

# Edmond O'Donovan

By Richard J. De Loughry

**D**URING the Crimean campaign of 1854 to 1856 great newspapers sent correspondents into the battlefield. By international agreement these newspaper reporters were recognised as part of the engaging forces and it soon developed into a specialised branch of journalism.

Because of the glamour and danger of this life Irishmen seem to have been particularly attracted to it. As a result they formed a comparatively large proportion of the war correspondents during the numerous campaigns of the latter half of the 19th century. A statue of one of them, McGahan adorns one of the main streets in the city of Sofia. In 1877 he sent back gruesome graphic reports on the Turkish massacres in Bulgaria that roused European Statesmen to actively interfere in the affairs of that country and as a result Bulgaria became free and independent. But more famous was Edmond O'Donovan, universally recognised as the greatest, whose short life was crowded with adventure from its beginning to its tragic close.

“Edmond, born on the 12th September, 1844 on Friday at 12 o'clock at 49, Bayview Avenue, Dublin.” So runs the birth entry of the 2nd son as recorded by John O'Donovan who went to Dublin from Kilkenny and settled in the modest house that still stands in Clontarf. Having been tutored for a short time at home, he entered a day school run by Jesuit Fathers, known as **St. Francis' Saviour College** in Hardwick Place. (It later moved to Gt. Denmark St. and is now known to us as Belvedere College). From that institution where he showed a special aptitude for languages, chemistry and military engineering, he proceeded to the Royal College of Science at St. Stephen's Green. Subsequently, he studied at Trinity College where he gained a prize for proficiency in Chemistry but never graduated.

During his course he held the appointment of Clerk to the Registrar and Assistant Librarian. Having shown a great taste for heraldry, he was appointed aide to Sir Bernard Burke, Ulster King at Arms, and in that capacity, carried a banner at the installation of the Duke of Connaught as Knight of St. Patrick. He eventually abandoned his studies and took to freelance journalism. He began to contribute to various Dublin papers and at the same time assisted his father who was at that time working on the Brehon laws. In a letter to O'Donovan Rossa about his family, John O'Donovan has the following to say about Edmond . . .

“My second son Edmond is actually mad at his heraldic

studies though I have been constantly telling him that it is an obsolete science and that mankind will soon very well do without it. But my admonition is slighted and he continues to cultivate the old knightly science. You will soon see some of his doings in my article on Wilhelm Count Gaul van Bourke of the Austrian Service from whose brother Walter we descend collaterally. (The Gaules or Burkes of Gaulstown, Kilmacow were descendents of William de Burgo, Red Earl of Ulster. They settled in Gaulstown during the 15th century. The name in Irish "Gall" signifies stranger and was presumably given to them by the inhabitants of the district when they first settled there).

At the time of his father's death in 1861, the Fenian movement was beginning to spread throughout Ireland. Edmond O'Donovan with two of his brothers, John and William, were sworn into the movement by O'Donovan Rossa who was an intimate friend of their father. Of the 15 circles of Fenianism in Dublin, one was started by John O'Donovan junior, but it was Edmond who became its centre. An enthusiast for the Cause he devoted to it the knowledge of Chemistry and Engineering he had acquired at the College of Science. He was a great authority on Rifle Shooting and James Stephens induced him to write a practical handbook for use in Fenian training. In addition, the Fenian chief sent him as organiser to various counties and during his journeys, he taught the manufacture of Enfield rifle cartridges. The Enfield was the English army rifle and the same ammunition fitted the American Springfield.

A great stock of ammunition was made although there were few rifles outside Dublin and Clare. Edmond's activities became known to the authorities and in February 1866 he was arrested and lodged in Mountjoy Prison. At this time Sir Thomas Larcom was Under Secretary for Ireland and as such was the official in Dublin Castle mainly responsible for combating and suppressing Fenianism. He had previously been Superintendent of the Ordnance Survey Department and an intimate friendship existed between him and John O'Donovan who worked under him in that Institution. Before the latter died, he requested Larcom to act as guardian to his sons. Therefore when Edmond O'Donovan was a prisoner in Mountjoy, Larcom found himself in an embarrassing situation.

