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**Charles Bianconi:
Portrait of a Nineteenth Century
(Naturalised) Irish Self-Made Man**

by Alice Mc Dermott

The industrial revolution, which brought to mainland Britain truly significant and, for the most part, progressive and positive advances that fuelled attendant dynamic changes in industry, agriculture, population distributions, social mobility, economic development, indeed some would argue, evolving democracy itself, essentially failed to have any real impact on Ireland.¹

Consequently, the numerous Georgio-Victorian self-made men who, throughout the streets and counties of England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as the pages of considerable volumes of contemporary popular British fiction,² became such powerful symbols of all that was possible and probable regarding the acquisition of new wealth and status for those who had the will, determination, ambition, ability, and talent to work hard for it, were almost nowhere to be seen in nineteenth century Ireland.

There was, however, one notable (subsequently naturalised) Irish exception, Charles Bianconi, the founder of public transport in the country. This article examines the extent to which he, with his truly adventurous entrepreneurial spirit, living and working in largely rural and, with the exception of parts of the northeast,³ fundamentally unindustrialised Ireland, became a quintessential nineteenth century self-made man who appears to have possessed many of the same behavioural patterns as the industrialists who were his mainland British Georgio-Victorian counterparts.

Bianconi was born at Tregolo in the Lombard highlands of Italy in 1786.⁴ Interestingly, for such a subsequently accomplished entrepreneur, while at school, he apparently displayed an absolute inability and unwillingness to study and learn. In later years, when his coaching empire in Ireland was very well established, and he was frequently asked to describe the role that formal education had played in the extraordinary and continued success of his business, he used to describe his school days and his relationship with prescribed learning in the most unflattering (to himself) terms.

'I was never one for learning . . . Learning took as little effect on me as pouring water on a duck's back, though I liked being read to aloud - if possible, bits from the lives of famous men.'⁵

'(At school) I was the wildest boy and the greatest dunce; I never learned anything at school, except how to run away from it.'⁶

In the event, Bianconi left school at fifteen, apparently almost as ignorant as when he started 'and a great deal more wilful.'⁷

Throughout the remainder of his long life as, perhaps, the most successful nineteenth century entrepreneur to operate in Ireland, he continued to publicly boast about his formal 'uneducation'.⁸

And for those fifty years during which his coaching business made him the undisputed *King of the Irish Roads*, he was equally consistent in making widely known his lack of regard for both the value and the process of 'thinking'. Comments like 'thinking is not much in my line'⁹ and 'thinking is the business of fools'¹⁰ (apparently an Italian proverb) were freely expressed by him when talking both informally and formally about his half century extraordinary business success.

It should be noted, however, that his abject dismissal of the usefulness of thinking as part of the learning process, and his constant assertions that he did not trouble himself nor waste his time engaging with the procedure were probably disingenuous, not least because his management of a thriving business for such a lengthy period of time was neither a happy accident nor the result of a lucky series of randomly, spontaneously, disjointedly, and whimsically made executive decisions, regardless of his assertions to the contrary. Furthermore, Mary O'Connell Bianconi¹¹ has documented how her great grand-father first saw horse-drawn carriages travelling through the Alps when he was a young teenager,¹² how he carried the picture with him over a ten year period, during which time he left Italy for Ireland, until he was in a suitable financial position to begin buying cars and horses to provide public transport that was to eventually service the vast majority of the country, and how he frequently spoke about the profundity of the impression initially created and subsequently held until it could be launched as a business venture at an appropriate time. Carrying that vision of travel provision for a decade, and then arranging the means and taking a pivotal opportunity, (at the ending of the Napoleonic Wars), to become the provider of the service, required thoughtful and accurate memory of the first impression created upon seeing the horse-drawn carriages proceed to cross the Alps, as well as the more complex thought processes necessary to hold and refine the image's potential until it could be actualised, was not the work of an unthinking man, no matter how much Bianconi liked to promote such a representation of himself.

