



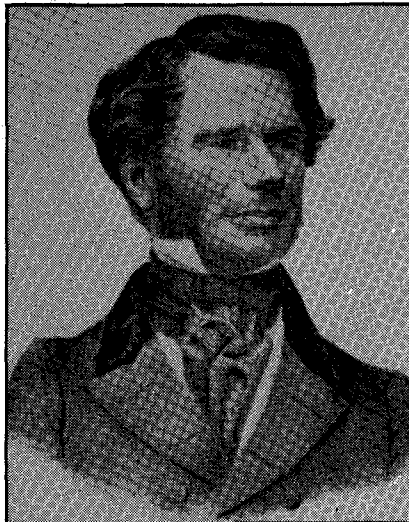
William Smith O'Brien in Van Diemen's Land 1849 - 1854

By John Cussen



On 1st November, 1849, William Smith O'Brien stepped ashore on Maria Island where he was to commence his sentence of transportation for life. Maria Island is a small island off Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) which was then part of the penal colony. Smith O'Brien was confined to a small cottage on the island, which he described as 'about the size of one of the smallest bathing lodges at Kilkee.' He was a prisoner, but definitely of a special category. His exercise area was to be narrowly defined and his letters were to be inspected. Smith O'Brien's position would have been more comfortable if he had accepted 'a ticket-of-leave' which had been offered to him. (A ticket-of-leave was an exemption granted by the authorities giving the holder the right to obtain employment, own property, and, in general, to live his own life within the confines of the colony.) Smith O'Brien had refused this opportunity for various reasons, but mainly because he wished to concede nothing to British officialdom and to remain an Irish leader in exile.

William Smith O'Brien was an unlikely revolutionary. Born at Dromoland, County Clare, on 17th October, 1803, the second son of Sir Edward O'Brien, his mother was Charlotte Smith, daughter of William Smith, a wealthy attorney from Newcastle West, Co. Limerick. On his maternal grandfather's death, Smith O'Brien adopted his name and inherited his substantial estate at Cahirmoyle, near Ardagh, Co. Limerick (now held by the Oblate Order). He went on to receive the conventional education of an English Protestant gentleman of the time at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, from which he graduated with a B.A. degree in 1826. He was elected to the House of Commons in April, 1828, for the borough of Ennis, after a by-election. He lost his seat in 1831, but was again elected, this time for Co. Limerick, at the general election in January, 1835, in which year he inherited Cahirmoyle. He was a keen and independent parliamentarian, who in the 1830s, concentrated on such economic affairs as railways, canals, education etc. He supported Catholic Emancipation, though he was not a general supporter of Daniel O'Connell. He opposed him for election in Co.

