

A FENIAN MARRIAGE:  
THE LIFE OF MARY JANE O'DONOVAN ROSSA WITH  
HER HUSBAND JEREMIAH

A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

### A Fenian Marriage The Story of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa with Her Husband Jeremiah

Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

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Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and his wife Mary Jane Irwin O'Donovan Rossa became transatlantic celebrities both honored and occasionally ridiculed by the Irish, the British, and the American populations—sometimes all at once. Their life reflected all that was destructive about the British and Irish relationship and all that was possible with the involvement of the diaspora in the United States. The culmination of this celebrity was Rossa's funeral in Dublin, attended by hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens. Mary Jane had created the opportunity for this extraordinary funeral by agreeing to bury her husband with great fanfare in Dublin rather than keeping his remains in New York with those of her beloved lost children or with Rossa's family in County Cork. Mary Jane recognized the power of public events and dreamed Rossa's closing act would honor his passion for a Free Ireland. Her last achievement for him would follow the pattern of their lifetimes.

This dissertation is a biography of both Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and his wife Mary Jane and the unique way their marriage took advantage of their talents, both literary and political. They created this celebrity by the power of the pen, public speaking, and the ingenious use of the growing strength of the press. Mary Jane was more than a partner in Rossa's life: she was the architect and the protector of his celebrity. She was the mother of thirteen of his children and the victim of his chaotic approach to life, but she

was a patriot in her own right. She believed as wholeheartedly as he in the cause of Ireland. She was an accomplished woman of her time: a writer, a poet, and a public speaker. Mary Jane and Rossa used their celebrity to keep the struggle for Irish freedom front of mind on both sides of the Atlantic for more than fifty years. This is the story of these two formidable Irish patriots: one whose name is remembered in Ireland but whose life is not well known, and the other who has been nearly ignored in history and commemoration but whose spirit was the bridge between the Fenians and the Easter Rising in 1916.

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It has been my pleasure to tell the story of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa. Mary Jane's children spent their youth on Staten Island, as did I, although two generations apart. It was this connection that brought me to investigate Mary Jane's story, and I believe her spirit was urging me on to tell the history of this heroic woman left on the sidelines of history. This could only have been accomplished with the help of many people, but, most importantly Mary Jane's granddaughter, Patricia Byrne. Little did I know when I began this work that Pat's and my paths had crossed before, and that the friendships I have now built with this wonderful family have made this effort so meaningful. I would like to thank Pat for sharing with me her memories and her archives. I would also like to thank her cousin Williams Rossa Cole for making available the letters of his grandmother, Daisy, and wish him success with the documentary he is creating to celebrate her life as well as that of Jeremiah for the one hundredth anniversary of their deaths. So many of the other Rossa descendants have helped, I could hardly name them all. But, special thanks goes to Mike Byrne, Steven Byrne, Eileen Byrne Quill, Kathy Gelson McEachern, Rossa Cole, and John Whelpley.

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## INTRODUCTION

A beautiful bridge crosses the river Liffey in Dublin. I came upon it years ago and was struck by its long name, O'Donovan Rossa. My trip to Dublin included attendance at a Gaelic football game, and the winning team was named O'Donovan Rossa. Again, when strolling through St. Stephen's Green I came upon a monument to the man himself, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. I had seen this name before adorning an old grave in St. Peter's Cemetery in Staten Island, near my childhood home.<sup>1</sup> Who was this person whose wife, Mary Jane, was buried in 1916 in Staten Island, New York, in a lovely grave? Who was this Irishman who warranted a monument in one of Dublin's major parks, and was memorialized by the renaming of a venerable old bridge in 1942?<sup>2</sup> What made this person so popular there are modern football and hurling teams bearing his name? My curiosity clearly piqued, I delved into research and discovered a fascinating figure both venerated and vilified. Rossa was a nineteenth-century Fenian who represented the deepest passion for Irish freedom in the 800-year struggle from the stranglehold of Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> The Fenians waged a fierce battle against the British without a real war. Although they had no battlefield victories, they have had an enduring influence on the Irish people. Fenianism is the heart of the Irish republican movement and Rossa, said John Devoy, himself a leader of the Irish freedom movement for more than fifty years, was the "incarnation of

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donovan Rossa Family Grave, Section 34, Plot 13, Grave 1, St. Peter's Cemetery, Clove Road, Staten Island. NY.

<sup>2</sup> M. Phillips and A. Hamilton, "Project History of Dublin's River Liffey Bridges," *Bridge Engineering ISA*, no. BE4 (December 2003): 166. There are seventeen bridges on the Liffey: Father Mathew, Rory O'More, Grattan, Mellows, O'Connell, Liffey, Sean Heuston, Butt, Carlisle, Loopline, Talent Memorial, Frank Sherwin, East Link, Millennium, James Joyce, and Guild St - Mark, O'Donovan Rossa.

<sup>3</sup> The Fenians were a transatlantic organization based in Ireland and the United States who believed that the freedom of Ireland from British rule could only be achieved through violence.

its spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Rossa became a transatlantic celebrity both honored and ridiculed by the Irish, the British, and the American populations—sometimes all at once. His life reflected all that was destructive about the British and Irish relationship and all that was possible with the involvement of the diaspora in the United States. The culmination of his power was his funeral, where Padraic Pearse called the Irish to arms with his spellbinding panegyric:

Life springs from death: and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The Defenders of this Realm have worked well in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the fools!—They have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.<sup>5</sup>

With these words, Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Irish Rising, hoped to unite public opinion with his revolutionary aim. They were spoken at the graveside ceremony, August 1, 1915, while thousands of Irish citizens packed the Dublin streets. Joining them were the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), and the Irish Citizen Army, together for the first time in public and aimed at inciting the people to action against their British rulers. Rossa’s wife, Mary Jane Irwin O’Donovan Rossa, had created this opportunity for this extraordinary funeral by agreeing to bury her husband with great fanfare in Dublin rather than keeping his remains close by with those of her beloved lost children in New York or with Rossa’s family in county Cork. She recognized the power of public events and dreamed Rossa’s last act would honor his passion for a Free Ireland. Her last act for him would follow the pattern of their lifetimes.

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<sup>4</sup> John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (Shannon: Irish University, 1969), 319.

<sup>5</sup> Padraic Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse; Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Dublin Phoenix, 1916), 137.



Rossa was a well-known public figure on both sides of the Atlantic. He had written the one of the definitive prison diaries, *A Prison Life*, published in 1874, after it was serialized in *The Irishman* in Dublin.<sup>6</sup> This was re-published in 1892 as *Irish Rebels in English Prisons*. He also published the memoirs of his early years, *Rossa's Recollections*, in 1898, again serialized, this time in his own newspaper the *United Irishman*.<sup>7</sup> His experiences were widely reported by the press when he was elected to Parliament while he was in prison in 1869 and again shortly after arriving in exile in the United States, when he ran for election against Boss Tweed in New York City in 1871.<sup>8</sup> His wife had become a celebrity in America during his time in prison and she was a catalyst for keeping Rossa in the minds and hearts of the people during his absence. However, he was most well known for his lifelong commitment to the violent overthrow of British control in Ireland. This strategy led him to establish a fund in the United States to support violent "skirmishing" in Britain aimed at threatening the British government into giving Ireland independence. He raised substantial funds for these violent, but controversial, forays that resulted in multiple explosions and one death, and believed that this action led to an assassination attempt against him in 1885.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Prison Life Serialized," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 3, 1874.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections, 1838 to 1898: Memoirs of an Irish Revolutionary* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2004), v. Serialization appeared between January 11, 1896 and May 7, 1898.

<sup>8</sup> "Gen. Sigel's Indorsement of O'Donovan Rossa," *New York Times* (New York), November 6, 1871; "Selection of O'Donovan Rossa by Tipperary," *Irish Times* (Dublin), February 11, 1870.

<sup>9</sup> "Rossa Shot By A Woman; Fired At Five Times In The Street. ," *New York Times* (New York), February 3, 1885.

Physically Rossa suffered much for his patriotism. His treatment in prison was harsh and had a lasting impact on his health. His health was not the only thing consumed by his devotion to the cause, as his business life and family life were subsumed as well. This resulted in a very meager and very sporadic income with which to raise a very large family. His wife, Mary Jane, an accomplished poet and speaker, often found herself earning required funds to supplement the family's finances. As a result, the family relied on the generosity of the Irish American community for much of their livelihood throughout the years. Rossa's role as the publisher of the Fenian newspaper in Ireland, the *Irish People*, and publication of his own newspaper in America, the widely distributed *United Irishman*, ensured that his ideas were read widely for fifty years. Despite this celebrity with Irish nationalists, he was estranged from some of his fellow Fenians after 1880, particularly John Devoy. However, with the encouragement of Mary Jane, Devoy and Rossa renewed their friendship shortly before Rossa's death in St. Vincent's Hospital, Staten Island, on June 29, 1915.<sup>10</sup>

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa was certainly a well-known Irish revolutionary in 1915, but in the nearly 100 years after his death only two biographies have been written: one in Irish with no English translation published in 1969, *O'Donnabháin Rosa* by Seán O'Lúing; and the first English language biography *Unrepentant Fenian* by Shane Kenna, was introduced in July 2015, in time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. There is no published work about Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, who was a patriot in her own right. Why has this been the case? Other Fenians, such as John Devoy, James Stephens, Thomas Clarke Luby and John O'Leary, have all been the focus of numerous studies.

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<sup>10</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, Patriot, Dies At 83," *New York Times* (New York), June 30, 1915.

Rossa has been included as a participant in the studies focusing on the bombing of Victorian England. He is also mentioned frequently for his elaborate funeral in Dublin, but those writings include little about the man himself and virtually nothing about Mary Jane except her attendance at the funeral. It is not surprising, however, that there is little written about Mary Jane, as histories about women are still scarce.<sup>11</sup> Rossa does play a large role in the memoirs of his fellow Fenians and he is acknowledged for writing the seminal book on English prisons in the nineteenth century, yet why does he remain in the shadows? Did his commitment to violence make him an anathema for historians or did they shy away because the reminders of the realities of physical force violence were too political during the Troubles of 1969-1998? Were writers put off by his volatile personality? Was he shunned for his long history of health problems, perhaps considered mentally ill and not fit for proper study? Or was he ignored because of the disagreements he held with compatriots John Devoy or Michael Davitt, or Charles Stewart Parnell? Or was he an important instigator who ignited Irish resistance that is so disdained by much of the Victorian world? And as that instigator was it the use of the modern tool of propaganda so adeptly handled by his wife that went unnoticed by historians?

This dissertation then is a biography of both Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and his wife Mary Jane and the unique way their marriage took advantage of their talents, both literary and political. Rossa's life both in Ireland and in America helped to convince him that violence was the only way to freedom. His words were the key to keeping the flame of Irish independence and violence against Britain alive for fifty years. So was it Rossa

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<sup>11</sup> Mary S. Pierce, *Irish Feminisms, 1810 - 1930*, 5 vols., vol. 3 (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2010), xvii.

himself who ignited that flame or the “idea” of Rossa that was really the catalyst used so expertly by himself and Mary Jane? Was he more of an icon than a hero? The Rossa his contemporaries experienced is vastly different from the descriptions of him historians wrote after his death. Did he just grow too old to remain of interest for more than his funeral? Did he suffer from mental illness, and would that explain his devotion to violence? Was he really an alcoholic as some of his peers contended? Or did he just grow old and friendless? Did Rossa seriously frighten Britain, so that contemporary news accounts described him as a “madman,” in order to belittle any effect he might have? In essence, did the British press (and sometimes the American) create a demon, so that his personality rather than the true plight of the Irish was the focus?

Whatever drove the interest in him, either positive or negative, Rossa was one of the most well known celebrities of his time. Rossa created this celebrity by the power of the pen, public speaking, and the ingenious use of the growing strength of the press. But, he did not do it alone. Mary Jane was more than a partner in his life; she was the architect and the protector of his celebrity. She played a major role in the propaganda war as a well-known poet, speaker and fundraiser. The decision she made to bury Rossa at Glasnevin Cemetery was, she believed, “the lesson of his life and would constantly appeal to the hearts of thousands of his loving countrymen and women prolonging after death his powers to circumvent and worry the English government in Ireland.”<sup>12</sup> Mary Jane and Rossa used their celebrity to keep the struggle for Irish freedom front of mind on both sides of the Atlantic for more than fifty years. That same tool was used to change

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "Rossa's Death Described by Mrs. Rossa," *Gaelic American* (New York), September 11, 1915.

popular thought. This was later evidenced in 1916 when publicity of the executions changed the result of a small skirmish into a fatal blow for the British Empire. This is the story of these two formidable Irish patriots: one whose name is remembered in Ireland but whose life is not well known, and the other who was ignored in history and commemoration but whose spirit was the bridge between the Fenians and the Easter Rising in 1916. It is the story of a marriage: two lovers who spent fifty years together and who both loved Ireland. As Mary Jane wrote:

When first he called me “sweetheart” he sighed,  
And told me he loved one other beside—  
One other who was already his bride;  
And I should love her for him—I cried:  
Then he told me that other was Erin!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Lyrical Poems* (New York: Haverty, 1868), 37.

## Chapter 1

### JEREMIAH O'DONOVAN ROSSA, THE BEGINNING

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, or Dhiarmuid O'Donnabháin Rosa, as he was called in Irish, was born in Rosscarbery, County Cork, and according to the church records he was baptized on September 4, 1831.<sup>14</sup> During his lifetime, Jeremiah was never certain of his exact date or place of his birth and listed September 10 and Coolfliuch, County Cork, in any record he made.<sup>15</sup> But according to his daughter, he never had access to the church records and would probably see that as more definitive.<sup>16</sup> And since his death, both the towns of Rosscarbery and Reenascreena claim to be his birthplace, but Rossa always considered Rosscarbery as the official place even though he spent his early years in Reenascreena.<sup>17</sup> He grew up speaking both Irish and English while listening to folktales and oral history about the injustices suffered by the Irish People. His patronymic surname, Rossa, was used to distinguish his ancestors from the remaining sept of O'Donovans. It was a reminder of their original home in nearby Rossmore, the land originally acquired by the Cromwellian army, forcing his family to be tenants on their own land.<sup>18</sup> Prior to his adulthood when Jeremiah O'Donovan permanently added Rossa to his name, only Irish speaking friends and neighbors used the term to refer to his

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<sup>14</sup> Baptism September 4, 1831, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, July 20, 2015, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/0d87c80258328>.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Eileen O'Donovan Rossa McGowan, To Sean O'Luing dated July 18, 1960, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms 26788, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

family.<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah believed that publicly claiming the name Rossa was a personal defiance of British rule.<sup>20</sup>

Rossa's family lived comfortably as tenants on fair sized property in Rosscarbery. Here, as a young man, he joined other townspeople in Mick Hurley's workshop to hear one of the town scholars, Patrick Keohane, read *The Nation*, the political newspaper of Irish republicans.<sup>21</sup> These stories increased his political fervor, incited particularly after the death of the nationalist poet and activist Thomas Davis in 1845.<sup>22</sup> But any comfortable existence came to an end when the Famine began that same year. Rossa watched as his family lost first their potato crop to disease and then their wheat crop to pay the rent. His father was forced to join the public works crews, which were set up by the government. Britain refused to distribute aid without work even to those weakened by starvation. It was hard work for little pay, and he contracted famine fever in March 1847 and died.<sup>23</sup> Like so many in West Cork at the height of the Great Hunger, labeled for over a century as the Irish Famine, Rossa's father died the slow death of starvation compounded by sickness. The family was left nearly destitute. Jeremiah was sixteen, and memories of these years would last throughout his life. His experience of death and sickness was made all the more heinous by the British inaction and their ability to ignore the devastation. In his memoirs, *Rossa's Recollections 1838 to 1898: Memoirs of an*

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "The Name Rossa," *United Irishman* (New York), February 19, 1887.

<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Sean O'Luining, *O'Donnabhain Rosa, Vol I*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Sairseal agus Dill, 1969), 45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

*Irish Revolutionary*, he would later describe the term *famine* as misleading. He believed the term, *famine*, suggests a natural act of God, but blaming God for something done by the British was blasphemy to him:

There was no “famine” in Ireland; there is no famine in any country that will produce in any one year as much food as will feed the people who live in that country. . . . In the year 1845 there were 9,000,000 people in Ireland; allowing that the potato crop failed, other crops grew well, and the grain and cattle grown in the country were sufficient to sustain three times 9,000,000 people.<sup>24</sup>

Two months after his father’s death the family was evicted from their home. Since the first failure of the potato crop, Denis O’Donovan had borrowed from local lenders to feed his family. In May 1847, young Rossa would watch as the family belongings were taken and auctioned as for payment for this debt. His memory was still vivid nearly 40 years later when he wrote: “I saw the tables and the chairs and the settles thrown out on the road.”<sup>25</sup> Soon after the eviction, Rossa moved to Skibbereen to work with a cousin. His older brother John was sent passage to Philadelphia from an uncle and his younger brother, Conn, went to live with other family. His mother and sister, Mary, tried to survive on land donated from some friends but the potato crop failed again the following year. While Rossa worked hard, his meager earnings made little difference to the family’s existence and in late 1848 his mother and his remaining siblings emigrated.<sup>26</sup>

1848 was a watershed year in the move toward nationalism all over Europe, including in Ireland. Daniel O’Connell, who had achieved emancipation from the

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<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Memories - October 31, 1885," *United Irishman* (New York), October 31, 1885.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 142.



severely controlling penal laws for Catholics,<sup>27</sup> had died the previous year.<sup>28</sup> Some of his more strident followers, frustrated by the conditions, believed the time had come for physical violence in the name of Irish liberty.<sup>29</sup> Before his death, Thomas Davis was the strong voice of *The Nation* and considered the intellect and heart of the movement. Following the French Revolution in February, the Young Ireland movement, as this group came to be called, staged a short-lived but well-publicized insurrection. Although easily quelled by the British, it had a long-term effect on the growing fervor for Irish nationalism. British surveillance resulted in the arrests of some of the main conspirators.<sup>30</sup> One of these leaders, John Mitchel, was an outspoken supporter of armed rebellion who would later influence Rossa's belief in guerilla warfare.

For five years after his father's death, Rossa continued to live and work in Skibbereen with his cousin, Mortimer Dowling.<sup>31</sup> He had attended school as a young boy and his interests included poetry, literature, and genealogy, along with his focus on nationalist politics. He spent nearly all his earnings on books and writing materials. His interest in genealogy led him to a friendship with the leading genealogist of Irish families, the well-respected John O'Donovan in Dublin. They became close friends and shared a passion about the history of their native land. John O'Donovan was instrumental

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<sup>27</sup> Severe regulations prevented Catholics from attending or teaching school, owning land for longer than 31 years, serving in public office, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Christine Kinealy, *Repeal and Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2009), 105.

<sup>29</sup> John O'Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism, Vol 1*, 2 vols. (London: Downey & Co., 1896), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Christine Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland* (Stroud: Sutton, 2008), 170.

<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 142.

in Rossa's nomination and election as a member of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society as recognition for his work on the O'Donovan genealogy.<sup>32</sup>

On June 5, 1853, at age 21, he married for the first time to Hanora Eagar.<sup>33</sup> Nano, as she was called, had been running a small shop she had inherited in Skibbereen when she met Rossa at one of the lively social events she held there occasionally for a small group of young people. She, like he, was very popular and socially active among the more educated but still economically struggling young adults in the area.<sup>34</sup> Their marriage produced four sons: Denis, born in April of 1854; John, born in August of 1855; Jeremiah, born in January of 1857; and Conn, born in March of 1858.<sup>35</sup> As a young husband and father, Rossa started his own business, a store that catered to the more established population in Skibbereen, selling a general supply of hardware and farm seeds. He also had a small bar on the premises—a common occurrence in country areas at the time. From here he could expound on his own views and interest others in politics and literature. Sean O'Luing in an early manuscript of his 1969 Irish language biography of Rossa states: "In Skibbereen, Rossa was looked on as a kind of poet-laureate." He wrote

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<sup>32</sup> Mark F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1946), 87.

<sup>33</sup> Marriage 1853, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 1, 2015, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/4a85f70048807>.

<sup>34</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 175.

<sup>35</sup> Baptism April 6, 1854, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 14, 2014, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/28d6310277740>; Baptism August 5, 1855, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 15, 2014, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/c196600278014>; Baptism January 18, 1857, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 14, 2014, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/2eb8ed0278259>; Baptism March 9, 1858, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 14, 2014, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/d27de50278497>.

ballads that were circulated in town, which had political overtures. He wrote “rhyming commentary for the traditional Shrove Tuesday gaiety” and also “spent time learning step dancing at the local dancing school.”<sup>36</sup>

His time in Skibbereen was also the beginning of his active role in the Irish nationalist (republican) movement. In 1856, he joined a number of other young men in forming the Phoenix National Literary Society, a deceiving name for a nationalist military organization devoted to drilling soldiers for the hoped-for battle. Rossa was distressed that the Irish nationalist movement in Ireland seemed to be nearly eradicated after 1848. This was most apparent in 1854 when no revolutionary activity existed while Britain was engaged elsewhere during the Crimean War. As Rossa wrote in his *Recollections*: “There was not a red-coat soldier left in Ireland; there was not a stir in Ireland against English rule.”<sup>37</sup> Strategy for Irish insurrection had always maintained that battle should be drawn while Britain was distracted by problems elsewhere in the world. Therefore, he proposed the name “Phoenix” in the title of the new organization to signify that the cause for Irish independence was to rise again.<sup>38</sup> Rossa used words in a speech given on January 2, 1858, at the one-year anniversary dinner for the founding of the organization that would iterate his passion of a lifetime:

Irishmen have a right to the country of their birth. By the use and aid of one steel . . . the pen—our committee have taken possession of that right, and as their title one day may be disputed, I trust they will be able and willing to prove it by the aid of another steel—the sword.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Sean O’Luing, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, Manuscript, 1960, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*.

<sup>38</sup> John Savage, *Fenian Heroes and Martyrs* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1868), 345.

<sup>39</sup> Sean O’Luing, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, Manuscript, 1960.

Thus he began his lifelong campaign to convince other Irishmen to join the cause. He believed that publicity of the cause was the way to expand a movement and the more he could find ways to get out that message the more powerful the movement would become. Some of his compatriots thought his ideas were risky and believed that secrecy was safer, but Rossa was afraid that secrecy destined the group of believers to be few in number and lacking the spirit to create change by violence. He never believed that Ireland could be free of British domination without violence and he believed that preparing for that battle was the job of each of the members.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, an Irish American organization, the Emmet Monument Association, had been formed in 1855 in New York as the outgrowth of one founded by John Mitchel on April 13, 1854 called the Irishmen's Civil and Military Republican Union.<sup>41</sup> Its goals were similar to those of the Phoenix Society: recruiting soldiers and raising money for an invasion to free Ireland.<sup>42</sup> In 1858, the leaders of this organization, Michael Doheny and John O'Mahony, asked a fellow 1848er, James Stephens, to build an Irish army and join their efforts for the violent overthrow of the British government. On March 17, 1858, Stephens established the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (IRB) with money sent from New York, where the Emmet Monument organization was now called the Fenian Brotherhood.<sup>43</sup> The name *Fenian* is a version of *Fianna*, the ancient Irish soldiers of

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<sup>40</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> William D'Arcy, "The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858-1886" (Dissertation, Catholic University, 1947), 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Denieffe, *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood; Giving a Faithful Report of the Principal Events From 1855 to 1867* (New York: The Gael Publishing 1906; reprint, Forgotten Books, 2012), 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

legend, and was soon the name most often used to describe members of both the American and Irish organizations.

In May 1858, Stephens, while proselytizing through Skibbereen, met Rossa. Immediately nearly all one hundred men of the Phoenix Society became members of the IRB.<sup>44</sup> Rossa became an active leader and recruiter for the Brotherhood and in six weeks the membership increased to nearly three hundred men throughout West Cork. As designed by Rossa, the Phoenix Society was a public organization, intended to attract the interest of journalists. It was at this early in his political career that he began to use publicity to create interest for fellow patriots as well as exaggerating the impact on his sworn enemy, the British Government. This added to the excitement but raised fear in the British, so much so that the government sent an additional force of 105 men to Skibbereen and sixty to Bantry, a large town nearby. By December 6, 1858, the British became so concerned that they arrested Rossa and more than twenty others.<sup>45</sup> After holding all of the men for a few weeks, most were released; only Rossa and two others remained in custody. All during his captivity, Rossa wrote letters to members of the British government and worked surreptitiously to make sure they were published in the local press.<sup>46</sup> This made him a popular hero locally but a larger target for authorities. The three men were held for eight months without trial and finally released, as the Government could not convict them: no one would testify against them. However, in

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<sup>44</sup>Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels in English Prisons: A Record of Prison Life* (New York: Sadlier, 1878), 6.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 216.

<sup>46</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To the General Lieutenant of Ireland dated May 9, 1859, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/1/8, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

order to help gain release for a fellow Fenian subsequently captured, the prisoners were required to plead guilty to a lesser charge.<sup>47</sup> While in prison for those eight months, Rossa proved himself a bane to the British authorities. He wrote letters to newspapers and government officials mocking the lack of legal process and ensuring that the prisoners' situation was in the forefront of public discourse. Rossa went to great lengths to ensure that his situation was recorded publicly so that many of these missives were published in newspapers not only in Ireland but also in England and the United States.<sup>48</sup> Although believing that keeping a man in prison without trial was "a breach of treaty," Rossa accepted release ultimately because his business in Skibbereen was ruined and his family had suffered such hardship. He was released on July 27, 1859.<sup>49</sup>

Rossa returned to Skibbereen and attempted to revive his business and personal life, but both were severely shattered by his time in prison and the devastating death of his wife shortly after his release. Rossa was known in New York by this time, as a death notice for Nano Eager O'Donovan Rossa was noted in the New York *Irish American Weekly* in November.<sup>50</sup> The rich landlord clientele were now wary of conducting business with him, and opportunity among the poorer class was limited. He continued to own a shop but dealt more in liquor than in hardware as had been his previous experience.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John Savage, *Fenian Heroes and Martyrs*, 347-8.

<sup>48</sup> "The Southern Reporter," *The Cork Daily Reporter* (Cork), July 15, 1859.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 228-9.

<sup>50</sup> "Our Dublin Correspondent," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), November 26, 1859.

<sup>51</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 20.

His political activities continued as if uninterrupted, however, including his association with James Stephens. In spring 1861 he met with John O'Mahony, who was visiting from America, and strengthened his ties with the Irish American Fenians. While O'Mahony was in Ireland he discussed with Stephens the need to revitalize the Fenian strategy in the mind of the public. They developed a plan for a public demonstration that could be used to generate support among the people of Ireland.<sup>52</sup> Rossa became an important organizer of that demonstration held for funeral of Terence Belew McManus on November 10, 1861.<sup>53</sup> McManus was a former 1848er who escaped from prison in Van Diemen's Land (now called Tasmania) and died in San Francisco.<sup>54</sup> His funeral, a well-orchestrated spectacle in Dublin, was attended by nearly 100,000 people and marked the beginning of widespread support in Ireland for the Fenians.<sup>55</sup> This support occurred despite moves by the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland to prevent it, even though Archbishop John Hughes had conducted a funeral service in New York prior to the body being shipped to Ireland.<sup>56</sup> Cardinal Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin, had made it clear that he was opposed to the Fenians. He believed that the Catholic Church in Ireland should support the current government unless that government attacked the Church.<sup>57</sup> The Fenians also believed in the separation of Church and State, hoping to attract Protestant

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<sup>52</sup> Oliver P. Rafferty, *The Church, the State and the Fenian Threat, 1861-75* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 25.

<sup>53</sup> "The Remains of T.B. McManus," *New York Times* (New York), November 21, 1861.

<sup>54</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 235-6.

<sup>55</sup> Mark F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Oliver P. Rafferty, *The Church, the State and the Fenian Threat, 1861-75*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

as well as Catholic supporters. This concept was unpopular in clerical circles, where they believed the Church should have control over the civil as well as religious life of the Catholic populace. The Church had an overall opposition to oath-bound organizations such as the Fenians and was against any political activity that threatened the status quo. After all, this strategy had given the Church substantial control over the Irish people. The Church worked hard to denounce the MacManus funeral and stem the rise of popular opinion in support of Irish liberty and the Fenians. Cardinal Cullen had initially refused the request for the funeral, which caused a public outcry but did not stop a priest from conducting a gravesite service.<sup>58</sup> The Church was unsuccessful in preventing the spectacle and became a longtime enemy of the leaders of the rebels. The true success of the demonstration was that membership in the Fenian organization reportedly doubled in the following few weeks.<sup>59</sup>

With Rossa's reputation as a Fenian and a revolutionary well established, it was not a surprise that his future father-in-law objected strenuously to his marriage to the well-born, European-educated Ellen Buckley. They eloped in 1861 and the next year had a son, Florence Stephens, named after the Fenian Chief.<sup>60</sup> Shortly after his fifth son's birth—and after further business difficulties—Rossa took the opportunity to represent the Fenians on a trip to New York. While there he pursued the chance to immigrate, starting

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<sup>58</sup> Oliver P. Rafferty, *The Church, the State and the Fenian Threat, 1861-75*, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections of an Irish National Journalist* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis 1883), 115.

<sup>60</sup> Baptism April 5, 1863, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 1, 2015, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/20d5e50279606>.



a business with a relative and planning to send later for his family.<sup>61</sup> He visited his mother, now settled in Philadelphia, and spent time with Irish American Fenians fighting in the Civil War. He observed his future home of Staten Island, commenting on its beauty later in his memoirs as he arrived in May 1863,<sup>62</sup> but also he saw the bad times of the Draft Riots later in July.<sup>63</sup> He also took advantage of the opportunity to file his first papers for American citizenship.<sup>64</sup> His aim was to better support his growing family but sadly, while he was there, Ellen O'Donovan Rossa died in childbirth at the home of her parents in Ireland, on July 9, 1863.<sup>65</sup> A devastated Rossa returned to Ireland to his now dispersed family.<sup>66</sup> In November 1863, Stephens called him to Dublin to be business manager of a newly established newspaper, the *Irish People*. Stephens asked those who were the leaders of the Fenian Central Secret Committee to work with the paper, including Thomas Clarke Luby, John O'Leary and Charles Kickham, all as the joint editors.<sup>67</sup> The offices were at 12 Parliament Street, just one hundred yards away from Dublin Castle, and the home of the British government in Ireland. Stephens and his circle of Fenian leaders believed that publicizing their belief in rebellion was an important goal

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<sup>61</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 142.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Murder of Colonel O'Brien," *United Irishman* (New York), October 16, 1886.

<sup>64</sup> Sean O'Luining, *O'Donnabhain Rosa, Vol II*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Sairseal Agus Dill, 1979), 48.

<sup>65</sup> "Munster, Cork," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 15, 1863. Mary Mackey, "O'Donovan and his Second Wife," *Mizen Journal*, 1999, no. 7; "Munster, Cork," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 15, 1863.

<sup>66</sup> His first four sons were being raised by O'Donovan relatives, and his fifth, Florence Stephens stayed with Ellen Buckley's family.

<sup>67</sup> John O'Leary, *Recollections, Volume I*, 239.

and did not expect to shy away from taking a stand. This obstinacy for principle and propaganda was both a strength and a weakness. In the short life of the *Irish People*, many Irishmen were convinced of the rightness of the battle, but their openness led them quickly to trouble with the authorities.

## Chapter 2

### MARY JANE IRWIN, THE BEGINNING

While Rossa was part of building the *Irish People*, his soon-to-be third wife was just returning to her home in Clonakilty after finishing school in County Tipperary. Her background was more privileged than that of Rossa, but her belief in a free Ireland was similar. Mary Jane Irwin was born on January 27, 1845, in Clonakilty, County Cork, the eldest of ten children born to Maxwell Irwin and Margaret Keohane.<sup>68</sup> Like Rossa, she was from a family that had been long in the West Cork area. Her mother's family, the highly esteemed Keohanes, was a very old family from Rosscarbery and believed to be nationalist descendants from Maria O'Regan, who was a hero from the Battle of Rosscarbery on July 12, 1800.<sup>69</sup> Her father's family was well established in Clonakilty. Maxwell Irwin was active in local politics and reform and was an outspoken member of the Temperance organization as evidenced by a notice publicized in 1842 in the *Cork Examiner*.<sup>70</sup> Although a convert to Catholicism, he was a follower of Daniel O'Connell and active in the Repeal movement as early as June 1843, when he was listed with other supporters in the *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*.<sup>71</sup> He was also later a member of Young Ireland and participated in the failed uprising of 1848.<sup>72</sup> Irwin, a

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<sup>68</sup> Baptism January 26, 1845, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 1, 2015, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/fad50c0029145>.

<sup>69</sup> Kieran Wyse, Exhibit on Centenary of Jeremiah and Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, July 1, 2015, Cork County Library and Arts Service, Cork.

<sup>70</sup> "Temperance Tea Party At Clonakilty," *Cork Examiner* (Cork), September 2, 1842.

<sup>71</sup> "Repeal! Repeal! Repeal!," *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier* (Cork), June 13, 1843.

<sup>72</sup> Kieran Wyse, Exhibit on Centenary of Jeremiah and Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, July 1, 2015.

merchant, believed in education and recognized Mary Jane's intelligence at an early stage. She was sent first to Miss White's school, and then to the Convent of Mercy School in Clonakilty, where she was a top student. At age fifteen she went to the Sacred Heart Convent School in Roscrea, County Tipperary, where she learned French and Italian, as well as furthered her knowledge of English literature.<sup>73</sup> As an award-winning student in Roscrea she wrote a poem "The Beads of Mary—a legend of Rosscarbery" which was later acclaimed by Owen Roe, the Fenian writer Eugene Davis, in the literary journal *The Shamrock*.<sup>74</sup> The poem depicts a legend of the Fairie Queene of Carrigeliódhna, a lady of beauty and power who was a source of fear and anxiety for young women of her native area in West Cork. Here Mary Jane writes of a young girl using her rosary beads to keep her safe as she crosses the bridge. Mary Jane showed real talent at such a young age but this poem also shows how influenced she was by her native area. Perhaps she was homesick for Clonakilty when writing it. Homesickness for both Ireland and later the United States would influence her poetry and her life for the next fifty years. This early poem sets the stage for her future poetic writings:

Nigh fifty years have glided on  
 Their varied course each measure meeting,  
 Of joy how small! Of sorrow wan,  
 How great the need poor mortals greeting,  
 Since what I sing; though not the bliss  
 Nor yet the grief sweet nature pressing,  
 Occurred and testified the peace  
 Attached to Mary's potent blessing.

Tween fair Rosscarbery's wooded site  
 And Clonakilty scarce last name,

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<sup>73</sup> Academic Award presented to Mary Jane Irwin, 1861, Papers Collected by Sean O'Luing, Ms 22,917, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>74</sup> Mark F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories*, 92.

The peasants traveled many a night,  
 From fair or mart, or pattern coming;  
 And often to beguile the way  
 In winter time and the weather,  
 All franked their purchase in one day,  
 And faced the murky road together.

For in this time were goblins rife,  
 And many crossroads counted airy,  
 And round the fire of the thrifty wife  
 Would stories tell of ghost and fairy.  
 Some in Dhouned held whip and rein  
 And scourged mankind from there to Dhroena,  
 And young men feared the spells of her—  
 The Faerie Queene of Carrigeliódhna.

Black clouds enchained the struggling moon  
 One story night, as home returning,  
 A peasant left the neighboring town,  
 Her steps to fair Rosscarbery turning,  
 And sore in fear to be alone,  
 With inky darkness all around her,  
 She prayed the Virgin and the Saints  
 From evil things to keep and bound her.

And with her trembling fingers drew  
 From out the pocket where they rested,  
 Her Rosary beads, to help her speed,  
 While wind and sleety rain she breasted.  
 The blustering gale blew right and left,  
 And fore and aft, with vexine current,  
 And in her tears it drowned the war  
 Of water bridged above the torrent.

She told her teaching beads—wrought strange—  
 A coffin, holy relics holding,  
 Hung from the rounded polish range  
 Of stones in quaint and curious moulding,  
 And said to be of Blessed worth  
 In banning ghosts and spirits unholy;  
 She told her beads and went unhurt  
 By ghosts or ghouls or goblins, wholly.

And on she trudged, and, murmuring still  
 “Hail Mary,” the mill bridge was nearing,  
 My journey now is near its fill

She thought—the thought her spirit cheering:  
 When sudden in her hands a blaze  
 Of glorious light the Rosary flashing,  
 Revealed to Ellen's startled gaze  
 The broken bridge, the waters splashing.

In mad confusion o'er the wreck  
 One step beyond where she was standing,  
 The swollen current knew no check,  
 But leapt and swept the bounds, disbanding  
 The remnants of its jailer—then  
 It rolled along in foaming thunder,  
 And far away it growled again,  
 Tearing the mortared stones asunder.

Prostrate she fell to heaven's Queen,  
 Her grateful accents loud upraising,  
 Still did the rosary burn and gleam  
 With all on unwaning glory blazing;  
 Till turning from the dangerous place,  
 She trod her way, then slowly waning,  
 It paled away, and died apace,  
 With flickering halo around her raining.

And when she reached her house and told  
 Her wondrous tale, mid prayer and blessing,  
 A man was sent to watch the ford,  
 Till morning broke, to warning those passing,  
 A new bridge spans the peasants' way,  
 Both strong and safe, for those most wary,  
 And o'er its brink I heard one day  
 This legend of the beads of Mary.<sup>75</sup>

After Mary Jane finished school she went home to Clonakilty. Rossa had been calling on her father relative to his IRB work and was certainly known to her when she was a young child. Rossa first mentions meeting Mary Jane when she was just twelve or thirteen years old when he was recruiting for James Stephens and came to the Irwin house to meet with her father. He recalls that she had “twinkling eyes, and red rosy

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<sup>75</sup> Owen Roe, "Hours With Irish Poets No. XXXIII -- Mrs. M.J. O'Donovan Rossa," in *The Shamrock* (Dublin: Irish National Newspaper and Publishing, 1877), 483.

cheeks and coal black hair.”<sup>76</sup> It is not clear that Maxwell Irwin was a member of the IRB but his position in the community at Clonakilty made him an important connection for Rossa, even more so after Rossa became the publisher of the *Irish People*.<sup>77</sup> According to advertisements in the *West Cork Eagle*, Irwin’s business, Maxwell Irwin & Sons on Sand-Quay, Clonakilty, sold threshing machines, ploughs, and American stoves.<sup>78</sup> This business and other activities such as Temperance meetings and the Repeal Association would have made him a popular member of the middle class in town.

According to one of Mary Jane’s letters to Rossa, in 1865, she recollected they met again in April 1864 while attending the funeral for a young relative of the Irwin family in West Cork.<sup>79</sup> Soon they were romantically involved and some of Mary Jane’s poetry began to appear in the *Irish People* under various pseudonyms. John O’Leary, who was editor of the paper at the time, believed she had great promise as a poet.<sup>80</sup> Along with Ellen O’Leary, John’s sister, Mary Jane was one of the few women publishing nationalist poetry in the 1860s.<sup>81</sup> Similar to the period twenty years earlier when *The Nation* was the newspaper of rebellion and a number of women such as Lady Jane Wilde known as Speranza were writing, Mary Jane and Ellen O’Leary’s poetry had great impact on other young people.

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<sup>76</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, 202.

<sup>77</sup> He was named as publisher in the official registration papers.

<sup>78</sup> Sean O’Luing, *O’Donnabhain Rosa, I*, 197.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated April 10, 1865, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>80</sup> John O’Leary, *Recollections, Volume I*, 107.

<sup>81</sup> "Ellen O’Leary," *Southern Star* (Cork), December 30, 1905.

Rossa and Mary Jane had become engaged without the knowledge of her parents, for though they respected Rossa and agreed with his politics, they thought him unsettled and his material prospects precarious. Adding to their concerns for their nineteen-year-old daughter were Rossa's five sons. Although they were currently cared for by relatives, they would undoubtedly become Mary Jane's responsibility. On discovering the engagement they insisted Mary Jane end the relationship and she did write to Rossa to end it. A few years later Rossa wrote a poem, "The Dutiful Daughter," about receiving that letter and the pain he felt at the time. The young couple used poetry to communicate their affection and Rossa pens what may have been Mary Jane's thoughts at the time to begin his poem. Just as he later did throughout his life, Rossa used the idea that he could magnify his case if he used the press. He shows here that it was not limited to magnifying his politics.

A dutiful daughter won my heart  
 And after winning it, cruelly said,  
 I write to tell you that we must part,  
 For papa and mamma won't have us wed.

Mamma asked me last night to sing,  
 As we sat in the parlor after tea;  
 But as I played, she noticed the ring—  
 Then I told the truth, when she questioned me.

She said she liked you well as a friend,  
 And wished none better than she wished you.  
 And telling papa—he said it could end.  
 In nothing but ruin to the two.

He knew you were never inclined to save;  
 He knew you were never a miser, nor poor;  
 He knew that all you could hope to have  
 Would keep a wife, but would keep no more

That cares come on in a year or two,  
 Which young people marrying never see;



And 'twould be as much as you could do  
To get us both bread, butter and tea.

That half the miseries of this life  
Were caused by people who rashly wed;  
That he was to blame who took a wife,  
Unprepared for others, who'd cry for bread.

I never saw papa so troubled before;  
I never saw mamma cry.  
I told them I'd think of our marriage no more,  
For they know more of the world than I.

Then papa said he would write a letter,  
To tell you the matter was at an end;  
But mamma thought I might write the letter,  
And send the ring in it—which I send.

As this is my last—I'll say adieu;  
I never looked into the future before  
What papa and Mamma say is true.  
Good bye! Good bye. Don't write any more.

This is the letter that causes the smart;  
This is the letter that nurses the pain;  
This is the letter that pierces the heart;  
This is the letter that burns the brain.

Bright dreams of Paradise, where have you gone?  
Odors of fairy bowers, where have you flown?  
Cupid plucked summer flowers, where are you strewn?  
Am I lost, am I left in the world alone?

I can't rest, I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't pray –  
Can do nothing but drink—oh! I wouldn't much grieve  
If death would but come in a natural way,  
But God in His mercy ordains that I live.

I'm like a wreck on a sea-washed rock,  
That every wave heaves to and fro;  
I'm like a lightning-stricken oak  
With odds against having an heir to inherit.

Will anything alter the state of my mind?  
I find myself tempted to go on a spree—  
Or go making verses—I'm strongly inclined

To appeal through the Press for sympathy.<sup>82</sup>

Rossa writes that there was also discussion among Mary Jane's family that she would be sent to Queensland, Australia, for a marriage match organized by her aunt. But, their love persisted and they eventually convinced Irwin of their steadfast agreement, and he reluctantly consented to the match. In October of 1864, Rossa was expected to make a trip to England and Scotland for James Stephens to review the IRB resources as they prepared for revolution. Rossa, however, was determined to marry Mary Jane prior to taking this trip. Therefore, on his way to Clonakilty he called at his Dublin parish to request a marriage license. His efforts were stymied by the Church's rule aimed at censure of the Fenians. The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, under Cardinal Cullen, refused to recognize or permit the sacraments to anyone who had taken a secret oath. Rossa then left Dublin and stopped in Cork on his way to Clonakilty. Again he tried to obtain a formal license from the Church and again he left with no certificate but only an informal marriage license. When Rossa arrived in Clonakilty still without a proper license, he and Maxwell Irwin went to the parish priest, Father Leader. Father Leader in response asked to see Mary Jane himself, ostensibly to convince her not to marry a Fenian. The priest then told Rossa he would have to go directly to the bishop in Skibbereen to receive a license. Rossa explained that he needed to leave soon for Scotland on business and felt he had done everything required by the Church thus far to no avail. Mary Jane then told the priest they would leave for Cork and get married there without the Church. Father Leader was shocked to think Mary Jane would leave the

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<sup>82</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 30.

parish in scandal.<sup>83</sup> He then instructed the curate, Father Patrick Madden, to marry the couple, albeit in the church vestibule; this marriage took place on October 22, 1864. As unorthodox as the wedding was the couple did receive a certificate from the Church.<sup>84</sup>

When they married, Rossa was thirty-three years old and twice widowed, the father of five sons ages ten, nine, seven, six and eighteen months. Mary Jane was just nineteen years of age. Rossa's young sons did not attend the wedding in Clonakilty, and Mary Jane and Rossa left on their wedding trip before she had the opportunity to meet the boys.<sup>85</sup> The older four boys were in Skibbereen being taken care of by a family friend, Mrs. Healy, where they had been since the death of their mother. The youngest boy, Florence Stephens, was living with his Buckley grandparents not far from Skibbereen.

Immediately after the wedding, Mary Jane and Rossa took an unlucky steamer from Cork to Liverpool, which broke down twice before the trip was abandoned back in Cork. Ignoring the trouble, they then took the train to Dublin. They soon arrived in Liverpool as their first stop on the trip through England and Scotland, where Rossa visited men of the IRB in various town and cities. Much of that time Mary Jane was left sitting in railroad stations and boarding houses waiting for her husband to return after meetings.<sup>86</sup> Although they did enjoy some time in London together, Mary Jane must have realized that this was what was soon to be her life. Her brief comments about this trip

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<sup>83</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 29-31.

<sup>84</sup> Memorial of Marriage, 1864, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>86</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Fenian Movement XI," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), August 16, 1885.

don't reflect any consternation about the neglected wife but it is interesting to note that in her later life it would be unusual for her to have been so quiet about such treatment. It was nearly Christmas when they returned to Dublin where they both immersed themselves in writing and political activity. Rossa's work as business manager and recruiter for the IRB left little time for writing articles for the newspaper, but Mary Jane became a very frequent contributor. She wrote poetry under the name "Clíodhna," a name she borrowed from West Cork myth about a fairy muse. Her own poem, some of it shown below, about this myth may reveal how she may have viewed her romantic role with Rossa. It also very clearly reflects the West Cork area they both called home. He used the name "Clíodhna" for her throughout their lives when referring to their love and his muse.

#### A South of Ireland Legend

There dwelt in Corrigelíodhna, on the coast  
 Of pleasant Munster, once, a fairy queen,  
 Below her realm afront the strong waves washed,  
 And backward sloped a spread of softest green.

Much love Queen Clíodhna showed for humankind,  
 More than was good, I heard old mothers say,  
 And when I questioned, wisely shaken heads  
 And sage rejoinder ordered into play.

My curious interest! anear and far  
 Mothers and maidens feared her magic art,  
 And kept fair sons and sweethearts from the coast,  
 For beauty moved the fairy ruler's heart.

And many a brave lad, toil, or pleasure drawn  
 Beyond Glandore, to Ross, or the Red Strand,  
 With weird enchantments found his way beset,  
 And tremulous music of the fairy land.

And many a tale I heard of how the queen  
 Would strike the different chords of different minds,  
 And one by pleasure, one by profit lure,  
 And one by promised power o'er sea and winds.

And one within the memory of the dame—  
 A brown-faced youth, she told me, ruddy-cheeked,  
 With passionate fires lighting his dark eyes,  
 And chestnut curls from forehead steady streaked.

He laughed a merry laugh at weirdest tale  
 Of fairy stories and the Fairy Queen:  
 He hugged his books. (He was a stranger here,)  
 “These are my love” he said, and sought the green.

He spread big volumes on the velvet moss,  
 He laid him down and chuckled merrily,  
 First at his pleasant thoughts, and then he read,  
 And then we heard him mutter, “Verily

“There is no wine like wine from study’s cup,  
 There is no woman fruitful as my muse  
 In fruits of honey for the spreading soul,  
 Fair Knowledge is the bride my life shall choose.”

He looked as fair as any heathen god,  
 Resting with easy length upon the sword;  
 He saw the broad waves foam like prancing steeds,  
 He heard them smite the rocks with loud accord,

And then a vision broke his waking dream—  
 Draped in a sunset cloud a form of light,  
 With earthly beauty moulded from the skies,  
 And eyes that banished night.

He heard low words, fall sweet as honey-drops  
 That melt from smooth cliffs in the Promised Land;  
 “O, fairest youth” it murmured, “I have waited  
 A weary time to greet you on this strand.

“For on your brow a spirit seal is set,  
 Your thoughts grow tangled in a seeking river,  
 And never shall grow clear without my reign—  
 I hold the beauty you shall love forever.

“So clasp your hand in mine my brave bright boy,  
 And we shall wander thro’ the world together;  
 I know the trees where fruits of knowledge grow,  
 I know the reddest banks of waving heather.

“And when you weary we shall rest us there,  
 And list the murmurous tidings from the forest,  
 The leafy lips that flutter all things sweet,  
 The restless brook, the old woods sweetest chorist.

“I know the caves within this spreading sea,  
 Where whitest pearls and reddest corals cluster;  
 And I know all the wild waves sobbing say,  
 When angry winds against their white necks bluster.

“So clasp my hand and let us pilot through  
 the dreaming glory of this pleasant world,  
 And sea or forest, hill, or vale shall tell,  
 The unread love within its bosom furled.

“His be the dreams I dream who is my love,  
 High pinions flashing in the brow of heaven,  
 And burning thoughts like starry hosts above  
 The cloudy curtains of a Summer even.”

She ceased, and shook aside her glistening hair,  
 That rippled golden to the yellow sand;  
 She bent her winsome blue eyes on his brow;  
 She beckoned him with a lily hand.

And all the youth's resolve edged slowly out,  
 Within the magic of the fairy's spell;  
 He stretched his arms, and on his burning lips  
 Her cool sweet kisses fell.

He stretched his arms, he clasped her; and from out  
 The shimmering ocean and the bronze-rocked shore  
 A mist arose, enfolding both, and he,  
 The student youth was heard of never more.<sup>87</sup>

Rossa's frequent absences were a trial for the young newlywed as she wrote in her scrapbook when reminiscing a few years later. However, she was quick to point out that Rossa's role in the nationalist movement was more important than her loneliness:

A source of great distress to me were my husband's frequent absences for weeks together on national business and I take some credit to myself for having young as I was had the forbearance never to express by word or look my desire on the

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *Lyrical Poems*, 13.

subject—lest he should be tempted to please me at the expense of national interests.<sup>88</sup>

While they were in England and Scotland, Rossa was frequently in circumstances that were precarious legally. While trying to convince Irishmen now living abroad to join the Brotherhood and plan to take part in rebellion, he was confronted by some who were eager to turn him in to the authorities. He sometimes barely escaped, being followed and held. Rossa wrote about those days in an article in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1885, recollecting what quick thinking was required to walk away.<sup>89</sup> Mary Jane was concerned about the risk of his work as well, but showed her own spirit of nationalism while also hinting at the self confidence that would be so important throughout her life:

I will not enter into any of the alternate joys and fears of my few months of married life. I was ever bracing up my heart to hear before night that my husband was a prisoner, but I never experienced any desire to cool his ardor in the national cause, on the contrary I envied him that he would have the man's glorious part "to dare and to do" and I should only take the woman's inglorious and most soul quieting share to sit passively to suffer and to live while my fate was being decided without my aid, before my eyes.<sup>90</sup>

They led very active lives in Dublin. Rossa, John O'Leary, Thomas Clarke Luby, and Charles Kickham were working as the editors and publishers of the *Irish People*. James Stephens was still the overall leader but he was not often in Dublin. The wives and sisters of these men also became a social circle for the young wife. Ellen O'Leary along with Mary Jane wrote poetry for the newspaper, and Letitia Luby was an active supporter

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<sup>88</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>89</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Fenian Movement XI," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), August 16, 1885.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

of the IRB. As young as she was, Mary Jane became a major contributor to the newspaper and a full participant in the active social group made up of older people who had been friends for some time. During the short life of the *Irish People*, the staff spent Friday nights at the home of John O’Leary. These gatherings, hosted by his sisters Ellen and Mary, were as much social as political. The main topics of conversation were literature as well as politics, and here both Mary Jane and Rossa were strong contributors.<sup>91</sup> But Rossa was James Stephens’s major recruiter for the IRB and was traveling a great deal. Mary Jane, still the young romantic, wrote to him while he traveled care of the *Irish People* office whence mail and messages were sent. During March and April 1865, Mary Jane was staying in Clonakilty and her letters to Rossa are full of fondness and family gossip but also contain evidence that she was taking time with his sons to get to know them and build a close relationship. She speaks of the youngest son, Florence Stephens, whom she called Stephens, having asked his Buckley grandparents to “make him her own” but “they would not let me.”<sup>92</sup> It would be the first of many disappointments and much grief the two would share over their children. But we can see her humor in these letters as well, particularly in one dated April 2, 1865, when she discussed what was said at church (the emphasis is hers):

I heard since what Father Leader said. Twas the usual “Pulpit Denunciation” of the supposed Society with a little variation which consisted in his informing his congregation that “The Recruiting Sergeant” was here a short time ago & has left his marks behind him for of the formerly peaceable young men of the town more than half are now Fenians, led astray,—going to destruction don’t go to Church or

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<sup>91</sup> Marcus Bourke, *John O’Leary, A Study in Irish Separatism* (Tralee: Anvil, 1967), 70.