Within a few days however, he ordered Edmond's release, after which he tried to extract a promise from him to abandon the militant movement. O'Donovan refused to do so and within a few months was re-arrested. Larcom again intervened, procured his release and on this occasion vehemently declared that he would have nothing further to do with him.

Towards the end of 1866, he was once more arrested. This time at Limerick for carrying firearms in a proscribed

district, was tried and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment. On hearing this, Larcom swore he would let him rot in jail. Again however, the Under Secretary relented, ordered his release and once more O'Donovan returned to his revolutionary activities. By this time a Rising seemed imminent and amongst the plans for the Dublin area was one for the capture of the magazine fort and the Pidgeon house, where immense quantities of ammunition were stored. The plans were drawn up by Edmund O'Donovan. After the failure of the '67 Rising, Edmond escaped arrest by fleeing the country. Like a number of other Fenian refugees, he settled in Paris where he particularly devoted himself to linguistic studies.

An Irish journalist, John Augustus O'Shea, in his "Leaves from the Life of a Special Correspondent" gives the following pen portrait of him whilst there.

"Our Irish Colony in Paris was strengthened about this time 1867 by the arrival of a sprightly young fellow who has since annexed a niche in history, Edmond O'Donovan. He was an ardent Partisan of what are known as extreme Irish national politics and had it forced upon him that it was now more convenient to live out of British Territory than within it. To Paris he came, partly because his brother William was there before him and partly for the facilities it afforded for self-education. A gay but purposeful stripling, he was well read, quick to perception and brimming with vitality. What a sprightly step he had and what a peculiarly earnest emphatic voice as he delivered his views on what he had seen in language vivid and well chosen."

He returned to Ireland for the famous Longford Election of 1868. He was one of the leading supporters of honest John Martin the 1848 veteran and was particularly active leading the Fenians, mostly to victory, in the many pitched battle that were fought in the streets of the town. The election was lost by John Martin and Edmond went to America for a while before returning to Paris. Whilst in America he continued his medical studies, attending for some time the courses at the Belevue Hospital Medical College in New York. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 found him in Paris. Eager for adventure he hastened to Sedan and joined the Foreign Legion of the French Army, in which he was given the rank of Sous Lieutenant.

In Ireland the sympathy of the people was with France and a movement was started to give practical support to it by recruiting an Irish Brigade to fight in the French ranks. International Law however, prevented this and in its stead an ambulance corps was sent which carried with it a number of men beyond its necessary requirements. They were incorporated in the Foreign Legion at Tours and O'Donovan was recognised

as their chief. Moved to the front as the advance guard of the Army of the Loire, the Legion was soon in action. It suffered heavy losses and was finally forced to retreat into Orleans pursued by the Germans. In that city the fighting was intense, the streets were swept by artillery fire causing heavy casualties. O'Donovan was hit by a shell, rendered unconscious and captured. His own account of this experience is vivid . . . .

"I was in the act of picking off a huge Saxon when a sudden crash at my side caused me to turn. I remembered nothing more until I opened my eyes to see a helmeted German pouring water over my face. I had been wounded and was evidently a prisoner. No Chasse Pot was near me and in the distance I could see the red kepis of my comrades moving to and fro. By degrees I became thoroughly conscious of my exact position and another wounded also was at my side whom I recognised as Sergeant Codilski of my own Company."

O'Donovan was interned as a prisoner of war in Straubing in Bavaria until the peace came. Whilst there he sent an account of his experiences during the war to various Dublin and London newspapers. In May 1871 he was released and returned to Ireland where he lived for many months at his mother's home in Co. Clare. (His mother was Eugene O'Curry's sister). During this period he joined O'Donovan Rossa and Dr. Mark Ryan in reorganising the I.R.B. in Connaught with varying success.