While current experts in entrepreneurship are generally united in asserting that there are, as such, no particular sets of characteristics or personality traits that distinguish entrepreneurs from the rest of the population, they do concede that business magnates appear to share certain generic behaviour patterns.¹³

Any assessment of Bianconi as an entrepreneur, a self-made man, who shared behavioural archetypes with his Georgio- Victorian mainland British counterparts, would be remiss in failing to acknowledge, at the outset, his significant cognitive and emotional intelligence, evident since his early teenage years when he began to carry and mould his dream of becoming a pioneer of public transport, regardless of his lack of formal education and his self-professed denials of the existence of thinking in his persona. The remainder of the article will identify further personal attributes and business approaches which, taken as a whole, appear to have made Bianconi's emergence as, perhaps, the greatest of Ireland's nineteenth century entrepreneurs almost inevitable. The article will conclude with an analysis of the extent to which Bianconi's behaviour patterns in his business dealings over the fifty year period, during which his coaching empire flourished, appear to mirror those of his contemporaries on the British mainland and indeed elsewhere, right up to and including, the present.

Bianconi left Italy for Ireland just before his sixteenth birthday at the request of a wealthy local landowner in Tregolo who feared that the young man was having an 'inappropriate relationship' with his daughter who was betrothed to another. Sharing the concern and conscious of the social disgrace should he fail to heed the landowner's warning, Bianconi's father arranged to apprentice the young Carlos (Charles) to a good friend who was travelling, in the very near future, with other apprentices to England.¹⁴

No records exist of the journey made by Bianconi and his group or, indeed, explanations of why they ended up in Ireland instead of England, as they had originally intended. All that is documented is that, in the autumn of 1802, Faroni (Pietro Bianconi's friend), together with his four apprentices, was renting accommodation close to Dublin Castle.¹⁵ The apprentices, while unable to speak a word of either English or Irish, spent their first few months in Ireland peddling pictures of royal, religious, and military figures on the streets of Dublin. When they began to speak English with some degree of fluency, Bianconi and his associates were sent into the countryside beyond Dublin, where they walked averages of thirty miles a day carrying heavy baggage and trying to sell their wares. As a successful coaching entrepreneur many years later, Bianconi frequently told people that his business 'grew out of his shoulders.' After eighteen months, Bianconi completed his apprenticeship as a peddler/guilder and, taking leave of his mentor and acquaintances, set off on his own in 1804 to try and become 'a great man.'¹⁶

His journey south from Dublin, carrying a box of pictures and frames he had bought (with money contributed by his family and friends and held in safe-keeping by his mentor while he completed his apprenticeship) on his back, eventually led him to County Tipperary, where he decided to settle and explore business opportunities as a peddler and guilder. For eleven years subsequently, Bianconi travelled around Tipperary and Waterford, eventually opening a shop in Clonmel, while he continued to guild and sell framed pictures and mirrors. Throughout his eleven years as a sometimes itinerant peddler and qualified guilder, Bianconi increasingly despaired of the amount of time he spent travelling on foot and the weights of the loads he constantly carried. He never forgot how he had seen movements of goods and people conducted more quickly and more efficiently by means of horse drawn carriages back home in Italy. Nor did he ever accept as inevitable and unalterable both the daily grind of constant personal discomfort resulting from the carrying of heavy baggage and the loss of time walking or waiting for boats and tides to carry him and his loads from place to place. On the contrary, he came to the realisation, alone at that time, it appears, that time saved travelling by means of public conveyances was worth more than the actual cost of the transport. He refined his ideas on the value of time even further when he read, some years later, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.¹⁸ The poor people of Tipperary did not share his view. For them, a day spent, for example, walking to a fair and another on the return was worth the saving of the cost of public transport there and back. Bianconi was, in fact, very progressive in deducing that time was more valuable than money because a similar regard for the value of time had hardly begun to be articulated, not to mention become widely held, in the furiously developing factories of mainland Britain. Bianconi, of course, would probably have said, if his astute valuing of time over money had been pointed out to him, that he wasn't actually thinking at all! He was, however, simply displaying in advance, one of the most important hallmarks of an entrepreneur, a proper regard for the value of time.¹⁹

Bianconi also had an extremely well defined appreciation of the value of money, long before he established his public transport venture. In later years, when he was reminiscing about his days in the corner shop in Clonmel, he would proudly boast of how, 'when I was earning a shilling a day . . . I used to live upon eight pence.'²⁰ In this, as in every other sense, during his years as a peddler and qualified guildler, he was sharpening his business acumen in preparation for his subsequent career as, possibly, Ireland's foremost entrepreneur.

