a preposterous story it is hard to imagine—except that any story likely to discredit O’Connell at the time was eagerly accepted. By her own admission, O’Connell insisted on seeing all his clients at his own house in Merrion Square, where he lived with his wife and his large family of children; some at least of whom (to say nothing of his secretaries) must have heard the girl’s ‘vain cries for assistance.’ Her narrative proceeds to describe how, after she had recovered from a ‘death-like trance,’ O’Connell ‘took a book with a cross upon it, and in the most earnest and solemn manner swore that he would liberally provide for me, that I should never know the pangs of want and that all in his power (which was not inconsiderable) should be accomplished for my peace and happiness.’ The sequel is even less convincing. She claims to have determined at once to leave Ireland in disgust, and that he gave her ‘a trifling sum’ to pay for her journey to London, where she ‘fortunately gained a situation of respectability,’ until she knew that she was going to become a mother, whereupon she returned to Dublin. There the boy was born, and, by her account, was christened Henry Simpson at O’Connell’s suggestion. But he refused to give her money, so that she had to pawn all she possessed, and then went back to London for four years with the child,

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and there with a lady's help founded a small school.

One point in her narrative is most curious, for she states that she 'never told any person of Mr. O'Connell's conduct towards me,' even when she and her child were in extreme poverty in London. 'To the present hour,' she writes in January, 1832, 'the sad tale of my misfortunes has only been communicated in detached portions to two or three female friends.' O'Gorman Mahon must have felt some suspicion when he read that startling statement a year after the lady had applied to him and delivered an ultimatum to O'Connell through him! How many of her other statements in the pamphlet were equally untrue we can only guess. It is probably true enough, however, that when O'Connell's rich uncle died she returned to Dublin again to renew her efforts to get money from him. By this time, O'Connell had plainly decided to have no more dealings with her, for he refused to see her and referred her to a 'religious professor whom he employs to transact such affairs as will not exactly suit the conscience and honour of more scrupulous men.' She even pursued O'Connell to his house; but there his patience finally gave way and 'he suddenly hurled me from his door and slammed it against my face with all the fury and gesticulation of an incensed drayman.'

So the squalid narrative proceeds—the narrative upon which Sir James O'Connor has based his own gratuitous attack upon O'Connell's moral character. There is no need to follow her subsequent difficulties, which culminated in her imprisonment for debt and in the publication of her half-crown pamphlet—which must have earned a large profit for her publishers and been a valuable contribution to the recklessly unscrupulous campaign with which O'Connell was pursued after his return to Parliament. How much of the profit came to Ellen Courtenay was of little consequence;

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that ill-starred 'female' was very soon in dire trouble again. She returned to Ireland after her release from prison, and changing her former tactics, she proceeded to get in touch with Dublin Castle, as the author of one of the most damaging attacks upon O'Connell that had been delivered by anyone. She applied to the chaplain to the Lord Lieutenant, Dean Vignolles, who was afterwards to become Dean of Ossory and whose library not long ago was dispersed among book collectors in Ireland. It contained many interesting old volumes, and among them a bound collection of Irish pamphlets which included the Dean's own copy of Ellen Courtenay's libel on O'Connell. With it he bound up four letters addressed to him in the year 1835 by Ellen Courtenay, and these, together with the volume itself, have been kindly placed at my disposal by their owner, Mr. Williams.

The first letter is dated April 12th, 1835, from 48 Mabbot Street, and said that 'my distress is such that if something be not immediately done in my behalf I must inevitably perish!—to the truth of which *I court the strictest enquiry.*' For two years she had been living in the house of an impoverished widow. She had been separated during her travels and her imprisonment from her son—who had been placed in a Catholic orphanage through the assistance of O'Connell's friend, the 'religious professor,' to whom Ellen Courtenay had herself applied. Now she writes to Dean Vignolles to say that 'the bearer of this letter is my long-lost, scouted and deserted child, who I have at length found after and painful and almost hopeless search of two years, amongst a horde of Mr. O'Connell's deserted offspring, in filth, nakedness, wretchedness, and misery—grown-up men and women totally uneducated in this enlightened Age that education is available to all. Could I get to London, I have much to say on this Subject, but here I can do nothing. I

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therefore implore you, Revd. Sir, for the Sake of Him who loves and rewards generous Acts, have Compassion upon the long Sufferings of a deeply injured, heart-broken and defenceless female and Afford her the Assistance she most earnestly solicits, and for which goodness her grateful tears and prayers should ever be offered.

'If His Excellency will not Assist—Oh! Sir, will you not do something in my behalf yourself? I beg leave most respectfully to subscribe myself,

'Your most humble servant and suppliant,

'ELLEN COURTENAY.'

