

Sir William Shee--The Queen's Sergeant

BY JAMES J. DELANEY

William Shee was born in Finchley, London, in 1804. He was eldest son of Joseph Shee of Thomastown, and his wife, Mary Teresa Darrell, of Scotney Castle, Kent. From his father, William Shee claimed descent from Robert Shee, M.P. for Kilkenny, in 1559.

William went to St. Cuthberth's College, Ushaw, Durham, in January 1, 1818. He left this college around 1822 and went to study in Edinburgh for a time. In June 19, 1828 he was called to the bar and went on the home circuit.

Shee first distinguished himself politically at a great Protestant meeting of the men of Kent on Pennendon Heath in 1828 when he spoke for the Liberal Party. As a barrister he first earned distinction for his knowledge of shipping cases. He also took part in many famous criminal cases.

662 VOTES

In 1840 when he was 36, Shee was made Sergeant at Law. Six years later he was granted patent of precedence.

At the British general election of 1847 Shee stood as a Liberal. During his campaign he said he "was not an enemy of the Church though not a member of it". He thought Church rates should be abolished and considered that the Church of Ireland was "a scandal and a shame to christendom". He got 662 votes but failed to get a seat in Parliament.

Two books by Mr. Sergeant Shee published in 1849 caused much comment. The books advocated giving some of the revenues of the Church of Ireland for the support of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

In March, 1852, a request to John Greene, M.P. and Sergeant Shee appeared in local papers, inviting them to become candidates for Kilkenny in the forthcoming general election. The invitation carried 400 signatures. Some of these were flagrant forgeries and others were names of men long since dead. The name of Fr. J. Delaney, C.C., Muckalee, appeared without his permission.

In his letter of acceptance Shee claimed he was opposed to all projects for connection by means of pecuniary provision of Catholic clergy with the State. He also advocated an extended franchise, voting by ballot and the education of children in the religion of their parents.

SOILED LINEN

During the election campaign the opposition were not idle. Much soiled linen came out in the wash. Father Thomas O'Shea of Callan, refuted the suggestion that Shee had stood for Marylebone on Tory principals. He quoted "The Times" of August 2, 1847, in which Shee had said when accused of being an Irishman: "There is no disgrace in belonging to the country of Burke, Sheridan, Grattan and Canning". The fact was that he had been born in England and was an Englishman. He loved the Irish and his father had been an Irishman.

Four candidates went forward for nomination on July 18, 1852. They were Lord James Butler, brother of the Marquis of Ormonde, the Hon. Mr. Agar Ellis, son of Lord Dover, Gowran Castle, Mr. John Greene, M.P. for Kilkenny, and Mr. Sergeant Shee. Shee was proposed by Father Aylward and seconded by Mr. Blake of Ballynamona House, Thomastown.

MEN WITH BLUDGEONS

On the night before the election the tenants of Colonel Weyms at Rathclough were wakened by a mob of about 40 men armed with bludgeons. They took away with them 14 men known to be opposed to Sergeant Shee. They were brought to Kilkenny and locked in a yard until they agreed to vote for Greene and Shee.

Polling began at 9 a.m. in the five polling districts — Kilkenny, Castlecomer, Thomastown, and Piltown. Before the booths opened it looked as if Shee and Greene would have it all their own way. The expected supporters of Lord James Butler and the Hon Mr. Ellis only arrived in twos and threes where they had been expected in hundreds.

On the previous day all the cars sent out for Lord James Butler's supporters had been broken by a mob and the horses clipped and disfigured. At Bennettsbridge rioters threw cars into the river. Many electors had been carried away from their

homes during the night or threatened. Others were met on their way in to vote and forced to vote for Shee and Greene or return home.

Lord James Butler on his way from the castle to the courthouse was "pelted with household objects from upper windows by females of families hitherto calling themselves respectable". It is thought that the support given by the Marquis to the Ecclesiastical Tithes Bill was the cause of this demonstration.

EFFIGIES BURNED

Kilkenny was decorated with green boughs. A banner was put up at the Shambles by a butcher. It showed a soldier bayonetting a bishop and nun while the sacred vessels lay on the ground. The legend under this claimed that this could be expected in Ireland if people did not vote for Shee and Greene. Effigies of Lord J. Butler and the Hon. Mr. Ellis were burned near the Watergate. Troops and police had been drafted into the City for the day. The Mayor, Daniel Cullen and Edmund Smithwick, the High Sheriff, used their influence with the mob to restrain them.

VIOLENCE IN THOMASTOWN

In Thomastown things were even worse. Acts of violence were frequent. The windows of the house of F. P. Barnes where Lord James Butler had his tally rooms were smashed. A figure representing Lord Butler was hung from a rope across the street outside Sergeant Shee's home at The Mall House. It had hanging from its mouth the tongue of a calf.

The same morning a large mob moved towards Kilfane to meet John Power, Father Doyle of Graigue, and voters. The mob was beaten back but reinforcements arrived and Sir John was rolled on the ground; Father Doyle was injured by a blow from a stone and Sir John's carriage was burned at Kilfane Cross.

SHOT IN THE SHOULDER

The most unfortunate incident of the day was when Rev. Jeremiah M'Cheane was wounded in the shoulder by a bullet from the gun of a soldier of the 57th regiment. The clergyman had come to Thomastown from Kilmoganny to vote but was seized by the mob and rolled in the dirt. He was wounded in the resulting confusion.

