

REBECCA O'CONNER

Jenny Mitchel



YOUNG IRELANDER

A BIOGRAPHY

NEW YORK WELCOMES THE JOHN MITCHELS

An Excerpt from *Jenny Mitchel: Young Irishlander*

by Rebecca O'Conner

Jenny Mitchel: Young Irishlander is the recently published biography of the spirited wife of the exiled Irish patriot, John Mitchel. Mitchel was publisher of the militant United Irishman and its "treasonous" language during the 1848 unrest in Ireland got him transported to

Tasmania under a fourteen year sentence. Jenny and their five children joined Mitchel in Van Diemen's Land, where a sixth child was later born. In 1853 the entire family escaped to the United States and set up housekeeping in Brooklyn where other '48 exiles had found refuge. In New York, John Mitchel began to publish The Citizen. NYIHR member Rebecca O'Conner describes the city that welcomed them in this excerpt from Chapter 7.

How young everybody was in Brooklyn. Except for the Dutch, who had been there with the Indians, most had come recently; from Germany, South Carolina, Ireland, even New England. Ireland was still being emptied at the rate of 30,000 each month to New York alone. The first month of John Mitchel's life on Union Street, just nearly each and every Irish who had left the old country wanted to come and claim him as a hero.

They came with bands and pennons, in marching clubs, to stand in the street until a Mitchel came out. Formal deputations were at the door to present resolutions and scrolls; they had to be invited in, even if unexpected. Special organized craftsmen arrived in marching step, carrying the hooks and axes of their trades. Many came informally, walking in when the hallway doors were open, as they might have in County Down. It would be late at night before the hats and coats were gone from the front halls and the neighborhood could sleep. . . .

The neighbors were small merchants and mechanics who owned their own Brooklyn shops. Like all Brooklyn streets, trees lined the road sides. The home of the Mitchels was near the river and bay, with verdant woodlands to walk on the heights. They could hear the noise from Buttermilk Channel, when incoming and outgoing tides met the currents of the rivers. They could watch it churning and look over the spectacular views of the Jersey shore and the close-by life of New York City, see the boats coming in from voyages, setting forth, and the smaller busy messenger boats and the thirteen ferries to the city.

Not until after three public events, the holidays and New Year's Day calls and the excitement of getting a weekly newspaper, *THE CITIZEN*, off and running could Jenny settle into home making and renewing old and close friendships and forging new ones. The Common Council of New York City offered the hospitality of the Governor's Room at City Hall for John Mitchel to receive in a more

orderly fashion, that he might decide on the programs in some protection and comfort. City Hall, which John Mitchel thought the only real building with architectural correctness in the whole city, was close to the Fulton Street ferry landing, ten minutes from Brooklyn. He was pleased to accept. It made him more accessible to newspaper people, since an American Fleet Street faced the Hall and its pretty park. . . .

The Common Council of the City of New York wished to make the patriot welcome, without the exhaustion of a grand progress through cheers and beautiful women. At the City Hall there were military organizations and bands to be reviewed, and speeches to be given and received on the portico. John Mitchel drew from his San Francisco eloquence that the kind reception proffered him showed the English what liberty-loving Americans thought of England and English justice. The Mayor frowned and stiffened. Coming away from the Hall a well-disposed New York journalist said to Mitchel: "Don't say that kind of thing; these people do not mean any affront to the British government at all; they mean to pay a passing tribute of respect; take it as it comes and don't push it too far."

The Directory* organized an event they did mean to show the English government what the the American Irish thought of their stubbornness. They held a dinner to make all other congratulatory dinners seems small. The banquet was the night of December 19th [probably 1854], at the Broadway Theatre. Here the ladies were included. Brave Jenny was in the first box, surrounded by children, with Mrs. Mary Haslett Mitchel and daughters Henrietta and Mary Jane. All the other boxes and the dress circle were filled with women and their escorts. It had been necessary to lay a temporary floor over the theatre's slanting aisles, and tables for 600 were set. The table for the principal guests was the stage. There were gold draperies and canopies. The theatre backdrop was, oddly, the banqueting scene from "Macbeth".

