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The first election to the reformed Clonmel Corporation 150 years ago

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Clonmel voters throughout the 1840s called themselves either Liberals or Conservatives, the former being for the most part Catholic, while the latter were usually Protestant. Every member elected to Clonmel Corporation between 1842 and 1849 was a Liberal and a Catholic.

With only nine days to polling in the first election, the Liberals were in high spirits at their rally in the Ormond Hotel on the afternoon of Sunday 16 October 1842. Their election campaign was going well and an overwhelming victory at the polls was beckoning. The principal speaker, Father Michael Burke, evoked a chorus of cheers and laughter when at the outset of his address he theatrically donned a black cap, as he said himself, "to pronounce the death sentence on the Old Corporation."

And he stirred the emotions of his audience as he colourfully recalled their contribution to the Catholic Emancipation and Tithe War campaigns. He heralded the new dawn when as Roman Catholics they would now take control of Clonmel Corporation from which they and their forebearers had been excluded for 150 years.¹

These Clonmel Liberals, who were bound together by their adherence to the politics of Daniel O'Connell rather than by an allegiance to any philosophy of liberalism, were representative of the town's Catholic commercial and professional class under the leadership of their clergy. They dismissed the notion of being sectarian by their claim that not a single Clonmel Protestant could be found who shared their political ideology.²

At times they liked to call themselves The Radical Party, but their frequent claim to be the Popular Party was more appropriate since their ranks included the town's highly organised, though disenfranchised, workers and their meetings attracted even the beggars off the streets. They espoused all Catholic causes, their leadership for instance being similar to that of the Clonmel Temperance Society.³

Their headquarters in 1842 was The Liberal Reading Room in Blue Anchor Lane, from which in 1845 they moved to a building in Church Lane off Mary Street. This in deference to the Repeal headquarters in Dublin was known as Conciliation Hall, and it was here that between 500 and 600 members paid four pence a month for the privilege of reading, some aloud for the benefit of others.⁴

The political organ of the Clonmel Liberals was *The Tipperary Free Press*, a twice-weekly newspaper owned and edited by one of their most prominent members, John Hackett, who since the foundation of his newspaper in 1826 had given an uncompromising articulation to O'Connellite politics and had consistently attacked the Tory-dominated Corporation.⁵ While Hackett was usually the chief spokesman of Clonmel Liberals, their undoubted leader was Father Michael Burke, parish priest of S.S. Peter and Paul's since 1836. Of farming stock from Kilsheelan, Burke was a former professor in St. John's College, Waterford. He was firmly convinced that "none but the principles and teachings of O'Connell will ever lead to the regeneration of Ireland".⁶

Burke's involvement with the Liberals of 1842 was the beginning of a long period which was to be remarkable for his influence on the politics of the town. Less dominant though also significant among the Liberals was Father John Baldwin, the parish priest of St. Mary's, Irishtown, who like Burke was of farming stock; he was a native of Carrickbeg.⁷ Among them too was Charles Bianconi,

* Extract from study in preparation — "Clonmel Corporation 1842 — 1898".



whose road car service had brought him fame and fortune and whose personal friendship with Daniel O'Connell had gained him access to the highest political circles.⁸

The Clonmel Conservatives of 1842 were disorganised and leaderless, showing little enthusiasm for the Municipal Act. They were a far less homogeneous group than the Liberals either in their occupations or in their religious persuasion. As Protestants they may have identified with Lord Lyndhurst, who during the debate on the Municipal bill described Irish Protestants as "unalterably attached to the English connection" and having to contend with a population "alien to Englishmen, speaking, many of them, a different language, professing a different religion, regarding the English as invaders, and ready to expel them at the first opportunity".⁹

The liberal-minded among them may have privately agreed with the local landlord, Lord Donoughmore of Knocklofty, who favoured equal rights for Catholics; but they found it impossible to publicly identify with the Catholic cause, according to Donoughmore, because "of the violence of O'Connell and his association in this part of Ireland."¹⁰ The Conservatives included some of the biggest property owners in the town, and in the case of Donoughmore it was only in the defence of this property that they would be prepared to fight.¹¹

Religion, which was a binding force for Liberals, was not so in the case of Conservatives because of the number of Protestant denominations in the town. While many Conservatives were Church of Ireland others were Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, or Baptist. They lacked a positive political purpose apart from their common antipathy to Daniel O'Connell.

