

William Smith O'Brien in Poland and Lithuania in the 1860s

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William Smith O'Brien (1803–1864), Irish nationalist MP and leader of the Young Ireland Movement, seemed to attract more attention from foreign than Irish researchers in the late 20th century.¹ Richard Davis from the University of Tasmania and his wife Marianne deserve to be commended here for editing O'Brien's prison journal from Van Diemen's Land, and for other published works including an important biography. Blanche Tuohill has also published a biographical book on the life of William Smith O'Brien.² The primary emphasis in these works is on his role in Irish history, his participation in the Repeal Association founded by Daniel O'Connell in order to appeal the Act of Union of 1800, his involvement in the Young Ireland Movement and his penal exile in Australia. More recently, Richard Davis has published *Travels of William Smith O'Brien* which includes a description of O'Brien's voyages and journals.³

Since completing my doctoral thesis, I have studied the Polish contacts of Smith O'Brien and, although my opinion on him is personal, it is as a result of a deep interest in his life and study of various historical sources. Looking at him from the Polish view point gives me a different sense of his importance in history to that derived from the Irish or American perspective, and convinces me that writing about his Polish journeys has a validity. In this article I am using the content from my previous works, including the 2012 online article⁴ which drew on the material in the journals of William Smith O'Brien held in the National Library of Ireland⁵, and also the content from my paper given at a conference in Bulgaria, Veliko Tyrnovo (2007), on the Irish rebellion of 1848 and the 1863 insurrection in Poland. Some new information has been added from on-going research. For the purpose of this paper I have consulted O'Brien's travel journals from September 1861, when he saw Poland for the first time, as I believe it will complete the picture I wish to present here.⁶

William Smith O'Brien (1803–1864) came from a Protestant aristocratic family; he was an Irish nationalist MP whose life took a very unusual course after he decided to join Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association. His family was proud of being descendants of Brian Boru, High King of Ireland from 1002–1014. Initially, he was a great admirer of Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator,

1 Richard Davis, *Revolutionary Imperialist, William Smith O'Brien 1803–1864* (Dublin, 1998).

2 Blanche Tuohill, *William Smith O'Brien and his Irish Revolutionary Companions in Penal Exile* (Missouri, 1981).

3 Richard Davis, *Travels of William Smith O'Brien In Europe and the Wider World 1843 to 1864* (Dublin, 2013).

4 Katarzyna Gmerek, 'W.S. O'Brien w Polsce i na Litwie. Kraków - Wilno, maj-czerwiec 1863. cz. 1' (<http://histmag.org/W.S.-OBrien-w-Polsce-i-na-Litwie.-Krakow-Wilno-maj-czerwiec-1863-cz.-1-6347>) (18 Jul. 2015).

5 'Journal 'Berlin '63', June 1863 (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 46, 829/8); despite the title, the journal is about the visit in the Russian part of Poland, and it had been written in Berlin after the author left the Russian Empire.

6 'Journal of an excursion made during August and September 1861' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 32, 707).

but he became disillusioned with O'Connell and involved himself in the more militant Young Ireland Movement. Driven by the great cultural upheaval and the Irish resurgence, he started as a middle aged man learning Irish and collecting Irish manuscripts. As a landowner, he was deeply concerned about the fate of the starving peasantry during the Great Famine, and tried to persuade the Westminster Parliament to give more substantial assistance. When his and other Irish deputies' efforts proved useless against the English ultraliberal laissez-faire approach, he decided to break-off relations with the English parliament, and to prepare for a rebellion. It seems important here to look at the events of 1848 in Ireland in a broader European context. That year of revolutions which in Poland is referred to as the 'Springtide of the Nations' had seen many rebellions, social and national, in many European countries, including the Prussian and Austrian parts of Poland, however, the most turbulent rebellions took place in France, Italy and Austria. The Irish literate public was aware of these upheavals, as they were covered by local papers which mentioned place names from Budapest to Posen, and which compared the situation in Ireland with that of Italy, Hungary and Poland. The Young Ireland Movement began to plan for a similar revolution in Ireland.

In the eventful spring of 1848 the Habeas Corpus Act was lifted for Ireland, and first sentences were passed for sedition. The small and unsuccessful rebellion began in July of the same year. A group of radicals persuaded William Smith O'Brien that he, as a descendant of Brian Boru, was the perfect choice as national leader. The insurgents had no precise plans, no finances and lacked people with military training. Additionally, the country was suffering from famine. In these circumstances it is no wonder that the rebellion of 1848 had to be short. O'Brien who had neither military training nor natural talent lost his last chance for a more significant military action during the skirmish at Ballingarry, Co Tipperary. This incident was unjustly described by the contemporary London *Times* as 'A battle at the Widow McCormick's cabbage garden'. It is important to underline that although the reality of the event overwhelmed the courageous O'Brien, there was nothing heroic on the part of the British constables who took local children as hostages, and communicated to O'Brien that they would die if he did not withdraw from his action. In face of such an ultimatum, O'Brien decided to agree to the terms and ended his battle; but sporadic fights continued for some time afterwards according to Lawrence Fenton.⁷ The British press used the case of the honest, unskilled insurgents to develop propaganda aimed against the rebels and Ireland in general. This narration became dominant and, to a certain extent, prevails to the present day. Later on, O'Brien gained great popularity among the Irish nationalists, it was not because of his dilettante attempt to lead a revolt but because of his imprisonment. He was one of the first famous figures in Ireland whose prison protest and mistreatment became a widely disputed issue.⁸ He was sentenced to death along with other leaders, but the verdict was changed to the penal exile in Australia at Her Majesty's pleasure, and he was sent to Van Diemen's Land. Limited freedom was offered to prisoners on the condition that they give their word not to attempt to escape. O'Brien was the only one who refused to give his word; he attempted to escape on one occasion and persisted in his obstinacy for about one year, ending his protest after months in solitary confinement. The reason for his protest was that he wanted to be perceived as

⁷ Lawrence Fenton, *Young Ireland Rebellion and Limerick* (Cork, 2010).

