

The forgotten Irish

A highly-regarded Fenian leader, Westminster MP and inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty, John O'Connor Power deserves his place in Irish history, writes author Jane Stanford

JOHN O'Connor Power didn't write his memoirs or leave a diary, effectively allowing his life story to be elbowed out of history. Of his personal life, he left few traces, and it was a connection to the actor and writer, Walter Macken, which finally revealed his family roots.

Several historians have attempted to unmask this 'seek him here, seek him there' Irish pimpernel. Described by contemporaries as 'enigmatic', 'elusive', 'a man of mystery', O'Connor Power used many aliases in his early career. Now his parliamentary record, the accounts of his colleagues, his writings and newspaper reports, readily accessible on internet databases, give us the man.

Born in 1846, the first year of the Great Irish Famine, he lost his parents at an early age and spent some time in Ballinasloe workhouse. He went on to become a leading

INSPIRATION FOR EVIL: Doyle's Professor Moriarty was based on O'Connor Power and recently played in *Sherlock* by Andrew Scott, below.

PROFESSOR MORIARTY



figure in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, taking the Fenian vision to Westminster, where he fought for the Nationalist goals of self-government, land reform and amnesty for political prisoners. He was acknowledged to be one of

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the great orators of the late nineteenth century, as charismatic on the platform as in the House of Commons, where he was ranked with Gladstone and Disraeli.

In the 1911 UK census he gives his birthplace as Clashaganny, County Roscommon, the home of his mother, Mary

O'Connor. Some weeks later he was taken to Ballinasloe, where his father, Patrick Power, lived and worked. Ballinasloe was a prosperous town, the centre of Ireland's inland trade and the gateway from the west of Ireland to the markets of Britain and Europe. But these were harsh times, and the community was overwhelmed with victims of famine, typhus, smallpox and cholera.

He and his two brothers, cared for by the extended family, the Powers of Ballygill, survived the upheavals and eventually took the emigrant path to England.

O'Connor Power, the youngest, moved to Lancashire at the age of fifteen and joined relatives in Rochdale. He worked as a house painter and, in the winter months, as a mill hand.

As a member of the IRB, he organised and recruited in the North of England, and there were many 'led into the National fold by his teaching'. A skilled political strategist, he is credited with planning the abortive raid on Chester Castle in February 1867. A band of a thousand men marched on Chester, intent on seizing arms from the military arsenal. They would then cross over to Ireland and join the proposed insurrection. An informer betrayed the Fenians to the authorities, and, forewarned, they returned, without loss of life, to the 'little Irelands' of towns and cities across England.

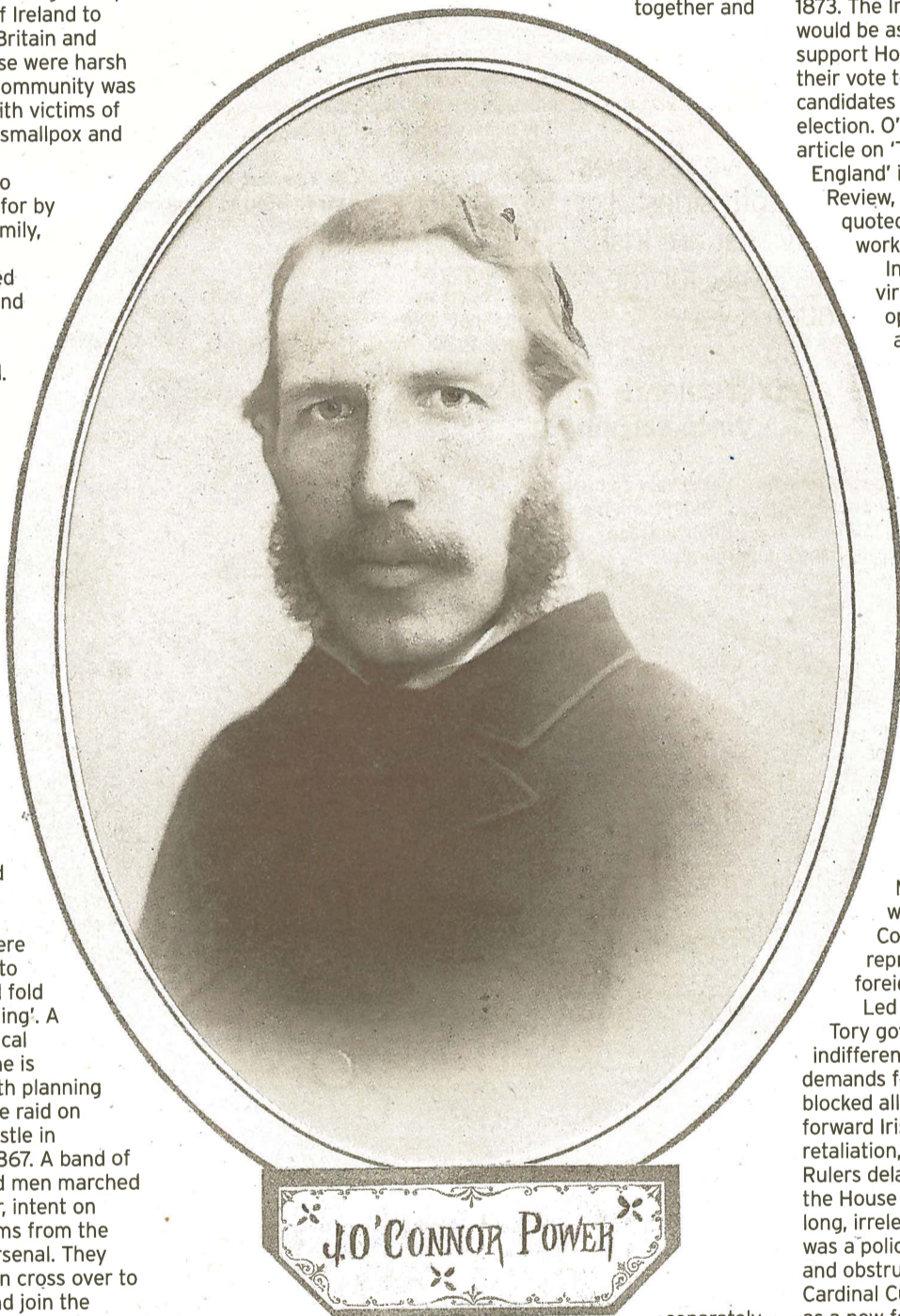
He was present for the Manchester Rescue, an attack on a prison van in Hyde, Manchester. In the

