

GRADY'S NOSEGAY

by Paddy Lysaght

At the Summer

Assises in Limerick, in 1816, before a special jury from the county, a trial for libel, worthy of inclusion in any anthol-

ogy of famous trials, took place. George Evans Bruce, a Limerick banker and once High Sheriff of the county, took a libel action for £20,000 against Thomas Grady, who, he maintained, had libelled him in a poem entitled *The Nosegay*.

Who were the protagonists in this extraordinary case? Thomas Grady, a barrister, who, although never a great success at the bar, possessed considerable literary talent and had a reputation for wit. He was popularly known as 'Spectacle' Grady, because, being shortsighted, he wore thick glasses. He spoke for the Union at a meeting of the bar, in 1799 when, in a few colourful sentences, he said that "the Irish are only the rump of an aristocracy ... Give me a Union. Unite me to that country where all is peace, order and prosperity." It was said that he was made a County judge because of this speech. Sometime later, he was made Postmaster of the Limerick P.O.

Disillusioned when he did not receive promotion at the bar, he retired to his house, Belmont, Castleconnell where he began to write satirical poetry. He borrowed £1300 from George Bruce, the plaintiff in this case, with whom he appeared to be on friendly terms at the time. For some reason, Bruce decided to call in his money rather quickly, thus antagonising Grady. What communication if any, they had with each other for the next two years is not known, but it is evident that Bruce further provoked Grady's ire by a libel, circulated through the Post Office, which claimed that he (Grady) had robbed the P.O. and murdered his nephew. Grady's answer to this was the poem *The Nosegay*, published in Dublin, in 1815, in an edition of 1000 copies - hence the libel action.

On Wednesday August 7th, the court sat at nine o'clock and the 12 Jurors, some of the most important men in the county, were sworn in. Apparently, the trial had already aroused unusual interest, as the area outside the court was packed with a crowd waiting to get in. After the usual opening proceedings, a Mr. Goold, in a long, eloquent speech, stated the plaintiff's case. The poem, he said, "was the most violent satire and the most malignant piece of invective that the history of literature could furnish; that its malignity acquired superior effect, compared with all other compositions of the sort, by the superiority of its powers, and that compared to the crimes imputed to his client, which extended from swindling up to treason, and compared to the



Thomas 'Spectacle' Grady.

powers and spirit of the poetry, Nero was an ordinary sinner, and Juvenal a timed lampooner."

Goold then went on to praise his client. He was well got; no expense was spared on his education; he was sent to the Temple where "he acquired the esteem and respect of his fellow students." In 1780, when an association of Templars was formed, Bruce was appointed to the command. In 1784, he married a young lady of high connections, of "exquisite beauty and great fortune." They lived happily for some time, until "a certain circumstance led

to their separation."

He went on to state that Bruce became a member of a fashionable London club in 1786, and that Grady had the malignity to assert that he was banished from this club because he cheated at cards, by having a five up his sleeve. The reality was, Goold said, that Bruce left the club because of a waiter who had attempted to cheat him out of 45 guineas. At this, Bruce asked the club to sack the waiter, and when they refused to do so, "in that proud spirit that became a man of honour," he left the club.

In 1788, he came to Ireland and purchased the Hermitage at Castleconnell, where he was, according to Goold, highly respected, so much so that Lord Clare had great confidence in his loyalty and integrity, and appointed him to the Commission of the Peace. In 1802, he sold Hermitage and became a banker in Limerick. All very well, but as Goold puts it, "a little accident happened to himself in this capacity." He was convicted of usury. Of course, Goold makes light of this, by reminding everyone in the court that people are accustomed to making mistakes, and that Bruce's fall from grace was, after all, only a venial offence. The charge of usury, together with the other charges of treason, perverting youthful minds, procuring abortions and of having an incestuous relationship with his wife's sister, were, Goold stated, so vile and preposterous that Mr. Bruce should really be given ten times the amount of damages sought, especially since the poem was already, as he said, "spread over the British Empire and is, for its talent, likely to descend to posterity."

Then having outlined the cause of the dispute between Bruce and Grady, he proposed to read the poem. Apparently, Mr. Goold was a consummate artist for, according to a report of the trial, he read it "in the most impressive manner. To the most dignified passages he gave additional dignity by the powers of his recitation; to the keenest passages he gave additional edge by the personality of his expression. The most humorous passages he heightened by a manner of speaking and of acting appropriately comical..."

Several times during the reading he interjected comments, as for instance, "one is successively dazzled by the talent and horrified by the malignity," or "the greatest mischief arises from the fascinating effect of a composition hitherto unrivalled." On this couplet, "In daring prim – in principles unbuckled; Reluctant subject – voluntary cuckold," he muses thus: "What a mass of crime has he not blazoned and condensed in the compass of ten words!" And when he comes to the line, "Got in a cuckold and got out a cheat," he looks round the courtroom and says, "I see around me a literary audience of the first character, and I ask them if they can show one line, such as this, from any or all of the classics, whether ancient or modern, where severity and wit, and antithesis, force of expression, and the simplicity of expression, are all brought to bear upon one point..."

