Fitz-James O'Brien

BY MICHAEL BURKE

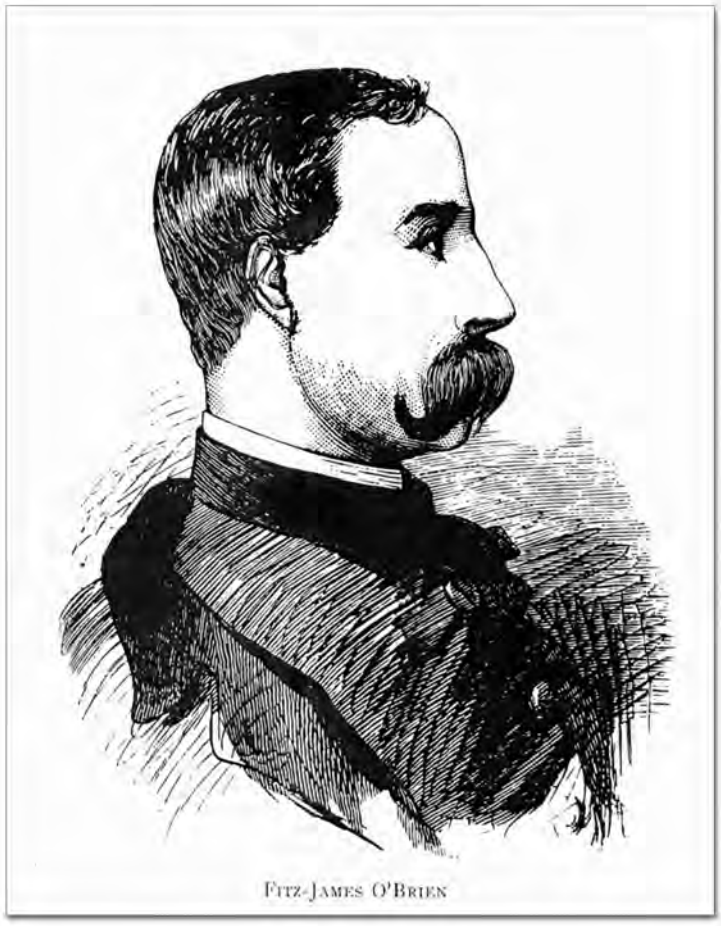

Illustration: *Portrait of Fitz-James O'Brien from a drawing by Sol Eytinge, Jr., probably done shortly after his arrival in New York City from London. Courtesy of Michael Burke.*

He was called "the Celtic Poe,"[1] and years after his death the writer and critic H.L. Mencken said that he was the only significant artist to die in the Civil War.[2] Fitz-James O'Brien, born in Ireland, arrived in New York by way of London in 1851. In the short span of 10 years he became a well-known and prolific writer of short stories, poetry, essays, criticism, and several plays—at least two of which became box office hits. His career ended only when, as a lieutenant in the Union Army, he was wounded in action and subsequently died, a hero, as a result of his wound and was buried in The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. In his day he was both a popular and controversial character, yet today very few people with the exception of literary scholars and historians have heard of him.

Michael Fitz-James O'Brien was born in County Cork, Ireland, sometime between 1824 and 1828.Both his grandfathers were named Michael. His middle name was Fitz-James, as his father, an attorney who died when Michael was about 12, was named James, and Fitz means "son of." His mother, Eliza, who was said to be a great beauty, later married DeCourcy O'Grady and Fitz-James added DeCourcy as a middle name, never using the name Michael. He had no siblings. Michael O'Driscoll, his maternal grandfather, lived at Baltimore House, a manor in the town of Baltimore on the Cork coast. He was