<sup>92</sup> Mary Jane O’Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa dated March 31, 1865, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.



chapel or attend any religious duty” &c &c &c—You of course are the  
 “Recruiting Serg[eant].”<sup>93</sup>

During this time, in addition to Rossa traveling for the IRB, he and Mary Jane did make a few trips from Dublin to Skibbereen together where Mary Jane visited with the children and her family. So it was not a surprise when in late June 1865, while Rossa left Cobh for New York on a trip for James Stephens, Mary Jane stayed in Cork visiting her family in Clonakilty as well as the boys in Skibbereen. Rossa expected to stay in New York for a few months to calm the concerns of the Americans about IRB readiness. O’Mahony was dealing with hostility in his organization as two newly elected members of the Central Committee, P.J Meehan and William R. Roberts were anxious to have their Civil War experienced troops begin the rebellion planned for in Ireland. In reaction, O’Mahony was sending two men to review the organization in Ireland to determine Stephens’ organization when Rossa arrived. Given that substantial funds to support the transatlantic organization were needed from donations in the United States, Stephens would very seriously view this review. The leaders in Ireland believed the time had come for rebellion and Rossa, knowing how important it would be to convince the New York delegates of their readiness, believed his place was in Ireland. O’Mahony, however, wanted Rossa to stay in New York. Despite O’Mahony’s pleadings, on July 12, after only seven days, Rossa left on the same ship, the *Cuba*, as the two emissaries, P.J. Meehan and P.W. Dunne and a draft for £500.<sup>94</sup> Rossa learned during this trip that O’Mahony had disagreed with Stephens’ request to pay for Rossa’s passage and had written a letter to

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<sup>93</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated April 2, 1865, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections*, 154.

Stephens requesting Rossa be sent back to America as soon as possible.<sup>95</sup> This correspondence and the money draft mysteriously disappeared during the voyage and miraculously appeared again later, when it became the basis for the British government's case of conspiracy against Rossa.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> John Rutherford, *The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy, Its Origin, Objects, and Ramifications*, Vol 2, 2 vols. (London: C. Kegan Paul 1877), 84.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections*, 154.

## Chapter 3

### ARREST AND PRISON

The *Irish People* became the main proselytizing outlet for the Fenians. It contained inflammatory anti-British and pro-revolutionary editorials in addition to foreign political news, correspondence with readers, and original literature. Espousing the main principles of separatist politics and the advocacy of armed insurrection, it was broadly read by the middle and working classes. It was among this group that membership rolls grew to a size feared by the British to be 120,000 men, but was undoubtedly significantly less. The popularity of the newspaper was also its downfall, as it inadvertently exposed many of the group's plans to the police. Rossa was the publisher, managing the business affairs and writing articles for the paper, and his diverse role in the IRB organization included receiving firearms shipped illegally from the American Fenian Brotherhood organization.<sup>97</sup> As important as was the newspaper for modernizing and radicalizing the Irish population for collective dissent, it was the planning for violent rebellion that was the true aim of the IRB.<sup>98</sup> Stephens had made it clear that revolutionary action was to occur in 1865, but believed the necessary financial aid had not been forthcoming from the American organization and continued postponing the battle. Meanwhile, the British had placed informers throughout the movement—one of whom, Pierce Nagel, on staff at the newspaper, turned over documents about the imminent

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<sup>97</sup> Leon O'Broin, *Fenian Fever: An Anglo-American Dilemma* (New York: New York University, 1971), 12.

<sup>98</sup> Matthew Kelly, "The *Irish People* and the Disciplining of Dissent," in *The Black Hand of Republicanism: Fenianism in Modern Ireland*, ed. Fearghal McGarry and James McConnel (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 35.

timing of violent action planned for September 20, 1865.<sup>99</sup> Included among these documents were the ones that had been missing when Rossa returned from New York. These documents were damning to Rossa and Stephens because of the connection with O'Mahony and the American Fenians.<sup>100</sup> The government, determined to undermine the efforts, seized the *Irish People* offices in the early morning hours of September 15, 1865.<sup>101</sup> Rossa was the first arrested as he went to the office to prepare for another trip to New York he expected to take with Mary Jane under direction from Stephens.<sup>102</sup> The arrest of the staff, seizure of documents, and suppression of the paper was extremely damaging to the movement, particularly when the next day Rossa, John O'Leary, and Thomas Clarke Luby were arrested. Stephens eluded the police but was finally arrested on November 11, with Charles Kickham.<sup>103</sup> With the rich store of documents seized at the newspaper headquarters and the later suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, hundreds of suspects were soon arrested all over Ireland.<sup>104</sup>

After a night in a local jail, Rossa and about 30 others were formally charged with high treason and moved to Richmond Bridewell Prison. Crowds of people lined the streets as the black vans made their way through Dublin. When more than a week later, when Mary Jane was permitted to see Rossa in the presence of the prison governor, she

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<sup>99</sup> John Rutherford, *The Fenian Conspiracy*, 93.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>101</sup> Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief: a Biography of James Stephens* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1967), 206.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections*, 158.

<sup>103</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922* (London: Routledge, 2003), 123.

<sup>104</sup> P. J. Stephenson, "Hidden and Vanishing Dublin," *Dublin Historical Record*, 1, no. 2 (1938): 64.

told him of the terrible things being said about the Fenians in the press. The most difficult for him to hear was the position of the Irish Catholic Church, for Archbishop Cullen had put out a pastoral letter condemning them individually. Rossa maintained his solid belief in Catholicism despite the view of the Church about Fenianism, but he was so disappointed that the Church would take aim at him personally. Rossa always believed that this act allowed the British jailers to treat the prisoners more inhumanly than would have normally been the case. Immediately after this visit with Mary Jane, Rossa wrote to her showing how bleak he thought the future and telling her she should go at once to America:

Dear Moll,

Our meeting forcibly brings to my mind that meeting we had at 'early morn' in your father's house before we were married, when each of us had so much to say, and said so little or nothing.

I now think I should have complimented you on your growing refinement as looking at you since. I think your cheeks at least have lost some of the rustic tinge. But to business Moll—Looking into the future, I cannot in a word see you "better off" anywhere than in America. Tis the last place I would have you live but I'd rather have you live there than die, or (what is much the same to you and me) be dependent upon anyone, here. A ship leaves Cove on Thursday. You will get a cabin passage for £13 or guineas. As Mr. O'Leary cannot get money we must only utilize the resources at hand. My watch + chain will get you 7 or 8 pounds. . . . If you go, go immediately. . . . If you did not go to America, I think the next best thing for you to do would be to go home with Tim [her brother]. Having idleness here you would never be free from anxiety. Yours Moll ever fondly,

Rossa<sup>105</sup>

For nearly three months Rossa, Luby, and O'Leary were treated in the same manner as convicted felons. They were held in solitary confinement, separated from each other, but allowed a short period of consultation with each other occasionally. The

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<sup>105</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated September 25, 1865, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/2/14, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

government determined that the sheer number of arrests prevented trials in the normal progression and decided to establish Commissions in Dublin, Cork and Limerick to hear cases.<sup>106</sup> While most of the prisoners took their situation as inevitably weak, this was not Rossa's outlook. He believed that maintaining the interest and concern of the people could reduce the effect of the British in jury packing and otherwise violating the British procedure of law. This was particularly true after Stephens escaped Richmond Prison only twelve days after his capture. The press coverage of Stephens' escape gave Rossa more impetus to take advantage of the opportunity to make their cause and situations well known. To gain publicity, he purposely delayed his own hearings and later decided to defend himself rather than continue with the lawyers assisting his co-workers.<sup>107</sup> The attorney general complained publicly that Rossa was using the trial to disseminate Fenian ideas and principles.<sup>108</sup> He took every opportunity to belittle the court and demand copies of documents from the *Irish People* being used to prosecute him. He then proceeded to read every word of some issues of the paper aloud in court, one time for eight hours straight.<sup>109</sup> As shown in the transcript below, in Rossa's closing remarks, he taunted the Court.

*Mr. Geale (Prosecutor)*—Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, you have been indicted and found guilty of compelling her Majesty to change her measures, and stir up the incite foreigners to invade this country. What have you to say why sentence should not be passed upon you?

*The Prisoner*—With the fact that the government seized papers connected with my defense and examined them—with the fact that they packed the jury—with the fact that the government stated they would convict—with the fact that they

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<sup>106</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 123.

<sup>107</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 39.

<sup>108</sup> Mark F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories*, 88.

<sup>109</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 62.

send Judge Keogh,<sup>110</sup> a second Norbury, to try me—with these facts before me, it would be useless to say anything.<sup>111</sup>

During his trial Rossa was housed in Kilmainham Jail. Mary Jane was present for the five days the trial lasted, December 9-13, 1865, watching her husband's tenacious approach to his defense. When the trial was over he wrote to her to share his love and his confidence he had done the right thing:

My own wife,  
 . . . On the whole Mollis I am satisfied with the course I took. I hope you are too. With a view to public good I considered it a good one to adopt, and I believe that all who would sacrifice anything for the cause of country will approve of it. I'm glad I denounced that juryman who said he'd consider my reading of the Chicago pamphlet enough to convict me.

I'll say nothing when convicted. I suppose it is best for you to go home immediately. I would rather you were there than anywhere else. There or elsewhere you will of course have to act by your own lights in all things affecting either of us. May God guard and strengthen you till we meet again, if that is a thing to be hoped for in this world and if the mercy of God gives us any disposition of ourselves in the next world and that recollection and identification regarding mortals here be a gift of the souls there, we are sure to meet. At least I am sure to make enquiries about fond, fair, and fairy Cliodhna of my present love and happiness.

'Tis strange to have written that word "happiness" under present circumstances, but you will understand the sense in which I use it, as well as you understand all the unhappiness connected with it. With all the tossing about since the escape of the "Captain" sentry calls outside your window at night and door watches to see have you escaped thro' the window or not, up and down to court during the trials and no regular meals with lots of anxiety of mind I felt rather not myself at all up to this morning. Now that everything is over I feel somewhat better, at least I feel "calm and self-possessed." I must stop.

Ever fondly Moll,  
 Rossa<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Judge Keogh, a Catholic, had originally been a supporter of Irish nationalism but decided a government judicial position was more attractive. He had been a frequent target for critical articles in the Fenian press. Terry Golway, *For The Cause of Liberty; A Thousand Years of Ireland's Heroes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 145.

<sup>111</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 65.

<sup>112</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated December 13, 1865, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

As Rossa states in his prison memoirs, the British press thought he had “shown myself a fool, a madman, or a man of inordinate vanity.” But, John Mitchel, the Young Irelander living in Paris at the time, believed “to my mind the conduct of O’Donovan Rossa was the noblest of all.” *The Times* of London, in its description of Rossa, was surprisingly complimentary: “it would seem that self-reliance, self-confidence, patriotism, and even justice, were confronting the judge and the informers at the bar.”<sup>113</sup> These contrasting descriptions of Rossa—the fool or madman vs. the hero—would be repeated over and over throughout his life. By the time he was moved to Mountjoy Prison in Dublin, he had reached the highest level of public notoriety.

All the senior Fenian prisoners were found guilty: John O’Leary and Thomas Clarke Luby each received a sentence of twenty years, Charles Kickham one of fifteen years; only Rossa received a sentence of penal servitude for life. The reason given was his 1859 guilty plea in Cork, but it is certain that his attitude in court did him no favors. The sentence caused a public sensation, even in America where it was honored in the *Irish American Weekly*: “In fact not a defense, but a defiance—a bold defiance.”<sup>114</sup> The same day he was sentenced he was moved to Mountjoy Prison in Dublin where for ten days he was kept in isolation and made to come to the door of his cell every fifteen minutes to assure the warder he had not escaped; so concerned were the authorities after Stephens’s escape. Then after nine sleepless nights, he was transported to Pentonville

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<sup>113</sup> Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 66-8.

<sup>114</sup> “The Fenian Prosecutions, Trial of O’Donovan (Rossa),” *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 6, 1866.



Prison near Chester, England.<sup>115</sup> It was Christmas Eve. It was cold and the prisoners were separated and refused flannel clothes. As Rossa later wrote in *Irish Rebels*: “In the way of mere physical discomfort I do not know that I ever experienced anything worse than those early morning hours in Pentonville.”<sup>116</sup> Some time after his arrival in Pentonville, Rossa received a letter from Mary Jane. Brought to him by a priest who was permitted to visit him, the letter was written from Dublin and spoke of her concerns about money but also about the joy she felt about being pregnant with their child.

Now, Cariss, about the children. The last, I suppose, I should put first, the wee one that makes me sigh for you at every time I feel its presence. I don't know whether I'm most happy or most miserable about it. 'Tis all I have of you, and if things turn out badly it will be the only thing I'll care to hold my life for.<sup>117</sup>

Rossa was permitted to write to Mary Jane while sitting there with the priest but his letter was analyzed for days and then edited before finally being sent from the warder five days later. Mary Jane's letter would be his last communication from his wife until after their son was born on April 30, 1866, nearly five months later.<sup>118</sup> Even then he was told the contents of her letter but not permitted to read it. He was also not permitted to answer her because the warder told him convicts might only write or receive one letter every six months. A few days after receiving the news of the birth of his sixth son he and the other

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<sup>115</sup> Dublin Prison Classification General Register 1854-1865, Irish Prison Registers 1790-1924 Transcription, Ireland Courts and Legal, Dublin, <http://search.findmypast.ie/record?id=ire%2fprisr%2frs00018282%2f4492746%2f00715%2f004&highlights=%22>.

<sup>116</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 86.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>118</sup> Baptism May 1866, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 1, 2015, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/e20d2e0033730>.

Fenians were moved yet again, this time to Portland Convict Prison on the coast near Dorset, England.

The treatment of the prisoners at Portland Prison was somewhat worse than that at Pentonville because of the location near the ocean. Rossa's cell measured three and a half feet by seven feet; it occasionally flooded, but it was always wet and damp. They were fed bread, cheese, and water as a steady diet and worked hard in the laundry or later, outside in the quarries pounding stones. Their behavior and demeanor were closely monitored and for the slightest infraction of a sidelong look or a whisper they would be punished; Rossa was punished more often than any of the other prisoners. He was frequently put on "bread and water" which consisted of eight ounces of bread and a pint of water twice a day, with no stool or bed in his cell. He was left there for twenty-four hours a day, sometimes for days at a time.<sup>119</sup> By the rules a convict was permitted one visit from family every six months, so that in August 1866, Mary Jane and the baby were permitted a visit. Rossa was overjoyed to see her and the baby son he had yet to meet. Less than a week after the visit, Mary Jane wrote a letter that received wide publication in Ireland and England, describing the visit. She remarked that Rossa was permitted to hold the baby and she was surprised that the guard had allowed it. Also she described in detail Rossa's current condition, worrying that his failing sight was being caused by such strenuous work in the blazing sun on the barren island where the prison was located.<sup>120</sup> Mary Jane also wrote an intensely sad but patriotic poem about the visit, which she published two years later titled "A Visit to My Husband in Prison." She comments about

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<sup>119</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 130.

<sup>120</sup> "The Fenian Convicts at Portland," *The Western Daily Express* (Bristol, UK), August 17, 1866.

his shocking physical appearance that made her realize he was a victim of the cruel political situation.

Within the precincts of the prison bounds,  
 Treading the sunlit courtyard to a hall,  
 Roomy and unadorned, where the light  
 Thro' screenless windows glaringly did fall.

Within the precincts of the prison wall,  
 With rushing memories and bated breath;  
 With heart elate and light swift step that smote  
 Faint echoes in the house of living death.

Midway I stood in bright expectancy,  
 Tightly I clasped my babe, my eager sight  
 Restlessly glancing down the long low room  
 To where a door bedimmed the walls pure white.

They turned—the noiseless locks; the portal fell,  
 With clank of chain, wide open, and the room  
 Held him—my wedded love. My heart stood still  
 With sudden shock, with sudden sense of doom.

My heart stood still that had with gladsome bound  
 Counted the moments ere he should appear  
 Drew back at sight so changed, and shivering waited,  
 Pulselessly waited while his steps drew near!

Oh! For a moment's twilight that might hide  
 The harsh, tanned features once so soft and fair!  
 The shrunken eyes that with feeble flash  
 Smiled on my presence and his infant's there!

Oh!! For a shadow on the cruel sun  
 That mocked thy father, Baby, with his glare;  
 Oh! For the night of nothingness or death  
 Ere thou, my love, this felon garb should wear!

It needed not these passionate, pain-wrung words,  
 Falling with sad distinctness from thy lips,  
 To tell a tale of insult, abject toil,  
 And day-long labor hewing Portland steeps!

It needed not, my love, this anguished glance,  
 This fading fire within thy gentle eyes,

To rouse the torpid voices of my heart,  
Till all the sleeping heavens shall hear their cries.

God of the wronged, and can thy vengeance sleep?  
And shall our night of anguish know no day?  
And can thy justice leave our souls to weep  
Yet, and yet longer o'er our land's decay!

Must we cry still, "How long, oh Lord, how long!"  
For seven red centuries a country's woe  
Has wept the prayer in tears and blood, and still  
Our tears to-night for fresher victims flow!<sup>121</sup>

The day of their visit the governor of the prison happened to be away and later Rossa learned that had he been there no visit would have been permitted because of Rossa's infractions of the prison rules. When shortly after the visit, Mary Jane sent a photo of herself and the baby, James Maxwell, to Rossa at the prison, Rossa was refused permission to receive them and they were returned to her. A poem she wrote after this disappointment, called "The Returned Picture," was later one of her most publicized:

Refused admission! Baby, Baby,  
Don't you feel a little pain?  
See, your picture with your mother's,  
From the prison back again?  
They are cruel, cruel jailors,—  
They are heartless, heartless men!

Ah! you laugh, my little Flax Hair!  
But my eyes are full of tears;  
And my heart is sorely troubled  
With old voices in my ears:  
With the lingering disappointment  
That is shadowing my years!

Was it much to ask them, Baby—  
These rough menials of the Queen's  
Was it much to ask them, give him  
This poor picture, form, and mien  
Of the wife he loved, the little son

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<sup>121</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *Lyrical Poems*, 43.

He never yet had seen?

Ah! they're cruel, cruel jailors,  
 They are heartless, heartless, men!  
 To bar the last poor comfort from  
 Your father's prison pen;  
 To shut our picture from the gates  
 And send it home again!<sup>122</sup>

Rossa continued to incur infractions and continued to be punished. His behavior warranted yet another transfer, this time to Millbank Prison in London in February 1867. Here he was again in solitary confinement but this time there was a sign on his cell that said: "This prisoner will be well watched, and the gas to be left lighting his cell all night." Rossa was subjected to a strip search every day for the first three months.<sup>123</sup> But even this humiliation did not stop him from getting messages out of prison. He managed to get pencils and paper and smuggle written documents out through other inmates. As he later wrote, he was determined "that, right or wrong, by fair play or by foul, I would never stop until I found some means of reaching the world, and getting out an account of our treatment."<sup>124</sup> He maintained his notoriety throughout his time in prison. He became the most famous prisoner in English jails. He managed to smuggle letters to newspapers and government officials that publicized his condition. He did this by throwing small pieces of paper over walls, hiding them in his own body cavities, or passing them to other prisoners. He wrote letters to the editors of London papers including messages to the Prison Directors and their supervisor, the Secretary of State. Mary Jane, too, wrote to

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<sup>122</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *Lyrical Poems*, 42.

<sup>123</sup> Sean O'Luing, *O'Donnabhain Rosa, I*, 269.

<sup>124</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 160.

government officials complaining that she was not receiving any of her husband's letters. One of her appeals to the Home Secretary was also published in the *Dublin Evening Post* on March 28, 1867, when she stated that Rossa had been "chained in the lowest dungeon of the prison," and "afterwards denied medical relief when suffering from illness."<sup>125</sup> His descriptions of the situation in the prison were appearing frequently in newspapers, even in English papers, and were making sensational headlines, such as: "A Voice from the Dungeon." This article contained a lengthy letter from Rossa sent from Portland Prison, dated January 19, 1867, and addressed to the Editor of the *London Star*. He describes here a punishment for having written a letter:

The day's postponement of my case was merely time for the Governor to consider my sentence, which happened to be 72 hours in solitary confinement on bread and water. This means eight ounces of bread and a pint of water at five o'clock morning and evening. There is no light, nor even a seat allowed. This I do not deem too hard for the offence, but for one thing or another arising out of it. Thirty-four days and nights in the cells, on bread and water and low diet, with the cold of the season, have been productive of the natural, may I say intended, result, on the body at least, and the flesh on my hands is visibly turning into corruption.

I asked the doctor if he would consider it unreasonable that I'd be put to work indoors, in a shed, anywhere out of the frosty air, at the same time, showing him my hands. He said they were not bad enough yet.<sup>126</sup>

After the September 18, 1867, Manchester incident and the execution of three Fenians for the death in that incident in November, the Irish population became more supportive of the Fenians in general. One of the three executed was Rossa's good friend Mike O'Brien from Cork, whom he had last seen in New York in 1863 as O'Brien enlisted in the Union Army. O'Brien's goal of learning to be a soldier and then fighting

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<sup>125</sup> "The State Prisoners," *Dublin Evening Post* (Dublin), March 28, 1867.

<sup>126</sup> "Letters from O'Donovan Rossa; A Voice from the Dungeon," *The Irishman* (Dublin), March 16, 1867.

for Ireland had led to his death.<sup>127</sup> Shortly after hearing about the Manchester executions, Rossa heard a whisper from another prisoner that his good friend Ned Duffy had died. Duffy was a close friend and a member of the Fenian leadership team that Rossa had worked and traveled with around Ireland. He was also a prisoner in Milbank prison. Rossa had attempted to visit him as he was dying and was refused. On hearing of his death, which had occurred on January 17, 1868,<sup>128</sup> Rossa penned what is one of his most widely published poems called “Lament for Edward Duffy:”

The world is growing darker to me—darker by the day,  
The stars that shone upon life’s path are vanishing away,  
Some setting and some shifting, only one that changes never,  
‘Tis the guiding star of liberty that blazes bright as ever.

Liberty sits mountain high, and slavery has birth  
In the hovels, in the marshes, in the lowest dens of earth;  
The tyrants of the world pitfall-pave the path between,  
And o’ershadow it with scaffold, prison, block and guillotine.

The gloomy way is brightened when we walk with those we love,  
The heavy load is lightened when we bear and they approve;  
The path of life grows darker to me as I journey on,  
For the truest hearts that travelled it are falling one by one.

The news of death is saddening even in festive hall,  
But when ‘tis heard through prison bars, ‘tis saddest then of all,  
Where there’s none to share the sorrow in the solitary cell,  
In the prison, within prison—a blacker hell in hell.

That whisper through the grating has thrilled through all my veins,  
“Duffy is dead!” a noble soul has slipped the tyrant’s chains,  
And whatever wounds they gave him, their lying books will show,  
How they very kindly treated him, more like a friend than foe.

For these are Christian Pharisees, the hypocrites of creeds,  
With the Bible on their lips, and the devil in their deeds,  
Too merciful in public gaze to take our lives away,

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<sup>127</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 264.

<sup>128</sup> Mark F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories*, 85.

Too anxious here to plant in us the seed of life's decay.

Those Christians stand between us and the God above our head,  
The sun and moon they prison, and withhold the daily bread,  
Entomb, enchain, and starve us, that the mind they may control,  
And quench the fire that burns in the ever living soul.

To lay your head upon the block for faith in Freedom's God,  
To fall in fight for Freedom in the land your fathers trod;  
For Freedom on the scaffold high to breath your latest breath,  
Or anywhere 'gainst tyranny is dying a noble death.

Still sad and lone was yours, Ned, 'mid the jailers of your race,  
With none to press the cold white hand, with none to smooth the face,  
With none to take the dying wish to homeland friend, or brother,  
To kindred mind, to promised bride, or to the sorrowing mother.

I tried to get to speak to you before you passed away,  
As you were dying so near to me, and so far from Castlereau,  
But the Bible-mongers spurned me off, when at their office door  
I asked last month to see you—now I'll never see you more.

If spirits once released from earth could visit earth again,  
You'd come and see me here, Ned, but for these we look in vain;  
In the dead-house you are lying, and I'd "wake" you if I could,  
But they'll wake you in Loughlin, Ned, in that cottage by the wood.

For the mother's instinct tells her that her dearest one is dead—  
That the gifted mind, the noble soul, from earth to heaven is fled,  
As the girls rush towards the door and look towards the trees,  
To catch the sorrow-laden wail, that's borne on the breeze.

Thus the path of life grows darker to me—darker day by day,  
The stars that flashed their light on it are vanishing away,  
Some setting and some shifting, but that one which changes never,  
The beacon light of liberty that blazes bright as ever.<sup>129</sup>

This poem shows how angry and depressed Rossa had become even though he remained unrepentant for his love of liberty. But as much as he was saddened by these losses, he was encouraged by the popular interest shown in the Manchester Martyrs. He

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<sup>129</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 269.



worked feverishly to smuggle his writings out of prison and into the hands of the press. The authorities were furious at this ability to leak messages; particularly as they had found many and punished him severely for those attempts, the idea that he had been successful so often impelled them to move him yet again. When he was transferred to Chatham prison in February of 1868, he could not believe that his situation could get worse. He had suffered months of solitary confinement in the dark, long stretches on bread and water; his physical condition was extremely weak, but he would suffer far greater inhumanity for the next three years in Chatham prison. As his treatment worsened so did Rossa's behavior. His defiance became aimed at refusing to recognize the salute required by the governor. At one point Rossa instead of saluting threw the chamber pot, contents and all, over the governor's head. Rossa later wrote in *Irish Rebels*:

I do not pride myself at having done this act; I once thought I could not be guilty of it, but prison life changes a man, and the treatment I received changed me into doing many things I thought myself incapable of when in the world. But I should have some satisfaction at the time for the indignities heaped on me, and if I could make the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister of England the recipient of the salute I gave the Governor, it would have increased my peace of mind. Their treatment of the Irish political prisoners was wonton and uncalled for.<sup>130</sup>

The punishment for this act was harsh; Rossa's hands were manacled behind his back and remained that way for thirty-five days. While he ate, they were manacled in front and only released while he slept. His punishments continued for some time and occasional near beatings rendered Rossa injured and demanding the doctor. Finally after one quite serious encounter, the authorities, concerned with the effect Rossa's writings were having with the London government, ceased the most serious abuse. But the physical damage Rossa endured would create physical weakness for the rest of his life. When he was asked

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<sup>130</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 284.

later in life how he managed to keep his mind during his imprisonment, Rossa responded that he made jokes or funny remarks every chance he got with his other prisoners and with some of the guards who were more sympathetic.

Some of my friends would gravely bring me to account for joking on such a serious state of affairs as ours; it did not comport with the dignity of our position to trifle with it or look upon it lightly. One would occasionally remark that convict life seemed quite agreeable to my nature, and I suppose my nature must be kind to me, as it moulds my head to rest lightly upon whatever pillow the vicissitudes of fortune place under it. I felt the pains and penalties of convict life as much as many of my companions, but I would not give my enemies the satisfaction to see that I did feel them; and it gave me pleasure to see how disappointed and enraged they were at my smiling and joking at punishments which they know bring a man to the verge of the grave, and in the grave I would be today, perhaps, had I carried myself through the torturing annoyances of prison with that gravity which is consonant with dignity and a life of death. There is no better way of frightening away a fairy than to laugh at it.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 147.

## Chapter 4

### MARY JANE, ON HER OWN

Despite Rossa's urgings to the contrary, Mary Jane stayed in Dublin immediately after the arrest of the *Irish People* staff. The women related to the Fenian leaders watched as hundreds of young men were arrested around the country.<sup>132</sup> This group made up of Mary Jane, Letitia Luby (wife of Thomas Clarke Luby), Ellen and Mary O'Leary (sisters of John O'Leary), Catherine Mulcahy (sister of Denis Dowling Mulcahy), and Isabel Roantree (wife of William Francis Roantree) were determined to take action themselves. They formed the Ladies' Committee for the Relief of the State Prisoners' Families and less than a month after the seizure of the paper announced a campaign to raise money for the financial support of the Fenian families. The first advertisement to solicit funds ran on October 27, 1865 in the Dublin newspapers and was reprinted in papers across the island. It listed Mary Jane as Secretary and Letitia Luby as Treasurer of the Committee.<sup>133</sup> The circular asked: "Ladies of charitable disposition are invited to form branch committees . . . we ask no men to subscribe."<sup>134</sup> The *Irishman* printed the entire announcement on the front page on October 28, 1865 and explained the need for funds:

The families of many of the prisoners are in a state of destitution. Several tradesmen, labourers, and men of small situations, whose families depend on their earnings for their daily bread, are now in prison, and likely to be kept there a considerable time. What is to become of their wives and children if you do not reach forth a helping hand?<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 146. As of August 1866, 756 men had been in prison.

<sup>133</sup> "Fenianism in Ireland," *Cork Examiner* (Cork), October 27, 1865.

<sup>134</sup> "Trial of the Fenians," *The Southern Reporter* (Cork), November 2, 1865.

<sup>135</sup> "The State Prisoners: An Appeal," *The Irishman* (Dublin), October 28, 1865.

This fundraising effort was somewhat successful, as the *Leeds Intelligencer* noted on June 30, 1866, that the organization had raised a total of £824 that year.<sup>136</sup> This effort, though, was not their only work. In addition to raising money for the prisoners' families these women stepped up to the needs of the movement. According to John Devoy's *Recollections*, they were

The keepers of important secrets, traveling from point to point bearing important messages, and were the chief agents in keeping the organization alive in Ireland from ...early 1866 until the rising on 5 March 1867 ...Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa summed up their program thus: "We received orders from Headquarters and obeyed them."<sup>137</sup>

Mary Jane and some of the other women of the Ladies' Committee were living, and may have been all along, what she wrote later in her sketchbook, the "men's more glorious part, to dare and to do."<sup>138</sup> It was dangerous work, as some of the women actually took messages between Dublin and Paris after Stephens had escaped prison and was living there. In 1916, John Devoy referred to them as the precursors to the Ladies' Land League and Cumann na mBan.<sup>139</sup> A similar group formed in America calling themselves the Fenian Sisterhood rather than the Ladies' Committee, a large-scale women's group organized strictly for political purposes. As Secretary of the Ladies' Committee in Ireland, Mary Jane was responsible for communication between the two groups.

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<sup>136</sup> "The Fenian Sisterhood," *Leeds Intelligencer* (Leeds, UK), June 30, 1866.

<sup>137</sup> John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel*, 113.

<sup>138</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>139</sup> John Devoy, "Widow of O'Donovan Rossa Dies Suddenly," *Gaelic American* (New York), August 26, 1916.

Mary Jane's own financial situation had improved since Rossa's arrest, as she had received £50 of what Rossa was owed by the *Irish People*. This money was spent on her own expenses in Dublin and support for Rossa's sons in Cork.<sup>140</sup> Mary Jane celebrated her twenty-first birthday in Dublin a month after Rossa's sentencing. In addition to her work on behalf of the Ladies' Committee, she tried to ameliorate Rossa's situation as well. In February 1866, she had correspondence with Peter Fox, a member of the Central Council of the Workingmen's International Association in London.<sup>141</sup> She was soliciting the Council's help to lobby Sir George Grey, the Home Secretary,<sup>142</sup> to alter prison discipline and allow visits and correspondence with the political prisoners then in Pentonville. According to a letter from one of the council members, those representing British, French, German, and Swiss membership voted unanimously to support her appeal. It appears Peter Fox agreed with Mary Jane and planned to publicize the letters the Council would send to Sir George Grey if they were ineffectual in their plea.<sup>143</sup> Even in those stressful days (marked by her husband just having been sentenced to life imprisonment, her difficult financial situation, and the imminent birth of her first child, while worrying about her adopted sons), Mary Jane planned for the public support that would be available once her husband's plight was made known. A month later as she

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<sup>140</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches*, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>141</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Survey of the Progress of The International Working Men's Association," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), 406. Karl Marx was the most outspoken of the members of this organization in 1866 and in 1867 lead a campaign in support of Irish nationalism.

<sup>142</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 158.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Fox, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 22, 1866, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/2/16, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

arrived at her father's home in Clonakilty to await the birth of her son, Mary Jane heard that her brother James Irwin had been arrested for his membership in the Fenians and sent to Mountjoy Prison in Dublin. James spent nearly a year in prison awaiting trial.<sup>144</sup> In Cork, she also heard from Mrs. Healy that she would no longer take care of the boys, and they, too, arrived in Clonakilty in time for James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa's birth on April 30, 1866.<sup>145</sup> Mary Jane had no prospects of income in Cork so she returned to Dublin two months later, taking with her the two oldest boys and the baby. The older boys became apprenticed with friends and the baby stayed with Mary Jane when she visited Rossa in Portland prison (see previous chapter) and then, as she resumed her Committee duties in Dublin. She also continued to write a weekly article in *The Irishman* seeking donations. These articles listed the monies brought in to the Committee and acknowledged the donors. At that point, her own and some of the other Committee members' financial situation was so strained that they began to take a salary of £2 per week from the Committee funds.<sup>146</sup> Prior to that she and the other officers "gave our services freely and without the slightest remuneration . . . our private means failing, we were necessitated to accept committee funds . . . when [Committee] funds got straitened, reducing our allowance proportionally with the reduction imposed on all other

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<sup>144</sup> Mountjoy Prison Portraits of Irish Independence, November 1866, Thomas A. Larcom Collection, 1111402/356420, New York Public Library, New York.

<sup>145</sup> Baptism May 1866, Church Records of Baptism, Marriage and Burial, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, March 1, 2015, <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/details/e20d2e0033730>.

<sup>146</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

families.”<sup>147</sup> As the fund struggled to keep up with the demand from more and more families as the arrests continued, Mary Jane became frustrated with the small amounts coming from the Sisterhood in America. In January 1867, she decided to mention her frustration in *The Irishman*. In an open letter to Anna J. McDonald, the Secretary of the Detroit Fenian Sisterhood, Mary Jane stated that for the past three months they had been expecting substantial contributions from America, “but up to this time have met disappointment, as none except yours arrived.” As the expected amount was nearly £500, Mary Jane made a bold claim that she believed there was “treachery of the trustees of money in America, subscribed by the Irish American people for the relief of their suffering brethren here.”<sup>148</sup> Mary Jane believed James Stephens was responsible; she was not referring to the organizers in America. Stephens, who had been responsible for collecting the money but had recently been deposed from leadership for having wasted time and money, may have determined he had better plans for the money than the relief committee.<sup>149</sup> Five months later, the Committee announced that a messenger had embezzled the monies. This may have been in response to indignant letters from America, rather than a true accounting of what had happened.<sup>150</sup> However, by the time of that retraction Mary Jane had resigned from the committee and the Fenian insurrection and defeat of March 5, 1867, was over.

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<sup>147</sup> "To the Subscribers of the Relief Fund for the State Prisoners' Families," *The Irishman* (Dublin), February 22, 1867.

<sup>148</sup> "Appeal to the Women of Ireland- Anna J. McDonald," *The Irishman* (Dublin), January 26, 1867.

<sup>149</sup> Sylke Lehne, "Fenianism- A Male Business? A Case Study of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845-1916)" (Master's, St. Patrick's College, 1995), 26.

<sup>150</sup> "Appeal to the Women of Ireland," *The Irishman* (Dublin), June 29, 1867.

As her family would later recall, Mary Jane adhered to a very strict moral code all through her life.<sup>151</sup> Therefore, the misuse of the relief money would have possibly soured her enthusiasm about the Committee; and since the Fenian leadership was in complete disarray after the failure of the Rising, she was ready for a change to her own circumstances. Given Rossa's suggestions two years earlier and the difficult financial straits in which she found herself, it is not at all surprising that she chose to seek opportunity in America. Her earlier correspondence with members of the Fenian Sisterhood had suggested that she herself would be more successful soliciting funds in America. With the promise of support from some of the Fenian leadership, she believed a trip was warranted. She resigned her leadership role in the Committee and refused any more salary payments but planned to continue working on their behalf. She did request a loan from the funds to pay for her travel but was refused, a fact that still angered her when she wrote about it in her sketchbook three years later. She then borrowed £20 from Mr. Richard Pigott, the publisher of *The Irishman*, promising to write for the newspaper while in America.<sup>152</sup>

On May 30, 1867, she sailed on the *City of Paris* for New York. She left the baby and three of the boys with her father in Clonakilty. Denis, the eldest, stayed in County Mayo, Ireland, in an apprenticeship arranged by Rossa's friend Ned Duffy prior to Duffy's death in prison.<sup>153</sup> Mary Jane tried to reach Denis prior to leaving Ireland so that

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<sup>151</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish* (New York: Devin-Adair 1939), 45.

<sup>152</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches*, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*



he could go with her but was unsuccessful; she later regretted leaving him behind.<sup>154</sup> But it was the despair she felt in parting with the baby about which she wrote to Rossa with deep feeling: “Oh, the pain of parting with him, leaving him—perhaps for years or forever. I know of no qualities my misfortunes have developed except my strength of endurance, and every woman is endowed with a share of that.”<sup>155</sup> Mary Jane’s arrival in America was typical of that of immigrants at the time. She stayed first in Brooklyn with Rossa’s cousin Tim Donovan but the family was accommodating her with difficulty, as the apartment was small. She soon moved to a room on Thirteenth Street in Manhattan rented from a family from Clonakilty. But after taking the only work she could find writing for the New York *Irish People* at a salary of \$10 a week, she found she could not afford the room and moved to a less acceptable neighborhood on Dominick Street closer to the notorious “Five Points” area.<sup>156</sup> So within six weeks Mary Jane had moved three times and was in still difficult financial straits.

During spring of 1867, Rossa was despondent. Letters he wrote to his wife were being held from delivery as punishment and the hoped-for government inspection of the treatment of the Fenian prisoners had occurred. The inspection reports claimed that all punishment was minimal and rendered only for bad behavior and infraction of the rules. *The Tralee Chronicle and Killarney Journal* carried a long article on July 8, 1867 that stated:

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<sup>154</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>155</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 331.

<sup>156</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

We could not but regret as we saw this fine active young man before us in prime of manhood, and in strong vigorous health; that such energies of mind and body had been so misapplied, and that the end of it all was the convict's cell, and a duel between himself and the authorities . . . He has no ill-usage to complain of; no severity but of his own seeking. He must mend his ways or abide his fate.<sup>157</sup>

To make matters worse when Mary Jane read of the reports she wrote to him and admonished him about his behavior. This letter dated July 19, 1867, which Rossa later published in *Irish Rebels in English Prisons*, was full of anger but also criticized him for his lack of leadership of the other prisoners and his lack of judgement in complaining about less important offenses. There is little doubt that Mary Jane had as fierce a temper as her husband but held it under more control and wished him to do the same:

It is necessary perhaps that you should have some incentive to act in a more rational manner. O'Leary is a proud, sensitive, high-spirited man: so also is Luby. Yet, with admirable dignity they hold up their heads and take no insult from creatures who are beneath their contempt. This is wise in every sense. They have less reason to be farseeing and politic than you, for think what reasons have you? Need I set before you the fact that you have six sons—four of them in my father's house—and likely to remain there? If the poor man can keep a house over them, for I have failed in getting any provision for them here. Need I remind you that you have a wife—a sorely wronged girl whom you took in her inexperience and world-ignorance, whom you afterwards with open eyes left unprovided for, and who is at present drudging away her life at writing for a pittance, wearing away her heart at yearning for the infant who finds a mother at the other side of the ocean? Ah, Rossa, Rossa, look out and think of these things—think which has most trouble, you who took it on yourself and drew it on me, or I who, depending on your love to do all that was just to me, find myself a married woman without a husband, a child without a parent, and a mother without a child. Steeped to the lips in poverty and misery and labor of heart and head; far from home and in the midst of friends who are hollow, and strangers who are suspicious and critical of my youth—who suffers most? Who has most reason of complaint? I against you, or you against the authorities?<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa - Prison Treatment," *The Tralee Chronicle and Killarney Echo* (Tralee), July 8, 1867.

<sup>158</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 329.

Mary Jane had much to be concerned about when she wrote this letter. She was alone in a strange city and having difficulty finding a path for financial stability. To make things worse, her brother, James, had been released from prison, forced to leave Ireland he had joined her in New York.<sup>159</sup> Rather than a help to his stressed sister, he was a further burden on her, as explained in a letter she received from her parents, months later in February 1868. Maxwell Irwin apologized that James was “a drag on you” and that he had “indolent habits.”<sup>160</sup> By that time James had been Mary Jane’s problem for more than six months.

In her search for work, Mary Jane called on John O’Mahony, the leader of the Fenian Brotherhood in America, and other prominent Irish American leaders in New York. O’Mahony promised to help her attain a governess or teaching position but admitted that vacancies appeared rarely. The disarray that existed between the factions in the Fenian Brotherhood complicated her situation. O’Mahony was the original organizer of Fenianism and was criticized for inaction in a similar way to James Stephens when no rebellion had been planned for in 1865. Many Irish American men were just released from serving in the Civil War and ready to fight the British. They believed this battle could be waged on their side of the Atlantic as well. O’Mahony helped to lead these impatient warriors in an ineffectual foray into Canada at Campobello Island in 1866. They believed Canada was Britain’s vulnerable underbelly. But it failed miserably. William Randall Roberts, who led a subset of the organization, proceeded to usurp power

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<sup>159</sup> "Munster," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 22, 1867.

<sup>160</sup> Maxwell Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 27, 1868, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/05/02/22, American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives (ACUA), Washington, D.C.

from O'Mahony and attempt to lead yet another foray into Canada in 1867, but no raid took place.<sup>161</sup> It left the organization in shambles, and with very little left to aid the IRB in its attempt at a rising in March of 1867. It was not an auspicious time for the Fenians on either side of the Atlantic, and that made assistance to Mary Jane that much more unlikely.

Mary Jane worked hard at keeping both factions of the Fenian Brotherhood informed and although she was friendly with O'Mahony she pursued a friendship with Roberts. She had written conversations about the plan to "keep the good men of both sides as your friends" in letters with her father.<sup>162</sup> Roberts became very helpful and hosted Mary Jane at his home on Bloomingdale Road, in Manhattan, where she stayed for seven weeks. He, too, did not have any ready employment opportunities but he advised her to publish her poems and sell them. She had a good number written as she had been publishing her poetry in a few newspapers, and Roberts believed they would be of interest to the Irish American audience. He also brought together some other wealthy Irish Americans who underwrote the \$800 cost of publishing *Irish Lyrical Poems*.<sup>163</sup> The first advertisement for the book appeared in November 1867 and the actual book was published in the winter of 1868. Selling at \$1.25 a copy, it gave Mary Jane hope of some success.<sup>164</sup> Mary Jane sent copies of the book to each of the New York papers asking for

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<sup>161</sup> W.S. Neidhardt, *Fenianism in North America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1975), 111.

<sup>162</sup> Maxwell Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 27, 1868, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/05/02/22.

<sup>163</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>164</sup> "Irish Lyrical Poems. A Volume of Poems, By Mrs. J. O'Donovan (Rossa)," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), November 23, 1867.

a notice to appear. George C Halpine, the editor of the *New York Citizen* and also known by his fictional character, Miles O'Brien, took great interest in Mary Jane and her work. He introduced her to Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune* and a very popular writer and politician. Halpine and Greeley convinced Mary Jane that she should pursue a role as a professional public reader in addition to publishing her poetry.<sup>165</sup> With their encouragement Mary Jane arranged to be tutored by the famous Joseph E. Frobisher, who held classes in elocution at the College of the City of New York and Cooper Union Free Academy.<sup>166</sup> A year later Frobisher would describe her as the “martyr poetess” who read and captivated her audience. He was not surprised at her success for she had “everything in your favor—health, strength, ambition, and youth and beauty.”<sup>167</sup>

While studying with Professor Frobisher she was planning and preparing her audience. The first major announcement was in the *Irish American Weekly* on May 30, 1868, entitled “Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa”

The wife of Jeremiah O'Donovan (Rossa)—a lady of acknowledged talent and literary ability, proposes to give a series of “Reading from the Poets,” commencing in this city some time during the coming month.—As a writer she has been well known to Irish Nationalists, during the past four years, in which she has contributed many brilliant gems to the press. But aside from her own merits as an educated and talented Irishwoman, she has claims on our people, which should neither be forgotten nor ignored.—Her gallant husband—a martyr for the land he loved so well and sacrificed so readily for—is now the inmate of a British convict prison, suffering for Ireland those mental and bodily torments which only the civilized “Great Briton” knows how to inflict; while his family, deprived of the support of his sustaining arm, are compelled to struggle through the world as best

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<sup>165</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches*, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>166</sup> *Werner's Directory of Elocutionists, Readers, Lecturers and other Public Instructors and Entertainers*, ed. Elsie M. Wilbor (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1887), 272.

<sup>167</sup> Joseph Edwin Frobisher, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated October 14, 1868, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/05/02/26, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

they may,—a struggle in which his wife has thus shown herself resolved to do her own part, and profit by the talents with which she is gifted. We are sure she needs no stronger recommendation to her patriotic countrymen and women; and when the date of her “Readings” is fixed, we shall announce it, confident that she will be greeted by an overflowing audience.<sup>168</sup>

Her first professional reading was held at the Cooper Institute on June 16, 1868, to a standing room only crowd. The description of the event appeared in many newspapers both in and beyond New York City. *The Sun* called it a “rich intellectual treat, a feast of the season, a flow of poetry and eloquence.” The article described Mary Jane’s voice as:

full, clear, and somewhat nerved with a patriotic fervor; her accentuation is distinct, with a slight touch of that sweet Munster brogue which adds a peculiar grace to her readings . . . she is one of nature’s gifted daughters, and will assuredly make her mark as a reader of poetry.<sup>169</sup>

Horace Greeley introduced Mary Jane to the audience and she read one of Miles O’Reilly’s poems called “The Green Flag.” Miles O’Reilly himself did a reading, as did Professor Frobisher; sitting on the platform showing her support was Susan B. Anthony.<sup>170</sup> Mary Jane ended the program by reading a favorite Irish patriotic piece, “The Battle of Fontenoy” by Thomas Davis, the story of how the brave Irish brigade saved the honor of France in 1745. This poem became her theme song for the lecture tour that followed her opening in New York.

While her life in New York was turning toward success, her family in Clonakilty became a big concern. A January 1868 letter to Mary Jane from her brother Tim told her Maxwell Irwin’s business was in serious trouble and his son was very concerned about

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<sup>168</sup> “Mrs. O’Donovan Rossa - May 30, 1868,” *Irish American Weekly* (New York), May 30, 1868.

<sup>169</sup> “Readings from the Irish and American Poets,” *The Sun* (New York), June 17, 1868.

<sup>170</sup> “Readings from the Poets,” *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 27, 1868.

his father's health. This long heartfelt letter could have only brought more sorrow to Mary Jane as Tim related his despair at finding a way to earn a respectable salary and make his father's life easier. Tim also relates that Miss Ellen O'Leary is about to visit Rossa in prison and wanted to be sure his sister had written to her so that Rossa would get the news of her success. It was apparent to him that the Ladies' Committee had ceased all operations and was in as much disarray as the Fenians themselves. He was particularly concerned that Mary Jane remained friends with Ellen O'Leary because he was certain that her relationship with Mrs. Luby had deteriorated so significantly that she believed Mary Jane an enemy. Mrs. Luby was asking for the three older Rossa boys to be sent to her in Dublin. It seemed that one of the boys, John (then 13), had written to her of his dislike of the situation in Clonakilty and Mrs. Luby's reaction was to level charges against Maxwell Irwin of "the most extraordinary nature."<sup>171</sup> In a later letter from her father, Mary Jane learned that the boys left for Dublin on February 16, 1868, but not before he made certain that both Jack and Jeremiah wrote to their father to let him know of their acceptance of move to Dublin although the boys themselves did not see the necessity of the move.<sup>172</sup> John O'Donovan Rossa went to apprentice with a solicitor named Lawless and the two younger boys were bordered with a Mrs. Duff.<sup>173</sup> A few months later, June 14, 1868, just as Mary Jane was preparing for her opening event, she received another letter from Tim congratulating her on her success in her study with

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<sup>171</sup> Timothy Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated January 22, 1868, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/2/20, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>172</sup> Maxwell Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 27, 1868, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/05/02/22.

<sup>173</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

Frobisher that had been announced in *The Irishman*.<sup>174</sup> But in those congratulations were the words of hope that she would now be able to solve their financial difficulties by her success:

How my heart leaped and pulsed as I read that high [praise] of your ability and the bright future the writer predicted for you. I cannot tell you what joy we have all experienced, what courage and hope renewed have taken possession of our breasts in place of the dark doubts and troublous thoughts that usually dwell there. We are all happy, happier than we have been for this many a long day for now with your help we will I trust in God be able to hold up our head and be independent . . . We will all be praying for you and for your success, all the boys and girls write with me in love to you and James and hope that you will soon be coming back to make us all happy and to place poor papa in a position that will free him from the troubles and trials he has been suffering so long.<sup>175</sup>

So, Mary Jane added total responsibility for the Irwin family to her financial goals as she started her new career and went on tour with her "Readings of the Poets." She spent the next eighteen months constantly traveling throughout the United States. She continued to speak of the plight of the Fenian prisoners and help raise money for them among the Irish American organizations, and her events were a huge propaganda success for the Fenian cause. But also she did very well financially, as evidenced by a notice that she had earned \$1125 from two readings in Chicago.<sup>176</sup> She gained more than money at some events; she received bracelets, necklaces, and even a gold nugget from some of her audiences.<sup>177</sup> She became a cherished celebrity as she worked her way across the country first north to Hartford, Providence, Brookline, Boston, Portland, Rochester, Montreal, Quebec; and

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<sup>174</sup> "Mrs.O'Donovan Rossa - June 13, 1868," *The Irishman* (Dublin), June 13, 1868.

<sup>175</sup> Timothy Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated June 14, 1868, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/05/02/23, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>176</sup> "News of the City-Chicago Republican," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), March 2, 1869.

<sup>177</sup> "News of the City-Nugget of Gold," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), February 1, 1869.



then west Cleveland, Dayton, Chicago, Detroit, Peoria, Toronto, Louisville, Leavenworth and Omaha; and south to Savannah, Atlanta, Augusta, New Orleans, Mobile, Memphis, and St. Louis; stopping in many others towns along the way.<sup>178</sup> In some of these cities she appeared more than once. Her travel schedule was grueling. She kept a scrapbook of her reviews from many of the events and those clippings and others available in contemporary newspapers are invariably glowing. One of the many positive reviews is this from *The Argus* in Albany, New York, October 10, 1868:

Mrs. Rossa is a genuine Irish lady, talented and cultivated, and one in whom every daughter of Ireland should enlist her interest, and seek to promote the welfare of the wife of an Irish patriot . . . Being deprived of her husband's support, Mrs. Rossa has sustained herself and her children by her literary labors. For this, if no other reason, she deserves to be encouraged and patronized; but aside from all this, she is endowed with intellect, beauty and accomplishments, qualifications that should induce the America public, as well as the Irish people to sustain her womanly devotion. . . . Those who love Ireland will admire Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa; and those who never saw Ireland, cannot fail to appreciate her beauty and highly cultivated talents.<sup>179</sup>

The leaders of the Irish American organizations shared in Mary Jane's success. Her goal to be friendly with all the factions within these groups had been very insightful. It helped not only Mary Jane but also the organizations with their own fundraising and recruiting because Mary Jane attracted larger audiences and they held meetings alongside her events. As John Devoy would later say: "The Fenian organization was hopelessly split

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<sup>178</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa's Readings - Providence," *Providence Evening Press* (Providence, RI), September 14, 1868; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa; Announcement," *Daily Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), October 2, 1868; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa Ohio and Illinois," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), May 15, 1869; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Peoria," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), March 6, 1869; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Canada," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York), October 23, 1869; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Brookline," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), September 5, 1868; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Augusta," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), April 26, 1869; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa - March 9, 1869," *Leavenworth Bulletin* (Leavenworth, KS), March 9, 1869; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa - November 25, 1868," *Hartford Daily Courant* (Hartford, CT), November 25, 1868.

