

DANIEL O'CONNELL AND
ELLEN COURTENAY

I

TO discuss the private life of Daniel O'Connell as though it required vindication is, especially around the centenary year of the Catholic Emancipation Act, an impertinence which would have called forth a scathing rebuke from the Liberator himself, if he had not passed beyond the range of those bitter controversies that saddened all his later public life. But a vindication has, in fact, become requisite in view of the extraordinary and quite gratuitous attack upon O'Connell's moral reputation which was made a few years ago in a book which has attracted a great deal of public attention both because of its sensational style and because its author is not only an Irish Catholic but a former Lord Justice of the Irish Courts.

In all the vast output of recrimination with which O'Connell was assailed during his long struggle to win Catholic emancipation, and later as the leader of the Repeal movement, there is certainly no more astonishing and vindictive attack than that which was made quite recently by the Rt. Hon. Sir James O'Connor in his *History of Ireland 1798-1924*. And as this ex-Lord Justice has seen fit to attack O'Connell's reputation from a new angle, throwing into the scales against a dead man his own prestige and authority as one of the principal former members of the Irish judiciary, the attack cannot, in fairness to O'Connell's memory, be left unnoticed. The present writer has by accident discovered quite recently new evidence bearing directly upon the flimsy testimony which Sir James O'Connor produced.

On page 251 of the first volume of his *History of Ireland 1798-1924*, Lord Justice O'Connor sums up

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the character of O'Connell in the following paragraph: ' In private life he was a queer mixture. He was intensely religious, and passionately attached to his wife and family. A letter written by him to one of his daughters who was afflicted by doubts about the Faith might have been penned by a wise and saintly archbishop. But "*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor,*" as Hazlitt reminds us, "is not the language of hypocrisy, but of human nature." *He was a man of strong animal passions, and seems to have indulged them somewhat promiscuously. The TIMES charged him with the parentage of "broods" of illegitimate children in Dublin and Kerry. A story, published in London by a Miss Courtenay, is unpleasant reading. We may safely discount much of it, but the residue that must be accepted goes to show that O'Connell was not prepared to act with much generosity to one partner in his amours.'*

Before discussing these astonishing charges in detail, a few points demand immediate attention. In the first place, there is not a shred of evidence produced in support of them by Sir James O'Connor, apart from the actual contents of the paragraph quoted above (in which the italics are mine), although he launches these accusations for the first time, and although the two large volumes of his book are otherwise copiously annotated with references to the original sources. Almost any other point in the history of modern Ireland is regarded as sufficiently important to require footnotes, but these reckless charges of immorality against O'Connell—although none of his many biographers has ever made them—are presented with such confidence that they are considered to require no proof. Secondly, Sir James writes with such a parade of footnotes on all other matters that his readers will naturally assume that he makes no statement without proper evidence; and the fact that he writes with the prestige of

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a former Law Officer and Lord Justice will be generally assumed to guarantee that he writes with due regard for weighing evidence.

Thirdly, he writes as an Irish Catholic throughout the book; and it will naturally be assumed that any Irish Catholic—and, above all, any Catholic barrister who has had a very rapid professional success such as Sir James himself obtained—will feel such gratitude towards Daniel O'Connell (who was himself prevented from becoming a K.C. even after he had won admission to the Inner Bar for Catholic barristers by the Act of 1829), that any comments in disparagement of his services, and still more of his private character, will be made with natural reluctance and with a sense that he should at least be given the benefit of the doubt, if doubt exists.

Yet far from feeling gratitude, or even an ordinary respect for the good name of the illustrious dead, Sir James O'Connor has seen fit to accuse O'Connell not only of 'promiscuously indulging his strong animal passions,' but of having acted ungenerously to Miss Courtenay, whom he describes as 'one partner in his amours.' And he supports these accusations by only two statements—the first being such an obviously reckless defamation in a hostile newspaper that it could not possibly be considered in a court of law; and the second being the unsupported evidence of a woman whom O'Connell treated as a blackmailer, and rightly so, as we shall see later in the letter which she herself wrote a year before she published the story which Sir James O'Connor quotes with such serenity.