Two economic consequences of the ending of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe in 1815 were the ready availability on the open market of vast supplies of cheap horses and cheap feeding grains. Not in any way fearful of the fact that all of Europe, at war's end, stood at the dawn of a new and uncertain era, economically as well as politically and militarily, Bianconi decided to avail of the favourable market conditions to launch, in a very modest way; his coaching business. In this, as with many other commercial decisions made throughout the next fifty years, he showed himself to be a risk-taker, a factor that will be returned to at the conclusion of the article when Bianconi's behaviour patterns in business are measured against other entrepreneurial typecasts.

A couple of years prior to the launch of his car business, Bianconi had bought himself a horse and gig. Before the chosen commencement day, he spent some time travelling in his own small car, recording the times of journeys between various towns and the numbers of people he passed walking on the roads. He left nothing to chance, noted every relevant fact meticulously, and made every deduction regarding distances and fares based on accurate calculations of income and expenditure.²¹ In other words, he did his market research and made out a business plan, complete with projected costings and takings.

On the morning of 6 July 1815, a scant two weeks after Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, Bianconi launched his first car, providing single and return journeys between Clonmel and Cahir for passengers, goods and mail. The vehicle travelled the twelve miles between the two destinations at an average speed of seven and a half miles per hour, carrying cross mail but no passengers. That first car, a two wheel jaunting car, was pulled by a single horse and had a six-passenger capacity.

For weeks, the car ran with scarcely a passenger paying for its use and the cross-mail fee not covering anything close to its running costs. This was because, apart from the generally held belief by poor people that money was worth more than time saved, they were also, quite simply, afraid of the unknown, and regularly available public transport between Clonmel and Cahir for ordinary people was certainly unknown up until then.

While many may have capitulated at that point, on the assumption that the venture was either too far ahead of its time or else too falsely reconciled with public demand to be workable, Bianconi's belief in his 'product' never wavered. Instead of conceding defeat, he responded to the lack of uptake of his coaches with a promotional ploy that, even by twenty first century standards, was impressive in terms of its simplicity and effectiveness. Bianconi bought a second horse and car which he put on the Clonmel-Cahir route in apparent opposition to his first one. Even the drivers of the two cars did not know that they both worked for Bianconi. As opponents, the cars began to race each other. Ordinary people's sporting instincts were appealed to. Fierce rivalry ensued, and consequently, within a short period of time, both cars began to arrive at each end of the route fully occupied by customers enjoying the chase! Eventually, although the excitement of the rivalry and competition ceased abruptly when the first car literally raced the second car's

horse to exhaustion, the notion of public transport as convenience took hold and Bianconi's enterprise began to grow.²²

Bianconi was not, it should be noted, the first person in Ireland to provide public transport. Stage coaches did run in certain areas prior to the launch of his return coach service between Clonmel and Cahir. However, these were available at costs that proved to be prohibitive for the vast majority of those who might have used them. River boats also provided public transport but river travel was generally regarded as too slow by many of those who might otherwise have availed of its services. Considerable parts of the country, furthermore, were not serviced by either stage coach or river transport.²³ Fundamental to the haphazard and sporadic nature of public conveyances throughout the country was the fact that, in 1814, a year before Bianconi started his first service, many of the roads across Ireland were nothing more than cattle trails and ancient war paths. Whole counties were actually cut off from one another and from the rest of the country.²⁴ Consequently, it was impossible to network and link the transport of people and goods from points A to B to C and, if required, to Z. While the Irish road network was the beneficiary of fairly constant improvements and expansions throughout the nineteenth century, accelerated growth only really began after the establishment, firstly, of the Board of Public Works (Ireland) in 1831 and, secondly, of road and bridge building projects (compulsory participation demanded) for those in receipt of famine relief payments.²⁵ Bianconi, as the years passed, availed of the opportunities created by constantly improving road connections and links to eventually expand his public transport network into each of the four provinces. This determination of his never to accept that commercially, he had reached the pinnacle, and, instead, to constantly seek improvements, progressions, and growth will also be noted when measuring Bianconi's work-related behaviours against fellow entrepreneurs at the conclusion of the article.

