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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is on the life of Sir Stephen Edward De Vere. In some ways, he might be viewed as a peripheral figure in nineteenth-century Irish history. Although he did serve as a Member of Parliament for county Limerick in the early 1850s, his political career did not reach the heights of his contemporaries, such as William Monsell, or Thomas Spring Rice. As a literary figure, he was overshadowed by his younger brother Aubrey. However, a study of De Vere's life and activities does throw light on such diverse and important topics of local and international history as emigration during the Famine, the national school system, the implementation of justice in nineteenth-century Ireland and the public lunatic asylum system.

An examination of De Vere's private and public life provides an insight into how members of the elite considered notions of religious and national identity. It allows for a closer examination of the ways in which some members of the Irish elite, who operated under a sense of national identity which was separate from the English, but still British, negotiated with the British State and with the Irish populace.

The late nineteenth-century saw the decline of the elite in Ireland. De Vere's staunch objections to any form of local governance in Ireland on the basis that it would erode what he felt was the legitimate claim to power of his class, provides the context for a study of how this societal change was witnessed in county Limerick.

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Introduction

In recent years, a growing body of work relating to the social and political landscape of nineteenth-century Ireland has been the subject of interesting approaches by scholars, through the prism of education, philanthropy and estate ownership. This work aims to contribute to that growing body of literature by providing an account of the life and activities of Stephen Edward De Vere, a landlord, politician and social commentator, who as of yet, has not been the subject of any comprehensive academic analysis.

The structure of this thesis has been influenced by works such as Ciarán Reilly's study, *Strokestown and the Great Irish Famine*, which provides an in-depth analysis of the effects of the Famine on a specific landed estate and its community. Reilly's approach was influential in that it is focused on a particular region, but it is based on a much larger archive of information than that which was available for this project. The Strokestown Park House archive is one of the largest Irish estate collections in existence, comprising of more than 50,000 items, as such aspects of estate life are dealt with in greater detail and to a wider extent, than within this work. This study and *Strokestown and the Great Irish Famine* are similar in that both are based on a chronological and thematic approach. Both works consider the relevant estates in pre-Famine Ireland, discuss various relief efforts, assisted emigration and the altered state of Irish society in the post-Famine period.

The focus of scholarly attention in recent years on the lives and experiences of members of the Irish landed class has resulted in the publication of case studies of estates and landowners and has seen the utilisation of previously underused sources, such as those relating to land agencies.¹ Desmond Norton's work, *Landlords, tenants, Famine: the business of an Irish land agency in the 1840s*, draws upon an archive in private ownership of the Stewart and Kincaid land agents. The letters in the archive relate mainly to the estates managed by the firm during the 1840s, and provide an insight into life in the Irish countryside during the period. There is evidence of some humane and caring landlords, the activities of middlemen, suffering tenants and emigration in a large number of locations, including Sligo and

¹ Desmond Norton, *Landlords, tenants, Famine: the business of an Irish land agency in the 1840s* (Dublin, 2006).

Roscommon, Clare and Limerick, Kilkenny, Carlow and Westmeath. This study, will, like Norton's, challenge some of the existing orthodoxies in regard to landlord and tenant relationships and emigration. Norton's study provides a complex and nuanced interpretation of the role of members of the landed class, he also demonstrates that there is still much to be revealed about this pivotal time in Irish history.

Stephen De Vere's life has not been the subject of the same level of scholarly attention as his contemporaries William Monsell and Lord Dunraven, yet, the National Library of Ireland, Trinity College Dublin and Limerick City Archive all hold collections which include his letters and private documents, and in the case of Trinity College, a selection of his diaries. While some of these sources have been previously utilised, most notably in studies relating to the history of emigration and the Irish Famine, there is still great scope for the completion of an original study which examines public events and institutions in tandem with De Vere's private life and experiences.

Kevin McKenna's work "Charity, paternalism and power on the Clonbrock Estates, county Galway, 1834-44", explores the charitable dimension of Robert Dillon, the Third Baron of Clonbrock's paternalism, and examines the role that philanthropy played in strengthening the bond between landlord and tenant. Clonbrock inherited his family's estates of c.27,000 acres in counties Galway, Limerick and Roscommon at the age of eighteen in 1826, and began his stewardship of the estates at a time when, according to David Roberts, a flourishing of paternalistic ideas was about to begin that would last for a further twenty years.² According to Roberts, 'there were three principal sets of duties (among many) that the conscientious paternalist of superior rank felt he must perform: ruling, guiding and helping'.³ De Vere's paternalism has been attributed to his social rank, but also his religious beliefs. The factors which influenced De Vere's world view to the greatest extent, arguably his religious faith and Liberal political ideology, were shaped to a large degree by his family, but also by a number of elite landowners in his district, including Lord Emly and Lord Dunraven, who formed part of his social circle. This group, which was later labelled as the Shannon Estuary Group, were in

² David Roberts, *Paternalism in early Victorian England* (New Jersey, 1979), p.28.

³ Roberts, *Paternalism in early Victorian England*, pp. 4-5.

many ways exceptional with regard to their intellectual pursuits, contributions to the political landscape, and the expression of their social consciousness. This group is also notable as many of its members, including De Vere, converted to Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth-century.⁴ A study of De Vere's life and activities provides a deeper insight into the motivations, concerns and influences of the Liberal elite in nineteenth-century Ireland. This work, through an analysis of De Vere's actions, commentaries and interactions with different sectors of society, explores the social, political and cultural histories of the Irish landlord class and their complex and changing role in both a local and national context.

Stephen De Vere's position as the younger son of a landed family, and the implications that had for the type of education and employment he was destined to pursue, are considered here. Like many men in his position, De Vere acted as a land agent and magistrate.⁵ An examination of Stephen De Vere's life is in some ways also a study of a specific region, namely west Limerick. De Vere was closely connected with the district and its inhabitants throughout his long life (1812-1904). The family seat of the De Veres and his birthplace, Curragh Chase, is just over eleven miles from his final home on Foynes Island. His occupation of these roles was significant in the period 1845-1848, so they will be examined largely in the context of his involvement in different aspects of Famine relief. During the Famine era De Vere demonstrated a great degree of conscientiousness and determination in the execution of these roles. Through his involvement in these positions, he was appointed as an engineer of public works, this experience and his general interaction with the tenants of his family's estate, and those of the surrounding areas, revealed to him the horrors of the Famine, and motivated him to take action in this regard. Like his father, Aubrey, his uncle, Lord Monteagle, and his friend, William Monsell, De Vere viewed emigration, as not quite a panacea, but certainly the most effective means of quickly alleviating widespread distress.⁶ The motivations which lay behind De Vere choosing to reveal the deficits of the system of emigration by travelling in steerage class to Canada is considered in detail, as are the reaction and subsequent impact on passenger legislation produced by the report he produced on his

⁴ Jennifer Ridden, 'Making good citizens: national identity, religion and Liberalism among the Irish elite c.1800-1850', PhD thesis 1998, King's College London, pp 7-12.

⁵ Ciaran Reilly, *The Irish land agent, 1830-60: the case of King's County* (Dublin, 2014), p. 40.

⁶ Matthew Potter, *William Monsell of Tervoe, 1812-1894, Catholic Unionist, Anglo-Irishman* (Dublin, 2009), p. 36.

experiences. De Vere travelled to Canada to explore the system of emigration, but also with the intention of establishing a Catholic colony.⁷ The inspiration for this endeavour is discussed, as are the possible reasons for its failure. The significance of the report De Vere compiled regarding his voyage to Canada is discussed in relation to the impact it had on later passenger legislation.

Various factors have been identified as the motivations which lay behind De Vere's decision to convert to Catholicism. These considerations are discussed as they related directly to De Vere, but also in the broader context of the potential challenges faced by converts during this period, and the reasons that may have drawn people to choose to convert. The impact of his religious faith on his personal relationships, such as the potential difficulty it may have presented in his relationship with his mother, daughter of the Protestant bishop of Limerick are also discussed, as is the role De Vere took in seeking to encourage others, most notably Lord Dunraven, to convert to Catholicism. The potential controversies and social implications of becoming a convert to Catholicism during the 1800s are explored, along with the place of converts within the Catholic Church, with regard partly to difficulties of acceptance, but also to the benefits that converts brought to the Church. De Vere's experience is compared and contrasted with that of a small number of other notable figures during that period. As a Liberal Catholic politician in county Limerick, De Vere found that the Catholic clergy were an important element of his support base. When he was elected as an M.P. for county Limerick in 1854 he stood on a platform of tenant right and defence of his religious faith.⁸ In 1852 De Vere argued that the British Government was using the weakened state of society in the aftermath of the Famine as an opportunity to quash the Catholic Church in Ireland. Once he had become a member of the House of Commons, De Vere pursued a spirited defence of Catholicism, especially in the face of calls to reduce funding to Maynooth seminary. With regard to tenant right, De Vere supported measures which he felt would be beneficial to tenants. He appeared to be genuine in his calls for greater equity and fairness in Irish society, but only in the context of Ireland being part of the Union,

⁷ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 10 September 1849, the De Vere papers, Trinity College Dublin, MS 5053/13.

⁸ Gerard Moran, 'The emergence of popular politics in County Limerick, 1868-1874', in Liam Irwin and Gearóid O Tuathaigh (eds.) *Limerick History and Society: Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County* (Dublin, 2009), p. 458.

and he remained utterly opposed to any claims for Home Rule. These matters are explored in detail in Chapter Five.

As the nineteenth-century progressed, De Vere, and his counterparts, witnessed a decline in their status and authority. Their standing as members of the ascendancy, which had once ensured them an automatic role in the distribution of justice, and a position of power and influence, was slowly eroded. De Vere's position as a governor of the Limerick District Lunatic Asylum and his involvement in various controversies associated with that institution in the late nineteenth-century reveals De Vere's concerns with maintaining his status in society, and protecting the interests of his class in general. The reaction of De Vere and men of a similar class and standing to the growth in power of professional groups such as doctors is examined. De Vere's defence of the grand jury system, and his resolute objection to the implementation of county councils, or any degree of local government in Ireland, is similarly explored in relation to how they affected the position of his class in society, and how he personally responded to growing calls for autonomy from different sectors of Irish society. The reasons that De Vere's views on systems like that of the grand jury came to be so out of line with society as a whole, and the challenges he might have encountered as a Catholic Unionist as the Home Rule movement developed, are also considered.

Sources

Public records such as parliamentary reports, inquiries, committee reports, and records pertaining to the House of Commons, all provided not only a means of investigating both De Vere's views on various issues, but also the local and national context in which he was operating. The detail provided in these sources formed the basis of the study of De Vere's public life, especially with regard to his career as an M.P. However, in order to complete a multi-faceted study of De Vere's life, it was essential to use the information provided in these sources in conjunction with the personal records relating to De Vere. Through a close examination of these records, one can determine to some extent the distance between the public perception of the man, and the private reality.

De Vere wrote a series of diaries between 1847 and 1877. These volumes, held in Trinity College Dublin, proved to be an invaluable source in compiling a

picture of his personal relationships, views on the provision of education, his personal reaction to political developments, interactions with people he employed and lived with, and his general daily activities. For example, they provide a particularly valuable account of his time in Canada in 1847. While De Vere himself was atypical of emigrants during this period, his description of his experience of life below deck in particular allows the reader to gain some insight into what the experiences of an Irish emigrant at that time might have been. He also provides a first person account of the scenes he witnessed at Grosse Ile, in which he discussed the prevalence of disease and treatment of newly arrived immigrants. He recorded his observations regarding the typical cost of lodgings, the types of employment available, and the interactions between recently arrived immigrants and resident Canadians. The diaries also allow us some insight into the anxieties of a Catholic convert regarding the reaction of his family members to his new religious allegiance. The diaries span a number of years, and include references to topics such as his involvement in the Limerick lunatic asylum controversy, the national school system and his efforts to fund the construction of a new church in Foynes. While the diaries compiled by De Vere in general were business-like, brief and practical and dealt with routine topics such as his attendance at petty sessions, they also included accounts of a more personal nature, and on occasion revealed his worries, hopes and concerns. During the 1860s in particular, following his retirement from the House of Commons, De Vere maintained a more detailed diary, and within it he detailed his relationship with William O'Brien, a young man, who was of a working class background, and employed as a railway worker, with whom he forged a significant friendship, and in whom De Vere rested his hopes for a successor.⁹ De Vere was concerned with the prospect of legacy, and aspired to a domestic ideal of family life, but he never married. In O'Brien he hoped that he had found a worthy successor. The relationship was unusual because it crossed social boundaries, and De Vere expressed an intense degree of feeling for O'Brien. The role of diaries as a means of transmitting and shaping the perception of public figures in the nineteenth-century is discussed in this context.

De Vere's correspondence with family members and friends also provides detailed accounts of his views on a number of wide-ranging issues, but most notably

⁹ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 30 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

Famine relief, criticism of the Catholic clergy, and the political issues of the day. His letters to his mother and other family members reveal an aspect of his personality which may not have been apparent otherwise. In these letters he expresses his views on issues such as marriage, poverty and grief. The personal nature of the correspondence adds another layer to the study of his life. The records of his contemporaries such as Lord Emly and Lord Dunraven were also helpful in investigating De Vere's public and private life. His correspondence with these men dealt with issues such as religion and spiritualism, his financial situation, his personal view of the Catholic clergy, the management of the Catholic University and his opinion of the Home Rule movement.

National and international newspapers from the period were essential in forming a comprehensive account of society during De Vere's lifetime. They provided commentary on his activities during the Famine and political career, but also provided a greater context for the society in which De Vere lived. For example, the tension and anger which people felt towards absentee landlords was evident at the funeral of De Vere's relative, the Earl of Limerick, which was the scene of mob violence and chaos.¹⁰ The resulting reports in the *Limerick Chronicle* and the *Limerick Reporter* revealed the strong bias of each source, but in comparing and contrasting them, one can gain some sense of the motivations and opinions of different classes and sectors of society.

One of the most useful and influential secondary sources consulted in completion of this study is Mathew Potter's biography, *William Monsell of Tervoe, 1812-1894, Catholic Unionist, Anglo-Irishman* (2009), in which there emerged many direct parallels between De Vere and Monsell. Both men were close contemporaries, they shared a similar political outlook and paternalistic concern for the lower orders, and they were both converts to Catholicism. While Monsell had a long and productive career in politics, De Vere's came to an abrupt end four years after he entered the House of Commons due to his ill-health. De Vere and Monsell maintained a correspondence with one another until Monsell's death in 1894. While one could conceive that De Vere may have felt a degree of envy in relation to Monsell's political influence, his friendships with Cardinal Newman and Pope Pius IX, and perhaps even his family life, there is little evidence to support this notion. If

¹⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 02 Dec 1845.

De Vere was envious of his friend, he did not reveal it, instead he turned to him as a sounding board for his views in relation to almost all aspects of public administration and moralistic concerns.

Chapter Description

Chapter One

This chapter provides an overview of Stephen De Vere's family background and social influences. It considers the extent to which De Vere's character was shaped by his father, Aubrey and his grandfather, Vere Hunt. The influence of other members of the elite in their district who formed part of De Vere's social circle is also examined. The family estate of Curragh Chase is discussed in relation to its architectural development and function as a centre for employment and social interaction.

Chapter Two

A discussion of De Vere's early adulthood is included in this chapter. The motivations which lay behind his decision to study law are considered, especially in relation to the fact that it was a relatively popular choice for men like De Vere, who were the younger sons of landed families. De Vere acted as a land agent for his father's estate in the period immediately before the Famine. The particulars of this role are examined, mainly in relation to the part he played in Famine relief.

Chapter Three

This chapter addresses De Vere's efforts to investigate the system of emigration to Canada during the Famine. His voyage from London to Quebec in steerage class, and the report he subsequently compiled on the conditions he witnessed is examined, especially in relation to the impact that it had on passenger legislation in 1851. De Vere's interest in establishing a Catholic colony and the experiences he encountered in travelling through Canada are considered.

Chapter Four

Religion was an integral part of De Vere's life. This chapter focuses on the conversion of De Vere and his contemporaries, including William Monsell and Lord Dunraven to Catholicism. The significance of the Shannon Estuary Group in shaping De Vere's religious, moral and political outlook is analysed. The broader context of conversion in the early nineteenth-century is also considered, the influences that led people to embrace the Catholic faith is explored, and the difficulties experienced by some converts is investigated. De Vere's personal expression of faith is examined, as is his public declarations in defence of Catholicism during the Papal aggression crisis.

Chapter Five

In this chapter, a study of De Vere's role in public life is presented. His reaction to the 1848 rebellion led by his friend, William Smith O'Brien, and his general views on Irish society in the post-Famine era are considered. De Vere's election to the House of Commons, his career as an M.P., and his early retirement from that position are discussed. De Vere's public life in a local context is also examined in relation to his views on the national school system, and his role as a governor of the Limerick District Lunatic Asylum.

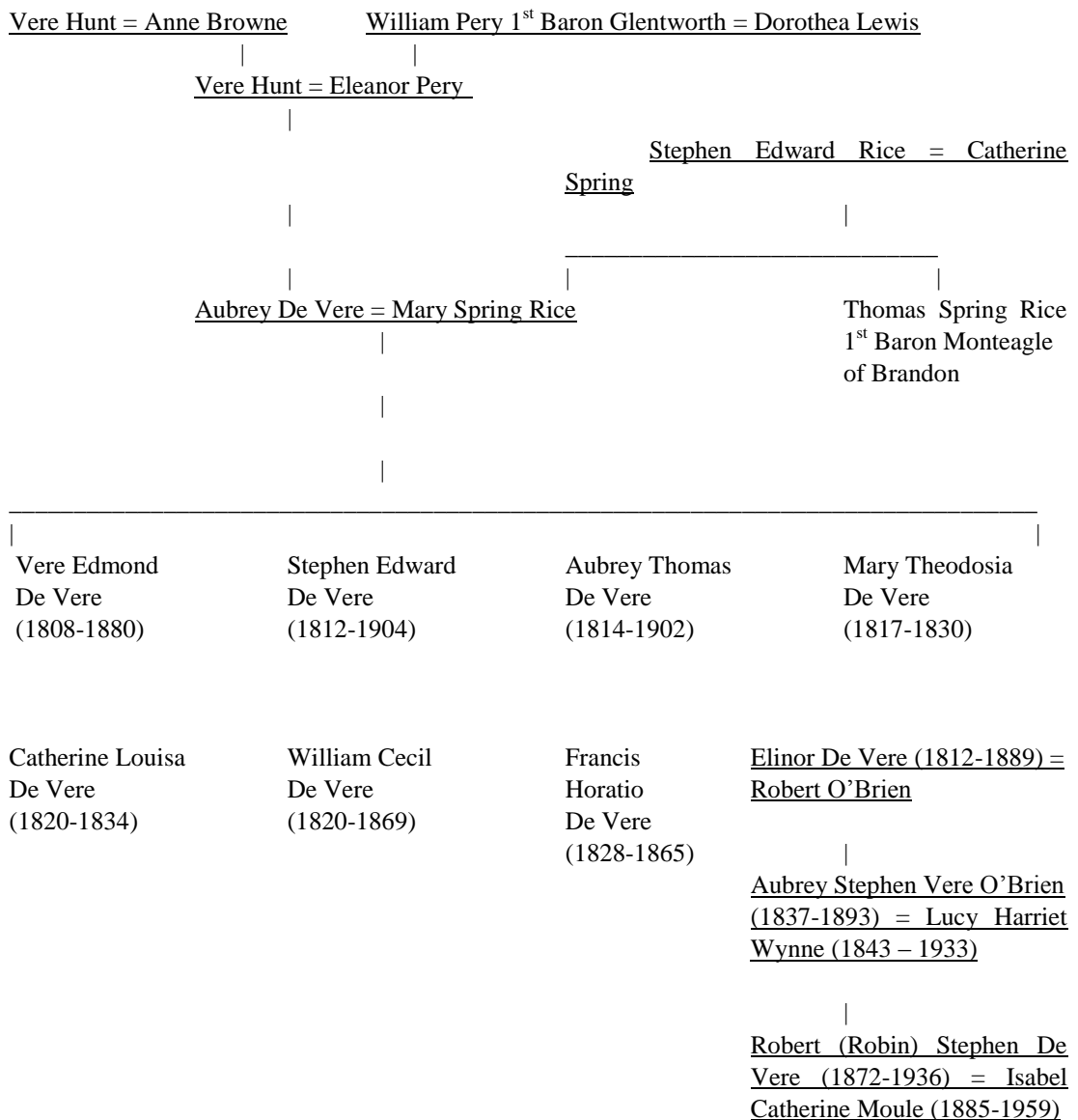
Chapter Six

De Vere's involvement in the administration of justice is examined in this chapter. The function and perception of the grand jury system is discussed, as is De Vere's defence of that system in the face of growing criticism. As the nineteenth-century progressed, the power and authority of the elite faced challenges in the form of the Land League and the Home Rule movement, De Vere's response to these issues is considered.

Chapter Seven

This chapter deals with De Vere's later life. His relationship with William O'Brien, and his concern about his successor, is discussed in detail. De Vere's response to O'Brien's death forms the basis for a study of grief in the Victorian era. De Vere's attitude to aging and his feeling of greater alienation from society is discussed.

Figure 1: De Vere family tree



Chapter 1: Family Influence and Social Connections

The De Vere family in Ireland can trace its origins back to the arrival of Vere Hunt in 1657. As a Cromwellian officer he was granted lands in Curragh, county Limerick, where the family seat was eventually established, and in Glengoole, county Tipperary.¹ In 1784 his descendant, also named Vere Hunt, was created a baronet. The 1st Baronet married Elinor Pery, sister of the Edmund Perry, 1st Earl of Limerick. Their only child, Sir Aubrey, assumed by Royal licence in 1832 the surname of De Vere only, he also altered the name of the family seat from Curragh to Curragh Chase. When he was just nineteen years old, Aubrey married Mary Rice, the eldest daughter of Stephen Edward Rice of Mount Trenchard, county Limerick.² Stephen Edward De Vere, the subject of this thesis, was the third of the five sons born to Sir Aubrey and Lady Mary.

In terms of his cultural identity, De Vere displayed many of the characteristics identified by Jennifer Ridden which relate to some members of the Irish elite who developed a sense of British identity that was not English, that they believed could be held simultaneously with Irish identity.³ The degree to which De Vere's character, actions and belief system were shaped by those he was closest to can be determined to some extent by examining his published comments and private correspondence with family members and with members of the group referred to as the 'Shannon Estuary group' by Matthew Potter. De Vere's father died in 1846, but his literary endeavours may have inspired De Vere to pursue similar artistic pursuits. His mother was active in implementing charitable relief measures for women in their locality during the Famine, perhaps reflecting a philanthropic nature which De Vere also inherited. De Vere's correspondence with his uncle, Thomas Spring Rice, 1st

¹ Mark Bence-Jones, *A Guide to Irish Country Houses* (London, 1988), p. 97. Sir Bernard Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Ireland* (London, 1904), p.147.

Sir Bernard Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic history of the peerage, baronetage and knightage* (London, 1886), pp 1365-1366. W. Nolan, "A public Benefit": Sir Vere Hunt, Bt, and the Town of New Birmingham, Co. Tipperary, 1800-18. 415-453 in H.B. Clarke, J. Prunty, & M. Hennessy, (eds). *Surveying Ireland's Past: Multidisciplinary Essays in Honour of Anngret Simms* (Dublin, 2004).

² 'Vere, Sir Aubrey De, second baronet (1788-1846)', Jessica Hinings, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7562>, [Accessed 20 Aug. 2014].

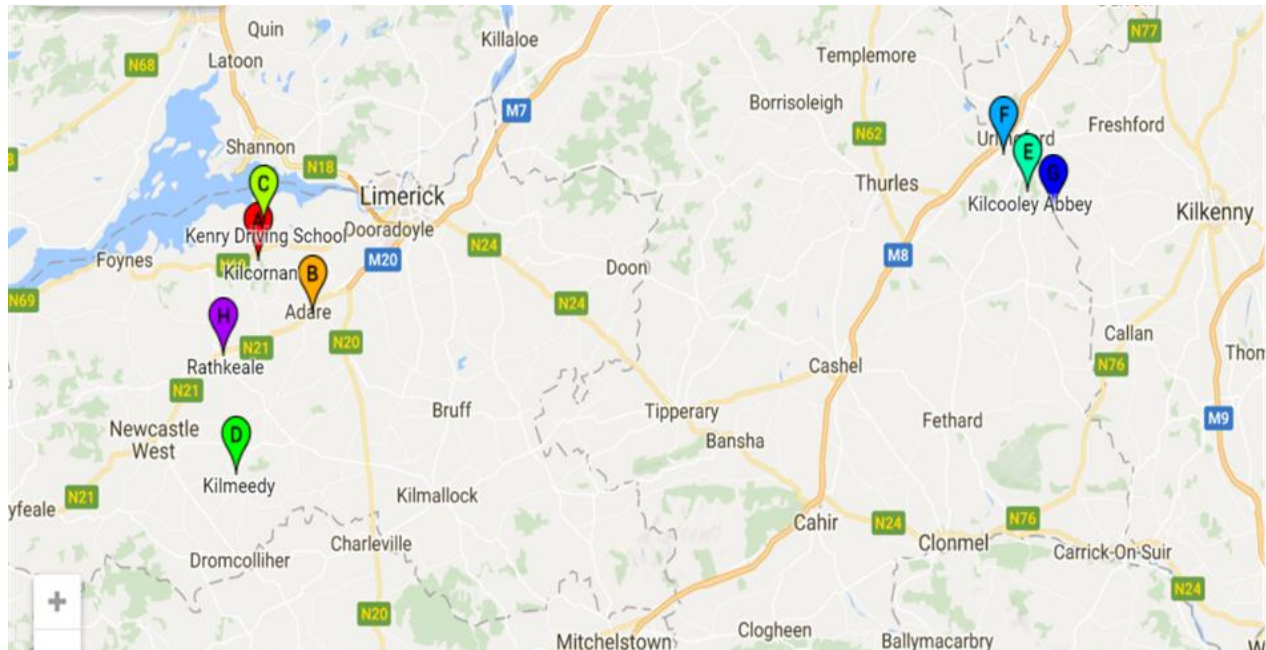
³ Jennifer Ridden, 'Making good citizens: national identity, religion and Liberalism among the Irish elite c.1800-1850', PhD thesis 1998, King's College London, p.3.

Baron Monteagle of Brandon, shows that this uncle played an important role in De Vere's life, acting as a mentor, and serving to influence De Vere's views on a number of political and societal issues. Of De Vere's four brother's, his closest relationships were with Aubrey, with whom he shared an interest in poetry and religion, and Vere, for whom he acted as a land agent in county Limerick. Outside of his immediate family, one of De Vere's most important relationships was with his friend, William Monsell. Born in the same year, the two men corresponded regularly on issues relating to the state of Irish society, religion and education.

The principal residence of the De Vere family, Curragh Chase, was approximately fourteen miles west of Limerick city, between Kilcornan and Askeaton. By the mid-nineteenth century, the De Vere estate was comprised of lands held in the parishes of Kilcornan and Adare, barony of Kenry and Kilmeedy, barony of Connello Upper, county Limerick and in the parishes of Kilcooly and Fennor, barony of Slievardagh, county Tipperary.⁴

⁴ Estate: De Vere, <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=2169> [Accessed 12 Sept. 2014].

Figure 2: Location of De Vere land and property holdings in the counties of Limerick and Tipperary.⁵



A – Kilcornan, B – Adare, C – Kenry, D – Kilmeedy, E – Kilcooley Abbey, F – Fennor, G- Sileverardagh Hills, H – Rathkeale.

Possession of land at this time provided wealth, but also power and authority. It was widely believed that possession of property conferred rights on landlords over their tenants. In the case of Lord Courtown, who stated in 1840 that ‘it cannot be supposed that any landlord will quietly offer himself to be stripped of the fair and legitimate influence which property ... confers upon him’, it is clear that these rights were carefully guarded.⁶ Although De Vere did not make any such direct statement with regard to the influence of landlords, he was a vocal defender of bodies such as the grand jury, bodies which were able to exert considerable power over society, and were dominated by members of the landed elite. The history of the Irish landlord class, in terms of its social interactions, economic influence, culture and politics, has been the focus of academic research in recent decades, as scholars seek to gain an understanding of the complex and changing role of the elite in local, national and international contexts. Some of the topics related to the landed elite and identified by scholars as areas worthy of historical research – and pertinent to this chapter – are

⁵ (Google Maps, 2016) De Vere estate and holdings.
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1ZHbjzaioryc87ojs45oMnLOT7qU> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2016].

⁶ K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland, 1832-1885* (Oxford, 1984), p. 116.

social class, material culture, the administrative role of the country house in the landed estate, and the lives of those employed in the ‘Big House’ and on the demesne.⁷

Vere Hunt

The term ‘parish gentry’ has been used by the Stones in their study of the English elite to describe families whose authority was merely local. This is opposed to the ‘great gentry’ for whom a house of minimum size is defined as one with at least fifty units of living space.⁸ The country homes of Irish landlords were traditionally referred to as ‘big houses’ by the wider community. In many localities, homes of the minor gentry constituted the ‘big houses’, and they were designed in such a way as to articulate their residents’ membership of an elite, however localised their authority might be.⁹ Although the De Veres were not the most significant landowners in the Limerick region, their wealth and holdings were still substantial: by the 1870s the De Vere estate was comprised of over 4,000 acres in county Limerick, whereas in the case of the De Vere’s neighbour, Lord Monteagle, his estate in county Limerick amounted to 6,445 acres and his county Kerry estate to over 2,000 acres in the 1870s.¹⁰

Despite their many differences, there were some similarities and common characteristics between the three generations of the De Vere family discussed in this chapter. Most notably, the perception that they were ‘improving’ landlords. De Vere’s grandfather, Vere Hunt, left behind a diary which shows him to have been a man who enjoyed life and appreciated good food, drink and company. The diaries of both Hunt and De Vere contain accounts of their official duties, financial affairs and political interests, as well as more personal matters relating to their friends and families. Hunt’s sense of humour and enthusiasm for fine living is evident in his writings, while De Vere’s account is more indicative of a man with a reflective, serious and pious nature, but it also shows him to be compassionate and considerate

⁷ Patrick Cosgrove, Terence Dooley and Karol Mullaney-Dingnam, *Aspects of Irish Aristocratic Life Essays on the FitzGeralds and Carton House* (Dublin, 2014) p.7.

⁸ Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An open elite? England, 1540-1880* (Oxford, 1984), p. 180.

⁹ Andrew Tierney, ‘Architecture of gentility in nineteenth-century Ireland’, in Ciaran O’Neill (ed.) *Irish elites in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2013), p. 31

¹⁰ Parliamentary papers. ‘Return of owners of land of one acre and upwards, in the several counties in Ireland’. HC 1876, LXXX; <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=1977>, [Accessed 12 Feb. 2014].

of others. Unlike his grandson, who was heavily involved in public service and interested in issues surrounding emigration, religion and education, Hunt engaged in duelling, managed a touring theatrical company, and founded at least one newspaper.¹¹ In contrast, religion played a particularly important part in Stephen De Vere's life, and following his conversion in 1845, he was for the remainder of his life a devout Catholic. He dined with priests on occasion, Bishop Butler was a guest in Curragh Chase and he corresponded with Bishop O'Dwyer. However, there is evidence in his private correspondence that he viewed priests with some suspicion.¹² Vere Hunt had been a supporter of Catholic emancipation, but was generally hostile towards priests, yet he, too, counted some priests among his friends, notably Fr Meighan of Glengoose.¹³ While it may be too great a leap to suggest that Stephen De Vere's attitude towards members of the Catholic clergy was directly influenced by his grandfather, it is an interesting parallel.

The correspondence between Vere and Elinor, his wife, especially in the early years of their marriage, indicates the existence of a mutual affection, but their relationship was not without difficulties.¹⁴ In 1793 Elinor assured her husband that despite all his faults, she loved him, and hoped that in the future they would be very happy together.¹⁵ This could be taken to indicate that their circumstances as they stood at that time were not conducive to the existence of a happy relationship, but Elinor hoped that would change in the future. Hunt has been described as 'a man of strong character, heavy drinking, roistering and running into debt'.¹⁶ In one letter Elinor berated her husband for the management of his financial affairs, and stated that she was 'a pauper living in the county of my brother'.¹⁷ In public office, the two men had much in common. Hunt was appointed as high sheriff of county Limerick in

¹¹ Melosina Lenox-Conyngham, *Diaries of Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), p.128.

¹² Joan Wynne Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase* (Cork, 1983), p. 27, *Limerick Reporter*, 15 September 1852, Thomas J. Morrissey, *Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer of Limerick, 1842-1917*, (Dublin, 2003) p.72.

¹³ Lenox-Conyngham, *Diaries of Ireland*, p.128.

¹⁴ Hunt married Elinor, daughter of Lord Glentworth, the Protestant Bishop of Limerick, in 1784. John Burke Esq., *A General and Heraldic dictionary of the peerage and baronetage of the British Empire*, fourth edition, volume 1. (London, 1832), 351–352.

¹⁵ Elinor De Vere to Sir Vere Hunt, 10 July 1793, De Vere papers, P22 (21). Limerick Archive, Limerick.

¹⁶ Wynn Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase*, p.7.

¹⁷ Elinor De Vere to Sir Vere Hunt, 21 Nov. 1810, De Vere Papers, P 22, (34), Limerick Archive, Limerick.

1784¹⁸, a position which his grandson also held in 1870, indicative perhaps of the closed nature of political appointments at that time. Hunt was also commissioned to raise two levies in succession at the opening of the French wars. However, he experienced immense difficulties in securing payment from the Government for his military activities, which added to his already fraught financial situation. He was elected to the Irish Parliament in 1797 for the Borough of Askeaton. This borough was later disenfranchised by the Act of Union. Hunt voted in favour of the union and was promised compensation for the loss of his seat. After prolonged political haggling, he was eventually appointed as weigh-master of Cork, at a sinecure of £600 per annum.

Hunt's tone in his letters to Elinor, especially in the early years of their marriage was occasionally tender, especially in relation to their son, he replied to Elinor's request for money by telling her to draw on him for cash to pay her bills and 'do not flint yourself for I would perish if I thought you and my darling Aubrey were to want any comfort'.¹⁹ While Vere Hunt's intelligence and capabilities were widely acknowledged, his financial difficulties were such that he was forced to spend most of 1803 in the Debtors' Prison on Fleet Street.²⁰ His purchase of Lundy Island, off the coast of Devon, was one of his best known financial gambles. Reflecting on his purchase of the island, Aubrey the younger stated: 'my grandfather always gave the sagest advice to a friend, but generally acted himself on a whim.'²¹ Hunt was interested in Lundy Island as there were no taxes or tithes to be paid on it. He purchased the island from John Cleveland in 1802 for £5,270. Hunt planted on the island a small, self-contained colony from his own estate and instituted his own coinage and divorce laws. Those who settled on Lundy Island had great difficulty in developing a productive agricultural sector and the colony was not a success. It was a struggle to generate any revenue from the endeavour during Hunt's lifetime or by future generations of the family. As Elinor put it, Lundy Island had 'been productive of nothing but vexation.'²² Hunt tried, unsuccessfully, to sell the island to the British Government as a base for troops. It eventually passed to De Vere's father, who also

¹⁸ John Burke, *A General and Heraldic Dictionary of the Peerage and Baronetage of the British Empire* (Volume 1, H. Colburn, 1833), p. 351.

¹⁹ Sir Vere Hunt to Elinor De Vere, 24 January, 1802, Limerick Archive, Limerick.

²⁰ Wynn Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase*, p.12.

²¹ Aubrey De Vere, *Recollections of Aubrey De Vere* (London, 1897), p.7.

²² Elinor De Vere to Sir Vere Hunt, 21 November, 1810, De Vere papers, P 22 (36), Limerick Archive.

had immense difficulty in attempting to secure any profit from the property. The island was sold prior to De Vere's appointment as agent. It was purchased by William Hudson Heaven in 1834 for 9,400 guineas. Stephen De Vere's interest in establishing a small, self-contained Catholic colony in Canada in the 1840s, is perhaps somewhat reminiscent of his grandfather's earlier efforts to form a new community.

Elinor did not appear to eschew social conventions to the same extent as her husband. In 1807, their son Aubrey, and Mary, the daughter of Stephen Edward Spring Rice, were engaged.²³ Soon after the engagement was announced, Elinor, clearly aware of Hunt's tendency to act on a whim and neglect to consider the consequences of his actions, wrote to him, and urged her husband to ensure that he either meet with Mary's father in Dublin or write to him to expedite a marriage settlement. She implored him to 'not neglect doing one or the other' as 'God knows in a business of this nature, a seeming neglect, would have a very disagreeable appearance.'²⁴ In March of the same year, a letter from Rice to De Vere stated his intention to settle a fortune of £7000 upon his daughter.²⁵

It is perhaps due in part to Hunt's behaviour that De Vere's grandmother developed what Aubrey the younger described as an 'authoritative' air. But he also stated that she was affectionate, and revered by her grandchildren. With regard to their grandfather, he recalled that they cared less for him, and he was regularly absent from Curragh Chase.²⁶ A superficial study of Stephen De Vere's life and activities may lead one to presume that he was atypical of members of the landlord class, and thus, perhaps influenced to some degree by his grandfather. Both men had a strong sense of individualism, they did not bow to social conventions, and were willing to forge their own paths. De Vere is most widely remembered for disguising himself as a typical emigrant, and travelling in steerage class to Canada in 1847, in order to draw attention to the plight of emigrants. While this action was recognised as being motivated by humane concerns, it was also seen as an extraordinary undertaking for a man of his class. De Vere also supported tenant right in parliament,

²³ Hinings, 'Vere, Sir Aubrey De', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7562>, [Accessed 01 September 2011].

²⁴ Elinor De Vere to Vere Hunt, 5 Feb. 1805, De Vere papers, Limerick Archive, Limerick. P 22 (33).

²⁵ Stephen Edward Spring Rice to Vere Hunt, 31 March 1807, De Vere papers, Limerick Archive, Limerick. P 22 (114).

²⁶ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 6.

converted to the Catholic religion, and called for the state to play a role in preserving the Irish language in the 1860s. But in many other respects, De Vere was emblematic of his social class, and the influence of his father Aubrey is evident. Aubrey's more conformist nature may have been shaped in part by his education at Harrow, where he was educated alongside contemporaries such as Robert Peel.²⁷ De Vere, like Aubrey, believed that part of his function in society was to play a paternalistic role, especially in relation to the labouring poor. From some of his writings, the image emerges of a person who wished to be viewed as a man of the people, yet, when he felt that his inherent authority and social standing was challenged, he responded strongly and swiftly.

Aubrey De Vere

An acquaintance of Aubrey De Vere noted his impression of him after an encounter in 1799. A Mr Dawes described how after a considerable pause in the conversation, Aubrey announced his intention 'to become the most learned man of his time.'²⁸ On 15 March 1832, by Royal Licence he assumed by letters patent, the surname and arms of De Vere only. Aubrey eventually became a poet and author but did not publish much of his work until after his thirtieth birthday. He earned considerable praise for his sonnets and for the drama, *Mary Tudor*, which was published posthumously.²⁹ Stephen De Vere was travelling through Canada at the time of the publication of his father's work but was sent a copy, and described it as 'most valuable gift' he had received – though whether because of its literary worth or his affection for his father is impossible to say.³⁰

Due, perhaps, to the precariousness of family continuity as a result of high infant and child mortality rates during the nineteenth century – only one of De Vere's sisters survived to adulthood – the various remaining family members appeared to form close relationships with one another. Aubrey and his wife, Mary Rice, had eight children, the second eldest being Stephen Edward De Vere. Vere Edmond de Vere, the eldest sibling, married Mary Lucy, daughter of Rowland Standish Esquire: they had no children. De Vere's two younger brothers joined the armed forces, reflecting

²⁷ M. G. Daughlish and P. K. Stephenson, *The Harrow School Register*, Third Edition (London, 1911).

²⁸ Mr. Dawes to Mr. O'Dwyer, 25 Mar. 1799, De Vere Papers, Limerick Archive, Limerick. P22 (94).

²⁹ Aubrey De Vere, *Mary Tudor, an historical drama: the lamentation of Ireland and other poems* (London, 1847).

³⁰ De Vere, diary entry, dated 2 Oct. 1847. De Vere Papers, TCD, MS 5061.

Cannadine's assessment that 'War was the occupation of the nobility and gentry'.³¹ William, born on 20 April 1823 became a captain in the Royal Navy. Francis Horatio (Horace) was born on 12 October 1828 and served as a major in the British army. On 4 November 1856, he married Anne-Celestine, youngest daughter and eventual heiress of James Hardiman Burke, esquire of the St.Cleran's estate in County Galway.³² De Vere's younger sister, Mary Theodisa, died by drowning in the river Shannon near the Mount Trenchard estate when she was twelve, while Catherine Louisa died of a fever in 1834.³³ A fever also spread through the household in 1831, and this event induced Aubrey De Vere to re-draft his will. At that time he decided that the ten thousand pounds settlement for his younger children was inadequate, and directed that a 'sufficient sum' should be appropriated out of his personal property, thereby providing fifteen thousand pounds to be divided between his younger children. The will shows that this sense of closeness extended beyond the immediate family, since for his 'dear cousin, Anne Hunt' he provided thirty pounds to be paid in half-yearly instalments.³⁴ Both families remained close after Aubrey's death. When Anne Hunt's son, John, ran into financial difficulties and was at risk of losing his farm, De Vere noted in his diary that he decided to immediately provide him with the (not over-extravagant) sum of £50, which he had intended to bequeath him in his will.³⁵ Neither De Vere nor his younger brother Aubrey married, and the baronetcy became extinct on his death.

The decision of Aubrey De Vere (Senior) to run for election to Parliament in 1820, albeit unsuccessfully, suggests that De Vere grew up in a household that was to some extent politically engaged and aware. De Vere's father was a loyalist, but, like Vere Hunt before him, in favour of Catholic emancipation.³⁶ He was a popular landlord and gained a reputation for being a responsible and enlightened landowner.

³¹ David Cannadine, *The Decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (New Haven, 1990), p. 264.

³² Estate: Burke (St Clearan's), <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=884> [accessed on: 21 May 2012].

³³ Wynn Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase*, pp 3-12; Hinings, 'Vere, Sir Aubrey De', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7562>, [Accessed 01 Sept. 2011].

³⁴ A. De Vere (Senior), draft of will, 1831, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053/09.

³⁵ De Vere, diary entry 15 February 1873, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5070.

³⁶ Wilfrid Phillip Ward, *Aubrey De Vere, a memoir: based on his unpublished diaries and correspondence* (London, 1904), p. 6.

He was certainly interested in improving the system of education in Ireland.³⁷ He was president of the Scientific and Literary Institute which met at Glentworth Street in Limerick. The inaugural meeting was held in 1842, it was described as being attended by ‘all the resident and neighbouring families of distinction – military officers, lawyers, and scientific characters.’³⁸ Stephen and Aubrey De Vere were members, as were Dunraven, Monsell, Lucius O’Brien of Dromoland, Sir Richard Bourke, Archdeacons Keating and Maunsell. De Vere’s father stated that the intention of the institution was to ‘develop talent, and the creation of a healthy appetite for literature and science ... which would impart practical advantage to all classes of the people’.³⁹ Stephen De Vere was also interested in education, as evidenced through his involvement in the national school system and voluntary groups, such as the Catholic Young Men’s Society.⁴⁰ Although he was well regarded as a resident landlord, Aubrey himself, devoted little of his time to the running of his Glengoole property in county Tipperary which was situated just over sixty miles from Curragh Chase. Instead, he concentrated on his literary works and re-building the house at Curragh Chase.

The ‘Big House’ and Eighteenth-Century Expansion

The De Vere estate was, in the typical fashion of the time, centred on the big house, widely regarded as being a symbol of a landowner’s economic strength and social standing in the community. Curragh Chase, like all big houses, served a variety of functions: it was a home, but also the economic nerve centre of the estate, a political gathering place, a social arena and a gathering place for huntsmen and huntswomen.⁴¹ The most attractive site on the estate was usually chosen for the big house and around this was maintained a demesne of untenanted land which, on average, accounted for about ten percent of a landlord’s total landholding.⁴² This was the pattern at Curragh Chase which had many of the typical features of such a demesne, with a home farm which allowed the house to be self-sufficient, a kitchen

³⁷ Hinings, ‘Vere, Sir Aubrey De’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7562, [Accessed 01 Sept. 2011].

³⁸ *Limerick Reporter*, 11 Feb.1842.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ (1868) *Royal Commission on Nature and Extent of Instruction by Institutions in Ireland for Elementary or Primary Education, and Working of System of National Education*, p. 872; *Limerick Reporter*, 16 August 1853.

⁴¹ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland, a study of Irish landed families 1860-1890* (Dublin, 2001), p. 11.

⁴² Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland*, p.7.

garden, ornamental lawns, woodland for the rearing of game, parkland for the grazing of cattle, out-offices for animals, and houses for the use of demesne employees such as gardeners, masons and carpenters.⁴³ The demesne and parkland also provided facilities for shooting and other leisurely outdoor pursuits.⁴⁴

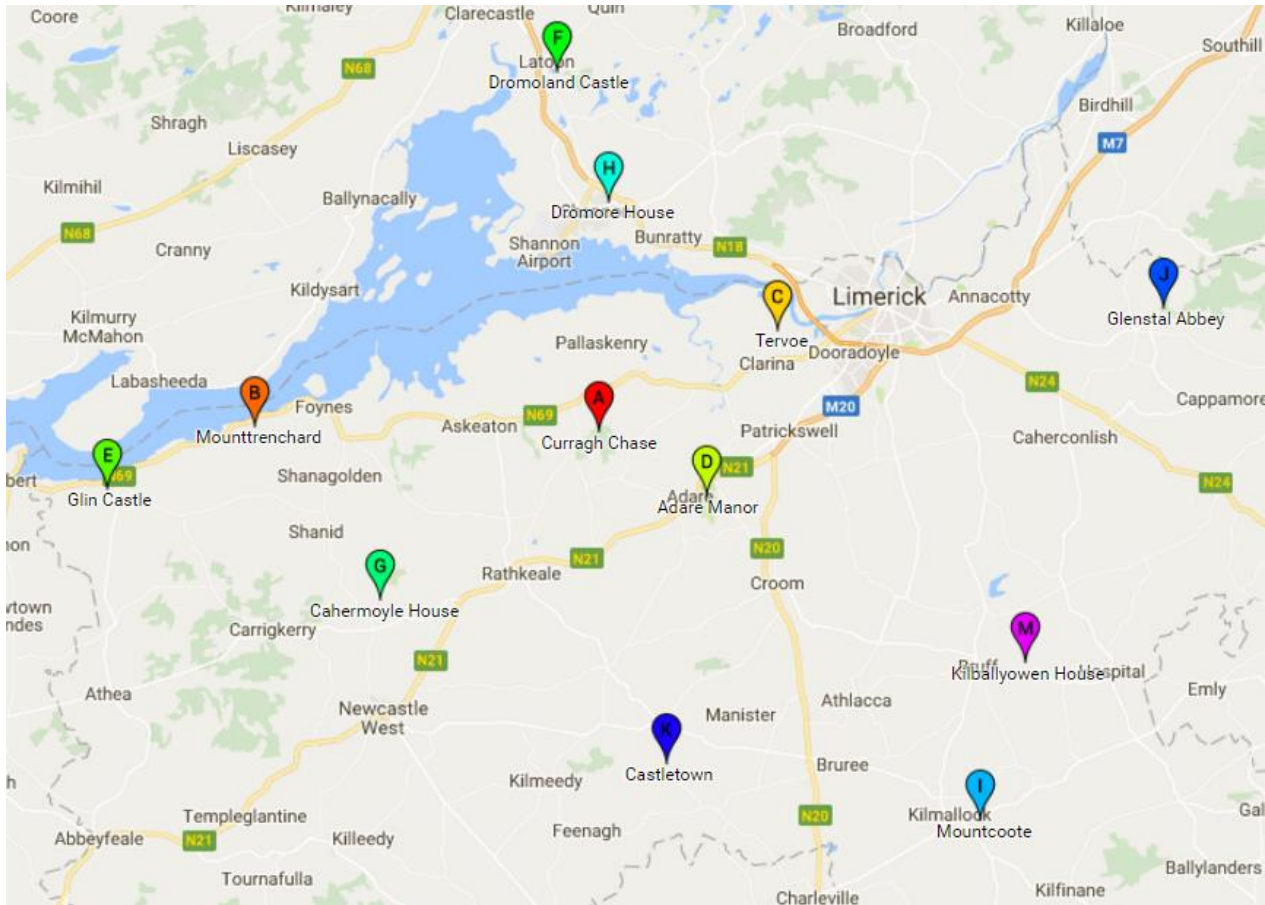


Figure 3. Demesnes of 750 statute acres in 1906.⁴⁵ A – Curragh Chase, B – Mounttrenchard, C –Tervoe, D – Adare Manor, E – Glin Castle, F- Dromoland Castle, G – Cahermoyne House, H – Dromore House, I – Mountcoote, J – Glenstal Abbey, K – Castletown, L – Mountshannon, M – Kilballyowen House.

During much of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth-century, Irish aristocrats, like their English counterparts, directed their energies and money into building or remodelling their houses. For example, in 1830 Sir Robert Gore Booth

⁴³ Wynne Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Matthew Potter; Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh; Liam Irwin, *Limerick: history and society* (Dublin, 2009), pp 550-551.

oversaw the construction of his new residence at Lissadell, which was finally completed in 1833. It has been suggested in a recent study that Gore Booth's reason for commissioning the building of a mansion at Lisadell was to have a residence that aptly reflected the family's greatly improved financial circumstances and social position.⁴⁶ It was often the case for country gentlemen that 'the timing to rebuild or remodel houses was usually underpinned by inheritance or marriage'.⁴⁷ This does not seem to have been the case with the work ordered by Aubrey De Vere (Senior), as it took place quite a number of years after his father's death and his own marriage. Given the extent of the financial difficulties experienced by Vere Hunt, however, it is probable that the renovations ordered by Aubrey De Vere were an indication of improved circumstances. The extension and redevelopment of Curragh Chase was designed by the architect James Pain in 1827, who also worked on other notable residences such as Dromoland Castle in County Clare, and Glin Castle in Limerick.⁴⁸ The reconstruction of Dromoland Castle, ordered by Sir Edward O'Brien, took place during 1826-35. It has been argued that this extensive building work provides evidence of the financial acumen of the Dromoland O'Briens of that era as, following the partial dissipation of the estate in the mid-1700s under the first Sir Edward, the requisite resources must have been accumulated through thrift, industry and beneficial marriages of the 3rd and 4th baronets.⁴⁹ It is possible that a similar rise in prosperity was responsible for the reconstruction of the De Vere's house and for which Pain was paid £709 11s.⁵⁰ Pain was also employed by Sir Matthew Barrington in 1833, but with a view to designing a new building in the Norman revival style. The Barringtons had advanced professionally, achieving success in industry and trading. The family, having settled relatively late in Ireland, in the late seventeenth century, were viewed as business people, rather than as members of the aristocracy, even though Joseph, the head of the family, was a baronet. Creating a family seat

⁴⁶ Gerard Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth and his landed estate in County Sligo, 1814-1876 land, famine, emigration and politics* (Dublin, 2006), p. 11.

⁴⁷ Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley, *Creating paradise: the building of the English country house 1660-1880* (London, 2000), p. 270.

⁴⁸ David Lee & Debbie Jacobs, *James Pain, architect* (Limerick Civic Trust, 2005), p.230. Dictionary of Irish Architects, 1720-1940, <http://www.dia.ie/works/view/55581/building/CO.+LIMERICK%2C+CURRAGH+CHASE> [Accessed on 07 Jan. 2012].

⁴⁹ Ivar O'Brien, *O'Brien of Thomond, the O'Briens in Irish History, 1500-1865* (Chichester, 1986), p.157.

⁵⁰ Dictionary of Irish Architects, 1720-1940, <http://www.dia.ie/works/view/55581/building/CO.+LIMERICK%2C+CURRAGH+CHASE> [Accessed on 07 Jan. 2012].

which had the appearance of antiquity may have been calculated to suggest the patron's more ancient lineage. Pain was already employed by the Dunravens when he was approached by the Barringtons, a fact which may have made his involvement in the project more desirable.⁵¹ Further work was carried out on Curragh Chase in 1828 and completed in 1829, overseen by the architect Amon Henry Wilds.⁵² At that time, Wilds was a fashionable architect, and so carried with him, and his designs, an element of prestige. Wilds is most closely associated with the architecture of Brighton, but he also played a role in designing Pery Square and Limerick.⁵³ Curragh Chase house was severely damaged by fire in 1941, but still retains much of its original fabric, such as its limestone sills and decorative window surrounds. Its imposing size and austere appearance make a notable impression on the surrounding landscape, while the expansive demesne has been said to lend the property an air of monastic seclusion.⁵⁴

In 1880 De Vere compiled an inventory of heirlooms held in Curragh Chase. This inventory gives some indication of the type of lifestyle enjoyed by the family and what the interior of the house looked like during his lifetime. He listed the various types of glasses, dinner services, linen table cloths, gilt candlesticks, white and gold embossed breakfast services, and tea services. He also recorded hundreds of tablecloths, pillowcases and towels. He noted the harp and grand piano, on which his mother and her brother, Lord Monteagle, had performed duets. Big houses often featured elaborate reception rooms, such as the hall and salon in Powerscourt or the picture gallery in Kilkenny Castle, as display areas for collections of fine art.⁵⁵ Engravings attributed to Raphael and Michelangelo were held in Curragh Chase. De Vere also stated that in the lobby hung a painting by Raphael, while the saloon held a large portrait by Rembrandt and an original drawing of *Christ and the Apostles* by Titian hung in the drawing room. The main hall contained a cast of Michelangelo's *Moses* as well as portraits, including one of Stephen De Vere by George Richmond,

⁵¹ Seán O'Reilly, *Irish houses and gardens: from the archives of country life* (London, 1998), p.172.

⁵² Mark Bence-Jones, *Burke's Guide to Country Houses, Volume I, Ireland* (London, 1978), p. 97.

⁵³ *Ibid*; Judith Hill, *The Building of Limerick* (Dublin, 1991), p. 135.

⁵⁴ <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=LC®no=21901128> [Accessed on 12 Feb. 2013]. Sir Thomas Acland, a school friend of De Vere's father, referred to the property's air of monastic seclusion. De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 11.

and bronze busts of various family members.⁵⁶ As well as many other works of art,

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Figure 4. Curragh Chase House.

On some of the larger estates, the living conditions of tenants and labourers benefited from their landlords' interest in building. On the Gore-Booth estate, for instance, the

mud-and-wattle thatch cabins which the majority of people lived in, were replaced by stone-built cottages and slated roofs.⁵⁷ The construction that took place in Curragh Chase was not extended to the improvement of the cottages of labourers or tenants. In his evidence before the Devon Commission, William Flynn, a tenant of De Vere's father in Glengoole, county Tipperary, stated that permanent improvements in the district in which Aubrey De Vere was the landlord were carried out by the tenants themselves.⁵⁸ Flynn stated that the tenants on the land adjoining the property he rented were all tenants at will, who did not hold leases, and 'dreaded' improving their land, as they feared that it would result in eventually being charged a higher rent by the landlord.⁵⁹

Life in Curragh Chase

Aubrey the younger indicated in his writings that aside from such distractions as an annual Christmas holiday visit to Adare Manor, which he described as a 'gay as well as a friendly and hospitable house', the De Vere children had relatively uneventful and peaceful childhoods.⁶⁰ Of this time he wrote, 'No change was desired by us and none came. The winds of early spring waved the long masses of daffodils till they made a confused though rapturous splendour in the lake close by, just as they had done the year before.'⁶¹ The children were educated for some time by a French governess and by later a succession of tutors, but William St. George Pelissier was noted as being the most influential.⁶² He was described as being a classical scholar and his influence may well have been a significant factor in Stephen De Vere's keen interest in ancient Greek and Latin, and the translations of Horace which he produced in the 1880s.⁶³ Unlike their father Aubrey, there is no mention of De Vere or his brothers in the register of students at Harrow. Life for the three eldest De Vere sons was comprised of study in the morning; wandering through the woods which formed part of the demesne, and walking or riding in the afternoon; and often enjoying music performed by their mother, sister, and uncle in the evening.⁶⁴ This

⁵⁷ Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ (1845) *Evidence taken before Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland. Part III.* p. 311.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 15.

⁶¹ Ward, *Aubrey De Vere, A Memoir*, p. 5.

⁶² De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 13.

⁶³ *St James's Gazette*, 05 July 1886.

