O'Donovan Rossa, Jeremiah

by Patrick Maume

O'Donovan Rossa, Jeremiah (1831–1915), Fenian, was born at Rosscarbery, Co. Cork, in late August or early September 1831 (he was baptised Diarmuid Ó Donnabháin on 10 September), second of four children of Dennis O'Donovan (d. 1847), tenant farmer, and his wife, Nelly (née O'Driscoll).

Early years Between the ages of three and seven the young O'Donovan lived on the nearby farm of his maternal grandfather, which he recalled nostalgically in later life as a pre-famine idyll. Although he learned English at a local school, the language of both households was Irish; he retained a lifelong attachment to the old language as well as to some of the fairy beliefs he acquired at this time.

The O'Donovans had a sense of having come down in the world: his grandfather had run a linen bleach-green and twenty looms, which faced increasing competition from cheaper imports, and also rented a large farm, which was divided among six sons. The family claimed that their ancestors had been Gaelic chieftains from the Rossmore area, dispossessed for refusing to conform to protestantism; in 1854, after corresponding with the Irish scholar John O'Donovan (qv), Rossa concluded that he was a descendant of the MacAinees branch of the O'Donovan dynasty and thereafter signed himself ‘Rossa’ (a nickname used by his father, which he regarded, possibly mistakenly, as a relic of chiefly descent). Members of his extended family were active in the repeal movement (Rossa shook hands with Daniel O'Connell (qv) after a ‘monster meeting’ held locally in 1843); he recalled attending readings from the *Nation* as a boy, hearing local traditional accounts of 1798, and observing his parents’ delight at the news that a landlord had been shot.

The O'Donovans were hit hard by the famine; *Rossa's recollections* gives a searing account of the repeated failure of their potato crops, the sale of their wheat to pay the rent, and the strain placed on family ties by the struggle for self-preservation. Rossa's father supervised a group of labourers (including Rossa) in relief work on local roads; he contracted fever and died in March 1847. After his death the family had to give up their holding and were seriously indebted. Rossa's best-known poem, ‘Jillen Andy’, composed over twenty years later in prison, is a starkly unpolished description of his participation in the burial of a famine victim at Rosscarbery abbey. In 1848 Rossa's mother and siblings emigrated to America with the assistance of a paternal uncle, who had gone out earlier. Rossa, who had found employment in the hardware store of a relative in Skibbereen, was left behind on the assumption that he could look after himself. At this time he took a pledge to abstain from alcohol, which he kept until 1857; he also read extensively in Young Ireland literature, borrowing his reading matter from acquaintances, and found a convincing explanation for his

own experiences in the views of John Mitchel (qv) that the famine was genocide and professed British liberalism was humbug.

After three months as a clerk in a Bantry store in 1853, Rossa established himself as a hardware and agricultural seed merchant and publican at Skibbereen. On 6 June of that year he married Nora Eager (d. 1859). Rossa acquired a reputation as a local doggerel bard; he composed ‘Skellig lists’ and other occasional verses, including a welcome to Thomas Somerville on his return from the Crimean war, which earned him friendly relations with the Somervilles of Castletownshend.

Politics and imprisonment In 1856 Rossa co-founded the Phoenix Society, which combined social gatherings with separatist politics. After James Stephens (qv) visited the area in May 1858 this became a front organisation for the newly-founded secret IRB. Its drillings and other activities came to official attention (assisted by the parish priest of Kenmare, who passed on to the authorities information gained from a penitent, and by newspaper denunciations). On 5 December 1858 Rossa and other local activists were arrested. While in prison awaiting trial Rossa displayed the ability to satirise officialdom which characterised his career; he penned a solemn petition to be allowed to go to Skibbereen to vote in the 1859 general election, suggesting that a refusal to allow him the opportunity to vote for the conservative party might precipitate European war. After the conviction of one member of the society Rossa and his associates agreed to plead guilty in return for his release and their own discharge.