⁸ Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922: Theatres of War* (London, 2005).

a political leader, albeit in a symbolic way. The fact of taking an oath was unimaginable for him and he could not accept the status of a criminal, although he never articulated this explicitly as some Fenian leaders did in a later era. There were contradictory opinions on his treatment at this time; the Irish nationalist press reported it very differently to the British Press which presented the propaganda of the government in their periodicals. O'Brien almost died in the penal colony in Maria Island after developing cardiac failure. The history of his confinement is an interesting one, but suffice it is to say here that the protest was so famous that it was known even in Prussian Poland, despite the fact that the relative freedom of the press was coming to an end in Posen at that time. A circle of local writers took O'Brien as an example of a patriot suffering for his country, and compared him to the Poles in Prussian prisons. One of them, a Hungarian military veteran of the 1848 events, Władysław Bentkowski, who was in Cracow at the same time as O'Brien (1863), is thought to have written O'Brien's obituary.

Smith O'Brien was released from his captivity in 1856 after the Crimean War which as a result changed political circumstances. British authorities believed that Ireland was now quiet and that O'Brien, variously nicknamed as a 'cabbage garden fighter', a 'lunatic', or 'perverse and insane', or 'King of Munster', was sufficiently humiliated and destined to die in oblivion. In 1858, he was allowed to return home. He started writing to a number of newspapers, mostly *The Nation* and the *Freeman's Journal*. He wrote about issues that he believed to be important, not limited to the Irish question, as he also reported on many events which took place in America and Europe.

His economic and social situation changed utterly as a consequence of his felon status, despite the fact that he was still a member of the privileged class and had prominent MPs in his family; all his brothers were staunchly pro-British. In 1848, just before he was sentenced, an informal deal was made to prevent forfeiture of his property. The provisions of the deal were that he would relinquish his property and a trust would be created, and would be administered by his older brother on behalf of O'Brien's son. When he returned from exile O'Brien found himself in a most uncomfortable position, however, thanks to the mediation of his wife (Lucy O'Brien) he and his family were allowed to live in their former house, and to cultivate the land that no longer belonged to them as a result of the previous arrangements. When Lucy died the eldest brother, who probably did not agree with the political views of William Smith O'Brien, withdrew that agreement. A long unpleasant dispute before a court resulted in a deal: Smith O'Brien received an annuity from his brother that allowed him to live comfortably, but he had to leave his home at Cahirmoyle, Co Limerick. It was taken over by his eldest son who shared his uncle's political views.

Following his wife's death, O'Brien made frequent journey across America and Europe. His unpublished travel journals and the newspaper articles he wrote after he completed his travels introduce another element to his character. It is no coincidence that he visited countries that were undergoing political changes, and that he had numerous meetings with people who played a significant role in these changes. This is true in reference to America which at that time was in a state of civil war, but also to Canada which was gaining autonomy in running its own affairs, and where he spent time in the company of deputies in the new parliament. In Greece, he observed the emergence of a constitutional monarchy, in Hungary he spent some time with local politicians who were demanding independence from Austria. It seems clear from his own accounts of his Polish-Lithuanian journey that he was intending to observe and describe political changes in the modern world in order to present it to the Irish public. It seems significant to note that in the re-

searched volumes neither the Irish rebellion of 1848 is mentioned nor his trial and imprisonment. Probably, he was more interested in noting the experience of many countries that would be useful for future Irish generations. It is also evident that some of his travel journals were written with the intention of publication. His descriptions were lively and colourful, and the writing profited from his excellent Cambridge education in history and classics. He seems to have been very open towards the people he met during his trips, never patronising or stereotyping anybody. Despite their obvious value, the journals remain as yet unpublished. The only book O'Brien actually managed to publish during his life, apart from a few pamphlets and speeches, is the work titled *Principles of Government or Meditations in Exile* (1856). Perhaps, his premature death prevented him from finding a publisher for what possibly is his greatest and most interesting work.

Already in 1846, Smith O'Brien made a parliamentary speech in which he compared Poland with Ireland, saying that the conquest of Ireland was just as criminal as the partition of Poland. The case he was referring to was the annexation of the Free City of Cracow by Austria, however, the references to the partitions in the late 18th century were explicit.⁹ The comparison was nothing new, as Daniel O'Connell and his associates in the Irish nationalist press often used during the 1830s, but it seems to be relevant here as it sheds light on the O'Brien journeys in the 1860s.