This antipathy was colourfully articulated for them by *The Tipperary Constitution*, a twice-weekly newspaper owned originally by Joseph Going and printed by Samuel Hovenden at Constitution Lane¹² but owned in the 1840s until its demise in May 1848 by John A. Quinlan of 7 New Street, and printed at 40 Bagwell Street by John Townsend.¹³ The incessant scorn and ridicule this paper poured on prominent local O'Connellites such as Burke, Hackett and Bianconi never occasioned any public disapproval from the Conservatives. It must therefore have reflected the feelings of at least some of them.

The political fortunes of Clonmel Conservatives between 1842 and 1849 were very much dependent on those of John Bagwell, one of the most dominant local political figures for much of the 19th century. Bagwell was the inheritor of a family political tradition, his grandfather and uncle having been MPs for Clonmel and mayors of the town. His aunt's husband, Eyre Coote, had been MP for Clonmel in 1830 and 1831 and his father, Richard Bagwell, was mayor on three occasions.¹⁴

At the age of 21 John Bagwell made his first entry to politics when in 1832 he stood as a Conservative candidate for the Clonmel constituency in the parliamentary election. He was defeated by the Repealer Dominick Ronayne by 262 votes to 212. He stood against the same candidate in 1835 and was again defeated, this time by 262 votes to 252.¹⁵

Bagwell stayed aloof from elections to the reformed Corporation until 1849, and by then he was no longer a Conservative. When he declared as a candidate for the County Tipperary seat in 1847 he was an Independent and when he finally became the MP for Clonmel in 1857 he was a Liberal. His defection greatly weakened the Conservatives and was to have a profound effect on the shape of the Liberal party within the borough.

The source of John Bagwell's influence was his wealth as a land and property owner. Born at Marlfield in 1811, he was educated at Winchester and succeeded to the estates of his uncle William Bagwell in 1826. The estate at Marlfield had been acquired by the Bagwell family in 1781 from the bankrupt Stephen Moore. It contained 436 acres with a valuation of £82.18.0. The original family mansion dated from 1785.¹⁶

The Bagwell land was not, however, confined to Marlfield. By 1878 it amounted to 5,157, acres with a valuation of £9,478 and was in four counties. John Bagwell's land in co. Tipperary totalled



3,519 acres with a valuation of £8,480. He had 778 acres in co. Waterford (valuation £385), 509 acres in co. Cork (valuation £468) and 351 acres in co. Galway (valuation £145).¹⁷

John Bagwell was by far the biggest owner of property in the borough of Clonmel. Griffith's Valuations for the town cites 1,783 properties with a total valuation of £17,230 — an average valuation per property therefore of £9.66. Bagwell was the immediate lessor of 159 or 8.9% of the total number of properties. The total valuation of these 159 properties was £2,330 or 13.53% of the total valuation of the borough and their average valuation was £14.66.

Significantly, there were 81 Bagwell properties which exceeded the £10 valuation, thus qualifying their occupiers for the vote in 1842. Of these 58 were in the East Ward and 23 in the West. This, together with his control of the freemen who had been admitted during his patronage of the Corporation, gave Bagwell a powerful political influence within the borough.

His political influence was further enhanced by his membership of the Tipperary (South Riding) Grand Jury. The power of the Grand Jury in the affairs of the town can be measured by the amount of its expenditure at any given time. At the summer assizes of 1840 for example the expenditure in Clonmel amounted to £2,358.14.7, much of it on the salaries of officials.¹⁸ The Grand Jury was of great benefit to the business community of Clonmel, and John Bagwell was its principal local broker.

The Clonmel electorate in 1831 had been 105. The Representation of the People (Ireland) Act 1832 had introduced a householder franchise in all boroughs for those holding houses of at least £10 annual value, and the immediate effect was the raising of the Clonmel electorate to 521.¹⁹ The electorate was determined by the Poor Law Valuation.