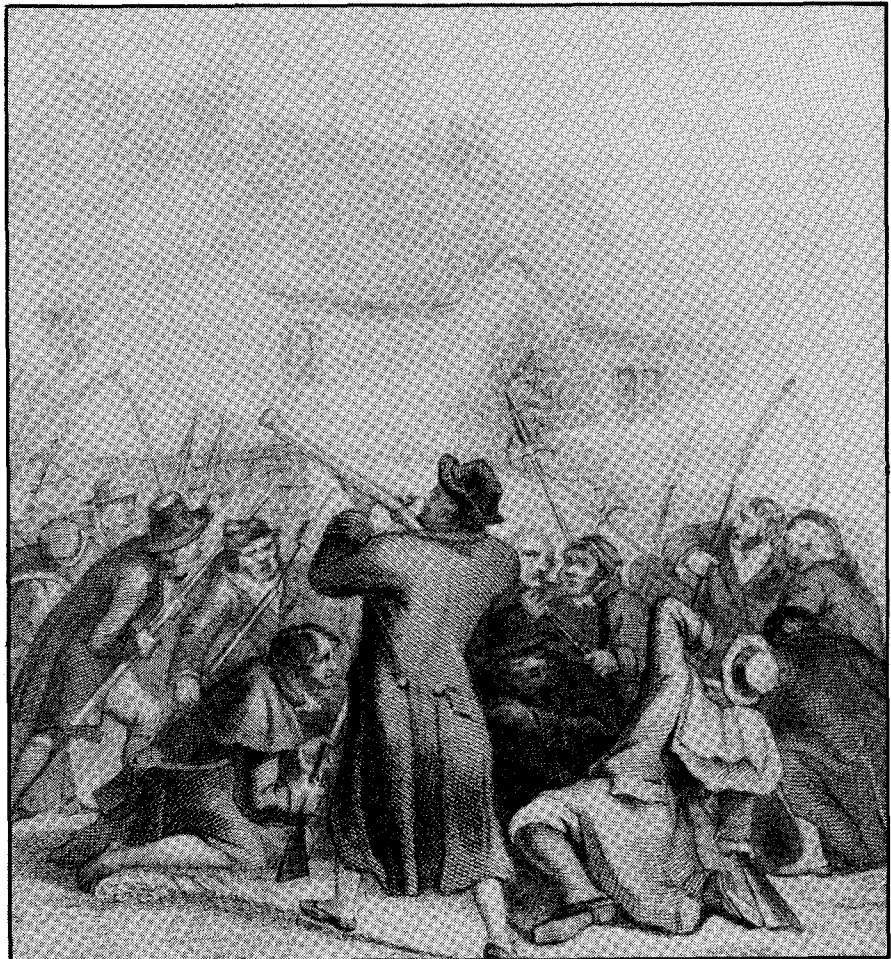


William Smith O'Brien, 1848.

Clare in 1830, when he fought a duel against one of O'Connell's supporters, Tom Steele.

On 4th July, 1843, in a passionate speech in the House of Commons, he pleaded for better government for Ireland, and urged that a committee be set up to tackle the country's grievances. His motion was defeated, and, on 20th October he applied for admission to the Association for Repeal of the Union ... 'Slowly, reluctantly, convinced that Ireland has nothing to hope from the sagacity, justice, or generosity of the English Parliament, reliance shall henceforth be placed upon our own native energy and patriotism.' Daniel O'Connell was delighted to receive such a recruit.

Smith O'Brien had little charisma and was grave and formal in his manner; his speeches were earnest but without elegance or humour. As Lecky the historian wrote: "He



The affray at the Widow McCormack's house, near Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary, 1848.



obtained great weight with the people from the charm that ever hangs round the chivalrous and polished gentleman, and from the transparent purity of a patriotism on which suspicion never rested."

William Smith O'Brien married Lucy Gabbett of High Park, County Limerick, in 1832. They lived in Cahirmoyle and had seven children, five boys and two girls.

In July, 1846, he broke with Daniel O'Connell on the 'peace resolution'. O'Connell consistently opposed physical force and the resolution was 'that under no circumstances would physical force be justified in securing national rights'. The Young Ireland Party with its leaders, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Francis Meagher, John Mitchel and Smith O'Brien, seceded from the Repeal Association on this point and afterwards founded the Irish Confederation. Commencing in November, 1846, Smith O'Brien contributed a series of articles to *The Nation*, the journal of the Young Irelanders founded in 1842, dealing with the needs of the country. The total failure of the potato crop in 1846-'47 brought an added urgency to these writings. There was a plea to the government and landed proprietors to deal with the emergency of the Famine and the other grievances of the country. It was to no avail: the Famine and the fever ran their course, and Smith O'Brien became more and more convinced that no help could be expected from the English parliament.

