

Sheil, Richard Lalor

by Sinéad Sturgeon

Sheil, Richard Lalor (1791–1851), playwright and politician, was born 17 August 1791 at Drumdowney, Co. Kilkenny, eldest of four sons of Edward Sheil, merchant, and his wife, Catherine McCarthy, of Spring House, Co. Tipperary. Richard was tutored at home by a French priest before attending for two years a Jesuit school in Kensington, London. In October 1804 he entered Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, and in November 1807 was enrolled in TCD. In 1808 Edward Sheil went bankrupt, but his wife's family enabled Richard to complete his university education, and he graduated BA in 1811. After keeping terms for two years at Lincoln's Inn, London, he was called to the Irish bar in 1814.

Sheil's legal practice was both expensive to establish and slow to develop, and he turned to literature and drama (in which he had long had an interest) as a means of income. He wrote eight plays, of which the most successful was 'Evadne; or, The statue, a tragedy' (1819), a reworking of James Shirley's (qv) Machiavellian court drama 'The traitor' (1635). 'Evadne' was performed thirty times during its first season at Covent Garden. Sheil's plays tended to be melodramatic and sentimental in style, and owed much of their success to the performances of Elizabeth O'Neill (qv), one of the leading actresses of the time. In 1821 he collaborated with John Banim (qv) on the successful play 'Damon and Pythias', but Sheil's own later plays such as 'Montoni' (1820) and 'The Huguenot' (1822) were poorly received. In 1816 he married Miss O'Halloran, the niece of Sir William McMahan, the master of the rolls. They had one son, born on 9 January 1822; shortly after giving birth, Sheil's wife died. Later that year Sheil began publishing in the *New Monthly Magazine* vignettes of lawyers and life at the Irish bar which proved immensely popular; he soon expanded their scope to address political issues in Ireland. His friend William Henry Curran (qv) later contributed significantly to these sketches, although their co-authorship was not widely known to contemporaries. The articles were later collected and published in two volumes as *Sketches of the Irish bar* (1855); those written only by Sheil were published as *Sketches, legal and political by the late Right Honourable Richard Lalor Sheil* (1855).

As Sheil's theatrical career faltered, his legal practice began to prosper, a reversal that coincided with his increasing involvement in the campaign for catholic emancipation. Sheil, who had studied rhetoric at Stonyhurst and participated in debating clubs at TCD and Lincoln's Inn, cultivated the art of public speaking, and was particularly noted for his passionate delivery. In 1813 he spoke before the Catholic Board and opposed a motion reprobating securities as a condition of emancipation, winning the approval of Daniel O'Connell (qv). In the early 1820s Sheil, sympathetic to English protestant opinion, advocated a conciliatory policy and was in favour of granting the British government a veto over the appointment

of catholic bishops. O'Connell strongly opposed such a concession, and in 1821 clashed bitterly with Sheil over this issue. They were reconciled, however, in the founding of the Catholic Association in 1823, in which Sheil played a leading role alongside O'Connell, becoming his most effective lieutenant. The success of this body, and the substantial revenue that it generated through the establishment of what was called the 'catholic rent', began to arouse alarm in London. In 1825 Sheil accompanied O'Connell to London in a campaign to prevent the suppression of the association.

When their efforts failed, Sheil's political views became increasingly radicalised. Soon afterwards he renounced his support for the veto and insisted that catholic emancipation be granted as a right, not a favour. In 1826 he published several unsigned articles on the condition of Ireland, in the French periodical *L'Étoile*, which attracted international attention. Also in 1826 he delivered a speech that included scathing comments on the duke of York, for which he narrowly avoided prosecution. In 1828 Sheil led the opposition to the re-election of Vesey Fitzgerald (qv) for Clare, and supported O'Connell's candidacy for the seat, acting as counsel on his behalf. As opposition to catholic emancipation mounted in England, Sheil purchased a freeholding in Kent, in order to qualify as a speaker at a meeting of the gentry and freeholders of Kent at Pennenden Heath held on 24 October 1828 to petition against any further relaxation of the laws against catholics.

O'Connell's victory in the Clare election was decisive in bringing about the Catholic Relief Bill of 1829, enabling Sheil to pursue his ambition of a parliamentary career. In the summer of 1830 he was one of the first catholics to be called to the inner bar, and his political prospects were further enhanced by his marriage on 20 July 1830 to Mrs Anastasia Power, the wealthy daughter and co-heir of John Lalor and widow of Edmond Power. He adopted Anastasia's maiden name, and her fortune enabled him to become independent of his profession and to pursue a parliamentary seat. Although he lost the 1830 contest for Louth, on 8 March 1831 he was brought in by the marquess of Anglesey (qv) for Milbourne Port, Dorset. He made his first speech on 21 March on the subject of the second reading of the Reform Bill. In the general election later that year, he was returned for Milborne Port and Louth, and chose to take his seat for Louth.

As momentum built behind the movement for repeal, Sheil reluctantly pledged his support and was accordingly returned for Tipperary in January 1833. In parliament he denounced the Suppression of Disturbances Bill on 28 February 1833, and was active in the repeal debate of April 1834. When this motion was defeated Sheil, believing repeal to be unattainable, concentrated on pursuing public office. Though castigated for this by many repealers, Sheil remained involved in Irish affairs; his reply to Lord Stanley (qv) on the Irish Municipal Corporations Bill on 23 February 1836 was one of his most celebrated speeches. He became a noted orator in the British parliament; his speeches were carefully prepared, although his rhetoric continued to be elaborate, and was criticised by some as artificial.