Before dealing with her accusations it is necessary to recall briefly the attitude of the *Times* to O'Connell at the period when it made the charge which is quoted by Lord Justice O'Connor. He himself quotes from the same newspaper, a few pages further on in his

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book, a sentence which describes O'Connell's own book on Irish history as a combination of 'drivelling intellectual imbecility with the most diabolical wickedness.' Such epithets were, in fact, mild in comparison with the language which the *Times* habitually used concerning O'Connell in the eighteen-thirties. 'We have declared war,' it said, for instance, soon after the passing of the Emancipation Act, 'against one whose principles are held in abhorrence, as those of the worst being in human form that ever disgraced the floor of an English Senate.'

And in 1835, when O'Connell had attacked Lord Lyndhurst, the *Times* retaliated with an outburst which, even in those days of coarse vulgar abuse in the Press, must have startled even the hardened readers of the *Times*. 'What an unredeemed and unredeemable scoundrel is this O'Connell,' it wrote, 'to make such a threat, and at such a time too! If he has not lied more foully than it could have entered into the imagination of the devil himself to lie, he makes the threat with his own wife dying under his very eyes. Oh, how long shall such a wretch as this be tolerated among civilised men!' And a few months later it published another famous onslaught upon O'Connell, this time in verse :

' Scum condensed of Irish bog!
Ruffian, coward, demagogue!
Boundless liar, base detractor!
Nurse of murders, treason's factor!
Of Pope and priest the crouching slave.
While thy lips of freedom rave.
Of England's fame the viprous hater,
Yet wanting courage for a traitor.
Ireland's peasants feed thy purse,
Still thou art her bane and curse.
Tho' thou liv'st, an empire's scorn,
Lift on high thy brazen horn.
Every dog shall have his day,
This is thine of brutish sway . . .

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Spout thy filth, effuse thy slime,
Slander is to thee no crime.
Safe from challenge, safe from law,
Who can curb thy callous jaw?
Who should sue a convict liar?
On a poltroon who would fire?'

English Catholics need no reminding that it was the same newspaper which, fifteen years later, led the attack upon Cardinal Wiseman when Pius IX restored the English hierarchy. Its attacks on the Pope and upon Cardinal Wiseman during those years should alone be sufficient to discredit its language in attacking any Catholic leader. Yet Sir James O'Connor, ex-Lord Justice, has seen fit to base upon one such vituperative epithet the grossest personal attack upon the great Catholic advocate, who won admission to the inner bar and to the judiciary for all Catholic barristers, both English and Irish.

More serious, because it is less easy to discredit, is the bold assumption by Sir James O'Connor that Ellen Courtenay's scandalous pamphlet, which was distributed all over England by O'Connell's enemies, must be accepted as trustworthy evidence. More than that, he so words his own denunciation that he treats her evidence as being that of 'one partner in his amours'—as though her hired attacks were sufficient demonstration of O'Connell's 'promiscuity' and of his frequent infidelity to his wife. Here also he gives no details, but writes, with the self-confidence of a High Court Judge, as though his own word is sufficient to confirm the evidence of O'Connell's traducer. The case of Ellen Courtenay has been forgotten; and Mr. Michael MacDonagh, who referred to it briefly in the first edition of his *Life of Daniel O'Connell*, has very properly omitted it from the new edition of his book which has been published in connection with the Catholic Emancipation centenary. But Sir James O'Con-

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nor not only revives the story but assumes that it is true, and even bases upon it a general accusation of promiscuous immorality.

To clear the matter now, it is necessary to recall it in greater detail. Ellen Courtenay, according to her own story, was an orphan of fifteen when she came to consult O'Connell professionally in Dublin in the year 1817, concerning a small leasehold in County Cork which her father had left to her heavily mortgaged. She gave birth to an illegitimate child in November, 1818; and, according to the account which she published afterwards, the child was baptised Henry Simpson at O'Connell's suggestion. O'Connell, she declares, had the boy placed in a Catholic home for children, and Miss Courtenay then went to London, where she earned her living as a school teacher and afterwards on the stage. When the boy was discharged from the home, he went to join his mother in London, and there they became involved in pecuniary difficulties.