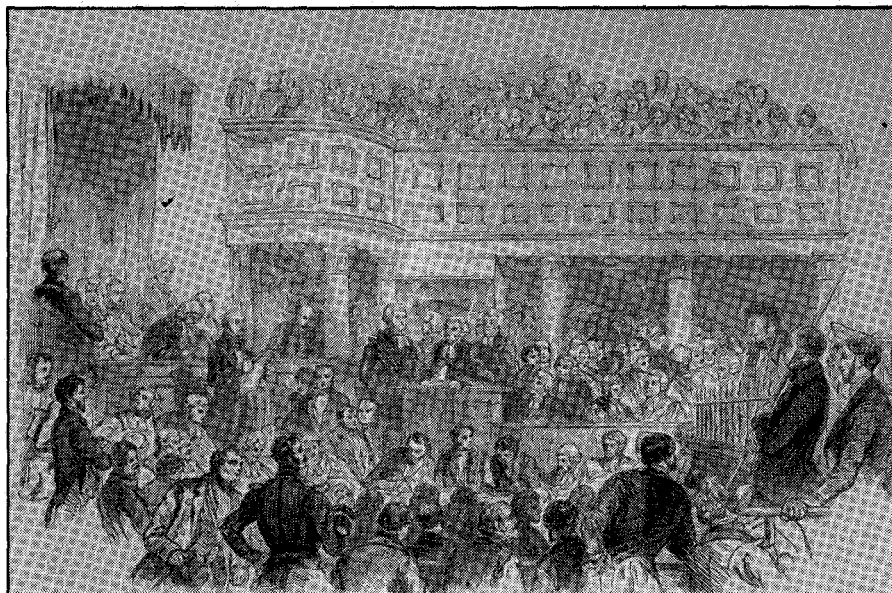
Smith O'Brien followed the pure line of Irish nationalism and self-government as against the new thinking in the Young Ireland movement expressed by James Fintan Lalor, who wished to involve the movement in the land question and tenant rights. The government was alarmed when the Chartist movement took up the Irish cause. In March of 1848 Smith O'Brien, Meagher and Mitchel were charged with sedition. The former two were acquitted, but Mitchel was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. The failure of the Repeal Movement and the sufferings of the Famine forced the Young Irelanders to contemplate armed revolt. The cabinet suspended *habeas corpus* in July, 1848. Armed insurrection was decided on. It was a hopeless gesture: there were no preparations; the people were beaten down with the Famine; the priests were against it. Efforts to raise the towns and countryside in Kilkenny and Wexford failed. Eventually a skirmish took place with the police at the house of a widow McCormack near Ballingarry. It was a fiasco. The rebels dispersed. Smith O'Brien, with a £500 reward offered for his capture, went into hiding but was arrested at Thurles railway station on 5th August and lodged in Kilmainham Jail. He was



The arrest of William Smith O'Brien at Thurles, Railway Station, Co. Tipperary.

tried before a special commission at Clonmel on the 28th September. The trial was to last nine days. On 7th October he was convicted of high treason and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. The government rushed an act through both houses of parliament to enable them to commute the sentence to transportation for life, and on the 9th July, 1849, Smith O'Brien was brought from Richmond Prison to Kingstown Harbour to board the man-of-war *The Swift* which would transport him to Van Diemen's Land. Transported with him were Thomas Francis Meagher, Terence Bellew McManus and Patrick O'Donoghue.

O'Donoghue in later years wrote: "I never loved William Smith O'Brien much; but his great nobility in general, and those exalted virtues which he so eminently possesses force me to acknowledge his great qualities. One of the great moments of my life was in Ballingarry watching Smith O'Brien's great soul superior to fear - but so meek and sub-servient of mercy, to the rights of man, to virtue. William Smith O'Brien was the greatest man I have known in either fact or fiction. During the Rising he could have taken towns, sacked villages, cut magistrates throats, and hanged bailiffs on every tree. Yet he refused to act in such a

