

# ***Thomas Shelly of Callan (1823-1905)***

## ***His Life and Times***

**Joseph Kennedy**

The town of Callan, for its size and population, has produced an impressive list of people who have made a major impression on the world stage: Brother Edmund Ignatius Rice, founder of the Irish Christian Brothers; James Hoban, architect of the White House in Washington D.C.; the Candler family, ancestors of the founders of the giant Coca Cola Company, among many others. The subject of this article, however, made no such impression on that same wider sphere. His involvements and achievements were confined almost totally to the place where he was born, reared, lived and died. He is one of the forgotten local activists who devoted a considerable portion of their time and energy ensuring that their town and its people got their fair share of whatever was to be had in 19th century Ireland. A successful business man, patriot, and politician in his time, he is now chiefly remembered as a local historian whose writings saved from oblivion much of Callan's past.

Thomas Shelly died on 28th August 1905 at the age of 82. An enormous crowd thronged the town to attend his funeral two days later. Callan on that day was not just burying one of its prominent citizens but the very person who had been its heart and soul for almost 60 years. It was burying its benign father figure. His obituary, published in the *Kilkenny Journal* newspaper on 2nd September 1905 summarises the status of the man admirably: "In the passing away at an advanced age of Mister Thomas Shelly, Callan, one of the oldest links that bound County Kilkenny of the past with that of the present has been snapped asunder. For 60 years the deceased gentleman had been so closely identified with everything in the life of the second town in our County that he might be almost said to form part of it, and to be himself the pillar of its social and commercial existence." It goes on to say that the name Shelly was regarded as "synonomous with that of Callan." Yet, unlike those who achieved fame and fortune, or recognition, outside their native town, Tom

Shelly, in a very short time, was to be almost forgotten, and his many achievements allowed to sink into oblivion. Indeed it is difficult to find more than the minutest trace of his existence in what still remains in the folk memory of 19th century Callan. Nor, indeed, has anything other than his obituary ever been written about him, except for the occasional reference here and there.

He was born in Green Street, Callan, on 17th December 1823, the fifth of eight children (5 sons and 3 daughters) born to Patrick Shelly and his wife, Brigid Tierney. His father, Patrick, is described in Pigot's Directory for the year 1824 as a 'Linen and woollen draper of Green Street'.<sup>1</sup> His mother, Brigid Tierney, was a relative of Edmund Rice's maternal ancestors, the Tierneys, but exactly what the relationship was is now difficult to determine.

The name Shelly, according to the noted genealogist, Edward MacLysaght, is a variant of the old Gaelic name O'Sealbhaigh — meaning 'having possession'.<sup>2</sup> The name is that of a Corca Laoidhe (i.e. South Cork) sept which spread in the course of time to other parts of Munster and further afield. When, precisely, the Shellys came to the Callan area is unclear. No Shelly, for instance, appears in the Hearth Money Rolls for the year 1664. Nor does the name crop up in the only extant record book of Callan's local court covering the years 1727-1756.<sup>3</sup> Our subject's father, Patrick, was born in 1781 in the townland of Ahenure, about two miles south-west of Callan town, son of a small tenant farmer whose name was also Thomas (1756-1818). The Shellys lived where Mr. Ned Kennedy lives today. Their house was a single storied thatched cottage, typical of several occupied in the area up to this day. At a young age Patrick was apprenticed into the drapery trade in Callan. He got on quite well and was able to establish his own business about the year 1806. In his lifetime he became one of Callan's leading citizens, and was involved in all the major movements of his time. He is described as being 'very articulate and patriotic'.<sup>4</sup>

Tom grew up in the Callan so well documented by the noted diarist Humphrey O'Sullivan.<sup>5</sup> It was an impoverished place with a population of some 6,000 people in the civil parish (three times the present population). There were some

1,000 people unemployed, and consequently hunger and disease were endemic. According to the English traveller Inglis, who visited the area in 1834, Callan was 'the very impersonation of Irish poverty and wretchedness'. However, it was also a time of some progress with a rising catholic middle class beginning to assert itself. The Shellys were very much part of this resurgence.

At the age of seven, with his brothers John and Michael and sister Ellen, Tom attended a school run by Humphrey O'Sullivan. They remained on as students until the school closed a year later. His subsequent schooling is not recorded, but he got a very good education. It is quite possible that he attended an academy run by the Augustinian Friars in Mill Street, for he obtained a level of education that certainly could not have been provided by the local private schools of the time.