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believed to be descended from the O'Driscolls of Toberanargid Castle, an ancient clan rumored to have sometimes engaged in piracy. Fitz-James refers to his ancestor in a story written in New York entitled "The Lost Room."[3] James O'Brien was a successful attorney with an office (and home) at 58 South Mall, at that time the most fashionable street in Cork City. Between there and Baltimore House Fitz-James seems to have had a pleasant early childhood. After his mother's remarriage to DeCourcy O'Grady they leased an estate called Cloon near Castleconnell, County Limerick, and Fitz-James continued his seemingly pleasant youth. As the estate was located on the Shannon River he most likely added swimming to the usual occupations of riding, hunting and fishing, since when living in New York City he was known to be a strong swimmer. He showed an early interest in literature and began writing at the age of 16. One of his earliest poems, *Loch Ina,*[4] describes the beauty of the scenery of Cork. In 1929 when O'Brien's biographer Francis Wolle visited Ireland, he discovered that the Cork schoolchildren learned the poem by heart, although at that time no one knew who the author was. The local residents were pleasantly surprised to learn that it was one of their own.[5] When the famine hit Ireland that area suffered greatly. Fitz-James, who by this time had had several pieces published, submitted some verses to the *Nation*, which were critical of the government and the landlords. For this, he was rebuked by the editors.[6]

Little is actually known of his formal education. He was thought to have followed in his father's footsteps and prepared for a career in the law at Trinity College. He claimed to have attended Trinity and while the school has no record of his graduating, he could still have attended classes there. Later, in New York, he was accepted into a fraternity, *Theta Delta Chi,* for which he would have had to prove some college education. It is unlikely that he could have written so much and so well without some formal training. His articles reflect an extremely well read and diversified young man. He was fluent in French and acquainted with Italian and the classical languages. When Michael O'Driscoll died he left his entire estate to his only male heir, Fitz-James. This consisted of Baltimore House, land, and money totaling somewhere between eight and ten thousand pounds. In his early writing O'Brien had criticized the government and the wealthy for not doing enough to help the poor during the Famine. It is not known how much, if any, of his own newly acquired fortune he donated to Famine relief. What is known is that he immediately set off for London and lived a lavish lifestyle until his money ran out—in two short years.

In London, O'Brien seemed to have had enough social connections to get invited to all the right places. He lived well but apparently still found time to write. It was here that he expanded from poetry to journalism and fiction, for which he had much more talent. O'Brien started writing regularly for a periodical, the *Family Friend,* edited by R. Kemp Philp who was to become a friend and mentor. A magazine was created by Philp to coincide with the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace called the *Parlour Magazine of the Literature of All Nations,* and O'Brien contributed to it extensively. He became a friend to Philp and his family, and when O'Brien died a portrait of him was in Philp's possession, which is believed to have been eventually returned to his mother. He was also an anonymous contributor to Charles Dickens' magazine *Household Words.* One fantasy story published by Dickens, "An Arabian Nightmare,"[7] later shows up slightly altered in *Harper's Monthly* in New York. At this time O'Brien also started editing, which he seems to have found boring. There are some conflicting versions of what happened next. He was apparently preparing to leave for New York, as he was soliciting (and receiving) letters of recommendation from influential friends and also writing to prospective employers in New York. In one he proposed delivering a series of lectures to the New York Mechanics Institute on various subjects (one being the advantages of cremation over burial of the dead.) Francis Wolle believed that at the same