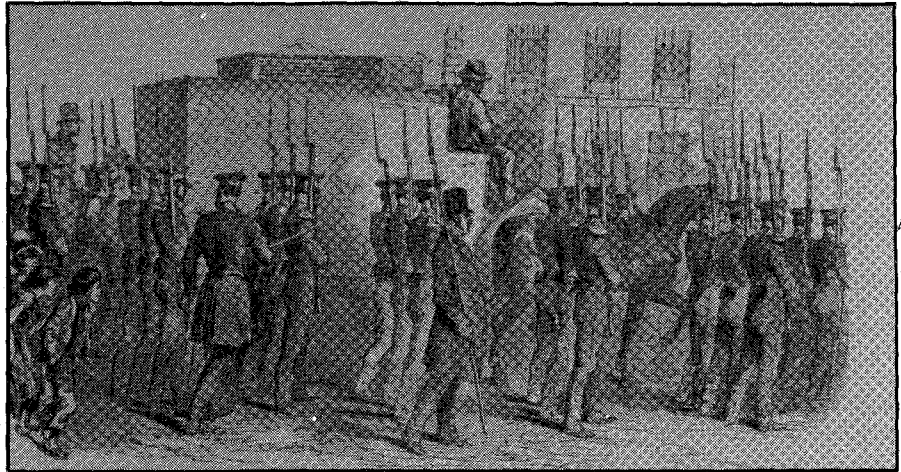


The trial of Smith O'Brien at Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, 1848.



manner. I would have executed the task, but the great pure man would have nothing but a revolution without blood. He was really the great O'Connell, with a little more ardour on account of years, he being so much younger – and the country in its last struggles."

The prisoners settled down to the long voyage. Smith O'Brien determined 'to wean myself from my former habits and also to learn never to ask another to do for me what I can do for myself.' On foot of this resolution he made his bed for the first time in his life. The voyage to Van Diemen's Land was largely uneventful, the boredom of life aboard ship was relieved by reading, backgammon, discussion and exercise on deck. The lack of fresh food and fresh water was felt. Each prisoner had been issued with two gallons of wine for the trip. After a voyage of 110 days, *The Swift* reached Van Diemen's Land,



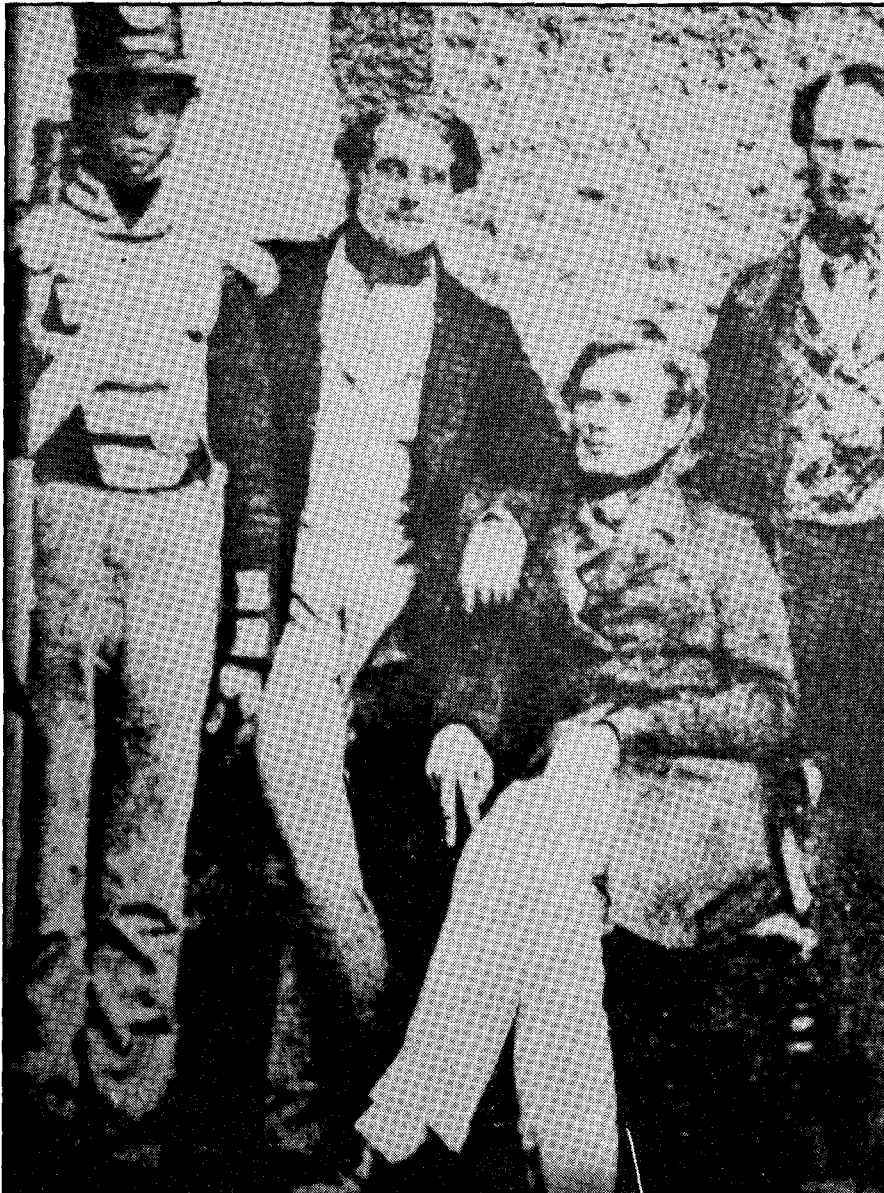
Smith O'Brien being brought to prison.

