

# John O'Leary A Study in Irish Separatism

by Marcus Burke

*(1st ed. Tralee, 1967) – reprint with an introduction by William Nolan  
(Geography Publications, Dublin, 2009). €40.*



*At the launch of John O'Leary - A Study in Irish Separatism by Marcus Burke were:  
Mr. Tom O'Donoghue, Dr. Martin Mansergh, Marcus Burke, Tom Ambrose,  
Dr. Denis Marnane and William Nolan.*

In the Spring of 1943 Radio Eireann broadcast from Tipperary town an edition of its very popular question time programme. Some topics of local interest were raised, including questions about John and Ellen O'Leary. In this very public way, towns-people were reminded of the degree to which the O'Learys were ignored in the town. The broadcast prompted talk about this omission and vague suggestions that something should be done. Of course, nothing was done.

As William Nolan mentions in his introduction to this new edition of Marcus Bourke's biography of John O'Leary, it was another twenty seven years before a plaque commemorated where John O'Leary was born. It was not organized by local interests, is factually incorrect and Ellen was ignored. (The O'Learys were not born in the house to which the plaque is attached. Following a devastating fire, the present house was built decades after O'Leary's death.) Even the publication of Bourke's biography three years before this commemoration, in 1967, did nothing to stir even the appearance of interest, much less enthusiasm for the O'Learys. The best O'Leary's own town managed, as reflected by the action of the town council, was to name a (very) minor housing development after John. To date, Ellen, buried in St Mary's churchyard in the town, has her name attached to nothing – not even her gravestone.

In 1967, the first edition of this book was launched in Dublin, in circumstances explained in William Nolan's introduction. Forty-two years on and this reprint was launched in Tipperary town on 26 March 2009 by Minister Martin Mansergh. Publication was made possible through the generous financial support of Tipperary Town Council, South Tipperary

County Council, County Tipperary Historical Society (publisher of this journal), the GAA and Muintir na Tire. The author Marcus Bourke, founder editor of *Tipperary Historical Journal* (1988-2001), also spoke and reflected on his family's and his own long involvement with Tipperary town, not least his links with Arravale Rovers.

Some forty years on, John O'Leary's role in Irish life is more appreciated and at a time when the political and cultural cross-currents of nineteenth century Ireland are more scrutinised, a reprinting of *John O'Leary A Study in Irish Separatism* is welcome, not least because it draws the attention of Tipperary people to O'Leary and to his sister. Even long neglected and long suffering Ellen is beginning to receive some scholarly attention.

Of interest in William Nolan's introduction to this reprint, is his discussion, not so much of O'Leary's Tipperary roots and connections, ground already well covered by Marcus Bourke, but of Tipperary's attitude to the O'Learys. Within the context of a small Irish town, the O'Learys were among the elite, which meant that they were in a minority and were very much not on the popular side during the greatest local issue of the day, the struggle over New Tipperary. Ellen O'Leary died in Cork on 15 October 1889, just as the New Tipperary agitation was gathering pace. The Tipperary town newspaper *The Tipperary People* was owned and edited by a man with Fenian sympathies. His paper's response to her death was articulate silence.

John O'Leary lived to be seventy-seven. A frugal life-style probably helped. There is an account of him sitting for hours over a single cup of coffee in Parisian cafes during his exile. Nothing much changed after his return to Ireland and domicile in Dublin. One young friend and disciple (the former tending to become the latter) described "an atmosphere of smoke and books, in the midst of which he sat enthroned, with usually a cup of entirely cold coffee on a chair beside him and around him piles of books, papers and pamphlets." The closeness between brother and sister, some fifteen months between them, humanises the Fenian and O'Leary's devastation when Ellen died suddenly, is moving.

With no wife or family, O'Leary had no distractions from his austere mission to reshape Ireland. Once that proved impossible and with the mantle of elder statesman on him, O'Leary's instinctive mission was to influence those who in time might reshape Ireland. Not the least unusual aspect of O'Leary's biography is that during a long life, the closest he came to having a job was when he worked on the Fenian newspaper, which lasted less than two years before its suppression in September 1865. This was followed by arrest, trial, conviction, prison and exile.

Rent from Tipperary town property was not a supplement to his income, it was his income and allowed his devotion to an inclusive and intellectual form of Republicanism that was marginalised, first by the ascent of the Home Rule movement and later by a Republicanism that was less inclusive and rather more practical than theoretical. The bread and butter politics of the Home Rulers, not least their Plan of Campaign offended him intellectually and damaged him financially. O'Leary was not alive to witness Sinn Féin Republicanism but the common ground between him and for example Dan Breen, was tenuous. However, it was the latter version that captured the imaginations of Tipperary people.



John O'Leary, convict

On two counts therefore O'Leary was suspect in the minds of his townspeople. A suspicion that was reciprocated when O'Leary was alive. On the one hand middle class enterprise provided him with an excellent education and a modest income for life but on the other hand, he was turned off by the pragmatic sentimental political and commercial opportunism of exactly these types of people. John O'Leary, influenced when a young man by the writings of Thomas Davis made his mind up about politics. One of the things people like Yeats so admired about O'Leary was the austere inflexibility of his opinions.

Marta Ramón in her 2007 study of James Stephens, described Bourke's biography of O'Leary as "outstanding". Forty years after publication therefore, *John O'Leary A Study in Irish Separatism* continued to fill a need as a solid well researched and empathic study of a key figure in the Fenian movement. The famous lines by Yeats about O'Leary forever link the two men in popular opinion and one version of the story has it that the fateful meeting between Yeats and Maud Gonne took place at O'Leary's lodgings in Dublin. Foster's monumental *Life of Yeats* (Oxford, 1997, 2003) makes clear the influence O'Leary (thirty-five years his senior) had on the young poet struggling to find an identity and a voice. O'Leary loaned the poet small sums of money from time to time – an interesting arc between Tipperary slums and the Celtic Dawn.

In the context therefore of increasing academic and popular interest in the milieu of John O'Leary, a new printing of Marcus Bourke's study of the Fenian is timely.

**Denis G. Marnane**