<sup>179</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, Scrapbook from 1868-1870, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia R. Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

during these years but both sections, bitterly hostile to each other, could meet in peace and harmony at her readings and remember for the moment that they had a common cause to serve.”<sup>180</sup> All the factions wanted to claim her as their own. She was so popular that during the national Irish Republican Convention held in Chicago in 1869 to support the political party of President Grant, one of the delegates proposed universal suffrage as a policy, and Mary Jane was the example used to justify why women should have the vote.<sup>181</sup>

Mary Jane remembered in her writings that not all was positive economically:

My publication of poems did not realize me anything owing to the shabby manner in which many people calling themselves patriots indeed forgot to pay for them. The book was largely circulated but there is hardly a state in the Union in which I could not find a goodly number unpaid for . . . brilliant as my success appeared I was seldom paid for more than half of the tickets that were distributed . . . it is not the easy moneymaking business which many acclaim.<sup>182</sup>

Much as Mary Jane lamented some of the behavior of the crowds, she had a very great impact on many who witnessed her performances. During a time when the common wisdom argued that Irish American organizations were manned by the rabble of society and took advantage of the low-income populace by stealing their money for a desperate cause, those in “respectable” positions attended Mary Jane’s events.<sup>183</sup> So she, the “Prison Widow” as she called herself, appealed not only to the factions within Fenianism but also to diverse social strata. All of these audiences were met with “a handsome lady

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<sup>180</sup> John Devoy, “Widow of O'Donovan Rossa Dies Suddenly,” *Gaelic American* (New York), August 26, 1916.

<sup>181</sup> “Irish Republican Convention,” *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), July 7, 1869.

<sup>182</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches*, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>183</sup> Shane Kenna, *War in the Shadows* (Sallins: Merrion, 2014), 13.

of about five and twenty, with flashing black eyes and majestic figure, robed in black and green velvet,” who had a lasting impact when she “stood up, and, stretching her right hand aloft, declared in a rich contralto voice, that ‘Ireland shall be free!’”<sup>184</sup>

Amidst all the traveling and business success, Mary Jane was alone and sad. Always the poet, she wrote to Rossa from Utica, New York, on December 13, 1868: “My heart is in the state of a dormant volcano—by avoiding thoughts of you or my child I avoid an eruption; by reflecting a moment on my more than three years’ widowhood and my far away baby, my soul is shaken to its deepest depths—my heart convulsed to the core with discontent.” She knew that Rossa had not received her other letters, so she went on to explain what she has done over the last few months and what she planned to do going forward.

I’ll give you the history of these three long years, years as long as ordinary lifetimes, years that I never expected human endurance could outlive. The little raft of resolution that floated in from the wreck of my fortune three or four years ago, has run steadily on the waves of life. It will soon, I hope, be strong enough to bear you up too. To depart parallels, I have been giving public readings for some months, and intend continuing to do so till I have acquired a sufficient sum of money to justify me in engaging counsel to re-open your case and appeal it to the House of Lords. You need not think I am “begging” in your name; . . . I am earning honestly my income and have gone through a careful training, have studied my role scrupulously, so that at least no one could call me an amateur reader or a very inferior one.

But perhaps her most telling words in this letter,

I am changed, Cariss—harder, imperious, self-willed . . . There is no man living, if I were free to choose, I could love better. . . . But there were some points in your character the little woman of ’65 bore most patiently. I would not promise the same forbearance from the matured, self-willed and exigent woman of ’68.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> “The Irish in New York,” *The Nation* (Dublin), July 25, 1868.

<sup>185</sup> Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 334.

The winter of 1869 was a long one for Mary Jane as she fought health issues and increased concerns. As she was preparing to leave Omaha after an event, she received a letter from Denis, Rossa's sixteen-year-old son, that he was unhappy in Mayo where he was apprenticing and wanted to come to America.<sup>186</sup> While she hastily made arrangements she discovered that he had already arrived on January 8.<sup>187</sup> After reaching out to some of her Fenian friends she knew that she could not afford a college education for Denis and found help from the New York *Irish People* printing office who offered him work towards learning the trade.<sup>188</sup> Shortly after that, Mary Jane suffered a cold that lingered and she became exhausted which caused her to take longer intervals between engagements. She again worried about finances and unfortunately fell prey to a scheming cousin of Rossa who sued for a portion of what was then called the "Belmont Fund." This fund was money that had been frozen in an account, held with a bank represented by August Belmont, when the original Fenians were arrested. John O'Mahony was suing to reclaim the funds but since he had lost control of the Fenian Brotherhood the ownership of the money was certainly not clear.<sup>189</sup> Mary Jane was convinced that she could lay claim to a portion of the funds to benefit Rossa and the children as payment for work Rossa had done in 1864-5. When this claim was publicized all the factions concerned criticized Mary Jane, accused of manipulating facts, and acting on extreme greed.

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<sup>186</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>187</sup> "Denis O'Donovan Rossa Arrives," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), February 20, 1869.

<sup>188</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>189</sup> "The Fenian Funds," *The Nation* (Dublin), September 18, 1869.

O'Mahony supporters had been working very hard to keep the \$30,000 in that faction's coffers and were not pleased at Mary Jane's entry into the confusion.<sup>190</sup> She made the situation worse by defending her claim in a very public way, only backing down when she realized that her husband would not support the effort. Rossa was indignant that Mary Jane would be a party to blackmail of the Fenian Brotherhood.<sup>191</sup> It is likely she believed that these monies, initially raised in America to send to the IRB in Ireland, would be appropriate means to pay back a debt she believed Rossa was owed by Stephens and other leaders for work he had done to start the *Irish People*. Some of the criticism of her was clearly gender based, as she was accused of having "no authority from her noble husband in the matter. She cannot recover a dollar of her outrageous claim—no man would readily scout such a claim than O'Donovan Rossa himself and she is merely a cat's-paw in the hand of knave."<sup>192</sup> These critics believed as a woman she was too weak to stand up to a scheming manipulator while her husband would never permit her to make such a claim. She allowed that criticism to become reality while she learned that reputation damaging public outcry was too high a price to pay for justice. She later wrote sadly about being duped by a "cajoling cousin" and "speculating lawyers" and pleaded for understanding.<sup>193</sup> It was one more lesson on her road to independence and mastering the role of public opinion. In late 1869 she received the first letter from her husband in

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<sup>190</sup> William D'Arcy, "The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858-1886," 326.

<sup>191</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa - January 31, 1870," *Dublin Evening Mail* (Dublin), January 31, 1870.

<sup>192</sup> Sylke Lehne, "Fenianism- A Male Business? A Case Study of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845-1916)," 38.

<sup>193</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

over a year dated November 2 with some good advice about the situation in which she found herself:

From your father I learned that the squabbles of party have brought you into the ugly circle of contention, too. This I regret as much as I regret anything. I should wish you had kept outside all those disputes. Perhaps you deemed it necessary to secure audiences to adopt a party; if so, it is deplorable. But when you are on your own resources I must give you liberty of opinion, and cannot be thin-skinned on the subject of my wife becoming a manly character. . . . When you become a public speaker or reader you enter that life which excited animadversion, and you must make up your mind to take all disagreeableness of the position with a strong mind.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 335.

## Chapter 5

### AMNESTY

The Ladies' Committee had succeeded in publicizing the conditions of the Fenian prisoners in 1866. Public opinion over the next three years began to call for amnesty for these political prisoners, most of whom had been arrested while habeas corpus was suspended. The Amnesty Association was formed in June 1868 with Isaac Butt as the president. Butt had been the legal defender for some of those arrested at the *Irish People* in 1865, although he was prior a conservative MP. He was now a proponent of tenants' rights and trying to build a coalition of activists to create a constitutional nationalist movement.<sup>195</sup> In the autumn of 1868 as feelings about amnesty intensified, some candidates for the impending general election were asked to declare their position on amnesty for the Fenian prisoners as a criterion for consideration. When Gladstone was elected in December 1868, expectations were high that the new government would release most of the prisoners, but the people were disappointed when only fifteen Fenians were released, and only one of them was a leader: the very ill Charles Kickham.<sup>196</sup> The case for amnesty for the remaining prisoners accelerated, as their harsh treatment in English jails became known more widely throughout Ireland. Rossa's writings were among the major sources of this information and heightened public interest early in 1869 when Richard Pigott, the publisher of *The Irishman*, visited Rossa in Chatham prison. Rossa told Pigott of being manacled for more than thirty days as punishment for prison

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<sup>195</sup> Brian Jenkins, *The Fenian Problem; Insurgency and Terrorism in a Liberal State* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2008), 278.

<sup>196</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 219.

infractions, and the subsequent publicity was wide spread.<sup>197</sup> Pigott's articles help to persuade George Henry Moore, MP from Mayo and a member of Irish Independent Party in Parliament, to propose a motion in the House of Commons to request an investigation into the treatment of political prisoners.<sup>198</sup> His motion, not unexpectedly, was rejected 171 votes to 36 votes.<sup>199</sup> Pigott's news also caused another MP to act; McCarthy Downing from Cork, a longtime friend of Rossa, also went to Chatham prison and interviewed Rossa to determine for himself the veracity of the report. He was convinced that the treatment Rossa had received warranted investigation. He later had a very public battle with Henry A. Bruce, the then Home Secretary, over government denials of what he observed at the prison in July 1869.<sup>200</sup> His observations were based on interviews with both Rossa and some of the prison staff about treatment over the course of the time the Fenians were imprisoned, not on what was occurring at the time of the visit. It was true that treatment had improved after Gladstone took office for his first administration in December 1868. The harsh punishment Rossa received became less severe and was much improved in March 1869 when Rossa's father-in-law, Maxwell Irwin, published a letter he received from a friend who had visited the prison stating: "Rossa has suffered the most excruciating tortures, but the prison authorities have at last ceased persecuting him."<sup>201</sup> Sean McConville, in his book, *Irish Political Prisoners*, attributes this

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<sup>197</sup> Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections*, 317.

<sup>198</sup> "The Irish Political Prisoners — Meeting in Dublin," *Cork Examiner* (Cork), June 30, 1869.

<sup>199</sup> Jenny Marx-Longuet, "The English Government and the Fenian Prisoners," *La Marseillaise* (Paris), February 27, 1870.

<sup>200</sup> McCarthy Downing, "Revelations of Prison Life," *Anglo-Celt* (Dublin), August 21, 1869.

<sup>201</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa - Letter from Augustine Costello," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), March 11, 1869.



improvement in Rossa's conditions both to Gladstone's election and to a recognition on the part of the jailers that "Rossa was not going to be compliant, that he had a daring and obdurate spirit, and the spirit of defiance and punishment could end in disaster."<sup>202</sup>

McCarthy Downing's, as well as George Henry Moore's, outrage at what had been done to the prisoners was continuing instigation to the movement requesting amnesty.

The Fenians, led by John Nolan, joined Isaac Butt in the Amnesty Association and established branches in towns all over Ireland. During the month of August 1869, they held large rallies in many of these towns; some claimed that nearly one million people had attended.<sup>203</sup> These "monster meetings" were similar to those held by Daniel O'Connell in the 1840s. Mary Jane's brother Tim Irwin spoke at a meeting in Skibbereen on September 4, 1869, pleading for Gladstone's mercy:

These men whom you hold in bondage are not mere adventurers, excited to desperate deeds by prospect of plunder. They are not thieves or robbers; they are men of unstained honour, whose only ambition has been to make our land the home of prosperity, freedom, and contentment. To do this they sacrificed everything that makes life tolerable. In their devotion they entirely lost sight of self, and flung themselves into the struggle for their native land. . . . The Irish nation appeals to you to extend to them pardon. Do not reject the nation's prayer—the sequel will prove that you have done well, and you shall not be sorry by-and-by, that even at the eleventh hour you did an act of justice and generosity.<sup>204</sup>

The culmination of this campaign was a meeting in Cabra, just outside Dublin, on October 10, 1869, which it was claimed nearly 200,000 people attended.<sup>205</sup> The

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<sup>202</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 174.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>204</sup> "A Speech for the Prisoners," *The Nation* (Dublin), September 11, 1869.

<sup>205</sup> "The Political Prisoners-Meeting," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), October 15, 1869.

November 1869 by-election was imminent, and the public outcry for amnesty was loud and frequent. According to Brian Jenkins in his work *The Fenian Problem*, the Fenian organization was more active and better organized in 1869 than at any other times in the past. They reversed Stephens' policy of scorning constitutional efforts and encouraged members to seek elected office.<sup>206</sup> The Amnesty Association, at the suggestion of George Henry Moore, MP, added Rossa's name to the list of possible candidates.<sup>207</sup> In the Tipperary nominating meeting, on November 22, a group composed of both constitutional nationalists and the Fenians proposed Rossa as candidate for MP. Neither group had the financial ability to support an election, but the populace was enlivened. On November 27 Rossa won the election, 1131 votes to 1028.<sup>208</sup> The news of the election was "received with demonstrations of popular joy . . . thousands of people turned out and marched in regular procession, singing national songs, and cheering . . . the 'tidal wave' of patriotism spread throughout Ireland."<sup>209</sup> The government was shocked by the election and increased its efforts to curb the swell of popular amnesty agitation by raiding the offices of the Amnesty Association and moving troops into affected districts. Police were instructed to disperse meetings with seditious tendencies and to ban advertised mass gatherings.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Brian Jenkins, *The Fenian Problem; Insurgency and Terrorism in a Liberal State*, 286.

<sup>207</sup> Owen McGee, *The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood From The Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>208</sup> Gerard Moran, "The Fenians and Tipperary Politics, 1868-1880," *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1994, no. 8: 76.

<sup>209</sup> "The Return of O'Donovan Rossa," *The Nation* (Dublin), December 4, 1869. "O'Donovan Rossa- Tipperary Election," *New York Times* (New York), December 12, 1869.

<sup>210</sup> Brian Jenkins, *The Fenian Problem; Insurgency and Terrorism in a Liberal State*, 287.

Hoping to stem the volatility of the political situation, Gladstone took nearly three months to rule on allowing Rossa to take his seat in Parliament, and during that time Rossa had the impudence to request a transfer to Millbank Prison to be closer to his constituency.<sup>211</sup> When Gladstone announced that Rossa was “incapable of being elected or named a member of this House” George Henry Moore interrupted him to request a committee study the matter. Moore’s request was to no avail; Gladstone’s motion succeeded 301 votes to 8.<sup>212</sup> This outcome was fully expected, but Isaac Butt renewed the energy of the Amnesty Association with smaller meetings and enlisted the help of Rossa’s young son, John, and Thomas Clarke Luby’s son, Thomas. Both boys recited poetry or sang at a Dublin meeting held on February 19, 1870. John O’Donovan Rossa recited Mary Jane’s well-known version of the poem “Fontenoy.”<sup>213</sup>

When news of Rossa’s election reached Mary Jane, her friends in America believed it was “an excellent time of negotiating his release” and suggested she go to Washington “in hope of making influence there that would have weight with Mr. Gladstone.”<sup>214</sup> Mary Jane went directly to Washington where she met with a great many members of Congress including Senators Charles Sumner and Henry Wilson of Massachusetts and Secretary of State Hamilton Fish.<sup>215</sup> Always concerned about

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<sup>211</sup> "The British Parliament: O'Donovan Rossa, M.P.," *New York Herald* (New York), February 8, 1870.

<sup>212</sup> "The Election of O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish Examiner* (Cork ), February 12, 1870.

<sup>213</sup> "Our Irish Letter," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), March 12, 1870.

<sup>214</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

finances, Mary Jane took the opportunity to do a reading at Carroll Hall in downtown Washington, at the invitation of the Irish nationalist groups in the city on January 10, 1870, at which Congressman John Shanks of Indiana introduced her.<sup>216</sup> On January 15, Mary Jane met with President Grant at the White House and although he expressed his view that Rossa would be released before long, he believed there was nothing he could do to help her case and referred her to the State Department.<sup>217</sup> The press was unimpressed by the President's self-deprecation and called his demeanor "Too Modest by Half."<sup>218</sup> Grant did, however, suggest that the American Minister in London could be of some assistance, and he issued a letter to Ambassador Motley for Mary Jane to bring to London.<sup>219</sup> Determined to take advantage of the timing of the election and the press, Mary Jane left at what she later recalled as the stormiest part of the year and arrived in Liverpool on February 2, 1870.<sup>220</sup> She went directly to Chatham and was permitted to visit Rossa in prison, for the first time in nearly three years. Mary Jane's mission to seek Gladstone's agreement to amnesty was not fully supported by her husband. As Rossa later wrote in *Irish Rebels*: "though I had some opinion of her ability to state her case honorably, I could not divest myself of a very uncomfortable anxiety lest anything should be said that would give my enemies satisfaction."<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa," *The New Republic* (Camden), January 15, 1870.

<sup>217</sup> "A Plea for a Fenian," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), January 17, 1870.

<sup>218</sup> "Too Modest By Half," *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), January 17, 1870.

<sup>219</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa with Letter for Gladstone," *Dublin Evening Mail* (Dublin), January 31, 1870.

<sup>220</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412; "Arrival of Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa," *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), February 6, 1870.

<sup>221</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 337.

In London, before handing over the letter to Motley and requesting an audience with Gladstone, Mary Jane sought the advice of George Henry Moore, but to no avail: Gladstone refused to see her. Very disappointed, Mary Jane spent her last night in London with Moore and his wife. In her sketchbook a few months later she lamented that Moore had passed away<sup>222</sup> and how “the noble woman and devoted wife who little saw at that time how near to her was the sad widowhood for which she pried me.”<sup>223</sup>

Not to be waylaid from her aim, and having received her husband’s reluctant approval, she sent a letter to Gladstone dated February 15, 1870. It reflects both her own astute political ability and her schooling from George Henry Moore and her husband.

Addressed to the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone, MP, it reads in part:

Sir: You have denied me the favor of a personal interview, and I feel deeply disappointed at that denial. I have traveled more than 3,000 miles in mid-winter for the sole purpose of pleading a cause which you will not hear—the cause of a husband, to whom, were he a sinner against any other government than that of England, or native of any other sod than that of Ireland, I have no doubt your ready sympathy would flow, in recognition of his sacrifices and sufferings for principle and liberty.

This is not the tone in which I should be advised by a practiced advocate to address you, but I am not a practiced advocate, only a young Irishwoman and Rossa’s wife, who, even in the depth of her humility and disappointment, cannot find it in her heart to say anything unworthy of her husband or of the cause that he endeavored to advance. . . . But, as far as I can gather from the expressions that have proceeded from your Government on various occasions, it would appear that your resolution in the matter is founded not upon the necessity of inflicting further punishment upon the political prisoners still remaining in confinement, but upon the danger that would result to the public peace by setting them at large. I cannot deny, even to my own mind, that there may be some reason in this view of the case; but I anxiously hope that I have found a solution of the difficulty, which I venture to submit to your sense of generosity and justice.

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<sup>222</sup> George Henry Moore died suddenly two months later, April 19, 1870. "Death and Burial of George Henry Moore, M.P.," *Tuam Herald* (Tuam), April 30, 1870.

<sup>223</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *A Notebook Containing Poems and Sketches*, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 412.

In my recent visit to my husband at Chatham I solicited and obtained from him the assurance, that to regain his personal liberty he would be willing to submit to any terms, not inconsistent with his personal honor and character that the Government might propose. He would consent to leave these islands forever under penalty of arrest and forfeiture of his pardon in case of his return without permission. He would prefer to go to America . . .

These terms were extended to Mr. Hamilton Rowan and several others implicated in the insurrection of 1798 by the government of that day, and they were not found to have endangered the peace of the country. It is to be hoped that justice has not grown more unrelenting, or the quality of England's mercy more strained, since that period. Whatever danger might be apprehended in the release of my husband and his fellow prisoners in this country, their influence could not contribute a feather's weight to the balance of good and evil throughout the world.<sup>224</sup>

Shortly after her visit to Rossa, he wrote her a long letter, explaining in more detail his reluctant approval of her appeal to Gladstone. In his meeting with McCarthy Downing in March 1869, he indicated that he would accept amnesty from the government if it required his exile from Ireland. Downing felt certain that it was the only possibility that the government would consider. Rossa later regretted the discussion and tried to rescind the document Downing extracted from him, but was unable. Since Mary Jane would agree to nothing more than this in her letter to Gladstone, Rossa agreed. But he had little hope she would prevail:

The Minister may not answer you decisively, and some of his admirers may suggest to you an unendurable waiting. The wisdom of a Satan advised Governors to keep the people always expecting something, and the people, afraid of losing that something, would be sure to do nothing. Do not, Mollis, waste your energies in this manner, by feeding at the feet of the British Lion on hopes, which may be vain.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To W.E. Gladstone dated February 15, 1870, W.E. Gladstone Papers, BM Add. Mss. 44306, ff. 247-9, British Library, London.

<sup>225</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 18, 1870, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/3/1, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

This letter was not just a message to Mary Jane about managing through the politics and his concern that she focused too much on gaining his release which he thought was never likely, but it also held some personal insights into how Rossa was dealing with his wife's success:

It is some satisfaction to me to know that, thrown on your own resources, you can obtain an honorable livelihood, but however much your ability and success in public reading may have pleased me, you must grant me the possession of a little husband pride, and that it is not without its alloy of humiliation when I see you "on the stage." But we cannot have the roses without the thorns. I do not know if all husbands feel as I do, but I will confess that my soul is sometimes shaken at seeing a wife that I am rather fond of in a position of life where the most exemplary conduct also requires a shield of the most guarded behavior to protect her from the idle tongue of society. In my parting letters I told you not to tread the ground heavily, to meet the world with as light a heart as you could afford to carry, and I repeat it now, for I have never doubted but that you would fight the hard battle with all safety to your honor and mine. . . . I have said before that I am averse to your coming to London if you have no business but to try to get possession of me. I do not presume to have a right or authority to issue peremptory commands to you, and in anything I say do not understand that I am speaking peremptorily. I resign the title to speak so with my inability to provide for you, and with the necessity that obliges you to have recourse to your own resources for maintenance. You have entitled yourself to a certain liberty of action, to a right to use your own mind instead of mine in anything you think proper to do, bearing in mind that any liberty which would restore you to me without a name unsullied, such as when you were torn from me, would be a liberty which I could not well enjoy.<sup>226</sup>

Mary Jane left London, and went to her father's home in Clonakilty happily reunited with her son and her family. She was struck by how her young son, James Maxwell, so resembled Denis, Rossa's eldest son, who was now in America. Some of her own siblings were much changed over the three years, as well; her brothers: Tim was working with her father, Will had gone off to sea, and Alf she called "a hardy little man;" and her sister Isabella "has grown to be a young woman." Her biggest shock was:

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<sup>226</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 18, 1870, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/3/1, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

“Mamma, who is, poor woman, but a shadow of her former self.”<sup>227</sup> Less than two months later, on May 12, 1870, Margaret Keohane Irwin was dead.<sup>228</sup> After a short stay at home, Mary Jane determined to take advantage of her position of notoriety, began a lecture tour of some cities in Ireland. Her first event was at the Athenaeum in Cork on March 14, 1870. The chairman of city council introduced her to cheers after these comments:

In America, her readings had been lauded to the skies by a highly critical people, as the Americans were known to be. He was sure they had but to hear her tonight, in order to see that the praises that had been bestowed upon her by the American press fell far short of her real merits.<sup>229</sup>

On March 17, a rousing audience in Tipperary met her, but to her consternation the police searched for arms in her hotel room. This act was a reminder that her political life in Ireland was very different than it was in America.<sup>230</sup> She followed this with an event in Limerick, on March 21, where the press reported: “her debut was made the occasion of a regular *furore* by the Nationalists. They are described as wild in their enthusiasm.”<sup>231</sup> She appeared in Ennis on April 6,<sup>232</sup> and then in at City Hall in Waterford on April 8. The crowd in Waterford was described as “pouring in,” delaying the entertainment. Mary

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<sup>227</sup> Letter from Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated April 21, 1870 reprinted in her husband's book. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 343.

<sup>228</sup> "News from Munster," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 11, 1870.

<sup>229</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa; The Readings from the Poets in Cork," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 2, 1870.

<sup>230</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa —Tipperary," *Cork Examiner* (Cork), March 21, 1870.

<sup>231</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Limerick," *The Dundee Courier and Argus* (Dundee), March 23, 1870.

<sup>232</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa; The Readings from the Poets in Cork," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 2, 1870.



Jane, wearing her traditional green and black, read her usual repertoire: Mahony's "Bells of Shandon," Davis's "Fontenoy," and O'Donnell's "Flag of our Land." The crowds in Waterford were so large that Mary Jane did a second appearance that week opening with "a soul-stirring address 'To Ireland'" by Speranza (Lady Wilde).<sup>233</sup> At some of these performances she read some of her own poetry, as well. Particularly popular was "The Bridge," a sad lament about an Irish girl who emigrated to America, recited in Cork and Tipperary:

There's a bridge in the midst of the city—  
 A dark-tinted bridge in the city;  
     And the waters below  
     With a swift motion flow,  
     And the train overhead,  
     With a thunder of dread  
 Fills the heart of the waif of the city.

Alone in the desolate dawn,  
     With eyes haggard, weary and worn  
 The folds of her shawl closely drawn,  
     Her shoes and her dress soiled and torn.

Lost and alone,  
 With her life one great moan;  
 And she passed to the bridge, and she wearily leaned  
 On the ponderous arch, by a tall pillar screened,  
 And she gazed on the stream that went eddying down,  
 With a fixed, fevered eye, and a pain-gathered frown.

And her parched lips were muttering  
     A sound like the rains  
 That come, whirling down—fluttering,  
     Thro' cold narrow lanes:

A sound like the lapping  
     Of damp forest leaves,  
 A sound like the tapping

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<sup>233</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Waterford," *Waterford News and General Advertiser* (Waterford), April 8, 1870.

Of boughs on the eaves.

And their measure ran softly,  
 Thus wondered I oftly,  
 O, River, what secrets are locked  
 Down in thy dark, troubled bosom!  
 What secrets to slumber are rocked!

Listen, O'River! 'Twill soothe me to tell  
 Of the poor little cot I remember so well;  
 And the bright Shannon waters that swept by its side  
 Than all other rivers more fair was its tide.  
 Listen, O, River! Ere tainted with sin  
 I left that small cot—left my country and kin;  
 Came here with high hopes, and I found—oh! I fell!—  
 God forgive me! I wrote home, "Dear friends, I do well."  
 They'd not blame me who knew all the cause of my wrong,  
 Bitter hunger assailed me—temptation was strong:  
 So I lived, and the fruit of my sin—earnings went  
 O'er the water to help toward the Michaelmas rent.  
 God forgive me! My brother, encouraged, has said,  
 "She is doing so well, in her footsteps I'll tread."  
 I have argued in vain: Shall we meet face to face!  
 Shall the high-hearted boy know his sister's disgrace?  
 Shall my father bow down by the hearthstone and weep?  
 Shall my mother, with shame, through the market-place creep?  
 No- No! Death before! Hush, the daybreak is brightening,  
 The great city stirs; I must rest ere it wake:  
 What reck I in life since its grief has not lightening?  
 What fear I in death? Oh! the spirit at stake!  
 Troubled, indeed, is thy bosom, O River!  
 Dark-glowing, strong-breasted, far stretching River!  
 Yet methinks it were better I'd rest  
 'Neath thy rough-swelling billows for ever!  
 Bear thou my tale till he comes here to seek me;  
 In low sorrow moanings, in sorrow moans low,  
 Then surge up the tales of my sins and my woe.  
 Pause! 'Gainst the span of the dark-tinted bridge,  
 Where the rough severed water unites in a ridge,  
 Like a furrow of snow, when the late morning sun  
 Looked down thro' the city smoke, misty and dun,  
 A chill form was floating there—a white face appearing there—  
 Lost! doubly lost! and no being in hearing there,

Under the arch of the dark-tinted bridge.<sup>234</sup>

While she was traveling for performances Mary Jane received the response she dreaded from Gladstone: Rossa had been right; the answer to her plea was no. It is likely that Mary Jane heard about this answer in the newspapers before she actually received the letter, which was dated March 18, 1870, and read:

Madam: Circumstances not under my own control compelled me to announce in the House of Commons last night, at very short notice, what I should have preferred to communicate to you in the first instance individually and privately—this, namely, that we are forbidden by considerations of public duty to allow any further release of political prisoners until we can procure such a change in the condition of Ireland as shall afford a greater degree of peace and security to the people of that country, now in several parts of it exposed to violence, distracted by alarm, and apprehensive of dissolution of many of the ties by which society is bound together.

During the interval since I wrote to you I have made inquiry to learn whether there were any particulars, which would enable the Government to draw a line in favor of your husband without injustice to others, but I grieve to say I have been unable to discover any particulars of such a character.

You will be well able to appreciate the gravity of the considerations, which have weighed upon my mind and the minds of my colleagues and I hope you may join with us at least in earnestly desiring the arrival of better days.

I remain, Madam, your very faithful servant,  
W.E. Gladstone<sup>235</sup>

The day before Gladstone wrote this letter to Mary Jane, on March 17, 1870, George Henry Moore requested yet again “a full and free inquiry into the health and treatment of the political prisoners in this country” as it would be “a public advantage” and on which “both sides of the question might be represented, and which would be sufficient to relieve the public mind from all further doubts or suspicions.” Surprisingly, Gladstone responded: given that “other Members of Parliament appear to sympathize”

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<sup>234</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Wife Poetry," *Nenagh Guardian* (Nenagh), March 23, 1870.

<sup>235</sup> W.E. Gladstone, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated March 18, 1870, W.E. Gladstone Papers, BM Add. Mss. 44306, ff. 250-268, British Library, London.

with Mr. Moore, “under the circumstances, it will be politic and just to allow an inquiry into the truth of these allegations.”<sup>236</sup> The outcome of this debate became the Devon Committee (known as the Devon Commission). Under the leadership of William Reginald Courtenay, the 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Devon, the Commission was established on April 8, 1870, and the membership included both an English member and Irish member: George Charles Broderick and Stephen Edward deVere, and two doctors, one Irish: Robert Spenser Dyer Lyons, and one English: Edward Headlam Greenhow. Unlike during the 1867 inquiry, this time friends of prisoners would be permitted to visit and help the prisoners prepare for their testimonies.<sup>237</sup>

Her performance tour of Ireland over, Mary Jane heard about the establishment of the Devon Commission after she returned to Clonakilty for Easter, April 17, 1870. But her travels had taken a toll on her health and she suffered from a bad throat infection. Glad to be home and under her sisters’ care she wrote a few letters to Rossa while convalescing. She described at length her travels and the places she stayed, including a short time with the aging and deaf Charles Kickham. She was so struck with the devotion of the Irish people, she tried hard to make it real for her husband, such as in this description of her treatment in Cashel in a letter to Rossa dated April 21:

On Sunday I went to last Mass, and found, when ‘twas over, the congregation were waiting to give me an ovation on my return to the hotel. The gallery stairs to the chapel were lined with people, and as I stood on the first landing and looked over the eager heads of a double line of people down the steps, spreading out into the sunny, tree-shadowed chapel yard, filling it densely, then swelling in still stronger numbers outside the gate and down and up the ancient street, my heart swelled to my throat with a feeling that was not vanity or mere personal

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<sup>236</sup> George Henry Moore and W.E. Gladstone, "Ireland Political Prisoners," *Hansard*, 200, no. (March 17, 1870): cc 76-81.

<sup>237</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 196.

gratification. While I paused, and felt my eyes fill with tears of national pride and gratitude, a tremendous cheer rang up within and without the sacred building; it was echoed and re-echoed down the street, and as I passed with much emotion down the steps and out into the chapel-yard and street, every head was uncovered; the people fell back to give me a passage, and while those near enough seized my hands and fervently kissed and pressed them, the whole mass of my country-people there murmured a blessing and a hope for the future of Ireland, of you and of me.<sup>238</sup>

She wrote to her husband about her own feelings, as well. She was enjoying her independence and letting him know how changed she might be from the girl he remembered. In this letter from April 27, she was putting him on notice that she was not likely to give up her fought-for independence:

You will laugh to yourself, and say I am growing very self-opinionated: I have doubts sometimes as to the advisability of getting so strong-minded—in view, you know, of someday being again called upon to “obey.” I think you will lead a dreadfully unhappy life with me, for I have entirely lost that amiable dependency and timidity of provoking reproof which, I think, constituted my charm for you in old times.<sup>239</sup>

When Mary Jane’s health returned and she was informed about the possibility of aiding Rossa in his testimony before the Devon Commission, she left Clonakilty with her young son, James Maxwell, and immediately went to London. Her visit to Rossa in Chatham Prison on June 6, 1870 did not go according to her expectations, and immediately afterwards she wrote a letter to Richard Pigott, publisher of the *Irishman*. This stark descriptive letter was printed in the June 13, 1870, issue of the *Irish Examiner*.

Dear Mr. Pigott—I have just returned from Chatham, and though I can scarcely collect my thoughts sufficiently to write anything readable, I yet superstitiously obey an impulse urging me to send a letter to you tonight.

I cannot describe to you, nor yet explain to myself, the reason of the disturbance and desolation of mind I have experienced since entering the Chatham Prison gates this evening. The warders to whom I had occasion to speak treated me with

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<sup>238</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 345.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

ready respect and kindness. The Deputy-Governor in his own way was inclined to be humane, but he managed to annihilate my gratitude at its birth by entering into an official, officious, and to me quite unnecessary caution, magisterially delivered, against making inquiries regarding Rossa's treatment, or giving to him any political information whatever.

Ushered into the prisoner's "reception" room, I found Rossa standing behind the iron fence, looking thinner and more wasted and worn than on my last visit. He also was cautioned in my presence to abstain from all reference to his treatment. He remonstrated vainly with the Deputy-Governor, who said in return that he had his instructions, and he should be obliged to act accordingly. Visits were not allowed, he continued for the purpose of discussing the prison treatment. Rossa was there before me—I could see him—was not that enough? In this strain was I exhorted by the mouthpiece of the Government to be content and thankful for the favours allowed me.

A hopeless chill descended on my heart while I listened. I felt this strenuous opposition to the prisoners. And I felt, also, that the assured air and firm confident manner of the Governor sprung from the certainty of official safety, whatever revelations may happen to be confirmed by this committee of inquiry. The jailers have merely obeyed their instructions, received from higher quarters and as the arrangements for the inquiry, and the committee to conduct it, are also emanations from the same source, it is more than likely that the discomfiture of the prisoners and a fraudulent governmental triumph will be the result.

I am very sad tonight, oppressed with so gloomy an anticipation. My heart is fairly wrung with a sense of deep injustice done us, and my own and Ireland's impotency to reverse it or punish its cause. The burning eloquence of a wronged and insulted nation is wasted on these English stoics. They are as self-possessed and as oblivious of the outcry we have made, as if our mouths had opened soundlessly against them. They are unashamed and impervious to disgrace.

My little son was with me at the prison today, and apparently found much favour in the sight of the Deputy-Governor. They say the surest road to a mother's heart is through her child, and I begin to believe it, for though the Deputy-Governor's manner to Rossa somewhat wounded me, the quills of my resentment were all extracted by the kindness evinced to the child. I am, therefore, left in that grievous predicament where, being reasonably incensed and indignant, I can yet find nothing tangible on which to expend my unamiable feelings. The officials all declare they are only obeying instructions, Mr. Gladstone is only obeying his conscience, and the Queen leaves it all to her Ministers, who in turn saddle the responsibility of wrong-doing on something or somebody else, and so on, ad infinitum. Paper is nearly out I find, and I shall suddenly wind up.—I remain, dear Mr. Pigott, sincerely yours,

Mary J. O'Donovan Rossa<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> "Letter from Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish Examiner* (Cork), June 13, 1870.

Mary Jane was by now so distrustful of the prison authorities that any hope that the process of the inquiry would lead to amnesty departed from her. She stayed in Chatham expecting to see Rossa again, as he had written to the Commission at the end of May formally requesting his wife's help with his preparation for testimony.<sup>241</sup> No response to Rossa's request had been received to his request by June 17, so Mary Jane wrote to the Earl of Devon, Chairman of the Commission, requesting that he assist her husband, quoting a statement made by Mr. Spenser Ollivant, the Secretary of the Commission, that friends of the prisoners would be permitted to assist the prisoners. The chairman responded through Mr. Ollivant that only the Home Secretary could give her permission, but the chairman sent a recommendation to the Home Secretary that her request be permitted. Mary Jane continued to wait in Chatham, and, when, a week later she had received no permission, she was informed that the interviews with the prisoners were now scheduled to begin on July 4. She wrote immediately to the Home Secretary stressing how little time remained to assist her husband. Again she received no response, so on the weekend before the inquiry was to begin Mary Jane left for Clonakilty believing that she and Rossa would have no time to meet. When she arrived home she received a message from the prison authorities that her request had been granted, but too late. She wrote immediately, on July 3, to the Chairman of the Commission, a very strong rebuke expressing some of the anger she had been harboring:

My husband is nearly five years in prison, and since his conviction I have received from him altogether five letters, each letter confined to one sheet of blue prison letter paper. Convicts are allowed to write, according to class, every second, third, fourth, or sixth month, I believe; but my husband's letters to me, with the exception of the five I mention, have been suppressed for five years. And in all these years I have had altogether but five interviews held always in the

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<sup>241</sup> "Tuam, Saturday, July 9, 1870," *The Tuam Herald* (Tuam), July 9, 1870.

presence of not less than two prison officials, by whom our limited conversation was subject to constant interruption . . .

My lord, this permission, granted at the eleventh hour, I look upon as an insult; as a crowning proof that while the government is thus anxious to keep the letter and appearance of its promise intact, it has no regard for the spirit of that promise. It tramples upon the soul of fair play that should be supposed to have suggested—it breaks faith in the spirit, and holding to the form, hopes craftily thus to justify itself before the world.<sup>242</sup>

The newspapers analyzed the situation exactly the same way:

Had the Home Secretary communicated this decision to Mrs. Rossa directly, it might have reached her in time; but, coming through the circuitous channel of the governor of the jail, it arrived too late, as, even if a single interview without any preparation would have sufficed, that interview could not have taken place, the 3 of July being Sunday. The case now stands thus. The government had granted the Commission with one hand, and with the other hand they have prevented the Fenian prisoners from making the proper preparations to bring their case fairly before it. They have willfully placed themselves on their trial, and they obstructed the prosecuting lawyers. We suppose they will be acquitted, but who will give them the least credit for it if they are?<sup>243</sup>

More of this letter appeared in *The Cork Daily Southern Reporter* on July 7, 1870, and makes clear not only her reaction to the government's actions but her intention not to participate in the exercise in the future:

My lord, again I crave your pardon for anything disrespectful in the tone of my letter. It is not, indeed, meant to be personal, and I should be more careful to restrain it did I not expect this letter would meet the eyes and ears of those who have borrowed the shelter of your honourable name to hide and further their schemes of cruelty and hypocrisy. They doubtless, will be ready by and bye, to stand up in the House of Commons or of Peers, and to shamelessly declare—"We have given the prisoners' friends leave and opportunities to see the prisoners, and to assist in their preparations, and they have neglected to take advantage of our concessions." It is neither the dread of distance, fatigue or excuse, not yet of the unmanly insolence of British officials that would keep me here in Ireland while my husband requires my presence in England. But it is, my lord, to save myself from being the victim and abettor of what I now believe to be a plot against the prisoners' character and veracity. It is to expose still further the unguineness and unreality of the powers vested in the commission that I now refuse the

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<sup>242</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa's letter to the Earl of Devon," *The Nation* (Dublin), July 9, 1870.

<sup>243</sup> "The Political Prisoners' Inquiry—Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa," *The Nation* (Dublin), July 9, 1870.



valueless accession of the Secretary of State to my own and my husband's request for an interview; and that I write to you, my lord, a letter of which I preserve the copy for publication.<sup>244</sup>

Mary Jane's publishing of these letters in multiple papers created great support for her and Rossa, and most importantly had one immediate impact: the Commission postponed the date for the interviews of the Chatham prisoners until July 19, 1870. Mary Jane herself received a letter from Mr. Ollivant a letter announcing the change in date, written as a response to her letter to the Chairman.<sup>245</sup>

Public opinion may have been in Mary Jane's favor, but after hearing of the approval of the visits Rossa still wanted to go ahead with his testimony. He wrote to ask Mary Jane to return to Chatham, but she was not inclined to agree. She wrote to Rossa on July 7, 1870, wishing to "wash her hands of the Commission," and rebuking her husband, "who have, since I first knew you, held public interest far in advance of mine or your own gratification. . . . To take advantage of this permission . . . this I would look upon a selling one's right like Esau."<sup>246</sup> She believed the permission to see him would still come with restrictions and no value would be had for the inquiries

to take advantage of it merely for the satisfaction of an ordinary interview, when we know that the fact would be brought against us to prove that the Government gave fair means of preparations, which were availed of, and in their barrenness of corroborative result . . . made another proof of the innocence of the Government?<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa and the Government," *The Cork Daily Southern Reporter* (Cork), July 7, 1870.

<sup>245</sup> Spencer Ollivant, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated July 8, 1870, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/3/3, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>246</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 349.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

This letter also confirmed for Rossa that if in the past Mary Jane had asked for him to temper his actions in order to think of his family, this was not the time.

I want no compromises, no mediums. "All or nothing!" "Saint or Sinner;" "Caesar or nobody," have grown instinctively to be my watchwords. So I will have all my husband or none of him, and I will have all its promises from the crown or none of them; and as I cannot have the peaceful wedded life I hoped for once, why I can make up my mind to lead a strong single one. Don't, therefore, abate or alter, after so long endurance, any of your principles, beliefs, or inspirations through compassion for me.<sup>248</sup>

Mary Jane was really more hopeful than these words portray. She believed that the Government was being forced to act and it would just take a little more time. This letter continues:

I have no doubt the Government will presently make concessions, not only in favor of the prisoners but of the country for which they suffer. I can wait for these concessions, which the Government hopes to get the prisoners' friends to hold the whitewash pail while it [the Government] whitens its even dark acts.<sup>249</sup>

But, Rossa insisted, he wanted her there. In a letter to Mary Jane dated just two days later, July 9, 1870, he wrote:

But I must tell you that independent of any advice you or anyone else could give me I have determined to pursue a certain course. And tho your letter may lead me to think that you would disapprove of it, still I will not alter my mind. That course is to give evidence before the Commission. If they see there is anything relevant to their inquiry contained in a part statement, which I laid before them on Monday the 4<sup>th</sup>. I did not make this statement as a complaint. I only stated simply matters that I experienced by virtue of prison discipline and left it to them to examine me or not as to the truth of what I stated. I was led to adopt this course by thinking that the most of what I stated to them were matters that were one way or another canvassed and contradicted in the world and whatever your opinion or my opinion of the Commission be, I concluded that I would not leave it in the gentlemen's power to say that my refusal to give evidence was proof that those statements could not be substantiated . . . the decision was that they would take the paper I gave them as a part statement that I would not go into my examination until they could come again on Tuesday the 19<sup>th</sup>, that every day till then I could have my

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<sup>248</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 349.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

wife's assistance in preparing my case (that is if my wife came) and that then I could give them the rest of my statement, if I wrote any more.

In answering her direct concern about his view of public interest, he continues:

Well I am not so much in alarm as you are in these matters. I will pursue the course I have indicated if the authorities do what they have stated they would do and I have no fears as to doing wrong, or as to injuring the public interest . . . I cannot see, suppose nothing else but the "public interest" was concerned, how a history of my prison life to you would not counterbalance the advantage the government would devise.<sup>250</sup>

After thinking overnight about this letter he wrote the day before, Rossa decided he should make his views clearer to Mary Jane and followed up with another letter on July 10, 1870:

I write a more brief and more decisive note than the long "do as you please" one which I wrote . . . last evening.

If I have ever made sacrifices for public interest, I have liked to see my way, and I cannot, in this matter, see how your visiting me now is to injure public interests.

I do not intend to injure public interests. I have no fear that anything I will ask you to do will injure them, and I ask you to come. . . . I don't know, Mollis, but that there is some of the husband pride breaking out here, for I think I feel a little humiliation at being obliged to say to my companions when I meet them by and by, at nine o'clock, "Oh, my wife wouldn't come."

I am to go through this inquiry whether you come or not, and your advice or assistance might not change the course I have struck out for myself, and that course I have determined with a view to public more than personal interests.<sup>251</sup>

This request Mary Jane could not deny, and she went to Chatham where she and Rossa had private meetings for six or seven days. Rossa prepared his statements and later sat for days answering questions for the Commission. The couple had some private time together but for Mary Jane it was agonizing to spend time together and then to have it end. Afterwards, on August 9, when she was in London worried also about her father's

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<sup>250</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated July 9, 1870, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/3/2, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>251</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 351.

health and whether she should leave at once for Cork, she wrote a forty-page letter to Rossa in deep despair. She was now twenty-five years old and her life had left her with such grief and melancholy that she told her husband, “Life is not what I hoped—it is bare, cold, wretched reality. . . . Let me alone, I am miserable; bury Chatham—fly from it, forget it, for all my wretchedness lies there.” The years of stress and sadness had left her emotionally numb and she wanted her husband to know, the letter continues:

Since I last saw you, I have sat for hours and hours with locked hands, closed lips and vacantly fixed eyes, actually blank with the load of invisible misery I seem to be carrying. It is grown to be a disease with me, this fearful weight of melancholy. It so overwhelms my soul that I cannot see in the future any circumstance that could reanimate me—anything that could bring me permanent joy.<sup>252</sup>

Rossa’s reaction to the time together was very different: he found it almost invigorating. No doubt, five years of very little human companionship had already taken its toll but spending time with his wife buoyed him. One night after a visit he wrote a very telling poem describing his love for her but also the changes he saw in her.

From a Dungeon

A single glance, and that glance the first,  
And her image was fixed in my mind and nursed,  
And now she is woven with all my schemes,  
And she rules the kingdom of all my dreams.

One of Heaven’s last gifts in an earthly mould;  
With a figure Apelles might paint of old—  
All a maiden’s charms with a matron’s grace,  
And the blossom and bloom of the peach in her face.

She has genius that flashes her bright brown eye,  
And she looks like the sun in a clouded sky,  
She has noble thoughts, she has noble aims,  
And these thoughts on her tongue are sparkling gems.

With a gifted mind and spirit meek,

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<sup>252</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 355.

She would right the wronged and assist the weak,  
 She would brave all dangers to cheer the brave,  
 She would smite oppression and free the slave.

Yet a blighted life is my loved one's part  
 And a death-cold shroud is around her heart,  
 For winds from the "clouds of fate" have blown,  
 That force her to face the hard world alone.

A daughter she of a trampled land,  
 With its children exiled, prisoned, banned;  
 And she vowed her love to a lover whom  
 The tyrant had marked for a felon's doom.

And torn from her ere honeymoon waned,  
 In the dungeons of England he lies enchained,  
 And the bonds that bind him "for life," a slave,  
 They bind his Love to his living grave.

He would sever the links of such hopeless love,  
 Were that sentence "for ever" decreed above,  
 For the pleasures don't pay for the pains of life,  
 When you're living in death with a widowed wife.

A single glance, and that glance the first.  
 And her image was fixed in my mind and nursed,  
 And now she's the woof of my worldly schemes,  
 And she sits enthroned as the queen of my dreams.<sup>253</sup>

The Devon Commission held sixty-three sittings for their inquiries of which  
 Rossa's was one of the eight sittings held in Chatham Prison. He was cross-examined and  
 confronted with the prison officials who had contributed to his mistreatment, and he was  
 permitted to defend his statement that Mary Jane helped him draw together. Rossa  
 published a line-by-line copy of these proceedings in his book, *Irish Rebels*. The  
 commissioners were respectful of the prisoners and all but Dr. Greenhow were  
 sympathetic. Dr. Lyons was particularly careful with Rossa, and actually permitted

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<sup>253</sup> "From A Dungeon," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), September 3, 1870. Jeremiah  
 O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 352.

himself to be manacled behind his back to see what the experience was like. Lyons asked detailed questions about the thirty-five days that Rossa spent with his hands manacled behind his back.<sup>254</sup> Not surprisingly the prison officials denied these charges, but when the Commission report was finally issued in January 1871, it found that Rossa was indeed telling the truth about that experience in spite of the denial by some of the senior prison officials.<sup>255</sup>

After the days of Rossa's interviews, Mary Jane arrived in London and waited for her brother Tim Irwin to arrive to help make arrangements for the series of readings planned for the coming months in England. With a short time to recover her equilibrium from all the tension at the prison, Mary Jane was compelled to go on the lecture circuit yet again. This time because of her father's protracted illness, she was again the breadwinner for her large family. Advertisements for her readings ran in the September 17, 1870, issue of *The Nation* with events held in Chatham's Lecture Hall on September 19 and 20, Deptford's Lecture Hall on September 23, and in Leed's Music Hall on October 3.<sup>256</sup> Mary Jane delighted her audiences: both those who supported her politics and those who did not. After her event in Chatham, she received a lovely note from the Churchwarden of Chatham that shows this:

Madam: I beg leave to express to you the gratification I felt in attending at your entertainment in the Lecture Hall last evening.

Your rendering of the several pieces, (Some of them most difficult) was delightful and showed how carefully you had studied the different authors, especially so I refer to the beautiful poem of the "Bells."

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<sup>254</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 370.

<sup>255</sup> "Political Prisoners Inquiry Commission," *The Nation* (Dublin), January 7, 1871.

<sup>256</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in England," *The Nation* (Dublin), September 17, 1870.

I do not presume to enter into the causes that have made it necessary for you to enter into the position of a public reader—but I cannot refrain saying that the Public are largely benefited by having the opportunity of hearing a Lady, willing and so able to give a high class entertainment.<sup>257</sup>

She continued her tour with events in Newcastle on November 14, where her politics were more of a benefit based on the review in the *Newcastle Chronicle*, the next day stating that she enjoyed the “utmost consideration and sympathy from her compatriots” but again commenting on the appeal to a wider audience. But Mary Jane’s statement at the end of this performance was clearly patriotic:

I thank you for your attendance and for your applause; it has been a source of great happiness for me to meet with so many of my dear countrymen to- night, and to observe that the places you most warmly applauded were those that were national; and indeed it is a matter of pride to me to think that in thus traveling through the country I am helping to keep alive the interest in our suffering country, an interest which I trust her children will never suffer to die out till we have an Ireland that is all our own.<sup>258</sup>

The tour continued through December 1870 with appearances in Wigan, Blackburn, and Sheffield.<sup>259</sup> Mary Jane had now spent three years in the public eye; nearly all her audiences, as well as people who just read about her in newspapers across England, Ireland, and the United States, viewed her as a very talented and strong woman. One article, “A Wife Worth Having,” written when rumors about possible release of the Fenian prisoners were at their height during the fall of 1870 while waiting for the report of the Devon Commission, is illustrative of how she was viewed by the public:

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<sup>257</sup> W Willis, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated September 20, 1870, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>258</sup> "Irish Readings in England," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), December 17, 1870.

<sup>259</sup> "Irish Readings in England; Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa in Sheffield," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 14, 1871; "Irish Readings in England; Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 7, 1871.

How invaluable a treasure a brave and loving wife may become has just been illustrated in the release from imprisonment of the Irish revolutionist O'Donovan Rossa. The leading features of his case will be readily remembered . . . everyone supposed that it was all up with the poor revolutionist, and his epitaph was written as sincerely as though he had been hanged and buried. The only person who did not share in this hopelessness was Mrs. Rossa, who finding herself poor and alone,—determined to give her life to the work of securing her husband's release. Instead of folding her hands and waiting for charity to seek her, she came at once to this country, where welcomed and encouraged by Halpine and the better class of sympathizers with Ireland, she began a course of readings throughout the states, coming, as will be remembered, to this city. The people everywhere received her warmly, as a heroic woman in misfortune is always received, and the funds she gathered were at once devoted to securing her husband's pardon and to the education of her children. Though pecuniarily successful, she could not buy her husband out of prison, but she did better, she created a public sentiment which not even British law could withstand. If Rossa is not a tender, faithful husband henceforth to that brave, devoted woman, he will be the basest of men. Moral to all men; Marry a good wife before you adopt revolution as a profession.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> "A Wife Worth Having," *Daily Leader* (Cleveland), November 7, 1870.