Though he laments the way in which Grady squanders his genius, he cannot refrain from praising him when, as he says, he writes passages which Pope alone could equal but could not surpass. As an example, there is the passage on the diety, which, though it has little bearing on the action before the court, he cannot refrain from quoting.

The first four lines read:

"Who clothes the earth? who form'd the 'immortal soul?
Who shaped the concave, and who fix'd the pole?
Whose hands the winds, the waves, the lightnings guide?
Who steers the planets, and who stems the tide?"

The temptation to quote passage after passage of the poem, as it is

Reluctant subject – voluntary cuckold,
Thou foul pollutor of thy sister's bed!
Fraud, us'ry, incest, treason, on thy head!
Of crime a climax – or Pandora's box,
Which ev'ry precious gem of hell unlocks;
One eye half clos'd – half out thy slaving tongue,
Thy twisted nose from nature's post half wrung,



George Evans Bruce.

undoubtedly a most malignant piece of invective, worthy of any of the great satirists, must be resisted. It is a long poem – forty two pages of rhyming couplets. The first sixteen lines, besides containing most of the charges levelled against Bruce, give the tone of the poem. The remainder of the poem is, essentially an elaboration of all these charges.

"Come ***** , -for tardy Justice takes her seat,
Convicted usurer! convicted cheat!
In ev'ry mischief, actor or abettor,
Self-vaunted infidel, and tam'pring traitor,
In daring prim – in principles unbuckled;

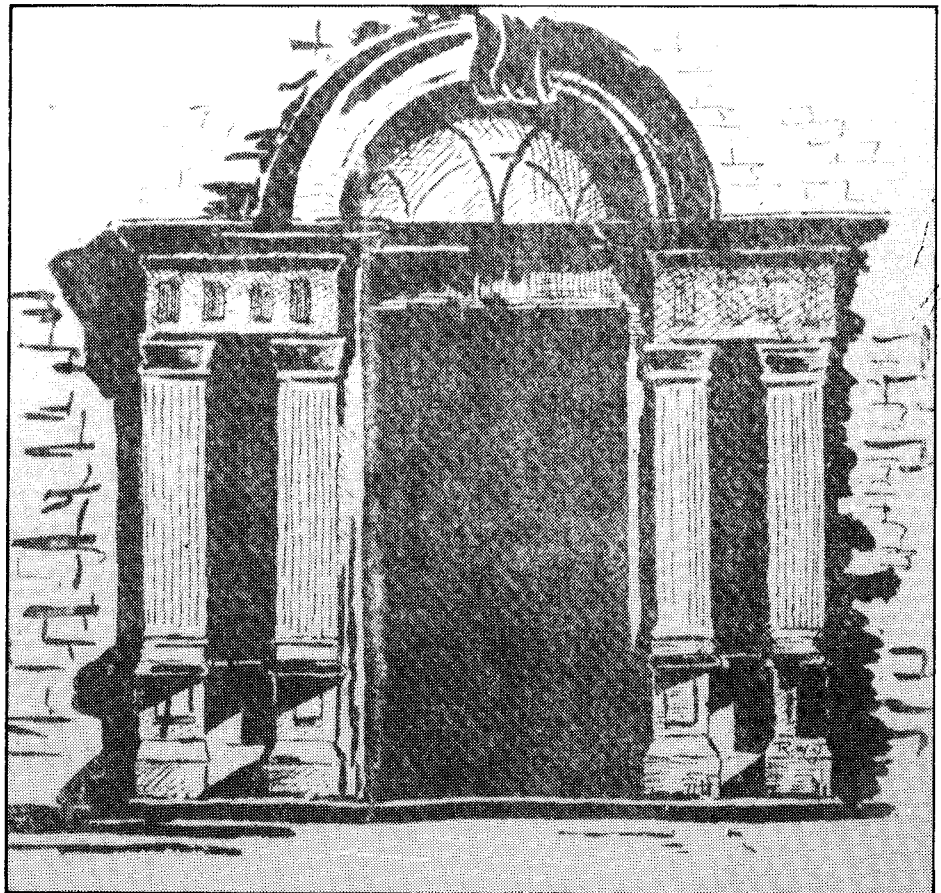
Cadav'rous cheek, and mischief-making grin,
Emblem and offspring both of death and sin."

Having finished the reading of the poem, Mr. Goold stated that damages of £20,000 were very moderate, and that nothing short of that amount would vindicate Mr. Bruce. He also warned the jury to restrain Mr. Grady from writing, because since he was the ablest and most formidable writer of his age, and, since they were his judges, they might easily become hereafter his victims.