⁶⁴ De Vere, *Recollections*, pp 12-13.

was not unusual in the households of landed families: music also featured prominently in the lives of the children of Caroline and Charles Fitzgerald, the 4th Duke of Leinster. Their children had a daily educational routine which included music practice, but also involved rising daily at 7.30 a.m. to prepare their lessons and read scripture before breakfast.⁶⁵ Based on the account of their childhood in Aubrey De Vere's memoir, there appears to have been a less rigid approach to their religious instruction.⁶⁶ However, this does not appear to have had any negative effect on the development of De Vere's sense of morality.

⁶⁵ Patrick Cosgrove, Terence Dooley and Karol Mullaney-Dignam, (eds.), *Aspects of Irish Aristocratic Life: Essays on the FitzGeralds and Carton House* (Dublin, 2014) p. 101.

⁶⁶ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 13.

Figure 5. Stephen De Vere.⁶⁷



De Vere, his siblings, and contemporaries such as Monsell and Dunraven, all expressed a clearly defined moral outlook, shaped by a sense of *noblesse oblige* and paternalism. De Vere, in particular, abhorred the use of profane language and the misuse of alcohol. David Spring has argued that by the 1830s many members of the upper class had become less tolerant of vice and debauchery, partly as a result of the evangelical movement.⁶⁸ Wilson stated that in the mid nineteenth-century the theatre and the public house were described as ‘secular temples of debauchery and degeneracy’. Organised sport was offered as a healthier alternative to both pursuits,

⁶⁷ De Vere papers, TCD, 5055 e, photograph 2. Aubrey De Vere (the younger) described an account of the family spending a summer at Richmond Hill, London during his childhood. The family stayed at a house adjoining the fashionable Star and Garter hotel. De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 12.

⁶⁸ David Spring, ‘Aristocracy, Social Structure, and Religion in the Early Victorian Period’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Symposium on Victorian Affairs (1) (Mar., 1963), pp 263-280.

as it taught moral values such as courage and fair play.⁶⁹ Spring noted that at the end of the eighteenth century a number of close connections between the theatre and the aristocracy had developed, and here the involvement of De Vere's grandfather in the theatre is one example.⁷⁰ Vere Hunt had, in fact, conducted a professional travelling theatre company in his youth, and he was noted for his performance in the leading role of Octavio in *The Duenna*.⁷¹ However, this liberal attitude had changed amongst many members of the upper class by the mid-nineteenth century. He gives the example of Emma Parnell, who, in 1827, was so offended by a fellow guest, the seventy-two-year-old Sarah Siddons, providing a private theatrical performance at her father-in-law's home, that she immediately left the room.⁷² It is easy to imagine De Vere's grandfather as belonging among members of the older generation who were somewhat puzzled by a more serious younger generation. Evangelicals like Emma Parnell were zealous in the practice of family prayers, filled their daily conversation with religious discourse and regularly attended church. They also refused to watch private theatricals or attend balls. However, despite Stephen De Vere's undoubted piety (which will be discussed in Chapter Four), he did not appear to be so extreme in his behaviour, and as he grew older, during his twenties and thirties, he began to attend more social events, especially with neighbouring aristocratic families, most particularly the Dunravens of nearby Adare, who regularly hosted opulent balls.⁷³ For members of the landlord class, wealth and social standing went hand in hand with a leisured lifestyle. Elizabeth Bowen wrote that big houses 'were planned for spacious living – for hospitality above all... The idea that begot them was a purely social one'.⁷⁴ For the elite, socialising at this time often served as a venue for discussing the political, certainly the De Veres had an obvious interest in politics, and during his career as an M.P., De Vere depended upon the support of

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Love Game: A History of Tennis, from Victorian Pastime to Global Phenomenon* (Chicago, 2016), p. 32.

⁷⁰ Some noblemen like the Earl of Derby married actresses; George IV was said to have found the company of actors to be highly congenial; and the playwright Sheridan was a friend of King George, as well as a Member of Parliament and an intimate of the Devonshire House set. Spring, 'Aristocracy, Social Structure, and Religion in the Early Victorian Period', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 6, No. 3, Symposium on Victorian Affairs (1) (Mar., 1963), pp 263-280.

⁷¹ William Smith Clark, 'The Limerick stage 1736-1800', in *The Old Limerick Journal*, Vol. 9, Winter 1981.

⁷² Spring, 'Aristocracy, Social Structure, and Religion in the Early Victorian Period', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Symposium on Victorian Affairs (1) (Mar., 1963), pp 263-280.

⁷³ *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent*, 28 May 1857; *Limerick Reporter*, 13 Jan. 1860; *Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1857; *Hereford Journal*, 22 Feb. 1860.

⁷⁴ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 44.

Monsell in particular, this suggests that Curragh Chase served as a venue for political discourse. Such notable visitors such as Lord Arundel, M.P. were entertained at Curragh Chase.⁷⁵

Socialising also represented a controlled environment in which young men and women could meet and choose their future partners. It was through marriages contracted in such a milieu that the De Veres had created connections with such notable Limerick families as the Perys and the Spring Rices.⁷⁶ For De Vere's siblings, creating and strengthening bonds with other families of a similar rank is almost certain to have been a consideration in their choice of marriage partner. Given his great admiration for William Smith O'Brien, De Vere must have approved of his sister, Elinor's marriage to O'Brien's brother in 1835.⁷⁷ Vere Edmond de Vere, the eldest sibling, married within their class, to Mary Lucy, daughter of Lady Lucy and Rowland Standish Esquire, of Scialely Costte County, Cumberland and Farley Hall.⁷⁸

Similarly, in 1834 William Monsell of Tervoe, eight miles west of Curragh Chase, married Lady Anna Maria Charlotte Wyndham-Quin, the daughter Lord Dunraven, gaining a close connection to a family who were later considered to be part of the Shannon Estuary Group. Obviously, these connections were not always formed seamlessly. Lord Dunraven, one of Ireland's wealthiest men, had deep concerns about gaining Monsell, whom he considered to be his social inferior, as a son-in-law. Stephen De Vere, although he remained unmarried, was very much a part of the social world in which such connections were formed, and he kept a close eye on the romances and marriage arrangements of that world. In 1854 he wrote to his mother that he had spent a few days in Adare, and enjoyed a large and pleasant party. He noted that Lady Gore Booth and her daughter, who was very handsome, were present. But, he also referred to a woman named Fanny, whom he believed to be still 'yearning after Horace' (his brother). He then stated categorically that he did not wish for a renewal of their affair, as he considered her to be 'silly and affected and not so pretty as she was.'⁷⁹ The account of the party provided to his mother by De Vere gives some indication of the social position, but also the general social attitudes

⁷⁵ *Limerick Chronicle*, 01 Oct. 1851.

⁷⁶ Henry Farrar, *Irish Marriages: Being an Index to the Marriages*, Walker's Hibernian Magazine, 1771 to 1812. (London 1897).

⁷⁷ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser*, 19 Feb. 1835.

⁷⁸ *Northampton Mercury*, 03 Feb. 1838.

⁷⁹ S.E. De Vere to E. De Vere, (no date given) 1854 De Vere papers, T.C.D. MS 5053.

of some members of the family. There was clearly some awareness that his younger brother's choice of bride would reflect on the family as a whole, and as such it was essential that she was of the appropriate social class, and in possession of the required manners and refinements.

Big houses during the period in question were designed to operate as centres of social interaction and Curragh Chase performed exactly this function. Some notable visitors to the house during De Vere's youth included the County lieutenant, the Earl of Devon, and Alfred Lord Tennyson.⁸⁰ Although De Vere did not provide a personal recollection of Tennyson's visit, these visits did apparently impact on the family as his brother Aubrey wrote to a friend in relation to Tennyson: 'I wonder why he came, and whether he is fond of me. I fear not much so.'⁸¹ Tennyson visited Curragh Chase on three occasions between 1842 and 1878, on the invitation of Aubrey De Vere. His visit in 1848 serves as a clear example of a clash of cultures. He only agreed to stay on the condition that he could breakfast alone, smoke in his room, and that 'there was no mention of the Irish distress.'⁸² For a family who were deeply aware of the suffering experienced by many at that time, and who were engaged in various ways of seeking to alleviate that distress, this is likely to have resulted in some uneasiness. It is possible that, for Stephen De Vere at least, occasions such as the tenants' and labourers' ball held at Curragh Chase may have been more acceptable, as that could at least be seen to reflect and promote a degree of concern for the poor. This type of event was relatively common on the estate from the end of the eighteenth century when there was a revival in the practice of hosting large dinners for the local tenantry to celebrate the usual family, local or national events.⁸³ In Curragh Chase the harvest was celebrated by hosting the estate's labourers, their wives and children, on one occasion, estimated to have numbered up to 250 people.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *Dublin Morning Register*, 01 Aug. 1839. *Dublin Monitor*, 31 Mar. 1840.

⁸¹ Cecil Y. Lang & Edgar Finley Shannon, (eds.) *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson: 1821-1850* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981), p. 321.

⁸² Michael Allis, *British Music and Literary Context: Artistic Connections in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 78.

⁸³ Michael Paterson, *Private Life in Britain's Stately Homes: Masters and Servants in the Golden Age* (London, 2012), p.27.

⁸⁴ *Tipperary Free Press*, 12 October, 1850; De Vere, Diary entry, dated 06 January 1851, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5065.

Curragh Chase as a centre for employment

Dooley has argued that a sound, employment-based local economy helped to maintain good local landlord-tenant relations.⁸⁵ He provided the example of a set of instructions left to the steward at Carton, the FitzGerald family estate, as a means of indicating the importance of the big house to the local economy and also demonstrating how the FitzGerald family developed a paternalistic relationship with their tenantry. The steward was directed that when anything was to be purchased, to enquire firstly in Maynooth, and then ‘among Lord Kildare’s tenants which, if not to be got there or among them as reasonable and as good as elsewhere, to get it where it is best and cheapest giving the preference to Lord Kildare’s tenants’. In most rural areas the local big house and estate was the primary provider of employment. A wide range of people were employed in farming, maintenance of the grounds, game-keeping, and masonry, as well as in the role of servants and cooks within the house. In terms of household staff, the De Vere family home reflected the pattern in other big houses, seven female servants were recorded as being resident in Curragh Chase in 1901. Their individual roles were identified as the following; lady’s maid, parlour maid, kitchen maid, dairy maid, housemaid, cook and general maid. While a middle class household would often retain a cook and a general maid, the social status of the De Vere family and the scale of their home compelled them to employ a wide range of domestic servants. In this context, servants were not regarded by such families as a luxury or status symbol, but as essential for their comfort and the proper organisation of their homes. From the point of view of the women employed, working in a big house with a number of other servants was seen as being preferable to being in a one or two servant home, as the duties were lighter, and the conditions not as lonely or isolating. English women were more likely to be employed for roles that involved direct contact with the family, such as a ladies’ maids – a pattern repeated in the De Vere house.⁸⁶ Generations of the same families often remained in the service of their local aristocratic family. In some cases, Stephen De Vere appeared to have quite a warm regard for some of the people he employed. Two men who shared the surname Hanly, who had previously been employed by De Vere as

⁸⁵ Terrence Dooley, ‘Till my Further Orders’ Rules Governing Servants at Carton in the mid-Eighteenth Century’ in Patrick Cosgrove, Terrence Dooley and Karol Mullaney-Dignam, *Aspects of Irish Aristocratic Life, essays on the FitzGerald and Carton House* (Dublin, 2014), p. 108.

⁸⁶ Mona Hearn, ‘Domestic servants in Dublin 1880-1920’, PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin (1984), p.31.

labourers, accompanied him to Canada on his journey there in 1847 and he took a great personal interest in them, continuing to correspond with them for the next number of years. The relationship between landlord and tenant in this case could be quite close: Stephen McDonagh, who had also been employed by De Vere, and was one of those who travelled to Canada with him, asked De Vere to be godfather to his son three years later.⁸⁷ Similarly, when a long-standing servant, Kirby, had a dispute with another employee and left his employment suddenly in 1863, De Vere wrote to him immediately and asked him to return, as he was ‘very sorry for it after our many years’.⁸⁸

Of the female servants who were resident in Curragh Chase in 1901, the ladies’ maid and parlour maid were both English-born, while those who were Irish born were employed in general service and as dairy maids. The long duration of employment evident among the estate workers like Kirby and Hanly was not replicated within the female household staff: none of the women listed in the 1901 census were still resident in 1911.⁸⁹ The number of servants resident in other local big houses differed to Curragh Chase, presumably based on the wealth of the families involved, the standard of living they expected, and the extent of their entertaining. The Monsells of Tervoe House employed three women as general servants, all unmarried, Irish, although not from Limerick, and Catholic in 1901. The census records for the same year show that the Barrington family of Glenstal Abbey returned ten domestic servants, a butler and a footman on their census form. The two members of the household staff, the lady’s maid and governess, who had the most contact with the family’s children were both members of the Church of Ireland. The Dunravens of Adare, who were particularly wealthy, employed eleven residential servants, including a butler, who was English and a member of the Church of England.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ De Vere, diary entry, dated 20 November 1850, TCD, MS 5069.

⁸⁸ De Vere, diary entry, 7 May 1863, TCD, MS 5069.

⁸⁹ Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds.) ‘Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women’s History in the 19th and 20th Centuries’ in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds.) *The Irish Women’s History Reader, Life for Domestic Servants in Dublin, 1880 – 1920*, (Dublin, 1989), pp 148-79.

⁹⁰ Lord Emly, residents of house 1 in Tervoe (Carrig, Limerick); Lord Dunraven, Residents of house 22.1 in Adare (Adare South, Limerick); Barringtons, residents of house 12 in Glenstal (Glenstal, Limerick), Census 1901.

During Stephen De Vere's era, occupation of a big house was associated with a lifestyle characterised to a large extent by socialising and leisurely pursuits. However, Curragh Chase, like other big houses, was also representative of the wealth, influence and status of its owners. The natural beauty of the region along the river Shannon was the setting for several mansion houses in county Limerick, including Tervoe and Mount Trenchard, the owners of these estates, Monsell and Spring Rice, being amongst those identified as members of the Shannon Estuary Group and an important part of De Vere's social circle. In common with these men De Vere was clearly motivated by a sense of noblesse oblige. Landlordism was not confined to the collection of rents, Stephen De Vere and other members of his family fulfilled the roles associated with men of their class, within local government and the administration of justice.⁹¹ A belief that members of the Irish landowning elite had a legitimate claim to leadership in society, although subject to challenge throughout the nineteenth-century, was not thought to be in any way at risk of being eroded during De Vere's formative years. Leadership was a task which De Vere took seriously, and while members of the landowning class were separated from the lower sectors of society to some extent, through the physical structure of the big house and demesne, and also the social norms and attitudes of the time, as will become clear in Chapter Two, De Vere, while remaining conscious of the role of the elite in society, engaged at a very close level with members of the Catholic poor.

⁹¹ Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, p. 4.

Chapter 2: Education and the pre-Famine period

As he entered adulthood, Stephen de Vere found himself in the typical twilight world of the younger son. It has been argued that younger sons were ‘downwardly mobile, with few career options except the church, the army or at worst unpaid bailiffs on their fathers’ or elder brothers’ estates, unless they should have the good fortune to marry an heiress.’¹ There is no indication in any of De Vere’s writings that he ever entertained the notion of marriage. While his older brother Vere, the first-born son of Aubrey and Mary, would inherit Curragh Chase and a title, there were no special privileges or hereditary titles available to Stephen De Vere. With regard to their university education, Vere Edmond, the eldest son attended Cambridge University.² While at the age of nineteen, De Vere enrolled in Trinity College Dublin during the Michaelmas term of 1831.³ De Vere graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1833.⁴ After reading at Lincoln’s Inn in London he was called to the Bar in 1836.⁵ De Vere’s decision to become a barrister is likely to have been considered to be a respectable and useful choice by his family. As W.J. Reader stated, law and divinity were considered to be ‘learned professions’, and as such were occupations which a ‘gentleman might engage in without disgrace’.⁶ His career path was not atypical for a young man of his class and position at that time. A legal career allowed younger sons (and in some cases, eldest sons such as Henry Bowen of Bowen’s Court), to maintain a respectable standard of living,⁷ although some landlords such as Richard Edgeworth and Robert French received a legal training, once they inherited their titles they ceased to practise.⁸ De Vere never practised as a lawyer, nor did he complete a grand tour of Europe, like his brother Aubrey.⁹ He was employed as a surveyor for a short time in the Office of Conveyor and Equity

¹ Stone, *An open elite? England, 1540-1880* (Oxford, 1984), p. 165.

² J. A. Venn., *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, (London, 1922-1954). www.Ancestry.com [Accessed 15 Mar. 2012].

³ S.E. De Vere to Monteagle, November 1829, De Vere Papers, T.C.D., MS 5053.

⁴ Trinity College, *A catalogue of graduates who have proceeded to degrees in the University of Dublin* (Dublin 1869) p 112.

⁵ Edward Keane, Beryl, P. Phair, & Thomas U. Sadlier, (eds) *King's Inns Admission Papers, 1607-1867* (Dublin, 1982).

⁶ W.J. Reader, *The middle classes* (London, 1972), p.7 quoted in Joanne McEntee ‘Gentlemen practisers’: solicitors as elites in mid-nineteenth-century Irish landed society’ in Ciaran O’Neill (ed.), *Irish elites in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2013), p.99.

⁷ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, pp 76-77.

⁸ Ciaran O’Neill (ed.), *Irish elites in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2013), p.102.

⁹ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 51.

Draftsman (G.L. Russell) after the completion of his studies. De Vere returned to Curragh Chase in 1837 to act as his father's agent.¹⁰

As for men in a similar position, De Vere's legal education may have been helpful in his carrying out the duties of an agent. It meant gaining an understanding of land law, ejectments and proceedings of the court, while also developing awareness of the inherent problems with jointures and family settlements.¹¹ There was a clear difference between the perceived prestige associated with becoming a barrister, rather than a solicitor.¹² De Vere trained as a barrister, a profession which was generally held in high esteem by the landed gentry. Barristers, unlike solicitors, usually had a university education or its equivalent, along with a good knowledge of history, classical literature, rhetoric and logic, all of which were deemed essential for the role of advocate.¹³ Some contemporary estate administration handbooks went so far as to advise against the employment of solicitors rather than barristers as agents, claiming that both estate business and commitment to agricultural improvement suffered as a result.¹⁴ Barnard observed that the branch of the profession occupied by solicitors was regarded with some distain by members of the landed gentry. In particular he claimed that 'the propertied, although happy to have sons at the bar, remained at best ambivalent and at worst hostile to lawyers.'¹⁵ It is probable that fathers in landed circles were inclined to encourage younger sons to pursue a legal education, so that legal matters and estate business could be kept within the family circle.¹⁶ There were also obviously advantages in having a detailed understanding of the legal system, if one were to pursue a career in politics at the highest levels. The agent for Curragh Chase prior to De Vere's appointment was Vere Lane, who also had a legal background as a solicitor.¹⁷ Daniel O'Connell's son John, a contemporary of De Vere, was also called to the bar, but never practiced, and instead pursued a

¹⁰ De Vere, diary entry, no date given (1847), De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

¹¹ Reilly, *The Irish land agent, 1830-60*, p.40.

¹² Albert D. Pionke, *The ritual culture of Victorian professionals: competing for ceremonial status, 1838-1877* (New York, 2016), p. 91.

¹³ Laurence Brockliss, 'The profession and national Identity' in Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood (eds), *A union of multiple identities: the British Isles, c. 1750-c. 1850* (Manchester, 1997) pp 16-17.

¹⁴ David Spring, *The English landed estate in the nineteenth century: its administration* (Baltimore, 1963), p.60.

¹⁵ Toby Barnard, *A new anatomy of Ireland: the Irish protestants, 1649-1770* (London, 2003), p. 122.

¹⁶ Ciaran Reilly, *The Irish land agent, 1830-60: the case of King's County*, (Dublin, 2014), p.40.

¹⁷ J. G. Hodges, *Report of the Trial of W. S. O'Brien for High Treason; with the judgment of the Court of Queen's Bench, Ireland, and of the House of Lords, on the Writs of Error* (Dublin, 1849), pp 15-27.

career in politics. Also, though they were diametrically opposed in their political viewpoints, like De Vere, he served as an M.P. for Limerick in 1847-51.¹⁸

Although by the mid-nineteenth century landlords increasingly turned to professional land agency firms to manage their estates, many landlords' sons continued to view the role of land agent as a viable career option. De Vere's diaries do not address this early part of his life, so his personal and private view of the role cannot be easily assessed. It is clear from De Vere's writings that he wished to be closely involved in his locality, in terms of engaging in philanthropic activities, but also within the administration of justice. In general, land agents enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy in the day-to-day running of an estate, they had a range of responsibilities, and were entitled to substitute for an absent landlord as resident magistrate or grand juror, a position which could increase their social standing in rural society.¹⁹ De Vere sat alongside his father and older brother as a member of the grand jury, and he was an active and engaged magistrate.²⁰ As an agent, De Vere dealt with various aspects of estate administration, he managed and oversaw estate expenditure and maintained records of farm accounts.²¹ Agents served as a point of contact between the landlord and tenant, often receiving petitions from tenants, particularly in relation to the reduction of rent.²² Other typical duties of agents included drawing up leases, selecting new tenants, supervising improvements and valuing property.²³ De Vere was also tasked with collecting rents and carrying out evictions. On one occasion, soon after he took up the role, a woman, referred to in the report as Widow Drew, fell into arrears in her rent. De Vere requested a year's rent from the woman in May 1837. On the same day that De Vere made his demand, the woman's house was engulfed in fire. The police investigating the incident believed that the widow's family intentionally burned down the house so that they could look to the parish for compensation.²⁴

¹⁸ J. A. Hamilton, 'O'Connell, John (1810–1858)', rev. R. V. Comerford, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20502>, [Accessed 21 Apr. 2015]. O'Connell involved in the Repeal Association while De Vere was a life-long unionist.

¹⁹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, pp 76-77.

²⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 Aug. 1845.

²¹ Notebook of S.E. De Vere, 1840-41, 1851, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5076.

²² Reilly, *The Irish land agent*, p.40.

²³ Dooley, 'Estate ownership and management in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland', available at: http://www.aughty.org/pdf/estate_own_manage.pdf, [Accessed 29 Sept. 2013].

²⁴ Chief Secretaries Office, Outrage Reports, Limerick, 18 May 1837.

It has been suggested that the sons of lesser landlords found a niche for themselves in Irish rural society by becoming land agents and it is probable that the position of land agent attracted the younger sons of landlords largely because, as one historian remarked, 'there seemed nothing else in Ireland for them to do'.²⁵ The financial rewards for an agent were relatively modest, the typical income of an agent in Ireland was 5 per cent of rents collected.²⁶ The records which still exist relating to the administration of Curragh Chase, and its expenses, do not include details of individual salaries. Yet the importance of the role of land agent, the status it bestowed, and the expectation that an agent would live as gentlemen meant that it was a profession which was suitable for the younger sons of the landed elite.²⁷ As Maguire argued, agents needed to possess 'manners and habits' that 'permitted easy social intercourse between employer and agent'.²⁸ In De Vere's case, he had been raised as a member of the gentry, and was highly educated, so presumably had little difficulty in engaging in discourse with those of a similar class. He had served as a magistrate, and so was familiar with being viewed as a figure of authority in his community, and a career as a land agent allowed him to maintain his connection to the land. So it was in many ways a role which was particularly suitable for De Vere.

Constantia Maxwell highlighted the importance of the land agent in the eighteenth century and stated that he was 'more than a glorified bailiff, he was a much more responsible officer, the landlord's man of business'.²⁹ This also indicates the motivation of landlords, as in the case of De Vere's father, and later his brother, in employing a member of their own family rather than bestowing such considerable responsibility and privilege on an outsider. This is not to suggest that land agents were a homogenous group. They came from a variety of social backgrounds and had various educational experiences. W.E. Vaughan has concluded that some land agents were men who failed to get beyond 'compound fractions and copper plate' and their social skills were the result of local balls 'to which everyone was admitted'.³⁰ If there was a degree of homogeneity amongst this group, it was in relation to their religion.

²⁵ Quoted in W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994), p. 134.

²⁶ Dooley, 'Estate ownership and management in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland', available at: http://www.aughty.org/pdf/estate_own_manage.pdf, [Accessed 29 Sept. 2013].

²⁷ Mingay (ed.). *The Victorian countryside*, p.453.

²⁸ Maguire, *The Downshire estates*, p. 191.

²⁹ Constantia Maxwell, *Town and Country under the Georges* (Dundalk, 1949), p. 115.

³⁰ Quoted in Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants*, p. 110.

The majority were of the Protestant faith, sharing the religion of their employer- not unlike the situation of higher status household servants like lady's maid, or butler.³¹

It was possibly owing to their increased powers that land agents became from the end of the eighteenth century a focus of agrarian outrage and the object of general dislike. The duties of an agent, as already noted, were administrative, legal, social and quite often political. In most cases, the agent was required to deal with legal matters, the magistracy and policing the estate. Undertaking the duties of a magistrate, the agent was also associated with the imposition of law and order emanating from a widening state control that was often resented by the lower orders. This was particularly the case after the establishment of the police force in 1822.³² The Outrage Reports and newspaper evidence from this period do not suggest that any attacks were directed towards De Vere, if one were to judge how De Vere was perceived in his locality based on the address presented to him in March 1847 by representatives of the residents of the Barony of Kenry, then in his role as land agent and magistrate he was popular and respected, he was referred to as 'the poor man's magistrate', and 'the protector of the poor'.³³

Agents and absentee Landlords

In 1800, as many as one-third of landlords were absentees who lived more or less permanently out of the country.³⁴ With regard to the situation in Limerick, some large landholders, such as the earl of Sandwich, possessed 2,844 acres in county Limerick, but had more significant holdings in England, he chose to reside in Grosvenor Square.³⁵ Of the eighteen 'premier' landlords in Limerick, that is, those in possession of more than 5,000 acres each, half were absentee. Four members of this group including Lord Cloncurry, who held property in Abbington, Limerick, but resided in Lyons, county Kildare,³⁶ resided in Ireland, while the remaining four were based in England. The largest estate in Limerick held by an absentee landlord was

³¹ See Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860-1960* (Dublin, 2001), Reilly, *The Irish land agent*, p.40.

³² Richard Barry O'Brien, *Dublin Castle and the Irish people* (London, 1909), p.102.

³³ *Limerick Reporter*, 02 Apr. 1847.

³⁴ Terrence Dooley, 'Estate ownership and management in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland', available at: http://www.aughty.org/pdf/estate_own_manage.pdf, [Accessed 29 Sept. 2013].

³⁵ *Dublin Evening Post*, 21 Mar. 1807; *Morning Post*, 14 Feb. 1871; Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, Liam Irwin, Matthew Potter (eds.), *Limerick: History and Society - Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 2009), p. 535.

³⁶ Kieran McManamon, 'Valentine Lawless, Lord Cloncurry, and his Landed Estates 1799-1845', M.A. thesis, (National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2004). p. 1.

that belonging to the earl of Devon. His lands in the region were centred on the town of Newcastle West, and amounted to 33,000 acres.³⁷ By the early 1870s, forty-six percent of estates had resident landlords; twenty-five per cent had landlords' resident elsewhere in Ireland, and twenty-three percent were owned either by public institutions or by absentees. On absentee estates, a great deal depended upon the efficiency of the estate agent. The estates owned by duke of Devonshire, an absentee, in Cork and Waterford, were regarded as being particularly well-managed.³⁸ Yet, by and large, absentee landlords did not tend to enjoy positive reputations. The demonstrably negative reaction of the crowd that attended the funeral of De Vere's grand uncle, Edmond Henry, the first Earl of Limerick (1758-1844) in Limerick city, was attributed (by the admittedly hostile local press) to the fact that he was an absentee landlord.³⁹

Because of the light it throws on the image of landlords and agents, and on the gap between popular and landlord opinion, the events of the funeral are worth describing in some detail. The funeral procession included the tenants of the deceased, who wore scarfs and hat-bands to indicate their mourning, followed by the Mayor of Limerick, while the De Veres, Earl of Dunraven, Lord Clarina, the Spring Rice family (Monteagle) and the Monsells were all in attendance.⁴⁰ The hostile *Limerick Reporter* (a strongly O'Connellite paper)⁴¹ stated that the procession attracted a great many spectators, but they were drawn 'more from curiosity than any other feeling, particularly as from the very moment the coffin was laid in the hearse until it reached the cathedral a continual fire of groaning was kept up.'⁴² Before 1800, the Perys had been one of the most politically powerful, influential and wealthiest families in Limerick city. The head of the family in the mid-eighteenth century, Edmond Sexton Pery was largely responsible for the present Georgian core of Limerick named Newtown Pery in his honour. His nephew Edmond Henry was created the first Earl of Limerick in 1803. However, the family became largely peripheral figures in the nineteenth century, after the Act of Union, ceasing to be

³⁷ Ó Tuathaigh, Irwin, Potter (eds.), *Limerick: History and Society*, p. 535.

³⁸ Dooley, 'Estate ownership and management', available at: http://www.aughty.org/pdf/estate_own_manage.pdf [Accessed 29 Sept. 2013].

³⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845.

⁴⁰ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 01 Dec. 1845; *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845.

⁴¹ Liam Irwin, 'Maurice Lenihan', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

<http://dib.cambridge.org.libraryproxy.mic.ul.ie/quicksearch.do> [Accessed 03 May 2017].

⁴² *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845.

resident in Ireland, and thereafter becoming unpopular absentees.⁴³ Henry's funeral attracted a great deal of attention in the press due to the reaction of the crowd as the funeral cortege made its way to St Mary's Cathedral in Limerick. Monteagle, De Vere's uncle, and the son-in-law of the deceased, was noted in a number of reports to have been the primary focus of the scorn and derision demonstrated by the assembled masses.⁴⁴ It was reported that when Monteagle left his carriage and attempted to enter the cathedral where the funeral service was held, he was 'so jostled by the crowd that he took refuge in a public-house opposite, and concealed himself under a bed!'⁴⁵ The *Limerick Reporter* described the futile attempts of the Mayor to protect Monteagle from the 'volleys of groans and even rougher usage', directed towards him from the crowd, who chanted 'turn him out'.⁴⁶ Some reports stated that the violence was so great it was feared that the hearse would be overturned and the remains of the deceased thrown into the river. There were also reports of the crowds attempting to remove forcibly the symbols of mourning attire worn by members of Lord Limerick's tenantry.⁴⁷

The contrary account of the event from the landlord's vantage point came from Stephen De Vere's father, who was described by the *Limerick Chronicle* as 'a most excellent, inoffensive and benevolent gentleman', and who was reported in the newspaper as having been knocked to the ground by the jostling crowd.⁴⁸ It was stated that Monteagle was eventually able to leave, after the intervention of the military, with the De Veres in their carriage.⁴⁹ Monteagle, however, dismissed the version of events as depicted in the *Limerick Reporter* as being entirely inaccurate. He wrote to the *Limerick Chronicle* (a significant move, since the *Chronicle* was the loyalist and landed newspaper for the area) in order to dispute the *Limerick Reporter's* assertion that a file of infantry, numbering almost two hundred and led by Colonel Maunsell, had to rescue him and the De Veres. In Monteagle's interpretation of events, he conceded that he and the De Veres found it 'impossible to proceed towards the cathedral', which he attributed to the lack of constables to direct the

⁴³ Matthew Potter, 'The Shannon Estuary Group' in Ciaran O'Neill, (ed.) *Irish elites in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2013), pp 115-116.

⁴⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 02 Dec. 1845, *Tipperary Vindicator*, 01 Dec. 1845, *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845.

⁴⁵ *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 01 Dec. 1845.

⁴⁸ *Limerick Chronicle*, 02 Dec. 1845.

⁴⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845.

crowd. While most reports described what was essentially an angry mob who had focused its aggression on Monteagle, he claimed that on leaving his carriage he instead found himself ‘surrounded by a few humble but resolute citizens, who far from ‘jostling’ or assaulting me, carried me into a house opposite the cathedral where I and several other gentlemen were received with true Irish hospitality and kindness.’⁵⁰

Monteagle seems to have taken particular exception to the assertion that he hid under a bed. He specifically stated that it was ‘wholly and most notoriously false to state that I was concealed under a bed’.⁵¹ Monteagle wrote that it was equally false that a ‘troop of dragoons, with drawn swords, rescued me from what is called my hiding place. When excitement subdued and before any soldiers arrived, I crossed over to the cathedral with my friends and entered my carriage without difficulty or concealment.’⁵² Even the details of the premises in which those attacked found refuge showed the political and social vantage point of those giving the report. The *Limerick Reporter* described Monteagle and the De Veres as taking refuge in a public house, the *Limerick Chronicle* referred to it as Mr Howard’s spirit shop, while Monteagle indicated that it was a private house.⁵³ Each party had its own agenda in regard to the manner in which they presented information. While the *Limerick Reporter’s* almost gleeful account of prominent landlords being jostled and intimidated by members of the lower orders suggests some exaggeration may have been employed, Monteagle’s overzealous attempt to put forward his version of events – and protect his reputation – makes his account, too, appear unreliable.

Unlike Lord Limerick, the De Vere family was generally resident in Ireland, although De Vere’s father had little personal involvement in the management of his properties. He employed Vere Lane, his cousin as the agent, prior to the appointment of De Vere.⁵⁴ During the period of Lane’s time as agent, from the 1830s onwards, a more rigorous system of management was introduced on many Irish estates. This was in response to the errors of their predecessors who had allowed their property to

⁵⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 04 Dec. 1845.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Dec. 1845, *Limerick Chronicle*, 02 Dec. 1845, *Limerick Chronicle*, 04 Dec. 1845.

⁵⁴ Limerick City Archives, Hunt and De Vere Family, 1755-1888, [http://www.iar.ie/Archive.shtml?IE LA P22](http://www.iar.ie/Archive.shtml?IE%20LA%20P22), [Accessed on 23 Apr. 2012].

become fragmented, arrears to accumulate, their indebtedness to grow, and their tenantry to slide into poverty. In 1844 a tenant of Aubrey De Vere's reported to the Devon Commission that subdivision continued in his district, he was aware of some instances of three or four families existing on ten to twelve acres, which they subdivided amongst themselves into plots of one and two acres.⁵⁵

Agents also had to contend with obstacles such as the growth in agrarian unrest during the first three decades of the nineteenth-century, and the rapid demographic expansion, concentrated as it was at the lower end of the rural class structure. In his capacity as agent and magistrate De Vere attended a meeting in Pallaskenry courthouse in August 1845 to address the 'disturbed state of the barony of Kenry'.⁵⁶ De Vere suggested that crime in the district could be reduced if education was promoted and temperance encouraged. Dawson Westropp of Mellon, Pallaskenry, a magistrate, objected to the sympathetic nature of De Vere's proposals. He argued that De Vere's remedies, 'might after twenty years prove edacious, but that he could not educate and reform the persons who were committing crime at present'.⁵⁷ With regard to Curragh Chase specifically, the focus of hostility was the estate steward Conner Coughlan, rather than De Vere, the agent. In December 1846, Coughlan was travelling from Askeaton to Curragh Chase, when he was fired upon by an unknown assailant, he was not severely injured in the incident, and there are no further references to the incident in the newspapers from the period.⁵⁸ Some agents were unpopular due to the belief that they were unaware of, or unconcerned with, the problems experienced by those living in the Irish countryside. In his evidence before the Devon Commission in 1844, then investigating landlord-tenant relations, Monsell stated that the duty of a land agent 'upon a well-managed estate consist in looking after the welfare of tenants'.⁵⁹ Yet the aloofness of some agents from the lower orders resulted in the perception among contemporaries and later commentators that some agents were unconcerned for the welfare of their tenantry. The perception was aptly summed up by Maurice Coolis, who gathered statistics for Trinity College

⁵⁵ *Evidence taken before Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland*. Part III. (1845) Command Papers Paper Number: 657 Volume Page: XXI.1 Volume: 21, p. 311.

⁵⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 22 Aug. 1845.

⁵⁷ *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 Aug. 1845.

⁵⁸ *Limerick Chronicle*, 24 Dec. 1846.

⁵⁹ *Evidence taken before the commission appointed to enquire into the occupation of land in Ireland* PP 1845 (20), p.739, 26 Aug. 1844.

estates, when on the eve of the Famine he noted that the general class called agents are nothing but receivers. The majority of them care nothing for the estates they profess to represent'.⁶⁰ Reilly has argued that if landlords and agents had been prepared to collaborate on relief measures at barony level rather than concentrating on their own estates, more progress might have been made in terms of the relief of hardship.⁶¹ While it may be somewhat unfair to generalise about land agents as being uninterested in the welfare of their tenantry, Reilly's point that a more concerted effort might have been more beneficial in alleviating distress is valid. In the next chapter, the response of De Vere and some of his contemporaries to the outbreak of the Famine will be examined.

Curragh Chase before the Famine

The evidence given before the Commission into the State of the Poor in Ireland in the early 1830s provides some insight into the state of the peasantry in the area around Curragh Chase. In the evidence given by De Vere's father before the inquiry in 1834 he described the typical conditions of tenants in his district. He reported that their cabins usually measured thirty by twenty feet, the greater part of the space being used as a kitchen area. He described the ordinary diet in the region as consisting of potatoes and milk.⁶² Although there were certainly regions of the country in which people lived in much worse conditions, as was clear in a letter to London written on board the HMS *Sapphs*. Here details were given of a voyage along the west coast of Ireland in 1821, indicating that by the early 1820s it was not inappropriate to refer to the southwest of Ireland as 'the land of potatoes'.⁶³ It was reported that members of 'the lower orders' were in a 'wretched condition...almost in a state of nudity.'⁶⁴ De Vere's father stated that in their district, in contrast that of the western seaboard, the people wore clothing which was of a good quality, but

⁶⁰ *The Devon commission*, witness no. 39, Maurice Collis, p. 247.

⁶¹ Reilly, *The Irish land agent*, p.106.

⁶² 1834 Poor inquiry (Ireland). Appendix (C.)--Parts I. and II. Part I. *Reports on the state of the poor, and on the charitable institutions in some of the principal towns; with supplement containing answers to queries. Part II. Report on the city of Dublin, and supplement containing answers to queries; with addenda to appendix (A.), and communications*. P. 224.

⁶³ Written 20-30 July 1821 and posted at Coleraine quoted in Desmond Norton, 'Stewart and Kincaid, Irish Land Agents in the 1840s,' (2002, University College Dublin) Centre for Economic Research, working paper series, <http://irserver.ucd.ie/bitstream/handle/10197/1286/WP02.08.pdf> [Accessed on 7 May 2014].

⁶⁴ Norton, 'Stewart and Kincaid, Irish Land Agents in the 1840s,' (2002).

often slovenly, though their appearance on Sundays was ‘very respectful’.⁶⁵ Rev. John Quinlan, the parish priest of Grange, which was situated ten miles from Curragh Chase in county Limerick, described the clothing worn in his particular district as being ‘very shabby,’ and he noted that ‘the want of covering keeps them and their barefoot children and wives from divine service on Sundays frequently.’⁶⁶ While Rev John Ryan P.P. of Cappamore also in county Limerick, described the ordinary diet of people in that location as being of ‘the worst possible description,’ and he stated that the majority of people were ‘generally clothed in the most filthy and squalid rags.’

Rev. Ryan also asserted that one could only know the true condition of the people if one went among them.⁶⁷ This acquaintance between elite and broader population seems to have applied in the case of the De Veres. Aubrey De Vere the younger wrote in his memoir that due to their father’s kindness and warm relations with his tenants, he and his siblings were ‘much more widely acquainted than we should otherwise have been with the humbler class’.⁶⁸ This might have also influenced the attitude of the De Vere family towards their tenants and poorer members of the community. But given the depth of class divisions of the time, the true extent of their insight into the lives of the less well-off is difficult to assess.⁶⁹ Dooley has asserted that by reasons of wealth, social standing, religion, cultural upbringing and political power, landlords and their families had become psychologically distanced from the majority of the people and Aubrey de Vere’s memoir echoes this in its account of how members of his class viewed the position of labourers.⁷⁰ He wrote that:

The extreme poverty here described will suggest that the proprietor class had been very remiss in the discharge of their duties. This charge would only be partly true. They did not feel that poverty as much as they ought to have felt it; but neither did the Irish poor themselves in ordinary times.⁷¹

To state that members of his class had been ‘remiss in the discharge of their duties’ implies that he believed landlords should either be bound by a sense of *noblesse oblige* or at least attempt to provide tenants with living conditions of a basic

⁶⁵ 1836 Poor inquiry (Ireland). Appendix (C.)--Parts I. and II. Part I. Reports on the state of the poor, and on the charitable institutions in some of the principal towns, pp 224-228.

⁶⁶ 1836 Poor inquiry (Ireland). Appendix (C.)--Parts I. and II. Part I. Reports on the state of the poor, and on the charitable institutions in some of the principal towns, pp 224-228.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 18.

⁷¹ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 21.

standard. But he also attempted to abdicate some responsibly in this regard, suggesting that in ordinary times the ‘Irish poor’ – interestingly describing them as an undifferentiated mass – were not particularly aggrieved or concerned about their circumstances. He went on to make further attempts (possibly accurate in their interpretation from an employer’s vantage point) to justify the actions of his class, by stating that ‘the labourer’s pay was deplorably low; but the work given for it was proportionally low.’⁷²

Outbreak of the Great Famine and Official Response to distress

The 1846 reappearance of the potato blight in Ireland, earlier in the season than in the previous year and far more extensively in its geographic range and lethal intensity, prompted a series of measures by the newly installed Whig government. This signalled a more rigid approach to relief than had followed the first, and more limited, crop failure of 1845. Public works, governed by stringent conditions, were made the primary means of relief, while the movement of foodstuffs in and out of the country was left largely unregulated. As early as October 1846, reports were appearing in newspapers throughout the United Kingdom – and the world – of ‘deaths from starvation’.⁷³ In Limerick, the state of destitution became something of a political football. In February 1846, the O’Connellite *Limerick Reporter* disputed claims published in the loyalist *Limerick Chronicle* that according to the Pallaskenry dispensary physician, there was no potato disease, or significant distress amongst the poor in De Vere’s locality. The *Reporter* claimed that this assertion was untrue, as there were very few farms that had not been affected by potato blight, and with regard to the poor the Famine had ‘already commenced, for they are at present suffering from scanty meals and bad potatoes.’⁷⁴

As conditions in Ireland worsened, relief policies, Corn Law repeal, and new coercive measures for Ireland were intensely debated in parliament.⁷⁵ De Vere was strongly opposed to Peel’s introduction of a coercion bill, known as the Protection of Life bill, in February 1846.⁷⁶ Representatives of Limerick and neighbouring counties joined in the debate in parliament. Some opponents of the bill claimed that the high

⁷² De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 9.

⁷³ R. Dudley Edwards and Thomas Desmond Williams, *The great Famine; studies in Irish history 1845-52* (Dublin, 1956), p.75.

⁷⁴ *Limerick Reporter*, 3 Feb. 1846.

⁷⁵ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, p.122.

⁷⁶ Ward, *Aubrey De Vere*, p.101.

military and police presence in the country rendered the bill unnecessary.⁷⁷ Henry Grattan and William Smith O'Brien both believed that the majority of Irish members were opposed to the bill.⁷⁸ Grattan asserted that the peace of Ireland could only be preserved by the gentry of Ireland being made to do their duty, while Smith O'Brien, M.P. for county Limerick, stated that it would be a great injustice to force the bill upon the people of Ireland at that time. Stafford O'Brien M.P. for Northamptonshire North believed that the Members for Clare, Tipperary, Roscommon, and Limerick would all oppose the bill, and he agreed with them as he found it to be 'inoperative and inefficacious'.⁷⁹ John O'Connell, M.P. for Limerick city was also resolutely opposed to the introduction of the bill. He argued that supporting the coercion bill would constitute 'committing a crime against Ireland, and against the real interests of the two countries'.⁸⁰ De Vere was clearly in agreement with these sentiments. Aubrey De Vere wrote that his brother dismissed the bill as being 'tyrannical' and it caused him to become 'greatly incensed, and inclined to take extreme courses'.⁸¹ Although the bill was eventually defeated, this was owing to Lord John Russel's tactical opposition, which prompted Peel's resignation.⁸²

The repeated failure of the potato crop and the resulting starvation had revealed the fragility of the foundations on which Irish rural society had been built. De Vere was a witness to the ever growing tension and despair which had spread through local society. A meeting held in the courthouse of Ballingarry, Adare, county Limerick, six miles from Curragh Chase, in September, 1846 was attended by Stephen De Vere in his capacity as a magistrate, a small number of other magistrates, landowners, and Catholic and Protestant clergymen, amongst whom was Archdeacon FitzGerald, described as 'the popular parish priest'.⁸³ Also present were W. H. Massey of Glenwilliam Castle, thirteen miles from Curragh Chase. Edward Lloyd of Heathfield in county Limerick and Ballincollig in county Cork⁸⁴, Thomas Davenport

⁷⁷ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, p.122.

⁷⁸ Protection of Life (Ireland) Bill, 30 March 1846 vol. 85 cc331-64.

⁷⁹ Protection of Life (Ireland) Bill - Adjourned Debate. HC Deb 25 June 1846 vol. 87 cc966-1027

⁸⁰ Protection of Life (Ireland) Bill - Adjourned Debate. HC Deb 06 April 1846 vol. 85 cc609-12.

⁸¹ Ward, *Aubrey De Vere a Memoir*, p.101.

⁸² Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, p.122.

⁸³ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 30 Sept. 1846, *Saunders's News-Letter*, 30 Sept. 1846.

⁸⁴ Estate: Lloyd (Heathfield), <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=2383>, Accessed on: [02 Feb. 2016].

who was agent for the Earl of Clare,⁸⁵ Robert Fetherston of Bruree house, twenty-two miles from Curragh Chase,⁸⁶ and Bryan Sheehy and R. K. Sheehy who were merchants in the cities of Limerick and Cork respectively.⁸⁷ The aim of the meeting was to provide employment for those in need, and to consider which measures could be put in place in order to alleviate distress. Political and other divisions surfaced quickly, and the scene was described as one which would ‘do little to edify the humbler classes in the paths of peace and goodwill’ as ‘the opportunity was seized on to display vindictive and jealous feelings in certain parties’.⁸⁸ It was proposed by Archdeacon Fitzgerald that ‘the sum of £700 should be given to two hundred of the most distressed families’. This motion was rejected by one of the magistrates in attendance, but the report does not state which one. A mob then rushed the courthouse and threats of violence were made against those who presided over the assembly. The article included a warning to the government, ‘and all others interested in the peace of the country’, to provide food, without delay to a starving people.⁸⁹ It was reported in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* that the crowd responded positively to De Vere’s conclusion of the meeting, during which he called for ‘peace and quietness.’⁹⁰

There was a clear reluctance of landed proprietors in the district, with the exception of some like De Vere, to involve themselves in relief provision. In December 1846 the *Dublin Evening Post* reported that De Vere had attended another meeting in Pallaskenry of magistrates and cess payers of the barony of Kenry. The earl of Dunraven chaired the meeting and inquired as to whether there was anyone who was willing to implement a drainage scheme in the locality, as the sum of £462 had been apportioned for it. There was no response. De Vere expressed his regret that ‘landed proprietors’ in that electoral division had not come forward to undertake a drainage scheme and then proposed a schedule of roadworks, to the amount of £462, which was approved. The article noted that all of the landed proprietors in the region, including absentees, approximately two hundred men, were asked to

⁸⁵ Estate: FitzGibbon, <http://www.landedestates.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/search.jsp?q=kilmoylan>, [Accessed on 19 Apr. 2014].

⁸⁶ Estate: Langton (Bruree) <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=2378>, [Accessed on 29 Dec. 2014].

⁸⁷ Estate: Sheehy (Cork & Limerick), <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=2460>, [Accessed on 11 Jun. 2014].

⁸⁸ *Saunders's News-Letter*, 30 Sept. 1846.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 30 Sept. 1846.

contribute to a relief fund, and they had all ‘refused point blank’. The only assenting parties were Lord Dunraven, William Walker and the De Vere brothers.⁹¹ De Vere also asserted during the meeting that he had ‘traversed the entire barony from one end to the other’ and had found great difficulty in selecting roads ‘upon which it was necessary to expend money to employ the poor’. This resulted in no works of a ‘reproductive nature’ being carried out. He urged the other attendees to ‘unite for so laudable a purpose’.⁹² In a report of the same meeting published in the *Dublin Evening Packet*, De Vere was described as ‘a gentleman of great intelligence, practical knowledge, and perfectly acquainted with the wants of the people throughout the entire barony.’⁹³ When Aubrey De Vere described the life of an ‘Irish squire’ at that time, it is likely to have been a fair interpretation of what his brother experienced. It was characterised by long hours spent travelling through one’s relief district, passing from house to house in order to assess the level of destitution, conscious that he might become infected with ‘the seeds of disease’. The presentment sessions he attended were scenes of anger and suffering, and led to the realisation of his worst fears – ‘Famine, fever and the gradual demoralisation of the lower classes, and the ruin of the higher.’ At night, his sleep was constantly broken by the thought that he might have misplaced a scrap of paper which contained the name of a family in need of immediate relief, and that due to his carelessness, a family starved.⁹⁴

Given his regular interactions with the tenants of his father’s estate and members of the lower orders as necessitated through his work as an agent and magistrate, De Vere could not have failed to realise the precarious state in which Irish society stood. As he wrote to Lord Monteaule, ‘I know this country intimately and I am painfully aware of the imminent peril in which it stands’.⁹⁵ The main problem, as insightful contemporaries like the De Veres were aware, was a lack of clear information. De Vere’s brother Aubrey wrote an account of a meeting of a Relief Committee at Pallaskenry, a village just over two miles from Curragh Chase. He described it as being ‘a perfect Babel, no one seeming to have the power of understanding anyone else, or making himself understood.’ Aubrey wrote that he

⁹¹ *Limerick Reporter*, 22 Dec. 1846, *Dublin Evening Post*, 26 Dec. 1846.

⁹² *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent*, 26 Dec. 1846.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ De Vere, *Recollections*, p. 126.

⁹⁵ De Vere to Monteaule, 13 March 1847, De Vere papers, T.C.D., MS 5053.

found it impossible to obtain basic information, such as how much corn was necessary to sustain a labouring man.⁹⁶

This lack of information combined with delay in the execution of relief schemes both locally and centrally to aggravate the crisis. In 1845 the government implemented a scheme of public works as a means of providing relief. De Vere acted as an engineer of public works in the barony of Kenry.⁹⁷ As early as the 1830s, proponents of public works, such as Thomas Bermingham, earl of Louth, believed that this was the way to improve the country's infrastructure and provide much needed employment for the poor during the 'hungry months' of late summer and early autumn.⁹⁸ But such works proved to be an inadequate response to the need which had arisen during the Great Famine. Initially, the wages provided through the schemes would likely have enabled a worker to feed his family. But by late 1846, the resulting market demands had caused the cost of food to rise to such a level that this was no longer the case. The government did not raise wages or place a limit on grain prices, but even so, the demand for work rose sharply. One report – admittedly from the anti-establishment *Limerick Reporter* – questioned whether if even all poor men in Limerick were employed, would they then be 'armed against want?' It was concluded that it would not, as the price of food had been raised to 'such a Famine mark that the wages of the labourer would scarcely provide more than sufficient bread for himself alone, to say nothing of his unfortunate family'.⁹⁹ By late summer of 1846, public works already employed close to 100,000 persons, rising to some 600,000 per week by January 1847, and peaking at over 700,000 in March of that year. The public works system quickly became overwhelmed.¹⁰⁰ As the *Limerick Reporter* stated in January 1847 'there are numbers that no system of public works however efficiently carried on can ever reach'.¹⁰¹ It eventually became apparent that many of those who applied for employment on work schemes were too weak from malnourishment to undertake such physically demanding labour. As one observer

⁹⁶ De Vere, *The Bard of Curragh Chase*, p. 40.

⁹⁷ De Vere, diary entry, (no date given) 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5061.

⁹⁸ Thomas Bermingham, First report of the committee on the Western Rail-Road and Navigation Company (Dublin 1831), *The social state of Great Britain and Ireland considered, with regard to the labouring population* (Dublin, 1831) in Mc Kenna, 'Charity, paternalism and power', 1834-44 in Geary and Walsh (eds.) *Philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland*, p. 103.

⁹⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 19 Jan. 1847.

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Helen Preston, *Charitable Words: Women, Philanthropy, and the Language of Charity in Nineteenth-century Dublin* (Westport 2004), pp 16-19.

¹⁰¹ *Limerick Reporter*, 19 Jan. 1847.

remembered, 'poor men sitting on heaps of stones, breaking them for a certain number of hours after walking five and six miles to their work in rags and tatters, more like spectres than able-bodied'.¹⁰²

In March 1847, the government began to end public works and open up soup kitchens. In May 1847 the dismissals from public works resulted in protests across Limerick city and county. Outdoor meetings were held at Clarina to protest against out-door relief and call for employment under the system of public works. In the barony of Kenry notices were placed at crossroads and the chapel gates requesting a meeting of labourers, 'in order to show an unanimous spirit in warding off the approaching Famine.'¹⁰³ Echoing De Vere's statement on the issue, the notices stated that peace was preserved while the system of public works was in operation.¹⁰⁴ The provision of gratuitous outdoor relief to able-bodied men was at variance with contemporary attitudes to the provision of poor relief.¹⁰⁵¹⁰⁶ Prevailing ideas about poverty and welfare held that while the impotent poor - the very young, the very old, the sick and permanently disabled - were deserving of help, to assist anyone who was capable of supporting themselves was to encourage idleness and immorality.¹⁰⁷ But the idea that private charity in addition to public relief should play a part in alleviating the consequences of the crisis was outlined as early as October 1845 by the Home Secretary, who stated that the Irish peasants should be relieved 'both by public and by private charity. And, that this charity may go as far as possible'. However, Peel was not optimistic about the effectiveness of private relief efforts, he believed that 'there will be no hope of contributions from England for the mitigation of the calamity. Monster meetings, the ungrateful return for past kindness, the subscriptions in Ireland to Repeal rent and the O'Connell tribute, will have disinclined the charitable here to make any great exertion for Irish relief.'¹⁰⁸ However, private charity played an important role in providing some measure of relief to those in need throughout the Famine era. It was clear that the government's policies were failing to save lives and, in the case of the public works, were

¹⁰² Preston, *Charitable Words*, pp 16-19.

¹⁰³ *Limerick Chronicle*, 08 May 1847.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Preston, *Charitable Words*, pp 16-19.

¹⁰⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 08 May 1847.

¹⁰⁷ Rachel Ginnis Fuchs, *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), pp 202-203.

¹⁰⁸ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 144.

exacerbating the suffering of the poor. As official relief floundered, a national and international movement spontaneously got under way to provide private relief in Ireland.¹⁰⁹

The *Limerick Chronicle* in October 1847 reported that many of the ‘chief landlords of Ireland’ stated that they would not deduct the poor rates from the rent charge of the clergy the coming year because ‘the clergy [had] acted so nobly, devoting their time and substance to the relief of the poor, with distinction of sect or party.’¹¹⁰ There are also a number of reports of efforts made by private individuals to engage in philanthropy in this regard. The *Limerick Chronicle* reported on 2 January 1847, that James Dillion McNamara, Esq., of Ayle, Co. Clare, provided his tenantry with a substantial ‘meat dinner’ on Christmas night, while his wife distributed clothes to those in attendance. It was also noted that J. L.W. Napier, Esq., of Olcastle in Co. Meath¹¹¹ had converted his kennel yard into a soup kitchen for the poor, while the earl of Clonmel in county Tipperary ‘distributed frieze coats to all his poor tenantry, and ordered an ox to be killed and distributed amongst them.’¹¹² In December 1847 Vere de Vere made additional abatements to his tenants, and stated his intention to afford additional reproductive works to the labourers on his property.¹¹³ But given the extent of the crisis, such efforts were not sufficient to counter the growing distress of those whose means of subsistence had vanished. In May 1847 the *Limerick Chronicle* published reports from members of the Catholic clergy in Limerick and Clare regarding deaths relating to the Famine in their parishes. The Rev. John Ryan, the parish priest of Knockaney in the south-east of the county estimated that in his parish between October and April of 1847, sixty-six deaths had occurred. He also stated that six hundred out of eight hundred families were totally destitute. The Rev. T. Mc Inerney, P.P. of Feakle in east Clare calculated that the number of deaths in his parish the previous six months at one thousand, of which ‘600 were from Famine.’ The Rev. A. Quinn, P.P. of Kilfenora stated that the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 25 Oct. 1847.

¹¹¹ Ambrose Leets, *A directory to the market towns, villages, gentlemen’s seats and other noted places in Ireland*, (Dublin, 1814) p. 391.

¹¹² *Limerick Chronicle*, 3 Jan. 1847.