Having finished his schooling, Tom most probably went to work in his father's shop where he learned all about the world of commerce. He also began to involve himself in the life of the community, and in the seething political world that was pre-famine Ireland. It was the time of the Repeal of the Union agitation, featuring the monster meetings organised by Daniel O'Connell. His father, Patrick, addressed the first Repeal meeting held in Kilkenny in 1841. From that time on, Tom himself became a political activist.

With the failure of O'Connell's agitation for repeal, Tom, like so many young idealists, joined the Young Ireland movement and supported the idea of armed insurrection to obtain freedom for the Irish people if all other methods failed. The writer of his obituary neatly sums up this period in his life as follows:- "Burning with indignation at the many humiliating sufferings under which the country groaned at the hands of a grossly unfair and intolerable system of government, Thomas Shelly, as a young man, threw himself into the '48 movement and was closely associated with the leaders, Lucas, Duffy, and Smith-O'Brien. So obnoxious did he make himself that he had to take to a hiding place to avoid arrest until the abandonment of the movement led to a relaxation on the part of the Government". Where he hid while 'on the run' is unfortunately not revealed.

During the famine, the Shellys were to the forefront in the local organisation established to bring some measure of relief to the victims of that most horrendous episode in the history of Ireland. As a result of their impoverished state, the tenant farmers were unable to pay their rents to the landlords and so faced eviction and starvation. In an attempt to assist the tenants the Tenants' Protection Society of Callan was established in October 1849 by two dynamic Callan curates, Fathers O'Shea and O'Keeffe.<sup>6</sup> A strong committee was formed and in the vanguard were Tom and his father, Patrick. They were very active from beginning to end. Tom was secretary in 1855 and received a letter from Fr. O'Shea in March of that year thanking him for all the help the Society had given both him and Fr. O'Keeffe. During the course of this letter Fr. O'Shea refers to Tom as his favourite cousin.



Portrait of Thomas Shelly c. 1870 by Aug. Nielson of Kilkenny

Not all of Tom's activities at this time involved the serious side of life. He found plenty of time for far more enjoyable matters, for later that same year, 1855, he married Ellen Norris of Ballywalter, Callan, and settled down to family life. They raised a fine family of nine children (5 sons and four daughters), many of whom distinguished themselves in later life. Tom, in spite of all his public commitments, was always first and foremost a family man.

Not long after the birth of his first child, Tom's father, Patrick, passed to his eternal reward in February, 1857. On his death the prosperous businesses he had built up were divided between his three surviving sons. John took over the shop now owned by the Lennon family, Green Street. It is described in Slater's Directory for 1846 as being a 'Grocers, Spirit Dealers, and Tallow Chandlers'. John wrote the first biography of Br. Rice, published in 1863.<sup>7</sup> Patrick acquired the large dry goods and millinery store in Bridge Street. Tom himself took over the drapery shop in Green Street and built it into one of the most prosperous and extensive establishments in Callan. (After his death in 1905 it passed to his son Michael, who in turn on his death in 1931 passed it on to his son Tom and daughter Mary. It is now owned by the O'Brien family).

Tom's political and social activities did not end or diminish because of his new family and business commitments. Indeed if anything they expanded. The 1860s and '70s were a particularly dramatic time for him. In 1864 the three Shelly brothers were mainly instrumental in getting the Irish Christian Brothers' School erected in Callan. They established a fund to build the school which eventually realised the considerable sum of £700. Out of this total the Shellys contributed £30 of their own money and raised £83 from various subscribers as far away as Liverpool and Glasgow.

In the early and middle '60s the Fenian movement became a major force in Ireland. Although not a Fenian himself, Tom is described as having been 'very much in the trust of the leadership', and many of its secrets were confided in him. The leading Fenians in Callan were John Locke, Edward Coyne and a young man who worked in Tom's shop named

James Cody. (The Fenian leader John Devoy testifies that there were more Fenians in Callan than in Kilkenny city). The movement eventually posed such a threat that the British government moved against it in September 1865, arrested its leaders and suppressed its paper, the *Irish People*. On the 29th of that same month a large force of police arrived in Callan to reinforce the local constabulary. Searches and arrests followed. At 3 a.m. the following morning Tom's house was surrounded and thoroughly searched. A trunk full of incriminating papers was taken away. They belonged to James Cody, who was arrested and lodged in jail. Tom was not arrested. He did not let down the three jailed Callan Fenians, Locke, Coyne and Cody and was primarily instrumental in obtaining their release and in getting them away to America.

He was an uncompromising nationalist. After the failure of the Fenian rising in 1867 he threw himself into the Home Rule movement and became an ardent supporter of Parnell. Until the end of his days he believed Ireland would never have peace or prosperity until it had its own government. As an instance of his political integrity, he refused the position of Commissioner of the Peace on four separate occasions from four different British administrations.

