LETTERS OF JOHN MARTIN, THE IRISH POLITICAL PRISONER.

By

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(Communicated by Dr. W. L. Crowther.)

(Read 10th October, 1932.)

Some months ago there was handed to me from St. George's Rectory, Hobart, a small packet, on which was written "Old Tasmanian Letters from Dr. C. . . . ." It was naturally supposed they were connected with the early history of the church (St. George's, Battery Point, Hobart), in which I was much interested. I looked forward eagerly to reading them, thinking they might have to do with the dispute between Sir John Franklin and Captain Montagu over building the tower. They might contain a note from Lady Franklin when she sent her five guineas towards a peal of bells, which, alas, never materialised. They might even be part of that very willing theological controversy between Bishop Nixon and Dr. Henry Phibbs Fry!

A glance at the first letter dispelled all my hopes; the address was one from which no governor or his lady, or bishop or his clergy, was likely to write. It was a Dublin jail, and the writer was John Martin, the editor of the "Irish Felon" newspaper, who for sedition and conspiracy had been sentenced to transportation for 10 years! The letters, with the exception of one from his mother to his brother David, were all in his handwriting.

The only early connection St. George's had with Dublin was through Dr. Fry, who was a graduate of Trinity College, at which institution John Martin had begun his never completed medical course; and from the dates these two might have been there a short time together. They were certainly contemporaries in Tasmania, and it was from Dr. Fry's parish, and through one of his churchwardens, that John Mitchell, one of Martin's fellow prisoners, made his escape.

But these suppositions proved to be groundless, and a recent letter in reply to mine, from the Rev. T. Quigley, now of Felixstowe, England, states these letters were sent to him by Dr. Crossley, of Bulli, New South Wales, some years ago, who found them in his mother's house in the north of Ireland, and who wished them to be given to some society or library in Tasmania on account of their historical value.

Some people hold the opinion that any letters relating to the convict system in Tasmania are better burnt than preserved. It was a very natural and reasonable opinion for the colonists of 1852, who had fought hard and made sacrifices in order that that system should cease, but now, after the lapse of 80 years, when the sting has died out of the question, and we are able to view it more dispassionately and impersonally, in the interests of historical accuracy it is wiser that such letters should be placed in the care of some reputable society where they can be studied by those really interested. Furthermore, the period covered by these letters—1843 to 1854—is one of the most stirring and interesting in Tasmanian history, and now that the writers of fiction are getting busy with it, it is good that any records which help to produce such a well-documented novel as the Sydney one, " A House Is Built," should be preserved. A recent Tasmanian novel centres round a church and the building of a bridge. No doubt visitors to Richmond will inspect the church there, and mentally reconstruct the opening scenes of the book, quite unconscious of the fact that it was not till some 10 years after the bridge was built that the church was erected. They will then look at the present rectory, and imagine the unhappy chaplain of the story flitting through its rooms, quite unconscious also that Richmond had no resident chaplain when the bridge was built, and that the present rectory was formerly the residence of the medical superintendent!

In such a way do legends arise.

There are doubtless many letters, and even diaries, of historical interest and value stored away and half-forgotten in Tasmanian homes.

If, as is quite natural, the owners would not care to give the originals to the Royal Society, why not give copies, and start an " Historical Letter Book "? Only last year, I believe, the diary of a former chaplain at Norfolk Island was lost when the owner's house was destroyed by fire and he himself died. A copy of such, lodged with the Royal Society, would have at least mitigated the loss.

In 1848 John Martin was a member of the Young Ireland party; a party which repudiated O'Connell's scheme for the repeal of the Union by constitutional methods, and advocated, chiefly through their newspapers, separation by force of arms.

Smith O'Brien attempted to raise the peasantry in a revolt, which failed, and he was condemned to death for treason, which sentence was afterwards commuted to transportation. John Mitchell, of the too-fluent pen, called on his countrymen to rise in " The United Irishmen," and when he was transported for sedition John Martin carried on the work in the " Irish Felon " newspaper, till he too was convicted and sentenced to transportation. The other additional members of the party who were sent to Tasmania were Meagher, McManus, O'Donohoe, and O'Doherty. Their story in Tasmania has been sympathetically told by the Rev. J. H. Cullen in " Young Ireland in Exile," and Fenton in his history has devoted a whole chapter to them, making large use of extracts from Mitchell's " Jail Journal " and letters.