¹¹³ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 11 Dec. 1847.

mortality in his parish for the same time was fifty-nine people, and he indicated that forty of those deaths were the result of starvation.¹¹⁴

Although the Temporary Relief Act of 1847, which allowed for the provision of soup kitchens, marked a radical departure from previous forms of relief. It was still regarded by the government as a short term expedient which was ‘necessarily of a nature contrary to all sound principles’.¹¹⁵ The general consensus was that charity should only be given to those who were morally ‘deserving’ and capable of self-improvement. Indiscriminate charity, it was agreed, did more harm than good.¹¹⁶ The *Limerick Reporter* advocated the provision of soup kitchens, and encouraged readers to donate money specifically for that cause. ‘Five shillings given in this way is better than a pound in indiscriminate charity.’¹¹⁷ At the same time, a moralistic note was evident even in official reports, the Relief Commissioners urging that it was to be made clear to each able-bodied man ‘how unmanly it is to abandon his independence, and all hopes of bettering the condition of his family’.¹¹⁸ As the crisis continued, and public and private forms of relief proved to be insufficient, there was an increase in the number of reports of physical attacks and robberies of Board of Works clerks, and estate stewards.¹¹⁹

De Vere, as a contemporary observer, identified mismanagement of the public work schemes as the main reason for their disbandment. But within his own locality, there were some accusations of corruption. Gerard Curtin has argued that Lord Monteagle was successful in obtaining funds for the Shanagolden area, to the detriment of other areas within the barony, because he and his supporters were in a majority at each Presentment Session. The influence of Lord Monteagle at local level was substantial. Firstly, the Presentment Sessions for the public works for the barony of Shanid were usually held in Shanagolden village, in the heart of the Monteagle estate. Secondly, Lord Monteagle could count on the support of family members such as his son Stephen Spring Rice and his nephews, Sir Vere and Stephen De Vere.

¹¹⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 10 May 1847.

¹¹⁵ Parliamentary Report (Distress Ireland), Treasury Minute and First Report of the Relief Commissioners, 1847, p. 14.

¹¹⁶ Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers*, (London, 2013) p.2.

¹¹⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 19 Jan. 1847.

¹¹⁸ Distress (Ireland): third report of the Relief Commissioners, constituted under the Act 10th Vic., cap. 7, p. 22.

¹¹⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 3 Jan. 1847.

Furthermore, other members of the grand jury allowed localism to colour their decisions: Burke-White (a farmer at Roberstown, just outside Foynes) and Stephen Roche, (a landlord in the Shanagolden district), tended to support works in the Shanagolden district. In fact, among cess payers, five of the six farmers with a voice were from the Shanagolden area. On all proposals at these meetings, Lord Monteagle had a majority of eleven to six. Thus it was likely that the barony of Shanid received more than its fair share of public works funding.¹²⁰ A typical session was dominated by the Earl of Devon, Lord Monteagle, his son Stephen, his nephews the De Veres as well as William Smith O'Brien and the Knight of Glin.¹²¹ At one particular meeting, the Knight of Glin referred to the fact that out of £9,800 that was sanctioned by the Board of Works for the barony of Shanid only £450 had been granted to Glin, where there were eight hundred households. Although Lord Monteagle sympathised with the lack of sufficient employment for the people of Glin, he obviously continued to prioritise directing funds towards his own locality, as he immediately proposed a motion that a sum of £200 be given to finish the Chapel Hill road in Shanagolden.¹²²

The transition from public works to the outdoor provision of food was not always smooth, or delivered in a timely fashion, leaving many without any aid for months. De Vere was an engineer of public works in the barony of Kenry when he wrote the cessation of works in such a manner constituted a 'cruel injustice'.¹²³ The poorest electoral divisions were frequently the last ones to open soup kitchens. A notice calling for a meeting of dismissed labourers in De Vere's district showed that they were opposed to out-door relief. 'Who is the man who will suffer himself to be treated to a pound of Indian meal, or the dregs of a soup-kitchen, so long as his healthy constitution enables him to earn and support his family, independently of the crouching charity dispensed by those unfeeling committees who are unacquainted with the distress which prevails in the country.' The compulsory reductions in the number of people employed on the public works in March and April 1847 resulted in a period of intermittent disturbances and outrages in some parts of Ireland. Clare, Cork, Limerick and Galway all had a high level of dependency on external relief agencies, and these counties experienced the most frequent disturbances, although

¹²⁰ *Limerick Chronicle* 21 Nov. 1846.

¹²¹ Gerard Curtin, *A Pauper Warren, West Limerick 1845-49* (Cork, 2000), p. 84. *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 Nov. 1846.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ De Vere, diary entry, no date given, 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5061.

isolated instances did occur elsewhere. A report in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* in March 1847 described an incident in which the workhouse in Rathkeale, Co. Limerick, the workhouse serving Kenry, was broken into, by ‘persons discharged from the public works’ who were in search of food.¹²⁴ While most of the disturbances occurred in the period between January 1847 and May 1847, i.e. the conclusion of the public works and the opening of the soup kitchens, some were a response to the provision of relief in the form of cooked rather than uncooked food. Kinealy has suggested that the continuation of these disturbances even after the new system of relief had come into operation indicates that they became absorbed into a more general set of grievances.¹²⁵

The disbandment of public works in Limerick resulted in public disturbances and many ‘tumultuous meetings’ being held. These occasionally led to the plundering of food stores. The police were usually called to put down these disturbances although occasionally they required reinforcement from the military.¹²⁶ These disturbances continued throughout the county even after soup kitchens had been opened. The Relief Commissioners attributed this to the fact that cooked food was ‘extremely unpopular with all classes’.¹²⁷ In one incident in Limerick city the soup boilers in one kitchen were ‘smashed to atoms’ and a meeting room of the relief committee was broken into and all documents and papers therein were destroyed. When the ringleader was arrested, the crowd attacked the local barracks with stones. This resulted in shots being fired into the crowd.¹²⁸ The attacks on the soup kitchens occasionally became interwoven with more general outrages. One newspaper – admittedly the conservative *Saunders’s Newsletter* – believed a general state of lawlessness existed in Limerick and Clare.¹²⁹ Additional troops were dispatched to the troubled areas and in May the County lieutenant issued a proclamation of ‘caution and admonition’.¹³⁰ The delays in opening the soup kitchens were invariably blamed on the local relief committees. Some were accused by the Relief Commissioners of being apathetic. Others, however, were regarded as being

¹²⁴ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 31 Mar. 1847.

¹²⁵ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 144.

¹²⁶ From *Saunders’s Newsletter*, reprinted in *Northern Whig*, 15 May 1847.

¹²⁷ *Second report from Relief Commissioners*, p. 5.

¹²⁸ From *Saunders’s Newsletter*, reprinted in *Northern Whig*, 15 May 1847.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Northern Whig*, 15 May 1847; *The Times*, 7 Jan. 1847.

unwilling to introduce a system of outdoor relief which had the effect of ‘feeding vast numbers of able-bodied men, who will be kept in idleness’.¹³¹

In March, 1847, De Vere wrote to his uncle, Lord Monteagle, that ‘a great social revolution has occurred - the bubble has burst and the false position in which Ireland has been for years is now laid bare.’¹³² De Vere was of course correct in his assessment of the situation. But the ‘false position’ on which Ireland stood had been a matter of necessity for those too poor to allow for any significant diversification of their consumption patterns. Overdependence on the potato, the widespread system of subdivision, and generally high levels of poverty that already existed, predisposed the population at large to vulnerability in the face of any disaster.¹³³ De Vere agreed with his father’s proposal that an improved system of agricultural education could help prevent distress.¹³⁴ But he saw that as a long-term solution, while an urgent response was required, ‘the organisation of that improved system would be the work of years, while starvation is but the work of days’.¹³⁵

This appears to be point at which Stephen de Vere turned to emigration as the best solution for the problem of Irish poverty. Emigration of the poor in particular had by that time come to be seen as an ‘an economic and social safety valve’, the writings of Thomas Malthus were of course influential in this regard, and many people began to consider emigration as a means of preserving social order at a minimum cost.¹³⁶ But that is not to say it was not a controversial issue in nineteenth-century Ireland. Even at the height of the massive outward movement in the 1840s, the official agencies of public opinion were at best ambivalent and mostly opposed to emigration. The *Limerick Reporter* described emigration as ‘an evil without parallel, except that presented by the wild excesses of those exterminating tyrants who glory

¹³¹ Christine Kinealy, *The Great Calamity – The Irish Famine, 1845-52* (Dublin, 1994), p. 147

¹³² De Vere to Monteagle, 13 Mar. 1847. De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053.

¹³³ Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved, A quantitative and analytical history of the Irish economy, 1800-1850*, (London, 1983), p. 260. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, (New Jersey, 2016), p. 405.

¹³⁴ 1847 (737) (737-II) Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence, pp 509-512.

¹³⁵ De Vere to Monteagle, 13 March 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053.

¹³⁶ Gerald J. Lyne, *The Lansdowne Estate in Kerry under the agency of William Steuart Trench 1849-72* (Dublin, 2001), p. 31.

in eliminating the people from the soil.¹³⁷ Landlord assisted emigration in particular was ‘generally condemned as a conspiracy to exterminate the Irish race’.¹³⁸

De Vere believed that emigration was one of the few practical solutions to the overwhelming distress, and he seems to have been motivated by humane concerns. He was of the opinion that a combined effort by the state, landlords, and the population generally was necessary in order to ‘locate elsewhere the hands that cannot here be paid for their labour and the mouths that cannot be fed.’¹³⁹ Sir Robert Gore-Booth, a fellow landlord, whose holdings, namely Lissadell and Ballymote, were based in north Sligo appears to have shared many of De Vere’s opinions in this regard. He was active in a number of private relief schemes, and supported assisted emigration as a means of Famine relief. He had actively funded and supported assisted emigration schemes in the pre-Famine years, but intensified these efforts as the situation in Ireland worsened. Gore-Booth collaborated with Lords Palmerston and Enniskillen in March 1847 to purchase two hundred tons of Indian meal which was distributed amongst tenants on their estates. He also assisted tenants on the properties of his neighbours, Sir Gilbert King, Capt. Michael Kelly and Charles Gore Jones, when the situation on their estates became critical.¹⁴⁰

Members of the ‘Shannon Estuary Group’, of which the De Vere brothers were considered to be members, also supported the idea of assisted emigration. It was advocated by Lords Dunraven and Monteagle, Sir Richard Bourke and William Monsell.¹⁴¹ The Famine increased both the urgency of the ‘overpopulation’ problem and the possibility of carrying out estate reform. The Irish landlord lobby led by Monteagle and Godley received increased attention at Westminster. Monteagle was instrumental in establishing the Select Committee on Colonisation from Ireland in 1847,¹⁴² which resulted in Limerick, along with Dublin, becoming one of the chief ports for landlord-assisted emigration in Ireland. Monsell, for his part, believed that the authorities should promote emigration to the colonies so as to meet the need for

¹³⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 25 Feb. 1842.

¹³⁸ Lyne, *The Lansdowne Estate*, p. 31.

¹³⁹ De Vere to Monteagle, 13 Mar., 1847, De Vere papers, T.C.D. MS. 5053.

¹⁴⁰ Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth*, pp 22-26.

¹⁴¹ Potter, *William Monsell*, p. 36.

¹⁴² Gerard P. Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor: assisted emigration to North America in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2004), p. 60.

labourers there, and at the same time relieve the distress in Ireland.¹⁴³ As political consensus in favour of the principle of assisted emigration grew, the issue became a feature in numerous reports of royal commissions and select committees, and even in prime ministerial plans.¹⁴⁴

The population of Ireland had risen exponentially during the early nineteenth century. Most economists agreed that Ireland suffered from chronic ‘overpopulation’, but they disagreed on the practicability of addressing the problem through emigration.¹⁴⁵ Monsell believed that over-population was the most significant social problem in Ireland. The Shannon Estuary Group, including De Vere, Sir Richard Bourke, Lords Dunraven, Adare and Monteagle, supported assisted emigration schemes.¹⁴⁶ There was no general consensus among politicians and economists regarding this solution. Early in the century many economists, including Malthus and McCulloch, argued that assistance for emigration was a palliative rather than a cure, and an expensive palliative at that. However, both writers endorsed state assistance for emigration during the Irish Famine.¹⁴⁷

David Fitzpatrick has stated that Ireland under the Union was a place which people wanted to leave, and ‘to the nineteenth-century mind, if not the Irish nationalist mind, emigration seemed a good thing.’¹⁴⁸ There is evidence of tenants who wished to emigrate petitioning the landlord or agent for assistance.¹⁴⁹ Monteagle assisted hundreds of people to emigrate from west Limerick between 1838 and 1858. P. Danaher is one example of the men whose emigration to Australia had been assisted by Monteagle. Monteagle had put forward funds to allow Danaher and his two sisters to travel to Australia. Danaher offered to repay some of this money, and on behalf of his sisters, expressed their sincere thanks to both Lord and Lady Monteagle.¹⁵⁰ Lady Monteagle was known to have attempted to circumvent the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners’ regulations in order to keep extended

¹⁴³ Potter, *William Monsell of Tervoe*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration*, p.14; Report from the select committee of the House of Lords on colonisation from Ireland, H.C., 1847 (737) vi, 332-44.

¹⁴⁵ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: a new economic history, 1780-1939* (Oxford, 1995), p.6.

¹⁴⁶ Potter, *William Monsell*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration*, p.14.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ McEntee, ‘Pecuniary assistance for poverty and emigration: the politics of landed estate management and philanthropy in mid-nineteenth century Ireland’ in *Philanthropy in nineteenth century Ireland*, pp 142 -126.

¹⁵⁰ Danaher to Monteagle, 20 March, 1848, NLI, Monteagle correspondence, MS 13400 (2).

families together.¹⁵¹ In Danaher's letter to Monteagle he makes a number of references to extended groups of relatives that he encountered and that Monteagle had previously assisted to emigrate.¹⁵² Monteagle received over a hundred similar letters from writers who, like Danaher, seemed genuine in their appreciation. They wrote to seek Monteagle's assistance with helping their family members to join them in Australia, and often included funds with their letters for this purpose.¹⁵³ Altruism was not the sole motivation for the Monteagles and other landlords who acted similarly in this regard. Their estate benefited from the reduction of surplus labours during times of extreme distress.¹⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick has stated that 'one might marvel at the ingenuity with which the Monteagles manipulated a flawed system and with which their beneficiaries forged a livelihood in Australia and coaxed out their kinsfolk to form family networks in unfamiliar surroundings'.¹⁵⁵ Estate-driven emigration has been described as 'fundamentally antagonistic to the tenantry, even to those who were relatively healthy, young or behind in rent payments.'¹⁵⁶ Such emigration was often motivated by a desire to reduce the 'surplus' population, and re-organise the estate lands. Lord Dufferin referred to a landlord 'weeding his property of men whose want of energy, or skill or capital renders them incapable of doing their duty by their farms' and upheld his right to 'replace them by more suitable tenants'. Trench appeared to support this assertion when in reference to emigration from the Bath estate in Monaghan in 1852 he stated that

The great and marked difference between the emigration off this estate and that which is purely voluntary is that in our case none but paupers are going. We have not lost one single man I should wish to keep ... Other estates where no assistance is given (and where emigration has at all set in) retain their paupers, whilst all the respectable tenants are moving off.¹⁵⁷

Within Ireland, the strongest advocacy of controlled emigration came from landlords and their agents. Before the Famine, they found their estates increasingly cluttered with squatters, smallholders and their surplus children. De Vere's father gave evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization

¹⁵¹ Robin F. Haines, *Emigration and the Labouring Poor, Australian Recruitment in Britain and Ireland, 1831-60* (New York, 1997), p. 315.

¹⁵² Danaher to Monteagle, 20 March, 1848, NLI, Monteagle correspondence, MS 13400 (2).

¹⁵³ Haines, *Emigration and the Labouring Poor*, p. 95.

¹⁵⁴ Haines, *Emigration and the Labouring Poor*, 95.

¹⁵⁵ Fitzpatrick, 'Thomas Spring Rice and the Peopling of Australia', p. 47.

¹⁵⁶ Duffy, "'Disencumbering our crowded places'", p.86.

¹⁵⁷ LH, Bath papers, Trench correspondence, annual report, 1 March 1852 quoted in Duffy, "'Disencumbering our crowded places'", p.87.

from Ireland in 1847. He reported that distress had almost been universal in the barony of Kenry in County Limerick where he resided. He knew of only one or two exceptions in which the potatoes did not fail. De Vere's father stated that in the region he was familiar with the amount of surplus labour was enormous, and in ordinary times labourers were only employed for approximately 140 days of the year. He stated that he believed that an official scheme of emigration was the only possible solution to the distress.¹⁵⁸ These 'redundant' inhabitants generated little or no income for the proprietor and were at risk of becoming charges on the estate as pensioners or paupers. They constituted a turbulent element in society and made it impracticable to complete the restricting of estates which many 'improving' or 'progressive' landlords desired.¹⁵⁹ Many landlords, therefore, advocated the removal of entire family units to distant destinations, until the 'optimum' population for estate reform had been reached. Although the landlord was often liable for the total cost of emigration, it was still considered by some to be a more attractive alternative than the provision of support for a pauper by payment of the poor-rate. Clearly, in some instances assisted emigration proved to be beneficial for both tenant and landlord and altruistic motives were undoubtedly what motivated some individuals who fulfilled such obligations as part of an estate management policy.¹⁶⁰ But the case of twenty-eight tenants on the Shirley estate who, in 1849, refused to emigrate, and were then evicted, highlights the sharp imbalance of power between both parties, and the stark choice which many tenants found themselves confronted with emigration or eviction.¹⁶¹

In 1845 Daniel O'Connell rejected the notion that there was a 'surplus population', he protested that it seemed 'to be taken for granted that man is a nuisance'. O'Connell asserted that 'emigration was not a remedy' as the holdings vacated by emigrants were 'filled with great rapidity'.¹⁶² But there does not appear to have been a high level of consistency with regard to the views of nationalists on emigration. In 1837 O'Connell had called for state assistance for emigrants while,

¹⁵⁸ Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence. Session 1847, pp 509 -512.

¹⁵⁹ McEntee, 'Pecuniary assistance for poverty and emigration: the politics of landed estate management and philanthropy in mid-nineteenth century Ireland' in *Philanthropy in nineteenth century Ireland*, p. 131

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Patrick J. Duffy, Assisted emigration from the Shirley estate 1843-54. *Clogher Record*, XIV (2) (1992), pp 7-62.

¹⁶² Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration*, p.16.

William Smith O'Brien, along with De Vere's father, was a strong advocate of state colonisation as a means of dealing with Irish poverty.¹⁶³ In the post-Famine period, De Vere continued to view emigration as a positive means of relieving distress, and also of promoting Catholicism in other countries. However, while De Vere took this positive view, nationalist rhetoric hardened against support of emigration, which had become associated with clearances and extermination.¹⁶⁴ The Catholic clergy was equally inconsistent and often conflicted with regard to the subject of emigration. Before the Famine Fr. Mathew, Bishop Doyle and other influential churchmen had voiced their support of some forms of emigration but as priests grew alarmed at the demoralisation and depletion of their congregations, their condemnation became more pronounced.¹⁶⁵ Emigration also promoted the growth of Catholicism (and Irish nationalism) in Britain and the New World. In practice, the clergy suspended their scruples in individual cases. Many priests in the west of Ireland participated in Vere Foster's scheme of assistance for female emigration during the early 1880s. A number of clergymen in Ireland, as well as America, promoted schemes for 'Catholic colonisation' in Minnesota and elsewhere.¹⁶⁶ Clerical opposition to emigration was largely directed against evicting landlords who preferred 'cattle to Christians', and state assistance of family emigration which tended 'only to promote disaffection amongst the Irish race at home and abroad'.¹⁶⁷

Resident landlords such as the De Veres were perceived, to some extent, in a more positive light than absentees. While, as previously noted, absenteeism did not automatically mean a badly managed estate, it was felt in some sectors that the physical presence in the locality of a landlord would result in greater benefits for the tenantry. This was not always the case, and in some instances the presence of a landlord on one of his estates, such as Dunraven's on his Limerick property, resulted in his being an absentee from his estates in Wales. In the case of the De Veres, and Stephen De Vere in particular, residence did seem to involve a greater interest in the welfare of tenants. He sought to engage with the Catholic poor of his district to a

¹⁶³ *Limerick Herald*, 17 Jan. 1833, *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Jan. 1833

¹⁶⁴ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (Oxford, 1985), p. 394.

¹⁶⁵ Cited by D. Fitzpatrick, 'The Irish in Britain', in *A New History of Ireland*, vol. VI, Ireland under the Union, Part II, 1870-1921, ed. W.E. Vaughan (Oxford, 1996), p. 629.

¹⁶⁶ Hilary M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801-1908*, (Cambridge, 2011) p.308. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

degree which was not typical of the members of his class. His involvement, through his assistance at the local school, as agent for his father's estate, and as an engineer of public works, ensured that he had a clear knowledge of the level of distress in his locality. He was challenged in 1845 for his suggestion that crime in the district could be resolved through the implementation of an improved system of education and the encouragement of temperance. This was considered by those who disagreed with him as representing a long-term solution to an immediate problem. In 1847 as De Vere himself acknowledged in a letter to Monteagle, an improved system of agricultural education was not the solution to the overwhelming distress which they were by then faced with addressing: 'the organisation of that improved system would be the work of years, while starvation is but the work of days'.¹⁶⁸ However, in what was perhaps an element of his paternalistic attitude, De Vere even at that stage, still saw a benefit in encouraging temperance? His benign paternalism was to become much more apparent in the journey he made with a party of emigrants from Limerick through Canada in 1847, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁶⁸ De Vere to Monteagle, 13 March 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053.

Chapter 3: Canada

In 1833 De Vere's father, Aubrey, seconded William Smith O'Brien's motion to establish the Limerick Emigrant's Friends Society. Smith O'Brien asserted that he believed the government should be responsible for taking some measures to support emigrants so they could avoid the 'disappointments and suffering' experienced by previous emigrants. The aim of the society proposed by Smith O'Brien was to provide emigrants with accurate information regarding their chosen destinations. De Vere's father stated that emigration was 'the most valuable means of mitigating the distress which is so prevalent in this country.'¹ The Society enjoyed cross-denominational support. The secretary of the Society, Rev. Michael Keating of Limerick city, hoped that that the society would eventually co-operate with the Colonial Office, and become involved in a broader scheme of mass colonisation. The Society was short-lived, and was no longer in operation by the height of Famine era emigration from Limerick.² However, one can see how De Vere's interest in emigration, and the welfare of emigrants, may have been influenced by his father's involvement in such a body.

By 1846 the Commissioners for Emigration were considering implementing changes to the 1842 passenger legislation, as the emigration system and shipping trade had been pushed to their limits during the Irish Famine crisis. Grey issued an instruction to the commissioners that no serious abuses were to be ignored, but nothing should be put in the way of the exodus from Ireland.³ Thomas Frederick Elliot, agent-general for emigration and a member of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission was in favour of the introduction of more stringent provisions for passenger protection at that time, but he also judged that the sufferings on board the ships would be nothing compared to the misery they would suffer if they did not embark on the journey.⁴ Elliot was keen to distance himself from the high mortality rate that occurred during the emigration of 1847, and regularly

¹ *Limerick Herald*, 17 Jan. 1833, *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Jan. 1833.

² Sarah Roddy, *Population, providence and empire. The churches and emigration from nineteenth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2014), p. 24.

³ Margaret Ray, 'Administering emigration: Thomas Elliot and government-assisted emigration from Britain to Australia 1831-1885' (PhD thesis, Durham University, 2001), p. 179.

⁴ Colonial Land and Emigration Commission. Seventh general report of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners. 1847. British Parliamentary Papers, 1847 (809) XXXIII.

stressed that fever was carried on to vessels, and not a result of shipboard conditions.⁵ Nevertheless, he was occasionally receptive to advice and proposals. Elliot had become acquainted with De Vere through his friendship with De Vere's brother Aubrey.⁶ De Vere decided to travel to Quebec in steerage class so 'that he might speak as a witness respecting the sufferings of emigrants'.⁷ Elliot proposed that he should provide a full account of the voyage and make proposals for tackling the 'evils'.⁸

Following a service at the Catholic Church in Pallaskenry, county Limerick, on 17 March 1847, what was described as the 'great majority of the inhabitants' of the village, or a crowd estimated to have amounted to over five-thousand people by the *Limerick Reporter*, assembled on the fair-green of Stone Hall (now Kilcornan) and travelled the distance of just over a mile to Curragh Chase.⁹ Their purpose was to address Stephen De Vere, as they had become aware of his intention to travel to Canada, and they wished to request that he would re-consider his decision. The *Limerick Reporter* stated that 'noting could be more affecting than the sorrow that pervaded every countenance, portraying their grief at the loss they felt at parting with the best friend the poor man ever had; the protector of the widow and the orphan, and the upright magistrate'.¹⁰ The address was from the overseers and labourers on the public works schemes in the barony of Kenry. It stated that his absence would be felt most sorely by the 'widow and orphan, to whom you have been a protector and a friend', but also by the public at large. De Vere was described as a 'benign influence' of peace in the barony.¹¹

In response De Vere outlined his plans to travel to Canada in order that he might be able to guide a future movement, on an extensive scale, of emigration or colonization for the benefit of the country.¹² De Vere asked the audience assembled at Pallaskenry on that day to be patient and obey the law, continue to impart the

⁵ Oliver MacDonagh, *A pattern of Government growth, 1800-60; the Passenger Acts and their enforcement* (London, 1961), p. 193.

⁶ Ray, 'Administering emigration: Thomas Elliot', p. 179.

⁷ Monteagle to Grey, 23 Jan. 1848, Monteagle papers, NLI., MS 13, 400.

⁸ *First Report of the Select Committee on Colonisation, Ireland*, B.P.P. 1847-8 (415) XVII, p. 44.

⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 02 Apr. 1847; *Freeman's Journal*, 23 Mar. 1847.

¹⁰ *Limerick Reporter*, 02 Apr. 1847.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Limerick Reporter*, 21 Mar. 1847.

blessing of education to their children and to adhere to their temperance pledges.¹³ De Vere had previously advocated avoiding alcohol, and had subscribed to the Fr Matthew testimonial in January 1843, four years prior to his conversion to Catholicism.¹⁴ It was reported that De Vere produced a deep impression on the minds of his audience through his fervour and the ‘sincere feelings he exhibited for the benefit of his poorer fellow-countrymen.’¹⁵ At the end of his address, it is reported that many members of the audience burst into tears and simultaneously knelt down ‘to give the benevolent and enterprising gentleman their blessing’.¹⁶ The scene was described in the *Limerick Reporter* as being far from an ‘everyday occurrence’, but it proved that ‘when one of the gentry feels and acts for his fellow men, as Mr De Vere does feel and has acted, he will be idolised by a grateful and impulsive people.’¹⁷ The emotional response of the audience may have been exaggerated for journalistic effect, but could also be viewed as the reaction of a people in search of any form of relief, or potential solution to their on-going distress. In the same year, De Vere’s father had described the failure of the potato crop in their district as being almost universal.¹⁸ In addressing a large crowd in this way, and informing them of his intentions, De Vere is likely to have succeeded in gaining popular support in the locality, but one cannot say with certainty whether or not this was motivated by his desire to pursue a political career in the aftermath of the Famine. But his actions during this period certainly served to promote his reputation as a liberal philanthropist. In the British press and in parliament there were frequent expressions of resentment regarding the arrival of poor and often diseased emigrants who had been evicted from their homes in Ireland. In driving their pauper tenants across to Britain, Irish landlords were widely held to be planning on taking advantage of the English poor law system – something that was often seen as Irish landlords shifting their burden onto the shoulders of British taxpayers.¹⁹ In 1847 Irish landlords were accused of being primarily responsible for having allowed the country ‘to sink to its present awful state’.²⁰ The Lancashire cotton manufacturer and Quaker John Bright

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 19 Jan., 1843.

¹⁵ *Limerick Reporter*, 21 Mar. 1847.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Wexford Independent*, 27 Mar. 1847.

¹⁸ 1847 (737) (737-II) *Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1847, p. 28.

¹⁹ *Times*, 20 Apr. 1847.

²⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 3 Apr. 1847.

declared that Irish landed proprietors, with ‘some brilliant exceptions’, were ‘for the most part... beggared’, ‘almost universally despised, and to a large extent detested’.²¹ De Vere was one of the exceptions to this rule, and he was widely praised for his efforts to draw attention to the conditions which emigrants were forced to endure.²²

Catholic colony

Although North America was depicted as being the land of opportunities and resources, French Canada was often perceived by English-speaking travellers as being quaint and romantic, and often condemned as being old-fashioned, and stultified by Catholicism.²³ As De Vere hoped to create a colony for Irish Catholics, this is likely to have been an attractive factor in his case. De Vere’s support for the idea of a Catholic colony was shared by some members of the Catholic hierarchy, particularly in Canada and America, during the nineteenth century, many bishops, such as Matthias Loras, Bishop of Dubuque, overseeing their own colonization schemes.²⁴ If adherents of the Catholic faith were to settle in rural areas, it was deemed necessary that they be concentrated in colonies where their spiritual needs could be adequately met.²⁵ The primary reason for the popularity of these schemes was the belief that they would prevent existing members of the church from losing their faith. It was also argued that the Church could only afford to provide people with churches, schools, hospitals and other facilities if they were in concentrated groups.²⁶ The presence in the colony of a priest, a church and school, however humble, would indeed guarantee the settlers’ spiritual solace, but would also provide them with a sense of social cohesion and of community to help sustain them during the arduous beginnings of the colony.²⁷ Only such all-Catholic settlements, which were cared for by the Church, would be free from the dangers of succumbing to the

²¹ Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (eds.) *Fearful Realities, New perspectives of the Famine* (Dublin, 1996). James S. Donnelly Jr., ‘Irish property must pay for Irish poverty’ British public opinion and the Great Irish Famine, p 72. *Illustrated London News*, 12 Jan. 1850.

²² Pauline Collombier-Lakeman, ‘The Canadian Press and the Great Irish Famine: The Famine as an Irish, Canadian & Imperial, Global Issue’, <http://mimmoc.revues.org/1787> [Accessed on 23 Aug. 2015].

²³ Jennifer Speake, *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopaedia*, (New York, 2003) p. 180

²⁴ Deirdre M. Moloney, *American Catholic Lay Groups and Transatlantic Social Reform in the Progressive Era*, (Carolina, 2002), p. 75-76.

²⁵ Moloney, *American Catholic Lay Groups*, p. 75-76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Marvin Richard O’Conner, *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church*, (Minnesota, 1988), p.143.

surrounding population of Protestants and unbelievers.²⁸ The idea of the creation of a Catholic settlement in Canada was discussed in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, although not opposed to the idea, it was strongly suggested that such an enterprise could only be successfully attempted if Catholic Irish emigrants were accompanied by their ‘natural leaders’, members of the Catholic clergy.²⁹

Between 1838 and 1839 a number of Irish immigrants, primarily from Cork and Limerick, settled near Dubuque in the mid-western American state of Iowa, in a region that eventually came to be known as Garryowen, named after the neighbourhood in Limerick city to reflect the community’s Irish heritage.³⁰ The instigator of the foundation of this Catholic community was Loras, Bishop of Dubuque. Garryowen was soon almost entirely populated by Catholics, and a church, St. Patrick’s, was constructed in 1840. By 1842 the congregation amounted to six hundred people. The community eventually prospered, and a small number of other Catholic parishes sprang up around it.³¹ An article in the *Catholic Advocate*, which was reprinted in the *Limerick Reporter*, provided a positive account of the settlement. With regard to the scheme, the article stated, ‘What a prospect for the Catholics in the far west! What an inducement to emigrants to select this country as their home, where they will find combined together the richness of the soil, the healthiness of the climate and the benefits of religion.’³² Given the Limerick connection, it is possible that initiatives such as this might have influenced De Vere’s ambitious plans to establish a Catholic colony in Canada in 1847. A report in the *Tipperary Free Press* which was described as having been provided by a ‘respectable correspondent’ described a Catholic settlement in St Sylvester, near Quebec. The author of the piece recounted ‘the spectacle I have every day before me of Irish energy, prosperity, and unalterable piety, among the wild woods of Canada’ – an ideal which very likely to have appealed to De Vere.³³

The Catholic colony De Vere envisioned for Irish emigrants in Canada never came to fruition. Although De Vere did not explicitly state the reasons for this

²⁸ Moloney, *American Catholic Lay Groups*, p. 75-76.

²⁹ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 21 Apr. 1847.

³⁰ Mary Gilbert Kelly, ‘Irish Catholic Colonies and Colonization Projects in United States, 1795-1860’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 29, No. 115 (Sep., 1940), pp 447-465.

³¹ Gilbert Kelly, ‘Irish Catholic Colonies’, *An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 29, No. 115 (Sep., 1940), pp 447-465.

³² *Limerick Reporter*, 30 Oct. 1840.

³³ *Tipperary Free Press*, 26 Aug. 1846.

failure, one might surmise that his funding model played a large role in the downfall of his plan. It was essentially based on convincing wealthy Catholic landowners in England to purchase tracts of land in remote regions of Canada, which Irish Catholic emigrants could then cultivate, farm, and on which they could form communities.³⁴ But the fact that it was De Vere, as a lay Catholic convert, rather than a Bishop, or another high-ranking member of the clergy, who hoped to establish a colony, may also have significantly contributed to the failure of his proposal. The British newspapers from the period in question consulted in the completion of this study do not contain any reference whatever to De Vere's efforts to raise funds for this endeavour, although he may have pursued his objective privately.

Although the Catholic colony never materialised, it was a significant factor in De Vere's decision to travel to Canada. The report he subsequently produced which referred to the process of emigration not only drew political and popular attention to the plight of emigrants at the time, but it now represents one of the most important sources of information for historians of Irish Famine migrants. Kerby Miller wrote that one 'cannot study modern Ireland without realising the central importance of massive, sustained emigration.'³⁵ The actual process of emigration, the risks which people undertook, the social and financial cost, as well as the psychological impact, are all important factors which are also worthy of consideration. Before the Famine, most of the emigration from Ireland had been to Britain but over the course of the nineteenth century, America became the destination of choice for emigrants. This was partly to do with the coincidence of a trade depression in Britain with the most critical years of the Famine. In Britain also, despite the Act of Union, a provision under both the English and Scottish Poor Laws meant that Irish immigrants could be 'removed' back to Ireland unless they could prove five years' residence in the country, and this may have been a deterrent for some.³⁶ The poorest and most destitute often opted to sail to Canadian ports, as the passage was substantially cheaper than that to Boston or New York.³⁷ The greater volume of emigrants led to higher death rates in Canadian quarantine facilities, some Canadian cities having

³⁴ De Vere Diary entry, dated 10 Sept. 1849, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053.

³⁵ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, p. 3.

³⁶ Frank Neal, 'The English Poor Law, the Irish Migrant and the Laws of Removal and Settlement, 1819-79', in D. George Boyce and Roger Swift (eds), *Problems and Perspectives in Irish History Since 1800* (Dublin, 2004), pp 95-106.

³⁷ Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p.146.

greater numbers of destitute people to accommodate in poorhouses and hospitals than Boston and New York combined did in 1847.³⁸

Travelling conditions for emigrants

In 1836 De Vere's father had stated that emigration from his locality went on constantly, and Canada was the preferred destination.³⁹ So it was likely that some social networks for Limerick emigrants had already been established there, and it was also a more financially viable option for most people. The combination of these factors is likely to have influenced De Vere's decision to choose that destination in particular. In order to gain an accurate insight into the conditions endured by typical emigrants on long voyages, De Vere is said to have concealed his true identity, and travelled in steerage class. Joan Wynne Jones in her memoir, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase, A big house remembered*, stated that while aboard the ship he 'dressed poorly in a frieze coat like his fellow passengers',⁴⁰ but she does not provide a reference for this information. The accuracy of Wynne Jones' depiction of his voyage is questionable: she also reported that De Vere was once put in irons by the captain, but he makes no mention of this at any stage in his diaries or letters.⁴¹ Nevertheless, making a voyage to Canada at that time was a significant undertaking. Although developments in shipping had made the journey to Canada faster, safer and cheaper than it had been in previous years, it was still the case that the length of a voyage could vary dramatically with the weather conditions. An average voyage to Quebec in 1843 took forty-four days, with the shortest at twenty-seven days and the longest eighty-eight. A long voyage usually meant shortages of water and food and caused increased suffering for many sick and starving emigrants during the Famine years.⁴²

De Vere's letter on the conditions he witnessed and experienced on board the ship on which he travelled to Canada has been widely discussed elsewhere. Sections of it have been reprinted in popular history books, as well as scholarly works.⁴³ On

³⁸ Margaret M. Mulrooney (ed.), *Fleeing the Famine: North America and Irish Refugees, 1845-1851*, (Connecticut, 2003), p.14.

³⁹1836 Poor inquiry (Ireland). Appendix (C.)--Parts I. and II. Part I. Reports on the state of the poor, and on the charitable institutions in some of the principal towns, pp 224-228.

⁴⁰ Wynn Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase*, pp 12-13.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mulrooney (ed.), *Fleeing the Famine*, p.14.

⁴³ Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, (Boston, 1999), p.137, Erik Durschmied, *The Weather Factor: How Nature Has Changed History*, (London, 2000), p. 58, Robert

occasion, details pertaining to De Vere's personal life which are printed to accompany the text are incorrect. Kathryn Miles wrote in *All standing – The remarkable story of the Jeanie Johnston, the Legendary Irish Famine Ship*, that at the time of his voyage to Canada, De Vere was a 'baron of considerable wealth and advancing age'.⁴⁴ As the younger son of an aristocratic family, he was certainly wealthier than his travelling companions, but at the time of his departure, he was renting a large farm, Cowpark, which was adjacent to his family's estate, and worked as his father's agent. He was also only thirty-five years old.⁴⁵ The diaries that De Vere kept during his voyage to Canada, provide some of the most detailed descriptions of the conditions that existed in steerage class on what were later termed 'coffin ships'.⁴⁶ Other Famine diaries, such as those attributed to Gerald Keegan, a schoolteacher, and to a Protestant gentleman, Robert Whyte, have been the subject of scrutiny, and their authenticity has been questioned. It has been asserted that they are in fact based on details provided by De Vere.⁴⁷ While De Vere had visited the cabins of the poor in his locality, one might easily assume that, given his social background, he had not previously endured living conditions comparable to those experienced by the other passengers in steerage class. However, the discomfort and indignity that De Vere was likely to have encountered paled in comparison to the risk he took of contracting a potentially fatal disease, such as typhus or cholera.⁴⁸

Although De Vere recorded the names of his travelling companions, he did not clarify his prior relationship or connection to them. De Vere wrote that he travelled with Pat O'Neill and his wife, J. Hanly, Tom Hanly, Roger Kennedy, J. Fitzpatrick and Johnny McDonnagh. The group has variously been described as a

B. Edgerton, *The Balance of Human Kindness and Cruelty: Why We are the Way We Are* (2005), p. 162, Edward Wakin, *Enter the Irish-American* (Lincoln, 1976), p.26, James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Gloucestershire, 2001), p.180, Magnús Magnússon, *Landlord or Tenant? A View of Irish History* (London, 1978), p. 91. Brendan Ó Cathaoir, *Famine Diary* (Dublin, 1999), p. 120, E. Margaret Crawford, (ed.) *The Hungry Stream: Essays on Emigration and Famine*, (Belfast, 1997), p. 21.

⁴⁴ Kathryn Miles, *All standing – The remarkable story of the Jeanie Johnston the Legendary Irish Famine Ship* (New York, 2013), p.69.

⁴⁵ De Vere diary, (no date given) 1847, TCD 5072.

⁴⁶ From "Coffin Ship" to "Atlantic Greyhound", *The Irish Review* (Dublin) Vol. 3, No. 36 (Feb., 1914), pp 609-613.

⁴⁷ Mark McGowan, 'Famine, Facts and Fabrication: An Examination of Diaries from the Irish Famine Migration to Canada', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Fall, 2007), pp 48-55.

⁴⁸ Joseph Robins, *The Miasma: Epidemic and Panic in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1995), pp 161-162.

party of agriculturalists, and as De Vere's household labourers.⁴⁹ De Vere also described them as 'those in whom [he] took much interest' which might be taken to indicate that his relationship with members of the group was closer than that of employer and employee.⁵⁰ On the night before their departure from London, De Vere dined on shore with his uncle, Sir Stephen Spring Rice. This was likely to have been one of the last enjoyable meals that De Vere had before he reached Canada as he later reported that it was almost impossible to cook food properly on board, as the cooking place was badly constructed.⁵¹ New Brunswick physicians claimed that the large number of deaths on board vessels carrying Irish emigrants were caused by the unhealthy conditions on the ships, such as impure water, poor diet, and inadequate provisions. The poor cooking arrangements and the provision of food to which the majority of passengers were unaccustomed, have also been identified as a cause of the high rates of death and disease amongst Irish emigrants.⁵² An emigrant from Donegal described his berth as being as hard and narrow as a coffin, and the food provided as consisting of 'a few sea-biscuits that were as hard as a ram's horn'.⁵³ Preparing food on board a ship was difficult at the best of times, even if the proper supplies were carried, which was not usually the case. Cooking and washing were done on deck when the weather permitted. Bad weather meant that often no one was allowed on deck and that no cooking was possible, and on passages across the Atlantic bad weather could be expected.⁵⁴

Many of the advertisements offering passage to Canada or America specified that the ships contained more than adequate supplies of water, fuel and provisions for the voyage.⁵⁵ However De Vere noted that although there was an abundant supply of water on board, the meagre quantity served out to the passengers meant they often had to forgo food and their supply of salt, because they did not have water enough to cook it and simultaneously satisfy their thirst. De Vere stated that on the voyage he undertook, food and water provisions were paid for and arranged in advance, but

⁴⁹ The group were described as 'agriculturalists' in the *Limerick Examiner*, 22 Mar. 1847. De Vere diary, (no date given) 1847, TCD 5072.

⁵⁰ De Vere diary, (no date given) 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁵¹ 1847-48 (415) First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence. Session 1848.

⁵² Mulrooney (ed.), *Fleeing the Famine*, p.14.

⁵³ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, p.355.

⁵⁴ Mulrooney (ed.), *Fleeing the Famine*, p.27.

⁵⁵ *Limerick Reporter*, 17 Jul. 1847, *Cork Examiner*, 25 Mar. 1846, *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 21 Mar. 1846.

were nominally and irregularly supplied. He also claimed that false measures of food and water were used, and one of his first actions upon reaching Quebec was to lodge a complaint against the ship's captain before Andrew Buchanan, the chief immigration agent for Lower Canada.⁵⁶ The recommendations later suggested by De Vere as a means of improving conditions for emigrants, highlighted providing proper stoves, cooking utensils, installing decent privies and raising the minimum supply of water from three to four quarts. He also asserted that the only alcohol on board should be that stipulated for medicinal purposes. As a deeply religious man, and one who was keenly aware of what he judged to be his role in providing moral guidance to the less well off, De Vere was appalled by the behaviour of some of his fellow passengers. He wrote of a complete lack of moral restraint, the absence of prayer, and widespread drunkenness with 'its consequent train of ruffianly debasement' which he believed was not discouraged, as it was the Captain who trafficked the grog, and profited from it. De Vere noted that spirits were sold indiscriminately once or twice a week.⁵⁷ The 1803 Passenger Act stipulated that there was to be no sale of intoxicating liquor on board emigrant ships, on pain of a fine of £100.⁵⁸ De Vere recognised alcohol as being the root of many of society's ills, he was known to have stressed the importance of sobriety when addressing the lower orders.⁵⁹

Of course, for those who undertook the long journey to Canada in steerage class, there were many evident dangers with which they were faced, most notably, the spread of disease. De Vere noted how quickly and dramatically people were affected by the conditions that they had to endure;

Before the emigrant has been a week at sea he is an altered man. How can it be otherwise? Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children, of all ages, from the drivelling idiot of ninety to the babe just born, huddled together without light, without air, wallowing in filth and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart.⁶⁰

In 1842 legislation relating to the transport of passengers decreed that there should be only two tiers of bunks, and there should be a distance of six feet from floor to ceiling, in order to enable adults to stand upright. It was also stipulated that each

⁵⁶ 1847-48 (415) *First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1848, p. 45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Donald MacKay, *Flight from Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada* (Dublin, 2009), p. 218.

⁵⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 21 Mar. 1847.

⁶⁰ 1847-48 (415) *First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1848, p.45.

passenger should have ten square feet of space between decks. This was the legislation that was in place during the Famine years, while it may have been adequate during normal years, it proved to be entirely unfit for purpose during the chaotic era of Famine emigration.⁶¹ De Vere was especially concerned about people who were already suffering with fever lying amongst those who were still healthy. His reference to fever is presumably an allusion to typhus and relapsing fever, as they were together known at the time as ‘Famine fever’, most people not distinguishing between the two.⁶² His worries were not only due to fears concerning the transmission of disease, but the fact that the confines of the bunks were so narrow that those who were ill did not even have room to change position. He wrote that the disease made people restless, and caused them to emit agonised ravings.⁶³ At the time of De Vere’s voyage, emigrant vessels were not required to carry a doctor, so the passengers themselves had to contend with the repercussions if they, or one of their party fell ill.⁶⁴ It has been estimated that over a nine month period in 1847 approximately 5,300 emigrants died *en route* from Ireland to Canada. Over 8,500 others were admitted to a quarantine station when they arrived: 3,400 of those died there, and a further 1,000 died after being released from quarantine in Quebec.⁶⁵ De Vere reported that he saw many passengers remain for days at a time in their dark, cramped berths, as they believed it would help them to suffer less from hunger. He described the beds as being filthy, and ‘teeming with all abominations’, they were never required to be brought on deck and aired. De Vere noted that the sleeping quarters contained ‘a damp and fetid stench’, and as there was not enough clean water to allow for washing, the quarters were never cleaned, until the day before arrival at quarantine ‘when all hands are required to scrub up and put on a fair face for the doctor and government inspector’.⁶⁶ In spite of the dire description provided by De Vere of the passenger’s accommodation, he still argued that it was not death or disease which were the worst consequences of a sub-standard system of emigration, rather it was the ‘utter demoralisation of the passengers’. De Vere

⁶¹ Alexander Murdoch, *British Emigration, 1603-1914* (New York, 2004), p. 105.

⁶² J. N. Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History* (Santa Barbara, 2005) p.239.

⁶³ 1847-48 (415) *First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1848, p.45.

⁶⁴ MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, p. 218.

⁶⁵ Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics*, p.241.

⁶⁶ 1847-48 (415) *First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1848, p.45.

concluded that the filth and debasement which they were subjected to rendered them ‘enfeebled in body and degraded in mind, even though he has the physical power, he has not the heart, nor the will to exert himself.’⁶⁷

Arrival in Canada

Dr George Douglas, the chief resident medical officer at Grosse Ile, believed that ‘the disease was in all cases brought on board the vessels (not generated there), and it found fit subjects in the half-starved miserable wretches who composed the mass’.⁶⁸ He felt that more stringent regulations for the passenger trade would help, but would not eliminate the problem.⁶⁹ While this is true, the attention which De Vere drew to the lack of humanity with which desperate emigrants were treated, conditions which were described as being compared to those in the slave trade, did eventually result in the implementation of reform measures.⁷⁰ De Vere met Douglas in March 1847, and they discussed the various problems which surrounded the entire system of emigration, especially in relation to health and hygiene. Douglas provided De Vere with a set of statistics concerning the years 1833 to 1847 which related to the transmission of cholera and resulting death rates amongst emigrants.⁷¹

The diaries kept by De Vere in 1847 do not include a description of his voyage, but refer to setting sail from Bristol on board the *Birman* on 1 May and recommence with an entry made on 9 June of that year when Newfoundland was first sighted. The diaries which he kept during this period provide some insight into how newly arrived emigrants were treated. On 16 June De Vere described the conditions which existed at the quarantine station, Grosse Ile.⁷² Cholera had made its way from India throughout the British Empire in the early 1830s, and several deadly epidemics struck British North America in the early nineteenth-century. Immigrants, arriving on ships from Britain, often carried the deadly disease into the colony. In 1832, the first cholera outbreak resulted in 5,820 deaths in Lower Canada and 504 in Upper Canada, according to the government’s Board of Health reports.⁷³ In anticipation of the spread of a cholera epidemic from Britain, the Lower Canadian government had

⁶⁷ 1847-48 (415) *First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1848, p.46.

⁶⁸ Quoted in McDonagh, *A pattern of Government Growth*, p. 120.

⁶⁹ Mulroney (ed.), *Fleeing the Famine*, p.14.

⁷⁰ Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, (Boston, 1999), p.137.

⁷¹ De Vere diaries, (no date given) March 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁷² De Vere diary entries, dated 1 May 1847 and 9 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD MS 5072.

⁷³ Alvin Finkel, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada: A History* (Waterloo, 2006), pp 52-53.

established two quarantine hospitals, one at Pointe Levy, across the river from Quebec in 1830, the second at Grosse Ile, down the river from Quebec, the following year.

The arrival of the disease in 1832 led to an expansion of the facilities at Grosse Ile and its designation as a permanent site for inspecting immigrants and detaining those who already displayed symptoms of illness and infection. A typhus epidemic in 1847 killed thousands of immigrants and resulted in the British imposing controls on the accommodation of, and food served to, passengers on ships. These regulations were, however, often poorly enforced, and this resulted in further outbreaks of disease, especially cholera, which proved particularly devastating in Kingston, where it killed twelve hundred of the town's ten thousand residents.⁷⁴ De Vere wrote that the ship he travelled on arrived at Grosse Ile at around seven in the morning, but all aboard were forced to remain there until the doctor could examine them. All of the passengers De Vere travelled with were given a clean bill of health. De Vere wrote that approximately forty ships were detained there, and the daily mortality rate was about one hundred and fifty.⁷⁵ It was reported that 3,238 died at the Grosse Ile quarantine hospital between May 1847 and November 1847.⁷⁶ The ship that De Vere and his companions travelled on was docked at Grosse Ile for two days in June of that year.⁷⁷ It is not possible to confirm if it was the same person, but a man, Pat O'Neill, who shared the same name as one of De Vere's travelling companions, and who had travelled aboard the same ship as De Vere's group, provided an eyewitness statement which was published in *1847, Grosse Ile: A Record of Daily Events* by Andre Charbonneau and Andre Sevigny. O'Neill described the surface of the St. Lawrence River as being 'cluttered with obstacles: mattresses, and fiddles, teapots and trunks, aprons and trousers – all personal effects of fever victims'. He stated that they had been cast aside, either by crew members or fellow passengers, in an effort to 'stave off contagion'.⁷⁸ This clearly indicates the fear that people had of contracting disease, but also gives some insight into the

⁷⁴ Finkel, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada*, pp 52-53.

⁷⁵ De Vere, diary entry, dated 16 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁷⁶ Thomas Stratton, 'Additional notes on the Sickness and Mortality among the Emigrants to Canada in 1847', *The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, Volume 71, (Edinburgh, 1849), p.95.

⁷⁷ De Vere, diary entry, dated 22 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁷⁸ Andre Charbonneau and Andre Sevigny, *1847, Grosse Ile: A record of daily events* (Ottawa, 1997), p.3.

situation in which those who remained healthy, but who had travelled with a person who became ill or died, might have found themselves.

De Vere wrote that the medical attendance was ‘bad’. But he also referred to the chaotic conditions with which the authorities had to contend. He described people dying as they made their way from their ships to the shore. He stated that wives were separated from husbands, children from parents.⁷⁹ Dr George M. Douglas, the medical superintendent on the island, repeatedly pleaded with the government for more help and greater resources, but these were not provided in a sufficient quantity. The sheds and tents that served as the quarantine hospital saw immigrants lie on bare planks or on the ground, while conditions within the sheds were overcrowded and unsanitary. By June 1847, 25,400 immigrants had arrived at Grosse Ile. More than ten percent, or 2,700, had died. Canadians caring for immigrants on the island began to become infected, and disease then spread to the citizens of Quebec and Montreal.⁸⁰ On 24 June 1847, De Vere and his party were staying in Montreal. In his diary De Vere referred to the rates of ‘frightful mortality’ which existed in the city’s emigrant sheds and hospital.⁸¹ In the year that De Vere travelled to Canada, of the 97,492 that set sail for British North America, it has been estimated that one-fifth died within the year, having either succumbed to disease on board ships that were, in some cases, substandard for passenger travel or, upon arrival, having been afflicted by one of numerous outbreaks of typhus. It has been argued that the sight of ‘haggard, vermin-infested, and diseased travellers, disembarking after their harrowing trans-Atlantic voyage under sub-human conditions, left indelible images on the society that hesitatingly received them.’⁸² As Irish Famine migrants moved inland from Grosse Ile, Quebec and Montreal, symptoms of typhus, which had often not yet emerged as people passed through the quarantine system, began to appear, and the disease spread rapidly among the migrants and locals. The Catholic weekly newspaper in Canada West, *The Mirror*, stated that ‘nine-tenths of the community have been frightened, not only out of their wits – but, what is still worse out of their humanity’.⁸³

⁷⁹ De Vere diary entry, dated 16 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁸⁰ Brian Stewart, *Life on the Line: Commander Pierre-Etienne Fortin and his Times* (Ottawa, 1997), pp 32-33.

⁸¹ De Vere diary entry, dated 24 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁸² McGowan, ‘Famine, Facts and Fabrication’, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Fall, 2007), pp 48-55

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Dr Douglas, argued that the landlords in Ireland had in selecting emigrants, ‘naturally enough abstained from choosing the young, strong, able-bodied labourer, but have sought to rid their estates of helpless widows with large families, cripples unable to work, aged persons, the confirmed idle and lazy, and those whose constitutions had been enfeebled by previous sickness and destitution.’⁸⁴ For many contemporaries, the Famine-era migrants came to define the Irish presence in Canada – destitute, shiftless, diseased, and Catholic. In this scenario, it was almost inevitable that tensions would arise. De Vere wrote that the ‘Irish and Canadians disliked one another’.⁸⁵ The growth in the number of Irish Catholic immigrants to regions such as New Brunswick, saw a parallel expansion of the Orange Order. Minor clashes between the two groups occurred during the 1830s, but by the late 1840s these tensions had escalated into the great riots of 1847 and 1849. It has been argued that by the mid-century the Orange Order acted as a nativist organisation, whose purpose was to defend Protestantism and British institutions against Irish Catholic encroachment.⁸⁶

De Vere also referred to the ‘cheating Canadians’ he encountered in Quebec.⁸⁷ From the early 1830s, the colonial authorities had appointed a number of agents to assist emigrants and had established a rudimentary network of state aid for ‘worthy’ recipients, including women and children, but their resources were limited, and many new arrivals had to manage on their own.⁸⁸ During the early nineteenth century tourists from Europe and the United States began to visit the colonies and backwoods settlements of pre-Confederate British North America. The itinerary of the popular Canadian ‘northern tour’, often an addendum to travels in the north-eastern United States, was likely to have included the cities of Quebec and Montreal and the scenic Saaguenay region in Lower Canada, the cities of Ottawa, Kingston, and Toronto in Upper Canada, and almost always included a visit to Niagara Falls. Although De Vere’s visit in 1847 had a more serious motivation than tourism, he did visit all of these regions. It is possible that De Vere was aware of the various guides and travel accounts relating to Canada that had appeared in previous years. So

⁸⁴ Mulroney, *Fleeing the Famine*, p.17.

⁸⁵ De Vere diary entry, dated 20 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁸⁶ Iacovetta, Draper, Ventresca, *A Nation of Immigrants*, p. 5.

⁸⁷ De Vere diary entry, dated 24 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities: Migration to Upper Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Quebec, 2007), pp 121-124.

successful was one of the earliest accounts of the northern tour, by the Irish author, Isaac Weld's *Travels through the State of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada* (1799), that it was published in successive editions and translated into several European languages. Many travel books by northern tourists or temporary residents, written with an audience of potential emigrants in mind, reported on the politics, economy, and agriculture of the provinces and the customs, manners and culture of the colonials. The number of travel reports on emigration increased in the years following the Napoleonic wars. John Howison wrote *Sketches of Upper Canada, local, domestic and characteristic* (1829), which recommended emigration to Upper Canada for the penurious of Great Britain as well as for educated and titled gentlemen of meagre independent incomes.⁸⁹ Joseph Neilson published *Observations upon emigration to Upper Canada* in 1837. Neilson in particular was eager to highlight the efforts that had been made to ensure the safety, comfort and protection of emigrants. He wrote;

The Home Government has manifested the most unwearied solicitude to protect the Emigrant, and facilitate his passage to the Colonies. To this end, Emigrant Agents have been appointed in all the principal out-ports of the United Kingdom, whose duty it is to afford the Emigrant all necessary assistance and protection... Poor people having the good sense to make their inquiries in a respectful manner, will never meet with a repulse, and by applying to none but gentlemen of respectability, will be safe from interested and fraudulent schemes.⁹⁰

Neilson was also clear in his advice to prospective emigrants that Quebec was a far superior destination than New York. He stated that in Quebec, 'the emigrant will find in all our principal towns agents ready to counsel and assist him, and will everywhere among the people, meet with a spirit of kindness, of hospitality.' But he warned that in 'the neighbouring Republic' the emigrant's situation 'would be very different.'⁹¹

The myths relating to rural life in North America, of easy access to plentiful land which was free from the encumbrances of a feudal past, and the potential for ordinary people to acquire great success, were fostered not only by the effusions of travel accounts and emigrant manuals, but also by the writings of immigrants

⁸⁹ Jennifer Speake, *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopaedia* (New York, 2003), p. 180.

