

Victorian Society in Merriion Square

PROFESSOR EOIN O'BRIEN

When on 1 January, 1801, the Act of Union dissolved the Irish parliament in Dublin, Westminster becoming the seat of government for both countries. The aristocracy and nobility departed for London leaving behind a social vacuum that was filled by the clergymen of the established church, the wealthy merchants and the professional classes.

The Georgian aristocracy left behind them a city that had few rivals for architectural eminence. The Gardiner family on the north side had developed Henrietta and Denmark Streets, Gardiner's Mall, Great Charles Street, Gardiner Street and Mountjoy Square, and on the south side architectural harmony was achieved by the Fitzwilliams.

The development of Merriion Square began in 1760 and was completed in 1790, together with Upper and Lower Fitzwilliam Streets. Fitzwilliam Square and Place were not completed until the 1840s. The houses of these great squares and streets were ideally suited to the professions, with the legal profession favouring the northside squares of Rutland and Mountjoy and the medical profession settling initially in Merriion Square and later in Fitzwilliam Street and Square. Medical personalities on the Square included: Dominic Corrigan at number 4; William Stokes at number 5; William Wilde across the street in the corner house at number 1; Sir Philip Crampton's house at number 14 was a landmark with its flowering pear-tree planted in the year of Waterloo. Indeed, so popular did Merriion Square become with the medical profession that it was known to irreverent Dubliners as "The Valley of the Shadow of Death."

The houses of Merriion Square provided ample accommodation for medical practice, family life and, of course, entertainment. The staff occupied the basement and coach houses at the rear; the hall floor contained the waiting room, the doctor's consulting room and a dining-room in reasonable proximity to the basement kitchens. On the second floor the drawing-room ran the width of the house and extended through folding doors

to the rear. From the front windows there was the beautiful view of a wooded quadrangular park. Here the conversaciones, the after dinner gatherings, and tea parties were held. The two upper floors contained the bedrooms and nurseries.

At these gatherings in Merriion Square the aristocracy, and at times royalty itself, rubbed shoulders with the lawyers, and the doctors, the clergy and the academics, the writers, the artists and the officers of the army. The atmosphere on such occasions was the quintessence of Victorianism: "The Landseer pictures, the plethoric side board, the anti-macassared armchairs whose knobbled headpieces and unaccommodating arms forbade the impropriety of rest, the red chenille tablecovers, and heavy velvet curtains, all conspired, with dim

melancholy dusk to defeat the light from the globed bat wing gas-jets in their efforts to dispel a little of the too respectable gloom."

In the home of William Stokes at number 5 Merriion Square among the doctors were artists, writers, actors and actresses who found in their host a warm and sensitive cultural appreciation of their achievements and endeavours. Indeed if we are to take Pentland Mahaffy



at his word, Stokes had been a considerable influence on at least one artist, his "very dear friend," George Petrie: "The remarkable researches of George Petrie built on the antiquities and the music of Ireland, would never have seen the light, but for the constant pressure and encouragement of William Stokes, who though he was neither a musician nor an artist, felt the beauty of artistic work with a keenness and tenderness beyond the depth of ordinary man."

Stokes also influenced the celebrated and very beautiful actress Helen Faucit, who often visited the houses of Merrion Square when playing in Dublin which she did frequently until her marriage in 1851 to Theodore Martin the biographer of the Prince Consort, of whom it was said he "valued his prize less highly after it was captured than before."

Perhaps Stokes was taking things a little far when seeing Helen he declared, "Woman the repository of all that is pure, and delicate, and moral in this life." Both had a passion for Shakespeare. She was acclaimed as a Shakesperian actress and had written a book on Shakespeare's female characters and Stokes was a member of a little Shakespeare Society in Dublin, which numbered among its members Mahaffy, Samuel and Lady Ferguson and Professor Dowden.

We can take it that Stokes's nature was such that his feelings for Miss Faucit were platonic, but not so those of two other guests to his home, William Wilde and the artist Frederick Burton. Wilde had not yet met his future wife, Speranza, and his pursuit of Miss Faucit would have been ardent, whereas his rival Burton, who remained a bachelor all his life, was of a more reticent disposition. This pair vied for the favours of the actress from the early forties, when she was appearing in *Antigone* at the Old Theatre Royal. "At every appearance she was greeted with enthusiasm, as she came on stage attired in classical garb embroidered in crimson and gold, the music of Mendelssohn blending with the silvery inflexions of her voice." Her suitors were a contrasting sight, each in a box on either side of the stage. Burton was extremely handsome and charming of manner, whereas Wilde was small, attractive, persistent and full of personality. The actress, however, it seems became involved with neither, other than to allow Burton to paint her.

Sir Frederick Burton linked together many famous personalities of the mid-Victorian era with an iridescent thread of delicate watercolour. He gained renown as a portrait painter, escaping the demands of a patronising society by retreating to the west of Ireland, or to the

forests of Franconia to paint moving studies of peasantry.

The Victorian doctors appreciated the relevance of the artist in society, and patronised the arts. Eccentric Clarence Mangan was well known to the doctors of Merrion Square, as indeed he was to most Dubliners, a fact that is hardly surprising if we heed Wakeman's description of the poet, "Poor Clarence Mangan with his queer poems and jokes, and odd little cloak, and wonderful hat, which exactly resembled the tiles that broomstick-riding witches are usually represented with, his flax-coloured wig, and false teeth, and the inevitable bottle of tar-water, from which he would sip and sip all day, except when asleep, with a plain deal desk for a pillow . . ."



William Stokes



Sir Dominic Corrigan

Carlyle who visited Ireland in 1849 has left an interesting pen-picture of Merrion Square society. Stokes and he did not take to each other. "In Merrion Square Dr Stokes is: clever, energetic, but squinting, rather fierce, sinister-looking man, - at least some dash of that susceptible in him: to there, nevertheless, to-morrow evening..."

Charles Lever often visited the Stokes and Wildes although he was not impressed by Merrion Square company, complaining of stupid dinner parties where men of physic and law talked an uninteresting and unintelligible jargon. Witty and irascible, his company was irresistible. Of him Trollope said, "Of all the men I have encountered, he was the sheerest fund of drollery." Lever had qualified in medicine with difficulty, but he found the practice of medicine not only arduous, but insufficient to afford his gambling debts. He was forced to turn, very successfully, to literature. When Lord Derby bestowed upon him the Counsellship of Trieste he did so with the trite observation, "Here is £600 a year for doing nothing, and you are just the man to do it."

In Dublin he feasted not only his body with the best of food and wine, but also his mind in wit and story, and to end on a festive note, Lever carried away this little tale to feature, no

doubt, in a future novel: "My friend, Dr Beatty, with whom I had a bottle of Carlowitz last evening told me not a bad thing. Christmas Day was celebrated at his house by a plum-pudding of vast circumference; but the doctor missed the whiskey which he had given out to rob it of dyspeptic terrors. That night he taxed his cook with the omission, who naively replied, 'The puddin' and I tossed to see which should have the whiskey, and the puddin' lost.'"

Professor Eoin O'Brien, Beaumont Hospital, Dublin