## Chapter 6

### RELEASE AND EXILE

According to Sean McConville, in *Irish Political Prisoners*, by winter 1870, Gladstone was convinced that the cycle of disturbance, sedition, violence, and state repression in Ireland needed to be broken, or it would continue indefinitely.<sup>261</sup> His strategy was to loosen the control over Ireland slowly over time. The beginning of this new policy was the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland enacted in 1869, and which became effective on January 1, 1871.<sup>262</sup> But, the amnesty issue for the Fenian prisoners was creating the most press and tension so on September 30, 1870, Gladstone took an amnesty proposal to the Cabinet where it failed for lack of support.<sup>263</sup> When rumors about the findings of the Devon Commission started to emerge that majority view began to change. When the final release of the report, in mid December, confirmed many of the allegations of ill treatment, the cry for amnesty was nearly universal among Gladstone's supporters. Summaries of the report appeared in most newspapers and were a vindication of Rossa. The investigation had proved that his treatment was indeed as he had testified:

The commissioners appointed to inquire into the treatment of the political prisoners have made their report to the Home Office. They held, it appears, sixty three meetings, and examined O'Donovan Rossa, Luby, Mackey, L Bourke, Dillon, Mulcahy, Roantree, Devoy, O'Connell, McClure, Lennon, Browne, O'Leary, Sheehy, Shea, Moriarty, Murphy, Ryan, Power, R Bourke, Halpin, Shaw alias Mulleda, St. Clair, Cafferty, doran and Walsh. The report contains recommendations as to medical treatment, supervision of goods, separate classifications, and other incidents. In reference to O'Donovan Rossa the commissioners state that the evidence of the turnkeys and entries in the prison books placed beyond all possible doubt that handcuffs were put upon him behind

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<sup>261</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 239.

<sup>262</sup> R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848-82* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998), 163.

<sup>263</sup> Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922*, 245.

for 34 days. This, the commissioners say, is established by proof, which they regard as irrefutable. They acquit O'Donovan Rossa of the charge of having endeavored to carry on "a loose interview," and they add that he gave his evidence in a candid and straightforward manner. They report that he alleged that, finding himself a marked man from the first, and branded as "a bad character," he was led into a protracted struggle with the prison authorities.<sup>264</sup>

By the time the details of the report were publicized Gladstone had declared amnesty for Rossa and the other Fenian prisoners in English jails, on the condition that they would not remain in or return to the United Kingdom. His letter, sent December 16, 1870, to members of Parliament, read in part:

I have to inform you that her Majesty's Government have carefully considered the case of the convicts now undergoing their sentences for treason and treason-felony, and that they have recommended to the Crown the exercise towards them of the Royal clemency, so far as it is compatible with the assured maintenance of tranquility and order in the country.

They will, therefore, be discharged, upon the condition of not remaining in, nor returning to the United Kingdom.

These prisoners were most justly condemned for participation, either secretly or by open violence, in a conspiracy, which, if in any degree successful, would have filled Ireland with misery and bloodshed; and the same principles of justices, which dictated their sentences, would amply sanction the prolongation of their imprisonment if the public security demanded it.

It is this last question, therefore, which has formed the subject of careful examination by her Majesty's Government, and they have been able to come to the conclusion that, under the existing circumstances of the country, the release of the prisoners, guarded by the conditions, which I have stated, will be perfectly compatible with the paramount interests of public safety, and, being so, will tend to strengthen the cause of peace and loyalty in Ireland.

There happily appears to be a concurrence of circumstances favourable to such an exercise of the Royal prerogative of mercy.<sup>265</sup>

Gladstone had deftly managed the politically dangerous situation by declaring Ireland safe from turmoil and stating that the freedom of the Fenians would only make it more peaceful as long as they were prevented from returning to British territory for the

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<sup>264</sup> "The Political Prisoners," *Dundalk Democrat* (Dundalk), January 7, 1871.

<sup>265</sup> "The Political Prisoners-Gladstone letter," *The Tralee Chronicle* (Tralee), December 20, 1870.

period of their specified terms. The Fenians themselves viewed this as a “conditional pardon” and some of their supporters considered it a “sham amnesty,” but it was really a victory for the Amnesty movement.<sup>266</sup> After some deliberations the prisoners at Chatham prison accepted the conditions and terms of exile: twenty years for Rossa and John McClure, five years for John Devoy, and four years for Charles O’Connell and Henry Shaw Mulleda.<sup>267</sup> Mary Jane, after hearing about Gladstone’s announcement left Clonakilty and immediately went to Chatham, hoping Rossa would be released before Christmas. Rossa was the first of this group to accept the terms but he was forced to wait to be released with the others. Mary Jane did visit him on the day before Christmas but then went home to Clonakilty to prepare for their trip to New York. He wrote a letter to his wife on December 28, 1870, discussing what clothes he would wear to be released, urging his wife to be patient and hoping she had forgiven him:

Settle down for a few days or it may be a few weeks, but settle so to be ready to start up immediately. Since you are willing to remarry one who has nothing to offer you but increased love. If you are able to tell me that you have no unpleasant reflection after your last visit, and that you forgive me for any trespass I might have made on your feelings in speaking or in writing to you. You are able to make me happier by telling me so in a few lines.<sup>268</sup>

Rossa spent the time waiting for release, making arrangements for his trip and for his children. He received a letter from his son John, who worked in a legal office in Dublin. John told his father that his brothers Jeremiah and Con were doing well attending

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<sup>266</sup> John Devoy, William O’Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag 1, 1871-1928*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Fallon, 1948), 1.

<sup>267</sup> "Departure of the Fenian Prisoners for America," *Manchester Evening News* (Manchester, UK), January 9, 1871.

<sup>268</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated December 28, 1870, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/3/4, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

school in Tuam with the support of the Ladies' Committee. John let Rossa know that fees and support for the boys in Tuam cost about £25 a year. John himself was giving his earnings to the Ladies' Committee, he told his father, and they allowed him some pocket money, but he would rather take the opportunity to go to America than stay with Rossa's friends in Dublin.<sup>269</sup> Shortly after receiving this letter from John, Rossa wrote to John Nolan, the Secretary of the Amnesty Association, in a letter dated January 4, 1871, to thank him for his offer of any assistance in money or arrangements the Government did not provide for their trip. Rossa's only concern for help from his friends was to maintain two of his sons currently enrolled in school in Ireland.

One of Mr. O'Connor's [Amnesty Association official] questions was about my children, and I must confess that I do not know what is to be done regarding them. I would not consider it wise to disturb them from their present situation, and take them to New York, with only the "gratuity" of my years of convict labour. I wrote a letter to Mr. Pigott last week on my position, and I told him that I was anxious about two of the children (from others somewhat settled), and regarding them I would prefer that any funds at your disposal to carry all my family with me would be reserved for the maintenance of these two till I see my way a little in the New World, or if my friends decide that the children go with me, or that any of the children themselves wish to go, they—the friends—are at perfect liberty to make any arrangements they deem necessary for having them with me.<sup>270</sup>

The wait for release was not nearly so long as Rossa feared: he and Devoy, McClure, Mulleda, and O'Connell left Chatham on Friday, January 6, 1870, spent the night at the Detective Department of the Central Police Station in Liverpool, and boarded the Cunard *RMS Cuba* on Saturday. The Government made arrangements for the five released prisoners to travel first class aboard the *Cuba* and gave them £5 each. The authorities

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<sup>269</sup> John O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated January 1871, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>270</sup> "The Political Prisoners — Letter from O'Donovan Rossa," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), January 9, 1871.

secretly moved the prisoners so there would be no demonstrations along the way. Only a few supporters who heard directly from the prisoners themselves were on hand to see them off from the pier in Liverpool.<sup>271</sup> However, numerous telegrams were received from New York congratulating them on their release and promising “a monster reception” on their arrival in New York.<sup>272</sup> But when they reached Queenstown they were not permitted to go onshore. A group of police came onboard to take the prisoners to their quarters and keep them there while they were in the harbor. Before they could be moved from the side of the deck, a number of small boats came alongside of the *Cuba*. These well-wishers were not permitted to go onboard but Rossa recognized them as longtime friends and he jumped over the side of the ship into one of the boats before he could be stopped. After much commotion, a few minutes later Rossa was back onboard—but he did have the opportunity to shake a few hands in the meantime.<sup>273</sup> However, a small group representing the Amnesty Association was permitted to board the ship, including Isaac Butt, John Nolan, and Richard Pigott of *The Irishman*. This group also gave each man £10 for his travels. A number of supporters were on the piers and in small boats around the vessel, but no demonstrations were permitted. Despite all the efforts by the authorities, when the boat sailed, a few hours later, there was much cheering; bands played on shore and bonfires were seen in the distance, while an American ship dipped her flags in honor of the released prisoners on the *Cuba*. Mary Jane along with James

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<sup>271</sup> "Departure of the Political Prisoners for America - From Our Own Correspondents," *Irish Times* (Dublin), January 9, 1871.

<sup>272</sup> "The Irish Political Prisoners, Their Release and Departure for America, Special Dispatches by the 'Cuba'," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 14, 1871.

<sup>273</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 424.

Maxwell, now nearly five years old, joined the voyage in Queenstown and sailed to New York with her husband.<sup>274</sup>

New York had changed since Rossa's last visit in 1865. The United States was beginning to recover from the Civil War in which thousands of Irishmen had died on both sides. Rossa's own family was impacted heavily, as he would later write: "All my family were killed fighting in the American war—two brothers and the husband of a sister, fighting for the North, and first cousins and second cousins in dozens killed, fighting South and North."<sup>275</sup> In fact, his mother was living in Charleston, South Carolina, the heart of the South, when she died on September 2, 1870. She had been living there with daughter Mary and son-in-law Walter Webb and witnessed the turmoil first hand.<sup>276</sup> One of the Union army's greatest generals, Ulysses S. Grant, was now President of the United States, and he was a member of the Republican Party. It was the Democratic Party under the hold of Tammany Hall that controlled the New York City government. Irish Americans were found in both organizations and both organizations supported the Irish prisoners, if for no other reason than to attract more Irish American voters. Of the million or so people in New York City at the time 80% had at least one foreign born parent and more than 40% of those were from Ireland.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> "The Released Fenian Prisoners — Their Departure for New York," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), January 9, 1871.

<sup>275</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Civil War," *United Irishman* (New York), August 13, 1892.

<sup>276</sup> "Death of Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa From the Charleston Courier," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), September 10, 1870.

<sup>277</sup> "The Ruling Race and Sect, What Ireland has Done In and For New York," *New York Times* (New York), June 8, 1879.

Meanwhile, the split in the American Fenian organization that Mary Jane so deftly managed the year before was now even more convoluted. The three distinct sections: the Fenian Brotherhood, sometimes called the O'Mahony wing (the original group), the Roberts wing (the group supporting the invasion of Canada and opposed to O'Mahony, and the "United Irishmen" (opposed to both O'Mahony and Roberts). The splits among these Fenian organizations were further complicated by the American political parties' exploitation of the Irish nationalist movement and the Irish political prisoners' situation.

The Irish political exiles faced this complicated political situation as soon as the *Cuba* entered New York Harbor on January 19, 1871. In the days before Ellis Island, when ships arrived in the Narrows of Staten Island, they stopped first at the Quarantine Hospital to have their passengers inspected for illness. As the ship sailed into the Narrows three different "welcoming parties" met the *Cuba* with great fanfare, cannons booming and bands playing. The first group was led by Collector Tom Murphy of the Port of New York, representing the Federal government with some of the Fenian organization under General Millen, and Rossa's son Denis on board the *Bronx*, having left behind a committee of United Irishmen.<sup>278</sup> The second group, aboard the *Antelope*, was a 100-member committee representing New York City government and Tammany Hall with Colonel W. R. Roberts and Richard O'Gorman and John Mitchel, the famous Young Irelanders, on board. The last group aboard the *Andrew Fletcher* included sixty members of an Irish organization called the "Knights of St. Patrick," along with Dr.

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<sup>278</sup> "The Fenians Arrived; A Scrub-Race for the Capture of the Irish Voters," *New York Times* (New York), January 20, 1871.

Carnochan, the Health Officer of the Port and a member of the Fenian Brotherhood. All were surprised to find only five exiles on board rather than the twenty-one they were expecting. Each group made long welcoming presentations and invited the exiles to be their guests at different hotels and for different celebrations.<sup>279</sup> The Cuba Five, as they were being called, were not pleased by the commotion and after taking some time in private under Rossa's leadership, gave the welcoming parties a copy of a letter declining all the invitations to leave the ship that night:

Gentlemen,—We thank you all for your invitations, and we will try to accept all, but we are only a few of many. Our fellow prisoners are on the way hither, and we will take no public step until they arrive.

You look upon us as representing the cause of Ireland, for the interests of which cause we desire all Irishmen should be united. It is painful for us to-night to see so much discussion among yourselves. For what your reception concerns us as individuals, we care but little compared to what we feel about it in connection with the interests of Irish independence; and as you have not united harmoniously to receive us, we will not decide upon anything till the arrival of our brothers. We will remain on board ship to-night, and go to a hotel tomorrow.<sup>280</sup>

Rossa and the others were upset by the lack of harmony among the Irish American organizations, and they were determined that they would not play into the hands of those that were manipulating the situation for American political gain. They were, however, very cordial, and Mary Jane was mentioned in the *Irish American* the following week as having been charming entertainment for all the visitors until they left the ship many hours later. The exiles stayed onboard the *Cuba* until it reached Jersey City the next morning when they disembarked with all the other passengers and took carriages to the ferry at Exchange Place. There were large crowds when they left the ship, and a military parade

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<sup>279</sup> "The Irish Exiles, their Arrival in New York," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 28, 1871.

<sup>280</sup> "The Released Fenians, Five of the Number Reach New York," *Boston Traveler* (Boston), January 20, 1871.



and hundreds of people followed them to the ferry.<sup>281</sup> When they reached Manhattan they made their way to Sweeny's Hotel at the corner of Chatham and Duane Streets, where the green flag of the Fenians was hoisted as soon as they arrived. Quickly hundreds of people arrived and crowds remained in the neighborhood for the next few days.<sup>282</sup>

Shortly after they reached the hotel, on January 20, a delegation from the United Irishmen called on the Cuba Five to present them each with an envelope containing \$1000 and a long formal resolution read by Richard McCloud which praised the exiles as patriots who

have done your share of impressing on your age the great truth that right is indestructible, and, in the end, must triumph . . . England may endeavor to crush out the aspirations . . . she cannot extinguish . . . the holy flame of liberty, or prevent the transmission from one generation to another . . . to unite their efforts and their power, and never to desist.<sup>283</sup>

Rossa was noted as warmly accepting the welcome and gift from the United Irishmen, which he commented was the first "substantial aid he had received since their arrival," and though he strongly objected to any public demonstration of the prisoners until the remaining exiles arrived he was struck by the sincerity of "those who sought to unite the Irish people for Ireland alone."<sup>284</sup> One of the sections within the United Irishmen was named Clan Na Gael, and this group would become the precursor for a later attempt by two of the Cuba Five, Devoy and Rossa, to unite all the factions of the Fenians.

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<sup>281</sup> "Arrival of the Irish Exiles," *Jersey City Journal* (Jersey City, NJ), January 20, 1871.

<sup>282</sup> "Arrival of the Exiles in New York," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 28, 1871.

<sup>283</sup> "The 'United Irishmen'," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 28, 1871.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

The Cuba Five also received a visit from Richard O’Gorman, who presented the exiles with \$15,000 collected by Tammany Hall from their fellow Irishmen. Rossa acted as financial manager and accepted on their behalf. O’Gorman also paid all their bills at the hotel for the rest of their stay.<sup>285</sup> O’Gorman and the Tammany men were focused on the value to the voters rather than the cause of Ireland, or so the exiles believed. Rossa and the others, therefore, tried to remain aloof from the partisan politics, particularly any outward sign that they were beholden to Tammany, but that was very difficult because most Irish Americans in New York City were strong supporters of Tammany Hall. Not only did Tammany control the city government but they had planned and were to host a tremendous event to honor the exiles on the streets of New York. The exiles were very conscious not to appear in contempt of the city government. Knowing how important that event would be to the Irish American people of New York; they agreed to participate in the activities.<sup>286</sup> As soon as the second party of exiles arrived, less than a week after the Cuba Five, on the Cunard ship *Russia*; they joined the others at Sweeny’s. On board were nine more Fenian prisoners now exiled to the United States: Thomas Francis Bourke, Edmund Power, Edward Pilsworth St. Clair, Patrick Lennon, William Francis Roantree, Patrick Walsh, Peter Maughan, Denis Dowling Mulcahy, and George Brown.<sup>287</sup> For the next two weeks, these men who had spent years in prison were the objects of great attention. Every day they were visited and lauded with speeches and resolutions. An outing to the opera for the Cuba Five on January 22 was no respite from the fanfare. Two

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<sup>285</sup>"The Freed Fenians," *New York Herald* (New York), January 31, 1871.

<sup>286</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 427.

<sup>287</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag 1, 1871-1928*, 2.

boxes had been set aside for the group and as soon as they entered the hall the band played "Wearing of the Green," to great applause. At the end of the performance Rossa and his comrades were treated to an elegant supper in a private room in the opera house with the cast and many other well-wishers.<sup>288</sup> Accurate descriptions of the exiles appeared in newspapers across the United States like this from Auburn, New York, a reprint from the New York *Sun*:

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa is nearly six feet in height, straight as an arrow, with fearless blue eyes, aquiline nose, high arched forehead, and brown beard. He is about forty years of age.

Capt. John McClure has dark hair and eyes, a strikingly pale face, and appears to be about twenty-five years of age. Charles Underwood O'Connell, prematurely old in appearance, his hair almost gray, and suffering from physical debility, shows too plainly the sad havoc which incarceration has made on his system. John Devoy is about five feet six in height, with broad shoulders, a large head, and short, thick neck. He has a high massive forehead, deep set blue eyes, and wears his hair cut short. He is about twenty-six years of age, and complains of near sightedness, as the result of his five-year's imprisonment. Henry Mulleda is about twenty-eight years of age, fair, with a heavy blonde moustache, and has a more hearty and robust appearance than any of his compatriots.<sup>289</sup>

On February 9, 1871, the celebration planned by the New York City Government and by Tammany Hall attracted what the New York *Herald* called half a million people. The *Herald* believed that the American people were so attracted to the exiles out of a national culture that was bound "Less by our public declarations of policy than our sense of justice and right, to fully recognize and approve of all and every attempt of downtrodden peoples to right their wrongs."<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> "The Irish Exiles Attend the Opera," *New York Evening Post* (New York), January 23, 1871.

<sup>289</sup> "The Irish Exiles From the New York Sun," *Auburn Daily Bulletin* (Auburn, New York), January 24, 1871.

<sup>290</sup> "Erin Go Bragh, America's Tribute to the Irish Exiles," *New York Herald* (New York), February 10, 1871.

Despite the bad weather, the streets were full, buildings were decorated, people carried shamrocks and laurels in their lapels, and flags were hung across streets. Platoons of police kept the parade way open as ten carriages carrying the exiles, followed by thousands representing Fenian groups, political organizations, temperance societies, and churches, first paraded to Tammany Hall at Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue. Then they marched through the Bowery and up to Madison Square Park and then on to City Hall, where there was a reviewing stand with the Mayor and the members of the City Council in attendance. At each stop speeches were read, cannons boomed, and bands played. At Tammany Hall, Richard O’Gorman spoke about the freedom-loving people of America and how America had won the fight to free itself from foreign power. He recalled his time in the dock in Ireland as a young man and introduced John Mitchel, who spoke also of the times he and O’Gorman were part of a previous struggle in Ireland. The crowd demanded a speech from Rossa and he did not disappoint. However, he was irked that O’Gorman hardly mentioned support for the current fight in Ireland so he called him on that and did not compliment Tammany as he was expected to do:

Mr. O’Gorman has said nothing about Ireland, about her cause, or anything connected with revolution that I do not endorse, He has said that success is the grand thing, which the people admire, and that treason is even justified by success. But we are here representing a failure. Why do you welcome us? What have we done? We have nothing as yet for the cause of Ireland. We have come to accept your invitation, and ask you and others here if anything is to be done . . . We have met you here today, accepting the invitation of the Tammany Society, just as we would any other society or people who come to welcome us, in sympathy with Ireland. If we went to Ireland and the Orangemen of Ireland welcomed us, we would receive their welcome, for we would feel it to be a tribute to our cause. I thank the Tammany Society for what they have done for us. Our conduct since we came has not been from disrespect to them, but when Irishmen come here, they are, for a time at least, more Irishmen than Americans. That was

our feeling when we came. Possibly, after we live here for some time, we may become Americans, but I don't know (laughter and applause).<sup>291</sup>

Rossa's words linking Tammany and the Orangemen were taken as an affront to William M. Tweed, the famous boss of Tammany, and other senior Tammany people, and when the parade reached City Hall, the planned reception was suddenly canceled. Rossa's relationship with Tweed would soon get worse.

Amidst all the excitement Mary Jane O' Donovan Rossa was mentioned rarely in the press. This was a very different experience, for she had been the American success just one year before. Now she was the barely-mentioned wife. Therefore, it is not a surprise that she accepted a benefit engagement during the weeks they were at Sweeny's Hotel. She returned to the location of her auspicious beginning and did a reading at Cooper Institute on February 16, 1871. The hall was full, and sitting on stage were Rossa himself and other exiles Thomas F. Bourke and Denis Dowling Mulcahy. The crowd asked Rossa to speak but he refused and left the stage to his wife.<sup>292</sup> However, Col. W. R. Roberts was not so polite: he took to the stage and made a speech about the exiles and all they had suffered.<sup>293</sup>

In Washington, D.C. the Congress and the Administration were just as welcoming to the exiles as was New York City. On January 30, 1871, in a move that created some discomfort in London, Congress passed a resolution on a vote of 172 to 21 "that the

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<sup>291</sup> "The Exiles' Welcome. New York Greeting the Patriots," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), February 18, 1871.

<sup>292</sup> "Mrs O'Donovan Rossa's Readings - February 16, 1871," *New York Herald* (New York), February 16, 1871.

<sup>293</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Readings - February 25, 1871," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), February 25, 1871.

Congress of the United States, in the name and on behalf of the people thereof, do give O'Donovan Rossa and the Irish exiles and patriots a cordial welcome to the capital and the country."<sup>294</sup> In typical American fashion of defending against any criticism, the public discomfort in London was answered in the *New York Tribune* on February 4, 1871:

We most respectfully suggest to our British contemporaries that no other people than our own can be permitted to exercise any supervisory power over the proceedings of the American Congress. If that body sees fit to welcome Kossuth, or O'Donovan Rossa, or Victor Hugo, or Mazzini, as exiled from his native land because of his devotion to its interests or its rights, it will do so, and no foreign criticism thereon will avail. Great Britain has imprisoned and then exiled the Fenian leaders—which is *her* business. What we shall see fit to do with them on our own soil is *ours*, we have no counsel to proffer Congress on the subject; and we assure *The Times* and other London oracles that *their* representations and wishes will receive no sort of consideration. Let each keep his own side of the hedge, and all will be well.<sup>295</sup>

The exiles were invited to speak all over America but the next big event would be in Washington. But before Rossa and Mary Jane left New York, Rossa went to meet with Judge Richard Larramore in his chambers and took the oath as a United States citizen. Since he had filed original papers towards becoming a citizen in 1863, he was given his actual certificate at this February 21 meeting.<sup>296</sup> The exiles then left New York and made their way to Washington, where they were introduced to President Grant and met with the local Fenian groups.<sup>297</sup> Immediately after visiting with Grant, Rossa left for Philadelphia, where he gave a scheduled speech solely about being an Irish political prisoner in English

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<sup>294</sup> "An Unneighbourly Act," *Nonconformist* (London), February 1, 1871.

<sup>295</sup> "Saturday," *New York Tribune* (New York), February 4, 1871.

<sup>296</sup> "News by Telegraph," *The Evening Traveler* (Boston), February 22, 1871; Citizenship Papers of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, February 21, 1871, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

<sup>297</sup> "The Fenians, Visit of the Exiles to President Grant," *New York Times* (New York), February 23, 1871.

jails. He spoke for well over an hour and made “a stirring appeal in behalf of the Irish cause, asking for unity among the sons of the Emerald Isle, and utilization of every faculty that could aid in the struggle against the tyranny.”<sup>298</sup> It wasn’t only to his audiences that he was stressing unity. Before the exiles left Sweeny’s Hotel they met on February 14, and resolved to appoint a committee to build a new united organization of Irish nationalists in the United States.<sup>299</sup> The committee was led by Rossa as chairman; Devoy as Secretary and Mulcahy, Bourke, Power, St. Clair, and McClure as the remaining members. The resolutions themselves show what an ambitious undertaking this was, and one, which had proved nearly impossible in the past.

*Resolved:* That we assume the immediate control of the various Irish organizations of America which have offered to place themselves under our guidance; that each of these organizations be asked to continue its existence and its present form until our plans of reorganization are completed.

*Resolved:* That each society, section or circle of the Irish nationality of this country discuss united action, and be requested to report its strength and efficiency without delay to our committee on organization.

*Resolved:* That printed copies of our recent address, seeking advice and assistance in bringing about the union of all Irishmen be forwarded to the leading Irish nationalists throughout the United States.<sup>300</sup>

John Devoy, who would make unity among the Irish American nationalists his lifetime mission, became the secretary of this new unified organization. Devoy made clear their strategy in a letter to John Boyle O’Reilly published in O’Reilly’s *Boston Pilot* on February 4, 1871. It is interesting to note that Devoy wanted the organization to function

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<sup>298</sup> "Lectures By the Exiles, O'Donovan Rossa in Philadelphia," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), March 4, 1871.

<sup>299</sup> "New York City - Metropolitan Items," *Cleveland Daily Leader* (Cleveland, OH), February 16, 1871.

<sup>300</sup> "The Irish Exiles. They Form an Organization with O'Donovan Rossa at the Head," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), February 16, 1871.

within the American political party system. This reflects the unhappiness the exiles expressed with the focus of the Irish American group's role within the Democratic and Republican parties:

Our aim will be to create an Irish party in this country, whose actions in American politics will have for its sole object the interests of Ireland. We will also hold aloof from all the different sections of Fenians. I may tell you that most of us are sick of the very issue of Fenianism, though as resolved as ever to work for the attainment of Irish independence.<sup>301</sup>

Despite the support of John Mitchel and others,<sup>302</sup> this Irish Confederation, as it became known, lasted only until spring of 1873 and was unsuccessful in its aim. Both Rossa and John Devoy resigned in October 1871<sup>303</sup> and the organization never recovered. The Fenian Brotherhood refused to join, and a secret society called Clan na Gael maintained the power in the Irish American movement. Clan na Gael had been started in 1867 by members of the IRB who fled Ireland and came to the United States.<sup>304</sup> A few years after arriving in New York, John Devoy would later unify the Irish organizations and head this organization, maintaining control over it for more than forty years.

Mary Jane's success had taught the Rossas an important lesson: it was imperative to take advantage of the current press activity about them and the Irish cause and plan a city-by-city tour, giving lectures and readings while they could fill halls and earn enough to set up a household in America. Rossa's lecture in Philadelphia in February 1871 was the beginning of fine-tuning his story about his prison years. He became the star of their

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<sup>301</sup> William D'Arcy, "The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858-1886," 372.

<sup>302</sup> "Letter from O'Donovan Rossa to John Mitchel," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 1, 1871.

<sup>303</sup> "Irish Confederation," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), October 14, 1871.

<sup>304</sup> William D'Arcy, "The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858-1886," 385.



events but Mary Jane did participate, and on many occasions if she was not on the program the crowd would demand her appearance. In Baltimore, on St Patrick's Day night, 1871, when the crowd saw her there they insisted she do a reading.<sup>305</sup> After more than a week in Washington, D.C., where they marched in the St. Patrick's Day Parade and lectured a number of nights, the Rossas started on a ten-week tour to Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, and other points west.<sup>306</sup>

John Devoy wrote in his *Recollections* that when they arrived as exiles in America, Rossa showed "restless energy, as if trying to pull up for lost time."<sup>307</sup> It was an apt description of him, particularly of that first year after they arrived. While traveling in the west that spring of 1871, Rossa accepted a position selling insurance for the Hibernian Fire Insurance Company of Ohio.<sup>308</sup> When he returned to New York at the end of May he also became a ticket agent for Williams and Guion Lines, selling fares to Liverpool and Queenstown.<sup>309</sup> In June, he began writing a weekly column for the *Irish People* on his prison experiences, which would be the basis for his book, *Irish Rebels* published in 1874.<sup>310</sup> But most interestingly he wrote to Judge Albert Cardozo, a Tammany Hall member, and requested an appointment to discuss his possible admission

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<sup>305</sup> "City Notes-Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa Called to Read," *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), March 18, 1871.

<sup>306</sup> "Affairs in Washington, D.C. - Celebration of St. Patrick's Day," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 1, 1871; "Freedom For Ireland, Martyrdom and Exile," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), March 25, 1871; "O'Donovan Rossa in Pittsburgh," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), May 13, 1871; "O'Donovan Rossa in this City," *Chicago Republican* (Chicago), March 29, 1871.

<sup>307</sup> John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel*, 328.

<sup>308</sup> "The Hibernia Insurance Co," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 3, 1871.

<sup>309</sup> "Steam to Queenstown and Liverpool," *New York Herald* (New York), September 8, 1871.

<sup>310</sup> "City Notes- Prison Life," *The Evening Journal* (Jersey City, NJ), June 21, 1871.

to the Bar so he could practice law in New York. The Judge, a Tammany Hall member, wrote back that he would not qualify for the Bar but he would be happy to meet him.<sup>311</sup>

Mary Jane may have been taking a less prominent role in all the events while they traveled west but she was still pursuing her own talents. In May 1871, a New York publisher issued a copy of William Henry Powell's *The Eviction*, "one of the most vivid and life-like pictures of Irish landlord cruelty and heartlessness ever produced."<sup>312</sup> Mary Jane wrote an intensely sad but fiery poem to appear below the print, based on the story portrayed:

The morning broke with mist and rain,  
The village woke to fear and pain,  
As from a brief, uneasy trance.  
And through the hills beheld advance  
The sheriff, with his Black Brigade,  
For ruin and despair arrayed.

Cold as the snow upon yon peak  
The Agent's heart, to groan and shriek  
Of maid and matron, child and man.  
Full soon the work of woe began,  
And soon bestrewn was the damp earth  
With household goods from every hearth.

"We owe no rent," a cotter cried;  
The Sheriff's hirelings quick replied,  
"You owe no rent; no, not a pound –  
But the Earl wants space for his hunting ground,  
And your wants, did they o'ertop the hill,  
Are naught to turn the Landlord's will.

The crowbars worked; a frantic crowd,  
With streaming eyes and voices loud,  
Implored for mercy where the name  
Of Mercy had no softening claim;  
With breaking hearts some stood aside,

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<sup>311</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Letter to Judge Albert Cardozo dated May 29, 1871, Devoy Papers, Ms 18009 (11.2), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>312</sup> "The Eviction," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), May 20, 1871.

In sullen scorn and injured pride.

And some, on desperate plans intent,  
 Their lowering brows together bent,  
 And swore within their silent breast  
 To know no peace, no home, no rest,  
 Until the wrongs they viewed to-day  
 In wronger's blood were washed away.

While one, with loss and sorrow crazed,  
 Ran, grasping a great pitchfork, raised,  
 Upon the bayonets of the line;  
 His trembling wife and children twine  
 Their arms around him, to impede,  
 In this rash enterprise, his speed.

Here, by the coffin of her child,  
 A widow kneels, with anguish wild,  
 And from the cold, unsheltered road,  
 The granddame mourns her lost abode;  
 In piercing streams their plaints ascend  
 To Him who is their only friend.

"Spare my sick father," cried a maid  
 On bended knees; "we never prayed  
 Indulgence for a backward rent;  
 Our tithes were ever duly sent;  
 But now for mercy I implore—  
 The old man lies at Death's cold door;

"His quivering lips would pray respite;  
 His dying eyes would see the light,  
 The last time, in his native cot;  
 The priest is sent for—will be brought  
 Directly. Bid the spoilers cease;  
 Oh let my father die in peace."

In vain implored the gentle child;  
 The work went on; the monsters piled,  
 With savage glee and action fleet,  
 Her treasures in the muddy street;  
 "Oh, spare my father!" still, she cried,  
 "if ye be human, stand aside!"

They heeded neither prayer nor tear,  
 But to the old man's bed drew near;

They shook him rudely, turned, and said,  
 “The old man feels no more—he’s dead!”  
 Over his daughter’s senseless feet,  
 They flung his body in the street.

Then rose a fearful shriek to Heaven,  
 To rain down fire upon the craven  
 Whose infamies so dire can stain  
 The record of a fertile plain—  
 At whose foul will a human race  
 Is crushed to give his cattle place.

Spurred by this cry, across the ford  
 Appears a military horde,  
 And villageward they bend their course,  
 To aid the Earl, and Law enforce.  
 With clattering hoof and shining spear  
 And scarlet trapping, they draw near.

The opening crowds give sudden way,  
 And in the fading light of day,  
 Above the corpse, with hand upraised,  
 And bosom on whose surface blazed  
 Crimson medals, hardly won,  
 Stood the too late returned son.

“Oh, Christ!” he muttered, in his breath,  
 “I have faced famine, fear and death,  
 To hold aloft the power that fade  
 My murdered father to the grave!  
 To prop the crown beneath whose shade  
 My dreams of hope and home must fade.

“Well may we curse the power we fed,  
 And our own ignorance, that shed  
 On Indian soil, in copious flood,  
 For British fame, our Celtic blood;  
 We dreamed, poor fools, the Irish race  
 In Britain’s glory found a place.

“Back once again, and battle-worn,  
 I find my roof tree rudely torn;  
 My sister senseless in her grief,  
 My aged father past relief,  
 My only home this trampled sward—  
 Oh, England, ‘tis a brave reward!

“If for thy rights on Irish earth  
 Thou blighted country of my birth,  
 Against the robber’s flag of red  
 The blood thy sons at Alma shed  
 Were vested, how thy veins would glow  
 With fierce resistance to the foe!

“If for thy rights the swords they bore  
 On many a far-off foreign shore  
 Were wielded, Oh, thou trampled land!  
 How thou shouldst take triumphant stand  
 Amid the nations proud and free,  
 After so long captivity.

Around me, Heaven be praised! Behold  
 Are Celts made resolute and bold,  
 Whose lifelong toil and latest breath  
 Shall echo Liberty or Death—  
 A Righter Land, a Ransomed Slave,  
 Victory, or a Soldier’s Grave!”<sup>313</sup>

It was a very confident Rossa who returned from the lecture tour to a New York still enamored of the exiles. He was asked his opinion on all things political and he took every opportunity to show his dislike for Tammany Hall. He reportedly disrupted a meeting in June 1871 where Tammany spokesmen were attempting to woo the Irish Confederation members to become active in local politics, saying “That it is not through the ballot boxes of America that Irish freedom is to be fought for or won.”<sup>314</sup> However, a few months later he was nominated by the Republican Party to run against the famous Boss Tweed for State Senator.<sup>315</sup> This may have been related more to his peripatetic

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<sup>313</sup> William Henry Powell and Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *The Eviction: A Scene From Life in Ireland*, 1871, NLI Prints and Drawings, vtis000246746, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>314</sup> "Mr O'Donovan Rossa, the Most Notable Fenian," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia), June 7, 1871.

<sup>315</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Supporters," *New York Herald* (New York), October 30, 1871.

attempt to find long-term employment than to his political aspirations, as he had also tried to win the role of City Register the month before his nomination to the State Senate.<sup>316</sup> However, it was certainly related to his continued dislike of Tweed and Tammany. Rossa believed that Tammany was helping the Irish emigrants for only one reason—to get rich themselves from graft.<sup>317</sup> The outcome of the State Senate race was determined by Tammany and not the voters, however, for although Tweed was announced the victor by a 4,000 vote majority, it was years later revealed that Rossa had actually won by 350 votes.<sup>318</sup> Tammany had cheated on the counting of the votes, and Rossa never was involved in American politics again. Tweed's term was cut short, however, as the investigation into the illegalities of his actions was well underway.

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<sup>316</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, Independent Candidate," *Daily National Republican* (Washington, D.C.), September 14, 1871.

<sup>317</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Rebels*, 434.

<sup>318</sup> John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel*, 328.

## Chapter 7

### LIFE IN NEW YORK

The Rossas returned from their travels to the West in the summer of 1871, where they earned enough to settle in New York City. They initially lived for a short while in Staten Island near the Quarantine Hospital where transatlantic passenger ships first landed before the days of Ellis Island. It was there that John O'Leary visited them.<sup>319</sup> O'Leary had been released from prison at the same time as the other Fenians in 1871, but had been living in France and only visited the United States for a few months. Rossa kept an office both at Quarantine and at 263 Broadway opposite City Hall, where he sold insurance and was a ticket agent. He also spoke frequently at Irish Confederation meetings like the one held on July 10, 1871, when he appealed for peace and order in the days before the Orangemen parade held two days later. The parade by the Protestant Association of New York and held on the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne was notoriously anti Catholic, and many in attendance at the meeting were determined to demonstrate at the same time. Rossa and others later pleaded unsuccessfully for governmental intervention to prevent the parade.<sup>320</sup> The ensuing riot resulted in more than one hundred deaths and many hundreds hurt.<sup>321</sup>

Shortly after O'Leary's visit the family moved to an apartment at 158 Henry Street in the heavily Irish Fourth Ward in Manhattan. This was the ideal place to launch his campaign against Boss Tweed. It was on Henry Street that Mary Jane and Rossa's

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<sup>319</sup> "From New York, July 23," *Springfield Daily Republican* (Springfield, MA), July 26, 1871.

<sup>320</sup> "New York News - Orangemen," *The Sentinel* (Fort Wayne, IN), July 13, 1871.

<sup>321</sup> "The Riot of 1871," *New York Tribune* (New York), July 13, 1871.

first daughter, Kate Ellen, was born on December 28, 1871.<sup>322</sup> Their financial situation must have been unsteady because it was less than a month after Kate's birth that Mary Jane placed an advertisement in the *Irish American Weekly* for poetry readings and lectures stating: "Programs for selection can be had . . . according to circumstances, from fifty or one hundred dollars."<sup>323</sup> She was only marginally successful in obtaining new events—about once a month over the next few months, appearing in New York, at the Galway Men's reception on April 1; traveling to Chicago to appear at Mechanics Hall in May, and back to New York at Cooper Institute in June.<sup>324</sup> But, July brought heartbreak for the family, when Kate Ellen suddenly died on July 12, 1872.<sup>325</sup> There is little evidence that either Mary Jane or Rossa did much speaking or traveling during the months following Kate's death. Rossa was busy writing his memoirs from his time in prison, which were published serially in Ireland by Richard Pigott at the *Irishman*. Rossa's pay for this work was being used in Ireland to support his sons attending school at St. Jarlath's in Tuam.<sup>326</sup> Pigott himself was causing some controversy over some missing money that the Irish Confederation had sent to Ireland for revolutionary purposes. Rossa's close relationship with Pigott led him to be accused as well, but he was

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<sup>322</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia R. Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

<sup>323</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa; Her Readings and Recitations," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 20, 1872.

<sup>324</sup> Poster for Mrs O'Donovan Rossa at Mechanic's Hall, May 30, 1872, Private Collection of Kathleen Gelson McEachern, Rindge, NH; "The Rev. Father Burke and Galway," *The Nation* (Dublin), April 27, 1872; "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa; Her Readings From the Irish Poets," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 15, 1872.

<sup>325</sup> "Marriages-Deaths July 13, 1872," *New York Herald* (New York), July 13, 1872.

<sup>326</sup> "St. Jarlath's College, Tuam," *The Nation* (Dublin), July 13, 1873.



later cleared when it was apparent that the money was never in Rossa's hands to send.<sup>327</sup>

The question of missing money was symptomatic of the distrust that sometimes existed between the Irish American groups who raised the funds for revolution and the way the money was handled in Ireland. The Americans were always anxious to see more action on the part of the Irish-based groups and underplaying the complexities that faced these groups in Ireland.

At the end of that year the Rossas moved again, this time to 38 King Street in Brooklyn, where Francis Daniel was born on January 26, 1873.<sup>328</sup> Soon after, Rossa's other sons came to the America to join their older brother Denis who had come five years earlier and was now in Chicago. Con and Jeremiah went to apprentice for printers in Jersey City and John came to New York to attend New York University Law School.<sup>329</sup> Rossa's youngest son from his previous marriage remained in Ireland with his Buckley grandparents. Arranging for the three boys to travel from Ireland was a burden, as Rossa's business dealings remained so difficult that he began representing yet another passenger liner, National Steamship Company. This addition required him to change his office location when in early 1873 he moved to Pier 44 at Spring Street and gave up for a time his office at 263 Broadway.<sup>330</sup> There is little evidence that either Rossa or Mary Jane had any speaking engagements, so their financial situation must have been dire—so much

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<sup>327</sup> "Irish Confederation Meeting of the General P.H. Sheridan Club," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 10, 1872.

<sup>328</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>329</sup> "From New York," *Daily National Republican* (Washington, D.C.), February 3, 1873.

<sup>330</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, National Steamship," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), February 8, 1873.

so that when Tweed was arrested and had to give up his Senate seat, Rossa aspired to fill the vacated term.<sup>331</sup> He also attempted to gain a political patronage position when New York City Mayor Havemeyer needed to make two hundred appointments later that year.<sup>332</sup> Neither of these attempts resulted in any successful employment.

Sadness and grief visited the small family again when the baby, Frank, died on September 5, 1873, at Quarantine Hospital on Staten Island.<sup>333</sup> They dropped out of public life for a few months, Mary Jane grieving and Rossa preparing his memoirs for publication in the United States.<sup>334</sup> This time he published *Prison Life* as a book to be sold in bookstores and to the Irish American organizations through the mail and at events. But grief stayed with them for the third time in less than three years when Maurice was born on May 6 and died on July 12, 1874.<sup>335</sup> By the time Maurice was born, Rossa had begun yet another business. He leased the Northern Hotel on the corner of Cortlandt and West Streets, very close to the depots for the New Jersey Central and Pennsylvania Railroads and adjacent to South Ferry. In early 1874, the family moved into the hotel whose restaurant was a frequent stop for the Irish American leaders in New York.<sup>336</sup> But their stay there was brief and in 1875 Rossa took a longer lease on another hotel in

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<sup>331</sup> "New York News - Tweed's Seat," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), April 21, 1873.

<sup>332</sup> "Politics At The City Hall," *Daily Graphic* (New York), April 19, 1873.

<sup>333</sup> "Mortuary Notice—Francis Daniel O'Donovan Rossa," *New York Herald* (New York), September 6, 1873.

<sup>334</sup> "Prison Life—O'Donovan Rossa Personal Narrative," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 3, 1874.

<sup>335</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection; "Mortuary Notice - Maurice O'Donovan Rossa," *New York Herald* (New York), July 13, 1874.

<sup>336</sup> Menu from the Northern Hotel, 1874, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/11/3, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

Chatham Square, closer to City Hall, which he named the O'Donovan Rossa Hotel.<sup>337</sup>

The ledger from this hotel shows that not only were the leaders of the Irish American organizations guests but John Devoy lived in the hotel and borrowed money from Rossa. The employees of the hotel included friends and family, most notably Mary Jane's sisters Amelia and Isabella Irwin.<sup>338</sup> Isabella had come from Ireland to attend nursing school in 1874 at the Blockley Hospital in Philadelphia and may have been traveling back and forth to that city while living and working part time at the hotel.<sup>339</sup>

It appears from the record that Mary Jane and Isabella shouldered much of the burden for the hotel while Rossa continued his focus on revolution in Ireland. The Irish Confederation formed by the exiles had been disbanded and Devoy and Rossa became leaders in Clan ná Gael, a secret organization that became a meeting ground for both factions of the Fenian Brotherhood. The Clan's Revolutionary Directory, made up of seven men, three from the IRB in Ireland and four from the United States, were responsible for planning all revolutionary actions. That, no doubt, is what Rossa was referring to when he wrote a letter to John Devoy in March 1874. This letter not only set the stage for the next phase of revolutionary activity, but it would portend the future trouble the two friends would have in their relationship. In the letter Rossa was voicing his support for violent explosions such as Chester Castle and Clerkenwell as valid methods of working for Irish liberty but also his frustration at the lack of urgency expressed by others:

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<sup>337</sup> John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel*, 329.

<sup>338</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Ledger from the O'Donovan Rossa Hotel, 1875, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/5/11/1, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>339</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 33.

It is not “conspirator” like, let’s take your plan or my plan or any other man’s plan to do anything, and you will find any man who means to do nothing able to pick holes in it. Sneer as you will at Pattison’s scheme of Chester Castle, and Clerkenwell & Manchester, these things did more to uphold the Irish name than anything you or I or anyone else did or than the thousand things we did not do. You say one man-ism is dead, so much worse for the ends of revolution. Granted that a council of Seven Senators, or seven wise men, or seven tricksters or seven do-nothings may accomplish your aims to suit your views, but I hold that any one of these seven acting by himself, could accomplish “these ends” in one seventh the time.<sup>340</sup>

Rossa was venting his frustration with the slow pace of planning a revolution and beginning to see the opportunities posed by having small groups of men create chaos for Great Britain, particularly with explosives. That chaos could be amplified by the use of publicity claiming responsibility for the efforts. Devoy was still convinced that preparations and activities should always be done in secret and the fewer people involved the better. However, he was just as interested in the possible actions of smaller forces of men and sympathetic to Rossa’s frustration. But he was focused on his own plans. In July 1874, he convinced the members of Clan na Gael to support a secret mission to rescue the last of the Fenian prisoners from a penal colony in Australia. Devoy had been working on this plan for three years when at the Clan convention in Baltimore, a committee was formed to carry it out and raise the funds.<sup>341</sup> It would take two years for the *Catalpa* rescue, but the incredibly difficult and very secretive plan was ultimately successful. Rossa became the manager of the fund as he had other funds established by both the Fenian Brotherhood and the Clan. One of the first donors to this fund was John Mitchel, the famous Young Irelander. He was living in Brooklyn when he wrote to Rossa on

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<sup>340</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated March 30, 1874, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/11/5, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>341</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 81.

December 8, 1874, and sent \$100 with a note, in which he took the opportunity to admonish Rossa.<sup>342</sup> Mitchel's letter made clear that he would never take money for any lecture he gave but would donate it to the fund as he was doing with this check. This must have irritated Rossa and certainly Mary Jane if she saw it, as their family survived only because of their lecture tours.

While Devoy was leading Clan na Gael, John O'Mahony attempted to consolidate the contentious membership of the Fenian Brotherhood by installing Rossa as the Chair of the meeting held in New York on September 28, 1874.<sup>343</sup> O'Mahony wanted to move beyond the petty quarrels that had immobilized the organization and believed Rossa would be a unifying leader. At the convention, Rossa was also elected a member of the governing Central Committee, but Rossa's leadership abilities were as weak as O'Mahony's and the membership was as contentious as ever. Still, Rossa's speech the night of the convention made headline news in the *Irish World* on October 10, 1874. The meeting was held at the Cooper Institute and about 7,000 people attended. Sitting on the stage with O'Mahony and Rossa were other Fenians such as Luby, Bourke, and Devoy, as well as Mary Jane, the lone woman. The headline claimed "More Skirmishers Wanted," referring to Rossa's fiery speech that began by quoting the *London Times*, which claimed that Fenianism was dead:

But if its writers could witness this immense gathering, they would see they had lied again, as they had often lied before, regarding the cause in whose interest we are here assembled . . . it flashes new life to do and dare all that brave men can accomplish for a nation's right. And though Fenianism is dead according to the

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<sup>342</sup> John Mitchel, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated December 8, 1874, Fenian Brotherhood and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, 014/1/13/46, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>343</sup> "A Fenian Meeting," *National Republican* (Washington, D.C.), September 29, 1874.

*Times*, the *Times* cannot forget the fear and terror that reigned in England the time of the Chester affair, the Manchester affair, and the Clerkenwell affair.

You, friends, can have no idea of the scare that seized the English mind that time. I happened to be a boarder in her prisons yards, I saw the extra guards of soldiers and jailors around my cell by day. I saw myself honored with two apartments instead of one so they removed me from my day cell, to a far off part of the prison at night lest any one would be able to give information as to where I slept. I saw terror in every face around me. Of course, it was “diabolical” for Fenians to do anything that could disturb the mind of England so much, and the *Times* does not fail to pronounce it so.

Just so, ladies and gentlemen; everything that England finds necessary to do to perpetuate her tyranny, is fair, square, and honorable; she can blow men from the cannon’s mouth, she can ravage, burn and destroy everything that stands in her way; but once her enemy proceeds to make use of the weapons that she has used to obtain and maintain her dominance, then she shrieks with madness. . . . There may be a little misunderstanding amongst us as to the best way to go about our work; but, while we all struggle to the same end, it is childish to be making such a scarecrow of that word “division.” . . .

We have failed, but true to our fathers and true to the heritage left us, we go on to fight again, and it is unworthy and unmanly to drag up what we lost by the last, as an escape for our having nothing to do with the next. I have never lost faith yet. I believe firmly today as I did twenty years ago, that there is a glorious future yet in store for the old land, and I long to have a hand in reaping the harvest. We have a fertile field to work but you will bear in mind that the richest field will produce no crop for him who sows no seed.<sup>344</sup>

Also in the same issue of the *Irish World* was an anonymous column that took Rossa’s words one step further by decrying the inaction of the Irish Americans and calling for action:

What are the millions of our race in America now doing that England should be alarmed at? Nothing. What is our peaceful enmity and hatred worth? Nothing.

If three or four ruffians attack you, disarm you, rob you, plunder your home, and leave you destitute on the world, are you satisfied to do nothing but hope and pray that some misfortune visit them and some opportunity avenge you? No; your duty is to provide yourself with arms, gather around you friends, and make yourself strong enough to visit the ruffians in their home, and wrest from them the plunder they have despoiled you of. . . . We must do something practical.

Talk and parade are but firing blank cartridge. . . . We want some band of men to pioneer the way—sometimes to skirmish, sometimes to act as forlorn hopper, sometimes to give martyrs and confessors; always acting, always showing that we

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<sup>344</sup> "Ireland's Cause," *Irish World* (New York), October 10, 1874.

have still amongst us brave men ready to do and dare all that brave men ever did and dared for the salvation of a fallen land . . .

There must be action and preparation before a revolution, and some little skirmishing, too, before the general battle comes on, and there must be somebody of Irishmen specially devoted to this work. . . . We stand impartial and unprejudiced before all societies of Irishmen . . . but our sympathies go with those who advance nearest to the enemy—those who will resolve themselves into skirmishers and pioneers.<sup>345</sup>

This push to action never ignited the membership despite Rossa taking on some speaking engagements, such as a series in Massachusetts the following month.<sup>346</sup> For nearly the next year, no matter how Rossa tried to spur the Fenians into action nothing worked. The Clan was totally focused on the rescue by the *Catalpa* still going on in the Pacific Ocean and the others could agree on very little.

While Rossa had been concentrating on gathering support for action Mary Jane was taking the occasional speaking engagement. She spoke in Rutland, Vermont, on St. Patrick's Day in 1875 and other places in New England on the same trip.<sup>347</sup> She had an audience of 250 people in Rutland despite efforts by the Catholic Church to keep people away. Rossa's determination for violence was taking a toll on his relationship with the Church, yet again: a situation that could only be distressing for the devout Mary Jane although she, like her husband, cared deeply about Ireland first and believed the Church was misguided in its attempts to still the Fenian cause. As always, Davis' "The Battle of Fontenoy" was one of her major readings, as was her dear friend Miles O'Reilly's "Old Green Flag." But, this period was very difficult for Mary Jane. Since her return to New

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<sup>345</sup> "The Fenian Brotherhood," *Irish World* (New York), October 10, 1874.