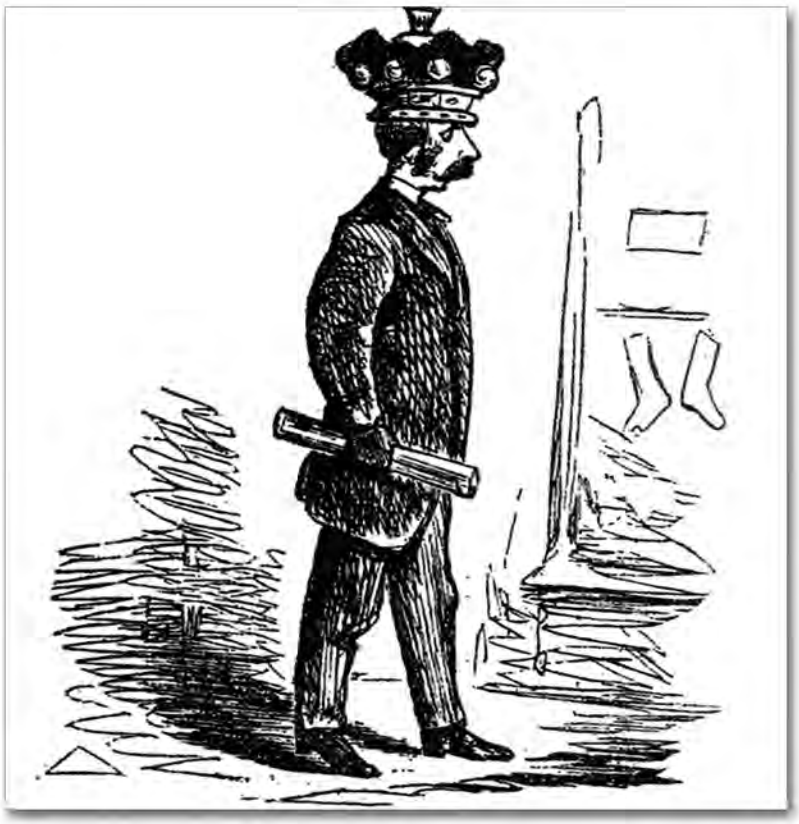


Illustration: *A caricature of Fitz-James O'Brien, one of several, done during his years in New York and spoofing his regal style. Courtesy of Michael Burke.*

time Fitz-James was carrying on an affair with the wife of an English Army officer who was stationed in India. When the husband came home unexpectedly they were found out, and Fitz-James fled the country. It seems to be true that he left in a hurry, as he was still employed as editor at the *Parlor Magazine* when he arrived in New York. We will never know the full story of this affair since all the people who insisted that this was true were O'Brien's American friends, who could only have heard it from him.

STARTING OVER IN NEW YORK CITY

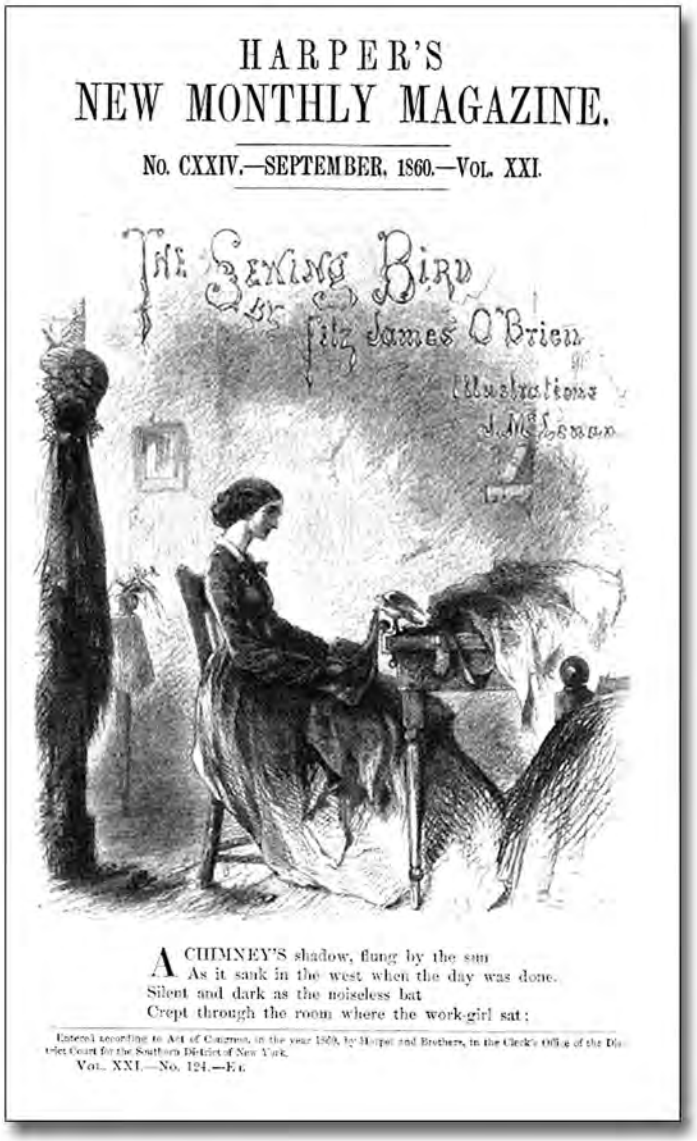
In the 1850s New York City was becoming a center for writers, with new periodicals starting up frequently. O'Brien arrived knowing practically no one, with only his letters of introduction, one written by R. Shelton Mackenzie, an Irish born editor then working at a Liverpool newspaper. (Mackenzie had never actually met O'Brien but wrote his recommendation at the urging of a mutual friend, Dr. Collins, the brother of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cloyne). O'Brien managed to find work right away and was soon contributing to various publications, one of the first being the *Lantern*, edited by the Irish born writer and actor, John Brougham, who also owned a theatre. They soon became lifelong friends. Having a naturally engaging personality, O'Brien became very popular. He seems to have felt at home in both the salons of the Fifth Avenue social set and the cellar bars of his fellow impoverished writers. A loosely organized, newly formed literary group referred to as the "Bohemians," modeled after a similar group in Paris, considered him a member. The Bohemians consisted of theatre, art and literary types, Walt Whitman being the most famous. On several occasions Whitman showed up at one of their favorite hangouts, Pfaff's Beer Cellar, with the Irish born entertainer, Eliza Gilbert (also known as Lola Montez). O'Brien seems to have lived a "boom and bust" type of lifestyle. He would sell a story, be flush with money, buy clothes, enter-