attempt to free Fenian officers, the prison guard was accidentally shot. Subsequently, three men, the 'Manchester Martyrs' were condemned to death and died on the scaffold.

without trial, and spent several months in Kilmainham Jail. Ireland had become too dangerous for the Fenians, and the IRB centred its operations in England.

On his release, as the Supreme Council's representative for Connaught, he moved to Mayo to work with Fenian units, where he campaigned for the election to a Westminster seat of Catholic landlord and patriot George Henry Moore.

Revolutionaries and constitutionalists were working together and



Delegated by the IRB to discuss future plans with the American Brotherhood, O'Connor Power travelled to America. In February 1868, he returned to Dublin and met with the Supreme Council, the governing body of the IRB. A few days later he was arrested under the Suspension of Habeus Corpus, imprisonment

separately to achieve their aims. It was 'a new departure'. Shortly before his death in 1870 Moore placed a notice before the House of Commons moving a resolution on the state of Ireland under the Union. It was the beginning of a new campaign for home government.

The following January, O'Connor Power enrolled at St

Jarlath's Diocesan College in Tuam, County Galway, to prepare for the next election. He continued his education and, at the same time, his Fenian activities - importing and distributing guns, recruiting and lecturing. Mayo men had strong bonds with Manchester and O'Connor Power was 'high in the councils of the Fenians' in that city. Support, moral and financial, helped to build a 'vast organisation' in Mayo. The Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain was founded in Manchester in January 1873. The Irish in England would be asked to formally support Home Rule and use their vote to influence candidates in the forthcoming election. O'Connor Power's article on 'The Irish in England' in the Fortnightly Review, 1880, is frequently quoted in academic works.

In 1874, despite virulent clerical opposition and the accusation that 'he was the recognised head of the Fenians in this country,' O'Connor Power won a seat in the House of Commons and represented Mayo for 11 years. His maiden speech was on a motion for Home Rule. Ten days later, he spoke again, spearheading the campaign for amnesty for Fenian prisoners, including his friend Michael Davitt. He was the Supreme Council's 'foreign representative', its foreign minister.

Led by Disraeli, the Tory government was indifferent to Ireland's demands for justice and blocked all attempts to bring forward Irish bills. In retaliation, a group of Home Rulers delayed the business of the House of Commons with long, irrelevant speeches. It was a policy of exasperation and obstruction. Ireland's Cardinal Cullen condemned it as a new form of Fenianism. Spy's cartoon of O'Connor Power, published in Vanity Fair's 'Men of the Day' series in December 1886, is captioned 'the brains of obstruction'.

In 1876, he visited Washington D.C. and presented a congratulatory address to the House of Representatives on the Centennial of American