

## Rice, Thomas Spring

by Bridget Hourican

Rice, Thomas Spring (1790–1866), 1st Baron Monteagle, politician, was born 8 February 1790 in Limerick, only son of Stephen Edward Rice (d. 1831), lawyer and landowner of Mount Trenchard, Co. Limerick, and his wife Catherine, heiress of Thomas Spring of Castlemaine, Co. Kerry. Stephen Edward Rice had 5,500 acres in Limerick as well as property in London, Dublin, and Kildare. His wife brought him a dowry of £50,000. Thomas matriculated (1809) at Trinity College, Cambridge, but did not graduate, though he received an honorary MA in 1833. He was admitted to Lincoln's Inn on 6 May 1817 but was never called to the bar. His ambitions were always political and these were helped by his marriage (11 July 1811), at the age of 21, to the well connected Lady Theodosia Pery (1787–1839), daughter of the 1st earl of Limerick (qv). He first drew attention to himself in 1816 when he published a pamphlet censuring abuses of the grand jury system; three years later he led an inquiry into the alleged ill-treatment of inmates in Limerick lunatic asylum. It was as a reforming liberal that he contested the Limerick city seat in 1820 and was defeated by the conservative Maj. John Prendergast Vereker. On petition to parliament all the votes of the non-resident freemen were disallowed and Spring Rice was elected and held the seat till 1832. This was the breaking of the long stranglehold of the Smith–Vereker interest, and the Limerick citizens responded exultantly. Spring Rice was met by a town procession; his portrait was painted by Sir Martin Arthur Shee (qv) and still hangs in the Limerick chamber of commerce, and a statue was erected of him in Pery Square, which still looks down on the People's Park.

Spring Rice was initially equal to the extravagant hopes for him. Daniel O'Connell (qv) recruited him to the emancipation movement; as a protestant landowner, he was a valuable asset. In a pamphlet, *Catholic emancipation considered on protestant principles*, he argued that security of person and property in Ireland depended on the measure. With his patron Lord Lansdowne (1780–1863) appointed home secretary in Canning's government, Spring Rice was made under-secretary for the home department (16 July 1827). His appointment was regarded as a pledge of commitment to Irish reform. After the duke of Wellington (qv) became prime minister, he quitted office in January 1828 to return three years later as secretary to the treasury (November 1830–June 1834) in Lord Grey's administration. Emancipation was the extent of Spring Rice's commitment to Irish reform, and during his second tenure in office he emerged as one of O'Connell's most vociferous opponents. He lost his Limerick seat in the 1832 election and was immediately returned for Cambridge, which seat he held till his elevation to the peerage in 1839. His defection to England did nothing to endear him to his former Limerick supporters. In the repeal debate of 22 April 1834 O'Connell spoke for five hours but Spring Rice for a little more. He argued that Ireland had prospered under free trade and the union, that the Irish parliament had been corrupt, and that repeal would mean separation within a

year. He referred to himself as a West Briton, and may have coined this phrase. His argument was backed up by an inordinate number of statistics, leading O'Connell to write dismissively that Spring Rice 'figures Ireland into prosperity' (*O'Connell corr.*, v, 128). During Lord Melbourne's (qv) brief first ministry he was secretary of state for the colonies (July–November 1834). On the opening of parliament (February 1835) the question of the speakership arose: Spring Rice had long coveted this position but his affability, which had originally endeared him to colleagues, had become a source of irritation; his manners were ingratiating, and his speeches too long and too boring. The speakership therefore went to James Abercromby, candidate of O'Connell and the radical whigs. Two months later with the tories again ejected, Spring Rice said that he could not join a government that depended on the radicals, but was finally prevailed on to accept the chancellorship of the exchequer (April 1835–September 1839). His tenure was difficult largely because of an economic recession beyond his control, but Gladstone, noting that whig finance was usually indifferent, held that it was never so discreditable as in Spring Rice's time. The historian Donald Southgate notes that he failed to grasp early opportunities and was later paralysed by deficits. He was hustled out of office in September 1839 but not before he had secured the comptrollership of the exchequer – a rich sinecure which others of his party wanted annulled – and his elevation to the peerage as Lord Monteagle. *The Times* commented (9 Feb. 1866): 'He entered the sacred edifice of the peerage, hid his face in a coronet, and the much-abused name of Spring-Rice was forgotten in the lustre of a new title.'