tain his friends and soon be broke or in debt. This cycle was to repeat itself throughout his life. A playwright and theatre critic, O'Brien seemed to develop a fondness for actresses. His favorite was Matilda Heron, popular in her day, who had along and successful career. He invariably wrote rave reviews about her performances, and at one point became her press agent and traveled with her to Boston. At his funeral she placed flowers on his coffin. One actress, however, of whom he was often critical, was Laura Keene. He wrote a scathing review of her theatre's production of *Our American Cousin.*[8] (Ironically, several years later Laura Keene would be performing in that same play at Ford's Theatre in Washington. It was she who ran from the stage to comfort the dying President Lincoln, cradling his head in her lap.) Fitz-James' own plays were performed mostly at The Wallack Theatre, owned by his friend, James W. Wallack, an actor who also performed in Ireland, and his son John Lester Wallack, known as Mr. Lester. The production of O'Brien's hit play *A Gentleman From Ireland*[9] was performed at Wallack's Theatre with his friend John Brougham, playing the lead.

In the 10 years that he lived in New York City, while frequently attending dinners and other social events, Fitz-James O'Brien managed to turn out over two hundred and eighty various pieces of work. This does not include his column in *Harper's Weekly,* "The Man About Town" in 1857, of which there were about 30 entries. Besides *Harper's*, his work appeared frequently in *Vanity Fair, The Atlantic Monthly, The Saturday Press,* and the recently founded *New York Times.* In addition, many of his early works were published anonymously. It may seem surprising that he accomplished so much considering his lifestyle. His friend and editor, William Winter said that he was the most industrious idle man he had ever known.[10] The Bohemians gathered weekly at Charles Pfaff's Beer Cellar for parties hosted by the writer Henry Clapp. O'Brien was popular there, as in many other places, due to his humor and wit. Being well brought up, he knew his way around society and was a frequent guest at many of the better Fifth Avenue homes. He was physically fit and wore a thick handlebar mustache, in what was called the cavalry style. Despite being often broke he was always impeccably dressed. That, along with his aristocratic bearing, earned him the nickname "The Baron." While he had many friends he also had a few enemies, one of whom, after an argument, had him attacked by hired thugs and beaten up. In another instance, his nose was broken in a fistfight with a professional boxer. Another of the Bohemians, Frank North, had a longstanding hatred of O'Brien and criticized him in print and any other way whenever he could. (North was born in England and descended from an aristocratic family. He seems to have been mentally disturbed over his failures in America and committed suicide by drinking prussic acid. At the time of his death he had 12 cents to his name.)His posthumously published book, *The Slave of The Lamp,* ridicules O'Brien in a thinly disguised character named Fitzgammon O'Bouncer. [11]

Illustration:
Portrait of Walt Whitman published in original edition of Leaves of Grass *in 1857, about the same time he would have encountered O'Brien among the Bohemians at Pfaff's.*

Although he had arrived in New York literally knowing no one, O'Brien quickly became a "character" in his adopted city, both popular and controversial. His work was often the subject of comment and criticism, as was his personality. Caricatures of him appeared in various periodicals. At one point he was the victim of


HARPER'S
NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

No. CXXIV.—SEPTEMBER, 1860.—Vol. XXI.

The Sewing Bird
By Fitz James O'Brien.
Illustrations
J. McLenan

A CHIMNEY'S shadow, flung by the sun
As it sank in the west when the day was done.
Silent and dark as the noiseless bat
Crept through the room where the work-girl sat:

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1860, by Harper and Brothers, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Southern District of New York.