Six days later another begging letter followed, which read :—

'Revd. Sir—Your Charity and goodness, I am sure, will make allowances for the Anxiety I feel to know the result of my Application. Food I have not been able to procure for my Child yesterday, to the truth of which I court the *strictest enquiry*. My distresses must shortly end, if something be not done in my behalf. Oh! Sir, have Compassion upon the manifold Afflictions of a broken-hearted individual and her grateful prayers shall ever be offered for your health and happiness.'

Dean Vignolles, as the Lord Lieutenant's chaplain, must have been accustomed to receiving begging letters. But it was surely a unique experience to receive these importunate appeals from a woman who, after spending more than ten years in trying to obtain money from the uncrowned King of Catholic Ireland and having actually made a considerable sum by denouncing him in a scandalous pamphlet, had now turned her attentions to the Lord Lieutenant. It may even have crossed the Dean's mind that she was a dangerous lady to have dealings with; and that he himself—if not the

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Lord Lieutenant—might quite conceivably be denounced by her as the parent of some other long-lost and neglected child. One thing he must have realised was that Ellen Courtenay, though a Catholic, was now appealing to the Protestant Establishment for relief. He could not even dismiss her with the obvious retort that there were Catholic orphanages where her boy would be cared for and taught; for she had by her own account just taken the unfortunate boy away from the Catholic orphanage where O'Connell's friend, the 'religious professor,' had found him a home. But her importunity was certainly remarkable. He had not answered either of her begging letters, and on April 27th he received yet another—this time brought to him by hand, and expressing a still greater anxiety because she had heard that their Excellencies were about to leave Dublin. And a week later, on the day before the Viceroy was to leave Dublin in fact, Ellen Courtenay played a last card by sending him a copy of her own pamphlet denouncing O'Connell, with a request that she might be allowed even to sell him a copy of it. At the end of this last note there is a very interesting footnote inscribed in the Dean's own handwriting. 'Miss C.'s Pamphlet,' he writes, 'was laid before His Excellency, who ordered £2 to be handed to Miss Courtenay, and which I paid to Mr. Torrell of Wexburgh Street, who was authorized to receive it.' And on the back of the same letter there is yet another footnote, added later by the Dean, which records the melancholy end to a very sordid transaction: 'Mr Torrell defrauded Miss Courtenay and never paid her the money.'

Having thus failed to collect money from Dublin Castle, Ellen Courtenay then made her way back to London in the following year, and there was one more unpleasant but extremely important incident in the squalid story that must be recorded. She was able

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to serve O'Connell's enemies once again, for she succeeded in bringing the matter into the police courts. The case is on record on page 29 of the *Annual Register* for 1836, which reports the proceedings at Bow Street on March 16th of that year. Two of O'Connell's sons, both Members of Parliament at the time, together with O'Connell's son-in-law, Mr. Fitzsimon, M.P., and also Mr. Morgan John O'Connell, M.P.—four M.P.'s in all—appeared in court when a charge of assaulting Ellen Courtenay's son was brought against John O'Connell. The boy was by this time seventeen years old, and he gave his own evidence.

On the previous Sunday, he stated, he had seen Daniel O'Connell and his son John O'Connell, M.P., walking arm in arm in Cavendish Street, apparently on the way to Mass in Spanish Place. John O'Connell had noticed him, had crossed the road, 'tore my cloak, dragged me along the pavement, and in the meanwhile beat me with his umbrella.' Daniel O'Connell, the boy continued, had then intervened and said 'Don't strike him any more, John.'

A different version of the story was then given by John O'Connell, who said that the boy (whom he had never seen before) had spoken to O'Connell and followed him in spite of being told repeatedly to go away. His father had then complained to him of 'having been annoyed and dogged by this boy for several Sunday mornings on his way to chapel.' The boy had retired, but followed them again, and John O'Connell had then gone across the road and beaten the boy several times lightly with his umbrella to drive him away.

When John O'Connell had made this statement in Court, the boy intervened again, saying to the magistrate, 'My mother and I are suffering the greatest distress, and who are we to apply to for relief if not to my father?' The magistrate replied that if he had

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any claim upon Mr. O'Connell 'there are legal and proper modes of redress of which you can avail yourself, but following him through the streets is not the way to obtain your object.' John O'Connell was then fined twenty shillings for assault, whereupon O'Connell's son-in-law, Mr. Fitzsimon, who was a solicitor, intervened to make a statement. He said that he was not appearing under instructions from O'Connell, but he appealed to the magistrates to devise some means of protecting O'Connell from this annoyance. 'Mr. O'Connell denies most distinctly,' he said, 'that there was any ground for such annoyance, or for the statements which have been made.' The magistrates, however, declined to act unless Mr. Fitzsimon was officially instructed to appear, and the case ended after Miss Courtenay had made an outburst in which she declared, 'It is Mr. O'Connell's own fault that he suffers any annoyance. Both his son and I are starving and destitute and he refuses to give us anything for our support. I have in vain endeavoured to come to some settlement with him, but although Major MacNamara was appointed to arrange the matter, nothing has yet been done. Had an arrangement been made, this unfortunate affair would not have occurred.'