On his release Rossa found that his business had been disrupted and he had to find new premises; the landlords and the local clergy not only boycotted his shop but pressurised their dependents to do likewise. Soon afterwards his wife died. Rossa was married again – to Eileán Ní Bhuachalla – in 1861; Eileán died, aged nineteen, only two years later. Rossa found temporary employment in 1862 as a relieving officer during a near-famine on Cape Clear and Sherkin Island, but it terminated in a dispute over Rossa's expenses: the poor law guardians resisted payment on the grounds that some recipients of supplies, though starving, were not entitled to relief; Rossa believed that his dismissal was partly due to his insistence on reporting a death by starvation rather than hushing it up. Meanwhile Rossa acquired a rifle, sword, and pike, which he defiantly displayed in his store to show that people could not be arrested for mere possession of arms.

In June 1863 Rossa visited New York on IRB business, and on his return in July moved permanently to Dublin as manager of the Fenian *Irish People*, travelling around Ireland to market the paper and swear in new recruits. On 22 October 1864, despite various ecclesiastical problems caused by his position as a member of an oath-bound society, he married his third wife, Mary Jane (qv) (née Irwin, 1845–1916), a poet who wrote for the *Irish People* as ‘Cliodhna’. On 15 September 1865 Rossa was arrested during the suppression of the *Irish People*. At his trial in December he conducted his own defence. Unlike his co-defendants, Rossa

recognised that conviction was inevitable and turned his defence into a form of political theatre, conducting a skilful cross-examination of the crown witnesses. During his final statement he read into the court record all the denunciations of the presiding judge, William Keogh (qv), published in the *Irish People*, as well as numerous other articles, taking over eight hours. Rossa was sentenced to life imprisonment (his plea of guilty in the Phoenix case being taken into account) and transferred with other Fenian prisoners to Pentonville prison in London, arriving on 24 December 1865.

The next three years, spent in Pentonville, Portland, Millbank, and Chatham prisons, were dominated by a struggle between Rossa and the prison authorities (‘I think I may claim the honour of driving [a dozen] prison directors to their wits’ ends'), caused partly by Rossa's resentment of prison discipline and partly by his persistent efforts to smuggle out letters describing prison conditions. His poor reputation with officials was exacerbated by his difficulty in completing certain prison tasks owing to his left-handedness. The rules imposing twenty-four hours on bread and water for breaches of regulations were applied so frequently that he was reduced to ‘a living skeleton’. He was repeatedly strip-searched, sometimes by force. Extra-legal measures were employed by the authorities: a letter which Rossa attempted to smuggle to his wife care of another prisoner's family was presented as ‘evidence’ of an attempt to carry on an intrigue with the fellow prisoner's wife. At one period Rossa spent thirty-four days with his hands cuffed behind his back; this was an illegal punishment for which the governor of Chatham was blamed, but John Devoy (qv) claimed that Rossa saw written evidence of its having been ordered by the home secretary, Henry Bruce. At another period he spent twenty-eight days in solitary confinement on bread and water in a darkened cell.

Some of Rossa's letters from prison were published by Richard Pigott (qv) in the *Irishman* (1867), and his case was also publicised by his wife (herself active in a women's auxiliary movement). These claims were taken up by Irish and radical MPs and by the growing amnesty movement. The conflict between Rossa and his captors ended in October 1868, when the chief director of convict prisons, Edmund Du Cane, proposed to Rossa that he begin again with a clean slate; this allowed both men to save face, Rossa claiming victory and Du Cane presenting him as having responded to the proper form of moral suasion (in accordance with Victorian penal ideology), represented by Du Cane himself. Rossa retained an abiding gratitude to Pigott for assisting his family during his imprisonment, and for afterwards employing him as the *Irishman*'s American correspondent (1871–82); as late as 1905 he lamented Pigott's fate in private correspondence (letter of 1905, William O'Brien papers, UCC).