O'Brien's first trip to Poland in 1861 was very short, albeit worth mentioning because he visited Cracow, the old capital of Poland in Galicia which was the most distant part of the Austrian Empire. In the same year, he also travelled to Hungary where he observed and admired the peaceful protests of the Hungarian politicians against the Emperor of Austria which ultimately led to the Hungarian success in obtaining autonomy, and which was later called by the Irish - the 'Hungarian way'.

O'Brien saw Cracow in the company of a Slovakian priest, Fr John Duchon (probably, Jan Duchon). They travelled together in a rustic chariot hired from one of Fr Duchon's parishioners. Fr Duchon was a chaplain of Count Theodore Csaky (possibly, Count Tivodar Csáky 1834–1894), a member of the Hungarian Diet. Their journey led through the Tatra Mountains, from Hodkovec (Hotkóc) in Spis (Spiš) to Podhale in Poland. During this trip O'Brien greatly admired the beautiful scenery of the Tatra Mountains, especially the Kohlbach valley (Studená dolina, Dolina Zimnej Wody). Conversations with the learned priest enriched O'Brien's understanding of the complex ethnic situation in Hungary which could not be reduced to a simple picture of the Hungarians' fight with their Austrian oppressor. Fr Duchon was a member of a small Slavonic minority that suffered great oppression from their Hungarian landlords; he regretted that the universal Latin language ceased to be the official language of Hungary. It was replaced by the Hungarian language with no recognition of the Slovak position. In 1848, when Hungarians fought for freedom, Slovaks and other Slavonic people of Austria did not join them, they supported the government hoping for the concessions that they never received.¹⁰ When Richard Davis commented on this paradox, he used a slightly far reaching comparison with Northern Ireland. It seems indeed, this was not exactly compatible as the Slavonic people were natives, not settlers. Furthermore, their Catholic religion was not a special consideration for the Austrian government which eventually dealt with the Hungarians despite their Protestant faith. It was simply a case of, as in the

⁹ *Hansard* 3, xci, 54 (16 Mar. 1847).

¹⁰ Antoni Giza, *Słowacki ruch narodowy w 19 i w początkach 20 wieku: do 1914 roku* (Szczecin, 2000).

Latin proverb, 'divide et impera' (divide and conquer), an old Roman way to express how to deal with multiple colonial peoples.

Returning to O'Brien's journey, the first Polish town visited by him was the poor looking Neu-markt (Nowy Targ). The Irish eye of the traveller appreciated fields with good potato crops, however, the condition of the peasantry did not impress him: 'Not even in Ireland have I seen such a breadth of land covered with potatoes as in the neighbourhood of Neuemarkt, but the condition of the peasantry appeared to be little better than that of the poorer classes in Ireland'.¹¹ O'Brien criticised the social system in the Austrian Empire where peasants not only owned their land but were allowed to distribute it among their children, in the event of the owner's death thus causing the 'infinitesimal division of property'.¹² This was very different to Ireland. Even the peasant women of Galicia did not impress the Irishman; he noted that they had a 'coarse' appearance and did not wear shoes, at least not in the summer. In another place he expressed his critical opinion of the local Jews in Galicia after a night spent in a Jewish inn on a bag of straw instead of a bed, although he admitted he slept surprisingly well. He could not help but note the lack of decent financial institutions in Catholic Austria, and he disapproved of the Jewish monopolist practices in banking. He gave a description of a Jew also: 'I did not see in Cracow a single Jew who appeared to me capable of bearing arms. Weak and diminutive in stature, unhealthy in countenance, they look as if a quest for gain was the sole object of existence.' Probably aware that his words might sound anti-Semitic, he declared: 'Personally, I entertain no prejudice against either Jews, Mahometans or Buddhists, and I adhere to the idea that the Jews are entitled to all the political rights that are enjoyed by Christians, but my visit to Cracow has led me to question what I have been told about the most liberal men in Hungary being unwilling to extend to Jews the political rights which they enjoy or claim for themselves'.¹³

The city of Cracow, especially when examined closely by O'Brien, did not look impressive but he was able to see the contrast between the glorious past and the present. Recalling O'Brien's parliamentary speeches concerning the Austrian annexation of the Free City of Cracow in 1846, his reason for visiting this city in 1861 becomes clear.¹⁴ The churches were not impressive on the outside but had very rich interiors, especially the Cathedral. 'The tombs and the sepulchres of kings, heroes and saints, form an historical study which recall to the Polish nation the ancient glories of their race and reminds them of the contrast which their present subjugation exhibits. The yearnings of patriotism still heave in the heart of this unhappy people but alas the triple yoke which oppresses them in the united forces of the Austria, Prussia and Russia is too powerful to be broken by a divided nation.' He added here a Latin proverb popular among Irish Repeal movement: 'ira leonum vincula recusantium' - 'the anger of lions refusing to be chained'. O'Brien even compared Poland to the Medieval English king who was imprisoned for a long time 'but he did not cease by his incarceration, to deserve the name Richard Coeur de Lion'.¹⁵

He observed how 'The Treaty of Vienna 1815' had been set aside. 'The Treaty of Vienna 1815 contemporary set at naught the claims of nations to national self-government but that treaty

¹¹ 'Cracow, Sept. 9', 'Journal of an excursion made during August and September 1861' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 32, 707, n. pag.).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Hansard* 3, xc, 1224 (11 Mar. 1847); *ibid.*, xci, 54 (16 Mar. 1847).