His involvement in all the successive national movements was only natural for he was ever to the forefront in the political life of the town, and his involvement in national causes was an extension of this. His activities were confined to his own area and there is no evidence to suggest that they ever extended beyond it. He was the archetypical local leader without whose backing no national movement could hope to succeed.

After the abolition of Callan's corporation in 1841 the town was governed by town commissioners. Their function consisted of maintaining and cleaning the streets and footpaths, providing public lighting and a water supply, collecting rubbish and regulating the fairs and markets. From the 1870s they became involved in the erection of public housing schemes which replaced the dreadful hovels in which so many of the town's inhabitants lived. Tom was a town commissioner for over 40 years. He was chairman from

1874 to 1879, and again in 1890. He was also chairman pro-tem at meetings, time and time again, and his actual attendance at meetings was prodigious for he rarely missed one. Not only that, but he was behind virtually every important decision taken by the commissioners, and was always the one to make sure these decisions were implemented. The extent of his dedication and commitment can be clearly seen in the town commissioners' minute book that covered the period 1871-1900.<sup>8</sup> He was, in effect, the uncrowned mayor of Callan for all of 40 years or more.

His popularity with the electorate was never in doubt, and he was returned as a commissioner at the end of each three year term unopposed. The ultimate test of his popularity came on 16th January 1899, when he was 76 years of age. On that date the first election under the Local Government Act of 1898 was held in Callan. This Act significantly widened the number of people eligible to vote, and for the first time gave the vote to women. The details of this historic election are well worth recording, and are as follows:<sup>9</sup>

There were 16 candidates for 9 seats.

309 voters were registered — 240 men and 69 women.

254 electors cast their votes — 208 men and 46 women.  
(an 82% poll),

There were 80 illiterate voters. 8 votes were spoiled.

Tom Shelly topped the poll getting 155 votes.

His interest in all local affairs continued into the new century and he remained active up to a few months before his death in 1905.

Tom Shelly, patriot, politician, successful business man, devoted husband and father, was also a noted scholar. He was, according to his obituary “a passionate lover of literature in all its many branches, and possessed a fine collection of books, many of them very rare and valuable editions”. What became of this book collection I do not know. However, it was for his achievements in the area of local history that he has made his greatest mark in the scholarly sense.

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While growing up in his father's shop in Green Street he could not help being attracted to old St. Mary's church across the street. Here was Callan's most venerable ruin with its elegant architecture and numerous medieval and



other monuments. The church and its monuments interested him all his life and he was the first to make a thorough study of them. Having acquired a working knowledge of Latin and heraldry he transcribed all the monumental inscriptions, and then researched and wrote a detailed account of the individuals and families to whom the monuments were erected. It was a major achievement containing in essence much of Callan's history from the foundation of the town in 1207 up to the early 19th century. He published the fruits of his labours in the *Ossory Archaeological Journal* of 1874 under the title 'transcripts from the monuments in Callan church',<sup>10</sup> In addition to St. Mary's the article also contains data on the monuments in Newtown church.

In a successive article<sup>11</sup> he wrote an account of the churches of Callan both ancient and modern, and compiled a list of the parish priests from medieval times down to the year 1854. The final portion of that article consists of a brief account of the town's corporation, and a list of its sovereigns (mayors) from 1699 to 1841. Had he done nothing else for his native place but publish these articles, he would deserve a hallowed place in the annals of Callan, primarily because he researched from several manuscript sources no longer known to exist, such as the 18th century minute books of the corporation and many of the towns charters and other documents of an official nature. His articles are a mine of local historical information and without them, present day researchers would be seriously disadvantaged.

A 49 page manuscript of Callan's history was discovered as late as 1986 by Mrs. Wilson of Ballyragget.<sup>12</sup> She very kindly returned it to the town. On examination it was established that it was in Tom Shelly's own hand. There were two postage stamps attached to it. Canon John Brennan, P.P., a noted philatelist, informs us that they were issued in 1870. This gave us a fair indication as to when the actual manuscript was compiled. It was written in the clear, direct style of Shelly, a style not unlike that of Kilkenny's greatest historian, Canon William Carrigan, leading some of us to the locally patriotic conclusion that the great canon in many ways imitated Tom's style. (There is some basis for this assumption because Carrigan spent six months in Callan in

the year 1883 with his brother, Patrick, a local curate. He became a close friend of Tom's during his stay, a friendship that lasted to the end of Tom's life. This is an interesting little matter that some scholar should investigate in the future, and establish whether or not our local boast has any real basis in fact). At any rate the discovery of this manuscript and its return to Callan, will forever place our local historians in debt to Mrs. Wilson.