Vol. XXI.—No. 124.—Ee

Illustration: *A cover illustration from* Harper's Monthly *in 1860 and illustrating O'Brien's short story "The Sewing Bird."*

an accusation of plagiarism, later proved to be groundless. His column, "The Man About Town" was an extension of his own persona. He was at home in both high and low social circles. The Bohemian writer, Richard Stoddard said of him

> *He was a bright young fellow, of pleasing address, elegant manners, and more than the average amount of intelligence. Everybody liked him. He was a favorite at evening parties, which had not yet been banished by afternoon kettledrums, a favorite at stag parties, where his wit set the table on a roar, and he was a member of a fashionable club.*[12]

Later, Mrs M. E. W. Sherwood, a well-known society hostess, described him as a "fascinating conversationalist, a rather handsome, dashing, well-dressed Irish gentleman, very much courted in society for a brief hour."[13]

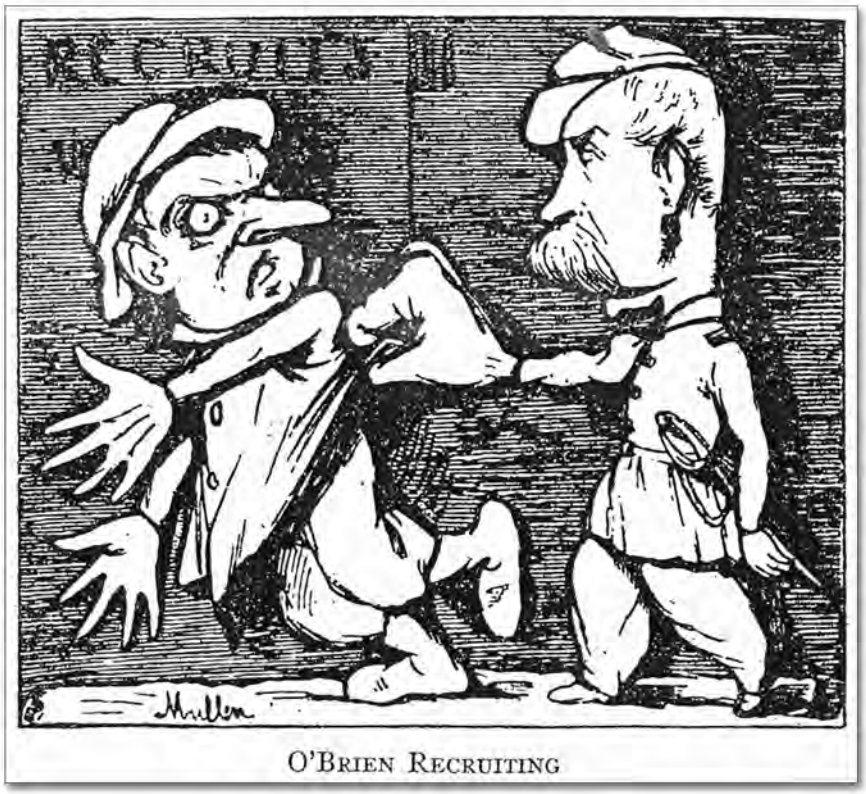
BIRDS & OTHER INTERESTS

O'Brien had a variety of interests and made use of them in his work. He was, oddly enough, even interested in bird-watching and wrote an article for *Harper's* entitled "Bird Gossip."[14] Health and physical culture were important to him and he went to the gym often. One of his articles, "How To Keep Well,"[15] addresses this subject. He was an advocate for the poor and oppressed, writing many articles calling for reform and even some poems, one called *The Tenement*,[16] about a rapacious landlord who enjoys a good dinner while his well insured tenement burns down. Another, *The Prize Fight* [17] deals with the exploitation of boxers. Curiously, O'Brien was an early proponent of cremation and urn burial, customs practically unheard of at that time (the first crematory in the United States, in Washington, Pennsylvania was not established until 1876). His article for the *New York Times,* "The Way To Get Buried,"[18] covers a trip he took to the then new Green-Wood Cemetery, where he recounts being given a private tour by the Superintendent. While he thought the cemetery beautiful, he was critical of the ostentation of many of its monuments.