an island which had been discovered in 1642 by a Dutch navigator named Tasman. He named the island in honour of Anton Van Diemen who had sent him

on his expedition. In 1788 the first penal settlement was established in Australia and in 1803 a convict station was opened in Van Diemen's Land. By the time Smith O'Brien arrived there were approximately thirty seven thousand free citizens and twenty nine thousand convicts in the colony.

The governor of Van Diemen's Land in 1849 was Sir William Denison. He was hoping that Smith O'Brien would accept a ticket-of-leave and when he did not Denison decided to enforce stringent confinement on him. Smith O'Brien found this irksome but wrote: "If penal affliction stops here, I trust that for a season, at least, I shall be able to endure it with cheerfulness." He commenced a barrage of letters to influential friends and relations in an effort to have his virtual solitary confinement lifted and also with hopes of an eventual pardon always in his mind.

Christmas, 1849, was a lonely time for him, isolated from his family and friends. His wife Lucy and himself kept up regular correspondence. She had ideas of living with him in Van Diemen's Land but he was not in favour of this. He worried about his family and their education and whether at such a distance he could inspire them with the patriotism and love of Ireland which he felt himself. Early in January he felt chest pains and his health gave cause for concern. The authorities granted him increased exercise facilities and ended his solitary confinement: the last thing they wanted on their hands was an Irish Martyr. They wished to persuade him to accept a ticket-of-leave and his family, alerted and anxious about his health, also now wrote urging him to accept the government's terms. Word of Smith O'Brien's frail health reached the outside world and was taken up by the Irish papers, including the *Limerick Chronicle*, which wrote in June 1850: "The Government of a great Empire thus concentrates its giant force to crush a solitary unresisting individual."



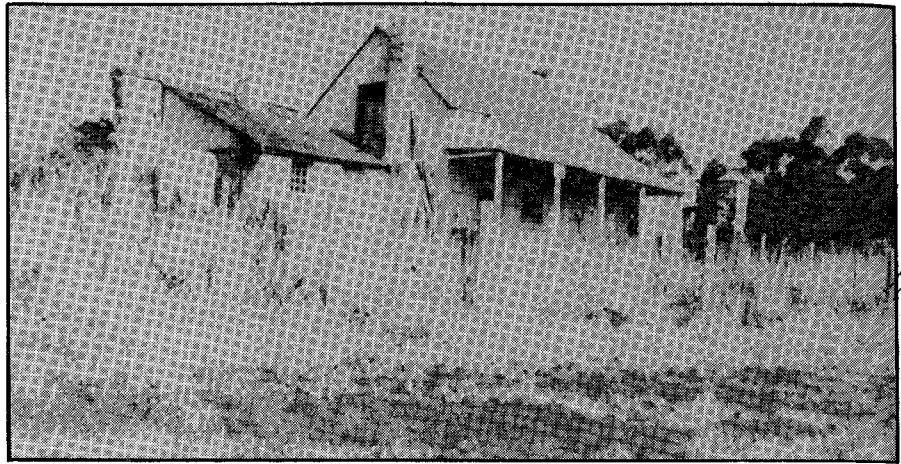
William Smith O'Brien (sitting) and Thomas Francis Meagher (standing beside soldier) outside Clonmel Prison, 1848.