John Martin came from Northern Ireland, from County Down; he was a Presbyterian, and on that account was nicknamed " John Knox " by his fellow prisoner and travelling companion, O'Doherty.

One would like to know the history of the change of an Ulsterman into a red revolutionary. He went to Dublin, to Trinity College, to study for medicine, and in the packet there is a letter to his young brother David, written, I conclude, by his mother on a visit there. She was evidently a cultured woman, for she regrets the heavy rain stopped them from going to see Trinity College library. She jestingly tells the boy she has seen the waxworks, with his favourite historical character, Henry VIII., and Elizabeth, whom he doesn't like, and later on she says he ought to be reading history with his elder sister Mary in the evenings. He must have been quite a small boy then, for she hopes that he washes and combs himself every day. It seems this mother must have died, as apparently had the father, for there is no mention of her at all in John Martin's letters; and yet this little glimpse of his Dublin student days gives a picture of happy companionship and affectionate care between mother and son.

Perhaps she was anxious for his future even then, and made this, her first, visit to Dublin for his sake, where she tells the young boy at home she has seen more people than she ever saw before, and things which will be better told by the fireside than compressed into letters.

What may be taken to be the first of John Martin's letters, for the year is not given, is written from Mount-street, Dublin, and concerns the result of an election for which the League was unprepared.

The second is headed "Richmond, Birdewill, Dublin, June 3rd, 1849," where he and his companions are awaiting sentence, and tells how news has arrived of Sir Lucius O'Brien's interview with Sir George Grey, the Colonial Under-Secretary, when he was informed that his brother, Smith O'Brien's, sentence had been commuted to transportation for life, and also that the convict ship "Mount Stewart Elphinstone" would call at Dublin that week to convey prisoners to Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land. They had not expected to be sent so far away, and thought it more likely that they would joint Mitchell at Cape Town. As we know from the "Jail Journal," the colonists at this place refused to receive transported convicts, and Mitchell was sent on to Tasmania.

The next, a longer letter, written three weeks later, is dated from "On board the Mount Stewart Elphinstone, Cork Harbour," where the pilot had just come aboard, and he and O'Doherty were setting out for Sydney without their four other companions in exile, as they hoped.

He says:

> "We will have quite a roomy, snug cabin for reading in. The people on board are all quite civil with us. Even the poor doctor, though a ridiculous, troublesome martinet, is not desirous to annoy us, I think, but the contrary. . . . .
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> "Our voyage is turning out expensive enough—£20 each at least—though we have all resolved to be at no expense for it. It was not on account of the quality of the food we would have as rations that we preferred making a bargain with the captain for our mess. The food that the common convicts get would be good enough I'm sure. But how could we manage to cook it, &c. Besides, we will be more civilly treated by the captain and other officials on account

> of our arrangement with him. And any comfort that a little money can procure us, I have no objection to take from officials."

This paragraph is quoted to show under what comfortable conditions these two prisoners travelled, for it is often supposed they shared the hardships of those he terms "common convicts," probably transported for far less serious crimes than "sedition" and "conspiracy."

Martin's strong family affection is evidenced in this farewell letter. He hopes that David will marry, and marry young, and when writing later from Bothwell, on more than one occasion he gives the same advice—"Don't leave it too late"—"find some good girl"—"and children of course." He concludes:

> "In bidding you farewell for a few years, my dear brother, I have but to beg that you will think hopefully of me; that you will continue to make honour and principle the guide of your conduct, that you will never forget that *God sees us.* I trust to see you again, and that before many years, and to live many happy years in free intercourse with you and all the members of my family. Surely no man ever received more affectionate care and support from all the members of his family than I have from all mine. God bless you, my dear brother."

It is disappointing to find the next two letters missing: one describing the voyage, posted at Sydney, and one written to his sister Mary soon after his arrival at Bothwell, both of which he speaks of in a letter to David dated from there on 16th November, 1849.

In it he describes the township, the valley of the Clyde, the surrounding country, his lodgings at £1 a week, and his landlady, Mrs. Harris, "the friend of your friend Sairy Gamp." Though he has only been in the country a fortnight he has already found the point where the police districts of Bothwell and Oatlands touch, and at a two-storey red brick house on the Jordan, "Pleasant Place," has met O'Doherty, his companion on the voyage from Ireland.