Such is the whole story upon which Sir James O'Connor, ex-Lord Justice, has seen fit to launch his disgraceful attack upon O'Connell's private life—treating Ellen Courtenay not only as an ill-used woman who had proved her case, but, with a gratuitous insult, as 'one partner in O'Connell's amours.' Even the report in the *Annual Register* would have indicated the obvious answer, that Miss Courtenay never took any legal steps to obtain relief from him. And the ultimatum which she sent to O'Gorman Mahon further discredits her unsupported story by the clearest evidence that she was being bribed to

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harass O'Connell. The whole episode was an instance of the sort of campaign with which O'Connell was vilified because of his determined efforts to obtain justice for the Catholics of his generation. The story of Ellen Courtenay was, in fact, used against him all over England, to such an extent that his wife undertook to accompany him through a tour in England, in an attempt to contradict the infamous slanders that were being spread about him. Her evidence also must be invoked, as another circumstance of the case overwhelmingly on O'Connell's side. She was a simple countrywoman from Kerry, whom O'Connell had married at the very outset of his career at the Bar, and he had deliberately incurred disinheritance by his rich uncle, whose heir he was to have been, by marrying her against his uncle's wishes. For the whole of their married life they remained devotedly attached to one another; and in all O'Connell's correspondence there is nothing more touching and impressive than the absolute faith he had in her and the way in which he turned to her alone, time after time, when he felt utterly dispirited and overcome by difficulties and disappointments. Even in the times when he was most triumphant he would write to her long letters complaining of the delay in getting back to her, and expressing the intense loneliness of his self-sacrificing life when she was not with him.

And one intimate letter from her, written in 1817, the very year in which Ellen Courtenay claimed that he had seduced her as an orphan in Dublin, must be quoted as evidence of his wife's implicit trust in him. 'My own darling Dan,' she wrote, 'I assure you my darling, you are our continual subject. When a kind husband or father is spoken of, Ellen and Kate will exclaim "Mamma, sure he is not so good a husband or father as our father!" You may guess, darling, what my reply is. You know what you deserve, and

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you are aware that in existence I don't think there is such a husband and father as you are and always have been. Indeed I think it quite impossible there could, and if the truest and tenderest affection can repay you, believe me that I feel and bear it for you. In truth, my own Dan, I am always at a loss for words to convey to you how I love and doat on you. Many and many a time I exclaim to myself, "What a happy creature I am, how grateful should I be to Providence for bestowing on me such a husband." And so indeed I am. We will, Love, shortly be fifteen years married, and I can answer that I never had cause to repent it. I have, darling, experienced all the happiness of the married state without feeling any of its cares, thanks to a fond and indulgent husband.'

That it should be necessary, as a footnote to the centenary of the Catholic Emancipation Act, to produce such intimate evidence in vindication of O'Connell's private character is a melancholy proof of that ingratitude which saddened the later years of O'Connell's life.

Even before 1829, he had impressed upon his wife that such ingratitude must be the lot of every public man who tries to serve his own people without accepting any reward or compensation for his services. It is a curious irony indeed that Sir James O'Connor—himself one of the most conspicuous examples of the rapid advance at the Irish Bar which was made possible to Irish Catholics by O'Connell's unaided and patriotic efforts—should in the same book, in which he has attempted to blacken O'Connell's moral character, write pages of virtuous indignation against O'Connell's habits of personal abuse of his opponents and 'attacks upon their honour, public and private.' Yet Sir James himself bases his own gratuitous attack upon O'Connell's private character on a grossly personal slander published by the *Times*, and upon

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the evidence of a blackmailer whose charges were entirely unsupported. O'Connell, after all, lived in an age when such abuse was the common form of expression in controversies, as the files of the *Times* abundantly reveal. And one can imagine what an outburst of indignation would have come from him if he had known that an Irish Catholic Lord Justice, writing a hundred years after the Emancipation Act, would seriously assert that 'the highest claim that can be made for O'Connell is that he antedated Emancipation by a decade'; would accuse O'Connell of 'promiscuously indulging his strong animal passions' and of acting 'without much generosity to one partner in his amours'; and deliver as his considered verdict that O'Connell 'debauched the Irish people, morally and mentally.'

DENIS GWYNN.