In the general election following the death of William IV in 1837, Sheil was again returned for Tipperary, and in the Melbourne administration under Queen Victoria he accepted the position of commissioner of Greenwich Hospital in 1839. A year later, he was appointed vice-president of the board of trade, and in the 1841 reconstruction of the Melbourne ministry was made judge advocate. At the 1841 general election Sheil, feeling adrift from popular opinion in Ireland, decided against the risk of a contested election in Tipperary and was returned for the much safer seat of Dungarvan. He was a vocal critic of the Peel (qv) administration, and with William Smith O'Brien forcefully obstructed the coercion bill of 1843, although he continued to urge conciliation with the government in opposition to O'Connell's campaign for repeal. In 1844 Sheil acted as counsel for O'Connell's son John (qv) in the state trials following the suppression of the monster repeal meetings.

The following year Sheil took his family to Madeira in an unsuccessful attempt to improve the delicate health of his son, who died there in November 1845. Sheil and his wife returned to England, and after the collapse of the Peel administration he was appointed master of the mint (1846–50). This necessitated a by-election in Dungarvan in July 1846, and O'Connell's decision not to allow a repeal candidate stand against a government officeholder such as Sheil was much criticised by the Young Irelanders and contributed to their secession from the Repeal Association. As master of the mint Sheil was censored for the circulation of a new silver florin which lacked the traditional Latin motto *Defensatrix fidei: dei gratia*. The omission was popularly attributed to Sheil's catholicism, though the coin was designed by Wyon and approved by the privy council. In these years he spoke less in parliament, though he paid tribute to O'Connell after his death in May 1847, and urged greater assistance for the Irish famine. He was returned for Dungarvan in 1849, but with a much reduced majority. By 1850 he was anxious to retire from politics, and on 4 November 1850 the prime minister, Lord John Russell, appointed him British minister at the court of Tuscany. He moved to Florence with his wife early in 1851, where he died following a severe attack of gout on 25 May 1851. His remains were brought home in a British warship and interred at Long Orchard, Co. Tipperary.

The most famous portrait of Sheil is the oil painting by Joseph Haverty (qv) in the NGI, which has also a marble bust (1847) by Christopher Moore (qv) and a plaster bust by Terence Farrell (qv). Collections of Sheil's papers are held at UCD (political and personal correspondence of 1824–51), the NLI (letters to his wife of 1834–6), and the University of Southampton Library (correspondence with Lord Palmerston in 1838–51).

Richard Lalor Sheil's younger brother Sir Justin Sheil (1803–1871), army officer and diplomat, was born on 2 December 1803. Educated at Stonyhurst, Justin was nominated to an East India cadetship in 1819 and a year later entered the 3rd Bengal infantry in 1820. On 11 July 1823 he was made a lieutenant, and served in the siege of Bharatpur in 1826. Made captain on 13 April 1830, on 4 July 1833 he was specially appointed as second in command of Colonel Pasmore's troops in

Persia. He subsequently pursued a career in diplomacy, and served as secretary to the British legation in Persia from 1836 to 1844, being promoted to the rank of major on 17 February 1841. He published two accounts of his travels in Persia in the 1838 volume of the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*: 'Notes on a journey from Tabriz . . . to Suleimaniyeh in July and August 1836' and 'Itinerary from Tehran to Alamut . . . in May 1837'. From 1844 until his retirement in 1854 he was British ambassador to Persia, during which time he was made lieutenant-colonel (11 March 1847) and awarded the CB (27 April 1848). He was subsequently awarded the KCB (3 February 1855), and promoted through the ranks of colonel (28 November 1856), major-general (26 April 1859), and lieutenant-general (25 June 1870).

In 1847 he married Mary Leonora, the only daughter of Stephen Woulfe (qv), chief baron of the Irish exchequer, and Frances, daughter of Roger Hamill of Dowth Hall, Co. Meath. Sheil contributed to Mary Leonora's book *Glimpses of life and manners in Persia*, published in 1856. They had several children including a daughter, named Laura Mary, who married Don Pedro Juan de Zulueta, a Spanish diplomat; the distinguished jurist Francis Zulueta (1878–1958) was their son. The *Cork Examiner* (30 Jan. 1860) records the birth of a son to Justin and Mary Sheil on 23 January 1860. In June 1865 they had another son, born in Dublin, Denis Florence Sheil (1865–1962), who was later ordained.

Mary Leonora Sheil died in 1869, and Justin died 17 April 1871 at 13 Eaton Place, London. A collection of his papers is held in the Oriental and Indian Office collections in the British Library, London.

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V. C. P. Hodson, *List of the officers of the Bengal army 1758–1834* (1827–47); Hermann von Puckler-Muskau, *Tour of England, Ireland, and France* (4 vols, 1832), 2.118; W. T. McCullagh, *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Richard Lalor Sheil* (2 vols, 1855); M. W. Savage (ed.), *Sketches, legal and political by the late Right Honourable Richard Lalor Sheil* (2 vols, 1855); *Dublin University Magazine*, 46 (1855), 548–58; *Times*, 21 Apr. 1871; *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, ed. M. R. O'Connell (8 vols, 1972–80)