In the absence of the Poor Law Valuation for the town of Clonmel it is possible only to estimate the actual electorate between 1842 and 1849. Griffith's Valuation is used as this estimate on the grounds that there is no report of any major change in property values in the town in the intervening years. The £10 property valuation was not in itself sufficient qualification to vote, however. The prospective voter also had to have up-to-date payments of all tolls, taxes and rates which in Clonmel included the Poor Law rate, the Town Commission rate and the Grand Jury cess (see Table 1, page 78).

In preparation for the first election to the reformed Corporation the Liberals held a primary election in an effort to select their candidates. A list of people who were willing to offer themselves as candidates was drawn up and each Liberal voter was asked to vote for his 12 favourite candidates in the ward in which he was entitled to vote. The 24 winning candidates would then be ratified as the official Liberal candidates for the election proper.

In this "primary" a total of 1368 votes were cast in the West Ward and 1089 in the East. Assuming that voters followed party instructions by voting for 12 candidates, it can be concluded that there were 114 Liberal voters in the West Ward and 91 in the East, with a total in the borough of 205. The result of the primary was as follows:

West Ward

John Hackett	108	Maurice Tobin	45	Daniel O'Brien	84
Michael Burke	68	Thomas Stokes	99	Peter O'Connor	30
Patrick Quinn	106	Thomas Prendergast	40	David Clancy	81
William Hogan	68	Eccles Greene	88	Michael Sullivan	28
Thomas Cantwell	105	James O'Farrell	39	Patrick Rivers	77
Richard Barrett	53	Patrick Corcoran	88	Patrick Mahony	26
William Kiely	101	Thomas O'Connell	34		



East Ward

Charles Bianconi83	William Hayes21	Michael Glissan39
Richard Guiton34	Patrick Hearn61	Richard Millea6
John Luther76	William Singleton19	Patrick Grady38
Denis Corcoran32	Edward Phelan60	Michael Cronin6
Patrick Fennelly72	Thomas B. Russell15	William Forrestal36
Edward O'Neill32	William Byrne42	Patrick Lenihan6
John Lacy66	Patrick Power14	Timothy Cassin35
William Sheehy28	Joseph Kenny42	John Lyons5
Thomas O'Brien65	Henry S. Ivors13	Michael Guiry3
Thomas Holmes25	Peter McSwiney40	
John Dunphy64	Jeremiah Troy11	

TABLE 1 — A DESCRIPTION OF GRIFFITH'S VALUATIONS FOR EACH AREA OF CLONMEL

Area	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Barrack St., Boolick Lane, Powerstown Rd., Dublin Rd.	55	£6.92	12	12	0	0	22	21
James' St., Main St.	147	£9.30	111	118	11	7	16	3
Collet's Lane, Bridge St., Shalmadan's Lane, Flag Lane, Blue Anchor Lane, Phelan's Lane, Evans' Lane, Hopkin's Lane	76	£5.79	11	13	5	5	31	24
White's Lane, Cooney's Lane	79	6.75	13	22	22	10	19	15
Dunphy's Lane, Sherlock's Lane, Mary's St.								
Morton St., Peter St., Gordon St.	86	£7.26	17	30	33	12	22	2
Irishtown (part of)	134	£6.56	23	34	37	23	33	18
Irishtown (part of)	91	£10.57	34	40	15	4	34	4
New St., Borheens	126	£3.57	4	4	4	30	53	35
Cherry Tree Lane, Gravel Walk, Whyte's Lane, Adelaide Lane, New Road, St. Stephen's Lane, Healy's Lane, Sargent's Lane, Wall's Lane	94	£2.48	5	7	2	4	24	59
Johnston St. (part of)	75	£16.28	49	55	10	9	5	2
Shamble Lane, Elbow Lane, Market St., Catherine St., Salmon Lane, Johnston St. (upper)	88	£10.70	27	30	12	17	25	7
William St., Cashel St., Queen St., Bolton St.	122	£5.40	13	20	31	20	37	20
Dispensary St., Heywood Road.	79	£3.06	3	3	0	17	21	38
Anne St.	25	£13.60	25	25	0	0	0	0
Blind St., King St., Thomas St., Gallavin's Lane, Backbone Lane.	103	£2.12	1	2	4	2	48	48
Duncan St.	21	£25.51	18	19	2	1	0	0
Quay St., Old Quay, New Quay	43	£25.37	34	36	5	3	1	0
Dublin St.	41	£16.76	33	36	3	0	4	1
Abbey St., Bank Lane, Curtis Lane,								
Ballalley Lane, Dirty Lane, Richmond St.	64	£15.35	27	31	17	4	10	6
Bagwell St.	73	£19.14	56	58	7	4	4	2
Nelson St., Forrestal's Lane, Wellington St., Wellington Lane, Stable Lane, Barrack St. (part of)	37	£19.44	16	18	4	8	7	2
Anglesea St., Prince Edward's Place	20	£17.21	19	1	0	0	0	0
Stephen St., Cross St., Dominick Row	42	£4.45	3	5	8	8	11	12
Ducket St.	57	£5.26	1	1	1	5	1	2
Coolens, Coronation Row, Heywood Road	52	£3.38	2	0	10	3	4	33
Gortmalogue	4	£17.50	2	0	0	0	1	1