¹⁵ 'Graz, Sept. 11', 'Journal of an excursion made during August and September 1861' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 32, 707, n. pag.).

has already been torn to pieces and soon be committed to the flames. Belgium and Greece had liberated themselves from foreign rule. Italy and France had united to cancel the provisions of this treaty. In Cracow it was violated by Austria in the year 1846 and in Russian Poland by the emperor of Russia. The time has nearly arrived when these examples will be followed by Venice, by Poland, by Hungary and by the minor principalities of Germany. May God grant that every subjugated nation whether it be the Pole in Europe or the Hindu in Asia shall hereafter acquire the blessings of self-government.¹⁶

For O'Brien the real significance of his visit to Cracow was in its historical and symbolic values. At some point during the journey he and his priest friend visited a monastery with only four monks. O'Brien made a remark that 'in every Catholic country except Ireland there exists at present a strong tendency to suppress or to abandon monastic establishments.'¹⁷ This was happening in Poland as well, even though he had seen signs of Catholic devotion everywhere in Cracow. Perhaps he was not familiar with the Austrian Josephism in the late 18th century that caused the removal of many monasteries as well as the forfeiting of their property, diminishing the significance of the Catholic Church and introducing secularisation. The application of the Austrian laws lasted many years in the incorporated part of Poland and resulted in reducing the number of Polish cultural centres. In the 1860s, Cracow was a middle-sized Austrian garrison town with the old castle of Polish kings transformed into a local citadel. All establishments and institutions suffered from the lack of liberties, including the financial and political establishments. This changed when Galicia gained more independence in 1867, and afterwards when Austria became a dual monarchy - the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is possible that in 1861 O'Brien could see the beginning of the political changes in the Empire, as they were more apparent in Vienna or Budapest than in the peripheral areas. The people were very cautious in their conversation, as he noted: 'It is probable that the inhabitants of Galicia having been subjected for a long time from the oppression of the Austrian police are inclined to [be] much more reserved than is employed by Hungarians to whom this kind of rule is comparatively a novelty.'¹⁸

The last part of the 1861 journey in Poland had a more optimistic dimension. The travellers visited the ancient salt mines in Wieliczka near Cracow, where O'Brien wrote: 'not less than 1200 foot below the surface of the earth.... I have never seen any subterranean excavation natural or artificial which could rival these salt mines...the height of several of these chambers is stupendous and when illuminated their appearance is perfectly beautiful. Several of the chambers have been excavated in the form of buildings appropriated to the purposes of life. There is for instance a chapel, a ballroom and a concert room. In one place I was carried across a small lake in a boat and imagination could scarcely conceive a scene more striking than that which is presented here. The pen of Virgil is required to describe accurately the descent to the infernal regions.'¹⁹ In the end, the traveller concluded that the only thing that is lacking here is the Egyptian temples...

After visiting Wieliczka they came back to Cracow where they reluctantly parted. O'Brien continued his journey to Graz and Innsbruck where he observed and admitted that as little as he admired the Austrian government he would willingly exchange the economic condition of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Ireland for that of Austria: 'I am convinced that there is more squalid misery in the city of Limerick than is to be found in all the towns which I have visited in the Austrian dominions.' He also believed that there is 'more of the spirit of liberty and perhaps less of political servitude in the Austrian dominions than is to be found at present in Ireland.'²⁰ It is worth noting that, while still in Cracow, O'Brien commented on the recent events in Warsaw where Russian soldiers shot Polish peaceful demonstrators in February and April 1861. He was aware of the political tension there and the possibility of a rebellion. The journey, lasting from 1862 to 1863, was to be his last European tour.

Besides Poland, O'Brien spent some time in Italy observing the process of Risorgimento (Resurgence). In March 1863, he was in Greece where a constitutional monarchy was established. Finally, in May of that year he again visited Cracow, and this time he sought to spend more time in Poland because a new uprising had just erupted in the Russian part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He desired to see if the insurrection was just a small affair caused by local troublemakers as the Russian government insisted, or if it was something more. His arrival in Poland was announced on 21 May 1863 by a very influential conservative Polish journal *Czas* issued in Cracow. A laconic announcement was printed: 'Mr O'Brien arrived in our city, returning from Istanbul and Athens; renowned in recent times from Irish history.'²¹ It seems rather obvious that the journal did not want to be accused of sedition if it emphasised O'Brien's engagement in the rebellion in Ireland. His visit to Cracow is not mentioned in the preserved letters and documents from that time which may suggest that he was regarded as a private person not representing anyone but himself.

