

The Four Courts



The Four Courts, Dublin.

To the Editor of the Dublin Penny Journal¹

SIR - I think a man who walks through any town except such a mushroom city as starts up in a day in the forests of America, must, if he has any mind beyond that necessary for providing his daily bread, or any curiosity beyond that which tempts him to peep into a shop window, ponder the various events that, from time to time, have taken place on the ground over which he walks, and summon up in rapid recollection the various characters whose faces he remembers as having met in passing along. Perhaps few are so well adapted for exercising such reminiscences as a Quinquagenarian, or few places are so suitable for calling them forth as a walk from College-green to the Four Courts.

Suppose then, gentle reader, you and I, having nothing else to do, making our promenade along the south side of the Green - the hour of the day forms an important ingredient in the interest of our perambulation - at eleven o'clock the stream of lawyers is sweeping onwards towards the Four Courts - about four o'clock the current is returning, and then there is less business in the face; the work of the day is over - the tension of the features is less rigid; chancery precedents and special pleading give place to news, politics and thoughts of dinner - the attorney foregoes bills of costs, to think of his bill of fare - and even the grim judge

¹ *Dublin Penny Journal*, Volume. 1, No. 18, October 27, 1832, the anonymous author called himself 'A Quinquagenarian' (50-59 years old). He also wrote *Life in Ireland*, 1821, as a 'Real Paddy'; the style is similar as are his jaundiced views of the legal profession. For a biographical reconstruction see <http://www.iancantwell.com/pdf/15Real%20Paddy.pdf>. Some very long paragraphs were split for ease of reading

smoothes his wrinkled brow in anticipation of the pleasanter discussion of a turbot than a law point: besides, about four o'clock, those who have occasion to levee the Lord Lieutenant, or Chief Secretary, are returning from the Castle, and you may meet sailing down this great gulf-stream of men, a portly bishop whose thoughts are intent on a translation - or a shovel-hatted dean, who has just reminded the Viceroy how deserving he is of a mitre. Then at four o'clock also, the merchants congregate about College-green, and you may observe just opposite you, and around the door of the Commercial Buildings, a herd of broad-bottomed wisecracks, heavy and purse, like animated sugar hogsheads, regulating the sales of colonial produce, and fixing the price current of the day.

How many faces of lawyers, priests, and aldermen, have I met in the course of the forty years that I have perambulated these flags. Here have I almost trembled under the piercing glance of Black John Fitzgibbon, the stern chancellor, as rapidly and solitarily, even though jostling through the crowd, he passes on towards his residence in Ely-place - there is something in his pocket that has the form of a pistol, which evinces that he is fearlessly, yet apprehensively prepared, and which all the world knows he would use, and could use.

Here have I met Big Bully Egan, and Little Philpot Curran, bandying jokes at each other as they passed along - and Henry Grattan, striding like Poucet in his seven-leagued boots, and stooping as if he was carrying the Genius of Ireland astride on his shoulders. Here I have recognised that soul of merriment, Ned Lysaght, and that mighty and masterly minded man, Lord Yelverton - I have seen them go, just under King William, across towards the Parliament House and as they ascended the steps of the colonnade have heard the shoeblacks and link-boys, and all the idling *canaille* of Dublin, passing their rough, and shrewd, and often witty comments on the life and character of those eminent men as they entered the National Building.

There is undoubtedly a very great difference between these men, and these times, and what we now know and see. The intellect, to be sure, is the same, and perhaps there is no degeneracy either in the times or the people, but certainly there is a mighty contrast between the O'Connells and the Shiels, the Pennefathers, the Blackburnes, and the Cramptons of this day, and the forensic men of old - there may be now more law, but certainly less wit under the wig.

Well, let us walk on. I remember instead of turning to the right down Parliament-street, going, in my youth, straight forward under the Exchange and up Cork-hill, to the old Four Courts adjoining Christ Church cathedral. I remember what an immense crowd of cars, carriages, noddies, and sedan-chairs, beset our way as we struggled on between Latouche's and Gleadowe's Banks in Castle-street - what a labour it was to urge on our way through Skinner-row - I remember looking up to the old cage-work wooden house that stood at the corner of Castle-street and Werburgh-street, and wondering why, as it overhung so much, it did not fall down - and then turning down Fishamble-street, and approaching the Four Courts, that then existed, through what, *properly* was denominated Christ Church Yard, but which *popularly* was called hell.