With his removal to the lords, Monteagle took little part in public life till roused by the famine. An improving, paternalistic landlord, during the crisis years he was characterised by his concern for his tenants, energetic attempts to influence policy, and a mounting bitterness towards the government. His correspondence with the treasury and board of works is of considerable value in helping to elucidate the official government position. His letters and speeches in the lords were studded with rhetorical invective against Britain's long mistreatment of Ireland. Holding landlords to be as much victims of British mismanagement as tenants, he rejected forcibly any claim that they should be held responsible and continually advocated state intervention, though he felt it should not be limited to road works, but extended to agricultural improvements. He did not accept fixity of tenure, since he felt Irish peasants too prone to subletting. His own experience as a landlord bore this out and he considered overcrowding as the principal evil of Irish agriculture. A strong advocate of state-assisted emigration, he was successful in bringing the lord lieutenant, Lord Clarendon (qv), over to his viewpoint, but not the government as a whole. He personally assisted numerous tenants to emigrate and then acted as mediator between them and their families still on his estate.

His stance during the famine earned him his good reputation in Ireland. In England he went down to posterity as 'a tedious speaker . . . accused of jobbing, undersized in stature . . . neither a very strong nor a high-minded man, we must do him justice as a shrewd one and a good partisan' (*Times*, 9 Feb. 1866).

Monteagle died at Mount Trenchard 7 February 1866, survived by his second wife (m. 13 April 1841), Mary Anne (1800–89), daughter of John Marshall of Hallsteads, Cumberland. He had seven children by his first wife; his eldest son predeceased him by nine months, having drowned while sailing on the *Tripoli* (9 May 1865). Monteagle was therefore succeeded by his grandson, Thomas Spring Rice (1849–1926), 2nd Baron Monteagle and co-founder of the agricultural cooperative movement, who was born 31 May 1849 at Lewisham, Kent, eldest son of Stephen Edmond Spring Rice (1814–65), deputy chairman of the board of customs, and his wife Ellen Mary, daughter of William Frere, serjeant-at-law and master of Downing College, Cambridge. Thomas was educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated in 1872. Three years later he married (26 October 1875) Elizabeth, daughter of the Rt Rev. Samuel Butler, bishop of Meath, and thereafter devoted himself to managing his estate. Like his grandfather, he was concerned with agricultural and industrial improvement and was president of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society 1882–4. In September 1889 he convened a meeting at Mount Trenchard of his neighbours, the parish priest, and Horace Plunkett (qv), at which the seed of the future agricultural cooperative movement was sown. Five years later the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) was set up with Monteagle on its committee. According to R. A. Anderson (qv), Plunkett's right-hand man, no one did more for the cooperative movement than Monteagle in his 'gentle, quiet, persistent way' (Anderson, 9). His demeanour was self-effacing, his reasoning slow and deliberate, and consequently he failed to get full recognition for his contribution. In politics he was unionist but was among the first to praise the dáil courts set up in 1920, and he accepted the establishment of the Free State. He died in Limerick on 24 December 1926, predeceased by his eldest son and by his daughter, the nationalist activist, Mary Ellen Spring Rice (qv). He was succeeded by his second son, Thomas Aubrey (1883–1934). The first baron's papers are in the NLI.

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S. S. Millin, *Historical memories of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society* (1920), 157; R. A. Anderson, *With Plunkett in Ireland* (1935), 8–9; Frank Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal* (1935); *Alumni Cantab.*; *N. Munster Antiq. Jn.*, iv (1945), 135–40; R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, *The great famine* (1956); Burke, *Peerage* (1959); Donald Southgate, *The passing of the whigs* (1962); Angus MacIntyre, *The liberator* (1965); M. O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* (1972–80), ii–viii, *passim*; G. C. Barrow, *The emergence of the Irish banking system* (1975); Philip Ziegler, *Melbourne* (1976); Fergus O'Ferrall, *Catholic emancipation* (1985); Trevor West, *Horace Plunkett: co-operation and politics* (1986); *NHI*, v; Christopher O'Mahony and Valerie Thompson, *Poverty to promise: the Monteagle emigrants* (1994); Peter Gray, *Famine, land and politics* (1999)

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