It may be interesting here to mention that some time earlier Cracow was visited by another Irish friend of Poland, John Pope-Hennessy, a young conservative MP for King's County, Offaly. In April 1863, he travelled across Western European courts acting as a Polish agent associated with the Polish Hôtel Lambert émigré faction, asking for a joint diplomatic action of western powers on behalf of Poland. His main goal was to try to intervene to secure the rights and liberties promised to the Poles in the Treaty of Vienna (1815).²² He was, however, unsuccessful. The tsarist regime was unprepared for any kind of negotiations concerning the Polish issues and the feeble diplomatic remonstrations of Britain and France only enraged the rulers of Russia, who tended to view the Polish problems as their own internal affair. Despite Pope-Hennessy's young age and his lack of real political significance, his visit is well documented. A banquet was held in his honour during which a poem was recited comparing him with the great Daniel O'Connell. His youthful self-importance combined with enthusiasm for the cause and with his eagerness to find foreign support for the Poles resulted in him, being mistakenly understood by many as a British envoy bringing a promise of a real alliance. In late 1891, this faithful friend of Poland, after years of colonial service as a newly-elected independent Home-Ruler, attempted to make contacts with the Hôtel Lambert and wished to take up the Polish cause in British parliament once again.²³

²⁰ 'Innsbruck, Sept. 22', 'Tour of Austria and Germany September - October 1861' (N.L.J., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 46, 829/3, (n. pag.).

²¹ *Czas*, 21 May 1863.

²² Joanna Nowak, 'Władysław Zamojski i John Pope-Hennessy: Epizod z polsko-irlandzkich kontaktów w XIX stuleciu', in *Pamiętnik Biblioteki Körnickiej*, vol. 25 (2003), pp 161-71.

²³ John Pope-Hennessy to Władysław Czartoryski, 5 Feb. 1891 (Biblioteka Czartoryskich, Korespondencja W. Czartoryskiego 1858-1894, MS 7281, n. pag.)

Sadly, his health was poor and he subsequently died from a tropical disease shortly thereafter. It is significant that in the first half of the 1860s there were two Irishmen visiting Cracow. While Hennessy was more widely known to the public, O'Brien, on the other hand, was neither an admirer of the Treaty of Vienna nor a diplomatic activist, just an older aristocratic gentleman, although more radical than his younger colleague. He (O'Brien) knew how to be less visible which was a valuable skill at a time when even a British journalist had difficulty getting into Russia, and there were cases of press correspondents being denied passports, particularly when they wanted to proceed to Lithuania. It was important not to be associated with Polish émigré circles in Britain, something O'Brien managed to maintain, contrary to Hennessy. It should be emphasised that during this time Russia was the enemy of England and many Irish nationalists looked to Russia for help (i.e. from the Russian embassy in the USA) in the belief that the 'enemy of my enemy is my friend'. The ageing Young Irelander was not suspected of being a friend of Poland. What the Russians did not realise was that O'Brien was an old idealist and a man of scrupulous principles rather than an opportunist. He was dedicated to the idea of freedom for all oppressed nations from the 1840s and he remained faithful to this idea, despite the short-lived alliances of his republican 'political grandchildren'.

In reference to O'Brien's second journey to Cracow, what is worth mentioning is that he returned to see the Cathedral with the grave of Tadeusz Kościuszko and had a closer look at the Mounds of Kraków, which reminded him of the Hills of Tara in County Meath. Dr Henryk Fryderyk Lewestam (the learned Philologist, loyal to the tsar, who lived in Warsaw) had speculated that there was evidence of Celtic existence in Poland in ancient times but O'Brien doesn't seem to have been aware of this.

It is characteristic that O'Brien was very cautious while informing about his Polish guides and interlocutors. He was well aware of being unwelcomed by the Austrian and Russian authorities, he also knew that his public pro-Polish speeches and articles given back home could bring repressions to those who informed him. He decided to write only the names of the people who were known to the European press as victims of persecution or as well-known combatants. The case of the Russian troops searching and plundering the manor house of Mr Bielski at Giebuttów caught his attention. This was just behind the Austrian border where some insurgents had been found hiding and were later on shot. Consequently, the innocent members of the Bielski family was harassed (they did not know about the hiding insurgents, although it is possible that this was of Bielski's son's involvement). The family survived only because of the sudden intervention of a more humane Russian officer. A travelling merchant with a British passport, Finkenstein (an arms dealer), was heavily wounded during this incident and the entire story became famous in Europe thanks to his testimony, while successfully suing the Russian government for his sustained injuries. Mr Bielski's brother arrested by the Austrians was in Cracow at the time of O'Brien's visit, and as we know, O'Brien desired to see him. From the letter of unknown Pole (most likely Mr Bielski) to W.S. O'Brien the conclusion of certain intimacy may be drawn, including information about the release of Mr Bielski's brother and guerrilla fighters operating close to Giebuttów.²⁴ The idea that the Irishman received that letter from Mr Bielski is supported by O'Brien himself when he acknowledges that he got introductory letters from some important

²⁴ 'Miscellaneous correspondence of William Smith O'Brien and members of his family, mainly concerning family affairs, 1863-93' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 448, pp 3280-3285).

people in Warsaw, such as a Cracowian banker, Ludwik Edward Helcel (1810–1872) whose sister was married to the owner of Giebułtów, Władysław Bielski.

O'Brien soon moved from Cracow to Warsaw. During this trip his luggage was thoroughly searched and many books and journals were temporarily confiscated by the Russian soldiers. He was assured that the suspicious materials, especially Greek newspapers and one book in Irish, would be returned to him if in the censors' opinion it was free from any seditious material. Preventative censorship was the norm in the 19th century when the state exercised control over written works imported to the country. O'Brien's confiscated belongings were verified and returned to him.