It was what John Mitchel would have called a white day in memory for the Mitchel women. Charles O'Connor, of The Directory, a lawyer's lawyer, a politician's politician, an Irishman's Irishman, and a Catholic's Catholic, presided. He introduced the regular programmed toasts, each underscored by an appropriate selection by Bloomfield's Brass Band, from Governor's Island. The principal part of the evening, speech making, was delayed because serving the banquet and light refreshments for the ladies was slow from the improvised caterer's kitchen.

Lawyer O'Connor began the program finally with a review of all the American wars in which Irishmen had taken part. He read letters of regret from those who could not be there, including one from his aged father who had come to America so long before from Connaught. Catholic Archbishop of New York, John Hughes, Ulsterman, declined on the grounds it did not become him as a representative of the Church, which had not endorsed

*A vague group whose origins and purposes require further research. —Ed.

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1848. He sent kind words of personal warmth to the honored guest and to Mrs. Mitchel and her children.

Brave Mrs. Mitchel heard oratory that echoed from Conciliation and Confederate Halls, Dublin, from some of the same throats. John Mitchel spoke freely against the English and suggested that the American press was too much influenced in Irish and European affairs by the London press. Meagher pictured in some grisly detail the horrors of being English prisoners. Richard O'Gorman and John Blake Dillon were called on, but accepted recognition only, saying the hour was getting late for speeches. Dillon had made and heard all he ever again wanted to hear and make.

Horace Greeley, editor of the *Tribune*, member of The Directory, responded to the toast to the press, and endorsed the value of newspapers in promoting truth and understanding. Judge Robert Emmet, son of Cork born Thomas Addis Emmet, brother to Robert Emmet, hanged as a rebel by the English in 1803, was called on to present the positions of The Directory. He said funds had come in large amounts from America and over the world meant for arms and men for the 1848 rebellion. Since then, many had wanted to have the money returned, or used for such things as repairing churches and opening orphanages. All of these things were worthy, but that was not what the contributors intended. He had been maligned, but had held firm. The Directory believed the money which was appropriated to bring John Mitchel and his family out [from Australia] properly advanced the cause of Irish freedom. They would have sent sooner, but had to wait for such an honest Irish adventurer as Patrick James Smyth to accomplish the expensive and difficult mission. Cheers for Pat Smyth, to which he responded, hoping the others would be rescued from Van Diemen's Land. The final toast, all standing, was to "brave Mrs. Mitchel". . . .

Brooklyn was a snug fit for Jenny. There was a ready-made Irish community from the old *Nation* days based near Union Street. They'd five years of gossip truth to catch up. (Was it true that Gavan Duffy and his wife were having real marital troubles?) (Heard the funny poem "Remember Me?" Richard D'Alton Williams down teaching in an Alabama Jesuit college, wrote to Meagher on his New York receptions?) Five years was a short span, but into it they'd each packed a biography of experiences. Many of the happenings they cared to share only with their Celtic nationalist circle. In no time it became again a weekly custom to gather from company with Jenny. She set Sundays for them, hours spent in music, talk and consuming her good refreshments.

It was thanks to the men of The Directory—acting as individuals—Directory funds were not for sustenance—that some who reached New York in disarray were now safely again in the middle class. Horace Greeley, editor of the influential daily, knew everything going on in New York, and helped find jobs for those without professions. Judge Robert Emmet made his home and table a comfort to those who were so away from family. He and Charles O'Connor lobbied the New York State legislature to allow members of the Irish bar to practice immediately, without waiting the five years to become citizens and taking examinations. Richard O'Gorman and John Blake Dillon formed a partnership with success. O'Gorman would follow O'Connor into Tammany and Democratic party politics. . . .

Richard O'Gorman had recently married a Dublin cousin and they had with them merchant Richard O'Gorman Senior and "Old Mrs. O'Gorman", who had emigrated. Mrs. O'Gorman had been a mainstay for the men in Dublin jails and on the run after 1848, and the women who waited for them. She remained a sturdy and warm center, writing letters home, keeping in touch with their roots. The O'Gormans were then within walking distance of Union Street.