In 1873 the Carlist insurrection broke out in northern Spain and he set out for that country as special correspondent for the Times and the Freeman's Journal. He also contributed many articles to the Hour. He became attached to the Government forces whilst his younger brother Henry who had studied medicine in Dublin but never qualified as a doctor was with the Carlist insurgents as a medical orderly. On his return to Ireland the following year he once more devoted himself to the revival and spread of Fenianism, and was appointed organiser for the North of England by the Supreme Council. To support himself during this period he became a contributor to the London Standard, the Times and later the Daily News. In 1876 he was again on his travels to South Eastern Europe where Bosnia and Herzegovina had revolted against Turkey. The Daily News selected him as its correspondent in the campaign, graphic accounts of which he furnished to its columns. In the following year he journeyed to Asia Minor as representative of the same paper during the war between Russia and Turkey.

On his return to England in 1879 he was hailed as the foremost war correspondent of the day. For his brilliant services to the Daily News he was presented with a special cheque for £1,000. It is reputed that he gave this money to the Fenians. At the urgent request of Sir John Robinson of the Daily News he undertook again as its representative, his famous journey to

Merv, a most daring, difficult and hazardous feat with which his name will always be associated. His energy and courage as well as his familiarity with the language and dialects of Mahommedan nations which he had studied in Paris marked him out as most fitting for this difficult and dangerous mission.

Merv was an extensive oasis, 600 sq. miles in extent in central Asia, inhabited by the Truscomans, a wild and turbulent people, never subject to any regular form of government. They kept their country jealously closed against travellers and they particularly dreaded a Russian invasion of their territory. It had long been a dream of explorers and travellers to penetrate its mysteries, but the perilous journey through jungle and swamp and the reputed ferocity of its inhabitants dampened the ardour of the most adventurous.

Setting out in 1879 he reached through Russia, the shores of the Caspian Sea where he spent some little time with the Russian advance post, and eventually set out on horseback accompanied by two native servants. Passing through northern Persia where he encountered many obstacles from the officials of that country, which he overcame by his tact and daring, he came to Khorassan and from there accompanied by a Kurd servant he rode boldly into the desert. The ride through vast waterless spaces was one of hardship and peril by reason of sandstorms, the intense heat and prowling bands of marauders.

After many vicissitudes he reached Merv where for nearly half a year he was to be at once a guest and a prisoner amongst the Truscoman. Although dressed in English costume, he was at first suspected of being an emissary of the Russians, who were then threatening an advance of Merv. For several weeks he consequently remained in a sort of honourable captivity in danger of death any day and with no prospect of release. He managed however to send into Paris a message which was there telegraphed to Sir John Robinson. In this dispatch, O'Donovan explained his position and appealed to his friend "for God's sake get me out of this." Sir John applied to the Foreign Office and to the Russian Ambassador in London and immediate steps were taken to effect his release.

Meanwhile however, a change gradually set in. All day long and far into the night the house allotted to him was filled with chiefs from the various clans who discussed with him the prospects and chances of having to fight the Russians. Despite his protests that his mission was solely to inform the outer world of the true state of affairs in Merv, they began to regard him as a representative of the British Government. Convinced that he was in no way associated with Russian interests they became so friendly that his advice and decisions were sought on every measure connected with public policy. Finally elected to the Triumvirate, a body invested with supreme authority,

he functioned as one of the three rulers of Merv. In that capacity he became part of the intimate life of the community and mixed in their wild sports and festivities. Gradually however, life amongst them became monotonous and wearisome and at the end of 5 months he announced his intention of leaving. This was received with a certain amount of suspicion and permission was not granted until after a long discussion a Council of Truscoman chiefs agreed to fall in with his wishes.

On returning to London he was received with enthusiasm and read a paper at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society. The history of his exploits on that expedition is set forth in two substantial volumes entitled "The Merv Oasis" published in 1882. His brother William relates that Edmond wrote it in an extremely short space of time, working day and night with a wet towel around his head to enable him to remain awake. This work gives a vivid account of his experiences and a realistic picture of the manners, customs and mode of government of the inhabitants of Merv. Its pages show a style of some distinction as well as an acute power of observation. Here is an example of both in a description of his first approach to Merv . . . .