Throughout his fifty years as a public transport provider, Bianconi expanded, adapted, and, on occasions, re-routed his horse-drawn carriage business not only in tandem with changes brought about by progress, for example, the arrival of railways in the country, but also to service various parts of Ireland that were literally being opened up for the first time with the laying down of a fairly comprehensive national road and rail network. His willingness to accept change as inevitable, his absence of fear regarding progress, his support, financial and otherwise for new ventures, as for example, his substantial investments in the railways, and his adaptability in response to the various courses and consequences of evolution during his years in business was, of course, invaluable throughout the establishment and maintenance of his half-century extraordinarily successful commercial enterprise.

By the end of 1815, the Clonmel-Cahir route had expanded west to Tipperary town and Limerick. A northern line was started that linked Clonmel with Cashel and Thurles. At the beginning of 1816, an east line was established from Clonmel, via Carrick-on-Suir, to Waterford. Bianconi's cars were travelling 226 miles per day. This was a significant business expansion for a venture that was only a year old.²⁶

Bianconi's business continued to grow throughout all the years of its existence. In 1832, his cars were travelling a daily average of 1,632 miles.²⁷ By 1836, the figure had increased to 2,234 miles daily.²⁸ In 1843, the daily mileage had increased by a third to 3,800.²⁹ In 1846, despite the fact that the railway lines were stretching deeper and deeper throughout the Irish countryside, and that the Great Famine had the country cruelly in its grip, the cars

were still travelling 3,190 miles a day.³⁰ In 1857, daily distances travelled had risen to 4,244.³¹

From the beginning of his career as a coach-transport provider, Bianconi demonstrated a remarkable ability to manage his enterprise in a manner that, by and large, generated for him the regard, loyalty, affection, and respect of both staff and customers. His apparently endearing combination of eccentricities, 'foreign-ness', high good-humour, and affability, together with a preference for 'patriarchal despotism'³² as an appropriate management style, allowed him to run his business without a murmur of dissent, disapproval, or disappointment from any quarter. These qualities were significant contributory factors in Bianconi's continued good fortune as an entrepreneur.

Bianconi's daughter³³ and great-grand daughter both give very detailed accounts of how he managed his immense business enterprise. They also clearly demonstrate the impact of his coaches on the towns and cities they serviced, the daily spectacles that the arrivals and departures of people and provisions provided, as well as the extent to which the Bians³⁴ were pivotal in shaping Ireland economically and socially for the fifty years during which they operated under Bianconi's ownership, and, indeed, beyond.

His daughter, Minnie, in her biography of her father, talks about his belief in what he called the 'Dick Whittington qualities'³⁵ necessary for success in business. His allusion to the children's story is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, because of his declared aversion to learning in the face of what is, essentially, a morality tale with plenty to be learned from the message it contains, and secondly, because the qualities it extols, industriousness, good behaviour, the importance of good works and acts of charity, luck, good fortune, and reward for effort, are ones which Bianconi rated highly, for himself and others. Interesting too, is the fact that the fictitious Dick Whittington was fourteen years old, a year younger than Bianconi was when he first left Italy, and that both found the streets of their respective adopted home places paved with gold. All in all, the reference to the story provides a fascinating insight into Bianconi's business outlook and, perhaps, his character.