⁹⁰ Joseph Neilson, *Observations Upon Emigration to Upper Canada* (Kingston, 1837), p.34.

⁹¹ Neilson, *Observations Upon Emigration to Upper Canada*, p.36.

themselves.⁹² David A. Valone has stated that the vast majority of Canada's Irish arrived before the Famine and not as exiles. From the mid-eighteenth century, safe passages, reasoned decisions and fairly successful outcomes characterised an ongoing mass voluntary emigration. Protestants constituted a higher proportion of Irish immigrants than did Catholics, and they arrived with sufficient financial means, material possessions and farming experience to ensure relatively speedy and successful settlement, predominantly in rural areas.⁹³ After the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, the number of Irish in British North America increased dramatically. Two of every three were Protestants, mostly transplanted Scots Presbyterians from Ulster. Like the Empire Loyalists, they were among the early settlers of Upper Canada, establishing farms or working on the canals in the timber trade. During the 1840s, the ratio abruptly changed, however, and the majority were impoverished rural Catholics.⁹⁴

During the height of the annual emigrant season, new arrivals landed in the midst of chaos. Lodgings were difficult if not impossible to find, and as at home, there were any number of locals who were willing to take advantage of newcomers. In the early 1840s the press in Canada delivered reports of emigrants sleeping in the streets, surrounded by their luggage. Periodically, the press condemned 'the impositions' perpetrated on emigrants by unscrupulous colonists. Innkeepers and provision merchants regularly overcharged for their services, petty thieves preyed on the unwary, and forwarders tried to entice new arrivals to take passage on their boats with promises of cheap fares and an impossibly quick passage. Others simply absconded with emigrants' funds or intentionally misdirected emigrants about where to go.⁹⁵ The number of Irish immigrants who arrived in British North America in 1847 represented a 250 percent increase over the previous year.⁹⁶ The flood of immigrants into Canada during the 1840s became part of a developing capitalist labour market, a reserve pool of unskilled labourers who had little choice but to enter and remain in the labour force. De Vere stated that soon after he arrived in Canada he

⁹² Rusty Bitterman, 'Farm Households and Wage Labour in the North-eastern Maritimes in the Early Nineteenth Century' in Laurel Sefton MacDowell & Ian Walter Radforth (eds.), *Canadian Working-class History: Selected Readings* (Toronto, 2006), p.3.

⁹³ David A. Valone, *Ireland's Great Hunger: Relief, representation, and remembrance. Volume 2*, p. 75

⁹⁴ MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, p. 7.

⁹⁵ Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities*, pp 121-124; Quebec Mercury, 20 March 1847.

⁹⁶ Jeff Keshen and Nicole St-Onge, (Eds.), *Ottawa-making a Capital* (Ottawa, 2001), p.226.

met with ‘many persons who had been working under my orders last winter’, presumably, on a Board of Works scheme. De Vere wrote that they were all employed, and were on ‘enormous wages’. But he noted that they had not set any money aside, and it was unlikely that they would have work to sustain them during the winter months.⁹⁷ Many of the newly arrived Irish were destitute. ‘Labouring paupers’, was how the immigration agent at Quebec described them and they had little hope of ever establishing themselves on the land.⁹⁸ By the 1840s the land granting and settlement policies of the government and private companies had combined to put land beyond the reach of such poor immigrants. Settlement even on free grants in the backwoods was ‘virtually impossible without capital’.⁹⁹ The only option open to most Irish arrivals was to accept whatever wage labour they could find. Many found work in the lumbering, shipping and shipbuilding industries, and in the developing urban centres, where they clustered in casual and manual occupations. The British North American economy could not absorb the massive immigration of unskilled Irish. Although the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1834 and the commercial crisis of 1837 had led to a decline in immigration and a shortage of labour in 1838, a labour surplus rapidly developed in the opening years of the 1840s, as the Irish arrived in record numbers.¹⁰⁰ One Canadian newspaper warned ‘The emigrants we may expect from Limerick, Sligo, and Londonderry are represented to be possessed of moderate means; but we must look forward, in addition to these, to a large influx of pauper emigration, and it behoves the authorities to be prepared for the occasion, as great misery and disease are likely to accompany these unfortunate sufferers, in their progress.’¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ De Vere diary entry, dated 16 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

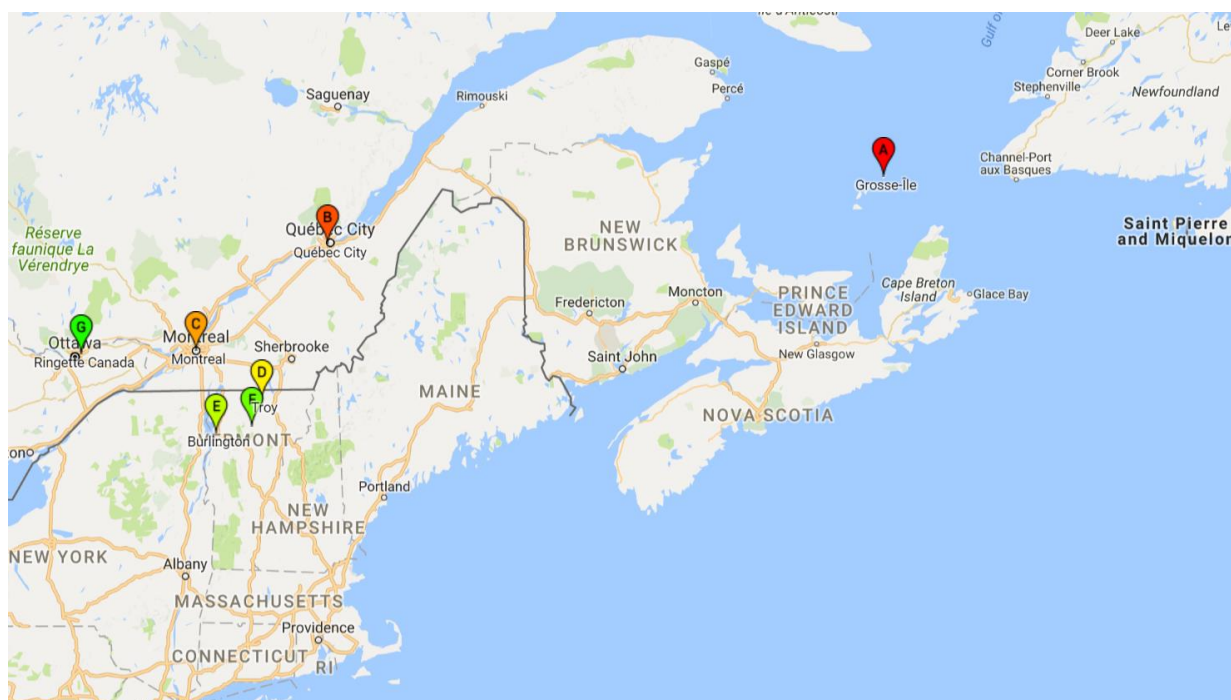
⁹⁸ J.K. Johnson and Bruce G. Wilson, *Historical Essays on Upper Canada: New Perspectives* (Carleton, 1989), pp 264-267.

⁹⁹ Johnson and Wilson, *Historical Essays on Upper Canada*, pp 264-267.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *British Colonist*, 11 May 1847.

Figure 6 De Vere's travels through Canada. 1.



Key: A – Grosse-Ile, B – Quebec City, C- Montreal, D- Troy, E- Burlington, F- Vermont, G-Ringette Canada.

Although De Vere and his travelling companions had appeared to survive the passage to Canada unscathed, as they made their way from Quebec to Montreal signs of fever and other illnesses began to appear amongst members of the group. Pat O'Neill's wife fell ill first. De Vere recounted that the medical attendant he had acquired for her was careful, respectable, but also cheap.¹⁰² While there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that De Vere had a charitable nature, his diaries and letters also reflect his prudent financial sense. Soon after O'Neill's wife recovered, John Hanly developed what De Vere described as the 'dreaded fever'.¹⁰³ Medical attendance was sought once again, but treatments for fevers had not advanced greatly since 1742, when 'bleeding, purging and a cool regimen' were the recommended

¹⁰² De Vere, diary entry, dated 21 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

treatments.¹⁰⁴ De Vere recorded in his diary a list of ingredients which could supposedly cure cholera or typhus. These included a mixture of snake root powder, tincture of cactus, cayenne pepper, and a solution of opium.¹⁰⁵ In Hanly's case, opium pills were prescribed, which De Vere administered.¹⁰⁶ Hanly suffered other bouts of illness, but had recovered sufficiently to travel independently to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by March 1848. De Vere wrote that he was 'very sorry' to lose him, but had 'no fear' for him, and believed that Hanly would do well wherever he went.¹⁰⁷ On occasion, some of De Vere's companions appeared to be close to death, and it was necessary to call for a priest to deliver the last rites and hear confession. De Vere's diary provides many accounts of his efforts to nurse and care for members of the group when they fell ill, such as measuring their pulse, helping them to eat and drink, and sitting up with them through the night when they seemed to be in immediate danger.¹⁰⁸

Reaction to De Vere's report

De Vere's actions in response to the stories which emerged of the mistreatment of Irish emigrants have been widely discussed, and even at the time, his voyage to Canada, and the philanthropic motivation which lay behind it were reported in newspapers including the *Dublin Evening Post*, *Cork Examiner*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Leeds Times*, *Morning Post*, and the *London Evening Standard*.¹⁰⁹ A report which De Vere compiled of his experiences was sent to Thomas Frederick Elliot, Britain's agent-general for emigration, who described De Vere's report as the most 'important pieces of evidence upon emigration which I have ever seen in my life'. He also stated that he believed the letter had 'weighed much with the Government in forming the conclusion that it was desirable to endeavour to amend the law in the course of the present session.'¹¹⁰ Frederick Elliot presented De Vere's report to Lord Grey, who then passed it to the Governor General

¹⁰⁴ Greta Jones and Elizabeth Malcolm, *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940* (Cork, 1999), p. 132.

¹⁰⁵ De Vere, diary entry, dated 18 November 1849, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5063.

¹⁰⁶ De Vere, diary entry, dated 05 July 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

¹⁰⁷ De Vere diary entry, dated 8 March 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5072.

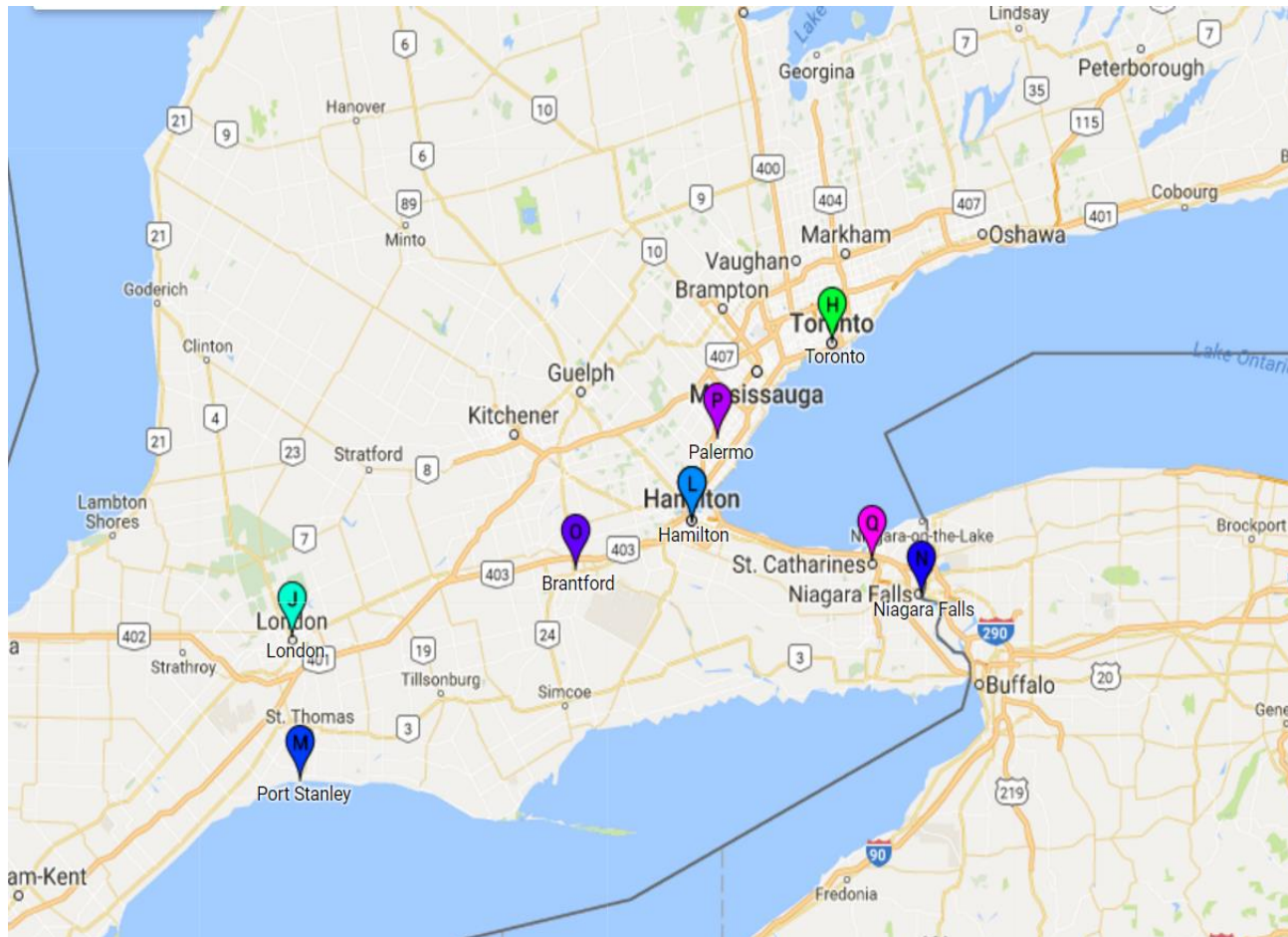
¹⁰⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated 25 October 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5061.

¹⁰⁹ *Dublin Evening Post*, 24 Feb. 1848, *Cork Examiner*, 06 Apr. 1849, *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Nov. 1848, *Morning Chronicle*, 04 Mar. 1848, *Leeds Times*, 10 Apr. 1847, *Morning Post*, 31 Mar. 1849, *London Evening Standard* 31 Mar. 1849.

¹¹⁰ 1847-48 (415) *First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on colonization from Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence*. Session 1848, p. 461.

of Canada, in order ‘to suggest the improvement of such matters as require correction on that side of the water.’¹¹¹

Figure 6 De Vere’s travels through Canada 2.



H – Toronto, I – Hamilton, J – London, K – Rochester, L – Hamilton, M – Port Stanley, N – Niagara Falls, O – Palermo, Q – Saint Catharine’s.

The influence of De Vere’s father, and uncle Monteagle, is clearly reflected in De Vere’s views on emigration, especially with regard to Monteagle’s endeavours to establish assisted emigration schemes on a public basis, and his own privately funded initiatives. Emigration was viewed by De Vere as an effective means of dealing with the problem of over-population, but also as a potential way of spreading

¹¹¹ Ibid.

the Catholic faith. In undertaking his voyage to Canada, and his travels throughout that country, De Vere had a two-fold objective – to investigate the realities of emigration and to establish a Catholic colony. His actions with regard to revealing an insight into the experiences of emigrants was successful to a great degree, and it is the aspect of his life which has had the greatest impact on his legacy and reputation. Even at the time, an era that saw landlords in Ireland face immense criticism regarding the dereliction of their duties, and accusations of ‘shovelling out paupers’, De Vere received praise and recognition for his actions in drawing to light the conditions experienced by emigrants.¹¹² His decision to ‘speak as a witness respecting the sufferings of emigrants’¹¹³ was important, because he was an educated member of the elite, with connections to the highest levels of government. The testimony which he provided regarding conditions on emigrant ships was widely accepted and acknowledged as being an accurate account of the reality experienced by emigrants, and significantly, it influenced subsequent passenger legislation. De Vere’s report had showed that the legislation regarding the transmission of emigrants during the Famine, inadequate as it was, was not abided by, and he provided specific and practical suggestions as to how emigrant ships could be made safer, and the experience more tolerable for those travelling on them.

His failure to successfully establish a Catholic colony did not appear to quell his enthusiasm for his new faith. He remained committed to the notion that emigration was a good method of alleviating distress in Ireland, and provided the emigrant with the opportunity to spread his faith in new communities.

¹¹² Pauline Collombier-Lakeman, ‘The Canadian Press and the Great Irish Famine: The Famine as an Irish, Canadian & Imperial, Global Issue’, <http://mimmoc.revues.org/1787> [Accessed on 23 Aug. 2015].

¹¹³ Monteagle to Grey, 23 Jan. 1848, Monteagle papers, NLI, MS 6053.

Chapter 4: The Religious Man

The Shannon Estuary Group

The Shannon Estuary group was first discussed in an article by David Fitzpatrick published in the *Old Limerick Journal*. Fitzpatrick demonstrated the interconnectedness of this social group through the intermarriages between the De Veres, O'Briens and Spring Rices.¹ Fitzpatrick characterised this group as having a strong sense of duty to their tenants in County Limerick. They shared economic interests and were situated in close geographical proximity to one another, they were also usually linked through their duties as county magistrates. While these factors were important in encouraging members of the group to associate with one another, the most significant element was their shared concern for theological issues and religious piety, despite their varying religious backgrounds and affiliations. All of these families were descended from Anglo-Norman or Old Irish families that had converted from Catholicism to Protestantism during the eighteenth century. The De Veres and the Rice side of the Spring Rice family were both descended from Old English Catholic families. The Bourkes were originally an 'Old English' Catholic family which included Edmund Burke. The O'Briens traced their lineage back to Brian Boru and had been Catholic until the eighteenth century. The Barringtons were descended from Catholic families on their mother's side (who was, herself, Catholic). Their father's family was of mixed Anglican and Quaker background. All of this group had some relatives that had remained Catholic.

Ridden has identified this shared background of 'eighteenth-century convert' ancestors as forming a point of contrast between this group and other members of the elite, who adhered to a rigid and long-held Protestantism as the basis of their social and political superiority.² Many members of the Shannon Estuary Group, including De Vere, converted (or re-converted back) to Catholicism during the 1840s and 50s.³ In general, the west and south-west Ireland were particularly volatile in the early

¹ David Fitzpatrick, 'Thomas Spring Rice and the Peopling of Australia', *Old Limerick Journal* 'Australian Edition' (1988), 39-49.

² Ridden, 'Making good citizens', pp 7-12.

³ 'The Barringtons of Limerick', *OLJ* (Winter 1988), 7; David Fitzpatrick, 'Thomas Spring Rice and the Peopling of Australia', *OLJ* 23 (Spring 1988), 42.

nineteenth century. During this period Limerick gained a reputation for being sharply divided due to the fact that the most explosive debates on religion, national identity, and agrarian violence took place there. It was also the scene of some of the most virulent Protestant opposition to O'Connell. However, even then, such divides were tempered by inter-dependence and complex social, economic, and political interactions which were not necessarily apparent to the outside observer.⁴

Religious composition in Ireland and Limerick

In 1834, 80.9 percent of the population in Ireland were Catholic. Large property owners and those with access to substantial wealth were disproportionately Protestant, mainly as a result of the legacy of the Penal Laws.⁵ There was an obvious divide between the Catholic population which formed the majority of the population, and occupied the lower strata of the social structure, and the Church of Ireland elite at the top. Divisions also existed within each of these groups. Catholics were not a homogenous class in terms of their socio-economic and political outlook. Divisions existed between poor cottiers, landless labourers, small tenants, 'strong farmers', and Catholic middlemen who acted as agents for large Protestant (usually absentee) landlords. Nor did the term 'Protestant' imply religious unanimity. Among the Protestant population, just over half were members of the Church of Ireland (Episcopalian), and the remainder were Dissenters, which included Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers.⁶ Church of Ireland members were divided into High Churchmen, Evangelicals, and Liberals.⁷ Sean Connolly and others have identified the way in which Ireland's economic divisions were closely correlated with its religious divisions in the pre-Famine era, and therefore how central religion was a practical way of differentiating socio-economic groups.⁸

However, the Church of Ireland population was never confined exclusively to members of the elite. Middle and working-class Church of Ireland populations existed in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, and Ulster.⁹ With specific regard to Limerick, Church of Ireland membership could generally be said to indicate elite status

⁴ Ridden, 'Making good citizens', p. 11.

⁵ 1835 (47) xxxiii. *First Report of the Commissioners of Public Instruction, Ireland*.

⁶ Ibid; W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish Historical Statistics: population 1821-1971* (Dublin 1978), pp 58-9.

⁷ Ridden, 'Making good citizens', p.12.

⁸ S.J. Connolly, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1985).

⁹ Ridden, 'Making good citizens', p.25.

(including the minor gentry and the professions). The religious denominations represented in the county included a small German Palatine Methodist community, a small number of Methodists and about 2,000 Quakers. The remainder of the population in Limerick were Catholic. In spite of the abolishment of religious exclusions in 1827-9, very few public positions were held by Catholics.¹⁰ Almost all positions of economic and political power in the southern counties were held by Protestants. There was only one Catholic on the Limerick Municipal Corporation in the 1830s, and none on the grand jury or the magistracy.¹¹

Conversion

The influx of Catholic Irish immigrants to Britain, along with the development of the Tractarian movement and the Pope's decision to establish a Catholic Church hierarchy in England, meant that the subject of religion was one which frequently occupied public thought during the mid-nineteenth-century.¹² It was a highly controversial topic, England witnessed 'no popery' riots and public meetings.¹³ Some members of parliament, as well as the press, issued vitriolic statements about Catholicism.¹⁴ Converts to Catholicism were frequently referred to as 'perverts'.¹⁵ In post-Famine Ireland, the devotional revolution saw the Catholic Church seek to demonstrate its growing power and influence in society, occasionally through questionable and controversial methods.¹⁶ Connolly has argued that during the early decades of the nineteenth-century, the Catholic Church in Ireland grew increasingly assertive in the defence of what were seen as Catholic interests.¹⁷ It was in this context that a number of people, who were, like De Vere, well-educated, and

¹⁰ Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin civic, politics and Irish protestant patriotism, 1660-1840* (Oxford, 1997); Virginia Crossman, *Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Belfast, 1994).

¹¹ David Dickson, 'Catholics and Trade in Eighteenth-Century Ireland: an old debate revisited' in T.P. Power and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Endurance and Emergence: Catholics in Ireland in the eighteenth century* (Dublin, 1990), pp 85-100.

¹² Denis G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford, 1992), pp 4-5. 'The Irish in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Problems of Integration' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, M. A. G. Ó Tuathaigh, Vol. 31 (1981), pp 149-173.

¹³ Danilo Raponi, *Religion and Politics in the Risorgimento: Britain and the New Italy, 1861-1875* (London, 2014) p.39

¹⁴ Donald M. Lewis, Review of *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-1860* by John Wolffe in *Church History*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Mar., 1994), pp 132-133.

¹⁵ Marjule Anne Drury, 'Anti-Catholicism in Germany, Britain, and the United States: A Review and Critique of Recent Scholarship' in *Church History*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Mar., 2001), pp 98-131.

¹⁶ J.H. Whyte, 'The Influence of the Catholic Clergy on Elections in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,' *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 295 (Apr., 1960), pp 239-259.

¹⁷ Sean Connolly, *Religion and society in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dundalk, 1985), p. 35.

often born with every social advantage, decided to convert to Catholicism, and publicly promote and defend their new faith.

The early and mid-nineteenth century was throughout most of Western Europe a period of religious revival but also increased secularism.¹⁸ This could be seen as a reaction against the formal and unemotional piety that had characterised many forms of European Christianity in previous years, but the new emphasis on religious values may also have been a response to conflict and insecurity.¹⁹ Connolly has argued that during this period of political upheaval and unprecedented economic change, men and women of all social classes found in religion a symbol of identity, a guarantee of stability, or a consolation in the face of a harsh reality.²⁰ In the local context, Potter has demonstrated how many members of the Shannon Estuary Group experienced considerable mental and political turmoil during this period. De Vere took practical action to investigate the conditions endured by emigrants, Aubrey De Vere published a severe criticism of British rule, entitle *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds*, William Smith O'Brien led an armed revolt against British rule, and Monsell became very anti-English, despite remaining a supporter of the Union. Potter has asserted that the Famine and the inadequate British response influenced Monsell's attitude in this regard.²¹ It is perhaps indicative of his strength of feeling on this issue, that on 5 November 1846 Aubrey De Vere wrote that he had 'tried as much as I could to soften William Monsell's indignation against the Government' but Monsell refused to alter his position.²² Monsell, Dunraven and the De Vere brothers were all active in Famine relief work, and so had direct experience of the devastation and tragedies experienced by a people affected by hunger and poverty.²³ No clear evidence has been uncovered in the course of the completion of this study to suggest that De Vere developed strong anti-English sentiments at that time.

In a biography of the poet and Catholic convert, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Jill Muller wrote that Catholicism was 'a way of life, a discipline, a relationship with

¹⁸ Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National: Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850-1914* (Berlin, 2006) p.15.

¹⁹ Connolly, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, p.7.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Potter, *William Monsell*, p.34.

²² Ward, *Aubrey De Vere*, p. 124.

²³ Potter, *William Monsell*, p.35.

authority.²⁴ A similar theme was identified by Anne C. Rose in her study of American converts to Catholicism during the Victorian era. She outlined what she considered to be their primary motives, and cited reasons such as a longing for the authority of a historical church, a desire to experience a deeper sense of spirituality in their daily lives, and the presence of an orderly church hierarchy.²⁵ Such factors may have been instrumental in the decision-making process of some converts. But it is difficult to maintain that identical issues could have been common in all cases. De Vere's conversion has been attributed to the influence of the Tractarian Movement, and even to the location in which he grew up. In 1891, T. E. Bridgette wrote that the sacred ruins of several churches and abbeys in Adare resulted in an 'atmosphere of Catholicity'²⁶ which might have contributed to the conversion of Monsell, Dunraven, and the De Vere brothers.²⁷ A variety of complex factors operating beyond their immediate surroundings was undoubtedly involved in leading each of these men to convert to Catholicism.

In an article about De Vere published by the *Catholic Northwest Progress*, an American newspaper, it is argued that the 'good lives of humble Christians' were often a factor in encouraging people to convert to Catholicism.²⁸ In the article, De Vere discussed his interactions with young men of the peasant class and stated that they were the main influence in his decision to become a Catholic.²⁹ He stated that he had gone among them, listened to them, observed them at their sports, and knew them. He attributed what he saw as their purity and the innocence of their morals to their religious affiliation. De Vere's romanticised view of popular morality was reflected in his claim that religion had the most significant impact on the moral character of Ireland's peasant class. He argued this on the basis that they had little education, and he knew their morals could not be attributed to society, as they had no knowledge of etiquette. He also stated that travel had not been a factor in their development. In comparing young men of the peasant class with the men of his own,

²⁴ Jill Muller, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding* (New York 2003), p.18.

²⁵ Anne C. Rose, 'Some Private Roads to Rome: The Role of Families in American Victorian Conversions to Catholicism.' *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (Jan., 1999), pp 35-57. Catholic University of America Press.

²⁶ T.E. Bridgette, 'The Religious Vicissitudes of Adare,' *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 19, No. 213 (Mar., 1891), pp 127-132.

²⁷ Bridgette, 'The Religious Vicissitudes of Adare', pp 127-132.

²⁸ *Catholic Northwest Progress*, 28 Nov. 1902.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

the only variant that he could identify as having a significant impact on their moral character was religion. And thus, he decided to ‘be of the religion that makes them so innocent and pure’.³⁰ The language used by De Vere suggests that he had a particularly idealised view of what he referred to as the peasantry. There are many contemporary newspaper reports which were deeply disparaging of Irish people of the lower orders, especially as the rate of emigration increased, and reports of an ‘influx’ of Irish emigrants began to be reported in fearful terms. The *Newry Telegraph* published an article in which it was directly implied that Irish people were inherently intellectually inferior to English and Scottish people. It stated, ‘were the Irish ... only as wise as an average English and Scotch farmer, or shopkeeper or labourer, we should shortly find them quite another nation.’³¹

It is clear from the diary De Vere kept during his voyage to Canada and subsequent travels through that country, that becoming a Catholic allowed him to feel more closely connected to the Irish emigrants with whom he lived and travelled. Catholicism and Irish national identity, certainly since the late nineteenth century, were closely connected, and have been described as being intrinsically linked.³² De Vere’s adoption of that faith did appear to provide him with a link to a people from whom he was otherwise separated from by class, culture and heritage. He wrote on 3 October 1847 that he had ‘attended divine service with my own dear brethren’.³³ The precise date and place of De Vere’s conversion to Catholicism have been erroneously reported in various publications.³⁴ It was stated in the *Connaught Telegraph* that De Vere conformed to the Roman Catholic faith, and read his recantation in the parish chapel of Stonehall (now Kilcornan), just over a mile from Curragh Chase, before the Rev. Timothy Foley on Palm Sunday 1847.³⁵ De Vere himself stated in his journal that he became a Catholic on 7 May 1846. His conversion was followed by that of

³⁰ *Catholic Northwest Progress*, 28 Nov. 1902.

³¹ *Newry Telegraph*, 14 Dec. 1847.

³² Emmet J. Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (New York, 1976), p. 101.

³³ De Vere, diary entry, dated 3 October 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5061.

³⁴ William James Gordon-Gorman, *Converts to Rome: a biographical list of the more notable converts to the Catholic Church in the United Kingdom* (London, 1878), p.84. Elizabeth Lee, ‘Vere, Sir Stephen Edward De, fourth baronet (1812–1904)’ [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32798>], [Accessed on 01 Mar. 2015].

³⁵ *Connaught Telegraph*, 28 Apr. 1847.

two of his brothers, Aubrey and Vere Edmond, and of his sister in law, Mary-Lucy, in 1851.³⁶

Some other members of De Vere's immediate circle of friends also converted to Catholicism during this period. It is perhaps not surprising that so many members of the closely connected group decided to convert within a relatively short period of time. Many of the families involved; the De Veres, Spring Rices, Bourkes, Barringtons, and O'Briens held daily prayer meetings during the 1820s and 30s, and shared their Sunday prayer meetings. These meetings, which were generally organised by the female family members, were one of the focal points in their family lives.³⁷ This common interest in religion, and the obvious significance it held for them, indicates that theological discussion and consideration were important aspects of their everyday lives. In the case of Monsell, it is arguable that as with De Vere, his direct experience and involvement with Catholic peasants during the Famine had increased his empathy towards them and their religion. Potter has described Monsell's conversion, which took place in 1851, as being the result of a process which had occurred over a number of years.³⁸ In his youth, Monsell expressed decidedly anti-Catholic views. He later came under the influence of John Henry Newman and the Tractarian movement, but his experiences during the Famine, like those of De Vere, were said to have been an influential factor in his conversion.³⁹ It is likely that De Vere had Monsell in mind when he wrote in 1852 that among the numerous conversions to Catholicism, some converts were notable for their strong early prejudices against the Church of their adoption. In acknowledging, perhaps, the higher social position and level of educational attainment of recent converts in comparison to 'cradle Catholics', De Vere also commented that many of these converts brought to their new faith their talents, learning and piety.⁴⁰ Monsell eventually became one of Ireland's leading liberal Catholics, and regularly corresponded with De Vere, amongst others, on the subject of religion.⁴¹ De Vere wrote to Monsell to congratulate him on his decision to become a Catholic. He

³⁶ Photocopies, transcripts and abstracts of correspondence and diary of the family of De Lisle of Grace Dieu, Leicester, with references to the Monsell, De Vere and other families; 1809-96, De Lisle papers, 24 September, 1851, NLI, Ms. 18,407.

³⁷ Aubrey De Vere, *Recollections* (London, 1897), p. 22; Aubrey De Vere to Bourke, 19 January 1830, Bourke papers, NLI, MS 403/7.

³⁸ Potter, *William Monsell*, p.7.

³⁹ Potter, *William Monsell*, p.35.

⁴⁰ Stephen Edward De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression?* (London, 1852), p.8.

⁴¹ Potter, *William Monsell*, p.35.

enthusiastically welcomed him to the church and informed Monsell that by submitting himself to 'His merciful call', he had become one of God's own people. De Vere also wrote that Monsell would know the joy of Christian charity, as his example may 'bring others to God'.⁴²

When De Vere wrote of his hopes of Monsell's conversion bringing others to God, it is very possible that he had Monsell's in-law, Dunraven in mind. De Vere's correspondence with Monsell suggests that he had a strong interest in encouraging Dunraven to convert. Dunraven's reluctance to convert to Catholicism was based to a large degree on his wife's opposition to the idea. De Vere seemed to believe that matters of faith should take precedence over any issues relating to domestic life or familial relations. In a letter to Monsell he wrote: 'If he (Dunraven) were to be carried off by the sudden call of the almighty, could he plead thus when arraigned before the eternal judge, 'I felt the call of your divine Grace, summoning me within the fold of your Church, but, from worldly motives, I did not obey it'.⁴³ He was dismissive of Dunraven's wife's concerns, and the effect Dunraven's conversion might have on their marriage. In fact, Dunraven's eventual conversion and the devotion he expressed towards his new faith resulted in great domestic strife and put an immense strain on his relationship not only with his wife but also with his son. De Vere stated that he believed Dunraven had for some time been 'fully convinced of the truth of Catholic faith', but had delayed his conversion because he believed the shock of it would result in some danger to his wife's health.⁴⁴ De Vere was correct in his assessment of the situation. Dunraven's wife, Augusta, wrote to him that her doctor had informed her that she was 'in great danger' and her heart condition would only subside if she were to be free from any agitation. She ended the letter by writing that her feelings on the Catholic Church were unchanged.⁴⁵ De Vere, totally devoid of any empathy towards Dunraven's wife, wrote that he believed that her strong prejudices against Catholicism had induced her to use any means possible to prevent her husband from converting. In delaying his conversion, De Vere believed that Dunraven was running the risk of eternal damnation.⁴⁶ This could be taken to

⁴² De Vere to Monsell, 20 December, 1850, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

⁴³ De Vere to Monsell, 25 February, 1851, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Lady Augusta Dunraven to Lord Dunraven, (undated). Dunraven Papers, University of Limerick, D3196/F/9/38.

⁴⁶ De Vere to Monsell, 25 February 1851, Monsell papers, NLI, Ms. 8317.

indicate the strength of De Vere's own religious convictions and the extent to which his system of religious belief influenced and affected various aspects of his life, as well as perhaps, some incapacity to understand human concerns.

De Vere drew Monsell into the campaign to push Dunraven towards conversion, he strongly urged him to alert Dunraven to the 'dangers of his present position', that is, the fear that God's grace would be withdrawn from him, and he would 'be left an infidel'.⁴⁷ This communication between De Vere and Monsell clearly reflects the depth of De Vere's devotion to the Catholic Church, and what he believed to be the one true faith, as well as his growing antagonism to the Protestant faith. De Vere stated that he did not address the need for Dunraven's conversion with him directly, as he feared he might cause offence. He instead asked Monsell to do so, as they were more closely connected.⁴⁸ In De Vere's correspondence with Dunraven, he wrote, 'Shall I, a sinner, scorn a sinner or less love my brother seeing he is weak? A cruel mockery to call that love which the world's power can wither.'⁴⁹ As this was written prior to Dunraven's conversion, it could be taken to mean that he did not directly pressurise Dunraven into converting to Catholicism. But the reference to his 'brother' being 'weak', could be interpreted as a commentary on Dunraven's indecisiveness. De Vere also wrote to Monsell that Dunraven's opinions on religion were universally known, and as such, if he waited much longer to 'come into the fold', it would be a matter of great scandal and give cause for 'bitter rejoicing to our enemies'. This shows that De Vere was conscious of how converts to Catholicism were perceived by the wider public, and perhaps in the press. It may also suggest that De Vere was conscious of the benefits that might be gained by attracting high-profile converts to the religion. De Vere concluded his letter by stating that it would be of benefit to the Catholic Church if Dunraven converted, not because he held a high rank and a large fortune, but because he was 'intellectual and good'.⁵⁰

Clearly, De Vere did not consider a man's acquiescing to the wishes of his wife to be an acceptable reason for not embracing Catholicism. In one regard, it is not altogether surprising that De Vere lacked sympathy with Dunraven's situation. There is no evidence in any of the primary sources relating to De Vere's personal

⁴⁷ De Vere to Monsell, 25 February, 1851, Monsell papers, NLI, Ms. 8317.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ De Vere to Dunraven, (undated), Dunraven Papers, University of Limerick, D 3196/F/1/7.

⁵⁰ De Vere to Monsell, 25 February, 1851, Monsell papers, NLI, Ms. 8317.

life, such as his journals and letters, to suggest that he ever had any meaningful relationship with a woman in a romantic sense. He remained a bachelor until his death in 1904, so perhaps he had a certain lack of understanding with regard to intricacies of a marital relationship. However, in another sense, one might have expected him to have greater empathy with Dunraven's predicament since he had himself been extremely anxious regarding the reaction of his mother and sister to his own conversion in 1846. He did not inform them directly, and instead wrote to his brother, Vere, asking him to tell them that he had become a Catholic. De Vere described this letter as containing an 'important disclosure upon which the reception of which probably depends my future path in life'.⁵¹ So clearly he did not underestimate the importance and possible repercussions of entering the Catholic Church. When De Vere did not receive a response from his mother, he wrote that he believed that the silence on her part was representative of a negative reaction to his conversion. He expressed this though in his diary, 'I can but surmise that the continued silence may result from my communication on the subject of my change of religion. Lord grand that if any evil tidings be the cause, they may be of a nature affecting myself alone.'⁵²

His diaries do not provide an account of the eventual reaction of his mother and sister to the news of his conversion, but he did continue to enjoy a close and loving relationship with both for the rest of their lives. De Vere regularly wrote in his diary of his love for his mother, and he appeared to be deeply devoted to her. In 1849, in reference to his mother he wrote, 'what would I not do? What sacrifice would I not make cheerfully to make her happy?'⁵³ As such, it must have been a cause of some concern for him that she did not become a Catholic. A diary entry on his mother's birthday in 1852 included the wish that God would 'spare her to us for a long time and grant her the grace of conversion to the true faith'.⁵⁴ De Vere's mother had a strong connection to the Church of Ireland through her father, Lord Glentworth, the Protestant bishop of Limerick.⁵⁵ This fact, coupled with De Vere's

⁵¹ De Vere, diary entry, dated 12 February 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5062.

⁵² De Vere, diary entry, dated, 14 February 1855, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5067.

⁵³ S.E. De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, 14 May, 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053.

⁵⁴ De Vere diary entry, dated 26 November 1854, De Vere papers, TCD, MS, 5066.

⁵⁵ John Burke Esq., *A General and Heraldic dictionary of the peerage and baronetage of the British Empire*, fourth edition, volume 1. (London, 1832), 351–352.

deep devotion to her, may have resulted in a mental struggle regarding his allegiances.

Difficulties experienced by converts

The controversial nature of the decision of men like De Vere to convert to Catholicism is exemplified in an incident relating to the erroneous announcement of Dunraven's conversion. In 1852 it was incorrectly stated in the *Tralee Chronicle* that the Earl of Dunraven had joined the Catholic Church. The paper had to print a retraction, the mistake was blamed on a hoax, and was said to have been a totally groundless rumour, although, as he actually became a Catholic in 1855, the story was not entirely without merit.⁵⁶ It is not difficult to understand Dunraven's reluctance to take the step of converting to Catholicism. On a personal level, it was clearly a source of tension within his marriage, but in general, there were very few advantages for the Catholic convert. Patrick Allitt has pointed out that conversion to Catholicism in mid-nineteenth-century Britain could result in accusations of disloyalty to the State, its Protestant heritage, even its sense of common decency.⁵⁷ Gerard Manley Hopkins' conversion to Catholicism resulted in his estrangement from his family.⁵⁸ His father believed that becoming a Catholic in mid-Victorian England would mean living his life in a 'cold limbo'.⁵⁹

When Thomas Arnold became a Catholic, his wife wrote a furious letter to Cardinal Newman. She accused him of persuading her husband 'to ignore every social duty and become a pervert.' She added, 'From the bottom of my heart I curse you for it.'⁶⁰ John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, the Third Marquess of Bute, was baptised an Anglican but became a Catholic on 8 December 1868.⁶¹ Some of the press coverage of his conversion was highly critical. The *Daily News* announced that the new convert 'had taken up his honours, wealth, and influence, and laid them in the lap of the Church of Rome.'⁶² A West of Scotland journal was 'sure that the

⁵⁶ *Tralee Chronicle and Killarney Echo*, 17 Sept. 1852.

⁵⁷ Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Muller, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, pp 8-12. Peter Groves, Hopkins and Tractarianism in *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 44, No. 1, Tractarian Poets (Spring, 2006), pp 105-112.

⁵⁹ Muller, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p.8.

⁶⁰ Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, p.5.

⁶¹ K. D. Reynolds, 'Stuart, John Patrick Crichton-, third marquess of Bute (1847-1900)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26722>, [Accessed on 3 April 2012].

⁶² Hunter Blair, *John Patrick, Third Marquess of Bute*, p. 82.

acquisition would, except in a pecuniary way, be of little advantage to those who had wheedled him out of his wits and into their snares'.⁶³ Bute wrote to a friend that he was concerned about returning to the family seat in Scotland. He had not been there since his conversion to Catholicism as he feared that 'the people' would be 'very strongly prejudiced' and he would 'have a very rough time of it'.⁶⁴ As De Vere's family seat was in a predominantly Catholic country, and this religious bias was reflected in a number of regional and national newspapers, it is possible that Irish converts faced less criticism in some sections of the press. News of a high-profile convert to Catholicism was often greeted with optimism, and the terminology used indicated a positive interpretation, such as the article in the Catholic *Tuam Herald* which stated that De Vere had 'embraced' the Catholic religion.⁶⁵ But that is not to say that this was a uniform reaction. Some Protestant and loyalist papers such as the local *Limerick Chronicle* regularly published lists of high-profile converts to Catholicism, often Anglican clergymen, or landed proprietors, without any comment. On the other hand, the *Chronicle* also published a number of articles, which could be seen as being distinctly anti-Catholic during the papal aggression crisis.⁶⁶

Within the Irish context, too, conversions could give rise to far-reaching social complications. Once Dunraven had finally converted, many of his Catholic friends, including De Vere, became particularly concerned with the religious education of his son. De Vere's writings strongly suggest that he believed that Dunraven's children were at risk of growing up with strong anti-Catholic prejudices as they were taught to despise 'the truth known to their father's heart', and were educated in a 'false faith'.⁶⁷ The anguish De Vere expressed at the prospect of his friend's soul being lost if he did not convert must have been magnified in the case of a convert and his child. Dunraven wrote to his friends on this subject, and they offered advice and consolation. In 1856 Dunraven wrote to his wife that he believed it was his duty as her husband to alert her to the claims of his church.⁶⁸ Dunraven wished his son and heir to embrace Catholicism, and to that end, he first enrolled him in a private school in Ireland, then entrusted his care to a succession of Catholic

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hunter Blair, *John Patrick, Third Marquess of Bute*, p. 94.

⁶⁵ *Tuam Herald*, 2 Sept. 1848.

⁶⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 Jan. 1851.

⁶⁷ De Vere to Monsell, 25 February, 1851, Monsell papers, NLI, Ms. 8317.

⁶⁸ Dunraven to Lady Dunraven, (no date given) August 1856, Dunraven papers, UL, D3196/F/9/29.

tutors, and eventually enrolled him in a school in Rome, during which time he was not permitted to communicate with his mother.⁶⁹ Convert friends, such as De Vere, clearly had an influence on the type of education Dunraven provided for his son, but they also arguably interfered with the family dynamic to an excessive extent. In the case of De Vere, this may have been the result of the strength of his religious conviction, coupled with a lack of sympathy for the beliefs held by Dunraven's wife, and an unwillingness on his part to prioritise the family unit over issues of faith and morality. Although it may have been an unfortunate by-product of their original intentions, nevertheless, it had a detrimental effect on Dunraven's closest relationships. With regard to his son's reluctance to embrace Catholicism, John Morris urged Dunraven not to lose heart, as even though it seemed that the Catholic instruction his son had received had not made any immediate change to his view of the Catholic religion, 'it would be impossible that so much teaching should not bear fruit later, even if it does not do so now.'⁷⁰ It eventually became clear that none of Dunraven's efforts to encourage his son's conversion had been successful, this has been attributed to the influence of his low-church Protestant mother. That period of Dunraven's son's life was said to have only succeeded in causing him to develop a stubborn streak of independence and obduracy.⁷¹ It also had a damaging effect on the relationship between father and son, which had once been warm. While Dunraven's son developed a dislike of any type of formal religious observance, he did take up an interest in spiritualism, as did his father.⁷²

De Vere was also interested to a limited extent in spiritualism and he and Dunraven communicated with one another on the subject. The tone and content of these letters demonstrate that while this was a subject matter readily embraced by Dunraven, De Vere was much more reluctant to engage in spiritualist practices in a context that was beyond the periphery of the Catholic Church. One letter implies that De Vere was present at a séance with Dunraven. De Vere wrote that he did believe in spiritualism, but 'only doubted what I saw.' He stated that he did not believe that one

⁶⁹ S. L. Gwynn, 'Quin, Windham Thomas Wyndham-, fourth earl of Dunraven and Mount Earl (1841–1926)', [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35644, [Accessed 10 Apr. 2013].

⁷⁰ John Morris to Lord Dunraven, (No date given), Dunraven Papers, UL, D3196/F/9/22.

⁷¹ Michael Spillane, 'The fourth Earl of Dunraven, 1841-1926, A study of his contribution to the emerging Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century', PhD thesis, University of Limerick, 2003, p. 10.

⁷² Gwynn, 'Quin, Windham Thomas Wyndham', http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35644, [Accessed on 10 Apr. 2015].

was communicating with the dead when communicating with spirits through séances. He believed that they were instead ‘spirits of bad or at least doubtful character.’ De Vere concluded that it was not wise to attempt to communicate with these spirits, but that if it was truly possible to communicate with the dead than one should do so in a ‘spirit of love and reverence, and not trifling’.⁷³ His negative view of spiritualism could be seen as a reflection of his traditional and respectful view of faith and religion – an outlook which was based on conformity to church rules, a reverence for God, a duty to promote and draw others to his faith, personal devotion and public defence of his religion.

The jolting loss of social status that accompanied many conversions, does not seem to have been experienced by De Vere. This was in contrast to George Tyrrell, for example, a young Anglican from a poor but genteel family in Dublin, who was intellectually convinced by Catholic arguments and announced his conversion to his parents. His mother stated that what pained her most, was ‘that a son of mine should go to mass with the cook.’⁷⁴ The equally class-conscious reaction De Vere’s mother had to his younger brother’s marriage indicates that issues of class and respectability were paramount to her. This may have played a part in De Vere’s reluctance to reveal his conversion to her. De Vere, as a member of the Catholic gentry, was part of a relatively large minority within an Irish Ascendancy, a group for whom Protestantism was considered axiomatic. But by 1871 this Protestant solidity had been dented. Catholics represented thirty-eight percent of the total number of Irish landlords and included major figures such as the Earl of Kenmare and the Earl of Fingal.⁷⁵ De Vere’s membership of the Shannon Estuary group ensured he had a number of friends and relatives with whom he shared a religious faith and a cultural heritage.

Although it is difficult to gain an unbiased view of how De Vere was perceived by other member of his community, he certainly believed that his faith had brought him closer to the poorer elements of the local and wider population. Although conversion did involve a curtailment of opportunities for some, De Vere’s career in public life did not appear to be impeded by his change of religion. This was

⁷³ De Vere to Dunraven, (no date given) 1869, Dunraven Papers, UL, D 3196/F/7/13.

⁷⁴ Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, p.6.

⁷⁵ Potter, *William Monsell*, p.35.

a different experience to that of Gerald Manley Hopkins, who came from a less well-off background. He stated that he became a priest because it was the best, ‘but perhaps only way’, his conversion to Catholicism having prevented him from pursuing a career at Oxford University where he had shown so much early promise.⁷⁶ While a convert might face prejudice or even ostracisation by their former co-religionists, they were not always totally accepted by members of their new faith either. There is certainly an element of truth in the statement by David Newsome that the convert had to begin life again within an alien community.⁷⁷ In the case of De Vere and many of his contemporaries, there were often significant social and economic differences between their background and that of many members of the Catholic clergy and hierarchy in Ireland – those nearest to them on the social scale. As the sixth duke of Devonshire observed, ‘the Catholic Bishop of Ross (William Keane), concerning whose grand consecration at Cork, a great breeze arose, is (the) brother of my *gardener* at Lismore.’⁷⁸ As a resident landlord, it is unlikely that De Vere would have been as shocked as Devonshire, an outsider, by such a revelation. But it is still possible that the class differences between some converts and clergy may have resulted in tension, if not animosity.

Religion and Education

De Vere and other members of the Shannon Estuary Group had a shared interest in humanitarian reform. Spring Rice was a founder member of the Abolition of Foreign Slavery Society and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, he was also involved in penal reform societies and a selection of Irish ‘improvement’ societies. The involvement of group members in these interdenominational philanthropic societies, and their own personal friendships, ensured that the group maintained contact with other ‘morally serious’ reformers such as Thomas Buxon, Elizabeth Fry, Florence Nightingale and many others.⁷⁹ One of De Vere’s main interests with regard to moral reform and development was the national school education system in Ireland.

⁷⁶ Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A very private life* (London, 1992), p. 172.

⁷⁷ Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, p.6.

⁷⁸ William George Spencer Cavendish, diary entry, dated 8 February 1851, Devonshire Papers, quoted in K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland, 1832-1885*, (Oxford, 1984), p.176.

⁷⁹ Ridden, ‘Making good citizens’, p. 52.

In 1812 an inquiry into the spending of public money on education concluded that the sectarian violence which plagued Ireland was exacerbated by educating Catholic and Protestant children separately and recommended that in future public money should only be given to schools where Catholic and Protestant pupils were taught together. About the same time, the Kildare Place Society was established to provide education on this principle. The government began to channel public funds through the society for the provision of primary schools on a non-sectarian basis. Some Catholic priests and bishops were unhappy with the society, so in 1831 the Irish government itself established the National Board of Education to provide non-denominational education. The Irish national system of education was controversial from its inception. There were disagreements among contemporaries regarding the nature and purpose of the system.⁸⁰ Some members of the Catholic Church clerical hierarchy were supportive: Dr Blake, the Roman Catholic bishop of Dromore, stated that he believed the Irish national system of education provided

A good moral education for the whole community, supplying excellent class-books, excellent teachers, and excellent inspectors. Secondly, it invites all the youth of the whole country into its schools. Thirdly, it takes care that the great principles of morality and religion, which are suggested by the law of nature and are admitted by all Christians of every denomination in Ireland, shall be diligently inculcated in its and books and by its teachers.⁸¹

De Vere was an ardent supporter of the system; he wrote to Robert Peel in 1861 that he had ‘never hesitated to give’ his ‘constant support to the system of national education’.⁸² However, others demanded a fully segregated educational system with government money handed over to the clergy of the different denominations to conduct their religious schools on religious lines. John MacHale, Roman Catholic archbishop of Tuam, viewed the system as the beginning of a government conspiracy. ‘From the extraordinary power now claimed by the state over a mixed education, it would soon claim a similar despotic control over mixed marriages, and strive to stretch its net over all ecclesiastical concerns.’⁸³

⁸⁰ D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Educational Experiment. The National System of Education in Ireland* (London, 1970), p.1.

⁸¹ *Royal commission of inquiry into primary education (Ireland)*, vol.1, pt. 1: Report of the commissioners, p. 123 [C 6], H.C., 1870, xxviii, pt i.

⁸² Copy of a letter, Stephen De Vere to Robert Peel, 3 December 1861, De Vere papers, TCD MS 5053.

⁸³ *Dublin Evening Post*, 24 Nov. 1838.

In 1862 De Vere wrote that he believed the ‘great political battle of the day’ was the question of ‘mixed or denominational education’.⁸⁴ The issue was a divisive one, with conflicts occurring between the church and state, but also within the elite levels of the Catholic community, between the Ultramontanes and Liberal Catholics. As Pope Pius IX was wary of the increasing move towards secularisation and liberalism in European society, the Catholic Church became more suspicious of the state’s involvement in education. The arrival from Rome of Dr Paul Cullen as Archbishop of Armagh in 1849 saw the commencement of what has been described as a sustained and strongly led Catholic attack on the national school system, based as it was on a model of mixed denominational schools.⁸⁵ The Church gave this system its limited support as it was state-funded. De Vere was a genuine proponent of mixed education, he believed that if Catholic and Protestant children were educated together, they would have increased mutual understanding and consideration for one another. Leading to a more peaceful society in the future. He saw mixed education as being the best option for Ireland and maintained that it would also benefit Catholicism. While he had no objection to separate schools or colleges, if they were a result of private enterprise or benevolence or a result of local necessity, he was resolutely opposed to clerical control of the national education system.⁸⁶ In his letters to Monsell, De Vere indicated that he believed clerical influence over the educational system would be used to exert greater control over Irish society. De Vere believed that the various criticisms levelled by the church against the national school system would result in a distancing of the faithful from the priests and he wrote to Monsell in 1862: ‘Now again I foresee from the present agitation on the education question a disastrous future. I foresee an alienation of the laity from a clergy’.⁸⁷ De Vere and Monsell did not agree on the issue of mixed education. De Vere wrote to Monsell that he found their disagreement on the topic to be ‘most painful’.⁸⁸ Monsell believed that religion should play an important role in education, he referred to its inclusion as ‘a pearl beyond all price, the blessings of an education through which, as a golden thread, religion is intertwined’; consequently, he believed that a secular system of education would result in a drastic decline in

⁸⁴ De Vere to Monsell, 14 May, 1862. Monsell Papers, NLI, MS 8317.

⁸⁵ Coolahan, *Irish Education: its History and Structure*, p. 18.

⁸⁶ Stephen De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, (no date given) July 1868, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053/85-100.

⁸⁷ De Vere to Monsell, 29 January 1862. Monsell Papers, NLI, MS 8317.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

society's standards. 'Domestic charities will languish ... natural sympathies will be deadened, patriotism will lead to place-hunting, and a universal cold reign of selfishness will prevail'.⁸⁹ However, both De Vere and Monsell were in agreement with regard to the role education, religious or otherwise, could play in developing the morality and social responsibility of the population. Monsell believed that the extension of education was the most important social reform of all, as it helped men to help themselves'.⁹⁰ This concern with education may have been influenced by both men's experiences during the Famine, during that time it was frequently asserted that improved education, especially with regard to agricultural practices, could prevent similar tragedies from occurring in the future.

The Catholic Young Men's Society was established in Limerick in 1849 by Reverend Dr Richard O'Brien, later Dean of Limerick. It eventually spread throughout Ireland, and branches were also set up by Irish communities in Britain. The stated aim of the organisation was to expand the educational opportunities available to young Catholic men, while also supporting and strengthening their faith. Branches held meetings, organised lectures and amateur theatricals and marched in formation with banners to church on Sundays. It was intended to be a non-political organisation.⁹¹ Although the target audience of the CYMS was the respectable working man, those of a higher social position were also encouraged to either join the society or act as patrons. In 1853 De Vere was invited to become a member.⁹² The Earl of Dunraven, Aubrey De Vere, and William Monsell were all also involved with the society.⁹³ Monsell was particularly interested and active in extending the educational aspect of the society. In 1856 he gave a donation of £10 for the purpose of establishing examinations, with certificates of merit being awarded to successful applicants.⁹⁴ The focus on religion and education was very much in line with his own interests and those of De Vere.

When the latter was invited to address the members of the society, he focused on the role emigrants had to play in spreading the Catholic faith. De Vere believed that it was the duty of every Catholics to promote their faith. As a means of

⁸⁹ Potter, *Monsell*, p.58.

⁹⁰ Potter, *Monsell*, p.58.

⁹¹ Alan O'Day, *Reactions to Irish Nationalism, 1865-1914* (London, 1987), p. 32.

⁹² *Limerick Reporter*, 16 Aug. 1853.