"From the summit of a grassy hill, I had a fine view of the plain reaching away northwards and eastwards. Although it was early in the year, the rays of the sun were intensely hot and further reaches of the plain appeared of an aerial blue tint, such as in Northern climates we are accustomed to associate with the sky rather than the earth. Far and wide were scattered countless towns and villages all deserted, their lonely walls and towers standing out grim and desolate in the white midday blaze. Scores of ancient monuments dotted the plain. The vast expanse marked with all the traces of vanished life, quivering and dancing in the mirage had about it something real and unearthly that filled the mind with a sense of desolation and loneliness."

Dr. Mark Ryan in his book, Fenian Memories, relates some incidents about O'Donovan which shows another side of his character.

"I have often met Edmond O'Donovan in London after he had returned from Merv, and whilst he was engaged on his famous book, the Merv Oasis. He was full of fun and fond of playing practical jokes. His escapades were spoken of by a wide circle of friends he had formed in London. He used to tell the most fantastic stories and whenever a friend remonstrated with him for taking liberties with the truth he used to say with a pained expression of his fine intelligent face, "don't say I'm telling lies, I may be guilty of a slight exaggeration of the truth but of lies certainly not." And he joined in the laughter which his reply always evoked. He often dressed in Turkish fashion and attracted the attention of passers by.

O'Donovan lived in Red Lion Square, Queensbury and used to turn night into day and day into night, according to his landlady, discharging an air gun at a target in his rooms, and sometimes in the street. He once said to John Augustus O'Shea, "do you know my landlady is a humorist, this mischievous first secretary of mine pretended that I could not knock the hat off a cabman dozing on a rank in the square. I did, worse luck. One of his mates saw me and the long and the short of it was that I had to compensate the cabby. Then the landlady called me and when she had seated herself in the chair began "I believe you are an explorer, Mr. O'Donovan, I bowed and muttered that some flattering persons did me the honour of putting me down as something of the sort. She then let herself out a few yards "in that case sir" she exclaimed, "I would advise you to start on the exploration of further appartments, this is not a private madhouse."

So much for his lighter side.

In the year 1883, affairs in the Sudan under the government of Egypt had reached a crisis. Unscrupulous tax gatherers and agents of the latter had long been plundering and ill-treating the Arab population with impunity. Driven to desperation, native tribes gathering around the Mahdi, rose on all sides to drive the foreigner out of their country.

Mohamed Ahmed: Born a nobody, left fatherless early in childhood without money or influential friends to help him Ahmed made his way in the world with the aid of exemplary piety, a high level of intelligence and an unshakable faith in his own high destiny. His piety attracted the attention of devout believers ever on the lookout for the Mahdi, the second prophet whose coming would make them freemen again. His intelligence told him when to refrain from striking and when to strike. His faith in himself being absolute readily communicated itself to others, so that hope became certainty and so the shepherds and herdsmen followed him as simple peasants followed Joan of Arc, because they believed that he was God inspired.

Early in 1883, an Egyptian army made up of 10,000 men, a mixed force of native Egyptians, blacks and a small number of European officers, 50,000 camels and an uncounted number of camp followers, under the command of Col. Hicks Pasha, an Anglo-Indian officer, was despatched to crush the Mahdi revolt. In May of that year, O'Donovan, as correspondent of the Daily News was commissioned to attach himself to this expeditionary force. His own intention was not only to chronicle the events of the campaign but also to explore the country and write a book on his experiences. Arriving in Egypt, he crossed the desert from Suakim to Berber pushed on to Khartoum where he joined the Egyptian army.

Early in September, Hicks Pasha moved on from Khartoum

to Omdurman. While his soldiers were of the poorest quality, many of them were survivors of Ahmed Aribi's army who had revolted against Egypt the previous year and had been defeated by a British expeditionary force under Sir Garnet Wolseley and been sent to the Sudan in chains. Internal discord between officers and men much weakened its morale.