<sup>346</sup> "Happenings," *Springfield Daily Republican* (Springfield, MA), October 7, 1874.

<sup>347</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa's Readings - Rutland," *The Rutland Daily Globe* (Rutland, VT), March 18, 1875.

York, she had lost three children, her husband struggled with businesses and spent most of his time with other men devoted to the cause, her young son was now in school, and most of the burden of running the hotel fell to her and her young sisters. But on February 29, 1876, Mary Jane gave birth to a very healthy baby girl, Sheela Mary, born at the Rossa Hotel on Chatham Square. In the family bible the Irish name Sheela is shown with the English translation of Julia written in parentheses, showing that the family was still straddling two cultures.<sup>348</sup>

However, by the time Sheela was born Rossa had made headlines again: this time at yet another mass meeting held in New York November 23, 1875, for the eighth anniversary of the Manchester Martyrs. The speakers that evening criticized those in Ireland who were supporting “Home Rule” or a parliamentary approach to allowing Ireland to have a separate parliament while still being part of the United Kingdom.<sup>349</sup> They were reacting to the visit of John O’Connor Power, a current MP and former Fenian, who was visiting the United States to drum up support for the Land League in Ireland.<sup>350</sup> Nationalist leaders were unanimous in their criticism of Home Rule, but neither the Fenian Brotherhood nor the Clan had made any outward move to take any other action toward revolution. In reporting on the meeting, Patrick Ford’s *Irish World* made a move to shock the groups into action. It started with the cover art on the December 4, 1875, issue, showing a sketch of a castle labeled “British Empire” sitting on a huge rock in the ocean. Underneath the rock were barrels and a man running away with

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<sup>348</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>349</sup> "God Save Ireland!," *Irish World* (New York), December 4, 1875.

<sup>350</sup> "Fenianism," *The Kerry Evening Post* (Tralee), February 5, 1876.



the caption “A Suggestion To Irish Revolutionists: The Patient Dint and Powder Shock Will Blast an Empire as a Rock.” A long editorial in that same issue laments the lack of action, but makes a specific suggestion calling to all Irishmen, not just Irish born but descendants, too, citing thirty million worldwide:

We are not now advising a general insurrection. On the contrary, we should oppose a general insurrection in Ireland as untimely and ill advised. But we believe in action nevertheless. A few active, intrepid, and intelligent men can do much to annoy and hurt England. The Irish cause requires skirmishers. It requires a little band of heroes who will initiate and keep up without intermission a guerilla warfare—men who will fly over land and sea like invisible beings—now striking the enemy in Ireland, now in India, now in England itself, as occasion may present.

This call for action also criticized the movement for Home Rule, asking:

What is their plan of action? They are a miserable minority in the London Parliament. They are utterly unable ever to win a positive triumph. . . . Oh, say they, we will oppose every ministry . . . block legislation . . . tire out the Government. They too,—those peaceable and constitutional gentlemen—mean to annoy England! Their policy is our justification. But the blows they’ll give her won’t hurt her much. . . . *We must take the offensive!* Action gives life. Action gives health. At present the Irish cause is received with a hiss and a sneer. This is telling against us. A few bold and devoted heroes must spring up and show the world there is still power in Fenianism not only to scare, but to *hurt*, England. Their acts will speak with eloquent tongue.<sup>351</sup>

This column is written like a history lesson, telling the stories of Irish bravery in battles against the British and including poetic turns about the American Revolution and the heroism of Fontenoy with the French in 1745. It is very similar to the programs Mary Jane created for her readings and sounds much like some of her other writing. This may be coincidence, but she was publicly identified with these descriptions. Perhaps she was acting as a counsel to both her husband and Patrick Ford, the outspoken editor of the *Irish World*. Patrick Ford and his brother Augustine were the people who gave this movement

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<sup>351</sup> "Can Ireland Be Made Free!," *Irish World* (New York), December 4, 1875.

direction and discipline, a capability not shared by Rossa.<sup>352</sup> But Rossa and Mary Jane were the creators of the messages that reminded the people of Irish America that they could individually do something to support the movement. They could give their small donations to a Skirmishing Fund and arm “the few good men” who would later cause fear in England.

The concept for the Skirmishing Fund began in that same issue of the *Irish World* with a letter from Clan na Gael suggesting the establishment of a National Fund.<sup>353</sup> But the formal start of the fund was not until three months later in the March 4, 1876, issue of *Irish World* with a letter from Rossa that had been written the day after the article in December where he takes up the cry “Action Gives Life.” Rossa criticizes the editor of the paper for putting him off collecting funds for the year between the first mention of the skirmishing idea in 1874 and the time he was writing because Ford was not ready to take an active part in the collection.<sup>354</sup> Rossa’s letter shows that Ford was now ready and he agrees by writing an editorial supporting it on another page of that week’s issue. Ford’s words were more specific:

Rossa wants to raise a “Skirmishing” Fund, He wants to see some *action* on foot. The idea is that stagnation will prove the silent destruction of the Irish cause, and that, to give strength and vitality to this cause,—in fact, to keep the very revolutionary organizations now in existence from dying out and stinking in the nostrils of the people,—it is necessary that the means should be on hand (independent of regular revolutionary funds) which will enable a few intrepid spirits to strike a blow at England, year after year, or oftener, as might seem advisable,—*heroic men who will carry on an irregular and incessant warfare*

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<sup>352</sup> Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012), 77.

<sup>353</sup> "The Test of Patriotism," *Irish World* (New York), December 4, 1875.

<sup>354</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "A Skirmishing Fund - O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish World* (New York), March 4, 1876.

*against the enemy*,—whilst the regular military organizations are preparing for the heavier and more regular war.<sup>355</sup>

Ford goes on to name James J. Clancy, a Ford associate, as the Treasurer of the Fund and includes the instructions to send money to him or to Rossa, promising that all donations would be acknowledged in the *Irish World*.

Devoy was not in total agreement with Rossa and Ford's plan. He wrote to a Clan supporter on March 1, 1876 that he agreed with Rossa on the building of a "public revolutionary fund" to be handled by a group of men with

revolutionary ability and [who] also have the confidence of our people. Such men can be got. I have argued this point over and over again with Rossa, but he thinks the whole thing depends on the word "skirmishing" being left in. That is just what most of us object to. We don't see why on earth we should proclaim our intentions to the world. We shall find plenty of trouble before any project we may attempt without creating more. I think there is a great deal in this point and that we may spoil a good thing by imprudence.<sup>356</sup>

This letter shows that Devoy's problem with Rossa was again the very public way Rossa was determined to fight for the cause rather than Devoy's constant desire for secrecy. But Devoy was supporting the idea, at least originally. Ford also gave Rossa the opportunity to write a regular column in the *Irish World*. This was the very center of Rossa's strategy. He believed that the more publicity, the more people would be won over to the side of the Irish people and against the British, so that even a column for thanking donors was an opportunity to educate public opinion, whether it was about real or rhetorical violence. The reaction from John O'Leary, their fellow Fenian, was not supportive; it was violently

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<sup>355</sup> Patrick Ford, "The 'Skirmishing' Fund - We Heartily Commend the Suggestion," *Irish World* (New York), March 4, 1876.

<sup>356</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 143.

against the plan. In a letter written in the *Irishman* on April 1, 1876, O'Leary repudiated "Rossa's scheme (or dream) with something like horror."

I find it very hard to express my feelings strongly enough on this subject without, at the same time, wounding those of my friend Rossa, who is, notwithstanding all this blood and thunder, at bottom one of the most amiable and best natured of men . . . I may, however, tell Rossa and your readers that while I hope I am as ready as most men to risk life, liberty, and other things that men hold dear, in the cause of Ireland, there is one thing which I will not risk, much less lose, even for Ireland, and that is my honor. When two nations are at war it is not easy to say what acts are not justifiable, but when countries are at peace, acts of violence, such as destruction of life or property, are simply crimes, and the men who commit these crimes serve not the cause they misrepresent, but the enemy they are seeking to combat.<sup>357</sup>

In their original context, it is easy to see that Rossa's columns in the weekly *Irish World* refer to the publicity about the fund, and the threat of action, to be a war in itself against Britain. He commented that some people worried he had identified events and people that funded and planned skirmishes. But his plans were more about fear and misdirection. Some people thought he had no right to talk about "dynamite, or powder, or Greek fire or guns and bayonets,"

Or anything else that would put England on her guard. . . . Do those people really imagine we are fools, and that in publishing what our contributors say we are giving England notice of the very things we are going to do? She knows as well as we do that the Irish in America could do a thousand and one things . . . but we are not doing it, nor will we do it, but without losing one dollar we can have the satisfaction of worrying the life in her while she is ordering about her ships and her soldiers and her police, and working heaven and earth to meet attacks we never intended to make.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> John O'Leary, "O'Donovan Rossa's Skirmishing Fund," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 22, 1876.

<sup>358</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "The Skirmishing Fund - Letter from O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish World* (New York), March 25, 1876.

Rossa, however, judged correctly the Irish American enthusiasm for action, as thirty months later the fund had reached a total of \$73,184.<sup>359</sup> Unfortunately for the donors, there still had not been any action.

After announcing the Skirmishing Fund and beginning his weekly column in the *Irish World*, Rossa began traveling for speaking engagements again. While Mary Jane ran the hotel, Rossa went to the West Coast and visited San Francisco. While there he was received by the Board of Supervisors of the City of San Francisco, who passed a resolution in his honor calling him “an advocate of republican principles.”<sup>360</sup> While various city politicians and other Irish Americans thought Rossa a hero, his son Denis spoke more harshly of him in a letter to Mary Jane dated July 5, 1876. Denis was now a twenty-two-year-old living on his own and beginning a small business in Chicago. Mary Jane had written to him to request money to send his brother Jeremiah out to the country for his health. This letter clearly described the issues facing Mary Jane:

Your description of the present status of 182 [the Rossa address on Chatham St.]—financially and otherwise—is decidedly Micawber-like. Although I myself am not much better fixed . . .

Now, were I in any position to do anything for Jer I would have done so before now—and you wouldn’t have to ask me. It seems highly improbable that father is not acquainted somewhere in the country—has not some friend that would keep him awhile.

And his railroad fare there will cost father less than funeral expenses. Father can do this if he will only make the effort. He has always been careless of his own family. Were a friend of his to come and say: “that a child of his was dying for want of country air—that he wanted to borrow money for RR fare”—father would make more effort to raise that money than he would at present—his own child being similarly circumstanced.

Tis sheer nonsense to say that father can’t raise railroad fare—that he hasn’t got a friend in the country to send Jer to—if he only makes the effort he can do it.

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<sup>359</sup> "Do Not Think Your Money is Not Needed," *The Sun* (New York), September 12, 1878.

<sup>360</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa - San Francisco," *Daily Evening Post* (San Francisco), May 9, 1876.

Father will make no bones of having carriage-hire and funeral expenses—this I said before—and there will be lots of his friends pay \$5.00 for a carriage for the funeral. Now, he's got some very original ideas—perhaps he'd use this second-hand.

Couldn't he raise money from those friends who would spend it in carriage-hire going to Jer's funeral (and you know they are many) and use it as a preventative against such an event occurring.

You may think this letter foolish—you can show it to father perhaps he'll think ditto. Another thing—he'll never be a success in the hotel business—the patriots have too much vantage ground. Father is peculiarly unfitted for the business, anyhow. But what the devil is the use of writing this—you know it yourself better than I do.<sup>361</sup>

Rossa, however, was completely occupied by political activities, and there is no evidence that young Jeremiah ever made a trip to the country. The next year would find Rossa helping to arrange another great public funeral in Ireland, this time for John O'Mahony who died on February 6, 1877, in New York. After O'Mahony's death, Rossa was named Head Centre of the Fenian Brotherhood.<sup>362</sup> The publicity around this funeral continued the good propaganda that had developed over the arrival of the rescued prisoners on the *Catalpa* six months before. These positive stories added to the success of the Skirmishing Fund as the first established public revolutionary fund, but it left the leaders of Clan na Gael nervous about the damage that could be done to the cause if any of Rossa's violent plans came to fruition. So in the spring of 1877 Devoy and other leaders of the Clan manipulated Rossa into radically changing the leadership of the Fund by adding Devoy, Luby, and Bourke to the Board of Trustees, which then was made up of Rossa, Dr. Carroll, J.J. Breslin, and James Reynolds. James J. Clancy and Augustine Ford resigned, thus ending Patrick Ford's influence completely. This new leadership was

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<sup>361</sup> Denis O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated July 5, 1876, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms 26970, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>362</sup> "John O'Mahony," *New York Tribune* (New York), February 8, 1877.

announced in the *Irish World* on April 21, 1877, where it was also stated that the new name of the fund was the “Special National Fund.” In the same issue Rossa showed his displeasure in his column:

When I started this Skirmishing Fund, the council-men of the two Irish revolutionary societies in America—the Fenian Brotherhood and the Clan na Gael—took it into their heads that I was going to interfere with the regular revolutionary work, that I was going to play the deuce with everything, and they gave me no friendly help. I have been doing all I could to convince them that I am not the very desperate character I was in prison or out of prison.<sup>363</sup>

The true intention of Devoy and the others is clear in a letter to Devoy from Dr. Carroll, dated March 30, 1877:

Concerning the Skirmishing Fund—It is good news to learn that Luby, Breslin and yourself are on the Committee and that you now hold the key to the position. The lapse of Rossa is a serious matter, and with his accustomed rashness may well “give us pause” before engaging in anything requiring strict and inviolate secrecy.<sup>364</sup>

Devoy’s views had won out over Rossa’s in the long run and the “lapse” Carroll spoke of about Rossa is probably related to Rossa having invited James Stephens to come and run the Fenian Brotherhood. Devoy and his allies believed that Stephens would only create further disunion among the factions and it was best to take a firmer hand in all activities before that happened. They pressured Rossa to agree. Devoy had now wrested control in one way or another over all the major groups and became the leading figure in Irish American revolutionary organizations.

Rossa and Mary Jane had little to celebrate during the summer of 1877 but there was one highlight: the graduation of John O’Donovan Rossa from New York University

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<sup>363</sup> "The Skirmishing Fund - 1877," *Irish World* (New York), April 21, 1877.

<sup>364</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 246.

Law School.<sup>365</sup> It was a short-lived respite. Denis was certainly right about his father's inability to run a hotel because only year after his letter, the hotel closed down.

Unfortunately for the family this was accompanied by the public humiliation of press reports describing their eviction and the seizure of the furniture by the landlord.<sup>366</sup> Things for the family only got worse when young Jeremiah died at their new home in Brooklyn at 387 Bridge Street on December 23, 1877, from consumption.<sup>367</sup> As 1878 started, Rossa was in difficult emotional straits; he was mourning the loss of his son, the loss of his business, and the loss of his control over the Skirmishing Fund. John Devoy claimed in documents written at the time that Rossa was drinking heavily and had misappropriated funds from the donations to the Fund.<sup>368</sup> There is no doubt that Rossa was in bad shape at this time, but Devoy was also being courted by Charles Stewart Parnell and his programs for Land Reform in Ireland to be accomplished by parliamentary means called Home Rule. Michael Davitt was becoming involved with this movement as well, and in early 1878 Devoy paid for Davitt's trip to America from Clan na Gael funds.<sup>369</sup> This was an anathema to Rossa, who would never agree to a marriage between the Fenians and the Home Rulers, as much as he liked and respected Davitt. Devoy needed Rossa's enthusiasm for violence to be suppressed during these discussions, and taking control of the volatile Skirmishing Fund was a good step toward that aim.

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<sup>365</sup> "The University Law School," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), May 28, 1877.

<sup>366</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, Hotel Lost," *New York Herald* (New York), August 10, 1877.

<sup>367</sup> "Irish-American Obituary," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 5, 1878.

<sup>368</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag 1, 1871-1928*, 316.

<sup>369</sup> K.R.M. Short, *The Dynamite War: Irish-American Bombers in Victorian Britain* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 46.



Rossa did, indeed, have a drinking bout in early 1878. It was a short one, however very well documented, and his emotional state continued to deteriorate, as did his writings. This was apparent when Devoy wrote to James Reynolds on February 6, 1878, describing his reaction to the extreme violence in one of Rossa's columns. Rossa had claimed Thomas D'Arcy McGee (a former Fenian) deserved to be murdered. Devoy threatened to resign from the Skirmishing Committee unless Rossa could be stopped. This complaint was added to Devoy's ongoing problem of a lawsuit brought about by an individual who claimed that Rossa promised the Clan would pay for his trip to the O'Mahony funeral in Ireland. This in Devoy's mind provided two more examples of Rossa's loose speech:

In my letter I said we were in a nice position with a lunatic on one side threatening us with a lawsuit and on the other with a drunken man bringing disgrace by raving in the papers . . . I waived many things about which I feel strongly for the sake of harmony. . . . But I will no longer stay on a board where such things are possible . . . I don't propose to fritter my life away in endless squabbles not do I think it safe to go into serious revolutionary work with men who can't keep a secret. Neither will I have my name associated with the childish rigmarole, which appears in the *Irish World* in connection with the Skirmishing Fund every week.<sup>370</sup>

Luby interceded with Rossa and elicited a promise from Rossa in writing never to say another "crooked word."<sup>371</sup> When Devoy received this note he relented and rescinded his resignation. But a month later, on March 10, 1878, when Devoy wrote to Reynolds, he believed Rossa's situation was worse:

Bourke, Breslin, and I had a long talk with Rossa on Thursday. He is hopelessly gone. He appealed to us to give him a week to "taper off" and try to straighten up. Of course, we said we would give him longer if he would only make a beginning

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<sup>370</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 302.

<sup>371</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated February 11, 1878, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/11/7, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

at once. Bourke brought him home with him that night and did not leave him till he got him at his office the next day. He kept nearly straight that day, but relapsed badly on Saturday. He is now so bad that I fear the only way to save him is to put him under restraint. He can't eat or sleep, and Tom passed a miserable night with him on Thursday. He has quarreled with his wife and has not gone home since last Sunday. He says he "will not be a slave in his own house," and that he will not go back any more. She has been over here complaining to us and warning us of danger to the fund. . . . She has since applied to Gibson of the Williams & Guion Line for a passage home to Ireland. . . . She also said that Ford can't afford to keep him and that he will soon be without any means of living. She described herself as sitting on a rock with the tide gradually rising around her with an inevitable fate before her if she remained.<sup>372</sup>

It is clear from this letter the condition in which Mary Jane found herself, but one week later Rossa was off to a St. Patrick's Day speaking engagement in Toronto. His trip to Toronto was already ill advised because of his emotional state but he had also received physical threats about appearing there.<sup>373</sup> The reality was even worse. As Rossa arrived by train a mob approached and he jumped off the train and ran to safety. His back and legs were injured. Typical of Rossa, he was not to be deterred and he gave his speech that night. However, as soon as Rossa and his hosts left the building a riot broke out among the Irish and anti-Irish crowd. Rossa somehow managed to reach safety unmolested.<sup>374</sup> When he returned to New York he was sober and after reflecting on the treatment he felt his friends gave him he was angry and disappointed. Writing to Bourke on March 26, 1878, he expressed that he felt that both Bourke and Luby had publicly repudiated the skirmishing idea. Rossa warned that this was what people had given their money to fund and therefore Bourke and Luby had expressed "your unfitness and both of you ought

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<sup>372</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 319.

<sup>373</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Wants to be a Martyr," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), March 16, 1878.

<sup>374</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa in Toronto," *Boston Journal* (Boston), March 19, 1878.

therefore resign” from the Committee and “it is too bad that your condemnation of the policy for the furtherance of which they gave their money should arrest the progress of a movement which was so promising.” He goes on to write:

I cannot consent to have the Skirmishing policy changed. You say of me and others . . . “He has talked of the destruction of cities and arsenals without any regard to the rules of modern warfare or the restraints of modern ideas. All this talk is both foolish and immoral and no one sympathizes with it except some ignorant persons who do not know any better.” Here you stigmatize as “ignorant” every contributor. . . . You want “Honourable warfare.” Well wait till England will let you have it, and you’ll wait till you lie down and die.<sup>375</sup>

The same day Rossa wrote to Bourke, Devoy wrote to Reynolds about having visited Rossa and commented: “he is sober now and the thing is therefore worse.” Devoy was determined that Rossa would no longer have control over the fund and threatened publicly shaming Rossa so others would not follow him and cause a further split in the revolutionary organizations.<sup>376</sup> But within a few days, Devoy had settled things with Rossa superficially, and with the help of Patrick Ford there would be no public split. Still, Devoy’s intentions were clear:

We discussed the matter frankly and fully and the result was an agreement. I am to write a note to submit to the trustees who are here and get their signature for next *Irish World*, saying something vague about the original object of the Fund to be carried out, etc.<sup>377</sup>

It is certainly not a coincidence that at the same time as Devoy was moving Rossa to the sidelines he was instructing Dr. Carroll on a visit to Parnell laying the groundwork for the

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<sup>375</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Thomas Francis Bourke dated March 26, 1878, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/11/1, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>376</sup> John Devoy, To James Reynolds dated March 26, 1878, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18135/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>377</sup> John Devoy, To James Reynolds dated March 28, 1878, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18135/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

eventual “New Departure” program that would support the Land League and the parliamentary efforts in Ireland.<sup>378</sup> Two months later Rossa was sent a letter from the Trustees demanding that he resign from the committee, and from then on they excluded him from any responsibility.<sup>379</sup> This added to his fragile emotional state.

Rossa was sober but also without financial resources now that he was no longer writing for the *Irish World*. Adding to the situation at home in Brooklyn, Mary Jane gave birth to Eileen O’Donovan Rossa on April 8, 1878.<sup>380</sup> She now had three children at home after burying three others: James Maxwell was now twelve years old and Sheela was two years old. To pay some of the family’s expenses and continue his political life despite his disagreements with the Clan, Rossa accepted what speaking engagements he could. On April 30, 1878, he spoke for two hours to about 300 people at the Cooper Institute in New York, reiterating his frustration that no action toward revolution in Ireland was being taken by the Irish American organizations.<sup>381</sup> But a month later it was announced:

The Fenian head centre, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, lies very seriously ill at his residence in this city. [Brooklyn] He was first attacked with gastric fever about ten days ago, but later his spine became affected, and this was followed by a partial paralysis of the lower extremities. The spinal disease is the result of a beating he received from his jailors when confined in prison in England. Physicians are in constant attendance upon the patient, and they express the belief today that all immediate danger is over. It will be some time, however, before he will be able to resume his duties. It is understood that a Central Council of Fenian Brotherhood has in consequence of current political events and inability of the

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<sup>378</sup> John Devoy, William O’Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag 1, 1871-1928*, 323.

<sup>379</sup> John Devoy, William O’Brien, Desmond Ryan, and eds., *Devoy's Post Bag 2, 1871-1928*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Fallon, 1948), 554.

<sup>380</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>381</sup> "British Tyranny Denounced," *New York Tribune* (New York), April 30, 1878.

head centre to attend to business of the organization been summoned to convene in the city early.<sup>382</sup>

This press release was repeated in the *Irish American Weekly* on June 8, 1878.<sup>383</sup> But, Rossa was evidently well enough to travel to Chicago the following week, albeit on crutches and with some speech difficulties, to speak at McCormick Hall to a rousing crowd.<sup>384</sup> Whether Rossa was suffering from spinal paralysis, or drunkenness, or having an emotional breakdown, we have no evidence. But Mary Jane was forced to take actions to help financially. With a new baby, it was not possible for her to go on the lecture circuit, but she knew that John Devoy owed Rossa \$700 and she wrote to Devoy for repayment.<sup>385</sup> Devoy responded to her on July 26, 1878, saying:

I received your letter on Wednesday last and would have answered it at once if I could have done more than send a mere acknowledgement. Until today, however, I have been unable to get any money, as I know no one who has any to spare, I enclose twenty dollars, which is all I have left after paying my board and a couple of small bills run up during the week. I am sorry it is not a larger sum, but I have never been able to save a dollar and can only make an attempt to pay my debts—which are frightfully large—out of my salary as I get it.

For the future, I will send over ten dollars every week, or nearly every week, until my debt to Rossa is paid. I may be able to render him a still more substantial service in a short time, but as I may fail it is better to say nothing about it till I know definitely what will be done.

I have not treated Rossa with indifference, not withstanding the fact that I did not call to his house, and my whole conduct towards him, as well as that of his other associates to whom you refer, can bear to be investigated. While stories were circulating through New York and Brooklyn that we had entered into a “conspiracy” to ruin him we were acting as his friends, perhaps at the expense of a cause that is nearer to us than even Rossa. The only “conspiracy” in fact, was a conspiracy to save him and if the facts should ever unfortunately be published there will be not question about our friendship for Rossa, whatever may be said of our action from another point of view. This is not time to enter into recriminations

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<sup>382</sup> "The Head Centre Sick," *Augusta Chronicle* (Augusta, GA), May 30, 1878.

<sup>383</sup> "Personal—O'Donovan Rossa Ill," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 8, 1878.

<sup>384</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa at McCormick Hall," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), June 10, 1878.

<sup>385</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, Desmond Ryan, and eds., *Devoy's Post Bag 2, 1871-1928*, 554.

and I hope you will not think what I have written above comes from any desire to be offensive or unpleasant. But I have been tired of listening to statements, coming from Rossa's "friends" about our "indifference" and "ingratitude" to Rossa which, if continued, may lead to exposures which will be much more unpleasant to Rossa than to us.

I don't want to injure Rossa and I never did; I am actuated by no feeling of jealousy or even rivalry that would impel me to take any unfair advantage of him, even if I was in the habit of doing such things. I am a younger man and have full confidence that my turn will come in our time. More than that, I believe that the utmost all of us together can accomplish just now is very small and that internal divisions would simply paralyze us. I have never wanted to shelve Rossa, but I have never thought it for the good of the movement, nor for his own, that he should act and speak in the way he has been going for some years and I have always candidly told him so.

I will make any sacrifice in my power to take him out of the condition he is now in, but I am at the same time convinced that it is a hopeless task so long as he is surrounded by the men who cling to him and whom he will not shake off.<sup>386</sup>

It is clear to see from this letter that Devoy believed that his actions were justified because of Rossa's behavior. But, Rossa's method of speaking out in vehemence was the same as it always had been. Devoy had decided that his method of managing the revolutionary organizations would cause fewer disruptions than Rossa's, particularly when his movement toward "New Departure" was taken into account. Devoy's priorities were made clear in a letter to Mary Jane just one week later when he was unable to send her the money he promised because: "It was of the greatest importance that Davitt, who had just arrived from Ireland, should be introduced to certain people without a day's delay, and the trip, as you may suppose, cost some money."<sup>387</sup>

No matter what the political reactions, Rossa was seriously ill and on August 16, 1878, it was announced in the New York Herald that he was in St. Peter's Hospital in

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<sup>386</sup> John Devoy, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated July 26, 1878, Fenian Brotherhood Collection, 014/1/14/17, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>387</sup> John Devoy, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated August 9, 1878, Fenian Brotherhood Collection, 014/1/14/18, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

Brooklyn and he had resigned from his position as Head Centre of the Fenian Brotherhood.<sup>388</sup> One week later Rossa left the hospital and in order to pay debts was forced to give up his business and his residence and also to sell his household goods.<sup>389</sup> Mary Jane and the three children were homeless and two days later, on August 27, 1878, they left for Ireland on the *Wyoming* with her sister Isabella. Rossa went to see the family off accompanied by Michael Davitt. An article in *Irish American Weekly* said: "Mr. O'Donovan Rossa by superhuman effort, arose from his bed of sickness, and managed to be present to say the sad word 'farewell' to his wife and family, before embarking on a voyage that may separate them from him for years."<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa- Resigns," *New York Herald* (New York), August 16, 1878.

<sup>389</sup> "Irish Skirmishing Money," *The Sun* (New York), August 25, 1878.

<sup>390</sup> "Personal—O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), September 7, 1878.

## Chapter 8

### FENIAN INTERNECINE WARFARE

It was through the generosity of the Williams Guion Steamship Line that Mary Jane and Isabella could return to Ireland with the children.<sup>391</sup> After seven years of heartache, Mary Jane was returning to her father's home in Clonakilty, where she left the three children for the next year. Knowledge of the family's situation had preceded her to Ireland, and while she was there the Irish Nationalist Association presented her with \$100 and a silver tea service in remembrance of her husband's service to the country.<sup>392</sup> Mary Jane did not abandon Rossa to his creditors and his political enemies, but she returned to New York, alone, sailing from Cobh on November 8, 1878, as a guest in a first-class cabin on the *Britannic* paid for by the White Star Line. The press reports from her sailing tell the truth of her mission:

It is but a short time since Mrs. Rossa left New York for Ireland with the view of placing her three children under her father's care, Rossa's failing health and broken circumstances obliging him to give up house and auction off his furniture. Having accomplished the objects of her voyage—or at least all that was practical of them—Mrs. Rossa promptly started by the *Britannic* for New York, to rejoin her husband, and by her presence, energy, and devotedness help to re-establish him in health and fortune. That the hearts of our people are in earnest sympathy with her, and that they will heartily welcome the day that restores Rossa to health and prosperity, are facts too evident to need any proofs on our part.<sup>393</sup>

While Mary Jane was in Ireland, Rossa's health slowly improved; it was reported in the press that the illness he suffered was a result of jumping from a train in Toronto the

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<sup>391</sup> "Personal—Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa and Family," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), September 7, 1878.

<sup>392</sup> "Personal —Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), December 7, 1878.

<sup>393</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa — From the Dublin Irishman," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), December 7, 1878.



previous March. The reports said this injury, added to his body so weakened by his previous treatment in prison, was the reason it was necessary for him to be hospitalized after Mary Jane left New York.<sup>394</sup> When he left the hospital he spent recovery time at a convent in Madison, New Jersey, as the guest of his friend Father McCartie.<sup>395</sup> As badly as Devoy and the other leaders had treated Rossa over a few months, once they were satisfied he had resigned from any position of influence in the organizations they became concerned about how his strained circumstances would be perceived by the rank and file members who had so steadfastly supported him in the past. They did not want to be viewed as a party to his demise but rather a force of help to Rossa and the family. They then hurriedly developed a plan to raise a financial appeal for Rossa and his family as a way of letting everyone know he was still held in high regard and appreciated, while also making sure everyone knew his reduced circumstances:

A few friends of O'Donovan Rossa, recently met at the house of one of them, to consider what steps should be taken for his benefit. He is, as you are aware, sick in St. Peter's Hospital, Brooklyn, under the care of the Sisters of St. Francis, and his family is entirely unprovided for. We know his reluctance to making his wants known to his countrymen; but we feel that they should not be left in ignorance of his condition. He has spent his life in the service of Ireland, and his countrymen owe it to themselves and their country, that he should not be left in want. We do not like public appeals for money, but without a public appeal any effort to provide for O'Donovan Rossa would not have the desired success. Let the Irish people, then, throughout the United States and Canada, be made aware of Rossa's condition, so that they may come to his assistance, and save the National cause the disgrace of allowing one that has lost and suffered so much through his connection with it, to feel that his services are not appreciated.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa in a Hospital," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 26, 1878.

<sup>395</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 353.

<sup>396</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Testimonial Letter," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 31, 1878.

John Devoy, Patrick Ford, John Carroll, Thomas Bourke, and Thomas Clarke Luby signed this solicitation: all the people who had been outspoken against Rossa, but who were now the major trustees of the Skirmishing Fund, now called the National Fund. In less than a month after publishing this letter, Rossa made it known that he did not need to have a testimonial fund raised for him and that subscriptions should be stopped; however, the committee chose to keep subscriptions coming in to the trustees until Christmas, 1878.<sup>397</sup> Two days after the committee made that decision, Rossa was well enough to appear on stage with Michael Davitt during a lecture in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>398</sup>

Davitt and Rossa had become friends during Davitt's tour in the United States, as they shared a Fenian prisoner background even if they did not agree on other things, like the priority of the land issues versus rebellion in Ireland. Davitt, too, was frustrated by the lack of action on the part of the nationalist groups in Ireland, but was focused on land reform and believed that Charles Stewart Parnell was taking action in that regard and supported it, which Davitt believed was more activity than was apparent elsewhere. Davitt's visit to the United States coincided with Devoy proposing the "New Departure" program, which linked Clan na Gael to Parnell's approach of Parliamentary agitation. Devoy believed that land reform was an essential part of the future of Ireland and thought Parnell's approach of gathering a united front could be added to physical force Fenianism to support the movement and then bring about self-government, leaving room to abandon the concept of federalism within Great Britain later. He sent a telegram showing the

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<sup>397</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Testimonial - Meeting at the Armory," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), September 28, 1878.

<sup>398</sup> "Michael Davitt — His Lecture in Newark, N.J.," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), October 12, 1878.

Clan's support to Parnell on October 25, 1878, through Charles Kickham, the old Fenian still living in Ireland. The telegram was published two days later in the *New York Herald*.<sup>399</sup> Part of Devoy's strategy in these announcements was to undermine any support for the return of James Stephens and the restoration of the Fenian Brotherhood, which was starting to surface among Irish Americans.<sup>400</sup> Devoy wanted a united organization under Clan na Gael with a united plan for Irish independence, which is why he was anxious to join with Parnell. Although Devoy's first announcement included his assurance to the Clan members that Rossa agreed with his approach, that was not the case. Rossa's true reaction was not a surprise to those who knew him well: "I have tried to work for Irish liberty through fight—not through the English Parliament, and though I am not well able to fight now, I believe it is through fight alone we can get independence for Ireland."<sup>401</sup> Rossa never supported Devoy, Davitt, and Parnell in what became the "Land League," believing that anything that involved trusting in the British Parliament was never going to lead to Irish independence.

While disagreeing with his old allies, Rossa was also publicly disagreeing with Mary Jane. While she was in Ireland with the children she wrote to the British Home Secretary about the remaining years of Rossa's exile, asking if her husband "would be allowed to reside in Ireland, as his health is now completely shattered, and residence in his native air would tend to prolong his life and assuage his suffering." She also assured the Secretary that "she would undertake, on the part of her husband's friends, that no

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<sup>399</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag I, 1871-1928*, 370.

<sup>400</sup> "The Irish New Departure," *New York Herald* (New York), October 27, 1878.

<sup>401</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Reply," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), December 21, 1878.

political demonstration should attend his arrival in Ireland, and that he merely desired to come home to die.”<sup>402</sup> The reply to Mary Jane was terse, “that he [the Home Secretary] must decline to accede to the request.” Rossa rebuked Mary Jane’s attempted action; he publicly claimed in a letter to a friend that was then widely quoted in Ireland that this application “was made without his knowledge or his permission.”<sup>403</sup> Mary Jane did make this request of the Home Secretary whether Rossa approved or not. Whatever the truth of Rossa’s involvement, when Mary Jane arrived back in the United States, Rossa met her while the *Britannic* was anchored off Staten Island. Rossa reacted to the negative publicity Mary Jane’s request to the Home Secretary had produced in letters later printed under the heading, “Save me from my friends.” This made clear his concern that some of his friends had misunderstood his own steadfastness, Rossa wrote to Patrick Ford:

Save me from my friends . . . I have many friends in America. Some of them would kill me with kindness, and some of them would kill me in a worse way by destroying the only thing I have and prize in this world—my hostility to English rule in Ireland. It has been reported in America, it has been circulated in Ireland, that I petitioned the English Government to be allowed to return home, . . . a petition, and that is what they will never get from me. . . . My wife . . . wrote . . . without my permission or knowledge. Asking if I would be allowed to go over [to Ireland] . . . you can judge for yourself whether or not it assumes the form of a petition.<sup>404</sup>

At the time of Mary Jane’s return to New York, the Williams and Guion Steamship Company again employed Rossa. He was selling transatlantic passage tickets from an office on Fifth and Broadway in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. This was announced in

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<sup>402</sup> "No Amnesty for O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 11, 1879.

<sup>403</sup> "The Home Secretary and O'Donovan Rossa," *Reynolds' Newspaper* (London), January 5, 1879; "Home Secretary and O'Donovan Rossa - Friday," *Belfast Evening Telegraph* (Belfast), January 3, 1879.

<sup>404</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa—Proposed Return to Ireland," *The Nation* (Dublin), December 28, 1878.

the *Irish American Weekly* with the comment: "This popular company was the first to employ Rossa when he came here from prison, and it at least shows he acted faithfully by them when now, after a long illness, he is trying to resume business, they again entrust him with their drafts and tickets."<sup>405</sup> Rossa hoped that this notice would dispel any rumors of bad business practices that were spread when Devoy and his friends were forcing him out of leadership in the Skirmishing Fund. Rossa and Mary Jane both quickly went back on the lecture circuit. They appeared together at the annual Emmet Commemoration held at Cooper Institute on March 4, 1879, where Mary Jane received "deafening cheers of the entire audience" and Rossa "seemed to regain the youth, vigor, energy and enthusiasm of twenty years ago. . . . Where he could never have been better received."<sup>406</sup> Also on the stage that night was James Stephens. Stephens was again attempting to reestablish the Fenian Brotherhood, much to the dismay of John Devoy who desired unity. Rossa saw his chance to lead again, and he was soon working with Stephens. On April 20, 1879, Rossa spoke at a meeting of some of the Irish national organizations from New York and told the audience that he was faithful to the original cause and to Stephens despite his instructions from Devoy and the Clan to the contrary.<sup>407</sup> While this garnered some publicity, it did not create much actual following because by 1879, Devoy had wrested most of the power from any of the other organizations. Devoy had correctly recognized Parnell's efforts, which grew into the Irish National Land

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<sup>405</sup> "Personal: Rossa—Williams and Guion," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), February, 15, 1879.

<sup>406</sup> "Personal: Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa and O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), March 22, 1879.

<sup>407</sup> "Meeting of the 'I.R.B.' James Stephens and O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), May 3, 1879.

League, and aligned himself with Parnell and Davitt. The Land War in Ireland had begun with the support of the Fenian organization through Clan na Gael. Rossa was no longer one of the main leaders of the Irish American movement.

Rossa's role was severely weakened in the Irish American community but Mary Jane was still an attraction on the lecture circuit. In late May of 1879, she made a trip to New England, appearing in Bennington, Vermont.<sup>408</sup> Rossa also did manage to speak at a Temperance Society event, but from the notices, it is apparent that Mary Jane was the major draw; the audience was not happy with her husband's apologies for her absence when she did not appear.<sup>409</sup> Given the rumors about Rossa's proclivity to drink, Mary Jane may have facilitated his speaking there alone hoping to help his reputation. Many years later, Rossa's daughter wrote that it was about this time that Rossa became a teetotaler.<sup>410</sup> While the children were in Clonakilty, Mary Jane was a constant correspondent, as evidenced by a letter from James Maxwell, dated March 31, 1879. Max, as he was known to the family, commented on adventures his mother had written about and articles he read about his parents in the *Irishman*. He also wrote about his grandfather's failing health.<sup>411</sup> Mary Jane's sister Isabella was the main caregiver for the children while they were in Ireland and wrote to Mary Jane often. She, too, missed New

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<sup>408</sup> "Readings of Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa," *Bennington Banner* (Bennington, Vermont), May 29, 1879.

<sup>409</sup> "St. Joseph's T.A.B. Soceity," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 9, 1879.

<sup>410</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 45.

<sup>411</sup> James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated March 31, 1879, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

York and all her friends.<sup>412</sup> But, luckily she and her sister Amelia were there with the children when Maxwell Irwin died suddenly on May 18, 1879, while in Dublin on business at his son Timothy Irwin's home.<sup>413</sup> Although there is no evidence Mary Jane arrived in Clonakilty for the funeral, she was there that summer preparing to bring her children home to New York. They arrived in New York on September 22, 1879, on the steamship *Angoria*.<sup>414</sup> It is likely that Isabella and Amelia Irwin came back to New York with them because shortly later in early 1880, the family including the two Irwin sisters was living in Philadelphia, at 3606 Market Street.<sup>415</sup> It is not known what drew the family to Philadelphia, although Rossa did have family there. It was in Philadelphia that Amelia O'Donovan Rossa was born in January 1880, and they were still there when she died on June 18, 1880.<sup>416</sup> Rossa was running the O'Donovan Rossa Cabin & Steerage Passenger Agency, representing the Guion Steamship Company and numerous American railroad lines. He was also running a wholesale and retail bookstore out of his home.<sup>417</sup>

By early 1880, the family's life was stabilizing, Rossa was working, and both he and Mary Jane had the occasional lecture. Despite being sidelined by Devoy, Rossa and Mary Jane were both still celebrities among Irish Americans. They were the lead speakers

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<sup>412</sup> Isabella M. Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated March 31, 1879, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 20974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>413</sup> "Death of Mr. Maxwell Irwin," *Cork Herald* (Cork), May 19, 1879.

<sup>414</sup> "News of Arrivals," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), September 23, 1879.

<sup>415</sup> 1880 United States Census, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., January 1, 2015, [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org).

<sup>416</sup> Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Death Certificates Index, 1803-1915, City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, November 11, 2015, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>417</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To James dated March 15, 1880, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/11/9, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

for the annual Emmet Celebration in March 1880, which was the high point of the Irish American political calendar.<sup>418</sup> The Irish American political world was changing; on the dais with them at Cooper Institute for the gala were Charles Stewart Parnell's mother and her three daughters.<sup>419</sup> Their celebrity status encouraged Rossa to openly disagree with the current move to support "New Departure" and he remained vocal about the folly of trusting Parliament; he was also vocal about his continued support for violence instead.<sup>420</sup> He was still angry about the lack of any actions that made use of the Skirmishing Fund. He wrote to one of Devoy's aides: "Look at this Skirmishing matter—I am not in their way these two years, and yet we have not a blow up anywhere."<sup>421</sup> Rossa still believed he could accomplish this work and it led to his call for a new organization, the Society of the United Irishmen, which he introduced at a "Convention of the Irish Race" in Philadelphia in June and July 1880. Before the convention he wrote a public letter to the trustees of the National Fund as an opening salvo in a press war with Devoy that would last for years:

Gentlemen—Circumstances oblige me to address a few words to you. Many men who have contributed to the "Skirmishing Fund" seem to hold me still responsible for the expenditure of their contributions, and they write to me saying they are determined to bring me to account for their money at the approaching convention, in Philadelphia, on June 28<sup>th</sup>. . . . They say they contributed their money for "Skirmishing" purposes . . . I delivered up to you, in 1878, my part of the trusteeship. And I ask you, or one of you, to come to the convention . . . and produce the bonds and moneys I left in your possession when I resigned.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> "Emmet's Day, Help for the Suffering Irish People," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), January 31, 1880.

<sup>419</sup> "Robert Emmet, Anniversary of his Birth, Observation in America," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), March 13, 1880.

<sup>420</sup> "An Irish Skirmish First Encounter between the Forces of O'Donovan Rossa and the Trustee of the National Fund," *New York Herald* (New York), July 4, 1880.

<sup>421</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To James dated March 15, 1880, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/11/9.

<sup>422</sup> "The 'Skirmishing Fund' Letter From O'Donovan Rossa. An Invitation to the Trustees," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), June 12, 1880.



As soon as Rossa called this convention together, he was spurned by Clan na Gael and ultimately expelled from that organization for violating their rule about joining a competing organization.<sup>423</sup> The convention drew up a constitution for the United Irishmen with a preamble committing the group to dynamite warfare by “believing in the eternal right of the Irish people to govern themselves, and with the view of securing that right by every means known to the science of modern warfare.”<sup>424</sup> The trustees of the National Fund did not answer Rossa nor attend the convention. A week later a committee headed by Rossa met with some of the trustees (Devoy, Bourke, and Augustine Ford) and accused them of having diverted some of the funds for expenses related to “New Departure” rather than “Skirmishing.” The committee requested whatever monies remained to be turned over to them. Devoy and the trustees claimed that they were doing an accounting for the subscribers themselves and there was no need of Rossa’s committee, which they believed was established only because of a personal disagreement between Devoy and Rossa and was therefore influenced by undue “passion.” The trustees would act on behalf of the subscribers and avoid the “threatened mischief.”<sup>425</sup>

More than a month later the United Irishmen represented by Patrick Crowe, who in this example was speaking for Rossa, made one more plea to the trustees of the National Fund. He made a strong case that the diversion of the original fund to “New

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<sup>423</sup> John Devoy, William O'Brien, and Desmond Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag 1, 1871-1928*, 502.

<sup>424</sup> Preamble and Constitution of the United Irishmen, June 28, 1880, Fenian Brotherhood Collection, 014/6/1/5, ACUA, Washington, D.C.

<sup>425</sup> "At Swords' Points, Lively Conference Between Rossa and the Skirmishing Fund Trustees," *New York Herald* (New York), July 8, 1880.

Departure” had undoubtedly taken place in the last two years but believed in the following course of action:

Let . . . an executive body of two men be appointed to carry out the original idea of the “Skirmishing Fund”—that of injuring England by every engine of war, for England today is at war with Ireland. The time is propitious; England is evicting and exterminating our kindred at home, Irish homesteads are to be razed to the ground by her agents . . . Let us show her that at last Irish blood is up, and that Irish “vengeance” is something more than empty curses. Let us show her that when an Irish cabin is leveled to the ground, an English ship shall in retaliation, be blown to pieces, or burned to the ground. Let us make her feel that every pound she extracts from Ireland will cost her ten in England; and, my word for it, she will soon leave us to settle the Land question, and every other question, in our own way. Do this, and there will be no asking for investigation as to where the money went, by any friend of Irish Liberty.<sup>426</sup>

After more than two months of this press war between Rossa and the trustees, Patrick Ford used his considerable power of the *Irish World* to call this round of the battle to pause. In a blasting editorial, he criticized Rossa for creating conflict within the Irish nationalist cause:

Had he [Rossa] said to the leaders of the national organization and to the Trustees of the Skirmishing Fund; “Gentlemen, you and I must part company. Your policy of inaction does not at all suit me. But we will not quarrel. For me to criticize you in public would be indecorous and improper, and to fault find in private is useless. No; there shall be no criticism on your conduct. You, no doubt are doing as well as your lights will let you. Charity bids me think this. My own judgment, however, leads me to the conclusion that you will never accomplish anything; and a sense of patriotic duty impels me to depart company. We shall diverge, but not conflict. We are brothers still, and for you I shall never cherish other than fraternal feelings. Farewell!” Had Rossa but evinced a spirit like this, he would have enlisted the sympathy of not a few. But Rossa, it would seem, is not capable of rising to the height.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> “The ‘Skirmishing Fund’ - Letter from P.W. Crowe,” *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 21, 1880.

<sup>427</sup> Patrick Ford, “The Hostiles. Chief Rossa on the Wrong Path,” *Irish World* (New York), August 28, 1880.

Ford's criticism painted a picture of an over-emotional Rossa bent on vengeance who had been incapable of action when he had the chance to accomplish it himself. Ford relegated Rossa to the position of an outcast from leadership in Irish nationalist circles, from which Rossa never recovered. He did, however, maintain a solid following among the memberships of those organizations with whom he communicated through his own newspaper, the *United Irishman*. He began publishing the *United Irishman* personally at the time of the Philadelphia convention and would do so for the next more than thirty years. The subscriptions and donations his followers sent would be at many times the family's only income. His first goal in establishing the paper was to raise money for his new fund, which was focused on the efficacy of using dynamite in the skirmishes he planned in England.<sup>428</sup> This fund, now called "Resources of Civilization Fund" soon was accused of financing an explosion at Salford Barracks on January 14, 1881, near Nottingham, England.<sup>429</sup> It would be the first of nearly twenty-five explosions in England over the next four years, six of them in 1881.<sup>430</sup> According to historian, Niall Whelehan, other than those in 1881, these explosions were probably not perpetrated under Rossa's lead, although he would always claim responsibility. It is believed that most of the later explosions were the work of teams secretly under the aegis of Clan na Gael and Patrick Ford.<sup>431</sup> This was despite the public denials by them that continued for years. These

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<sup>428</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Dynamite, Dynamite, Dynamite," *United Irishman* (New York), June 7, 1884.

<sup>429</sup> "Explosion at Salford Barracks, Supposed Fenian Outrage," *Nottingham Evening Post* (Nottingham, UK), January 15, 1871.

<sup>430</sup> "Dynamite Outrages," *The Morning Post* (London), September 17, 1896.

<sup>431</sup> Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters*, 85.

bombs targeted Parliament buildings, town halls, gasworks, bridges, press offices, railway and underground stations.<sup>432</sup> Rossa's goal was propaganda that, according to Niall Whelehan,

depicted a kind of apocalyptic showdown between the forces of revolution and reaction, where dynamite and scientific invention would be used by revolutionaries to secure their triumph in David-versus-Goliath-style encounters. Using bloated biblical language, he described the aim of the "missioners" or dynamiters as "to scald, to exterminate, to burn, to blow up, or demolish the cruel tyrants that have scourged our people." . . . Dynamite and nitro-glycerine were regularly . . . spoken of as god-given instruments to strike out against tyranny.<sup>433</sup>

Rossa would claim responsibility not only for explosions his teams produced but also for nearly anything violent that created tension between Britain and Ireland in the press or in Parliament. This caused Rossa to be viewed by many as reckless, even theatrical, while Clan na Gael and Ford were seen as calm strategists. Rossa was soon depicted as the cartoon character Jeremiah O'Dynamite Rossa on the cover of *Puck* in August 1881, wielding dynamite sticks at the British lion.<sup>434</sup>

While Rossa was meeting with the Trustees of the National Fund in July 1880, he was also looking at houses in Brooklyn where the family would move the following month. In a letter to Mary Jane he lamented the difficulty of house hunting and ultimately left the burden to her.<sup>435</sup> Mary Jane, still in Philadelphia, was grieving the loss of her daughter Amelia and nursing her own sister Amelia, who was suffering from

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<sup>432</sup> Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters*, 85.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>434</sup> *Puck Magazine*, August 10, 1881, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms 24552, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>435</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated July 21, 1880, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

consumption complicated by depression from a broken engagement.<sup>436</sup> Mary Jane soon found a home on Bushwick Street, Brooklyn, and shortly after moving went again on the lecture circuit. On February 21, 1881, while she was reading to an audience at Nordheimer's Hall in Montreal a bullet was fired through a window aimed at Mary Jane. Luckily it missed its target and Mary Jane was unhurt.<sup>437</sup> Mary Jane had lived in the public eye for fifteen years. She was recognized as an entertainer and lecturer and now her husband was recognized for violence as well as his Irish patriotism. The Irish audiences were split: some applauded and supported the couple; some vilified them.

Mary Jane was four months pregnant when she was attacked in Montreal; her son Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa would be born on July 29, 1881, at their home in Brooklyn.<sup>438</sup> About the time of Jeremiah's birth, Rossa again unsuccessfully sought steady employment when he applied for a position in the Customs House as a Collector.<sup>439</sup> As in his other attempts for work with governmental agencies, he was refused. The political establishment in Manhattan, still heavily controlled by Tammany Hall, was extracting vengeance on Rossa for his attempt to turn the Irish populace against them ten years before, added to his reputation as a "hothead" put forth by Clan na Gael was eliminating him from consideration.

Mary Jane now had four children: the girls Sheela and Eileen were five and three when little Jerry was born, but James Maxwell, called Max by his mother, was fifteen and

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<sup>436</sup> Eileen O'Donovan Rossa McGowan, Note to Sean O'Luing on envelope dated July 21, 1880, July, 1960, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>437</sup> "Telegraphic Brevities," *Boston Herald* (Boston), February 23, 1881.