O'Brien's articles were incredibly diverse, touching on many different subjects. Some were well written but others were obviously done in a hurry. Poetry was his weakest and least consistent genre. The short story, however, was where he excelled. These he had more time to work on and were subjects of his own choosing. He was, like many of the Bohemians, greatly influenced by Edgar Allen Poe. O'Brien excelled at interweaving plots and subplots successfully in a short space while making the stories thoroughly enjoyable reading. "The Wondersmith"[19] and "Tommatoo"[20] are perfect examples. "The Wondersmith" foreshadows the contemporary horror movie series about the malicious doll "Chuckie" in that carved

wooden dolls are infused with the souls of devils, which turn them into vicious killers in an evil plot to distribute them to children at Christmas. Fortunately for the children of New York City, the plot fails through a subtle subplot of alcohol abuse. While most of his early stories had Gothic or horror themes, they soon began to move in the direction of one of his other interests, science fiction. As the genre of detective fiction is said to originate with Edgar Allen Poe, so Fitz-James O'Brien has been hailed as one of the pioneers of science fiction. In the best known example of this work, *The Diamond Lens,* [21] the narrator, obsessed with the science of microscopy, acquires a large diamond by theft and murder. When processed a certain way, the diamond turns into a microscope lens which then reveals phantasmagoric images in a drop of water. The story raises questions about our concept of reality. Is the world in the drop of water as real as ours? Like many of Poe's characters, this protagonist also gradually declines and loses his mind in the end.

The writer and anthologist Jessica Amanda Salmonson, in the introduction to her 1988 edition of The *Supernatural Tales of Fitz-James O'Brien,* implies very strongly, but does not state specifically, that O'Brien was homosexual or, at least, bisexual. This idea seems to be based on the fact that he never married, spent most of his time in the company of men and authored some "homoerotic" poems. O'Brien himself had always vaguely alluded to a tragic love affair that made it impossible for him to love again. (He may have been referring to the English Captain's wife.) At any rate, marriage, for him, would have been out of the question. For someone of his social class in that era having sufficient money was a necessity to marry. For him that happening was highly unlikely. He spent most of his free time hanging around in bars with fellow writers and artists. In those days, except for a few Bohemians, marriageable women did not hang around in bars. His friend, Walt Whitman, was a known homosexual. He was also an established, published writer whom most of the Bohemians looked up to, so he was always welcome at their gatherings. As for homoerotic poetry, O'Brien often wrote about the affection between friends and of male beauty. He also wrote of love between opposite sexes and female beauty. One poem referred to was "A Fallen Star"[22] about a handsome, successful young man who eventually goes into decline. One of the Harper brothers, in his obituary of O'Brien, says he wrote this about himself. O'Brien's sexual orientation may be an interesting, arguable topic, and possibly adds another dimension to this already complex personality, but with little hard evidence likely to be found, it may have to remain just that.



O'Brien Recruiting

Illustration: *From the magazine* Vanity Fair, *caricature of Lieutenant O'Brien recruiting during the Civil War. Courtesy of Michael Burke.*

O'BRIEN IN THE CIVIL WAR

Upon the outbreak of The Civil War, Fitz-James O'Brien joined New York's socially elite Seventh Regiment. By this time he considered himself an American and was passionate about the Union cause and an opponent of slavery, but he also looked forward to the experience of fighting in a war and the material it would provide for his later work. After the Seventh Regiment was sent back to New York without seeing any action, he tried to start a regiment on his own calling it McClellen's Rifles. This didn't work out. He was court-martialed but found not guilty for shooting a drunken soldier who did not respond to O'Brien's call to identify himself and instead went to attack him. He then took a position as aide to General F. W. Lander (which was originally intended for his friend, the writer Thomas Baily Aldrich.) At the beginning of the war, O'Brien had arranged with the *New York Times* to send back dispatches from the front. He managed to send only one, the account of his regiment's transport to Virginia, printed under the title "The Seventh Regiment."[23] Francis Wolle writes of it "This account, written with such vivid fullness of detail and with the accurate knowledge of the participant, has become a recognized part of the records of the early days of the Civil War."[24] It is also referred to in other histories of the war, such as *The Civil War in Song and Story*[25] by Frank Moore and *The History of The Seventh Regiment*[26] by William Swinton, and is mentioned in O'Brien's obituary in *Harper's Weekly.*[27] He also sent back several poems that were published in *Harper's*. He was at least 31 years old at the time, older than most soldiers, but in excellent physical condition.