John Blake Dillon was exuberant about being a New Yorker. "I never want to set foot on Irish soil again!" he affirmed. He was bitter about the many who did not come out in support of O'Brien and the foolish failure at Ballinagary. The difference he found in law practice in the States was all to the good. He had the run of



Mitchel's was a peculiarly romantic nature, ending in an elopement, when not quite twenty years old, with Miss Jane Verner, whose rare personal attractions but indicated the gentle beauty of her nature; and whose heroic fortitude, and relentless, though womanly dignity, under the trying circumstances attending her husband's career will inspire some future poet to steal her name and virtues from the page of past history to give a soul and a character to romance.

John Savage, *The Modern Revolutionary and Literature of Ireland*, 4th edn, Belford, Clarke & Co, Chicago, 1882.

the law libraries of Judge Emmet and Charles O'Connor, soon realizing that American law was based on English precedents. He liked having an office, as opposed to leaning against a pillar in the Four Courts by the River Liffey, waiting for a solicitor to summon him to a case. And no wigs. He relished the hustle of New York, the many theatres, breakfasting with William Makepeace Thackeray, calling on Louis Kossuth, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. . . .

John Blake Dillon shared his city pleasures with Mary Haslett Mitchel and "the girls". William Haslett described his mother's relations with John Blake as very touching. "The old lady", as Dillon called her, rather bloomed more than a minister's widow could have in Newry. She was great company at the theatre, seeing European stars such as Rachel, having dinner at fashionable hotels. She played a mean game of whist, for which John Blake was a worthy opponent. He was so much a member of the family when they moved from the East Hampton farm to Sackett Street, if he went for an evening of dancing or singing or whist, he'd just tuck a tooth brush in his pocket in case he would stay over.

He brought to the Sackett Street parlor new friends he was making, not all exiles, but of Irish descent and Ireland minded the proper nationalist way. A Dillon kinswoman, Catherine Dillon, was the wife of John B. Purroy, the son of a refugee from revolution in Venezuela. Their children, near the ages of the older Mitchel boys were memorable; Salome for her flashing eyes and intellect, Mary for her sweet voice and Irish songs, and Henry D. for a go-ahead spirit. They lived a good distance away, in Fordham, but were often expected by the Mitchels for tea. . . .

It did not take long for Jenny and her children to become Americans. It was something in the atmosphere, a sort of freedom. The children made friends of their own and went about with them, independent of the parents' programs. New York City stores, theatres, and its sheer excitement as a bustling metropolis was a penny trip each way on a ferry, and many Brooklyn women went for a day's pleasure. Sunday after church in Brooklyn, everybody that could muster the proper dress was promenaded along the tree rich streets and squares on brick walks surrounding each great

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pile of religious manifestation. Jenny and John Mitchel admitted to Van Diemen's Land friends that sometimes, in the middle of all the hurrying crowds here, they were homesick for Bothwell and Nant Cottage [their Tasmanian home]. . . .

Jenny adopted the Brooklyn custom of setting aside one evening a week to be "At Home", a necessity. Americans were such sociable people. They would call at all hours if the household did not have such a device, since "At Home" had its obverse side: "Not At Home". Refreshments for the "At Home" evenings were simple, wine and cakes only. Jenny thought it not quite as hospitable enough from her Irish and Australian culture, but went along with it, saving more good things for the Sunday afternoons. Brooklyn offered the possibilities of fine tables. Better meats she had never seen anywhere. Chanting hucksters came through the streets with an endless variety of fresh caught fish. Farmers from the thrifty small Dutch acres sent new grown fruits and vegetables. Their dairy cows were fed on hot mash from the many breweries lining North River. The "swill milk" and its creamy butter were up to Jenny's high standards. The oysters were superb. . . .

Every activity at Union Street centered around the reason why home was now in Brooklyn, not Bothwell—a weekly newspaper, John Mitchel, editor. He wrote in his *Jail Journal* the idea of a paper such as only he could produce, and America needed, came after he reached the states and read the press. Leather and prunello, Mr. Mitchel!

Six weeks after the PROMETHEUS docked, the first number of the Mitchel paper came out, with a press run bragged at fifty thousand. New York City was a full-tilt town, but even with the backing of The Directory, it could not have been put in motion before Pat Smyth set out. The men of The Directory had more in mind when they invested their money than testimonial dinners and lectures to the genteel. John Mitchel, armed with pen and press, with his reputation as a patriot certain, would be the steely propagandist weapon inspiring all to be ready for the moment of the day they would bring about; the day to strike full force for freedom. He would correct the tendency of the American leaders and editorialists to accept the *Times* of London view of the British as proper rulers of the world.