<sup>438</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>439</sup> "Round About the Country," *Boston Journal* (Boston), August 1, 1881.

sent off to apprentice as a machinist in Providence, Rhode Island. Mary Jane was not at all happy about the arrangements Rossa had made for their son and tried unsuccessfully to convince Max to return home. Max stayed at his job, however, and already showed interest in his parents' political views. In a letter to his mother dated March 22, 1881, he inquired: "I hope the Skirmishing Fund is increasing and that it may make the light shine so brilliant in England, that you will see perfidious Albion going down, and regenerated Ireland rising over her ruins."<sup>440</sup> There is no evidence of the political interests of Rossa's older sons. Denis was working for the Germania Insurance Company as a salesman in Chicago and distancing himself from his father by using the name Denis Rossa.<sup>441</sup> John was now a lawyer in Sioux City, Iowa, and Con was working in Jersey City.<sup>442</sup> Florence Stephens O'Donovan Rossa had stayed in Cork with his mother's family but came to New York in early 1883 as evidenced by a photo taken of him by a New York photographer.<sup>443</sup> After a short stay, Finin, as the family knew him, enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to Colorado, where he developed consumption; he ultimately returned to County Cork.<sup>444</sup> On Finin's return to Ireland in mid-1884, his father told the press, "I hope he has the dynamite spirit in him,"—this comment made the young man the topic of police interest in Skibbereen.<sup>445</sup> Less than two years after Jerry's birth Mary Jane gave

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<sup>440</sup> James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated March 22, 1881, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>441</sup> "News - Denis O'Donovan Rossa," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), November 25, 1883.

<sup>442</sup> "Blaine and Logan Club," *Saint Paul Globe* (St. Paul, MN), September 28, 1884.

<sup>443</sup> Photo of Florence O'Donovan Rossa, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms UR 076989, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>444</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa and his Second Wife," *Southern Star* (Cork), January 6, 2001.

<sup>445</sup> "Notes July 16, 1884," *The Philadelphia Times* (Philadelphia), July 16, 1884.

birth to another girl, Isabella, known as Bella, born on March 25, 1883, in Bushwick. Twenty months later, another daughter was born: Mary Jane, known as Jennie, born on December 28, 1884, after the family had moved yet again to another home in Brooklyn at 37 Duryea Street.<sup>446</sup> During these four years Mary Jane spent most of her time at home and very little time on the lecture circuit. She did appear for the anniversary of the Manchester Martyrs in November 1882 at Cooper Union, where she recited an Irish translation of a James Clarence Mangan poem, which she had memorized.<sup>447</sup> Unlike her husband, Mary Jane did not speak Irish. But sadness visited the family again when Mary Jane heard of her sister Amelia's death in January 1885. Amelia had returned to County Cork and died in Clonakilty.<sup>448</sup> The three Irwin sisters, Mary Jane, Isabella, and Amelia, had been extremely close and Amelia's death hit her sisters very hard.

While Mary Jane was nurturing the family, Rossa was making headlines for the things he said and for the things some in the press invented. He did make outlandish claims in interviews: "O'Donovan Rossa claims that he has paid \$90,000 out of the Fenian skirmishing fund for a war engine or torpedo boat to use against England," and saying that he had shipped harmless material to England and then had someone pretend to act as informer to the British government claiming they were explosives.<sup>449</sup> In a later interview, Rossa would then claim it was all a farce. But it was closer to the truth than he would let on. Rossa's associate Patrick Crowe managed teams of people who were being

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<sup>446</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>447</sup> "Manchester Martyr Celebration," *Irish World* (New York), December 9, 1882.

<sup>448</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Deaths in Ireland," *United Irishman* (New York), January 26, 1885.

<sup>449</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Interviewed," *New Haven Register* (New Haven), July 29, 1881.

trained in explosives in a dynamite school in Brooklyn funded by the United Irishmen. These trained men were going to England with smuggled dynamite, and there was a torpedo boat built by Clan na Gael with skirmishing money.<sup>450</sup> Dr. William Carroll, who was actually responsible for the building of the submarine the *Fenian Ram*, barely held his temper when commenting following Rossa's headlines:

I regret exceedingly that Rossa has said so much . . . the way in which to do these things is to work in secret. Rossa is a good man and zealous in the cause, but he talks altogether too much. . . . It amuses me to see the trouble the steamship people are having. They needn't bother themselves at all, for when that ram is taken from New York it is not likely that any one will know the day and date. In fact, it is my impression she will mysteriously disappear.<sup>451</sup>

Rossa continued taking credit for any explosion that happened and continued his efforts to see the news was widely distributed, such as this note in the *Bismarck Tribune* in Bismarck, North Dakota:

The Work of Fenians  
New York, Oct. 31.—O'Donovan Rossa states that the explosions yesterday in the underground railway, London, were the work of the Fenian brotherhood, of whose movements he was apprised. London would be in ashes, he said, before long, unless England gave up Ireland. New developments might be expected any moment for it was the purpose of the brotherhood to reduce England to submission.<sup>452</sup>

The Clan disliked the publicity that Rossa generated but meanwhile this same publicity was having the exact effect Rossa hoped. Fear was growing among those loyal to Britain as shown in this column from the *Belfast News-Letter* of January 28, 1882:

In Dublin and elsewhere great depots of arms and dynamite have been discovered, and there is a universal belief that in many other places there are magazines not yet discovered, from which Fenianism hopes to arm its wretched soldiers of the

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<sup>450</sup> Shane Kenna, *Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Unrepentant Fenian* (Kildare: Merrion Press, 2015), 168; Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters*, 141.

<sup>451</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Best Man," *The Times* (Philadelphia), July 30, 1881.

<sup>452</sup> "The Work of Fenians," *Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, North Dakota), November 2, 1883.



“Irish Republic.” Within a week a large quantity of dynamite has been stolen in Limerick, and no one can tell the hour when desperate men may try to take the advice of O’Donovan Rossa, and, reckless of life and property alike, make an attempt to blow up some public buildings. There is, in fact, in the metropolis and all over the South, a feeling of apprehension far more widespread, and probably far better founded, than has existed in the country since the Fenian times.<sup>453</sup>

On May 6, 1882, the Phoenix Park Murders took place in Dublin. Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Henry Burke, the newly-appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland and the Permanent Undersecretary, were assassinated in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. A black-edged card left at newspaper offices claimed “Irish National Invincibles,” an unknown group, committed the murders.<sup>454</sup> The killers were actually a team of people loosely associated with Clan na Gael and their dynamite wing.<sup>455</sup> After the shock of the murders everyone associated with the Irish Fenian movement was condemned by the press: Parnell, Davitt, Clan na Gael, and most strongly Rossa. All of these groups denied any involvement; however, Rossa was the only person who refused to condemn the act as a heinous crime.<sup>456</sup> While this condemnation in the press was happening in New York, the Dublin paper the *Freeman’s Journal* interviewed John O’Leary. He makes an insightful remark about Rossa, which shows how well he knew his old friend. He believed that Rossa was the instigator of actions but not the perpetrator:

*Mr. O’Leary*—This paper and the “Irish People,” the organ of the [Fenian] party, condemned all assassinations in every shape and form. I have yet to learn of any well-known Fenian who has ever advocated that hateful doctrine.

*Correspondent*—You forget O’Donovan Rossa who, with the mass of Englishmen, still passes for a representative Fenian.

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<sup>453</sup> "Another Month Approaching Its Close," *Belfast News-Letter* (Belfast), January 28, 1882.

<sup>454</sup> K.R.M. Short, *The Dynamite War*, 75.

<sup>455</sup> Shane Kenna, *War in the Shadows*, 43.

<sup>456</sup> "The Voice of New York; Assassination Condemned," *Irish Nation* (New York), May 20, 1882.

*Mr. O'Leary*—The time when O'Donovan Rossa had any claim to represent any appreciable section of the Fenians is long passed . . .

*Correspondent*—Are you of the opinion that Rossa had anything to do with the assassinations?

*Mr. O'Leary*—No; I firmly believe he has not the means of carrying out his insane schemes. I more than suspect that, despite all his mouthing, he is far from being the desperado he would fain pass for.<sup>457</sup>

In the two years since Patrick Ford's article had caused him to be abandoned by the leaders of the Irish organizations, Rossa continued to fight for what he believed was the correct thing to be done with the money raised for the original Skirmishing Fund. Rossa accused the trustees of misappropriating the money from the fund away from skirmishing and using it to support Parnell. He claimed this had been proved through the reports he sent to newspapers from his Committee of Investigation established in 1880.<sup>458</sup> But by 1882, some of the trustees including John Devoy gave in to their own frustration and decided to make the battle personal. Devoy wrote a series of articles for the *Irish Nation*, accusing Rossa of "utter dishonesty" and "duplicity." He claimed the trustees had stepped in to save Rossa from disgrace in 1878 because of his mismanagement of the fund. When Rossa suggested a meeting to discuss the auditing of the Skirmishing Fund, Devoy answered publicly in the *Irish Nation*:

I decline to go to that meeting, or to any other called by you for that or any other purpose, and I refuse to do anything that would imply that you are an honest, a trustworthy or a decent man. Your dishonest application of the of that fund to your own personal use while you were in charge of it, your incapacity to keep either papers, money or secrets, deprive you of all right to a knowledge of anything concerning it; while your repeated revelations of matters you were sworn to keep secret, your constant association with bad and dishonest men who are your confidants, your monstrous and ruffianly lying for the past three years, and your treason to the National cause by supplying the British Government, through the public press, with important information, place you outside the pale of

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<sup>457</sup> "Mr O'Leary Interviewed," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), May 25, 1882.

<sup>458</sup> "Rossa's Fraudulent Report," *Irish Nation* (New York), September 30, 1882.

decent society. Your unparalleled scoundrelism towards me personally, who for years stood between you and disgrace, relieves me from the obligation of treating you even as a decent enemy.<sup>459</sup>

Articles in the *Irish Nation* followed this letter every week for over a month. Devoy got nastier as the month progressed, his articles carrying the titles “Eleven Years of Fraud and False Pretenses Exposed” and “Some Light Let in on a Dark and Dirty Subject.”<sup>460</sup>

Once Devoy started the personal attacks, Rossa showed his own contempt. He believed that Devoy was the cause of his downfall with the leadership of the Irish nationalists and the cause of all his personal troubles, as well. He struck out against Devoy in response with a letter appearing in the *Irish Nation*, behaving as badly as Devoy but giving his version of what had transpired in 1878 leading to his downfall:

15 Chambers Street, New York  
August 23, 1882

Mr. John Devoy:

You are one of the men to whom I some time ago gave the trusteeship of money that was contributed to be used for Ireland. You and the other trustees remained in possession of some \$89,000 of that money when the fund was closed and when you turned your attention to get freedom of Ireland from England without striking a blow at all for it.

I sent you a circular to attend a meeting on next Sunday, to account to the contributors of that money for whatever balance of it is now unspent, and in reply to that circular you turned up your very handsome nose and sent me a note that shows the very blackguard breeding that is in you. If any of the money is left, possibly you want it to follow up the life you have led since I came to know you, and that is to live upon money other people earned.

As you seem to be so independent in your “dead-beat” career now, it is no harm for me to remember that there is a little personal account between us to ask you to pay it. I want the money to help me clear off debts I incurred by being kind to you and others. When I was “laid up” some four years ago my wife looked over my books; she saw you owed me some \$700 or \$800. She wrote to you, and I have your letter sending her \$10 or \$20 and promising \$10 a week, till the debt was

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<sup>459</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Baseness," *Irish Nation* (New York), August 26, 1882.

<sup>460</sup> John Devoy, "O'Donovan Rossa, Some Light Let In," *Irish Nation* (New York), September 2, 1882.

paid; but you never paid more than \$20. You thought of a new way to pay old debts, and you and the others made a charity appeal to the country for me. And then because I persisted and still persist in saying that skirmishing money should not be used by you and a lot of sharks, I am very ungrateful in your eyes. Yourself gave me the items one time of the money you owed me, and it exceeded \$700. I will sue you for \$700—some \$200 or \$300 of money in cash lent, and the rest in feeding you and giving you house-room when no one else would feed or house you. I remember giving \$100 or \$200 to buy that cigar store you had in Hudson Street, and I remember you telegraphing to me for money when you were at the Baltimore convention of the Clan na Gael, as you wanted to pay your hotel bill there. I telegraphed the money to you, and Myles O'Brien and the other men who were at that convention say that you stole away from the hotel without paying your bill, and that they had to pay it to save the organization from disgrace.

It is the like of you that bring disgrace upon Irish societies in America—men who ride on them for the purpose of making a living they could not otherwise make. You may object to pay me that \$700 now, because \$700 would make a rich man of me, and you would not like me to have that satisfaction; but I will be heartily satisfied and give you a clear receipt of the money if you pay it to my creditors. I owe Edward L. Carey a hundred dollars for coal that I got from him when running that hotel of mine which you patronized; I owe James Walsh, Vandewater and Pearl Streets, a hundred dollars for meat; I owe F.K. Thurber, for wines and brandies, more than I owe all the world. You smoked some of Captain Plunkett's cigars; Carey's coals and Thurber's wines and brandies warmed you; pay to them the money you owe me and I will give you a clear receipt for the debt and be done with such an ungrateful wretch as you are.

Yours,

Jere. O'Donovan Rossa<sup>461</sup>

Again it was Patrick Ford who tried to avoid further conflict and called for a return to focusing on the cause they shared:

What has become of the money of the Skirmishing fund? That is what the Committee of Investigation wants to know. It is a fair question . . . If it be asked why in justice to myself I did not have these facts published before, and why I did not join in the cry raised by O'Donovan Rossa and others demanding an account of the funds, my answer is this: If by doing so I could have served the cause of Ireland I certainly would have done so, but my judgment inclined otherwise and I have held my peace. Every thoughtful man must feel grieved at the scandal created by factional discussions; and the mortification is intensified when one sees these discussions transferred to the columns of the daily press, whose cynical

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<sup>461</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "A Characteristic Letter," *Irish Nation* (New York), September 30, 1882.

editors desire such things for publication—desire to advertise our faults and our weakness—in order to discredit the good name and bring contempt upon the cause of the Irish people . . .

But if there is a time to be silent, there is also a time to speak, and that time is now. I have said my say, but the question awaits an answer—What has become of the Skirmishing Fund?<sup>462</sup>

The question of where the Skirmishing Fund money was spent has never been answered fully. The trustees supported the dynamiting program of Clan na Gael under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Gallagher. Gallagher developed an operational alliance with some of Rossa's recruits and worked with the dynamite school Rossa's followers had set up in Brooklyn. It was this bombing cell the future leader of the 1916 Rebellion Thomas J. Clarke joined and was later jailed while transporting bombs in April 1883.<sup>463</sup> The coordination between Gallagher and Rossa was not known initially to the officers of Clan na Gael and it was not known whether money spent from the Fund supported their effort. It is also not known whether Rossa was correct in his argument that money had been spent on "New Departure."

It was shortly after this war of words over the Skirmishing Fund that Rossa established his newspaper, the *United Irishman*. He now had a vehicle to speak directly to his followers on any topic of his choosing. He and Mary Jane became the sole employees and they wrote everything from news to poetry. They included small history lessons and updates on families of subscribers, both in America and in Ireland. Subscriptions and any monies Rossa's followers donated supported the publication and it became the financial mainstay for the family's existence for many years. In the earlier years as the paper was

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<sup>462</sup> Patrick Ford, "Skirmishing Again," *Irish Nation* (New York), October 14, 1882.

<sup>463</sup> Shane Kenna, *Unrepentant Fenian*, 189.

growing Rossa took some speaking engagements and Mary Jane was able to stay at home with her young children. But Rossa took every opportunity to attempt make money without giving up his cause, including using his wife's celebrity as a sales tool for selling "neuralgia oil." Throughout 1883, 1884, and 1885 Rossa ran ads in many newspapers throughout the United States as an endorsement for a cure: "Speaking of the Great German Remedy to a friend, O'Donovan Rossa said: 'Mrs. Rossa has been cured of a very severe attack of neuralgia by St. Jacobs Oil, as she will gladly tell you, if you call at my residence, 379 Bushwick Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y.'"<sup>464</sup> Rossa had certainly learned to use celebrity and publicity to his and his family's own benefit. Rossa's main goal, however, was for the paper to benefit the cause for Ireland. Rossa's methods had attracted a great many followers from the Irish diaspora in the United States to support the goal of Irish freedom. But the fear of Devoy, O'Leary, and the other leaders that secrecy would be lost was justified as well because all the publicity attracted people who would do the cause harm as well as those who would support the cause. By 1887, two such people working for the British government had indeed reached deep into the Irish organizations, Henri Le Caron (Thomas Beech) within Clan na Gael and Red Jim McDermott within the United Irishmen.<sup>465</sup> Rossa had a reputation of being too gullible and an easy mark for spies; as a result, he was removed from day-to-day planning even within his own group of the United Irishmen. This was confirmed by an investigation in

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<sup>464</sup> "Speaking of the Great German Remedy," *Harrisburg Daily Independent* (Harrisburg, PA), January 31, 1883.

<sup>465</sup> Shane Kenna, *War in the Shadows*, 306, 310.

London, published in the *London Times*, and written about occasionally in American papers:

The *London Times* of the 15<sup>th</sup> inst. [July 15, 1882] contains some curious disclosures concerning the operations and plans of what is called the dynamite section of the Fenian party in this city, which there is good semi official police reason for saying are, in the main, correct. . . . While O'Donovan Rossa was at one time the projector and conductor of the party, he is not now, nor has he been for some time in any position to control it, or to even learn of its secret doings. In fact, though sincere in his views, Rossa talked too much for the conspirators to trust him; and while his United Irishman's society directory were the general managers of the business, they used him only as a figure head. They directed operations generally without his knowledge, and on this account Rossa just now is in a somewhat dissatisfied condition of mind.<sup>466</sup>

This knowledge did not keep Rossa from thinking he was a target for British spying and so when an assassination attempt was made on his life February 2, 1885, he immediately thought the perpetrator was attacking under orders from London. Rossa had made arrangements to meet the young Mrs. Yseult Dudley near his Chambers Street office at 5 o'clock on Monday, February 2. She had met with Rossa before and offered to make a large donation to the Irish cause. She took five shots at him, hitting him only once with a glancing blow to the shoulder.<sup>467</sup> On being taken to the Society of the New York Hospital, Rossa wrote a note to Mary Jane delivered by messenger:

Mollis, Don't be alarmed; A Woman shot me in Chambers Street: The ball entered below and between the shoulders. I am in Chambers St. Hospital No. 160—The doctors cannot find the ball. I suppose you will run over but I don't know what the children will do.

Yours lovingly  
Jer O'Donovan Rossa

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<sup>466</sup> "The Dynamites, O'Donovan Rossa, the Very Leaky Leader," *Saginaw Evening News* (East Saginaw, MI), July 20, 1882.

<sup>467</sup> "Rossa Shot by a Woman," *New York Times* (New York), February 3, 1885.

Don't be alarmed—be a soldier; I do not feel any pain.<sup>468</sup>

Rossa insisted Dudley was a British spy and many in the newspaper community agreed. The *Brooklyn Eagle* interviewed Mrs. Dudley the day after the attack but she denied any claims of help from the British government and insisted she was working alone.<sup>469</sup> The investigation showed she was indeed working alone and her history of mental illness was the precipitating factor in the murder attempt. She was declared insane and sent to an asylum; Rossa was furious.<sup>470</sup>

There was still little support among the Irish nationalist organizations for Rossa after his recovery from the assassination attempt. After establishing the United Irishmen organization, Rossa had also revived the Fenian Brotherhood. But in 1886, Patrick Sarsfield Cassidy ousted Rossa as head of that group.<sup>471</sup> Cassidy cited earlier accusations of Rossa's mishandling of Skirmishing monies, a criticism that had begun during Devoy's personal attacks against Rossa four years before.<sup>472</sup> Again this resulted in Rossa's isolation from any of the Irish organizations, so aptly recalled by a columnist describing Rossa in the *Boston Weekly Globe* over a year before:

—this curious person . . . has now been in the United States some fourteen years, and has managed to keep to a certain amount of notoriety all the time. The Americans require exercising both sagacity and charity in considering a man like this. We are too apt to impute to an Irishman defect of character which we would overlook in some Italian or Greek patriot. . . . He had considerable Irish reputation

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<sup>468</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 2, 1882, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>469</sup> "Mrs. Dudley," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), February 3, 1885.

<sup>470</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Assailant; Mrs. Dudley to be Confined in an Asylum in England," *New York Times* (New York), March 3, 1891.

<sup>471</sup> "Dynamite Rossa Fired Out," *Boston Herald* (Boston), November 27, 1886.

<sup>472</sup> Shane Kenna, *Unrepentant Fenian*, 202.



here for his long sufferings and independent nature and retaliation. . . . He seems to have been an aggressive, rather turbulent man, and when I saw him after some years I thought I could observe the marks of thin-skinnedness all over him. . . . I was at the Philadelphia Parnell convention [some years ago] and then I saw Rossa . . . on a side seat, very pale, with a reddish beard, if I recollect, the air of one rejected in the house of his friends and outlawed by his enemies, yet with such cares and outrages that he had made up his mind to go it alone in the world and pay but little attention to conservative counsels.<sup>473</sup>

Rossa was exonerated of the charge made by Cassidy of mishandling money for the Brotherhood, when the one of the auditors for those accounts, Joseph Cromien, claimed on December 29, 1886, that:

He had known Rossa to have handled money belonging to other people, and entrusted to his care for the cause of Ireland, and although he wanted money for business and for home not one cent of it stuck to his fingers. . . . He has blundered, and that all his enterprises were not successes, and that he was sometimes a sad failure, but he always found him a man of truth, honor, and morality and devotion to Ireland.<sup>474</sup>

Despite this support for his character, Rossa and Cassidy became bitter enemies over the next three years. Rossa built an association with a group of Fenians in Philadelphia who had also been ousted from the New York based headquarters group. One of the leaders of that group was Red Jim McDermott, a man Rossa distrusted but did not expel from the group.<sup>475</sup> Cassidy later increased his criticism claiming that a British spy, Red Jim McDermott, had duped Rossa.<sup>476</sup> Rossa claimed he was always aware McDermott was a spy, foolishly sued Cassidy for libel for criticism published in the *Catholic News*, and had

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<sup>473</sup> George Alfred Townsend, "Townsend's Letter, The Romance of O'Donovan Rossa's Life," *Boston Weekly Globe* (Boston), January 20, 1885.

<sup>474</sup> "Believes In O'Donovan Rossa," *New York Times* (New York), January 2, 1887.

<sup>475</sup> "Fenian Brotherhood. O'Donovan Rossa Forms An Alliance with the Philadelphians," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), December 6, 1886.

<sup>476</sup> "Rossa's Foes," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), June 3, 1887.

him arrested on March 8, 1889 in New York.<sup>477</sup> Rossa's suit for \$100,000 in damages did not go the way he hoped, for the judge dropped the charges and Cassidy sued Rossa in return for claiming Cassidy an English spy.<sup>478</sup> Rossa was arrested on June 21, 1889, taken to the Tombs jail, and then paroled.<sup>479</sup> The trial proceedings in this second suit took nearly a year: from July 2, 1889, until sentence was passed down on April 28, 1890, and was written about extensively in the press, much of it critical of Rossa.<sup>480</sup> Many members of the Irish American organizations for both sides freely expressed accusations of dynamite trafficking and betrayal on the witness stand.<sup>481</sup> Rossa was found guilty of libel for calling Cassidy a spy, but could celebrate the ultimate outcome for he was only fined \$100.<sup>482</sup> The damage done to Rossa's reputation was substantial: that accusation of poor judgment in trusting McDermott would plague him for years.

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<sup>477</sup> "Libeling O'Donovan Rossa," *Worcester Daily Spy* (Worcester, MA), March 9, 1889.

<sup>478</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa wants 100,000," *New York Herald* (New York), January 22, 1889; "Tables Turned on O'Donovan Rossa," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), June 21, 1889.

<sup>479</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Arrested for Libel," *New York Tribune* (New York), June 21, 1889.

<sup>480</sup> "Rossa Cross-Examines Cassidy," *New York Times* (New York), July 2, 1889; "Rossa Found Guilty of Libel," *Elkhart Weekly Review* (Elkhart, IN), May 1, 1890.

<sup>481</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa in Court," *New York Times* (New York), April 23, 1890.

<sup>482</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Fined for Libel," *Jackson Citizen Patriot* (Jackson, MS), May 9, 1890.

## Chapter 9

### THE DIFFICULT AND SAD YEARS IN BROOKLYN

While Rossa was fighting with the other Fenians, Mary Jane was settling her family into a New York existence. Her young family was growing and they moved twice in Brooklyn after 1885, ultimately living at 1009 Hancock Street where they remained for nine years. It was on Duryea Street that Margaret Mary (Daisy) O'Donovan Rossa was born on April 4, 1887, just as Rossa's troubles with Cassidy were beginning.<sup>483</sup> Before celebrating the birth of another healthy daughter, though, newspapers reported that Rossa had a young grandson living in Chicago also named Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, the son of Denis. The child was living with his maternal grandmother; his mother was dead and his father was missing, having abandoned the child. The grandmother, Mrs. Hynes, claimed that Denis had used all her money in a losing business, "reducing her from a [life of] competence to poverty and dependence." The headlines, "Relatives Residing in Chicago Who are Not Proud of the Relationship," increased Rossa's bad publicity at the time by adding family issues to the political issues.<sup>484</sup> The family had also received notice that young Finin had passed away from consumption at the home of his grandparents in County Cork on February 17, 1887, less than three years after having visited the family in New York; he was only twenty-four years old.<sup>485</sup> Less than two years after Daisy's birth Mary Jane gave birth to another son, Joseph Ivor, born on January 19, 1889, who died ten

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<sup>483</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>484</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa; Relatives Residing in Chicago Who Are Not Proud of the Relationship," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), February 8, 1887.

<sup>485</sup> "Obituary: Florence S. O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), March 12, 1887.

days later.<sup>486</sup> By this time their son Max was working as an engineer on board the United States Revenue steamer, *Dexter*, stationed out of Newport, Rhode Island. Always maintaining his contact with the network of Irish Americans, in April 1889, Rossa wrote to Max and sent him a copy of an introduction he had sent for him to John Boyle O'Reilly and a few other Irish supporters in Boston.<sup>487</sup>

Mary Jane was spending all of her time with her children, and although Rossa spent much of his time in Manhattan, he wrote to her with updates during the day. On many nights he did not come home to Brooklyn, but he kept her apprised on a daily basis of all the details of his business and political issues, particularly when he was vexed with some of the other Irish Americans. Rossa wrote to Mary Jane, at 10 o'clock in the morning on May 14, 1889, letting her know that he was determined to see the Cassidy case end in court:

I saw Boston Driscoll at Sweeny's Hotel. I told him I had no place to settle this case but in Court. He said there was no use then, in being up at Tom Byrne's at 9 o'clock. I said "no."

Then I went to Tom Byrne's at 9 o'clock. He told me Driscoll said I told him I could not prove this case of spy against Cassidy. I told Driscoll no such thing. He, Tom Byrne's, was surprised that I'd say such a thing and was pleased at not settling the case.<sup>488</sup>

Then again on May 21, 1889, from the *United Irishman* office at 25 Beekman Street, Rossa wrote to tell Mary Jane that the court case had been postponed for a few days and he would spend the night with his friend, Tom Byrne, who might help him with

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<sup>486</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>487</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa dated April 1, 1889, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

<sup>488</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated May 14, 1889, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

a job. But he also wrote about his dogged determination to publish his side of the Cassidy case:

La Faye [his publisher] would not let me publish anything about Cassidy, as Cassidy has a lawsuit against him on my warrant, which he holds over his head to keep me silent in my own paper. So I'll look around today to see can I get my paper published anywhere else.<sup>489</sup>

Rossa was always looking for friends to help him financially, and the family's financial situation was severe during the Cassidy case when Rossa could not publish his newspaper. Receipts from the paper and donations from readers were his major sources of income. As difficult as the financial situation was Mary Jane continued to defend her husband in the Cassidy affair, but she still recognized Rossa's own faults and saw the matter more clearly than did her husband. In a letter dated June 14, 1889, she writes sadly but poetically to Max:

What awful lies people will swear to when their malignity is aroused and they surrender their souls to the devil of hatred and treachery! Cassidy knows in his heart your Father had no more of the informer or the political thief in his blood than the angel Gabriel but seconded by your Father's deplorable want of method and order in his business habits he opens a slice of libelous charges against him and when the unfortunate man clumsily tries without science or craft to get the law to punish Cassidy, he turns the tables like greased lightning on the unsophisticated plaintiff and comes out on top of the heap grinning. I have made up my mind it's no use to be getting mad about anything said of your Father. Meehan was for a long time known as "the man of the lost documents," but your Father is the man without any documents at all! He has no receipts for his payments to put hands on when needed. They're somewhere surely, maybe in those old boxes and bags of manuscripts with which he has encumbered the spaces in this house but he don't know where to find them and to go through those bags and boxes is a task which I have not time to undertake for him. Even if I tried to reduce them to some order the very next time he wanted anything they'd be rummaged into unconnected stacks of leaves again.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated May 21, 1889, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 26790, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>490</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa dated June 14, 1889, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Only four days later Mary Jane was much more depressed about their financial condition and writing again to Max she questions her ability to write a nice letter:

I am waiting I am watching and the question of living grows very serious. No position yet, no money coming in, in debt all round and a cyclone of injurious slander heaping up around your Father as you'd see rubbish on the seashore bearding the strand after a heavy sea. I have a vivid faith within me it will all come right after a time. . . . But I feel breathless and all folded up tight like a bud in advance of the season. It cannot disguise myself in talk. It seems as if relief must come soon and yet we may have much to bear before its approach.<sup>491</sup>

As difficult as the financial situation was Mary Jane did not want Rossa to lose the newspaper: a risk that was quite possible. Conscious of the importance of Rossa's reputation, she above all was worried about Rossa's value to the Irish cause:

To let the paper drop now when his enemies have the field and misrepresent him so fully and his own is the only place left to defend him, while his friends look on apathetically not seeming to realize the crisis, would be a mistake and a misfortune. Job had not more patience under personal injury than your Father. But now it is no longer personal, his usefulness to the cause for which he has spent all the years of his manhood is sought to be ruined. He sees the hand of his country's ancient foe directing the assassination of his character. Having failed in their efforts to hold or kill him, knowing the impossibility of bribing him they hire a crafty scribe and spy to spin a web of lies with distorted threads of truth to strengthen it and call the attention of the public to his appearance fastened in this slanderous pale. I think if he did not find faith and sympathy and encouragement at home his heart would break. As it is I never remember seeing him so prostrated, as he has been this week.<sup>492</sup>

In a letter dated July 1, Mary Jane is not so determined and poetic about the Cassidy affair, but is truly nervous about the outcome. Writing again to Max, she begins: "I feel spent from the strain," and worried about Rossa:

Today the Cassidy case is to be in court again. I don't know how it will end. Your Father seems quite confident of his ability to prove Cassidy all he has called him.

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<sup>491</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa dated June 19, 1889, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library Of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

I have seen none of his proofs and have the horrible fear he will find himself overmatched and in the grip of National Law.

She goes on to describe her own stress:

Every breath I draw is a sigh but perhaps from being naturally sanguine I have been knocked by repeated buffets to the extreme. There's no use in sighing one's life away, I must shake it off and bend my mind to considering how much at the very worst I have to be thankful for. We are none of us sick thank God. Neither do we suffer as others and better people the want of food, clothing and a roof to shield us. I have a dreadful feeling that we are not halfway into the possibilities of suffering and I still depend on that position relieving your Father from pecuniary straits. We are like earth cracked and gaping in need of the shower that has been long delayed.

She ends this letter with descriptions of Max's siblings: Sheela, Eileen, and Jerry all celebrated being promoted in school, while Jenny and Bella are sure that his letters are the happiest part of the day for their Mama.<sup>493</sup>

Six months later, while the Cassidy case still languished in court, the newspapers wrote that Mary Jane had been ill for three weeks. When she was feeling better, she was determined to visit her son in Charleston, South Carolina. She sailed from New York on January 31, 1890 aboard the *Delaware*.<sup>494</sup> Max, still serving the United States Treasury Service, had been transferred to the United States Revenue Cutter *Lot M. Morrill*, stationed in Savannah and Charleston. Mary Jane did not return to Brooklyn until March 10, 1890, and while she was there Rossa kept her apprised of the situation at home.<sup>495</sup> As was the practice, Mary Jane's sister Isabella had stayed with the family during the illness and remained with them to care for the children when Mary Jane traveled. Rossa wrote of

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<sup>493</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa dated July 1, 1889, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>494</sup> "Brooklyn People," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), January 26, 1890.

<sup>495</sup> "A Distinguished Visitor," *Wilmington Messenger* (Wilmington, NC), March 11, 1890.

pleasant family life and missing his wife: “The house feels lonesome to me. Having you in the house is like feeling that I have money in the bank—even though I haven’t the money, or have not you in my pocket.” Isabella, however, was reminding Rossa that he did not have money in his pocket and there were things in the house that needed attention: “Isabella is cleaning up the house in great style. She said this morning it was a pity she has not money to buy something of a new carpet for your room.”<sup>496</sup> When Mary Jane returned to New York the Charleston newspaper printed a notice of her departure, commenting on how pleased they were to have vacationing with them a recognized author from the *United Irishman* and the *Irish World*.<sup>497</sup> She returned to find Rossa soliciting his subscribers to the *United Irishman* for their neglected fees. Rossa had historically sent the newspaper to anyone who asked and many times was not paid for the subscription. But in early 1890 he was concerned enough about his family that the requests for back receipts were printed frequently in the paper.<sup>498</sup> Rossa had in the past traveled selling cigars, wines, and liquors for Thurber, Whyland and Company and again in the summer of 1890 they employed him.<sup>499</sup> Although Rossa was estranged from the Irish American leadership he was still loved by many in the community. Some of these friends started raising funds for him. In June 1890, an article ran in the *Freeman’s Journal* in Ireland: “Friends of O’Donovan Rossa are being asked to contribute towards the fund for his approaching old age. The committee says that they require the sum of

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<sup>496</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated February 5, 1890, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>497</sup> "Visitors," *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, VA), March 7, 1890.

<sup>498</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Subscriptions," *United Irishman* (New York), March 29, 1890.

<sup>499</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Again," *Muskegon Chronicle* (Muskegon, MI), August 1, 1890.



\$100,000, so that they can ensure an annuity of \$5000 for life.”<sup>500</sup> A “Rossa Testimonial Committee” located on Third Avenue in New York and chaired by Edward J. Rowe with Rossa’s friend John O’Brien as a Trustee, managed this fund.<sup>501</sup> This effort on behalf of his friends only proved to show how removed he was from his former supporters when four months later the fund had only gathered \$131.<sup>502</sup> Rossa was hoping some of these funds could pay for his trip to Ireland when his exile expired in 1891 and discussed that in his paper.<sup>503</sup>

No doubt, however, the push for funds and employment that summer was necessitated by Mary Jane’s pregnancy, for she gave birth to her last child, Alexander Aeneas, on August 22, 1890.<sup>504</sup> This was Mary Jane’s thirteenth child and Rossa’s eighteenth. Mary Jane was forty-five years old and Rossa was fifty-seven. Like four of Mary Jane’s other children, Alex only lived for seven months; he died on March 28, 1891, at their home in Brooklyn.<sup>505</sup> The morning the baby died Rossa wrote to Max, full of sadness:

Your mother is in good health. She was saying this morning she should write to you. Aunt Isabella told her not to write today. Then mother told me [to] write. She is in sore sorrow at the loss of your little brother Alexander. He went away from us this morning at a quarter to six o’clock. I am after returning from Staten Island to see about the grave. John McCarthy went with me to the priest. I got a new grave plot . . .

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<sup>500</sup> "Friends of O'Donovan Rossa," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), June 16, 1890.

<sup>501</sup> Rossa Testimonial Committee, Papers Collected by Sean O’Luing, Ms 22917, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>502</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Testimonial," *Irish World* (New York), October 25, 1890.

<sup>503</sup> "Abbreviated Telegrams," *Daily Illinois State Register* (Springfield, IL), August 10, 1890.

<sup>504</sup> Rossa Family Bible, Rossa Family Private Collection.

<sup>505</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, Alexander Aeneas," *New York Herald* (New York), March 29, 1891.

The dear little fellow will be buried on Monday. I feel very sad myself at his death; he was such a beautiful, healthy, active little fellow, till ten days ago. Then he was attacked with pneumonia, but if a mother's care and an aunt's care could have saved a child from death, he would not be dead today.

The look he gave at mother and me a few minutes before he died will never leave my mind—a look as if of an aged person, full of knowledge and meaning, as if it said, “I know the two of you, and know how you feel”. I asked your mother on the instant: “What does it mean”?

He was such a beautiful child, that I said to mother a few weeks ago “Somebody will overlook him.”

I will say no more, Maxwell. This only explains to you why you have not had a letter from home for the past ten days.<sup>506</sup>

The family's grief was complicated by concern for the future. Rossa's exile from Ireland had expired in January 1891 and he was determined to return to Ireland, even if only for a long visit. A few weeks after Alex's death, Rossa wrote in the *United Irishman*: “Making the journey [to Ireland] is connected to everything I've done so far in life and I'll go there this summer if I can.”<sup>507</sup> But Mary Jane and Rossa were concerned that when he landed in Ireland he would be sought out and arrested by the British. He therefore sought out assurances from the United States government that he would be protected as a United States citizen:

The Hon. James G. Blaine, Secretary of State, Washington:

Dear Sir:

I apply to you for a passport to Europe. I am an Irishman; I tried to drive England out of Ireland; England arrested me in Ireland in the year 1865 and sentenced me to “penal servitude for life.” In 1871 she gave me a patent of conditional pardon, a copy of which I enclose. She shipped me from Chatham Prison to America and forbade me to return for twenty years. The twenty years are up now and I desire to take a trip to Ireland and other places in Europe.

My friends here say England will arrest me and put me in prison again, and keep me in prison for life; more of the friends say she will not, because James G. Blaine is Secretary of State now and that he will insist that England cannot arrest an American citizen for any act of his, or any speech of his inimical to England in

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<sup>506</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa dated March 28, 1891, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>507</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Return to Ireland," *United Irishman* (New York), April 18, 1891.

the United States. Of course, if I break the law of England I'll be arrested, as you or anyone else would be arrested.

But the passport I want is one that will save me from arrest on my landing in the Cove of Cork—provided I commit no crime on shipboard during the voyage.

I don't or won't deny that, as an Irishman and an American, I have, while in America, done all I could to help Irishmen to free Ireland from the tyranny of England. You, by your speeches and your contributions, have helped in that direction yourself.

I enclose the necessary papers for the passport, with the legal fee.

Yours very respectfully,

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa<sup>508</sup>

Rossa received a standard reply with a form for a passport from the State Department, but he was not satisfied with this and wrote again to Blaine:

Dear Sir: I have before me your letter of January 15. Of course you cannot give any guarantee to save an American citizen from arrest in foreign countries. But I have been reading of your name in connection with a law or a treaty or an agreement made between the United State and Great Britain, that an American citizen cannot be held in prison in Great Britain for any political words or acts of his in the United States of America.

It is in the belief that such a law, treaty or agreement existed that I applied to you for the guarantee and respectfully desire to know now if such a law, treaty or agreement is in force between the two nations.

I do not desire to be giving you any trouble, but I like to know my rights as a citizen of this great country.<sup>509</sup>

Despite hearing that no such agreement was in force, Rossa made plans for his trip. But when Isabella Irwin heard about the trip, she was furious that Rossa would even consider it—not just because he would be unsafe but also because he would be leaving his wife in difficult financial straits back in Brooklyn. This blistering letter makes clear the feeling Isabella had toward the life Mary Jane had led in the wake of Rossa's actions. She thought it was time he acted like a sensible man, and one whose political power in the

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<sup>508</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Honorable James G. Blaine dated January, 1891, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 8648, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>509</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Honorable James G. Blaine, Secretary of State dated January 17, 1891, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 8648(2), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

United States was in the past. She begs Mary Jane to let her try to persuade him to at least postpone the journey for a time, if not forever:

118 States Avenue, Atlantic City, Saturday  
My Dear Mary Jane,

You tell me that Rossa is to sail for Ireland on the 30th but you do not give me the least idea as to what arrangements he has made for your and the children's support. I feel very uneasy on that point, particularly as I know quite well that he should be arrested when he landed or later the excitement would either cause paralysis of the whole or part of the body, and in such a condition he would be very likely to live for years, even though he might be subjected to very cruel treatment at the hands of the English turnkeys. He has wonderful will power and (I believe) no heart trouble, so that he would not be likely to die as soon as the English would like him to do.

In the meantime, what is to become of you and your children? If Rossa thinks for one moment that you will be taken care of by the public, he had better put that idea out of his head; he is nothing and nowhere any longer.

Younger and bolder men have taken his place. I wish with all my heart he would try and realise that fact.

Can you not persuade him, dear Sister, for all our sakes to change his mind and act like a sensible man, or have you lost all care as to whether he comes or goes?

I know you have borne more than thousands of women because of your great love for your husband; surely he owes you something in return for your years of unceasing devotion and faith in him. In his darkest hours you were true to him; through your courage and unfaltering determination you kept his name unstained.

I am nearly heartbroken, dear, thinking of you all. The feeling that Rossa would deliberately leave you at the mercy of a cruel world has almost unfitted me for work ever since I heard he had made up his mind to go to Ireland.

He is your husband and the father of your children, and if you cannot get him to look at things in their proper light, I don't know what is to be done.

Do you think he would listen to me if I were to beg him to cease thinking, for the present at least, of making that journey? I have always been his friend and have felt that he was not fairly dealt with because he was too honest. I have never spared myself when I could do a good turn for his children, and in those years I have never asked a favour of any great amount from him; but now I would beg him to grant our united wishes and relieve us from this terrible nightmare of suffering, if you think it wise that I should interfere in the matter.

With fond love and sympathy, I am your affectionate sister, Isabella M. Irwin<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> Isabella M. Irwin, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated May 1891, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Mary Jane and Isabella must have been persuasive or perhaps lack of funds kept Rossa home; he did not return to Ireland for three years.

While grieving Mary Jane never neglected her other children, particularly her much loved first-born son. So when Maxwell celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday on April 30, 1891, Mary Jane wrote him a beautiful poem celebrating his life. Maxwell embodied all the love of family and country for Mary Jane and she wrote of all she hoped for his future:

To Maxwell on his 25<sup>th</sup> Birthday, April 30, 1891

Rocked on the blue of southern seas  
 With turquoise heavens o'er him  
 How gently breathes the swelling breeze  
 On glistening waves before him;  
 How gaily sunbeams paint the Bay  
 With golden gleams auspicious!  
 So be the years beyond today  
 Of peace and joy fruitions!

Dear to the Mother's breast the child  
 Of every time and station,  
 From first to last that helps to swell  
 The census of the nation;  
 But dear thou to mine, apart,  
 More prized than any other,  
 First Born that woke my girlhood heart  
 To dignity of Mother!

What rapture filled and overflowed  
 My bosom nigh to bursting,  
 That heavenly joy submerged my soul  
 From arid pathways thirsting  
 When out of dreams of pain I woke  
 To see thy blue eyes shining  
 Surprised and mildly questioning mine  
 Within their range reclining!

Straightway thou went my ruling thought  
 My joy, my hope, my treasure,  
 To live and gaze in love engrossed

A never ending pleasure.  
 To plan thy future and to dream  
 Thy fortune fame and power  
 Filled up abundantly to theme  
 For convalescent hour!

What fountains of inspiring thought  
 Thy infant life developed  
 What harvest of exalted dreams  
 Thy rising steps enveloped  
 A Jacob's ladder to the sky  
 Thy love because to me  
 For all I wished my boy to grow  
 I truly sought to be.

No father blessed thee or caressed  
 Thy velvet cheek so serious,  
 For Liberty, and Tyranny  
 Are Mistresses imperious  
 And one demanded his brave soul  
 And one his body fettered  
 His name a number on the roll  
 Of convicts prison lettered!

Yet thou were loved and prized the more  
 By grandparents and kindred,  
 The early romps on native shore  
 Were happy and unhindered.  
 The larks loud carol on the hill  
 Reminded thee of heaven  
 The seagull shared thy midday meal  
 And folklore whiled the evening

The ring road doubtless winds today  
 Its way through dreams Elysian  
 And Inchidooney's banks display  
 Their sand waves to thy vision  
 And up from memories mirrored well  
 Refreshing draughts are taken  
 Kind thoughts sweet voices tones of old  
 From long closed graves awaken.

I'll take my ship to Ireland home  
 I'll fly a green flag o'er her  
 And when I beat her cruel foes  
 To glory I'll rest on her!

“When I’m a man.” Oh vanished days  
 Of generous inspiration,  
 When baby hands would rise to tear  
 The bonds that bound a nation,

Now rocked on blue of southern seas  
 With turquoise heavens o’er him  
 The Stars and Stripes upon the breeze  
 And Life and Love before him  
 Not all at once perhaps may come  
 This fortune to our Rover;  
 Not all at once the boys of Fame  
 May bind his forehead over.<sup>511</sup>

Since Maxwell was the child born in the most difficult time of her life, Mary Jane always had a special feeling that his future was the hope of her life as well.

Both Mary Jane and Rossa had relied on fees from lectures and readings to add to the family’s finances, but by early 1892 invitations were very scarce. Mary Jane was lecturing very infrequently but she was still publishing her poetry in newspapers, particularly in Ireland.<sup>512</sup> Rossa was still a newsworthy subject but now he was being referred to as a “faded flower” of the Irish movement.<sup>513</sup> Occasionally they would both be invited to speak, such as by the Philo Celtic Irish School at 263 Bowery in Manhattan, where they appeared on February 12, 1892. Rossa taught Irish language classes there.<sup>514</sup> Rossa was desperate for money, so again he set out to raise some from his subscribers to the *United Irishman*. Many of these people had not paid for their subscriptions but Rossa

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<sup>511</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Maxwell on his 25th Birthday dated April 30, 1891, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>512</sup> "The Returned Picture," *Kerry Sentinel* (Tralee), November 19, 1892.

<sup>513</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa A Grocer," *New York Times* (New York), February 15, 1892.

<sup>514</sup> Thomas S. Norris, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated January 19, 1892, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

sent the copies out anyway. Now he needed the money. He had always referred humorously to these supporters as his “tenants” on his “estate,” meaning the newspaper, but this new fundraising was now written up in the *New York Sun* where Rossa blamed these financial difficulties on the politics of the day:

O’Donovan Rossa sat in his editorial rooms at the top of 12 Spruce Street yesterday and complained of the hardness of the times.

“I blame it all,” he said, “on the McKinley bill, pension bills, and the like, that are begging the country and squeezing you and me until, like the lemon, there is nothing left for us. Why, I never saw such times as we are having. I am just sending out bills to every one of my tenants on the estate, and trust things are in better shape with them than with me. You see, there are more than 5,000 tenants on the estate. They live out as far as Arizona and as close by as Vermont. If everyone of them sent me in \$2 I’d have \$10,000.”<sup>515</sup>

However, a month later the family was more worried about Maxwell than about finances; on March 27, 1892, Mary Jane received a letter from her son now stationed on the revenue steamer *Seward* in Mobile, Alabama, describing his involvement in a serious accident aboard ship. The next day she received a letter, which gave an account from the commanding officer of the ship, describing how Max had saved a number of men when an explosion occurred. Max was very badly burned and his lungs were damaged from the steam. He was given leave to go home to heal but was not well enough for the journey for over three months. After recovering at home for a year, Max still suffered from a serious cough. In July 1893 he was sent to Clonakilty where his mother believed he would have the opportunity of regaining his health, but he returned to Brooklyn after only a month in Ireland, sicker than when he had arrived.<sup>516</sup> While Mary Jane nursed Max at home, Rossa was again on the lecture circuit, traveling to Boston for a number of events but then put

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<sup>515</sup> "Gone Into Groceries," *The Sun* (New York), February 14, 1892.

<sup>516</sup> Sean O’Luing, *O’Donnabhain Rosa, II*, 219.



off other invited events in Philadelphia when it was apparent that Max would only live a short time longer.<sup>517</sup> Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa died on November 22, 1893, surrounded by his parents and siblings.<sup>518</sup>

In her book, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, Margaret O'Donovan Rossa describes the sadness that fell over the house in Brooklyn following Max's death:

The weeks and months that followed Maxwell's death are sad ones to recall. Throughout the wake and funeral we children were keyed up with the excitement and the novelty of it all. Never had we seen so many gorgeous officers, never had we been petted and made so much of by the many old friends who came to offer sympathy. Nothing in this strange and interesting period prepared us in the least for the terrible loneliness to follow. For, after the funeral, it seemed that papa and mamma forgot our very existence in the bitterness of their grief . . . one day . . . we poised in terror. There above sat our father, his fine head buried in his hands and the tears streaming through his finger, while his body shook with convulsive sobs. . . . In abject fright we stole, unnoticed, past him and fled to mamma's room for comfort. But mamma's door was locked and the sound of bitter weeping filled the air.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, a Crowded and Enthusiastic Meeting," *Boston Journal* (Boston), October 27, 1893.

<sup>518</sup> "Mortuary Notice - James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa," *New York Herald* (New York), November 23, 1893.

<sup>519</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 85.

## Chapter 10

### RETURN TO IRELAND

Rossa's desire to return to Ireland had not waned over the three years since his exiled had ended. He was as determined as ever that he would return a hero and be able to earn a living through lectures there and in England, as well as be a candidate for a political appointment of employment in Ireland. So just days after Maxwell's death in November 1893 when Rossa heard from an agent named James Corbett Connolly inviting him to return to Ireland, he was anxious to go. Connolly advised Rossa to stay independent of any of the political factions then vying for advancement in Ireland but to appeal to all of them:

Go home! Return to the old sod. Speak to the men and women of this generation in Ireland. Tell them the story of their country. Speak to them about the Fenian Rebellion, tell them what were the horrors that befell you in prison. . . . They will make you immensely welcome! They will organize meetings everywhere!<sup>520</sup>

Rossa soon agreed to accept Connolly's offer of a lecture tour of Ireland, England, and Scotland. But before leaving Rossa wanted to secure the necessary funds to leave his family behind. After failing to raise the money in America himself, Rossa convinced Connolly that he should advance him \$1000 for his family's expenses before he left New York.<sup>521</sup> When he made plans to go he wrote in the *United Irishman* of May 26, 1894:

The fact that I was forbidden to return to Ireland made me the more convinced to return, and when the twenty years had expired, I felt sad and sorry that I could not go back. I had given hostages to fortune—I had a large family of young children; honest, independent newspaper business is not a money-making business; I had not enough of money to take me to Ireland and to support my family while I was away, so I had to stay, and let my hair grow unremarkably gray. Now a chance

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<sup>520</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Letter to Rossa from James Corbett Connolly," *United Irishman* (New York), November 25, 1893.

<sup>521</sup> Shane Kenna, *Unrepentant Fenian*, 212.

offer and I embrace it. I am offered an engagement of a course of lectures in Ireland. I accept it, and as you read this, I expect to be breathing once more my native air. My people will find me in heart and spirit the same man that I was when I stood in the dock in Dublin twenty-nine years ago. Some friends say I will be arrested. I hope not. I will give no reason for arrest.<sup>522</sup>

Rossa had applied for and received a passport from the United States State Department in January 1891 based on the citizenship papers he had received in 1871.<sup>523</sup> Before leaving New York on the *Campania* on May 19, 1894, Rossa wrote to Washington for a new passport, as the 1891 passport had expired in 1892. Rossa sailed before receiving any word from the State Department, expecting Mary Jane to forward to him the passport when he arrived in Ireland. But on May 22, while Rossa was still at sea, Mary Jane received the surprising reply:

Department of State  
Washington, May 22, 1894

Sir: Referring to your application for a passport dated May 15, 1894, in which appears, that you emigrated to the United States sailing on board the "City of Baltimore" from the County of Cork on or about 14 May 1863, that you resided in the United States until August . . . you are informed that the requirements of five years continuous residence in this country before naturalization, cannot be considered by the Department to be complied with. . . . It appears from your statement that you returned to Ireland after July, 1865, but it does not appear when you returned to this country, or that you resided here for five years continuously prior to obtaining your certificate of naturalization of February 21, 1871 . . .

Edwin F. Uhl,  
Acting Secretary<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>522</sup> Sean O'Luing, Notes from his Biography of O'Donovan Rossa, 1955, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms 24552, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>523</sup> United States Passport for Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, January 9, 1891, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

<sup>524</sup> Sean O'Luing, *O'Donnabhain Rosa*, II, 225.