Continuing his journey, O'Brien was accompanied by a young insurgent, Count Czapski. It is not known exactly who he was but a guess can be made, based on the information provided. He was twenty three years old and was from Prussian Poland. He had recently inherited land following his father's death. It is quite possible he was **Kazimierz Czapski** from Bukowiec in Pomerania who's father died in 1862²⁵ (he was not a descendant of Count Józef Napoleon Czapski, who visited Ireland in 1832).

When he arrived in Warsaw, O'Brien was accompanied by the local conservative Polish elite, although no full names are mentioned. We know that he visited one of the Counts Zamoyski and was the host of the banker Józef Rawicz, an assimilated Jew. He met Count Adam Aleksander Ronikier from Lithuania. Count Roniker, a clairvoyant and psychic, invited O'Brien to his evening party and let him observe a séance with a medium (a young French woman). The Irishman remained skeptical, insisting that he would believe only if the count's revelations could be confirmed. O'Brien discovered that Roniker's sister was married to O'Brien de Lacy and that the family was of Irish origin, and still lived in Lithuania near Grodno. Without delay he decided to travel to meet the family. On his journey to Grodno he was accompanied by a gentleman named 'Jules Olendsky'. His identity remains unknown but this name in Polish could be Olędzki. A short adieu letter (dated 27 May 1863) written in French by a gentleman of this name is held by the National Library of Ireland.²⁶ O'Brien arrived in Grodno after a nine hour journey from Warsaw. He rested in the house of Count Starzeński to whom he had introductory letters. The gentleman was a local politician of a moderate view who believed in the idea of limited autonomy against tsarist's policy toward Poles. Starzeński informed O'Brien that he was a rebel suspect and that he expected to be arrested soon. Wiktor Starzeński died in St. Petersburg, as he was never allowed to return back home after his imprisonment in Russia.²⁷ After his visit to Starzeński's, Smith O'Brien travelled to Augustówek escorted by 'Pierre', Piotr O'Brien de Lacy. It is important to note that the name O'Brien de Lacy often causes confusion with another Irish name (O'Byrn), existing contemporarily in Poland.

²⁵ Ireneusz Pieróg, 'Czapscy z Bukowca i ich wkład w walkę o zachowanie polskości na Pomorzu Gdańskim w okresie zaborów' in Jan Sobczyk, Leszek Kuk, Norbert Kasperek, Zbigniew Karpus (eds), *W kraju i na wychodźstwie. Księga pamiątkowa ofiarowana Profesorowi Stawomirowi Kalembe w sześćdziesięciolecie urodzin* (Toruń, 2001), pp 195–6.

²⁶ 'Miscellaneous correspondence of William Smith O'Brien and members of his family, mainly concerning family affairs, 1863–93' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 448, n. pag.).

²⁷ Henryk Głębocki, 'Dzieje litewskiego Wielopolskiego. Hr. Wiktor Starzeński i projekty autonomii prowincji litewskich przed powstaniem styczniowym' in Artur Patek, Wojciech Rojek (eds), *Naród - państwo. Europa Środkowa w XIX i XX w.* (Kraków, 2006), pp 45–56.

No academic study of this family has been found²⁸, however, it seems that Maurice de Lacy (1740–1820) was a relative of the more famous Marshall Peter de Lacy (1678–1751). Both men belonged to the Wild Geese who joined the Russian military service. Maurice de Lacy was awarded by tsarina Catherine II for his military achievements with a residence, Augustówek, which previously belonged to the last King of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski. In his old age Maurice adopted a nephew, Patrick O'Brien, a son of his sister Mary, the wife of Denis O'Brien of Sullig.²⁹ In 1819, Patrick inherited his uncle's property. Long before his death, Maurice made some payments to account of his old mother and other impoverished Irish relatives, however, after 1819 Patrick decided to stop the funds, perhaps believing that Maurice's mother had died and the younger members of the family no longer needed the support. The Irish relatives pressed charges against Patrick and the issue went to court. It is thanks to the legal disagreements that some knowledge about the family origins has been revealed.

O'Brien did not mention any of the above, albeit he wrote: '...all the persons with whom I became acquainted in Poland spoke to me without the least reserve, and this candid exposure of their feelings render me doubly anxious to avoid saying anything which might be a cause of pain or danger.'³⁰ He had a brief encounter with Peter O'Brien de Lacy who told him about his military service in the Russian army and his regret at taking part in extinguishing the Hungarian insurrection in 1848 as well as his activity in Caucasus, when Caucasians fought for their freedom. Service in the Russian army was obligatory for nobility in the so-called Western Country (Russian expression for the eastern part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, also known as 'western Russia'). This posed no issue for Maurice de Lacy and Patrick O'Brien, but the younger generation quickly Polishised and began to identify themselves with the rest of the society in which they lived. Patrick O'Brien de Lacy was born in Co. Limerick, not far from Smith O'Brien's house in Cahirmoyle, however, according to W.S. O'Brien 'his recollections were rather confused'.³¹

O'Brien visited Vilnius where he spent an evening with Count Kossakowski (Franciszek Kossakowski, a participant in the Polish rising in 1863) and his wife Katarzyna, a daughter of Patrick O'Brien de Lacy, who was active in helping political prisoners.³² It seems that Countess Katarzyna identified herself strongly with Poland. O'Brien regretted that he could not stay long and soon left the company of the Polish patriots.