It is somewhat surprising how these Irishmen took so easily to cross-country riding through the bush, and, as the "Jail Journal" shows, their excursions to Lake Sorell were among the happiest incidents recorded. Later on, when John Mitchell was sent to Bothwell and joined by his wife and children, the whole company moved to Nant Cottage. Mitchell

was supposed to be farming, but Martin records that he was not taking it seriously, and in the last year had put in no crops. Exciting plans for various escapes, stolen visits to other districts, news from Ireland and America, left little time for hum-drum agricultural work.

It was difficult for Martin to earn a living in a country township, and yet these men had to be sent to inland districts to lessen the possibility of escape. So he took up the only thing he could, the teaching of some of the landowners' sons, and did not find it very congenial. And here he met another strange schoolmaster, in charge of the State school in the township—"Mr. Frost, the Chartist leader, sentenced to be hanged for treason in 1839, and whose sentence was commuted to transportation. I have seen him twice," he says, "and had plenty of talk with him. He has met remarkably harsh treatment compared with ours, and yet it seems that he was always very submissive and respectful to the English Government people. It is only within three years (I think) that he has got a ticket-of-leave, and previously he was under probation like any common convict, and working on the Government road in chains. I don't understand all this. He is a stout, hale man of 63. All he begs for is a conditional pardon which would enable him to go to any place except the United Kingdom. He would go to America, and Mrs. Frost would meet him there. Is it not a striking proof of the English Government's consciousness of their iniquity against my country that they treat us sturdy Irish rebels so leniently?"

This passage is quoted in full because some people believe the Irish prisoners were very harshly treated, a belief which may have its origin in the exaggerated language of Mitchell. He frequently speaks of "our dungeon," meaning either the wide, pleasant country round Bothwell, or the whole island of Tasmania, and even before he has seen it refers to Hobart as "that metropolis of murderers, and university of burglary, and all subterhuman abomination."

In comparing Frost's sentence and treatment with theirs, one has to remember that the Chartist risings were attended with bloodshed and great destruction of property, while though Young Ireland called upon the peasantry to rise and free their country from the British yoke, the peasantry very wisely went quietly home. Also one is compelled to consider the fact that some of the Young Irelanders had influential relations in the English Parliament.

For David's information Martin gives current prices at the time of the gold rush to the mainland:

> "Draught or freight from here to Hobart Town for six or seven months is £6 to £7 a ton, the distance being 46 miles.
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> "Draught colts £50 to £100 each, oats 16s. a bushel, potatoes £20 a ton.
>
> "The decent man, my neighbour, grumbles because he has to pay 20s. per hundred for his sheep-shearing instead of 9s. or 10s., and £40 to his shepherd instead of £18 or £20."

References to friends and relations at home, to political events in Ireland, America, and descriptions of Tasmanian scenery make up the rest of the letters.

The whole of the Irish incident in Tasmania was over in little more than five years; four of the prisoners had escaped, the rest were pardoned.

In Fenton's history, after mentioning Martin's pardon in 1854, we read: "He then went home—but to die." This is what one might call exaggerated language, as John Martin did not die till 1875, 21 years after his release, and in that time he did a good deal besides dying.

I have heard it stated, but cannot vouch for the truth, that this chapter on the Irish prisoners in Fenton's history was not written by Fenton himself, but by some one more in touch with them.

The heading of the last letter in the packet is a far cry from the township of Bothwell; it is Paris (France), 29th April, 1859, the letter of a sick and weary man, vexed with the haphazard ways of his sister's family, and "still more angry at myself for being angry."

Paris is humming with excitement, the Italian war of liberation is on, the French army is in marching order, and Martin stands outside the Tuilleries in the crowd that watches the regiments march past the Emperor. He hears the shout of "Vive L'Empereur! Vive L'Italie!" and joins in the cry from his heart.

"Vive L'Empereur!"—a strange salute from Young Ireland to the man who in the end wavered and sent his French soldiers to break Garibaldi's army at Mentana, and so delayed the trumph of United Italy!

And last of all there is an epilogue to these letters, in the form of a passport of 1867 for travelling on the Continent "for Mr. David Martin, British subject, accompanied by his wife." David had evidently listened at last to his brother's oft-repeated advice, made "the sound investment," and found "the good woman"!