Photo of Shelly's Drapery, Green Street, Callan, 1978 by Ignatius O'Neill.

There are many other interests of Tom Shelly's not possible to describe in detail in an article such as this. For example, he was Callan's only practical archaeologist by virtue of the fact that he had actual excavations carried out on the town's Norman moat. He also had a reputation as an artist, but like the contents of his library, none of his pictures survives as far as I can ascertain. Like all Irish people, he was fascinated by that perennial subject the weather, and wrote about it in his scrap book. He mentions, for example, that "on the night of January the 5th (1894) . . . the temp. went down to 10 deg. fahr. . . . and on the following night 2 degs. lower . . ." These very low temperatures caused "a sheet of ice (to form) across the river below the bridge'. Many of the other interests are to be found in the pages of this scrap

book. They reveal a person fascinated by the whole panorama of life.

What type of man was he? He is described as being 'austere, kind, intelligent and cultivated'. He was also cheerful and witty, with a good sense of humour, as may be deduced from his writings, however the only tradition regarding his character that I have been able to discover describes him as being 'a decent man'. This last virtue without a doubt was very much appreciated by the poor of 19th century Callan and the fact that he is best remembered for his generosity speaks volumes that no words of mine can improve upon. One man told me, for instance, that he provided a coffin for his grandmother when she died because they were too poor to afford one. Like all of us he undoubtedly had his faults and failings, but whatever they were they have long ago faded into the mists of time, and even if I wanted to, it would be impossible at this date to discover what they were. Hopefully I have been able to reconstruct accurately the details of his life and by so doing preserve for posterity the memory of one of Callan's noblest sons.

## REFERENCES

1. Pigot's *Directory* (1824), p. 137.
2. *The Surnames of Ireland*, by Edward MacLysaght, p. 268.
3. The original is preserved in the library of the Royal Society of Antiquaries, 63 Merrion Square, Dublin 2. A microfilm of the manuscript is in the National Library of Ireland. Reference Number p. 938.
4. Thomas Shelly's Obituary in *Kilkenny Journal* 2nd of September, 1905.
5. *Cin Lae Amhlaobh Ui Shuilleabhain*. A short version of the original diaries was published in 1976 in a paperback edition. T. De Bhaldraithe translator.
6. Fr. Thomas O'Shea and the Callan Tenant Protection Society, by Margaret M. Phelan, *Old Kilkenny Review* 1980, pp. 49-58.
7. *Edmund Ignatius Rice and the Christian Brothers. A Compilation*, by John Shelly. Printed by Coyle Brothers, Rose Inn Street, Kilkenny, 1863.
8. This Minute Book is privately owned. A microfilm is in the

- Public Record Office, Four Courts, Dublin 7.
9. Contained in above Minute Book.
  10. Transcripts from The Monuments in Callan Church by Mr. Thomas Shelly, *Ossory Archaeological Journal*, 1874, pp. 274-294
  11. The Churches of Callan, Ancient and Modern, by Mr. Thomas Shelly, *Ossory Archaeological Journal* 1874, pp. 294-306.
  12. Several copies have been made of this manuscript. A copy is in the Public Record Office, Four Courts, Dublin 7, and there is another in the National Library, Kildare Street, Dublin 2. Local copies may be obtained by contacting Callan Heritage Society.
  13. This scrap-book is in private ownership and is in excellent state of preservation. Other manuscripts probably exist and hopefully they will come to light. Tradition has it that he wrote an actual history of Callan, but that it was never published.

## Kilkenny Bird's Eye Marble

Ted Nevill

Mantlepieces in the black Kilkenny marble are very common in the older houses for the reason that they were made over a period of almost 200 years (1730-1920) by the Kilkenny family of Colles (Nevill 1986).

In hue or pattern the Kilkenny marble may be plain black, or black with many white fossil shells which are seen cut in section, or again the stone may be the Bird's Eye Marble. Incidentally the geological age of the Kilkenny Marble is close to 300 million years.

Bird's Eye Marble is so called because it encloses stem-sections of 'sea-lilies' (crinoided) which resembles birds eyes (Jackdaws' especially) in appearance and are very easily recognised. The complete stem is like a tall pile of small coins. Each bird's eye (coin or washer) is made of a white ring (like a small washer) with at its centre a black dot or disc, and many 'bird's eyes' may be seen on each slab of a mantlepiece.

### REFERENCE

Nevill, T. 1986 Kilkenny Black Marble: *Old Kilkenny Review*.