She also describes Bianconi's faith in 'good organisation' for the successful running of a business. Central to good organisation in a commercial enterprise, as he learned from his reading, was adherence to a strict division of labour so that everyone involved understood what was required of each and of all.³⁶

She elaborates further:

It (his coaching business) was worked on a peculiar plan, and was, perhaps, the most perfect system . . . Never was a man better fitted than my father for perpetually watching and catching up ideas. His natural passion for rushing about, his extreme sharpness, the great quickness of his mind, of his hand, and of his eye, seemed to destine him specially for some such enterprise.³⁷

She outlines the extent to which Bianconi controlled and supervised every minute aspect of his business with the following description of his approach to overseeing: (M)y father's minute code of precautions.³⁸ As well as his 'avowed and acknowledged supervision' of every aspect of his endeavour, Bianconi also relied, his daughter tells us, on additional reports 'from spies' who travelled incognito on his cars to ensure that numbers of passengers, etc., listed on his way-bills were, in fact, accurate. Spies also reported on the condition of the horses, and the behaviour of the agents and drivers. In return, they were given free travel.³⁹ By these irregular means, Bianconi was familiar with the behaviour and habits of every employee and every horse that was part of his establishment. This aspect of his business management was both ruthless and efficient but, presumably, because he had hundreds of loyal and dedicated employees, not without a certain degree of charming

effectiveness. Such tight control of his establishment also, of course, better ensured its commercial prosperity.

Minnie highlights what she sees as another important factor in her father's undoubted business success, his:

Power of adaptability; he was not a discoverer, hardly an inventor, but no man was quicker or keener to grasp all the bearings of a subject and mould them to his own uses.⁴⁰

On various occasions throughout his career as a coach-transport provider, Bianconi's ability to adapt to the vagaries of public opinion (for example, the initial reluctance of poor people, in particular, to use his coaches), shifting trends (for example, the arrival of the railways), etc., not only saved him from commercial failure but also helped him to achieve even greater success.

Minnie describes his management style as:

Patriarchal despotism; his orders were to be obeyed without a murmur of dissent, he had a horror of men who asked why and wherefore.⁴¹

The account cannot help but remind one of all the Dickensian stereotypes of the nineteenth century self-made man.

His great grand-daughter, Molly, perhaps softens her grand mother's descriptions of his leadership style when she points out that, while he was strict, he tempered it with fairness and good humour in all of his dealings with employees.⁴² This, undoubtedly, also factored positively in determining his continued industrial success.

Minnie gives a very vivid account of the spectacle that ensued every time a Bianconi conveyance left one destination for another. In this instance, the scene is Cummin's Hotel in Waterford.

There every day at three o'clock in the afternoon there used to be a scene of business and bustle, not unmixed with merriment, that never failed to attract a crowd to see the starting of the Bians. At two o'clock the preparations began; the huge vehicles were drawn out before the door of the hotel, and luggage from all quarters came down on trucks, or on the backs of men and of boys. And from the hotel, whilst impatient and business-like commercial men were providing, at the ample table d'hôte, against the hardships of the road, that valuable servant the 'boots' might be seen bearing case after case of heavy luggage to be stowed in the well or piled up on the top of the car. Then came the cynosure of many eyes, the coachman, followed by a boy carrying his whips-for the coachman who thought well of himself always carried a spare tormentor. He walks along slowly, bending under the burden of many caped coats and rugs, and as each driver arrives his merits are criticised and decided upon by the knowing ones who are skilled in horse-flesh. Already 'boots' has secured the post of vantage - the box seats - for his favourites, and dangling down may be seen the flash rugs of well known commercial men in evidence of possession gained. As the hour approaches the guests come forth from the hotel dressed in all the varied fashion of travelling costume, fur rugs, glaring mufflers, wonderful topcoats, and cunning devices of all kinds for keeping out the cold or keeping in heat. Tobacco pipes of curious and grotesque patterns astonish and delight the inquisitive lookers-on, and many an apprentice, who lingers in open mouthed admiration at the travellers, wonders if it shall ever be his good fortune to get on 'the road'. The packing of the luggage was a work demanding skill and experience . . . The principal attraction, however, was the arrival of the horses.⁴³

The scene described of the coach departing Waterford, which, it should be remembered, occurred fairly similarly several times a day throughout the four provinces, was, of course, valuable free advertising, guaranteed to create a huge desire to experience similar journeys for themselves in all of the assembled and coincidentally passing spectators.

Minnie reproduces the text of a paper delivered on behalf of Bianconi to the Belfast meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1867. In it, he describes the impact of the arrival of the railways to Ireland on his business. Essentially, the railways were responsible for having his cars expelled from main lines. Instead of

passively accepting the negative impact on his coaching business, he simply diverted his cars to more remote areas and continued to do good business there for the remainder of his career as a public transport provider.⁴⁴ This is, as has been mentioned, just one example of Bianconi's ability to modify the way that he conducted his business to adapt to progress.