This was certainly a very profane and unseemly *soubriquet*, to give to a place that adjoined a cathedral whose name was Christ Church; and my young mind, when I first entered there, was struck with its unseemliness. Yes; and more especially, when over the arched entrance there was pointed out to me the very image of the devil, carved in oak, and not unlike one of those hideous black figures that are still in Thomas-street, hung over Tobacconists' doors.

This *locale* of hell, and this representation of his satanic majesty, were famous in those days even beyond the walls of Dublin; I remember well, on returning to my native town² after my first visit to Dublin, being asked by all my playfellows, had I been in hell, and had I seen the devil. Its fame even reached Scotland, and Burns the poet, in his story of "Death and Doctor Hornbook," alludes to it when he says -

"But this that I am gaun to tell,
Which lately on a night befell,
Is just as true as the deil's in hell,
Or Dublin city."

As hell has not now any local habitation in our city, neither has the devil - but I can assure you, reader, that there are relics preserved of this very statue to this day; some of it was made into much esteemed snuff-boxes - and I am told there is one antiquarian in our city, who possesses the head and horns, and who prizes the relic as the most valuable in his museum.

At any rate, hell to me, in those days, was a most attractive place, and often did I go hither, for the yard was full of shops where toys, and fireworks, and kites, and all the play things that engage the youthful fancy, were exposed for sale. But hell was not only attractive to little boys, but also to bearded men: for here were comfortable lodgings for single men, and I remember reading in a Journal of the day, an advertisement, intimating that there were "To be let, furnished apartments in Hell. N. B. They are well suited to a lawyer." (!!)

Here also were sundry taverns and snuggeries, where the counsellor would cosher with the attorney - where the prebendary and the canon of the cathedral could meet and make merry - here the old stagers, the seniors of the Currans, the Yelvertons, and the Bully Egans, I have above alluded to, would enjoy the concomitants of good fellowship -there Prime Sergeant Malone, dark Phil. Tisdall, and prior still to them, the noted Sir Toby Butler, cracked their jokes and their marrow-bones, toasted away claret and tossed repartee, until they died, as other men die and are forgotten.

The characters of Malone and Tisdall are still preserved in Baratariana, and other satirical or serious records of that day. Sir Toby - I question whether he may not have been the prototype, the *eidolon* of Toby Philpot - has his name and his fame, as an astute negociator, engraven on the treaty of Limerick, and of course he belongs to history; but as a tavern toper I fear he is almost forgotten. His tomb is in St. James's churchyard, and any one who enters that well-peopled cemetery, must observe it as forming the chief ornament of that ugly place. Sir Toby's remains lie mouldering and liquifying there - but, in sooth, if ever ashes deserved to be vitrified, and melted, and cast into a drinking cup, they were those of this old Hibernian lawyers.

It is astonishing how these old fellows could do business coolly in the day, who came to it under the effects of the over-night's hot debauch. Doubtless, it did affect them; and I recollect some anecdotes of the same Sir Toby, that show the shifts that this old claret guzzler had recourse to: - Sir Toby was engaged in an important cause which required all his knowledge and legal acumen, (which were not little,) to defend, and the attorney, deeply alive to the importance of keeping Sir Toby cool, absolutely insisted upon his taking his corporal oath that he should not drink any thing until the cause was decided; and, of course, sooner than

² Probably Limerick

lose the retaining fee, the affidavit was made, but kept as follows: - the cause came on - the trial proceeded - the opposite counsel made a masterly, luminous, and apparently powerful impression on the jury - Sir Toby got up, and he was cool - too cool - his courage was not up to the sticking point - his hands trembled - his head was palsied - his tongue faltered - every thing indicated feebleness - whereupon he sent to "mine host" in hell for a bottle of port and a roll, when extracting a portion of the soft of the roll, and filling up the hollow with the liquor, he actually eat the bottle of wine, and recovering his wonted power and ingenuity, he overthrew the adversary's argument, and won the cause.

Reader, as I am a rambler by profession, allow me, while I have a hold of Sir Toby, and as you may never hear of him again, to recount another anecdote of him, which proves that he was as well an honest as

"A thirsty old soul,
As e'er cracked a bottle,
or fathom'd a bowl."