In April, 1850, John Mitchel arrived in Van Diemen's Land from Bermuda, where his health had broken down. He had a joyous reunion with Meagher 'as we exchanged greetings - I know not from what impulse, whether from buoyancy of heart, or bizarre perversity of feeling - we laughed till the woods rang around; laughed loud and long and uproariously.'

On 12 August, 1850, Smith O'Brien was involved in a dramatic escape bid from Maria Island. The plan was arranged for some time and Smith O'Brien walked along a stretch of sea shore for several days in anticipation of the rescue attempt. He was accompanied by a constable when the escape vessel *The Victoria* came close to shore and a row boat was let down. He made a dash for it and swam towards the boat. However the constable was alerted and drew a gun, which alarmed the boatman, who immediately surrendered. It subsequently transpired that the authorities had become aware of the plot and were prepared for it. Smith O'Brien was confined to his quarters, and on 21st August, 1850, moved to Port Arthur Probation Station. He received renewed entreaties from his family and friends to accept a ticket-of-leave. In November, 1850, he relented and requested a ticket-of-leave which was immediately granted. He was freed from confinement on 18th November and immediately journeyed to Hobart Town, where 'he was met by a body of admirers, and cheered to the inn.' He took lodgings at The Freemason Hotel for some time, where he was visited by some of the other prisoners, who were quickly arrested as being in breach of their ticket-of-leave. Though there was legal argument as to whether they were actually in breach of their ticket-of-leave, and the magistrates were lenient, Governor Denison took the occasion to make example of them, and McManus, O'Doherty, and O'Donoghue were sentenced by him to three months in probation camps. This show of pettiness by Denison caused agitation in the Colony and on the Australian mainland to have him removed from office. At this time there was a general move to have transportation abolished but Denison was very much in favour of having it retained. After a further legal battle, McManus was freed on a technicality, and, before he could be arrested, escaped by boat to San Francisco.

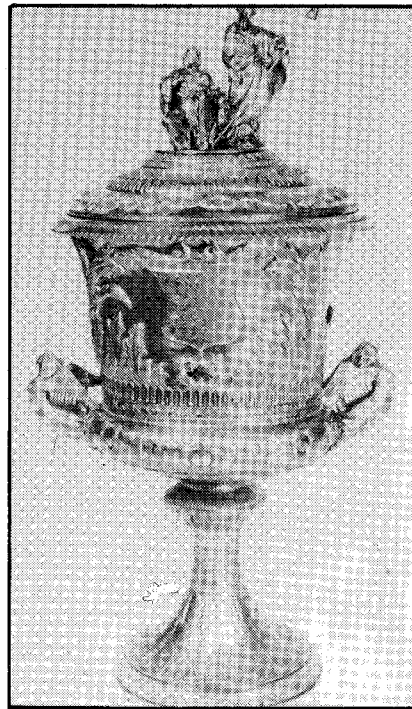
In February, 1851, Smith O'Brien took an appointment with a Dr. Brock as a tutor to his two young boys, their mother having died a short time before. The job gave him no satisfaction but it was the best he could get and he had to earn money to pay the cost of his escape attempt. He viewed his position with some irony: "I have spent thirty years cultivating my mind and acquiring experience which ought to



Cottage of William Smith O'Brien at Port Arthur, c. 1850.

enable me to rule Nations and I find myself a pedagogue."

John Mitchel's wife and family joined him in Van Diemen's Land in June, 1851, and in October they visited Smith O'Brien in Avoca. It had been three and a half years since the men had seen one another. Mitchel thought Smith O'Brien's health had failed somewhat: he was stooped and his hair more grizzled. They walked and talked of the Rising and of their hopes for Ireland. They had their differences: Mitchel held more republican views and Smith O'Brien believed in the Queen, Lords, and Commons of Ireland. After they parted and Smith O'Brien commenced his 14 mile walk to Dr Brook's, Mitchel noted: "We stood and watched him long, as he walked up the valley on his lonely way; and I think I have seen few sadder and few



On 22nd July, 1854, the Irish gold miners of Ballarat presented Smith O'Brien with this magnificent gold cup, now in the National Museum of Ireland.

prouder sights."