Ellen Courtenay insisted that O'Connell was the father of the boy, and she appealed to him repeatedly for financial relief. O'Connell, however, declined to provide for her and the child, although he had been earning a considerable income at the Irish Bar, and although he received a much greater income after the Emancipation Act through the collection of the O'Connell Tribute when he left the Bar (since George IV refused to include him among the Catholic barristers who were almost immediately admitted as K.C.'s). That fact alone is evidence of his own denial of the boy's paternity; and anyone who knows O'Connell's private correspondence, which reveals the extraordinary generosity with which he gave donations to every sort of charity, frequently on condition that his name should not be mentioned, would naturally be slow to believe that he, who was so generous in giving

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alms, would have allowed any woman to starve who had a valid claim upon him.

Failing to obtain financial support from O'Connell, Ellen Courtenay was imprisoned for debt in the Fleet Prison in London in 1832; and while she was in prison she published a pamphlet accusing O'Connell of having seduced her and of having left her to starve. The title of her pamphlet was 'A narrative of most extraordinary cruelty, perfidy, and depravity perpetrated against her by Daniel O'Connell, Esq., M.P. for Kerry.' One might well ask how a poor woman imprisoned for debt had managed to find resources to publish a pamphlet while she was in prison. But Sir James O'Connor asks no such questions, and merely records her accusations as damning evidence against O'Connell. Two further points of vital importance are: whether O'Connell was in a position to afford her relief (assuming, as all his private correspondence shows, that he was the sort of man who would not allow his own illegitimate child to starve); and also whether he had special reasons for wishing to avoid the scandal of having a pamphlet published against him containing such accusations.

On both points the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of O'Connell. As a junior barrister, working with almost incredible industry in Dublin and on circuit, O'Connell had been able to earn about £8,000 a year; and he had also inherited Darrynane and a part of his uncle's fortune, before the Emancipation Act. But when he devoted himself to politics, and his friends organised the O'Connell Tribute to relieve him from further financial anxieties, his income increased enormously for the first few years. Fitzpatrick, the son of the organiser of the Tribute, declares that in some years the total amounted to £16,000, and that between 1829 and 1834 the total collected was £91,800. O'Connell had certainly to meet very large

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political expenses out of this, particularly when his opponents tried to cripple him by attempting to invalidate elections which he had won. But his finances were most prosperous at this very period, and he had absolute control of the fund. It was intended to cover every sort of expense; and it is absurd to suppose that O'Connell would have hesitated to make some small grant (such as Ellen Courtenay claimed to have been all that she asked to keep herself and her son from starvation) if he felt that she had any claim upon him.

Above all, he was so bitterly assailed in England at the time when he was just entering upon his Parliamentary career, as a man approaching his sixties, that he would obviously have done anything in reason to avoid the public scandal of any attack such as Ellen Courtenay made upon him during her imprisonment. He was being held up to every sort of obloquy in the *Times* especially; and yet, according to Ellen Courtenay's incredible story, he would not save her from starvation although he was the father of her son. These are considerations which anyone with the slightest regard for evidence would naturally take into account. But Sir James O'Connor ignores them.

Only one possibility, it would seem, might have led O'Connell (assuming him to have been devoid of any sense of duty to a woman whom he had seduced as an orphan) to ignore the danger of being publicly exposed. He might not have thought that there was any possibility of Ellen Courtenay obtaining a hearing. But accident has brought to the notice of the present writer an old letter from Ellen Courtenay herself which not only shows that she was already contemplating a public attack upon him, but that she had been offered great financial inducements to attack him. The letter was even sent by her to The O'Gorman Mahon, who had nominated O'Connell for the historic election in Clare in 1828 and had succeeded him as M.P. for

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Clare. I am indebted to Mr. Blake Butler, the owner of The O'Gorman Mahon's papers, for permission to reproduce the letter in full. It shows not only that Ellen Courtenay had been offered a bribe to denounce O'Connell, but also that O'Connell himself would have been warned by The O'Gorman Mahon that she was threatening to attack him publicly.