The opposing tribesmen on the other hand were fanatically brave and they were well armed. By this time too the Egyptian force was suffering from the climate and lack of provisions. In a desperate despatch on the last day of September, O'Donovan writing from a place 30 miles South West of Duem, reported that the heat was intense and that the camels were daily dying in considerable numbers. Later, another letter from him tells of his uneasiness regarding the water supply . . . "we have halted for the past eight days owing to the uncertainty of the water supply in front. Here we are entirely dependent on surface pools. The water supply is the cause of intense anxiety, the camels are dropping."

After a halt at Duem, the expeditionary army moved across the desert to Rahed. Of evil omen were the flocks of vultures that followed its tracks and Hicks Pasha realised that disaster awaited him unless he struck a quick and decisive blow against the Mahdi. At this time too, O'Donovan's reports to the Daily News became more and more gloomy. From Duem on the 23rd September, he had written a private letter to an Irish journalist friend. It was to be his last communication to the outside world, and it proved prophetic regarding his own fate and that of the expeditionary force. It ran . . . .

"We are 11,000 strong and with no end of artillery and cavalry but the enemy is double that strength and holds very strong positions. After tomorrow we march and six or seven days after we expect to have a sanguinary engagement. All the expeditions which preceded us during the past two years have been defeated with disaster. Let us hope that ours won't share the same fate. I am writing this under circumstances which bring me almost as near death as it is possible to be without being under absolute sentence of execution or in the throes of some deadly malady. However, to die out here with a lance head as big as a shovel through one, will meet my views better than the slow gradual sinking into the grave which is the lot of so many. You must know that here we are 1,500 miles south of Cairo in the midst of a wild almost unexplored country. The Egyptian army with which I am here camped on the banks of the Nile will have but one chance given to them one tremendous pitched battle. We are obliged to march in square with our baggage and water camels, 5,000 in number, in our midst lest the enemy cavalry surprise us."

Just before reaching Rahed, a German non-commissioned

officer, Gustav Klootz who was O'Donovan's servant, foreseeing the probable annihilation of the Egyptian army, deserted to the camp of the Mahdi. Brought before the latter who questioned him regarding the enemy army, Klootz replied that it lacked courage and harmony. It was an entirely truthful picture that Klootz gave of the state of the Egyptian army which, at the end of October, marched towards El Obeid, where the great mass of the Sudanese were mobilised. From the 1st November the former were subject to almost continuous fire at close range from a hidden enemy. On that date, a guide in the Mahdi's pay led Hick's force to a rocky defile without water where they were held in ambush by the Sudanese armed with rifles and artillery.

The death agony of the Egyptian army lasted 3 days.

On the first day of fighting most of the camp followers perished. On the second, unable to use their guns, the main body of the army struggling to advance in cumbersome squares, the officers distracted and the men without will to fight, was systematically cut to pieces by the Arab warriors who knowing that victory was certain, fought with discretion and killed without haste. On the third day, their cartridges being exhausted, Hicks Pasha ordered a bayonet charge with himself at its head. It was unflinchingly met by the tribesmen who swept against it with a cry of God and His Prophet. The Egyptian army worn out by thirst and fatigue offered little resistance and was annihilated almost to a man.

As has been stated, O'Donovan foresaw the end shortly before when he reported that "The Mahdi is mustering all his men and I am greatly afraid we shall get the worst of it when not a man will escape," and again in the diary of a slain European officer was found the entry "I spoke to Mr. O'Donovan today and asked him where he thought we should be eight days hence, 'In Kingdom come,' was his reply."

A legend grew up among his friends at home that O'Donovan escaped the holocaust. He is supposed to have started from Hicks Pasha's camp to enter the Arab lines in the Sudan and interview the Mahdi and was never seen again. Sir Garnet Wolsey had a great admiration for him and told the Daily News people that he made exhaustive efforts to trace him by examining Arab prisoners, but could not get a word of genuine information about him. Opinions varied as to whether he was shot when trying to enter the Mahdi's lines or whether he actually succeeded in joining him and was afterwards killed in battle by the Anglo-Egyptian forces who overthrew the Mahdi's empire. There were many circumstances which seemed to support the latter theory. He spoke Arabic very well and his sympathies at least in his early years were entirely with England's enemies.