What is significant here was that that both Grodno and Vilnius of Lithuania were inhabited by a mixed population of Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Belarussians, and all this territory was considered by Russia as 'mainland' and was treated accordingly - the regime was more severe there and oppression was very harsh. O'Brien was a guest of three aristocratic families but his main interests were in Russian policy, especially with reference to local Polish landowners who were trying to hold onto their land despite confiscations and transfers of the land to the ethnic Russians. While at the home of Count Starzeński O'Brien realised: 'This diabolical policy was adopted in Ireland during several centuries by England and gradually eliminated from the

²⁸ See an article on Augustówek and O'Briens de Lacy in Polish: Roman Aftanazy, *Dzieje rezydencji na dawnych kresach Rzeczypospolitej. Woj. trockie, Ks. Żmudzkie, Ks. Kurlandzkie* (Wrocław, 1992), pp 11–2.

²⁹ *Cork Examiner*, 13 Nov. 1843.

³⁰ 'Berlin June 3 1863', 'Journal 'Berlin '63' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 46, 829 /8, n. pag.).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Zofia Kossakowska-Szanajca, *Zawsze przestaje być teraz*, Fundacja Kossakowskiego, (<http://www.muovok.pl/publikacja/sciagnij/60/zawsze-przestaje-byc-teraz.html>) (18 Jul. 2015).

possession of land by Irish nation nearly all the...proprieties...of Ireland'. After his visit to Count Kossakowski's he wrote: 'There are as we know well in Ireland indecent as well as indirect modes by which property be confiscated.'³³

O'Brien's attitude towards the Polish people underwent a change when he visited the country: 'In passing through life I had made acquaintance with very few Poles before my recent visit to Poland and I confess but I entertained a prejudice against the Poles rather than a prepossession in their favour. Though my unreserved sympathy was given to their struggle for national freedom. By my recent intercourse with the Poles this prejudice has been converted into admiration, and the sympathy which I formed earlier on grounds of political principles is now confirmed and intensified be personal feeling.'³⁴

During the journey from Vilnius while in Królewiec (Königsberg) he wrote a long open letter addressed to his Belgian friend, Édouard Ducpétiaux (1804–1868), a member of the Belgian-Polish Committee in Brussels. This letter was subsequently published as *Du V véritable caractère de l'insurrection polonoise de 1863* (Paris 1863). In the letter he explained the motives behind his travel to Poland. He said, he was eager to understand the true character of the uprising, even though he loved liberty he would not support the revolution if it was just an undertaking inspired by irresponsible elements. O'Brien, when he was sure that the true intentions of the Polish insurgents were to fight for freedom and for law and order, gave his support and asked the main European powers to provide the Polish underground National Government with political status, as was the case of the American Confederation. He argued that Polish people abroad should collect money for the insurgents instead of lobbying for diplomacy. Similar ideas were expressed in his Dublin lecture³⁵, where he gave an outline of Polish history from the Treaty of Vienna (1815), with special reference to the Russian partition of Poland. He also expressed his admiration for the Polish clandestine National Government and the organisation of the underground state. In spite of his support for the Poles, O'Brien did not at this time believe in diplomatic interventions but rather in military action. Poland should have been made independent within its own borders before the partitions (1772). He used moral arguments: 'Lapse of time cannot in itself sanction a wrong', and 'as long as the memory of past injustice is continued by the perpetration of a present wrong so long the right of redress continues without impeachment.'³⁶ In his opinion, to assist the Poles in regaining their independence the unity of Europe was required along with neutrality from Austria and Prussia.³⁷ O'Brien even drew up a plan to create a new Irish Brigade in France, the purpose of which was to assist Poland by military means. It is important to emphasise here that both Ireland and Poland had a tradition of creating brigades. During the Crimean War a Polish Legion was created in Turkey, consisting of Polish veteran officers under British supervision. At the same time two Irishmen expressed their proposition to create the Irish Brigade in the Ottoman service, but under Polish not British control.³⁸ The project was dismissed by the British authorities; nevertheless, such discussions were taking place among Irish and Polish emigrants

³³ 'Berlin June 3 1863' (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 46, 829/8, n. pag.).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ W.S. O'Brien, *The Lecture on Poland* (Dublin, 1863).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁸ M. J. E. Copson-Niečko, 'Irish-Polish correspondence' in *Irish Sword*, vol. 11 (XLIV) (1974), p. 145–162.

in France where O'Brien had a well-informed Irish friend, John Leonard. O'Brien's lecture in Dublin shows that he was very serious about creating an Irish Brigade in France. Although we don't know how the public reacted to his speech, we can be assured that money was collected for the Polish insurgents as the Dublin Rotunda was filled with people while O'Brien was lecturing. On the platform he was accompanied by J.B. Dillon, A. M. Sullivan, Dr and Ms Wilde, and the Lord Mayor P.P. MacSwiney.³⁹

What might be interesting to note here was that Vincent Scully, MP for Cork, often compared Poland to Ireland in a rather sardonic way. He said: 'Ireland was the exact parallel to Poland, with this only difference was that it was a very much worse case.'⁴⁰ It may be underlined that during a parliamentary debate on 22 June 1863, Scully voiced a rather strange request put to him in a letter from Poland suggesting that 'two thousand Minié rifles from Ireland would be most acceptable.'⁴¹ The Cork MP claimed that in the whole of Ireland that many rifles couldn't be found, as the Irish had no right to bear arms.