The election results were — Greene, 2,536 Shee, 2,621 Butler, 500; Ellis, 350. Greene and Shee had triumphed but there was some talk of a petition to unseat them as they had been returned by violence and lynch law.

The "Kilkenny Journal" was exuberant in its praise of the election success. About reports of outrages reported in the "Moderator" the "Journal" wrote — "Every little shoneen in every village who hung upon the skirts of Lord James Butler in mean and ravenous expectation sends to the "Moderator" most unblushing statements of riots that never occurred and assaults that were never committed".

"Even in a few cases where they can lay hold on a single grain of fact they build up an immense superstructure of falsehood. A scratch is a gaping wound — a push a bloodthirsty onslaught".

Of the Liberals elected in Ireland, 17 had pledged themselves to remain independent of the English parties. The Tenant League held a great conference in Dublin in September, and 41 M.P.'s attended among them Shee. They passed a resolution that they would not join any party which did not have as a policy the betterment of the conditions of the Irish tenants.

EXAGGERATED OPINION

The Tenant League selected Sergeant Shee as the most fitting man to take charge of the League Bill when Crawford lost his seat in the general election. As a former leader of the English Bar he was an asset to the party, but no one was more aware of this than himself. He had an exaggerated opinion of himself and was capable of asserting that he knew better than the entire Tenant League what was the right course to take.

The impression which may be drawn from Shee's speeches and writings is that he was a pompous and rather vain man without any sense of humour.

Crawford's Bill was defeated in Parliament in 1853. A Tenants' Compensation Bill introduced by Napier was due for consideration in the House of Lords in the following session. This put the Tenant League in a quandary as to which Bill to support.

It was eventually agreed, at a conference of the League,



to accept nothing short of Crawford's Bill. When Parliament reassembled Shee brought in not Crawford's Bill but a more moderate version of his own.

Though his bill was not successful, Shee was censured by the Tenant League for flouting instructions. He refused to attend the next meeting of the League. This made him no longer desirable as leader.

General elections came around again in 1857. This time, although supported by the Bishop of Ossory, Shee was opposed by most of the clergy, who used their influence against him. He came bottom of the poll, losing his seat to the Hon. Leopold Agar-Ellis.

His disappointment may have been lessened somewhat by his being appointed Queen's Sergeant in the same year. He was unsuccessful as a Parliamentary candidate in 1859. He tried to enter Parliament as member for Stoke-on-Trent in 1862 but was again unsuccessful.

In 1860 he declined the offer of Chief Justiceship of Madras.

FIRST CATHOLIC

In 1864 Shee was made Justice of the Queen's Bench, the first Catholic to hold the honour since the Reformation. He was knighted in June 14, 1864.

The death of Sir William Shee from gout was reported incorrectly in a London paper when he was ill. The Lord Justice of the Queen's Bench wrote: "I am glad to be able to state that the announcement in the morning papers of the death of Shee is incorrect. He, however, is very ill".

On February 19, 1868, Sir W. Shee, K.T., died at his London home in 5, Sussex Place, Hyde Park. Probate of his will was granted to his elder son, George Darrell-Shee. A marble plaque was erected to George Shee in the old chapel yard in Thomastown near the grave of Sir William Shee's parents.

Mrs. Shee died in 1861. She was the daughter of Sir Gordon Gordon, 7th Baronet of Letterfourie in Bauffshire, Premier Baronet of Scotland by Mary, daughter of Willian Glendonwyn of Glendonwyn, and they had married in Paris on December 26, 1837.

A further link with Co. Kilkenny was forged by the marriage in 1873 of George Shee to Jane, daughter of Henry Innes of the Island Mills, Thomastown.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Only an overgrown and dilapidated monument in a neglected graveyard in Thomastown now commemorates the family of the Queen's Sergeant, Sir William Shee.

Goresbridge and Barrowmount House

BETTINA GRATTAN-BELLEW

The village of Goresbridge owes its name partly to the family of Gore who established themselves here towards the close of the 17th century and partly to the Bridge which here spans the Barrow, uniting the Counties of Kilkenny and Carlow. It was also named Newbridge. Arthur Gore obtained from King Charles II grants of lands in this neighbourhood, forfeited by Irish Catholics, and established himself at Barrowmount, formerly the property of Piers Butler and built himself a house opposite the site of the Butler residence. He was interred at Powerstown but when that church fell into disuse the mural slab was removed to the Protestant Church of Goresbridge, called Grange Sylvae. The inscription reads "Here lyes ye body of Ralph Gore, Esq., late of Barrowmount, in ye County of Kilkenny, son of Sir John Gore, of Lecum in Hertfordshire, Knight, who departed this life ye 12th day of December, 1721, aged 68 years".

Another Ralph Gore probably son to this, one, is reported to have been a great racing character. An embellishment of an old map of the Co. Kildare published in 1752 exhibits a grotesque sketch of a race under which is the following; "A prospect of the Great Match run on the Curragh, Sept. 5th, 1751, for 1,000 guineas, between Black and All-Black, belonging to the Hon. Sir Ralph Gore, and Bajazet, the property of the Rt. Hon. the Earl of March, won with ease by the former".

(I am glad to say the racing traditions of Barrowmount