The letter bears the postmark 28th February, 1831, and is addressed, in an educated hand, to O'Gorman Mahon, Esq., M.P., L.L.D., Long's Hotel, Bond Street. It is dated from 12 Beaufort Buildings, Strand, and it runs as follows:—

SIR,—I beg leave very respectfully to state that I waited at home several Evenings in the hope that you would fulfil your *promise* of Calling upon me, and I still flatter myself O'Gorman Mahon is an individual who would feel a pleasure in rendering a service to a most persecuted, injured and helpless female who is in daily danger of being arrested for a debt of O'Connell's which relying on his words, on his oaths and his honor she pledged herself to pay, but taking the meanest advantage of her very unprotected state he refuses to do, and in fact is *too Mighty a Man* to hear any thing on her Subject. I wished to explain this matter to you and shew documents of the respectability of the party, who has recourse to this measure as a *last resource* in the hope and certainty that if you represent the case and point out the danger incurred it would have the desired effect as O'C. is very cautious when *known*. The Suffering individual having Claims on public Sympathy is urged—strongly urged by many persons who would assist her on the occasion—to publish the entire facts—it would make her fortune—and she is in Misery—but notwithstanding from a feeling of delicacy and a love of country which she still cherishes, wishes (if possible) to avoid doing so—as it would not only bring eternal disgrace on O'C., but on the Country in general and a Catholic priest who is also deeply concerned. You have no doubt Sir, read romances, but you have never read nor heard of a case of a more extraordinary nature, of more Suffering, Misery and Destitution on one side, nor more heartlessness, depravity and every want of just

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and honourable feeling on the other. For God's sake and in the Name of Charity and humanity I implore your Services in the way which I have stated—first that you will hear this extraordinary Case and secondly that you will use your influence in behalf of the party, which would be an Act worthy your goodness and should ever be held in the most grateful recollection. I will wait upon you tomorrow or next day and take my chance of seeing you as no doubt your parliamentary duties deter you from Calling. With apologies for this troubling you, I have the honor to be your Obedt. Servt. Ellen Courtenay.

Among the private papers of the O'Gorman Mahon I have been unable to trace any record of what action he took upon receiving this carefully worded ultimatum. But it may be assumed that O'Connell received warning of its contents, and he must have recognised that internal evidence suggested that it was drafted by a practised hand. The 'persecuted, injured and helpless female' was even by her own admission much less 'unprotected' than she alleged, inasmuch as she alludes to the 'many persons,' able and willing to assist her, who were 'urging her strongly' to publish 'the entire facts,' and she even states plainly that to do so 'would make her fortune.' If ever a public man had strong reasons for avoiding the exposure of any act of private immorality O'Connell had both reason and opportunity in the years 1831 and 1832, when he controlled enormous political funds and when his enemies were searching for every possible means of discrediting his reputation. Yet even after Ellen Courtenay had delivered this ultimatum through the O'Gorman Mahon, he refused to be blackmailed.

For years he had been living an extremely ascetic and industrious life as a champion of the Catholic cause. It is incredible, to anyone who has read his private letters and who knows the intimate relations upon which he consulted many priests, that, if he really were the father of Ellen Courtenay's child, he would

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have failed to make provision for her. What substance there may have been in her accusations against O'Connell will never be known. She may have been suffering from delusions. She may simply have been an unscrupulous adventuress who saw the possibilities of blackmailing him, and who had discovered 'many persons' who were prepared to 'make her fortune' if she would bring charges against him that were difficult to disprove. To anyone familiar with O'Connell's life the last explanation that will seem probable, in view of his circumstances at the time and in view of his well known generosity, is that her accusation was true. What is clear from the letter sent by her to the O'Gorman Mahon is that she had discovered means of making money by denouncing O'Connell. The mystery must be rather why she consented to go to prison for debt when 'many persons' were willing to assist her. Their assistance was obviously forthcoming to the extent of publishing a pamphlet that was distributed broadcast over England after her imprisonment, and the plain inference would seem to be that she was obliged to undergo imprisonment as part of the price which she received, in order to focus attention upon her attacks.

There was a sequel to the publication of this pamphlet, after Ellen Courtenay had been released from prison, which brought the whole matter into the police courts in London. In another article I shall examine the story that was revealed in that way, and I am also able to produce several other remarkable letters of Ellen Courtenay's which were accidentally discovered among a collection of old pamphlets in Dublin a few years ago, bound up with a copy of her own pamphlet, which has also been placed at my disposal.

DENIS GWYNN.

(To be concluded.)