In November, 1851, Smith O'Brien decided to leave his teaching post with Dr Brock. He was worried about his health and felt that a change of scene might be beneficial. He travelled to New Norfolk in December, and took up residence in Elwin's Hotel. He made many new friends in the area and was reasonably content.

In January, 1852, Thomas Francis Meagher escaped from Van Diemen's Land by boat to South America and later New York. In the spring of 1852 there were renewed meetings and petitions in America for the release of Smith O'Brien and the other prisoners. In February, 1852, Lord John Russell's Whig government fell from power in England and was replaced by the Tory government of Lord Derby. The American Ambassador to Great Britain, Abbott Lawrence, made behind-the-scenes efforts on the prisoners' behalf. He was not successful, but was of the opinion that they would be pardoned 'at no distant day'. As the possibility of a pardon grew, Smith O'Brien received a letter from his wife Lucy asking him to renounce politics forever. He was upset and wrote: "I would much prefer that you would invite me to shoot myself for the good of my children rather than call on me to abdicate all the attributes of manhood." However, he did concede that if there was a pardon and general amnesty for the men of 1848 he would feel himself morally bound to abstain during his life from seeking to overthrow British dominion in Ireland. On 17th May, 1852, a memorial signed by many prominent people was presented to the Irish lieutenant, Lord Eglinton, asking the Queen 'to pardon William Smith O'Brien and his Companions in exile.' Lord Eglinton refused to forward the memorial to the Queen to the disappointment of all.

In December, 1852, Patrick O'Donoghue escaped to Australia and from there journeyed to California and New York. In February, 1853, the new British Government under Lord Aber-

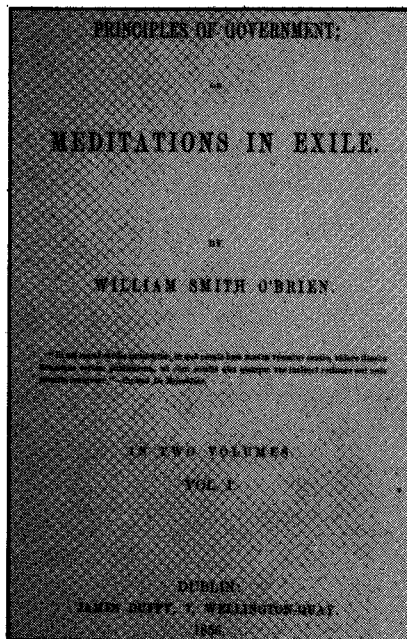


been finally bowed to the inevitable and ended transportation. On receiving word that transportation would cease immediately, the Legislative Council in Van Diemen's Land petitioned the Queen to rename the island Tasmania. That request was granted in 1855. Mitchel and Smith O'Brien renewed their interest in an escape bid. Smith O'Brien decided that Mitchel should make the attempt. He felt that Mitchel would feel more at home in America. He believed that he might be freed by the government in the future and, if he was, he intended returning to Ireland; if he escaped, Ireland might be barred to him forever. In June, 1853, Mitchel went on the run and eventually sailed for Australia on 20th July, and from there to America.

At the beginning of 1854 the British government decided to pardon Smith O'Brien. The growing threat of war with Russia was a lever, as the British would need the loyal and united support of the Irish if war broke out. On 22nd February, 1854, Lord Palmerston announced in parliament that the government was advising the Queen to grant Smith O'Brien a pardon. When news of the pardon reached Ireland two bonfires were lit at the gate of Dromoland Castle. His family were overjoyed. The Crimean War commenced on 28th March, 1854.