KEY TO TABLE 1: A. Number of properties. B=Average valuation. C=Properties valued at £10 or over. D=Properties valued at between £8 and £10. E=Properties valued at between £6 and £10. F=Properties valued at between £4 and £6. G=Properties valued at between £2 and £4. H=Properties valued at less than £2. There were 562 properties of £10 or higher valuation within the borough boundary.



Following the results of the “primary” the Liberals issued lists of candidates to their voters and instructed them to vote accordingly.²⁰ These lists were in accordance with the results of the primary except in the East Ward, where the name of Joseph Kenny was replaced by that of Patrick Grady. The first election for the reformed Corporation took place on Tuesday 25 October 1842. There were two polling stations, one for the East Ward in the Temperance Hall in Blue Anchor Lane and one for the West Ward at 95 Main Street. Polling was from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. but the poll clerk in charge of each station was empowered to close it at any time if an hour had elapsed without a vote being cast.

Each elector could vote for any number of persons, not exceeding twelve, by presenting to the poll clerk a voting paper containing the christian and surnames of the persons of his choice together with their addresses and occupations and signed by the voter with the address of the property in respect of which he was entitled to vote. On receiving the voting paper the poll clerk then read aloud the name of the voter and the names of the persons for whom he voted.²¹ Within a short time of the closing of the poll the result was announced as follows:²²

East Ward

William Byrne, tobacco manufacturer 21, Main St	98
John Luther, wine merchant, 24, Main St	96
Patrick Hearn, grocer, 29, Bagwell St	95
Michael Glissan, spirit dealer, 45, Johnson St	95
Thomas O'Brien, cloth merchant, 14, Main St	94
Edward Phelan, medical doctor, Bagwell St	94
Charles Bianconi, car propietor, Silver Spring	93
Patrick Fennelly, bacon merchant, Johnson St	93
John Lacey, woollen merchant, 8, Main St	92
John Dunphy, spirit dealer, 27, Main St	92
Peter McSwiney, woollen draper, Abbey St	92
Patrick Grady, corn merchant, Quay St	73

West Ward

John Hackett, printer, 101, Main St	121
Thomas Cantwell, corn merchant, New St	121
Patrick Quinn, tobacco manufacturer, 45, Main St	120
William Kiely, tanner, Mary St	118
Thomas Stokes, spirit dealer, 2, Johnson St	118
Eccles Greene, baker, 23, Irishtown	118
Patrick Rivers, brewer and tanner, Main St	117
Daniel O'Brien, woollen draper, 50, Main St	116
Patrick Corcoran, publican, Quay St	116
Michael Burke, woollen draper, 112, Main St	115
David Clancey, ironmonger, 87, Main St	113
William Hogan, publican, Old Bridge	108