Engaged in a cause where the counsel opposed to him appeared to carry both the feelings and opinion of the jury, he stood up and said, "Gentlemen of the jury - the cause of our antagonist, though plausible, is bad, if there be truth in the old saying that 'good wine needs no bush, or a good cause no bribery:' here, gentlemen of the jury, is what was put into my hand this morning," holding out a purse of gold, "it was given in the hope that it would have bribed me into a lukewarm advocacy of my client's cause. But, gentlemen, here I throw down Achan's wedge - here I cast at your feet the accursed thing:" and so he went on most ably to state his case and defend his cause; and no doubt but the exhibition of the purse had as much weight as the force of his argument, in inducing the jury to give a verdict in his favour.

The attorneys of the Old Four Courts, and who passed through this palpable hell to gain access to its darker purlieus, were as distinct as the lawyers of the day from those of modern times. I remember, when a youth, being brought into the office of one of the most eminent in Dublin, who dwelt in that then fashionable resort of attorneys, Chancery-lane, instead of residing, as now, in some of the squares, as men of ton and elegance - as the rivals of all that is exquisite in taste, *virtu*, equipage, and horse flesh. Your attorney of that day was to be sure, equally keen, equally conscionable in the length and composition of his bill of costs - but he was a vulgarian - a provincial - a *brogueanier*. (Reader, pardon the coinage.)

Perhaps it may be as well to stick to the single portrait I have alluded to - my uncle's attorney in Chancery-lane - he was not a bad or extra specimen of his race. I remember, when ushered into his back parlour, which sewed him for office, dressing-room, eating-room, and, I believe, sometimes sleeping-room, what a dusty, dingy, dark, foetid hole it was. The man was not out of keeping with his domicile - he looked like a great bloated spider in the centre of his cobweb.

I have him before my mind's eye, as he waddled off his triangular chair to salute us; his snuff-stained, cadaverous face overhung by a brown scratch wig that stuck awry on his head, and seemed to have grown too small for his cranium; his natural black hair thrusting itself out over his left ear, and hanging extravagantly from his poll behind; his abdomen immensely protuberant, and as his inexpressibles scorned the aid of suspenders to keep them up, they fell apart from his waistcoat, and leaving a goodly share of not quite clean linen to be seen, they

hung in loose folds about his thighs, and caused the corduroy of which they were composed, to whistle as he waddled about the chamber.

His accent was in the rich broad brogue of the County of Limerick; and nothing could exceed the familiar, gossiping, flattering, slewdering fondness, with which he complimented my uncle, who was one of his oldest clients. I have reason to remember Tim — well; the best part of my worthy relative's property passed into his hands, instead of mine, in liquidation of his tremendous volume of a bill of costs, which, whether they were taxed in hell, and under the encouraging presence of his satanic majesty, I do not remember.

Mr. Editor, I have written thus far of my ramble from College-green to the Four Courts, and you see that instead of rambling to it, I have rambled away from it - but what have I to say for the present Four Courts more than what every one knows, namely, that the foundation stone was laid by the Duke of Rutland in 1786, that the architect who built it was Mr. Gandon, that it was opened for business in the year 1797, that it is, as your wood-cut represents it, a very noble pile of building, forming an oblong rectangle of 440 feet to the front of the river, (by the way, what business have Thames' barges on the Liffey?) that the centre pile is 140 feet square, that the handsome and towering dome lights the great hall of the Courts an object of just admiration from its chaste and lofty appearance and proportions, and that during Term time it is crowded with lawyers and pickpockets, strangers and stragglers, the fleeced and the fleecing, the hopeful and the hoping, the anxious and the careless, and that, at such a period of bustle, a visitor, as a Picture of Dublin benevolently forewarns, "*should look to his pockets.*"

Unlike other structures in our city, this building remains true to its destination, and has not proved either too large, or too unsuitable; unlike our Parliament House, which is turned into a Bank - our Custom House into a Stamp Office - our Stamp Office into a haberdasher's store - and our Exchange into nothing. No, our Four Courts, thank the Genius of our Isle, is still in full business; and as long as Erin remains the land of Ire, so long surely will lawyers fatten, and attorneys batten on the quarrelsome and litigious propensities of our people.

A QUINQUAGENARIAN