In November 1869 Rossa was nominated for a vacant parliamentary seat in Tipperary county and won the by-election, defeating the catholic liberal lawyer Denis Heron (qv). Being a convicted felon, he was promptly unseated by the house of commons, despite opposition from some Irish nationalists and a few political

mavericks such as William Johnston (qv) of Ballykilbeg. In 1870 he gave evidence to a commission of inquiry chaired by Lord Devon, which sensationally confirmed the truth of his account of his treatment and of the conditions under which Fenian prisoners were kept. Even some British commentators responded that the Fenian prisoners had been treated with undue severity, worse than that denounced by Gladstone in the prisons of Naples (a comparison regularly echoed thereafter by Rossa in his frequent denunciations of Gladstone as a hypocrite). Rossa described his prison life in *Six years in English prisons* (New York, 1874). This book, a significant resource for prison historians as well as students of Irish history, was reprinted several times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Rossa's experiences were often invoked by Irish nationalist prisoners seeking recognition as political offenders. His treatment in prison left him with a permanent spinal injury, which forced him to spend several hours a day in a reclining position.

The years in America In January 1871 Rossa was one of the Fenian prisoners released on condition that they remained outside the UK until the expiry of their sentences. He sailed to America with four other Fenians (including Devoy) on the ship *Cuba*. On his arrival at New York, Rossa rejected attempts to recruit him to the service of the corrupt democratic municipal machine run by William Tweed; instead he was recruited by the republican party to stand against Tweed (already beset by the scandals that led to the collapse of the ‘Tweed ring’) for the New York state senate in November 1872. He was narrowly defeated amid allegations of ballot rigging. By way of a living in America, Rossa started a passage ticket agency, and after this failed he edited a weekly paper, the *Era*. He then ran two hotels in succession in the Five Points district; he is alleged to have said that one of these hotels failed because many of the (Irish) clientele did not pay their bills, and that he blamed himself, ‘for I am sure they would have paid if I had asked them’. These pressures brought on a period of alcoholism, which ended only in 1879, when he renewed his pledge under pressure from his wife and friends.

In 1876 Rossa founded an idiosyncratic weekly newspaper, the *United Irishman*, which lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century; it was supported entirely (and erratically) by subscriptions and written entirely by Rossa. Its contents included his comments on the news of the day, a few news items, an obituary column (displaying the fondness for genealogy evident in *Rossa's recollections*, which was originally published in serial form in his paper), and some poems. In 1877 Rossa was elected leader of the residual Fenian Brotherhood after the death of John O'Mahony (qv), but this was merely a shadowy remnant; the leadership of American separatism had passed to Clan na Gael. In 1875, in the *Irish World* of Patrick Ford (qv), Rossa proposed the creation of a ‘skirmishing fund’, which would be used to fund a bombing campaign in British cities. Rossa's repeated journalistic eulogies of dynamite (at one point he speculated about the possibility of releasing poison gas in the house of commons) won him a notoriety that contrasted with his mild and gentle private manners. Some modern writers regard his rhapsodies on dynamite as constituting one of the earliest modern statements of terrorist ideology.

John Devoy succeeded in wresting control of the ‘skirmishing fund’ away from Rossa by getting some of his Clan na Gael allies elected as trustees in March–April 1877; Rossa and Devoy accused each other of misappropriating or mismanaging the fund. These conflicts became public when Rossa was expelled from Clan na Gael after forming a rival society, the United Irishmen, in 1880; Devoy mounted characteristically vitriolic personal attacks on Rossa in his paper, the *Irish Nation*. Although Rossa subsequently fell out with the United Irishmen, accusing their leader, Patrick Sarsfield Cassidy, of being a British agent provocateur, dynamiters loyal to Rossa mounted several small attacks in Britain during the ‘dynamite war’ of the mid-1880s; Rossa's taunts also probably helped to stir Clan na Gael into mounting its own bombing campaign. Rossa became a hate figure for British public opinion; when he was shot and wounded by an insane Englishwoman on 2 February 1885 there were widespread expressions of satisfaction in Britain. By 1891, when the expiry of Rossa's original term of imprisonment left him free to revisit the UK, the dynamite war had died away amid divisions, arrests, and suspicions. Rossa retained a coterie of friends and followers but increasingly devoted his efforts to reminiscing about the past. Attempts to secure local government employment to supplement his tenuous income from the *United Irishman* met little success.