⁹³ *Limerick Reporter* 4 Jan. 1853

⁹⁴ *Limerick Reporter* 25 Apr. 1856

demonstrating the strength of the Catholic religion, he wrote that ‘wherever the enterprise of the robust Saxon has opened the way, the Celt, his Catholic brother, has followed in his footsteps and planted the Cross.’⁹⁵ In his address to the association, he urged members of the audience to aim for more than their own ‘selfish advancement’.⁹⁶ De Vere appeared to have considered those who might emigrate as potential Christian missionaries. He asserted that as emigrants they would be held up to the world as ‘examples of the Catholic religion and specimens of the Irish people.’ He told them that they should live as ‘practical witnesses of the purity’ of Catholicism.⁹⁷ His message could not have been clearer. His advice for young men who potentially would leave Ireland was to consider first their role as missionaries for the Catholic faith. His use of the phrase ‘selfish advancement’ indicates that he believed one’s personal success should be a secondary concern. This may not have been directly in correlation with the aims of the CYMS itself. It had, admittedly, a clear and obvious religious focus, was exclusively Catholic and male in composition and stressed the importance of active piety on the part of its members, and it was stipulation in the society’s rules that all new applicants had to be practising Catholics.⁹⁸ But it was also concerned with the individual advancement of members through education. The mission of the society as described by the staunchly catholic and pro-Repeal *Limerick Reporter* was the ‘development of religious, moral, and literary education’ in Limerick city.⁹⁹ The organisation was initially successful, with large crowds gathering for church processions.¹⁰⁰ Within the society, the authority of the clergy was unquestioned. The priest was responsible for ‘preserving the religious character of the branch’ but was also called on to extend the interest of the members into social action, guiding the members in any form of lay apostolic activity that they might be called on to undertake, and taking a leading role in the formation of study circles that would ‘seek to imbue the minds of Catholic young men with sound Catholic principles.’¹⁰¹ The society eventually faced declining interest and

⁹⁵ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression?* p.12.

⁹⁶ *Limerick Reporter*, 22 Dec. 1852.

⁹⁷ De Vere, Lecture on emigration to the Young Men’s Catholic Society, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5074/3.

⁹⁸ *Constitution of the Catholic Young Men’s Society of Ireland* (Typescript in Limerick Diocesan Archive, no date) in Mortimer Meehan, *Philanthropy, Self-Help and Religion in Limerick City, 1850-1900*, M.A. thesis, MIC, p.78.

⁹⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 22 Apr. 1856.

¹⁰⁰ *Munster News* of 4 May 1852.

¹⁰¹ Mortimer Meehan, ‘Philanthropy, Self-Help and Religion in Limerick City’, p.76.

membership, based to a large extent on the focus on educational attainment, and particularly the pressure on students, who often had only an elementary level of education, to pass exams.¹⁰² Although it is not clear when De Vere left the CYMS, it is obvious from his correspondence with Monsell that, despite his evangelical Catholicism, he was far more liberal than those who shaped the Society. This came across in the early 1860s in his anger and deep disappointment in O'Brien, the president, as he had made what De Vere termed 'an undisguised attack' upon the Limerick Model School. Monsell, who was also present at the meeting, did not contradict O'Brien. De Vere believed that in failing to do so, O'Brien remarks received from Monsell 'the sanction of silence'.¹⁰³ The Limerick Model School admitted both Catholic and Protestant children, a system of which De Vere was deeply supportive. In 1863 Catholic Church leaders called for a withdrawal of Catholic pupils, ostensibly due to the provision of unsatisfactory religious instruction in the school.¹⁰⁴

The Clergy and Electoral Politics

In the early 1800s, the Catholic Church in Ireland maintained a stance of non-resistance with regard to political matters. But James O'Shea in his study of the Catholic clergy in nineteenth-century Tipperary has argued that Daniel O'Connell was so successful in encouraging priests to become politically active that they eventually came to regard such involvement, if not as their birthright, then as an essential part of their duty. This deviation from purely spiritual matters was strongly defended. Patrick O'Keeffe C.C. Fethard asserted that both purposes, both spiritual and temporal, were noted in the Gospel: 'Our Lord cured the body as well as the soul'.¹⁰⁵ As the century progressed, this attitude changed as many more priests were able to undertake their education in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, rather than in France, and so were subject to different influences.¹⁰⁶ Some theologians, such as Dr Patrick Murray (professor of Moral Theology in Maynooth from 1841 to 1849) saw political involvement as a civil right. Murray published a pamphlet which asserted

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ De Vere to Monsell, 29 January 1862, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

¹⁰⁴ Model School, O'Connell Avenue, Limerick, Limerick City, <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=LI®no=21521043>, [accessed on: 16 Apr. 2017].

¹⁰⁵ James O'Shea, *Priest, Politics and Society in Post-Famine Ireland, a study of County Tipperary 1850-1891* (Dublin, 1983), pp 43-44.

¹⁰⁶ Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society*, p. 178.

that the priestly character did not detract from the priest's status as a citizen. Although Maynooth professors ostensibly discouraged a political atmosphere in the seminary by forbidding political discussions or the reading of newspapers by students, they were still aware of the necessity to provide some guidelines for the Divinity students on the scope, quality and limitations of their future political activity.¹⁰⁷

Some members of the clergy became inclined to view political action as being acceptable in some cases. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 saw many members of the clergy successfully influence voters, but their political activity soon decreased dramatically. Thousands of poorer voters were disenfranchised by the act, thus limiting the scope of the Church's influence. Whyte has asserted that the Church's decision to support the repeal of the Union during the eighteen-forties played a part in strengthening the role of the clergy in the Irish political system. The Irish reform act of 1850 had trebled the size of the Irish electorate, and extended the scope of the clergy's sphere of influence.¹⁰⁸ Whyte calculated that the political influence of the clergy reached its peak in 1852.¹⁰⁹ Between the Great Famine and 1868, electoral politics in Limerick was dominated by the Liberal Party. This was due in part to the lack of organisation among the Conservative party in the district, and their inability to secure reputable candidates. The Liberals had a pool of strong candidates to draw from as the majority of landowners in Limerick were supporters of that party. These men, which included De Vere, Monsell and S.J. Synan, were closely associated with the county and had developed a strong local following, both with their peers, and also with the Catholic Church.¹¹⁰ The influence and authority of the Liberal party in Limerick was made possible by the co-operation of the Catholic clergy. There was an absence of any lay organisations with political power until 1870, so the clergy had significant influence over voters. Some priests justified their involvement in political activity as being the necessary counter-balance to landlord influence, a number of priests also argued that they helped the people redress their

¹⁰⁷ O'Shea, *Priest, Politics and Society in Post-Famine Ireland*, pp 43-44.

¹⁰⁸ J.H. Whyte, 'The Influence of the Catholic Clergy on Elections in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,' *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 295 (Apr., 1960), pp 239-259.

¹⁰⁹ Whyte, 'The Influence of the Catholic Clergy on Elections in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,' pp 239-259.

¹¹⁰ Gerard Moran, 'The emergence of popular politics in County Limerick, 1868-1874', in Liam Irwin and Gearoid O Tuathaigh (eds) *Limerick History and Society: Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County* (Dublin, 2009), p. 458.

grievances, and keep them within the limits of constitutionality. In this capacity, some priests considered themselves, along with their bishops, to be the political leaders of the parishioners.¹¹¹ That is not to say that electors always abided by their instructions. In August 1847, a mob attacked a priest who directed voters to support an unpopular candidate, it was necessary for the priest's fellow clergy to rescue him.¹¹²



Figure 8. Stephen De Vere, Bishop George Butler and William Monsell.¹¹³

However, during the 1850s and 60s the clergy's political authority was clear and they were actively engaged in the electoral process. George Butler, who became Bishop of Limerick in 1864, pictured below with De Vere and Monsell, was not at all opposed to his priests directing voters from the pulpit as to how they should vote, particularly when issues of religious equality and political matters that affected the people's religious interests were in question. Butler stated that he thought it was 'right for the priest to explain to the people what the issue to be tried at the hustings is, and what the clear duty of Catholics is in trying that issue'.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ O'Shea, *Priest, Politics and Society in Post-Famine Ireland*, pp 43-44.

¹¹² J.H. Whyte, 'The influence of the Catholic Clergy on elections in nineteenth-century Ireland', pp 242, 247-9.

¹¹³ Wynne Jones, *The abiding enchantment of Curragh Chase*, p. 27.

¹¹⁴ *Report from the select committee on parliamentary and municipal elections, and the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence and appendix, HC 1868-9 (352)*, viii, p. 483, q. 11591; p. 484, q. 11601.

James Spaight, a Conservative, stated that during the elections in the 1860s, the priests in Limerick directed the mobs and provided them with whiskey. There appears to be some evidence to support his accusation; in 1865 the curate of St Munchin's parish authorised the distribution of £15 worth of whiskey to the mob.¹¹⁵ In a case study of Co. Tipperary, it was found that seventy-seven percent of the priests who served in the county between 1853 and 1892 took some part in politics, but were occasionally found to have employed controversial methods. Between 1853 and 1892 nine Irish MPs were unseated on the grounds that their election had involved the exercise of undue influence, in some cases constituting 'spiritual intimidation', in others physical violence, on the part of the Catholic priests. This prominent political involvement led some contemporaries to assert that it was the Catholic clergy who were the real controlling force behind Irish popular politics.¹¹⁶ Stricter rules governing the conduct of the clergy in politics were drawn up by the hierarchy in 1853 and thereafter, priests who attempted to exert too great an influence in electioneering matters could find themselves in trouble with ecclesiastical and civil authorities.¹¹⁷

De Vere observed that 'the Irish voter was hitherto bandied about between the landlord and the priest'.¹¹⁸ Of course, electoral influence was not confined to these two groups, it could also have been exercised by workmates, agents, business owners and a variety of other sectors of society.¹¹⁹ But while De Vere considered the excessive power of landlords in electoral matters to have lessened over time, he believed that the influence of the clergy held strong. De Vere stated in 1859 that his only reason for supporting the ballot was the hope that it would 'ultimately and utterly' destroy 'clerical political influence'.¹²⁰ As a Catholic political figure who was very vocal on issues which were connected with his religion, such as the maintenance of the Maynooth grant, it is interesting that he was, or over time became, so opposed to clerical interference in political matters. In this, as in other regards, the Famine seems to have operated as a turning point since De Vere seemed

¹¹⁵ Moran, 'The emergence of popular politics in County Limerick', in Irwin and O Tuathaigh (eds) *Limerick History and Society* (Dublin, 2009), p. 459.

¹¹⁶ Connolly, *Religion and Society*, p.37

¹¹⁷ Whyte, 'The Influence of the Catholic Clergy on Elections in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,' pp 239-259.

¹¹⁸ De Vere to Monsell, 29 December, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

¹¹⁹ Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society*, p.47.

¹²⁰ De Vere to Monsell, 29 December 1859, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

to have developed a very different view of Ireland and her people in the post-Famine period. He stated that ‘the framework of society’ had been shattered.¹²¹ He believed that the Famine had damaged the education system, leaving people to grow up in ignorance, and he saw industry as having been replaced by theft.¹²² This change in attitude is obviously in stark contrast to the idealised view of poor, Catholic Irish people which De Vere once held. It is difficult to assess why this dramatic change of opinion occurred, but he was clearly disappointed with the type of social structures that had emerged in post-Famine Ireland. De Vere also asserted that as a people, the Irish were ‘too apt to confine’ their ‘administration to those whose sphere of action has placed them most prominently before the world’.¹²³

The commencement of De Vere’s political career almost coincided with the peak of clerical political influence, and so this influence may have constituted a genuine concern. But he expressed his feelings discreetly: his criticism of the clergy, such as his observation that they valued power above all else and would not relinquish it without a struggle, were not made publicly.¹²⁴ On a personal level, he maintained a long friendship with a Father Flanagan, the parish priest of Adare.¹²⁵ He was also connected with Bishop Edward Thomas O’Dwyer of Limerick, a controversial character who clashed with Protestants, whom he accused of fraud and proselytising, but he also tangled with the Christian Brothers and the Society of Jesus for what he saw as their flouting of his authority in educational matters.¹²⁶ He sought De Vere’s advice on a number of issues, such as the running of local hospitals. While De Vere was ready to support a range of worthy causes, his vision was broader than that of the bishop, and he refused to assist with O’Dwyer’s Literary Institute because it was confined to Catholic young men.¹²⁷ As with his stance on university and primary education, presumably De Vere’s views on the importance of mixed education extended to charitable endeavours too.

¹²¹ De Vere, Lecture on emigration to the Young Men’s Catholic Society, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5074/3.

¹²² *Limerick Reporter*, 22 Dec. 1852.

¹²³ De Vere, Lecture on emigration to the Young Men’s Catholic Society, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5074/3.

¹²⁴ De Vere to Monsell, 29 December 1859, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

¹²⁵ *The Irish Times*, 14 Nov. 1904.

¹²⁶ Thomas J. Morrissey, *Bishop Edward Thomas O’Dwyer of Limerick, 1842-1917* (Dublin, 2003) p. 72.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

De Vere and the Papal Aggression Crisis

While converts occasionally had to contend with disputes and differences of opinion with other members of their religion and the clergy of the Catholic Church, they were also regularly faced with the public and widespread expression of anti-Catholic sentiment during the mid-nineteenth century. As the Catholic Church began to reassert its authority, educated, intelligent converts, including De Vere, often acted as its principal advocates.¹²⁸ The decision of Pope Pius IX to establish a Catholic hierarchy in England in 1851 resulted in the last great wave of anti-Catholicism of the nineteenth century.¹²⁹ While De Vere was opposed to the Church gaining greater control over aspects of politics and education in Ireland, he defended the establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in England. He wrote that the title of Bishop is ‘not only venerable from its antiquity, but is peculiarly appropriate as expressing the idea of the ecclesiastical functions incident to the office.’¹³⁰ He also argued that a Church hierarchy was simply necessary for the establishment of uniformity of discipline.¹³¹

What was apparently seen by De Vere and his counterparts as the restoration of the hierarchy was considered by Protestants to be an act of papal aggression.¹³² Much of the protest appeared to be based on the belief that the loyalty of Catholics always was firstly to the Pope in Rome, and only secondly to the monarch.¹³³ *The Times* in 1853 doubted that ‘in England, or indeed in any free Protestant country, a true Papist can be a good subject’.¹³⁴ Rapon has argued that it is historically incorrect to consider, as Frank Wallis has done, that anti-Catholicism was a ‘prejudice’ of ‘ultra-Protestants’ who operated serial ‘discrimination’ against the Roman Catholic Church.¹³⁵ It was instead, Rapon concluded, a widespread protest that target not only the Papacy but also the clergy, the practices and doctrinal beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, the veneration of saints, priestly celibacy, and the institute of the confessional. Fear of so-called papal aggression was so great that it occasionally

¹²⁸ Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, p.ix.

¹²⁹ Walter Ralls, ‘The Papal Aggression of 1850: A Study in Victorian Anti-Catholicism’, *Church History*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jun., 1974), pp 242-256.

¹³⁰ Stephen Edward De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression* (London, 1851), p.4.

¹³¹ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression*, p.16.

¹³² Anders Jarlert, *Piety and Modernity*, (Leuven, 2012), p.46.

¹³³ Danilo Rapon, *Religion and Politics in the Risorgimento: Britain and the New Italy, 1861-1875*, (New York, 2014) p. 39.

¹³⁴ *The Times*, 3 Mar. 1853.

¹³⁵ Rapon, *Religion and Politics*, p. 47.

bordered on paranoia.¹³⁶ The *Belfast Newsletter* reported in relation to ‘papal aggression’, that there had ‘never perhaps’ been a ‘common danger more thoroughly organised’, and it was necessary to ‘drive back the bold front of this daring invasion.’¹³⁷

The argument that the authority claimed by the Catholic Church over British subjects extended far beyond their spiritual lives was occasionally fostered by Catholics themselves. For example, Father Frederick William Faber produced a New Year’s sermon in 1860 which was concerned with loyalty to the Pope. He stated that allegiance to the pontiff ought to be total and unwavering, while Viscount Fielding, the future earl of Denbigh, a Roman Catholic convert, and founder of the Franciscan friary at Pantasaph, North Wales, inscribed his banner ‘First a Catholic, then an Englishman.’¹³⁸ But the approach of many Catholics in response to the papal aggression crisis was to reassure their contemporaries and the monarch that they were loyal subjects of the crown. Lord Lovat, a leading Roman Catholic aristocrat, presented a loyal address bearing 255,766 signatures of Roman Catholics to Queen Victoria in 1851. The memorial began by stating their ‘unimpaired and unalterable fidelity to Your Majesty’s Royal Person, Crown and Dignity.’ It continued to ‘beg most sincerely to assure Your Majesty that the organisation granted to us is entirely ecclesiastical, and its authority purely spiritual.’¹³⁹ De Vere’s personal response to the crisis did not depend upon a declaration of loyalty to the crown, instead, he argued that:

The nations of the civilised world have looked with astonishment upon an agitation in which they can only distinguish the fury of party, the bitterness of personal animosity and the rancour of religious bigotry. They demand, where is England’s justice, spirit of fair play, love of liberty?¹⁴⁰

While the crisis of 1851 had undoubtedly served as a flashpoint for anti-Catholic propaganda and legislation, the implication that Catholics owed their ultimate allegiance to a foreign power, and thus could not fulfil their obligations as loyal subjects of the Crown and citizens of the United Kingdom, was not a new

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 Nov. 1850.

¹³⁸ Rapon, *Religion and Politics*, p. 46.

¹³⁹ 1851 (236) Roman Catholic hierarchy. Copy of an address presented to Her Majesty from Her Majesty's Roman Catholic subjects in England, disclaiming any intention of trenching upon the royal prerogative, in the recent appointment of a Roman Catholic hierarchy with the number of signatures attached.

¹⁴⁰ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy and Aggression*, p.4.

development in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴¹ Since the 1830s a number of Protestant associations, bible societies and evangelical groups, as well as *The Times*, the *Quarterly Review*, and other non-confessional and Protestant periodicals had reinforced this charge against Catholics.¹⁴² For a Unionist like De Vere, the accusation of divided loyalties must have been difficult to accept.

A number of pamphlets in defence of the Catholic hierarchy were issued, perhaps most famously by Cardinal Wiseman. He published what was considered to be an able defence, in a thirty-one-page pamphlet entitled *An Appeal to the Good Feeling of the English People, on the subject of the New Hierarchy*. It was somewhat hastily produced: Wiseman arrived in England on 11 November 1850, he finished the pamphlet by the fifteenth, it was published on the nineteenth of November and appeared in the London papers the following day. It quickly sold thirty thousand copies. It has since come to be regarded in Roman Catholic historiography as having done much to quell the popular uproar. Wiseman's pamphlet received more national notice than did any other Roman Catholic defence. It was reprinted in full in the *Freeman's Journal*, and commented upon in many of the regional newspapers, including the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*.¹⁴³ Authors of similar material included Lord Shrewsbury, who published a pamphlet in defence of the Catholic hierarchy and the Queen's Colleges for Ireland¹⁴⁴ while Sir George Bowyer, the leading Roman Catholic lawyer, wrote a letter to *The Times* on 16 October 1850 which set out a number of arguments in defence of the establishment of the Catholic Hierarchy. He stated that the hierarchy exercised no temporal power, that it had been created for reasons purely internal to the English Roman Catholic Church. It was from this work that De Vere drew inspiration for his own pamphlet, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression?*¹⁴⁵ This response to the crisis by De Vere came later than some of the better-known defences, but he stated that he believed 'a temperate correction of all mis-statements may still be of use.'¹⁴⁶

Allitt has argued that a substantial amount of the content produced by Catholic converts during this period was written with, for the most part, a protestant

¹⁴¹ Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*, pp 97-99.

¹⁴² Rapon, *Religion and Politics*, p. 45.

¹⁴³ *Freemans Journal*, 24 Dec. 1850.

¹⁴⁴ *Nation*, 15 Feb. 1851.

¹⁴⁵ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression*, p.12.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

audience in mind. He has asserted that this was done in an effort to vindicate their own conversion and to persuade others to follow them.¹⁴⁷ But De Vere's work could be considered to be quite provocative and written from a specifically Irish perspective. De Vere wrote that the crisis was based on 'fallacious reasoning and bold assertions', and although he felt bitterly the 'coarse insults, and underserved invectives' that had been heaped upon what was now his church, he would not return 'railing for railing'.¹⁴⁸ De Vere questioned the reasons for the England's descent into intolerance, and attributed it to the country becoming weaker. His central argument was that the Catholic Church did not claim to have at all times a perfect administrative system: instead, her perfection was confined to her doctrinal faith.¹⁴⁹ With reference to the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill, De Vere alluded to what he considered to be the last piece of discriminatory religious legislation, the last of the penal laws in Ireland. In attributing a victim-like mentality to Irish emigrants, De Vere argued that their fate had been the result of a growing pauperism which drove the Irish emigrant as 'a fugitive not an aspirant to every British colony'. Yet, De Vere argued, the Catholic faith continued to flourish amongst the Irish, which, he believed, was an indication of the strength of the religion. De Vere concluded by stating that the government owed Irish Catholics 'a vast debt of restitution for the persecutions of successive centuries'.¹⁵⁰ He was to utilise a very similar argument in later years when speaking about the government's obligation to finance adequately educational provision in Ireland.

The Ecclesiastical Titles Bill of 1851, in any case, eventually proved to be a dead letter.¹⁵¹ But Paz has argued that the experience of defending the hierarchy against Protestant attacks in 1850-51 had a lasting effect on many Roman Catholics. They were from that point on far less willing to tolerate anti-Catholic measures. Although they experienced poor treatment at the hands of the Russell ministry, many Catholics still turned to the state to protest against anti-Catholic processions and demonstrations.¹⁵² In 1853 De Vere was amongst a group of Catholics who sought to petition the parliament against a Bill that many Catholics believed would amount to

¹⁴⁷ Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁸ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression*, p.3.

¹⁴⁹ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression*, p.14.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* (London, 1966), pp 292-309.

¹⁵² Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*, pp 97-99.

the introduction of unwarranted official inspections of convents.¹⁵³ The official title was ‘a Bill to secure the personal liberty of the subject’, but the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* referred to it as an attempt to ‘establish an inquisitorial inspection of convents’.¹⁵⁴ The petition was referred to as ‘one of the most impressive demonstrations of public opinion which this or any other country has ever witnessed.’¹⁵⁵ Isaac Butt declared the Bill to be ‘an outrageous infringement on the liberty of the subject’. He considered it to be ‘cowardly and unmanly’ to seemingly legislate for one thing when in fact the legislation was directed for another purpose. Butt stated that if the government wished to legislate against convents ‘let them do so openly, and not proceed covertly to their object’. Butt argued that it was claimed that the bill was designed to protect Catholics, but Catholics were not consulted, and were obviously opposed to the measure, given the many petitions that had been presented against it.¹⁵⁶ Clearly, De Vere had re-evaluated his opinion of the Government by 1866 if one were to judge his feelings by the content of his letter to Dunraven in June of that year. Dunraven had been appointed to the House of Lords, and De Vere wrote to congratulate him. He stated that it was ‘an additional proof if any were wanted, of the kind disposition of the Govt. towards Catholic Ireland.’¹⁵⁷

De Vere and Saint Senan's Roman Catholic Church, Foynes.

Prior to the introduction of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, there were obvious difficulties involved in constructing Catholic churches of architectural distinction on prominent sites. As the nineteenth century progressed communities across Ireland, aided by the emergence of a prosperous Catholic middle class, set about funding the construction of Catholic churches.¹⁵⁸ The return to Ireland of Cardinal Paul Cullen in 1850 saw an increasing importance placed on the necessity of a parish church.¹⁵⁹ He quickly set about attempting to impose some order on the clergy and people. Cullen discouraged the practice of ‘stations’, which involved the priest saying mass in different houses, and introduced the practice of the exposition

¹⁵³ *Freeman's Journal*, 7 Jun. 1853.

¹⁵⁴ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 01 Jun. 1853.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Limerick Reporter*, 24 Jun. 1853.

¹⁵⁷ De Vere to Dunraven, 9 June 1866, Dunraven papers, University of Limerick, D3196/F/7/9.

¹⁵⁸ Brendan Grimes, *Commodious temples: Roman Catholic church building in nineteenth-century Dublin* (Dublin, 2010), p.7.

¹⁵⁹ Emmet Larkin (2011) ‘Paul Cullen: the great ultramontane’ in Dáire Keogh and Albert McDonnell (eds.), *Cardinal Paul Cullen and his world* (Dublin, 2011), p.21.

of the Blessed Sacrament. One of the directives issued as a result of the Synod held in Thurles in August 1850 was that all sacramental rites, with the exclusion of last rites, were to take place in a church.¹⁶⁰ While the practice of having mass said in private homes did not stop – mass was celebrated on Christmas Day 1851 in Curragh Chase – the Catholic parish church as a building took on a greater significance.¹⁶¹ The erection of churches which could accommodate large numbers of people, but also act as a symbol of their new social centrality locally, came to be seen by many as a necessity.¹⁶² Although there is some evidence to suggest that Cullen preferred the classical style of architecture, Catholic church builders in Ireland were heavily influenced by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, the renowned English architect remembered for his pioneering role in the gothic revival style.¹⁶³ De Vere had previously attended mass in Robertstown, the church which served Foynes until the late 1860s. The small barn-church in Robertstown was constructed in the immediate prelude to Emancipation, and opened in 1830.¹⁶⁴

In 1868 J. J. McCarthy often referred to as ‘the Irish Pugin’ was commissioned by De Vere to design a new Catholic church for the village of Foynes in county Limerick.¹⁶⁵ During the 1850s and 1860s, McCarthy designed four cathedrals – Armagh, Monaghan, Thurles and Derry, and about sixty churches.¹⁶⁶ De Vere led the committee charged with collecting subscriptions, entering into contracts and making all financial arrangements concerning the construction of the church.¹⁶⁷ Some commentators have claimed that the religious antipathy of the period meant that it was extremely rare for a Protestant architect to design Catholic churches or *vice versa*. The huge output from offices such as those of J. J. McCarthy, based in Dublin, in the post-Famine period is considered to be a reflection of the building

¹⁶⁰ Desmond Bowen, *Cardinal Cullen and the shaping of modern Irish Catholicism* (Dublin, 1983), pp 113-116.

¹⁶¹ *Cork Examiner*, 2 Jan. 1852.

¹⁶² Chris Brooks, *The Victorian Church: Architecture and society* (Manchester, 1995), p. 143.

¹⁶³ Grimes, *Commodious temples*, p.7.

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.limerickdioceseheritage.org/Shanagolden/chRobertstown.htm> [accessed on 07 Jan. 2012].

¹⁶⁵ Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720-1940 <http://www.dia.ie/works/view/10576/building/CO.+LIMERICK%2C+FOYNES%2C+CHURCH+OF+ST+SENANUS+%28RC%29>, [Accessed on 22 March 2015].

¹⁶⁶ Jeanne Sheehy, *J.J. McCarthy and the Gothic revival in Ireland* (Belfast, 1977), p.18.

¹⁶⁷ Stephen De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church list of subscriptions and statement of income and expenditure*, (Limerick 1868), TCD 5059/19.

boom in Catholic churches.¹⁶⁸ So while the decision of the committee to employ McCarthy might be seen as an example of religious bias, it could also be viewed as a desire on their part to employ an architect with a strong reputation and a proven track record. McCarthy's initial plans were highly ambitious, and a scaled-down version of the original design was eventually put in place. The resulting structure, which was Gothic in style, was described by De Vere as being 'beautiful'.¹⁶⁹ Although the church could accommodate between four and five hundred people, the capacity of the building was still deemed to be insufficient by De Vere, who stated that there would not be enough room for the ordinary church goers when sailors and mariners were in attendance.¹⁷⁰ The larger design for the church included a central tower, transept, and eastern apse.¹⁷¹ De Vere estimated that it would cost between £2,500 and £3,000, and stated that it could still be completed when the necessary funds became available. De Vere stated that the spirit of 'religious enthusiasm' in the locality gave him hope that the full plans for the church could one day be realised.¹⁷² While the church was eventually extended, this work did not actually commence until the 1930s.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Brooks, *The Victorian Church*, p. 142.

¹⁶⁹ De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church list of subscriptions and statement of income and expenditure*.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. Foynes is a maritime port.

¹⁷¹ Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720-1940

<http://www.dia.ie/works/view/10576/building/CO.+LIMERICK%2C+FOYNES%2C+CHURCH+OF+ST+SENANUS+%28RC%29>, [Accessed on 22 May 2015].

¹⁷² De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church List of subscriptions and statement of income and expenditure*, 5059/19.

¹⁷³ <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=LC®no=21829015>, [Accessed on 02 Jan. 2014].



Figure 9. St Senans Roman Catholic Church, Foynes, Co. Limerick.¹⁷⁴



Figure 9. St Senans Roman Catholic Church, Foynes, Co. Limerick.¹⁷⁵

The Foynes church was an example of landlord co-operation: while De Vere took charge of the funding, the site for the church was given as a gift by Lord

¹⁷⁴ National Library of Ireland, Lawrence collection, [between ca. 1865-1914], Roman Catholic Church, Foynes, Co. Limerick, available: <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000318164>, [Accessed on 02 Jan, 2015].

¹⁷⁵ National Library of Ireland, (between ca. 1865-1914), Roman Catholic Church, Foynes, Co. Limerick, available: <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000318170>, [Accessed on 20 Jan. 2015].

Monteagle, De Vere's uncle, and one of the largest proprietors in the area.¹⁷⁶ It was not always easy to obtain a suitable site for a new church. It is likely that Monteagle was more sympathetic and generous in his provision of a site due to the close relationship he enjoyed with De Vere. The church in Foynes was given a prominent and central location in the village. In general, most of the money needed for the construction of churches was raised locally, in Enniskerry, as in Foynes, a fund-raising committee was established.¹⁷⁷ It was not unusual for Protestants to contribute to the building funds of Catholic churches, through the provision of a building site, money or professional services. The *Catholic Directory* of 1860 noted that a large number of Protestants had subscribed to the building fund to enlarge the Catholic church. While it was estimated that as much as ten percent of the contributions made to St Mary's, Pope's Quay, Cork, came from members of churches other than the Catholic church.¹⁷⁸ In the case of the church in Foynes, De Vere reported that £335 had been donated by members of the Protestant community. He acknowledged the generosity of the contributions from members of the wealthier class but noted that of the 670 subscribers, 600 were for sums under £5, and were given mainly by small farmers and labourers. De Vere personally donated £228.2s.6d, the largest donation from any one individual, the total expenditure was £1,864.¹⁷⁹ De Vere compiled and published a list of the names and amounts donated by each subscriber to the church construction fund. It has been argued that lists of subscribers were published, posted in churches, or read from the altar, as a calculated method of encouraging larger donations.¹⁸⁰ One can easily see this as an effective method of encouraging people to be more generous than they might otherwise have been in their donations. De Vere, however, stressed that the publication of the list of names and amounts donated was to allow for transparency, to show that all the money collected could be accounted for. He provided a detailed description of the expenses incurred and stated that he held the contracts and account records, and was prepared to submit them to any

¹⁷⁶ De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church list of subscriptions and statement of income and expenditure*.

¹⁷⁷ Brooks, *The Victorian Church*, p.147.

¹⁷⁸ Grimes, 'Funding a Roman Catholic church in nineteenth-century Ireland', in *Architectural History*, Vol. 52 (2009), pp 147-168.

¹⁷⁹ De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church List of subscriptions and statement of income and expenditure*.

¹⁸⁰ Grimes, 'Funding a Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in *Architectural History*, Vol. 52 (2009), pp 147-168.

subscriber who requested to see them.¹⁸¹ De Vere did value his reputation for integrity and honesty, and so a desire to be beyond reproach in this matter is possible.

De Vere himself collected donations annually from the wealthier subscribers. Members of the working class contributed smaller amounts, usually on a weekly basis.¹⁸² The donations from poorer contributors were important in every parish, even those whose inhabitants included many wealthy people, such as St Andrew's in Dublin. In that parish, more than a third of the cost of over £20,000 for the parochial houses and church came from the weekly contributions of the working classes.¹⁸³ Some Catholic priests found their reliance on the contributions of the poor to be a humiliation. Some commentators have argued that it was unfair to expect people to donate so much of their meagre earnings to church building.¹⁸⁴ Yet, De Vere seems to have considered it to be almost a source of pride to announce that most of the contributions for St. Senan's were made by labourers and small farmers.¹⁸⁵

De Vere's belief in the importance of constructing Catholic churches was evident long before the establishment of St. Senan's in Foynes. In 1847, while staying in the town of London in Canada, he wrote that he induced a priest with whom he had become acquainted to open a subscription for building a new church. De Vere deemed the existing church to be insufficient and subscribed ten pounds, plus one dollar for each of the men who travelled with him.¹⁸⁶ De Vere seems to have prioritised church building over meeting the other needs of newly arrived emigrants from Ireland, such as education and healthcare. Before the church in Foynes opened, De Vere usually attended mass in Robertstown, approximately two miles from Foynes village. Despite the proximity of this church, a number of people in Foynes, and certainly De Vere, given his efforts to raise funds for the church, believed that the new building was necessary, and perhaps integral to a sense of local pride. In relation to his efforts to establish the new church, De Vere wrote 'I feel humbly and deeply thankful to God for having enabled me to do so much for his house and for my poor friends.'¹⁸⁷ On De Vere's ninety-first birthday, an address from the people

¹⁸¹ De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church List of subscriptions and statement of income and expenditure*.

¹⁸² De Vere, diary entry, no date given, 1870, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5070.

¹⁸³ Grimes, 'Funding a Roman Catholic Church', pp 147-168.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ De Vere, *Foynes Catholic Church list of subscriptions, and statement of income and expenditure*.

¹⁸⁶ De Vere, diary entry, dated 1 November, 1845, De Vere papers, TCD MS 5061.

¹⁸⁷ De Vere, diary entry, dated 15 May 1870, De Vere papers, TCD MS 5070.

of Foynes was presented to him. It referred to his piety and zeal as a Christian, and the imperishable memento he had left in the form of the 'beautiful church he had built in Foynes.'¹⁸⁸

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the landlord class in Ireland did not form a homogenous group, but one of the characteristics shared by most was their religion. Most were members of the Church of Ireland, while the majority of those outside the landowning class were Roman Catholics. Conversion to Catholicism for a member of the landed elite, then is likely to have required deep contemplation, reflection, and a strong desire to become a part of that Church. De Vere's conversion occurred at a time of great social and political upheaval, and shortly before the last major wave of anti-Catholicism of the nineteenth century, this also coincided with his time as an M.P.¹⁸⁹ Clerical authority and influence in regard to political matters was prevalent in 1850s, it is unlikely that the Liberal party could have achieved the influence they retained in Limerick during De Vere's political career, had it not been for the support of the Catholic clergy. There is evidence of the influence of De Vere's religious faith during his career as an M.P., and while he was a vocal defender of Catholicism, he was not incapable of considering matters of public interest from a perspective other than that of his religious allegiance. While De Vere saw it as a duty of Catholics to spread their faith, he was opposed to influence of the Catholic clergy in the national school system in particular, but supported non-denominational education in general, even in the face of opposition from his great friend, Monsell. Although he remained strongly committed to this standpoint, his desire to promote his religion was evident in other aspects of his life, most notably his efforts to have a Catholic church built in his locality.

¹⁸⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Aug. 1903.

¹⁸⁹ Walter Ralls, 'The Papal aggression of 1850: A Study in Victorian anti-Catholicism', *Church History*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Jun., 1974), pp 242-256.

Chapter 5: The Public Man

De Vere's role as a magistrate and land agent for his father's estate in the years prior to the Famine, as well as his position as a member of the gentry, ensured that he was a prominent figure within his locality.¹ His efforts to coordinate relief measures in the region during the early 1840s brought him to greater prominence, but it was the attention that he garnered through his report on the conditions endured by Irish emigrants on the voyage to Canada, that raised his national and international profile, and, along with his conversion to Catholicism, influenced his decision to enter public life. De Vere remained in Canada between June 1847 and June 1848, although he indicated in his diary that he had initially intended to return to Ireland at an earlier date.² De Vere decided to comply with the advice offered to him by his mother and younger brother, Aubrey, who had both written to him, and urged him to stay in Canada. They had suggested to him that his return home in May 1848 would have placed him in 'a most painful position' in the event of any disturbances.³ De Vere wrote to his brother Aubrey that he 'could not and would not be disloyal, even if I thought the rising had a chance of success, I never could bring myself to aid in spilling the blood of the noble, deluded people, who are entwined with my heartstrings'.⁴

De Vere first noted on 24 April 1848 that he had received reports of an insurrection in Ireland.⁵ He wrote to his mother that 'there is a large body of Irish in Canada seriously dissatisfied towards England and inclined to fraternize with the French ... for the feelings of the Irish Canadians are much changed since the last rebellion here, where they were the most loyal people in Canada, and the strong hostility that then existed between them and the powerful French Canadian party has been greatly diminished.'⁶ De Vere had previously observed in his diary that Quebec's Irish population were 'well affected to England', whereas 'the Irish and (French) Canadians dislike one another.'⁷ Such statements are likely to have

¹ Norman Gash, *Aristocracy and People: Britain, 1815-1865* (Massachusetts, 1979) pp 4-5.

² De Vere, diary entry, dated 12 May 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5062.

³ Ibid.

⁴ S.E. De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, 14 May 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053, 1-10.

⁵ De Vere, diary entry, dated 24 April 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5062.

⁶ S.E. De Vere to E. De Vere, 10 April 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5075 A.

⁷ De Vere, diary entry, dated 17 June 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5061.

contributed to Jason King's argument that De Vere's configuration of national identity was 'wildly discrepant'.⁸ King also asserted that in reality, the majority of Irish emigrants to Lower Canada and Quebec in the 1830s and 1840s compartmentalised their cultural and political affiliations 'between a precarious sense of loyalty to the emergent British Canadian polity, varying degrees of antipathy towards French Canada, and a residual feeling of hostility towards British rule in Ireland.'⁹ On 14 May 1848, De Vere wrote to Aubrey that he no longer had any fear of 'a general outbreak' of hostilities, but believed that it was likely that some disturbances would occur in the large towns.¹⁰ By this time, De Vere had spent a number of months living, travelling and attending religious services with Irish Catholics. Many of his diary entries clearly reveal how close he had grown to members of this group, how warmly he regarded them, and the sense of responsibility he felt towards them.¹¹ De Vere's reference to a 'noble, deluded people', can be interpreted as a paternalistic response to the actions of a people for whom De Vere had compassion, but whom he also saw as being incapable of governing themselves.¹²

1848 Rebellion and William Smith O'Brien

The decision on whether or not he should return to Ireland was one which appears to have weighed on De Vere's conscience. In the same letter to Aubrey, De Vere appeared to try and justify his position, being insistent that he himself remain in Canada because he believed that he could serve his country 'infinitely more' there than at home.¹³ He wrote that his decision might result in accusations of 'cowardice', but he had 'long ceased to value opinion more than conscience.'¹⁴ Although he qualified the statement by adding that he would immediately return to Ireland if he felt any member of his family was in danger, De Vere's acceptance of accusations of cowardice, during an era when notions of manliness, honour and self-respect

⁸ Jason King, *Famine Diaries: Narratives about Emigration from Ireland to Lower Canada and Quebec 1832-1853*. M.A. Thesis, (Mc Gill University, 1994), p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ 14 May 1848, S.E. De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053, 1-10.

¹¹ De Vere, diary entries, dated 8 March 1848 and 17 April 1847, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5062.

¹² Julie Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell* (Hampshire, 2007) p.15

¹³ S.E. De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, 14 May 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053, 1-10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

appeared to be paramount in society, could be taken to demonstrate the strength of feeling he had on this subject, but also an awareness of how others might view him.¹⁵

De Vere may also have been torn by the involvement of William Smith O'Brien in the 1848 rebellion.¹⁶ The families had become closely connected through the marriage of De Vere's only sister, Elinor, to O'Brien's younger brother, Robert.¹⁷ De Vere had also previously expressed his admiration of O'Brien, in response to the latter's support of Peel's introduction of income tax in 1842. De Vere wrote 'I cannot avoid ... letting you know how very much pleased I am with your conduct upon Peel's taxation scheme. It is open, manly, independent, and I think it perfectly right in principle. You are the only public man that I see determined to act as you think right *coute qui coute*.'¹⁸ His views on this matter are also perhaps an indication of his social attitudes, and opinions on the purposes of taxation. De Vere outlined his views on the failed 1848 rebellion in a letter to his mother. They reflect his Unionist stance, he was deeply unhappy with the action taken by O'Brien and others involved in the rebellion. In an attempt to view matters in a positive light, De Vere stated that he drew one positive consequence from their activities. He felt that the failure of the rebellion would provide evidence to the English that 'the Irish people, maddened by Famine... could not be led into rebellion by their most trusted and eloquent leader'.¹⁹ De Vere also stated that he was convinced that 'there never was a general intention of rising in arms. There may have been a general expectation but I am sure that it was more coupled with fear than hope.'²⁰ In this analysis, De Vere seems to have overestimated the power of Smith O'Brien in drawing others to rebellion. De Vere never seems to question the motives of the rebellion, and his idealised view of the Irish is evident once again. There were many practical reasons for the failure of the 1848 rebellion, but that does not negate the evidence that many people were deeply unsatisfied with British rule.

¹⁵ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family, and Empire* (London, 2005), p. 136.

¹⁶ Robert Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien and the Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848* (Dublin, 2000), p. 238.

¹⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Feb. 1835.

¹⁸ De Vere to O'Brien, Smith O'Brien Papers, 8 Mar. 1842, NLI, MS 431, f839.

¹⁹ S.E. De Vere to E. De Vere, 03 June, 1848, The De Vere papers, Limerick City Archive, P22/2779210.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

After his return to Ireland, De Vere addressed a meeting which was held in Limerick. The purpose of the meeting was to issue a call for clemency for O'Brien and the other 'exiles of 1848'.²¹ Despite De Vere's personal feelings with regard to the rebellion, at the meeting, he referred to the 'long, and intimate, and friendly, and attached relations' that he had with O'Brien. De Vere focused his attention on O'Brien, rather than the other exiles, as he had the closest relationship with him, but he stated that his call for clemency was also extended to all of O'Brien's associates. De Vere described 'the privilege he had of knowing O'Brien as a private and domestic man,' and spoke of him as being 'the loved and loving husband, the kind and affectionate father, the dutiful son, and the loving brother.'²² Given De Vere's very conservative views on morality, it is possible that he was unaware of the two children O'Brien had fathered outside of marriage, when he made this comment.²³ With regard to O'Brien's public life, De Vere referred to him as a man of 'extraordinary talent, of steadfast industry, of the most perfect disinterestedness, of the purest honour, and above all, of unspotted patriotism.'²⁴ In private, De Vere had written to his mother that he 'had no idea that poor W. O'Brien' would have allowed himself to be caught up in such 'folly' and place himself 'in a position of so much danger'.²⁵ But publicly, he described O'Brien as someone whose actions were motivated by a love of his country. De Vere gave the analogy of a musical string that sends forth different notes according to where the hand is laid, and said it was the same with those who 'are animated by the same patriotism ... there may be shades of difference'.²⁶ De Vere clearly had a very different understanding of patriotism to O'Brien, with De Vere adopting perhaps a more complex ideology which involved aligning his cultural and religious heritage with a more nuanced view of what it was to be an Irish Catholic, but also a loyal British subject.

As he prepared to leave Canada, De Vere wrote to his mother that he felt grateful as he had successfully achieved some measure of success in drawing attention to, and improving, the conditions on board emigrant ships. De Vere did not travel alone on his return journey, as some of the members of his party who had

²¹ *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 31 Jan. 1852.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien*, pp 22-23.

²⁴ *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 31 Jan. 1852.

²⁵ S.E. De Vere to E. De Vere, 03 Jun. 1848, The De Vere papers, Limerick City Archive, P22/2779210.

²⁶ *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 31 Jan. 1852.

initially travelled to Canada with him also opted to return to Ireland. This could be taken to indicate the positive relationship they enjoyed with De Vere, and the quality of conditions he provided them with. De Vere stated that ‘Michael, his wife and sister, Stephen Mc Donagh and my little godson, and John Hanly accompany me, the latter as my servant. All the rest are well provided for here.’²⁷ De Vere maintained contact with the members of his travelling party who did not return to Ireland with him, noting that he received letters from O’Neil and O’Dwyer in Canada and Michael Hanly in Pittsburgh.²⁸

De Vere did not recommence writing in his journal until November 1848. He had by then returned to Limerick, and wrote that he passed his time at Mount Trenchard and Curragh Chase. In December 1848, De Vere advised his older brother Vere to ‘leave home and let his demesne’, which could be taken to indicate that his brother was experiencing financial problems. In January, 1849 De Vere put forward a plan to his brother that he would rent from him Hollypark, a Georgian, Gothic-style country house less than a mile and a half from Curragh Chase.²⁹ De Vere proposed that he would rent the house and the lands of Hollypark, at one pound per acre and also pay any applicable rates and charges. He wrote that Vere agreed to the plan ‘most willingly’.³⁰ It was during this period that De Vere’s younger brother, Aubrey, remarked to their sister, Elinor, that ‘Stephen is looking very much better than usual, his work seems to agree exceedingly with his spirits.’³¹ De Vere’s role in public life during that time involved attending committee meetings, such as those held by the Pallas Cholera Committee, serving as a magistrate, and writing pamphlets.³²

Views on Post-Famine Ireland

In the months preceding the 1852 general election De Vere’s name began to be mentioned as a possible candidate for election to the House of Commons.³³ A letter to the editor of the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* called on citizens to ‘ask if there is not a person now ready and willing to come forward with all the pecuniary

²⁷ S.E. De Vere to E. De Vere, 03 June, 1848, The De Vere papers, Limerick City Archive, P22/390.

²⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated 27 November 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5063.

²⁹ <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=LC®no=21901126> [Accessed on 15 Jan. 2015].

³⁰ De Vere, diary entries, dated; 28 December 1848 and 1 January 1849, De Vere papers, MS 5063.

³¹ A. De Vere to E. De Vere, 03 July 1850, De Vere papers, TCD MS 5053.

³² De Vere Diary entries, 08 January 1849 and 16 April 1849, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5063.

³³ *Morning Post*, 9 Apr. 1852.

means necessary to carry a contest with influence, talent and character, one whose very name would unite all parties, and heal all the wounds dissension has inflicted. And if there be, as there is, such a person, and his name is Stephen De Vere, why not call on him at once?’³⁴ It is interesting that it was felt that De Vere had the ability to ‘unite all parties’, De Vere himself, was, like the majority of Limerick landowners, a Liberal. There may have been a perception of him as a diplomatic figure, who was to some extent above party politics, and motivated by more genuine concern for people’s welfare. De Vere did not contest the election in that year, but he did second the nomination of William Monsell, and in so doing, delivered a speech on the condition of Irish society as he saw it at that time. His experiences in Ireland in the years which followed the Famine had altered his view on the potential of emigration to solve the problem of over-population and poverty:

Our hardy and industrious population have fled and are flying to other lands to earn by the sweat of their brow the daily bread denied them at home; but the diminution in the number of our labourers seems hardly to have improved the condition of those who remain at home. I see daily many poor men, idly loitering ... who would gladly barter their daily labour for sixpence a day, and can’t get it.³⁵

This was a local confirmation of Ó Gráda’s assessment of the negative effects of the displacement of tillage by cattle rearing in the immediate Famine decades, changes which benefited the landlord and larger farmers to a greater degree than the small farmer or labourer.³⁶ It has also been argued that the steady decline of tillage in the years after the Famine led to a reduction in labouring needs.³⁷ In the aftermath of the failed Irish Confederation rebellion of 1848, De Vere reasoned that as the mass of Irish population did not rise up, ‘England must be grateful’ and feel compelled ‘to adopt a more worthy system of Irish legislation’.³⁸ De Vere’s frustration at the lack of an equitable tenant right bill was clear. In his speech to propose Monsell, as a candidate for Limerick county in the general election, De Vere referred to the hesitancy of those who still maintained some land and capital in investing in improvements to their homesteads. He attributed this hesitancy to the lack of confidence many people felt in the permanence of their tenures. De Vere argued that

³⁴ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 21 Apr. 1852.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925*, (Manchester, 1993), p.152.

³⁷ Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, (London, 2001), p.194.

³⁸ S.E. De Vere to E. De Vere, 03 June 1848, De Vere papers, Limerick City Archive, P22/2779210.

the ‘nature of man is not so foolhardy as to risk his all upon improvements which may be speedily transferred to the pockets of those who have not affected them.’ De Vere eventually became a firm proponent of tenant right, and even at this stage his beliefs on the subject were clear, as he called for a change in the law, which would protect the tenant from ‘being compelled either to abandon the produce of his own industry and capital, or to pay for it over again in the shape of an increased or perhaps impossible rent’.³⁹ By 1847 Monsell was also an advocate of improving landlord/tenant law, and conditions for tenants in general as a means of preventing future distress. Monsell associated with members of the Repeal movement, and there is some speculation that he considered aligning himself with them in 1847-1848. There is no evidence in local newspapers, such as the *Limerick Chronicle* or *Reporter*, or De Vere’s private writings from that era to suggest that he considered joining the Repeal movement.⁴⁰

De Vere also took the occasion of Monsell’s bid for parliament to speak about the subject of the condition of the Catholic religion in Ireland.⁴¹ In a decidedly negative view of the actions of the British Government, he compared its actions to those of the persecutors of early Christians, and stated that the government had sought to take advantage of Ireland’s weakened state to, ‘plant their iron heel upon her quivering limbs, to force her to forsake her faith.’ De Vere’s perception that members of his faith were being oppressed was likely to have been instigated by the Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1851. This act led him to argue that the government had ‘endeavoured to rob religion of her reverence in the eyes of men, they prohibited her title, they scoffed at her authority, they calumniated the virtue of her priesthood and the honour of her women.’⁴² De Vere signed a public petition to the mayor of Limerick, which called for of a public meeting at St Michael’s Roman Catholic Chapel, Limerick, to protest against the ‘unjust and insulting measures regarding Convents and Monasteries,’ as had been introduced in the House of Commons, and petition Parliament for the rejection of these measures and the protection of civil and

³⁹ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression?* (London, 1852), p.12.

⁴⁰ Potter, *William Monsell*, pp. 33-42.

⁴¹ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 17 Jul. 1852.

⁴² *Ibid.*

religious rights of conventual institutions.⁴³ He had previously referred to nuns as ‘those earthly angels’.⁴⁴

De Vere rhetoric was equally decisive when he referred to the Stockport riots of June 1852, which involved three days of street fighting and the destruction of property. The riots were motivated by political battles between the Tories and Liberals for control of the town council, and exacerbated by the mouthpiece of the Tory leaders, the *Stockport Advertiser*, which attacked the Irish, Roman Catholics and Liberals.⁴⁵ De Vere argued that the ‘Catholic blood’ spilt during these riots, was the ‘blood of Ireland’ and it flowed at the command of the Derby Government. De Vere dismissed the veracity of the promised tenant right bill of the Derby Government, and asserted that the Government believed that ‘Ireland’s weakness is England’s strength, and they blindly dream that they can be strong, not in the love, but in the hatred of seven millions of their fellow countrymen. Oh! This policy is as false as it is wicked.’⁴⁶ De Vere’s religious faith appears to have been an increasingly important and influential factor in his life during the early 1850s. When Archdeacon Manning and William Wilberforce visited county Limerick in 1852, De Vere dined with them at the residence of Carrigaholt’s parish priest, Fr Meehan. It was reported that the people in the locality reacted to the news of ‘these remarkable men’ dining with the priest in their village by lighting bonfires in celebration.⁴⁷

Election to the House of Commons

Clearly there were issues which exercised De Vere in 1852, yet he did not choose to run as an M.P. at that stage. It was the sudden death of Wyndham Gould M.P. for County Limerick in 1854 that saw De Vere’s name re-emerge as a serious contender for public office. The other potential candidate in the field was the ultra-Tory, Colonel Dickson of Croom Castle.⁴⁸ The Conservative *Saunders Newsletter* stated that De Vere was not ‘up to the mark that class of electors would like’, while it was reported in the *Morning Post* that Colonel Dickson’s ‘unflinching opposition to

⁴³ *Limerick Reporter*, 14 Apr. 1854.

⁴⁴ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 17 Jul. 1852.

⁴⁵ Pauline Milward, “The Stockport Riots of 1852: A study of Anti-Catholic and Anti-Irish Sentiment”, *The Irish in the Victorian City*, ed. Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (London, 1985), pp 209-11.

⁴⁶ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 17 Jul. 1852.

⁴⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 15 Sept. 1852.

⁴⁸ *Dublin Evening Mail*, 29 Nov. 1854.

Popery', prevented any chance he might otherwise have had of Catholic support in the county of Limerick.⁴⁹ The local newspapers had a broadly positive response to De Vere's intention to run for election. The *Limerick and Clare Examiner* stated that during his election canvass De Vere was 'received in all quarters with enthusiasm' and his success seem assured.⁵⁰ De Vere received support from the clergy, which may have been expected, as he was a Liberal Catholic candidate, but he also received the support of Congregated Trades of Limerick, a body of unionised skilled workers, who typically voiced their opposition to members of the gentry.⁵¹

In a speech before the electorate in Abbeyfeale, county Limerick, De Vere outlined his political aims, which were primarily concentrated on protecting the position of the Catholic Church's clergy and hierarchy, procuring religious instructions and 'consolation' for Catholics serving in the army and navy, and securing a tenant right Bill which would provide adequate compensation for improvements made by tenants and fixity of tenure. As these were issues which De Vere had publicly addressed over the course of a number of years, it is probable that this was not mere rhetoric. It was stated in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* that there were 'several members of the Tenant League', in attendance, who 'were candid enough to admit that he went farther even than the League.'⁵² Formed four years earlier, the Tenant Right League sought to have the Ulster custom enshrined in law, but divisions between Catholics in the south and Protestants in the north ensured that the League never succeeded in launching any meaningful agitation.⁵³

De Vere did not directly attack his election opponent, Dickson, he even referred to him as a good landlord, but he also pointedly stated that he considered there to be 'other qualities besides these which a gentleman seeking the representation of this great Catholic county should possess'.⁵⁴ Fr Richard Liston, who was a supporter of De Vere and a long-standing acquaintance of his, was more direct in his criticism of Dickson, as he asserted that 'it was much more fitting for the gallant Colonel to be up at the Crimea than to be seeking for the representation of

⁴⁹ *Saunders's News-Letter*, 01 Dec. 1854; *Morning Post*, 8 Dec. 1854.

⁵⁰ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 09 Dec. 1854.

⁵¹ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 13 Dec. 1854; Timothy Moloney, *Limerick Constitutional Nationalism, 1898-1918: Change and Continuity* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010), p. 31.

⁵² *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 09 Dec. 1854.

⁵³ William Ernest Montgomery, *The History of Land Tenure in Ireland* (Cambridge, 2013), p.122.

⁵⁴ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 09 Dec. 1854.

this county, a position which he would never obtain.’ Fr Liston also recommended that Dickson should redistribute a portion of what he spent on his horses and dogs ‘to those poor widows and orphans who were now houseless wanders, and who were entitled to some restitutions from him’.⁵⁵

When Dickson eventually withdrew from the race he cited the necessity of unanimity between members of all classes, and as a ‘religious cry’ had been raised in the county, he did not feel justified in entering a race which would place the constituency in a ‘painful and difficult position’.⁵⁶ It was reported in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* that the ‘unflinching opponent of Popery has flinched from meeting it at the hustings of this county’.⁵⁷ On 3 January 1855 it was reported that De Vere, ‘the Priest’s candidate’ had been elected unopposed.⁵⁸ The extent to which De Vere actually was ‘the Priest’s candidate’ is debatable. De Vere’s stance as a supporter and defender of Catholicism was clear during his election campaign, he was nevertheless occasionally quite critical of priests in his private correspondence. Nevertheless, during his acceptance speech, he was joined on the platform by twenty members of the Catholic clergy, which could be interpreted as an obvious display of support for De Vere by the Catholic Church, but also, as a demonstration of their own strength and importance as a political force, and perhaps, as a display of De Vere’s political pragmatism. In his acceptance speech De Vere outlined his main political aims. He desired the introduction of an equitable landlord and tenant bill, ‘by which the latter should be secured by a lease, affording him full remuneration for outlay and industry’ and a sufficient number of Catholic clergy to administer to those in the army and navy. He also expressed his opposition to any amendment in arrangements of the Irish national education system and management of schools.⁵⁹

De Vere’s first contribution in the House of Commons was on 4 May 1855, during his speech he expressed his support for the Tenants’ Improvements Compensation Bill (Ireland). He believed that it would prove to be an ‘excellent remedy’ to difficult relations between landlord and tenant.⁶⁰ Serjeant Deasy M.P. for

⁵⁵ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 09 Dec. 1854.

⁵⁶ *London Daily News*, 14 Dec. 1854.