All those elected were Liberals and Roman Catholics. In their issues following the election both local newspapers noted the absence of Conservative candidates and the paucity of Conservative voters. There is further evidence that Conservatives for the most part abstained from this election when it is considered that the total number of votes cast in the election was only 51 more than in the Liberal primary, an increase that could have been accounted for by as few as five extra voters. The absence of Conservatives meant, of course, that the reformed Corporation was about to become until 1849 the preserve of Catholics, a development which was hardly desirable in a society where there was deep religious division. Parliamentary election results and Protestant population statistics for the borough suggest that the Conservatives could have won at least two or three seats. Protestant hostility to what they perceived to be an O'Connellite reform was probably the principal reason for their non-participation.



The Liberals were pleased with the election results in the West Ward, where voters had followed instructions by voting for candidates in an order that was close to that of the primary election. They had mixed feelings however about the East Ward where Charles Bianconi, the poll-topper in the primary, had been reduced to seventh place thus depriving him of an aldermanship, and where the poll had been topped by William Byrne, who had received only 42 votes in the primary. The outcome in the East Ward revealed a deep division among Liberals. William Byrne, who headed the poll and Joseph Kenny, whose name had been removed from the official list, were later to become prominent in a group of Corporation members who called themselves Independent Liberals. This group was to include four of those candidates rejected by the electorate in the East Ward primary. Together they had conspired in this election to thwart the Liberal leadership.

John Hackett reacted petulantly to the outcome by twice referring in his newspaper to William Byrne as "the man least worthy in our party of becoming an alderman" and as "one who owes his votes to the Orangemen".²³ To blame the Conservatives for electing Byrne as an alderman was merely a convenient brush with which to tar his political opponents; while a handful of Conservatives may indeed have voted for Byrne it seems unlikely that they could have been responsible for the outcome in the East Ward.

The linking in the public mind of Independent Liberals with Conservatives was to become a regular feature of Clonmel Liberal tactics especially in the run-up to future elections. But it did not prevent the Independent Liberals from becoming a formidable opposition within the reformed Corporation.

FOOTNOTES — (Abbreviations: T.F.P.= *Tipperary Free Press*; T.C.= *Tipperary Constitution*).

1. T.F.P. 19.10.1842
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. 5.1.1842.
4. T. C., 25.6.1845.
5. Joseph C. Hayes: *Guide to Tipperary Newspapers (1770—1989)*, in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1989. p.5.
6. James O'Shea: *Priest, Politics and Society in Post-famine Ireland*. (Dublin, 1983). pp.145 and 327.
7. Ibid. p.326.
8. M. O'Connell Bianconi and S.J. Watson: *Bianconi, King of the Irish Roads*. (Dublin,1962) p.101.
9. Hansard, XXXIII, 734@5, 9 May 1836, Lyndhurst.
10. Fergal O'Ferrall: *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1985) p.211.
11. Ibid. p.206.
12. Hayes. op.cit., p.6.
13. T.C. 4.7.1843 and 17.3.1847.
14. S.J. Watson: *A Dinner of Herbs: The History of Old St. Mary's Church, Clonmel*. (Clonmel,1988) p.108.
15. B.M. Walker (ed.): *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1801-1922*. (Dublin, 1978) p.261.
16. William Nolan: "Patterns of Living in County Tipperary from 1770 to 1850". *Tipperary: History and Society*. Ed. Nolan and McGrath (Dublin,1985) p.322.
17. U.H. Hussey De Burgh: *The Landowners of Ireland*, (1878) p.16.
18. Presentments of Tipperary Grand Jury (South Riding) Summer asizes 1840.
19. Walker: op.cit., pp.204 and 261.
20. For a detailed account of primary see T.F.P. 22.10.1842.
21. T.C.21.10.1842 and T.F.P. 22.10.1842
22. The names and occupations are from T.C.28.10.1842 and the addresses from Shanly's Directory of Clonmel.1839.
23. T.F.P. 29.10.1842 and 25.11.1843.