Thomas Francis Meagher had a name to make available as a possible "co-editor", but there was donkey work to be done by Brother William Haslett. A title had to be settled on early, so the logo could be designed and executed. Printers and a press had to be lined up, paper reserved, advertisements solicited, offices rented, a list made of potential subscribers and newspapers for exchange, and influentials who would receive complimentary copies. All of this needed to be made ready before a single editorial line was set for print. William Haslett had learned from the *United Irishman* in Dublin.

The name chosen was *The Citizen*, a simple statement into which readers might interpret what they would. It was aimed at thinking people. The objective was to influence those who sat in editorial chairs and seats of government power, as well as the faithful to '98 and '48. There were other Irish papers, by and for, directed to the immigrant floods, to help them feel at home in America and still keep their identity with their own Irish bog. Some of the papers, which came and went, tried for a balance between the nationalist point of view and the strictures of the Catholic publications, as aggressive in tone and language as Mitchel.

Jenny wrote of *The Citizen* as "ours". It was a sixteen-page quarto, the first two pages front and back mostly carrying ads, as was customary. Several pages of international news came next, with Mitchel editorializing. Newspapers from the Continent, England, and Ireland, came by frequent Atlantic steamers. Enterprising agents hired small steamers to meet the big vessels where they first touched at Halifax, Nova Scotia. They rushed the journals to Boston and New York. Each editor cut and pasted the overseas material to suit his own editorial bias; it was scarcely a fortnight old. Inland papers would then cut and paste from the eastern press.

Mitchel treated the political news from Washington to the same cut and paste and comment style. *The Citizen* was not without its pointless fillers, culled from exchange sources. Such as "A Negro was hung in Charlotte, North Carolina, for assulting a perfectly respectable white woman." John Mitchel began publishing his *Jail Journal* in its pages, to critical acclaim. Jack Savage, who was there in New York with his father, was art and literary critic, and contributing poet. He had made many merry evenings merrier in Jenny's Dublin homes and now was shining on her Irish Sunday afternoons. He and Johnnie [Mitchel, their oldest son] were special friends. Jack was a steady professional journalist, a good illustrator, with many columns of news print and books ahead of him. . . .

The Citizen business office was around the corner [from Printing House Square] on Nassau Street, which was a Dublin street sawed off and coming as immigrant over the Atlantic. It was a sorry street, carelessly cobbled, with a drain in the center. Meanly built narrow brick buildings faced each other. The whole was overseen and criss-crossed with telegraph poles and wires. It was undergirded by those who knew what tunnels

THE IRISH CITIZEN.

WEEKLY NEWSPAPER,

NEW YORK.

PROPRIETOR AND EDITOR,

JOHN MITCHEL.

The IRISH CITIZEN has now entered on the fourth year of its career. Its main purpose has been, and will continue to be, to develop and exalt the sentiment of Irish Nationality, especially on this Continent, where the citizens of Irish birth will probably have it in their power one day to redeem their kindred at home from oppression and raise up Ireland an Independent Nation.

The CITIZEN will, as heretofore, be supplied with several series of Local, Historical and Biographical ESSAYS and SKETCHES; together with occasional Irish Correspondence from one of the best-informed and most zealous Nationalists in that country.

Its constant aim will be to defend the Irish People from unjust attack, and make themselves and their cause better known upon this Continent, where it is the persistent object of English and Anglo-American writers to overwhelm them with slander and insult.

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and drains. There were eating houses for newsmen gathering to smoke, talk and talk, eat splendidly fresh oysters with decent ale. For John Mitchel it was coming home to D'Olier Street. Almost.

Everything was going auspiciously when *The Citizen* launched. Unfortunately for "our" paper, there were too many windmills other than Irish nationality risen on John Mitchel's landscape. A Don Quixote in Nineteenth Century trousers and with an Eighteenth Century mind-set, he could not resist tilting. The Directory was not pleased. . . .