Mary Jane immediately wrote to Rossa. She was very frightened that he would be arrested if the British government knew he had no valid passport and the United States government had denied the validity of his citizenship. She did not say exactly what the Acting Secretary had written as she feared his mail could be read by spies, but she strongly suggested he cancel his lectures in England and Scotland and return home after he completed his Irish tour. Rossa received her letter when he arrived in Cobh and cabled her immediately.<sup>525</sup> He undoubtedly fabricated a reason he had no passport, for the press reported that he had been refused a passport “on account of his omission to answer certain questions which are never waived.”<sup>526</sup> His arrival in Cobh created a sensation. The Cork *Examiner* carried a large story highlighting Rossa’s words as he spoke to the crowd appealing for unity among the nationalist groups.<sup>527</sup> Soon announcement was made for his upcoming lectures, beginning in his hometown of Skibbereen on Monday June 4, 1894. The lectures were advertised as: “The Lessons of my Life,” “My Life in Prison,” “The Fenian Movement,” and “The Irish in America.”<sup>528</sup> Both he and Mary Jane had great hopes for this trip: he for the opportunity to talk about the cause but Mary Jane also saw the chance to improve his reputation on both sides of the Atlantic. She took great effort to see that word got out and shortly after his arrival in Cork, a poem Mary Jane had written about the trip was published in the *Irish Examiner*:

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<sup>525</sup> Sean O’Luing, *O’Donnabhain Rosa, II*, 225.

<sup>526</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa in Ireland; He was refused a Passport by Gresham," *Irish World* (New York), June 2, 1894.

<sup>527</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Return, His Views on Irish Affairs, Appeal for Unity," *Irish Examiner* (Cork), May 28, 1894.

<sup>528</sup> "O'Donovan (Rossa) in Ireland," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), May 30, 1894.

Off to Ireland  
(By Mary J. O'Donovan Rossa)

He kissed his helpless babies all,  
And he clasped his patient wife,  
"Oh love," he murmured, "stand or fall  
This act becomes my life.

I have yearned to tread my native hills,  
And to greet the pounding shore,  
I have longed for a sight of the mountain rills,  
And the trackless woods of yore,

I have dreamed of the fire that cannot die,  
In the breast of my kith and kin;  
I would look once more in the Nation's eye  
For the thought of the heart within."

So he kissed his helpless babies all,  
And he clasped his patient wife;  
Then he sailed away 'ere the dawn of day  
To round his work for life.

He will beard the lion in his den,  
The hawk on his native height,  
While he pleads and preaches to Irishmen  
For *Union*, and *Love* and *Right*.

The prison yawns in his fearless face,  
And his path is set with care.  
But freedom dwells in his heart's hearth place,  
And nerves each sinew there.

God speed, beloved! And a welcome wide  
From friends across the sea—  
A welcome suiting a hero bold,  
And a safe return to me!<sup>529</sup>

His appearances in West Cork were a great success, so much so that Mary Jane would write on June 12: "You're the greatest old fraud that ever lived, pretending to be lonesome and sad [in his letters to her] when all Ireland is at your feet . . . I'm satisfied

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<sup>529</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa; Speech at Queenstown," *Irish Examiner* (Cork), June 4, 1894.

you're having a good time and getting all the honours and glories that should have been yours for twenty years condensed into one season's trip." But much of this very long letter concerns the paper and finances. Mary Jane was accustomed to running the paper for Rossa and writing a great deal of it but while he is away for a long period, she sees the true state of the economics:

Hendrickson [the printer] is very kind and obliging to me, saves me as much as possible of trouble and even warns me against having too much printing done as funds are coming in so meanly. This week's paper will cost even more than the last as we are copying a lot of those Irish newspaper notices of your reception. . . . I had a note from Rocky [Rocky Mountain O'Brien, one of their closest friends]. He told me if I was short of money to call on Mr. McCusker and present an order he sent me for \$35 but unless Rocky owes you that money I could not have it on my conscience and deprive his wife and family of so much. I will not therefore avail myself of his offer unless unforeseen necessity should arise. . . . Regarding the *United Irishman* I think if the receipts for the paper do not sum up more satisfactorily it had better be discontinued. The few friends who sent in more than two dollars [the rent] would do so outside the paper altogether and if you count them out the receipts would not half pay for printing and mailing much less pay the fee of an editor or office boy.

She goes on to remind him something that they no doubt had reviewed before:

You know my time is of value at home and I am worried into uselessness by the profitless responsibility of the office. It would take a large income to pay for the making and repairs of children's wear in this house and the waste consequent on the mother's subtraction from the head of affairs in the house. It will not work at all and you can just imagine how ruefully I gaze at my melting money. There is a very good chance to let it [the paper] down gracefully now and I am quite satisfied to let them think it's my incompetence and your absence has caused its fall. Unless funds rise, or you lay orders on me to print, this week's issue will be the last I will stew over.

Despite the threat to his paper, Mary Jane ends the letter with sincere love and affection and a little fear:

We long for you every day and every hour of the day in Hancock Street. The time seems unending that you are away and we have three dogs we're so lonesome and afraid of tramps and burglars alone. Fondest love and kisses from all of us especially Daisy and your devoted loving wife.

Mary J. O'Donovan Rossa<sup>530</sup>

Rossa quickly sent the receipts from his lectures home to his wife and she continued publishing the newspaper in his absence, although she was still not happy that the cost was higher than the income from "rent." Mary Jane informed the subscriber "tenants" as well: "It's a good thing for the United Irishman that our friends in Cork sent the income from Rossa's lectures to us; without it, the paper was dead this week for want of sustenance . . . Dear Friends, please have a more sympathetic understanding for us."<sup>531</sup> Mary Jane was not just concerned about money or burglars; she was still deeply grieving. As was usual for the family, Isabella Irwin had come to help nurse Maxwell before he died and stayed on to help Mary Jane through her grief. As described by Daisy in her memoirs written some years later, when Rossa left for Ireland, Isabella stayed on in Brooklyn but Mary Jane was still spending most of her time crying in her room. Isabella pleaded with her sister about her duty to her other children but Mary Jane felt surrounded by reminders of her grief. She decided that the only solution was to begin afresh and move to a new house. Mary Jane and Isabella went to Staten Island and purchased a large house in Mariners Harbor, a remote country area far from the ferry to New York City. According to Daisy that decision was made and executed in two days. In her mother's words, she described the place: "To a quaint little town in Staten Island where Maxwell

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<sup>530</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated June 12, 1894, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms 26970, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>531</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, *United Irishman* (New York), July 7, 1894.

and I once visited, to a house in view of the water, where I can watch the ships that come and go, and Maxwell's brave spirit will give me strength."<sup>532</sup> The children loved the new home near the water with a big barn for horses, a hayloft, vast open space to play and rowboats on the water, called Kill van Kull. Having the children so happy helped Mary Jane as she dealt with her grief as best as she could, as Daisy describes it:

Not without a bitter struggle did my mother recover from the overwhelming shock of Maxwell's death, but day by day she fought her battle, throwing herself wholeheartedly into anything that might occupy her mind and tire her body. She studied books on the cultivation of grapes and built a beautiful latticed arbor to shade the little red brick path in back of the house. Her she planted many colors and varieties of this luscious fruit and nursed them on with tender care. She bought fancy breeds of chickens, each one of which was known by name, and great was her delight one day when Sir Clarence and Lady Betty recognized her voice and followed her gravely around the yard.

But when grief would threaten to overwhelm her she would always take refuge in prayer or writing. Hours at a time she would kneel at her bed in supplication, hours at a time she would sit on the wisteria-shaded porch scribbling furiously on sheet after sheet of rustling paper, stopping only to gaze with wistful eyes at the ships that sailed the Kill van Kull.<sup>533</sup>

Mary Jane describes the home in Mariners Harbor in less lofty terms to Rossa in a letter when discussing her financial affairs while he was in Ireland:

You left me \$350 and I got \$250 for the Cork £52 cheque and \$194 for the Dublin £40 draft. That's \$800 I had the handling of. Well, \$500 of that went as a deposit for this little home in Staten Island. Everyone that I confided in thinks it is a good investment and it took nearly a hundred to get us moved. The three issues of the paper have been a loss of nearly a hundred more and all that came in and the balance of your £40 only cover the cost of supporting the family since your departure. Mr. O'Flaherty's cheque went to the Dime Bank for mortgage interest you know. The Hancock Street house is a drag on me. Tis neither let nor sold yet and consequently I am sometimes very sorry for being tempted to move at all. Especially as this place has none of the conveniences of the Brooklyn house, is in fact only a makeshift of a home until we could get the equity from Hancock Street

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<sup>532</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 87.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.



to improve it. The ground and location are valuable; but I have so much extra worry, labor, and anxiety because of moving that I wish I had never seen them.<sup>534</sup>

Mary Jane could have been regretting the purchase in Staten Island, as the press that was critical of Rossa, the *New York Times*, was noticing it:

It was ascertained, after much search, that the patriotic household had taken up its residence on the Shore Road at Mariners Harbor, Staten Island, in a large house on the corner of Van Pelt Avenue. . . . The house itself is a very spacious affair, and has quite a quantity of land around it, in which there is a large outhouse and various handsome shrubs and flowers. It was lately bought by Mrs. O'Donovan, (Rossa,) so it is said, for the sum of \$6000, and is decidedly worth that amount, being very well situated and admirably constructed, with view of Newark Bay and the Kills. It is, moreover, no further than a hundred feet from the water's edge, and constitutes, altogether, a most desirable estate. The railroad station at Erastina is a short block from the place, calculated to satisfy the wishes for a homestead of a man of considerable means. . . . The Staten Island home of the Irish exile hardly succeeded in confirming the basis of an appeal for a memorial fund urged during the exile's visit to his native Skibbereen . . . on the ground of the "in-expressible sufferings" he had sustained during his enforced exile.<sup>535</sup>

In Ireland, Rossa was met with more positive expression. He was treated as a conquering hero all over Cork, Kerry, and Galway and even to Belfast.<sup>536</sup> Sean O'Luing would write of Rossa's arrival in Dublin in the manuscript copy of his biography of Rossa:

Everywhere he [Rossa] was received with affection, respect, and enthusiasm. A huge crowd welcomed him to Dublin from four to five hundred torchbearers took part in this great procession which escorted him from Kingsbridge, along the southern quays to Parliament Street, past his old *Irish People* headquarters, through Dane Street, College Green, O'Connell Street to Cootigan's Hotel near the Rotunda, where he was to give his lecture. Among those who welcomed him were Arthur Griffith, Willie Rooney, E. R. Whelan and others of the Young Ireland League.<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated July 13, 1894, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>535</sup> "Alas! Poor O'Donovan (Rossa)," *New York Times* (New York), August 17, 1894.

<sup>536</sup> "News from the Counties," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), August 27, 1894.

<sup>537</sup> Sean O'Luing, Notes from his Biography of O'Donovan Rossa, 1955, Sean O'Luing Papers, Ms 24552.

While the people welcomed him wholeheartedly, the Home Rule supporters and some nationalists were puzzled by Rossa's reception. He had been vilified for his support of dynamite and violence and been criticized by most Irish American organizations very loudly in the press. But here were crowds of people cheering him. The Parnellite newspaper *United Ireland* published an editorial about their confusion over his success and asked a question many could still ask today:

We frankly confess that we were not prepared for so emphatic, so unmistakable a welcome to the exiled Fenian leader who has done so many things of which Fenians themselves disapprove. Why was it?—The truth is, look at it how you wish, but the people of the Irish capital opened their arms to O'Donovan Rossa because he was (and we presume is) the most stouthearted Irish rebel England has had to deal with in our time. The incident should make a good many of us pause. Are we quite certain, if ever could our Parnellite ideas prevail in Ireland and England, and Mr. Gladstone's Parliament be established in Dublin, that the Irish question would be at an end?<sup>538</sup>

As much as the people welcomed him when the Dungarvan Town Commission requested the Dublin Corporation (the ruling body of Dublin) to appoint Rossa to the vacant position of City Marshal, it was voted against by twenty-three to three votes.<sup>539</sup>

The more Mary Jane heard about the triumphant welcome Rossa received the more nervous she became. Her letter to him dated July 6, 1894, and sent from Mariners Harbor reflected this concern:

I don't know how I can live I'm so lonesome for you. There is not anything can compensate for your absence to me. This greatness and glory with which the people are surrounding you terrifies me, much as it dazzles me and I tremble lest it should turn of a sudden into a mountain of trouble. I wish you safe at home. I think you have said enough now to satisfy all who love and hate you, and there is

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<sup>538</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Welcomed to Dublin," *United Ireland* (Dublin), June 30, 1894.

<sup>539</sup> Dungarvan Town Commission, Appointment of O'Donovan Rossa to Dublin City Marshal, July 10, 1894, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(i), National Library of Ireland, Dublin; "Passing Events," *Irish World* (New York), July 21, 1894.

great danger in going further. Don't you feel yourself you are treading on a smoldering volcano? I am very lonesome and very worried.<sup>540</sup>

In a letter a week later, she is still worried about his safety, but is also questioning his association with Connolly. The press were highly critical of him and complained that Rossa's reputation was being used as a money-making method by Connolly; Rossa had to publish a letter to the editor defending himself while in Cork.<sup>541</sup> Mary Jane writes to

Rossa:

I cannot advise you as to what you ought to do under present circumstances but I know what I wish you would do with all my heart and that is to come back from Ireland to America. Enter into a new arrangement with him if you must stay to lecture in England and Scotland, for the first is only binding on our honor until he was safe in his speculation and had been refunded all he advanced [the \$1000 he gave to Mary Jane before leaving]. As that has been accomplished I do not feel bound any longer and I value your company ten times more than all the profits from your lectures. . . . It is not in Ireland only the bad feeling against Mr. Connolly prevails. Nobody here has a good word for him. . . . I think you had best come home and make another start for another trip to England and Scotland if you want to. I'm sick and tired of being a lone widow. I want my old Darling Dear within telephone distance anyway and you can put the blame on me if anybody is dissatisfied. . . . Your visit to Ireland has done all the good possible so far. Take my advice, let it stand at that and come home before beginning a purely business trip.<sup>542</sup>

A few weeks later in a letter dated August 6, 1894, Mary Jane is not nearly as comfortable having the responsibility for Rossa's decision put on her shoulders, but thinks the improvement in Rossa's popularity may be too important an outcome to devalue:

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<sup>540</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated July 6, 1894, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 109749(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>541</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "Letter to the editor - Southern Star," *Southern Star* (Cork), June 9, 1894.

<sup>542</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated July 13, 1894, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii).

My head is in turmoil since reading three letters yesterday by Mr. Connolly, Mr. Doran [Rossa's dear friend from Cork], and yours. I suppose you have given Mr. Connolly to understand that I am the arbiter of your destiny and can imperatively stretch my hand and say "stay there" or "come here" and you must move accordingly. I can understand of course that you want me at a safe distance to be the scapegoat of Mr. Connolly's disappointment and vexation but why carry the farce into your own letter? Don't you know very well I will try to make the best of any situation and if you really think you had better stay another month why don't you say so? You know how things are at home in America and if the situation does not strike you as requiring your immediate presence or as susceptible of improvement through a little more lecture profit you know very well it isn't in me to be so unreasonable and selfish as to stand in the light of the general family welfare by objecting to lengthen your furlough. But you won't get me to take the responsibility of saying, "stay;" though if you decide it is best to stay I will submit with grace. But if you wish me to say "come" I'll say it with the greatest gladness and pleasure, "Come in the evening or come in the morning come when you looked for or come without warning!"—and whether your pockets are full or empty be sure it won't alter the true quality of the love the kisses and welcome that are before you my old fraudulent Dear. It may be you will be already on your way to New York when this note gets to Queenstown if you haven't engagements after the 13<sup>th</sup>. I hope you will be on the way. I feel there is more loss by your absence from here than could be compensated for by the profits you have so far. Unless indeed that the return of popularity may call the kind of attention of your political friends here to you now and recommend you as a candidate for some considerable position.<sup>543</sup>

Rossa was very nearly on his way, for he arrived back in New York, at the Staten Island Quarantine Station, on August 25, 1894, where his steamship, *Umbria*, was met by brass bands, members from the different Irish societies, and a banner floating in the wind saying "Cead Mille Failte."<sup>544</sup> The crowds of people and the brass bands then escorted Rossa down Shore Road to the new family homestead to be greeted by his loving family.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated August 6, 1894, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>544</sup> "A Royal Irish Welcome for Him. O'Donovan Rossa Greeted by a Big Crowd," *New York Tribune* (New York), August 26, 1894.

<sup>545</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 99.

Rossa was determined to give lectures in England and Scotland and began raising money for the trip soon after arriving home. By November he was touring New England telling audiences of his triumphant return to Ireland earlier in the year.<sup>546</sup> Before he could leave he needed to clear up his citizenship and passport issues. He made a plea to President Grover Cleveland, which was widely publicized in the press.<sup>547</sup> It is not clear this helped to solve the problem but on December 5, 1894, Rossa received new citizenship papers and a valid passport.<sup>548</sup> He remained home with his family for Christmas and New Year and left for Liverpool on January 30, 1895 aboard the White Star liner *Majestic*.<sup>549</sup> The ship hit terrible storms in the North Atlantic, nearly foundering but landed safely in Liverpool on February 6.<sup>550</sup> Mary Jane, reading in the press of the fierce weather, wrote a long, heartfelt letter to her husband before she heard he was safe:

My heart is sore and trembling until I am assured you are safe at the other side of the ocean. So many disasters at sea reported in the papers since you sailed that my nerves are shaken. What should I do if anything happened to you! I dare not dwell on the thought yet it persists in intruding itself at all hours and occasions. May God have mercy on us and save you from the perils of the sea as well as the dangers of the land! I think "why was I not sufficiently charged with the recklessness of affection to go with you and share your perils," but if I did I would be as miserable speculating on the risks of the children in that case as on yours in this. Between Scylla and Charybdis I had little choice but as my remaining here with the children commended itself to both our judgments if not to our fancy I suppose I may try to console myself with the conviction that I acted entirely for the best.

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<sup>546</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa at Holyoke," *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), November 19, 1894.

<sup>547</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa No Citizen," *Worcester Daily Spy* (Worcester, MA), October 23, 1894.

<sup>548</sup> O'Donovan Rossa Citizenship Papers dated 1894, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT; "Rossa Wants Vindication; He Goes Abroad to Tweak the British Lion's Tail," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), January 12, 1895.

<sup>549</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Sails on the *Majestic*," *Jersey City Journal* (Jersey City), January 30, 1895.

<sup>550</sup> "The *Majestic* in a Gale," *Kerry Weekly Reporter* (Tralee), February 9, 1895.

She then wrote cheerily about the children, telling him she was helping them learn to write in Irish so that he would be pleased and promise them anything their hearts desired. But she was just as concerned about the business prospects or the lack of them, taking the opportunity to remind him of the purpose of his trip:

I don't like the prospect for you of a month waiting for your first English lecture. Delays are dangerous and sometimes demoralizing. Remember Dear I have only consented to a short parting and with the view that it may conduce to the material comfort and benefit of the family. Your visit to Ireland last year was a pure matter of sentiment in which I sympathized with you too strongly to put any bars in your way. But your visit to England now is a different matter. I let you go with the hope and prospect of gaining a needed increase of fortune by your lecture in England. It is business only and there is no "exaltation" of sentiment on patriotism to help me bear any disappointment or failure of our plan. This sounds very sordid but tis a fact isn't it that we have bartered the priceless pleasure of each other's society for the prospect of "filthy lucre" or not to put it so contemptibly for the actual means of living for ourselves and our children. Don't lose sight of that and I think you will try to fill the month before your St. Martin's Hall lecture with some work pertinent to the end in view.<sup>551</sup>

Mary Jane continued in her concern for him, loneliness that she was left at home, and continuing regret for the move to Staten Island. But she was always concerned about money and the hold it had on their choices in life:

Graveyard filling for this week's paper put me under a spell of melancholy and otherwise seeing friends and acquaintances step out of the ranks of the living at such short notice these times puts a wholesome fear and consideration of the inevitable in my heart. I sent Mr. Burke five dollars for insurance on the house but he has not given me a policy yet as he says his companies object to Staten Island property. The children have not even been moved by the winter gales from their allegiance to Staten Island but I am heartily sick of the cold and isolation. I am so frozen through that even the printing office with its fog of tobacco smoke is like paradise because I can feel the heat sensibly which I can't do even with my arms round the stove at our romantic old homestead in Staten Island.

It seems a year since the *Majestic* sailed. I want to sit down and cry for my Darling all the time, but of course that fancy cannot be indulged. Money is a good thing. With it you can buy off your responsibilities, pay for people to make and mend, comb and tend your children and teach them. Yes even Heaven has a

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<sup>551</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated February 5, 1895, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

golden key for you can pay for Masses and prayers and cover your failings in the mantle of charity if you're sick. But if you're poor you must let your old Darling go prospecting to a distance and you must stay at home in loneliness because you can't afford to pay somebody else to stay there!<sup>552</sup>

Rossa's first lecture was indeed in at St. Martin's Hall in London; the empty time was a foreboding of what was to come. Although he toured many of the areas in England largely settled by immigrant Irishman, the tour was not financially successful. After four months the papers were speculating that Rossa would return home very soon after disappointing results on tour.<sup>553</sup> According to Sean O'Luing, the highlight of the trip personally for Rossa was his stay with Dr. Mark Ryan, a member of the IRB. It was at Ryan's house that he met Maud Gonne, whom he later traveled to visit in Paris before returning to America. When he arrived in Paris Gonne was not at home and he returned immediately to London and Dr. Ryan's home.<sup>554</sup> His time in Wales and Scotland was equally disappointing. The pressure from the British government with surveillance and threats to the Irish communities had prevented some of Rossa's lectures and had surely reduced the attendance when his lectures were still held. Rossa wrote to Mary Jane and described that his lecture in Bootle was canceled when the owner of the hotel where the event was to be held was told his liquor license would not be renewed if he allowed Rossa to speak there. Money was evidently very tight at home because in this same letter

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<sup>552</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated 1895, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>553</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa to Return," *Boston Herald* (Boston), April 25, 1895.

<sup>554</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated February 21, 1895, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

dated May 1, Rossa told Mary Jane he had telegraphed \$100 and hoped “that you feel relieved a little.”<sup>555</sup>

When he returned to London, he attended a session in the House of Commons where there was discussion of the repeal of the hated Coercion Act. From his seat in the gallery, Rossa rose and addressed the house, claiming that his “assassin’s blow had been aimed at him in that house.” The Sergeant-at-Arms immediately led him out of the building.<sup>556</sup> The news of this outburst and his ejection from Parliament spread quickly across the Atlantic.<sup>557</sup> It was an eventful day for Rossa and he wrote to Mary Jane on the same day, first describing who was in the gallery when he arrived in Parliament:

Our kinsman Ned Barry from Newmills was the first man to welcome me, and then John Redmond came by. The two of them were chatting to me but when I saw that they didn’t speak to each other I said, “In God’s name, are things so bad that you two couldn’t speak to each other?”

This animosity is something Rossa saw throughout his trip. There was so much tension and disagreement between the Irish nationalists and Home Rulers that it was apparent why his lectures had been so meagerly attended. In describing his outburst in the House of Commons, Rossa believed he had a unifying effect on the Irishmen present. Still, the actual expulsion frightened him:

Before I could say any more the House officials had grabbed me. I was delivered into the hands of the supervisor. He accompanied me out and awaited orders. Then orders came, to put me out of the House and never to let me in again. . . . Then, out in the courtyard, John Redmond and Tom Condon and ten or twelve of the Irish representatives gathered round me. One thing I did, at any rate was to make John Redmond and McCarthy’s factions come to agreement in supporting

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<sup>555</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated May 1, 1895, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(i), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>556</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa in Parliament," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), May 8, 1895.

<sup>557</sup> "Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. Exciting Career of the Agitator Recently Ejected From the House of Commons," *Chronicle* (Muskegon, Michigan), May 22, 1895.



me. That's something. If you observe a little tremble in my handwriting, remember that I am writing you this an hour after the event.<sup>558</sup>

The event may not have helped him with audiences in England, Scotland, and Wales, but it made his arrival back in New York a major event.<sup>559</sup> Rossa arrived home on the *Germanic* on May 24, 1895, after five months abroad having helped the finances for the family very little but having gained a great deal of positive publicity in America.<sup>560</sup>

Rossa had insisted that Mary Jane continue the newspaper while he was gone and on his return he focused on it and any other means of employment. Government positions were the most attractive, and in New York political appointment positions were filled most often with Irish Americans. Just prior to leaving England, Rossa had heard that a committee of Irish Americans who supported the Republican Party in America were seeking job opportunities for him with the government. Rossa said in the *United Irishman*: "I returned to New York believing that all I had to do was walk into the job. However—I don't see it."<sup>561</sup> As it turns out, many months later he was asked to apply for a position requiring a lengthy application, which questioned him on past arrests, convictions, and his drinking habits. He answered these questions truthfully, describing his arrests in Dublin, his conviction of libel against Cassidy, and the fact that in 1896 he had been "a teetotaler seventeen years." On April 30, 1896, he heard from the Secretary of State William S. Briscoe that he was refused a position because he was unsuitable in

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<sup>558</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa dated May 8, 1895, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(iii), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>559</sup> "J. O'Donovan Rossa Returns," *New York Times* (New York), May 24, 1895.

<sup>560</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Here," *Trenton Evening Times* (Trenton), May 24, 1895.

<sup>561</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, "On My Return," *United Irishman* (New York), July 13, 1895.

reputation.<sup>562</sup> Rossa was incensed and immediately took to the pages of the press and claimed he would do a lecture tour to denounce his treatment.<sup>563</sup> Two years later, in June 1898, Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck of New York appointed Rossa to a position as Inspector of Weights and Measures for the Borough of Richmond (Staten Island) at an annual salary of \$1500.<sup>564</sup> This position was the only official job Rossa had ever received up until that time and was terminated just a year later when Rossa was required to take the Civil Service competitive examinations. He was informed on September 5, 1899 that he did not pass the exam he took on July 31 that year. The city required a 70% passing grade and Rossa only received a 61.6% score.<sup>565</sup> By the time Rossa had lost this job he had reestablished the *United Irishman* to increase the level of donations (rent) from his followers and he had also completed his second book of memoirs, *Rossa's Recollections, 1838 to 1898, Memoirs of an Irish Revolutionary*, and published it after having it serialized in his newspaper. It was not particularly well received, even in Irish American circles. The review of the volume in the *New York Times* was somewhat scathing:

The book wanders along without connectedness, and marks of sincerity are frequently lacking entirely . . . He sees assassins sent out to kill him and even the machinery of the English House of Commons used to proclaim him a villain and an outlaw. It would seem to the chance-reader that he exaggerated his own importance.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> Sean O'Luing, *O'Donnabhain Rosa, II*, 251.

<sup>563</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Again Bobs Up," *St. Louis Republic* (St. Louis, MO), May 3, 1896.

<sup>564</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Appointed to City Position," *New York American* (New York), June 23, 1898.

<sup>565</sup> Sean O'Luing, *O'Donnabhain Rosa, II*, 253.

<sup>566</sup> "A Book That Was Not Wanted," *New York Times* (New York), November 26, 1898.

While Rossa was struggling with employment and politics, Mary Jane was always writing poetry and in January 1899 on the death of her dear friend, Margaret O'Brien, wife of "Rocky Mountain" O'Brien, she wrote a lovely tribute:

Twenty golden years of love,  
 And then a night of woe—  
 When truest heart from fondest heart  
 Reluctantly must go;  
 And round her couch a weeping hand—  
 Eight children and their father—stand,  
 To kiss her lips of snow.

"Now mourn me not as lost," she said  
 "I only go before,  
 To wait where friendship never parts:  
 To wait and watch for your dear hearts,  
 On heaven's happy shore"

"And build no monumental stone,  
 Nor darkly drape my bed;  
 But lay me down in robes of white,  
 With bloom of flowers and sunshine bright,  
 And waving grass o'er head"

The pivot of a household's love,  
 Her children's joy and guide;  
 Care of her lover husband's heart,  
 His comfort and his pride,  
 The flower and bloom of womanhood—  
 As mother, maid, or wife—  
 Sighed out her fragrant spirit here,  
 And closed her eyes on life.

Her body lies in sacred ground in Calvary today;  
 And as she wished the sunshine gilds her quiet bed of clay;  
 While tinted o'er from wintry blast by wealth of fragrant flowers,  
 The young grass cradles on her breast, awaiting summer showers.

Her memory lives within our hearts—a precious thing, a balm—  
 To strengthen and to edify—to magnitise, to calm.  
 For meditation, subject sweet; for emulation, fit—  
 A blessed life, by faith and hope and love's pure sunshine lit.<sup>567</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> "Rocky Mountain" O'Brien, "My Birth and Adoption.," *Southern Star* (Cork), October 1, 1904.

Mary Jane was enjoying her involvement with her children who were growing up. Sheela and Eileen had both finished high school and gone to work. Both girls were employed, adding some income to the family; Sheela was involved in musical pursuits as well as working in publishing in New York City, and Eileen was headed to more administrative responsibilities with a clerical role near home in Port Richmond, Staten Island.<sup>568</sup> Denis, the eldest of Rossa's sons, had reappeared in the press in 1897 when he was in Fresno, California, and Denver, Colorado, working with mining companies.<sup>569</sup> Meanwhile, John was now a prominent attorney in Sioux City, Iowa, building an excellent reputation in the Midwestern states.<sup>570</sup> It is not known whether the older boys joined the family for the celebration of Sheela's wedding on May 18, 1899 when she married John MacIntyre at St. Mary's Church in Port Richmond.<sup>571</sup> Sheela and John were well known as musicians around New York and later published music and songs they wrote together.<sup>572</sup> The last decade of the century brought new sorrow to Mary Jane as well, when James C. Irwin died in San Francisco on April 25, 1898. He was the last of Mary Jane's three brothers in America to pass away.<sup>573</sup> Alfred Irwin had been hit by a trolley car in Brooklyn in 1895 and died, and her eldest brother Dr. Timothy Warren Irwin had died in San Francisco a few years before James.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 112.

<sup>569</sup> "D. O'Donovan Rossa," *Fresno Morning Republican* (Fresno, CA), March 14, 1897.

<sup>570</sup> "J. O'Donovan Rossa's Impressions of Zenith City," *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, MN), July 31, 1899.

<sup>571</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa's Daughter Marries," *New York Tribune* (New York), May 25, 1899.

<sup>572</sup> "Ragtime Still Very Popular," *Denver Post* (Denver, CO), February 2, 1901.

<sup>573</sup> "A Patriotic Irishman," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco), April 26, 1898.

<sup>574</sup> "Verdict for Mrs. Irwin," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), May 17, 1900.

But Mary Jane's life was filled also with many activities based on her own reputation as an accomplished and well known woman. She enjoyed particular recognition among women who were interested in women's suffrage, as she had been a friend to Susan B. Anthony since her earliest days in America. Because she had spent so many years in the public eye it is not surprising that she would want to share her knowledge of public relations with those in the suffrage movement. She was active in the movement behind the scenes in 1894, distributing petitions for signature. Always thinking of how to manage a message, Mary Jane wrote a letter to Mariana Wright Chapman, a great leader in the movement, suggesting better ways for the promulgation of information to reach supporters, a lesson both she and Rossa had learned over the years. Mary Jane had been canvassing for signatures on a suffrage petition in Brooklyn in May 1894 when she wrote to Chapman:

Are there leaflets to be distributed which might reach women who don't read the papers . . . I think it would be a great saving of canvassers throats if tracts or leaflets with simple instructions and reasons for the faith that is in us were judiciously distributed amongst those whose adherence we desire . . . such women in a neighborhood would form the nucleus of a little army of women suffragists with proper cultivation and instructions from headquarters.<sup>575</sup>

Mary Jane and Rossa both continued to be active in the Irish American community. Rossa was writing editorials for the newspaper and Mary Jane was writing poetry which was occasionally published in other newspapers. They were one step removed from the political center of Irish American activity of the late 1890s based on Rossa's continued isolation from Clan na Gael. But when large meetings occurred in

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<sup>575</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Mariana Wright Chapman dated May 10, 1894, Mariana Wright Chapman Family Papers, RG5/260/Series 1/ Box 1/2ALsS, Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

New York or close by the couple would be in attendance. One such event was the welcome given to the visiting John Redmond on January 9, 1898, at the Broadway Theatre.<sup>576</sup> Despite their past differences with Parnell, when a monument was being proposed in his honor and the Lord Mayor of Dublin and John Redmond again were in New York on October 22, 1899, Mary Jane and Rossa were on the dais with the leaders of the Irish organizations.<sup>577</sup> They were respected patriots by this time and given great applause and recognition. When Rossa lost his government job he went back out on the lecture circuit, appearing in Boston in November of 1899.<sup>578</sup> The Rossas knew that appearing at an event gave them an opportunity to speak about the cause of freedom for Ireland. The fact that they disagreed with Parnell or then Redmond on the method of obtaining freedom was less important to them. They remained staunch believers in rebellion versus Home Rule and voiced that opinion no matter where they spoke, as Rossa did in Boston on May 8, 1900, at the Ancient Order of Hiberians national convention when he proposed another revolutionary fund that would level a ten percent tax on all members.<sup>579</sup> Their closest friends remained Irish Americans who believed as they did, such as Patrick "Rocky Mountain" O'Brien who had been their closest friend since they arrived in New York. The O'Briens maintained a large house in Brooklyn and had frequent guests from Ireland. In February 1900 Maud Gonne paid a visit. During this visit, Mary Jane appeared on stage with Gonne, reading a selection of poetry at a sold-out

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<sup>576</sup> "Redmond's Great Welcome," *Boston Herald* (Boston), January 10, 1898.

<sup>577</sup> "Appeal for Parnell Fund," *New York Tribune* (New York), October 23, 1899.

<sup>578</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Lectures," *Boston Herald* (Boston), November 27, 1899.

<sup>579</sup> "Urges Fund to Fight Ireland," *Fort Wayne Daily News* (Fort Wayne, IN), May 9, 1900.

event at the Manhattan Academy of Music.<sup>580</sup> While Gonne was in New York she spent her free time and dined frequently with the two families.<sup>581</sup>

The Rossa family was soon celebrating a new arrival in their family, for Sheela and John McIntyre welcomed the third Isabella to the family on March 5, 1900.<sup>582</sup> The other children were growing up, as well. Bella wanted to follow her Aunt Isabella into the nursing field and entered St. Vincent's Hospital Nursing School in New York City. Jerry was not interested in going to college and he went off to the City to work as an office boy for a lawyer.<sup>583</sup> With only Jennie and Daisy at home, Mary Jane decided it was time to move into a somewhat smaller house on Staten Island. As she had written when purchasing their current home, Mary Jane always wanted to her home to be in view of the sea, and so the next house was again on Richmond Terrace but very close to the ferry in the St. George area, for an easier commute into the City. They moved into 194 Richmond Terrace on June 2, 1902.<sup>584</sup> However, just three months before this move newspapers all over the country were talking about Rossa being on his death bed.<sup>585</sup> However, it wasn't Rossa but his son Denis who was dying in St. Francis Hospital while visiting Colorado Springs on business. Denis had led a difficult life, estranged from his father, in and out of trouble with the law for his business paractices; his obituary, however, mentioned first his

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<sup>580</sup> "Maud Gonne's Lecture," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), February 3, 1900.

<sup>581</sup> "Miss Gonne the Guest," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), February 3, 1900.

<sup>582</sup> New York City Births 1891-1902; Births Reported in 1900. Borough of Richmond; Certificate # 273 New York Department of Health, New York, May 2, 2013, [www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com).

<sup>583</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 132.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>585</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Ill. Noted Agitator and Fenian May Die at Any Moment," *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), February 28, 1902.

participation in the Fenian raids into Canada while his father was in prison. His tragic illness and death on March 1, 1902, caused by infection and gangrene, was watched closely by the press for nearly a month, and when he died his brother John was with him.<sup>586</sup>

Rossa continued to struggle with obtaining employment and was again on the lecture circuit in New England in 1902.<sup>587</sup> He was still mentioned in the newspapers and now that he was over seventy he was becoming part of the history that was on display at the St. Louis Exhibition for the World's Fair. The Irish Historical Society of Boston requested Rossa's actual pardon he had received with the British great seal affixed to be included in an Irish exhibit. Rossa complied, and it joined an eclectic exhibit that included a clock that had been Daniel O'Connell's.<sup>588</sup> Rossa himself went to St. Louis in November of 1903 to lecture at the Pickwick Theatre to celebrate the Manchester martyrs.<sup>589</sup> A year later when invitations were few and the only income the family had was from subscriptions for the newspaper, Rossa received an invitation from the Young Ireland Organization from Skibbereen in County Cork. The organization asked Rossa to dedicate the new statue in the center of town, the *Maid of Erin*, for which they had been raising money for three years with the help of events given by Rocky Mountain O'Brien,

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<sup>586</sup>"O'Donovan Rossa Died Yesterday," *Colorado Springs Gazette* (Colorado Springs, CO), March 2, 1902.

<sup>587</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa is Coming to Worcester," *Worcester Daily Spy* (Worcester, MA), March 1, 1902.

<sup>588</sup> "Irish Exhibit of Much Variety Industry, Art and History of Erin are Exemplified.," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), July 17, 1904.

<sup>589</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Coming," *St. Louis Republic* (St. Louis, MO), November 3, 1903.



John Daly, and Maud Gonne.<sup>590</sup> Rossa accepted immediately and left for Ireland on November 13, 1904 on the *Etruria* to be there for the ceremony celebrating the Manchester Martyrs.<sup>591</sup> The night before he left, the American organization of the Young Ireland Society gave him a celebrity send-off dinner attended by a few hundred of the more politically powerful Irish Americans who gave speeches about Rossa's patriotism, bravery, and sacrifice for Ireland and presented him with a purse large enough to cover his trip and the care of his family while he was gone.<sup>592</sup> Rossa's arrival in Ireland was celebrated by thousands; he was welcomed in every town between Cobh and Skibbereen by speeches and brass bands. He was ceremonially given the "Freedom of the City" in Cork which was a great honor. The *Southern Star* reported:

The reception which veteran patriot O'Donovan Rossa received in Cork City and County this week was one which might well have flattered any living man. It was a spontaneous outburst of public admiration for a man who, through a long life has given proof of a consistency, a loyalty to principle, and an unflinching devotion to country, with few parallels in the world's story of patriotism. It would, of course, be easy to find men who have stuck to early convictions with a similar tenacity through a very long life; but it would be hard to find one who has shown a like tenacity under such galling and trying circumstances. There is no necessity for us to refer to any of the sufferings and trials and tortures of Rossa. His life is familiar to most of his fellow countrymen. He has, so to speak, been put in the crucible and come out of it purified. But the qualities which have won for him the admiration of his countrymen, and the undying hatred of his country's enemies, are his singleness of purpose, his great self-sacrifice. He has never benefited a brass farthing by his efforts to free his country. . . . He faced the world, and the worst it could do to him, with unflinching countenance.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> Philip O'Regan, "The Maid of Erin and the Story Behind It," *Southern Star* (Cork), February 16, 2015.

<sup>591</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Sails - Irish Patriot Goes to Unveil Statue," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), November 13, 1904.

<sup>592</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Their Guest," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), November 11, 1904.

<sup>593</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Reception in Cork City," *Southern Star* (Cork), November 26, 1904.

This description of Rossa as the “unflinching countenance” is the most well known and became the way he was thereafter described. When he landed in New York on Christmas Eve, after his five weeks in Cork, he spoke to reporters and said that all the talk of home rule was: “nonsense, except by force of arms.” He then gave his argument for revolution, the same argument he had given since his first trip to America in 1863: “I am strongly in favor of a revolution. It can and must be done. If the Irish in England, the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in America should join forces it would be a dark day for England.”<sup>594</sup> Given Rossa’s reception in Cork and the difficulty finding work in New York, it was not surprising that Rossa accepted the invitation of the Cork City Council the following year to a clerical position at £500 per year.<sup>595</sup> His friends in Cork, led by Charles G. Doran and the Young Ireland Society, had determined that it was time Rossa returned to his native land for what remained of his life. A letter from the Society on October 28, 1905 explained, groups in Dublin and Cork had not only raised nearly £200 for his trip and:

We are getting a nice villa for you. Our members pledged themselves that you should have it rent-free and when you arrive in Cork you can walk into your new home fully furnished and fit for you, it is the least we can do in return for all you did for Ireland.<sup>596</sup>

Rossa was thrilled at the prospect of returning to Ireland permanently, not so his wife. Mary Jane was dreading the separation from her children and the place she viewed as home. It was arranged that Jerry O’Donovan Rossa, recently married to Norah (Nonie)

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<sup>594</sup> "O'Donovan Returns. Declares the Irish Must Rise in Revolution Against England," *The Sun* (Baltimore), December 25, 1904.

<sup>595</sup> "Cork Votes Job to O'Donovan Rossa," *Boston Herald* (Boston), September 8, 1905.

<sup>596</sup> Charles G. Doran, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated October 28, 1905, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(i), National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Murphy while Rossa was in Ireland the previous December, would move to the home on Richmond Terrace and keep it going. Also, John McIntyre (Sheela's husband) would take over the publishing of the *United Irishman*.<sup>597</sup> Bella had graduated from nursing school in June 1905 and was working and living in New York City.<sup>598</sup>

On November 11, 1905, Mary Jane and Jeremiah sailed on the *Etruria* for Ireland. Joining them were their two youngest daughters, Jennie and Daisy, who would stay in Ireland for a visit before returning to their jobs in New York.<sup>599</sup> The transatlantic trip was made more interesting by the companionship on board of the inventor Guglielmo Marconi. When the ship landed in Cobh, the family was met by a large delegation of the Irish organizations who had raised the testimonial awards to pay for the position and housing Mary Jane and Rossa would now occupy in Cork. It was also the day of the annual Manchester Martyr celebration, which brought huge crowds to Cork; when the Rossas arrived Rossa gave a speech during the celebration.<sup>600</sup> For the six weeks Jennie and Daisy were in Ireland, they helped settle their parents in the house at 9 Chapel Street, Blackrock. They traveled with their mother to Clonakilty to visit her homestead and were welcomed by many old family friends.<sup>601</sup> The girls sailed back to New York on February 2, 1906, on the *Carmania*.<sup>602</sup> As Rossa settled into his new role and took opportunities to

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<sup>597</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 138.; New York, New York Marriage Indexes 1866-1937, New York City Municipal Archives, New York, January 10, 2015, [www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com).

<sup>598</sup> "Miss O'Donovan Rossa Obituary," *New York Times* (New York), June 17, 1972.

<sup>599</sup> "Off To Ireland," *Houston Chronicle* (Houston, TX), November 12, 1905.

<sup>600</sup> "Manchester Martyrs; Annual Celebration; O'Donovan Rossa," *Cork Examiner* (Cork), November 20, 1905.

<sup>601</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 146.

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

lecture throughout Ireland, such as in Belfast with Bulmer Hobson, Mary Jane became ill and despondent.<sup>603</sup> She was badly homesick for her children and had not recovered from a recent flu when she wrote to Daisy on Ash Wednesday (February 28, 1906):

Mr. Daly is putting this house into spic and span order for us. He told the workmen to do anything I wanted in it. I don't want anything extra for I don't know how long I can stay here without my heart breaking in pieces for my babies. . . . Oh how I wish I could be home! Lord, have pity and shorten my misery. Shall I ever hug my babies in my arms again?<sup>604</sup>

By April 7, Mary Jane was still terribly ill, suffering from debilitating headaches and a lingering case of pneumonia; a cable was sent for Bella to leave her job at the hospital and come to Ireland and care for her mother. Bella left immediately on the *Etruria* from New York.<sup>605</sup> When Bella arrived in Cork she found her mother very sick; she had passed through a crisis but had suffered some heart complication. Bella cared for her for two months but the doctors believed she needed to go home to her family in order to really heal.<sup>606</sup> On June 13, 1906, Jeremiah, Mary Jane and Bella returned to New York on the *Caronia*.<sup>607</sup> Although Rossa returned to New York with his wife, he was hoping it was not a permanent return, so he took a leave of absence from his Cork County position. When he was in New York he gave an interview that revealed more of the details about his decision:

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<sup>603</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Delivered Lecture in Belfast," *Gaelic American* (New York), April 14, 1906.

<sup>604</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Margaret O'Donovan Rossa dated February 28, 1906, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>605</sup> "Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa Ill," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), April 14, 1906.

<sup>606</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 155.

<sup>607</sup> "Broken Propeller Delays Liner Nearly a Day," *New York Times* (New York), June 14, 1906.

I don't know how soon I'll be going back. I won't be in a hurry. Truth, I like New York more than I realized. But I've promised the boys to be back with them, and I am only on leave of absence. I'm sort of secretary to the board; then again I'm not. I guess I'm an adviser. I only get \$17 a week. My daughters make more at typewriting than I do. . . . Whist, boy, come closer: I don't want to say this too loud—but Ireland is going to the bad. The poor, deluded people, God help them, think they're going to get home rule, but it will never come. I was all over the land, talking with members of Parliament and almost everybody else in political life. I find there's little hope for Ireland. . . . But I believe that even if they demanded their rights they would be turned down. England has been bluffing all along.<sup>608</sup>

Rossa spent the summer in New York, but in September he returned to Cork to personally tender his resignation to the Cork Council and he quickly sailed again for America on the *Merion* on September 20, 1906, having spent only ten days in Ireland.<sup>609</sup> This would be his last trip while he was alive. As Daisy would write in her memoir, her father

made his greatest sacrifice . . . He resigned his treasured position . . . knowing as he did so that many of the friends he loved would misconstrue his motives and think him unappreciative of the honors done him. Yet between that great man's own desires and his duty to his wife there could be no compromise.<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>608</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Back in This Country," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), June 15, 1906.

<sup>609</sup> "Quits Ireland for America," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), September 20, 1906.

<sup>610</sup> Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, *My Father and Mother Were Irish*, 155.

## Chapter 11

### ROSSA'S FINAL DAYS

After returning to Staten Island, Mary Jane and Rossa continued to publish the *United Irishman* together, with Mary Jane doing more and more of the writing. In the fall of 1906, Rossa managed to get a political appointment job in the Brooklyn Clerk's office as a rapid transit inspector, earning \$4 per day, but he again was dismissed when failing to meet the civil service requirements.<sup>611</sup> After 1907, any other paid employment was elusive. For a time, three of the Rossa girls lived at home working and helping with support, but the family had only the money from dwindling subscriptions to the newspaper. Rossa had a few occasional speaking engagements and continued to be the firebrand against British rule. The Irish American community never deserted their hero and many sent regular donations. One of Rossa's consistent correspondents was Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet. Emmet made an annual donation to the family of \$100 for many years. Rossa prized his letters; an example is one he wrote on January 5, 1907:

I am going to the Breakers, Palm Beach, Florida, and I wish you were going to be with me, as we would settle Irish affairs by many a good talk.—The older I get the more I am approaching your position, in the belief that the Irish people will not get what is necessary for their prosperity without fighting for it—when, God only knows—but the greater the struggle the more will the gain be appreciated. I have not lost any confidence in my personal friends, the National leaders, as they have gained much in bettering the conditions of the people and they will doubtless gain much more. . . . Hence, I have always regarded you with great consideration, notwithstanding we have not always agreed, but I have fully appreciated your unswerving honesty of purpose, and I must admit your methods so far as put in practice, gain more respectful interest in England, toward advancing the Irish cause, than was ever gained by any other movement.<sup>612</sup>

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<sup>611</sup> "Coler Gives Rossa and Inspectorship," *Alton Evening Telegraph* (Alton, IL), November 22, 1906.

<sup>612</sup> Thomas Addis Emmet, To Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa dated January 5, 1907, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 10974(i), National Library of Ireland; Thomas Addis Emmet, To Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa dated June 28, 1913, O'Donovan Rossa Papers, Ms 8648/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

After reading this letter, Rossa wrote on the envelope: "Important historical letter." This missive must have cheered him when he was no longer in the midst of men who were leading the cause for Ireland and likely felt he had very few friends who believed, as he did, in continuing the fight. He was so far removed from leadership that a syndicated article appeared on the same day he received Emmet's letter listing him as one of a group of "Some Extinct Human Meteors; Names that have flashed brilliantly across the public horizon, but are now buried in comparative obscurity."<sup>613</sup>

Rossa's body never really recovered from his prison years, his assassination attempt, and the frantic pace of his travel and speaking. After 1909, he aged and weakened to become an invalid. Mary Jane became his full-time nurse and sole editor of the newspaper, which she finally shut down in 1910.<sup>614</sup> Without the *United Irishman* to give official updates, numerous reports of Rossa's ill health were published. Many notices, such as those printed in the *New York Times* on October 19, 1910; in the *Muskegon Chronicle* on October 26, 1910; and in the *Daily Illinois State Journal* on December 28, 1910, claimed that he was near death.<sup>615</sup> This last article included an interview with the ailing Rossa, which Mary Jane had arranged to assure readers that Rossa was still alive. They were still receiving contributions from supporters and Mary Jane was concerned they would stop if the rumors of his death were widely printed and proof that he still lived was not available. These publicity efforts were successful, for

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<sup>613</sup> "Some Extinct Human Meteors," *New Orleans Item* (New Orleans, LA), January 6, 1907.

<sup>614</sup> Post Office Department, Discontinuance of *United Irishman* on December 31, 1910, June 29, 1912, Papers Collected by Sean O'Luing, Ms 22917, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>615</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa Ill," *New York Times* (New York), October 19, 1910; "Noted Fenian Near Death," *Muskegon Chronicle* (Muskegon, MI), October 26, 1910; "Relates Story of Turbulent Career," *Daily Illinois State Journal* (Springfield, IL), December 28, 1910.

testimonial funds were begun both in New York and Ireland to raise funds for the family, as well as a fund for funeral arrangements for Rossa in Cork when the time came that his current illnesses would cause his death. The testimonial fund, spearheaded by Seamus MacManus in New York and later run by Edward Dwyer, received publicity on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>616</sup> The fund established in County Cork to raise funds for burying Rossa in his birthplace were started in Clonakilty, Mary Jane's home town, began earlier than the New York fund and included all the leading men of the area.<sup>617</sup>

In 1911, the family's financial situation improved when their daughter Eileen received a fairly high paying job as the Commissioner of Charities in Staten Island at a salary of \$1000 per year.<sup>618</sup> This was great help to the family as the testimonial funds had just been established and any writing Mary Jane was doing was published infrequently. She did have a fine poem published in October of 1912 after attending the Carnegie Hall performance of Rita O'Donohoe, a young Irish musician who was enthusiastically received in New York and considered the star of the Carnegie performance.

The Little Girl From Ireland  
By Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa

Little Girl from Ireland, you wave a magic wand,  
Your rippling notes transport my heart  
With memories bright and fond,  
Dear scenes of Youth and Childhood,  
Old joys, old friends arise  
From mists of time, while o'er the string  
Your bow melodious flies!

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<sup>616</sup> "To Honor O'Donovan Rossa," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), November 9, 1912; "Career of Edward Dwyer," *Leitrim Observer* (Carrick-on-Shannon), December 21, 1912.

<sup>617</sup> "The Bringing to Rosscarbery Burial Grounds the Remains of O'Donovan Rossa," *Southern Star* (Cork), November 4, 1911.

<sup>618</sup> "Position for Miss Rossa," *Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.), March 10, 1911.



Little Girl from Ireland,  
 Play on, if you be kind,  
 The years drop off, the heart grows young  
 And sorrow fails to bind.  
 While flows the sweet, pure music in silvery wealth around,  
 And dancing fairies seem to dwell  
 In every wave of sound.

Little Girl from Ireland,  
 I thank you for your treat;  
 Long may your white hands hold the reins  
 Of melody so sweet,  
 And smiling innocence be safe from every sordid care  
 And time be lenient to BLUE EYES  
 And curling golden hair.<sup>619</sup>

When the monies began arriving from the testimonial solicitations Mary Jane had no access to a newspaper for making public acknowledgements, so she asked Devoy to acknowledge them in the *Gaelic American*. This is the first evidence that Mary Jane wanted to bridge the disagreement between the two Fenians that had lasted so many years. In a letter dated December 26, 1912, Mary Jane took the opportunity to tell Devoy he “once was like a brother.”