On 11 November 1863, O'Brien published a letter in the *Freeman's Journal*, concerning Poland in the context of its abandonment by France and England despite having previously promised their support: 'The Poles have been treacherously betrayed by the diplomacy of the three powers which have professed to espouse the protection of Polish interest. The Poles have been lured to destruction and then abandoned by those who undertook the championship of their cause.' His special contempt was reserved for the British who, he believed, behaved as hypocrites, giving Poland a half-hearted diplomatic support because of public sympathy in Britain for the cause, but later capitulating to the Russians.⁴² He ended the letter with the following words: 'Forsake not the cause of bleeding Poland. Be true and faithful to those who suffer for the sake of their country. The time will come when your intervention on behalf of Poland, however feeble it may now appear, will become one of the proudest memories of the Irish race!'⁴³ The letter was not the last sign of his interest in the Polish affairs, as there is a letter from February 1864, concerning the Dublin lottery for the Polish cause⁴⁴, and an article from *Freeman's Journal* regarding the money previously collected that O'Brien received from the Patriotic Irish Society of Liverpool.⁴⁵

In the early months of 1864, O'Brien's health began to deteriorate as a result of cardiac problems and he died in Bangor, Wales, on 18 June 1864. The removal of his remains attracted crowds, particularly Irish nationalists. The funeral procession in Co. Limerick was reported to stretch for five miles. In 1870, a collection was made and O'Brien's statue was erected in Dublin, partially founded by the Poles.

Within two weeks of O'Brien's death a long and emotional obituary was published in Poland, on the first page of the *Dziennik Poznański* in the Prussian part of Poland. The author seemed to be well acquainted with Irish history and O'Brien's life. No information was included about

39 *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Jul. 1863.

40 *The Times*, 3 Jul. 1861, p. 7.

41 *Hansard* 3, clxxi, 1274 (22 Jun. 1863).

42 W. S. O'Brien, *The Lecture on Poland* (Dublin, 1863), pp 22–5.

43 *Freeman's Journal*, 11 Nov. 1863.

44 'Komitet Polsky w Paryży, Comitté Polonais à Paris', 6 Feb. 1864, Miscellaneous correspondence of William Smith O'Brien and members of his family, mainly concerning family affairs, 1863–93 (N.L.I., William Smith O'Brien Papers, M5 448, p. 3315).

45 *Freeman's Journal*, 20 Feb. 1864.

O'Brien's journeys in Poland, as it could cause problems for the editors. Although the author of the obituary is unknown, it seems to be justified to speculate that it was Władysław Bentkowski, a fine journalist and military officer who was one of the editors of the *Dziennik Poznański*, and who had stayed in Cracow at the same time as O'Brien (1863). A historian by education, Bentkowski was familiar with Irish history: he translated into Polish the work of Thomas Babington Macaulay. In 1850, another newspaper *Goniec Polski* published an article about William Smith O'Brien comparing him to the Polish patriots suffering in the Prussian prisons. The editor was Bentkowski.⁴⁶

The visit of Smith O'Brien to Poland and Lithuania in 1863 has to be seen in the context of the general interest of Irish society in Polish affairs. Many press articles, political speeches and books which appeared in times of political upheavals (i.e. in the years: 1794, 1830, 1846, 1848, 1864, and 1901) made comparisons between Poland and Ireland. The same applied somewhat to Polish literature and the press, but it was less evident due to censorship of the press in the part of Poland under Russian rule. An interest in Irish affairs was evident in 1798, the early 1800s, late 1840s, and the 1860s.⁴⁷ William Smith O'Brien was perceived differently in parts of Poland. In the journals published in Posen, he was portrayed as a national leader and martyr while in Warsaw newspapers he was seen as a dangerous rebel. This was no indication of popular feeling; it reflected nothing more than political correctness intended for censor's eye.

To finish, it is important to say something about the attitude of the Irish in relation to the Polish January rising (1863–4). At this time Ireland experienced many social and political problems, but it was generally peaceful. There were signs indicating that civil society was recovering in the aftermath of the Great Famine and that there was an awakening of parliamentary and underground activities. Few Irishmen were expressing an interest in the dramatic events at that time in Poland but those that were looked upon the Polish insurgents as their fellow prisoners from another country. It is hard to underestimate the impact which the pro-Polish (and pro-Hungarian) activities had in Ireland in terms of reawakening society, however this issue is beyond the scope of this article. It seems, that O'Brien admired both the Hungarian and Polish way and his main concern was to apply to Ireland any measure that could eventually free the country. It is just to suggest that he and other former Young Irelanders shared to some extent the idea of a general attitude of solidarity with all oppressed nations which was expressed in the following: 'for our freedom and yours.'

It was inevitable that O'Brien would see it as the duty of the Irish to support Poland, and that he would see the benefits of that to the Irish in a similar struggle for independence. He proudly wrote: 'The time will come when your intervention on behalf of Poland, however feeble it may now appear, will become one of the proudest memories of the Irish race!'⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Goniec Polski*, 24 Oct. 1850.

⁴⁷ Katarzyna Gmerek, *Polacy i materia celtycka w XIX w.* (Poznań, 2010).

⁴⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 11 Nov. 1863.

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