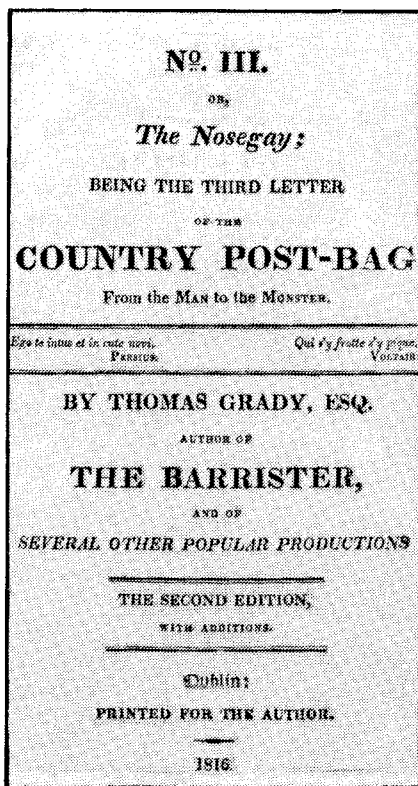
After Goold's impassioned address, Mr. O'Connell, who could also fashion a simile or create a metaphor, address-

sed the jury on behalf of Grady. But, since he had not the vocal artistry of Goold, some of the courtroom drama and atmosphere must have receded.

Remorselessly, he went on and on dismantling the character of Bruce. He said that, as a banker, "like a sordid owl ... he sate only watchful with heavy wings to cuff down the rising prosperity of your city; while, like a moral torpedo, he benumbed every virtue with which he came in contact." Bruce, he admitted was one time a member of the Grand Jury and had secured this position through the intercession of Crosbie Morgell, a man who cheated everybody. He will prove through witnesses that Bruce had an incestuous relationship with his wife's sister, and had offspring by her; he will also prove that he was the accomplice of the Marquess of Headfort in the seduction of a



A drawing of the doorway of Bruce's Bank, Rutland Street, by Robert Wyse-Jackson.



The title page of 'The Nosegay'.

clergyman's wife; he will establish that he was convicted for usury in 1802; he will prove that he was a cheat in 1786, a traitor in 1794, a pimp in 1804 – all these crimes and many more he will list. Thus, he maintained that Bruce's reputation before the publication of the poem was so bad that he could not sustain any other injury because of it.

Of all the witnesses called, only one, a Mr. Boyle Vandelure of Ralahine, Co. Clare, testified in favour of Bruce by saying that he believed him to be one of the most honest, upright and moral men living, and that he never heard anyone speak ill of him. When it was pointed out that it must have been unpleasant for him to have to listen to all the evidence that was given

against Bruce's reputation, he said that he was a little deaf in one ear, and that he should turn the other one towards him, but when he changed his position and turned the other side he was told that he could step down.

The evidence on both sides then closed and a Mr. Burton addressed the jury at length on behalf of Grady. He pointed out that many of the leading men in the county had refused to assemble with Bruce upon a Grand Jury, that by his anonymous libels circulated through the Post Office he had disturbed many people, and that many of the first families in the county refused to associate with him.

A Mr. Pennyfeather spoke for Bruce, saying that only the crime of usury had been proved against his client and that he had already paid dearly for that crime. He maintained that all the other offences Bruce was supposed to have committed appeared to have been instigated by the defendant. Finally, he suggested to the jury that the poem was a monstrous libel against an innocent man and that its author should be punished severely.

The judge then summed up by reading the evidence both for the plaintiff and the defendant. He gave it as his opinion that the poem contained libellous passages and that the jury should determine what damages should be given on the evidence before them. On the other hand, if the plaintiff had no

reputation to lose on publication of the book, he had sustained no injury and thus was not entitled to damages. He ended on a passionate note. "If," he said, "you believe the evidence which goes to make him a bankrupt in reputation, in the name of God give him but nominal damages. I care not how little you give him."

The rest is anti-climax. The jury retired and, in less than half an hour, awarded Bruce £500 damages and sixpence costs. It was a hollow victory but Bruce made the most of it. He lit a tar-barrel before the door of his bank in Rutland Street, and the fishermen of Castleconnell were prevailed upon to illuminate their cottages in honour of his victory.

While the damages were little more than nominal and the costs paltry, Spectacle Grady could not see his way to pay them. He absconded to the Continent to avoid doing so, and died at Boulogne in 1863, after wishing, I would expect, that the last quartraine of his poem would literally descend on Bruce, the noted scoundrel and profligate. It read:

"And while fang'd adders nestle in his breast,
Let ravens croak him from reluctant rest,
And panting toads and hissing serpents there
Exalt the fiercest horrors of despair."