In 1894 Rossa undertook a lecture tour in Ireland. The city marshalship of Dublin fell vacant; Rossa allowed himself to be nominated but was heavily defeated. His supporters attributed this defeat to local jobbery; one complained that if Wolfe Tone (qv) himself had been the candidate he would have received the same treatment. In 1895 he undertook a lecture tour in Britain. On an Irish visit in 1904 Rossa received the freedom of the city of Cork, and in September 1905 was appointed to a clerkship in the office of the secretary to Cork county council at a salary of £150 per annum, and provided with a cottage in Blackrock by public subscription. Although some of his local Fenian contemporaries were involved in securing the position, many younger Irish Irelanders and separatists thought him a pathetic figure; Terence MacSwiney (qv) believed his appointment resulted from jockeying between local political factions and feared he might be induced to say something that would compromise his separatist principles (MacSwiney diary, UCD Archives). The pitiable Fenian ex-prisoner John Whitelaw O'Loughlin portrayed by Daniel Corkery (qv) in his first play, ‘The Embers’, was inspired by an encounter with Rossa.

In September 1906, owing to his wife's ill health and a desire to be near his family in New York, Rossa resigned his position in Cork and returned permanently to America. In 1907–8 he was an inspector of street openings in Brooklyn. From 1910 Rossa's health declined; he suffered periods of senility during which he relived his childhood or his years in prison. He spent the rest of his life at St Vincent's Hospital, New Brighton, Staten Island. At times he spoke Irish and at others he tried to escape through the hospital windows. He died there 29 June 1915. Although Rossa had expressed a wish to be buried with his father and the other famine victims at Rosscarbery abbey, his body was brought back to Ireland for burial at Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin. The funeral on 1 August was orchestrated from America by Devoy

(with whom Rossa had been reconciled in his last years) and in Dublin by the Irish Volunteers, who virtually policed Dublin for the day. The graveside oration was delivered by Patrick Pearse (qv); his declaration that Ireland unfree could never be at peace while it held the graves of the Fenian dead is one of the classic statements of Irish nationalism. (The political setting of the funeral was further embittered by a report, fabricated by a journalist and mistakenly accepted as genuine by the home rule leaders though Rossa's family denounced it as untrue, that the dying Rossa had endorsed John Redmond (qv) and the allied war effort.)

Richmond Bridge over the Liffey was renamed after Rossa in 1923 and a monument to him by Seamas Murphy (qv) was erected in Stephen's Green, Dublin, in 1954; there is also a Rossa Park in Skibbereen, and several GAA clubs bear his name. Pearse hailed Rossa as ‘the most typical’ of the Fenian leaders, deriving courage and endurance from the Gaelic tradition; he can also be seen in his anger, derision, suffering, nostalgia, and cultural confusion as typical of many other nameless nationalist contemporaries. Capable of inspiring intense affection, the bitterest hostility, and profound exasperation, he is perhaps best summed up by his political opponent T. D. Sullivan (qv): ‘No more determined or consistent enemy to British rule ever breathed the air of Ireland’. From his three marriages Rossa had eighteen children: his first marriage produced four sons; his second wife had one son, who died young; and with his third wife he had six sons and seven daughters, of whom two sons and five daughters survived. *My father and mother were Irish* (1939) by Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, is an affectionate memoir by his youngest daughter in which Rossa is seen as a kindly and absent-minded parent. There are Rossa papers in the Catholic University of America.

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *O'Donovan Rossa's prison life: six years in English prisons* (New York, 1874); Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's recollections, 1838–1898* (New York, 1898); Margaret O'Donovan-Rossa, *My father and mother were Irish* (1939); William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan (eds), *Devoy's post bag* (2 vols, 1948–53); Patrick Maume, *‘Life that is exile’: Daniel Corkery and the search for Irish Ireland* (1993); Terry Golway, *Irish rebel: John Devoy and America's fight for Ireland's freedom* (1998); Tim Cadogan (ed.) *Cork county council: a centenary souvenir* (1999); James Mullin, *The story of a toiler's life*, ed. Patrick Maume (2000); John Sarsfield Casey, *The Galtee boy: a Fenian prison memoir*, ed. Mairead Maume, Patrick Maume, and Mary Casey (2004); *ODNB*; Owen McGee, *The IRB: the Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin* (2005)