⁵⁷ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 13 Dec. 1854.

⁵⁸ *Hereford Journal*, 3 Jan. 1855.

⁵⁹ *Nation*, 30 Dec. 1854.

⁶⁰ *Tenants' Improvements Compensation (Ireland) Bill*. HC Deb 04 May 1855 vol. 138 cc139-75

Cork, who had proposed the Bill argued that a tenant who had carried out permanent improvement to his holding, with the landlords sanction, should not be deprived of his holding without compensation for them. Deasy stated that although the terms of the Bill were exceptional, ‘in Ireland there were exceptional cases relating to the tenure of land, which made exceptional legislation necessary’.⁶¹ De Vere asserted that ‘he would be loath to place his advocacy of this measure on a mere class interest’ as he believed the Bill would benefit the entire community, in that a more successful and motivated tenantry would be beneficial to all aspects of Irish society. De Vere, perhaps in an attempt at diplomacy towards his contemporaries, defended opponents of the Bill by arguing that some were ‘excellent men and humane landlords’ and as such, may have assumed that others were equally benevolent, and unaware of the conditions in which many people in Ireland existed.⁶² The Bill was rejected, and no effective change in this regard was introduced until 1860.

On 24 May 1855, ‘A Bill to Encourage the providing of Improved Dwellings for the Labouring Classes in Ireland,’ was proposed. De Vere’s support of tenant right was once again evident, as he voiced his opposition to the Bill on the basis that it sought to provide facilities of ejection to landlords, a principle which he believed the House should not sanction.⁶³ The Bill was defended by Sir William Somerville, who argued that the disgraceful conditions of Irish labourer’s dwellings was due to the difficulty and expense of ejection. Mr Napier also supported the Bill, which he spoke off as being conducive to social reform for the labouring classes in Ireland.⁶⁴ De Vere, once again adopting a diplomatic stance, stated that although he believed Somerville had intended to promote the well-being of the people of Ireland; the bill he proposed would have the very opposite effect. De Vere argued attempting to improve labourer’s housing through legislative enactments would be futile. He further objected to the Bill as it would increase the power of the employer over the labourer; and as such he stated his intention to oppose its further progress.⁶⁵ The *Freemans Journal* was scathing in its condemnation of the Bill. Stating that ‘a fine name covers many defects of character’ it was asserted that the authors of the Bill for Improving the Dwellings of the Labouring classes in Ireland, had designed the title

⁶¹ *Tenant's Compensation (Ireland) Bill*; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*: Series 3, Volume 150, 1858, Cols. 1802-1829.; CMSIED 9804209

⁶² *Tenants' Improvements Compensation (Ireland) Bill*. HC Deb, 04 May ; 55, vol. 138, cc139-75

⁶³ *Dwellings for Labouring Classes (Ireland) Bill*. HC Deb, 18 July 1855, vol. 139, cc1028-34

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Nation*, 08 Mar. 1856.

with the intent of obscuring the actual object of the measure, which was to extend eviction capabilities. The article referred to Somerville's expressed desire to improve the dwellings of the poor, but argued that there must have been some other means of achieving this aim, rather than through an extension of the ejecting facilities, which had already 'covered the land with mourning, and filled poorhouse and emigrant ships'.⁶⁶

De Vere's other primary focus as an M.P., the defence of Catholicism, became evident during the furore concerning the Maynooth Grant and the papal aggression crisis in 1850-51.⁶⁷ In 1845, Robert Peel increased the funding provided to St Patrick's college, Maynooth. Peel hoped that the Maynooth grant would placate and subdue a large section of the Irish Catholic community. It was to prove to be a divisive and controversial measure, leading to a split within the Conservative party, and provoking vehement opposition among some factions of the Protestant community.⁶⁸ By the time De Vere sat in the House of Commons, the main voice of opposition to the Maynooth grant came from Richard Spooner, M.P. for North Warwickshire. Spooner believed that Britain, a Protestant nation, should have no involvement in providing funding for a Catholic seminary. Spooner called for the Maynooth grant to be abolished, every year, in the House of Commons from 1851 until his retirement in 1862.⁶⁹

Thomas Chisholm Anstey, M.P. for Youghal, and one of the first Catholic parliamentarians, provided the initial defence to Spooner's motion of inquiry into the state of affairs of Maynooth. Seven Catholic M.P.s, including De Vere, attacked Spooner's measure. Francis Stack Murphy welcomed an inquiry into practices at Maynooth, as he asserted that any governmental inquiry into Maynooth would increase the seminary's credibility.⁷⁰ De Vere asserted that while Spooner was free to believe that Maynooth should not receive a grant, based on what he felt was the provision of an education that was inconsistent with Christian morality, proper

⁶⁶ *Freemans Journal*, 20 July 1855.

⁶⁷ Frank Wallis, 'The Revival of the Anti-Maynooth Campaign in Britain, 1850-52'. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), pp 527-547.

⁶⁸ Saho Matsumoto-Best, *Britain and the papacy in the age of revolution, 1846-1851* (Woodbridge, 2003), p. 22.

⁶⁹ Wallis, 'The Revival of the Anti-Maynooth Campaign in Britain,' pp 527-547

⁷⁰ Eric G. Tenbus, *English Catholics and the Education of the Poor, 1847-1902* (London, 2015), p. 24.

government and sound faith. That did not mean that ‘a great national institution’ should be ‘disendowed simply because the hon. Gentleman entertained a theological hatred for the religious opinion of his Roman Catholic fellow subjects’. De Vere argued for the maintenance of the grant on the basis that if it were withdrawn the Catholics of Ireland would, by any means, seek to ensure that the clergy could be educated, and this might result in them seeking help from foreign Catholic powers. De Vere also cautioned that the removal of the grant could result in renewed agitation in Ireland.⁷¹ It has been argued that the annual debate over the Maynooth Grant was a reflection of the emerging political confidence and assertiveness of the Catholic community.⁷²

De Vere’s career as an M.P. coincided with a relatively stable political period, especially when compared with the preceding years of Famine and economic decline.⁷³ But the government was still faced with the political dilemma of how Ireland should be governed. Some policies were based on the imposition of singular, and often draconian measures, such as the Peace Preservation Bill (1856) which proposed sending additional members of the police force to disturbed districts in Ireland, whose populations had a heavy tax imposed on them to pay for the forces. De Vere was among the MPs who opposed the Bill on the grounds that it was an unnecessary measure, and that similar schemes were not in place in any other part of the government’s jurisdiction.⁷⁴ Other policies were designed to make attempts at assimilation. The phrase ‘killing home rule with kindness’ is more often associated with the final years of the nineteenth-century, but it was a strategy frequently utilised by leading British politicians from the 1830s onwards. They recognised the necessity of including Catholics in the political process, and saw that some measure of conciliation was needed.⁷⁵ De Vere was also conscious of this strategy, he stated in 1858 that he was ‘fully aware of the advantages which the government might derive from Irishmen and Catholics holding office.’⁷⁶

⁷¹ Maynooth College - Committee. HC Deb 15 April 1856, vol. 141, cc1049-104.

⁷² Tenbus, *English Catholics and the Education of the Poor*, p. 24.

⁷³ Roger Swift and Christine Kinealy (eds.), *Politics and Power in Victorian Ireland* (Dublin, 2006), p.57

⁷⁴ Peace Preservation (Ireland) Bill. HC Deb 17 June 1856 vol. 142, cc1573-9.

⁷⁵ Swift and Kinealy (eds.) *Politics and Power*, p.10.

⁷⁶ De Vere to J.D. Fitzgerald, 12 Feb. 1858, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053 (38).

De Vere made relatively few contributions in the House of Commons. His most active year was 1856 when he was recorded as speaking on eight separate occasions, in each instance on issues directly related to Ireland. Although De Vere had a close personal connection to the Crimean war, his brother Francis Horatio, a major in the British army served during the conflict, he did not make any public commentary with regard to the war. His contributions in the House of Commons between 1855 and 1859 were heavily focused on issues related to the Irish labouring class, education, and the administration of justice, especially with regard to the qualifications of Justices of the Peace.

Retirement

In 1859 many Catholics turned their support towards the political party that could offer them the most in return, and a Tory drift began. Some Catholics turned their support towards the Tories when Russell, Viscount Palmerston and the Whigs in general, supported the national unification movement in Italy which threatened the temporal power of Pope Pius IX. Tories were less optimistic about Italian unification, especially given Italian nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi's republican background, and as a result, Catholic and Tories formed an unlikely alliance in 1858, with Disraeli promising Cardinal Wiseman that the Tory government would not intervene in Italy. From this alliance Catholics also received the right to have their own army chaplains of equal rank and salary as Protestants. Wiseman even openly supported the Tories in the parliamentary election of 1859. However, the Tories were not returned to office – Palmerston and the Whigs were.⁷⁷

Other than Monsell, De Vere's closest associate in the House of Commons appears to have been J.D. Fitzgerald, with whom he corresponded regularly. Fitzgerald was M.P. for Ennis (1852-1860) and he served as attorney-general from 1856 to 1858. De Vere became aware through Fitzgerald that he was considered for a position within the office of the Treasury. De Vere stated that he had gained great satisfaction from 'feeling that' his 'political conduct' had singled him out 'for the distinction of being recommend to Lord Palmerston for the vacant office'.⁷⁸ In 1859 De Vere wrote to Monsell on the subject of his retirement from politics, 'my political career is closed – nor am I sorry.' De Vere, who once stated that he was 'first and

⁷⁷ Tenbus, *English Catholics*, p.128.

⁷⁸ De Vere to Fitzgerald, 12 Feb. 1858, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5053 (38).

foremost a party man', was obviously unhappy at the direction in which Catholics in parliament had begun to direct their support. He stated, 'I see what an Irish Catholic has to expect. He may serve his country with fidelity. He may advocate with all his energy, views inculcated for 30 years by the advice, the opinion and the example of the church, but if she suddenly changes her mind and he does not, he must be prepared to be abandoned and denounced.'⁷⁹

In early April, 1859, it was widely rumoured throughout Limerick that Edward J. Synan, Esq, of Fedamore House was to offer himself for election in the place of De Vere.⁸⁰ As people prepared for a political campaign to commence, De Vere made the unexpected announcement that he was to retire from politics, and would not be putting himself forward for re-election. The reason he gave for his retirement was his bad state of health.⁸¹ Monsell accepted De Vere's reason for stepping down, he wrote to De Vere in response to his departure from the House of Commons, 'if you had health you could have occupied a considerable position in the present Parliament'.⁸² De Vere admitted that he occasionally felt that he 'should like once more for a few moments to tread the great stage and denounce falsehood and intrigue', but instead, he implored his friend to take action: 'You must do it, you can do it, and you must'.⁸³ Monsell and De Vere clearly had a warm relationship, which was of deep significance to both of them. De Vere believed that his political life had borne him some reward, as it had 'earned for me that touching expression of your (Monsell's) affection. If I had done nothing more I am amply repaid'.⁸⁴ Monsell's description of the House of Commons without De Vere, was as 'a sort of dreary wilderness', he regretted De Vere's retirement as he believed that De Vere was developing rapidly as a politician, 'I never say one developing so fast as you were .. in the last few months ... your party action and consequently your influence over others, had much increased – you were beginning to have reasonable confidence in yourself'.⁸⁵ One of De Vere's final contributions in the House of Commons was to press the members to proceed with the debate regarding a Lunatic Poor in Ireland Bill – an issue directly involving the public lunatic asylum system in Ireland was to

⁷⁹ De Vere to Monsell, 2 Sept. 1859, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053, (46).

⁸⁰ *Nation*, 09 Apr. 1859; *Belfast Newsletter*, 07 Apr. 1859.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Monsell to De Vere, 21 May 1859, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053/38-51.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ De Vere to Monsell, 11 June 1859, Monsell Papers, NLI, MS 8317.

feature prominently in his activities in the late 1800s, as discussed later in this chapter.⁸⁶ De Vere was also vocal on issues relating to the management and administration of the Irish national school system, a topic which he also became deeply involved with in the years that followed.⁸⁷

The National School System and the Catholic Church Hierarchy

Despite stepping down as an M.P. De Vere did not altogether remove himself from public life. He continued to be vocal on certain issues, such as education, and the role that it could, and should play, in improving the social condition of the mass of the Irish population. Even in his youth, De Vere, like his father, had been a proponent of improving the system of agricultural education in Ireland, but by the 1860s his views on primary and higher level education had become more nuanced. The significant extension of the provision of education throughout large regions of the developed world during the nineteenth century resulted in frequent church-state clashes, especially involving the Catholic Church.⁸⁸ From 1850 onwards the Catholic hierarchy was increasingly concerned with the issue of education and under Paul Cullen, the Archbishop of Dublin, they demanded as one of their primary goals for the second half of the nineteenth century ‘separate, state-supported, education for Catholics as a right at every level.’⁸⁹ The resolve of the Irish Catholic Church hierarchy in the matter of denominational education was consistent with papal priorities. In 1873 Pope Pius IX declared to the German Literary Society that it was a Catholic duty to ‘teach all nations’ and that their right to do so separate from state interference was absolute: ‘Instruction’, he repeated, ‘belongs entirely to the Church.’ This remained the fundamental position of the Catholic Church on education throughout the nineteenth century.⁹⁰

Manager and Teacher

De Vere was a supporter of the National Schools system, which was intended to be non-denominational, because he believed it placed ‘sound and useful

⁸⁶ Lunatic Poor (Ireland) Bill, HC Deb 16 March 1859, vol. 153 cc209-18.

⁸⁷ *Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland). Vol. I. Containing the report of the commissioners, with an appendix*, (1870), p. 19, p. 334 – 348.

⁸⁸ Potter, *William Monsell*, pp 57-58.

⁸⁹ Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918* (Dublin, 1973), preface.

⁹⁰ Ciaran O'Neill, *Catholics of Consequence: Transnational Education, Social Mobility, and the Irish Catholic Elite 1850-1900* (Oxford, 2014), pp 13-14.

knowledge within the reach of all, even the poorest.⁹¹ Since the commencement of the national school system, De Vere had acted as manager for the national school which was situated on his older brother's estate. He described this experience as having provided him with opportunities to become acquainted 'with the practical working of the present system'. De Vere subsequently became the local manager and *de facto* manager of the eight schools which were situated on his uncle, Lord Monteagle's estate. Managers were not elected officials, In order to retain their posts, they were dependent on the good will of their patrons and the neutrality of the commissioners.⁹² Managers were themselves unpaid officials but in the matter of financing their schools they were grant-aided, though they were also expected to raise a considerable portion of expenditure from local sources.⁹³ Managers had the authority to appoint and dismiss teachers on a whim and until the end of the nineteenth-century teachers had no right of appeal in the case of such dismissal, Akenson concluding that teachers were at that time treated as day labourers rather than educated men.⁹⁴ De Vere believed that educating Catholic children, alongside children of other religious faiths, would benefit the country in general, and the Catholic Church, as it would lead to increased understanding amongst people of different faiths.⁹⁵ Like De Vere, Monsell was also deeply interested in education, but they disagreed on this aspect of educational policy. In 1861 Monsell addressed the Catholic Young Men's Society of Newcastle West, County Limerick and stated that a secular system of education 'has an absolute irreligious tendency', which would ultimately lead to a drastic decline in society's standards. 'Domestic charities will languish ... natural sympathies will be deadened, patriotism will lead to place-hunting, and a universal cold reign of selfishness will prevail.'⁹⁶ De Vere wrote to Monsell that it had caused him 'great pain' to 'differ from him' on the issue of denominational education. But as noted in Chapter Four, De Vere's objection to the

⁹¹ De Vere to Monsell, 29 January 1862, Monsell Papers, NLI. MS 8317; John Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure* (Dublin, 1981), p. 5.

⁹² D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Educational Experiment. The National System of Education in Ireland* (London, 1970), p.154.

⁹³ Arthur Maltby, Jean Maltby (eds.) *Ireland in the Nineteenth Century: A Breviate of Official Publications* (Oxford, 2003), p. 172.

⁹⁴ Akenson, *The Irish Educational Experiment*, p.155.

⁹⁵ 29 January 1862, De Vere to Monsell, Monsell Papers, NLI.

⁹⁶ William Monsell, *Extract from a lecture delivered to the Young Men's Society of Newcastle on the 8th December, 1861, by W. Monsell, M.P., followed by some remarks by Dr Moriarty Bishop of Kerry* (Limerick: privately published, 1861) quoted in Matthew Potter, *William Monsell of Tervoe, 1812-1894, Catholic Unionist, Anglo-Irishman* (Dublin, 2009), pp 57-58.

Catholic Young Men's Society was based upon its stance against non-denominational education, a position which was shared by Monsell.⁹⁷

Kilcornan National School

De Vere was closely connected with Kilcornan national school, the school had in fact been built on a plot of land donated by father in 1841. He stated that he had taken a 'very peculiar interest in the management of that school ... and for several years assisted in instructing the head class of the school myself.'⁹⁸ The residents of the barony of Kenry presented De Vere with an address in 1847 that thanked him for 'his exertions in obtaining [for the barony] a cheap, liberal and improved system of education'.⁹⁹ The address noted that the residents of the barony had difficulty in confining their admiration and respect for De Vere 'within proper bounds' as they recollected his daily attendance of the national school in Kilcornan, and his devotion to assisting the teacher in 'polishing the rude, rustic minds of the humble children ... and imparting to them such valuable instruction as your noble and gifted mind knew was best suited to their lowly station in society'.¹⁰⁰ De Vere's close and personal involvement with this school could be considered to be somewhat unusual in the context of the time. While aristocratic men often interested themselves in urban schools and missions to the poor, it was more typical for aristocratic women rather than men to confine their interests to the villages on their estates where their involvement constituted the face of a 'benevolent' county society.¹⁰¹ The school in which De Vere provided instruction was attended by Catholic and Protestant children, De Vere reporting that 'a good many of the Protestant farmers of the neighbourhood sent their children to the school.' De Vere asserted that although Protestant children formed the minority of the school community, no pressure was placed on them, and 'the association of Protestant and Catholic children in that

⁹⁷ De Vere to Monsell, 29 January 1862, Monsell papers, NLI, MS 8317.

⁹⁸ Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland). Vol. I. Containing the report of the commissioners, with an appendix. Parliament Session: 1870, Paper Series: Command Papers Paper Number: C.6 Volume Page: XXVIII, p. 380.

⁹⁹ *Limerick Reporter*, 02 Apr. 1847.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ K. D. Reynolds, *Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1998) p. 73.

school has been productive of very happy consequences in producing union and sympathy between them in after life.’¹⁰²

Education and Social Mobility

Religion and education were closely connected during the nineteenth century, popular education was often seen as a means of confirming denominational support. Some commentators have asserted that the purpose of education was to reinforce the social hierarchy, to render the populace docile, and to prevent the acquisition of dangerous knowledge.¹⁰³ De Vere’s views on education appear to have been at the opposite end of the spectrum to those of Herbert. De Vere seems to have considered education to be a valuable tool for social advancement. De Vere, the chairman of Mount Trenchard Agricultural Society, made a speech to the members of that society, the majority of whom were large farmers, on the subject of their children’s education. He addressed them as ‘men who have risen in the world, and who have a natural wish to transmit your respectable position in society to your children’.¹⁰⁴ De Vere advised those present that it was their duty to provide education for their own children, but also for the children of their labouring tenants. De Vere’s arguments in favour of providing adequate educational provision for one’s child focused directly on social advancement. He argued that ‘a man whose education is below his station in life is an object of contempt and ridicule’, and it was necessary for their children to be adequately prepared for the ‘higher position’ in life that they should aspire to.¹⁰⁵ As a man with a strong interest in the arts and intellectual pursuits, it is deeply unlikely that De Vere viewed education solely as a practical means of gaining a higher social status, so perhaps his speech was couched in terminology he felt his audience would find appealing.

De Vere’s Recommendations for the National Schools System

De Vere made a number of recommendations with regard to the provision of education through the National School system. Some of his suggestions were based

¹⁰² Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland). Vol. I. Containing the report of the commissioners, with an appendix. Parliament Session: 1870, Paper Series: Command Papers Paper Number: C.6 Volume Page: XXVIII, p. 573

¹⁰³ K. D. Reynolds, *Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain*, (Oxford, 1998) p. 73.

¹⁰⁴ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 20 Jan. 1860.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

on practical considerations; he believed that teachers should be provided with a residence and a plot of ground for a garden near their school, as a teacher ‘may make more out of that residence and the land attached to it than he would make by receiving the rent of it into his pocket; infinitely more’. He was also clearly concerned with morality, as reflected in his recommendation that providing teachers with residences would make them a ‘fixed person’ in the community. This would have the result of causing members of the profession to be more circumspect in their conduct. He argued that it would also encourage teachers to actively try and ‘advance themselves in the good opinion of those around them’ and encourage them to avoid bad company and habits.¹⁰⁶

Others members of the landlord class and their agents agreed with De Vere’s proposal: William Steuart Trench and his son, Townsend, who managed the Lansdowne estate were publicly extolled as an example to other agents with regard to their interest in education. In 1867 Denis O’Sullivan, teacher in the Lansdowne Agricultural School in Kenmare stated that the latter readily agreed to spend £50 in building him a residence and also attached to it a plot of land for his and subsequent teachers’ use. As O’Sullivan discussed the benefits of having his own residence, ‘it is ... trying ... enough to spend six weary hours in a crowded school without retiring for the night fagged and jaded to a smoky hut or cabin ...’, he seemed to agree with De Vere’s assertion that the provision of a home and garden for teachers would encourage them to act as models of morality. O’Sullivan argued that the teacher ‘is looked to as a proper model for imitation both in his home, his person and even his looks and gestures; but what model ... can he place before his children in an unsightly cabin.’¹⁰⁷ There were of course others who were far less concerned with the role of teachers in the community, or their comfort. Lord Kenmare’s agent, Sam Hussey, referred to them as ‘petty pedagogues ... the Baboos of Ireland ... drawn from the small farmer class’.¹⁰⁸

De Vere suggested that if the children in the system were provided with some instruction in maintaining a kitchen garden, it would develop their knowledge of

¹⁰⁶ Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland). Vol. I. Containing the report of the commissioners, with an appendix (Dublin, 1870), p. 380.

¹⁰⁷ Trench to Lansdowne, 6 March 1869. (Bowood Papers: Kerry: Miscellaneous: 1865-1900) quoted in Gerald J. Lyne, *The Lansdowne Estate in Kerry under the agency of William Steuart Trench 1849-72* (Dublin, 2001), p.655.

¹⁰⁸ Lyne, *The Lansdowne Estate in Kerry*, p.656.

food. He also advised that lending libraries should be established. With regard to De Vere's opinion on the importance of introducing some instruction on gardening and food preparation, he stated that 'the Irish people waste their food because they do not know how to cook it; and they do not know how to cook it because they do not understand, as they do in France, and in other places, the use and the value of vegetables, in making their food go far and be palatable and wholesome'.¹⁰⁹ De Vere's views on the necessity of educating the working classes on food and cookery were not in any way radical. Domestic economy was introduced to the elementary state education system in England in the 1840s, with the aim of improving the basic living standards of members of the working class. The emphasis in elementary schools was on teaching girls the skills of plain cookery that could be used to feed their families.¹¹⁰ While disquiet about food preparation among the urban poor had been articulated since the early 1860s as part of the effort to reform working-class habits, much of the attention was directed at women who were readily accused of being 'ignorant of all those habits of domestic economy' fitting for a good home.¹¹¹ But overcrowding, poor cooking facilities and the expense of fuel meant that for many people, cooking was kept to a minimum.¹¹²

The Irish Language

The issue of the exclusion of the Irish language from the national school system was very controversial, and put forward as evidence that the system sought to diminish Irish culture.¹¹³ By 1891 the national percentage of children under the age of ten who were native Irish speakers had fallen to approximately 3.5 per cent.¹¹⁴ De Vere reported that in his district Irish was spoken and understood by the parents of what he described as the 'passing generation', and those who usually spoke Irish

¹⁰⁹ Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland). Vol. I. Containing the report of the commissioners, with an appendix (Dublin, 1870), p. 380.

¹¹⁰ Marc J. de Vries, Ilja Mottier, *International Handbook of Technology Education*, (Rotterdam, 2006), p. 273.

¹¹¹ Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London, 1842), p. 205.

¹¹² Keir Waddington, *The Bovine Scourge: Meat, Tuberculosis and Public Health, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 67.

¹¹³ Coolahan, *Irish Education*, p. 21.

¹¹⁴ Walsh, *The Pedagogy of Protest*, p. 131.

often had no understanding of English.¹¹⁵ De Vere stated that although he believed the national system had allowed people to gain a greater knowledge of the English language, it had not resulted in the obliteration or destruction of Irish. However, the census of 1901 which listed 676 inhabitants in Kilcornan suggests a different reality. The sixteen respondents who indicated that they spoke Irish had an average age of sixty and were drawn from the ranks of domestic servants, labourers, farmers and housekeepers. Neither of the two national school teachers, both Limerick born, and resident in Kilcornan reported an ability to speak or write in Irish. De Vere did not support elementary level education being provided through the medium of Irish, he did believe that it would be 'very advisable that the State, which has the control of the education of the country, should make some provision for saving the fine old Irish language from being entirely destroyed and obliterated'.¹¹⁶ De Vere appeared to have been genuine in this assertion. In 1857 he became a member of the Ossianic Society.¹¹⁷ An organisation founded on St Patrick's Day in 1853, for the purposes of preserving and publishing manuscripts in the Irish language.¹¹⁸

Education and Morality

It has been argued that during the late nineteenth-century many felt that the downward extension of education would act as a social stabiliser by transmitting the values of the ruling classes down to the ruled. This was the case to some extent, as school board members and teachers were generally drawn from middle-class ranks, and the values they imparted consciously or otherwise, to their pupils, were also middle class. Other commentators feared that increasingly available popular education would result in moral decay, arguing that the newly literate working classes were gleefully reading penny dreadfuls instead of 'literature' and were being exposed to 'undesirable' and 'unsuitable' subjects through their reading of popular newspapers.¹¹⁹ De Vere had a foot in both of these camps. While he recognised the importance of making education available to all, and believed that it would have a positive influence on the moral character of the labouring class, he also feared that

¹¹⁵ Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland). Vol. V. Evidence. Analysis and index. Parliament Session: 1870 Paper Series: Command Papers Paper Number: C.6-IV Volume Page: XXVIII Pt.IV.547, p. 154.

¹¹⁶ *Royal Commission on Nature and Extent of Instruction by Institutions in Ireland for Elementary or Primary Education, and Working of System of National Education*, p. 872.

¹¹⁷ *Nation*, 07 Feb. 1857.

¹¹⁸ "The Ossianic Society." *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society* 2, no. 2 (1853): 1-3.

¹¹⁹ Janet Roebuck, *The Making of Modern English Society from 1850* (London, 2005), p.44.

when young people left the National Schools system, the only reading material they could easily avail of might do them ‘more harm than good’. De Vere claimed that the only reading material available to the pupils who had learned to read were story books sold by hawkers, and cheap newspaper literature, which De Vere referred to as not being of a character liable ‘to increase the literary knowledge of the children who may read it.’¹²⁰ To this end, De Vere proposed the establishment of a system of lending libraries, which would provide the more ‘advanced scholars’ with the appropriate reading material. De Vere was a strong advocate of the importance of improving rates of literacy, and the pleasure that could be derived from reading. He gave the example of people who had not received instruction in their youth, but could benefit from their children’s education through the national school system. He referred to his personal knowledge of men who ‘were utterly ignorant in early life, and who have imbibed from their young sons and daughters first an elementary knowledge, and next a taste for reading which has proved the happiness of their declining years.’¹²¹

Payments by Results

In 1872 a scheme of payment by results was introduced to the National Schools system in Ireland.¹²² The pupils in the system were examined annually by an inspector. Fixed sums of money were paid for each pupil who passed the examination, provided the child had attended school for a certain number of days in the year preceding the examination. De Vere and Monsell were once again in disagreement on this subject. De Vere was opposed to such a system, while Monsell advocated competitive examinations in the education sphere as a means of ascertaining the amount of government funding that should be paid to schools.¹²³ De Vere felt that competitive examinations would be an inequitable method of attributing funds, as within some sectors of society, children were necessarily absent from school as their labour was required on their family farms. De Vere argued that this would affect their school performance, but nevertheless, such absences were not

¹²⁰ *Royal Commission on Nature and Extent of Instruction by Institutions in Ireland for Elementary or Primary Education, and Working of System of National Education*, p. 872.

¹²¹ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 20 January 1860.

¹²² Maura O'Connor, *The Development of Infant Education in Ireland, 1838-1948: Epochs and Eras* (Bern, 2010), pp 76-77.

¹²³ Potter, *William Monsell*, pp 57-58.

only justifiable but praiseworthy.¹²⁴ A year after the introduction of the payment by results scheme, J. G. Flemming stated before a commission on National School education that he believed the initial distrust of the scheme by teachers had diminished and would soon disappear. He concluded that ‘it would, indeed, be a strange anomaly to find intelligent educated persons refusing to accept the principle so fully recognised in every department of professional and commercial life, that the amount and value of the work performed by the party employed must bear a due and fair proportion to the remuneration paid by the employer for such work or service.’¹²⁵ During the era of payment by results, there is some evidence that rates of illiteracy fell; in 1871 the percentage of people over five years of age unable to read and write was thirty-three per cent and this was reduced to fourteen percent by 1901. But the system also fostered a narrow focus both in content and method, with a strong emphasis on rote learning. Sporadic attendance by pupils also continued to be a problem, as De Vere had recognised, the demand for child labour to do seasonal farm work did not diminish. Epidemics and inadequate clothing also contributed to making sporadic attendance the norm. The system of payment by results was eventually abolished in 1900.¹²⁶

De Vere was effusive in his praise of the National Schools System; he believed that it had ‘elevated and humanised the people’, and as such, he felt he owed it a ‘debt of gratitude which I can never forget.’ Although he recognised that the system had some imperfections, he countered this by stating that no human institution was without them, and overall, ‘the system as it is’ should be accepted ‘with confidence and gratitude.’¹²⁷ Monsell also frequently praised the National Schools system. On one occasion he described the primary schools as having ‘conferred greater good on Ireland than any other institution founded there by the Imperial Parliament’.¹²⁸ Although De Vere and Monsell had different ambitions for the system, with the latter being more focused on the spread of education as a means of encouraging a spiritual revival, both men saw education as being essential for ensuring greater social stability in society. They shared the hope that it would result

¹²⁴ 1870 [C.6] *Royal Commission of Inquiry into primary education (Ireland)*. Vol. I. Containing the report of the commissioners, with an appendix. p. 345.

¹²⁵ *Reports from Commissioners: Volume 8, Education (Ireland) National Education* (1873), p. 222.

¹²⁶ Coolahan, *Irish Education*, pp 27-34.

¹²⁷ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 20 Jan. 1860.

¹²⁸ Potter, *William Monsell*, pp 57-58.

in the development of morality and social responsibility in the population.¹²⁹ Monsell considered the superior educational system of Scotland to have been a major factor in that country's economic development. He suggested it as a model which Ireland should adopt:

You will find among the university students in large numbers, the sons of clothiers, stationers, butchers, bakers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, carpenters, masons, farm servants, labourers; and as the necessary result, you will find Scotchmen of humble extraction thriving and prosperous all over the world. If we want to compete with them, we must imitate their example.¹³⁰

Given De Vere's view of education as a mode for social advancement, it is likely that he would have been in favour of this model of higher education. His concern for people's moral welfare was met by his belief that a good education would enable people to overcome the greater temptations associated with material prosperity.¹³¹

Limerick District Lunatic Asylum Controversy

De Vere and his older brother, Vere Edmund, both served on the Board of Governors of Limerick District Lunatic Asylum. De Vere referred to his execution of this role as being based on a strong sense of duty. Their time on the board was not without controversy. One major incident was the death of an asylum inmate in suspicious circumstances, and an ensuing alleged cover-up by the resident medical officer. De Vere was active in calling the attention of the authorities to the case and was particularly critical of the medical inspectorate. De Vere also appeared to have felt pushed into taking action when a proposed new rule directed that governors submit to the authorities in Dublin receipts for rejected tenders. De Vere considered this to be an insult to his honesty, honour and perceived ability to fulfil the requirements of his post.¹³² The difficulties and disagreements which he encountered in his capacity as governor of the asylum were due in large part to his perception of his role and place in the social order, and the reality of a society which was rapidly changing, and witnessing the emergence of the professionalisation of medicine.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ William Monsell, 'Address of the Rt. Hon. William Monsell M.P. Vice-President at the Annual meeting of the Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland on 22 January 1869', in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland*, 5, 36 (1868-1869), p. 69.

¹³¹ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 20 Jan. 1860.

¹³² *General Rules and Regulations for Management of District Lunatic Asylums in Ireland, and Correspondence*, HC 1874 (343) 54 581, p. 10.

In 1816 Robert Peel, chief secretary of Ireland, appointed a committee to investigate the best way to house and treat lunatics.¹³³ The committee, which was mainly comprised of Irish members reported that it was necessary to provide district asylums ‘exclusively appropriated to the reception of the insane’.¹³⁴ De Vere’s uncle, Thomas Spring Rice, later Lord Monteagle, who was at that time governor of the Limerick House of Industry, sat on the committee. The government initially focused on districts in which gaols were the only institutions available to house lunatics, and towns in which abusive practices had already come to light. Spring Rice gave extensive evidence before this parliamentary committee, reporting that lunatics were held in conditions there which were worse than dog kennels. They had little protection from the elements, and some were chained to their beds with their hands fastened behind their knees for so long ‘that they have so far lost the use of their limbs, that they are utterly incapable of rising.’¹³⁵ He also stated that the medical attendance was ‘scarcely adequate’, but Spring Rice ended by revealing the grossest misconduct, accusing the keeper of the lunatics of claiming ‘an exclusive dominion over the females confided to his charge, and which he exercised in the most abominable manner, I decline going into the instances, the character of which are most atrocious.’¹³⁶

Before the introduction of public lunatic asylums, people considered insane were, depending on their social class and financial status, typically either cared for by their families, placed in private asylums or sent to the workhouse. But the belief that insanity might be treatable through moral management rather than just physical restraint, and that the state should provide institutions to house and care for pauper lunatics, eventually gained credence during the early nineteenth-century. It was also felt that those suffering from lunacy should not be allowed to roam freely as they might be a danger to themselves and others. The motivation for asylum building was, therefore, not purely philanthropic: from the government’s point of view, asylums would also be a useful tool in containing social unrest.¹³⁷ In 1817 the Irish administration in Dublin was empowered to build asylums at will. A parliamentary

¹³³ Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane*, p.25

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 26.

¹³⁵ Melinda D. Grimsley-Smith, ‘Politics, Professionalization, and Poverty: Lunatic Asylums for the poor in Ireland, 1817-1920,’ PhD Thesis, (Notre Dame University, 2011) pp 28.

¹³⁶ HC 1817 (430) *Select Committee on Relief of the Lunatic Poor in Ireland*, 14.

¹³⁷ Grimsley-Smith, *Politics, Professionalization, and Poverty*, p.26

decision was taken to construct district asylums, each to house between 120 and 150 patients. Twenty-one county institutions were constructed over the following thirty years.¹³⁸

The asylum for the insane in Limerick was the second institution of its kind to be opened in Ireland. The site was acquired in 1821, and the building designed by Francis Johnston. It was intended to accommodate 150 inmates (75 males and 75 females). Dublin builders Williams and Cockburn won the contract for the construction of the asylum at a cost of ‘not more than £20,000.’ On 14 May 1824, the first stone of the central building of the new asylum was laid by Stephen Edward Rice, Esq., who was representing his son, Thomas Spring Rice, Esq., M.P. It was finally completed in May 1826 at a cost of £30,200 and was opened on 30 January 1827.¹³⁹ It was built on the outskirts of the city in the area known as Spittaland. The asylum was situated on Mulgrave Street, which was soon dubbed ‘Misery.. Row’ or ‘Calamity Avenue’ as it also contained the fever hospital, a prison and a graveyard.¹⁴⁰

The lord lieutenant appointed governors to oversee the running of individual lunatic asylums. There was a degree of prestige attached to such appointments. Governors were generally drawn from the landowning class, the church, and prominent members of the merchant and business community.¹⁴¹ While this appointment was seen as a privilege and an honour, the governors were not completely autonomous, as the Board of Control in Dublin made the decisions on financing and the appointment of the manager or resident medical superintendent.¹⁴² The Board of Governors dealt with many aspects of the running of the asylum. The medical superintendent reported any difficulties or transgressions committed by the staff to the board. The governors also made decisions on admission to the asylum and ensured that the patients were from the district since the funds for the asylum were drawn from local taxation. In fact, the asylum’s upkeep was one of the largest items

¹³⁸ Peter Bartlett and David Wright, *Outside the Walls of the Asylum: The History of Care in the Community, 1750-2000* (London, 1999), pg. 5.

¹³⁹ Lunatic Asylums, Ireland: Copies of all Correspondence and Communications between the Home Office and the Irish Government, during the Year 1827, on the Subject of Public Lunatic Asylums, p.3.

Elaine O’Malley, ‘Governors, staff and lunatics, life in the Limerick district lunatic asylum, 1827-1901’, M.A. dissertation, University of Limerick, 2006, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Pauline M. Prior, *Asylums, Mental Health Care and the Irish, Historical Studies, 1800-2010* (Newbridge, 2012), p. 223.

¹⁴² Walsh, ‘A Perfectly Ordered Establishment’, in Prior (ed.) *Asylums*, pp 247-248.

of local expenditure in Limerick and was estimated to have amounted to about one-fifth of the entire grand jury cess. It was important, therefore to ensure that people from outside the district were not being paid for through local taxation. The governors also made decisions on tenders for supplies, conditions within the asylum, the state of the sewers and water supply and the provision of proper accommodation for the inmates. Although it was an important position, some governors were more diligent than others in fulfilling their duties, such as attending the monthly board meeting. While the governors of lunatic asylum boards had been traditionally drawn from the elite, as the nineteenth-century progressed, the calls for greater representation of the local government on the boards of the asylums. For men like De Vere, this must have appeared to be an attempt to displace those he considered to be the natural leaders of Irish society, fellow members of his class. Limerick Corporation voiced objections to the way governors were appointed as it gave the ratepayers no power. Eventually, the local government act of 1898 stipulated that officials from the county and borough councils sat on the board.

There are examples of Boards of Governors who jealously sought to protect their institutions, even to the point of opposing the construction of others elsewhere. Oonagh Walsh gave the example of the governors of Balinsloe asylum opposing the construction of a new asylum in Castlebar. When the new asylum was proposed for Sligo in the early 1850s, and another at Castlebar a decade later, there was strenuous opposition from Ballinasloe, despite many complaints to the County lieutenant regarding overcrowding within the institution. Ballinsloe administrators and governors resisted not merely its establishment, but also the transfer of Co. Mayo, Leitrim and Sligo patients to the new asylums on their opening.¹⁴³ A similar incident occurred in Limerick when the lord lieutenant received a deputation from the Limerick Corporation, members of county Limerick grand jury, and the governors of the Limerick District Asylum in 1860. It was indicated that there would be negative consequences for the counties of Clare and Limerick and the city of Limerick, if the proposed decree made in council, to have separate asylums went ahead. They argued

¹⁴³ Oonagh Walsh, 'Landscape and the Irish asylum' in Glenn Hooper, Úna Ní Bhroiméil (eds.), *Land and landscape in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2008), p. 162

that the asylum in Limerick was ‘fully able’, and just required some ‘small additions, to meet all requirements.’¹⁴⁴

District Asylums lent considerable status to the local area, despite the anxieties some felt regarding the congregation of mentally ill. Asylums were seen as important centres of employment, they were often the largest institution in a town. Merchants and townspeople were often happy to have an asylum designated for their region as it could become a major customer for a variety of products. However, it was not unusual for accusations of jobbery to be levelled at the governors as disputes arose over the awarding of contracts.¹⁴⁵ As significant public institutions, asylums should also be regarded as civic statements, and expressions of a public pride in modernity itself, as well as modern medicine. Like the town halls and public libraries of nineteenth-century Northern England, Irish asylums were not merely a response to concerns regarding the treatment of the mentally ill, but a marker of progress. But of course, as so often occurred with regard to lofty ambition, there was a significant gap between aspiration and reality.¹⁴⁶

In 1857, Dr John Nugent was appointed to the post of inspector of public asylums for the insane. He was assisted by a fellow doctor, George Hatchell. Nugent had previously been employed as travelling physician to Daniel O’Connell, ‘the Liberator’. Nugent’s style came to dominate the image of the inspectorate. He held the post for more than forty years. Grimsey-Smith has asserted that it was during his tenure that the inspectorate underwent a transformation. Grimsey-Smith has argued that a department which began as a minimally accountable and a ‘vaguely responsible administrative entity’, developed into a powerful department. She also claimed that given its autonomous nature and the fact that it was accountable only to the lord lieutenant and chief secretary, the inspectorate was not subject to the traditional localism of Irish affairs.¹⁴⁷

While Finnane described Dr Nugent as a vigorous advocate on behalf of his department, he stated that Nugent’s perception of the inspectorate’s remit was a narrow one. There is no evidence to indicate that Nugent had any experience in the care of lunatics or the running of lunatic asylums prior to his appointment as an

¹⁴⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 12 Mar. 1860.

¹⁴⁵ O’Malley, ‘Governors, staff and lunatics,’ p. 75.

¹⁴⁶ Walsh, ‘Landscape and the Irish asylum’, p. 162

¹⁴⁷ Grimsey-Smith, ‘Politics, professionalization, and poverty’, p. 81.

inspector. Finnane has stated that during Dr Nugent's term in office he failed to show that his conception of his role went any further than a rather mundane administration of institutions. The division of responsibilities between the various parties accountable for asylums was unclear, the confusion surrounding the division of responsibilities for the care of lunatics was at the centre of a number of disputes between the inspectors, the boards of governors and the medical superintendents.¹⁴⁸ It has been argued that inspectors being administratively responsible for the institutions they were supposed to inspect led to a conflict of interest. From 1860 the inspectors were members of the Board of Control, the body whose duty was the planning and construction of district asylums. Therefore criticism of the Irish asylum system, the quality of the buildings, or the conditions within, could be construed as criticism of the efficiency and competence of the inspectorate. Nugent and Hatchell (and all inspectors between 1845 and 1921) were medical men.¹⁴⁹ Nugent was a member, though not an active one, of the Medico-Psychological Association, the professional organisation of asylum doctors, and so one could argue that it was likely that his sympathies lay on side of the medical profession. Finnane maintains that the presence of inspectors in various levels of asylum administration must have limited the possibility of an impartial inquiry into the conditions of asylums generally and into cases of ill treatment more specifically. This resulted in cover-ups and in lengthy distracting disputes between inspectors and boards of governors and between boards of governors and superintendents.¹⁵⁰

An incident which has been used to emphasise this point took place in Limerick district asylum in 1871. James Danford, a patient in the asylum was reported to have struck an attendant on the morning of the 2 December 1871. The attendant in question was later authorised by the superintendent of the asylum, Dr Fitzgerald, to give Danford a plunge bath. Baths in various forms were widely used in asylums, and it was believed that their primary function was to 'calm excitement'.¹⁵¹ Danford did not survive the treatment. De Vere took an active interest in this case, and sought to highlight the deficit in the care of asylum inmates, and role

¹⁴⁸ Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane*, p.64.

¹⁴⁹ Prior, *Asylums, Mental Health Care and the Irish*, p. 134.

¹⁵⁰ Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane*, pp 64 – 75.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Bewley, 'Madness to Mental Illness A History of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' (2008) available at: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/files/samplechapter/MadnesstoMILLnessSChap.pdf> [accessed on: 27 Sept. 2012].

of the inspectorate that it represented. Danford's death was to have far reaching repercussions and draw national attention to the management and running of the Limerick asylum. A meeting was held by the Board of Governors of the asylum, and a resolution was passed to call on the Government to investigate the circumstances of Danford's death. Six weeks later the board received an acknowledgement of that resolution. The board reconvened, and again called on the authorities to produce Nugent's report, and the evidence on which the report was based.¹⁵² De Vere was disappointed with the response of the lord lieutenant to the Board's call for an inquiry. He believed that their concerns had not been properly addressed, he wrote to Monsell that 'it would appear that the lord lieutenant thinks the whole thing can be settled by getting rid of Dr Fitzgerald and infusing new blood in the Board. We seek much more. We ask for an inquiry which will have to judge the inspectors and the whole system'.¹⁵³ This statement indicates that De Vere was determined to use the circumstances of Danford's death as a means to address his larger concerns relating to the general administration and inspection of asylums.

Nugent eventually agreed to hold a sworn investigation in the Limerick District Asylum. Dr Fitzgerald was the first witness. In his evidence he stated that he had instructed the attendant, Connell, to give James Danford a plunge bath for a 'semi-punishment or curative purpose'.¹⁵⁴ He stated that when he later examined the body and found no marks of violence. He admitted that he had not been present while the treatment was taking place, but stated that he knew the water was tepid, not cold. He believed that the deceased had not died by drowning, but rather from 'excitement'. He stated that although he did not inform the board or inspector general, he did write a report on the death. However, after further inquiries into the circumstances he found it was incorrect, and substituted what he had initially inscribed, with the words 'died suddenly'. When he was later questioned, he stated that he found it impossible to decipher or remember what he had originally written.¹⁵⁵ Fitzgerald also neglected to inform the coroner's office. At that time in Ireland, unlike what pertained under the English system, it was not mandatory to report asylum deaths to the coroner.¹⁵⁶ Connell, the attendant, was also questioned.

¹⁵² *Morning Post*, 05 Dec. 1872.

¹⁵³ De Vere to Monsell, 12 March 1873, Monsell Papers, NLI. MS 1075.

¹⁵⁴ *Irish Times and Daily Advertiser*, 11 Oct. 1872.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 Sept. 1872.

¹⁵⁶ Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane*, p.65.

He denied using any violence towards Danford and stated that he and four inmates of the asylum had buried the deceased in the cemetery, but was no longer able to identify where. De Vere called on the Inspector to order an inquest, but the request was denied.¹⁵⁷ In four inspections of the asylum after Danford's death, Nugent appeared to try and direct the responsibility for the incident towards the attendant Connell, rather than the superintendent, and fellow medical man, Fitzgerald. Nugent also used the opportunity of the inquiry to criticise the governors for failing to draw his attention to the manner of Danford's death, and their failure to make regular inspections of the asylum. The members of the Board were clearly aggrieved by such insinuations, and responded by agitating for an inquiry into Nugent's conduct of the case, his own alleged failings in the matter of inspection and his whitewashing of the role of the superintendent. The attendant was subsequently prosecuted but acquitted, but the dispute raged on until 1874.¹⁵⁸

De Vere addressed a meeting of the governors of Limerick district asylum on 1 January 1873. He spoke at length on the subject of Nugent's investigation into the death of James Danford. Such was his condemnation of Nugent's findings that he called for a new sworn inquiry to be held before an authority that was familiar with the law of evidence and independent from both the Board of Governors and the Inspector General of the Asylums. The memorial he proposed stated that the new investigation should inquire into the local circumstances connected to the asylum, but also the manner in which the Inspectors General of Lunatic Asylums exercised their powers. The memorial concluded by calling for a review of the Privy Council rules which the board felt had caused them to be stripped of their powers which were then vested with the Inspectors and local superintendent. The adoption of the memorial was unanimously agreed to by the board. The High Sherriff of Limerick, Michael Robert Ryan, who seconded the adoption of the memorial and also spoke out about the recent controversy in the asylum. He asserted that the death and a number of other breaches of discipline had been uncovered by the governors. He stated that the 'glaring erasure of the death from the report book' had been passed over by the inspector and referred to a recent report which stated that the patients,

¹⁵⁷ *Irish Times and Daily Advertiser*, 11 Oct 1872.

¹⁵⁸ Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane*, p. 65.

their cells and bed clothes were ‘reeking with wet’.¹⁵⁹ Fitzgerald sought to excuse his behaviour with regard to the Danford case by claiming that at the time of the incident he was suffering from an ‘acute disease’ which he believed might have impaired his judgement. Fitzgerald claimed that Danford had a Turkish bath on a previous occasion, and it produced a positive effect on his behaviour. Fitzgerald accounted for the erasures in the report book as being the result of a miscommunication with a colleague. The lord lieutenant described Fitzgerald’s explanation as being ‘anything but satisfactory’. As Fitzgerald had admitted that his health problems interfered with his professional duties, and given the onerous duties involved in running a large asylum, the lord lieutenant decided to call for Fitzgerald to resign his appointment. Fitzgerald did so, but requested that his twenty-three years of service be taken into account by the governors when granting him a pension.¹⁶⁰ He was granted the highest pension legally allowed.¹⁶¹ De Vere’s leniency with regard to Fitzgerald may seem surprising. But in a letter to Monsell, De Vere revealed his private opinion of Fitzgerald as ‘a poor, weak, incapable idiot’ but objected to what he saw as the attempt by the authorities and inspectorate to make Fitzgerald the ‘scapegoat of a vicious system’.¹⁶²

Fitzgerald was replaced by Dr Edward Maziere Courtenay, an appointment which the asylum officers welcomed. Courtenay demonstrated an interest in the causes and treatments of insanity. He entered into a correspondence with Charles Darwin on the subject, and he was also instrumental in establishing the Irish branch of the British Medico-Psychological Association. Dr Courtenay eventually left the post in 1890, at which time he was appointed as Inspector of Lunatic Asylums in Ireland.¹⁶³

Resignation from the Board of Governors

De Vere was at the forefront of another controversial issue concerning the Board of Governors of Limerick district asylum when they challenged the introduction of a rule which stated that all rejected tenders were to be sent to the board of control in Dublin for inspection. The members considered it a slight on their

¹⁵⁹ *Irish Times*, 1 Jan. 1873.

¹⁶⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 26 Mar. 1873.

¹⁶¹ Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane*, p. 66.

¹⁶² De Vere to Monsell, 12 Mar. 1873, Monsell Papers, NLI.

¹⁶³ O’Malley, ‘Governors, staff and lunatics’, p.18.

characters, the inference being that they did not discharge their duties honourably, and campaigned for the rule to be overturned. De Vere and his older brother both resigned over issue of tenders. In a communication with the lord lieutenant, De Vere wrote that ‘the fact that the funds for the lunatic asylum are, in the first instance, lent by the State, forms no excuse for this derogatory exception’.¹⁶⁴ De Vere was a member of the Board of Governors between 1861 and 1874, but in his letter of resignation he admitted that he had stepped aside from actively participating as a governor in 1862 due to the controversy surrounding the amendment of asylum management rules, especially Rule Eight which related to the submission of tenders to a central authority. De Vere wrote that he found this rule to be ‘arbitrary, unconstitutional and derogatory.’¹⁶⁵ A meeting of governors resolved that the propose new rule sought to ‘diminish and discourage the exertions of the local governors (and) increase unduly the power of the resident superintendent.’¹⁶⁶ De Vere was not the only Board member to feel so aggrieved at the inclusion of this rule. Stephen Spring Rice resigned his position on point of principle when the rule was not amended or removed, he also expressed deep concerns regarding the expanding power of the inspectorate, at the expense of the Board. On the 28 February 1862, Spring Rice wrote to the lord lieutenant to offer his resignation as a governor of Limerick district asylum. He compared the situation in Ireland, where the Board of Control decided on the rules by which asylums were managed, and the position of local governors in England who were permitted to frame the rules for the institutions in which they were involved, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State. Spring Rice asserted that Irish gentlemen of similar positions were being ‘insulted’ as requests for information were refused, and rules were drafted without their input.¹⁶⁷ As he saw it, this essentially placed the Board under the control of the inspectors. The tension that existed between the Board members, the inspectorate, and the government is clearly demonstrated by Spring Rice’s remark that if the State required clerks to ‘carry out the instructions of Drs Nugent and Hatchell and make

¹⁶⁴ *Dublin Daily Express*, 8 Apr. 1874.

¹⁶⁵ Lunatic asylums (Ireland). Copies of the general rules and regulations for the management of the district lunatic asylums in Ireland having reference to tenders; of the resolution of the governors of the Limerick district Lunatic Asylum. Parliament Session: 1874 Paper Series: House of Commons Papers Paper Number: 343 Volume Page: LIV.581, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶⁶ *Dublin Medical Press*, 25 June 1862.

¹⁶⁷ Lunatic asylums (Ireland). Copies of the general rules and regulations for the management of the district lunatic asylums in Ireland, pp. 8-9.

reports and returns to them, the State can afford to pay clerks for the performance of that drudgery'.¹⁶⁸ In a clear indication of what Spring Rice felt the superior status and responsibilities of his class entailed, he argued that expecting Board members, which included peers, Bishops, privy councillors and 'principal gentlemen of the district' to make reports and returns was 'absurd' since these men had, by virtue of their social and professional position, many duties, and often resided a considerable distance from the asylum. Thomas Larcom writing on behalf of the lord lieutenant accepted Spring Rice's resignation, but stated that no slight was intended on the board of governors.¹⁶⁹

The monthly meeting of the Governors held on 3 May 1863, which was attended by both De Vere brothers, was dominated by one issue, that of the new code. The minutes of the meeting essentially reflected the Board of Governors belief they were accused of being incompetent in undertaking the duties of their position. Board members argued that their role, and the role of the Board of Gaol Superintendence were similar in many respects, yet Gaol and Poor Law Boards were permitted to conclude contracts, a right which it was proposed should be denied to Asylum Governors. The Governors stressed that they had no personal motive for retaining their seats on the Board, rather they accepted them 'as a public duty'.¹⁷⁰ In what was presumably a reference to the necessity of recruiting members from sectors other than the elite, if their honour continued to be impinged upon, the board issued a warning that governors might eventually have to be drawn from men who were motivated by less than purely altruistic concerns, 'diminishing the interest with which such local bodies feel in providing for the wants of their own lunatic poor, may have the effect of ultimately transferring their function to less worthy hands.'¹⁷¹

The board submitted twenty-five different objections to the new code of regulations. A response was dispatched from Dublin Castle on the 26 May 1862. It stated that 'in several instances' the objections raised were 'founded on misapprehensions of the meaning of the particular rules referred to' and that 'the

¹⁶⁸ *Cork Examiner*, 04 July 1862.

¹⁶⁹ Lunatic asylums (Ireland). Copy of correspondence that has taken place between the governors of the district lunatic asylum at Limerick, or any of them, and the Irish government, with reference to the new code of regulations for the government of Irish lunatic asylums. Parliament Session: 1862 Paper Series: House of Commons Papers, Paper Number: 339 Volume Page: XLIV.583 Volume: 44, p. 9.

¹⁷⁰ *Dublin Evening Mail*, 03 July 1862.

¹⁷¹ *Medical Press and Circular*, vol. 68 (London, 1874), p. 137

opinion expressed by the board as to the general tendency of the rules, is altogether unsustainable.’ Each of the rules objected to by the Board of Governors was noted and discussed, but none were amended at that time.¹⁷² ‘We are gratified that the very dignified course adopted by the Governors of the Limerick Asylum, who refused to hold office any longer, has induced the Chief Secretary to contemplate an alteration of the obnoxious rules. We may venture however ... that the rejected tender rule is nothing more than a selected subject of objection on the part of the board of governors, and its amendment will go very little way towards removing the causes of dissatisfaction. The actual grievance of which not only that in Limerick, but most other boards complain, is that the whole policy of these new rules is that which has for so many years been pursued by Dr Nugent, the concentration of all authority in the inspectors and their nominees, the president of the superintendent and the lowering of the function of the board of governors.’¹⁷³

De Vere felt compelled to actively re-engage in the administration of the asylum in 1872, when ‘lamentable disorders resulting in the loss of human life’ came to light.¹⁷⁴ Although De Vere stated that he became involved with the board of governors again on the basis of purely humanitarian motives, he quickly revealed his concerns regarding the asylum inspectorate. In effect, De Vere, although likely to have been motivated by moral concern for the asylum inmate who died in suspicious circumstances, also recognised the opportunity to draw widespread attention to the inspectorate. De Vere echoed many of the sentiments expressed years earlier by Spring Rice with regard to the diminishing independence of the board and the growing, untethered authority of the inspectorate. Rule Eight the submission of rejected tenders to the Board of Control, once again proved to be an especially contemptuous issue. For De Vere, the central concern seemed to be how the honesty and trustworthiness of the board members was perceived, ‘if the governors be worthy

¹⁷² Lunatic asylums (Ireland). Copy of correspondence that has taken place between the governors of the district lunatic asylum at Limerick, or any of them, and the Irish government, with reference to the new code of regulations for the government of Irish lunatic asylums, (1862) HC, pp 6-8.

¹⁷³ *The Medical Press and Circular*, Volume 68 (London, 1874), p. 137.