O'Brien's service, however, did not last long. As an aide to Gen. Lander, he fought bravely in the battle of Bloomery Gap, and received a letter of commendation from Gen. George McClellan. However, shortly after the battle he was involved in a skirmish with the same Confederate unit. He was shot in the shoulder by the Commander of that unit, Colonel Ashley, whom he then shot and killed. The shoulder wound was not serious but it was not treated properly, and several weeks later he died at the home of George Thurston in Cumberland, Maryland, of tetanus, on April 6, 1862.

True to character, O'Brien died with a glass of sherry in his hand. In an eerie premonition, the last piece of writing he submitted to *Harper's Weekly* was a poem called "A Soldier's Letter,"[28] in which the narrator, writing to his sweetheart, tells her that he has lost an arm, but consoles her by saying that others suffered much worse than he.

O'Brien's body was taken back to New York City where it lay in state at the Seventh Regiment Armory, and where his funeral was held with both his sword, and the sword of the Confederate Captain he had defeated at Bloomery Gap, placed on his coffin. This was followed by a large procession, which included the Regimental Band, to The Green-Wood Cemetery. A service was held at the cemetery and his coffin was placed in the receiving vault. It is assumed that plans were to be made for his body to be buried in Ireland; however, for reasons unknown, this did not happen. After 12 years in the receiving vault Fitz-James O'Brien was buried in grave #1183 in Public Lot 17,263 in Section 15 of The Green-Wood Cemetery. The cemetery at that time provided a section for Civil War soldiers killed in the war to be buried, free of charge (the Drummer Boy, the first casualty of the Civil War is interred there). Why this was not utilized is also unknown.

Perhaps because he died during the chaos of wartime, or perhaps because he had no family (except a mother living in Ireland), this popular, well-known Irish hero of the American Civil War has been almost totally forgotten. The first collection of his works, *Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien,* edited by his friend William Winter, was published in 1881, almost 20 years after his death. His plays were still being produced until the 1890s, especially the seasonal hit *My Christmas Dinner.* But now they all seem to be lost except one, the comedy *A Gentleman from Ireland.* His stories, some of which were considered excellent by contemporary critics, have appeared only occasionally in antholo-

gies, with the exception of *The Supernatural Tales of Fitz-James O'Brien,* edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, 1988. A biography, *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen Fifties,* by Francis Wolle, was published in 1944. A recent book, a collection of non-fiction, *Fitz-James O'Brien Selected Literary Journalism,* edited by Wayne R. Kime, came out in 2003.

When O'Brien was buried in 1874, his friends got together to put a stone on his grave. However, when Wolle visited Green-Wood in the 1920s he could find only a small marble stone, severely eroded, with the name O'Brien on top and Fitz-James on the bottom, both barely readable. Today, the names are almost completely obliterated.

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Notes

1 *The Catholic World,* March, 1920,"A Celtic Poe" by Joseph J. Reilly, PhD.

2 *Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery* by Jeffrey I. Richman p. 92.

3 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (HNMM), September, 1858.

4 *The Family Friend* April 1, 1858.

5 Francis Wolle, p. 8.

6 Ibid. , p. 11.

7 *Household Words,* November 8, 1851.

8 *Harper's Weekly,* "Dramatic Feuilleton" October 23, 1858.

9 Samuel French, New York 1858.

10 Winter, William, p. vii.

11 North, William,1855.

12 Stoddard, Richard, March 6, 1881.

13 Sherwood, Mrs M. E. W. *An Epistle To Posterity,* p. 123.

14 HNMM, October, 1855.

15 HNMM, December, 1856.

16 HNMM, February, 1861.

17 HNMM, December, 1858.

18 *NY Times,* March 19, 1853.

19 *Atlantic Monthly,* October, 1859.

20 HNMM, August, 1862.

21 *Atlantic Monthly,* January, 1858.

22 HNMM, November,1860.

23 *New York Times,* May 2, 1861.

24 Wolle Francis, p. 210.

25 Moore, Frank, *The Civil War in Song and Story,*1882.

26 Swinton, William, *History of the Seventh Regiment,* 1870.

27 *Harper's Weekly,* April 26, 1862.

28 HNMM, August, 1862.