News of the pardon did not reach Tasmania until the middle of May. Smith O'Brien was residing in Hobart at the time. He immediately began to make plans to leave the island. Sir William Denison had also received news of his transfer to be governor of New South Wales. Smith O'Brien's departure was celebrated by several assemblies with dinners and speeches. He left Tasmania in the middle of July 1854 for the Australian mainland, and, at another sumptuous banquet in Melbourne on 22nd July, he was presented with a magnificent gold vase (this vase is now in the Irish National Museum, and Sydney Nolan, the Australian artist, has described it as a work of outstanding craftsmanship). When Sir William Denison heard of the Melbourne reception he wrote: "A set of rabid Irishmen are preparing an address to him and are striving to make his release a sort of triumph." On 26th July Smith O'Brien sailed out of Melbourne on board *The Norma*. He was by now a world renowned figure, honoured and respected in Australia, the United States and Canada.

Smith O'Brien's pardon was conditional on his not yet being allowed to return to live in Ireland. On his way to Europe, he travelled to Madras in India to visit his brother-in-law, Major Gabbett, who was serving with the British Army there. He continued his journey by way of Malta and Gibraltar to Paris, where he arrived at the end of



Title page of Smith O'Brien's book 'Principles of Government or Meditations in Exile', published by Duffy in 1856.



Statue of William Smith O'Brien in O'Connell Street, Dublin.

November, 1854. By the end of the year he was in Brussels working on his book *Principles of Government or Meditations in Exile* which he had begun in Tasmania. On 9th May, 1856, Lord Palmerston announced a full pardon for Smith O'Brien. He returned to Ireland in July. Within a few weeks he was asked to run for parliament in Tipperary. He declined the offer. However, he announced that he intended to keep a vigilant watch over legislation effecting Ireland.

There were no demonstrations when he returned to Ireland but in September a crowd of up to ten thousand gathered at his home at Cahirmoyle, Co. Limerick, to welcome him home. He settled down in Cahirmoyle with his family. It seems he did not get on very well with his children, especially with his eldest son Edward. They had no sympathy with his revolutionary activity. His wife Lucy kept the peace. He wrote extensively on public matters by way of letters to *The Nation*. In 1859 he visited America and in 1861 he travelled to France where he met John Mitchel. His wife died in June, 1861. This was a heavy blow to him. His relations with his son Edward disimproved. When he was convicted of treason in 1848 he had transferred his property to trustees to prevent seizure by the state. On his wife's death he attempted to restore his ownership of the estates. The trustees were not agreeable to this. The estates were then transferred to his son Edward, with Smith O'Brien receiving an annual pension of £2,000. These arrangements caused great tension in the family and Smith O'Brien subsequently considered himself only a visitor at Cahirmoyle. He was constantly on the move. He died on 18th June, 1864,

while staying with his sister in Anglesea, Wales. His body was taken from Bangor to Dublin. A huge crowd followed the coffin from the North Wall to Kingsbridge station, from where it travelled by train to Ardagh. He was buried at Rathronan churchyard, near Cahirmoyle, on 24th June, 1864. A committee was formed to collect money to erect a monument, and a statue of him was unveiled in O'Connell Street, Dublin, on 26th December, 1870.

William Smith O'Brien has been described as a 'rosewater' revolutionary and certainly the Rising of 1848 was quixotic. However, he has his place in the pantheon of the heroes of Irish nationalism. Once he became convinced in the principle of Irish self-government, he never wavered in this belief and, with great nobility and courage, endured a long exile and the disappointment of seeing his hopes for his country's independence come to nothing.

His exile in Van Diemen's Land had the effect of immensely enhancing the international reputation of Young Ireland but, in addition to that, it helped to transform the local image of Irish patriotism from that of the refuge of rough rebels and criminals to a noble pursuit, worthy of gentlemen.

Acknowledgements: This article is mainly derived from a detailed study *William Smith O'Brien and his Irish revolutionary companies in penal exile* by Blanche M. Touhill, published by the University of Missouri Press in 1981. Other works consulted include *The Dictionary of National Biography* and *The Young Irelanders* by T. F. O'Sullivan and *Heart of Exile: Ireland in 1848* by Patsy Adam-Smith, published by Nelson in Australia in 1986.