Dear Mr. Devoy,

I had a letter yesterday from Mr. James J. McCarthy of Butte Montana with a cheque for 204 dollars enclosed as a Xmas present from the generous Irishmen of Butte for Rossa. I need not tell you how glad it made our Christmas nor how gratefully we blessed the donors. The list of names I carried to early mass and prayed with all my heart that God would return to them a hundredfold the joy and benefit their timely gift and the kind sentiments that accompanied it meant to us. Mr. McCarthy wished to have the names of contributors published in the *Gaelic American* and I hasten to ask you if it could be agreeable to print them. If you will do it as speedily as possible that they may be satisfied their goodness is appreciated and acknowledged. I feel embarrassed asking you to do me this favor as it costs money to print such lists and I am sure you would be offended if I offer payment. I believe most of the contributors are *Gaelic American* subscribers so they probably look on it as a kind of right to be commemorated in its pages. That will reassure me. I will send you Mr. McCarthy's letter and the list in another envelope and say no more in this but wish you a happy new year and assure you

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<sup>619</sup> "The Little Girl From Ireland," *Irish American Weekly* (New York), October 5, 1912.

of the vitality still of Rossa's old time affection for you, and of mine too. John Devoy, who once was like a brother and has still a place in our hearts though unclaimed.

Sincerely  
Mary J. O'Donovan Rossa<sup>620</sup>

She lamented the lost friendship having succumbed to a fiercely fought public battle more than thirty years before. She expanded on this thought in a letter two months later, answering a notice from Devoy on some contributions, when she described Rossa's condition in more detail and attempted to broker a peace between them, telling Devoy:

Rossa is not suffering any pain, but he is obliged to lie in bed all the time through lameness and general debility. His physician gives no hope of ultimate recovery though he thinks he may live indefinitely in his present condition. He is in his 82<sup>nd</sup> year and too old to undergo successfully an operation that would restore a younger man. I think if you could come and talk of your earlier hopes and labors together before those differences of opinion crept in it would do him a world of good. He has a simple loving heart and you were very dear to it long ago. Bury the between times and be again the younger brother.<sup>621</sup>

Rossa himself wrote a brief note at the same time and added his signature in Irish:

Dear John,

My wife showed your letter to me. Why cannot you come down some day? I am at home and in bed every day. I got a fall a few years ago and cannot walk out. Tis a lonesome kind of life. I read those Irish poems you print in the Gaelic American.<sup>622</sup>

Mary Jane also had another motive for healing the rift between the two men: she needed Devoy's help in marketing copies of Rossa's books, as her own sales network

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<sup>620</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated December 26, 1912, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/12/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>621</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated February 24, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/11/1, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>622</sup> Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated February 24, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/13/1, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

was shrinking after she closed the paper.<sup>623</sup> A few months later she smartly arranged to have the publisher send copies of the books directly to the *Gaelic American* offices to be sold when her ads were answered in the paper.<sup>624</sup> Devoy came to visit Rossa on St. Patrick's Day 1913, a fitting day to celebrate an old friendship. Mary Jane wrote about the visit hours after Devoy left the house on Richmond Terrace:

Your visit today made us very happy and it did Rossa a lot of good. His face is still wearing the smile of satisfaction that greeted your coming, and he has pleasant food for thought for many days to come. Thank you very much for making time to sit awhile by his bedside and cheer him up. Few have the power to do it so effectually. I might say no other living man means so much to him as you. For, you are the last of that beloved inner crowd of political brothers that travelled the same sacrificial road with him since '65.

Oh, of course, I know there were personal differences but his affection for you never changed. Rossa has a wonderfully faithful, simple and affectionate heart; I have never known him to lose affection for anyone he once liked no matter what the provocation. I guess, as we grow older we view as trifles provocations that seemed very formidable in earlier years, and nothing counts but faith, fidelity and love. While we are true to the great cause we love, true to our ideals of honour, and work towards the general uplift as best we know how, we may very well be tolerant to the misunderstandings of beloved friends and even blind to them.

In trying to be lucid I hope I'm not covering myself with fog. The point I'm coming at is simply, I'm very glad indeed we're friends once more.<sup>625</sup>

It was not surprising that the two men had so easily reconciled even though it had taken many years. Devoy himself had written in his own memoirs of the regret he felt at their estrangement.<sup>626</sup> In a letter dated May 15, 1913, Mary Jane wrote more clearly about the affection of these two men had shared based on their common experiences, describing it

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<sup>623</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated April 7, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/13/4, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>624</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated September 16, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/14/7, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>625</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated March 17, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/13/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>626</sup> John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel*, 330.

to Devoy as a reminder: “But these were . . . as the purest and most exalted friendships, angelic and fervent, were common experience in the days that followed the forced exile of the Fenian Prisoners.”<sup>627</sup>

Mary Jane also wrote often to Devoy about the severity of Rossa’s condition. She was concerned that the public would tire of hearing how he was close to death but he continued to live on:

They [the press] do not seem to have any idea of poor Rossa’s real condition and it is painful to me to be explaining it. It makes me feel as if I am treating him without respect or delicacy to be letting the light in so glaringly on his decay, when my whole desire is to shield and shroud him from unnecessary observation and nourishing his closing days with peace and comfort and rest. It is quite possible he will be still alive after I am worn out in the service but that contingency costs me no disquiet as long as I leave no duty undone that time presents. He is coming to the stage that he would be as well off in a home or hospital as with his family—a premature second childhood that may outlast the lives of all his friends. He is very much to be pitied because of that—like a dream that is spoiled because the curtain shields halfway that should fall, the public will be tired of him because he can’t die and yet there’s no more action in him; life is truly over for him and in such a common prosaic way.<sup>628</sup>

Devoy, realizing how difficult were the Rossas’ circumstances, arranged for donation petitions in his paper, the *Gaelic American*. As these petitions began to appear and the checks began to arrive, Mary Jane wrote to Devoy thanking him, but this letter also shows how lonely she was and how important Devoy’s friendship was for her, as well.

I know your time is filled and not with trifles, and I know you fly back and forth a good deal on important business, so, like the friends of Mary on the stile, your letters when they come are all the more prized and received with a sense of appreciation for kind caring . . . I am truly thankful to you for the unfailing kindness and consideration you have given me since your memorable visit to Rossa’s bedside and I feel I can’t tell you half often enough how much I and my

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<sup>627</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated May 15, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/13/7, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>628</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated May 19, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/13/8, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

daughters appreciated it. We know you are the unseen inspiration of those little treasures of tribute to Rossa on this side of the Atlantic . . . which have made life so much easier for him and for us in the last year. But even putting that evidence out of consideration we feel your friendship in some blind instinctive way that I can't find words to explain and the very sight of your handwriting on the envelope as the postman passes it on is like a warm shake hands and wakes a smile of response immediately. If this seems too flowery you must excuse it because of the poetic mental vision "medium" I think Moore says—through which I see you.<sup>629</sup>

As contributions were received Mary Jane would write to tell Devoy of Rossa's condition but also of other happenings around the house. On July 20, 1913, she was enjoying a visit from her son Jerry and his wife and baby daughter. Her daughter Daisy had recently graduated from nursing school and both she and Bella were at home and not out on nursing cases. But, that happiness did not disguise the discomfort she felt at receiving small gifts from friends that were so necessary for their subsistence or the pain she felt as Rossa's deterioration:

I enclose a letter from Mr. Long of the *Nationalist Clonmel* that brought me £5.8 and one from Mr. Maloney in Pittsburgh Pa containing \$5.00. I had an order for 2 books from Mr. F. McCloskey Mobile, Ala. Rocky Mountain O'Brien called to see Rossa before sailing for Ireland and I found he had left a \$10 bill in Rossa's hand. Mr. Frank Carney of Sharon, Pa sent two dollars in a letter "to buy Rossa a bouquet of flowers or some dainty of your own choosing for him." I am trying to write to you under some difficulties Jerry and his wife and Baby and my two nurse daughters came down to see us and they are all making an idol of the baby on the table that serves me for a desk.

Rossa does not say anything but as he is not really suffering pain we may be thankful. He's greatly troubled these days as he cannot remember my name nor where we were married and he asks the same question a dozen times a day.<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated July, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/14/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>630</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated July 20, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/14/3, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Soon after this letter, Rossa's condition became worse. In a letter to Devoy's assistant with other donation acknowledgments, she explains that Rossa is physically the same with no improvement, but

His mental condition is worse. He has to be watched constantly for he forgets he's not able to walk and he takes every opportunity to get up "to go to New York" and he falls on the floor immediately; then I have to get a neighbor's assistance to lift him in bed again. My girls are away at business during the day during which time I am left alone with him. I do the best I can but I'm not very strong now after three years constant attendance on him. Yet there's nothing else to be done but just what's doing and trust in God for help and strength to continue.<sup>631</sup>

Shortly after writing this letter to Mr. Lennon, the wear and tear on Mary Jane finally resulted illness and exhaustion. Her sister Isabella visited and with Eileen's help made arrangements for Rossa to be cared for by the Sisters of Charity at St. Vincent's Hospital very near their home for \$50 per month.<sup>632</sup> Eileen wrote to Devoy on September 7, 1913 confirming that her mother had spent the last few days confined to bed and that they had delivered Rossa to be cared for at the hospital. Her description of the situation makes clear what Mary Jane was trying to deal with all alone:

So we took him there last Thursday night; it was to do me a personal favor that the Sisters agreed to take him as they never take incurable patients. They have placed him in a corner bed in the Medical Ward; there are about six other patients in this Ward and somebody always calls for the Orderly the moment Father tries to get out of the bed. They tried to keep him in bed by tying him with sheets but he tore the sheets in half; they would not consider placing him in a private room unless he had a private attendant. I spend some time with him every day and he is apparently happy and comfortable but anxious to return home. He had several bad falls and it was miraculous that he did not break his neck while at home; some time during the night he would always make an attempt to escape from prison and he would turn table, chairs and everything in reach upside down, pull the mattress off the bed, put the bedclothes out the window, and then would lie on the floor

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<sup>631</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Mr. Lennon dated August 14, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/14/10, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>632</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated August 28, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/14/5, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

until someone looked in his room and put things right again; after his attempted escape from the English prison he would be helpless as a baby. We were constantly in fear that he would meet with some dreadful accident while we were sleeping.

Mother was very much opposed to sending Father to the hospital as she feared that people would think we were trying to get rid of him; Aunt Isabella was here last week and she also advised hospital on account of his condition; Mother had to listen to reason when she got sick and she agreed to have him sent to St. Vincent's temporarily. We have tried to make him comfortable and we have seen Mother wear out under the strain of caring for him; we would all become nervous wrecks if we didn't get this rest.

You have been very good and kind and you can't begin to know what a comfort you have been to my Mother; I'm afraid that we are too much of a burden on your shoulders.<sup>633</sup>

Rossa spent his remaining days at St. Vincent's Hospital. Mary Jane visited him nearly every day but she now had time for thinking about other things. She had always kept abreast of the writings of people she knew and causes in which she was interested and her correspondence began to reflect some of this. In a letter to Devoy dated October 8, 1913, Mary Jane refutes an article written by George Henry Moore's son, Colonel Moore, about her letter to Gladstone in 1870. She was clearly angry but recognized that as a woman she was subject to more criticism. She goes on to comment about writing her memoirs:

Colonel Moore takes the backbone out of me when he asserts of my letter that his Father wrote it for me to Mr. Gladstone; I certainly wrote it myself but was advised to submit it to Mr. Moore's judgement before sending it to Mr. Gladstone. I think, that, being a woman and young, our friends who directed the Movement at the time mistrusted my Spartan spirit and feared I might compromise their National dignity by some feminine weakness or sentiment of speech. Or perhaps it was that they wished to show George Henry Moore in all matters trifling or great how they wished to be in unity with him and guided by him. Anyway they wished me to submit my letter to him and I did getting it back with his kind approval and a few sentences more tactfully turned than they were originally. . . . Often have I thought to write my story of my experiences of these old times but I'm the greatest coward living. All I want is to be let live in the shade and have

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<sup>633</sup> Eileen O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated September 7, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/10, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

nobody look cross at me. But perhaps if I get a chance to recover a little spirit and live a few years longer I may brave the critics and begin to write voluminous reminiscences too. Would you encourage the daring or would you say “would be better to be saying your beads and making your soul”?<sup>634</sup>

Mary Jane had always been writing poetry, and a lengthy lyric poem about Rossa that was composed around this time was found in her desk and lovingly saved by her daughter Sheela O’Donovan Rossa MacIntyre and her husband John:

Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa

I saw him first in troublous times,  
 When spies were on his track,  
 And he had little golden store  
 Of fortune at his back;  
 Then numerous the strains and shifts  
 His management required  
 To keep the organ of the Cause  
 In order as desired.

And yet he never seemed to feel  
 A sorrow or a care;  
 A boy’s heart laughed within his breast  
 When most his purse was bare;  
 A boy’s fresh daring thrilled his pulse  
 When work was to be done,  
 And in his manhood’s prime he seemed  
 His country’s youngest son.

I saw him standing in the dock,  
 Where fate had sent before  
 An Emmet, Orr, Fitzgerald, Tone;  
 His face the expression wore  
 Of calm disdain for tyranny,  
 A patriot love, of truth;  
 Of reckless, rugged hope that buoyed  
 His golden heart of youth.

Who that has seen can e’er forget  
 That mien of proud command,  
 That flashing eye, and open brow,

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<sup>634</sup> Mary Jane O’Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated October 8, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/15/3, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.



And firm, unshrinking stand;  
 That fearless majesty of love,  
 Which answering cried with scorn:  
 I am an Irishman, my lord, thank God  
 Since I was born!

I saw him clank a felon's chain;  
 I saw him—sight accursed!  
 The blood boiled, swelling in my veins;  
 My soul seemed as 'twould burst!—  
 Degraded in a motley garb;  
 Cropped, guarded, shorn and caged;  
 A spectacle for eyes that wept  
 With love and grief enraged.

I saw him when a nation's prayer  
 Unlocked his prison door;  
 When lean and worn, yet green of heart,  
 Beside his native shore  
 He stood a hero exiled  
 On deck and outward bound,  
 While with his worshipped name the hills  
 Were echoing around.

Swarmed was the sea with little boats  
 That added their acclaim,  
 And from a thousand lusty throats  
 The breath of incense came;  
 Green banners fluttered in the breeze—  
 The harp without the crown—  
 And "God save Ireland!" shouted all,  
 "And strike oppression down!"

I saw him on American soil  
 With almost regal rites,  
 Received and sought by those who were,  
 Or would be, leading lights;  
 Political intriguers too  
 Were there to buy a name,  
 Whose mere recital stirred the honest  
 Masses to a flame.

Too loyal to make capital  
 Of public honors won,  
 He chose a thorny path to walk,  
 Unaided and alone;

Unspoiled by flattery, unchanged,  
 Head-level, modest, true,  
 His heart remained the boy's heart still,  
 His oldest comrades knew.

Too simple for the golden bait  
 That sought his honest hand,  
 He knew not fortune when she came  
 Beside his chair to stand;  
 Too sturdy to be silent  
 When his faith impelled him on,  
 He still proclaimed that liberty  
 On weaponed warfare shone.

I see him now: his face is pale;  
 His fearless eyes are dim;  
 Heartsick, with hope frustrated;  
 No longer light of limb,  
 He lies a prey to life's decay,  
 A warrior fallen by the way  
 Who waits the spectre grim.<sup>635</sup>

During Rossa's last months, Mary Jane and Devoy were in nearly constant contact. As donations arrived Mary Jane sent notes to Devoy listing all the donors and the method of acknowledgement: either publicly in the *Gaelic American* or just personally, which she would handle herself. Many of her letters included reminders to Devoy to keep himself well and "not be worked to death before your time. You are the one man, the Fastnet Rock around which the Advanced National hopes of Ireland cluster."<sup>636</sup> But later the same month she received news from Ireland that made Mary Jane rejoice:

Something tangible is shaping itself on the national horizon. [but concerned about Devoy] You become too precious to be used except for actual necessity where no substitutions would suffice. It is a cruel pity to squander your brain and vitality on anything less than supreme importance. If you were forty or even fifty you might

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<sup>635</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, Scrapbook of Poetry, August 1916, Private Collection of Kathleen Gelson McEachern, Rindge, NH.

<sup>636</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated November 24, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/16/5, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

venture to take the risk [to go to Ireland] but the odds would be against you now to the despair of those who hope in you.

. . . Oh how bad it is to think that he [Rossa] is not in the condition to realize what he always hoped for and believed sure to come and what is actually on the air at the present time . . . the return of the Irish People to the old doctrine of physical force.

—“I could sit and cry for him, poor old faithful banner bearer, poor old wolfhound of the cause, fading away slowly in mental decline while the mutterings of the longed for storm had beat on deaf ears.”<sup>637</sup>

After hearing this news, Mary Jane began to worry that the donations coming to Rossa, which were supporting his stay in the hospital, would be better spent on the activities beginning in Ireland. She wrote to Devoy:

Leaving Rossa in the ward, [rather than a private room] the expense will be moderate and I could pay for him for 3 or 4 years without taxing the people any more. If this volunteer movement in Ireland should grow fast it will need help to arm and the generosity of subscribers should be concentrated to that end and not dissipated on unproductive subjects however worthy. I'm quite sure Rossa would feel that way and I know I feel so myself.<sup>638</sup>

By the beginning of 1914 Mary Jane had nearly \$3000 in the bank, having used the rest of the money from donors through the *Gaelic American* for Rossa's care.<sup>639</sup> The house on Richmond Terrace was in poor shape, but Mary Jane refused to spend money meant for Rossa on repairs. She still hoped that someday Rossa would come home to the house he knew. Doubts began to appear in her letters in 1914:

I am never done paying bills for repairs to roof or ceilings or plumbing or carpentry and there's no comfort in it anymore for me while the two girls are living in it under protest. I have been hoping against hope to get Rossa home

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<sup>637</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated November 30, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/16/6, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>638</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated December 12, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/17/6, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>639</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated February 2, 1914, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/18/5, National library of Ireland, Dublin.

again but I see the hope growing fainter as times goes by though I try to keep myself from fully realizing the futility of it. I dread to realize it.<sup>640</sup>

As everyone began to fear Rossa's last days were upon them, the plans for his ultimate burial in Ireland became somewhat contentious. Mary Jane had promised Rossa for many years she would see he was buried with his family in Rosscarbery and the fund set up in Ireland by a large group in Clonakilty under the chairmanship of M. D. Kennedy had been established as early as 1911.<sup>641</sup> In April of 1914, Mary Jane was approached by representatives of the Corkmen's Society in New York, who suggested that they raise the necessary money for final arrangements and deal with the group in Cork in her name. Mary Jane was agreeable at first but after hearing from Devoy that these men, P. J. Moriarty and John P. Hayes, were now supporters of the Parliamentary group, she declined their help and reinforced that she was working exclusively with Devoy on any arrangements when they were necessary. She made clear her views on the importance of having a public funeral:

To accentuate the depth of his [Rossa's] devotion to the cause of Ireland and the full appreciation of his national principles by his own people and to fling that fact in the teeth of England before the whole world by honoring his poor body. So, Rossa is satisfied to be buried anywhere; it does not trouble him at all for his spirit uncontrolled is always in Ireland. But I am sure his soul is quickened by the thought that in death he may have one chance more of proclaiming his national creed to thousands of loving hearts who hold the same in Ireland and who apparently are waiting to honor liberty through him.

This looks rather gushing to me as I read it over but I won't fritter your time by trying to modify it. I am certain I have no foolish pride about such a funeral and no desire to take any conspicuous part in it.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>640</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated February 15, 1914, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/18/7, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>641</sup> "The Bringing to Rosscarbery Burial Grounds the Remains of O'Donovan Rossa," *Southern Star* (Cork), November 4, 1911.

<sup>642</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated April 27, 1914, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/19/8, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

During 1915, Mary Jane was solely focused on her family. She pointed out to Daisy, in a letter dated March 9, that she had been to a Gaelic Celebration and “was much awakened and refreshed” from it. She told Daisy: “It is very deadening and stultifying to be too much in the house as I have been all winter . . . and now like that hedgehog, I have come out of my cold storage cell.”<sup>643</sup> She wrote again to Daisy on June 15 when she believed Daisy’s last letter had “brought sunshine” back to the family when they learned that Daisy was pregnant.<sup>644</sup> It was only fourteen days later that Rossa died at St. Vincent’s Hospital, on June 29, 1915.<sup>645</sup> Mary Jane and Eileen were with him and his other children and grandchildren who lived in New York were at the hospital when he died very peacefully. John Devoy and some other friends met the family at the house that same day and discussed arrangements for a funeral first in Staten Island and then the larger funeral in Ireland. Thousands turned out for his funeral in Staten Island, walking from his home on Richmond Terrace to Mass at St. Peter’s Church, including Joseph McGarrity, Justice Goff of the New York Supreme Court, Judge John F. Cohalan, Rocky Mountain O’Brien, and militant Irish labor leader Jim Larkin.<sup>646</sup> His body was then kept at St. Peter’s Cemetery in a “glass lidded, white satin lined copper case, hermetically sealed, which was then placed in a solid mahogany coffin and re-enclosed in a hardwood

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<sup>643</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Margaret O'Donovan Rossa Cole dated March 9, 1915, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>644</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Margaret O'Donovan Rossa Cole dated June 15, 1915, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>645</sup> "O'Donovan Rossa, Patriot, Dies At 83," New York Times (New York), June 30, 1915.

<sup>646</sup> John Devoy, "Last Loving Tribute to O'Donovan Rossa," *Gaelic American* (New York), July 10, 1915.

box, which was painted battleship gray and furnished with name plate and handles,” and prepared for shipping by American Express to Ireland.<sup>647</sup> Mary Jane knew that Rossa had been a committeeman on the Terence MacManus funeral which had such a great impact on exciting the Irish people toward the Fenian cause in 1861 and thought that a similar opportunity existed at the time of Rossa’s death.<sup>648</sup> With her knowledge of the current status of the Irish Volunteers, she decided more could be gained through a public funeral in Dublin rather than in Cork, particularly with the help of Tom Clarke and Devoy. The day after Rossa died, Mary Jane wrote to Clarke thanking him for his assistance in their “mission” and enclosing a check for \$20 to have him purchase a plot in Glasnevin cemetery.<sup>649</sup> On July 10, Mary Jane and Eileen sailed on the *St. Louis* for Liverpool, feeling brave despite the concern for German U-boats prowling the Atlantic. They docked on July 18 and were met by Tom Clarke’s wife, Kathleen, and a few Irish Volunteers. They left for Gresham Hotel in Dublin the next morning after making arrangements for Rossa’s body, arriving on the *St. Paul*, to be sent to Dublin as soon as it arrived.<sup>650</sup> Mary Jane later wrote about her fondness for Kathleen Clarke who was her guide throughout her stay in Dublin:

Mrs. Clarke is a young woman of great dignity and personal grace, with beautiful hair, large serious eyes and very gentle manners. She looks like one’s ideal of a poetess, but she has a fund of practical good sense in stock and a very firm mind

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<sup>647</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "Rossa's Death Described by Mrs. Rossa," *Gaelic American* (New York), September 11, 1915.

<sup>648</sup> "The Remains of T.B. McManus," *New York Times* (New York), November 21, 1861.

<sup>649</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Tom Clarke dated July 1, 1915, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/25, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>650</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "Mrs. Rossa's Story of the Funeral," *Gaelic American* (New York), September 18, 1915.

of her own with all her gentleness and youth. Her children are beautiful, docile and intellectual. Mr. Clarke has much to live for. May God be kind to him.<sup>651</sup>

She also was very glad to renew her friendship with Tom Clarke, who was the person responsible for all activities surrounding Rossa's funeral. Mary Jane would later so poetically describe how she felt at the time:

I do not know if Mr. Clarke and his splendid Funeral Committee will be inclined to think this is detracting any from the universal acknowledgement of the magnificence of their practical achievement, but I have to tell how I felt for my part, just as if I had been commissioned by the Great Commandant of Destinies to life and hold a single thread of a fabric to be woven, and I could see the glittering garment grow, while I lived, and moved, and did nothing more than hold the thread that started it.<sup>652</sup>

The entire spectacle is described in detail in a series of articles Mary Jane wrote for the *Gaelic American*. She reports about Rossa's body lying in state at City Hall with the Fianna Boys standing Guard, and the sounds on the day of the funeral: "The sound of marching feet; the flutter of patriotic flags, the glint of arms, the hum of life and universal preparation filled the streets with an atmosphere of subdued elation and solemn glory."<sup>653</sup> Her descriptions include the masses of people that lined the streets; the prayer with Father Michael O'Flanagan; Clarke ceremonially closing the lid on the casket at her request; sitting in a carriage at the head of Parliament Street near where the *Irish People* offices had been, as the procession to Glasnevin began; and sitting spellbound while Pearse spoke his "heart striking" oration.<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>651</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "Dublin on the Eve of the Great Funeral," *Gaelic American* (New York), October 2, 1915.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "The Day of the Rossa Funeral in Dublin," *Gaelic American* (New York), December 4, 1915.

<sup>654</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "A Memorable Nationalist Demonstration," *Gaelic American* (New York), December 25, 1915.

Mary Jane was impressed with all the new breed of republicans she met in Dublin but especially the women: her guide, Kathleen Clarke; the women of Cumman Na mBan she met at a meeting she attended; but most of all Countess Markievicz. Her poetic description in the *Gaelic American* is remarkably visual:

Then there is that picturesque and versatile lady . . . tall and fair, young and golden haired, with bright blue eyes of soldier keenness, and wild rose complexion, dashing and boyish, recklessly brave, yet appealingly feminine, an Irish girl of the “ascendancy” as she explained herself, married to a Polish count . . . a writer, speaker, an insatiable seeker for knowledge . . . she is very good tempered, which is lucky, as she is also said to be a capital shot.<sup>655</sup>

Before sailing on the *New York* to return home, Mary Jane and Eileen had the chance to visit Tom Clarke’s newsagent shop, have lunch with Dr. Mark Ryan, and visit with some of her Keohane relatives. But before she left she wrote to Clarke and the other members of the Funeral Committee:

I feel I cannot sail for America without again expressing to you my satisfaction with and gratitude for the superb management of the National Testimonial directed by you on the part of the people of Ireland, Consoled by the honor conferred on him, and the open affection and sympathy and unity with his ideals displayed and avowed by hundreds of thousands of his countrymen and women. I leave Rossa to rest in his native sod convinced that Ireland was never so close to the fruition of his dreams as at this moment, and inspired with an ardent desire to help with heart and soul always and everywhere, that cause of freedom in the service of which O’Donovan Rossa lived and died.<sup>656</sup>

But everything about her trip to Dublin was not lovely and charming. It was, after all, the height of the tension before the rebellion, and the Irish people were blatantly demonstrating their nationalism with the very act of the funeral. Furthermore, Rossa was

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<sup>655</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "The Old Spirit Revived in Ireland," *Gaelic American* (New York), November 6, 1915.

<sup>656</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "A Memorable Nationalist Demonstration," *Gaelic American* (New York), December 25, 1915.



truly hated by the British government. So it is not surprising that Mary Jane and Eileen were followed everywhere they went in Dublin and their presence was noted in the police surveillance logs covering Clarke, Pearse, Countess Markievicz, and others.<sup>657</sup> More intrusive yet were the theft of a few of Mary Jane's papers from her hotel room and the evidence that her luggage had been searched while in the Gresham Hotel in Dublin.<sup>658</sup> When Mary Jane and Eileen arrived in New York, Eileen gave an interview in which she describes nearly losing their passports to a British government representative, but her quick thinking allowed them to turn over their police permits instead and escape onto the ship home. This same interview made very clear that Eileen believed that the Irish people were not pro-British but pro-Irish, not a welcome comment when the United States was on the brink of war as Britain's ally. The newspaper that covered this interview was filled with pro-British and anti-German articles.<sup>659</sup>

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<sup>657</sup> Dublin Metropolitan Police Report Movement of Extremists 29 May 1915-20 April 1916, July 23, 1915, Dublin Metropolitan Police: Chief Secretary's Office, Crime Branch, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>658</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "British Detectives Rifled Her Valise," *Gaelic American* (New York), October 9, 1915.

<sup>659</sup> "Says Ireland is Pro-Irish," *Springfield Union* (Springfield, MA), August 23, 1915.

## Chapter 12

### REBELLION AT LAST

Mary Jane had spent the last five years out of the public eye, focusing on her husband. But when she returned from Dublin after the funeral she was anxious to be active again in the fight that was coming soon. In a letter to Devoy on October 11, 1915, she writes:

There is a great giving up of guns in the Harbor [New York Harbor] for an incoming ship. I can see it passing up the bay but it is nearly swallowed up already in a thick smoky haze, don't know what it is all about. There's something stirring in the shots that brings me back to your letter and the vision it raises of the near future for Ireland. I too would love to be filling some post however humble. That would bring me to the border of the glorious enterprise. So think of me when the time approaches and let me earn a bay leaf.<sup>660</sup>

So many of her thoughts about Dublin centered on the women she met and the role they were playing in the movement. Meeting so many of the members of Cumann na mBan as well as Markievicz made a deep impression on her:

They're [the women] indeed as fine a lot as the heart of man could hope for and I pray they devise some way of redeeming Ireland without the sacrifice of their bright lives or their affections. But they are brave women and see no reason to expect freedom without sacrifice. They can be depended on to practice what they profess.<sup>661</sup>

She followed through on some of her beliefs about these women when she decided to speak publicly about them and her support for their efforts at an event where she shared the stage with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. The mass meeting was organized by Cumann na mBan of America and held October 5, 1915, at Tuxedo Hall, Madison Avenue and

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<sup>660</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated October 11, 1915, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/23/1, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>661</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated October 25, 1915, John Devoy Papers, Ms 180009/22/6, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Fifty-Seventh Street in New York City.<sup>662</sup> However, all her support for the women didn't mean she was forgiving when they overstepped her nineteenth-century beliefs that women still should have a second place. In a later letter to Devoy when she was concerned that he had allowed the women's organization to take possession of the prized films from Rossa's funeral, she wrote:

I paid sixty-one dollars and something for the bill. If they go into the women's control they will not produce the returns that would come if you only loaned them out. Pardon me for getting so stirred up about it, but while I have a great respect for women's work in general, I have seen in societies that there may be a good deal of obstruction to the good intended caused by the unavoidable membership of a few contrary or foolish or self-important people, unscrupulous enough to override their fellows. And while women's societies can be a great auxiliary help to the plans of men, I don't believe in giving unlimited license or permitting them a chance to go into competition with men in men's work. I believe in votes for women, of course. Every woman does these days, and I have always done so for every individual woman, no matter how silly or perverse can think to the point where her affections or interests are concerned.

Her real rant was against the organizations of women, not the women themselves; perhaps her experience with the Fenian Sisterhood in the 1860s, which occurred at such a difficult period in her own life, had left a lasting impression. She wrote further in this same letter to reinforce her point, even though she knew Devoy disagreed:

Maybe you don't want to hear my ideas about women's societies—I approve of them for as much good as they do for women and particularly for as much help as they can give men in patriotic matters. But they must be absolutely under obedience to the authorized men and take willing guidance from them if they profess to be patriotic societies.<sup>663</sup>

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<sup>662</sup> "Women's Council to Hear How Old Ireland Stands," *Gaelic American* (New York), October 2, 1915.

<sup>663</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated Autumn, 1915, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/22/4/, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

But this view did not stop her from becoming an associate member of Cumann na mBan and signing Eileen up as a full member.<sup>664</sup> Mary Jane believed Eileen was a born leader and her membership in the group could vastly enhance their effectiveness. Her description of Eileen in an earlier letter to Devoy does undermine her view of women's societies:

Eileen has the business brain of the family. She is really unusually clever. . . . She is daring and not afraid to aim at a star and she is a natural leader of women . . . anything she takes in hand she works at with might and main and anything she wants she spares no effort to achieve.<sup>665</sup>

Eileen O'Donovan Rossa finally married John F. McGowan after many years of courtship, on February 7, 1916. This left Mary Jane rudderless as she describes to Devoy: "I got so accustomed to having her like an encyclopedia of human practical information and reliability and force at my elbow that I am completely lost without her and don't know how to adjust myself to the new conditions."<sup>666</sup> Mary Jane had spent all the money she saved from donations first on Rossa's treatment and then on her expenses for the funerals. When she returned from Ireland her own financial situation became desperate. In a letter to Devoy, she laments she was unable to sell the house and would not be able to spend the winter there as it needed a great deal of repair and she could not afford that.<sup>667</sup> She moved in to a New York City apartment on 135<sup>th</sup> Street with her daughters

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<sup>664</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated November 7, 1915, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/23/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>665</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated April 9, 1913, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/13/5, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>666</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated February 9, 1916, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/24/2, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>667</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated January 9, 1916, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/24/1, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Jane and Bella. Far away from all her books and with no means of writing her biography as she had wished, she despaired in a letter to Daisy: “the fear at eventual poverty and dependence check completely any inclination to present productivity I might have—I always felt that I earned my living—If I were younger and could undertake a lecture or reading tour to clear expenses, I would do as I always have done.”<sup>668</sup>

Mary Jane knew the planned rebellion was coming soon, particularly after Eileen received a letter from Captain Craven, who spent time with them in Dublin, telling her they were awaiting imminent word in Ireland.<sup>669</sup> Mary Jane wrote to Devoy on April 6, 1916, noting this message from Craven and worried about Devoy making the right decision for his own role in the coming fight:

The times are so tense and I am so anxious and feel so lonesome on the outside when all within seem to be so busy that I am impelled irresistibly to try to shake a little illumination from the fountainhead. Meaning you. Perhaps I can now lessen your anxiety regarding the men in the gap by reminding you that they sent you their message by Eileen last August that it should make no difference who was arrested for relays of substitutes were appointed to fill their places, and if all else failed the women were coached to continue the work. I am sure this was true, so be comforted even in the absence of cable messages. These seem to be the dead still days before the storm when no round is in the air. . . . I feared you were gone to Ireland . . . I hope you will remain at this side to direct and vivify the forces you have marshaled for the assistance of the men at home. To throw yourself into the midst of things in Ireland would be the fulfillment of a beautiful dream to you, I am sure, but while you can be of more practical benefit here I hope you will regard the dream as a temptation to be resisted.<sup>670</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Margaret O'Donovan Rossa dated July 27, 1916, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>669</sup> Eileen O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated March 22, 1916, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/10/5, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>670</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated April 6, 1916, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/24/6, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Mary Jane was undoubtedly pleased when she heard of the start of the rebellion on Easter Monday. However, she was horrified when she read of the news of the executions in the May 4 *New York Times* and wrote a letter to Daisy that same day:

I am fearfully distressed by the news from Ireland. I feel heartbroken for I knew those gallant men who have been slaughtered in the Tower of London by the savage English government and they were the bravest and noblest and simplest of true patriots . . . they knew they were facing death in the struggle for their country's freedom but they had no premonition that they would be trapped and captured so quickly and rushed to the tower to be shot on sight without the ministrations of their church or human burial. . . . law called in troops from England and Wales and turned machine guns on the people as well as shelling from warships. So many wounded so many dead of all the lovely people who were kind to Eileen and to me last year in Ireland and who buried your Father as if he were a king.<sup>671</sup>

Mary Jane immediately became more politically active and spoke at major rallies held in New York, donating the flag that had draped Rossa's coffin to be used at a gathering of 4,000 people in Carnegie Hall to commemorate the executions.<sup>672</sup> In a letter to the head of the Women's Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, she called the flag "a treasured personal gift from Tom Clarke, Pearse and MacDonagh—the Irish Volunteers, the symbol of their hope and aspirations before enfolding Rossa's body as the most significant sign of their love for and faith in him."<sup>673</sup> Mary Jane, herself appeared at a memorial meeting held in New York at the Montauk Theatre where she spoke "of the lasting love of freedom in the Irish People. She also read a poem commemorating the

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<sup>671</sup> "Four Irish Rebel Leaders Executed," *New York Times* (New York), May 4, 1916; Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Margaret O'Donovan Rossa dated May 4, 1916, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection, Williams Rossa Cole Residence, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>672</sup> "Irish Pay Tribute to Dublin Rebels," *New York Times* (New York), May 15, 1916.

<sup>673</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Ellen Regan Jolly dated June 26, 1916, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

effort of the last martyrs to the cause of Erin's freedom."<sup>674</sup> She attended another women's mass meeting at Cooper Union on July 10, 1916, at which she read "The Heroine of the Irish Rebellion of 1916," a poem dedicated to Countess Markievicz that she had composed for the event:

The Countess Markievicz! A name  
 For evermore allied to fame:  
 A figure of romance and pride,  
 She did her part on Liffey side.  
 Heroic in her suit of green,  
 With steady eye and fearless mien  
 For days she held her brave command  
 With valorous action ably planned,

"To arms! To arms!" and at the cry,  
 The downtrod legions leap and fly—  
 The flag of Ireland waves on high—  
 White, Green and Gold against the sky!  
 Glad voices shout upon the street,  
 The sounds increase of hurrying feet,  
 And generous swelling hearts advance  
 For death or freedom to take chance.

Alas 'twas death for many there!  
 And chains or torture for the share  
 Of all who perished not afield,  
 But to false English pledges yield.  
 Hard pressed by overwhelming troops,  
 Half-armed the insurgent army droops,  
 But battling bravely still, defied,  
 A week long, England's power and pride.

For days outnumbered by the foe,  
 Hemmed in, besieged, her men laid low,  
 Supplies and ammunition failed,  
 The Countess Captain never quailed  
 Till every hope of victory lost,  
 She looked upon her dwindling host,  
 And woman-hearted still though brave,  
 Resolved the remnant's lives to save.

How could she who had only known

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<sup>674</sup> "Big Crowd Cheers Ireland's Martyrs," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn), May 29, 1916.

Chivalrous Ireland, guess the stone  
 That lies for heart in England's men?  
 How could she know their treachery then?  
 As, flag of truce held in her hand,  
 She let her small heroic band  
 To where the British forces wait,  
 Outside the tottering College gate.

One moment and the deed is done!  
 She kissed her glittering rebel gun  
 And laid it in the foeman's hand,  
 Surrendering her brief command.  
 Now flamed the treacherous British hate,  
 Now clangs the murderous prison gate,  
 And led and leader locked within  
 Swift doom of death in life begin.

Oft had she vowed, her weapon raised  
 In Freedom's cause should be aphased  
 By death alone; and in her eye  
 The flame of battle mounted high.  
 That flashing eye, so brightly blue,  
 Held like her name, a meaning true,  
 And yet within its depths betrayed  
 The tender mercy of a maid.

Ah, Countess Constance, nature planned  
 Your heart for more than war's command;  
 That heart so gallant, gay and bright,  
 That mothered thousands in its light,  
 That trained up boys and girls to see  
 How they could help make Ireland free.  
 Big sister to Eblana's youth,  
 God lift you from these days of ruth!

Music, and song, and painting, speech,  
 For either she could fill the breach;  
 A press suppressed? Her printing type  
 And editorial help were ripe,  
 At service of the Cause she loved  
 Her purse and mansion ever proved  
 A writer she of fearless school  
 And foe of England's long misrule.

Brave lady! gifted to excess  
 With cultured genius meant to bless,



Accomplished and of noble mind,  
 War's fortune is to thee unkind,  
 In this enlightened age, at will  
 Of medieval captors still!  
 God save thee! till our strengthened hands  
 Can burst thy barbarous prison bands!<sup>675</sup>

In the last months of Mary Jane's life she was very active in Irish affairs and happy to be focused on the cause to which she had devoted so much during her life, but she was aware that others may not have understood the Irish people as she did. In a letter, three weeks before her death, asking Daisy to attend an Irish event in California, she says:

Bella and Jane [her other daughters] are not like Papa they have little interest in or appreciation of genuine Irish people who as victims of English oppression seem uncouth and unpolished to a newer more prosperous generation here. The Irish people have souls and brains and great overflowing hearts susceptible of the highest cultivation—and where they lack it—is the fault of the despotism that has been stamping on them for centuries. It is a miracle that they have preserved the human virtues under a systematic course of misgovernment and persecution unprecedented in the world's history.<sup>676</sup>

She spoke often during those days after the Easter rebellion and wrote poetry about the people she met who had died for Ireland. One of those tributes was found on her desk by her daughter Eileen and sent to Devoy when she died in August of 1916:

In Memory of Padraic Pearse  
 August 16, 1916

I walked with the Gods a year ago,  
 On radiant roads, twixt daisied fields  
 And blossoming hedges;  
 High over our heads the skylark flew  
 Piercing the blue

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<sup>675</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To John Devoy dated July 11, 1916, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/24/7, National Library of Ireland, Dublin; Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, "Countess Markievicz," *Gaelic American* (New York), July 15, 1916.

<sup>676</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, To Margaret O'Donovan Rossa dated July 27, 1916, Williams Rossa Cole Private Collection.

O Heaven's edges.

Our talk was lifted above the bird,  
Exalted over the song we heard,  
For 'twas all for freeing the Land we loved,  
The holy talk of tried and proved  
Living up to their sacred pledges.

Oh woe! That the beautiful soul is gone,  
And the Shepherds flock, distraught and wan,  
On wavering feet seek hither and yon  
The guiding message they loved to con.

The work of their poet sages,  
The vital, thrilling, electrical word  
That winged to the heart and promptly stirred  
To full grown life, the passionate chard  
Responsive through all the ages.

Pearse, St. Enda mourns you well,  
Martyr of Freedom that fought and fell  
In angelic sanctity, hear us tell  
How we shall love you forever  
And never cease to seek as you sought  
Holding, as you did, life at naught  
For the Honor and Glory of Ireland's cause,  
Humanity's uplift, Righteous laws,  
And the chains of Bondage to sever.<sup>677</sup>

Mary Jane died suddenly on August 17, 1916, at the apartment she shared with her daughters at 622 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. Devoy was so struck by her sudden death that he wrote a long, beautiful obituary. He commented:

Those who met her at meetings wondered at the clearness and power of her voice, which was a marvel for a woman in her seventieth year, and her step was as lively as that of a girl of twenty. But the Coroner's physician found that her heart had been affected and that she died of heart disease.

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<sup>677</sup> Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, In Memory of Padraic Pearse, August 16, 1916, John Devoy Papers, Ms 18009/10, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Devoy wrote that not only was she a devoted wife and Rossa's best counselor but "a woman of fine ability":

Animated by the same spirit [as her husband] of self sacrifice, gifted with fine literary ability, supplemented by wide reading and having an intimate knowledge of the Irish people, she was fitted to shine in the governing circles of Dublin if the movement had succeeded in her time. She never shed a tear for her own troubles, but wept bitterly when the news came to her of the savage shooting of the men who had stood around her husband's grave in Glasnevin . . .

Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa was never at any time in her valuable life more useful to the Irish Cause than at the moment of her death. Her knowledge of Ireland and the Irish people, her personal acquaintance with the men and women whom she met in Dublin during her recent brief stay there, coupled with her sound judgment and great tact, made her counsel very valuable. . . . Both men and women will miss her sorely, knowing that nobody can take her place.<sup>678</sup>

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<sup>678</sup> John Devoy, "Widow of O'Donovan Rossa Dies Suddenly," *Gaelic American* (New York), August 26, 1916.

## CONCLUSION

On the one hundredth anniversary of Rossa's funeral in Dublin, there were two great ceremonies: one held by the then Irish government going through the formal motions of a state event, and the other, a thunderous celebration on the streets of Dublin by the people of Dublin. It is fitting that, even in 2015, the established power structure could not understand the devotion the common people had to Rossa. As Padraig Pearse wrote in the funeral program in 1915:

O'Donovan Rossa was not the greatest man of the Fenian generation, but he was its most typical man. He was the man that to the masses of his countrymen then and since stood most starkly and plainly for the Fenian idea. More lovable and understandable . . . Rossa held a unique place in the hearts of Irish men and women. They made songs about him, his very name passed into proverb.<sup>679</sup>

The people believed in Rossa, despite his commitment to violence, which has caused him to be shunned by many twentieth-century historians. The people ignored his volatile personality and his long history of health problems, but they remembered well his consistent belief that Ireland would be free and remembered how much he suffered for his beliefs. He became the icon of the struggle whose life existed in both prose and poetry, much of it created by Mary Jane. She was the architect of this vision of him that she created during his time in prison while she was a young wife traveling through both the United States and England telling his story. The vision was further built by both Rossa's and Mary Jane's use of the press to publish poetry and prose that captured their hopes and dreams and stayed steadfast to their view of rebellion. Mary Jane continued to keep Rossa in hearts and minds of the Irish people during the ten years before his death

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<sup>679</sup> Diarmuid O Donnabain Rosa, *Souvenir of Public Funeral to Glasnevin Cemetery*, August 1, 1915, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

when he could not speak for himself. She continued to tell the story of the “unconquerable Irishman breathing the same unalterable desire for the absolute freedom of his country and its utter separation from England,” as she described him in the program for his funeral.<sup>680</sup> If, as is said, the Fenians were the pilot light of Irish nationalism leading up to the 1916 rebellion, there is no doubt that Mary Jane, through the work she did on Rossa’s behalf and in her own right, was the keeper of that flame and an apostle for Irish freedom.

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<sup>680</sup> Diarmuid O Donnabain Rosa, *Souvenir of Public Funeral to Glasnevin Cemetery*, August 1, 1915, Rossa Family Private Collection, Patricia Byrne Residence, Milford, CT.

APPENDIX  
ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Mary Jane Irwin. Photo from Sean O’Luing, *O’Donnabhain Rosa I* (Dublin: Sairseal Agus Dill, 1969), 192.



Figure 2. Marriage Certificate for Mary Jane Irwin and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, October 22, 1864. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.

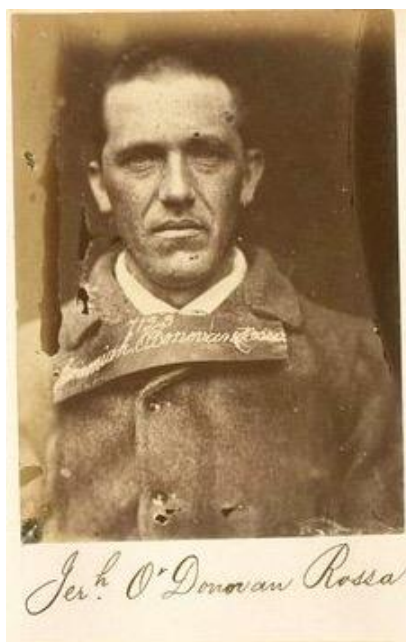


Figure 2. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in Mountjoy Jail, 1870. Photograph courtesy of Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 3. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, 1868. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 4. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, 1870. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.





Figure 5. James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa, 1870. Photograph returned to his mother from Chatham Prison 1870. Photograph courtesy of Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 6. James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa, 1870. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 7. The “Cuba Five,” 1871. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O’Donovan Rossa Family.

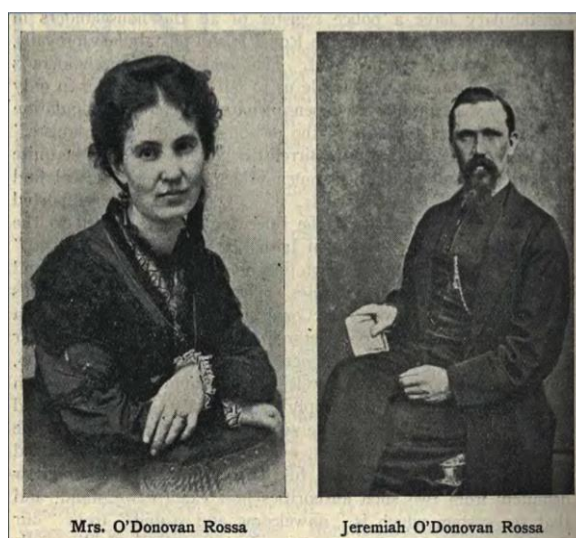


Figure 8. Mary Jane and Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa. Photograph from *The Catholic Bulletin* V, no. 8 (August 1915): 566. Courtesy of Kieran Wyse, County Cork Library and Arts Service.



Figure 9. O'Donovan Rossa children Jeremiah (Jerry), Isabella (Bella), Margaret (Daisy), and Jane (Jennie). Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 10. Three Sisters: Amelia Irwin, Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, and Isabella Irwin. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



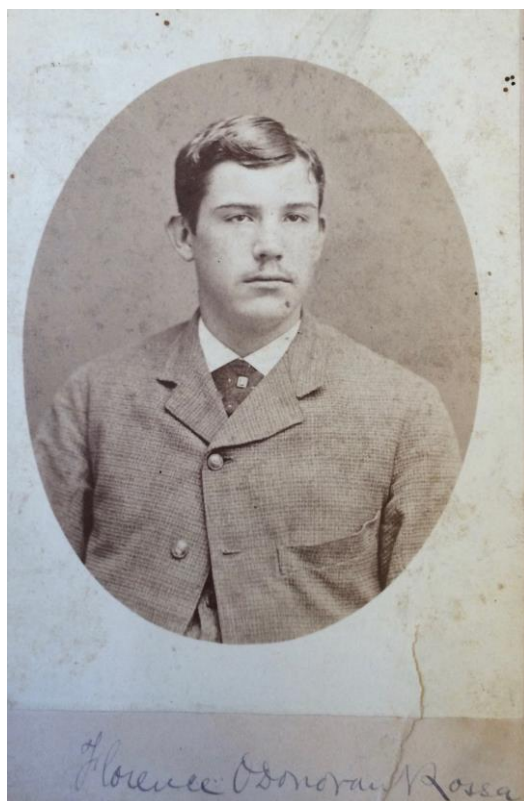


Figure 11. Florence Stephens O'Donovan Rossa, 1883. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 12. From center top clockwise: Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa; James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa; Maxwell Irwin; James Maxwell O'Donovan Rossa as a child; Eileen O'Donovan Rossa; Shelia O'Donovan Rossa; Irwin sisters, Amelia, Mary Jane, Isabella, and Isabella O'Donovan Rossa; Jane O'Donovan Rossa; Margaret O'Donovan Rossa; Maxwell Irwin with Dr. Timothy Irwin; Dennis O'Donovan Rossa. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa family.



Figure 13. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa and her children at their home in Mariners Harbor, Staten Island called "Erastina." Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 14. Mary Jane and daughters and granddaughter on the front lawn at 194 Richmond Terrace in Staten Island. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.

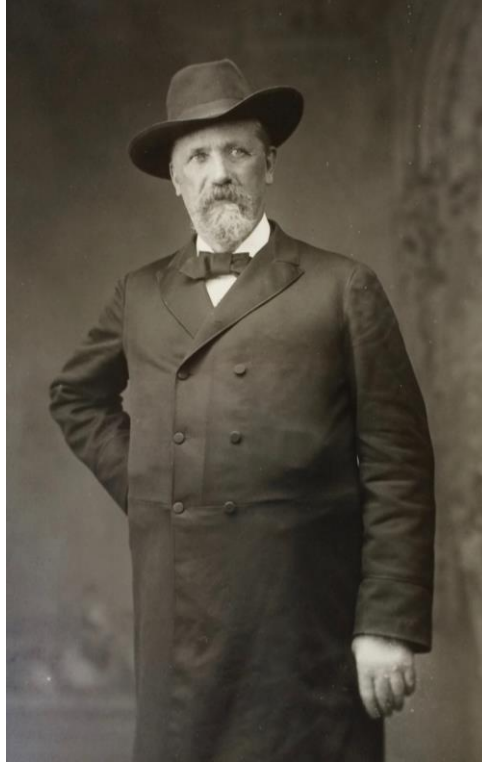


Figure 15. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, circa 1894. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 16. Margaret O'Donovan Rossa, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Jane O'Donovan Rossa, and Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, 1905. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 17. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa and her daughters: Eileen, Isabella, Margaret, and Jane, circa 1906. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 18. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa at home in Staten Island, circa 1906. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.





Figure 19. Mary Jane and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa at home in Staten Island, circa 1906. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa Family.



Figure 20. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa in the garden at home in Staten Island, circa 1910. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa family.





Figure 21. Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa portrait from Dublin funeral for her husband. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa family.



Figure 22. Formal Portrait at O'Donovan Rossa Funeral in Dublin, August 1, 1915. Left to right: Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, Father Michael O'Flanagan, Eileen O'Donovan Rossa, Thomas Clarke. Photograph courtesy of the Byrne/O'Donovan Rossa family.

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