¹⁷⁴ Lunatic asylums (Ireland). Copies of the general rules and regulations for the management of the district lunatic asylums in Ireland having reference to tenders; of the resolution of the governors of the Limerick district Lunatic Asylum, protesting against the eighth of the said rules; Parliament Session: 1874 Paper Series: House of Commons Papers Paper Number: 343 Volume Page: LIV.581 Volume: 54, p. 9.

of trust, let them be trusted; if not let them be dismissed'.¹⁷⁵ He also expressed the view that the 'two medical men in Dublin' would not be able to accurately assess the validity of contracts, as they would not possess the requisite local knowledge.

I feel so strongly the claims the lunatic poor have on my services that I would bear with much if I could render those services with independence and without forfeiture of self-respect, but I believe that an administration, apparently, but not really free, outwardly responsible, and really powerless, must be necessarily weak, inefficient and useless ... I will not consent to remain a member of a board whose independence I conceive to be abrogated, and whose honour I conceive to be impugned.¹⁷⁶

A number of other governors, having expressed the similar objections to De Vere, followed his lead and also tendered their resignations. The matter was eventually resolved, with the Board of Control eventually ceding to the Board of Governors request that Rule Eight be amended to their satisfaction.¹⁷⁷

Grimsley-Smith has asserted that the incident of James Danford's death has been used by historians to illustrate the darker side of asylum life, but it would be more apt to see it as a demonstration of the poor quality of the governance of these asylums. As in the aftermath each side involved rushed to accuse the other and absolve themselves from responsibility. Neither the lord lieutenant nor the press were sympathetic to the governor's claims that they were not personally responsible for overseeing the asylum.¹⁷⁸ Grimsley-Smith did concur with De Vere on one point, his assessment of the government of district asylums as 'a mongrel system. It has not the vigour of centralization, and it has not the advantage of independent local action and defined responsibility.'¹⁷⁹ There were clearly numerous problems in the governance of asylums. An intricate and confusing system of inspection and administration, power struggles and political interference made effective management and transparency almost impossible.

Rather than leaving the post officially in 1862, De Vere chose to stand aside. His renewed involvement in 1872 saw him lead a very public and vocal charge against the inspectorate system. Conflicts between boards of governors and the

¹⁷⁵ *General Rules and Regulations for Management of District Lunatic Asylums in Ireland, and Correspondence*, HC 1874 (343) 54 581, p. 10.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ O'Malley, 'Governors, staff and lunatics', p.35.

¹⁷⁸ Grimsey Smith, 'Politics, professionalization, and poverty', p. 50; Ian Miller, 'Asylums, Mental Health Care and the Irish, 1800–2010', *Social History of Medicine*, 2013, Vol. 26 (3), pp 581-583.

¹⁷⁹ Grimsey Smith, 'Politics, professionalization, and poverty', p. 50.

central authority in charge of their administration, were not unheard of. In the mid-1800s the Governors of the Belfast district lunatic asylum entered into successful litigation against the lord lieutenant as he had proposed the appointment of asylum chaplains. The course of action followed by the Board indicates their unwillingness to yield control of the asylum to a central authority. Although the Board members pointed to the possible arousal of religious disputes if chaplains were appointed, Prior has argued that this dispute was instead a manifestation of the general sense of powerlessness felt by Board members in local affairs.¹⁸⁰ With regard to the grievances expressed by the Limerick governors, there are many factors which could account for this. The most frequently recorded official explanation is that they were unhappy at having their integrity questioned and their independence limited, but another contributing cause may have been their unhappiness with Fitzgerald's performance in the role of resident medical superintendent – a position to which he was appointed without their approval. The Board then found themselves with no power to reprimand or dismiss him.¹⁸¹ De Vere had been heavily involved in various charitable and philanthropic efforts since his youth. He had shown himself to be altruistic and genuinely motivated by a desire to help others. The idea that there was a total reform of the treatment of the insane at the turn of the nineteenth century, a 'new dawn' of benevolence and scientific medical treatment has been described as one of the abiding myths about insanity and asylums.¹⁸² As the *Freeman's Journal* stated, with reference to the death of Danford at Limerick Asylum, 'there are hardly any suspicions ... more deeply ingrained in the public mind than ... the uncontrollable suspicion that deeds are done, and inhumanity practiced under the privilege of lunacy restraint, which would not bear the light of open investigation.'¹⁸³ There were many examples of the mistreatment of inmates, and while De Vere expressed concern for the lunatic poor, and stated that he felt compelled to work for their benefit, his reasons for resigning from the board; the impingement on his independence, and the 'forfeiture of self-respect' seem to reflect his anger over the treatment of the governors by the inspectorate and privy council, more so than

¹⁸⁰ Prior, *Asylums, Mental Health Care and the Irish: 1800-2010*, p. 473.

¹⁸¹ Serena Trowbridge, *Insanity and the Lunatic Asylum in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2015), p.3.

¹⁸² General Rules and Regulations for Management of District Lunatic Asylums in Ireland, and Correspondence, HC 1874 (343) 54 581, p10.

¹⁸³ *Freeman's Journal*, 04 Nov. 1872.

concern over the mistreatment of asylum patients.¹⁸⁴ Only men of high status were appointed to the Board of Governors – the ‘principal gentlemen of the district’ – as Spring Rice put it.¹⁸⁵ The governors of Limerick asylum clearly felt that their status had not garnered the recognition and respect they believed they deserved. De Vere, along with the other governors were clearly unhappy at what they saw as being reduced to mere clerks whose only function was to carry out menial administrative duties for two medical men, Dr Nugent and Dr Hatchell.

De Vere’s public life was dominated to a large extent by his views on religion, whether in the context of his vocal support and defence of Catholicism in the House of Commons, or in his assertion that the national school system should be free of clerical influence. Although seemingly expressing a contradictory viewpoint, De Vere felt able to separate matters of doctrine from practical considerations.¹⁸⁶ With regard to his views on the national school system, he had exhibited an approach which was both practical and aspirational. He did not lose sight of the everyday considerations and responsibilities of those who were part of the system, namely teachers and students, and his recommendations on the system reflected an outlook which was shaped by tangible experience. However, they also showed a paternalistic concern for the moral development of the Catholic poor. This concern was motivated by a sense of responsibility to provide leadership, which emanated from his position as a member of the elite. His involvement in the controversies surrounding the Limerick District Lunatic Asylum was motivated to a large extent to protect what he considered to be a legitimate position of leadership in the form of Asylum board Governor. De Vere considered this position to be based upon his education and ability, but also his social status. The emergence of a middle class, in the case of the Lunatic Asylum controversy, represented by medical men, and the process of increasingly moving power from the hands of the elite to a centralised public authority represented a challenge in the eyes of men like De Vere to the very basis of their role and function in society.

¹⁸⁴ Correspondence between Governors of District Lunatic Asylum at Limerick and Irish Government, with reference to new Code of Regulations for Government of Irish Lunatic Asylums, p.4.

¹⁸⁵ Rev. P. Fitzgerald & J.J. Mc Gregor, *The History, Topography and Antiquities of Limerick* (Dublin, 1827), p.384.

¹⁸⁶ De Vere, *Is the Hierarchy an Aggression*, p.14.

Chapter 6: Power and Privilege

Stephen De Vere's family had, like many of their counterparts, been involved in the administration of justice in county Limerick for a number of generations. De Vere's, father Aubrey, his oldest brother, Vere Edmond, and his grandfather Vere Hunt, had all served on grand juries, as justices of the peace and as high sheriffs.¹ De Vere expressed some pride in his contribution to these bodies, he wrote to William Monsell, 'I am (except yourself) the oldest and most experienced and I may say most hard working magistrate of my county.'² There is evidence within his own personal writings, and published reports to suggest that he took the administration of justice seriously. However, De Vere was not unaware of the status attached to such positions, and he was strongly opposed to the idea of being joined on the bench by men he considered to be inferior, on the basis of their education, but whom he also judged to be 'corrupt' and 'disloyal'.³

Justices of the Peace met at quarter sessions four times a year and tried all offences, with the exclusion of treason, murder and felonies punishable by death or penal servitude for life.⁴ One of the first cases De Vere contributed to in this capacity involved a group of men who were accused of partaking in a riot in Abbeyfeale, county Limerick in 1841.⁵ His attitude to this particular case is not recorded, but in a diary entry in April 1869 he briefly referred to a case he tried at Foynes petty sessions that involved two mariners who engaged in rioting. De Vere sentenced them to two months imprisonment with hard labour.⁶ Although unpaid, justices of the peace were required to perform a wide variety of duties, and tackle questions of some legal complexity.⁷ In order to become a JP, one had to apply to the Lord Chancellor, via the county lieutenant, by submitting a biography which included details about property held, family history, personal characteristics, previous applications, and anything else thought relevant. The county lieutenant of the county was effectively chief of all such JPs. The Irish criminal justice system was the focus of official

¹ *The London Gazette* 14 Dec. 1784; *Saunders's News-Letter*, 12 Feb. 1811; *The Pilot* 12 Aug. 1836.

² Stephen De Vere to William Monsell, 8 April 1884, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ O'Neill, *Catholics of Consequence*, p. 137.

⁵ *Kerry Evening Post*, 30 Oct. 1841.

⁶ De Vere, diary entry, dated, 21 April 1869, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5070.

⁷ R. B. McDowell, "The Irish Courts of Law, 1801-1914", in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 40 (Sep., 1957), pp 363-391.

scrutiny on a number of occasions throughout the nineteenth century.⁸ In response to the perceived failure of JPs to exert sufficient control over their districts throughout the previous decade, Resident Magistrates had been introduced in 1836 through the Constabulary (Ireland) Act. Bonsall has indicated that in the first half of the nineteenth-century corruption and inefficiency were endemic among the Irish magistracy, and as a result, the administration was compelled to introduce government paid magistrates to address these complaints.⁹ But it was necessary for RMs, too, to be men of independent means as this was a prestigious, but costly position, and the salary was set in 1836 at £400 a year, being increased in the late nineteenth-century, but only to £525.¹⁰ These paid professional justices were supported by a professional police force. They continued to operate alongside the unpaid JPs, and this resulted in tensions arising between them as the boundaries of their respective roles were not always clear.¹¹ De Vere was himself in favour of such a system of unpaid magistrates. This showed the difference between his attitude and that of many of his class since the decision to increase the number of Stipendiary Magistrates as a permanent fixture in law enforcement as members of the newly formed Irish Constabulary in 1836 resulted in a wave of hostility from local Justices of the Peace towards government. A number of JPs considered the newly appointed stipendiary magistrates to be less capable of maintaining law and order as they were unfamiliar with the territories which they were appointed to. A contemporary of De Vere, Lord William Fitzgerald stated that paid magistrates would be ‘the object of jealousy and ill-will of the unpaid.’¹²

The unpaid magistrates grew increasingly bitter and disillusioned as they were superseded in various areas by the professional magistrates.¹³ It was still an issue of concern for De Vere in 1884, presumably prompted by the introduction of A Bill to Amend the Act Regulating the Salaries of Resident Magistrates in Ireland in

⁸ O'Neill, *Catholics of consequence*, p. 137.

⁹ Penny Bonsall, *The Irish RMs: the resident magistrate in the British administration in Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), pp 12-13.

Parliamentary committees were established to focus on problems relating to the administration of justice in Ireland in 1825, 1839, 1852 and 1871.

¹⁰ Bonsall, *The Irish RMs: the resident magistrate in the British administration in Ireland*, pp 13-15.

¹¹ Niamh Howlin, ‘Nineteenth-Century Criminal Justice: Uniquely Irish or Simply “not English”?’ *Irish Journal of Legal Studies* (IJLS), 3 (1): 67-89.

¹² Lord William Fitzgerald, *Some Suggestions for the better government of Ireland: Addressed to the Marquis of Kildare* (London, 1846), p. 23.

¹³ Daragh Emmett Curran, ‘A society in transition: the Protestant community in Tyrone 1836-42’, (PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2010), p. 90.

Certain Cases.¹⁴ De Vere frequently referred to his sense of duty as being the primary factor for his involvement in public life, so he may have concurred with the statement: ‘If you once pay my countrymen for doing their duty they will never do their duty without being paid.’¹⁵ De Vere regarded the voluntary positions he held as a privilege. Although he expressed this as being the privilege of meeting the needs of his poorer countrymen, his attitude was not entirely altruistic as there certainly was also an element of prestige involved. In fulfilling the role of magistrate, De Vere could maintain a sense of authority in his locality.¹⁶ De Vere also believed that a system of unpaid magistrates would help to maintain the bond between landlord and tenant. As a member of the landlord class, he presumably had a more positive view of a system which would ‘bind classes together’ – an attitude that those further down the social scale were less liable to hold.¹⁷

Justices of the Peace and Social Background

Magistrates in England were traditionally drawn from among the ranks of landed gentlemen. In Ireland, however, there were often more difficulties and controversies surrounding appointments to the role, given the small size of the rural gentry and the divide between Catholic tenants and Protestant landlords.¹⁸ To a great extent, the authority of an individual JP rested on the level of respect shown to him by the community in which he lived or operated. It was necessary for JPs to be familiar with the people with whom they dealt – many of these being members of the lower classes. JPs in Ireland were often drawn from the stratum below the elite, and in many cases they were, like De Vere, also employed as land agents. This often resulted in their having more direct contact with people of all classes than had the great landed magnates.¹⁹ In 1884, showing his more open attitude to the composition of the magistracy, De Vere wrote to Monsell that he had no objections to men who were not members of the gentry becoming JPs; in fact he advocated the appointment of men drawn from the middle class. He believed that the bench would benefit from the inclusion of such men, as he believed that ‘good men’ of that class would ‘add to

¹⁴ *Magistrates (Ireland) (salaries). A Bill to Amend the Act Regulating the Salaries of Resident Magistrates in Ireland in Certain Cases*, vol. 123 of Bills, 1884.

¹⁵ Bonsall, *The Irish RMs: the resident magistrates in the British administration in Ireland*, p. 18.

¹⁶ S. E. De Vere to William Monsell, 8 April, 1884. De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053, 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ R. B. McDowell, ‘The Irish Courts of Law, 1801-1914’, in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 40 (Sep., 1957), pp 363-391.

¹⁹ Daragh Emmett Curran, ‘A society in transition’, p.79.

the weight of the dignity of the Bench.’ De Vere stated that he felt if a man was fit for the role by virtue of his character, education, and intelligence, then he should be appointed. He did not agree with the exclusion of men from the role on ‘social or religious grounds’, and argued that such a practice should not be defended or continued.²⁰

As the nineteenth-century progressed, a minority of small businessmen and merchants joined the bench.²¹ But the system was still overwhelmingly dominated by members of the Protestant religion. The religious composition of the bench had been the subject of criticism since the 1830s, as it was seen as contributing to political bias on the part of justices. Given that the men appointed to the bench were general of a similar social class, and were members of the Church of Ireland, Hoppen has argued that magistrates used quarter sessions, which were lower forms of court, as much for ‘tribal solidarity as for law enforcement’.²² But the make-up of the magistracy was changing in the latter nineteenth century: in 1884, seventy-three percent of Justices of the Peace in the provinces outside Ulster were Protestant, by 1910 the proportion of Protestants had dropped to sixty per cent.²³ As a Catholic himself, De Vere was opposed to members of his own religion being discriminated against. However, he did maintain that only Catholics who had avoided any involvement with nationalist protest should be considered as fit men to sit on the bench. Although De Vere did not refer to any individual or group in specific terms, he expressed his deep opposition to proponents of nationalism, or those whom he referred to as having taken ‘a violent path’, being appointed to the bench.²⁴ It has been argued that many Catholic JPs were sympathetic to those involved in nationalist or agrarian protest.²⁵ But De Vere as a Unionist considered such men to be ‘ignorant, violent, disloyal, and corrupt,’ he believed that they had been rendered so through a lack of education rather than ‘an accident of birth’. De Vere asserted that he had ‘too much respect for himself’ to share the bench with such men. Nevertheless, De Vere was disinclined to step aside,

²⁰ S. E. De Vere to William Monsell, 8 April, 1884, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053/142.

²¹ O'Neill, *Catholics of consequence*, p.139.

²² Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p.116.

²³ William J. Crotty, David A. Schmitt, *Ireland and the politics of change* (London, 2014), p. 105.

²⁴ S. E. De Vere to William Monsell, 8 April, 1884. TCD, MS 5053, 142

²⁵ O'Neill, *Catholics of consequence*, p. 139.

‘my strong sense of duty would make me most unwilling to throw up my commission.’²⁶

Criticism of Justices of the Peace

As early as 1816 Peel was clearly disillusioned with the conduct and ability of the magistracy. He expressed the desire to ‘to revise the magistracy,’ as ‘half our disorders and disturbances arise from the negligence of some and corruption and party spirit of others. But what other local authorities can you trust to?’²⁷ The Irish magistracy was subject to generalised criticism of their conduct and character throughout the nineteenth-century. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that landlords who approached their position on the magistracy or local governing body with a liberal outlook, such as the De Veres, were as a result viewed in a positive light.²⁸ Michael Leahy, a Limerick based solicitor, noted that he had frequently observed De Vere in a professional context, as being ‘the poor man’s magistrate.’²⁹ Leahy was himself described as ‘the friend of popular liberty, the poor man’s advocate, and the opponent of jobbers and oppressors.’³⁰ Even so, by the mid-nineteenth-century, the system of JPs dispensing justice had come to be seen by many as an outmoded system of local administration.³¹ De Vere observed that the Catholic population of Ireland had ‘little sympathy for the law’. But he did not consider this to be surprising, as ‘the law’, had for centuries ‘persecuted and oppressed them’. Yet, by the time of his statement in 1868, he believed that the law in Ireland was ‘justly and humanely administered’, but the change in the state of affairs had been too recent for the mass of people to fully appreciate it.³² De Vere was clearly at odds with many Irish Catholics in his opinion of the regard in which members of the bench were held. Although De Vere’s chief concern was that men of unfit character might be appointed to the bench if a professional system came into operation, there was already substantial evidence of corruption and incompetence in the system as it was. In the selection of JPs, there was often a direct link to either prestige of occupation,

²⁶ S. E. De Vere to William Monsell, 8 April, 1884. TCD, MS 5053, 142.

²⁷ Peel to Saurin, 8 April 1816 (Peel papers, B.M., Add. Ms 40211) quoted in Galen Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812-36* (London, 2016), p. 43.

²⁸ Ridden, ‘Making good citizens’, p. 77.

²⁹ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 09 Dec. 1854.

³⁰ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 14 Nov. 1849.

³¹ R. B. McDowell, ‘The Irish Courts of Law, 1801-1914’, in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 40 (Sep., 1957), pp 363-391.

³² *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 12 Sept. 1868.

wealth, or simply having the biggest house in the area.³³ This frequently resulted in the positions being filled by men seeking to profit politically and financially. In 1822 the county lieutenant admitted that appointments were often made ‘more with reference to local or temporary exigencies than to personal merit or qualification’.³⁴

Many flaws in the magistracy were still evident half a century later. In Limerick there was an example, not of corruption, but of disinterest. In 1879 Monsell, as county lieutenant, felt compelled to call on the counties’ magistrates to attend a special meeting in the grand jury room of the courthouse. Between eighteen and twenty magistrates, including De Vere, attended. It transpired that Monsell had received a communication from the lord lieutenant regarding the non-attendance of magistrates at petty sessions throughout the district. This resulted in members of the public being put to great expense and inconvenience. Monsell revealed that after a careful investigation, he found the attendance rates of the Limerick magistracy were much worse than those in the neighbouring counties of Clare and Tipperary. He asserted that if magistrates were not in a position to attend to their duties as justices of the peace, then they should resign their commissions, and allow the authorities to identify men who could adequately fulfil the role, concluding with a warning that ‘this question is important to you as a class, and in it you should be deeply interested. If the aristocracy and magistrates of a county are languid in the discharge of their duties towards the people they will soon lose their legitimate influence over them’.³⁵

Monsell’s response to this situation could be described as an example of the institutional and individual reforms subscribed to by the elite in an attempt to identify themselves as legitimate leaders and gain popular support. Ridden has argued that the Liberal elite group in Limerick, which included Monsell and De Vere, believed that Irish society was unstable because of divisions between Radicals and Tories and Catholics and Protestants. They were also of the opinion that inadequate leadership from a corrupt aristocracy had resulted in the Irish population becoming disillusioned. Their solution was to reform the existing elite from within, and attempt to re-emerge as the legitimate leaders of Irish society. As such, they sought to behave responsibly, and show that they were cognisant of popular grievances, and would

³³ O’Neill, *Catholics of Consequence*, p.139.

³⁴ Galen Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812-36* (London, 2016), pp 40-41.

³⁵ *Kerry Evening Post*, 14 June 1879.

respond to them. The institutional and individual reforms developed by the elite group of which De Vere was a part sought to demonstrate that this group was the only one capable of enacting the changes sought by the populace.³⁶ .

In De Vere's writings there is some sign that he regretted the passing of old forms of authority and their replacement by newer ones. In 1896 De Vere wrote, 'my early years were chequered, my latter have been full of trials'.³⁷ This reflection on his past may, on the one hand, refer to the difference of opinion De Vere had on more than one occasion with the Catholic Church hierarchy, especially in relation to the provision of education. Or, on the other, it may allude to the diminishing power and authority of De Vere and other members of his class, and the emergence of professional bodies and nationalist movements which challenged their role in society. For the greater part of De Vere's life, until the closing decades of the nineteenth century, there was little indication of any serious threat to the social power enjoyed by generations of the landed class. Big house functions and leisurely pursuits continued to be indulged in, while club life, education and army or naval careers contributed to the shared experience which served to connect Irish landlords to the wider British class. But the agricultural depression and land agitation which occurred in the late 1870s and 1880s contributed to an assault on the political power of landlords.³⁸ Nevertheless a vibrant social life continued for members of the elite in Limerick, with various reports of balls being held throughout this period, such as that held by Dunraven in 1893 which was reported to have caused a great 'flutter in fashionable circles'.³⁹ Despite the influence that members of the Irish landlord class continued to exercise, they lacked any real control of the state as a means of maintaining their position. Hoppen stated that Irish landlords in the late nineteenth century were actually quite removed from the controls of the state machine. The Royal Irish Constabulary took control of law and order, which meant that individual landlords were as bound by law as everyone else and could not manipulate it to their own advantage.

³⁶ Ridden, 'Making good citizens', pp.138-140.

³⁷ De Vere, diary entry, dated 26 July 1896, De Vere papers, TCD MS. 5054.

³⁸ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p.78.

³⁹ *Irish Times*, 07 Jan. 1893.

The introduction of paid magistrates and the development of the civil service further diminished the power and authority of the landowning class.⁴⁰ That is not to say that members of the landlord class were excluded from positions of power since, in general, they continued to dominate both local and national politics. But it became apparent that they were bound by the state rather than being in control of it. In the final years of the nineteenth century, in order to maintain their position of ascendancy, Irish landlords were reliant on the deferential and paternalistic nature of rural society and on the economic power which they could still employ. In 1862 an article appeared which effusively praised De Vere as a friend of the poor and model of decorum.⁴¹ But the deference which was directed towards some members of the elite in the late 1870s was not a solid basis for power. The majority of Irish landlords were of a different religious and cultural background to their tenants, unlike England where there existed a sense in which landlord and tenant all shared part of a common heritage. Members of the landlord class, like De Vere, might have considered themselves to be Irish, but his tenants could potentially have viewed him as foreign usurper who had no moral right to the lands he held. When Charles Stewart Parnell visited Limerick in 1880 he told the assembled crowds that ‘the labourers of Ireland can only be raised from their present degraded and suffering condition by making the land free to all.’ Parnell also stated that ‘they got rid of their landlords in France, they got rid of them in Prussia, they got rid of them in Belgium. Why should we not get rid of them in Ireland?’⁴² There is some evidence to suggest that De Vere remained sympathetic to the circumstances of poorer tenants on the Curragh Chase estate. He wrote to his nephew Robin in 1882 to suggest an abatement of rents, as he believed that the small tenants had had a particularly ‘trying year’. De Vere suggested that his nephew could make up the loss of revenue by retaining what he would typically allocate to him, as De Vere stated that he could ‘rub on perfectly well without it’.⁴³

As tenants became much more politicised during the early 1880s, changing political attitudes had a profound effect on the position of the landlord. Nationalist politicians sought to encourage this perception of the alien landlord as the manifestation of English misrule in Ireland. In 1887, William O’Brien, editor of the

⁴⁰ K. Theodore Hoppen, ‘Landownership and power in Ireland: the decline of an elite’ in Gibson and Blinkhorn, *Landownership and Power*, pp 164-80, p.72.

⁴¹ *Kerry Star*, 14 Feb. 1862.

⁴² *The Irish Times*, 02 Nov. 1880.

⁴³ S.E. De Vere to Robin De Vere, 4 Jan 1882, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5054.

United Ireland, and leading figure in the National League, stated that ‘the grand army of Irish freemen will march unconquered and unconquerable until they have trampled down in its last ditch alien landlordism and ascendancy, and hauled down from its highest pinnacle the last shred of English misrule.’⁴⁴

The Struggle for Power

Hoppen has stated that by the late nineteenth century the state ‘was more and more establishing itself as an alternative centre of influence and power and as such was not prepared to dance to the landlord’s tune’.⁴⁵ JPs saw their discretion in relation to the administration of criminal justice diminish as there was increased centralisation of law and order. Members of the elite, such as De Vere, viewed this as a challenge to their authority. De Vere took his role as a JP very seriously, and he was, as in other aspects of his involvement in public service, quick to vocalise his concerns if he felt his honour was being called into question. One incident which demonstrated De Vere’s insistence on his integrity being respected took place at Rathkeale quarter sessions in 1877. De Vere, who attended in order to provide a character reference for an applicant who wished to obtain a licence for a public house, objected to taking the oath before providing his evidence. He felt that as he was a sitting magistrate, he was already bound by an oath to give his opinion on cases to the best of his judgement, and so he protested at being asked to take ‘a fresh oath to confirm that opinion’.⁴⁶ The Chairman, Theobald A. Purcell, stated that it was ill-advised for magistrates to make observations from the bench on issues relating to the state of law, and in any event, De Vere was in that instance not acting as a member of the bench, and so in giving evidence he should do so on oath, ‘the same as any other member of the community’.⁴⁷ De Vere eventually agreed to take the oath, and provided an excellent character reference for the applicant in question. The case at hand, the provision of a licence for a public house, was clearly not a critical matter, given the reluctance of some magistrates at that time to exercise properly the duties of the position.⁴⁸ It seems unlikely that many of De Vere’s contemporaries would have exhibited a similar reaction in the same circumstances. As such, this

⁴⁴ Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland*, p.318.

⁴⁵ Hoppen, *Landownership and power in nineteenth-century Ireland: the decline of an elite*, p. 164.

⁴⁶ *Freemans Journal*, 15 Oct. 1877.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Kerry Evening Post*, 14 Jun. 1879.

incident was perhaps a reflection of his nature, the significance he attached to the role of magistrate, and his perception of the respect which he felt was due to his position. De Vere's uncompromising nature was evident many years before this incident took place, another example of his tenaciousness can be found in the evidence of Mr Justice Fitzgerald before a select committee on juries in the early 1870s. Fitzgerald referred to what he called a 'remarkable case with which all who are connected with law are perfectly familiar with'. Fitzgerald recounted his experience of attending a murder trial in Limerick as a young barrister. The jury could not reach a unanimous verdict as one juror, De Vere, despite the protestations of his fellow jurors, was not convinced that the evidence presented against the accused was conclusive. A retrial was held, and the man in question was found innocent. Fitzgerald commented that 'the prisoner was fortunate to have a man of superior intelligence on the jury.'⁴⁹

Some members of the aristocracy, such as Lord William Fitzgerald, who argued that 'the number and power of the unpaid magistracy should be reduced, and in place of them, paid, efficient magistrates, who are independent of local affections and prejudices, appointed',⁵⁰ were in favour of a professional system. But it is likely that De Vere's feelings on the issue were more in line with Galway magistrate R. J. Manseragh, who in 1837, stated 'to send down a paid officer to take upon himself the duties which we, the more constitutional authorities, are fully competent and willing to perform, and that too without even the common and cold courtesy of an official communication appears in the face of the public to cast a slur on us which I know to be fully undeserved.'⁵¹ Many members of the elite considered the introduction of a police force which was not answerable to them and reforms to the administration of justice as being evidence of the loss of their privileged position in society.⁵²

⁴⁹ First, second, and special reports from the Select Committee on Juries (Ireland); together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix. Parliament Session: 1873 Paper Series: House of Commons Papers Paper Number: 283 Volume Page: XV.389.

⁵⁰ Lord William Fitzgerald, *Some Suggestions for the Better Government of Ireland: Addressed to the Marquis of Kildare* (London, 1846), p. 24.

⁵¹ Daragh Emmett Curran, 'A society in transition: the Protestant community in Tyrone 1836-42', PhD thesis, Maynooth, 2010, p. 89.

⁵² Oliver MacDonagh, "Ideas and institutions, 1830-45" in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, v, no. 1* (Oxford, 1989), pp 193-216.

The Land League

The Liberal Party's attempt to address the agrarian problem in Ireland, the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act 1870, received De Vere's unconditional approval.⁵³ However, given the cautious approach by Gladstone in framing the act and the various compromises that had to be reached before it was deemed to be acceptable, it proved to be somewhat irrelevant, and even counter-productive. The terms of the act included giving the force of law to the Ulster Custom where it existed, providing compensation for tenants for improvements made to a farm if they surrendered their lease, and compensation for 'disturbance', i.e. damages, for tenants evicted for causes other than non-payment of rent. The Act also included the 'John Bright Clauses', which allowed tenants to borrow two-thirds of the cost of buying their holding from the Board of Works.⁵⁴ This was still beyond the means of most tenant farmers. There was no compulsion on landlords to sell, and many chose not to. The Act originally stipulated that rents must not be excessive, but this was amended in the House of Lords to state that rents must not be 'exorbitant'. This allowed some landlords to raise rents to a level their tenants could not afford, and then evict them for non-payment of rent without the necessity of providing compensation. The legal disputes which arose over customary rights and 'exorbitant' rents worsened landlord-tenant relations. De Vere's reasons for supporting the Act were presumably based on his previously asserted beliefs that tenants should be compensated for improvements made to their holdings, and be provided with some fixity of tenure, but as Norman Dunbar Palmer stated, 'the Land Act of 1870 was nobly conceived, but, its promise was better than its performance'.⁵⁵

The agricultural depression which began in 1877 ushered in an era that was in stark contrast to the preceding three decades of economic prosperity. The generation of tenant farmers (and landlord-farmers) who had come of age in the post-Famine period saw the value of their agricultural produce decline by thirty-six percent, the value of their crops by fifty per cent and the value of their livestock by around thirty-six percent. Tenant farmers who could remember the Famine, and the devastation it incurred, had no desire to return to it, while those who had grown up in an

⁵³ Stephen De Vere, *Local Government in Ireland* (London, 1891), p. 7.

⁵⁴ Norman Dunbar Palmer, *The Irish Land League Crisis* (New York, 1978), p. 41.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

atmosphere of economic prosperity had no desire to relinquish it.⁵⁶ Tenants were numerous, and had the capability of organising themselves as a united front, as opposed to landlords, who were numerically weak, and vulnerable, in that they often had highly visible profiles within their communities, their properties were not adequately secured by demesne walls, and they would have been unable to withstand a rent strike, as their burdens were fixed.⁵⁷ There was evidence of growing hostility between landlords and tenants during this period in De Vere's locality. In 1887 a trial, in which De Vere was called as the principal witness for the prosecution, involved Michael Mc Mahon, Dennis Toemey, John Nash and James Nash who were charged with trespassing on the property of Charles Taylor of Hollypark, Co. Limerick, in close proximity to Curragh Chase. The defendants admitted trespassing on Taylor's estate, but claimed a private right of way. It is indicative of the animosity which was felt towards landlords in the locality that Taylor sought to have the trial held in Dublin as 'a fair and impartial trial could not be had in Limerick, owing to the strong feeling that existed there against persons of the landlord class'.⁵⁸

The Irish National Land League, established in 1879, appealed to the tenant class, but also to shopkeepers and publicans who had benefited from tenant prosperity, and were often also farmers themselves. The Land League quickly gained influence, as its leaders vilified landlords as rack-renters.⁵⁹ De Vere attracted the unfavourable attention of the Land League when he attempted to arrange for the auction of some meadows on his estate in 1881.⁶⁰ Sheriffs' sales were frequently boycotted in 1881 as a tactic by the Land League to prevent landlords from recovering money lost through non-payment of rent,⁶¹ so this may have been a factor in De Vere's case. When members of the Shanagolden Land League posted notices warning farmers to boycott the sale, their tactics were successful in that no sale was arranged.⁶² Although it is not possible to determine in this case if the sale was of distrained property, the League did prohibit bidding in such instances.⁶³ De Vere referred to outrage as 'but a waste of material when the object will be effected by

⁵⁶ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p.91.

⁵⁷ Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants*, p. 177.

⁵⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 June 1887.

⁵⁹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p.90.

⁶⁰ *Leinster Express*, 06 Aug. 1881.

⁶¹ Adam Pole, 'Sheriffs' Sales during the Land War, 1879-82', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 34, No. 136 (Nov., 2005), pp 386-402.

⁶² *Leinster Express*, 06 Aug. 1881.

⁶³ Samuel Clark, *The Social Origins of the Land League* (Princeton, 1979), p. 313.

secret and widespread intimidation'.⁶⁴ Opponents of the League, including landlords, bailiffs and land agents, became the subject of boycotts, but people from all sectors of society could be targeted if they were seen to have opposed the League or violated its rules.⁶⁵ De Vere believed that those who engaged in agrarian outrages had little fear of conviction, as witnesses were intimidated to such an extent by the League that they would not provide factual evidence. He wrote that 'Ireland would be a happy country if criminals were as much afraid of the law, as witnesses are of the League'.⁶⁶ The government put in place some measures to safeguard property rights, such as supplying police to defend bailiffs. Official action was also taken to protect landlords and their supporters from violent attack. In 1880 over a hundred people throughout the island received personal police protection, and 1,149 were watched by the police for the specific purpose of guarding against outrage.⁶⁷ But De Vere believed that the law was 'powerless to protect or to punish' and 'property is not sufficiently protected in Ireland, and peace and liberty are not secured.' He stated that the land was 'full of outrage never reported, concealed in terror by the victims themselves'.⁶⁸

In the south of Ireland, one of the Land League's main tactics was to call for Griffith's Valuation to be used as a basis of rent. Tenants were instructed to resist paying the usual rents until the last possible moment, a policy known as paying 'rent at the point of a bayonet'.⁶⁹ As De Vere put it, 'a small amount of rent is paid in sufferance, under conditions imposed upon the landlords by the tenants themselves'.⁷⁰ Although it is not clear if De Vere was speaking on personal experience, his statement was made three years before he seceded his estate to his nephew, Robert (Robin) Vere O'Brien, so he was still in possession of land.⁷¹ There were obvious reasons for tenants to clamour for rents to be reduced to Griffith's valuations as they were very much below the real letting value of land by the late 1870s.⁷² But tenants were often also subject to pressure by members of the Land

⁶⁴ Stephen Edward De Vere, *Ireland: a letter addressed to Lord Monteagle* (London, 1886), p. 4.

⁶⁵ Clark, *The Social Origins of the Land League*, p. 313.

⁶⁶ De Vere, *Ireland: a letter addressed to Lord Monteagle*, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Clark, *The Social Origins of the Land League*, p. 308.

⁶⁸ De Vere, *Ireland: a letter addressed to Lord Monteagle*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Samuel Clark, James S. Donnelly, Jr. (Eds.), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914* (Wisconsin, 1983), p. 211.

⁷⁰ De Vere, *Ireland: a letter addressed to Lord Monteagle*, p. 9.

⁷¹ *The Irish Times*, 14 Nov. 1904.

⁷² Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 91.

League in this regard. Local branches were known to hold ‘courts’ to determine whether or not a League law had been broken, such as paying rents which were above Griffith’s valuations, and if sanctions should be put in place.⁷³

In the 1880s many landlords accepted Griffith’s Valuation rates because if they did not, they could be subjected to rent strikes, although many landlords claimed that Griffith’s valuations were not a fair measure to base rents on in the late 1800s.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it was reported that De Vere accepted Griffith’s Valuation on his estate, as did the neighbouring proprietors, Colonel Dickson and John White.⁷⁵ The earl of Donoughmore’s tenants withdrew *en masse* without paying anything when he refused to accept rents at Griffith’s Valuation in December 1880.⁷⁶ John C. Delmege, High Sherriff of county Limerick and a landowner argued that Griffith’s valuation was ‘a fallacious as a scale for fixing rents, it was only intended for taxation purposes, and any other notion should be got rid of.’⁷⁷

Other landlords, perhaps quite optimistically, believed that if they weathered the storm, the crisis would eventually pass, and tenants would resume paying the standard rent and clear their arrears.⁷⁸ Some landlords such as John George Adair refused to accede to grant any reductions on his Queen’s county estates. He asserted that

...the tenants are aware that my estates are subject to charges, taxes, rents, annuities and encumbrances; these must be paid without reduction. Were I therefore to accede to their request I should be driven to abandon my property. This I am not prepared to do, and consequently cannot grant their request.⁷⁹

It was not, of course, just a matter of income: the attitude of tenants towards landlords and landlordism was profoundly changed during the land agitation of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Joseph Lee has argued that the Land League provided the stimulus ‘to the struggle to emancipate tenants from the shackles of mental serfdom. It taught the tenants the simple but symbolic technique

⁷³ Samuel Clark, *The Social Origins of the Land League* (Princeton, 1979), p. 313.

⁷⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 Oct. 1880.

⁷⁵ *London Evening Standard*, 6 Dec. 1880.

⁷⁶ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, pp 90-94.

⁷⁷ Report of Her Majesty’s Commissioners of Inquiry into the working of the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870, and the acts amending the same. Parliament Session: 1881, C.2779 C.2779-I C.2779-II C.2779-III

⁷⁸ Carla King, *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), p. 119.

⁷⁹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 92.

of not doffing their caps to landlords.⁸⁰ Geary has provided an example of this in action through the resolution passed by the Rossmore branch of the Land League, who did ‘solemnly bind [themselves] not to take off [their] hats to any man in future except the priest’.⁸¹ Within De Vere’s immediate locality, there is some evidence to suggest that he was still well regarded and respected into his old age, but there was an obvious difference in how the national press, such as the *Freeman’s Journal*, referred to him. Commentary on his arguments against the introduction of local government, for example, occasionally included references which were disparaging towards him personally, and sought to highlight how removed he was from the popular point of view on such topics, and society in general.⁸²

The Grand Jury

For many people in Ireland, grand juries were seen as bastions of the protestant landlord ascendancy. They were widely considered to be corrupt and inefficient.⁸³ However, in De Vere’s opposition to any alteration in the administration of local governance in Ireland, he showed himself to be particularly concerned about the introduction of measures which would alter the structure of the grand jury. For much of the nineteenth-century, the grand jury was the most important local body in rural Ireland. It was empowered to raise money through county rates or cess for purposes such as the upkeep of local institutions like hospitals and lunatic asylums and the construction and repair of roads and bridges.⁸⁴ Members of the grand jury were chosen by the High Sheriff from amongst the most substantial landholders in the localities, and some of the more prosperous members of the middle class. De Vere, typical of other grand jurors, was selected by the high sheriff of county Limerick to become a member of the grand jury in 1864.⁸⁵

Unsuccessful efforts at reform of the grand jury system had been attempted since 1816, in an attempt to address the frequent accusations by cess payers of

⁸⁰ Joseph Lee, *The modernisation of Irish society* (Dublin, 1973), p. 89.

⁸¹ Geary, ‘Anticipating memory’, p. 127.

⁸² Mark Callanan & Justin F. Keogan, (eds.), *Local Government in Ireland: Inside Out* (Dublin, 2003), p. 15.

⁸³ Catherine B. Shannon, ‘The Ulster Liberal Unionists and Local Government Reform, 1885-98’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 18, no. 71 (1973): 407-23.

⁸⁴ Virginia Crossman, *Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 07 July 1864.

jobbery, extravagance and corruption levelled at members of the grand jury.⁸⁶ De Vere referred to such accusations as a ‘gross injustice’ and an ‘attack upon the grand jury system’.⁸⁷ However, even though De Vere was a defender and supporter of grand juries, he still acknowledged that there were some ‘defects’ with the system. In 1878 De Vere published a pamphlet in which he set out the legal remedies through which he believed those issues could be resolved. De Vere did not believe that there was ‘any general want of confidence in the grand jury or any general wish for a radical change’.⁸⁸ Although reforms, including the grand jury act of 1836, had regulated the proceedings of the grand jury and provided cess-payers with a limited role in deciding how local taxes should be spent, the system never successfully shook off its reputation for corruption and partiality.⁸⁹ De Vere sought to distance the grand jury system of which he was a part from the ‘grand juries of old’, which he referred to as being ‘corrupt and isolated bodies, having no link to connect them with the people whose interests they were supposed to represent. They were reckless and irresponsible jobbers; but their successors have been reformed, partly by themselves, partly by wise legislation’.⁹⁰ De Vere’s suggestions for improving the system included repealing the provision that the lowest tender must be accepted for public work, allowing peers to sit on grand juries and only allowing cess rates to be decided upon at presentment sessions.⁹¹ The response in the *Freeman’s Journal* to De Vere’s suggestions on the reform of the grand jury system was as disparaging as might have been expected from a newspaper of its political views: ‘There is no great merit in tinkering and nibbling at the law as it now stands. The whole machinery must be overhauled. The great fact to remember is that grand juries spend money which is taxed off the people; and that they neither represent the people nor are amenable to the people’.⁹²

A grand jury system which was ‘high controlling, restraining, and moderating power, selected not elected’ was desired by De Vere.⁹³ Political debates and

⁸⁶ Callanan & Keogan, (eds.) *Local Government in Ireland*, p. 17.

⁸⁷ De Vere, *A Letter to Lord Monteagle* (London, 1886), p.4.

⁸⁸ Stephen De Vere, *Thoughts on the Grand Jury system of Ireland: in a letter to the Right Hon. Lord Emly, Her Majesty’s lieutenant for the county of Limerick* (London, 1878), p.1.

⁸⁹ Catherine Shannon, Reviewed Work: *Local Government in Nineteenth Century Ireland* by Virginia Crossman, *History Ireland*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), pp 58-59.

⁹⁰ De Vere, *Thoughts on the Grand Jury system of Ireland*, p. 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 7-10.

⁹² *Freemans Journal*, 07 March 1878.

⁹³ De Vere, *Thoughts on the Grand Jury system of Ireland*, p. 10.

discussions surrounding the manner in which local government in Ireland was conducted had taken place throughout the nineteenth century. Local government was a source of grievance within the Catholic community, particularly in the first half of the century, when positions of local responsibility were almost exclusively the preserve of the Protestant landed elite.⁹⁴ De Vere had reservations about the Irish capacity for effective self-rule at either local or national level. He was dismissive of any suggestion that a general uprising would take place in Ireland, believing that ‘the Irish, with all their political folly ... must know indeed that, poor, weak and disorganised as they are, they could not make any rebellion much more formidable than that of Smith O’Brien’.⁹⁵ But he also believed, apparently not distinguishing between Home Rulers and advanced nationalists, that if Irish Nationalists gained legislative power through a central elective assembly, it would be ‘suicidal as regards Imperial interests, and unjust and tyrannical as regards a large minority’.⁹⁶ It was not surprising, then, that in response to the Gladstone’s Government of Ireland Bill (1886),⁹⁷ De Vere asserted that an Irish Parliament would not only be detrimental to landed proprietors, but also to industry and commerce, as the ‘labouring classes, in their blind and suicidal ignorance, would destroy all manufacturing industries by strikes sustained by violence and intimidation’ without the guidance of an ‘impartial Government’.⁹⁸ De Vere also believed that it would eventually result in Ireland falling into bankruptcy and internal revolution. Echoing Lord Salisbury’s argument that the Irish people were not responsible enough to deserve the privilege of autonomy,⁹⁹ De Vere stated that Ireland had not reached a stage at which she could ‘yield the power of self-government to her own advantage’.¹⁰⁰

Local government reform in the nineteenth century was based to a large extent on the belief that improving the local administration would cause a decline in the levels of lawlessness and turbulence in Ireland, and counteract calls for separation from England. But nationalists began to pursue local self-government as both as an alternative and as a stepping stone to national self-government. With the introduction of elections for town commissioners, members of municipal

⁹⁴ Crossman, *Local Government*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 12 Sept. 1868.

⁹⁶ De Vere, *A Letter to Monteagle*, p.4.

⁹⁷ Government of Ireland Bill. HC Deb 08 April 1886, vol. 304, cc 1036-141.

⁹⁸ De Vere, *A Letter to Monteagle*, p.4.

⁹⁹ Lewis Perry Curtis, *Coercion and Conciliation in Ireland 1880-1892* (New Jersey, 2015), p. 453.

¹⁰⁰ De Vere, *A Letter to Monteagle*, p.5.

corporations and poor law guardians, Catholics and more importantly, farmers, retailers and lesser professionals entered these bodies, representing a class as much as a denominational change in local administration.¹⁰¹ This resulted in more frequent challenges to the traditional holders of power and authority. In 1885 it was reported that at the annual election of the chairman of the Rathkeale Union ‘a very vigorous effort was made by the Nationalist party to oust Sir Stephen De Vere from the position, which he has occupied for many years.’¹⁰² De Vere retained his seat, but a Nationalist did succeed in replacing the sitting chairman in Limerick city.¹⁰³ With reference to the extension of local self-government, De Vere wrote:

It has been suggested that the best way to teach a people the right use of political power is by the extension of municipal responsibility. The argument is generally true, but it is not true as applied to Ireland in her present state. The experiment has been tried in Corporations, Boards of Guardian and other bodies and it has failed. You might as well propose to promote temperance by unlimited supplies of alcohol.¹⁰⁴

But the spread of mass education in both Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth-century had resulted in the creation of a literate and more politically aware population, unwilling to tolerate a government, at either local or national level, which was aristocratic and unrepresentative.¹⁰⁵

Unionist political clout in Limerick city had been dealt a blow with the unopposed return of Isaac Butt in the parliamentary election of 1871.¹⁰⁶ Home Rule candidates achieved and maintained election success throughout the country in the 1870s, with the exception of Unionist enclaves such as Dublin University, and the major towns in the northeast. Under Charles Stuart Parnell’s leadership of the Party, candidates in the 1885 general election no longer referred to themselves as Home Rulers, but as Nationalists.¹⁰⁷ Prior to the ‘Parnell’ and ‘anti-Parnellite’ split, two elections in Limerick city were uncontested, an indication of the demise of Unionism as a political force in Limerick.¹⁰⁸ By the early 1890s Home Rule candidates had

¹⁰¹ Crossman, *Local Government*, p. 1.

¹⁰² *Irish Examiner*, 2 Apr. 1885.

¹⁰³ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 02 Apr. 1885.

¹⁰⁴ De Vere, *A Letter to Monteagle*, p.11.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Potter, *The Government and the People of Limerick, the history of Limerick Corporation/City Council, 1197-2006* (Limerick, 2006), p.351.

¹⁰⁶ Brian M. Walker, (ed.) *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978), pp 280-300.

¹⁰⁷ Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, p.155.

¹⁰⁸ Moloney, *Limerick Constitutional Nationalism*, p.15.

gained control of sixty percent of the vote. The Parnell-related divisions among the Nationalists were seen by the Unionists as a potential avenue to regain some ground, the *Limerick Chronicle* stating that ‘the present opportunity is one that should not be let pass.’¹⁰⁹ But the death of Unionist hopeful, James Spaight, in January 1892 resulted in the Limerick city Unionists declining to contest the election.¹¹⁰

Although the introduction of elected county councils in England and Wales had been a relatively straightforward administrative measure, the existence of the Home Rule movement complicated matters in Ireland. The British government and supporters of the Union were reluctant to empower Irish local authorities, due to the concern that they would become dominated by militant Nationalists.¹¹¹ It was argued by the government that administrative reforms could not be introduced until law and order were restored. Accordingly, the chief secretary, Arthur Balfour, introduced coercion acts to end the ‘agrarian outrages’. Balfour finally announced on 10 August 1891 that local government legislation would be introduced in the next parliamentary session. De Vere was utterly opposed to any extension of local government in Ireland, he believed that even with the provision of safeguards, the bill would be detrimental to Irish society.¹¹² He wrote that ‘whether safeguarded or not’ the bill ‘would complete the social dislocation already unhappily existing and finally accomplish the separation of the classes’.¹¹³

Unionists and landlords predicted that the new authorities would not be loyal, and the Nationalists who gained control of them would use their power to drive them out of the country. De Vere believed that if county councils were established, the ‘old aristocracy’ and then the middle classes would become isolated from wider society, and lose their trust in the parliament of the United Kingdom.¹¹⁴ De Vere used similar terminology to argue against the introduction of stipendiary magistrates, since the existing system represented a bond and connection between members of the landlord class and members of the tenant class. Once again, his viewpoint was based solely upon his perception of a society which required guidance from members of the elite. De Vere claimed that the introduction of county councils would result in some

¹⁰⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 Jun. 1892.

¹¹⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1892. Moloney, *Limerick Constitutional Nationalism*, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Potter, *The Government and the People of Limerick*, p.352.

¹¹² *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Oct. 1891

¹¹³ De Vere, *Local Government in Ireland 1891*, pp 729-738.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

members of the elite and middle class taking refuge ‘amongst revolutionists, some amongst Orangemen’ and ‘some few will patiently submit to ostracism till better times come, and though abandoned, will not forsake their principles’.¹¹⁵ Although there was strong opposition to the proposed measure, Balfour made it clear that he intended to proceed. The split in the Irish Parliamentary Party encouraged Balfour to believe that the bill could be used to quash the demand for Home Rule and further splinter the Nationalist movement.¹¹⁶ The Unionist press called for a number of protective devices, such as minority representation or special franchise qualifications, to be put in place with regard to the proposed legislation.¹¹⁷

An indication of the anxiety which the proposed introduction of local government in Ireland engendered among both Irish and English unionists is shown in A.V. Dicey’s letter to Balfour.

The proposal to extend local government to Ireland on what is termed English lines seems to me in itself absurd. One thing is certain. The state of England is quite different from that of Ireland, and there is not the least presumption that an arrangement which succeeds in Birmingham will succeed say in Limerick. The extension of local government is absolutely inconsistent with the policy of strictly enforcing the law by means of so-called coercion.¹¹⁸

De Vere, for his part, was of the opinion that even if the functions of elective councils were confined to those which were at the time exercised by grand juries, they would still be ‘fatal to the best interests of Ireland’. He believed that not only would councils be a ‘focus of jobbery, reckless expenditure, and unscrupulous oratory’, but they would also serve to legitimise and extend the reach of the nationalist movement:

Those who inflame and pervert the minds of men will find a ready-made arena at their own doors, costing them nothing, in which each orator can air his eloquence, and his malevolence against the landlord, the law and the State, safely and profitably, not as a volunteer adventurer, as at present, but as a ‘chartered libertine’ the representative of a large constituency elected under the law. He will enjoy the double privilege of being dangerous to others and safe himself.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Shannon, ‘The Ulster Liberal Unionists and Local Government Reform,’ 18 (71): 407–423.

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, 21 Aug. 1891; *Spectator*, 15 Aug. 1891.

¹¹⁸ Dicey to Balfour, 29 April 1890 (B.M., MS 49792, f. 182) quoted in Catherine B. Shannon, “The Ulster Liberal Unionists and Local Government Reform, 1885-98.” *Irish Historical Studies* 18, no. 71 (1973): 407-23.

¹¹⁹ De Vere, *Local Government in Ireland 1891*, pp 729-738.

The debate on local government reform in Ireland – and Limerick – did not go unnoticed within the British press. The pro-reform *Shields Daily Gazette* in a response to De Vere's comments on Local Government, stated that 'these gentlemen who are denouncing any possible measure of Local Government reform are about to be disregarded now as they have been disregarded before. If they could only be brought to perceive the fact, they are themselves among the strongest possible illustrations of the necessity for Home Rule.'¹²⁰ De Vere, demonstrating either a lack of awareness or consideration regarding how his comments might be interpreted, posed the rhetorical question as to whether the men elected to the councils would possess the same qualities as those who currently served on grand juries, which he believed to include intelligence, experience, business acumen and 'known impartiality'. He clearly did not think that they would, as he stated that if any members of the 'upper and better-educated class' were elected, they would form a 'contemptible minority' who would 'soon release themselves from a position of humiliation'.¹²¹ De Vere's pamphlet also attracted the attention of *The Freeman's Journal*, which stated that 'Sir Stephen is an uncompromising opponent of any extension of Local Government, on the grand old crusted ground that any extension of the elective principle in Ireland must necessarily pave the way to Home Rule and separation.' The author of the piece admitted (a tribute to this senior public figure) that De Vere's arguments, although not convincing, were put forward with honesty and with ability, however, his position was 'one which only seem to be possible in the case of a man who had only just arisen from an uninterrupted slumber of twenty years or so.'¹²²

De Vere's commitment to preserving the *status quo*, especially in relation to the functions of the grand jury, is not surprising. The grand jury was an important body in rural Ireland, and although in practice it was composed of the larger landowners and ratepayers, not everybody who was entitled to attend to county administration did so. This resulted in a small group of men who were in possession of the time, inclination, and ability to do so, holding a great deal of power – and

¹²⁰ *Shields Daily Gazette*, 05 Nov. 1891.

¹²¹ De Vere, *Local Government in Ireland 1891*, pp.729-738.

¹²² *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Oct. 1891.

responsibility.¹²³ De Vere sought to protect the interests and position of men of his class and felt that the opening up of official bodies to the general population, and in particular those who supported Nationalist sentiments, would prove to be contrary to the interests of all members of society. De Vere asserted on a number of occasions that the extension of local government in Ireland would disrupt society and cause social friction and ‘intensify and perpetuate the feud between classes, which is the curse of the land’. He also declared that the Government sought to deprive [men of his class] ‘of their duties ... and so to complete the social disintegration of Ireland’.¹²⁴ De Vere clearly believed that members of the lower orders were fundamentally incapable of self-governing, and Irish society could not function properly without leadership provided by men of De Vere’s class. However, warnings such as those expressed by De Vere that the extension of self-government would result in the ‘complete the severance of classes’¹²⁵ is, of course, precisely what attracted most people to it.

The government of Ireland bill was introduced to parliament in 1892, the Unionists had succeeded in securing safeguards on their hold on local government. These included cumulative votes for voters who paid the highest level of cess; the entitlement that any ratepayer to challenge the council presentment before a judge and jury, the possibility of dismissing county and district councils for ‘disobedience to the law, corruption or consistent malversion and oppression’ and the introduction of a joint committee of councillors and grand jurors to approve all capital expenditure and appointment of officers.¹²⁶ The bill had been watered down in order to gain acceptance by Unionists and was restricted to county and district councils being elected on the parliamentary franchise, the limited transfer of grand jury powers (in relation to roads and sanitation) to the new councils, and the placing of decision-making with regard to local revenues and the setting of county cess being placed in the hands of the majority of ratepayers. Opposition came from all sides. Only a small number of Ulster Liberal Unionists supported the bill.¹²⁷ Irish Members

¹²³ J. P. D. Dunbabin, ‘British Local Government Reform: The Nineteenth Century and after’, *The English Historical Review* 92, no. 365 (October, 1977), pp 777-805.

¹²⁴ De Vere, *Local Government in Ireland 1891*, pp.729-738.

¹²⁵ De Vere, *Local Government in Ireland 1891*, pp.729-738.

¹²⁶ Alan O’Day, *Reactions to Irish Nationalism, 1865-1914* (London, 1987), p.358.

¹²⁷ Dunbabin, ‘British Local Government Reform’, *The English Historical Review* 92, no. 365 (1977), pp 777-805.

reacted to Balfour's bill with almost universal condemnation.¹²⁸ It was rejected by Nationalists who hoped that the imminent general election would result in the Liberal administration, who they felt were more amenable to the prospect of Home Rule, coming to power. The bill was accordingly abandoned.¹²⁹

In 1891, De Vere signed a petition of Catholic Unionists against the Home Rule Bill. The address which accompanied the petition acknowledged, but excused, the anti-Catholic sentiments which were expressed by their fellow Unionists, as being a result of 'the excitement of the moment'.¹³⁰ It stated that if home rule was 'imposed' on Ireland, it would 'foster a revolutionary spirit disastrous to the true interests of our religion.' The address concluded with an invitation to their fellow Roman Catholics to support the petition. Amongst the signatories of the petition were Daniel O'Connell of Derrynane, Lord Emly of Limerick and Count De La Poer, Waterford.¹³¹ The extent of De Vere's commitment to the cause was called into question in an article published in the *Evening Herald*. It was claimed that as De Vere had signed the petition, but then 'declined point blank' to take part in any of their meetings, he was offering a 'polite snub' to the Limerick Unionists.¹³² But there is no other obvious evidence to indicate that De Vere's support for the Union had diminished. He faced some criticism in the press for his decision to resign his position as Deputy Lieutenant of Limerick when Thomas O'Brien of South Hill was appointed as county lieutenant.¹³³ De Vere's resignation was reported in some outlets as being the result of the Government's decision to appoint 'a retired grocer and publican the lord-lieutenant of the county Limerick', obviously indicating that his reaction was based on issues of social class.¹³⁴ O'Brien replaced the deceased Lord Emly in the role of county lieutenant.¹³⁵ O'Brien who was described as a moderate Home Ruler was appointed by the Chief Secretary for Ireland, John Morley.¹³⁶ Other reports of De Vere's resignation pointed to O'Brien 'being in disfavour with the local Unionists' which may, in reality, have had a greater influence on De Vere's decision

¹²⁸ O'Day, *Reactions to Irish Nationalism*, p.358.