His brother William, who knew Edmond probably better

than any other man, believed to the last that he had succeeded in joining the Mahdi and might have been killed fighting the English and he told people laughingly that he would not be surprised if Edmond turned up later as an Arab chief. Authentic evidence however, proved that the legend had no foundation in fact. Klootz, his servant, the deserter to the Mahdi's camp was, after the massacre at El Obeid, moving around the corpse-strewn battlefield and recognised there many of the bodies including that of Hicks Pasha.

He was especially on the watch for that of O'Donovan to whom he was affectionately attached. After a while he observed a leather case in a bush which he recognised as his old master's and in it were his manuscripts, spattered with blood. Searching further he found pieces of his body torn by hyenas and beside them was his bloodstained macintosh. The last entry in the manuscripts read . . . "here I am making notes and writing my papers but who knows who is going to take them home." Klootz brought the manuscripts to the Mahdi's camp and presented them to Fr. Ohrwalder, an Austrian Catholic missionary priest who was a prisoner there. Unfortunately they were mislaid and are lost forever.

When the circumstances of O'Donovan's death were verified, all the great newspapers paid tribute to his outstanding character. In his native country especially, his friends mourned the death of a singularly engaging and distinctive personality. An old Fenian comrade recalling earlier days of friendship wrote in a rhapsody "his was a tall light form, a mobile Celtic face, a laughing eye in whose twinkle were humour, friendship and the love of that early freedom which had urged him onwards until he was elected a white prince amongst the dusky monarchs of Merv. Almost girlish in his gentleness and trustful simplicity, I felt a pang that caused me to reproach Rossa for boasting that he had baptised that tender stripling whom he was proud of as a grand young fellow. To see one so youthful and so delicately formed brought with ourselves under the shadow of the gallows, gave me a pain which I remember to this hour. Edmond O'Donovan was conscious of his danger and was as ready to face it as the manliest of the Fenian force and with all his exquisite fancy and flowing imagination he was practical and particularly scientific."

During the Sudanese campaign, the sympathy of the Irish people was almost entirely with the tribesmen. The most widely read Irish newspaper of the time, United Ireland, reflecting popular opinion expressed its wish for success in their efforts to hunt the whole horde of Egypto-British usurers and taskmasters out of their country and referring to O'Donovan's death it continued: . . . "Woe, however to Ireland that he the Mahdi, had not known that one gallant adventurer in the file

of the Englishmen hated the Saxon with a hatred that not even the Mahdi could surpass. Peace to the ashes of Edmond O'Donovan."

His dying moments must have been consoled by the thought of the ruin which the disaster of El Obeid wrought on English projects in Egypt. Of all the tributes to O'Donovan's character, the most unexpected appeared in a brochure published after his death. It was entitled "The Repeal of The Union Conspiracy" and it contained scathing attacks not only on Parnell and his lieutenants but on the Fenian leaders. While all alike were characterised as assassins, self-seekers etc. the anonymous author goes out of his way to except O'Donovan from his condemnations.

"The most distinguished literary man ever known to be in the ranks of the Fenians was undoubtedly Edmond O'Donovan the well-known Asiatic traveller and writer who was a provincial organiser for the North of England.

"I must pay tribute to the memory of O'Donovan who was the most earnest and sincere believer in the righteousness of the Fenian cause. Far from deriving substances from the funds of the organisation, the large profits which he derived from his book were always placed with a free hand at the disposal of the Brotherhood and before leaving for Egypt he bequeathed all his property in trust for the movement."

All the memories left of him by his friends as well as the facts we know of his colourful career, reveal Edmond O'Donovan as at once a dreamer and a man of action, an enthusiast and a realist and in most ways as typically Irish, and it seems not a little incongruous that the only memorial to one who was a sworn enemy of foreign rule in Ireland is a plaque in St. Paul's Cathedral, in the heart of England's Capital.

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## OLD KILKENNY REVIEW

Articles and notes of Kilkenny interest are always welcome for the Review. The editor would like to have all such material to hand by late summer to expedite publication at an early date in winter.

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