In all, Bianconi delivered four papers during his years as *King of the Irish Roads*. The first two, in 1843 and 1857, were delivered to the British Association for the advancement of Science, and the second pair were delivered to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. Collectively, they give an account of the 'Bianconi approach to enterprise'. They also detail the nature and extent of the economic and social progress brought to Ireland as a direct result of Bianconi's coaching empire opening up the country and establishing general free-flow of people and goods. Essentially, the reliability and frequency of his public conveyances impacted progressively on agriculture; industry; transport of goods, mail, and fresh food; and society generally. His cars, for example, brought efficiency and speed into mail delivery in Ireland. They also gave ordinary people an appreciation of the monetary value of time. This, in itself, was a 'small social revolution'. They linked the country from north to south, east to west, and every permutation thereof. They helped to bring down the price of goods and food that were no longer scarce or unattainable because they could be ported regularly and cheaply.⁴⁵

When it came time for Bianconi to finally dispose of his coaching empire, sometime after 1866, he conducted the process as impressively as he had its establishment more than fifty years earlier. He first broke up, and then sold, on very generous financial terms, various parts of the business, mainly to his own agents and employees. At the time of his death in 1875, all of the independent businesses that had once constituted his coaching empire were still thriving.⁴⁶

No account of Bianconi, the entrepreneur, can fail to acknowledge the fact that he was also extraordinarily forward thinking in many other of his business practices. He employed women, he promoted staff who showed aptitude and promise, he provided pensions for those who retired due to age or illness/accidents, he provided his drivers with uniforms, and he built up substantial ancillary businesses such as harness making and coach building.

Does Bianconi share generic behaviour patterns with other successful entrepreneurs? Before the question can be answered, it is useful to consider what contemporary entrepreneurial theorists suggest are the performance prototypes in business shared by high achieving entrepreneurs. The general consensus appears to be that such people share: a passion for their business; a product and customer focus; tenacity despite failure; and execution intelligence (the ability to translate plans into action).⁴⁷ Using these as a yardstick by which Bianconi's entrepreneurial acumen might be judged, the answer would appear to be in the affirmative. He had a life-long enthusiasm for his business; he was constantly customer and product driven; he was tenacious despite set-backs and apparent limitations/failures; and he had the sustained desire, ability, and talent to follow his dream and actually become the founder of public transport in nineteenth century Ireland. In his business dealings, he was also, of course, a risk taker for whom, crucially, perhaps because of his high intelligence and sound common sense, these never back-fired. Finally, he was constant in his struggles, over a fifty year period, for commercial refinement and improvement. He was, truly, the 'great apostle of traffic'⁴⁸ and a classic nineteenth century self made-man.

References:

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3. See. Lyons, F.S.L, *Ibid.*, pp. 60-2.
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19. *Ibid.*, pp.35-6.
20. *Ibid.*, p.174.
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22. *Ibid.*, pp.58-9.
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27. Bianconi, M.O'C., S.J. Watson, *Op. Cit.*, p.88.
28. *Ibid.*, p.109.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
31. *Ibid.*, p.168.
32. O'Connell, Mrs. M.J., *Op. Cit.*, p. 58.
33. Mrs. Morgan John O'Connell nee Bianconi.
34. The affectionate name by which Bianconi's coaches were known throughout Ireland.
35. O'Connell, Mrs. M.J., *Op. Cit.*, p. 30.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p.56.
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42. Bianconi, M. O' C. , Watson, S.J. , *Op. Cit.*, p.62.
43. O'Connell, Mrs. M. J., *Op. Cit.*, pp.60-2.
44. *Ibid.*, p.72.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-98.
46. Bianconi, M.O'C, Watson, S.J., *Op. Cit*, p.179.
47. For further information on entrepreneurial behaviour, see Barringer, B.R., Ireland, R.D., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 7-8.
O'Connell, Mrs M.J., *Op. Cit.*, p.196.