¹²⁹ Shannon, 'The Ulster Liberal Unionists and Local Government Reform', pp.407-23.

¹³⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Oct. 1891.

¹³¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Oct. 1891.

¹³² *Evening Herald*, 15 Apr. 1893.

¹³³ *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 22 Mar. 1894.

¹³⁴ *Reading Mercury*, 29 Dec. 1894.

¹³⁵ *Weekly Irish Times*, 15 Dec. 1894.

¹³⁶ *Dublin Daily Express*, 20 Jan. 1896.

to leave his position than had O'Brien's social background.¹³⁷ In any event, O'Brien appeared to be willing to co-operate for the purposes of the office with a Unionist. Sir Charles Burton Barrington was appointed as Deputy Lieutenant of the country, in place of De Vere. The appointment was reported to be remarkable as it was bestowed by a Nationalist on a Unionist.¹³⁸

De Vere's attitude to members of the Irish population who were not part of the landowning class seems to have changed dramatically between the early 1800s and the 1860s. As noted in Chapter Four, De Vere's conversion to Catholicism in the 1840s was motivated and inspired by the purity and innocence he believed to be exhibited by members of the lower orders.¹³⁹ By the late 1860s, in contrast, De Vere expressed a view of the labouring classes that was entirely negative. He alluded to their incapacity to govern themselves, and a propensity to violence that would ultimately result in the destruction of all manufacturing industry in the country.¹⁴⁰ This apparent about-turn in attitude actually evolved over a number of years, in parallel with the growing politicisation of Irish society. As a committed Unionist, De Vere appears to have been unable to even conceive of a scenario in which Irish society could function properly without the guidance and leadership offered by members of his class, which he feared would be entirely displaced if any element of home rule was introduced. De Vere stressed the importance of reform of some public bodies, rather than their abandonment. He was supportive of middle-class men being appointed to the bench, for example, as this meant that the body would still be preserved, and the elite could still exert some influence over it. The intention of members of the Liberal elite to assert legitimate leadership by addressing the grievances of the general population was not sufficient to quell the desire for greater autonomy and independence

¹³⁷ *Flag of Ireland*, 15 Dec. 1894.

¹³⁸ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 Feb. 1895.

¹³⁹ *Catholic Northwest Progress*, 28 Nov. 1902.

¹⁴⁰ De Vere, *A Letter to Monteagle*, p.4.

Chapter 7: The Private Man

Retirement to Monare

In 1859 De Vere moved to a house and farm on Monare, Foynes Island in county Limerick. The house was only accessible by boat. De Vere used a small boat, which he called Bluebell, on occasion to travel to Limerick city.¹ His Monare home was located just over eleven miles from the family seat of Curragh Chase and he continued to act as agent for his brother.² De Vere's decision to live in what was described as a 'cosy mansion'³ on a small island might suggest the early phase of what the press sometimes referred to as his reclusiveness.⁴ However, he stayed in close geographical proximity to the main members of his social circle and his immediate family members. He maintained his correspondence with others and as already discussed, continued to engage in public discourse.



Figure 11: De Vere's home, Monare, Foynes Island.

De Vere attributed his reason for retiring from the House of Commons to his poor health, he stated that if he had continued to serve as an M.P., 'the constant application of political duty would probably have been fatal to me', and he suffered

¹ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 23 April 1859, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5068.

² Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 30 October 1863, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5069.

³ *Dover Express*, 11 Aug. 1899.

⁴ *Wicklow People*, 16 Aug. 1902.

frequent re-occurrences of ‘unpleasant symptoms of the head and chest’.⁵ Yet he was active in public discourse for many years after his retirement, and he did live to the age of ninety-four, this suggests that he choose to give up his political career for another reason, but one can only speculate as to what that might have been, as no indication is provided in any of his papers that have been preserved. In general, De Vere’s diaries and letters suggest that he was of a contemplative disposition, and so this choice of home may have provided the solitude he required. Rev. Richard O’Kennedy, who had served as the Parish Priest of Fedamore in county Limerick,⁶ wrote of De Vere in 1910 that ‘his home was in the river he loved and there he asked for nothing more than his dog, his pipe and his book’.⁷

William O’Brien

De Vere does not note in his private papers if any members of household staff were resident with him in Monare. However, he does provide a detailed account of a young man who came to live with him. In 1863 De Vere made the first direct reference in his journal of a young man named William O’Brien.⁸ It was clearly a deeply important relationship to De Vere. While many of his diary entries were phrased in official, perfunctory and unsentimental language, when he wrote about O’Brien, the language used was descriptive, emotive and affectionate, he often referred to him as his son.⁹ Rebecca Steinitz has shown that ‘the diary was ubiquitous in nineteenth-century Britain’ and constituted a ‘uniquely effective vehicle for the dominant discourses of the century’, indicates that diarists were conscious of the possibility that their own diary might eventually be published.¹⁰ This suggests that De Vere’s feelings for O’Brien were sufficiently deep enough for him to be comfortable with an external audience being aware of the relationship. While the exact origins of how they first met, or formed a friendship are not revealed, it is clear that De Vere regarded O’Brien very warmly, and was concerned with his welfare.

De Vere’s diaries contain many references to acquaintances, employees and friends, but his relationship with O’Brien clearly held great significance for him. It

⁵ De Vere to Monsell, 11 June 1859, the Monsell Papers, NLI, MS 8317.

⁶ Fedamore parish, <http://limerickdioceseheritage.org/Fedamore.htm> [accessed: 10 April 2017].

⁷ *Wicklow People*, 19 Nov. 1910.

⁸ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 30 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

⁹ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 10 July 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

¹⁰ Rebecca Steinitz, *Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary* (New York, 2011), p. 2.

was a relationship which crossed social class boundaries, O'Brien was employed as a railway worker, and lived in 'miserable lodgings' in Limerick city.¹¹ De Vere also noted that O'Brien was prone to bouts of ill-health, and was not of a constitution suitable for heavy manual labour. On 10 July 1863 De Vere noted that he spent his day with O'Brien, who was recovering from an operation, during the days that followed, De Vere referred to the progress of his 'patient'.¹² Eventually, O'Brien went to stay with him in Monare, in order to aid his recuperation. De Vere regularly referred to 'nursing' or 'caring for his patients' while travelling through Canada in 1847. This may now seem to be quite feminine terminology for a man in the Victorian era to use, however an 1874 article in *Fraser's Magazine* noted 'in hospitals the first peculiarity to be noticed is, that women are employed to nurse both sexes; whereas in private families men nurses are frequently, if not generally, in attendance on men'.¹³ De Vere did not treat or refer to O'Brien as an employee or tenant, he instead wrote of his 'joy' as his 'son' came to share his home.¹⁴ De Vere was at that time forty-one years old, and O'Brien was twenty-four. In early August, De Vere wrote that the 'pure air had clearly worked wonders' for his 'dear patient'.¹⁵ When O'Brien had recovered sufficiently to return to his lodgings in Limerick city, De Vere was content that O'Brien's health had improved, but distraught at the prospect of his 'son' leaving him. As already mentioned, this was not a friendship between social equals. O'Brien seems to have had only received a rudimentary education, as De Vere noted that his reading and writing required attention and needed to be improved.¹⁶ De Vere did have a very strong interest in education and methods to improve to condition of the lower orders, so from that perspective, one can see how De Vere may have felt well placed to assist O'Brien.¹⁷ When O'Brien went to live with De Vere, he left his employment on the railway, and became financially dependent on De Vere, who paid for his medical treatment, and also assisted O'Brien's parents financially when necessary.¹⁸

¹¹ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

¹² Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 10 July 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

¹³ Quoted in Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara, 2009), p. 169.

¹⁴ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 11 August 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

¹⁷ Royal Commission on Nature and Extent of Instruction by Institutions in Ireland for Elementary or Primary Education, and Working of System of National Education (1868), p. 872.

¹⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5369.

In this section of De Vere's diary there is more self-disclosure than in previous entries. While the emotional management of diarists can vary widely, De Vere was typically restrained, but obviously in the case of his relationship with O'Brien, he was not overly conscious of safeguarding his privacy.¹⁹ During the time they lived together, De Vere wrote that the affection he bore for O'Brien 'is now no secret, nor ought I to be shamed of it. I ought indeed be proud of securing the esteem and faithful affection of one possessing the noble qualities which belong to W[ilia]m. He is indeed my son and one whom I will never disown or neglect'.²⁰ His use of language implies that the affection he held for O'Brien was at one time something he had felt the need to conceal, but no longer felt it necessary to do so. To implicitly state that he should not be ashamed indicates that he had at one time held reservations about the relationship. The reference to O'Brien's 'noble qualities' is reminiscent of the language he used to describe the young Irish men who influenced his decision to convert to Catholicism.²¹ De Vere's statement that he would never 'disown or neglect' O'Brien was later cemented by his decision to name O'Brien as his heir, and alter his will accordingly.²²

While it is not possible to gain an insight into the relationship from O'Brien's point of view, aside from friendship, he also clearly benefited financially. It may also have served as means of social advancement for O'Brien, as the other potential avenues during that era, gaining a university education or marriage to a member of a higher class, were most unlikely to have been available to him.²³ In the mid-nineteenth century Samuel Smiles wrote a popular text in which he claimed, there were no social barriers for those who were willing to apply the principles of 'self-help'. What some men are', wrote Smiles, 'all without difficulty might be'.²⁴ While this may have been the case for some, especially in industrialised countries, significant barriers to social mobility remained in Ireland.²⁵ Based on the evidence

¹⁹ Anne-Marie Millim, *The Victorian Diary: Authorship and Emotional Labour* (Burlington, 2013), p. 9.

²⁰ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

²¹ *Catholic Northwest Progress*, 28 Nov. 1902.

²² Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 September 1864, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

²³ Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (London, 1999), pp 7-12.

²⁴ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* quoted in Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (London. 1999), p.1.

²⁵ Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Social Mobility and Modernization: A Journal of Interdisciplinary History Reader* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 8.

available, it is not possible to ascertain if De Vere and O'Brien had a homosexual relationship or romantic friendship. Obviously, they were extremely close, their relationship was public and they shared a home. No pretence was used by alluding to O'Brien as a servant or employee: he was treated by De Vere as his heir apparent. The relationship also seemed to have been accepted by both families.²⁶ In her work on the representation of romantic friendships in Victorian literature, Oulton stated that 'romantic friendship, then, was regarded as separable from its more orthodox counterparts even at the time of its highest appeal' and De Vere's relationship with O'Brien.²⁷

O'Brien's parents were still alive during this period, and he had three siblings, two of whom had emigrated to America.²⁸ De Vere expressed some anxiety that O'Brien might one day also choose to emigrate. He explained that in his 'declining years' he wanted 'the daily help and subtle affection of one who is indeed a son to me.'²⁹ On one occasion, O'Brien considered emigrating with the rest of his family to join his brothers in America, De Vere privately expressed his devastation in his journal, but stated that he kept his thoughts to himself, and prayed to God that he would not be left without his friend and son.³⁰ De Vere occasionally gave the impression in his diary that he was sickly or frail, and so dependent on O'Brien for practical reasons. However De Vere's appearance in his sixties was described as 'middle-sized, somewhat stout, with the full beard between brown and grey.'³¹ One of his obituaries noted that his death was the result of 'the gradual wearing out of a frame strong and robust'.³² For De Vere, the relationship was not just based on the friendship and company he enjoyed at the time, it was also intrinsic in securing the future that De Vere hoped for. That is, to have O'Brien succeed him as his heir. De Vere also wrote that he 'longed for O'Brien to be settled', and that he often urged O'Brien to marry, as he longed to 'have his little children about my knees'.³³ In

²⁶ Stephen De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, August 31 1864, Limerick City Archive, De Vere papers, P22/395 (11); Thomas O'Brien to Stephen De Vere, TCD De Vere papers, September 24 1864, MS 5053/70.

²⁷ Carolyn W. De La L. Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (Hampshire, 2007), p. 147.

²⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated August 22 1864, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

²⁹ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

³⁰ De Vere, diary entry, dated 13 May 1864, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

³¹ *Wicklow People*, 19 Nov. 1910.

³² *Weekly Irish Times*, Nov. 19, 1904.

³³ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 September 1864, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

essence De Vere hoped that O'Brien would lead him to the domestic future that he had not created for himself through marriage, but clearly still desired. Based on De Vere's account of his life during this period, he seemed to have spent most of his time with O'Brien, in happy companionship. They spent time together on his farm, took out his boat and went swimming, they visited Curragh Chase together and went shooting.³⁴ De Vere also worked with O'Brien to improve his reading and writing. De Vere commented that O'Brien's constant study had resulted in such an improvement in his education that he would have been fit for the position he would fill at De Vere's death.³⁵ That is to say the position of landowner, for which one could expect to need at least some knowledge of law and agriculture. As well as the necessary manners and awareness of social etiquette.

Grief and Mourning

On Monday 29 August 1864, O'Brien complained of stomach pain, and as the day progressed his condition worsened dramatically. De Vere helped him to bed, and then sent for a doctor and later a priest. O'Brien received the last rites as the doctor was not hopeful of a recovery. De Vere spent the night by O'Brien's side. On Tuesday 30 August, De Vere sent for O'Brien's mother, but he passed away before she arrived.³⁶ De Vere recounted the deathbed scene in detail and wrote that he was heartbroken, as he now had no child. His journal entries from that time clearly reflect the sorrow and sense of desolation he felt at the loss of O'Brien. He sat with the body for two nights. He washed him, dressed him, and laid him out. He wrote that he wrapped O'Brien in his shroud and laid him in his coffin. He repeatedly wrote of his wish to feel the pressure of O'Brien's hand in his own once more.³⁷ On 1 September 1864, O'Brien's body was first taken by boat to Foynes, and then by train to Limerick where he was brought by hearse to Mount St Lawrence cemetery. He was buried with his father, also named William.³⁸

De Vere wrote that he immediately went to buy that grave in perpetuity, so as to prevent anyone else from being buried there without his permission. He reasoned that as O'Brien's mother and sister were about to immigrate to America, the next

³⁴ De Vere, diary entry, dated 08 January 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

³⁵ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 October 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

³⁶ De Vere, diary entry, dated 30 August 1864, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 September 1864, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

time the grave would be opened would be for his burial.³⁹ The question of where he would be buried, and who he would be buried with, had obviously occupied De Vere's mind for some time. In 1858 De Vere stated that he had obtained the 'fullest permission' from the relatives of his late friend, Dan Kirby, who had died in 1850, to be buried in Kirby's grave. De Vere wrote that Kirby had influenced his decision to convert to Catholicism.⁴⁰ So this may have been a factor in his desire to be buried with him. Members of the Kirby family had been employed by De Vere for many years, but such a close relationship between employer and employee does seem unusual. In 1873 De Vere related his surprise as one of his employees, John Kirby, who was possibly related to Dan Kirby, announced that he had determined to go to America. Kirby thanked De Vere for his 'kind and liberal treatment' of him, and said that De Vere had 'been a father and more to him', but nothing would dissuade him from going to America. De Vere paid Kirby £4 in wages owed, and provided him with £5 as a gift. De Vere wrote of his 'great sorrow' as Kirby left Monare, and stated that Kirby had promised to visit him to say good bye before he left the country. De Vere does not note in his diary if this visit ever took place.

Mourning Poetry

In the aftermath of Kirby's death, De Vere wrote a poem entitled "A Death-Bed". The poem is primarily concerned with representing a 'good' Christian death. De Vere presented an idealised version of the scene in which the dying man, 'gazing upward whispered low, The Saviour's name he loved so well'. De Vere wrote that his friend felt 'his Angel hover o'er him' and knew that the 'peace of God was in his heart'. The poem concludes with De Vere requesting a blessing from his friend 'He gave me from his heart of hearts, last, dearest gift, his dying blessing.' These themes of death, grief and 'the glory of a Christian death'⁴¹ frequently emerge in De Vere's poetry. The titles which deal directly with this subject matter include; *In death not divided*, *Death: a poem beginning 'On me he turned his dying eyes'* and *A Friend Long Dead*.⁴² The poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson, in particular, are noted for delving into the ways that people expressed grief. *In*

³⁹ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 September 1864, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

⁴⁰ De Vere, diary entry, dated 05 August 1858, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5068.

⁴¹ Stephen Edward De Vere, *Grave and Gay, Verses of Many Years* (Place of publication not specified, 1883).

⁴² Stephen De Vere, *A Friend Long Dead: A Poem Beginning "The Light of My Eyes Is Gone"*, *The Irish monthly*, Vol. X, pp 500-501, July, 1882.

Memoriam A.H.H. by Tennyson was completed in 1849, contains some of the most frequently quoted lines in poetry, 'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.' This requiem for the poet's beloved friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, became one of the most influential poems of the century.⁴³

De Vere eventually had the remains of William and his father moved to what he termed a 'properly constructed grave' which he bought in perpetuity. He had a headstone erected which identified it as 'the grave of Wm O'Brien of Monare, Foynes Island, who died Aug 20 1864, aged 25 years, and of his father by adoption ... who died ... aged. years, may they rest in peace and rise in glory together'.⁴⁴ In the correspondence between O'Brien's siblings and De Vere, they expressed their gratitude for the kindness he showed O'Brien during his life, and 'for the respect shown to his remains, such a noble act as you can never be repaid for'.⁴⁵ In an act which was presumably motivated by his affection for O'Brien, in 1867 De Vere donated £20 towards the construction of a mortuary chapel at the cemetery where O'Brien was buried, Mount St Lawrence.⁴⁶

In David Vincent's analysis of love and grief in working-class autobiography, he argued that death was not, in fact, the great leveller. The ways in which people experienced loss and grief were often affected by their economic circumstances. Vincent stated that for many people: 'The loss of a close relation was so bound up with the material problems of life that at worst it seemed no more than an intensification of the misery of existence'. He described 'pure grief' as a luxury which members of the working class, especially those in the grip of poverty, could ill afford. They were simply not in a position to abandon their work and focus on their loss.⁴⁷ De Vere's journal entries for nearly a year were almost entirely concerned with his grief. Although this pales in comparison to many of the other mourning diaries from that period. Those of Dr John William Springthorpe begin in 1897 with an account of the death of his beloved wife in childbirth. For the next fifteen years, he barely refers to any other topic in his diary. However, Springthorpe's personal

⁴³ John F. Genung, *Tennyson's In Memoriam: Its Purpose and Its Structure; a Study* (New York, 1970), p.5; Michael Y. Mason "In Memoriam": The Dramatization of Sorrow Victorian Poetry Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer, 1972), pp 161-177.

⁴⁴ De Vere, diary entry, dated 15 December 1858, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5059.

⁴⁵ Thomas O'Brien to Stephen De Vere, 24 September 1864, TCD De Vere papers, 1864, MS 5053/70.

⁴⁶ *Tipperary Vindicator*, 26 Mar. 1867. *Tipperary Vindicator*, 26 Dec. 1867

⁴⁷ David Vincent, 'Love and Death and the Nineteenth-Century Working Class', *Social History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May, 1980), pp 223-247.

grief did not interrupt his thriving public career.⁴⁸ It would seem that De Vere, at least temporarily, withdrew from society to some extent. Immediately after O'Brien's death, De Vere responded to a letter from his brother Aubrey. He thanked him for his two offers, of coming to see him and attending the funeral. But he stated that he did not want to see anyone, and he needed rest following the sudden loss of his son. De Vere stated that he did not want his brother to attend O'Brien's funeral, as circumstances had made them nearly strangers to one another, he wrote that it would have been a different matter had he known him 'well and intimately'.⁴⁹ De Vere does not explicitly state the reasons why O'Brien and his brother did not know each other well. They lived within relatively close proximity to each other, and De Vere and O'Brien had visited Curragh Chase on a number of occasions.⁵⁰

A month after O'Brien's death, De Vere refused the offer of £400 a year to act as agent for one of William Monsell's properties. He wrote that he was unfit to undertake important duties, and concluded the entry with the statement 'I have no son'.⁵¹ On St Stephen's Day of 1864, De Vere wrote that he went to Mount Trenchard 'to go to the children'. Monsell had a young son and daughter at that time.⁵² De Vere often took an interest in, and expressed concern, for children. One example of this was the instance in which he attended the funeral of a labourer. He later paid the man's eldest son, who also worked for him, his monthly wage of £1, but also gave him £4 to buy clothes for his younger brothers. He wrote that they seemed to him at the funeral to have been in need of them.⁵³ When on 28 December 1864 he attended a large party at Adare he wrote that he felt miserable, and 'utterly unfit for society'.⁵⁴ During this time his faith appears to have been a comfort to him. De Vere wrote that he kept rosary beads that O'Brien had given to him, and silently prayed for his son. He stated that if it was not for prayer, his life would be a misery, as prayer united him with the dead. He noted in his journal that while he attended mass on New Year's Day in Robertstown, thoughts of his lost child 'weighed down on his very soul'. He wrote that this feeling was increased by the sermon delivered

⁴⁸ Stephen Garton, 'The Scales of Suffering: Love, Death and Victorian Masculinity' *Social History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Jan., 2002), pp 40-58.

⁴⁹ Stephen De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, 31 August 1864, De Vere Papers, Limerick City Archive, P22/395 (11).

⁵⁰ De Vere, diary entry, dated 08 January 1863, TCD, De Vere papers, MS 5069.

⁵¹ Stephen De Vere, diary entry, dated 23 September 1864, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

⁵² Potter, *William Monsell*, p.172.

⁵³ De Vere, diary entry, dated 21 April 1873, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5070.

⁵⁴ De Vere, diary entry, dated 28 December 1864, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

by Father Hayes, which he believed alluded to William's death, 'in terms harsh and unfeeling'.⁵⁵ He does not give any further information, nor does he refer to this particular subject in his letters. But one could theorise that the priest perhaps objected to De Vere's public display of grief. De Vere wrote to his brother Aubrey that no one could understand his sorrow, as no one else knew O'Brien's deep affection and noble character. It would appear that De Vere discounted to some extent the relationships O'Brien might have had with his siblings and parents and took the role of chief mourner. De Vere's reaction to the death of O'Brien was more extreme than his usual response to loss. De Vere's younger brother, Horace, a major in the British army, was murdered by a junior officer in 1865⁵⁶. When De Vere recounted the event in his diary, his tone was factual, but sympathetic for his late brother's wife and children, whom he travelled to be with during their time of grief.⁵⁷

De Vere also recounted in his diary, in some detail, the illness and death of his friend Dan Kirby. From the evidence contained in De Vere's description of their friendship, they were very close. De Vere noted on 31 October 1850, that he took Kirby to be admitted to hospital for treatment, but only when it appeared that nothing more could be done for him, De Vere sent for Kirby to be brought to his house. De Vere wrote that by this time Kirby was very ill and extremely weak, and he hoped only to be of some comfort to his friend 'in his last illness'.⁵⁸ Over the following days and weeks, De Vere helped to care for his friend, sat through the night with him when necessary, read to him, and led prayers for him. On 20 November 1850, Kirby passed away. De Vere described his funeral as being 'large and respectable'. Kirby was buried at Castletown, in county Limerick, as with O'Brien, De Vere purchased the gravestone which marked his friend's burial place. De Vere wrote in his diary that the epitaph read 'pray for the soul of Daniel Kirby, who lived virtuously and died happily. Nov 20, 1850, aged 21 years. Amici Sonuim, Stephen De Vere, Eheu ultimum'. (Sound friends, Stephen De Vere, alas, the last).⁵⁹ De Vere demonstrated kindness and compassion for his friend, and he had obviously sympathy for him. But although Kirby's death later inspired a poem about loss and grief, his death, in as much as one can judge from the description provided by De Vere, did not have as

⁵⁵ De Vere, diary entry, dated 01 January 1865, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

⁵⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 21 Sept. 1865.

⁵⁷ De Vere, diary entry, dated 11 August 1865 December 1864, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5069.

⁵⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated 31 October 1850, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5068.

⁵⁹ De Vere, diary entry, dated 13 December 1850, TCD De Vere papers, MS 5068.

significant and lasting an impact as that of O'Brien. This could be taken to show that De Vere was not necessarily prone to overt displays of emotion in general, but one must also take into consideration that De Vere may not have had the same depth of feeling for Kirby, as he had for O'Brien.

It has been argued that Victorian society ritualised, classified and commodified death.⁶⁰ The cause for this perceived sense of fatalism and interest in death culture has been attributed to the high death rate of that era. Conversely, it has also been argued that the rate of morbidity actually declined, and as death became a less frequent occurrence, people's fascination grew.⁶¹ After O'Brien's death, De Vere engaged in some of the typical acts of Victorian mourning, such as using writing paper that had a black outline, which narrowed as the period of mourning progressed. He also purchased a locket to hold a piece of O'Brien's hair. In her study on Victorian secular relics, hair jewellery and death culture, Deborah Lutz wrote that nineteenth-century relic culture could be perceived as demonstrating a willingness to dwell in and with the moment of loss itself.⁶² De Vere wrote that he did not want to remove his sorrow. He wanted to make himself fit to bear it. Relic culture, and wearing hair jewellery in particular, became common practice starting around the middle of the eighteenth century. It had become such a craze from the 1850s to the 1880s that a busy industry flourished. Advertisements for designers in hair, hair artisans, and hairworkers ran in newspapers, and periodicals discussed the fad. Queen Victoria commissioned eight pieces of hair jewellery to be made from locks of her late husband's hair. Some of the pieces were to be worn by their children.⁶³

Old Age

De Vere certainly seemed to express genuine affection for O'Brien, and the sense of devastation he expressed in his journals at his death is palpable. Other than the Fr Hayes' condemnation, which might simply have been how De Vere, in his grief-stricken state, perceived it, there is no real evidence of any public comment or controversy regarding the relationship. The deaths of O'Brien and Kirby seem to

⁶⁰ Shane O'Shea, *Death and Design in Victorian Glasnevin* (Dublin, 2000), pp 8-9.

⁶¹ F. S. Schwarzbach and John Kucich, 'The Victorians and Death', *PMLA*, Vol. 95, No. 5 (Oct., 1980), pp 875-877

⁶² Deborah Lutz, 'The dead still among us: Victorian secular relics, hair jewellery, and death culture', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2011), pp 127-142

⁶³ Lutz, 'The dead still among us: Victorian secular relics, hair jewellery, and death culture', pp 127-142

have had an impact on De Vere's poetry. In the poem *Old Age*, De Vere wrote 'Old friends, alas! To stand beside their biers, sunk in an agony too deep for tears, still living, lingering, such the old man's fate.' If one were to base their assessment of De Vere's attitude towards aging on this poem, then it is obviously entirely negative. The idea that happiness would only be found once again in the after-life was clearly expressed. 'The weary watcher by a cherished grave, welcomes those glorious wings that bring him death'.⁶⁴

De Vere's motivation for maintaining the relationship appears to have been based, to a significant extent, on his desire to have an heir. De Vere and his brother Aubrey were once described as being 'long lived', but lacking 'the courage of matrimony'.⁶⁵ Although a life-long bachelor, he clearly had a desire to have a family, and felt that O'Brien's children, would be his grandchildren. He told his brother that had O'Brien survived him 'I should have treated him as a son. I always called him son, and he always called me father.'⁶⁶ One gains a sense that had De Vere a family and grandchildren around him, his older years might have been happier, and he might have had a greater sense of contentment. As it was, his focus seems to have been fixed firmly on the past, and on the grief he felt for loved ones who had passed on before him. De Vere's decision to appoint O'Brien to the role of heir, had circumstances been different, might have resulted in causing significant societal repercussions. It continued to be a controversial issue for the next generation. De Vere's eventual successor, his nephew, Robert Stephen Vere de Vere and his wife Isabel, adopted a daughter. It was considered to be acceptable for the landed gentry to adopt a girl, provided that the estate was entailed, as Curragh Chase was.⁶⁷

The diaries kept by De Vere reveal aspects of his character and demeanour which may not have become apparent through an examination of more public sources, but they end in June 1877. Other volumes are thought to exist, but they have not been made available to researchers. De Vere's letters provide a useful insight into his later life. Although he enjoyed a long life, in his eighties he began to refer to serious and lasting medical complaints. In 1895 he was involved in an accident, the

⁶⁴ De Vere, *Grave and Gay; Verses of many Years* (1883), p. 27.

⁶⁵ *Dover Express*, 11 Aug. 1899.

⁶⁶ Stephen De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, 31 August 1864, Limerick City Archive, De Vere papers, P22/395 (11).

⁶⁷ Joan De Vere, *In ruin reconciled: a memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959*, (Dublin, 1990), p. xiii.

physical repercussions of which still affected him a year later.⁶⁸ In 1898 he wrote to his nephew that his eyes were beginning to fail, and he no longer felt strong enough to walk about. De Vere referred to experiencing memory loss and intermittent deafness. He also noted his partial deafness in his census return for 1901⁶⁹ De Vere was occasionally referred to in the press as being a recluse.⁷⁰ There is some evidence that he gradually withdrew from society in later life, De Vere himself attributed this to his health troubles. In a letter to his grand-nephew, Robert O'Brien, whom he had named as heir, De Vere stated that his ailments did not make him unhappy at home, but would make him 'very uncomfortable abroad.'⁷¹ He also discussed leaving his club, as he did not know 'or want to know the few men I see there'. De Vere stated that when he did attend, no one there knew his name, or cared whether he was 'alive or dead'.⁷²

De Vere may have felt out of step with the current generation, having outlived so many of his friends, relations and acquaintances. Although he was less inclined to appear publicly in his later years, De Vere remained in close and frequent contact with his grand-nephew, who had trained as a barrister, and before his return to the family seat, had resided in London.⁷³ In the late 1880s De Vere attracted some attention for his translations of Horace, his work being described in one review as a fairly smooth version of 'O Diva, a gratum quae regis Antium' and in effect, doing 'about as much for Horace as a translator can.'⁷⁴ Another reviewer commented that the poems in the translation which read best were those written either in a regular stanza or in couplets. 'But it is thankless to carp at a man who has come nearer to accomplishing the impossible – an adequate rendering of the Odes – than anyone else'.⁷⁵ In his later years, De Vere appeared to have lived quite simply, in comparison to his contemporaries. The 1901 census records only one other occupant of his house, Patrick Walsh, who was a twenty-nine year old widower. He served as De Vere's coach driver and domestic servant.⁷⁶ It would seem that within his locality De Vere

⁶⁸ De Vere, diary entry, dated 23 June 1896, De Vere papers, TCD MS. 5054.

⁶⁹ Residents of a house 4.2 in Foynes Island (Ballynacragga North, Limerick), Census 1901.

⁷⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 08 Nov. 1890, *Dover Express*, 11 Aug. 1899

⁷¹ *North Devon Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1900.

⁷² Stephen De Vere to Robin De Vere, 04 January 1898, De Vere papers, TCD MS. 314.

⁷³ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Dec. 1898.

⁷⁴ *St James's Gazette*, 05 July 1886.

⁷⁵ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 July 1899.

⁷⁶ Residents of a house 4.2 in Foynes Island (Ballynacragga North, Limerick), Census 1901.

continued to be well regarded, and enjoyed a considerable degree of affection and respect from his neighbours. It was recalled in an article published soon after his death, that when De Vere travelled to the village of Foynes to attend mass, ‘the elders come and lift their hats and pass on and Sir Stephen answers with a friendly smile. Or he calls one of them, and the newcomer drops into the group and they talk about the weather, the crops, the fishing, the potatoes or any other thing that concerns the people generally.’⁷⁷ On his eighty-sixth birthday a deputation of people from Foynes visited De Vere at his residence on Foynes Island and presented him with an address of congratulation. De Vere was described in a report of the event as an eminent litterateur. A newspaper account of the scene referred to De Vere’s character as being one of almost saintly simplicity.⁷⁸

The address which was presented to De Vere by Mr Madden, a school teacher in the village of Foynes, contained references to De Vere’s work as a governor of the Limerick lunatic asylum and his involvement in raising funds for the village church. There were references to his modesty and humility, ‘he writes his name not on a stone, nor asks a marble bust, he seeks God’s holy gifts alone’. His generosity was noted, and it was claimed that his tenants were spared rack-rents and evictions. It is very likely that there was a degree of exaggeration in this document, but it still reflects the positive opinion in which De Vere was held. De Vere’s ninetieth birthday was also marked by an address from representatives of ‘the farming class, to remind the aged recluse that the humanitarian work performed by him for over sixty years of his life has not been forgotten’. De Vere responded to the address by letter, he wrote, ‘My dear friends, the previous condition of my health deprives me of the power of saying more than a few words in reply to your address. I must however, whilst expressing my warm and grateful thanks record my fear that you have much overestimated my small attempts to be of any use. We are all bound to remember that nothing is our own, and to think the suffering poor are always with us’.⁷⁹

Death

If one were only to undertake a cursory examination of De Vere’s diaries and letters, it would quickly become apparent that for many years he was preoccupied

⁷⁷ *Wicklow People*, 19 Nov. 1910.

⁷⁸ *Flag of Ireland*, 06 Aug. 1898.

⁷⁹ *Wicklow People*, 16 Aug. 1902.

with his health, and what he feared would be his imminent death. As Rev. O’Kennedy, the former Parish Priest of Fedamore in county Limerick,⁸⁰ wrote, ‘for a long time, for years, Sir Stephen felt that the end was approaching.’⁸¹ O’Kennedy also noted that De Vere’s final will included a stipulation that he be buried beside the church in Foynes village, and that his funeral be as ‘inexpensive as possible’. De Vere also requested that he was buried in a plain coffin, without any inscriptions, other than his name and age and birth and death, and that no monument should be erected other than a plain horizontal slab. O’Kennedy also mentioned that De Vere included the proviso that if it were not possible for him to be buried at his chosen location, he wished to be buried in the new graveyard of Knockpatrick, which was three miles from Foynes. De Vere specifically requested that he should not be interred in the family vault at Askeaton.⁸² De Vere does not provide a reason why he was opposed to being buried with his family, if it was on religious grounds, it suggests that he was more extreme in his views than his brothers, who did not object to being buried in Askeaton.

De Vere died on 10 November 1904 at his residence in Monare. It was reported that he died after a long illness, but ‘illness it could hardly be called, for it was the gradual wearing out of a frame strong and robust, which made Sir Stephen a busy man in public affairs when most others would have to give way’. At the time of his death Sir Stephen was called the ‘Father of the Irish Bar’.⁸³ A report in an English newspaper on De Vere’s death noted that ‘there dies not only one who was almost, but not quite the doyen of the baronetage, but the baronetcy of De Vere dies as well.’⁸⁴ De Vere’s requests regarding his final resting place were adhered to. One report of his funeral noted that during his requiem mass his coffin was covered with wreaths and wildflowers. The inclusion of wildflowers may suggest that they were provided by poorer members of the locality, whom De Vere had closely interacted with over the years. Flanagan, who had been the parish priest of Adare, was described as ‘a lifelong friend of the deceased’, officiated during the mass, assisted by four other priests from adjoining parishes.⁸⁵ De Vere’s brother Aubrey who had

⁸⁰ Fedamore parish, <http://limerickdiocesheritage.org/Fedamore.htm> [accessed: 10 Apr. 2017].

⁸¹ *Wicklow People*, 19 Nov. 1910.

⁸² *Wicklow People*, 19 Nov. 1910.

⁸³ *Weekly Irish Times*, Nov. 19, 1904.

⁸⁴ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 11 Nov. 1904.

⁸⁵ *The Irish Times*, 14 Nov. 1904. These priests were Rev. J. Fitzgerald of Adare, Rev. M. McCarthy of Donaghmore, Rev. J. Conway of Shanagolden, and Rev. J. O’Gorman, also of Shanagolden.

died in 1902 was, unlike De Vere, buried in the family vault in Askeaton Protestant cemetery.⁸⁶ It was reported that De Vere was unable to attend his brother's funeral due to his own ill-health, it was also noted that the day of his funeral was a particularly cold and inclement. The *Weekly Irish Times* noted that there was 'much sympathy evinced for the venerable gentleman in the circumstances'.⁸⁷ De Vere's eldest brother, Vere Edmond, was also buried at Askeaton. Vere Edmond appeared to have shared De Vere's emphasis on privacy, he specified that his funeral mass be held at eight o'clock in the morning, as he wished for the funeral to be as private as possible. Fr Flanagan also officiated at his funeral mass.⁸⁸

Given De Vere's preoccupation with his final resting place, and the importance he seemed to place on his relationships with Kirby and O'Brien, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that he eventually chose to be buried alone. De Vere's specification that he not be interred in the family vault in Askeaton may be related to the fact that it was in a Protestant cemetery; however, this did not seem to be a concern of his brother Aubrey or Vere, who were both also converts to Catholicism. There does not appear to have been any severing of relationships within the family since Aubrey bequeathed his estate to De Vere, and De Vere in turn to his grand-nephew.⁸⁹ De Vere's eventual choice of burial place may simply have been a result a deeply felt connection to the village of Foynes, and the church which he had helped to establish there. During his later years, De Vere was deeply involved in the church in Foynes village, which he was instrumental in establishing. It was reported that he assisted 'in this little church' during Mass 'as unobtrusively as the humblest poor man entering the sacred doors'. He attended services with 'the island-men' who 'pushed their boats into the water and crossed to the beautiful little temple of worship,' and the local residents, drawn from the village itself, and the encircling hills. De Vere's humility was said to have been evidenced by the fact that he did not travel to mass in a carriage, and he was not accompanied by liveried servants, coachmen or footmen. 'Instead, he stood happily with the first group of men, old or young that he meets.'⁹⁰ De Vere's decision to forego any monument other than a modest marker could be seen as a reflection of this sense of modesty and humility. In

⁸⁶ *The Irish Times*, 23 Jan. 1902.

⁸⁷ *Weekly Irish Times*, 01 Feb. 1902.

⁸⁸ *Irish Times*, 30 Sept. 1880.

⁸⁹ *London Daily News*, 28 March 1902; *Weekly Irish Times*, Nov. 19, 1904.

⁹⁰ *Wicklow People*, 19 Nov. 1910.

opting not to be buried with those men in his life who were not blood relations, De Vere may have, upon later reflection, opted to avoid raising questions over his relationship with either man.



Figure 12: Exterior of St. Senan's Church, Foynes, Co. Limerick.

There is no doubt that religion played an important part in De Vere's life. It impacted on his political and public experience and activities, but in the context of his private life, it served as a source of consolation in the face of grief, especially in the form of private prayer in the aftermath of William O'Brien's death. However, De Vere did not restrict his mourning to exclusively private practices, he also had a headstone erected to mark the grave of O'Brien, which named him as his adopted son. With regard to his reaction to Kirby's death, he published a poem which clearly reflected his thoughts and emotions on the matter. The church which he helped to establish in his community could be considered to be representative of De Vere's devotion to his religious faith. In his later years in particular, he appeared to find comfort both in his local church in particular, and in being part of a small community in general. Contributing as he did to church services on a regular basis, and having interactions with the residents of his locality, it is unlikely that he was a recluse in the true meaning of the word. However, as he entered the later stage of his life, he did seem to desire and enjoy a simple life, which was not focused on the typical social pursuits and engagements of his class.

Conclusion

For those who have an awareness of Stephen De Vere as a historical figure, he is generally associated with drawing attention to the plight of emigrants during the Famine. While indeed his efforts during that time were brave, and noteworthy, he is also a complex and at times contradictory figure, who was connected with a variety of public institutional bodies and philanthropic efforts throughout the nineteenth-century. It could be argued that De Vere was as much a product of his time, as of his class. The existence of a group of like-minded men in his immediate locality, The Shannon Estuary Group, was a significant factor in developing his political and

religious outlook. These men, members of the elite, viewed leadership as a duty of their class. For De Vere, this sense of duty came to the fore during the Famine era. In the later years of De Vere's life, he clung resolutely to the notion that Irish society could only function effectively with the leadership provided by members of the elite landowning class. His publicly voiced objections to the introduction of any form of local government saw him face criticism in the press on the basis that his views belonged to a bygone age.

It is difficult to discuss De Vere, especially in relation to his earlier years, without reference to his family, and their estate Curragh Chase. Social, financial and professional considerations meant that De Vere maintained a strong connection to both his family and the estate. As noted, his sense of duty was inspired to some degree by his association with the Shannon Estuary Group, but it is also likely to have been a result of the example set by the men in his family, especially those noted in this study, his father, grandfather and older brother, all of whom fulfilled leadership roles in society, albeit, with quite different approaches. Their example, and also by the broader perception during the early nineteenth-century of what the duties of his gender and class entailed, De Vere took an active role in local governance, and sought to provide leadership in his community. His sense of noblesse oblige was mirrored by other members of the Shannon Estuary Group. It is difficult to determine if De Vere's life would have taken a different path if he had not had the influence of and interaction with members of this group. Monsell, in particular, seems to have had a substantial role in encouraging De Vere to pursue a political career. His encouragement was based upon his belief that De Vere was able and intelligent (thought of course they also shared similar political agendas).

The big house in which De Vere was born was presumably, like similar structures, designed to separate the family from the community in the surrounding locality, and demonstrate their wealth and power. On a personal level, De Vere seems to have sought a greater connection to the people of his locality, it was, as noted, one of the primary factors in his decision to become a Catholic, but in a broader political context, De Vere believed that there was a necessity for members of his class to maintain authority at the top level of society, and for those at other lower levels to accept their guidance. For De Vere leadership was not a distant, autocratic manner of demonstrating power, he made genuine efforts, most significantly during

the Famine era, to provide some measure of relief to those affected by the distress, and advocate on their behalf to the official authorities. This was acknowledged by his those in his locality, who expressed the warmest regards towards him. His decision to travel to Canada was a source of great distress amongst the labourers on the Board of Works scheme he supervised, and the population of the barony in which he was resident. This distress was based upon a general contention that in De Vere they had a leader, protector and benefactor. It was acknowledged that he showed concern and provided assistance for society's weakest members.

That is not to say that De Vere was at all times purely motivated by altruistic concerns. At a later stage in his life, during the 1870s, De Vere's efforts to lead the charge against the Lunatic Asylum Inspectorate, ostensibly on the basis of seeking justice for an asylum inmate who was unlawfully killed, was widely acknowledged to have been driven instead by a desire to prevent medical men being imbued with greater power than the members of his class who sat on the Board of Governors. De Vere essentially viewed leadership as the preserve of educated members of the elite. For educated men of the middle class, such as the medical men represented by the Asylum's Inspectorate, De Vere, and his contemporaries, wholly objected to any suggestion that they could or should, hold and exert a greater degree of power and authority the aristocratic members of the Board of Governors.

De Vere occasionally responded in ways that one might not expect. He did not express anger towards the Government regarding the catastrophes he witnessed during the Famine, but he became openly hostile to the British administration in the wake of the Ecclesiastical Titles crisis. During the Famine, De Vere was strongly of the belief that a combined effort, including all classes of society, and the Government, was necessary to alleviate and prevent future distress. To this end, he worked with the Government, by investigating the system of emigration, and making detailed suggestions on the subject. De Vere was not drawn to the Repeal movement, or to the extreme action taken by his friend William Smith O'Brien. Nor did the ineffectual response of the Government engender anti-English sentiment to any great degree in De Vere, as it did in Monsell. The reaction of De Vere to the 1848 rebellion was of disappointment that his respected friend, Smith O'Brien allowed himself to become involved in such an enterprise of folly. De Vere attributed the Famine to providence, but he reasoned, in 1847, it would eventually result in the

emergence of a superior and more stable society. In 1852 De Vere appeared to concede that this had not in fact been the case. Instead he considered Irish society to have been weakened. It was during this time that De Vere expressed anti-English sentiment, although it may also be interpreted to some degree as an anti-Government position. He compared the actions of the British Government with regard to the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill, as similar to the treatment endured by the first Christians.

De Vere's career as an M.P. (1854-1859) was characterised to a significant extent by a defence of Catholicism. He also spoke on the subject of tenant right, but as previously noted, he remained resolutely committed to maintaining the Union with Britain. Although he advocated for tenant right as a Member of Parliament, he did so on the basis that members of the labouring class should be afforded more rights within the political system as it stood, he had no desire for sweeping changes to the status quo. This attitude was also evident in his defence of the grand jury system. His Liberal attitude as a magistrate saw him be credited with the title, 'the poor man's magistrate'. While there is evidence to suggest that De Vere was a conscientious member of the grand jury, the system was widely viewed as being unfair, dominated as it was by members of the Protestant elite. De Vere did not occur with this assessment. He contended that although there had been deficiencies in the administration of justice in Ireland in the past, by the 1860s, the majority of people in Ireland were satisfied with the grand jury system, as it stood at that time. He did not provide any evidence to support that assertion. De Vere's insistence on the maintenance of a system which had for decades been viewed with suspicion by some, and hostility by others is unlikely to have been based on a genuine lack of awareness regarding the widespread perception of the system. De Vere acknowledged that the system was in need of some reform, but continually asserted that it was a necessary body in Irish society.

Conversely, De Vere was also a supporter of the national school system, arguably a source of modernisation and a potential avenue of social advancement in Irish society. Based upon his long involvement in the provision of education in his locality, and his detailed discussions with contemporaries on the subject, it is clear that De Vere had a passionate interest in education. De Vere's views on the national school system appear to have been based on a genuine, altruistic concerns. He felt that through education people could develop a path to a different life, he also so it as

a source of developing ones morality. De Vere's interest in education was also based on practical experienced. As noted in Chapter Five, he assisted with the instruction of children in the national school in his district. As an agent in the pre-Famine period there is little evidence in newspapers or Outrage Reports that there was a significant level of antagonism directed towards him. However, there are sources which suggest that the efforts he made within his locality to provide education, justice and relief in times of distress were acknowledged and appreciated.

De Vere's recommendations with regard to the delivery of education in the national school system were based to a large extent on practical considerations, but were also influenced by a desire to promote the moral development of the labouring class. For example, he gave legitimate reasons as to why teachers should be provided with accommodation adjacent to the schools they taught in, but added that in being resident in the community they worked in, they would need to be more conscious of their behaviour, and so could serve as a positive example to others. De Vere's views on the Irish language were also essentially based on practical concerns. He was opposed to the use of Irish as the language of instruction in the national school system, essentially as he saw it as being a language in decline, and presumably also reasoned that many of the students in the system may eventually emigrate, and English would serve them better abroad. Yet, he was not dismissive or critical of the language, he didn't view it as being backward or inconsequential. De Vere showed a level of respect for the language, and saw the necessity of putting measures in place to preserve it.

De Vere's approval of the national school system in particular was due to its status as a non-denominational body. As a dedicated Catholic, who on a number of occasions expressed the belief that Catholics should seek to draw others to their faith, De Vere nonetheless, considered it to be a matter of great importance that education and religion were separate, and in particular that the national school system did not come under the control of the Catholic clergy. This was one of the main points of dispute between De Vere and Monsell. While De Vere was concerned about the Catholic clergy gaining control and influence over a publicly funded system, Monsell agreed with the Catholic Church's teaching on education at that time, which stipulated that education should be the exclusive preserve of the Church. De Vere's

stance that the co-education of different religious groups would result in greater societal harmony could be considered to be enlightened and modern.

De Vere and Monsell's friendship was not damaged by their disagreement on this matter. Friendship was important to De Vere, and possibly took on an additional significance in his life as he was unmarried. De Vere's interactions with men such as Dunraven and Monsell provided an avenue of intellectual engagement, while De Vere's relationship with William O'Brien held an additional significance. In O'Brien, De Vere felt he had found his heir. For a man who viewed social class and education as being amongst the most important elements in determining one's ability to hold authority, it is interesting that he chose O'Brien, who shared none of the privileges of De Vere's birth right, to succeed him. While it is the case that De Vere interacted with the Catholic poor to a greater extent than might have been expected of a man of his class, to decide to name a young man, to whom he had no familial connection, as his heir, held a significance that De Vere must have been aware of. He must surely have also realised that his decision might attract public commentary, but the depth of his affection for O'Brien must have been such, that he was willing to overlook such matters. The loss of O'Brien clearly affected De Vere deeply, his diary entries relating to that period of his life do not attempt to conceal his grief. It is noteworthy that he chose to include the description of his grief in his diaries, as he is likely to have been aware, or have written his diaries with the intent, that they may eventually become the basis of a study on his life.

One of the most interesting aspects of studying De Vere's life is the change in his attitude towards his fellow countrymen from the 1840s to the 1860s. While it is undoubtedly completely natural to experience a divergence of views as one ages, and undergoes different life experiences, the alteration in De Vere's attitude seems extreme. In the 1840s De Vere's conversion to Catholicism was based on the 'purity' he saw in the members of the lower orders.⁹¹ He attributed many of the positive attributes he recognised in that class to their religion, as, he reasoned, they had not benefited from education or travel. While Monsell and De Vere's younger brother Aubrey came to convert to Catholicism through the Tractarian movement, De Vere's conversion was based on admiration and a desire for a greater connection to the labouring class. His declarations that he went among the labouring class, and had an

⁹¹ *Catholic Northwest Progress*, 28 Nov. 1902.

understanding of them, were not merely rhetoric. There is evidence to suggest that he closely engaged with many members of this class.⁹² However, that is not to suggest he actually had a deep or accurate understanding of what such people were motivated by, what their opinions were. While he acted as a teacher in a local school and had daily contact with members of the labouring class, one must presume that the people of the locality, who were entirely aware of De Vere's social status, may have altered their behaviour and manner to some degree in his presence. This alteration may have been based on entirely innocent motives, such as a desire to demonstrate respect for a man who at that time is likely to have been characterised as their social better. However, it still has the effect of presenting De Vere with a slightly more idealised view of this sector of society.

As became ever more apparent in the late nineteenth-century, De Vere was of the strongly held belief that the wider Irish Catholic populace were incapable of self-governance. De Vere's response to calls for greater levels of self-governance seemed to be inspired not merely by opposition on a political basis, but almost on a personal sense of betrayal. The people who inspired his conversion to Catholicism, and to whom he, and fellow members of his class had provided guidance (to his mind in any case) for many decades, began to call for greater autonomy. The previously benign paternalism exhibited by De Vere was replaced by efforts to castigate those who sought to alter the state of society, and render the role of the elite in society redundant. De Vere found it easier to reconcile his support for William Smith-O'Brien in the aftermath of rebellion, than he did for the wider Irish populace, whom he had once referred to as being 'entwined in his heartstrings,' call for greater autonomy.⁹³ While the *Freeman's Journal* referred to the opinions expressed by De Vere on the subject of local governance to have been those formed by a man who had been asleep for twenty years,⁹⁴ as this thesis shows, he had in fact been active in society in many regards. His opinions were not derived from a lack of experience or information, but rather an unwillingness to accept a changing society.

De Vere's final years, spent in the village of Foynes, seem from one perspective to have been relatively content, but there is also evidence to suggest that he experienced a sense of alienation from general society. Having outlived so many

⁹² *Limerick Reporter*, 02 Apr. 1847.

⁹³ S.E. De Vere to Aubrey De Vere, 14 May 1848, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053, 1-10.

⁹⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Oct. 1891.

of his peers, and being witness to the decline of the elite in Ireland, he may have found it difficult to accept the modern state of society. Yet within his locality, there is evidence to suggest that he remained well respected. For example, the annual celebrations and processions to his home on his birthday demonstrated the respect and affection held for him by the people of Foynes. His involvement in the local church appeared to provide him with a sense of purpose in his later years, and as noted, he was so deeply attached to it that he chose to be buried beside it, rather than with the other members of his family. While De Vere had been concerned with his health for many years, death, when it came, was attributed to old age. One gains the sense from studying De Vere's private writings that legacy was important to him. While he may have objected to having a monument erected in his honour, in a prominent location in Foynes village, he is likely to have appreciated the sentiment of the inscription, which reads; 'This fountain is erected in grateful recognition of the numerous benefits conferred on his native country on the poor and on this neighbourhood by Sir Stephen Edward De Vere Bart, statesman, philanthropist, poet, through whose generous aid and zealous co-operation in conjunction with contributions from others the Catholic Church of Foynes was built. Died 10 November 1904 Aged 92 Years'.⁹⁵

Epilogue

In 1898 De Vere and his only surviving brother, Aubrey, conveyed their respective estates to their eldest nephew, Major Aubrey Vere O'Brien, who was born to their sister, Elinor, in 1837. The male line of Irish de Vere's expired on Sir Stephen's death in 1904. Curragh Chase then passed to the widow of Major Aubrey Vere O'Brien, and their only son, Robert (Robin) Stephen O'Brien. In anticipation of this they assumed by Royal licence in 1899 the surname and arms of De Vere.⁹⁶ On 26

⁹⁵ Sir Stephen Edward De Vere Memorial - Foynes, County Limerick, Ireland.

⁹⁶ *Weekly Irish Times*, 19 Nov. 1904

September 1906, Robin married Isabel Catherine Moule, daughter of the Bishop of Durham.⁹⁷

In 1898 De Vere wrote to his grand-nephew, Robin, on the subject of landlordism and estate ownership, 'You must remember that I have always looked upon my incumbency as an honourable trust for those who succeed me, and I have always considered it to be my first duty.'⁹⁸ As previously noted, the issue of who would succeed De Vere was one which weighed heavily on him. De Vere's letter to Robin continued, 'I feel that it is my duty as honourable trustee to put myself last and I cannot commit to receive anything from the property until after every other charge has been paid in full or as fully as the earth will supply the means.'⁹⁹ In expressing his own personal views on the role of landowners, De Vere appears to also seek to guide and influence the attitude Robin might have toward the role. Presumably, he was satisfied with his grandnephew's actions in this regard, as he wrote to him in 1893, that 'the tenants are poor, and in any other hands would have been ruined,' he concluded, 'I can say no more, than you have served the estate'.¹⁰⁰ Robin fought in both the Boer War in 1900 and in the First World War. He was a practising barrister, and like De Vere, held the office of Justice of the Peace. He held the office of Chief Justice of Seychelles between 1928 and 1931, and was appointed to the office of Chief Justice of Grenada in 1931. Robin Stephen Vere de Vere died in 1936, he was buried in Bow Cemetery, Durham, in the same plot of ground as his father-in-law, Bishop Moule.¹⁰¹ He was survived by his wife Isabel, who was chiefly resident in Curragh Chase house until its destruction by fire in 1941.¹⁰²

Curragh Chase House was destroyed by fire on Christmas Eve in 1941. Only three people were resident at the time, Isabel De Vere and two maids. The fire was tackled by neighbours, estate employees and the fire brigade, however, it quickly became apparent that nothing could be done to save the building, as it was found that there was no water supply available except the pipe-line in the house which had already been cut off. The fire brigade directed their efforts to salvaging what articles of furniture could be removed with safety from the ground floors. It was reported that

⁹⁷ *Irish Times*, 28 Sept. 1906.

⁹⁸ S.E. De Vere to Robin De Vere, 22 Mar 1889, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053 (235).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ S.E. De Vere to Robin De Vere, 9 Nov. 1893, De Vere papers, TCD, MS 5053 (269).

¹⁰¹ *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 19 Sept. 1936.

¹⁰² *Weekly Irish Times*, 1 Nov. 1941.

‘priceless art treasures and many antiques and articles of historic value were among the valuables lost in the conflagration.’¹⁰³ Isabel De Vere, who had been actively involved in various charitable endeavours, was said to have been very popular in the locality, it was reported that ‘thousands visited the scene to express they sympathy with Mrs De Vere who is held in very high esteem and is loved and respected by all who have the pleasure of her acquaintance. Despite the fact that the mansion has been destroyed the loss having cast a gloom in the district everybody in the locality and surrounding area is very pleased that Mrs De Vere and employees escaped unharmed.’¹⁰⁴ It was reported thanks to her maid, Maureen Ryan, that De Vere did survive the fire, as Ryan rescued her as she attempted to retrieve a portrait of Aubrey De Vere and some other valuables, but was overcome by the smoke.¹⁰⁵ Isabel died in 1959 and was buried in St Nicholas Old Graveyard, Adare, Limerick. Curragh Chase was never restored to a habitable condition, and in 1957, the estate was purchased by the state and is now used as a forest park and activity centre.¹⁰⁶

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¹⁰³ *Limerick Leader*, 27 Dec. 1941.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

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